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Early Christianity and Essenes - Convergence or Hostility?

Abstract

Christianity emerged and developed in a Jewish environment already divided into religious groups with semi-exclusive pretensions. Among these, the Essenes were to be closest to the spiritual principles of Christianity. However, the theological foundation would be so different that it would not allow mergers, only isolated and one-way conversions from the Essenes to Christianity.

Keywords

inspiration, prophecy, purity, holiness, conversion



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Introduction

The discovery of manuscripts and the monastic settlement at Qumran in Palestine in 1947 entailed a genuine effervescence in scientific research, which focused both on the analysis and appreciation of the manuscripts found and on understanding the possible relationships between the early Church and the group of Essenes in Palestine in the first Christian century.

The last level of research proved particularly interesting for Christians. The principles of community life, spiritual dedication to studying the Scriptures, and the cultic life of the Essenes produced the assumption (though isolated in the scientific community!) that Christianity itself might have been the “powerful” product of the Essenes, through its main initiators, John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth.

1 What do we know about the Essenes?

The most essential accounts concerning the Essenes come mainly from two Jewish contemporaries of the group, namely, Philo of Alexandria (15/10 BC - AD 54, who called them “*Esenoi*”) and Flavius Josephus (AD 37- c. 100 – “*Essaioi*”). But Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79, historian and prefect of the Roman fleet in the Gulf of Pompeii) also had knowledge of these people, referring to them in Latin as “*Essenes*”¹, in his work *Natural History*.² Explaining the name of *Essene* still calls for debate, as they called themselves in an obscure, cryptic manner, a veritable *play on words* using several meanings, such as: “*seers*” (in the sense of

¹ Constantin Daniel, *Esenienii și manuscrisele de la Marea Moartă*, Ed. Herald, București, 2022, p. 108.

² *Istoria naturală*, V, 15, apud Pr. prof. dr. Vasile Mihoc, Lect. Dr. Daniel Mihoc, Pr. asist. Ioan Mihoc, *Introducere în studiul Noului Testament, Curs pentru anul I*, Sibiu, 2007, p. 30.

prophets), “*the numerous ones*”³, or “*sons of Sadoq*”, phonetically and graphically similar to “*sons of justice*”, or “*sons of light*”, that is, in a spiritualized interpretation, “*those who see*” (the truth and God)⁴.

The term *Essene*, should one consider it as deriving from the Hebrew “*asaia*”, would mean “*healer*”, i.e., in the current terms – “*doctor*”. This meaning is quite consistent with the concerns of some of them, who were bent on treating diseases and became genuine therapists, which also included the exorcism of the sick. Therefore, a spiritual approach to the human condition!

But the name “*seers*”, i.e., “*prophets*,” fits the Essenes especially because of the vast prophetic literature they wrote.⁵

The abovementioned Jewish writers gave us an extremely positive image of the Essenes, whom they describe as people very concerned with spiritual life, prayer, authentic observance of the Law (i.e., relieved of Pharisaic complications), moral people, dedicated to peace, who refused the use of weapons,⁶ withdrawn from the world, primarily preoccupied with analysing and deciphering the divine revelation written until then. But the same authors specify that the Essenes were also concerned with spiritual performances that might be achieved continuously, through a deeper relationship with God (including therapeutic powers), which could lead to new revelations; they were hence concerned with the “*art*” of prophesying.

Their geographical location should consider the more secluded localities of Palestine during the centuries of transition to the Christian era (intentionally avoiding the big cities), among which Qumran would become emblematic. But the Essenes also lived in

³ Flavius Josephus, *Istoria războiului iudeilor împotriva romanilor*, II, 8, 9, Ed. Hasefer, București, 1997, p. 161.

⁴ Constantin Daniel, *Esenienii și manuscrisele de la Marea Moartă*, p. 114.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

⁶ Athanase Negoită, *Manuscrisele eseniene de la Marea moartă*, Ed. Științifică, București, 1993, p. 26.

impressive numbers both in the Nile Delta and in the desert of Egypt⁷, probably in the same mountain near Alexandria, Nitria, as a suitable refuge for the spiritually hungry Jews who were dwelling in this country at the same time.

The principled coagulation of the Essenes into a separatist group is not an isolated phenomenon of Jewish society. In the 4th-3rd centuries BC, there were already tendencies of those who thought and lived religiously in a certain way to associate in order to form groups that became increasingly defined by spiritual ideology⁸, political attitude and even clothing identification.⁹ By the 2nd century BC, the main Jewish religious groups, that is, the Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes, had historically stood out. The differences between the mentalities of these groups were to cause mutual hostility, leading to declared, public rivalries, particularly between the Pharisees and Sadducees of the 2nd-1st centuries BC; meanwhile, the Essenes preferred to isolate themselves from society so as to especially enjoy the study of revelation and the satisfaction of energetic communion with Yahweh. Thus, for the Essenes, there was already a divine revelation contained in the consecrated, canonical Jewish writings, 22 in number (also taken up by Christians in what they would refer to as the "*Old Testament*"), but they seemed to know something else as well!! That much other information could be obtained about the supernatural world, such as God's relationship with angels,

⁷ Philo's statements outline an impressive number of Jews in his time, in the city of Alexandria and the localities in the Nile Delta, where there were about one million Jews at the beginning of the Christian era. Constantin Daniel, *Esenienii și manuscrisele de la Marea Moartă*, p. 45.

⁸ Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, who lived in Palestine in the second half of the 1st century, justified the defeat of the Jewish people by the Romans by the Jews' continued tendency to dissociate on more or less religious grounds, noting the twenty-four "*heretical*" groups that had been formed. *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁹ The Essenes would always wear white attire. Flavius Josephus, *Istoria războiului iudeilor împotriva romanilor*, II, 8, 3, p. 159.

humans, and the universe, or past or future realities, achieved only through the spiritual performances gained by those in direct contact with Yahweh.

