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# No Essenes at Qumran?

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**A**nother war is brewing in the Middle East, this one pitting Israelis against Israelis and many others in the academic world. The cause of the latest skirmish? A book to be published next month by Israeli academic Rachel Eilior of Hebrew University, which questions the relationship of the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Essenes.

Such a challenge goes to the very foundation of Dead Sea Scrolls research over the past 60 years. Eleazar Sukenik, who purchased the original scrolls in 1947, immediately suggested a possible connection between the finds at Qumran and a group known as the *Essenes*. The basis of his claim was a statement by Pliny the Elder, who commented about the group's proximity to Ein Gedi, which is adjacent to the Dead Sea. Pliny's statement has been the guiding star for most of the subsequent [Dead Sea Scrolls](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-bible-dead-sea-scrolls/1012.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-bible-dead-sea-scrolls/1012.aspx>) research.

This thesis has been challenged from time to time but has so far weathered the onslaught. Those who see the archaeological remains at Qumran as having been a fortress, country estate or pottery production site, rather than the home of the Essenes, have questioned Sukenik's view. Professor Norman Golb, of the University of Chicago, objected to the concept by theorizing that the scrolls were from Jerusalem and had been placed in the caves prior to the Roman siege in 69 C.E. For Golb, the scrolls had no relationship to the archaeological ruins near the caves.

Where Elijah departs from others who came before her is to claim that the Essenes had no relationship with the priesthood and that the scrolls do not portray the people described by either Philo of Alexandria or Josephus. Until now, it has been accepted that the Essenes were a breakaway group from the priesthood in Jerusalem. Elijah also claims that the term *Essene* does not exist within the body of the scrolls texts available to us today.

Her latter point is perhaps more easily dealt with than the former. Was the term *Essene*, as used by Philo, Pliny and Josephus, the term by which they knew themselves? It could have been a label applied by detractors. The case has certainly been made that the term *Christian* was originally a derogatory term used by outsiders against the followers of Jesus, which only became accepted by the community as a self-description in the second century (see [\*Before Christianity: A First Century Perspective \(visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality/church-history-before-christianity-4198\)\*](#)). Secondly, the term *Essene*, as used by those writers, was a Greek term, and the scrolls are written principally in Hebrew and Aramaic. Some Greek documents were found, but these are largely biblical texts rather than sectarian documents.

For these reasons, one would not expect to find the term *Essene* in the Dead Sea Scrolls. But scholars have found certain terms in the sectarian documents that do provide a self-definition of the group. A term such as *Ossey* (pl. *Ossim*) or “doer” has long been considered the possible Hebrew equivalent of *Essene*. It is strange that Elijah has not addressed this aspect. Although the actual text of her book is not yet available, Elijah has referred to it in Internet discussions. In one posting, the focus was on finding the term *Essene* or the Greek *Essaioi* (or a closely related term) in the Dead Sea Scrolls rather than considering a possible Hebrew equivalent. This lapse does not bode well for Elijah’s thesis.

The argument that the Essenes were not described as priests by the writers in the first century is quite understandable. Neither Josephus nor Philo sought to provide an exhaustive theology of each of the groups. We know from other writings of the period the diversity of beliefs of those who considered themselves to be Pharisees, but Josephus provides only a rudimentary description of the sect. So the fact that the writers believed themselves to be the true priests, rather than their corrupted counterparts in Jerusalem, is not a surprising omission by Josephus. What has normally been considered is that the accounts in which Josephus and Philo describe the beliefs of the Essenes is in reasonable harmony with what is found in the sectarian documents.

James VanderKam, a noted Dead Sea Scrolls scholar, considered the pros and cons of the *Essene* hypothesis in his book *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*. He states:

In a recent analysis of the material in Josephus and the scrolls, Todd Beall has reached the following conclusions: there are 27 parallels between Josephus and the scrolls, 21 probable parallels, 10 cases in which Josephus makes claims about the Essenes that have no known parallel among the scrolls, and 6 “apparent discrepancies” between them.

VanderKam then proceeds to examine these discrepancies and to explore ways to harmonize them. He states that “the word *Essene* never occurs in the Qumran texts.” He also notes the opposing views of Lawrence Schiffman and that of Norman Golb mentioned above.

Lawrence Schiffman for his part has long highlighted the similarity of legal rulings found at Qumran with the Sadducean ideas of the day. The Sadducees were the priesthood in Jerusalem controlling the temple and its services. Yet he traces the separation of the two groups to the time of the Hasmoneans in the mid-second century B.C.E., a dating that allows plenty of time for other ideas to develop that harmonize with those of the Essenes. So the connection between the scrolls and the priesthood is not a new idea.

Elior’s concepts run into more problems when an article in *Time* magazine quotes her as suggesting that her opponents have only read Josephus, Philo and Pliny. In reality, those who have shaped the ideas about Qumran, whether it be Schiffman, Golb or others from Sukenik to VanderKam have been involved in this field since the late 1940s. In most cases they have not only read those authors but have also read the entire text of the scrolls that was available to them.

In summary, it would appear that Elior would have been better served by reading her potential opponents more carefully rather than making assumptions about their level of involvement with the scrolls.

The hype that the media concocts is lost when the real issues are uncovered. These ideas will not be shaken by Elior’s writing, but the end result could be the refining of the ideas that have existed over the past 60 years.