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# Response to "New Documents: Qumran and Gnostic Writings" by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Jr.

Sidnie White Crawford

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, [scrawford1@unl.edu](mailto:scrawford1@unl.edu)

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American Bible Society

Symposium Papers on

# The Bible in the Twenty-First Century

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SESSION I: New Documents: Qumran and Gnostic Writings

Paper presented by **Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Jr.**, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at Catholic University of America, Washington, DC

Respondent #1—**James A. Sanders**, Professor of Intertestamental and Biblical Studies at the School of Theology, Claremont, CA; Professor of Religion, Claremont Graduate School; and President of the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center for Preservation and Research.

Respondent #2—**Sidnie A. White**, Assistant Professor of Religion at Albright College, Reading, PA

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RESPONSE: Sidnie A. White

My thanks to the American Bible Society for inviting me to participate in this 175th anniversary celebration; and thanks to Professor Fitzmyer for his excellent paper. It is a pleasant duty to be a respondent for a paper with which I agree in all its substantive points!

In my response, I will discuss three points raised by Professor Fitzmyer: the identification of the Qumran sect as the Essenes, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's hypothesis of the Babylonian origins of the Qumran sect, and the impact of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls on Old Testament textual criticism.

The identification of the Qumran sect as the Essenes mentioned by Josephus, Philo and Pliny the Elder goes back to the first discovery of the scrolls, and is based on the fact that there is a substantial amount of agreement between the internal evidence provided by the scrolls and the classical sources. Recently, however, there have been challenges to that identification, most notably by Larry Schiffman, whose position I will discuss below. First, however, I will present the classical evidence.<sup>1</sup>

Pliny the Elder describes the lifestyle and beliefs of the Essenes, and there is a large correspondence between their descriptions and the evidence of the scrolls for the lifestyle and beliefs of the Qumran sectarians. According to Josephus and Philo (and I am lumping their evidence together indiscriminately), the Essenes share their property.

<sup>1</sup> An excellent discussion of the evidence of the classical sources is found in Deborah Dimant, "Qumran Sectarian Literature" in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum; Section 2; ed. Michael E. Stone; Philadelphia; Fortress Press, 1984), 483–550.

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SIDNIE A. WHITE is Assistant Professor of Religion at Albright College, Reading, PA.

1QS, the Serekh ha Yahad, talks about the joining of the property of a new member to the community, evidence of shared property. Essenes, according to Philo and Josephus, engage in a lifestyle of work and study. 1QS states "and where the ten are, there shall never lack a man among them who shall study the Law continually, day and night, concerning the right conduct of a man with his companion. And the Congregation shall watch in community for a third of every night of the year, to read the Book and to study the Law and to pray together."<sup>2</sup> Josephus and Philo go on to tell us that the Essenes take their meals together, maintain a strict state of ritual purity, and organize themselves into a strict hierarchy. All these claims correspond to statements made in the Scrolls about the community and its rules. Finally, both authors inform us that the Essenes had a body of special teachings not shared by other groups of Jews in the Second Temple period, for example predestination. Again, in the Hodayot (1QH) we read, "For thou hast established their ways for ever and ever, and hast ordained from eternity their visitation for reward and chastisement; Thou has allotted it to all their seed for eternal generations and everlasting years... In wisdom of thy knowledge thou didst establish their destiny before ever they were." So there is substantial agreement between the classical sources and the scrolls, leading to the identification of the Qumran sectarians with the Essenes.

But, as some scholars have pointed out, there are also some areas in which the scrolls and the classical sources disagree. Josephus and Philo both declare that the Essenes were celibate, yet no mention of this is made in the published Qumran documents. In fact, there were a few skeletons of women and children in the cemeteries at Qumran and Ein Ghuweir, and the Damascus Document

<sup>2</sup> G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (3rd ed.; London: Penguin Books, 1987) 69.

<sup>3</sup> Vermes, 167

<sup>4</sup> Josephus (J.W. 2:160-161) does mention a 'second order' of Essenes, who married and lived in villages.

discusses rules for married sectarians. However, the settlement at Qumran does appear to be essentially male, and the scrolls, aside from the Damascus Document, make little or no mention of women. How can we reconcile these competing facts? It has been suggested, and this seems to me reasonable, that celibacy, or better the avoidance of sexual contact for reasons of ritual purity, may have been practiced by some, or perhaps the majority of Essenes, but that some of them, particularly in the villages, were married. Qumran, therefore, was not the only Essene settlement in Judea, but rather a large Essene center. In support of this, we know that there were Essenes active in Judea at large. For example John the Essene was a leader in the Jewish Revolt.

The weight of agreement between the classical sources and the scrolls makes the equation of 'Qumran settlers = Essenes' highly probable. Recently, however, Larry Schiffman has proposed that the Qumran sectarians were actually proto-Sadducees.<sup>5</sup> He bases this suggestion on the fact that some of the laws (namely four) found in 4QMMT, that is, *Miqsat Ma'aseh Torah*, a new document from Cave IV, agree with rabbinic reports of Sadducean interpretation of these same laws. He states "The dominant Essene hypothesis, if it is to be maintained, would require a radical reorientation. It would be necessary to assume that the term Essene came to designate the originally Sadducean sectarians who had gone through a process of radicalization and were now a distinct sect in the sense derived from the sectarian documents."<sup>6</sup> I find Schiffman's use of the term 'Sadducee' misleading, since he is doing precisely what the supporters of the Essene hypothesis have been accused of doing, retroactively applying a term from the Roman period to a group of Hellenistic Jews. I would suggest that Zadokite would be a better term. Also, we know from Peshar Nahum that, at least in a later period, the

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Significance of the Scrolls." *Bible Review* VI (October, 1990), 19-27.

