



# CREaTE

Canterbury Research and Theses Environment

Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

<http://create.canterbury.ac.uk>

Please cite this publication as follows:

Capper, B. J. (2014) The Essene religious order of ancient Judaea and the origins of Johannine Christianity. *Qumran Chronicle*, 22 (1-4). pp. 39-71. ISSN 0867-8715.

Link to official URL (if available):

This version is made available in accordance with publishers' policies. All material made available by CReaTE is protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

Contact: [create.library@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:create.library@canterbury.ac.uk)



# **The Essene Religious Order of Ancient Judaea and the Origins of Johannine Christianity**

School of Humanities  
Canterbury Christ Church University  
Canterbury CT1 1QU, United Kingdom

Brian J. Capper

This paper will present an argument for an historical relationship between early Johannine Christianity, understood in its social character as an expression of virtuoso religion, in social form a religious order, and the ancient Jewish religious movement of the Essenes, which contained, amongst its social manifestations in ancient judaea, members who lived according to particular, regulated forms of virtuoso religious life, gathered in religious orders which formed particular sectors or subgroups of the Essene movement as a whole. Discussions about the Gospel of John, Essenism and the Dead Sea Scrolls commonly employ the social model of sectarianism, without considering the possible relevance of the sociological category of virtuoso religion. Much of this paper will be concerned to explain how the ‘sectarian thesis’ concerning Johannine Christianity is sociologically misconceived, and will argue that its fundamental category, the social model of sectarianism, should be abandoned in favour of the sociological category of virtuoso religion, the particular style of life of the religious order, understood as a religiously specialised and numerically limited sector of a wider spiritual community. This paper will also argue that the same shift in sociological interpretation should be applied to the understanding of Essenism during much of its history and across several of its social expressions. Having established the appropriateness of social classification as virtuoso religion both for some sectors of the Essene movement and for Johannine Christianity, historical arguments will be given for discovering a linkage between the Essenism and the roots of Johannine Christianity in and around Jerusalem both at the time of, and after, the ministry of Jesus.

The 'sectarian thesis' concerning Johannine Christianity is widely accepted among scholars who find in the Johannine literature typical social characteristics of sectarianism, including self-legitimizing strategies, i.e. theological thinking which justifies social separation from the wider spiritual community, and exclusivity. Wayne Meeks and J. Louis Martyn were the principal proponents of this view.<sup>1</sup> For Meeks and Martyn the Gospel narrative expressed a sense of alienation from the 'world.' This sense is understood to have derived from the social situation of the Johannine community, which had recently undergone a process of exclusion from the synagogue on the grounds of its belief in the Messiahship of Jesus alone, and found itself, like the Johannine Jesus, estranged from its former world of Judaism. On this model, the high Johannine Christology is understood more as a legitimating strategy of the separated Johannine community rather than a constituent ground and cause of its separation from its parent Judaism. Alternatively, of course, the explicitly divine Christology of John's Gospel may be understood as the ground for the separation of many Christians from much of Judaism, as a prior but inevitable working out of the implications of the ministry of Jesus and of the early Christian community's post-Easter religious experience; or a dialectic process between these inverse directions of explanation may be proposed. However the relationship between social separation and Christology are conceived, the articulation of explicitly high Christology may be understood as the expanding ground for the unusually intense devotion of virtuoso religious life amongst particular groups of believers in Jesus, focused on the worship and service of the divine Jesus, rather than as grounds for the separation of a group of believers in Jesus as a sectarian, breakaway group.

The sectarian thesis concerning the Gospel of John is not without internal

---

<sup>1</sup> W. Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91 (1972), pp. 44–72; J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

sociological difficulties. In applying the category of ‘sect’ to the Gospel, perceptions often merge between seeing the Fourth Gospel as sectarian *vis à vis* its matrix of Judaism, and perceiving an exclusivist relationship of the Johannine community *vis à vis* the ‘Great Church’ of early Christianity. Against the latter view, R. E. Brown and M. Hengel sought to emphasize the mainstream character of Johannine Christianity.<sup>2</sup> In his survey regarding the supposed sectarian character of Johannine Christianity, Craig Keener concluded that the Fourth Gospel “differentiates Jesus’ followers from the outside ‘world’ no less clearly than did the Essenes”, but notes that interpreters have found this distinction from the outside world to be common to all of early Christianity.<sup>3</sup> One such interpreter was Robin Scroggs, who characterized the early Christian communities together as a ‘sectarian movement’.<sup>4</sup> We may compare how Philip F. Esler found that Luke-Acts represents a ‘sectarian’ perspective in early Christianity,<sup>5</sup> and Graham N. Stanton argued that Matthew, likewise, reflects a ‘sectarian’ form of early Christianity, drawing parallels between ‘sectarian’ features in Matthew and Qumran.<sup>6</sup> The perception of all of early Christianity as ‘sectarian’ raises therefore questions concerning the heuristic value of the sociological category of ‘sectarianism’ for understanding the distinctiveness of the Johannine literature.

