

What is the significance of the Qumran Scrolls for the study of the New Testament?

G Rumney, September 2007

In addressing the question of the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls for the New Testament, this essay will discuss several areas of convergence between the DSS and New Testament documents including: the role of John the Baptist, the understanding of the Messiah(s), the signs of the Messiah, the term Son of God and the exalted heavenly being, the figure of Melchizedek, the teachings of Jesus on rebuking members within the fellowship, the use of beatitudes, and the shared world-view on angels, demons and exorcism. Contrast will also be made between the teaching of the New Testament and the DSS regarding the Sabbath. From this it will be argued that the DSS throw light on the world of Second Temple Judaism(s) and provide some undeniable parallels. These convergences provide “parallels to features of the New Testament that were previously regarded as distinctive.”¹

John the Baptist's ministry is related by the Gospel writers to the text of Isaiah 40:3:

A voice cries out:
 “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
 make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”²

This same verse is applied by the Qumran community to their wilderness existence. The relevant passage is 1QS 8:14-16.

As it is written: In the desert, prepare the way of ****, straighten in the steppe a roadway for our God.³

The DSS and the accounts of John's ministry share other features such as the

1. Donald H. Juel, “The Future of a Religious Past: Qumran and the Palestinian Jesus Movement,” in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls Volume 3: The Scrolls and Christian Origins* (Waco, TX; Baylor University Press, 2006), 65.

2. NRSV cited throughout.

3. Garcia Martinez translation (1996) used unless otherwise stated.

imminent end of the age and the significance of ritual washings.⁴ This does not indicate a bald identification of John with Qumran however: John is portrayed, for example, as an active agent of baptism, while the washings at Qumran seem to have been self-administered.⁵

The Qumran scrolls speak of a prophet and two messiah figures in 1QS 9:11 (“until the prophet comes, and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel.”) Parallels exist between the roles of the Qumran messiahs and the portrayal of Jesus. 1QSa (*The Rule of the Congregation*) 11-22 describes, for example, the messianic banquet in a way reminiscent of both Luke 22:29-30 and Revelation 19:6-9.⁶

In 4Q521, the *Messianic Apocalypse*, several characteristics are listed that the Qumran Messiah shares with the features found in Luke 4:16-21 and 7:20-22.

freeing prisoners, giving sight to the blind, straightening out the twisted... he will heal the badly wounded and will make the dead live, he will proclaim good news to the meek... (from 2:8,12)

The reference to making the dead live, while shared by 4Q521 and Luke, is absent from the Isaiah texts on which they both draw. The agreement between the two is significant, attesting to some form of common resurrection hope.

Paul would have agreed with the Messianic Apocalypse that “the fruit of a good work” will not fall to the ground, but God will remember the faithful even beyond the grave.⁷

VanderKam and Flint cite John Collins' observation that “4Q521 significantly supports the traditional view that Jesus did indeed see himself

4. Peter Flint, “Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison Jr., and John Dominic Crossan (editors), *The Historical Jesus in Context* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006), 117-118.

5. *Ibid.*, 118.

6. *Ibid.*, 114.

7. Casey D. Elledge, *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Society of Biblical Literature: Archaeology and Biblical Studies 14; Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 128

as Israel's Messiah.”⁸

4Q246 (*Aramaic Apocalypse*) refers to the Son of God: “He will be called son of God, and they will call him son of the Most High... His kingdom will be an eternal kingdom, and all his paths in truth and uprightness” (2:1,5) Here are clear parallels to Luke 1:30-35, and the passage is sometimes referred to as the *Son of God Text*.⁹ The identity of this figure is unclear (Antichrist, Melchizedek, Michael or the corporate Jewish people have been suggested),¹⁰ but the connections to Luke seem evident.

Morton Smith colorfully describes the *Self-Glorification Hymn* (4Q491) as the work of “some egomaniac”.¹¹ The extravagant language of this document recalls the personal claims made by John's Jesus and Paul's language in Philippians 2 (6-11).

