

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

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THE FIRST OF THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS were found at a place called Qumran in the Judean desert in 1947.¹ From then until 1956, eleven caves were discovered near the north-west shore of the Dead Sea in which there were clay jars containing ancient scrolls. Scroll fragments, many no bigger than a thumbnail, littered the floors of the caves in the tens of thousands. Written on the scrolls were the books of the *tanakh*, or Old Testament, and other documents that were important to the sect that lived there in ancient times, the Essenes. The biblical texts were a thousand years older than any known to modern scholars. Jews and Christians can easily agree that, for them, this was the most important archaeological find of the twentieth century.

The biblical and non-biblical writings of the Scrolls contain many ideas and inspirations that are relevant to spiritual life in the present day. Study of the Scrolls enhances and refines our appreciation of the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments. The Scrolls are imbued with adoring devotion to God and to the task of finding a path towards God who is Jewish, priestly, scriptural and apocalyptic. The Scrolls community treasured God's revelation and approached in practice St Paul's ideal of constant prayer. In many respects it followed a path that closely parallels the Christianity of the same period. Research on the Dead Sea Scrolls helps Christians to see themselves in several ways as an outgrowth and development of Judaism.

The spirituality of the Scrolls has much to do with the law (*torah*), the prophets, the covenant, the priesthood and the Temple. Christian

¹ See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Impact of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2009).

teaching maintains devotion to all of these Jewish spiritual sources and resources, although Christ replaces the *torah* as the centre of authority and devotion. At Qumran, the *torah*, the covenant and the community itself as the True Israel were of central importance. The covenant was the indispensable context in which the law was understood and applied. And like the Christians, the Qumran sect proclaimed a new covenant to supplement the old one.

The sectaries of the Qumran community were called to membership in a higher reality, not just a *renewed* covenant but a *new* covenant with God—although the old covenant was honoured alongside the new. This new covenant brought a higher degree of holiness and election than had been possible or available before. The new covenant created in the sectarians a greater capacity for grace and an enhanced ability to participate in the Kingdom of God. Christians are similarly called to feel within themselves this ever-increasing capacity, and to experience an ever greater joy as they grow in intimacy with God.

At Qumran the *yahad* (community) or *qahal*² (assembly) was of great importance. Indeed, the people of God were the new Temple, replacing the Temple of Jerusalem as the primary place of holiness and sacrifice. In the Book of Revelation, likewise, the New Jerusalem has no temple in it; the saints themselves make up the new Temple. What Christians can learn from a study of the Qumran community documents is a keen sense of identity in living and in liturgy within the community, without any neglect of individual commitment and devotion. The fact that the charism of the Qumran community ceased and the community itself did not long survive is a lesson to us to cherish religious life in the forms that we know now in Christianity.

The Dead Sea Scrolls and Biblical Scholarship

Collectively, today's scholars know more about the Bible, its background and its contents than any generation of believers between its writing and the present age. There are more scripture scholars alive and working today than at any previous time. The work of comparing texts is greatly aided by the use of computers, and scholars now communicate with one another over the internet. It is providential that the discovery

² On the importance of the *qahal* or *qahal Yahweh* in Catholic theology, see Louis Bouyer, *Liturgical Piety* (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame P, 1955), 161 and following.

of the Scrolls took place when it did, when such expertise and exquisite new techniques could be brought to bear in the work of reconstruction and the analysis of texts. It puts us in exciting new contact with the ideas and events of so very long ago. We now have the documents of a sect that antedated Christianity and that grew up next to Christianity



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like a big sister or brother who would live a short life, yet leave behind a rich heritage of devotion and recorded spiritual experience.

