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Dead Sea Scrolls and New Testament

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Community Rule Summary

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a collection of books that were found in 11 caves near the Dead Sea. (The Israel Museum, Jerusalem) Experts estimate that they are about two thousand years old, and while most of them were in destructed physical states, scholars have somehow managed to place them together into about 950 manuscripts. The length of these varies, from very short letters to several columns of text. These scrolls are divided into three categories: biblical, apocryphal and sectarian. The Biblical manuscripts do represent the earliest evidence we have for Biblical texts in the world *ever*. The apocryphal manuscripts, those that were not included in the Jewish biblical canon, are works that were previously known before through translations. Despite some of them being familiar, there were some that were not known at all. Lastly, the sectarian manuscripts contain a variety of biblical genres. Some of these are; biblical commentary, apocalyptic compositions and even religious-legal writings. Many scholars believed that these scrolls were part of a library formed by the sect that lived nearby. It is important to note that scholars also believe that said sect only wrote part of the scrolls, meaning the rest of them must've been copied from a different sect.

One of the most significant texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls is the Community Rule, and it is also known as the Manual of Discipline. This is believed to have been written and developed by a sect named the Essene community. The Essene community was a Jewish community that existed during the Second Temple period, (which would be roughly from the

2nd century BCE to the first century CE). The Essenes lived in many locations throughout Palestine, but the most studied community lived near the Dead Sea, in an area that is now known as Qumran. (This is also where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found). (The Essenes and the Dead Sea Scrolls, PBS)

This group was widely known for the strict following of the Jewish law and their commitment to their communal living. They lived very simple lifestyles, and they were also known for renouncing material possessions and isolating themselves from the outside world. They took purity rituals very seriously and they had meticulous ways to observe the Sabbath, among other Jewish holidays. (Essenes in Judaeon Society: the Sectarrians of the Dead Sea Scrolls, 2021). The Community Rule provides extremely clear and detailed descriptions of their beliefs and practices. It is interesting to note that despite their strict behaviors to follow the Jewish law, they are not really mentioned in the Hebrew Bible or any other Jewish text. In fact, very little is known about them from a historical lens, or any other writing outside of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Community Rule is a set of regulations that are put in place with the intention to provide a detailed description of the structure, beliefs, and practices of the Essene community. This scroll is an important text for scholars to dissect, especially for those who focus on Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. The community rule provides a glimpse into the beliefs and practices of ancient Jewish sects, and these were contemporaneous with Jesus and the then-early Christian church. This scroll also sheds light on the diverse spectrum that is found in Jewish beliefs, especially those that practiced during the Second Temple period. It also challenges some of the assumptions that were held about Jewish life overall during this period of time. This scroll is believed to have been found by Bedouin shepherds, eventually acquired by

scholars. It measures 8720 cm in length and 30 cm in width, and it's written on animal skin (also known as parchment) and contains 20 columns of text in Hebrew. Some scholars believe it was written between 100 BCE and 50 CE. As previously mentioned, the Community Rule is also famously known as the Manual of Discipline.

The Community Rule begins with a statement explaining the community's basic beliefs and values. This text emphasizes the importance of their structure through maintaining a covenantal relationship with God, which includes living in harmony with God's will. The community is also described as a "holy congregation," and it highlights the fact that it is set apart from the rest of the world. This also showcases the necessity for members of the congregation to live a life of purity, full devotion and righteousness in front of God. Throughout, the text goes on to describe the structure of the community in even more depth. The community is divided in three classes; these are priests, Levites and Israelites. The main differences between Levites and Israelites is that while all Levites are Israelites, not all Israelites are Levites.

This is because the Israelites were descendants of Jacob, and the Levites were a specific tribe within the Israelites. Israelites had 12 tribes and Levites were the ones who were in charge of carrying out religious laws and rituals. Similarly enough, the Essenes were also led by a council of 12, and were also notoriously known for their strict rule following. (*Who were the Levites?*, chabad.org)

Each of these classes had a specific duty and responsibility; and this also implied that there were strict rules that governed the interactions between each other. The text also shows that the community was led by a council made up of 12 men, and these were known as the "council of the community," and they were responsible for overseeing the community's overall affairs. They also had to make sure that the rules were enforced. Some of the regulations that the

Community Rule included were concerning different aspects of community life. It also brought instructions on prayer, worship and even reading the Holy Scriptures. They also highlight rules for meals, clothing and even the use of communal property. The text really emphasizes on the importance of being obedient and submitted to God. One of the things that I found to be the most interesting were the instructions for admission to the community. These instructions were quite strict - incoming and prospective members had to undergo a probation period, and in this period they were tested for their commitment to the community's beliefs and practices. If the incoming and prospective members pass the probationary period, then they would go through an initiation ceremony that consists of a ceremony of purification and consecration.

Despite its strict initiation, the text also informed of provisions that were for the expulsion of members to go through, if they violated the community's rules or even failed to live up to its standards and expectations. These members, the ones that were exiled, were considered to be "outside the covenant," and were shunned by the rest of the community. The Community Rule also includes a series of blessings and curses. This one is pretty obvious to decipher - the ones who obey the rules in the community, by living a life of righteousness, are blessed. Those who do not, meaning those who violate the rules and do not live up to the standards of the community are cursed. The text itself does emphasize the importance of living life and being obedient not only to God, but also to the community leaders. This way of life would surely bring blessings, especially to those who did commit to lives of purity and devotion.

In summary, the Community Rule is a detailed description that goes over the beliefs, practices, organizations and structures of the Essene community. This text provided deep insight into the daily lives of the community, and we got to learn their worship practices, arrangements for communal spaces living, and rules for their governing behavior and conduct. It even showed

us deeper what it would be like for members of the community to interact with one another. The Community Rule also emphasized the importance of living in harmony with God's will, as well as maintaining a communal relationship with God. It provided instructions on admissions to the community, also went over the consequences of violating said rules. Overall, the Community Rule became an important document for scholars who focused on Second Temple Judaism, because it did provide a unique and rare glimpse into the beliefs and practices that this Ancient Jewish sect practiced.

In the end, it is believed that this sect also coincided with Jesus and the early Christian church.

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