Therefore, a unique thing about the Essenes, compared to the contemporary Jewish Pharisees and scholars in Palestine, was that divine revelation had not ended, and the believer cleansed from sin could benefit from this immortal source if he had become alienated from the world and was willing to fully open his mind and heart to Yahweh. Moreover, in terms of the possibility of traditional intercession between man and God provided for by the Law, the corrupt priesthood of the Jewish temple, especially since the assumption of the episcopal office by the Hasmonean dynasty (152 BC), no longer corresponded to its authentic mediating and sanctifying mission.¹⁰

Hence their determination to separate themselves, a certain Essene community organization, a hierarchy of members, a discipline of life, a search for purity, a specific worship sustained by a clergy of their own,¹¹ an assiduous concern for biblical reading, and, what interests us most, the emergence of prophets within the community, capable of speaking “*inspiringly*” and authoritatively about the mysteries of divinity and man. These people would have enough credibility to prophesy and record their revelations, creating genuine “*books*,” which were to become a veritable treasure of the community, found after twenty centuries by archaeologists in the caves of Qumran¹².

¹⁰ [Crestinortodox.ro/editoriale/manuscrisele de la Marea Moarta-70328.html](http://Crestinortodox.ro/editoriale/manuscrisele_de_la_Marea_Moarta-70328.html).

¹¹ The Essenes had their own priests who offered specific prayers and blessed the meal. Flavius Josephus, *Istoria războiului iudeilor împotriva romanilor*, II, 8, 5, p. 160.

¹² The most important of them were *The Damascus Document*, *The Rule of the Community*, *Hymns*, *The War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness*, *the Copper Scroll*, *The Book of Jubilees*, *The Testament of the*

1.1 The Essenes, people of purity, prayer and divine revelation

The archaeological research launched after 1947 at Qumran revealed a remarkable library hidden in 11 caves and an establishment built according to communal, “*monastic*” principles, to provide a small location, isolated from the world, to people obviously concerned with a spiritual calling. Archaeology has confirmed the principles of community life of the inhabitants of Qumran, which correspond to those related by witnesses of antiquity: assembly hall, kitchen and pantry, study rooms (“*scriptorium*”), water cisterns for ablutions (ritual washings) and space for community prayer, etc.¹³

Their preoccupations with the inspired text can also be seen in their desire to have more copies of all the biblical texts consecrated at that time¹⁴, in addition to numerous creations of their own: commentaries on canonical texts, but mainly writings specific to the community, springing from among effervescent members on the prophetic line. The more than 40,000 fragments found in the caves actually make up 930 manuscripts, of which 750 are in Hebrew, 150 in Aramaic and a few in Greek.¹⁵

But no text from the New Testament collection has been found, although most Christian books would circulate successfully in Palestine and the Mediterranean basin, beginning in AD 44¹⁶, and increasingly until AD 70, when 22 of the 27 books of the New

Twelve Patriarchs, etc. Athanase Negoită, *Manuscrisele eseniene de la Marea moartă*, pp. 26-42.

¹³ <http://virtualqumran.huji.ac.il/tour/VirtualTourIntroduction.htm>.

¹⁴ 14 copies of the same book have also been found.

¹⁵ [Crestinortodox.ro/editoriale/manuscrisele de la Marea Moarta-70328.html](http://Crestinortodox.ro/editoriale/manuscrisele_de_la_Marea_Moarta-70328.html).

¹⁶ The year AD 43 or 44 is considered to be the year the Gospel According to Matthew, the first written gospel of Christians, was written in Jerusalem or Palestine. XXX, *Studiul Noului Testament pentru Institutele teologice*, Ed. IBMBOR, București, 1984, p. 67.

Testament were already written, and Palestine would be ravaged by the war of the Jews with the Romans, dissolving the community at Qumran.

What should be emphasized is that this community was intentionally placed in a secluded space of the province of Judea precisely to benefit from the privacy of an area devoid of population, due to soil infertility. This aspect points to the concern of some people to be isolated from the surrounding society, to integrate into a specific programme, combining work with religious experience. And this space itself, located at the edge of the Judean desert, with its distant view of the Moab Mountains, over the water mirror of the Dead Sea¹⁷, would provide the traditional propitious framework for the manifestation of divine revelation, so biblically connected to God's great revelations in the wilderness (Genesis 28:10-15; 32:24-30; Exodus 3:2-10; 19:3-6).

But there were certainly other Essene groups in Palestine, in specific, isolated locations, or even in ordinary localities; Flavius Josephus mentioned some differences in thought and practice among the Essenes, which allows for, or even indicates separate communities¹⁸.

Qumran is, however, located close to Jerusalem, 20 km away, and 14 km from Jericho, which means that the Essenes there were not completely cut off from the social environment of Palestine, from the circulation of information, being able to reach the mentioned cities quite fast. This ensured contact with the social or political news of the country, and we may assume that the Essenes quickly found out about the appearance of the Baptist at the Jordan, or about the apparently controversial (but especially

¹⁷ Pliny the Elder geographically places the Essenes precisely in this location relative to the Dead Sea. Pr. prof. dr. Vasile Mihoc, Lect. Dr. Daniel Mihoc, Pr. asist. Ioan Mihoc, *Introducere în studiul Noului Testament, Curs pentru anul I*, p. 30.

¹⁸ Flavius Josephus, *Istoria războiului iudeilor împotriva romanilor*, II, 8, 13, p. 163.

growing) personality of Jesus of Nazareth, in Galilee, then in Judea.

The actual buildings found by archaeologists at Qumran did not provide enough space for all Essenes, estimated at thousands of members even in Antiquity.¹⁹ These buildings could accommodate only a few dozen people, but some caves nearby exhibit signs of long habitation and the practice of using the simplest oriental variant of living in the area should be considered as well: the tent made of durable fabrics, or the hut.²⁰ In this case, the capacity of the settlement could be greatly expanded.

Therefore, Qumran corresponds to the descriptions of Antiquity regarding the Essenes, and the large number of members, exceeding the built space, is also proven by the large tableware collection found here, i.e., over 1,000 kitchen utensils.²¹ The find supports both the impressive number of members and the scrupulousness mentioned by Flavius, that each Essene would eat from his/her own plate, that is, in a deep spirit of the rules of purity,²² as opposed to the Jewish practice of the time, of eating communally at the table, all from the same bowl²³ (Matthew 26:23).

