

The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception

14 - Zeal for the Law

According to **Robert Eisenman**, the Qumran community emerges from the Dead Sea Scrolls as a movement of a very different nature to that of the Essenes of popular tradition. This movement has centers not just in Qumran, but in a number of other places as well, including Jerusalem. It can exercise considerable influence, can wield considerable power, can command considerable support.

It can dispatch Paul, as well as many others, on embassies of recruitment and fund-raising abroad. It can organize riots and public disturbances.

It can plot assassinations (such as that attempted on Paul at the end of Acts and, subsequently, that of Ananas). It can put forward its own legitimate alternative candidate for the position of the Temple's high priest. It can capture and hold strategically important fortresses such as Masada. Most significantly of all, it can galvanize the entire population of Judaea around it and instigate a full-fledged revolt against Rome - a revolt which leads to a major conflict of seven years' duration and necessitates the intervention not of a few detachments, but of an entire Roman army.

Given the range and magnitude of these activities, it is clear that traditional images of the Essenes and of the 'early Church' are woefully inadequate. It is equally clear that the movement which manifested itself through the Qumran community and the 'early Church' also manifested itself through other groups generally deemed to be separate - the 'Zadokites', for example, the Zealots and the Sicarii.

Eisenman's research has revealed the underlying simplicity of what had previously seemed a dauntingly complicated situation. As he says, 'terms like:

Ebionim, Nozrim, Hassidim, Zaddikim (i.e., Ebionites, Palestinian Christians, Essenes, and Zadokites), turn out to be variations on the same theme'¹, while 'the various phraseologies the community at Qumran used to refer to itself, e.g. 'sons of light' ... do not all designate different groups, but function as interchangeable metaphors'.²

The militant Zealots and Sicarii will prove similarly to be variations on the same theme, manifestations of the same movement. This movement is militant, nationalistic, revolutionary, xenophobic and messianic in character. Although rooted in Old Testament times, it coalesces during the Maccabean period of the 2nd century BC; but the events of the 1st century of the Christian era will imbue it with a new and particularly ferocious momentum. At the core of the movement lies the question of dynastic legitimacy - legitimacy not just of the ruling house, but of the priesthood. In the beginning, indeed, priestly legitimacy is the more important.

The legitimacy of the priesthood had become crucial in Old Testament times. It was supposed to descend lineally from Aaron through the Tribe of Levi. Thus, throughout the Old Testament, the priesthood is the unique preserve of the Levites. The Levite high priests who attend David and Solomon are referred to as 'Zadok' -though it is not clear

whether this is a personal name or an hereditary title.³

Solomon is anointed by Zadok, thereby becoming 'the Anointed One', the 'Messiah' - 'ha-mashi'ah' in Hebrew. But the high priests were themselves also anointed and were also, in consequence, 'Messiahs'. In Old Testament times, then, the people of Israel are, in effect, governed by *two parallel lines of 'Messiahs', or 'Anointed Ones'*.

1. *One of these lines presides over spiritual affairs and descends from the Tribe of Levi through Aaron.*
2. *The other, in the form of the kingship, presides over secular affairs and traces itself, through David, to the Tribe of Judah.*

This, of course, explains the references in the *Dead Sea Scrolls* to 'the Messiah(s) of Aaron and of Israel', or 'of Aaron and of David'. The principle is essentially similar to that whereby, during the Middle Ages in Europe, Pope and Emperor were supposed to preside jointly over the Holy Roman Empire.

The priestly line invoking a lineage from Aaron maintained their status until the Babylonian invasion of 587 BC. In 538 BC, when the 'Babylonian Captivity' ended, the priesthood quickly re-established itself, again claiming a descent (metaphorical, if not literal) from Aaron. In 333 BC, however, Alexander the Great overran the Holy Land.

