

# WERE JOHN THE BAPTIST OR JESUS ESSENES?

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As part of his Easter 2007 messages Pope Benedict XVI made the surprise statement that he now believes Jesus celebrated the Passover Supper according to Essene rites and implied that he thought the meal took place in an Essene house somewhere in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> He did not go so far as to say he now believes Jesus had been an Essene, but reading between the lines it is the logical conclusion of his statement.

Referring to contradictions in the Gospels on the timing of the crucifixion, the Pope said: "Jesus celebrated Passover with his disciples probably according to the calendar of Qumran, that is to say, at least one day earlier—he celebrated without a lamb like the Qumran community and did not recognize the Temple of Herod and was waiting for a new Temple."

Many Christians, especially Catholic theologians, were thrown into a state of disarray. Previously they had tended to try to maintain as large a gulf between Jesus and the Essenes as possible, but here was the

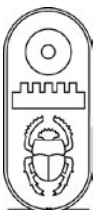
head of the Church confounding traditional thinking that Jesus had emerged from a Pharisaic background. In my second book, [The Secret Initiation of Jesus at Qumran](#),<sup>2</sup> I developed a strong case, not only to link Jesus to the Essenes, but also to place him as a long-time member of their community at Qumran, and this suggestion met strong resistance from Christian scholars, especially the more conservative. Now that the head of the Catholic Church has made a statement supporting much of what I have been contending, theologians have had to accept the possibility of an entirely new perspective for the origins of Christianity.

One can only admire the Pope's forthright thinking, but wonder what was the motivation behind this unexpected statement. I have several theories about the reasoning behind the Pope's comments:

1. Relatively recent excavations have confirmed the existence of an Essene community living in the Essene Gate part of the city of Jerusalem in Second Temple times.

2. The ongoing problems caused by claims in the [Da Vinci Code](#) and other books, such as [The Templar Revelation](#) and [Holy Blood, Holy Grail](#), that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had a child with her.<sup>3</sup> If Jesus is now to be seen as following an Essene lifestyle, the implication is that he would have remained celibate and not married. Conceding one somewhat undesirable scenario completely eliminates a potentially much more damaging theory.

3. The Dead Sea Scrolls and books, like my own, have produced increasing evidence to support the likelihood that early members of Jesus' followers, including John the Baptist, and even Jesus himself, were members of the Qumran community.



The consensus tendency, before Pope Benedict's pronouncements, was to resist the conclusion that John the Baptist was a *long-term* member of the community, or that Jesus had ever been a member. Certainly John the Baptist's rebellious character does not seem to be consistent with his remaining very long within the quiescent structure of the Qumran community. This resistance among Christian theologians and historians has almost certainly been motivated by a desire to retain the uniqueness of the Christian message and avoid the implication that another sect might have been the source of many of its beliefs and practices.

However, even staunch Catholic traditionalists, like Father Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, of the École Biblique in East Jerusalem, were forced to admit as early as 1960, long before much more persuasive information had become available from the Dead Sea Scrolls, that Paul, the architect of Christianity, was definitely in contact with someone who knew Essene teaching thoroughly, and that Timothy, one of Jesus' close followers, belonged to the same circle as John the Baptist.

In fact, some earlier scholars, such as Dr. Joseph Klausner in 1925 and Heinrich Graetz<sup>4</sup> in the nineteenth century, were firmly convinced long before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls that John the Baptist was at one time an Essene. The opinion of these latter scholars is largely based on analysis of the Christian Scriptures and the descriptions of John the Baptist given by Flavius Josephus, a contemporary Roman/Jewish historian (37–ca. 100 CE). The most relevant quotation from the Christian Scriptures indicating John the Baptist's membership in the Qumran Essene community comes from Luke 1:80:

*And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing to Israel.*

The Gospel of Luke endorses the probability that John the Baptist attained

intellectual and religious maturity elsewhere than at his home when it refers to him spending his early life in the desert. For example, when the Evangelists describe the Baptist as "living in the wilderness and eating a diet of locusts and wild honey," it is understood by most scholars to be a reference to the Qumran-Essenes, as anyone banished from membership would have previously taken a vow only to eat prepared food that had been blessed by the leader of the community. However, once evicted they would be forced to eat only wild food.



*John the Baptist (with aspects of Bacchus)* (1513-1516), by Leonardo Da Vinci.