The Essenes practised eating daily food only in a community spirit, with a stable schedule and common food, which could, in

¹⁹ Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus claim there were 4,000 of them, compared to the Pharisees estimated at 6,000 people. Constantin Daniel, *Esenienii și manuscrisele de la Marea Moartă*, p. 9; Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan, Diac. Prof. Dr. Emilian Cornișescu, *Arheologie Biblică*, Ed. IBMBOR, București, 1994, p. 345.

²⁰ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan, Diac. Prof. Dr. Emilian Cornișescu, *Arheologie Biblică*, pp. 116-117.

²¹ <http://virtualqumran.huji.ac.il/tour/VirtualTourIntroduction.htm>.

²² Flavius Josephus, *Istoria războiului iudeilor împotriva romanilor*, II, 8, 5, p. 160.

²³ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan, Diac. Prof. Dr. Emilian Cornișescu, *Arheologie Biblică*, p. 121.

principle, offset the ritual of bloody sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem, where joint ritual meals were held.²⁴ And this way of life would feed their imagination to consider themselves a genuine community of priests.²⁵ It has been estimated that up to 150 people could eat simultaneously in the great hall of the settlement of Qumran.²⁶ But in the case of a huge number of members, it was possible to practise dining in successive groups, within the limits of the tableware mentioned.

The most resonant note of this group, which is of particular interest to us, is the promotion of the gift of prophecy among the members of the community, even with public manifestations (when the Essene prophets wanted to manifest themselves), because it expresses their certainty that they were in an ideal relationship with God, preferring to die in case of false prophecy,²⁷ which would have meant “*denial*” of Yahweh.

An image controversy emerges in terms of this subject. Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus basically present a reserved attitude of these people, intimately concerned with the communion of prayer, selfless work, spiritual peace and religious meditation, with therapeutic nuances, but also with great scrupulousness regarding personal purity threatened by sinners, causing a natural desire for isolation from strangers. But Flavius also provides episodes that highlight the prophetic capacity of some of the Essenes, manifested in public, in cities, outside their community, being even accompanied by disciples and admirers.

There are obvious reasons to believe that, in principle, the Essenes had no particular interest in manifesting themselves out-

²⁴ Ibidem,

²⁵ Pr. prof. dr. Vasile Mihoc, Lect. Dr. Daniel Mihoc, Pr. asist. Ioan Mihoc, *Introducere în studiul Noului Testament, Curs pentru anul I*, p. 32.

²⁶ <http://virtualqumran.huji.ac.il/tour/VirtualTourIntroduction.htm>.

²⁷ Flavius Josephus, *Antichități iudaice*, 13, 11, 2, Volumul 2, Ed. Hasefer, București, 2001, p. 164.

side the community, in the Jewish towns and villages of Palestine, as they were in need of neither popularity, nor proselytism. Compared to them, the Pharisees wanted to continually assert themselves as spiritual leaders of the people (Matthew 23:2-28). However, proselytizing could certainly bring concrete advantages to the Essene groups, since a new member always had to donate his material goods to the community in which he was to integrate, cancelling his established mentalities: private property, the utility of slavery, the use of luxury and gluttony.²⁸ Any donation could have been a substantial material help for the rest of the community.²⁹

Beyond this aspect of abolishing the “*social-natural*” conceptions of the time, we have reason to believe in a genuine force of attraction of the Essenes towards their ideal life (beyond the display of prophetic capacities), a life lived in the light of revelation and *concerns for the immortality of the soul*, with the prospect of universal judgement that God would make. “*These are the Divine doctrines of the Essenes about the soul, which lay an unavoidable bait for such as have once had a taste of their philosophy,*”³⁰ Flavius Josephus confessed. Therefore, the inner call to God relying on the value of the pure, clean soul, ready to ascend to heaven, was the engine and justification of the Essenes’ life. Hence, the fundamental requirement of ideal scrupulousness towards everything that could defile man.³¹ It required members to keep away from anything impure (food and body, including the sinners of this world) by practising daily full-body ritual washing

²⁸ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan, Diac. Prof. Dr. Emilian Cornișescu, *Arheologie Biblică*, p. 346.

²⁹ Constantin Daniel, *Esenienii și manuscrisele de la Marea Moartă*, p. 54.

³⁰ Flavius Josephus, *Istoria războiului iudeilor împotriva romanilor*, II, 8, 11, p. 163.

³¹ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan, Diac. Prof. Dr. Emilian Cornișescu, *Arheologie Biblică*, pp. 348-349.

before eating in community (and not just hands before any meal, like the Pharisees, Matthew 15:2).

Based on this requirement, we would be tempted to see the Essenes as people absolutely isolated from society, ideally living the joy of their religious intimacy with God. However, contrary to the requirement of purity, Flavius Josephus presents several Essene prophets who manifested themselves without reservation in public. An Essene named Judas, “*who never missed the truth in his predictions,*” accompanied by friends and disciples (an obvious group in society), in Jerusalem in the 2nd century BC, in the time of King John Hyrcanus’ sons, prophesied certain immediate events with dynastic implications for the Hasmonean royalty and the history of the Jewish people.³²

Another Essene, Manahem, prophesied to the young Herod the Great of his future royal life as being God’s choice at a time when no one could have envisaged such destiny.³³ The immediate conclusion is that King Herod had good reason to appreciate and support the Essenes throughout his life in strengthening the secluded communities of this group; and to persecute the Sadducees and Pharisees as hypocrites and sanctimonious because they too claimed to have such spiritual prerogatives.³⁴ As a sign of complete confidence, Herod the Great even exempted the Essenes from taking the oath of allegiance that all Jews had to take before the king. And the Essene Manahem would eventually even become vice-president of the Sanhedrin,³⁵ as a slap in the face to the Pharisees and Sadducees, powerful parties in the frictions of political domination.

