

only we would abandon ourselves to His care! If only we would really trust that He will make all things work together unto good! And this is the doctrine that the Church has always taught. As the First Vatican Council has said: "God protects and governs by His providence all things which He created, 'reaching from end to end mightily and ordering all things sweetly' (cf. Wisdom 8:1)."

—Humbert Gustina, O.P.

## IN THE WILDERNESS PREPARE THE WAY

"IN THE WILDERNESS PREPARE THE WAY, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Most Christians will immediately recognize this familiar text of Isaias, foretelling the advent of Christ's precursor, John the Baptist. But few people know that shortly before the time of John there developed a group of Jews who also had heeded the words of the prophet and had fled to the desert to await the coming of the Messiah. These were the men who had copied and composed the now famous Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in caves near the Wadi Qumran in the spring of 1947. Most scholars have now agreed that they were the Jewish sect of the Essenes, described by Josephus in his *War of the Jews*, and also in his *Antiquities of the Jews*.

The most striking feature of the men of Qumran is the similarity that their way of life bears to monasticism as practiced in the Western Church. Many scholars, both professional and amateur, have suggested that this band of Jews was actually the well-spring of early Christianity, but a careful examination reveals that this is far too rash a statement. A study of their doctrine and customs as a religious community will make it clear that the Qumranians were primarily sincere and devout *Jews*, although similarities as well as differences can be found between the Church of Christ and this Essenic community. Almost all the information contained here has been taken from the Scrolls themselves, from ancient historians, archeology and where first-hand knowledge is lacking, only the most sound and authoritative opinions are proffered.

### The Monastery and Surrounding Area

Off the shore of the Dead Sea, about ten miles south of Jericho and north of biblical Engaddi lie the remains of Khirbet (ruin) Qumran. Until recently, it was thought to have been the remnant of a Roman fortress but the five excavation campaigns from 1951 to 1956 have revealed that this was the main monastery building for a group of Jews who were living a communal life. In spite of the proximity of the Khirbet to the caves in which the Scrolls were discovered, no connection was suspected between the two until Pere Roland de Vaux, O.P. began the painstaking work of unearthing the ruins.<sup>1</sup> The archeological discoveries that were then made, served to confirm the antiquity of the manuscripts and revealed to the scholars the existence of a flourishing sect of pre-Christian Jewish "monks" who were apparently the scribes of the great Scrolls found in 1947.

The monastery itself is a complex unit of many buildings centered about two principal blocks separated by an open court. The greatest length of the compound measures 380 feet while the largest width extends 292 feet. At the north-west corner of the main building is a tower, two stories high and several feet thick; its separation from the rest of the building makes it obvious that this was a last outpost of defense. A kitchen with fire, latrine and washing place are among the various domestic rooms discovered. But the largest single room of all, 72 feet long and 15 feet wide, appears to have served as a hall for prayer, meetings and quite possibly a sacred communal meal.<sup>2</sup> At the end of a plastered floor there is a circular area paved with flat stones and this would very easily have provided a place of honor for the Superior of any large assembly.<sup>3</sup> To the right of this hall is a pantry in which were found over a thousand pieces of jars, plates, bowls, goblets and other such eating utensils. This was a substantial indication that the hall served as the community's refectory.

Of all the workshops found at the ruins, the one most important to scholars of the Scrolls was the scriptorium. There can be little doubt that it was in this writing room that many of the manuscript finds were copied or composed. Here was found a writing table some 15 feet long and 18 inches high along with some smaller tables, and two inkpots, one bronze and the other earthenware. The scriptorium was also furnished with a rather low bench running along its walls.

Sleeping accommodations would have been of the simplest as they were for most of the Jews of that time. Thus, one should not be surprised to find that no specific room was set aside as a dormitory. A few thick mats were discovered in the monastery and in nearby caves; such furniture

would have sufficed for their frugal needs. Fr. de Vaux, however, has shown that the brethren of Qumran might have dwelt in some of the nearby caves as well as in tents and small huts. He believes that the buildings of Khirbet Qumran served as an administrative center and a place for common prayer, meals and various kinds of work, while the members lived scattered throughout the neighboring district.<sup>4</sup>

The most ingenious aspect of the monastery was its complex system for water supply. An aqueduct coming from the Wadi Qumran fed an intricate arrangement of cisterns, pools and baths with the water needed by the Qumranians. Although many of the archeologists thought that these cisterns were solely used for purification rites (a practice peculiar to the Essenes) Fr. de Vaux has pointed out that they were principally for water storage, while admitting that two or three of the smaller baths would have sufficed for ritual ablutions.<sup>5</sup> The presence of a mill, bakery, pottery, and a stable complete the picture of a self-sufficient community flourishing in the middle of the Judean desert.