John the Baptist's baptizing ritual was very reminiscent of the ritual immersion practiced by the Essenes; and, in the words of an earlier commentator, Israeli professor Yigael Yadin, "The influence of the sect's teachings is recognizable in the views, practices, ideology, and even the very phraseology of the founders of Christianity."<sup>5</sup> Professor Yadin had little doubt that John the Baptist was a member of the community for a period of his life. Other experts of the Christian Scriptures, like the German Otto Betz and Jean Steinmann of France, believed that John the Baptist grew up as an Essene, almost certainly in the wilderness at Qumran.<sup>6</sup>

## Analysis of scholarly opinion on John the Baptist's membership in the Qumran-Essene Community<sup>7</sup>

Member at some period in his life	In contact and influenced	Little contact or influence
(Josephus)*	Jean Danielou	H. Rowley
R. Eisler	Jack Finnegan	Frank Cross
Otto Betz	Daniel Schwartz	Pierre Benoit
Jean Steinmann	Raymond Brown	Cyrus Gordon
Yigael Yadin	R. Harrison	Edmund Sutcliffe
John Allegro	Charles Scobie	John Pryke
Barbara Thiering	John Robinson	Joan Taylor
Charles Fritsch	Oscar Cullmann	James Charlesworth
Millar Burrows	Robert Webb	Carsten Thiede
David Flusser	William Brownlee	Ian McDonald
Kurt Schubert	George Brooke	
Michael Grant	Lucretta Mowry	
Joseph Fitzmyer	James VanderKam	
Magen Broshi	The Jesus Seminar	
Jozef Milik**	Pope Benedict XVI	
Geza Vermes		
Robert Feather		

Chart © Robert Feather

\* The extensive descriptions of John the Baptist by Flavius Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities* have been taken by some scholars, such as H. Lichtenberger, as a portrayal of John as an Essene.

\*\* Jozef Milik's opinion was communicated to the author during interviews in 1999 and 2001.

### So What of Jesus' Earlier Years?

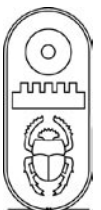
Between descriptions of the birth of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry, the Christian Scriptures give sparse detail of his formative years. The brief mention there is comes from Luke 2:41–52, where we are told he came up “according to custom” to Jerusalem at the age of twelve. Jesus then stayed on in Jerusalem to converse with, and confound, the learned persons of the Temple.

The tradition of a boy going up to Jerusalem “according to custom” at twelve years of age is in itself rather strange, as the normal “Son of the Commandment” (Bar Mitzvah) ceremony, or coming of age for a Jewish child, occurs when the child is thirteen. An explanation may be that the earlier age involved a biblical linking to the beginning of the prophet Samuel's ministering period, which commenced during his twelfth year.

What happened after this event and up to the time of the beginning of Jesus' ministry is not clear from the Gospels, which say nothing about the eighteen intervening years. Why would the Christian Scriptures be silent about a period spanning more than half of Jesus' critically formative adult life?

When Jesus reached the age of sixteen, his parents were required by law to place him in a recognized school. From the knowledge that Jesus and the Christian Scriptures subsequently exhibited, it seems certain that they opted for the intense learning center of Qumran.

Our information on the requirements for recruitment to the community comes largely from three sources: the Dead Sea Scrolls; Josephus, Philo, and Pliny; and a recently found ostrakon, or pottery fragment with a written inscription. For continuity of the story, we need to take a brief look at all three sources.



## The Dead Sea Scrolls

The Qumran Dead Sea Scroll called the Community Rule (also known as the Manual of Discipline), sets out the requirement for a ten-year period of study, after which, at the age of twenty, students had to undergo a public examination before their peers to verify their integrity and their understanding of the Law. A year of probation followed, and then the student was again examined. If he passed this test, he served a further year of probation before a proposal for full membership in the Brotherhood was put to the vote. If accepted, he was required to swear an oath of loyalty. The minimum age to hold office in the Brotherhood was twenty-five, and the “fourth degree of holiness” (referred to by Josephus) could not be reached before the age of thirty. (It is interesting to note the similarity in the use of the terms *brotherhood*, *degree*, and *master* to those used in the Masonic movement. This subject is discussed more extensively in *The Mystery of the Copper Scroll of Qumran*.<sup>8)</sup>

The most likely scenario is, therefore, that Jesus “graduated” at the age of thirty and then chose to become an “urban Essene,” taking his own path with his own cadre of followers. Basing himself in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, he set forth with several close disciples to preach the basic message of the Essenes and Torah, enriched by his own divine revelation.

### Josephus, Philo, and Pliny

Recruitment to the community appears to have taken place at any age, but the preferable age for an apprentice was when the child was quite young. Philo and Pliny report that adults were taken in for qualification, but Josephus says boys were also admitted for training.

### Recently Found Ostrakon

The excitement was almost palpable as people crowded around pictures of an ostrakon, or inscribed pottery fragment, trying to get a better view. The subject of the Copper Scroll, which had drawn delegates to an international conference in Manchester,

England, in 1996, was for the moment forgotten. This was the star turn of the day. Esther Eshel, of Bar-Ilan University, was showing what appeared to be the first-ever archeological proof that the inhabitants of Qumran considered themselves a community—a *Yahad*.

The ostrakon contains a legal text in Hebrew, apparently recording the surrender to the community by a new recruit of his personal property. The procedure is entirely consistent with that prescribed in the Manual of Discipline, and as such represents the first solid outside evidence that conventional scholarship is correct in its assessment of activities at Qumran.

