

Section 105

Jesus' Early Life

The Essenes

Introduction

In recent years considerable evidence has emerged that Jesus was involved with a particular sect known as the Essenes. Whether he was an actual member of the community whose documents have become known as the Dead Sea Scrolls is still a matter for speculation. but what is clear is that many of the thoughts and precepts which Jesus expounded and taught were drawn from material developed well before his birth. It seems highly likely therefore that he did indeed spend some time with the Essenes, studied the scriptures with them and absorbed much of their philosophy and outlook. It could well be that this was what he was doing mainly in his early manhood and that the phrase 'forty days and forty nights' was figurative speaking for several years and when Jesus retreated into the desert he was in fact visiting the Essene community on the shores of the Dead Sea at Qumran.

Could his baptism by John have occurred much earlier that we are often lead to believe, certainly the evidence of John the Gospel writer seems to indicate this and it was considerably later that the encounter in Bethany triggered a period of intense study and prayer with the Essenes and that he emerged to replace John when John was arrested? But let us return to what the Bible tells us.

The Temptations

Some time after he has been baptised Jesus retreats into the desert to contemplate his future ministry. He must have been sore tempted to not go ahead with his mission. Mark makes a passing reference to this.

MARK 1.12 to 1.13

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.

Matthew elaborates, The high Mountain referred to is reputedly the Mount of Temptation just to the west of Jericho.:

Matthew 4.1 to 4.17

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali-- to fulfil what was said through the prophet Isaiah: "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Again Luke tells a very similar account indicating a common source.

Luke 4.1 to 4.13

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'"

And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours."

And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'"

And he took him to Jerusalem, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

One can interpret these temptations as being related to Jesus accepting the discipline of the Essene sect. He knows his mission but until these 'devils' have been conquered he knows he will not be up to it. However he succeeds and at last Jesus is ready. His ministry is about to begin. (see section 201)

The Essenes

The Essenes were a Jewish sect who had been established about 150 BC. They were described by several early writers including Pliny who refers to a single community based between Jericho and Engedi which is reasonably identified as Qumran near the Dead Sea.

Pliny Natural History Chapter V 17.4

To the west (of the Dead Sea) the Essenes have put the necessary distance between themselves and the insalubrious shore Below the Essenes was the town of Engada (Engedi).

He goes on

They are a people unique . . . and admirable beyond all others in the whole world, without women and renouncing love entirely, without money . . .

Philo of Alexandria is quoted by Eusebius and refers to several communities scattered throughout Judea and other lands.

Eusebius 17:13 ff

The community is to be found in many parts of the world, for it is right that what is perfectly good should be shared by Greek and foreign lands. It is very strong in Egypt in each of the nomes and especially in the Alexandrian area. The best men in each region set out as colonists for a highly suitable spot, regarding it as the homeland of the Therapeutae

The whole period from dawn to dusk is given up to spiritual discipline. They read the sacred scriptures and study their ancestral wisdom philosophically....

Thus they not only practice contemplation but also compose songs and hymns to God in all kinds of metres and melodies.

Philo does not specify these communities as Essene and Eusebius tends to interpret them as early Christian foundations. In a later section Eusebius lists the Essenes as one of the Jewish sects:

Eusebius 22.5

Hegesippus also names the sects that once existed among the Jews:

There were various groups in the Circumcision among the Children of Israel, all hostile to the tribe of Judah and the Christ. They were these - Essenes, Galileans, Hemerobaptists, Masobothians, Samaritans, Saducees and Pharisees.

Flavius Josephus describes the sect as comprising of 4000 members in Palestine.

Josephus from his "Antiquities of the Jews" 18, 18-22:

The Essenes like to teach that in all things one should rely on God. They also declare that souls are immortal They put their property in a common stock, and the rich man enjoys no more of his fortune than does the man with absolutely nothing. And there are more than 4000 men who behave in this way. In addition, they take no wives and acquire no slaves; in fact, they consider slavery an injustice

He goes on to list them as one of the sects

Josephus from "The Jewish War" 2, 119-120

There exists among Jews three schools of philosophy: the Pharisees belong to the first, the Sadducees to the second, and to the third belong men, who have a reputation for cultivating a particularly saintly life, called Essenes

There appears to have been two quite distinct groups; the monks who lived at Qumran who were celibate and who followed a very strict rule; and the 'associates' who lived with their families under the tutelage of a superior. They were concerned almost exclusively with religion and maintained themselves by following normal occupations but any money they earned and other possessions went to the superior and they received food and other things as they needed it.

The monks themselves did not marry, and indeed seem to have a disdain of women, however they were very keen to 'adopt' other people's children and mould them in their own image:-

Josephus from "The Jewish Wars" 2, Chap VIII

These last are Jews by birth and seem to have a greater affection for one another than the other sects have. These Essenes reject pleasures as an evil, but esteem continence, and the conquest over our passions, to be virtue. They neglect wedlock, but choose out other person's children, while they are pliable, and fit for learning and esteem them to be of their kindred, and form them according to their own manners.

Adherence to the Sabbath was very strict as were other religious practices such as ritual washing. They wore white garments and rejected animal sacrifices which clearly set them apart from conventional Judaism.

Josephus from The Jewish wars 2 Chap VIII

They think that oil is a defilement; and if one of them be annointed without his own approbation, it is wiped off his body; for they think to be sweaty is a good thing; as they do also to be clothed in white garments.