1Q28a Rule of the Congregation

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Description and Background

Appended to the well-known sectarian document 1QS *Rule of the Community* is another Qumran document only two columns in length and written on parchment in the square Hebrew script. Known as 1Q28a *Rule of the Congregation*, this fragment is referred to by some scholars as the *Messianic Rule*.\(^1\) The manuscript was composed sometime during the first century B.C., possibly around 75 B.C.\(^2\)

The text describes the order of life within the Qumran community in anticipation of the last days. It lists the duties and responsibilities of all male members from childhood through age sixty; specifies regulations governing marriage (somewhat more restrictive than under normal circumstances); makes provisions for Levites, aged persons, and individuals with physical handicaps; indicates assignments and tasks for the sons of Levi; and describes the order that will prevail at the Council of the Community and at the grand banquet that will be held when the Priest of Aaron, who presumably will head the community, and the Messiah of Israel, a descendant of King David, come.

The text reflects a religious community in an attitude of anticipatory fulfillment—looking forward to a Messianic age and to a pending “war destined to vanquish the nations.” Though living in a pre-Messianic age, members of the community were to conduct their lives as though these two messiahs, as they are sometimes referred to, were about to come or had in fact already appeared. Their communal organization, including their community councils and meals, was carried out in full expectation of the arrival of these last days. According to Charlesworth and Stuckenbruck, “each feast was an enactment of what the messianic banquet would be like.”\(^3\)

According to the text, and in a manner that may be distinctive of this particular religious community, the Messiah of Israel is subordinate to the Priest of Aaron in the order of seating at this messianic banquet.\(^4\)

The *Rule of the Congregation* was first published in 1955, based on a transcription prepared by Dominique Barthélemy, who also gave the text its name.\(^5\) In the following translation by Professor Geza Vermes, headings in the manuscript appear in italics, brackets enclose hypothetical but likely reconstructions, lacunae (missing text) are represented by ellipsis points, and parentheses enclose wording added for fluency in English.\(^6\)

Translation

**Column I**

This is the Rule for all the congregation of Israel in the last days, when they shall join [the Community to walk] according to the law of the sons of Zadok the Priests and of the men of their Covenant who have turned aside [from the] way of the people, the men of His Council who keep His Covenant in the midst of iniquity, offering expiation [for the Land]

When they come, they shall summon them all, the little children and the women also, and they shall read into their [ears all] the precepts of the Covenant and shall expound to them all their statutes that they may no longer stray in their [errors].
And this is the Rule for all the hosts of the congregation, for every man born in Israel

From [his] youth they shall instruct him in the Book of Meditation and shall teach him, according to his age, the precepts of the Covenant. He [shall be educated] in their statutes for ten years . . .

At the age of twenty years [he shall be] enrolled, that he may enter upon his allotted duties in the midst of his family (and) be joined to the holy congregation. He shall not [approach] a woman to know her by lying with her before he is fully twenty years old, when he shall know [good] and evil. And thereafter, he shall be accepted when he calls to witness the judgements of the Law, and shall be (allowed) to assist at the hearing of judgements.

At the age of twenty-five years he may take his place among the foundations (i.e. the officials) of the holy congregation to work in the service of the congregation.

At the age of thirty years he may approach to participate in lawsuits and judgements, and may take his place among the chiefs of the Thousands of Israel, the chiefs of the Hundreds, Fifties, and Tens, the Judges and the officers of their tribes, in all their families, [under the authority] of the sons of [Aaron] the Priests. And every head of family in the congregation who is chosen to hold office, [to go] and come before the congregation, shall strengthen his loins that he may perform his tasks among his brethren in accordance with his understanding and the perfection of his way. According to whether this is great or little, so shall one man be honoured more than another.

When a man is advanced in years, he shall be given a duty in the [service] of the congregation in proportion to his strength.

No simpleton shall be chosen to hold office in the congregation of Israel with regard to lawsuits or judgement, nor carry any responsibility in the congregation. Nor shall he hold any office in the war destined to vanquish the nations; his family shall merely inscribe him in the army register and he shall do his service in task-work in proportion to his capacity.

The sons of Levi shall hold office, each in his place, under the authority of the sons of Aaron. They shall cause all the congregation to go and come, each man in his rank, under the direction of the heads of family of the congregation—the leaders, Judges, and officers, according to the number of all their hosts—under the authority of the sons of Zadok the Priests, [and] (under the direction) [of all the] heads of family of the congregation. And when the whole assembly is summoned for judgement, or for a Council of the Community, or for war, they shall sanctify them for three days that every one of its members may be prepared.

These are the men who shall be called to the Council of the Community . . .

All the wise men of the congregation, the learned and the intelligent, men whose way is perfect and men of ability, together with the tribal chiefs and all the Judges and officers, and the chiefs of the Thousands, [Hundreds,] the Fifties, and Tens, and the Levites, each man in the [class of] his duty; these are the men of renown, the members of the assembly summoned to the Council of the Community in Israel before the sons of Zadok the Priests.

Column II

Fifties, and Tens, and the Levites, each man in the [class of] his duty; these are the men of renown, the members of the assembly summoned to the Council of the Community in Israel before the sons of Zadok the Priests.
And no man smitten with any human uncleanness shall enter the assembly of God; no man smitten with any of them shall be confirmed in his office in the congregation. No man smitten in his flesh, or paralysed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish; no old and tottery man unable to stay still in the midst of the congregation; none of these shall come to hold office among the congregation of the men of renown, for the Angels of Holiness are [with] their [congregation.] Should [one] of them have something to say to the Council of Holiness, let [him] be questioned privately; but let him not enter among [the congregation] for he is smitten.

