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The Qumran Baptism

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Qumran

The Qumran community was composed of Jews who considered themselves as the elect remnant of Israel, who would emerge in the last days from the purging judgement of God. In order to prepare for this judgement, they advocated a renewal of the covenant of Moses by a strict repentance and a new obedience to the requirements of the covenant. Naturally, this greatly influenced their lives.

(A) Identification of the Qumran Sect

There is no certainty as to what the members of the Qumran sect called themselves. The term, Qumran, has been ascribed to them by contemporary scholars. However, some scholars refer to them as Zealots, Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. Among the authorities concerned with this problem some believe they were Zealots. The Zealots, who were opposed by some Pharisees according to Finkelstein, rejected all compromise with Rome and acknowledged only God as the ruler of Palestine. Russell says of the Zealots that it is wrong to regard them simply as a radical group within the state who stirred up trouble with the Romans. They were essentially a company of Jewish patriots motivated by deep religious convictions. On the other hand, Zealots were fanatically brave and reckless men who were ready to strike for independence regardless of the odds. However, other scholars do not share this hypothesis because it is not supported by the

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literary, archaeological, and palaeographical evidence found at Qumran.

Some scholars believe that it is highly improbable that Qumran was a Pharisaic community. Some Pharisees may have been in Qumran but it is most unlikely that they comprised a very large segment of the population.

Finally, could the people at Qumran be Essenes? And, if so, were the Essenes as described in the writings of Josephus, Philo, and Pliny the Elder, the same people who settled at Qumran (4 B.C.-68 A.D.)? Most scholars accept the theory that the Qumranians were a branch of the Essene movement.

Although many scholars have presented considerable evidence in support of the Essene theory, it is not a proved fact; yet it is the soundest theory.

(B) Geographic Location of Qumran

The site of Qumran may be the ancient salt city, the valley of Achor, the site of Secacah, or none of these. Khirbet Qumran is the name of the site that lies approximately four to ten miles south of Jericho in Palestine. The etymology of the word Qumran is obscure. It is called Khirbet by the Arabs meaning a hill with ruins on it or ruins alone. The area of Qumran has been called the Wilderness.

The meaning of wilderness is questioned. The Hebrew word *midbar* means pasturage, wilderness, steppe, or frequently a defined tract of wilderness or the wilderness of a particular region. It also means grazing land and the Greek word *eremos* means a lonely, uncultivated, uninhabited place.

While some express skepticism about the meaning of wilderness, others claim that it was nothing more than a non-local expression in near eastern mythologies. Yet, geological and meteorological data seem to justify its meaning as the wilderness of Sinai or the wilderness of Judaea. In any case, the wilderness was a natural place for those who were dissatisfied with existing conditions as well as for those who wanted a rendezvous place

relatively free of detection. Whether it is accepted in the wider or the narrower sense of the word, the wilderness of Judaea was the activity area of the Qumran people.

(C) Time of Occupation

Archaeology shows there were three main periods of occupation of the Qumran site, as follows : The first quarter of the first century, B.C., or earlier than 31 B.C. when a severe earthquake shook Judaea ; 4 B.C. to June 68 A.D. when the Roman army under Vespasian destroyed it ; 132-135 A.D. during the short-lived second Jewish revolt. It is the second occupation of the area of Qumran (4 B.C.-68 A.D.) which concerns us.

(D) Reason for Occupation

The conditions of Palestine in the first century A.D. were not stable. The Romans were not in complete military control of the country but were a great menace to the Palestinian Jew. Both politically and religiously, the Jewish priests were the authorities during the first century A.D. when the Judaeian area of Palestine was in perpetual fever of religious excitement. It was inevitable that there would be a clash between Rome and Palestine. Rome avoided internal interference as much as possible ; however, the Roman procurators of Judaea were mostly irresponsible men. Whether some Jews went to Qumran from different areas of Palestine for political, military, or strictly religious motives, or a combination of these motives is not certain, but it seems to have been primarily for religious motives.

(E) Archaeological Evidence

From the *Manual of Discipline* it is clear that "baptisms" were prescribed for purification. Archaeological evidence shows that there were elaborate cisterns and basins to supply large amounts of water to the community. De Vaux, the archaeologist, made the following observations : (1) All cisterns except two, not counting the basins attached to them, are equipped with a large flight of steps

descending into them. The upper steps are divided by low partitions, which form several parallel descents. Caution must be exercised in accepting the belief that these cisterns may have been used for ritual baths, because similar cisterns in the same period and in the same area have been discovered that definitely did not have a ritualistic function; (2) The Qumran cisterns were probably merely cisterns; (3) There are, however, two small basins with flights of steps and these are certainly baths, but it is impossible to determine whether the baths had a ritual significance.