In the quest for a sociological tool of greater refinement, Bryan Wilson’s typology of sectarianism has been applied to both John’s Gospel and the Qumran literature. Wilson classifies religious groups according to how their soteriological

---

<sup>2</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) pp. 16–17; M. Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Scroggs, ‘The Earliest Christian Communities as Sectarian Movement’, now in D. G. Horrell, ed., *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), pp. 69–91; cf. Brown, *Community*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>5</sup> P. F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); cf. Timothy Ling, *The Judaean Poor and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 165.

<sup>6</sup> G. N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), pp. 85–107.

strategy responds to the ‘world’, identifying seven ideal types: conversionist, manipulationist, thaumaturgical, reformist, revolutionist, utopian and introversionist.<sup>7</sup> Religious movements which demonstrate a different soteriological strategy from their surrounding, wider society are classified as sects. Philip Esler has sought to use Wilson’s category of ‘introversionist’ sect to define what was uniquely Johannine. However, despite his attempt to depict the Johannine community as withdrawn and inwardly directed,<sup>8</sup> John’s Gospel is not uniformly negative regarding the ‘world’. The Gospel is interested in the world’s salvation: the Father’s loves ‘the world’ and sends the Son (3:16–17), who is the ‘Savior of the world’ (4:42) and the bread which gives life ‘to the world’ (6:33, 51). The disciples too are sent into the world (17:18). It is hoped that all people will be drawn to the Son (12:32) and that the world will believe (17:21). Moreover, the Gospel also shows affinities with Wilson’s ‘conversionist’ sect type: it does not advocate leaving or renouncing the world, and does not offer a soteriology based upon a separated community, but rather, in an individualistically conceived, conversionist strategy, emphasizes the need for personal receipt of the ‘eternal life’ available only through faith in the incarnation of the divine Logos as Jesus, the unique divine Son.<sup>9</sup> The application of Bryan Wilson’s typology, therefore, does not yield an unambiguous explanation of Johannine Christianity as sectarian.

As explained above, this study will argue that the forms of religion reflected in the Johannine and Qumran texts, as well as in the classical sources for the Essenes, are, at least in certain phases of these communities’ histories, best classified as ‘religious orders’ rather than sects. For the purposes of this paper, the social type of the religious

---

<sup>7</sup> Bryan Wilson, *Magic and the Millenium: A Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protest among Tribal and Third-World Peoples* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 22–26.

<sup>8</sup> P. F. Esler, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 70–91.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. John 1:12–13, especially in its context of the divine Christology of 1:1–4 and 1:15–18; 3:16; 4:13–14; 5:19–26; 6:26–68; 7:37–38; 9:35–39; 10:9; 11:24–26; 12:26, 44–50; 14:23–24; 15:6–10; 20:30–31; cf. Ling, *Judaean Poor*, pp. 157–160.

order will be characterized as a form of ‘religious virtuosity’ or ‘virtuoso religion’, a category originated by Max Weber. When Weber coined the term ‘virtuoso religion’ he applied it to both the sect and the religious order, noting close similarities between these social types. These similarities are key to the present argument and will be explored in detail below.<sup>10</sup> However, here I will apply the terminology of ‘religious virtuosity’ and ‘virtuoso religion’ only to the activity of the individual ascetic and, more particularly, to aggregations of such persons in religious orders, and *not* to the social type of the sect. I will argue that, around the turn of the eras, Essenism generally functioned as an accepted part of the wider, Temple-worshiping Jewish religious community as a *religious order*. I will argue that most Essenes were not at this time sectarian, detached from central Temple authority and disengaged from the surrounding society. I will also argue that there are a good number of indicators that the Johannine tradition had its origins with this form of ‘virtuoso religion’ in Judaea, especially in the Jerusalem area.