That the Gospels and historical external evidence tell us almost nothing of Jesus’ formative years is not surprising, if those years were spent at Qumran. If I am correct, he was closeted away in a desert environment from an early age and excluded from outside contact with his parents and family.

The minimum age given in the Rule of the Congregation for when a novice could attain his full accreditation, thirty years, is exactly the same age as the Gospels state for the reappearance of Jesus into the outside world. By the time Jesus reached this age, he would have been fully immersed in the teachings of the Qumran-Essenes, and their protocols would have been engraved on his conscious and subconscious mind. This is a potent piece of correlation, which does not appear to have been connected to Jesus before.

It is not surprising, therefore, that so many of the echoes of the Qumran-Essenes can be detected in the later transcribed words and recordings of Jesus’ acts. If the view that John the Baptist was also at one time or another a regular visitor to, or even for some period a resident member at Qumran, it is reasonable to assume that his rebellious nature may have inspired Jesus to reassert his own radicalism. What is more natural than on reaching his majority at the age of thirty, Jesus should strike out on his

own, leave the community, and seek out John the Baptist for reassurance and communion?

The Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John say Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a village that certainly existed at the time of his birth. Nazareth, the town he is said to have lived in during most of his early life, is less easily identifiable. The question marks that hang over this period of Jesus' life, and the uncertainty of Nazareth as a place of prolonged residence for Jesus, may well have

relevance when it comes to considering an alternative place of residence for his maturing years. Although Nazareth is now a bustling town of some forty thousand people, neither Talmudic texts nor the Masoretic Testament (Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament), the Apocrypha, or Josephus can help verify the existence of the Nazareth of the Christian Scriptures (New Testament).

Tellingly, Jesus, in the New Testament, performs many miracles, healings, and exorcisms across the Holy Land, but never performs anything in Nazareth. Josephus, one-time commander of the Galilee region, lists its towns and villages, but makes no mention of a place called "Nazareth." The only possible external reference to Nazareth comes from a fragmentary ancient Hebrew inscription dated to the end of the third century CE., found at Caesarea, on the north coast of Israel. This lists twenty-four priestly "allotments" of duty rotations (Hebrew, *mishmarot*) and the places from which they derived. The eighteenth allotment is given in Hebrew as *nzrt*, which could be read as Nazareth.

Archeological work at Nazareth in 1889, led by Father Prosper Viaud, and between 1955 and 1970, led by Father B. Bagatti, has yielded some clues about a possible early history, and excavations are said to have revealed graffiti in lower layers under the existing Church of the Incarnation. These are



Oldest known Icon of Christ Pantocrator from St. Catherine's Monastery, Mt. Sinai (6th-7th century).

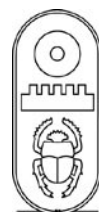
believed to indicate an early Judeo-Christian presence, but nothing from the first century CE.

If there is little proof that Nazareth actually existed in Jesus' time, why is the name mentioned in the Christian Scriptures? The explanation put forward by a number of scholars as the most likely reason is that it has been confused with the term *Nazirite* or *Nazarene* (*Nazorene*). The Nazirites were a select Jewish group who took a vow of dedication to the Lord and followed a spiritual lifestyle. The three lifelong Nazirites mentioned in the Bible are Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist; intriguingly, the term has been associated with the Essenes.

So where does current conventional scholarship stand on the possibility of a connection between Jesus and other characters from the Christian Scriptures, and the Qumran-Essene community? Surprisingly, a number of eminent observers of early Christian history, such as Dr. Matthew Black; Dr. Hugh Schonfield; and Hyam Maccoby, who was visiting professor at Leeds University until his death in May 2004; make little more than passing reference to the "Qumran-Essene effect." Their views can be summarized as follows: "The oldest roots of the Christian movement in 'Galilee' are to be sought in a group of dedicated Nazirites, sectarians who continued the ancient Israelite institution of the lifelong Nazirate."<sup>9</sup>

Even a modernist writer such as John Crossan, professor of Biblical Studies at De Paul University, Chicago, has a virtual blind spot when it comes to considering how the Qumran-Essenes might have influenced Jesus or the Christian Scriptures. When he does mention the Dead Sea Scrolls, his facts are questionable.<sup>10</sup>

In all these works, the associations of Jesus and John the Baptist with Qumran are highly contentious, accepted by many



scholars but disputed by others, as the following paragraphs point out.

The present state of opinion from authoritative scholars such as Magen Broshi (former curator, Shrine of the Book, Israel Museum), Geza Vermes (professor emeritus, Oxford University), and Professor George Brooke (Manchester University), is weighted in favor of John the Baptist having been a member of the Qumran-Essene community at some period in his life. The tendency, however, is to resist drawing a similar association for Jesus. This resistance, as one would expect, is far stronger from Christian, particularly Catholic, commentators, such as Father Émile Puech (director of research, CNRS, Paris), Professor Carsten Peter Thiede (minister, Church of England), Father Jerome Murphy-O'Connor (École Biblique, Jerusalem), and Professor J. Van der Ploeg (University of Nijmegen, Holland).