Brownlee¹ states that it is the nature of the community rather than the distinctiveness of the cisterns themselves that makes it probable that some of them may have served as bathing pools. One of these cisterns, he says, was constructed indoors, which lends credence to the bathing theory.

Likewise Cross,² and Sutcliffe,³ believe that the cisterns were places for the storage of water during the rainy season of winter and early spring. The summer months were practically rainless so that a good supply of water was required for the needs of the community. Both Milik⁴ and Driver agree that the water system, with its aqueducts and canals, was linked together, but it is unknown for what purposes the tanks, cisterns and communal basins were used. Fritsch⁵ states that the different arrangements and grouping of steps indicate that they were used for baptismal or ablution rites. According to Cross,⁶ if the Qumranians practised a ritual baptism, they probably would have used the Jordan River or the waters of Ain Feshkha near Qumran instead of the waters from the cisterns or basins. Allegro⁷ suggests that at least two of the cisterns

¹ W. H. Brownlee, "John the Baptist in the New Light of Ancient Scrolls", *Interpretation*, 1955, p. 39.

² Frank Moore Cross, Jr., *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961, pp. 67-68.

³ Edmund Sutcliffe, *The Monks of Qumran*, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1960, p. 26.

⁴ Josef Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judea*, Studies in Biblical Theology, No. 26, London: SCM Press, 1959, p. 56.

⁵ Charles Fritsch, *The Qumran Community*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956, pp. 5-8.

⁶ Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁷ John M. Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of Christianity*, New York: Criterion Books, 1967, p. 100.

are of a size and shape consistent with their use as baptistries. Two of these cisterns are different from the usual Roman type of cistern, says Ringgren,⁸ he believes they were used for minor lustrations. Finally, Gordon⁹ simply states that "baptismal pools have been unearthed at Khirbet Qumran."

Hence, although archaeology has established that there were cisterns, basins and a large water supply system at Qumran, the purposes for which these cisterns and basins were used cannot be logically deduced from the data. What seems clear at this point is that it is reasonable to assume that some of them were used for "baptism."

Having examined the historical background of the Qumran community, let us look at the Qumran "Baptism."

Perhaps the most distinctive development that took place within the Qumran community was the great emphasis the people placed on their ablutions, lustrations, or "baptisms". Judging from this, it seems that purification was of paramount consideration for the Qumranians. The laws of purity and impurity were expressed for them in Leviticus (Chapters 11-17), Numbers (Chapter 19) and Deuteronomy (Chapter 14), the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Books of the Torah, respectively. In these books, four sources of impurity are apparent: Leprosy, issues from human sexual organs, the dead bodies of certain animals, and particularly human corpses. Man could be defiled by impure things. For the Qumranians, like many of their Jewish contemporaries, water became the principal method of purification. In the Old Testament, water sometimes represented the instrument (Genesis 7 : 11 ff.) or the symbol (Isaiah 43 : 2) of destruction or danger. It also could be the instrument or symbol of blessing (Zechariah 14 : 8), or the symbol of cleansing from iniquity (Isaiah 1 : 16 ; Ezekiel 36 : 25). Therefore, water could correct the state of impurity : after the ablutions, the person or object became pure once more. He remained in the pure state until impurity was contracted again.

⁸ Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran*, Pennsylvania : Fortress Press, 1963, p. 222.

⁹ Cyrus H. Gordon, *Adventures in the Nearest East*, London : Phoenix House, 1957, p. 136.

Usually, the only cleansing a person received from water was external, a physical purity. It fulfilled the laws of purity that enabled a person to be admitted once again to religious ceremonies. For example, water in the form of baths was prescribed in the book of Leviticus; one had to bathe after being cured of leprosy (Leviticus 14: 8-9) and after contracting personal uncleanness (Leviticus 15: 11, 13, 16, 18). These ritual baths (Hebrew-*Telilah*) became increasingly important during the Second Temple Period (500 B.C.-70 A.D.).

It seems that many scholars avoid the term "baptism" when they refer to the washings at Qumran. Perhaps they do so because the term may be misunderstood to mean Christian baptism. Scholars seem to favour either the term "lustrations" or "ablutions". Neither Brownlee nor Vermes use the term "baptism" in their translations of the *Manual of Discipline*. In fact, Vermes uses the term "ablutions" (3: 4-5), whereas Brownlee uses the term "washings" in his translation (3: 4-5). Both men, however, clearly mean that the Qumranian washing (ablutions) were *moral washings*.