To explore these possibilities, the first section of this study will examine the sociological models used in most discussions of the Essenes and introduce another model, the ‘religious order’. In this discussion, I will distinguish between Essenism in general and the particular form of Essenism known through the Dead Sea Scrolls. This section will situate Essenism within mainstream Judaism around the turn of the eras. Following the analysis of Essenism as a distinct form of piety *within* Second Temple Judaism, I will argue that this form of religious piety was particularly associated with the region of Judaea, and was found in Jerusalem and at an Essene settlement close to Jerusalem, in Bethany. This will lead into a discussion of Jesus’ contacts in Jerusalem and Bethany as recorded in the Gospels, leading to the conclusion that Jerusalem and its environs, especially Bethany, provided the geographical and social context where

---

<sup>10</sup> See Weber’s essay ‘The Social Psychology of the World’s Religions’ in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948), pp. 267–301, see especially pp. 287–291.

Essene ideas influenced the nascent Johannine tradition.

### **Sects/Sectarianism or Religious Orders/Virtuoso Religion**

Philip Esler sought to characterize the authors of the *Damascus Rule* not as a 'sect' but as a 'reform movement', still a part of the wider Jewish religious community. Kåre Fuglseth found the Johannine community to have been 'cult-like', manifesting tension with the group's Jewish 'parent body', but not the complete segregation of the 'sect'.<sup>11</sup> Yet the 'reform movement' and Fuglseth's 'cult-like' model, drawn from the study of modern groups, are not the only social forms which share exclusivist features with the 'sect'. The religious order, too, exists in a liminal social position but falls short of breaking all ties with its wider religious community.<sup>12</sup> As will be shown below, the social feature which distinguishes the 'religious order' from the 'sect' is precisely the religious order's abiding connection with the wider religious community; the sect, contrastingly, shuns any 'external authority'. Ilana Silber has employed the terms 'virtuoso religion' and 'religious virtuosity' to describe the piety of both the individual ascetic, who exists as part of a wider religious community, albeit in a liminal position, and the practice of the religious order, which exists, also liminally, as an accepted, legitimate part of a larger religious community while expressing a whole-of-life focus on religious concerns and discipline.<sup>13</sup>

Silber has offered a typology defining religious 'virtuosity' across different cultural contexts and historical periods which may be summarized as follows.

*Religious virtuosity:*–

---

<sup>11</sup> Esler, *First Christians*, pp. 70–91. Esler sees the Johannine community as a 'sect'. This categorization has been strongly contested by Kåre Sigvald Fuglseth *Johannine Sectarianism in Perspective. A Sociological, Historical and Comparative Analysis of Temple and Social Relationships in the Gospel of John, Philo and Qumran* (NovTSup 119, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), cf. his conclusions on pp. 373–374.

<sup>12</sup> 'Cult-like' groups may, like the religious order, accept the essential legitimacy of other churches but hold that not all are called to the special practices of the group, e.g. a pronounced focus on mission. In such cases 'cult-like' groups are, in effect, religious orders.

<sup>13</sup> Ilana F. Silber, *Virtuosity, Charisma, and Social Order: A Comparative Sociological Study of Monasticism in Theravada Buddhism and Medieval Catholicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

- 1) Is a matter of individual choice;
- 2) Involves an intensification of personal commitment over normal compulsory religious routine, norms and behavior;
- 3) Involves the seeking of perfection, an extreme urge to go beyond everyday life and average religious achievement;
- 4) Sustains the seeking of perfection in a disciplined, systematic fashion, a defined rule or method;
- 5) Implies a normative double standard; its rigour is not only not necessary for all, but also impossible for all;
- 6) Is based in achievement and non-ascriptive criteria, and is in principle an option for all, although in practice only achieved by an 'heroic' minority.<sup>14</sup>

As has been noted, the sociological description of the 'sect' may be very similar to that of the religious order. D. A. Martin observed that the religious order is 'an analogue, within the inclusive church, of the spiritual elitism which finds expression in the sect'.<sup>15</sup> Michael Hill called the religious order a 'sect within the church' and a 'quasi-sect',<sup>16</sup> noting many similarities between the sect and the religious order as follows.<sup>17</sup>

*Both sect and religious order:—*

- 1) Are voluntary associations;
- 2) Accept members on the basis of achievement (proof of merit);
- 3) Demand an unusually high level of personal commitment;
- 4) Emphasize exclusivity and expel deviants;
- 5) Carry the self-conception of an elect;

---

<sup>14</sup> Silber, *Virtuosity*, pp. 191–192.

<sup>15</sup> D.A. Martin, *Pacifism*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 4, cited in Hill, *Religious Order*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Hill, *Religious Order*, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Hill, 'Typologie sociologique de l'ordre religieux', *Social Compass* 17 (1971), pp. 45–64; *A Sociology of Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 84–87; *Religious Order*, pp. 61–71.