[M]y glory is [is incomparable] and besides me no-one is exalted... I am counted among the gods and my dwelling is in the holy congregation... who is comparable to me in my glory... For I am counted among the gods, and my glory is with the sons of the king.

The identity of this individual is also unclear, and suggestions range from Michael the archangel to Menachem the Essene.¹² The significance of the text lies in indicating the presence within Second Temple Judaism of “speculation about deification by ascent toward or into the heavens... they prove that fifty or sixty years before Jesus' crucifixion, men in Palestine were actually making claims of the sort that John was to attribute to Jesus.”¹³

8. James C. VanderKam and Peter W. Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance for Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity* (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 2002), 334.

9. Flint, “Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 119.

10. *Ibid.*, 120.

11. Morton Smith, “Two Ascended to Heaven – Jesus and the Author of 4Q491,” in James Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York, Doubleday, 1992), 295.

12. Israel Knoll, *The Messiah before Jesus: The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000), 55.

13. Smith, “Two Ascended to Heaven,” 298.

While this does not suggest a direct link between the Christology of the Jesus movement and the DSS, Smith notes that “there is considerable likelihood that both this Qumran document and the mystery material in the Gospels are mushrooms of the same ring...”¹⁴ Gabriele Boccaccini's reconstruction of the relationships between the various Middle Judaism's locates a common origin (though emerging at different times) for both the Jesus movement and the Qumran community in the mainstream Essenism which arose from Enochic Judaism.¹⁵ The elements of a high Christology, once believed to be a later Hellenistic development, now seem to have deep roots in pre-Christian Judaism. The similarity between the deified human of the DSS and New Testament passages such as Luke 20:35-36 seem more than coincidental.¹⁶

A further linkage can be made between the DSS and the New Testament in the way Melchizedek, a priestly figure mentioned only briefly in the Old Testament, is regarded in both sources. Melchizedek features prominently in *Hebrews* (7:2-10), and Peter Flint speculates that it may have been “written to a group of Judeo-Christians of Essene background who believed that the Levitical priesthood was still necessary for Christians.”¹⁷

As in *Hebrews*, the Melchizedek of 11Q13 is more than a mortal.

But Melchizedek will carry out the vengeance of God's judgements [on this day, and they shall be freed from the hands] of Belial, and from the hands of all the sp[irits of his lot.] (2:13)

Apart from eschatological frameworks, which the NT and DSS seem to

14. *Ibid.*, 299.

15. Gabriele Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998), xxii.

16. David Flusser, “Resurrection and Angels in Rabbinic Judaism, Early Christianity, and Qumran,” in L. H. Schiffman, E. Tov, and J. C. VanderKam (ed's), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years after their Discovery: Proceedings of the Jerusalem Congress, July 20-25, 1997* (Jerusalem, Israel Exploration Society, 2000), 568.

17. Flint, “Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 121.

share in large measure, there are also similarities in both the structure and content of more practical teachings. We can see this in both the genre of beatitudes, and the advice which members receive when dealing with conflict within their respective communities.

4Q525 is described as a wisdom text with beatitudes. Its existence demonstrates that this literary structure was not unprecedented in first century Palestine. While the Qumran list is quite different in many ways, with the NT examples being described as eschatological rather than sapiential,¹⁸ there are some interesting parallels.

[Blessed is the one who speaks the truth] with a pure heart (2:1, cf. Mt. 5:8)

Matthew 18:15-17 gives instructions for handling internal disciplinary matters similar to the advice contained in the *Rule of the Community* (1QS 5:24-6:1). Three stages are involved in each case: confronting the errant individual, doing so a second time before witnesses, and finally referring the matter to the judgement of the group.¹⁹ Both communities apparently drew on Leviticus 19, yet developed these teachings in parallel ways.²⁰ The *Damascus Document* describes a similar approach (9:2-8).

