SICARII ESSENES, "THOSE OF THE CIRCUMCISION," AND QUMRAN

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In a much-overlooked description of Essenes, usually attributed to the Third Century theologian/heresiologist Hippolytus in Rome (an attribution that is by no means certain), there exists the completely original presentation of said "Essenes," probably going back to a variant version of the received Josephus—perhaps even the one based on the earlier work he did in Aramaic for his Eastern brethren (War I.3). In this version of the two famous descriptions in Josephus (the originality of which probably identifies it as being based on an earlier source and not a creative effort on the part of Hippolytus—if indeed he was the author in question), four groups of "Essenes" are identified, not "four grades" as in the Jewish War or four "philosophical" schools or "sects" generally as in the Antiquities (Haeres. 9.2) as opposed to War 2.119 and Antiquities 18.11.

To be sure, the version in Hippolytus has all the main points of the received Jewish War, though at times it is somewhat clearer—for example, 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 Judgment" (Haeres. 9.23)—and does include (aside from "the four parties" of Essenes) the additional point about there being two other "groups," marrying and non-marrying ones. On these aspects, both texts in the Jewish War and the one in Hippolytus' version 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" that, "as time went on," "did not preserve their system of training in exactly the same manner." His version, then, contains an element of chronological development and changes that occurred over time, a point nowhere mentioned in the normative Josephus. In this he is much clearer than the received Josephus.

It is at this point, too, having raised the issue of "the passage of time," that he adds the new details, connecting both the "Sicarii" and "Zealots" to the "Essenes," that in the writer's view has particular relevance to the materials at Qumran and the problem many commentators have encountered in contemporary Scroll research when trying to sort the "Essene" character of the Scrolls at Qumran from their "Zealot" one. This delineation will have particular relevance to "early Christian" history in Palestine as well.

The first "party" of Essenes Hippolytus says Josephus identifies is the familiar one we know from descriptions in the received Josephus—which also seems to have found its way to some extent into descriptions of the New Testament's "Jesus," that is, that "they will not handle..."
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 Qumran group as “Zealots.” Nor can anyone who reads the literature from Qumran fail to be impressed by the extreme “zealotry” of the larger part 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 the new material that the present writer cannot imagine as an invention of Hippolytus, but rather a suppression of information previously extant in variant versions of Josephus:

1) that the “Zealots” or “Sicarii,” were known for their insistence on circumcision—a point we never heard before but which might have been surmised;
2) that they felt one first had to come in under the Law as delineated in the Torah of Moses before one could even discuss either God or the subject of the Law (something Paul would have found extremely prohibitive given his modus operandi and intellectual attitude);
3) it was permissible to forcibly circumcise individuals on pain of death. For a good example of this in the Jewish War 2.452, see the choice offered Metlius and the others holed up in the Citadel at Jerusalem at the outbreak of the war against Rome in 66 CE. While his soldiers are all butchered, Metlius chooses “forced circumcision.”

But in another way, like Paul—we shall reserve judgment about James—“Essenes” of this kind, 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 21:20 denotes as the greater part of James’ “Jerusalem Church” adherents, “Sicarii” or “Nazarites” wished to kill Paul.

Anyone who has carefully read the Letter to the Galatians 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 Hippolytus’ version of Josephus’ description of the “Essenes” as “the party of the circumcision” is more of a précis—what Paul in Galatians 2:12 calls, as well, “the same 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 about the Essene refusal “to eat forbidden foods” or “blaspheme the Law-giver” in the Jewish War, but also even more closely, “the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy founded by Judas the Galilean” in the Antiquities. In other words, there is a slight shift even in the normative Josephus in these two accounts from “Essenes” to “Fourth Philosophy,” where in fact he 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 time
time being he had declined to name, as he
goes along in both works, as “Sicarii,”
but he never actually employs the
term “Zealot” (a point to which
Morton Smith first called attention)
until midway through the Jewish War
when with those he calls “Klismaeans”
they slaughter James’ nemesis Ananus
ben Ananias and Josephus’ own close friend
“Jesus ben Gamala” and throw
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 that is basically schismatic
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 Pesher’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.

