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Holy Wealth: Economics and Religion at Qumran and in the Dead Sea Scrolls

The identification of the sectarian population of Qumran with the Essenes, a group that Josephus and Philo characterized as rigorously ascetic, has led to a popular conception that the Qumran sectarians identified wealth with corruption and immorality and poverty with virtue. In fact, archaeological evidence indicates that Qumran participated in the thriving Judean economy of the Second Temple period and that sectarians amassed at least some surplus wealth. Analysis of the *Dasmascus Document*, a core sectarian text, reveals that the ideological relationship that the Qumran community had with wealth was much more complex than a unilateral condemnation of riches. Lawrence Schiffman, Alison Schofield, and Katherine Murphy, among others, have suggested that the Qumran community, which felt alienated from the Jerusalem Temple, eventually came to view itself as a replacement for the Temple.¹ Due to the strong link between religion and economics that existed during the Second Temple period,² any critique of the Temple invariably would have included an economic element, and any attempt to create a surrogate Temple would have needed to involve economic regulation and reform.

THE *DASMASCUS DOCUMENT* AND TEMPLE WEALTH

If the number of copies of a text found in the Qumran caves is any indication of its significance, then the *Dasmascus Document* (D), which describes the organization and

¹ See Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their True Meaning for Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); Alison Schofield, *From Qumran to the Yahad: a New Paradigm of Textual Development for the Community Rule* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009); Catherine M. Murphy, *Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Qumran Community* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2001).

²This link is described at length in Marty Stevens' *Temples, Tithes, and Taxes: the Temple and the Economic Life of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006).

legal practices of a number of “camps” scattered throughout Israel, appears to have held great importance for the Qumran community.³ This text is notable for its harsh condemnation of the sect’s adversaries: those Jews who have maintained their connection to the “wickedness” of the Jerusalem Temple and have failed to enter into the “new covenant in the land of Damascus.” Many of these critiques are of a pointedly economic nature. Throughout the document, the “sons of the pit” (likely a sobriquet for Temple officials or Temple tax collectors⁴) are characterized by their tendency to misuse wealth. Sectarians are cautioned to “abstain from wicked wealth which defiles...and from the wealth of the temple and from stealing from the poor of the people, from making widows their spoils and from murdering orphans” (*Dasmascus Document*, CD^a VI, 15 - 17).⁵

This passage, with its references to “stealing from the poor” and the victimization of orphans and widows, can be understood as an expression of disapproval of the Temple administration’s economic practices. In *Temples, Tithes, and Taxes*, Marty Stevens explains how the Temple was a central fixture of the economy of Israel from the time of King Solomon through the Second Temple period. In addition to being a place of worship, the Temple levied taxes, gave out loans, and served as a depository. As the agent of YHVH on earth, the Temple’s function included watching over financially disadvantaged members of society.⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, the phrase “orphans and widows” is often used to refer to the people who need this type of special protection,

³ Ten copies of D have been recovered from Caves 4, 5, and 6, “a number exceeding all but a few of the other non-Biblical scrolls,” Schofield, 163.

⁴ Murphy, 76.

⁵ Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). All subsequent translations of the Qumran material are taken from García Martínez unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Stevens, 131-134.

either from YHVH or, by proxy, from the Temple.⁷ Whether or not the *Dasmascus Document* passage in question is relating a specific historical incident where a Temple care fund for the poor was embezzled or misappropriated is unknown.⁸ In any case, the text is relying on biblical rhetorical language to articulate its dissatisfaction with the Temple. The need to hold Temple officials accountable for their economic actions has a precedent in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the prophetic books.⁹ Micah criticizes “priests [who] teach for a price” (Mic 3:11), while Jeremiah claims that “everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely” (Jer 6:13).¹⁰ These types of concerns are expressed in other early sectarian documents as well. The *Halakhic Letter*, for instance, implies that the Jerusalem priests are accepting grain offerings from the wrong sources. “[None] of the wheat of the Gentiles shall be brought into the temple... the sons of the priests ought to be vigilant [in all these] things [so that they do not] lead the people into sin” (*Halakhic Letter*, 4QMMT^a I, 8 - 14).

The *Dasmascus Document* does not merely denounce the Temple’s mismanagement of wealth; it also proposes an alternative economic system for the community that it governs. One passage describes a special community tax that is used to promote the welfare of the camps.