³² Flavius Josephus, *Antichități iudaice*, 13, 11, 2, p. 164.

³³ *Ibidem*, 15, 10, 5. pp. 313-314.

³⁴ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan, Diac. Prof. Dr. Emilian Cornițescu, *Arheologie Biblică*, p. 333, 338.

³⁵ Pr. prof. dr. Vasile Mihoc, Lect. Dr. Daniel Mihoc, Pr. asist. Ioan Mihoc, *Introduce în studiul Noului Testament, Curs pentru anul I*, p. 31.

Later, another Essene, Simon, publicly predicted to the tetrarch Archelaus, one of Herod's sons, about the unfortunate future of his reign.³⁶

In conclusion, although the Essenes basically lived a secluded life, some of them would spend their time in the villages and cities of Palestine (even in the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem), by virtue of their prophetic authority, accompanied by admirers, onlookers and disciples. These people must have had great prophetic authority among the people (more than the Pharisees), indirectly proselytizing because of their credibility. And it would not be without importance if we considered the Saviour's warnings in the *Sermon on the Mount*, regarding false prophets of His time (Matthew 7:15-20), to be an accurate reference to these itinerant Essenes.³⁷

Interestingly, the discovery of numerous horoscopes by archaeologists at Qumran proves that this prophetic ability that some Essenes acquired was also based on the use of "technical" methods, such as resorting to astrology of Mesopotamian origin, endowed with cryptic documents and horoscopes.³⁸

The very Flavius Josephus proclaimed himself to be an admirer and disciple of the Essenes, exhibiting a certain ability to make predictions, as a true "art of foretelling the truth", which could be acquired through a special exercise. He confesses to having successfully prophesied about the duration of the siege of the city of Yodfat, which he administered in Galilee, in the first stage of the war with the Romans (AD 66-67), but especially about the bright

³⁶ Flavius Josephus, *Antichități iudaice*, 17, 13, 3, p. 430.

³⁷ The Orientalist Constantin Daniel makes a convincing demonstration in this regard, *Esenienii și manuscrisele de la Marea Moartă*, pp. 119-120.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 29; Athanase Negoită, *Manuscrisele eseniene de la Marea moartă*, p. 42.

future of the Roman general Vespasian and his son, Titus, i.e., acquiring the status of emperor of the Romans,³⁹ thus securing an unprecedented imperial protection.

Beyond public prophetic manifestations, the Essenes must have been people of the community, where their lives were conducted on the principle of abandoning personal property, working for the benefit of others, and intensive study of revelation. Those who adhered to this life had to take a solemn oath to comply with all organizational requirements, but especially with those of spiritual moral nature, practising the virtues (among which the spirit of justice was paramount), respecting the hierarchy and secrets of the community, that is, the teachings received, the content of the holy books and, in particular, the names of angels known and circulated among themselves.⁴⁰ Based on this principle, it has been concluded that angels were held in high esteem in Essene spirituality and were considered essential intermediaries between humans and God.⁴¹

1.2 Essene exclusivism

The Essenes always lived in groups, in the same house (or housing complex), in ordinary localities, with other people, but mainly in compact, secluded communities, Qumran being the main example, but certainly not the only settlement of its kind in Palestine. The intention of isolation succeeded:

- in providing the tranquillity of the members of the group by excluding the curious people;

³⁹ Flavius Josephus, *Istoria războiului iudeilor împotriva romanilor*, III, 8, 9, p. 280.

⁴⁰ Pr. prof. dr. Vasile Mihoc, Lect. Dr. Daniel Mihoc, Pr. asist. Ioan Mihoc, *Introducere în studiul Noului Testament, Curs pentru anul I*, p. 31. The "secret" names still remain unknown, with only Michael, Gabriel, Sariel and Raphael mentioned.

⁴¹ Constantin Daniel, *Esenienii și manuscrisele de la Marea Moartă*, p. 103

- in protecting the informational treasure constituted on the basis of the investigation of the Scriptures and the mysteries of divinity, through revelations with theological content, or doctrinal dreams, in the manner of consecrated biblical prophets.

Whence, an attitude of self-sufficiency of the Essenes in their spiritual performance, which excludes a priori everything that might have challenged (or renewed) them from outside, that is, any possible entrustment of the divine Truth to other people, who were not part of the community (and the history of Judaism mentions quite a few false messiahs, Acts 5:36-37).

To the Essenes, the Sadducees were the guilty opportunists of the compromised clergy at the temple, all the more reason for not participating in the sacrifices and life of the temple in Jerusalem. The Sadducees patronized the affairs in the temple courtyard, that is, they sold animals that could be offered as sacrifices (lambs, kids, sheep, rams, calves, oxen, pigeons) to the believers, through intermediaries, at a special price; the animals were verified according to the requirements of the Law (Leviticus 1:2-17; 22:21, etc.) and were the only ones that could be accepted by the priests for sacrifice (Deuteronomy 17:1). But they also had people who would exchange the money of those coming from the diaspora to bring sacrifices to Jerusalem into the currency of the country (the only one with which animals could be bought in the temple). Jesus of Nazareth would also protest against this mercantilism that was in opposition to the piety which should have reigned in the temple courtyard (Matthew 20:12-13; John 2:14-16).

To the Essenes, the Pharisees and scholars were conceited people who thought they knew God by swotting up the Scriptures, but invented new rules of life with their hypocritical scrupulousness, believing that this would please Yahweh. Their immorality was concealed under the guise of piety, erupting violently when their status as holy men of God was challenged. If the Sadducees remained isolated in the temple world where they patronized re-

ligious public life, the Pharisees continually strove to be most obviously among the people, in synagogues, marketplaces, streets and alleys, in order to captivate the people's attention and adulation. Anything that threatened their dominance could not be tolerated, and the Essenes continually and obviously undermined their position as spiritual leaders of the people. But we have no mention of the public conflicts that certainly existed between them, based on the principle that both such different groups rejected one other, each considering themselves as representatives of the Divine Truth revealed to men, but treated in such a special way!

