

Eschatology in the Qumran community

1. Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran community

Discovery: The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered beginning in 1947 when Bedouin goat-herds found jars filled with manuscripts in a cave in the area of Khirbet Qumran, on the shores of the Dead Sea in Israel. Further searching and excavations yielded eleven caves which contain ancient manuscripts, as well as unearthing evidence of a settlement.

Language(s) and date: All in all about 800 manuscripts (mostly Hebrew but also some Aramaic and even Greek) have been found in the area, dating from approximately 200 BCE to 68 CE.

Contents: Some of the Dead Sea Scrolls preserve copies of texts that circulated widely among a range of different Jews during the Second Temple period (e.g., every book now in the Hebrew Bible except Esther [including at least eight copies of Daniel] as well as multiples copies of Tobit, Astronomical Book, and Book of the Watchers). Other manuscripts seem to preserve the writings of the community itself. These writings are marked by priestly interests, disapproval of the priesthood at the Temple in Jerusalem, promotion of a strictly pious lifestyle (often cited as precursor to later Christian practices of asceticism and monasticism), and eschatological expectations involving, among other things, an impending battle between the forces of good and evil. The writings include prayers and hymns, biblical retellings, rules for community life, as well as biblical interpretations called "pesharim," aimed at deciphering the eschatological meanings in the writings of biblical prophets.



Qumran community: Most scholars agree that these manuscripts are remains of a library that belonged to a community that occupied Qumran in the Second Temple period. This community is often characterized as "sectarian" and "apocalyptic." They seem to have separated themselves from other Jews and to have seen themselves as the elect ones, the righteous remnant which alone would be saved at the End of Time. This separation seems to have taken place in the wake of the Maccabean Revolt, possibly in reaction to the Maccabean takeover of the high priesthood, which had traditionally been passed down along specific genealogical lines (i.e., line of Aaron, brother of Moses, through Zadok, a priest in King David's court).

Place within Second Temple Judaism: Some scholars identify the Qumran community with the Essenes mentioned by the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (about whom we'll talk in a few weeks). Others are more wary to make such equations, since Josephus and others' descriptions of the Essenes do not quite fit what we know of this community from their writings and from the archaeological remains. Moreover, there seem to have been a variety of Jewish groups that arose in the decades surrounding the Maccabean Revolt, in response both to the persecutions by the Seleucids (perhaps related to the questions that it raised with regard to the proper response – e.g., martyrdom vs. military resistance) and to the establishment of an independent Jewish state by the Maccabees thereafter (perhaps related to the questions about the authority of this new non-Davidic monarchic power and especially their claims to the high priesthood, the traditional line of which had earlier been broken by the Seleucids, leading some Jews to think the priesthood and Temple corrupt). The "Apocalypse of Weeks" and "Animal Apocalypse," for instance, describe how the pious elect arose during this precise age, likely alluding to the very group(s) that composed these apocalypses. Similarly, Daniel speaks of "the wise" as a separate category from the rest of Israel.

2. Eschatology in the Qumran community

Given the diversity of materials in the Dead Sea Scrolls, it can be difficult to determine which writings were authored by members of the community and which represent other viewpoints among Jews of the time. We can, however, posit some basic patterns in their beliefs about death and the afterlife.

Resurrection of the body: Josephus says of the Essenes that they “regard the soul as immortal” in a manner that leads them to strive towards righteousness (*Antiquities* 18.16; contrasting them to Pharisees, as we shall see). By contrast, the writings of the Qumran community may suggest a belief in resurrection (so Segal pp. 298ff).

Theodicy: The writings of the Qumran community are have in common with the *Book of the Watchers* and other apocalypses that we’ve read a belief that the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked punished after their earthly lives. One text, for instance, holds out the promise that members of the community will even join the “congregation of the sons of heaven” (1QH 3:20-22), consistent with other texts that depict the worship of the community as an earthly counterpart to the angelic liturgy in heaven in anticipation of their eschatological fellowship.

Eschatology: The Qumran community seems to have been “apocalyptic,” in the sense of living in expectation of the impending End of the Time. They thus provide us with an interesting parallel and precedent to the earliest stages of the movement surrounding Jesus, which seems similarly to have been shaped by eschatological expectations – although, as we shall see, this movement arose many, many decades later, in a different socio-historical context.

Several important texts (e.g., *War Scroll*) depict the community as fated to fight, together with God’s angels, in the great battle between “the sons of light” and “the sons of darkness” that would help to usher in the messianic age with the victory of good over evil here on earth as well as up in heaven.

Messianism: A number of Qumran texts are messianic (see box). Characteristic is the belief in two messiahs – one priestly and one kingly – who come at the End of Time. The *Community Rule*, for instance, tells of how both will preside at an eschatological banquet that would mark the beginning of a new age, in which, among other things, worship in an ideal Temple.

Messiah: From the Hebrew *meshiah*, meaning “anointed one” (the Greek translation of this term is *Christos*, from which is derived the English term “Christ”). Within ancient Israel, anointing had a close association with kingship and priesthood, due to the practice of anointing kings with oil. In the Hebrew Bible, David himself is called *meshiah*, in the context of his line ruling forever (1 Sam 22:50-51; also Ps 18:50-51). After the Babylonian Exile, when Israel was no longer self-ruled and no Israelite monarchy thus persisted, these and other earlier prophecies about the eternity of David’s line on the throne of Israel (e.g., 1 Sam 7) came to be reinterpreted in terms of a figure from the line of David who would redeem and restore Israel – whether in a military/political sense in this world or in an eschatological sense in the World to Come.