

The Essenes
Presented to the Manitoba Masonic Study Group QCCC
by RW Bro. Ken Thomas January 28th, 2001, MMT

I want to read you something. It is likely not familiar to most of you. Some of it may seem a little strange. However, as I read it you may hear some themes or ideas that strike a distant chord.

The Seven Fold Vow

I want to and will do my best
To live like the Tree of Life,
Planted by the great Masters of Our Brotherhood,
With my Heavenly Father,
Who planted the Eternal Garden of the Universe,
And gave me my spirit;
And my Earthly Mother,
Who planted the Great Garden of the earth,
And gave me my body;
With my Brothers,
Who are working in the Garden of our Brotherhood.

I want to and will do my best,
To hold every morning my Communions
With the Angels of the Earthly Mother,
And every evening
With the Angels of the Heavenly Father,
As established by
The Great Masters of our Brotherhood.

I want to and will do my best
To follow the path of the Sevenfold Peace.

I want to and will do my best
To perfect my body which acts,
My body which feels,
And my body which thinks,
According to the teachings
Of the Great Masters of our Brotherhood.

I will always and everywhere obey with reverence
My Master,
Who gives me the Light,
Of the Great Masters of all times.

I will submit to my Master
And accept his decision
On whatever differences or complaints I may have
Against any of my Brothers,
Working in the Garden of the Brotherhood;
And I shall never take any complaint against a Brother
To the outside world.

I will always and everywhere keep secret

All the traditions of our Brotherhood
Which my Master will tell me,
And I will never reveal to anyone those secrets
Without the permission of my Master.
I will never claim as my own
The knowledge received from my Master,
And I will always give credit to him,
For all this knowledge.
I will never use the knowledge and power I have gained
Through initiation from my Master,
For material or selfish purposes.

I enter the Eternal and Infinite Garden
With reverence to the Heavenly Father,
To the earthly Mother, and
To the Great Masters,
Reverence to the Holy,
Pure and Saving Teaching,
Reverence to the Brotherhood of the Elect

This is the seven-fold vow of an initiate, taken from a translation by author Edmond Szekely, of *The Manual of Discipline of the Order of the Essenes*. The Essenes were an ancient Jewish sect that first appeared about 170 years before the birth of Christ and disappeared after the Romans ended the Jewish revolt at Masada around 70 CE.

I first prepared a paper on the Essenes for presentation during my year as District Deputy in the 11th district, and in that paper I highlighted the similarities between the above vow and our own Masonic teaching. I would like to touch on some of them here. However, as a result of the original research I did, I became interested enough to do considerably more research. I would like to present a more thorough picture of who and what they were and weren't. At least, I would like to, however, the more I read, the more it became evident that we know virtually nothing about them for sure. Even the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, including the above noted *Manual of Discipline*, are an uncertain resource, as the linkage between the Essenes and the Qumran community, site of the scroll caves, is now under serious challenge from a number of reputable biblical scholars.

For this paper I relied on several sources, but primarily the book *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls*, which was edited by Hershel Shanks, of the *Biblical Archeology Review* and contains a number of articles encompassing a wide variety of scholars. I also used *Great Sects and Schisms in Judaism* by Reuben Kaufman, and *The Mystery and Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls* by H. Shanks.

But first, some Masonic comparisons. The Essenes lived in an agrarian society and so they used the garden as an analogy for life much as we, with our connections to stone masons, use the quarry. The similarities to our own principles and ritual are striking. In the charge to the Entered Apprentice the new brother is told - there are many other excellences of character towards which your attention may be forcibly directed. Foremost amongst these are secrecy, fidelity and obedience. And here we have those same three principles - secrecy surrounding the teaching of the Master, obedience to the Master and the traditions of the Brotherhood, and fidelity to your brothers.

We also hear the Master referred to as the source of light, exactly as in our ritual. There is also a reference to one's corporal and mental faculties that is similar to the admonition contained in the charge to the Entered Apprentice. There are other obvious similarities, such as the prohibition against using the fraternity for personal material gain.