[This shall be the ass]embly of the men of renown [called] to the meeting of the Council of the Community

When God will have engendered (the Priest-) Messiah, he shall come [at] the head of the whole congregation of Israel with all [his brethren, the sons] of Aaron the Priests, [those called] to the assembly, the men of renown; and they shall sit [before him, each man] in the order of his dignity. And then [the Mess]iah of Israel shall [come], and the chiefs of the [clans of Israel] shall sit before him, [each] in the order of his dignity, according to [his place] in their camps and marches. And before them shall sit all the heads of [family of the congregation], and the wise men of [the holy congregation], each in the order of his dignity.

And [when] they shall gather for the common [table], to eat and [to drink] new wine, when the common table shall be set for eating and the new wine [poured] for drinking, let no man extend his hand over the first-fruits of bread and wine before the Priest; for [it is he] who shall bless the first-fruits of bread and wine, and shall be the first [to extend] his hand over the bread. Thereafter, the Messiah of Israel shall extend his hand over the bread, [and] all the congregation of the Community [shall utter a] blessing, [each man in the order] of his dignity.

It is according to this statute that they shall proceed at every meal at which] at least ten men are gathered together.

Commentary

Three subjects in the Rule of the Congregation are of special interest: what is implied in part of the “list of ages,” what is implied in the order of marriage at Qumran, and the identification of the two messiahs. In the list of ages, the various stages of life are described for all male members of the community from childhood until age sixty. For instance, the text states that at age twenty-five a male member is to “take his place among the ‘foundations’ of the holy congregation to work in the service of the congregation,” meaning, according to Lawrence H. Schiffman, that this is the “minimum age for military service.”

The reference to preparation for warfare, which has its parallel in similar passages in the War Scroll (suggesting anticipation of the messianic age), along with references to a messianic banquet (suggesting fulfillment in the messianic age), strengthens the contention that this document reflects anticipatory fulfillment.

With regard to marriage, the document differs from the discussion of this subject in other sources. For instance, historians from the same period, Josephus and Philo, both indicate that the Essenes, who some identify with the members of the Qumran community, are disinclined to marry. Josephus asserts that “marriage they regard with contempt.”

Similarly, he states in his Antiquities, “They neither bring wives into (the community) nor do they seek to acquire slaves, since they consider that the latter leads to injustice and the former inclines towards causing factions.”

Philo is even less hesitant. In his Hypothetica he states straightforwardly that “no Essene takes a wife.” Yet, in the Rule of the Congregation, women and children are clearly recognized as members of the
community,¹² and specific instructions are given on the proper age of marriage (it is stipulated that twenty is the minimum age for marriage and, consequently, for sexual relations).¹³ According to the rabbinic tradition, twelve years of age for females and thirteen years of age for males (the onset of adolescence) is the minimum age for marriage, while twenty (the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood) is the maximum.¹⁴ It appears that not only did the Qumran community allow for marriage, but also that the authors of these sectarian rules, in their own way, created an additional "fence" around the law, making twenty the minimum age for marriage.

We now come to questions regarding the messiah in the Rule of the Congregation: Is there one messiah or more than one? What does it mean to say that God will "engender" the messiah? Did the priest have precedence over the messiah at the banquet at the end of days? First, there appear to be two messiahs in this text: a "[Priest-] Messiah" as well as a "[Mess]iah of Israel." The idea of two messiahs at a banquet near the end-time is not surprising, because, according to Schiffman, "those sectarian texts expecting a single Davidic messiah are of the restorative type, while those expecting two messiahs, a lay messiah (not said to be Davidic) and a priestly messiah, follow the utopian trend"¹⁵—a trend characteristic of the community at Qumran.

Furthermore, Vermes's translation of the Rule of the Congregation contains the phrasing "When God will have engendered [YWLYD] (the Priest-) Messiah . . ." However, the original Hebrew text is blurred, making the reading YWLYD ("engendered") conjectural. Other scholars, including Frank M. Cross¹⁶ and Yigael Yadin,¹⁷ have emended the passage differently. And Emile Puech, following a careful reexamination of the passage, has shown that "it is no longer possible to read YWLYD."¹⁸ Finally, in the banquet at the end-time, the priest takes precedence over the messiah(s): "[L]et no man extend his hand over the first-fruits of bread and wine before the Priest; for [it is he] who shall bless the first-fruits of bread and wine, and shall be the first [to extend] his hand over the bread. Thereafter, the Messiah of Israel shall extend his hand over the bread." But according to Schiffman, who compares this idea with an early Jewish interpretation of Leviticus 21:8, this precedence of the priest over the messiah reflects the honor given to the priest in blessing and distributing the food at mealtimes.¹⁹

The Rule of the Congregation helps us appreciate the environment of messianic expectation that existed among various Jewish groups at the end of the first century B.C. It also provides additional background for understanding the causes of the Jewish revolts during the first two centuries of the Christian era. This glowing spirit of messianic awareness and expectation may be compared to similar themes found in other pseudepigraphic writings such as the Sibylline Oracles 3:652–795; 1 Enoch 36–71, 90; the Psalms of Solomon 17–8; the Fourth Book of Ezra; and 2 Baruch.²⁰

Notes


3. Ibid.
4. Compare this with 11Q19 Temple Scroll, in which “the king is dependent on the guidance of the priest” (ibid., 108 n. 5).


12. See 1Q28a 1:4.

13. See 1Q28a 1:12–3.