The people who actually wrote the Bible and the religious authorities in biblical times had not yet developed a canon of holy scripture. The canon of scripture involves a growing sense, instilled by the Holy Spirit and developed over time, that certain books were divinely revealed; and that others, although valuable, were not revealed. At Qumran the sense of the inspired canon was still fluid and undeveloped. All the Old Testament books that Catholics consider to be biblical and inspired were present at Qumran, with the exception of the Book of Esther. However, Essene documents, such as the *Rule of the Community*, the *Damascus Document* and the *Temple Scroll*, were considered by the Qumran people to be just as authoritative. The sectaries wrote elaborate commentaries, called *peshers*, on many of the biblical books. The tone of these commentaries often suggests that they were considered to be the word of God in the same sense, or with the same authority, as the biblical books.

The biblical portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls date back to times earlier than that of Jesus. Before the Scrolls were found, the oldest texts of the Jewish Bible or Old Testament dated to the ninth or tenth century. Imagine how exciting it is for scholars to compare the texts of the Bible as they already know them to texts that are a thousand years older. Amazing, too, is the accuracy with which the texts were transmitted over this millennium. Nevertheless there are many slight

differences in these handwritten texts which are being studied by scholars. The sciences of palaeography³ and orthography, which study the developmental differences in the formation of the Hebrew and Aramaic scripts over time, are greatly advanced by the new discoveries. Spelling and changes in the formation of the Hebrew letters help scholars to date texts, and to determine which pieces belong to the same scroll when fragments of several scrolls are mixed together on the floor of a cave. It borders on the miraculous that the Scrolls have been preserved, waiting deep in those dry hills until the time when we could approach them with finely honed exegetical skills, with numerous scholars (Jewish, Christian and secular) and with excellent technology.

One of the great lessons we can learn from the Scrolls is the respect that God has for human agency in the composition, preservation and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. The Qumran library, now in our hands, shows that, although it was probably not their intent, people like us in that ancient time and place took great pains to provide these documents for us. God worked through their community. And the way the scrolls were hidden away, as if waiting as a gift to be given to the modern generation of Jews and Christians, is a surprise at which to marvel.

The Law and Expectations

There was a great love of rules and regulations, prescriptions and stipulations among the Qumran community. A devotion to the will of God as expressed in the Law of God is shown in their having and wanting to fulfil a directive for every occasion. Indeed, an unbroken succession of obligations claimed almost all of the time and energy of the Qumran sectarians. Ritual washing and ritual eating seemed foremost among the practices that structured their daily activities. Writing or copying the Scrolls was a sacred and ritual task. Some of these Scrolls tell us about Qumran's liturgy, based on psalms and psalm-like prayers, which was also very important to them. The sense of joy in the sectarians' common identity, common prayer and common tasks is palpable as we read the Scrolls.

³ James VanderKam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2002), 22–27.

The sectarians had an experience of the *torah* and its importance that we do not have. The *torah* defined their relationships with God, with one another and with everything else. To the Qumranians, obligations were opportunities to show obedience to the law of God. While the covenant had to do with God's love for them and their love for God, the energy of that love was immediately channelled into the *torah* and to the many stipulations and obligations that flowed from the *torah*. The *torah* contains, along with essential moral stipulations, obligations concerning ritual, custom, etiquette and hygiene. For the sectarians, love was immediately translated into obedience and, indeed, into legal structures that brought justice and religious satisfaction to the people.

We today tend to think that, the more love reigns, the less of a sense of requirement and duty we will experience. Excessive obligations are a burden to us. With the Qumranians, it was just the opposite. Channels were needed to express their covenant love, and the law provided these channels. The stringency of the law's demands provided the opportunity for the faithful to develop and to demonstrate their righteousness. As the channel for God's grace reaching us, and for our love reaching back to God, the law was the supreme sacrament.

The core religious experience of the Qumranians was one of personal fulfilment only when they fulfilled the law. The satisfaction that we moderns have when we do something that fulfils a precept lacks the intensity and devotion of their experience. Fulfilling the law just for the sake of fulfilling the law, even when we do so also in order to obey God, is not the essential religious experience for most modern Christians. Freedom from the law, and the freedom of the children of God as stated in St Paul's letter to the Romans, are more amenable to our understanding and experience. For the Qumran sectarians, the law was the connecting link to God. For us, Christ, as found in the sacraments, personal prayer, and the neighbour we are enjoined to love, are the focal point of access to the divine.