In fact some of the more fanciful of Masonic scholars have even attempted to establish direct lineage between Freemasonry and the Essenes. I would not attempt to advance such a foolhardy exercise, however, we are in a very real sense their descendants.

For what we do is not new. The origins of Freemasonry as an organization are lost in history, subject to immense debate and speculation, and will likely never be firmly established. But Freemasonry, in the broader sense, in the sense of a brotherhood of like minded men, founded on a belief in a Supreme Being, following the highest of principles and dedicated to the pursuit of the spiritual and moral improvement of self and of others, in this sense, Freemasonry has existed since time immemorial. This is our true linkage to the ancient Essenes, and many other orders as well.

However, although a great deal of romanticism developed in 19th and 20th centuries about the Essenes, in fact they are in some ways about as far from Freemasonry as one can get.

The prevailing idea of the origin of the Essenes is related to the Maccabean revolt, which occurred around 170 B.C.E. and the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty of High Priests. The Essenes were followers of the traditional Zadokite priestly line, believed to be descended from the High Priest in David's time, and appointed by God. In protest against the Hasmonean usurper they withdrew from society and practiced their own pure religious beliefs. They rejected the Temple authorities and all temple related practices, at least until the true priestly line could be restored. They quarreled with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Wicked Priest and Righteous Teacher, found in the well-known Temple Scroll, are almost universally agreed to represent the founder or other early leader of the sect and one of the Hasmonean usurpers. Others, including Biblical Scholar Prof. Robert Eisenman have attempted to identify these two characters with known figures of the New Testament era, such as James, brother of Jesus, and Paul; or Jesus as the Wicked Priest and John the Baptist as the Righteous Teacher, and other such fanciful pairings. Although such identifications have appealed to certain popular constituencies, they have convinced virtually no one in the world of serious scroll scholarship.

First, let us look at what do we know about the Essenes from ancient sources. Philo, Pliny the Elder and Josephus are ancient historians who commented on the Essenes. Josephus spent a brief time as a youth in their company.

Philo describes them having no property of their own and owning no slaves.

“They either pursue agriculture or tend to their sheep, cattle or beehives, or practice some handicraft. Their earnings are in the care of an elected steward who buys the food for their meals and whatever is necessary for their life. Every day they eat their meals together; they are contented with the same food because they love frugality and despise extravagance as a disease of body and soul. They also have their dress in common, a thick cloak in winter and a light mantle in summer. Each one being allowed to take whatever he chooses.”

Josephus tells us that they kept apart from the rest of society. That they did not marry but rather recruited young men, often as children, including orphans, into their ranks. Some sources suggest there was one branch of the Essenes that did marry, but only for procreation. Essenes definitely regarded all forms of sexual activity impure unless carried out specifically for reproduction.

Josephus describes their communal lifestyle and says:

“Riches they despise, and their community of goods is truly admirable; you will not find one among them distinguished by greater opulence than another. They have a law that new members on admission to the sect shall confiscate their property to the order, with the result that you will nowhere see either abject poverty or inordinate wealth; the individual's possessions join the common stock and all, like brother's, enjoy a single patrimony.”

Josephus further describes their daily routine:

“At early dawn they rise for devotion and prayer, and speak not a word to one another until they have praised God in hymns. They speak not a word about profane things before the rising of the sun, but they offer up the prayers they have received from their fathers, facing the sun as if praying to the rising. This practice is in keeping with the verse in Psalm 72:5 *They shall fear thee with the sunrise and so long as the moon throughout all generations.* After prayer they go forth each to his work until the fifth hour. Then they put on linen aprons and bathe in cold water before they eat breakfast, none being allowed to enter the house who does not share their views or mode of holiness. For all meals they are dressed in sacred linen garments. Having taken their seats in order amid silence, each takes a sufficient portion of bread and some additional food, but none eats before the benediction has been offered by the priest, who also recites grace after the meal. Both at the beginning and the end they praise God in hymns. After this they set aside their sacred linen garments used at the meal, put on their work clothes left in the vestibule, and betake themselves to their labours until the evening when they take supper. There is no loud noise or vociferation heard at their assembly; they speak gently, and allow their discourse to flow with grace and dignity, so that the stillness within impresses outsiders with a sense of mystery. They observe sobriety and moderation in eating and drinking. Above all they refrain from all forms of passion and anger as leading to mischief. All pay due attention to the president and whatever he orders they obey as the law.”