- 6) Have personal perfection as their goal;
- 7) Exercise totalitarian control over their members;
- 8) Characteristically tend, in different ways, to keep away from the world.

Given this extensive correlation, it is significant that the set of features distinguishing the religious order from the sect is very limited. Hill finds, at most, only two:–

- 1) Religious orders, as part of the wider church, acknowledge a source of authority which is ultimately external to the group, although they are in practice allowed a very considerable degree of autonomy in their internal arrangements; sects are self-legitimizing and acknowledge no external sanctions in regulating their beliefs and structures;
- 2) While religious orders are typically celibate, sects are only rarely celibate.

Hill expressed his first distinguishing criterion, unlike his second, without qualification. It is therefore the only firm guide he gives for distinguishing between the sect and the religious order. The religious order is “distinguished from the sect proper by its acceptance of an external, ecclesiastical source of authority.”<sup>18</sup> Only the religious order’s acknowledgement of a source of authority outside its own ranks clearly distinguishes it from the sect.

The close proximity between the categories of ‘sect’ and ‘religious order’ is shown by overlaps between the terms ‘virtuoso religion’, ‘sect’ and ‘religious order’ in the early sociology of religion, and observations of historical transitions between the social forms so termed. Max Weber distinguished *virtuoso religion* from other forms of religious expression such as ‘charismatic religion’ and ‘mass religion’. As noted above, he included both ‘sects’ and ‘religious orders’ within the category ‘virtuoso religion’,

---

<sup>18</sup> Silber, *Virtuosity*, p. 40.

observing affinity between the sect and the religious order.<sup>19</sup> Ernst Troeltsch regarded both the voluntary association and the religious order as expressions of ‘sect-type’ religion. He found that the sect-type religion of the voluntary association could be transformed, from ‘sect’ into ‘religious order’, by becoming subject to legitimating lines of control from the church of mass religion. He argued, for example, that ‘The Franciscan movement belonged originally to the sect-type of lay religion.’<sup>20</sup> I depict his analysis below. It must be emphasized that the early sociology of religion observed not only the close proximity between ‘sect’ and ‘religious order’, but also the possibility of transitions between these social forms in either direction. Hence, caution must be exercised in classifying a particular religious group as a ‘sect’ rather than a ‘religious order’ in all phases of its history.

This caution necessarily applies to the choice between the categories of ‘sect’ and ‘religious order’ when seeking to characterize the hypothetical communities reflected by the Gospel of John, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the ancient sources for Essenism (if this grouping is to be distinguished, as in some recent views, from the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls). Many characteristic features which appear to justify a sociological classification as ‘sect’ also figure in typologies of the religious order, and may therefore instead constitute evidence that the group under consideration is a religious order. Focus on what *distinguishes* the sect from the religious order is necessary to justify choice of either category. Furthermore, since historical examples show that social transitions are possible both *from* sect *to* religious order and *to* sect *from* religious order, a firm grasp of developments *over time* is required for a legitimate classification of a particular group at a particular time. Where certainty about the chronological and historical

---

<sup>19</sup> H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948), pp. 287–288, cf. Michael Hill, *The Religious Order: A Study of the Religious Order and its Legitimation in Nineteenth Century England* (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931), vol. 1, p. 355, cf. vol. 2 p. 723.

relationships between diverse and partial sets of evidence is difficult to establish, classification may easily err. The possibly diverse, multiform or fragmented character of Essenism (emphasised in so much recent scholarship) gives cause for caution in pronouncing upon the true state of affairs in a particular era of Essene history, or in the case of a particular sector of Essenism. The historian, who is of course expected to be thorough and to synthesize all available evidence into an overall portrayal, must not be too ambitious, but have regard for the possible dangers of forcefully ‘homogenizing’ or ‘harmonising’ the available source materials. This note of caution is now often sounded in Dead Sea Scrolls studies, since the range of clearly interrelated evidence emerges in sources which are of different types and sometimes uncertain provenance, and which are the possibly chance remains of a complex social development which occurred over a long time period.

### **Transitions between ‘Sects’ and ‘Religious Orders’**

The studies of Ernst Troeltsch show the value of extending the range of heuristic sociological categories in the investigation of Essenism to include the ‘religious order’ as well as ‘movement’ and ‘sect’. Troeltsch’s work concluded that the sect may, through a process of ecclesiastical inspection, approval, and incorporation, become a religious order of the wider religious community. Conversely, the religious order may become intolerable within the host religious body.<sup>21</sup> As noted above, Troeltsch observed the former development in the case of the mendicants who gathered around St. Francis.