Speaking to us in our own terms, then, the Qumran people would have to speak of their experience of freedom. They were seeking a kind of freedom that was a liberation from certain corruptions and also from distractions. Distractions from the law were a threat to the purity of observance that they required of themselves. Their aim was to give full and pure attention to the law and to nothing else. By contrast



Christians have sought freedom from the law itself, especially when the law presented obstacles to evangelizing the gentiles. To Christians, the old law could not save anyone of itself, and was there principally as a reminder that one was a sinner and could not be saved. When the burden of sin was lifted by the death and resurrection of Jesus, then the burden of the law was lifted as well. But while this realisation provided a new spirit and a psychological lift for Christians, it did not remove the Decalogue and its corollaries. In this way, Christians, like Qumranians, maintain the old covenant, at least in its moral core, as well as the new.

The Two Ways

The mentality or consciousness of the Qumran community was structured by the 'Two Ways',⁴ as found in the Book of Psalms. These are the way of wickedness and the way of righteousness. Psalm 1 and Psalm 37, especially, present the teaching of the Two Ways. The righteous person lives in all respects by the law of God. The wicked person not only does not live righteously, but also seeks to destroy the righteous

⁴ *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, translated by Geza Vermes (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 443. See also George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 139.

person. The urgent message in this dichotomy is to attract hearers and readers to the side of the righteous, to have them repudiate the wicked way, and to demand a commitment from them. The dynamic set in motion by the Two Ways is one that engages the conscience and evokes choice and conversion.

The doctrine of the Two Ways structures the Dead Sea Scrolls pervasively. Throughout the Scrolls literature we find, again and again, the way of darkness and the way of light, the spirit of darkness and the spirit of light, the children of darkness and the children of light. The light is truth, and the darkness is falsehood. The Teacher of Righteousness is opposed to the Wicked Priest. The chief demon is most frequently known as Belial or Beliar. Melchisedech or Michael is the name of the angelic priest. The way of God leads to salvation; the way of evil leads to torment. Fully developed in the Qumranian perspective, the Two Ways evolve into a doctrine of eschatological warfare between the children of light and the children of darkness in the *War Scroll*.

To the Scrolls sectarian, the dichotomy of the Two Ways dominates consciousness and has an effect on everything else one does and thinks about. The way of the righteous person has everything to do with the law of God, the covenant and the discipline of the community. A certain satisfaction comes from knowing the truth about the cosmic struggle, God's revelation and one's personal situation. A personal decision comes into play as one aligns oneself with the way of the righteous and repudiates wickedness. A trusting anticipation, involving both anxiety and hope, dominates everything as one dreads, prepares for and eagerly awaits the outcome of the eschatological war.

In *The Impact of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Joseph Fitzmyer discusses the basic dualism in Qumranic and apocalyptic thinking, finding the emphasis to be more on ethical dualism⁵ in the human heart than on cosmic dualism. Nevertheless, however remotely, cosmic dualism remains the horizon for understanding the scope of the struggle and the plight of the divided human heart. The Essenes explained the problem of evil as if it involved the spirits of good and evil struggling with each other for domination over the present world and within the hearts of individual human beings. It is the Creator God who put the two spirits in human beings and who will judge their conduct at the

⁵ Fitzmyer, *The Impact of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 78.

time of his visitation. It is the choice of each person as to which spirit will dominate within the human heart. Hence, this dualistic thinking intends to be compatible with a belief in free human conduct and traditional Jewish monotheism.

War and Persecution

The God whom the Qumran sectarians loved so radically and passionately was constantly offended by the mounting sinfulness of God's creatures. People everywhere worshipped false gods, or else lived as if there were no God at all. To the Qumranians, the world and its people were wicked, depraved and beyond redemption. Their fellow Jews were included in this: the institutional priesthood at the Temple in Jerusalem, especially, was viewed as completely corrupt. The last remnants of just persons and true believers were the members of the Qumran sect.

