The Dead Sea Scrolls

The Theology of the Scrolls
Evidence that the Essenes were the Scroll Keepers

- The Jewish historian Josephus described how each member of the Essenes swore an oath “to preserve the books of the sect.”
- The Scrolls were preserved in earthenware jars in accordance with Jeremiah 32: 14 “that they may last for a long time.”
- The jars were then carefully hidden in caves – either buried or placed in secret chambers.
A Library – not a Scriptorium

- DNA analysis of the hides reveals that they came from numerous locations.
- Calligraphy experts indicate that they were written by hundreds of individuals – only three hands appear on more than one scroll, but one wrote 54 manuscripts hidden in 6 different caves!
- This was a sectarian collection -- None of the scrolls supports the beliefs and practices of the Pharisees or Sadducees.
Who were the Essenes?

- A dissident group of “priests and a few good men” who broke with the Temple hierarchy during the Maccabean reign, *circa* 135 B.C.
- They retreated to the desert to “prepare the Way of the Lord” for the expected apocalypse.
- They had small communities of believers all across Israel and Judea.
- They remained as a potent opposition force to the authority of the priestly hierarchy until 68 A.D.
Josephus on the Essenes:

“Jewish philosophy takes three forms . . . the Pharisees . . . the Sadducees, and the Essenes. The Essenes [Essenoi, or “Holy Ones”] have a reputation for cultivating peculiar sanctity . . . . They show greater attachment to each other than do other sects. They shun pleasure as a vice and regard temperance and the control of passions as a special virtue. Marriage they disdain, but they do adopt other men’s children [as their own] . . . And mold them in accordance with their own principles . . . They do not . . . condemn wedlock and the propagation of the race, but they wish to protect themselves against the wantonness of women . . . .
Josephus on the Essenes (continued):
Riches they despise and their own community of goods is truly admirable; you will not find one among them distinguished by greater opulence than another. They have a law that new members on admission to the sect shall confiscate their property to the order, and with the result that you will nowhere see either abject poverty or inordinate wealth; the individual’s possessions join the common stock, and like brothers, [they] enjoy a single patrimony.”
Josephus on the Essenes (continued)

“They occupy no one city, but settle in large numbers in every town. On the arrival of any one of the sect from elsewhere, all the resources of their community are put at their disposal, just as if they were their own, and they enter the homes of men whom they have never seen before as though they were their most intimate friends. Consequently, they carry nothing whatever with them on their journeys, except arms as a protection against brigands.”
“For their doctrine is this: their bodies are contemptible and the matter they are made of is not permanent; but their souls are immortal, and continue forever; and that they came out of the most subtle air, and they are entitled to their bodies as a prison. . . But that when they are set free from the bonds of their flesh, they then, released from bondage, rejoice and mount upward. And this is like the opinion of the Greeks, and good souls have their habitations beyond the oceans . . . And to the souls of the wicked, the region of the ungodly, Hades (Flavius Josephus, War of the Jews 2.8.11).”
The Theology of the Scrolls

1. Fanatical Observance of the Law:

More extreme than even the Pharisees:

- A contaminated cup defiles the pitcher, not just the contents of the cup.

Jerusalem was to be a holy city, pure forever:

- A special gate (the Gate of the Essenes) led to their roofed latrines outside the city wall (Deut. 23: 9-14).

- “No man shall lie with a woman in the city of Sanctuary to defile the city of Sanctuary with their uncleanness (Damascus Document).”
2. An Intense Apocalypticism

Their belief that they lived in the end times \textit{(eschaton)} meant that they had an obsession with maintaining ritual purity and separation from the impure and imperfect.

- Daily ritual of immersion in “living” water.
- A strict hierarchy, two-year novitiate period, and restricted membership to those without flaws or afflictions.
Ritual Practices of the Scrolls Community

3. Regular Ritual Communal Meals with ceremonial breaking of bread and blessing the cup – including a communion presided over by the priestly messiah (or a stand in).

4. Did Not practice Animal Sacrifice – they believed that a ritual of personal prayer and communal praise substituted for the tainted sacrifice of the upstart Temple priests.
5. **Belief in Predeterminism** – an eternal and omnipotent God created everything after first determining exactly what would happen in creation – there are frequent references in the scrolls to “before He created . . . .” Genesis 1:1 “In the beginning was the “Word” – God’s Plan.”

6. They believed that God had revealed this plan to humans through the pages of His sacred texts.

7. The Scroll Keepers believed they had broken the “code” of how the end time events would unfold.
The Theology of the Scrolls (continued)

8. God established a Covenantal Relationship with his chosen people, a group that had to be continuously winnowed down to a holy remnant (the “sons of light,” the Way, etc.).

– Celebrated an annual ritual of covenant renewal
– The Community organized in ranks that paralleled the sojourn in the desert: priests, Levites, and followers (Israelites) arrayed in ranks of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens.
9. They observed a different calendar from the one followed by the Temple priests.

10. They believed in the Spirit of God, a human spirit, and a spiritual/bodily Resurrection of the Dead at the End of Time

   - Spirit was the divine spark – the breath of God.
   - The soul was the essence of an individual
   - Both were found in blood, which was forbidden
11. Special Apocalyptic Beliefs

- The Messiah(s) would soon usher in a new apocalyptic age (the *eschaton*).
- This new age would feature a Heavenly Kingdom -- a new kind of community ruled by God and the angels.
- A new Temple would emerge in a re-purified Jerusalem with the scroll keepers in charge of the altar as the rightful priests.
12. They believed in Two Ways: the Way of Light versus the Way of Darkness (Evil).

– This was a Duality in which there was no middle ground – a belief in an evil force that was far more powerful than other Jewish sects.
– A cosmic conflict that could only be decided when God granted victory to the “sons of light”
– Since everyone possessed both light and dark, this cosmic struggle was played out at the individual level as well as a battle for the soul – hence the need for absolute purity.
Belief in the Two Ways (continued)

• Instead of an Adam and Eve theory of the creation of humankind in God’s likeness, the scrolls adopt a fallen angel scenario, much like that mentioned in Genesis 6: 1-4 (when the “sons of God” married the daughters of men and sired a new breed called the Nephilim) – a belief greatly expanded in the legend of Enoch.

• The scrolls support an Adoptionist view of divinely inspired humans as “the sons of God.”
The Manual of Discipline 3.21-24

“The Angel of Darkness leads all children of righteousness astray. And until his end, all their sin, iniquities, and all their unlawful deeds are caused by his dominion in accordance with the mysteries of God. Every one of their chastisements and every one of their seasons of distress shall be brought about by the rule of his persecution; for all his allotted spirits seek the overthrow of the sons of light.”
The nature of all the children of men is ruled by these [two spirits], and during their life all the hosts of men have a portion of their divisions and walk in [both] their ways. And the whole reward for their deeds shall be for everlasting ages, according to whether each man’s portion in their two divisions is great or small. For God has established the spirits in equal measure until the final age, and has set everlasting hatred between their divisions. Truth abhors the works of falsehood, and falsehood hates the works of truth. . . . And their struggle is fierce.