For the next 160-odd years, Palestine was to be ruled by a succession of Hellenistic, or Greek-oriented, dynasties. The priesthood, during this period, spawned a bewildering multitude of claimants, many of whom adapted, partially or completely, to Hellenistic ways, Hellenistic life-styles, Hellenistic values and attitudes. As is often the case in such circumstances, the general liberalizing tendency engendered a 'hard-line' conservative reaction.

There arose a movement which deplored the relaxed, heterodox and 'permissive' atmosphere, the indifference to old traditions, the defilement and pollution of the ancient 'purity', the defiance of the sacred Law. This movement undertook to rid Palestine of Hellenized collaborators and libertines, who had, it was felt, by their very presence, desecrated the Temple.

According to the first book of Maccabees, the movement first asserted itself - probably around 167 BC - when Mattathias Maccabaeus, a country priest, was ordered by a Greek officer to sacrifice on a pagan altar, in defiance of Judaic law. Enraged by this blasphemous sight, Mattathias, who 'burned with zeal for the Law' (1 Mace. 2:26), summarily killed a fellow Jew who complied, along with the Greek officer.

In effect, as **Eisenman** has said, Mattathias thus became the first 'Zealot'.⁴

Immediately after his action in the Temple, he raised the cry of revolt:

'Let everyone who is zealous for the Law and supports the Covenant come out with me' (1 Mace. 2:27).

Thereupon, he took to the countryside with his sons, Judas, Simon, Jonathan and two others, as well as with an entourage called the 'Hasidaeans' - 'mighty warriors of Israel, every one who offered himself willingly for the Law' (1 Mace. 2:42). And when Mattathias, a year or so later, lay on his deathbed, he exhorted his sons and followers to 'show zeal for the Law and give your lives for the Covenant of our fathers' (1 Mace. 2:50).

On Mattathias's death, control of the movement passed to his son, Judas, who 'withdrew into the wilderness, and lived like wild animals in the hills with his companions, eating nothing but wild plants to avoid contracting defilement' (2 Mace. 5:27). This attests to what will eventually become an important principle and ritual -that of purifying oneself by withdrawing into the wilderness and, as a species of initiation, living for a time in seclusion. Here, Eisenman suggests, is the origin of remote communities such as Qumran, the first foundation of which dates from Maccabean times.⁵

It is, in effect, the equivalent of the modern 'retreat'. In the New Testament, of course, the supreme exemplar of self-purification in remote solitude is John the Baptist, who 'preached in the wilderness' and ate 'locusts and honey'. But it must be remembered that *Jesus*, too, undergoes a probationary initiatory experience in the desert.

From the fastnesses to which they had withdrawn, Judas Maccabaeus, his brothers and his companions embarked on a prolonged campaign of guerrilla operations which escalated into a full-scale revolt and mobilised the people as a whole. By 152 BC, the Maccabeans had wrested control of the Holy Land, pacified the country and installed themselves in power.

Their first act, on capturing the Temple, was to 'purify' it by removing all pagan trappings. It is significant that though the Maccabeans were simultaneously de facto kings and priests, the latter office was more important to them. They hastened to regularize their status in the priesthood, as custodians of the Law. They did not bother to call themselves kings until the fourth generation of their dynasty, between 103 and 76 BC.

From the bastion of the priesthood, the Maccabeans promulgated the Law with fundamentalist ferocity. They were fond of invoking the Old Testament legend of the 'Covenant of Phineas', which appears in the Book of Numbers.⁶

Phineas was said to be a priest and a grandson of Aaron, active after the Hebrews had fled Egypt under Moses and established themselves in Palestine.

Shortly thereafter, their numbers are devastated by plague. Phineas turns on one man in particular, who has taken a pagan foreigner to wife; seizing a spear, he promptly dispatches the married couple. *God*, at that point, declares that Phineas is the only man to 'have the same zeal as I have'. And He makes a covenant with Phineas. Henceforth, in reward for his zeal for his *God* (1 Mace. 2:54), Phineas and his descendants will hold the priesthood for all time.

