

'Sicarii Essenes,' 'Those of the Circumcision,' and Qumran

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5/25/2014

In a much overlooked description of 'the Essenes', attributed to the Third-Century Early Church theologian Hippolytus in Rome, there exists a completely original version of Josephus' famous description of them. This probably goes back to a variant version of the received Josephus, the one even he says he did in an earlier work in Aramaic for his Mesopotamian brethren in the East. In this version of Josephus, the originality of which identifies it as based probably on an earlier source and not an original effort on the part of Hippolytus (if indeed he was the author in question); Josephus identifies 'four' groups of 'Essenes' - not four 'grades' as in *The Jewish War* or four 'sects of Jewish philosophy' as in *The Antiquities*.

To be sure, the version in Hippolytus has all the main points of the the received *Jewish War*, though at times it is somewhat clearer (for instance, in the description of the progress of the novitiate relative to the tasting of pure food, the resurrection of the body along with the immortality of the soul, and the clear evocation of a 'Last Judgement') and does include - aside from 'the four parties' of Essenes - the additional two 'groups' of marrying and non-marrying ones.

On these aspects both versions are virtually the same; but, whereas Josephus speaks of 'four grades' in basically descending order of Holiness, Hippolytus rather speaks of a 'division into four parties' as time went on, that is, his version contains an element of chronological development - a point nowhere mentioned in the received Josephus. It is at this point too, having raised the issue of 'the passage of time', he adds the new details connecting both the 'Sicarii' and 'Zealots' to 'the Essenes' that, in the writer's view, have particular relevance to the documents at Qumran and the problem many commentators have encountered in contemporary Scroll Research in trying to differentiate the 'Essene' character of the Scrolls from the 'Zealot' one. This delineation will have particular relevance to 'Early Christian' history in Palestine as well.

The first 'Party' of Essenes, Hippolytus identifies, is the familiar one we know from descriptions in Received Josephus which also seem to have found its way into descriptions of the New Testament's 'Jesus', that is, 'they will not handle a current coin of the country' because 'they ought not to carry, look upon, or fashion a graven image'. The implication here is 'land' or countries in general, not a particular 'country' or nation, since it is immediately followed up by another familiar characteristic - that they will not enter into a city 'under a gate containing statues as (they also) regard it as a violation of Law to pass beneath (such) images' - itself a familiar variation on the Mosaic ban on graven images having particular relevance to First-Century Palestinian History.

So much for the first group of Essenes, the earliest one if one takes Hippolytus' note about chronological sequentiality seriously. The second group is even more impressive and gives us the distinct impression that those Josephus denotes - and this pejoratively - as 'Sicarii' and from 68 CE onward as 'Zealots' grew out of 'the Essene Movement' and not, as some might have thought - from an improper reading of Josephus - the Pharisees, a point the present writer has always taken as self-evident. As Hippolytus puts this:

"But the adherents of another party (the Second 'Party' seemingly in the 'the course of time' or chronologically speaking), if they happen to hear any one maintaining a discussion concerning God and His Laws and, supposing such a one to be uncircumcised, they will closely watch him (something Paul seems particularly concerned about in Galatians 2:4-8 in his description of 'false brothers stealing in by stealth and spying on the freedom we enjoy in Christ Jesus' - sic!) and, when they meet a person of this description in any place alone, they will threaten to slay him if he refuses to undergo the rite of circumcision (so much for our picture of 'peace-loving Essenes'). Now, if the latter kind of person does not wish to comply with this request, (a member of this Party of Essenes) will not spare (him), but proceeds to kill (the offender). And it is from this behavior that they have received their appellation being called

(by some) 'Zealots', but by others 'Sicarii'."

Not only does this resemble something of what happens to Paul in Acts 21:38, where in the first place 'Sicarii' are for the only time specifically invoked and where others take a Nazirite-style oath 'not to eat or drink till (they) have killed Paul' (23:12-21); but it is nowhere to be found in the extant Greek of Josephus' Jewish War. Nor, as we have said, is it something Hippolytus was likely to have made up on his own. It also helps explain certain puzzling aspects of the notation 'Zealot' or 'Sicarii' I shall presently explain.