Both communities also experienced the pressure of failed expectations accompanying a disconfirmation of eschatological hope. The End did not arrive on schedule, and adjustments had to be made in the group's identity and proclamation. Both communities shared an “already-but-not-yet” attitude to the Last Things:²¹ the future held the fulfilment, but the reality was believed to be already present within the life of the group.

Before briefly exploring some further parallels, it is useful to note an example where the two communities show divergence in their approach to

18. VanderKam and Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 338.

19. *Ibid.*, 339.

20. Flint, “Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 125.

21. Jonathan G. Campbell, *Deciphering the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2nd edition (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002), 138.

earlier scriptures: the dispute over what is proper on the Sabbath.

Matthew 12:11-12 reads:

He said to them, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.”

The *Damascus Document* provides instruction on a series of Sabbath laws.

CD 11:13-14 has particular relevance to the Matthew passage:

No one should help an animal give birth on the Sabbath; and if it falls into a well or a pit, he may not lift it out on the Sabbath.²²

Continuing the list of Sabbath restrictions, 11:16 reads: “Any living human who falls into a body of water or a cistern shall not be helped out with ladder, rope, or tool.”²³

These texts provide a context for the words of Jesus in Matthew, which were not delivered in a vacuum, but spoken against the background of existing practices within the Judaisms of that day. Despite similarities and parallels, the NT and the DSS attest to distinct communities.

Both the early Christians and the Qumran community appear to have shared assumptions about the intermediary world of angels and demons. In the DSS this is evident in *1 Enoch*, the books of *Tobit* and *Jubilees*, and the sectarian scrolls. The Scrolls provide a window on the world out of which Christianity and the NT developed. The Qumran community had a dualistic view of the world, and a corresponding interest in angelology and demonology. They believed that all people were governed by either the spirit of truth or the spirit of falsehood.

He created man to rule the world and placed within him two spirits so that he would walk with them until the moment of his visitation: they are the spirits of truth and deceit. (1QS 3:17b-19)

22. Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 2005), 72.

23. *Ibid.*, 72.

This extreme dualism reflected the influence of Persian religion. Many of these themes are also expressed in the NT, especially in the accounts of exorcisms.

Exorcism is a key feature of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, often inseparable from the healings. Graham Twelftree argues that there was a messianic dimension to Jesus' claims to cast out demons by the Spirit of God.²⁴ However, even this distinction finds precedent in the literature present at Qumran.²⁵

These illustrations do not exhaust the possibilities. The shared heritage of the two movements is substantial.

Concepts we consider typically Christian, such as original sin, the primeval war between Michael and the devil, the corruption and degeneration of history, and the apocalypse at the end of time, were Essene before becoming Christian. The Old Testament contains only a few, scattered allusions to these ancient Enochic doctrines, yet Christians read the entire Old Testament in light of these concepts.²⁶

A further indication of a connection between the DSS and the NT lies in the vocabulary used by the two communities. Jonathan Campbell notes parallels between the Congregation and Paul's "majority" in 2 Cor. 2:6, and between Guardian/Overseer (1QS 6:12) and Bishop/Overseer (Phil. 1:1).²⁷ It is also worth noting the close correspondence between the communitarian character of the early Christians in Acts 4:32 and the requirements of the *Community Rule*.

To summarise:

The Scrolls and the New Testament breathe the same air, providing invaluable information about Jewish society and Judaism at the time

24. Graham Twelftree, *Christ Triumphant: Exorcism Then and Now* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), 79

25. *Ibid.*, 79-80.

26. Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis*, 191.

27. Campbell, *Deciphering the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 140-141.

Christianity emerged.

The Scrolls help define the message of the New Testament over against the beliefs and practices of other contemporary groups.

The Scrolls demonstrate that “a good deal of Jesus' teaching was anticipated in earlier texts rather than being the product of the later church.”²⁸

The Scrolls demonstrate that the unique claims made for Jesus, including titles such as son of God, were already anticipated within the wider traditions of Judaism.

28. Flint, “Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 112.

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