(F) The Qumran "Baptisms"

The moral washings of the Qumranians are mentioned in three passages of the *Manual of Discipline*. (3: 4-9; 5: 13-14; 6: 14-23).

The first passage of the *Manual of Discipline* (3: 4-9) seems to lay down the conditions necessary for admittance to and continuance in the community that demanded purification. Apparently, the Qumranians demanded several conditions for membership of which two were basic for purification. First, there was the water cleansing (3:4-5). Second, there was the further need for moral purification, that is, observance of the Laws of God (3:6). In order to achieve this moral purification, the person had to have a proper interior disposition (3:8-9).

For clarity, I have divided the first passage (3:4-9) according to the various aspects discussed in the *Manual of Discipline* document.

1. *Man's Purification is Not Accomplished Just by Water Itself*

He cannot purify himself by atonement, nor cleanse with water for impurity, nor sanctify himself with seas or rivers, nor cleanse himself with any water for washing (3:4-5).

2. *Man's Purification Depends on the Observance of God's Law*

Unclean ! Unclean shall he be as long as he rejects God's laws (3:6).

3. *Man's Impurity Excluded Him from the Community's Counsel*

For it is through the spirit of God's true counsel in regard to a man's ways that all his iniquities will be atoned (3:6-7).

4. *There were Conditions for Men's Forgiveness :* In summarizing this passage, one can reduce the moral conditions required for the Qumranian baptism to genuine repentance and amendment of one's ways.

Through an upright and humble spirit that his sin will be atoned, and through the submission of his soul to all God's ordinances that his flesh will be cleansed (3:8-9).

5. *Fulfilment of the Moral Conditions and Physical Washing Will Atone for All Sins :* It seems that the Qumranians did not place a limitation on the number or type of sins that could be forgiven if they observed the moral and physical conditions.

That he will be cleansed of all iniquities (3:8).

6. *Water was Used :* What seems certain is that the Qumranians used water for their purification rite, but the place of the water purification rite cannot be deduced from the translation of this passage. Similarly, it cannot be determined how the moral washing was done.

So that he may purify himself with water for impurity and sanctify himself with rippling water (3:9).

In another section of the *Manual of Discipline* (5:13-14), there is a reference to the purification rites of the Qumranians. It seems to refer to the need of repentance before an unclean person could associate with the purified members of the Qumran community. It is apparent that the unclean person, the neophyte or the lapsed member, could not associate with the pure (morally and physically clean) full-fledged members of the community.

These may not enter into water to be permitted to touch the Purity of the holy men, for they will not be cleansed unless they have turned from their wickedness, for uncleanness clings to all transgressors of His word (5:13-14).

The third section of the *Manual of Discipline* (6:14-23) seems to refer to the requirements for admission into the community. These requirements apparently were: (1) Membership was restricted to Jews (6:14). (2) There was an examination of the neophyte by an Overseer or Guardian (6:14). (3) The neophyte was informed about the life of the community (6:14). (4) There was an unspecified probation period prior to his temporary admittance into the community (6:15-16). (5) There was another examination of the neophyte and a decision to admit him had to be made by the whole community (6:15-16). (6) There was a one year probation before the neophyte could be admitted to the Purity of the Many (6:16-17). (7) At the completion of the second year of probation, the neophyte was admitted to the Drink of the Many (6:20-21). (8) After the completion of the second year and another examination, the neophyte was permanently admitted into the community (6:21-22).

And everyone from Israel who dedicates himself to join the Council of the Community (6:14).

The man who is Overseer at the head of the Many shall examine him as to his understanding and his deeds (6:14).

And if he grasps instruction, he shall bring him into the covenant to turn to the truth and to turn away from all perversity (6:14-15).

The whole group will be asked concerning his affairs; and however it is decided under God in accordance with the counsel of the Many, he will either draw near or draw away (6:15-16).

He must not touch the Purity of the Many until they investigate him as to his spirit and his deeds, until the completion of a full year by him (6:16-17).

He, the necphyte, shall not touch the drink of the Many until the completion of a second year among the men of the Community (6:20-21).

But upon his completion of a second year, he, the Overseer, shall examine him under the direction of the Many, and if it is decided under God to admit him into the Community, he shall enroll him (8:21-22).

Biblical Scholars' Opinions

Biblical scholars have interpreted the above passages in the *Manual of Discipline* in various ways. For purposes of clarity, I have grouped their findings under four headings.