The more the emerging information is examined and the existing material reevaluated, the more apparent it becomes that the hotbed of spiritual industry bubbling away at Khirbet Qumran on the northwestern edge of the Dead Sea was a cauldron from which were cast many of the templates of early Christian ideas—a background that early Christian writers were readily able to adapt to the experiences of Jesus.

To assess what the relationship of John the Baptist and Jesus might have been to Qumran, it is necessary to understand a bit more about this strange, quirky, secretive, male-dominated, nonconformist Jewish community, and why the predominantly Christian researchers involved in early Dead Sea Scrolls studies tended to shy away from linking Jesus and John the Baptist to Qumran.

### **The Qumran Community**

The community that lived at Qumran never referred to themselves in their own documents as *Essenes*. The name is one applied to them by the Roman/Jewish historian Josephus.

Since detaching themselves from the Temple environment, around 140 BCE., the community shunned its ceremonies and castigated the officiating Sadduceean priests for not adhering to the correct calendar, amongst other objections. However, the Second Temple was, to the Essenes, a place of intense contradiction. The holy place, central in concept to their inheritance, was occupied by alien forces and governed by the whims of Herod, a lackey of Rome.

The Temple's size and shape were not to their liking and, worse still, from around 31-30 BCE onward, two lambs were sacrificed every day by the Temple priests for the "well-being" of the Roman emperor and the Roman Empire. This animal sacrifice was an anathema to many Jewish groups, and especially to the Qumran-Essenes. No wonder they interpreted the earthquake of 31 BCE, which caused widespread destruction in the area of the Judean Desert and severe damage to their own settlement, as a portent that they were right and that their belief in an imminent apocalypse was justified.

Although they put immense store in traditional Hebrew teachings, they followed an apparently alternate form of Judaism, which yearned for and echoed the early days of Mosaic Sinai, and which, I maintain, dates back even further to the ancient monotheism of Akhenaten and Jacob.

It is evident from the Dead Sea Scrolls that the Essenes of Qumran considered themselves an elite messianic group; they had retreated from the fray of the Temple and the priesthood and sought refuge in the wilderness to protect their piety. The opening verses of Isaiah, chapter 40, aptly describe their role:

*A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."*

As we go through a brief description of their unique teachings and behavior patterns it will be evident that many were transferred to Christianity.

Successive “right teachers” had the role of ensuring that the community adhered to the true interpretation of the Torah, while they waited for a prophet similar to Moses and an unprecedented *two messiahs*.

This waiting was to be accompanied by immersion in the Holy Scriptures and by following an ascetic, celibate way of life. Each year a cumulative total of 120 nights was to be spent in prayer and study. Personal possessions and income were to be given to the yahad, the community, and in turn the community looked after the individual’s needs. Living and eating was communal, and garments were plain and purely functional. There are many similarities in this unselfish way of life to the modern ashrams of America and the kibbutzim of modern Israel.

Within the community, at least at the outset, there was a strong hierarchical structure. At the top sat the right teacher. Priests, aided by Levites (individuals of priestly descent), dictated the doctrine of the group. All full members could vote in an assembly on nondoctrinal matters, while general day-to-day administration was in the hands of a triumvirate of three priests and twelve helpers. Each member had a specific place in the hierarchy in relation to level of learning and holiness, as determined by their peers.

Throughout the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls that describe the feelings and activities of the Essenes, there are repeated themes and motifs that endow these works with a sense of collective purpose: of sons of light fighting sons of darkness, messianic portents, battles with evil, the fruits of righteousness. Their fundamental themes embody persons who are:

Righteous—*Zaddikim*

Pious—*Hassidim*

Holy—*Kedushim*

Meek—*Anavim*

Endowed with God’s Spirit—*Ruachim*

Faithful—*Emunim*

The first three are recognizably strongly Jewish; the latter three carry noticeable overtones that would later become strongly applied in Christianity.

There is a continual reference throughout their scrolls to the part played by the Tabernacle priests. It is clear that the Essenes considered themselves the keepers of the covenant and part of the direct line of priests that attended the holy shrines.

So whom were the Qumran-Essenes waiting for? The answer is contained in a number of the Dead Sea Scrolls texts that indicate they were waiting for two, and some scholars read three, messiahs. These messiahs, one priestly and one royal, are given various titles in different scrolls:

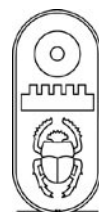
**Priestly:** Interpreter of the Law, the Star; the Messiah of Aaron, who was of princely descent.

**Royal:** Prince of the Congregation, the Scepter; the Messiah of Israel; the King Messiah.

In addition, they expected the return of a prophet similar to Moses. Fortunately, there are quite detailed descriptions of these messiahs in a number of their scrolls, so one would assume it should be relatively easy to identify whom they were talking about. Unhappily that is not the case, and conventional scholarship makes little attempt to utilize this information.