As also just signaled, these can certainly not be considered 'peace-loving' Essenes. On the contrary, they are quite violent, exhibiting something of the ethos, the writer contends one encounters at Qumran which is why in the early days of Qumran research scholars such as G. R. Driver and Cecil Roth were inclined to identify the group responsible for the manuscripts at Qumran as 'Zealots'. Nor can anyone who reads the literature at Qumran fail to be impressed by the extreme 'zeal' or 'zealotry' of a preponderance of its attitudes - particularly where 'the Last Days', 'the Torah of Moses', and foreigners were concerned.

However this may be, three things immediately emerge from this new material which the writer cannot imagine as an invention of Hippolytus, but rather, a suppression of information previously extant in alternate versions of Josephus: 1) That the 'Zealots' or 'Sicarii' were known for their insistence on circumcision - a new point we never heard before, but which might have been surmised. 2) They felt that one first had to come into the Law, as delineated in the Torah of Moses, before one could even discuss either God or the subject of the Law, to say nothing of its promises - something Paul would have found extremely prohibitive, given his so-constantly-expressed contempt for it. 3) It was permissible to forcibly circumcise individuals on pain of death (something like in Islam, i.e., 'circumcision or death').

Put in another way, like Paul - we shall reserve judgement about James - they too were interested in non-Jewish converts but, for them, 'circumcision' was a sine qua non, not only for conversion, but even to discuss questions pertaining to the Law. No wonder certain 'Zealots' (in particular, those Acts 21:21 denotes as the greater part of James' 'Jerusalem Church' adherents), 'Sicarii', or 'Nazirites' wished to kill Paul.

Anyone who has read the Letter to the Galatians in its entirety will realize that 'circumcision' was a subject utterly obsessing Paul. In addition, however, if one has carefully read it and the prelude to the well-known 'Jerusalem Council' in Acts 15:1-5 - tendentious or otherwise - supposedly triggered by 'those who came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers that unless you were circumcised, you could not be saved'; then one will realize that what one has before us in this version of Josephus' description of 'the Essenes', found in Hippolytus, is 'the Party of the Circumcision' par excellence - what Galatians 2:12 calls as well 'the Some from James who came down from Judea' (to Antioch) or 'Those of the Circumcision'.

Hippolytus rounds out his description of the 'four groups', corresponding to the Greek Josephus' 'four grades', with a Third 'Party' who would 'call no man Lord except the Deity, even though one should put them to torture or even kill them' which, of course, not only overlaps Josephus' testimony in The Jewish War about the Essene refusal 'to eat forbidden foods' or 'blaspheme the Law-Giver'; but also, even more closely, 'the Fourth Sect of Jewish Philosophy' founded by Judas the Galilean, in The Antiquities. In other words, there a slight shift even in the normative Josephus in these two accounts from 'Essenes' to 'the Fourth Philosophy' where, in fact, Josephus cuts a piece from the Essenes in the one and adds it to Judas the Galilean's Fourth Philosophy in the other.

Normative Josephus identifies this 'Fourth' Group (which for the moment he had declined to name), as it proceeds, as 'Sicarii'; but he never actually employs the term 'Zealot' (a point first called attention to by the late Morton Smith) until midway through The Jewish War when, with those he calls 'Idumaeans', they slaughter James' nemesis, Ananus ben Ananus, and Josephus' own close friend, 'Jesus ben Gamala', throwing their naked bodies outside the city as food for jackals.

Josephus follows this up in The War with a picture of 'the Zealots' that is so hysterical - including dressing

themselves up as women and wearing lipstick - that it verges on the comical but, by this time, he is beside himself.

Be this as it may, Hippolytus follows his picture of this Third Group 'who will call no man lord' with a 'Fourth' Group who are basically schismatics and have 'declined so far from the (ancient) discipline' that those 'continuing in the observance of the Customs of the Ancestors (at Qumran 'the First') would not even touch them'. In fact, should they (the Habakkuk Peshier's 'Torah-Doers') 'happen to come into contact with them, they would immediately resort to water purification as if they had come into contact with one belonging to a foreign people'.

This an incredible piece of precision and one should note its resemblance to Acts 10:28's picture of Peter's words - accurate or not - to 'Cornelius' (described not a little sardonically as 'a pious' Roman 'Centurion' - 10:7 and 22 - whose name will also have relevance to the whole complex of materials we are in the process of developing) that it was 'unlawful for a Jewish person to keep company with or come in contact with one of a foreign race'. Not only do these appear in the context of Peter's 'table cloth' vision, declaring all foods lawful and where he learns 'not to make distinctions between holy and profane' and his subsequent visit, however preposterous, to 'the Righteous and God-fearing' Roman Centurion, 'borne witness to by the whole nation of the Jews' (sic!); but, as just alluded to, we shall see the significance of the name 'Cornelius' - attached to this particular Roman Centurion in Caesarea - in the Roman legal corpus, the 'Lex Cornelia de Sicarius et Veneficis' below.