Troeltsch found that transitions between ‘movement’, ‘sect’ and ‘religious order’ proceeded in various directions in mediaeval Catholic religion in southern Europe from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. At times, the late mediaeval groups he surveyed achieved accommodations with the wider ecclesiastical establishment; at other times,

---

<sup>21</sup> Troeltsch, *Social Teaching*, vol. 1, pp. 349–369; vol. 2, p. 723.

they did not. Troeltsch pointed to transitions in the case of particular groups from movement to sect, from sect to religious order, and also to the emergence of sects *out of* dissatisfied sectors of religious orders. He observed that the Waldensians originated as what he termed a ‘home mission movement’; its popular preachers lived in poverty, in literal obedience to the Gospel mission charge (Matthew 10:1–16; Mark 6:7–13; Luke 9:1–6; 10:1–11). By this means, they identified with the poorest of the population, who were their principal audience. “When they were prohibited by the Church they became a sect,” characterized by an egalitarian ideal.<sup>22</sup> Troeltsch noted the connections between the Waldensian ‘Poor Men of Lombardy’ and ‘Poor Men of Lyons’ and the movement of St. Francis of Assisi. “Here, however, the Church understood the situation, incorporated the new movement into her system” as a religious order, “and made use of it precisely for winning back the endangered city elements of the population to the Church.”<sup>23</sup> Early on, the Franciscans encouraged an anti-ecclesiastical mysticism amongst the laity, especially through their associate members. Later, tensions arose between the Church hierarchy and the religious orders of ‘Spiritual’ Franciscans (*Fraticelli*), with their ideals of ‘the Primitive Church’, of ‘the poor church’, and of the apostolic life lived in service to the poor. The ‘Spiritual’ Franciscans finally splintered into a variety of ‘sects’ and ‘heresies’, enthusiastic for a re-kindling of the perceived fervor and poverty of primitive Christianity but condemned by the Church. Later came the Flagellants, the Soccati, the Apostolic Brethren, and other sects which expressed fervour similar to that of the Franciscan order but which could not be similarly accommodated within the ecclesiastical structure, and which drew converts from the pool of enthusiasts which also supplied recruits to the religious orders.<sup>24</sup>

Troeltsch’s survey and sociological analysis of the religious ferment of southern

---

<sup>22</sup> Troeltsch, *Social Teaching*, vol. 1, p. 354.

<sup>23</sup> Troeltsch, *Social Teaching*, vol. 1, p. 355.

<sup>24</sup> Troeltsch, *Social Teaching*, vol. 1, pp. 354–356.

Europe prior to the Reformation, i.e. before the emergence of Protestantism out of Catholicism, gives food for thought when considering the complex of Jewish groups and movements over the periods immediately prior to and during the emergence of Christianity as a religion distinct from Judaism. The late mediaeval groups considered by Troeltsch were characterized by a desire for a return to a pristine, supposedly original form or religion. They set forth their own, distinctive interpretations of writings accepted by the whole religious community as Scripture. They manifested mystical, enthusiastic, apocalyptic and egalitarian tendencies. They expressed their search for religious authenticity in new social forms, sometimes espousing the communalising of property. All of these features characterize the so-called 'sectarian' documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Essenes as portrayed in the classical sources; all of these features are also found in the New Testament evidence for early Christianity.

#### **Qumran in Relation to the Judaeen Essene Movement.**

Manifest similarities between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the classical writings on the Essenes allow most interpreters to designate the Qumran community as a form of Essenism. Analysis of the Dead Sea Scrolls corpus now commonly distinguishes 'pre-sectarian' from 'sectarian' documents. Current views on the relationship of the Qumran community to the broader Essene movement include two proposals that see the Qumran group as a sectarian breakaway from the wider Essene movement. The 'Groningen hypothesis' regards the Qumran community thus. Gabrielle Boccaccini, building upon this thesis, has termed the broader Essene movement 'Enochic' Judaism. This type of Judaism generated the pattern of thought found in the Enoch literature, from which the Qumran community diverged. According to Boccaccini, the movements led by John the

Baptist and Jesus grew out of later ‘Enochic Judaism,’ i.e. out of Essenism.<sup>25</sup> Such analyses suggest the possibility that the term ‘sect’ is only appropriate for the community at Qumran, but not for the whole Essene movement. I would argue that there are three strong indicators that, at least from a point in, and for some time after, the reign of Herod the Great, most celibate Essenes were not sectarians but *virtuosi* gathered in a religious order which maintained a connection with Judaism’s central Temple authority.