### A Davidic Messiah?

The idea of the kingly messiah referred to by the Essenes is inevitably taken as being someone emerging from the Davidic line of kings, commencing with King David himself. The tacit assumption by most scholars is that King David was the role model for this returning royal messiah. If King David wasn’t the role-model messiah, ordinary scholarship has nowhere else to go. The assumption, however, is fraught with problems. King David (who ruled in approximately 1000 BCE) noticeably failed to live up to the righteous ideals demanded in the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Kings, and Chronicles.



David had Uriah, an officer in his army, murdered in order to marry Uriah's wife, and brought destruction on seventy thousand Israelites for his evil doings. In a parable by the prophet Nathan, David is roundly condemned for his evil acts against God and told that his descendants will suffer as a result of his murderous deeds. This is hardly a worthy pattern for a future messiah. In fact, formal messianism in Jewish scripture does not appear until the time of Daniel in the second century BCE, so King David is even less likely to have been the role model the Qumran-Essenes were thinking of.

One has to wonder, therefore, where the Qumran-Essenes obtained their quite detailed and well-developed philosophy of these anticipated messiahs and messianism—which, in any event, appear to predate any of the royal kings of Israel. The problem of identifying the two messiahs, one kingly and one priestly, alluded to in the Hebrew Scriptures but distinctly specified in the Qumran-Essene literature, is so

contentious that modern scholarship either ignores the problem or scratches around to try to find possible candidates using very weak evidence.

Nowhere does the Pentateuch or any succeeding text of the Hebrew Scriptures suggest that, when the faithful in Israel worshiped at the Tabernacle or later in the Temple at Jerusalem, they looked to the Aaronic high priest as a foreshadowing of a future messianic high priest. Almost in desperation, some scholars have even suggested Zerubbabel, the rebuilder of the First Temple, or Joshua, the postexilic high priest, as possible contenders.

The phrase “Davidic line” is, in my view, only an indicator of a longer royal line predating King David. In fact, in Qumran texts, and in most biblical texts, the messianic king is deliberately *not* referred to as Davidic. Although many of the motifs in the expectation of a future king may be drawn from Israel's experience of kingship, other motifs can clearly be traced to pre-Hebrew Scripture's kingship periods of Israel's history. Indeed, how can King David be the personification of a messianic figure when the same messianic figure is seen by Isaiah and Zechariah, and by Dead Sea Scrolls texts such

as 4Q285, as a “suffering servant” of God who is frustrated in his ambitions and killed for his efforts? None of these characteristics can be applied to King David. One eminent scholar, Kenneth Pomykala, like others, has postulated that any reference by the Qumran sect to a messiah of Israel should be regarded categorically as non-Davidic.<sup>11</sup>

Why should this be, unless there was some memory of another

previous line of royalty? In the same way as there is no reference to Jerusalem in the so-called *New Jerusalem Scroll*, there appears to be limited reference to a Davidic messiah in other sectarian Qumran-Essene scrolls. That the references to a Davidic messiah are limited, however, has not prevented most scholars from falling back on the assumption that David *was* the Essenes' role model for a future messiah, even given the fact that there are alternative explanations that have not yet been explored.

### John and Jesus' continuity with the Qumran-Essenes

When one looks at other factors that tend to confirm the continuity of specifically



David and Solomon, detail from the *Icon of the Harrowing of Hell (Anastasis)*, 11th century, in the Nea Moni in Chios.



Essenic thinking and practices that have been transmitted on into Christianity, and by extension into Islam, it becomes irresistible not to conclude that both Jesus and John the Baptist must have been intimately involved with Qumran. One of the main contentions in my work has been that the Qumran-Essenes had an allegiance in terms of holy and secret knowledge to the earliest forms of Hebrew religion, as developed in Egypt, prior to the Exodus, and specifically linked to the monotheistic Pharaoh Akhenaten.

If the early Jesus movement owed a powerful debt to the beliefs practiced at Qumran, then it would not be surprising to find that some of Akhenaten's teachings and imagery would be transferred across and reflected in the early Jesus movement and later Christianity. The examples of these phenomena are numerous, but there is space here only to refer briefly to two of them.



*Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek*, Dieric Bouts the Elder, 15th century.

## Melchizedek

Melchizedek is a complex character that appears in their texts as a figure of major importance to the Qumran-Essenes. There are detailed descriptions of this figure in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and in Rabbinic writings, as well as references in the mainstream Bible, but no one is certain who Melchizedek relates to, despite endless speculation. Just as the

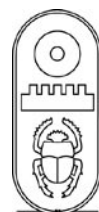
Qumran-Essenes revered this character, so Jesus has also to be associated with the kingly-priestly figure.

As if to verify my contention that Melchizedek incorporated the concept of Akhenaten's high priest, Meryra, new light on the Christian Scriptures' Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews has been shed by the fragmentary first century BCE document found in Cave 11 at Qumran, known as the *Heavenly Prince Melchizedek* (11Q Melch.). The description in Hebrews depicting Christ as the "Son of God" and "without beginning of days or end of life," as "priest according to the order of Melchizedek," now makes sense as reflecting the same image of Melchizedek portrayed by the sectarian Dead Sea Scroll.