A new applicant was given a mattock, a linen apron, and a white robe. The applicant was not allowed to eat in the main hall for the first year. After demonstrating his self-control he was advanced further but was not allowed to join the common meal for another two years and only after assuming the oath.

The Essenes had their own calendar and calculated the year differently than the rest of the Judaic society. They also had several of their own holidays, such as three new ‘first fruits’ festivals.

Theologically, they believed in the immortality of the Soul, and like the Pharisees, believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. They had a strong apocalyptic and eschatological belief - believing that there would be a terrible war between God and Satan and then those who were the Children of the Light would be resurrected into a wonderful heaven and the rest would be damned to a terrible hell, especially the Hasmoneans. In this regard, they were similar to other Jewish sects at that time, including the Christians. There were differences, of course, over who was getting into heaven and who was going to hell.

They also believed strongly in predestination and fate. There was little room in their belief for Free Will but rather insisted that a man’s fate was determined from birth.

They were also fanatical about ritual purity. Some examples will illustrate this point.

They observed the Sabbath with a vengeance. They cooked their Sabbath meals the day before so they would not have to touch fire on the Sabbath. Many would not rise from their couches from sunset to sunset. They also would not defecate on the Sabbath. If you had to go, you held it until sunset. There is a long and involved discussion about this practice, which I won’t get into in great detail here. But essentially, the old laws governing the camp in the desert had restrictions on how far the latrines had to be from the camp. The Essenes interpreted this very strictly. The distance, however, was further than a man was permitted to walk on the Sabbath. There is a gate in the walls of old Jerusalem that Josephus described as the Essene gate. Some scholars speculate this name may derive from the fact that the Jerusalem Essenes lived nearby and this was the gate they hurried out whenever they were in need.

A further example of their fanaticism about ritual is illustrated by their belief in the upward traveling impurity of water. This is similar to the old argument about how many angels can sit on the end of a pin. In this example, if you have a pure or clean vessel, filled with pure or ritually clean water, and you pour some

of the water into an impure bowl, all the water and the original vessel are rendered ritually unclean or impure. The impurity in the bowl instantly rises up the downward flowing stream of water and contaminates both water and vessel. There were also injunctions about spitting, talking during meals, and others. The list is considerable.

Other groups, such as the Pharisees, took much more liberal positions on these matters, and were regarded by the Essenes as dangerous libertines,

One of the romantic speculations about the Essenes that has attracted great interest is that Jesus was an Essene. In spite of its popular appeal, this is almost certainly not the case. Yigael Yadin, the famous Israeli scholar who excavated Masada, was one of the first scholars to work on the Temple Scroll, starting in the late sixties. From his work on the Temple Scroll he identified passages that he believes explains some references attributed to Jesus that have previously puzzled scholars. One pertains to the story of the twelve loaves and the seven loaves where Jesus makes a reference to the seven loaves of the Herodians. Yadin believes that he has found evidence that this refers to the seven loaves used by the Essenes in certain of their ceremonies - seven being a number of considerable importance to the Essenes. Based on this and other findings in his research he believes that Jesus was openly anti-Essene. One of the problems we encounter here is that modern scholarship has thrown a great deal of doubt on the historicity of the Gospels. It is hard to know for sure what the historical Jesus really believed and said as opposed to what his later followers attributed to him.