This last in effect banned circumcision, at least for those not originally born Jewish, and other similar bodily mutilations - 'circumcision' being considered a bodily mutilation equivalent to castration in Roman jurisprudence, and its application became particularly more stringent after the fall of the Temple and the War against Rome from 66-73 CE, itself ending in the suicide of 'The Sicarii' at Masada.

Though this Fourth 'Grade' of so-called 'Essenes' does appear in the extant Jewish War, as already alluded to, there it is the more innocuous matter of being in an inferior state of preparation to those in a superior one and already advanced far beyond them where purity is concerned. This is a significant disagreement between the two accounts and, on the face of it, Hippolytus' account makes more sense since it is hard to imagine such a horror of contact or 'touching' directed simply against junior members in a more novitiate state. In fact, Hippolytus' 'Fourth Group' very much resembles those new more-'Paulinized' Christians (of the kind 'Peter' learns to accept in Acts 10 above), who - in the writer's view - are following a less-stringent, more extra-legal form of 'Essenism' - totally alien to the forms preceding them. It is for this latter reason that it becomes impossible either to keep company with or even 'to touch them'.

In any event, Hippolytus now returns to his earlier description of the three forms of Essenism or, at least, the two earlier ones, that is, 'the Zealot' or 'Sicarii Essenes' - if in fact the two can be distinguished in any real way from the third - those willing to undergo any form of torture rather than 'call any man Lord' - because he now picks up the points paralleled in the normative Josephus about the longevity of Essenes, their temperateness, and incapacity for anger. Moreover, he now returns a second time to his previous description of how 'they despised death' and the willingness they displayed to undergo torture, evincing - or so it would seem - aspects from Josephus' 'Essenes' in the War and 'the fourth philosophical sect' (later 'Sicarii' or 'Zealots') in the Antiquities.

In any event the reader will immediately recognize the description in The Jewish War of the bravery shown by the Essenes in 'our recent War with the Romans' - that, no matter how much they were 'racked and twisted, burned and broken,' they could not be made to 'blaspheme the Law-Giver (meaning Moses) or 'eat forbidden things'. This last is the key point and for Hippolytus now refines the latter as well - in the process bringing it to even closer agreement with what Paul is concerned about in 1 Corinthians 8-11 where, the reader might recall, in the process of attacking James' directives to Overseas Communities, as delineated in Acts 15:25, 15:29, and 21:26, Paul is calling persons like James or those who follow him as 'those with weak consciences' (8:12) or whose 'conscience is so weak' that they will not 'eat things sacrificed to idols' (8:4) considering it 'polluted' or 'defiled' (8:7).

As Hippolytus now expresses this:

“If however anyone would attempt even to torture such persons in order to induce them either to blaspheme the Law (note the parallel to Josephus’ ‘blaspheme the Law-Giver’ in the War above and here occurs perhaps the most significant of all significant departures) or eat that which is sacrificed to an idol, he will not achieve his end for (an Essene of this kind) submits to death and endures any torment rather than violate his conscience” (here Paul’s ‘conscience’ language from 1 Corinthians 8:7-10 above and elsewhere, not to mention the combination of the picture of either ‘Essenes’ or ‘Zealots’ being willing to undergo any torture and martyrdom in both the War and Antiquities).

The reader now has the option of deciding which version of Josephus is more accurate in this regard - the War’s vaguer and less specific ‘refusal to eat forbidden things’ (‘not blaspheming the Law-Giver’ and the Antiquities’ ‘not calling any man Lord’ aside) or the more precise and, as we shall presently see, also more ‘MMT’-oriented ‘refusal to eat things sacrificed to idols’, reflecting James’ directives to Overseas Communities at ‘the Jerusalem Council’ in Acts 15:20, 15:29, and 21:25 above - to say nothing of Paul’s attack on same throughout the whole of 1 Corinthians 8-11.