First, *the Essenes sent offerings to the Temple, and thus enjoyed a legitimating relationship with Jewish ‘ecclesiastical authority’*. Josephus wrote concerning the Essenes’ sacrificial practices:

They send offerings to the Temple, but perform their sacrifices using different customary purifications. For this reason, they are barred from entering the common enclosure, but offer sacrifice privately.<sup>26</sup>

Josephus gives no indication that Temple officials looked askance at Essene offerings, as if from a group known to be antipathetic to the *status quo* in Jerusalem. We must accept therefore that in the era to which his account refers their fellow Jews apparently saw all Essenes, or the vast majority, as part of the Temple-worshipping community, submitted to the High Priest. Differences of opinion concerning procedure and purity justified neither complete Essene separation from the Temple nor withholding of offerings. It is very unlikely indeed that Josephus would find cause to mention the surrender of Essene material wealth if most Essenes challenged Temple authority. The harsh attitude of sections of the *Rule of the Community*, with its explicit prohibitions of forming any fellowship of property with the ‘men of the pit’, the ‘men of injustice’

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Jonathan Campbell, *Deciphering the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp. 46–77; Gabrielle Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1998). Note especially Boccaccini’s chart on p. xxii.

<sup>26</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.1.5 §19.

under the dominion of Belial,<sup>27</sup> cannot, for the Essenes described by Josephus, have applied to the Temple hierarchy.

Second, *Herod the Great's friendliness towards the Essenes suggests that they played a role in his political establishment and Temple.* Herod the Great appears to have exploited inner-Jewish rivalries to assert himself against the Hasmonean dynasty, which he had deposed. It is frequently hypothesised that a key impulse towards the formation of Essenism was the Maccabean seizure of the high priesthood from the 'Teacher of Righteousness'. Herod appears to have turned to the prestigious Essenes, who early in their history had experienced tensions with the Hasmoneans, to bolster his establishment against popular support for the Hasmoneans.<sup>28</sup> According to Josephus, Herod 'held the Essenes in great honour, and thought more highly of them than their mortal nature required.'<sup>29</sup> Herod's reason was his supposed boyhood receipt, from the Essene Menahem, of a prophecy of his future rise. 'At the height of his power' Herod thanked Menahem,<sup>30</sup> an apparently political manoeuvre. Many Essenes may have found the possibility of gaining influence on Herod's reconstruction of the Temple very attractive. The Temple Scroll, discovered at Qumran, offers a plan for an ideal Temple and Holy City. M. Delcor has argued that this plan influenced the design of Herod's Temple.<sup>31</sup> Many Essenes may have considered Herod's Temple at least a step towards the realisation of the Essene plan for an ideal Temple in Jerusalem. Prior to the turn of the eras, Essenism appears to have gained a privileged position connecting it with supreme power in Jerusalem. In my view, Herod's patronage probably both increased the general popularity and attraction of the Essene way and led to substantial and

---

<sup>27</sup> 1QS II.4–9; III.20–24; IX.8–9, 21–23.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ernst Bammel, 'Sadduzäer und Sadokiden', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 55(1979), pp. 107–115; Brian J. Capper. "'With the Oldest Monks...'" Light from Essene History on the Career of the Beloved Disciple?', *JTS* 49 (1998), pp. 1–55, see pp. 26–36.

<sup>29</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.10.4 §372.

<sup>30</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.10.4–5 §§372–379.

<sup>31</sup> M. Delcor, 'Is the Temple Scroll Source of the Herodian Temple?', in G. J. Brooke, ed., *Temple Scroll Studies* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), pp. 67–90.

influential settlement of Essenes in and around Jerusalem. Many Essenes, enjoying a reputation for scrupulous Levitical purity, may have worked cutting stones for the Temple, which were finished off-site. Herod's accommodation of the Essenes may have led to their sending of offerings to his Temple.

Third, *celibate Essene males gave alms and assistance to the needy deemed worthy amongst the general Judaeen populace*. The consistently 'sectarian' interpretation of Essenism overlooks a further statement of Josephus, who, after explaining the apportionment of food by officers at Essene common meals, writes:

On the whole, therefore, they do nothing unless ordered by the superiors. Two things only are left to individual discretion, the rendering of assistance and compassion. Members may of their own accord help the deserving, when they ask for alms, and supply food to the needy, but they have no right to subsidize members of their own families without the authority of the officers.<sup>32</sup>

Essene celibate males supplied food to outsiders of their immediate community. Josephus has just emphasized that all within the community ate well, though not to excess, at common meals.<sup>33</sup> The 'needy' (*aporoumenoi*) to whom food was supplied at individual discretion cannot have been members of the community, who were allotted exact portions regarded as appropriate to their needs. The judicious regulation that donations to family members were prohibited indicates the same. Anyone received into the community, perhaps as an adoptee from a poor, needy local family unable to feed all its children (a common experience in agrarian society), might experience a clash of loyalties. Illegitimate and unregulated requests from kin external of the community might waste precious resources. Hence, while the Essenes thought it appropriate to feed deserving outsiders, they insisted that officials always be consulted in the case of

---

<sup>32</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.6 §§128–134.