However, if Jesus was an Essene, then this is the equivalent of a Civil Rights Movement claiming as their inspiration and ultimately deifying an Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Jesus was the very antithesis of the Essenes, or else his life is irrelevant, and some one else is entitled to a remarkable place in history. It was no Essene who ate with the tax collector, protected the harlot, kissed and healed the leper, touched the dead, talked to the Samaritan woman at the well, defended the disciples for breaking the Sabbath, or preached the Sermon on the Mount. The Essenes quarreled with the Pharisees as Jesus did. But not because the Essenes saw the Pharisees as the rigid legalists we see in their dialogues with Jesus, but rather, as liberals and reformers who had compromised the true faith.

However, John the Baptist is another story. There are some serious scholars who suggest that John the Baptist could have spent some time at Qumran, or at least with the Essenes, although he would certainly have left them to begin his ministry. His call to repentance in the wilderness, his ascetic lifestyle, and his attacks on the King would all fit with Essene doctrine. It is also possible that he could have been adopted by the Essenes as a boy, as this was a regular practice for children to join their ranks to be raised by them.

However, much of what we believe today about the Essenes, including some of what I have just described, is based on the assumption that the major elements of the Dead Sea Scrolls belonged to the community at Qumran and that community was a settlement of Essenes. This was almost totally accepted until recently, but now is under serious scrutiny.

The original excavation at Qumran was conducted by Father Roland De Vaux, who started with the assumption that this was a monastic site, and interpreted the evidence accordingly. He claimed to have found writing desks in considerable number, a large number of baths for ritual bathing and a large common eating area, all consistent with monastic life. However, more recent archaeologists have established that the number of baths is not unusual for any Jewish settlement at that time, and that what was supposed to be writing desks would be nearly impossible to write at.

Much of Father De Vaux's artifacts, including the bones excavated from some of the graves at Qumran, have been lost and future research is seriously hampered. There is evidence at the site of other activity that would not be compatible with a monastery. In fact some modern scholars are now suggesting that the site may have been a military barracks, which the Romans used it for briefly after they captured it, or a port for barges bringing goods for Jerusalem over the Dead Sea. The latter would explain both the large

number of baths and the large common eating hall.

Another argument that has great credence is best put forward by scholar Frank Cross and is based on the worked of Pliny the Elder, the great ancient historian. Pliny describes a rural Essene community on the west side of the Dead Sea and states that the city of Engedi is below it. This originally was interpreted as meaning south. However, it is agreed today that Pliny meant literally below - in altitude. Cross states that it is inconceivable that two sects sprang up in the same neighbourhood and that Essene settlement disappeared and the Qumran settlement belonged to some other sect that history has not recorded. This seems to be compelling. However, as I mentioned earlier, there are questions as to whether this is in fact a religious site. Secondly there is an ancient ruin in the hills above Engedi. It is known to the locals as the 'Essene village.' It has never been excavated. If this site were to be excavated and found to be compatible with a religious sect, then the whole relationship between the Essenes and Qumran would be shattered. Today the case for the Essene Qumran connection is seen to be so tenuous that most scroll scholars now simply refer to the Qumran community and do not identify it with any known sect.

Lastly, there is no way of determining for sure where the scrolls came from and who buried them in the caves at Qumran. There is considerable agreement that the sheer volume and diversity of the scrolls rules out the idea that they were all the product of the sect at Qumran, assuming Qumran to be the site of a sect. Theories abound, including one that many of the documents were brought for safekeeping from Jerusalem after the war began with Rome.

Today we can say for sure that there was a sect called Essenes who lived during a certain period of time and carried out certain practices. Some of these practices were highly admirable and we have rightfully adopted similar ones within our own fraternity. We can also say that this sect has captured the imagination of many modern people, and their imaginations have taken them to places that substantive evidence does not support them going.

We in Freemasonry have seen the dangerous fruits of undisciplined and fanciful speculation published as research for the popular press. Much of the problems we have in Great Britain arose on the heels of certain writings like *Inside the Brotherhood* by Martin Short and other anti-Masonic nonsense. We need therefore to be prudent in what we ourselves accept as sound research, even though some of it may appeal to our sensibilities.

Thank you.

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