“And this is the rule of the Many, to provide for all their needs: the salary of two days each month at least. They shall place it in the hand of the Inspector and of the judges. From it they shall give to the orphans and with it they shall strengthen the hand of the needy and the poor, and to the elder who is dying, and to the

⁷ See Deut 24:19-21, Ps 146:5-9. Stevens also notes that Psalm 68 “hint[s] at the role of the temple in providing permanent shelter for the orphan” Stevens, 133. The text of the psalm supports this idea: “Father of orphans and pleader for widows, God is in his holy habitation. God is setting the solitary in a household” (Ps 68: 6-7).

⁸ Although some scholars have suggested this interpretation. Murphy, 77.

⁹ Stevens, 138.

¹⁰ Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Containing the Second Edition of the New Testament and an Expanded Edition of the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

vagabond, and to the prisoner of a foreign people, and to the girl who has no protector, and to the unmarried woman who has no suitor” (*Dasmascus Document*, CD^a XIV, 12 - 16).

Here, the sectarian community creates an economic microcosm for itself. This economy mimics the redistribution of Israel’s resources and the accompanying welfare system that the Temple in Jerusalem and its priests were failing to implement correctly.

In addition to providing an insight into the specific economic policies of the sect, the *Dasmascus Document* reveals important information about sectarian attitudes towards wealth in general. Eyal Regev has used the *Dasmascus Document*’s seemingly disparaging references to wealth to argue that, for the Qumran sectarians, “wealth *per se* and the private accumulation of property and riches [were] bad, immoral, and ungodly pursuits in principle.”¹¹ It is true that the *Dasmascus Document* lists wealth as one of the “three nets of Belial,” along with fornication and Temple defilement (*Dasmascus Document*, CD^a IV, 15 - 17). However, since fornication is the misapplication of sex and Temple defilement is the misuse of the Temple, it seems likely that the term “wealth” in this context should be understood as the *misuse* of wealth. Stated differently, other sectarian documents show that the sexual act and the Temple institution are not considered to be evil things in themselves.¹² Rather, the *Dasmascus Document*’s polemic is directed against those who pervert them. In a similar vein, the multiple references in the *Dasmascus Document* to “wicked wealth” or “wealth that defiles” seem to imply that wealth is not inherently wicked: if it were, there would be no need to qualify it as such.

¹¹Eyal Regev, “Wealth and Sectarianism: Comparing Qumranic and Early Christian Social Approaches,” in *Echoes from the Caves: Qumran and the New Testament*, ed. Florentino García Martínez (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009), 211-229.

¹² The *Rule of the Congregation*, for instance, allows a man over the age of twenty who “knows good from evil” to have sexual intercourse (*Rule of the Congregation*, 1Q28^a I, 9-11) and treats the sexual act as a natural part of human life, albeit one that should be regulated. As far as the Temple is concerned, its central role in sectarian philosophy and the sectarian’s belief that its restoration was a necessary component of the restoration of Israel are well-attested (see note 1).

ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT AT QUMRAN

The archaeological evidence from Qumran further substantiates the claim that wealth, when used properly, was not considered offensive by sectarians. Industrial remains at Qumran and in the nearby caves include date pits and presses, a pottery kiln, installations for dying wool, and salts and vegetal compounds used to produce *borit* soap.¹³ Although the sectarians probably manufactured many of their own goods for purity reasons, they also could have sold any surplus to obtain raw materials not native to the Judean region or products that they could not make for themselves. Such interactions were permitted (to a limited degree) by sectarian legislation. The *Rule of the Community*, for example, describes how money could be used to conduct transactions with non-sectarians, or the “men of sin.” “No-one should eat of any of his possessions, or drink or accept anything from his hands, unless at its price” (*Rule of the Community*, 1QS V, 16-17). Note that in this passage, money serves as a useful tool and a kind of purifying force: the act of paying for goods with cash makes it acceptable to consume them. Money was certainly used at the site: De Vaux cataloged 1, 234 coins from his Qumran excavations.¹⁴

Almost one-half of the total number of coins found at Qumran came from the hoard of silver Tyrian tetradrachmas that was found buried under the floor of Locus 120.¹⁵ Magness tentatively identifies this hoard with the half-shekel or didrachmon Temple tax, an obligation which is first mentioned in Exodus 30:11-16, where it is a one-

¹³ Ze'ev Safrai and Hanan Eshel, “Economic Life,” in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 232.

¹⁴ Murphy, 305.

¹⁵ Murphy, 305.

time payment levied during the taking of the census.¹⁶ In Exodus, the collected money goes to fund the restoration of the tabernacle. Later sources such as the Mishnah, Josephus, and the Gospel of Matthew all describe an annual half-shekel tax used for Temple maintenance and sacrifices during the Second Temple period.¹⁷ This tax was certainly known to the sectarians and is mentioned in a halakhic document known as the 4QOrdinances.