<sup>33</sup> *Jewish War*, 2.8.6 §133.



members of the individual Essene's ('former') family, lest kinship ties siphon off resources.<sup>34</sup>

The social import of this text is clear. The Essenes described by Josephus did not regard all outside their communities as 'sons of darkness', to be 'hated' as 'men of injustice' whose needs were of no consequence.<sup>35</sup> Such an attitude towards all outsiders would be rightly found 'sectarian'. Josephus' male Essene celibates, who consumed communally and modestly, offering succour to deserving outsiders, were not sectarians but a religious order. They served the wider Temple-worshipping Judaeian community from a liminal social position. While the many communities of celibate Essenes across Judaea pursued a distinctively regulated social life, perhaps preserving secret teachings,<sup>36</sup> they nonetheless regarded the poor whom they assisted as legitimate co-members in the wider, Temple-loyal Jewish religious community. They understood both themselves and the beneficiaries of their charitable activities to belong to the same faith community, while seeing themselves as serving a special vocation, or specialised role, within that community.

From before the turn of the eras, then, while some Essene groupings may have functioned antagonistically towards Temple authority, at least the great majority of Essenes accepted the authority of the Temple and aided the deserving poor. By the time of Jesus' birth, most Essene male celibates belonged to a religious order of *virtuosi* legitimated by the authority of Temple, High Priest and ruler. It is therefore fair to speak of the majority of Essenes of the early first century as belonging to a 'movement' which included a celibate male 'religious order', alongside further orders for married members and perhaps for celibate females and widows too, but not to regard the broad sweep of

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Jesus' insistence that allegiance to his disciple group, as a new family, had priority over links to the disciple's blood family (Mk 3:31–35).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. e.g. 4Q496; 1 QM I.1, XIII.1–6, 9–12; 1QS I.9–11, III.13, VIII.12–15.

<sup>36</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.7 §§141–142.

Essenism as ‘sectarian.’<sup>37</sup> It is against this background of the Essenes as a widespread movement including ‘religious virtuosi’ that I now turn to discuss how this movement may inform our understanding of Jesus and his disciples.

### **Jesus’ Traveling Discipleship Group and Judaeen Virtuoso Religion.**

Jesus selected the Twelve from his larger circle of disciples to travel with him in a common life of meal fellowship, regular teaching and witness (Mark 3:13–19; cf. Luke 6:12–16 and perhaps John 7:2). The group’s property was held in a common purse (John 12:6; 13:29) into which were placed, we may rightly assume, the supporting contributions of its wealthy women patrons (Luke 8:1–3). While some meals of Jesus’ traveling party were for private instruction,<sup>38</sup> it appears that on other occasions needy hearers ate well as they listened to Jesus.<sup>39</sup> Since Jesus urged the rich to give generously to the poor,<sup>40</sup> it is likely that his party also offered assistance from their perhaps substantial pooled resources. Several texts suggest that alms were given from the common purse (John 12:4–6; Mark 14:4–5, cf. Matthew 26:8–9). When Jesus asked Philip where bread might be purchased to feed a vast crowd near Passover, Philip exclaimed that two hundred *denarii* would not suffice. Jesus’ question was intended to test Philip (John 6:5–7), presumably because the generous donations of Jesus’ elite patrons meant that it was not usually beyond his traveling party to aid the needy in

---

<sup>37</sup> Celibacy dominates the ancient reporting about the Essenes because it was newsworthy, something unusual dwelt upon to intrigue readers. However, historic analogies, for example from Christianity or Buddhism, show that celibacy is usually undertaken by only a small minority within a religious community. Celibate males may have formed only a minority within Essenism, perhaps indeed a small minority. Entirely disproportionate space may be taken up in the ancient reports of Essenism with attention to the distinctive lifestyle of the perhaps only slightly more than four thousand Essene male celibates (*Antiquities*, 18.1.5 §§20–21). Josephus gives only a passing reference to married Essenes who most likely outnumbered the celibate: “Moreover, there is another order of Essenes, who agree with the rest as to their way of living, and customs, and laws, but differ from them in the point of marriage, as thinking that by not marrying they cut off the principal part of the human life, which is the prospect of succession; nay rather, that if all men should be of the same opinion, the whole race of mankind would fail” (*Jewish War*, 2.8.13 §160).