Such was the figure to whom the Maccabean priesthood looked as a 'role model'. Like Phineas, they condemned all relations, of any kind, with pagans and foreigners. Like Phineas, they insisted on, and sought to embody, 'zeal for the Law'. This 'xenophobic antagonism' to foreign ways, foreign wives etc. was to be passed on as a legacy, and 'would seem to have been characteristic of the whole Zealot/Zadokite orientation'.⁷

Whether the Maccabeans could claim a literal pedigree from Aaron and from David is not certain. Probably they couldn't. But their 'zeal for the Law' served to legitimize them. During their dynasty, therefore, Israel could claim both a priesthood and a monarchy that conformed more or less to the stringent criteria of Old Testament authority.

All of this ended, of course, with the accession of Herod in 37 BC, installed as a puppet by the Romans who had overrun Palestine a quarter of a century before. At first, before he had consolidated his position, Herod was also preoccupied by questions of legitimacy. Thus, for example, he contrived to legitimize himself by marrying a Maccabean princess.

No sooner was his position secure, however, than he proceeded to murder his wife and her brother, rendering the Maccabean line effectively extinct. He also removed or destroyed the upper echelons of the priesthood, which he filled with his own favorites and minions. These are the 'Sadducees' known to history through biblical sources and through Josephus. Eisenman suggests that the term 'Sadducee' was originally a variant, or perhaps a corruption,

of 'Zadok' or 'Zaddikim' - the 'Righteous Ones' in Hebrew, which the priesthood of the Maccabeans unquestionably were.⁸

The 'Sadducees' installed by Herod were, however, very different. They were firmly aligned with the usurping monarch. They enjoyed an easy and comfortable life of prestige and privilege. They exercised a lucrative monopoly over the Temple and everything associated with the Temple. And they had no concept whatever of 'zeal for the Law'. Israel thus found itself under the yoke of a corrupt illegitimate monarchy and a corrupt illegitimate priesthood, both of which were ultimately instruments of pagan Rome.

As in the days of Mattathias Maccabaeus, this situation inevitably provoked a reaction. If Herod's puppet priests became the 'Sadducees' of popular tradition, their adversaries - the 'purists' who remained 'zealous for the Law' - became known to history under a variety of different names.⁹

- *In certain contexts - the Qumran literature, for example - these adversaries were called 'Zadokites' or 'Sons of Zadok'.*
- *In the New Testament, they were called 'Nazorenes' - and, subsequently, 'early Christians'.*
- *In Josephus, they were called 'Zealots' and 'Sicarii'.*
- *The Romans, of course, regarded them as 'terrorists', 'outlaws' and 'brigands'.*
- *In modern terminology, they might be called 'messianic revolutionary fundamentalists'.*¹⁰

Whatever the terminology one uses, the religious and political situation in Judaea had, by the beginning of the 1st century AD, provoked widespread opposition to the Herodian regime, the pro-Herodian priesthood and the machinery of the Roman Empire, which sustained and loomed behind both. By the 1st century AD, there were thus two rival and antagonistic factions of 'Sadducees'.

On the one hand, there were the Sadducees of the New Testament and Josephus, the 'Herodian Sadducees'; on the other hand, there was a 'true' or 'purist' Sadducee movement, which repudiated all such collaboration and remained fervently loyal to three traditional governing principles - a priesthood or priestly 'Messiah' claiming descent from Aaron, a royal 'Messiah' claiming descent from David and, above all, 'zeal for the Law'.¹¹

It will by this time have become clear to the reader that 'zeal for the Law' is not a casually used phrase. On the contrary, it is used very precisely in the way that such phrases as 'brethren of the craft' might be used in Freemasonry; and whenever the phrase, or some variant of it, occurs, it offers a vital clue to the researcher, indicating to him a certain group of people or movement.

Given this fact, it becomes strained and disingenuous to argue - as adherents of the consensus do - that there must be some distinction between the Qumran community, who extol 'zeal for the Law', and the Zealots of popular tradition.