So now we approach a conundrum. The sort of ‘Essenes’ described by Hippolytus - in particular, those he is calling either ‘Zealot’ or ‘Sicarii Essenes’, or both, who also will not tolerate any uncircumcised person talking about the Law and are prepared to kill anyone doing so who declines to be circumcised (if not a direct certainly a tangential attack on Paul and his so-called ‘Gentile Mission’ generally) - are also prepared to undergo any sort of torture or martyrdom rather than ‘eat anything sacrificed to an idol’. This certainly does represent a refinement of Josephus with particular relevance both to ‘the Party of the Circumcision’ and those Paul calls the ‘some from James’ in Galatians 2:12 above.

However, as just signaled, one should keep in mind that one section of the ‘Letter’ or ‘Letters’ found at Qumran, now known by everyone - after a phrase found at their outset: Miksat Ma’asei-Torah (‘a Selection of the Works of the Law’) - by the acronym ‘MMT’ (to say nothing of Columns 46-47 of the Temple Scroll having to do with ‘pollution of the Temple’ and the barring of various classes of unclean persons and things from the Temple), also has to do with this complete and total ban on ‘things sacrificed to idols’ (Part B: Lines 8-9).

In addition, looked at through another vocabulary, this can be seen as just a variation on the theme of ‘pollution of the Temple’ - what the version of James’ directives, rephrased in Acts 15:29, refers as ‘the pollutions of the idols’ and what Paul is being accused of doing in Acts 21:28 above too - the third and perhaps pivotal part of ‘the Three Nets of Belial’ accusations in the Damascus Document, that is, as it is expressed there in Columns IV-VI, the same ‘nets’ with which Belial (The Devil) seduces and subverts Israel.

Before pulling all these seemingly disparate datum together, we should perhaps turn to one final source relevant to discussing ‘Sicarii Essenes’ - their forcible circumcision with the sica-like knife from which they were originally alleged by Josephus to derive their name and the view, already called attention to above, of circumcision as a kind of castration-like bodily mutilation in Roman Jurisprudence (cf. the same sense in Acts 8:27-39’s presentation of the Ethiopian Queen’s ‘eunuch’ - an episode we have identified in previous articles as simply a parody of the circumcision of Queen Helen of Adiabene’s two sons Izates and Monobazus at the chronologically-parallel time in both the Antiquities and the Talmud).

Before doing so too, one should note that even in The Jewish War, forcible circumcision was to some extent part of the program of those Revolutionaries, Josephus starts to call ‘Zealots’ and at other times ‘Sicarii’. This is particularly the case in the episode at the start of the War where the Commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem is offered just such a choice by the insurgents and, in fact, agrees to do so, while the rest of those under his command are butchered. There are also other examples of this in The Jewish War.

Curiously, the first clue one comes upon relating to the ‘circumcision’ aspect of the terminology is the denotation by Origen - a ‘Christian’ theologian and Early Church Father of the 3rd Century - of the terminology ‘Sicarii’ as those who have either circumcised themselves or forcibly circumcised others in violation of the Roman ‘Lex Cornelia de Sicarius et Veneficis’, already called attention to above, that is, the Roman Law against circumcision and mutilation

of the flesh and/or castration.

In his work *Contra Celsus* 2.13, Origen specifically describes 'the Sicarii' as being called this 'on account of the practice of circumcision', which in their case he defines as 'mutilating themselves contrary to the established laws and customs' and as being, therefore, inevitably 'put to death' on this account. Of course, this is in Origen's time (i.e., in the Third Century as just noted above).

It does not necessarily mean that such a total ban would have been in effect prior to the First Jewish Revolt against Rome in 66-73 CE, when the problem would probably not have been deemed sufficiently serious to merit it - in fact, probably not until the aftermath of the Second Jewish Revolt when, it is clear, things were becoming more and more repressive on this score. Nor, as he stressed, does one ever hear - that is, in his own time - of a 'Sicarius' reprieved from such a 'punishment even if he recants, the evidence of circumcision being sufficient to ensure the death of him who has undergone it.'

This text is doubly ironic for we know that Origen himself was just such a person, that is, 'a Sicarius' (the singular of Sicarii) and had reportedly castrated himself presumably, not because of his 'zeal' for the Law or circumcision, but rather because of his 'zeal' for celibacy and the statement, attributed to Jesus in the Gospels: 'make yourselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven' - Matthew 19:12). Nevertheless, where non-Jews, anyhow, were concerned, castration of this kind was clearly being seen as the equivalent of circumcision - or rather vice versa, the Romans viewed 'circumcision' as just such a bodily mutilation of the flesh and a variety of castration.

