Part II: The Writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls

16. What happened to the writers of the scrolls?

The first century AD was a troubled period in Jewish history. After several unsuccessful regional uprisings, the entire population of Jerusalem and Judea revolted against Roman rule in AD 66. Vespasian (later to become Roman emperor from AD 71 to 78) was ordered to suppress the revolt. By AD 70 Rome had crushed the revolt in Judea and Galilee, Jerusalem lay in the grasp of its hated enemy, and the temple at Jerusalem was destroyed.

Things were not much safer for the community that owned the scrolls. Probably expecting that their community would shortly be dispersed, and wishing to prevent their writings from being seized or destroyed, members hid the scrolls in caves about AD 68—70 (scores of coins have been found in the Qumran caves that assist archaeologists in dating the ruins to this time period). Fire and the Roman attack destroyed the building complex, as evidenced by a number of Roman arrowheads that excavation has uncovered. It is not known whether the inhabitants of the community were able to flee or whether they were killed or taken captive at that time.

17. Why did the people of Qumran separate themselves from Jerusalem?

Scholars believe that the people of Qumran departed from Jerusalem or other parts of Israel to retreat from those who they believed were wicked or ritually impure. Members of the Qumran community believed that a very high degree of religious purity was necessary in order to be prepared for the end of times.

A legal document among the scrolls called Some Observances of the Law (4QMMT) lists differences between the Qumran group and other religious Jews, perhaps including those of Jerusalem. The document explains that there were at least twenty points of the law of Moses wherein the Jewish groups differed, including their respective views on the offering of sacrifices from the Gentiles, bringing certain animal skins to the temple, sacrificing pregnant animals, eating unborn animals, bringing dogs into Jerusalem, the marriage of priests, and items concerning lepers, the blind, and the deaf (see question 55). The text also explains that, as a result of different doctrinal interpretations, the Qumran people “have separated from the mass of the peo[ple] . . . and from mingling” in matters pertaining to religious uncleanness and impurity (Some Observances of the Law 7:7—11).

18. What was the Qumran community’s view of the inspired interpretation of prophecy?

Qumran texts illustrate the belief in the inspired interpretation of scripture by one Jewish group that believed it was living in the last days, during which that gift had been renewed. The community as a whole was convinced that the Spirit of God, a gift for the last days, was present and active in their midst. Although the Holy Spirit is primarily regarded as the spirit of prophecy in Rabbinic Judaism, in Qumran the Holy Spirit has a function that is more broadly conceived in terms of cleansing, truth, holiness, and divinely mediated knowledge and insight. Apart from inspired interpretation of scripture, prophecy (as direct revelation mediated through inspired speech or writing) does not appear to have been practiced by the Teacher of Righteousness (see question 21) or other members of the Qumran community. For the Qumran community, inspired interpretation played a role equivalent to prophecy, yet it is readily apparent that the differences between the two phenomena are not small.

19. Did the Qumran people believe they were living in the last days?
The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls believed they were living in the last days. They considered themselves to be living in the end of times and preparing for the temple of the last days, and they believed that the establishment of their community constituted the period “which will end with the final judgment.”

They read and interpreted the scriptures in this light, likening the prophecies concerning the last days to themselves.

According to Frank Moore Cross, the Qumranites represented a group who lived “in anticipation of the Kingdom of God.” They anxiously looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, who they believed would cleanse the world and redeem them. The writers of the Qumran community’s texts considered themselves to be not only the “remnant of Israel” of their time but also the “remnant” of all time, the final “remnant.”

The War Scroll preserves an account of battles of the last days between the forces of righteousness, called the Sons of Light (under the direction of the Prince of Light), and the forces of evil, called the Sons of Darkness (under the direction of Belial). The latter forces, which were identified with “the traditional enemies of the Jewish people,” would be annihilated for eternity.

