

The Book of Mormon and the Dead Sea Scrolls

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Consider this tale of two peoples:

The individuals of one group, originally a family,

- left their mother city, Jerusalem, because they believed that it was becoming irredeemably wicked and that it would eventually be destroyed;
- went out into the desert in order to escape its corruption;
- having left the desert, built temples and had priests;
- strictly observed the law of Moses;
- required the complete immersion of those who entered their community;
- looked forward with anxious anticipation to the coming of their Messiah; and
- wrote on metal plates that they hid away in a time of crisis.

The other group also

- left Jerusalem, which they, too, believed had become irretrievably corrupted;
- withdrew into the desert to escape its corruption;
- loved the temple and honored priests as members of their community;
- strictly observed the law of Moses;
- required immersion of those who wished to enter their community;
- looked forward with eager anticipation for the coming of their Messiah(s); and
- wrote on parchment, on papyrus, and in one case on metal plates, which they hid away in a time of crisis.

Which groups fit these descriptions? The group first described was Lehi and his family, who left Jerusalem and escaped into the desert around 600 BC because Lehi had been warned by the Lord that Jerusalem would be destroyed (see 1 Nephi 1:4, 13; 3:17; 2 Nephi 1:4). In the New World, the Nephites built temples that formed the center of their communities (see 2 Nephi 5:16; Jacob 1:17; 2:2, 11; Helaman 3:9, 14). They observed the law of Moses (see 2 Nephi 25:24; Jacob 4:5; 7:7; Jarom 1:5, 11; Mosiah 2:3) while looking forward to the coming of their Messiah (see 2 Nephi 25:16, 18; Jarom 1:11). They organized a church (see Mosiah 21:30; 26:17; Helaman 3:24–5) that required baptism of all those wishing to become members (see Mosiah 18:16–7). The Nephites wrote their history on metal plates (see the title page of the Book of Mormon; 1 Nephi 1:17; Mosiah 1:3–4, 6; Omni 1:3–4, 8, 11; Mormon 1:4; 2:18), which the last of the Nephites, Moroni, hid to come forth “in their purity” at a later time (see 1 Nephi 14:26).

Members of the second group included the writers of many of the Dead Sea Scrolls, who also left Jerusalem (probably sometime in the late third or early second century BC),¹ established a home in the wilderness, loved the temple, honored priests and Levites,² expected the imminent coming of their Messiah(s),³ and wrote on various materials, including parchment, papyrus, and copper plates, which they buried in haste in a time of danger to the community.⁴

The correlation between the actions of these two groups of people is not the only similarity. A study of the theological themes in the documents they produced reveals several common topics in their beliefs.⁵

1. The writings of the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal a strong sense of being a covenant people, who saw themselves as the continuation of the true Israel. Compare the ideas in the following quotations from the scrolls with the feelings of the peoples of the Book of Mormon, who saw themselves as a “remnant of the house of Israel” (title page of the Book of Mormon):

{W}elcome into the covenant of kindness all those who freely volunteer to carry out God’s decrees, so as to be united in the counsel of God and walk in perfection in his sight, complying with all revealed things concerning the regulated times of their stipulations. (1QS I 7–9)

And all those who enter in the Rule of the Community shall establish a covenant before God in order to carry out all that he commands and in order not to stray from following him for any fear, dread or grief that might occur during the dominion of Belial. When they enter the covenant, the priests and the levites shall bless the God of salvation and all the works of his faithfulness and all those who enter the covenant shall repeat after them: ‘Amen, Amen.’ (1QS I 16–20)

[And all] those who enter the covenant shall confess after them and they shall say: “We have acted sinfully, [we have transgressed, we have si]nned, we have acted irreverently, we and our fathers before us, inasmuch as we walk [in the opposite direction to the precepts] of truth and justice [. . .] his judgment upon us and upon our fathers.”

(1QS I 24–6)

And all those who enter the covenant shall say, after those who pronounce blessings and those who pronounce curses: “Amen, Amen.” *Blank* And the priests and the levites shall continue, saying: . . . “whoever enters this covenant leaving his guilty obstacle in front of himself to fall over it. When he hears the words of this covenant, he will congratulate himself in his heart, saying: ‘I will have peace.’

(1QS II 10–3)

May all the curses of this covenant stick fast to him. May God segregate him for evil, and may he be cut off from the midst of all the sons of light because of his straying from following God on account of his idols and his blameworthy obstacle. May he assign his lot with the cursed ones for ever.