The Zealots of popular tradition are generally acknowledged to have been founded at the dawn of the Christian era by a figure known as *Judas of Galilee*, or, more accurately perhaps, Judas of Gamala. Judas launched his revolt immediately after the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC. One particularly revealing aspect of this revolt is cited by Josephus. At once, 'as soon as mourning for Herod was over', public demand was whipped up for the incumbent Herodian high priest to be deposed and another, 'of greater piety and purity', to be installed in his place.¹²

Accompanied by a priest known as 'Sadduc' - apparently a Greek transliteration of 'Zadok', or, as suggested by **Eisenman**, Zaddik, the Hebrew for 'Righteous One' - Judas and his followers promptly raided the royal armory in

the Galilean city of Sepphoris, plundering weapons and equipment for themselves. Around the same time - either just before or just after - Herod's palace at Jericho, near Qumran, was attacked by arsonists and burned down.¹³

These events were to be followed by some seventy-five years of incessant guerrilla warfare and terrorist activity, culminating in the full-scale military operations of AD 66-73.

In *The Jewish Wars*, written in the volatile aftermath of the revolt, Josephus states that Judas of Galilee had founded 'a peculiar sect of his own'.¹⁴ Josephus' second major work, however, *Antiquities of the Jews*, was composed a quarter of a century or so later, when the general atmosphere was rather less fraught. In this work, therefore, Josephus could afford to be more explicit.¹⁵ He states that Judas and Sadduc 'became zealous', implying something tantamount to a conversion - a conversion to some recognized attitude or state of mind.

Their movement, he says, constituted 'the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy', and the youth of Israel 'were zealous for it'.¹⁶ From the very beginning, the movement was characterized by Messianic aspirations. Sadduc embodied the figure of the priestly Messiah descended from Aaron. And Judas, according to Josephus, had an 'ambitious desire of the royal dignity' - the status of the royal Messiah descended from David.¹⁷

Judas himself appears to have been killed fairly early in the fighting. His mantle of leadership passed to his sons, of whom there were three. Two of them, Jacob and Simon, were well-known 'Zealot' leaders, captured and crucified by the Romans some time between AD 46 and 48. The third son (or perhaps grandson), *Menahem*, was one of the chief instigators of the revolt of AD 66.

In its early days, when the revolt still promised to be successful, *Menahem* is described as making a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, 'in the state of a king' - another manifestation of messianic dynastic ambitions.¹⁸ In AD 66, Menahem also captured the fortress of Masada. The bastion's last commander, known to history as Eleazar, was another descendant of Judas of Galilee, though the precise nature of the relationship has never been established.

The mass suicide of 'Zealot' defenders at Masada has become a familiar historical event, the focus of at least two novels, a cinema film and a television mini-series. It has already been referred to in this book, and there will be occasion to look at it more closely shortly. Masada, however, was not the only instance of such mass suicide. In AD 67, responding to the rebellion sweeping the Holy Land, a Roman army advanced on Gamala in Galilee, the original home of Judas and his sons.

Four thousand Jews died trying to defend the town. When their efforts proved futile, another five thousand committed suicide. This reflects something more than mere political opposition. It attests to a dimension of religious fanaticism.

Such a dimension is expressed by Josephus, who, speaking of the 'Zealots', says:

*'They... do not value dying any kinds of death, nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relations and friends, nor can any such fear make them call any man Lord...'*¹⁹

To acknowledge a Roman emperor as a god, which Rome demanded, would have been, for the 'Zealots', the most outrageous blasphemy.²⁰ To such a transgression of the Law, death would indeed have been preferable.

'Zeal for the Law' effectively brings the 'Zealots' - usually envisaged as more or less secular 'freedom fighters' - into alignment with the fervently religious members of the Qumran community; and, as we have already noted, Qumranic texts were found in the ruins of Masada. 'Zeal for the Law' also brings the 'Zealots' into alignment with the so-called 'early Church', to whose adherents the same 'zeal' is repeatedly ascribed.