Between the monastery and the Dead Sea lies the Qumran cemetery containing over a thousand graves. Almost all of them are arranged in the same manner; the body was buried with the head to the south and the hands crossed at the pelvis. With no coffin, grave apparel or offerings the body was laid in a brick-lined cavity and an oval layer of stones was placed over the top. With the exception of a few female and children's skeletons all the remains appear to be those of men. Although the Essene sect at Qumran was known to be celibate, Philo and Josephus tell us that there were other Essenes of both sexes throughout Palestine and this would offer an explanation for the presence of female skeletons. Perhaps relatives and others died while visiting at the monastery or possibly those dwelling in towns may have been brought there after death out of reverence for the community.<sup>6</sup>

### Historical Background

But what was the historical setting that saw such a foundation as that of Qumran come into existence, and what prompted its members to leave the bosom of Judaism and flee to the desert? It has been agreed by most scholars that the Qumran sect of the Essenes finds its roots in the Hasidim, or *pious*, movement of the Maccabean era. Although this Hasidic group existed prior to the revolts, it was during that time that the movement began to play an important function. It was not what could be called a specific sect or party, but rather a devout group of orthodox Jews who desired to

preserve the laws and traditions given to their fathers.<sup>7</sup> They were the Jews who were loyal to their ancestral Law when the hellenizing party exercised such a great influence over many of the people.

The community's inception has been dated at the middle of the second century B.C., and historically speaking this would place them under the rule of the high-priest Jonathan (160-142), a dating completely in accord with the archeological evidence.

### Doctrine

The Essenes of Qumran fled to the desert as a result of the hellenization of Palestine and its consequent evil effects. But their separation from the rest of Judaism was not merely physical for there are to be found differences of mind and spirit. The point that distinguishes them is their determination to carry out the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law with the greatest of diligence and precision.<sup>8</sup> Hence, they were obliged "with a binding oath to return the Law of Moses according to all His commandments with all one's heart and with all one's soul." Constant study of the Law was to be carried out both day and night, and if anyone saw a new meaning or interpretation in his study, he was to report it to the authorities.

One of the most notable features in the doctrine of Qumran is that of a dualism which is not only ethical in character but also cosmological. In the Manual of Discipline is found:

It is God that created these spirits of light and darkness and made them the basis of every act, the (instigators) of every deed, and the directors of every thought. (1 QS, III 13-IV 26)

From this selection, we see that the Qumranites believed that these two spirits were made by God and remained subject to Him. But they can refer to two different things. One is that there exists in the world both good and evil; the other that there is an angel of good who is called "the angel of God's truth" while Belial or "the angel of darkness" is his opponent.<sup>9</sup> Each of these spirits battles for control of the hearts of men. Thus we read:

God appointed for him (man) two spirits after whose direction he was to walk until the final Inquisition. These are the spirits of truth and of perversity. (1QS, III 13-IV 26)

There is a strict line of difference between the good and the bad, or "the children of light" and "the children of darkness." These opposing forces are always in constant struggle but in the "final period" God will judge

each man, sin will be done away with, and light will triumph over darkness.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of an after life was not too evident in the Hebrew Old Testament for the ancient Israelite sought his happiness on this earth where he would increase his progeny and possessions. He thought that happiness ended when he died, therefore death was the most severe punishment that could befall a man. But the brotherhood of Qumran believed that they would be received into the ranks of the angels after death and partake of eternal happiness:

For, lo Thou hast taken a spirit distorted by sin, and purged it of the talent of much transgression, and given it a place in the host of the holy beings, and brought it into communion with the sons of heaven. (H III, 19-36)

Throughout the Qumran manuscripts there are found several indications of their belief in predestination. Fourteen times in the Manual and three times in the Damascus Document there are references to the destiny allotted by God to each man. The righteous are called "the men of the lot of God" and the evil are known as "the men of the lot of Belial." They realized that God knew all of man's actions and that He used this knowledge in ordering His plan for the world. They understood that man, through his free will, could choose which spirit he would follow and could repent if he fell away.<sup>11</sup> Thus it cannot be said that the predestination of the brotherhood was blindly fatalistic.