Jerome in the 4th-5th Centuries confirms this in Letter 84 to Pammachus and Oceanus when, in claiming that Origen 'castrated himself with a knife' (thus, clarifying the 'sica' part of the 'Sicarius' formulation) and ridiculing him by quoting Paul's own critique of 'Zealotry' and 'Zealots' in Romans 10:2, saying he did this out of 'zeal for God but not according to Knowledge', both he as well as Paul showing their awareness of 'Zealots' and, in particular, that such an act would have been characteristic of them.

In fact, Paul goes on in Romans 10:3-4, much like he does in 1 Corinthians 8:1-4 already alluded to above when speaking about 'things sacrificed to idols', to ridicule the reputed 'Righteousness' - which anyone who knows anything about Qumran knows was a basic concept there - of such persons saying:

"For being ignorant of God's Righteousness (in 1 Corinthians 8:1-3, it is their alleged 'Knowledge' and 'loving God', i.e., their 'Piety', he is ridiculing) and seeking to establish their own Righteousness, they do not submit to God's Righteousness (more of Paul's strophe, antistrophe, epode rhetorical expertise, showing how well-educated he was in this Hellenistic discipline), for Christ is the end of the Law for Righteousness."

Here we leave out Acts 21:21's final denotation of the greater part of James' 'Jerusalem Church' followers in his seeming final encounter with Paul as 'Zealots for the Law'.

This Roman Law, which seems actually to have been attributed to Scipio - therefore the 'Cornelia' part of the designation - and which Origen attests the judges in his time were so zealously enforcing - according to Dio Cassius (2nd-3rd c. CE), seems to have first come into real effect in Nerva's time (96-98 CE), that is, in the aftermath of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome. But the sudden interest in it and its connection, in particular, to 'circumcision', in fact appears to be both linked to the 'Sicarii' and the whole issue of the First Revolt. Certainly, by Hadrian's time and his actual prohibition of circumcision, it is reflected in a law - 'the *lus Sikarikon*' - relating to the confiscation of enemy property, primarily it would seem in Palestine, connected to those defying his decree on the subject who at the same time appear to have participated - as in the First Jewish Revolt - in the War against Rome (132-36 CE).

The repression of circumcision, particularly in relation to those Jews being called 'Sicarii' - now seemingly because of their insistence on 'circumcision' and not, as Josephus previously presented it, their propensity for assassination, by Hadrian's time had become extraordinarily severe; and this had to mean, once again, where non-Jews were concerned. In Tanaitic literature, the term 'Sikarikon' actually describes the property - including land and slaves -

which was expropriated from Jews by the Roman Authorities in the aftermath of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome because of the perception of their participation in this War.

Against this background, it seems clear that 'Sicarii' at this point in time was being used both to characterize the most extreme partisans of revolt against Rome as well as those 'insisting on circumcision' as *asine qua non* for conversion (as it is today) - in particular 'the Party of the Circumcision' (as Paul describes the 'Some from James' in Galatians 2:11-21, who come down from Jerusalem to Antioch with James directives, *inter alia*, not to eat things sacrificed to idols' and then proceeding to go off in the rest of the Letter on a venomous rant against 'circumcision', 'the Law', and 'Zealotry', to say nothing of calling both Peter and Barnabas 'hypocrites' - sic!) - now in the wake of all the unrest being expressly prohibited in an official manner by Rome.

In this regard one should pay particular attention to the designation of 'Judas Iscariot' or 'the Iscariot' in the Gospels as having some relationship to or in some manner parodying or holding these practices up to ridicule, that is, 'Judas the Circumciser' - a matter much under-emphasized in New Testament research until the recent discovery of an apocryphal Gospel in his name, a fuller discussion of which I have already made on this blog line.

There is no doubt that Qumran was extremely 'zealous for circumcision' too. This position is perhaps most forcibly put forth in Column XVI of the Damascus Document (Cairo recension - re-ordered by contemporary scholars as Column X) at the beginning of the more Statutory part of the Document where 'the Oath of the Covenant, which Moses made with Israel...to return to the Torah of Moses with a whole heart and soul' is the principal proposition. One should perhaps compare this with Paul in Romans 10:5 above, where he too speaks of how 'Moses writes of the Righteousness which is of the Law, that the man who has done these things shall live by them', before going on to trump it in 10:6 with what he says 'the Righteousness of Faith speaks'.