The figure cited in the Gospels as 'Simon Zelotes', or 'Simon the Zealot', attests to at least one 'Zealot' in *Jesus*' immediate entourage; and Judas Iscariot, whose name may well derive from the Sicarii, might be another. Most revealing of all, however, is Eisenman's discovery - the original Greek term used to denote members of the 'early Church'.

They are called, quite explicitly, '*zelotai of the Law*' - that is, 'Zealots'.²¹

There thus emerges, in 1st-century Palestine, a kind of fundamentalist dynastic priesthood claiming either genealogical or symbolic descent from Aaron and associated with the expected imminent advent of a Davidic or royal Messiah.²²

This priesthood maintains itself in a state of perpetual self-declared war with the Herodian dynasty, the puppet priests of that dynasty and the occupying Romans.

Depending on their activities at a given moment, and the perspective from which they are viewed, the priesthood and its supporters are variously called,

- '*Zealots*'
- '*Essenes*'
- '*Zadokites*'
- '*Nazoreans*'...

...and a number of other things - including, by their enemies, 'brigands' and 'outlaws'. They are certainly not passive recluses and mystics.

On the contrary, their vision, as Eisenman says, is 'violently apocalyptic', and provides a theological corollary to the violent action with which the 'Zealots' are usually associated.²³

This violence, both political and theological, can be discerned in the career of John the Baptist - executed, according to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, for condemning the marriage of Herod Antipas to his niece because it 'is against the Law for you to have her'. And, indeed, Eisenman has even suggested that John the Baptist may have been the mysterious 'Sadduc' who accompanied Judas of Galilee, leader of the 'Zealots' at the time of *Jesus*' birth.²⁴

To recapitulate, then, there emerge, from the confusing welter of sobriquets and nomenclature, the configurations of a broad movement in which 'Essenes', 'Zadokites', 'Nazoreans', 'Zealots' and other such supposed factions effectively fuse. The names prove to be merely different designations - or, at most, different manifestations - of the same religious and political impetus, diffused throughout the Holy Land and beyond, from the 2nd century BC on.

The ostensibly separate factions would have been, at most, like the variety of individuals, groups and interests which coalesced to form the single movement known as the 'French Resistance' during the Second World War. At most. For **Robert Eisenman** personally, any distinction between them is but a matter of degree; *they are all variations on the same theme.*

But even if some subtle gradations between them did exist, they would still have been unified by their joint involvement in a single ambitious enterprise - the ridding of their land of Roman occupation, and the reinstatement of the old legitimate Judaic monarchy, together with its rightful priesthood.

That enterprise, of course, did not end with the destruction of Jerusalem and Qumran between AD 68 and 70, nor with the fall of Masada in AD 74. In the immediate aftermath of the debacle, large numbers of 'Zealots' and Sicarii fled abroad, to places where there were sizeable Judaic populations - to Persia, for example, and to Egypt, especially Alexandria.

In Alexandria, they attempted to mobilize the local Jewish population for yet another uprising against Rome. They met with little success, some six hundred of them being rounded up and handed over to the authorities. Men, women and children were tortured in an attempt to make them acknowledge the emperor as a god. According to Josephus, 'not a man gave in or came near to saying it'.

And he adds:

But nothing amazed the spectators as much as the behavior of young children; for not one of them could be constrained to call Caesar Lord. So far did the strength of a brave spirit prevail over the weakness of their little bodies.²⁵

Here again is that strain of fanatical dedication - a dedication that cannot be political in nature, that can only be religious.

More than sixty years after the war that left Jerusalem and the Temple in ruins, the Holy Land erupted again in a new revolt, led by the charismatic Messianic figure known as Simeon bar Kochba, the 'Son of the Star'. According to Eisenman, the terminology suggests that Simeon was in reality descended by blood from the 'Zealot' leaders of the previous century.²⁶

In any case, the image of the 'Star' had certainly figured prominently among them during the period culminating with the first revolt.²⁷

And, as we have noted, the same image figures repeatedly in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It derives ultimately from a prophecy in the Book of Numbers (24:17):

'a star from Jacob takes the leadership, a sceptre arises from Israel'.