“The money of the census which one gives as ransom for his own person will be half a *shekel* corresponding to the *shekel* of the temple, as an offering to God. Only once will he give it in all his days” (*Ordinances*, 4Q159 II, 6-7).

As James Liver has noted, the Qumran document stresses the idea that the half-shekel tax should be a one-time payment (as is implied in the Torah) as opposed to the annual one described in the Mishnaic sources.¹⁸ The question of how often to pay the half-shekel tax, then, was possibly one of the points of halakhic difference that separated the Qumran sect from the other Jewish sects in Jerusalem. In any case, the document is evidence that Temple economics was a topic of some importance to the Qumran sectarians and that they took an interest in the larger workings of the Israelite economy.

If Magness’ interpretation of the hoard is correct, it would mean that the Qumran sectarians were willing to fund the Temple in Jerusalem despite their condemnation of the contemporary Temple institution as outlined in texts like the *Dasmascus Document*. It should also be noted that if the hoard was in fact intended for the Jerusalem Temple, it clearly never reached it. It seems much more likely that the hoard represents a collection of community wealth that is ideologically related to the half-shekel Temple tax but was

¹⁶ Jodi Magness, “Two Notes on the Archaeology of Qumran,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 312 (1998): 37-44.

¹⁷ James Liver, “The Half-Shekel Offering in Biblical and Post-Biblical Literature,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 56, no. 3 (1963): 173-198.

¹⁸ Liver, 195-96.

not intended to be sent directly to Jerusalem. If the Qumran community did indeed view itself as a surrogate Temple, then it may have attempted to govern itself in accordance with some of the Temple's economic regulations as outlined in the Hebrew Bible.

Murphy goes one step further and links the hoard to the *Dasmascus Document* passage quoted earlier which requires each sectarian to contribute two days' salary to a community fund each month. A claim this specific is difficult to support, but I agree with Murphy's basic premise that the hoard was most likely amassed "for the benefit of the community rather than the Temple."¹⁹

While coins may seem to be the most obvious indicator of economic prosperity at an archaeological site, other artifacts must be considered as well. The presence of any metal item at a Judean site indicates the existence of both a certain level of wealth and an open market that traded with other communities. Metal was expensive, and since "there were no iron and copper deposits in the Land of Israel...all metals would have had to be imported."²⁰ One of the most remarkable metal artifacts recovered from Khirbet Qumran is the remains of a zinc coffin excavated by Eshel, Broshi, Freund, and Schultz during their work at the Qumran cemetery in 2001. This is the only metal coffin dating from the Second Temple period ever to have been excavated in Israel. Not only is zinc not native to Judea, it also seems to have rarely been used in the larger Mediterranean region during this time. Eshel cites only three other zinc artifacts recovered from the area in the fifth through first centuries BCE: one from Switzerland, one from Greece, and one from

¹⁹ Murphy, 314.

²⁰ Ze'ev Safrai, "Judea: Economy," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 441.

Rhodes.²¹ There is little doubt that the coffin was buried by the Qumran sectarians. It dates from a period of sectarian occupation of the site, and it is oriented north-south like the other graves which have been identified as sectarian (as opposed to the east-west oriented burials, which date from the past few centuries and are likely later Bedouin graves).²² Eshel remarks that since “Bedouins do not bury in coffins... it seems likely that this tomb must be a Jewish burial.”²³

For a find that is so unusual and so costly, the zinc coffin has received surprisingly little scholarly attention, and few attempts have been made to explain its presence at Qumran. Both Eshel and Schofield claim that the person who was interred in this coffin was brought to Qumran from far away,²⁴ a hypothesis that suggests a certain level of dissociation between the sectarians who inhabited the site and the zinc coffin. However, they provide little support for this claim, especially since primary and not secondary burials are the rule at Qumran. If Qumran sectarians did indeed pool their financial resources to meet community needs, as the hoard of Tyrian tetradrachmas suggests, then they could have obtained the metal or the coffin directly in order to bury one of their own members who lived at the site (likely an important person, given that most other burials in the cemetery identified as sectarian are simple shaft tombs).²⁵ Even if the owner of the coffin hailed from outside of Qumran and the coffin were not

²¹ Hanan Eshel, Magen Broshi, Richard Freund, Brian Schultz, “New Data on the Cemetery East of Khirbet Qumran,” *Dead Sea Discoveries*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2002), 135 - 165.

²² Eshel et al., 142.