20. Did the owners of the scrolls believe they were a covenant people?

In a very real sense, the owners of the Dead Sea Scrolls believed they were a covenant people—the “sons of light” (Community Rule 1:9; 2:16; War Scroll 1:1, 3, 9, 11, 13)—involved in a mortal struggle with the “sons of darkness” (Community Rule 1:10; War Scroll 1:1, 7, 10, 16). Becoming a member of the community involved entering into a “Covenant of Grace . . . that they may be joined to the counsel of God and may live perfectly before Him in accordance with all that has been revealed” (Community Rule 1:7). The Community Rule contains some forty-five occurrences of the word covenant, while the Damascus Document contains forty-two.

21. Who are the “Teacher of Righteousness” and the “Wicked Priest”? 

The scrolls identify the Teacher of Righteousness (Hebrew moreh ha-tsedeq) as a priest who appears to have been highly influential in the early history of the Qumran community. For reasons that remain unclear, the writers of the scrolls used code names instead of given names; thus the actual names of the Teacher of Righteousness and Wicked Priest can only be surmised. The appearance of the Teacher of Righteousness and his conflict with the Wicked Priest is a chapter in the wider history of the struggle between Hellenization and traditional Judaism.

The Hellenizers, who wanted Judaism to adopt Greek culture and values, were led by the family of Tobias. The traditionalists, who preferred to maintain the received values of Judaism and who viewed Greek influence as baneful, if not deadly, to Jewish life, were led by Onias III, a Zadokite and the legitimate high priest, who is described as a “zealot for the laws” (2 Maccabees 4:2). The struggle between the Hellenizers and traditionalists became so intense that it threatened to break out in a full-scale civil war. Fearing such a turn of events, Onias went to Syria to plead the cause of the traditionalists and to affirm his support for Seleucus Philopator, the Syrian Greek ruler over Palestine (187 AD). When Seleucus Philopator was assassinated in 176 AD, he was succeeded by Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), who was not well-disposed toward Onias. In the view of some scholars, while in Syria Onias came into contact with members of the Dead Sea Scrolls community and became one of their guiding lights (possibly the Teacher of Righteousness) and was responsible for composing several texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Onias was deposed from his high priestly office by his brother Jason and, hearing of a plot against him, fled to Egypt. He was murdered in 172 AD on the orders of Menelaus, whom many Dead Sea Scrolls scholars regard as the Wicked Priest.
Although the Teacher of Righteousness did not refer to himself as “prophet,” in many ways he functioned as one. For example, the *Commentary on Habakkuk* indicates that he provided inspired interpretation of scripture and was taught by God himself, who had poured out His spirit upon him (see 2:2—3; 7:4—7). In the Qumran scrolls, prophecy was related to the interpretation of scripture and to the community’s concern with the last days:

> God told Habakkuk to write down that which would happen to the final generation, but He did not make known to him when time would come to an end. And as for that which He said, *That he who reads may read it speedily:* interpreted this concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of His servants the Prophets. (*Commentary on Habakkuk* 7:1—5)

### 22. Were the ritual immersions at Qumran considered to be baptisms?

It is difficult to tell the significance of ritual immersions among Jews in antiquity, let alone try to determine the Qumran community’s exact understanding of the practice from their writings. Archaeological evidence indicates that these immersions took place in a water installation (a type of font) called a *miqveh*. Scholars have seen the connections with Christian baptisms, observing “close contacts in language and thought between the early church and the Qumran community. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan during the time when the community of covenanters was flourishing not many miles away. . . . [John’s mode of baptizing] may have had some historical connection with the ritual bathing of the Qumran sect.”

The *Community Rule* states that purificatory immersions occur following a year of probation (see 3:4—6; 5:13—15). However, as Lawrence Schiffman notes, “to the sectarians, ritual purification was not more than a symptom of spiritual purification. Indeed, the sect believed that no amount of lustration or ablation would render pure anyone who was still an unrepentant transgressor.” This view is reflected in the *Community Rule*:

> He will not be purified by atonement rituals, nor will he become pure in waters of lustration. He will not be sanctified in seas or rivers, nor will he be purified in any waters of ablation. Impure, impure, he will remain as long as he despises the divine regulations, so as not to be disciplined by the counsel of His community. (3:4—6)

### Notes


22. Ibid., 80, 88.


25. Zadokites were descendants of the priest Zadok, who served in the high priesthood during most of the First and Second Temple periods.

26. See the chronological table in the LDS Bible Dictionary, 641.