1. *The Qumran Washings Are Lustrations or Ablutions with or without Requirement of Repentance.*

Fritsch¹⁰ says that the Qumran washings were a purification rite before the common meal. Neither the candidate's atonement nor the water could purify him unless he accepted the commandments of God and the instructions of the community council. Vermes¹¹ shares similar views.

Genuine repentance and an adoption of a new way of life must accompany the lustration according to Sutcliffe.¹² Schubert¹³ and McKenzie¹⁴ express the same idea. Along

10 Fritsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-67.

11 Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1962, p. 45.

12 Sutcliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

13 Kurt Schubert, *The Dead Sea Community: Its Origin and Teachings*, London: Adam and Charles Black Ltd., 1959, pp. 54-55.

14 John McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Wisconsin: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1965, p. 79.

with them, Van der Ploeg,¹⁵ and Lasor¹⁶ advance the same theory that some form of repentance on the part of the candidate is necessary when he enters the baths or washings. However, none of them believes that the water itself has the power to purify the candidate. Ringgren¹⁷ implies that repentance is necessary but adds that it is a prerequisite for participation in the common meal. Scholars like Smyth,¹⁸ De Vaux,¹⁹ Albright,²⁰ and Blau²¹ state simply that the Qumranians practised daily ritual baths of purification.

Harrison,²² however, is explicit in his denial of the need for repentance before the candidate undergoes the ritual ablution. Finally, Murphy and Rowley make very cautious statements. The Qumranians practised many sacred lustrations, but Murphy²³ does not specify what he means by sacred. He says that the Qumranian washing in the passage of the *Manual of Discipline* probably refers to the first ritual lustrations of the day. Later, he adds that the ritual bathing act which is a total immersion is meaningless without the spirit to validate it.

Many scholars support the theory that some form of repentance on the part of the neophyte must accompany the ritual washings.

2. *The Qumran Ablutions or Lustrations Were Baptismal Rites.*

There are scholars who believe that the Qumran washings were more than ablutions or lustrations, with or

15 J. Van der Ploeg, *The Excavations at Qumran*, New York : Longmans, Green and Co., 1958, pp. 21-312.

16 William Lasor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament*, Michigan : Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972, p. 70.

17 Ringgren, *op. cit.*, p. 220

18 Kevin Smyth, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, London : Catholic Truth Society 1956, p. 22.

19 Roland De Vaux, *Archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, London : Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 132.

20 William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, New York : Doubleday and Co., 1957, pp. 375-377.

21 Salo Baron and Joseph Blau, *Judaism*, New York : Harper and Row Publishers, 1954, p. 78.

22 R. K. Harrison, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, New York : Harper and Row Publishers, 1961, pp. 109-116.

23 Roland Murphy, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible*, Maryland : The Newman Press, 1957, p. 65.

without the need for repentance. They claim that these washings were baptismal rites. Cross²⁴ says that the washings were definitely a baptism but he is not sure as to all the conditions and frequency of the washings. According to Rowley,²⁵ the Qumran washings were a baptism in the sense that they repudiated the past and they emphasized repentance. They could be received repeatedly. It was a baptism, Cullman²⁶ says, because it admitted the candidate into the fellowship of the community. Black²⁷ makes a further clarification, saying that it was a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, but not in the full sense of Christian baptism which has no purificatory significance. For Leaney,²⁸ it was a baptism of water and spirit.

Wright²⁹ states that the initiatory rite was a baptismal rite, which was repeated at intervals as a sign of purification from evil thoughts and intentions. It is called a baptism with double significance, a ritual purity and an act of atonement. Gordon³⁰ infers that baptism took place when he states that baptismal pools were found at Qumran. Finally, John Heron summarizes his position by saying that the initiatory rite was initiation by baptism with immersion in running water accompanied by the recitation of the Decalogue and confession of sin followed by participation in a sacred meal of bread and wine.³¹

3. *The Qumran Ablutions or Lustrations. Were Rites with or without a Baptismal Ceremony.*

There are scholars who believe that the Qumran ablutions refer to a rite of initiation accompanied by a lustra-

24 Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-96, note 96a, 234.

25 H. H. Rowley, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament*, London: The Talbert Press, 1964, pp. 222-223.

26 Oscar Cullman, *Baptism in the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology 1, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1969, p. 219.

27 Matthew Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961, p. 98.

28 A. R. C. Leaney, *The Rule of Qumran and Its Meaning*, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1960, pp. 155-156.