Certainly, the Essenes' exclusivism was not unknown to the Pharisees, who would have the chance of revenge after the war of AD 66-70 by excluding the Essenes from any mention of the Talmud, considering them, naturally, heretics.⁴² A true *damnatio memoriae*, quite practised in Antiquity, calling them simply and inexpressively: "*the people of Jericho*",⁴³ in reference to the proximity of Qumran with Jericho.

In this Palestinian social context, and according to the attitude outlined towards the world, the discovery of a requirement in the Essene writings, in the *Rule of Community*, to bear enmity (in secret) to all those who were not like them, generically called "*sons of darkness*",⁴⁴ that is, any person who would not share their vision and values, is not inexplicable. If they had continuous revelations through their own prophets, and they had their own priests to provide an effective liturgical service, then they should

⁴² Ibidem, p. 86.

⁴³ Constantin Daniel, *Esenienii și manuscrisele de la Marea Moartă*, p. 39.

⁴⁴ Athanase Negoită, *Manuscrisele eseniene de la Marea moartă*, p. 23.

be exclusive, because, in their opinion, they were the only authentic representatives of eschatological Israel, and the only ones who were still the true “people of God.”⁴⁵

Therefore, the Essenes present themselves in history as a group of people living mainly isolated from curious individuals, exclusive and self-sufficient, concerned with spirituality, purity, and holiness (as they understood it), with knowledge of the Scriptures, with living, communicable revelation between God and man, and with all the mysteries Yahweh could make available to the purified. This led to the accumulation of specific spiritual accents, usually transmitted orally, later noted within the community, necessarily hidden from laymen and sinners, as true expressions of their alleged prophetic genius.

Surely the personality of John the Baptist, or of the teacher Jesus of Nazareth could not have escaped the attention of the Essenes, who were interested in the pulse of the social life of brethren in Palestine and, especially, in Jerusalem. The moral stature of the Baptist, through his eloquent simplicity, but especially through the sermons delivered (Luke 3:7-18) and the practice of baptism in the Jordan with a resounding affluence, must have aroused the curiosity of some of the Essenes. But we do not know how they reacted.

And the news of Jesus of Nazareth’s wonderful power to heal “*every sickness and every infirmity among the people*” as well as His unique spiritualizing sermons certainly caught the attention of some members of Essene life. If they could like him for publicly sanctioning trading in the temple (John 2:14-16), or for exposing the Pharisees’ hypocrisy (Matthew 6:1-8, 16; 12:1-15, 38-42; 15:1-14), they certainly would not understand what did not correspond to their vision of the Messiah. That is, Jesus’ closeness to the sick, the marginalized, or, especially, those openly declared

⁴⁵ Pr. prof. dr. Vasile Mihoc, Lect. Dr. Daniel Mihoc, Pr. asist. Ioan Mihoc, *Introducere în studiul Noului Testament, Curs pentru anul I*, p. 32.

and recognized as sinners (Matthew 9:10-11; Luke 19:7). To the same extent, Jesus' willingness to foreigners, or, moreover, to Samaritans, could not be understood either (Matthew 4:23-25; 8:2-16; 15:22-28), as it did not correspond to the Essene messianic "profile".

2 The early Church in Jerusalem

The descent of the Holy Spirit on the Jewish feast of Pentecost marks the visible establishment of Christ's Church in Jerusalem, whence it would spread throughout the world (Acts 2:1-4). At that time, the book Acts of the Apostles reported that there was already a community of 120 people ready to welcome the happy event, and following the arguments of the apostolic preaching, about 3,000 were baptized on the same day (Acts 2:41).

Therefore, the historical emergence of the Church took place triumphantly, with many members at once, who would require sustained catechesis on the part of the Apostles in order to fully understand the valences of their spiritual union with the Risen Jesus Christ, a process that would lead to the inherent conclusion that they were the true Israel (Acts 2:40), the living and working community between God and men, who must protect their values before others.

These converts were primarily Jews and Gentile proselytes, who had come from the diaspora to Jerusalem (non-participants in the crime on Golgotha), eager for their encounter with God more than the people of Judea because they came from afar, motivated by a religious duty thirsting for the supernatural. In contrast, the inhabitants of Jerusalem lived too comfortably in the vicinity of the temple, unwilling to feel anything special at each feast of the year. This explains their reluctance to the apostolic sermon delivered in foreign languages at that time, which, in their national and intellectual ignorance, they would not even recognize as the

real, spoken languages of other peoples, preferring the convenient conclusion of drunkenness (Acts 2:13-15). Glossolalia would, in fact, be the first step towards the universality of the Church, testimony to the divine desire to save all humanity!

Thus, the first characteristic of the members of the Church of Pentecost is certainly cosmopolitanism, with a consistent multi-national percentage, a genuine sign of the universality of the newly established Church. And among these representatives of peoples we should first note not the Jews of the Diaspora, but the proselytes who accompanied them and who were now enthusiastically baptized. In addition, there were some Jews who had come from Galilee to the feast of Pentecost, who kept a vivid and grateful memory of the Master Jesus of Nazareth. And, probably, some Jews in Jerusalem, certainly few at first compared to the great mass of townspeople reluctant to street manifestations, even religious in nature, in a common mentality of the man familiar with the ritual of the temple, with the public differences of political parties and with the emulations of impostors to the messianic title.

These Christians organized themselves. The apostles ordained cultic meetings in the homes of those who, converted to Christianity, could accommodate a greater number of believers, and the cultic and social communion was built through catechesis, charisms and miracles, in a powerful spiritual unity, *“praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved”* (Acts 2:42-47). But the equation of members soon changed.