<sup>6</sup> Schiffman, "The New Halakhic Letter (4QMMT) and the Origins of the Dead Sea Sect," *BA* 53 (June, 1990) 64-73.

sectarians at Qumran differentiated themselves from the Sadducees, to whom they refer as 'Manasseh.'<sup>7</sup> It does not seem reasonable to scrap the identification of the Qumran sectarians as Essenes, when there is such substantial correlation between the scrolls and the classical sources, because we have new evidence that doesn't quite fit the old definition. Instead, what is needed is an expansion of the term 'Essene.' As Philip Davies so aptly illustrated, "A modern Josephus, writing for Muslims, might well divide Christianity into three sects, Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants."<sup>8</sup> However, if you asked an Episcopalian and a Baptist what their doctrines and practices were, you would be hard-pressed to create a coherent picture of a Protestant! The same may be true of the word 'Essene.'

I would suggest that the group of Jews who inhabited Qumran may have evolved over time, from a group with deep roots in Palestinian Judaism, who split with other Jews over such disputed things as law and calendar, to a sect with highly developed doctrines of, for example, predestination and angelology, which set them apart from other Jews. This is the group that Josephus is describing. Therefore, I would argue for the continuing identification of the Qumran sectarians with the Essenes.

This brings me to Murphy-O'Connor's Babylonian hypothesis. As stated by Fitzmyer, Murphy-O'Connor has suggested that Qumran was settled by a group of Jews who returned from Babylon in the mid-second century, in response to the success of the Maccabean revolt. Not finding things as they expected, they withdrew from the Jerusalem community and settled at Qumran. Murphy-O'Connor bases most of his theory on evidence from the Damascus Document.<sup>9</sup> This theory has not received much support because of two dubious suppositions: 1) the identification of Damascus in the

<sup>7</sup> Vermes.282.

<sup>8</sup> Philip R. Davies, "The Birthplace of the Essenes: Where is 'Damascus?'" *Revue de Qumran* 14 (4, 1990), 503-519.

<sup>9</sup> J. Murphy-O'Connor, "The Essenes and their History," *RB* 81 (1974), 215-244.

Damascus document with Babylon, and 2) the supposition of a second century return. As far as is known, nowhere else in the literature of the Second Temple is Damascus used as a code for Babylon. Why not just say Babylon? But Murphy-O'Connor points out that Damascus is equated with a land of exile, and that the place of exile is always Babylon in later Jewish literature. Even if this equation is accepted, however, the second objection looms. Why posit a return in the second century? There is no evidence elsewhere in the scrolls for such a return, and the text of the Damascus Document is at best ambiguous. The term *שְׂבִי יִשְׂרָאֵל* which Murphy-O'Connor translates as "the returnees of Israel," may also be translated "those who repent in Israel," and, in the context of the entire scroll, makes better sense. Finally, the group at Qumran, which we have identified as the Essenes, appears to have deep roots in *Palestinian Judaism*, adopting ideas cherished earlier in Palestine, in particular the solar calendar. Evidence for this is found in the prevalence of books such as I Enoch 72-82 (the Astronomical Book) and Jubilees (14 copies) from the early phase of habitation at Qumran. Unless Murphy-O'Connor's group made a radical adaptation to Palestinian practices and beliefs almost immediately upon arrival, it is difficult to accept a second century Babylonian origin for the group. It is not yet clear what Damascus stands for in the Damascus Document, but a second century Babylonian origin for the group at Qumran seems untenable.

Finally, I would like to comment on the contribution the Dead Sea Scrolls has made to Old Testament textual criticism. As mentioned by Fitzmyer, complete or fragmentary copies of every book of the Old Testament were found at Qumran, with the exception of Esther. I have been informed by Emile Puech that J.T. Milik will publish, in the next volume of *Revue de Qumran*, fragments of an Aramaic text that he has labelled 'proto-Esther'! That is exciting news for Esther scholars, myself included! If Esther did exist in an Aramaic form at Qumran, that would give 100% representation of the Hebrew Bible at Qumran.

The field of Old Testament textual criticism has also undergone a revolution owing to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Scholars who had discounted the reliability of the Septuagint were put to shame by the existence of Hebrew texts at Qumran which appeared to be prototypes of the Septuagint translations. The existence side-by-side at Qumran of different versions of the same biblical book led Frank Moore Cross to propose his theory of local texts as originating in Palestine, Egypt and Babylon. The geographical designations were never meant to be stringent (after all, they were all found in the Qumran caves!), but the idea of grouping witnesses together according to type lies at the heart of Cross's theory. This theory has been vigorously attacked by Emanuel Tov, among others, who argues that it is anachronistic to designate texts by their agreement with witnesses (the Masoretic text, the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch) which received their final form only after the destruction of the Qumran community. Tov sees a much more complicated evolution for the biblical text, and resists the idea of grouping texts together, although he admits to the existence of a proto-Samaritan group at Qumran. As study on these texts progresses, it seems fair to say that certain strands, or families of texts are clear in each separate biblical book (or group of books). For example, in the Pentateuch we have a clear proto-Samaritan strand, exemplified by 4Qpaleo-Exod<sup>m</sup>, 4QNum<sup>b</sup> and 4QPentateuchal Paraphrases. Textual critics are now speaking about groups of texts which exhibit similar characteristics, the most complete examples of which often are the Masoretic text, the Septuagint, and the Samaritan Pentateuch. This is a modification of the original Cross theory.

As Fitzmyer has pointed out, the discovery of the Qumran texts has increased our knowledge about Second Temple Judaism exponentially. 1992 will mark the 40th anniversary of the discovery of Cave IV. Forty years is a biblical generation, so the second generation of Qumran studies has begun. I hope the work of this second generation will prove as fruitful and thought-provoking as that of its predecessor.