The scroll called *The War of the Children of Light against the Children of Darkness*, or the *War Scroll*, was found in Qumran Cave 1. Fragments of the same text were found in other caves as well. This work contains the plan for the armies and the campaigns of the final forty years' war, when God will crush the forces of evil and darkness in this world. The war is to be conducted according to theological designs rather than according to practical military strategy. The high priest plays the dominant role; there is no clear expectation of a Davidic or royal messiah in this text. This high priest will be a member of the Scrolls community; he will not be the official high priest in Jerusalem. To what degree the Scrolls community literally believed in the coming war to end the world as they knew it is not known.

Leading up to the war, quickly and imminently, there will be a sorting out process and, eventually, all just persons will become members of the sect. They will stand with their God in this one last terrible war in which all their enemies and God's enemies will be destroyed. Angelic and diabolical powers will oppose one another in cosmic and decisive combat. As described in the Scrolls, the outcome of the war is predetermined, but it will be fought as if everything depended on the human fighters and their angelic allies. The Essene sectarians believed in the absoluteness of the divine will, but also esteemed the importance of individual will and choice.

The dominant theme of the *War Scroll* is how, if the forces of good and light are organized according to the proper quasi-liturgical scheme

and if their standards and trumpets are inscribed with prayers, then God will favour the sectarians and victory will be assured. The role of the priests is to deliver ardent sermons encouraging the troops. Priests do not enter battle because contact with blood would deprive them of their ritual purity. The priests sound the battle signals and direct the troops. Prayer, ritual purity and priestly direction are essential to victory. The angelic and cosmic dimension of the battle comes into play as Michael the archangel, with the aid of Raphael and Sariel, leads the forces of light, and Belial guides the forces of darkness. Other names for Belial appear in other texts and scrolls. Thus, Belial is also called Satan or Melkiresha. Michael and Melchizedek, on the side of light, are fused into the same angelic entity.

The mentality of spiritual warfare based on armies fighting for God or for Satan is one that accents the basic choice individuals must make in the spiritual life. The *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius presents this same choice under the image or metaphor of the Two Standards. For Ignatius, discerning souls must make a choice as to whether they will follow Christ or follow Satan. St Ignatius had been a soldier, and he frequently favoured military analogies and metaphors. He associated following the standard or banner of Christ with a preference for poverty, humility and imitation of Christ, and the opposite standard with riches, comforts and worldly power. For Christians, no matter how much evil accumulates in the world, grace is always stronger than sin and evil, and God can bring redemption to people and to the world. Christ, through his life, death and resurrection, has redeemed the world and, although much evil remains, it is now essentially and decisively defeated.

Heavenly and Earthly Liturgies

The aim of a holy life lived within the covenant community at Qumran was to penetrate the secrets of heaven in this world and to stand before God forever in the next. Preparing for holy war, liturgical worship and producing and maintaining scrolls were the main concerns of the community. The Essenes strove for a mystical knowledge that was inseparable from prescribed good works, inner contemplation, overt ritual and community participation.

The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, copies of which were found in Caves 4 and 11, and also at Masada, presupposes that the heavenly

and earthly communities join in worship on the sabbath. The earthly liturgy was intended to be a replica of the heavenly liturgy sung by the choirs of angels in the celestial Temple. The Temple in Jerusalem was considered to be a humanly constructed temple that was a replica of the heavenly Temple. The new covenant at Qumran made the sectarians themselves, the congregation of the faithful, into the new Temple. The congregation itself was the earthly Temple, mystically identical with the heavenly Temple of eternal angelic worship. There was a requirement of exact simultaneity between events in these two Temples, the heavenly one and the Qumran congregation. Worship at Qumran had to be perfectly coordinated with worship in heaven. It was of supreme importance to the sectaries that their earthly calendar match exactly the heavenly calendar of cosmic and celestial events.