2.1 Diagnosis of the Church in Jerusalem

Diaspora Christians, Jews or Gentiles, soon had to return to their homes; meanwhile, the percentage of native Christians in Jerusalem or Palestine grew rapidly (Acts 4:4) as life in the Eucharistic communion with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit began to speak for itself (Acts 6:7). Christians would not hide, would not

protect the truths of faith, would not refuse dialogue with the unconverted in the temple, in homes, in the streets, or even in synagogues (Acts 5:42; 6:8-10), because they lived in a strong intensity of the heat of the Holy Spirit, which caused them to be ready for anything. Proselytism was not institutionalized; each Christian became, in the simplest way, a true missionary in his own circle of life, speaking to friends, neighbours or relatives, both about the gracious warmth of their full union with Jesus of Nazareth - the Son of God, in receiving the Holy Eucharist, and about the reverberations of the Spirit giving charisms and life. The daily Eucharist was extended in communal meals called *agape* (Acts 2:42-46), and Christian love was continually manifested through sharing of goods (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37), as a Christian life carried out concretely in love. For these people, the deep relationship with Jesus Christ, with a view to achieving the same resurrection, suddenly became the only purpose in life.

The number of Judeans becoming Christians was to increase as more and more people understood that, indeed, the Jesus whom the leaders of the people had crucified, had Risen from the dead in order to open the most desired physical and spiritual perspective to people: overcoming suffering, disease, the devil and, of course, death.

An episode that is emblematic of the power of Christian proselytism in Jerusalem was to be the sermon of the Apostle Peter delivered in the temple (Acts 3:12-26), as a consequence of the miracle of healing the lame man at the Beautiful Gate, which spontaneously entailed the conversion of about 2,000 people (Acts 4:4) coming, this time, only from Jerusalem and Judea, as, at that moment, there was no feast with an influx of pilgrims. The effect must have been fulminant, for the Pharisees, Sadducees, or Essenes in the temple or city were sufficiently impressed by the miracle, and also by the words of the Apostle, to begin to open their hearts to the great reality of the Resurrection from the dead of the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth!

The signs and wonders performed by Christians would continue, especially after a new outpouring of grace, to strengthen the sacrificial faith (Acts 4:31), making themselves popular among the people, who praised them. At the same time, it was noted that the members of the already established groups, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and certainly the Essenes (i.e. – “*none of the others*”), would not yet dare to join the members of the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 5:13). Undoubtedly, they lived in an exclusivist spirit, with great reservations towards innovations, but also in a sense of self-sufficiency, as belonging to a group that already possessed doctrinal truth, eliciting the retrospective remark of St. Paul the Apostle years later: “*Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened*”, (Romans 11:7).

2.2 Revenge of Jewish exclusivism

For several years, Christian communities in Jerusalem and other cities in Judea and Galilee became consistent through the conversion of local Jews, drawn by messianic hopes comforted by the gifts and charisms of the Holy Spirit. However, we should not forget the converts of Pentecost in the diaspora, who had to go to their homes keeping their faith in the Risen Jesus, but who certainly kept in touch with the Church in Jerusalem, either by returning on pilgrimage, or through their associates, friends or relatives, whom they advised to follow the same path of knowing the redeeming Truth. These connections were meant to enliven the life of the Church and its propagation in extra-Palestinian localities.

As the Church emerged as a divine-human society in Palestine, some Pharisees, or members of the Essene communities, especially in Galilee, were able to convert, benefiting from the living memory of Jesus of Nazareth. This statement is based on the testimony of the book Acts of the Apostles, which relates the special fact of the conversion to Christianity of many “*priests*” (from Judea or Galilee), members of the sacrificial mosaic cult practised

at the temple (Acts 6:7). The mentioned priests must have belonged to the ordinary structures of the Levitical priesthood, living in various localities of Palestine, and should not be considered the Sadducees of the organizational elite, who remained rather cold about believing in the crucified and Risen Jesus.

But the extent of the Church's development would be temporarily interrupted by the exasperated and firm reaction of the Sanhedrin and Pharisees in Jerusalem, obviously envious of the Christians' missionary success and at the same time fearful of this new "heresy" (Acts 28:22), which could not be controlled. The first massive persecution of the Church, with arrests, confiscations, imprisonments, corporal punishment, and martyrdom (Acts 7; 22:4; 1 Corinthians 15:9), occurred on AD 36, causing not only suffering and death, but also an expansion of the Church from Jerusalem to Palestine, with the exception of the Apostles who remained in Jerusalem.

Despite the Jewish exclusivism certainly manifested not only by the Sadducees and Pharisees mentioned, but also by the Essenes convinced of their direct connection with Yahweh, after a short time, the number of members of the Church of Jerusalem was restored and continued to grow, attracting people from all walks of life; the charisms of the Holy Spirit would prove, continuously and irrevocably, that, in the name of the Risen Jesus, many miracles happened, prayers were fulfilled, and the spiritual experience of the new cult was vibrant and uplifting in the highest way possible.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ St. John Chrysostom would state in the 4th century: "Whoever was baptized he straightway spake with tongues, (...) many also prophesied, and some also performed many other wonderful works. For since on their coming over from idols, without any clear knowledge or training in the ancient Scriptures, they at once on their baptism received the Spirit, yet the Spirit they saw not, for It is invisible; therefore God's grace bestowed some sensible proof of that energy". Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Comentariu la Ep. I către*

2.3 The prophets of Christians, God's "mouth" to men and His Church

Among the charisms of the early Church, the importance of prophecy should be emphasized as a possibility established in the Jewish people to communicate divine truths to people. There are, therefore, Christian prophets, beginning with the Holy Apostles (as holders of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Acts 2:3-4), who manifested this gracious communion with God in the interest of community members (Acts 5:3-10), helping in catechization, or in edifying members on doctrinal issues or matters concerning the future of individuals and community (Acts 11:27-28). Prophecy, as an obvious work of the Holy Spirit, could also be given to women, this fact being especially mentioned (Acts 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:5).

For all this missionary efficiency, the role of prophets was not exacerbated in the history of the early Church, because their characteristics and activity were not insisted on as part of the obvious gifts of the Holy Spirit. But this role should not be neglected either, because Christian prophets held a highly valued place within communities and decisively participated in consolidating faith, strengthening community life and animating Christian hearts, thus convinced that God was a Person, had a Son who had become incarnate, interacted with people and was concerned with the existence and spiritual-moral state of each person (Acts 21: 4-11).

