

The People of Qumran...

By: [Dr. William V. McDonald](#) Posted: February 09 2006

The People of Qumran: are we repeating their beliefs today?

The Dead Sea Scrolls are perhaps the most important archaeological find in Israel to date. Much has been written outlining the historical setting of the scrolls for the purpose of scholarly interpretation. In this article I will discuss the people of Qumran--their identity and lifestyle in the isolated community of Qumran.

The Qumranites were members of a Jewish sect which moved to the Judean desert near the Dead Sea (and possibly also to Damascus). They attempted to walk continually before the Lord in the ways of truth. According to their Manual of Discipline, their major purpose was to study the Law. Within the Qumran literature special importance was placed upon the Law. The Qumranians believed that they alone had been given the purpose of walking by the Law and not deviating to the right nor to the left.

Much emphasis was placed upon ethical, ritual, and ceremonial concepts such as truth, righteousness, kindness, covenant love, justice, chastity, and honesty. These concepts are repeatedly mentioned in their literature. The Qumranites became a separated community apparently consisting of mostly men, having all things in common. They also believed that they were the last generation, living at the end of the age. According to the Qumran writings (1 QM 1:5), this end time was for salvation and would be a time of peace and blessing to the people of God, whom they believed to be themselves.

The Qumran community believed the Bible was the word of God. They had someone reading the Bible 24 hours a day, because of the verse, "Thy words shall not depart out of thy mouth day or night." Their whole system of faith and life was built around such principles.

According to Dr. William S. LaSor, Professor Emeritus at Fuller Theological Seminary, history proved that these people were wrong in their beliefs. LaSor points out five major factors which sealed the final history of the Qumran Community:

(1) They became a sectarian group which broke away from the historical community (the Jews of Jerusalem), calling and believing themselves to be the only elect. Evidence of such thought can be found in the text of the Covenant of Damascus, which states that they (the Qumranites) were the ones who "went out." Column VI mentions the digging of a well. This well is believed to have represented the Law, and the diggers represented the ones who went out from Jerusalem (the Qumranites) to dig the well.

(2) They had no concept of the historical context of the written word that they interpreted. The Book of Habakkuk is a good example of how they took a historical book and interpreted it to fit their own situation. In their commentaries, they understood the Teacher of Righteousness to be synonymous with the righteous spoken of by Habakkuk, and the wicked nation oppressing them to be a wicked priest (1 QpHab 8:1-3 and 1

QpHab 1:12).

(3) They had no perspective. According to them, everything in the Scriptures pointed to the end time and was happening to them now, in the end of redemption. In their writings, they spoke of themselves as the elect of the order of Israel, and the only part of Israel active in God's plan of redemption. This order is seen in IQSa: "This is the order for all the congregation of Israel, for in the last days when we were gathered in the community to walk according to the Sons of Zadok and the men of the covenant." Their understanding of the last days showed a lack of perspective concerning interpretation. They believed that God would raise up from among them a Teacher of Righteousness who would interpret the words of God for them, putting all things in order.

(4) One person was the inspired interpreter of the word. According to the Dead Sea Scrolls, God spoke his words through the prophets, but it was their Teacher of Righteousness who received the understanding of His mysteries. The Damascus document's first column helps set the historical stage for such interpretation. It speaks of the destruction that would come upon Israel by Babylon. The capital, along with their Temple, would be destroyed and only a remnant spared. Israel would then live under this rule for 390 years until God visited His remnant and caused a root to come forth. According to the Damascus document, God would then allow the remnant to wander blindly for 20 years until He saw their hearts and raised from among them a Teacher of Righteousness. This teacher would interpret the mysteries of God concerning the elect remnant and the disobedient (those in Jerusalem who were not a part of their sect).

(5) The Qumranites used allegory, word plays, and alteration of the text to make interpretation fit into their system, an example being Isaiah 24:17, "Fear, and the pit, and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth." They somehow interpreted this Scripture to deal with matters of fornication, getting wealth for one's self, and the profaning of the Temple.

There is no doubt that one's personal beliefs can be strengthened by the study of such historical evidence. One can clearly see the Qumranite's mistakes being repeated today. As Dr. LaSor stated, history did, in fact, prove them wrong. Will it prove us wrong if we don't learn from their mistakes? They had but one interpretation. They had no perspective. Are not these same fallacies seen in the believing community today? I believe that many things are being over emphasized by some believers, for example, the Second Coming, the Rapture of the Church, or centering the whole New Testament message upon evangelism. These concepts are important and part of God's redemptive plan. However, we must be cautious in our interpretation of Scripture--especially prophetic Scripture--keeping in mind the teaching of Paul, "Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman who needs not be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth." The Qumranites, by way of the Teacher of Righteousness, used proof texts, words plays, and allegoric teachings to make the text fit their interpretation. Are we doing the same thing today? Manipulation of the text got the Qumranites into trouble, and why should we assume that it will not get us in trouble as well? If history is a judge, will the judge not hold us accountable for the same mistakes?