Man is conceived of as a lowly and humble creature: "shaped of clay and kneaded with water"; "the food of worms is his portion"; "he must return unto dust." Nevertheless God has created him to be united to the angels in heaven. A total love of God is the highest virtue to be practiced and then charity towards one's brethren. All anger was to be avoided and provision was made for fraternal correction which should be carried out humbly and lovingly. (Such admonitions are strikingly similar to the Rule of Saint Augustine.) Realizing that they themselves were sinners, the Qumranians wished to lead all to an obedience of the Law,<sup>12</sup> for they awaited the day when "all nations might know Thy truth, and all peoples Thy glory." In the Manual of Discipline we also see that part of the reason for their devout lives was "effecting atonement for the earth and ensuring the requital of the wicked." The men of Qumran, then, can certainly not be accused of leading an ascetical life for purely selfish motives.

So it was that the Qumranites severed themselves from the "sons of



darkness" and lived in fellowship to await the time of God's intervention which would be preceded by the coming of two Messianic figures. One of these would be chief-priest of the community and the other would be the Messianic Prince of the congregation. This corresponds to the twofold aspect of the brotherhood, religious and political and in it we can see a parallel to Moses and Aaron. Both the priest and the Prince would be called "anointed one" but only the latter would truly be the Messiah.<sup>13</sup> Qumran was eschatological in character for they considered themselves as living in the last period. In the War Scroll we find a period of forty years described at the end of which all wickedness would be destroyed. The fortieth year was the end of an eschatological war and would see the victory of the "sons of light" over the "sons of darkness." This period was made up of six years for preparation, 29 of actual warfare and five years of release. The enumeration of minute details to be carried out at the time of the war is extremely impressive, yet one cannot help but feel that this is only a symbolic description of the battle between the spirits of Light and Darkness.<sup>14</sup>

There are several points of agreement that can be found between the Qumran teachings and those of Christian doctrine: dualistic terminology (similar to that found in the Johannine writings), angelology, repentance and others. But to conclude from a study of the Dead Sea Scrolls that John the Baptist, John the Evangelist or even that Jesus and the Apostles were connected with the Essenes at Qumran is merely to proffer an opinion that has absolutely nothing more than a shallow basis. The Qumran writings contain no reference to the Trinity, the redemption, the sacraments or any of the other doctrines which constitute the essence of Christianity. It cannot be denied that the manuscripts shed a great deal of light on the Jewish world during the period of Christianity's inception, but a side-by-side reading of the New Testament and the Qumran literature will reveal the tremendous gulf that divides these two sets of writings.<sup>15</sup>

### Government and Customs

As might be expected, there existed at Qumran an elaborate system of regulations and admonitions that extended to the process of admission, communal justice and peculiar religious rituals. Once again the Manual of Discipline and the Damascus Document provide us with the greatest amount of information. But it is also at this point of inquiry that a divergency between these two works begins to appear. A comparison of the manuscripts makes it clear that the Damascus Document is providing regu-

lation for married members of the sect who lived in settlements or "camps" while the Manual lays down a rigid way of life for the celibates who dwelled at Qumran itself. Although this strict two-fold distinction has not met universal acceptance, it has enabled the scholars to account for many of the difficulties found in the texts.

At the Qumran establishment, there is a natural division between the priests with their assistants, the Levites, on the one hand, and the laity on the other. The priests, who were the sons of Aaron and Zadoc, were the actual rulers. Fully initiated members had much authority and a voice in the common assembly, particularly in matters of admittance and discipline, but the ultimate power rested in priestly hands. A priest had to be from 30 to 60 years old, and according to the Manual a council of twelve priests and three lay men headed the community, but in the Damascus Document a group of four priests and six laymen are prescribed. Both documents mention an official known as "mevaqquer" or overseer. He seems to hold a unique position especially in the individual settlements outside of Qumran. His jurisdiction included admission of new members to his camp, supervision of property, legal matters and even religious instruction. This last duty is rather surprising since the "mevaqquer" is not explicitly mentioned as a priest. Unfortunately there is a paucity of information on the nature of the "mevaqquer" at Qumran.<sup>16</sup> Quite possibly, he fulfilled the role of a procurator and task-master.