This interpretative understanding was taken still further in discussion at a recent international conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. A paper by Margaret Barker published in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*<sup>12</sup> maintains that Jesus knew of and understood Melchizedek; that he may have patterned his life on the Qumranic conception of Melchizedek; and that his earliest followers built on that understanding. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus is "...a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (5:6).

That this is the same high priestly figure of the Qumran-Essenes is underlined by a further reference to him as the superior priest. Suggestions that this priest is Aaron, or a Zadok of his lineage, is excluded by the insistence that Jesus, like Melchizedek, is in the Greek wording *agenealogetos*, "without a genealogy." As Professor Joseph Fitzmyer, of the Catholic University of America, points out, "Every priestly family was supposed to be able to trace its lineage from Levi via Aaron and Zadok. Aaron's lineage itself was known from Exodus 6:16-19, but Melchizedek's lineage was unknown."<sup>13</sup>

Analysis of the Melchizedek that Jesus of the Christian Scriptures was to emulate,



however, shows that this attribution, as explained by Deborah W. Rooke, of King's College, London, was "not merely of *high* priesthood but of *royal* priesthood."<sup>14</sup> The relationship is spelled out in Hebrews, but although the royal association is assumed to be to King David, scholars are at a loss to explain why there is no specific Davidic categorization for this royal element.

David is not referred to by name in Hebrews. Instead, the king specifically mentioned is the King of Salem, who is related to the patriarchal period of Abraham, long predating the Israelite kings, and a royal figure who had nothing to do with King David. Once again, there is no Israelite king that conventional scholarship can turn to, and the issue is stuck in the mire of preconceptions. Indeed, it is made crystal clear that the Melchizedek Jesus aspired to emulate was the King of Salem in Genesis:

*And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine; and he was the priest of the most high God. (14:18)*

A number of other scholars have noted that the Melchizedek of Hebrews can definitely be linked to the Melchizedek in the Qumran scrolls (11Q Melch.), and this character, as discussed above, is certainly not Davidic.<sup>15</sup>

Even if a royal association were tied only to the Genesis descriptions and not also to the Qumranic descriptions, we would have to ask why an apparently pagan king, the king of Salem, should be singled out as a prototype for a divine personage. Not only is he seemingly a pagan king; he is not even a Hebrew! The answer, I suggest, lies partly in the Amarna letters, where Jerusalem is specifically chosen by Akhenaten as "his holy city forever." The appellation of King Melchizedek can then clearly be seen as a sacral name combining the royal aspect of King Akhenaten and his High Priest, Meryra.

The problem of why Abraham and Jesus should want to associate themselves with an apparently pagan figure is thus entirely explained by the fact that Akhenaten and

Meryra, his High Priest, were not pagan, but together with Jacob and Joseph, were the first true monotheists. Thus Abraham acknowledges Melchizedek's God El Elyon (God Most High) as his own God in their encounter in Genesis (14:18–24).

For this high priestly figure to have no ancestors can only mean that he was the first of his class. Once again, the literal evidence points strongly in the direction of Meryra, the first High Priest of Akhenaten's new monotheism, who we know from Egyptian records was a hereditary Egyptian prince—a requirement also spelled out in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

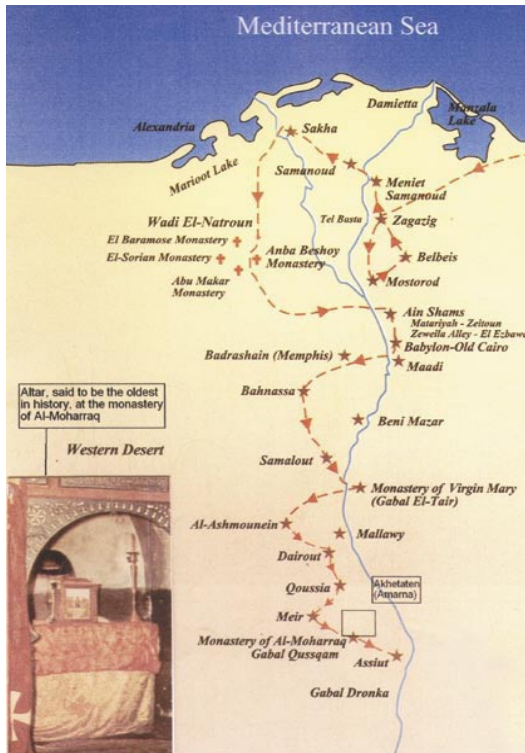
As becomes dramatically apparent in the explosive archeological evidence documented in *The Secret Initiation of Jesus at Qumran*, this assumption is almost certainly correct.

## Amarna

Both the Christian Scriptures and historical tradition maintain that Jesus and his parents, Mary and Joseph, fled to Egypt from Judea around 4 to 7 BCE to escape the tyrannical threats of Herod the Great (Matt. 2:13–20).