²³ Eshel et al., 144. It should be noted that Joe Zias has challenged the authenticity of the zinc coffin, suggesting that it was placed in the Qumran cemetery post-1967 after the excavations of de Vaux and Stockholl had taken place (see Joe Zias, “Skeletons with Multiple Personality Disorders and Other Grave Errors,” *Revue de Qumran*, no. 81 (2003): 83-98). Eshel and Broshi have countered that the zinc cannot be modern: it is hammered rather than rolled, and the chemical composition of the metal does not match that of any modern source of zinc (see Magen Broshi and Hanan Eshel, “Zias’ Qumran Cemetery,” *Revue de Qumran* 21, no. 83 (2004): 487-89). Zias also fails to explain why any modern person would have interred a zinc coffin at Qumran.

²⁴ Eshel et al., 147, Schofield, 269.

²⁵ Schofield, 238.

purchased with the community's money, it could hardly have been interred in the cemetery without the assistance of the Qumran sectarians. Clearly, an individual who was wealthy enough to afford such an expensive personal luxury was considered worthy of inclusion in the sectarian cemetery.

One final indication that the inhabitants of Qumran engaged in the Judean economy is the evidence of Qumran's relationship with the urban center of Jericho, which is located a mere fourteen kilometers to the north. The sites share similar pottery assemblages, including the ovoid-form scroll jars, Qumran lamps, and a large amount of tableware.²⁶ The absence at Qumran of amphorae or imported fine ware dating from the Hasmonean period is often cited as evidence of poverty at the site. However, as Bar-Nathan observes, this lack of imported vessels is paralleled at the Hasmonean palaces at Jericho, which were undeniably inhabited by wealthy members of Judean society. "The absence of imports in the Hasmonean palaces precludes any argument in favor of economic motives...the reason for the absence of imported pottery in Hasmonean Judea...is most likely related to *halakha*."²⁷ The finds of imported fine ware increase in the Jericho palaces during the Herodian period, and recent excavations have uncovered Nabatean fine ware and *terra sigillata* from the Herodian loci at Qumran as well.²⁸

²⁶ Rachel Bar-Nathan, "Qumran and the Hasmonean and Herodian Winter Palaces of Jericho: the Implications of Pottery Finds on the Interpretation of the Settlement at Qumran," in *The Site of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Archaeological Interpretations and Debates*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah, vol. 7, ed. Katharina Galor, Jean-Baptiste Humbert, and Jurgen Zangenberg (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006), 263-277.

²⁷ Bar-Nathan, 273.

²⁸ Albeit not in the same amounts as at Jericho. Yitzhak Magen and Yuval Peleg. "Back to Qumran: Ten Years of Excavation and Research, 1993 – 2004," in *The Site of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Archaeological Interpretations and Debates*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah, vol. 7, ed. Katharina Galor, Jean-Baptiste Humbert, and Jurgen Zangenberg (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006), 55-113.

In addition to the ceramic evidence, Yehudah Rapuano has noted similarities between an architectural structure extending to the east of the Hasmonean and Herodian winter palace at Jericho and a complex of rooms at Qumran located directly west of the “scriptorium” (De Vaux’s L1, L2, L4, L12, and L13). The buildings share almost exactly the same dimensions and internal divisions, and both spaces seem to be designed for assembly.²⁹

One final link between the two sites takes the form of an inscribed ostrakon recovered near the outskirts of Qumran. The ostrakon, which was made out of Jericho clay, is inscribed with a “deed of gift” where Jericho is named as the center of transaction.³⁰ Furthermore, the paleography of the inscription dates the sherd to the Late Herodian period,³¹ indicating that even in the later stages of Qumran’s history, it remained economically connected to greater Judea.

THE COPPER SCROLL

It would be remiss to discuss the idea of sacred wealth and Temple-related economic obligations at Qumran without touching on the enigmatic Copper Scroll, a text that is both written on costly sheets of extraordinarily pure copper³² and describes the location of large amounts of hidden treasure buried around Judea. Initially, the immense

²⁹ Yehudah Rapuano, “The Hasmonean Period ‘Synagogue’ at Jericho and the ‘Council Chamber’ Building at Qumran” *Israel Exploration Journal* 51, no. 1 (2001): 48-56. Rapuano also notes that both buildings are oriented more or less north-south and mentions the possibility of a correspondence between this orientation and the location of the Jerusalem Temple -- an interesting idea when considered in light of Qumran’s self-identification as interim Temple.

³⁰ Schofield, 262.

³¹ Schofield, 262.