(1QS II 16–7)⁶

2. The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls insisted on strict observance of the law of Moses, including a particular concern for the time and manner of observing the festivals. The members of the Dead Sea community intended to live “the law which he commanded through the hand of Moses” (1QS VIII 15). Compare the following quotations from the scrolls to 2 Nephi 25:24, where Nephi says that they “keep the law of Moses” even though they “believe in Christ” and “look forward with steadfastness . . . until the law shall be fulfilled”:

For [the Instructor . . .] . . . [book of the Ru]le of the Community: in order to seek God [with all (one’s) heart and with all (one’s) soul; in order] to do what is good and just in his presence, as commanded by means of

the hand of Moses and his servants the Prophets; in order to love everything which he selects and to hate everything that he rejects; in order to keep oneself at a distance from all evil, and to become attached to all good works; to bring about truth, justice and uprightness. (1QS I 1-5)

As it is written: "In the desert, prepare the way of {the Lord}, straighten in the steppe a roadway for our God." This is the study of the law which he commanded through the hand of Moses, in order to act in compliance with all that has been revealed from age to age, and according to what the prophets have revealed through his holy spirit. (1QS VIII 14-6)

And he taught them by the hand of the anointed ones through his holy spirit and through seers of the truth, and their names were established with precision. (CD II 12-3)

3. Writers from both these groups display a vivid sense of expectation of the coming of the Messiah. Like the early Christians, they lived in the belief that the end of days was at hand and that their struggle was with the principalities and powers, and they reinterpreted the scriptures in that context. According to one eminent scholar in the field, Professor Frank Moore Cross, "Theirs was a church of anticipation."⁷ Many of the Dead Sea Scrolls, such as the *Rule of the Congregation (or Messianic Rule)*, are written in expectation of the time when the Messiah would be present in their midst or (in the case of the *Temple Scroll*) of an era immediately preceding the Messianic age. The Book of Mormon, too, reveals an intense expectation of the coming of their Messiah (usually referred to in the Book of Mormon as Christ).⁸ The Nephites "look forward unto Christ [i.e., the Messiah] with steadfastness for the signs which are given" (2 Nephi 26:8). Indeed, the prophets of the Book of Mormon even prophesy the year of Christ's birth: Nephi prophesies that Christ will be born "six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 10:4), while the mysterious Samuel the Lamanite tells the Nephites that he would be born in five years (Helaman 14:2).

Examine the strong messianic expectations in the following excerpts from the scrolls:

For he will honour the devout upon the throne of eternal royalty, freeing prisoners, giving sight to the blind, straightening out the twisted. Ever shall I cling to those who hope. In his mercy he will jud[ge,] and from no-one shall the fruit [of] good [deeds] be delayed, and the Lord will perform marvellous acts such as have not existed, just as he sa[id] for he will heal the badly wounded and will make the dead live, he will proclaim good news to the meek give lavishly [to the need]y, lead the exiled and enrich the hungry. (4Q521 II 7-13)

And they will recount the splendour of his kingdom, according to their knowledge, and they will extol [his glory in all] the heavens of his kingdom. And in all the exalted heights [they will sing] wonderful psalms according to all [their knowledge,] and they will tell [of the splendour] of the glory of the king of the gods in the residences of their positions. (4Q400 2 i 3-5)

He will be called son of God, and they will call him son of the Most High. Like the sparks of a vision, so will their kingdom be; they will rule several years over the earth and crush everything; a people will crush another people, and a city another city. *Blank* Until the people of God arises and makes everyone rest from the sword. His kingdom will be an eternal kingdom, and all his paths in truth and uprigh[tness]. (4Q246 II 1-5)

A star has departed from Jacob, /and/ a sceptre /has arisen/ from Israel. He shall crush the temples of Moab, and cut to pieces all the sons of Sheth. (4Q175 12-3)

4. Temples played a vitally important role among the peoples of the Book of Mormon. Following their arrival in the promised land, Nephi built a temple “after the manner of the temple of Solomon save it were not built of so many precious things” (2 Nephi 5:16), where Nephi’s brothers Jacob and Joseph later taught as priests (see Jacob 1:17-8). Subsequently, temples were built in Zarahemla (see Mosiah 1:18, 2:1, 5-7) and in Bountiful, where the risen Christ appeared to the people (see 3 Nephi 11:1; compare Mosiah 6:3).⁹

The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls also placed great importance on the priesthood and the temple:

In the Community council (there shall be) twelve men and three priests, perfect in everything that has been revealed about all the law to implement truth, justice, judgment, compassionate love and unassuming behaviour of each person to his fellow to preserve faithfulness on the earth with firm purpose and repentant spirit in order to atone for sin, doing justice and undergoing trials in order to walk with everyone in the measure of truth and the regulation of time. (1QS VIII 1-4)

{A}t this moment the men of the Community shall set themselves apart (like) a holy house for Aaron, in order to enter the holy of holies, and (like) a house of the Community for Israel, (for) those who walk in perfection. (1QS IX 5-6)

They shall not desecrate the oil of their priestly anointing with the blood of futile nations. (1QM IX 8-9)

And the priests, sons of Aaron, shall station themselves in front of the lines and blow the memorial trumpets. And afterwards, they shall open the gat[es] to the soldiers of the infantry. The priests shall blow the battle trumpets [to strike] the lines of the nations. (4Q493 1-4)

They shall be for me a people and I will be for them for ever and I shall establish them for ever and always. I shall sanctify my temple with my glory, for I shall make my glory reside over it until the day of creation, when I shall create my temple, establishing it for myself for ever, in accordance with the covenant which I made with Jacob at Bethel. (11Q19 XXIX 7-9)