If one had to predict where the family of Jesus might have stopped *en route* in their journey through Egypt, on the basis of the proposed connections I claim existed between the Qumran-Essenes and Akhenaten, and between the Qumran-Essenes and the earliest followers of Jesus, the following four destinations would have been definite favorites in their itinerary:

1. Lake Mereotis (Marioot), near Alexandria, traditional location of the Therapeutae, close Egyptian associates of the Essenes;
2. Valley of Natrun, traditional location of the Therapeutae;
3. Leontopolis, near Heliopolis (Cairo), site of the temple founded by Onias IV, who, I maintain, was the Essenes' Teacher of Righteousness;
4. Amarna, site of Akhenaten's holy city.



Journey of the Holy Family in Egypt, highlighting the location of their longest stay, near Amarna (Akhetaten). © Robert Feather, based on a map published by the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism. From *The Secret Initiation of Jesus at Qumran*.

In horse-racing parlance, my shortest odds would be on Amarna, and the combination odds of all four of these highly significant Essenic connected places featuring as important locations in the Holy Family's journey would be about ten thousand to one.

Take a look at the figure illustrated in this article. It shows the route, strongly entrenched in Egyptian legend and tradition, taken by the Holy Family in Egypt. All four suggested locations are included in the journey and are considered the most important of the numerous monastic centers that have grown up in Egypt. So which of these locations is believed to be the most important of all?

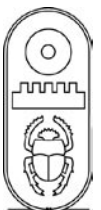
The words of Pope Shenouda III, guardian of the national traditions of the Coptic Church in Egypt, give us the answer: "Now it was time for the Holy Family to set out for what is, arguably, the most meaningful destination of all in the land of Egypt, the place where there would be 'an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt'—Gabal [Mount] Qoussqam."<sup>16</sup>

Nestled in the foothills of this mountain lies the monastery of Al Muharraq, on the site where the Holy Family were reputed to have lived for six months, their longest stay at any one place in their four-year travels through Egypt. It was the culmination of their journey, and to this day the area surrounding the monastery is redolent of the Coptic Christian ethos, so much so that it is named the Second Bethlehem. Why should this place have become so important to the earliest Christians? At first glance it appears to be in the middle of nowhere. The answer, I suggest, is that it really is not in such an obscure location. The location was directly opposite the place where Akhenaten established his Holy City and built a huge Temple in honor of Aten—his name for God.

At the turn of the millennium, the vast site of Amarna would have been as bleak and desolate as it is today. The only pockets of habitation would have been small settlements on the west bank of the Nile, near the village of Qoussqam. The monastery of Al Muharraq lies directly opposite Amarna, at what was then one of the closest habitable places to Amarna.

Whatever you believe about the legends surrounding the journey of the Holy Family in Egypt, there is almost always a kernel of truth that kindles a legend. That kindling has resulted in a surfeit of historical Christian places of worship in the vicinity of the Nile, some often in quite remote locations, which makes it difficult to justify the charge that they were invented to attract tourists.

The preponderance of these witnesses to an earlier legend is concentrated around Amarna, the site of Akhenaten's ancient capital. The grain of truth, if there is one, behind the legends in this region indicates that the main destination of the Holy Family was the Amarna area. *Something* must have sparked the tradition, and the raft of other evidence that points to Amarna as a site of special interest to the Qumran-Essenes and, by association, to the earliest followers of Jesus underlines the essential truth of this assertion.<sup>17</sup>



## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20070405\\_coena-domini\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070405_coena-domini_en.html).
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Feather, *The Secret Initiation of Jesus at Qumran* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2005; London: Baird/Watkins, 2006).
- <sup>3</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Black Swan, 2004); Lyn Picknett, Clive Prince, *The Templar Revelation* (London: Corgi, 2007); Henry Lincoln, Richard Leigh, Michael Baigent, *Holy Blood, Holy Gnaul* (New York: Random House, 1983).
- <sup>4</sup> Joseph Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul* (London: Macmillan, 1922); Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946).
- <sup>5</sup> Yigael Yadin, *The Temple Scroll* (Suffolk, UK: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985).
- <sup>6</sup> Otto Betz, "Was John the Baptist an Essene?" *Biblical Revue* (December 1990); Jean Steinmann, *Saint John the Baptist and the Desert Tradition* (New York/Boston: Harper and Brothers, 1958).
- <sup>7</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); H. H. Rowley, "The Baptism of John and the Qumran Sect," in *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of T. W. Manson* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1959); Daniel Schwartz, *Studies in the Jewish Background of Christianity* (Tuebingen, Germany: Mohr-Siebeck, 1992); R. Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist According to Flavius Josephus' Recently Rediscovered "Capture of Jerusalem" and Other Jewish and Christian Sources* (New York: The Dial Press, 1931); Barbara Thiering, *The Gospels and Qumran*, (Sydney Theological Explorations, 1981); Otto Betz, "Was John the Baptist an Essene?" *Biblical Revue* (December 1990); Yigael Yadin, *The Temple Scroll*; John Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of Christianity* (Metuchen, NJ: Criterion, 1967); William H. Brownlee, *John the Baptist in the New Light of Ancient Scrolls* (n.p.: Interpretation, 1955); Lucretia Mowry, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Early Church* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962); R. K. Harrison, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961); Charles Scobie, *John the Baptist: The Scrolls and Christianity* (Bloomfield, CT: Talbot, 1969); John A. Robinson, "The Baptism of John and the Qumran Community," *Harvard Theological Studies* 50 (1957); Oscar Cullmann, "The Significance of the Qumran Texts for Research into the Beginnings of Christianity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955); Kurt Schubert, *The Dead Sea Community: Its Origin and Teachings* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1959); Jean Danielou, *The Work of John the Baptist* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire, UK: Helicon, 1966); Jean Steinmann, *Saint John the Baptist and the Desert Tradition* (New York: Harper, 1958); Jack Finnegan, *Light from the Ancient Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959); Raymond E. Brown, "Second Thoughts: The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament," *The Expository Times* (October 1966); Charles Fritsch, *The Qumran Community* (New York: Macmillan, 1956); Millar Burrows, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Viking, 1958); Pierre Benoit, *Paul and Qumran* (Chicago: Priory Press, 1968); Frank Moore Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies* (New York: Doubleday, 1961); Carsten P. Thiede, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Jewish Origins of Christianity* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Cyrus Gordon, *Adventures in the Nearest East* (Fair Lawn, NJ: Essential Books, 1957); Edmund Sutcliffe, *The Monks of Qumran* (Westminster: Newman Press, 1960); Robert L. Webb, "John the Baptist and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, supplement series 62 (Sheffield: Sheffield University, 1991); James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Doubleday, 1992); David Flusser, *Jesus* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969); Michael Grant, *The Jews in the Roman World* (New York: Scribner, 1973); James C. VanderKam, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christianity," in *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Reader from the Biblical Archaeology Review* (New York: Random House, 1992); Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist Within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); John Pryke, "John the Baptist and the Qumran Community," *Revue de Qumran* 16 (1964); Ian McDonald, "What Did You Go Out to See? John the Baptist, the Scrolls and Late Second Temple Judaism," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls in Their Historical Context*, ed. by T. Lim, et al. (New York: T & T Clark, 2004). The Jesus Seminars, listed in the middle column of the table, are meetings of a group of biblical scholars who discuss New Testament topics and then vote to determine a majority view. Founded in 1985 in America, the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar on the issue of John the Baptist's relationship with the Essenes is purportedly summed up by John W. B. Tatum, who says the Baptist may have been an Essene at some period in his life (*John the Baptist and Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1994)). Geza Vermes, in a lecture at University College London, December 7, 1998, declared, "On balance John the Baptist was a member at Qumran" (Taylor, *The Immerser*). Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), "Homily given at the Mass of the Lord's Supper," April 5, 2007, at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, Rome. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20070405\\_coena-domini\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070405_coena-domini_en.html).
- <sup>8</sup> Robert Feather, *The Mystery of the Copper Scroll of Qumran* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2003).
- <sup>9</sup> Matthew Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1961); Hugh Schonfield, *The Passover Plot* (London: Element, 1993); *Those Incredible Christians* (London: Element, 1985); In a lecture at the Spiro Institute, London, on March 15, 2000, Maccoby spoke for over two hours on the origins of Christianity without once mentioning the Essenes.
- <sup>10</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper/San Francisco, 1995).
- <sup>11</sup> V. K. Pomykala, *The Davidic Dynasty Tradition in Early Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995). See also Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll, *Israel's Messiah in the Bible and in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).
- <sup>12</sup> Margaret Barker, "The Time Is Fulfilled: Jesus and the Jubilee," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 53, no. 22, 2000.
- <sup>13</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Responses to 101 Questions on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992).
- <sup>14</sup> D. W. Rooke, "Jesus as Royal Priest: Reflections of the Interpretation of the Melchizedek Tradition in Heb. 7," *Biblica* 81 (2000).
- <sup>15</sup> Yigael Yadin, "A Note on Melchizedek and Qumran," *Israel Exploration Journal* 15, (1965); M de Jonge and A. S. Van der Woude, "11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 12 (1966); J. A. Fitzmyer, "Further Light on Melchizedek from Qumran Cave 11," *Journal of Biblical Studies* 86 (1967).
- <sup>16</sup> Mamdouh El-Beltagui, *The Holy Family in Egypt* (Cairo: Egyptian Ministry of Tourism, 1999). According to local traditions, the Holy Family stayed in Egypt for three years and eleven months; Coptic Christians celebrate their journey each year on June 1 (see Christian Cannuyer, *L'Égypte Copte* (Paris: Gallimard/IMA, 2000). The route of the Holy Family in Egypt, according to Coptic tradition.
- <sup>17</sup> This text and the images and chart marked © are Copyright © 2007 Robert Feather. All Rights Reserved. Printed with Permission of the Author.