³² P. Kyle McCarter, “The Copper Scroll Treasure as an Accumulation of Religious Offerings,” in *Methods of Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Khirbet Qumran Site: Present Realities and Future Prospects*, ed. Michael O. Wise, Norman Golb, John J. Collins, Dennis Pardee (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1994), 133-148.

value of the treasures listed in the Copper Scroll (an estimated 4360 talents, or 58 to 174 tons of silver and gold), as well as archaeologists' failure to recover any of the treasure, led scholars to dismiss the text as fiction or folklore. However, most of the more recent scholarship has tended to accept the treasure as genuine. James Harper, for example, has compared the magnitude of the treasure described in the Copper Scroll to other inscriptions and texts from the ancient Mediterranean and Near East that list authentic historical treasure, either in the form of treasury inventories, descriptions of wealth seized from conquered nations, or accounts of tributes and taxes exacted by rulers.³³ When placed in this context, the Copper Scroll treasure is consistent with contemporaneous examples: although still quite large, it is not so large as to be unbelievable.

Where could a treasure of this size have originated? Kyle McCarter draws attention to a number of technical terms in the Copper Scroll that are used in the Hebrew Bible and in rabbinic sources to refer to wealth of a particularly religious, Temple-centric nature (namely a first tithe, or *mă^áśēr rī'sôn*, which is given to the priests and a second tithe, or *mă^áśēr šēnî*, which must be brought to Jerusalem and spent or consumed by the contributor).³⁴ On the basis of this specialized vocabulary and the large amount of wealth described, McCarter suggests that the Copper Scroll inventory represents the Temple treasury, which could have been hidden in the Judean desert shortly before the Roman destruction of the Temple during the First Jewish Revolt in 68 CE.

Al Wolters agrees with McCarter's hypothesis and further suggests that a Herodian juglet of oil found in Cave 13 by Patrich and Arubas represents one of the

³³James E. Harper, "26 Tons of Gold and 65 Tons of Silver: Too Much to Believe?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 19, no. 6 (1993): 44 - 45.

³⁴McCarter, 135.

Copper Scroll treasures.³⁵ The oily contents of the juglet have been tentatively identified as belonging to an extinct plant, possibly the famed balsam that was produced in Ein Gedi and the Jericho Valley during the Second Temple Period.³⁶ Even if the juglet is not related to the Temple treasure or the Copper Scroll, it does date from a period of sectarian occupation at Qumran and provides an interesting example of wealth at the site. If it is indeed balsam, it would have been “worth double its weight in silver”³⁷ and demonstrates that the Qumran sectarians were in contact with wealthy Judean centers in Ein Gedi and the Jericho valley that produced balsam.

If the Copper Scroll inventory does describe the contents of the Temple treasury as Harper, McCarter, Wolters, and many other scholars have suggested, what would explain the presence of this inventory at Qumran, given the anti-Temple sentiments of the sectarians? It is possible that the Copper Scroll was hidden in Cave 3 without the knowledge or consent of the inhabitants of Qumran. However, the fact that a *Pesher Isaiah* (a uniquely sectarian text), a copy of the book of Jubilees (frequently cited in sectarian documents), and pottery that matches the pottery assemblage found at Qumran were also recovered from Cave 3 makes this scenario unlikely. One explanation could be that, although the Qumran sectarians may have disapproved of the way that other Jewish groups were running the Temple, they maintained a strong reverence for and psychological connection to the Temple institution. In a time of violent political turbulence, then, they were willing to cooperate even with religious officials from

³⁵ Al Wolters, “History and the Copper Scroll,” in *Methods of Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Khirbet Qumran Site: Present Realities and Future Prospects*, ed. Michael O. Wise, Norman Golb, John J. Collins, Dennis Pardee (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1994), 285-298.

³⁶ Joseph Patrich and Benny Arubas, “A Juglet Containing Balsam Oil (?) From a Cave near Qumran,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 39 (1989): 43-55.

³⁷ Wolters, 295.

Jerusalem in order to prevent further defilement of Temple resources. The Temple treasure itself, although sullied by misuse, was respected and subsequently protected by the Qumran sectarians simply because it was a surviving remnant of the holy Temple institution.

CONCLUSION

Textual analysis and archaeological remains demonstrate that wealth and sectarian religious observance at Qumran were not diametrically opposed and that Qumran did not seal itself off from the Judean economy for religious reasons. On the contrary, sectarians considered the proper use of economic resources and the establishment of an economic system that cared for vulnerable members of society to be integral to the service of YHVH. The target of sectarian polemics such as the *Dasmascus Document* was not wealth itself, but the ways in which wealth was misused by the current Temple administration in Jerusalem. A Temple that fulfilled its economic role correctly and justly would be a central fixture of the new Israel that would follow the eschaton: as Temple-in-waiting, the Qumran sect attempted to emulate that future institution to the best of its ability.

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