On the contrary, however, the Damascus Document emphasizes the binding nature of oaths sworn 'to return to' and 'keep the commandments of the Torah' at 'the price even of death' - again a particularly important emphasis for those prepared, as per Hippolytus and Josephus above, to undergo any torture rather than disavow the Law. This is repeated with the words: 'even at the price of death, a man shall fulfill the vow, he might have sworn, not to depart from the Law', which in turn evokes both Deuteronomy 23:24 and 27:26 and the curses of the Covenant attached thereto. It is in this same Column and in this context that Abraham's circumcision is also evoked and the most fearsome oaths of retribution attached to it!

In other words, once again, we are not really in an environment of 'peaceful Essenes' and certainly not of Paulinism, but rather one of absolute and violent vengeance and a-life-and-death attachment to the Torah of Moses whether acquired by birth or entered into by conversion. As this is put at this point in the Damascus Document:

"And on the day upon which the man swears upon his soul (meaning, 'on pain of death') to return to the Torah of Moses, the Angel of Divine Vengeance (here expressed as 'the Angel of the Mastema' - in other vocabularies 'Satan') will turn aside (or 'cease') from pursuing him, provided that he fulfills his word. It is for this reason Abraham circumcised himself on the very day of his being informed (i.e., of all these things)."

The reference is to Genesis 17:9-27, in particular Abraham's obligation to 'circumcise the flesh of his foreskin' and that of all those of his household - the addition of this last being an important addendum - as 'a sign of the Covenant' which, the text observes, he accomplished - just as in Column 16, Line 6 above - 'on that very day', though he was ninety-nine years old!

Nor is it coincidental either that this is the very same passage that the Talmud insists Queen Helen of Adiabene's two sons, Izates and Monobazus, were reading when the more 'Zealot' teacher (identified by Josephus in *The Antiquities* as 'Eliezer from Galilee') asked them whether they 'understood the meaning of what' they were reading?). It is at this point, too, having understood the true nature of the conversion they were undertaking, in both Josephus and the Talmud, 'on that very day', they too immediately went out and circumcised themselves.

But the parallels don't end here. This is the very same question that, in Acts 8:26-39's rather scurrilous parody of this episode in its story of the conversion of 'the Ethiopian Queen's eunuch' ('one in power over all her Treasure') - but this time of 'the Ethiopian Queen's eunuch' has just left Jerusalem and is on the Road to Gaza and Egypt, though 'Philip' (who asks the question in Acts 8:30, attributed in Josephus and the Talmud to Eliezer of Galilee, i.e. 'a Galilean') is supposedly on his way to Caesarea.

Here the caricature of 'circumcision' as castration has to be seen as malignantly purposeful as is that of 'the Queen' being an 'African' and presumably, therefore, 'black' (Queen Helen most certainly was not and it was she, along with numerous other works of charity, who gave the Golden Candelabra, pictured in Rome on Titus' Arch of Triumph which was probably ultimately melted down to help build the Temple of 'blood sports' and Death, we now all call 'The Colosseum').

Now, too, the 'eunuch' is reading Isaiah 53:7-8, basically part of the fundamental 'Christian' proof-text, while the heroic Monobazus and Kenedaeus, whose offspring sacrifice themselves on the Road to Beit Horon at the start of the Uprising against Rome in 66 CE, are reading Genesis 17:10-14 about Abraham's circumcision and that of all his household and all those traveling with him. Like they, 'the Ethiopian Queen's eunuch' immediately proceeds to be baptized (8:38), not circumcised. In fact, it should be obvious that the creation of this canny caricature can be dated within the complex of the various notices being discussed in this blog and whoever did so was an individual both of some talent and not a little knowledge.

To go back to Column XVI.1-8 of the Damascus Document above, there can be little doubt, as we have said, of the aggressive and uncompromising ferocity of this passage and others like it in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where even 'the avenging fury of the Angel of Mastema' and 'a person vowing another to death by the laws of the Gentiles, himself being put to death' (IX.1) are evoked. The aggressive ferocity in question is more in keeping with Hippolytus' description - tendentious or otherwise - of 'the Sicarii Essenes' who would either threaten to kill a man or forcibly circumcise him if they heard him discussing 'God and His Laws' while at the same time 'submit to any death or endure any torture rather than violate (their) conscience' (i.e., 'blaspheme the Law') or 'eat that which was sacrificed to an idol.'