[Because he has established] the holy of holies among the eternal holy ones, so that for him they can be priests [who approach the temple of his kingship,] the servants of the Presence in the sanctuary of his glory. In the assembly of all the deities [of knowledge, and in the council of all the spirits] of God, he has engraved his ordinances for all spiritual works, and his [glorious] precepts [for those who establish] knowledge of the people of the intelligence of his glory, the gods who approach knowledge. (4Q400 1 i 3-6)

Priests and Levites played a crucial role in the organization and operation of the Qumran community. Although the temple in Jerusalem was seen as corrupt, the writers of the Qumran scrolls had a vision of a purified interim temple as well as a temple of the endtime.

5. Passages from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Book of Mormon reflect the belief that a war is being waged between good and evil. Both show a strong sense that good will prevail. Compare Alma 12:31; 29:5; and Moroni 7:19 to the following:

And in the hand of the Angel of Darkness is total dominion over the sons of deceit; they walk on paths of darkness. Due to the Angel of Darkness all the sons of justice stray, and all their sins, their iniquities, their failings and their mutinous deeds are under his dominion in compliance with the mysteries of God, until his moment; and all their punishments and their periods of grief are caused by the dominion of his enmity. (1QS III 20–3)

{T}o separate themselves from the sons of the pit; to abstain from wicked wealth which defiles, either by promise or by vow, and from the wealth of the temple and from stealing from the poor of the people, from making their widows their spoils and from murdering orphans; to separate unclean from clean and differentiate between the holy and the common. (CD VI 14–7)

The sons of light and the lot of darkness shall battle together for God’s might, between the roar of a huge multitude and the shout of gods and of men, on the day of the calamity. It will be a time of suffering fo[r all] the people redeemed by God. (1QM I 11–2)

Since ancient time you determined the day of the great battle [] to assist truth, and destroy wickedness, to demolish darkness and increase light.

(1QM XIII 14–5)

Do not all peoples loathe sin? And yet, they all walk about under its influence. Does not praise of truth come from the mouth of all nations? And yet, is there perhaps one lip or one tongue which persists with it?

(1Q27 1 i 9–10)

Conclusion

Qumran illustrates the presence of prophecy in one Jewish group, which believed that it lived the last days—a time within which the gift of prophecy had been renewed. The community as a whole was convinced that the Spirit of God, an eschatological gift, was present and active in their midst in providing “cleansing, truth, holiness, and divinely mediated knowledge and insight.”¹⁰ According to Josephus, among the Essenes “there are some . . . who profess to foretell the future, being versed from their early years in holy books, various forms of purification and apothegms of prophets; and seldom, if ever, do they err in their predictions.”¹¹ The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls believe in the inspired interpretation of scripture and prophecy. The *Commentary on Habakkuk* faults those who do not believe the words of the Teacher of Righteousness, who says that he received “from the mouth of God.”¹² Book of Mormon prophets taught that the scriptures were “plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy” (2 Nephi 25:4; see also verse 7), and that the spirit of prophecy and revelation was in their midst (see Alma 17:3).

Of course, there are differences between the Book of Mormon and the Dead Sea Scrolls: the desert was the final destination of the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, not the transit point as for Lehi and his family. The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls loved the temple but did not build their own, while the Nephites did. Although both peoples observed the law of Moses, only the Nephites in the Book of Mormon looked forward to its fulfillment in Christ. Still, the areas of overlap between these people and the contours of correspondence between them—their warm belief in prophecy, their vivid sense of living in the end time, their belief in being a covenant people, the true

remnant of Israel—help us to understand the good tidings that have come since Cumorah about those things that were held sacred in antiquity.

Notes

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1. See Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their True Meaning for Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 83–95; compare Hartmut Stegemann, *Die Entstehung der Qumrangemeinde* (Bonn: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1971).
2. See Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 70–3, 80.
3. See *ibid.*, 317–27.
4. See *ibid.*, 397–9.
5. Translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls are from Florentino García Martínez, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, translated into English by Wilfred G. E. Watson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).
6. See also 1QS III 11–2; IV 22; V 1–5, 8–12, 18–22; VI 14–5, 18–20; VIII 8–10, 16–9; X 10–1)
7. Frank M. Cross Jr., “Dead Sea Scrolls: Overview,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 1:362.
8. On the use of *Christ* in place of *Messiah* in the Book of Mormon, see Stephen D. Ricks, “Book of Mormon Prophets Knew before the Lord’s Birth That His Name Would Be Jesus Christ. Did Old Testament Prophets Also Know?” *Ensign* (September 1984): 24–5.
9. See the outstanding study of the temple in the Book of Mormon by John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 297–387.
0. See David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 342.
1. Josephus, *Jewish War*, trans. H. Thackeray and R. Marcus, Loeb Classical Library (1927), 2.159.
2. *1QpHabakkuk* II 2–3.