

Essenes

The Essenes were a Jewish religious community which was first mentioned in history in the writings of Josephus (*Antiquities*, XIII, 5, 9), who mentions them as flourishing in the time of Jonathan Macabaeus, in about 150 B.C., where he speaks of Judas, an Essene.

The Essenes are not mentioned directly in the Bible. However, it is thought that Matt. 19:11,12 and Col. 2:8 and 18 include indirect references to Essenes. In any case, the Essenes disappeared from history after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The Essenes were an extremely ascetic group of men in Palestine and Syria, and they are thought to have formed the first cells of organized monasticism in the Mediterranean world, setting the pattern for the various holy orders which proliferated during and after the time of Christ. It is still not clear whether the Essenes proceeded from some sect of Judaism or whether elements of Greek and other foreign philosophies had an influence in their origin. Their main colonies were near the northern end of the Dead Sea and around the town of Engedi. The study of the Dead Sea Scrolls has produced a considerable body of knowledge of the early Christian sects; and the Essenes may have been the group which produced the scrolls. The bibliography of this article provides references for further study.

Essene Organization

The community of the Essenes was organized as a single body, with a president at the head. The members had to obey the president unconditionally. A man who wanted to join the order was given three articles: a pickax, an apron, and a white garment. After a year's probation, during which he was observed continuously, he was admitted to the second stage of his probation period. Another two years passed, after which the successful candidate was admitted as a full member and allowed to participate in the common meals. He was required to take a terrible oath, in which he swore to be absolutely open to the brethren and to keep secret the doctrines of the order, under pain of excommunication.

Children were instructed in the principles of Essenism; and Josephus says that the Essenes were divided into four classes. The children formed the first class, the first and second stages of novices were the next classes, and the fourth class were the full members.

Essene Discipline

Discipline was carried out by trial, and guilt was never decided unless at least one hundred members voted for it. After that, the decision was unalterable. The usual punishment was excommunication, often amounting to a slow death, since an Essene could not take food prepared by strangers, for fear of pollution.

The strongest tie between members was the absolute community of goods. Those who came into the order had to give all they had to stewards who were appointed to take care of their common affairs. There was one purse for all, and all members had expenses, clothing, and food in common. Those who were needy, such as the aged and infirm, were cared for at the common expense; and special officers were assigned in each town to take care of traveling brethren.

Essene Ethics and Customs

The daily labor of the members was strictly regulated. After group prayer, the members were dismissed to work by their president. They reassembled later for purifying washings and the common meal. They went to work again for the afternoon and gathered again for the evening meal. The chief employment was agriculture, and there were crafts of every kind. Trading, however, was forbidden; it was thought to lead to covetousness. It was also forbidden to make weapons or any utensils or tools that might injure men.

According to Josephus and other historians, the Essenes' life was simple and unpretentious. They did not marry, but other people sent their children to them for training and admission to the order. They only ate enough to stay healthy; and they were content to eat the same food day after day. They felt

that great expense was harmful to mind and body; and they did not throw any clothes or shoes away until they were completely worn out. They only acquired for themselves the minimum required to maintain life.

The following special customs were observed by the Essenes:

- They had no slaves; all were free, mutually working for each other.
- Swearing oaths was forbidden as worse than perjury; “for that which does not deserve belief without an appeal to God is already condemned.”
- The forbade anointing the body with oil or perfumes, because they thought that having a rough exterior was praiseworthy.
- It was compulsory to bathe in cold water before meals, after the functions of nature, and after coming into contact with lower Essene classes or strangers.
- They wore white clothing all the time.
- They required great modesty. In performing natural functions they dug a foot-deep hole with their pickax, which they always carried, covered themselves with a mantle (so as not to offend God), and covered the hole when they were finished. While bathing, they tied the ever-present apron around their loins.
- They sent gifts of incense to the temple, but they did not offer animal sacrifices because they thought their own sacrifices were more valuable.
- Their common meals had many characteristics of sacrificial feasts. The food was prepared by priests with the observance of certain rites of purification; and an Essene could not eat any food but this.

Essene Theology

The Essene theology was basically Jewish, with an absolute belief in God. Next to God, the name of Moses the lawgiver was an object of great reverence, and whoever blasphemed either God or Moses

was sentenced to death. In their worship, the Scriptures were read and explained. The Sabbath was so strictly observed they did not even move vessels or perform the functions of nature. Their priesthood closely paralleled the Aaronic priesthood.

They had a strong belief in angels and revered them highly. Novices had to swear to preserve the names of the angels.

Concerning their doctrines of the soul and of immortality, Josephus writes: “They taught that bodies are perishable, but souls immortal, and that the souls dwelt originally in the eternal ether, but being debased by sensual pleasures united themselves with bodies as if with prisons. But when they are freed from the fetters of sense, they will joyfully soar on high as if delivered from long bondage. To the good souls is appointed a life beyond the ocean, where they are troubled by neither rain nor snow nor heat, but where the gentle zephyr is ever blowing...But to the bad souls is appointed a dark, cold region full of unceasing torment.”

The Essenes had peculiar conduct with respect to the sun. They turned to the sun while prayer, in contrast to the Jewish custom of turning toward the temple.

Essenism seems to have been Pharisaism in the highest degree. It was, however, influenced by foreign systems of theology and philosophy, including possibly Buddhism, Parseeism, Syrian heathenism, and Pythagoreanism.

Bibliography:

Josephus, *Antiquities*, xviii,1,5; Wars, II,8,2

Schuerer, *Jewish People*, Vol. II

Edersheim, *Life and Times of the Jesus the Messiah*,

Brownlee, W.H., “A Comparison of the Covenants of the Dead Sea Scrolls with Pre-Christian Jewish Sects”, in *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. XIII, Sept. 1950, pp. 50-72.

Unger, Merrill F., *Unger’s Bible Handbook*