Saint Paul the Apostle, himself the bearer of many charisms (1 Corinthians 14:18), presents a list of these divine gifts intended to support the development of the Church (1 Corinthians 12:4-7) and mentions prophecy in a prominent place (Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:28), intertwined with the church hierarchy: "*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds*

and teachers" (Ephesians 4:11). The apostle even insists on the missionary effectiveness of prophecy, saying, "If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you," (1 Corinthians 14:23-25). From this one can note the key position of the prophets of the early Church, obviously exceeding the attractiveness of the Essene prophets. Their image as Puritans and holders of the mysteries of divinity soon faded among the Jewish people, because Christianity revealed the divine mysteries without reservations and interests, in an effective communion of men and women with God, based on the feeling of love of which every man is capable.

The Christian community of Jerusalem had many prophets who helped develop the Church, carrying out catechetical missions in Palestine and beyond, going to the newly established local churches, even reaching Antioch (Acts 11:27-28). The excitement they elicited ("*Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and there was great joy...*" Acts 11:27)⁴⁷ testifies to the uplifting feeling of encounter between man and God through the mouth of Christian prophets.

In the face of the Church's charismatic evidence, there were certainly enough scrupulous people of the Law who converted to Christianity, from among the Pharisees, perhaps also from among the Essenes, both groups being attached to Mosaic values, in a different manner.

Still, the way these special converts received Jesus Christ would become a problem for the Church (especially Christians among

⁴⁷ In version B of the book *Acts of the Apostles*, XXX, *Studiul Noului Testament pentru Institutetele teologice*, p. 120.

the Pharisees, Acts 15:5). Being too tributary to the Law, these converts would accept, in principle, that Jesus was indeed an expiatory offering (Acts 3:18), a Lamb sacrificed for the redemption of the sins of the nation. But they would hold fast to the belief that this new teaching was in the extension of the Law of Moses, which had to be fully observed. And in terms of the opening of the Church to the Gentiles, they would also vehemently affirm: “*Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved*” (Acts 15:1). The number of these Christians (called “*Judaizers*” due to their attachment to conservative Judaism) must have already been large enough in Jerusalem by AD 42-44 to have the courage to rebuke the Apostle Peter for baptizing “*uncircumcised*” people at Caesarea Palestine (Acts 11:1-18). And their protest was loud enough to prompt him to explain himself to them.

In these early events of Christianity in Palestine, there is no explicit mention anywhere of an adherence on the part of the Essenes to the early Church, either individually or, much less, communally. It is obvious, however, that if there were Essenes drawn by faith in Jesus Christ, their conversion was an isolated case, without engaging the rest of the Essene communities in any way. But surely the Essenes, unimpressed by the meanings of Jesus of Nazareth, showed much hostility toward the Church. It should also be noted that the Essene laws (*Community Rule*) provided severe curses for those who abandoned the community, because it was supposed they would expose its secrets.⁴⁸

2.4 Controversies in the Church of Jerusalem

The contradictions triggered by the Christianized Pharisees (the Judaizers) escalated (which points out their considerable number in the Church of Jerusalem), with endless discussions about

⁴⁸ Athanase Negoită, *Manuscrisele eseniene de la Marea moartă*, pp. 23-24.

the role of the Mosaic Law, its prescriptions compared to the principles of the Gospel and of life in Christ (Acts 15:1). And the disputes also transferred to the diaspora, reaching Antioch in Syria (Acts 15:1-3). The contradictions led to the need for a clarifying debate, crowned with what we call the "*Apostolic Council*," which took place in 49 or 50, in Jerusalem⁴⁹ (Acts 15:6-31). Despite all the effort to clarify the divine truth, the discussions and decisions of the Council seemed to have failed to convince the Judaizing wing of the Church, recording only the conditions for the admission of pagans to baptism. And Judaizers made it their goal to go to the diaspora to spell out, in the newly established local churches, what the "*true*" conditions were for becoming a full Christian (Galatians 1:6-7; 2, 4-10).

The Judaizers would be equally consistent in this Church of Jerusalem eight years later, in AD 58, when the Apostle Paul came here accompanied by disciples laden with the great offertory which they managed to organize in three provinces (Achaea, Macedonia and Asia). With all his help and good faith, Paul was advised by the bishop of Jerusalem, James, "*brother of the Lord*," to prove his respect and adherence to the temple, the Law and Moses (Acts 21:17-26), that is, following the vision of the Pharisees (partly also of the Essenes), converted to Christianity. Indeed, these different views of what it meant to be a Christian were transmitted to the Essene communities in contact with Jewish society, jeopardizing the attractiveness of the Church through what could be considered a genuine radicalism against Mosaism.

The Apostle James, "*brother of the Lord*," the first bishop of Jerusalem (having the status of spiritual leader and godly person acknowledged even by the unconverted Pharisees), who would constantly pray in both church and temple, was able to preserve

⁴⁹ Pr. Dr. Ioan Mircea, *Dicționar al Noului Testament*, Ed. IBMBOR, București, 1995, p. 480.

a certain cohesion of this church which was facing both internal and external challenges. His success can be explained by the force of his personal example, as a devotion to all Old Testament revelation, but also as a prominent leader of the Church, like the Apostles, claiming membership to the family of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 1:14). In this latter capacity, he seems not to have used authority to impose anything on the Judaizing group, fuelling the missionary efficiency of the Church more quickly to enjoy the attraction of each new convert. His attitude can be better explained if we understand the broader context of things.

The Church already had its prophets (Acts 11:27-28; 21:9-11), who, by virtue of the grace received, would also anticipate the future threats already looming over Palestine and Jerusalem by God's will. The Saviour had prophesied the destruction of the city and the temple (Matthew 24:1-25), and by AD 70, when this happened, the race to rescue as many Jews as possible by conversion to Christianity was certainly getting fiercer. Understanding things as such, we realize that the bishop of Jerusalem, James, "*brother of the Lord*," carried a heavy burden in his soul, namely, the desire to save as many of his countrymen as possible, and therefore prayed devoutly almost continuously, in Christian communities, but also in the temple, always kneeling. In this context, with the immediate prospect of bloody punishment of the Jewish people for many sins, including the rejection of the true Messiah, contradictions about the importance of the Law in the Christian environment could no longer be important, with faith in Christ, union with Him through Eucharistic communion, hope of resurrection and salvation being a priority!!