As already remarked, this issue of 'abstaining from things sacrificed to idols' is the backbone of James' directives to overseas communities at the close of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:25 and 15:29. It is reiterated in Acts 21:26 when Paul is sent into the Temple by James for a Nazirite-style penance because the majority of James' supporters are - even in the language of Acts 21:21 - 'Zealots for the Law.'

Not only does the subject preoccupy Paul, as we have seen, from 1 Corinthians 8-11, where he uses it as a springboard to introduce his idea of 'Communion with the body' and 'blood of Christ' (10:16); but also to affirm that 'an idol is nothing in the world' (8:4), nor is 'that which is sacrificed to an idol anything' (10:19 - the exact opposite of James' ruling), and to insist that one should 'not inquire on account of conscience' (10:25, Paul's 'conscience' language again, used as a euphemism for 'the Law' as in 8:7-11); and, growing not a little violent himself, 'whoever eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks Judgement to himself - not seeing through to the body of the Lord' (11:29).

The subject forms the background to the whole section in MMT on bringing gifts and sacrifices on behalf of Gentiles into the Temple - a ban according to Josephus of which 'our ancestors were previously unaware' and the issue, according to him, that triggered the 66 CE War against Rome - 'sacrifices by Gentiles' in the Temple, in particular, being treated under the phrases that 'we consider they sacrifice to an idol' or 'they are sacrifices to an idol' generally. Though the exemplars are a little fragmentary here, the meaning is clear and the words 'sacrifice to an idol' shine through clearly in MMT B.8-9.

My conclusion is that the picture of 'the Sicarii' in Josephus as descending from the teaching of 'Judas and Sadduk' in the unrest of 4BC-7CE - not coincidentally, coincident with the timeframe of 'Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke - and at the forefront of the unrest in the 50's-early 60's, when Josephus is finally willing to tendentiously explain their

name, is only partly correct. As the events transpire, 'the Sicarii' are also involved in the mass suicide at Masada, while others flee down to Egypt which results in the destruction of the additional Temple at Leontopolis there, and finally into Cyrenaica in North Africa where similar unrest continues well into the 90's and beyond which finally results in the almost total elimination of the Jewish community in Egypt.

But Josephus is perhaps only being superficially forthcoming when he tells us that 'the Sicarii' derived their name from the beduin-like dagger, which resembled the Roman 'sica' and which they carried beneath their garments to dispatch their enemies - thus giving the impression that they were simply cut-throats or violent assassins. Moreover, this picture is even picked up in Acts 21:38 too - probably also somewhat tendentiously - where Paul, after disturbances provoked by the perception of his bringing Gentiles and presumably, therefore, their gifts into the Temple (cf. the cry in Acts 21:28 that 'he has brought Greeks into the Temple and polluted this Holy Place'), is queried by the Roman Chief Captain who rescues him from the Jewish mob 'seeking to kill him':

"Are you not the Egyptian who recently caused a disturbance and led four thousand Sicarii out into the desert?"

As I see it, this is true only as far as it goes. In the light of the materials from Hippolytus, Origen, Dio Cassius, and Jerome, highlighted above and designating those who circumcise or forcibly circumcise others as also being 'Sicarii'; we can perhaps go further. As we explained, this designation was based on the proverbial body of Roman Law, attributed to Publius Cornelius Scipio, forbidding castration and other similar bodily mutilations - particularly of the genitalia - the Lex Cornelia de Sicarius et Veneficis, which grew ever more onerous from the Nerva's time to Hadrian's, so that by the time of Origen's in the Third Century, Roman magistrates were applying it as a matter of course.

This law evidently bounced back on the Revolutionaries of the Bar Kochba Period - since they were obviously also being perceived as 'Sicarii' - to the extent that a law - known in the Talmud as 'the Sicaricon' - was applied to them too, allowing the Government to confiscate their property in the aftermath of the Uprising.

I would conclude, therefore, that what 'the Sicarii', we all talk about so confidently, were also known for was forcible circumcision - or rather, somewhat like Islam in a later incarnation, they offered those having the temerity to discuss the pros and cons of Mosaic Law, the choice of 'circumcision or death'. Judging by the efforts expended against them in this Period, this policy does not seem to have sat very well with their Roman overlords, who abrogated all the privileges the Jews had previously enjoyed regarding this practice, at least where those perceived of as 'Sicarii' Revolutionaries - 'Sicarii' or 'Zealot Essenes'(with a distinctly 'Jamesian' cast) as Hippolytus calls them - were concerned.