29 Ernest G. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, pp. 155-156.

30 Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

31 John Heron, "The Theology of Baptism", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1955, pp. 8, 39.

tion or a baptismal ceremony. It is the opinion of some that it was a rite of initiation accompanied by a lustration with the prerequisite of repentance. Finnegan,³² Milik,³³ and Brownlee³⁴ agree with Driver. In addition to the lustration and the need of repentance, Pryke³⁵ says that the rite of initiation included a solemn oath to obey the rules of the community. Allegro³⁶ suggests that the Qumranians practised a rite of initiation probably followed by a baptism ceremony.

4. *The Qumran Ablutions or Lustrations Were Sacramental Rites.*

There are few scholars who claim that these washings or baths were sacramental. Beasley-Murray³⁷ contends that the Qumran lustrations had some sacramental efficacy. Perhaps Millar Burrows gives the clearest expression of this position when he says, "These baths were sacramental but the 'mediation' was no more and no less sacramental than it was in the atonement rites of the Old Testament."³⁸

Briefly, then, it is apparent that scholars in their varying interpretations of the *Manual of Discipline* scroll are not universally in agreement. In fact, at times, some are completely opposed to one another. However, it must be remembered that Brownlee's and Vermes' translations of the *Manual of Discipline* have given a clearer picture of the meaning of certain words and phrases in this scroll. These men have helped to narrow down the wide spectrum of possible solutions. Their translations and interpretations provide a standard against which the interpretations of other scholars can be evaluated.

32 Jack Finnegan, *Light From the Ancient Past*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1959, p. 290.

33 Milik, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

34 Brownlee, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-78.

35 J. E. Pryke, "John the Baptist and the Qumran Community", *Revue de Qumran*, April, 1964, 4, pp. 483-496.

36 Allegro, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-121.

37 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, Michigan: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962, p. 18.

38 Millar Burrows, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, New York: The Viking Press, 1958, pp. 360-362.

Summary

From the collected data, several theories have been proposed concerning the identity of the group responsible for the settlement at Qumran. They have been identified as Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots and Essenes. Although the evidence favours the Essene theory, it is not a proven fact. It seems to me that there is a real danger in making the assumption that these people were Essenes or members of some form of the Essene movement. This may prejudice the reader, consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, I prefer to use the term, Qumranians, since there is presently no other identification in the translated literature of Qumran.

The Qumran site is in Palestine approximately ten miles south of Jericho, or sixteen miles east of Jerusalem. Its second occupation (4 B.C.-68 A.D.) is accepted by many scholars such as Burrows, Lasor, and Cross.

As far as the date of the scrolls is concerned, a few scholars, among whom the best known is Solomon Zeitlin, maintain that the scrolls are medieval forgeries. Many scholars like Lasor are of the opinion that the scrolls were produced during the last century and a half B.C. and the first half of the first century A.D.

The discovery of the scrolls provides evidence that there were sectarian Jewish movements that challenged certain practices in Judaism in the first century A.D. Although Qumran was one of these sectarian movements, at this time, it is clear from their religious beliefs that they were basically Jewish and not Christian, as some scholars have maintained. In fact, they shared many of the current Jewish eschatological and Messianic expectations of their era, with the exception that they believed they were the "elect remnant" who would do penance for themselves and their nation and usher in the "New Era of the Messiah."

The Qumranians were Jews who voluntarily separated from their contemporaries in Palestine in order to live an austere and ascetic life. Among their religious practices were ablutions and lustrations, or what some

scholars call "baptisms" or moral washings. Furthermore, archaeologists have discovered cisterns and basins that were used at Qumran but apparently the purpose for which they were used cannot be identified specifically. Neither do the translated texts give a clue as to their purposes. The Qumranians did practise ritual washings, which in themselves did not cleanse man from his sins, but whether these washings were some form of a "baptism" is certainly not clear from the translated texts. When scholars use the word, "baptism" it would be well to know exactly in what sense they are using the word, that is in the Jewish sense of the word or the Christian. Although the translated texts do not identify the type of washings that took place at Qumran, neither do the writings of scholars.

There is no consensus among scholars in their identification of the Qumranian washings. Since the word "baptism" is ambiguous and the translated passages of the texts are scanty, it would be more accurate to say that moral ritual washings took place at Qumran.

At this point, I believe that it is too soon to settle the above problems. When the remainder of the Qumran literature is translated, then perhaps a clearer picture of the language of the sect (terms such as "many," "purity") and of the religious practices at Qumran will emerge.

Finally, the data suggests that the members of the Qumran community had a strong conviction that they were living in the last days. Therefore, they prepared for the final days by a strict observance of ritual and moral commands in the Torah.