To attain full membership in the sect, an involved process of admission and examination was required. A postulancy preceded the two year novitiate, and its length varied according to time of entrance, probably because the novitiate commenced on the day when the brethren renewed their obligations. The aspirant's progress was reviewed at the end of each year and his continuance at Qumran was subject to the community's vote. At the conclusion of the second year, he joined the ranks of the brotherhood completely and could enter into all of the community's activities including the sacred communal meal. The initiation ceremony began with an admonition to the approved candidates and was concerned with the obligations of the covenant. There then followed a denunciation of those who entered insincerely and a warning to the novices who were without true repentance. The initiants had to make acts of penance by confessing their sinfulness openly. The priests proceeded to pronounce a number of blessings, while the Levites cursed "all the men of Belial's lot." Now the novice was formally received and inscribed according to his place within the brotherhood.<sup>17</sup> The oath they swore to the Mosaic Law was not as explicit

as today's profession form, but there can certainly be found in Qumran's practice of a religious life the equivalents of what are the Christian vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Throughout all of the Dead Sea Scrolls there is a tone of scorn toward wealth and possessions, particularly toward those who seek them excessively. There does not appear to be a surrender of property as regards the camp dwellers. They, rather, submitted their possessions to inspection by the overseer who would then be able to know who was self-supporting or not. In each settlement there was a common fund which provided for those who were unable to provide for themselves, and each capable man had to contribute two days wages to this fund every month. But at Qumran itself, the members made a total renunciation of all their goods for they brought "their property in accordance with His just counsel." If one left during his novitiate, the wealth that he brought with him was to be returned. The entire administration of the common fund for the community's benefit lay in the hands of the superiors, as we find provision made for dishonesty and loss of property.

The concept of celibacy was rather far removed from Jewish thought, for the Hebrew's reward lay in his progeny. Thus, the celibate community at Qumran is revolutionary in Judaism. Several implications in the Manual of Discipline have led to the conclusion that the Qumranites led a life without marriage. No provisions are made for women members, and had marriage been permitted there would have been prescriptions for ritual purity. There are also condemnations against those men who sin by "the eyes of whoredom." Unfortunately the Scrolls do not account for the incentive towards this practice of chastity. The very physical set-up of the monastery in the desert would seem to inhibit a married life. It would be extremely difficult for women to live there and large families would certainly hinder the religious aims of the group. It may be assumed, then, that the practical aspect answers the question of motivation while the ascetical side is not all too clear.<sup>18</sup> The matter of marriage also presents us with a further distinction between the monastic Qumranites and their associates, the camp-dwellers. It is quite clear that the latter were permitted to enter the conjugal state and these may well have been the marrying Essenes of whom Josephus speaks.<sup>19</sup> He mentions that they took wives for the sole purpose of propagating the race, or more formally, for the continuation of the sect. We have already pointed out that the few female graves at Qumran do not contradict the monastic group's celibacy.

Since no organized society can function and achieve its aims without



a certain degree of obedience, so too the community was obliged to obey both the regulations and those in authority. From a comparison of the documents it is obvious that the practice of this matter at Qumran would sharply differ from that exercised at the settlements. Members of the camps could not make financial transactions without the superior's permission, but the exact extent of his authority remains obscure. By his entrance into the community, the aspirant bound himself "with a binding oath to return to the Law of Moses . . . in agreement with all that has been revealed of it . . . to the priests, the guardians of the covenant." (1QS V 8 f.) In areas of business, we find that the order of religion has some standing.<sup>20</sup> Any infractions against the rule of the brotherhood involved a consequent punishment which in most cases was severe. They extend from limitation of the daily portion of food to permanent expulsion from the community. The two councils, already mentioned, constituted a system of judges and the right to vote in these matters extended to the whole assembly.