One should note the resemblance of
this last to Acts 10:28’s picture of Peter’s
words, accurate or not, to “Cornelius”
described not a little sarcastically as
“a pious” Roman “centurion” Acts
10:7 and 22, the name of whom will
also have relevance to the complex
of materials we are 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 “tablecloth” vision,
declaring all foods lawful and where he learns “not to make distinctions
between holy and profane” (10:14), and
his subsequent visit, however preposterous,
to “the righteous and God-fearing
Roman centurion” “borne witness to
by the whole nation of the Jews” but, as just
signaled, we shall see the significance of the
name “Cornelius” attached to the
Roman centurion in this encounter
in the Roman Lex Cornelia de Sicariis
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 in Roman jurisprudence
a bodily mutilation equivalent to castrat-
on and its application became partic-
ularly more stringent after the fall of
the Temple and the war against Rome
from 66-73 CE, ending in the suicide
of the “Sicarii” at Masada.

Though this fourth “grade” does
appear in the extant Jewish War, as we
said, there it is the more innocuous
matter of being in an inferior state of
preparation to those superior to them
and already advanced far beyond them
where “honesty” or “purity” is concerned.
This is a significant disagreement
between the two accounts and, on the
face of it, Hippolytus’ version makes
more sense since it is hard to imagine
such a horror of contact or “touching”
directed simply against junior members
in a novitate state. In fact, Hippolytus’
“fourth group” very much resembles
those new more “Paulinized” Christians
(of the kind “Peter” learns to accept in
Acts 10:28 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 the latter reason that it becomes impossible either to “keep company
with” or even “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 Zealots”
or “Sicarii” Essenes, if in fact they can be
distinguished in any real way from
the third—those willing to undergo any
form of torture rather than to “call any
man lord”—because he now picks up
the points paralleled in the normative
Josephus about the longevity of Essenes,
their temperance, and their incapacity
for anger. But he now returns a second
time to his previous description of how
“they despised death” and the willing-
ness they displayed to undergo torture,
even if the seems, parts 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,” Moses,
or “eat forbidden things.” This last is
the key point, 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, it will be
recalled, Paul is in the process of
attacking James’ directives to overseas
communities as delineated in Acts 15:25,
15:29, and 21:26, namely those “with
weak consciences” (1 Corinthians 8:12)
or whose “conscience is so weak” that they
will not “eat things sacrificed to
idos” (1 Corinthians 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 with 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. (9:21)

Here is Paul’s “conscience” language
from 1 Corinthians 8:7-10 above and
elsewhere, not to mention the combina-
tion 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
vague and less specific “refusal to eat
forbidden things” (“not blaspheming
the Law-giver” and the Antiquities’
description of “the fourth philoso-
phical sect” as “not calling any man lord”
aside) or the more precise and, as we
shall presently see, more MMT-oriented
“refusal to eat things sacrificed to idols,”
reflecting James’ directives to overseas
communities in Acts 15:20, 15:29, and
21:25 above, to say nothing of Paul’s
attack on those refusing to “eat things
sacrificed to idols” from 1 Corinthian
8 to 11, climaxing with “communion
with the body” and “blood of Christ”
in 10:16-23.

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 the “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 “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 we have now come to know as MMT—to say nothing of sections 46-47 in the Temple Scroll having to do with “pollution of the Temple” and the barring of various classes of uncircumcised persons and things from the Temple—also has to do with this complete and total ban on consuming “things sacrificed to idols” (QMTT B:8-49; CD 4:15-18; S-1:12, and 7:16-18).

In addition, viewed 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 in Acts 15:19 refers to as “the pollutions of the idols.” It is what Paul was accused of doing in Acts 21:28 above, the third and perhaps pivotal part of “the Three Nets of Beilai” accusations in the Damascus Document, that is, the “nets” with which the devil seduces and subverts Israel. Before pulling all these strands of inquiry 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 said by Josephus to derive their name, and the view, alluded to above, of circumcision as a kind of castration-like bodily mutilation in Roman jurisprudence (cf. the same sense in Acts’ presentation of the Ethiopian Queen’s “eunuch,” an episode we have identified in previous work as simply a parody of the circumcision of Queen Helen of Adiabene’s two sons Izaak and Monobazus at the chronologically synchronous time in Antiquities 20.44-47 and Genesis Rabbah 46.10).

