

Social Location of the Qumran Community in Brief
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James C. VanderKam offers a credible set of proposals to the much disputed historical origins and identity of the Qumran community. What follows is a very brief presentation of key elements of the proposals (see references below for further detail).¹ The Dead Sea scrolls themselves set the origins of the community at about 177 BCE (if the two biblical numbers 390 and 20 are taken literally²).

“And in the age of wrath, **three hundred and ninety years** after He had given them into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, He visited them, and **He caused a plant root to spring from Israel and Aaron** to inherit His land and to prosper on the good things of His earth. And they perceived their iniquity and recognized that they were guilty men, yet for **twenty years** they were like blind men groping for the way. And God observed their deeds, that they sought Him with a whole heart, and **He raised for them a Teacher of Righteousness to guide them** in the way of His heart.” (Damascus Document 1.5-11 emphasis mine)³

The Qumran sectarian scrolls do not name the Teacher of Righteousness nor his opponents referred to as “man of the lie” and “Wicked Priest.” These opaque references underlie much of the debate and speculation. The dispute between the Wicked Priest and the Teacher of Righteousness may have initiated the Essene movement much later associated with Qumran. The title Wicked Priest may provide a basis for proposal. “Scholars have long suspected that the epithet is a Hebrew wordplay on the title ‘the high priest’ *ha-kohen ha-ro'sh* [הַכֹּהֵן הָרֵאשִׁי] = high priest; *ha-kohen ha-rasha* ‘[הַכֹּהֵן הָרָשָׁע] = the wicked priest). If so, the Teacher’s opponent was none other than the Jewish high priest of the time.”⁴ The following passage may speak about the dispute which led to the departure of the Teacher of Righteousness.

The wicked watches out for the righteous and seeks [to slay him. The Lord will not abandon him into his hand or] let him be condemned when he is tried [Ps 37:32-33].

Interpreted, this concerns the Wicked [Priest] who [watched the Teacher of Righteousness] that he might put him to death [because cause of the ordinance] and the law which he sent to him. (4QpPs 4.7-9)⁵

The basis of the dispute may stem, in part from a religious calendar dispute.

Woe to him who causes his neighbours to drink; who pours out his venom to make them drunk that he may gaze on their feasts (ii, 15).

Interpreted, this concerns **the Wicked Priest who pursued the Teacher of Righteousness to the house of his exile that he might confuse him with his venomous fury. And at the time appointed for rest, for the Day of Atonement**, he appeared before them to confuse them, and to cause them to stumble on the Day of Fasting, their Sabbath of repose. (1QpHab XI)⁶

¹ Primarily based on VanderKam 2010, chap 4 “Qumran Essenes”

² 390 years of punishment comes from sign in Ezek 4:5; 20 years is half of a generation

³ Vermes translation cited in VanderKam 2010

⁴ VanderKam 2010, kindle loc. 1595

⁵ Vermes translation cited in VanderKam 2010, kindle loc. 1598

⁶ From Vermes 2011, 515

This is likely not the entire reason for dispute since the alternate interpretation had been around since the 3rd century BCE in 1 Enoch.

The Hasmonean civil leader appointed priest, Jonathan (152-142 BCE) seems the best candidate for the Wicked Priest. During the days after the Maccabean uprising against the Seleucids the temple may have been without a high priest from 159 to 152 (much disputed report from Josephus). One of the leading priests during this time is referred to in 1 Maccabees 10. It is possible that this could be the Teacher of Righteousness who would have been displaced by Jonathan's appointment.⁷

Since Qumran was not occupied until after 100 BCE, the Teacher of Righteousness and his contingent of Essenes may have lived in Damascus or elsewhere. The total number of those who lived at Qumran on the northwest shores of the Dead Sea numbered between 150 and 300. The total number of Essenes was about 4,000 according to both Philo and Josephus. "The eventual choice of Qumran as the home of the group seems to have been made in response to biblical prophecies about the wilderness. The Rule of the Community, in a passage that speaks about the group's separation from the impious, cites Isaiah 40:3 as the warrant for their settling in the wilderness."⁸

And when these become members of the Community in Israel according to all these rules, they shall separate from the habitation of unjust men and shall go into the wilderness to prepare there the way of Him; as it is written, ***Prepare in the wilderness the way of ... , make straight in the desert a path for our God (Isa. xl, 3). This (path) is the study of the Law*** which He commanded by the hand of Moses, that they may do according to all that has been revealed from age to age, and as the Prophets have revealed by His Holy Spirit. (1QS VIII emphasis mine)⁹

On this reading, the Qumran community may have taken Isaiah 40 literally in the sense of going to the wilderness and figuratively in the sense of making the way straight by Torah study.

Summary primarily based on:

James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, 2d ed. (Eerdmans, 2010).

Also see:

James C. VanderKam, "Identity and History of the Community," in Peter W. Flint and James C. VanderKam, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years: A Comprehensive Assessment*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 2: 484-533. This essay includes a list of what can be known of their history (on the latter see esp. 2:524-531).

_____. *An Introduction to Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), chap 2, sec. on "The Qumran Community and Its History."

_____. "The People of the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 63 (1998): 129-146. An important and persuasive argument for Qumran community as Essenes, over and against other options.

Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*. 7th ed. Penguin Books, 2012

⁷ See VanderKam 2010, kindle loc. 1615

⁸ Vanderkam 2001, chap 2, sec. on "The Qumran Community and Its History"

⁹ From Vermes 2011, 109