Although there is no detailed account of procedure, the men of Qumran probably observed a ritual purity which was even more stringent than that followed by the majority of the Jews at the time. The Damascus Document explicates the manner of bathing while the Manual of Discipline says little on the subject. But it is clear that lustrations do not suffice for repentance: "He cannot be cleared by mere ceremonies of atonement, nor cleansed by the waters of ablution. . . . Unclean, unclean he remains so long as he rejects the government of God." (1QS III 4-6). Père de Vaux has mentioned that a few of the monastery's many cisterns and pools might have served for purificatory rites, and these would no doubt correspond with such practices that Josephus speaks of in his *War of the Jews*.<sup>21</sup>

Part of the consequence of establishing this desert foundation was that the sectaries of Qumran officially severed themselves from the priests who were in control of the temple at Jerusalem. Although they regarded sacrifice offered by these priests as unlawful, still they must have felt that the laws of sacrifice were binding since they were so orthodox a group. Yet, for them to set up a sacrificial cultus of their own would be too great a violation of the Law. Perhaps they expected the legitimate worship to be restored when the corrupt priests were overthrown. But the Qumranites preferred prayer to an unworthy sacrifice: "atonement will be made for the earth more effectively than by any burnt offerings or fat of sacrifices. The oblation of the lips will be in all justice like the erstwhile pleasant savor of the altar." (1 QS IX 4-6) The Damascus Document contains rules for sending offerings to the temple, but it has been suggested that

these were remnants from the time before the temple separation. And most scholars agree that the animal bones, carefully placed in jars, were from the community's sacred meal and possibly from the annual renewal of the covenant.<sup>22</sup>

In regard to the common fare, the Manual legislates:

They shall eat together, bless together and take council together. (1QS VI 2-3)

And it shall be when they arrange the table to eat or the must to drink, the priest will stretch forth his hand first to bless with the first fruits. (1QS VI 4-5)

From the nature of the brotherhood's rule, it appears that this meal is really an anticipation of the Messianic banquet which will take place during the last days. Although the Jews did not see the full implication at the time, the community which was to eat the Messianic banquet comprised not only the sect of Qumran itself but also the future congregation of God's elect.

The daily routine of the brethren was probably a very arduous one since their location in the desert forced them to be almost self-sufficient. Thus, a major part of the day was given to manual labor. This would have included agricultural cultivation of the nearby oasis as well as the raising of cattle. History and archeology indicate that they raised their own bees, ran a communal tannery and pottery, and utilized the minerals and herbs of the area to care for the sick.<sup>23</sup> The labor of the hands, however, was supplemented by the prominent role that prayer and study of the scriptures played in the brotherhood's life. The Manual orders common prayer at dawn and at sundown, and a vigil for a third of the night spent in "reading the books (scripture), studying the Law and worshipping together." (1QS VI 8) One man out of ten was to be freed from all other duties to search out the Law "day and night" in order to discover the "hidden things" contained therein and make them known to his brothers. Their well integrated schedule resembles in great measure the monastic life as practiced under the Benedictine ideal, but one should be wary of reading too much into such a similitude.

While we must admit that there are many points of agreement between the Essenes of Qumran and the Christianity that soon followed it, a deep consideration of the problem will reveal that most of the likenesses are superficial. There can be no questioning the fact that they were orthodox *Jews*, living the Mosaic ideal to the fullest. It is quite possible that John the Baptist, who lived in the area, knew of them and that Christ and

His Apostles were cognizant of their establishment, but the doctrinal issues that separate these two groups have already been pointed out. It would indeed seem strange if none of these sincere men of Qumran eventually came to accept the following of Christ. Possibilities still remain for relating them to the early Christians, but presently we can at least praise the devout God-loving lives that they offered there in the desert, and commend the great courage they exhibited in severing themselves from the wickedness of the unfaithful. And with A. Dupont-Sommer we would say: "Here we have the monastery cemetery. They are the tombs of the Essenes! Here lie these warriors, these wrestlers of God, after the fierce struggle of their lives on earth."<sup>24</sup>

—Celestine Ryan, O.P.

<sup>1</sup> R. de Vaux, O.P., "Fouilles de Khirbet Qumran," *Revue Biblique*, LXIII, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 545-547.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1958), p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> R. de Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 559.

<sup>5</sup> E. F. Sutcliffe, S.J., *The Monks of Qumran*, (Westminster: Newman Press, 1960), pp. 26-28.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>7</sup> Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Graystone, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Originality of Christ*, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), pp. 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible*, (Westminster: Newman Press, 1956), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Graystone, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Sutcliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Graystone, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> Sutcliffe, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>17</sup> 1QS, I 1-III 12.

<sup>18</sup> Sutcliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>19</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*, II, viii, 2-13.

<sup>20</sup> Sutcliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> Josephus, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Frank Moore Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies*, (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1958), p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> Josephus, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Jewish Sect of Qumran and the Essenes*, (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 7.