The *Sabbath Songs* describe a vision of this Temple in the heavens:

And the likeness of the living 'gods' [angels] is engraved on the vestibules by which the King [God] enters, luminous spiritual figures ... figures of a glorious light, wonderful spirits; among the spirits of splendour there are works of art of marvellous colours, figures of the living 'gods'.⁶

So, engraved into the stone of this Temple, as part of its glorious architecture, there are figures of angels. Having described them first as works of art, the author of the *Sabbath Songs* then brings these figures to life as real angels or as 'living gods'.

The figures of the 'gods' shall praise Him, the most holy spirits of glory All their works of art are living 'gods' and their artistic figures are holy angels.⁷

The celestial Temple is a work of the creative imagination, but the author presents it as something seen in a vision, modelled on the vision seen by Ezekiel. William Butler Yeats, in his poem 'Byzantium', used the same device: the angelic figures depicted on the façade of the Hagia Sophia come to life as they praise God. The vision conjured up in the *Sabbath Songs* seeks to describe what heaven is actually like. God is like a king; God's throne is like a chariot, the ultimate weapon of

⁶ *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 336 (editorial apparatus has been omitted for clarity).

⁷ *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 337.



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war. Angels abound, first appearing as images and then coming to life before the eyes of the author. An eternal liturgy is performed in which earthly liturgies participate, and which they represent and re-enact.

Then and Now

The Qumran community was an apocalyptic and eschatological one. The visions of Ezekiel were to them as if they themselves were presently experiencing those visions. The sense of God speaking directly, in biblical literature, in the documents of their own sect and also through their leaders and teachers, was intense. They urgently expected the end of the world and the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. Preparation for the final events was the primary activity in which the sectarian ought to be involved; this included prayer, ritual purity, and the care and keeping of the scrolls.

There are probably relatively few, although at least a few, modern Christians who experience this apocalyptic sensibility and the moral antitheses of good and evil with the intensity of a Qumran sectarian. There are also relatively few Christians today who have a powerful sense of opposition between good and evil spirits at war in the cosmos and affecting our personal lives. We experience most of our choices in life, not as between absolute opposites of good and evil, but rather between alternatives with mixed consequences, both good and bad. Even if we read the Bible frequently or know it well, most of us are exposed to other literature and media, and to conversations that are secular and not religious. Although ever on the horizon, religion does

not affect directly the way we think in all matters and on all issues. This was not the case at Qumran.

In contemporary Christianity we are more likely to defuse acute moral antitheses with an awareness of a possible spot of evil or error in our own eye, while we also grant that there might be at least a trace of goodness or correctness in our adversary. A sense of ambiguity between antithetical or contrary ideas pervades our modern consciousness. We generally take the tolerance for ambiguity and the ability to perceive it as a healthy trait. Indeed, the absence of such a sense is a factor in the radicalism and extremism that we seek to avoid. This sense of ambiguity was lacking in the ancient Qumran community and mentality. The ancient Semitic mind appears more prone to polarity and hyperbole than our, often more temporising, modern mentality is. For instance, there is a verse in scripture about hating your parents as you go off to follow Jesus (Luke 14:26). *Hate* was used in the Bible to express order of preference, and not always rancour and enmity.⁸

The Qumranians' repudiation of the world was extreme. Certainly, in the most radical sense, they believed that everything that happened occurred according to the will of God. But even so, most of what actually happened in the world was, to them, in opposition to the will of God. To us, there would have been some discernable presence of God in most of the many people whom the Qumran sectaries cut out of their lives by going into isolation. Their repudiation of the Temple and the Jerusalem priesthood was extreme. Even if there was corruption and unsavoury accommodation to foreign influences among the priests and temple officials in Jerusalem, the reaction of the Qumran Essenes seems excessive to us.