Bishop James, brother of the Lord, did not live through the days of dramatic punishment of Jerusalem, being martyred in AD 62 by the Sadducees, who could no longer bear his presence in the

temple⁵⁰. Four years later, the all-out destructive war broke out against the Romans.

In all this account of events recorded in the book Acts of the Apostles, the first ecclesiastical history, there is no explicit text about possible interference between the Church and the group of Essenes, only assumptions about the intersection of members and ideas. A proof of this can be the canonical Epistle of the Apostle Jude, brother of the Lord⁵¹, which, in verses 14-16, speaks of the ancestor Enoch, according to the knowledge of the apocryphal book of *Enoch*, certainly written in Essene circles.⁵²

The known issues about the evolution of the Christian community of the Church of Jerusalem do not in any way validate a certain presence of members with Essene's views. There are commonalities in the lives of the early Christians and Essene principles, such as the community of goods or the daily communal meals of members (Acts 2:44-46; 4:32. 34-37; 5:1-11), but the motivation, along with theological and gracious support, was utterly different.

The war against the Romans would occur in stages over four years, from AD 66 to 70. The Christians would flee Jerusalem and Palestine, indeed warned by their own prophets. The second part of the war (AD 69-70) was to bring the destruction of Jerusalem and, implicitly, of the Essenes in Judea, approximately one million casualties. Many Essenes were captured and exemplarily tormented by the Romans for refusing to abjure their specific

⁵⁰ Pr. prof. dr. Ioan Rămureanu, pr. prof. dr. Milan Sešan, pr. prof. dr. Teodor Bodogae, *Istoria Bisericească Universală*, Ediția a III-a, Editura IBMBOR, București 1987, p. 67.

⁵¹ XXX, *Studiul Noului Testament pentru Institutele teologice*, p. 298.

⁵² Constantin Daniel, *Esenienii și manuscrisele de la Marea Moartă*, p. 114. It is not certain that the Apostle Jude read the book written by the Essenes because many oral traditions, on various topics, circulated among the Jews in Palestine, in the first century AD; XXX, *Studiul Noului Testament pentru Institutele teologice*, p. 285.

faith and traditions. Flavius Josephus mentioned regarding the Essenes: *“The war with the Romans gave abundant evidence what great souls they had in their trials, wherein, although they were tortured and distorted, burnt and torn to pieces, and went through all kinds of instruments of torment, that they might be forced either to blaspheme their legislator (Moses), or to eat what was forbidden them, yet could they not be made to do either of them, no, nor once to flatter their tormentors, or to shed a tear; but they smiled in their very pains, and laughed those to scorn who inflicted the torments upon them, and resigned up their souls with great alacrity, as expecting to receive them again.”*⁵³ Despite this terrible persecution by the Romans, which foretold the torments to which Christians would be subjected in the future, the Essene movement did not disappear, some of its members being mentioned in Christian works of the following centuries.⁵⁴

Conclusions

- The Essene community had precise rules regarding members, hierarchy, and community regulations. They had priests, prophets like Moses, and a written thesaurus of revelation. Therefore, they did not need any radical change through adherence to Christianity.
- The Essenes valued the community’s traditional exegesis and the writings of their own prophets too much to allow the introduction of doctrinal texts from outside their community. Therefore, no fragment of Christian apostolic writings has been found in the caves of Qumran.

⁵³ Flavius Josephus, *Istoria războiului iudeilor împotriva romanilor*, II, 8, 10, p. 162.

⁵⁴ Hippolytus and Porphyry quoted by St. Cyril of Alexandria in P.G., vol. 76, col. 776, apud Constantin Daniel, *Esenienii și manuscrisele de la Marea Moartă*, p. 30; or Epiphanius of Salamis, *ibidem* pp. 31, 53.

- The leaders of the Essene community had great authority in the eyes of their members, built on spiritual foundations, so they could not allow faith in a Messiah from outside, much less from a dusty Galilee town, a discouraging obscure origin (*"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"* John I, 46).
- There is a status of holiness that the members of the two communities, Essene and Christian, acquire, a genuine desire to have a pure life, but the projection of receiving and perpetuating this status is totally different. Christians receive it through the Holy Mysteries and the growing communion of the Holy Spirit, which is superlatively expressed through charisms (prophecy being highly appreciated); the Essenes – through prayer, daily ritual washings in the purifying water, study to deepen knowledge and extreme scrupulousness to any impurity.⁵⁵
- There are similarities between the Essenes and early Christianity in the organization of community life, daily communal meals, or lack of interest in material goods, but the differences are radical, as Christians practiced selfless love for their gracious union with the Risen Jesus Christ. The Essenes loved only their own kind.⁵⁶
- Although the Essenes and Christians would have a significant common point, the belief in the immortality of the soul and the determining value of good deeds in the perspective of the afterlife, for Christians eternal life was to be conditioned by the believer's faith in and identification with the crucified and

⁵⁵ Flavius Josephus, *Istoria războiului iudeilor împotriva romanilor*, II, 8, 10, p. 162: „Now after the time of their preparatory trial is over, they are parted into four classes; and so far are the juniors inferior to the seniors, that if the seniors should be touched by the juniors, they must wash themselves, as if they had intermixed themselves with the company of a foreigner”.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, II, 8, 2, p. 158

Risen Jesus. The Essenes would stick to the spiritual, moral model set by the Law of Moses.

- The Essenes continued to exist after AD 70 and were historically recorded in the centuries to come, indicating that they were theoretically not absorbed by Christianity. Hostility towards all those who were not like them, the “sons of light,” had existed since the beginning of the Essene movement.

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