Before doing so, one should note that even in the Jewish War, forcible circumcision was to some extent part of the program of those revolutionaries Josephus sometimes calls “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 it 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 of “Sicarii” as those who have either circumcised themselves or forcibly circumcised others in violation of the Roman Lex Cornelia de Sicariis et Veneficiis, already alluded to above, that is, the Roman Law against circumcision and mutilation of the flesh and/or castration. In Contra Celsum, Origen specifically describes the “Sicarii” as “having called this, on account of the practice of circumcision, which in this case he designates as ‘mutilating themselves contrary to the established laws and customs’” (Contra Celsum 2:13).
Finally, I would like to touch on one other point before moving on to some conclusions. There is no doubt that Qumran was extremely "zealous for circumcision," too. This position is perhaps made most forcibly in Column 16 of the Damascus Document (Cairo recension—re-ordered by contemporary scholars as Column 10) 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 paramount proposition. One should perhaps compare this with Romans 10:5, above,—where Paul speaks as well 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 calls "the righteousness of Faith."

On the contrary, however, the Damascus Document emphasizes the binding 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' descriptions above of both "Zealots" and "Essenes," to undergo any torture rather than disavow the Law. This is repeated with the words: "even at the price of death a man shall not fulfill the vow he might have sworn to depart from the Law," evoking 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 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," however such are defined, 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 by conversion. This is stated in the Damascus Document as follows: "And on the day upon which the man swears upon his soul [or "on pain of death"] to return to the Torah of Moses, the Angel of Divine Vengeance [here expressed as "the Angel of the Mourners"] 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 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" that the text observes, as is well known, he accomplished just as in CD 16:6 above "on that very day...though he was ninety-nine years old!"

It is important to note, too, that this is the very same passage the Talmud says Queen Helen of Adiabene's two sons Izates and Monobazus were reading when the more "Zealot" teacher, identified by Josephus as Eleazer from Galilee, was asking them whether they "understood the meaning of what" they were reading. It is at this point, having understood the true nature of the conversion they had undertaken to fulfill, in both Josephus and the Talmud, "on that very day" they too immediately circumcised themselves. Antiquities 20.44-47 and Genesis Rabbah 46:10.

As already suggested above, Eleazer's very words are being parodied in Acts' version of the encounter of "the Ethiopian Queen's eunuch," "one in power over all her treasure" with Philip (here the caricature of "circumcision" as "castration" is purposeful, as is that of the "Queen" as a Black or an African) who asks the very same question in 2:30, only now the "eunuch" is reading Isaiah 53:7-8, the fundamental "Christian" prototext—not Genesis 17:10-14—and in 8:38 immediately proceeds to be baptized. In fact, the creation of this canny caricature can undoubtedly be dated within the complex of notices being discussed in this paper.

To go back to CD 16:1-8 above, there can be, as we have said, little doubt of the aggressive and uncompromising ferocity of this passage and others like it in the Dead Sea Scrolls, wherein even the avenging fury of the Angel of Mourners and "a person wounding another to death by the laws of the Gentiles himself being put to death" are evoked. The ferocity in question is more in keeping with Hippolytus' description, tenderentious 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," but who at the same time would "submit to any death or endure any torture rather than violate [their] conscience," (= "blaspheme the Law") or "eat that which was sacrificed to an idol."

As already noted, 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 15:20 and 15:29. It is reiterated in Acts 21:26, wherein Paul is sent into the Temple by James for a Nazirite-style penance to mollify the majority of James' supporters who are described there as "Zealots for the
involved in the mass suicide at Masada while others fled down to Egypt resulting in the additional destruction of the Temple at Leonotis there, and finally into Cyrenaica in North Africa where unrest continues well into the 90s and beyond.

But Josephus is perhaps only being partially forthcoming when he tells us that they derived their name from the bedouin-like dagger (which resembled the Roman scio) they carried beneath their garments to dispatch their enemies, thus giving the impression that they were simply cut-throats or violent assassins. As already noted, too, this picture is picked up in Acts 21:38—probably also somewhat tendentiously—in which Paul after disturbances provoked by the perception of his bringing Gentiles and presumably 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.” He asks, “Are you not the Egyptian who recently caused a disturbance and led four thousand Sicarii out into the desert?”