The Romans, as several times now explained, looked upon 'circumcision' as little more than a variety of bodily mutilation of the sexual parts or castration and this, as suggested as well, is something of the private joke shining through Acts' distorted picture of the convert, it characterizes as 'the Ethiopian Queen's eunuch'. Based on the incomplete and somewhat dissembling picture in Josephus, who certainly seems to have known more about the subject of Sicarii, as his furious remonstrances and self-justifications in the Vita on the subject of Sicarii unrest in Cyrenaica at the end of the First Century clearly demonstrate, readers have concluded that 'the knife' from which they derived the Greek version of their name (certainly this was not what they called themselves, but what their enemies called them and this was hardly the Hebrew or Aramaic version of their name) was simply the assassin's.

In the light, however, of the picture in the new material we have gathered above, there is no justification whatsoever for this conclusion. So great was the attachment of 'the Sicarii' to and their insistence on 'circumcision' that they probably were far better known as 'the Party of the Circumcision'. Not only is this the name Paul seems to give to the 'Party' led by James - as we have several times now remarked - it is the issue with which he wrestles, as we have also seen, with such great emotion and anger throughout Galatians, including even his final contemptuous jibe at those he claims 'are disturbing' his communities - presumably with 'circumcision' in 5:12 - saying with such self-evident crudity: 'Would they would themselves cut off'.

There is no doubting the obscenity of his meaning here, nor the play on what he considers to be his opponent's key doctrine and/or even what happened to him. In this context, this expression 'cut off' is clearly but a lightly-disguised play on Essene and Qumran excommunication practices and an expression in wide use in the Damascus Document, particularly where backsliders from the Law and persons with the attitude of a Paul were concerned. Therefore, the 'knife' some saw as that of the assassin's probably doubled as that of the circumciser's.

In fact the emphasis should probably be reversed. The 'knife' Sicarii Essenes were using 'to circumcise' or 'forcibly circumcise' probably doubled as the one they used to assassinate and, just as Origen who had himself mutilated his own sexual parts reports, this is how such 'Mutilators' or 'Circumcisers' were known in the Greco-Roman World. In my view, this is a much more penetrating way to understand the literature one has before one whether at Qumran, in the Talmud, the New Testament, Josephus, Roman Historians, or the Early Church Fathers.

As I have argued in my previous works - including both James the Brother of Jesus (Penguin, 1997-98) and The New Testament Code (2006), the Community represented by the literature found at Qumran, in fact did actually contain a contingent of associated Gentile believers. These were referred to in the Damascus Document, for instance, as 'the Nilvim' (or 'Joiners') - even 'God-Fearers', for whom, Line 19 of Column XX, actually insists 'a Book of Remembrance would be written out' (thus! Cf. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:26, echoed in Jesus' purported words at the proverbial 'Last Supper' in Luke 22:19 and pars.: 'Do this in remembrance of Me').

Early commentators had difficulty reconciling the obvious militancy, intolerance, and aggressiveness that run through almost all the Qumran documents with their other seemingly 'Essene'-like characteristics. This conundrum is pretty well resolved if we take Hippolytus' additions to Josephus at face value - additions, I submit, Hippolytus would have been incapable himself of inventing in the Third Century, but which were either suppressed or diffused in alternate versions of The Jewish War either by Josephus himself or others as the true 'Apocalyptic Messianism' of 'the Essenes', represented by the documents at Qumran, came to be more fully realized.

Therefore, I submit that what we have before us here are the documents of the 'Sicarii Essene' or 'Zealot Essene' Movement (for Hippolytus there was no difference) - a Movement which, as the First Century progressed, became indistinguishable from those Paul is identifying as 'the Some' or 'Representatives of James' in Galatians 2:12 above; or those who were insisting - to use the language of Acts 15:1's prelude to the celebrated 'Jerusalem Council' - that 'unless you were circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you could not be saved'; or, as Paul himself characterizes them or to put it in his own words too, 'the Party of the Circumcision.'

When one takes Origen and Dio Cassius at face value, understanding 'the Sicarii' in this light, not as 'Assassins' - as their enemies wished us to see them - but as 'Circumcisers' utilizing the circumciser's knife, even sometimes when they heard someone improperly discussing the Law, 'Forcible Circumcisers' - then it should be clear that most of the difficulties hitherto surrounding a good many of these issues in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament, Josephus, the Talmud, and among the Early Church Fathers simply melt away.