

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* 1.3). 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.* 9.21 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 *cum* 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

a current coin of the country" because "they ought not to carry, look upon, or fashion a graven image." The implication here is "land" or "countries" in general, not a particular "country" or nation, since it is immediately followed up by another familiar characteristic—that they will not enter into a city "under a gate containing statues as [they also] regard it as a violation of Law to pass beneath [such] images"—itself a variation on the Mosaic ban on graven images having particular relevance to first-century Palestinian history.

So much for the first group of Essenes, the earliest one if one takes the note about chronological sequentiality seriously. The second group is even more striking and gives us the distinct impression that those Josephus pejoratively refers to in the First Century as "Sicarii" and, from 68 CE onwards, "Zealots," grew out of "the Essene Movement" and not, as some might have thought (from a too credulous reading of Josephus), "the Pharisees"—a point the present writer has always taken as self-evident. As Hippolytus puts this:

But the adherents of another party [the second "party" seemingly in "the course of time" or chronologically speaking], if they happen to hear any one maintaining a discussion concerning God and His Laws and, supposing such a one to be uncircumcised, they will closely watch him [something Paul seems particularly concerned about in Galatians 2:4-8 in his description of "false brothers stealing in by stealth and spying on the freedom" he enjoys "in Christ Jesus"] and when they meet a person of this description in any place alone, they will threaten to slay him if he refuses to undergo the rite of circumcision [so much for the normative picture most

people have of "peace-loving Essenes"]. Now if the latter kind of person does not wish to comply with this request [a member of this party of "Essenes"] will not spare [him] but proceeds to kill [the offender]. And it is from this behaviour that they have received their appellation being called [by some] "Zealots," but by others "Sicarii." (9:21)

Notice, in particular, the actual use of the word "zeal" in a crucial moment of the Community Rule's exegesis of the "Way in the wilderness" citation from Isaiah 40:3; 1QS 9.23, to say nothing of "zeal for the judgments of righteousness" in 1QS 4.4 and the whole attitude of the War Scroll against "the Sons of Darkness" and their confederates from 1.1 forward and the Habakkuk Peshar against "all the Nations who serve stone and wood" (1 QpHab 13.1-2).

Not only does this resemble something of what happens to Paul in Acts where in the first place "Sicarii" are for the only time specifically alluded to (21:38), and where others take a Nazirite-style oath "not to eat or drink until [they] have killed Paul" (23:12-21); but it is nowhere to be found in the extant Greek version of Josephus' *Jewish War*. Nor, as we have said, is it something Hippolytus (whoever he was) was likely to have made up on his own, but it is so striking in its originality as to fairly take the reader's breath away. Whoever was writing it, even if it was not Josephus (the writer thinks that it was Josephus—a more forthcoming Josephus) certainly knew something about this period beyond the usual superficialities. In particular, it also helps explain certain puzzling aspects of the notations "Zealot" and/or "Sicarii" I shall explain below.

As also just signaled, these could

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 this 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 new 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 Metilius 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, Metilius chooses "forced circumcision."

Put 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 "Nazirites" 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" *par excellence*—what Paul in Galatians 2:12 calls, as well, "the some 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 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 "Idumaeans" they slaughter James' nemesis Ananus ben Ananus 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 schismatics 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 Peshers' "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 sardonically 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 castration and its application became particularly 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 "holiness" 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 novitiate 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 "*call any man lord*"—because he now picks up the points paralleled in the normative Josephus about the longevity of Essenes, their temperateness, and their incapacity for anger. But he now returns a second time to his previous description of how "they despised death" and the willingness they displayed to undergo torture evincing, or so it would seem, 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 to 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 idols" (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 combination 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 vaguer and less specific "*refusal to eat forbidden things*" ("not blaspheming the Law-giver" and the *Antiquities*' description of "the fourth philosophical 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 Corinthians 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 all 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 unclean persons and things from the Temple—also has to do with this complete and total ban on consuming “things sacrificed to idols” (*QMMTB* 8.49; *CD* 4.15-18, 5.1-12, 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 Belial” 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 Izates 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 Sicarius et Veneficis*, 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 being called this “on account of the practice of circumcision,” which in their case he defines as “mutilating themselves contrary to the established laws and customs” and as being inevitably, therefore, “put to death” on this account (*Contra Celsum* 2.13).

Of course, this is in Origen’s time, in the Third Century. It does not necessarily mean that such a total ban would have been in effect prior to the First Jewish Revolt against Rome in the First, when the problem would probably not have been deemed sufficiently serious to merit it—the total ban was probably not enacted until the aftermath of the Second Jewish Revolt when it is clear things were becoming more and more repressive on such a score.

Nor, as he stressed, does one ever hear—that is, in his own time—of a “*Sicarius*” reprieved from such a “punishment (even) if he recants, the evidence of circumcision being sufficient to ensure the death of him who has undergone it.” Not only is the harshness of this striking, but the text is doubly ironic for we know that Origen himself was just such a person, that is, “a *Sicarius*” and had reportedly castrated himself, presumably not because of his zeal for the Law or circumcision but for celibacy (Jerome, Letter 84 to Pammachus and Oceanus). Nevertheless, as far as non-Jews were concerned, castration of this kind was clearly being seen as the equivalent of circumcision—or rather vice versa, the Romans viewed circumcision as just such a bodily mutilation of the flesh and a variety of castration.

Jerome confirms this, when claiming that Origen “castrated himself with a knife” (this clarifying the “*sica*” part of the “*Sicarius*” formulation) and ridiculing him by quoting Paul’s own critique of “zealotry” and “Zealots” in Romans 10:2, saying he did this out of “zeal for God but not according to knowledge” (in this regard too, one should have regard for Jesus’ statement in Matthew 19:12 about “those making themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven’s

sake”).