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 have seen, this designation was based on the proverbial Roman law attributed to Publius Cornelius Scipio forbidding castration and other similar bodily mutilations particularly of the genitalia, the Lex Cornelia de Scipio. Josephus, who more and more oneous from the time of Nero to Hadrian and beyond, so that by Origen’s time 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, who were also obviously being perceived as Sicarii to the extent that a law, known in the talmud as the Sinarokon, was applied to them allowing the government to confiscate their property in the aftermath of the uprising. I would, therefore, assert that what the Sicarii we all talk about so confidently were also known for 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—whether converts or foreigners—the choice of circumcision or death. Judging by the efforts expended against them in this period, this policy does not seem to have been very well received by their Roman overlords who abrogated all the privileges the Jews had previously enjoyed regarding this practice, at least where those perceived as Sicarian revolutionaries—Sicarii or Zealot Essenes—with a distinctly “Jamaican” cast. As Hippolytus calls them—were concerned.

The Romans, as already explained, looked upon circumcision as little more than a variety of bodily mutilation of the sexual parts or castration and, as already suggested as well, this is something of the private joke shining through Acts’ tendentious picture of the convert characterized as “the Ethiopian Queen’s eunuch.” Based on the somewhat incomplete and perhaps even dissembling picture in Josephus he certainly seems to have known more, as his lurid remonstrances and self-justifications in the War and the Vita on the subject of Sicarii unrest in Cyrenaica at the end of the First Century demonstrate—readers have concluded that the knife from which they derived the Greek version of their name (this was hardly the Hebrew or Aramaic version of their name) was simply that of the assassins.

In light, however, of the picture in the new material we have gathered above, there is no justification for this conclusion. Song 307 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” par excellence. Not only is this the name Paul seems to give in Galatians to the “party” led by James, but it is an issue with which he wrestles, as we have seen, with great emotion throughout Galatians, including his final contemptuous jibe at those he claims “are disturbing” his communities, presumably with “circumcision” in 5:12: “Would that they would themselves cut off!” Even the expression “cut off!” in this context is but a lightly disguised play on Essenian and Quinan excommunication practices and a euphemism in wide use in the Damascus Document, particularly where backsliders from the Law are concerned.

Therefore, this “knife” some saw as that of the assassins probably doubled as that of the circumcizers. In fact, the emphasis should probably be reversed. The “knife” Sicarii “Essenes” were using to circumcise, even forcibly, probably doubled as 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 8th-6th C. B.C.E. Roman world. In my view, this is a more penetrating way to understand the literature one finds at Quinan, which, as I have argued in previous work, did
contain a contingent of associated Gentile believers called, for instance, in the Damascus Document, "the Nivim" or "God-fearers." for whom a Book of Remembrance would be written out (cf. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:26 above, echoed in Jesus' words at the Last Supper in Luke 22:19 and parallels: "Do this in remembrance of me").

Early commentators had difficulty reconciling the militancy, intolerance, and aggressiveness that run through almost all the Quiran documents with their self-evident "Essene"-like characteristics. This conundrum is resolved if we take Hippolytus' additions to Josephus at face value—additions, I submit, that Hippolytus would have been incapable of inventing himself in the Third Century. They must have been either suppressed or diffused in alternate versions of the War either by Josephus himself or by others, as the true apocalyptic Messianism of the "Essenes" represented by the documents at Quiran came to be more fully realized.

Therefore, I submit, as well, that what we have before us are the documents of the "Sicarii Essene" or "Zealot Essene" movement (for Hippolytus, they are the same). As the First Century progressed, this movement became indistinguishable from those Paul is identifying as the representatives ("some") "from James," those who used the language of Acts 15:1's prelude to "the Jerusalem Council," namely, "unless you were circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you could not be saved," or, as Paul himself characterizes them, "the party of the circumcision." When one takes Origen and Dio Cassius at face value, understanding the Sicarii in light of the Lex Cornelia de Sicaus—not as "assassins" (as their enemies wished us to see them), but as "circumcisers" utilizing the circumcisers' knife (even sometimes when they heard someone improperly discussing the Law, "forcible circumcisers")—then I submit most of the difficulties hitherto surrounding these issues in the Dead Sea Scrolls evaporate.