Nevertheless, the ability of the sectarians to say, in effect, 'God's grace is enough for us', as they retreated to a remote and desolate place, feeling, as they did, called by God to do so, is admirable. They certainly put their trust in God, even if turning away from the rest of Jewish society may not in our eyes have been necessary. Paradoxically, they seem to have attracted many visitors in their own time, as people camped at the base of the hills in order to be near them, and nomads made regular visits there as well. Their interactions with others who

⁸ 'The OT often uses "hate" where we would say "not love" or "love less"' (John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* [Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1965], 341).

benefited from their presence and the stability and generosity of their community certainly suggest God's hand.

What we see in the people of Qumran is a personal need to experience and to show a greater faithfulness or more intense commitment to God. They had a need for doing something more in the way of giving oneself, as a person in community, back to God. Faithfulness to God was experienced as an ever more demanding reality, a reality that required ever greater signs of devotion and commitment. In this context, we can better understand their need for more rules and laws, as if these brought more opportunities to express faithfulness and commitment. We can also understand how this need was accompanied by the temptation to look down upon or disparage those who were less attentive to matters of the spirit.

Christianity and the Legacy of Qumran

It was part of the general mentality of ancient Judaism to believe that, when bad things happen to people, it is because those people have sinned gravely. After periods of captivity and subjugation by various foreign powers, the Essene Jews saw their nation as being justly punished by God for its unfaithfulness and wickedness. Their wrath was not only directed against their barbarous captors, but against their own countrymen, whom they saw as wicked, corrupt and deserving of destruction. They could and did write easily of hating their enemies and wishing them destruction. They saw themselves as chosen, by the grace of God, for better things and as protected from wickedness. When the time of their own destruction arrived, it must have been a terrible crisis for them to deal with. What is most touching about the Qumran community is the fact that, when perhaps totally disillusioned in their triumphal expectations, they carefully placed their precious scrolls in caves, either to save them from desecration or for others to discover afterwards.

Today's Catholic also has terrible crises to accept and deal with. The very idea that God would allow the abomination of priestly paedophilia to appear all over the world is a hard thing to accept. Some Catholics view the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and the mentality that



welcomes and celebrates them as a series of unwelcome innovations that they cannot understand or abide. Others, having revelled in the spirit of the new Pentecost brought by the Council, are disappointed at an apparent reversal of progress. What we can all learn from our forbears at Qumran is that God allows us to suffer confusion and consternation, even in the holiest precincts of our lives, as we try to discern God's ways and stay faithful to them. We must learn how to regard our closeness to God and our chosenness by God as blessings to be cherished which sometimes also entail burdens to be borne. And we need to acknowledge that some of our suffering, like that of the Qumranians, may be rooted in our own perception of reality, rather than in reality itself.

The piety of Qumran was apocalyptic, marked by an impatience for the coming of the Lord in final judgment to vindicate the faithful and punish the wicked. Christians might reflect that it is out of Jewish apocalypticism that their belief in the resurrection of the dead first arises.

Christianity is from its beginning a missionary religion There is an apocalyptic book, Revelation, in the New Testament, and there are apocalyptic passages in the Gospels, but apocalyptic urgency is, for the most part, transformed into patient endurance during a continuing pattern of history, especially by St Paul and St Luke. Unlike the Essenes, Christianity was interested in the foundation of a Church that would last for a long time, not a sect awaiting the imminent arrival of angelic armies on remote hilltops. In the New Testament, the apocalyptic mentality is usually modified and streamlined to fit into a historical approach. The four Gospels contain apocalyptic passages, but they place these in a more historical context. Christianity is from its beginning a missionary religion with a gospel that is to be preached in every new generation to all nations and peoples. Christianity affirms history in its basic goodness as the theatre that frames and displays God's saving grace.

The Gospel as a literary form, indeed, is unique and original to Christianity, and is rooted inextricably in the lifestyle and preaching of Jesus. The Qumran documents have nothing among them like an evangel or gospel, although they do share the idea that they are new scriptures, and new teachings beyond those found in the Old Testament. Both Christians and Essenes also have a leader who is unprecedented in

previous Jewish teachings and expectations—the Christians have Jesus, and the Essenes have the Teacher of Righteousness.