In this manner, both he and the passage from Paul he is quoting show their awareness of “Zealots” and, in particular, that such an act would have been characteristic of them. In fact, Paul goes on in Romans 10:3-4, much as he does in 1 Corinthians 8:1-4, when speaking about “things sacrificed to idols,” to ridicule the reputed “righteousness” of such persons (which we all recognize as a basic concept at Qumran), saying:

For being ignorant of God’s righteousness [in 1 Corinthians 8:1-3 it is their alleged “knowledge” and “loving God”—their “piety” he is parodying] and seeking to establish their own righteousness, they do not submit to God’s righteousness [this is a perfect example of his strophe, antistrophe, epode poetic rhetorical approach], for Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness.

Here we leave out Acts 21:20’s final denotation of the greater part of James’ “Jerusalem Church” followers in his seemingly final encounter with Paul as “Zealots for the Law.”

This Roman law seems to have been attributed to Publius Cornelia Scipio (thus the designation). Origen attests how the judges in his time were so zealously enforcing it. According to Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 68.3-4, it seems to have first come into real effect in Nerva’s time (96-96 CE), in the aftermath of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome. But the sudden interest in it and its connection, in particular, to “circumcision,” appears to be linked both to the “*Sicarii*” and the whole issue of the First Revolt. Certainly in the period of or following the Second Revolt and Hadrian’s actual prohibition

of circumcision, it is reflected in a law, the *Ius Sikarikon*. This piece of legislation treats of the confiscation of enemy property, primarily it would seem in Palestine, connected to those defying his decree on the subject who at the same time appear to have participated—as in the First Jewish Revolt—in the War against Rome.

The repression of “circumcision” particularly in relation to those Jews being called “*Sicarii*”—now seemingly *because of their insistence on circumcision* and not so much, as Josephus had previously presented it, *their propensity for assassination*—by Hadrian’s time had become extraordinarily severe, once again, where non-Jews were concerned. In Tanaitic literature, the term *Sikarikon* actually describes the property, including land and slaves, expropriated from Jews by the Roman authorities in the aftermath of the Second Jewish Revolt because of the perception of their participation in this war. Against this background, it seems clear that “*Sicarii*”—at this point in time—was being used to characterize both the most extreme partisans of revolt against Rome as well as those “insisting on circumcision” as a *sine qua non* for conversion—in particular “the party of the circumcision” as we have encountered it above—now in the wake of all the unrest being expressly prohibited in an official manner by Rome. In this regard one should pay particular attention to the designation of “*Judas Iscariot*” or “the *Iscariot*” in the Gospels as having some relationship to or, in some manner, parodying or holding such practices up to ridicule: “*Judas the Circumciser*”—a matter much under-emphasized in New Testament research but beyond the scope of our paper.

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 *Mastema*”—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 8:30, only now the “eunuch” is reading Isaiah 53:7-8, the fundamental “Christian” proof-text—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 *Mastema* and “a person vowing 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, tendentious 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

Law" (21:20). Not only does the subject preoccupy Paul from 1 Corinthians 8 to 11, wherein he uses it as a springboard to introduce his idea of "communion with the body" and "blood of Christ" (10:16) as we have seen, but also to affirm that "an idol is nothing in the world" (8:4), nor is "that which is sacrificed to an idol anything" (10:19), and to insist that one should "not inquire on account of conscience" (10:25, the "conscience" language again used by Paul as a euphemism for "the Law" as in 8:7-11) and, growing not a little violent himself, "whoever eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks judgment to himself not seeing through to the body of the Lord" (11:29).

As already signaled, too, the subject forms the background to the whole section in *MMT* on bringing gifts and sacrifices on behalf of Gentiles into the Temple (a ban according to Josephus of which "our ancestors were previously unaware of" and the issue according to him that triggered the war against Rome in 66 CE)—"sacrifices by Gentiles" in the Temple, in particular, being treated under the expression that "we consider they sacrifice to an idol" or "they are sacrifices to an idol" generally. Though the exemplars are a little fragmentary here, the meaning is clear and the words "sacrifice to an idol" shine clearly through.

I would conclude that the picture of "the *Sicarii*" in Josephus as descending from the teaching of Judas and Sadduk during the unrest of 4 BC-7CE (coincident with the picture of the birth of "Jesus" in the Gospels) and at the forefront of the unrest in the 50s and 60s CE, when Josephus is finally willing to partially explain their name, is only partly correct. As these events transpire, they are also

involved in the mass suicide at Masada while others flee down to Egypt resulting in the additional destruction of the Temple at Leontopolis 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 they derived their name from the bedouin-like dagger (which resembled the Roman *sica*) 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—wherein 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 Sicariis et Veneficis*, which grew more and more onerous from the time of Nerva 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 *Sikarikon*, 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 *Sicarii* revolutionaries—*Sicarii* or "Zealot Essenes" (with a distinctly "Jamesian" 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 furious 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 dem-

onstrate—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. So great 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 Essene and Qumran 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 circumcisers. In fact, the emphasis should probably be reversed. The "knife" *Sicarii* "Essenes" were using to circumcise, even forcibly, probably doubled as the 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 Greco-Roman world. In my view, this is a more penetrating way to understand the literature one finds at Qumran, which, as I have argued in previous work, did

contain a contingent of associated Gentile believers called, for instance, in the Damascus Document, "the *Nilvim*" 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 Qumran 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 Qumran 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 Sicariis*—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.