The 'War Rule' invokes this prophecy, and declares that the 'Star', or the 'Messiah', will, together with the 'Poor' or the 'Righteous', repel invading armies. Eisenman has found this 'Star' prophecy in two other crucial places in the Qumran literature.²⁸

One, the 'Damascus Document', is particularly graphic:

*'The star is the Interpreter of the Law who shall come to Damascus; as it is written... the sceptre is the Prince...'*²⁹

Josephus, as well as Roman historians such as **Suetonius** and **Tacitus**, reports how a prophecy was current in the Holy Land during the early 1st century ad, to the effect that 'from Judaea would go forth men destined to rule the world'.³⁰ According to Josephus, the promulgation of this prophecy was a major factor in the revolt of AD 66. And, needless to say, the 'Star' prophecy finds its way into Christian tradition as the 'Star of Bethlehem', which heralds *Jesus'* birth.³¹ As 'Son of the Star', then, Simeon bar Kochba enjoyed an illustrious symbolic pedigree.

Unlike the revolt of AD 66, Simeon's insurrection, commencing in AD 132, was no ill-organized conflagration resulting, so to speak, from spontaneous combustion. On the contrary, much prolonged and careful planning went into the enterprise. Jewish smiths and craftsmen pressed into Roman service would, for example, deliberately forge slightly sub-standard weapons.

When these were rejected by the Romans, they would be collected and stored for use by the rebels. From the war of the previous century, Simeon had also learned that there was no point in capturing and holding fortresses such as Masada. To defeat the Romans, a campaign based on mobility, on hit-and-run tactics, would be necessary. This led to the construction of vast underground networks of rooms, corridors and tunnels. In the period prior to the revolt, Simeon used these networks for training.

Subsequently, once hostilities had begun, they served as bases and staging areas, enabling the rebels to launch a sudden lightning assault, then disappear - the kind of ambush with which American soldiers, to their cost, became familiar during the war in Vietnam.³² But Simeon did not confine himself solely to guerrilla operations. His army included many volunteers from abroad, many mercenaries and professional soldiers with considerable military experience. Indeed, surviving records discovered by archaeologists have revealed that a number of Simeon's officers and staff spoke only Greek.³³

With such well-trained forces at his disposal, he could, on occasion, meet the Romans in pitched battle.

Within the first year of the revolt, Simeon had destroyed at least one complete Roman legion, and probably a second.³⁴ Palestine had been effectively cleared of Roman troops. Jerusalem had been recaptured and a Judaic administration installed there. The campaign came within a hair's-breadth of total success. It failed primarily because Simeon was let down by his expected allies.

According to his overall grand design, his troops were to be supported by forces from Persia, where a great many Jews still resided and enjoyed the sympathetic favor of the reigning dynasty. Just when Simeon most needed these reinforcements, however, Persia itself was invaded from the north by marauding hill tribes, who effectively pinned down Persian resources, leaving Simeon bereft of his promised support.³⁵

In Syria, safely outside Palestine, the Romans regrouped under the personal leadership of the Emperor Hadrian, with Julius Severus, formerly governor of Britain, as his second-in-command. Another full-scale invasion ensued, involving as many as twelve legions, some eighty thousand troops. In a two-pronged advance, they fought their way from post to post down the entire length of the Holy Land. Eventually Simeon was cornered, making his last stand at Battir, his headquarters, a few miles west of Jerusalem, in AD 135.

During the entire course of the revolt, Simeon's troops were in constant occupation of Qumran. Coins found in the ruins attest to their presence in what would, after all, have been a site of considerable strategic importance.

It is thus possible, despite the claims of Father **de Vaux**, that some, at least, of the Dead Sea Scrolls were deposited in Qumran as late as Simeon's time.

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