In fact in the Dead Sea Scrolls we find mention of not just one, but three eschatological figures that have some resemblance to Jesus. Coming at the end of days to lead and save us is a great prophet, as well as two messiahs, the priestly one and the royal one.⁹ This parallels the Christian understanding of Jesus as priest, prophet and king, as well as Son of Man and Son of God. In Christianity, Qumran's three eschatological figures are condensed into one. But relationship with Jesus is available to us in mystery in the present: Christians do not have to wait until the end of time to meet and know Jesus.

The idea of being involved in a new covenant is also strikingly similar in Christianity and at Qumran. With both there is some ambiguity as to whether there is a new covenant or a *renewed* covenant.¹⁰ While the Qumran community considered itself to have been given a new covenant with God, they also celebrated the annual renewal of the old covenant. The Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*) or Jewish Pentecost was the most important festival of the year at Qumran. This marked the ancient feast of the second harvest, which came seven weeks after the first harvest, at Passover time. At Qumran the Feast of Weeks also became the time for an elaborate celebration of renewing the old covenant. Such great attention to its renewal tends to suggest that the old covenant remained important to them. They seemed to want God's covenant with their mainstream Jewish adversaries to be abolished. Even so, they celebrated the old covenant as something to which they themselves were faithful. The Christian Pentecost, marked at the same time, is a feast celebrating a new beginning in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and a mission to bring the good news to all of humanity.

The phenomena of monasticism and religious life in Christianity have an important predecessor in the congregation at Qumran. These Essenes, or at least the group of ascetic Essenes at Qumran, lived a life of intense community, taking what amounted to vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Theirs was a devoted life of prayer, contemplation and

⁹ See Craig A. Evans, 'Qumran's Messiah: How Important Is He?' in *Religion in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, edited by John J. Collins and Robert A. Kugler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

¹⁰ VanderKam and Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 348.

liturgy. Not able to exercise their own priestly prerogatives, they cherished their priestly calling internally, and came to see themselves as a new covenant and a new Temple. It was as if the entire community shared a corporate identity as high priest—hence their profound concern with maintaining ritual purity. They also worked in service to the larger community that assembled around them. And Fr Fitzmyer, in his discussion of the relationship between the Qumran texts and the Johannine writings, points out that love for all fellow members of the sect community was promoted in the Qumran documents.¹¹

It is not easy for any contemporary, educated and cosmopolitan person to experience, as if from the inside, the world and mindset of a first-century, desert-dwelling Scrolls sectarian. But it is in part the exotic and different aspect of the Scrolls mentality that attracts and fascinates us. We worship the same God, say the same psalms and bless our meals with similar prayers. Our ritual washings are limited to baptisms and the use of holy water. We wash ourselves and our clothing with better soaps and detergents than they had, but we do not consider these washings to have religious significance. We live for the most part in separate homes and family dwellings, and not in tents or institutional settings. Our jobs and occupations are usually not connected with religion in any way. In the age of computer printers, copying scrolls by hand seems quaint and remote.

Our modern notions of time and process affect our spirituality, as do our science and secularity. We are more aware today than ever before of the human, social and gradual process of composition that produced the sacred scriptures. To us, the scriptures are thoroughly human, although not merely human, in origin and composition. We are different from the Essenes, and yet we are inspired by their devotion to God, to one another as they lived in community, and to their sacred texts and documents, and by their sense of the importance of preserving what was so valuable to them.

We can learn from these Essenes to pray urgently and intensely, even if we do so without a literal belief in coming eschatological combat. And we can appreciate the role of the imagination in constructing religious experience and belief, without sharing their apocalyptic sensibility. We are grateful to them for the priceless gift of their Scrolls

¹¹ Fitzmyer, *The Impact of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 115.

and cherish the sectarians as our ancestors in faith and as the unique and authentic people they were. We see in them an intensity of devotion and commitment that we ourselves can in most cases only aspire to.

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