<sup>38</sup> E.g. Mark 7:17, 24; 10:10, 30–31, 33.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. Mark 2:15; 3:20 (by implication); 6:10; 7:17, 24; 14:3.

<sup>40</sup> E.g. Matthew 6:24; Mark 10:17–27; Luke 12:16–21 (cf. Gospel of Thomas 63), 33; 14:7–33; 16:1–15, 19–21; 19:1–10.

Jesus' audience from the financial resources of the common purse. Jesus' form of educative, communal life and service in frequent, intimate contact with the poor was a form of 'religious virtuosity' or 'virtuoso religion'. Jesus called some who believed in him to this common life; he did not require it of all.

The common life of Jesus' traveling party, as described above, appears to have derived from *Judaea*, where virtuoso religious practice was prominent. Jesus was linked to the Judaeian group of John the Baptist immediately before entering upon a public ministry in Galilee (cf. Mark 1:1–20 and parallels; John 1:19–43). He appears to have 'taken north' the Judaeian concept of an intensely integrated, common religious life, perhaps developed by John the Baptist into a peripatetic, prophetic form in part imitation of the Elijah and Elisha narratives.<sup>41</sup> He gathered chosen disciples into a traveling party which daily shared meals and received special instruction. Such 'common life' appears not to have been a common Galilean practice. There are no other attested contemporary examples. By contrast, the practice of common life is very well attested amongst the Essenes in Judaea, the region to which Philo limited the Essene movement.<sup>42</sup> The community of property of the earliest Jerusalem church (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–5:11; 6:1–6) seems also to reflect specifically Judaeian social practice.<sup>43</sup> This practice of communal property seems to have developed in Judaea in response to the economic problems of the age.

Close communitarian forms of living had developed in Judaea because its social

---

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Brian J. Capper, 'Jesus, Virtuoso Religion and Community of Goods,' in Bruce Longenecker and Kelly Liebengood, eds., *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 60–80.

<sup>42</sup> *Apology for the Jews*, §1. On the essential limitation of Essenism to Judaea see Brian J. Capper, 'Essene Community Houses and Jesus' Early Community', in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus and Archaeology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 472–502, esp. 473–479.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Brian J. Capper, 'The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods', in R. J. Bauckham, ed., *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 323–356; 'Community of Goods in the Early Jerusalem Church', *ANRW*, series II, Vol. 26.2 (1995), pp. 1730–1774; 'Two Types of Discipleship in Early Christianity', *JTS* 52 (2001), pp. 105–123; 'Holy community of life and property and amongst the poor: A response to Steve Walton', *Evangelical Quarterly* 80, 2 (April 2008), pp. 113–27.

and religious world was somewhat different from the Galilean milieu. Galilee was more fertile than Judaea. It lay on major trade routes, and was well connected to the coast, making it more outward looking and affording different economic opportunities. By contrast, the Judaeian heartland was a land-locked, rugged, semi-arid inland region off the major trade routes. It had a long history as a Temple state, ruled by its clergy. Its religious, social and economic world was dominated by its massive Temple. I would deduce that ideals of holiness and consecration, conceived in imitation of the whole-of-life involvement of priests while on service in the Temple and separated from family connections, dominated the Judaeian religious and social world more comprehensively than they did the Galilean milieu. Judaea's lower rainfall and more rugged terrain posed the problems of survival in a subsistence economy somewhat more sharply than the more 'open' economy of Galilee, especially for Judaeans who sought to remain in their beloved ancestral land, close to their Temple and holy city. The relationship between this socio-geographic differentiation and Judaea's different social world has been worked out by my student, Timothy Ling.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Ling, *Judaeian Poor*, see esp. pp. 78–97. I first lectured on the possibly monastic character of the early Johannine tradition in 1989 (“‘With the Oldest Monks...’ Light from Essene History on the Career of the Beloved Disciple?”, *JTS* 49 (1998), pp. 1–55, the Tyndale Lecture for 1989). At that time I observed that Michael Hill characterised the religious order as a “sect within the church”. I am grateful to the Revd. Flora Winfield, then studying Anglican women’s religious orders in the nineteenth century, for her direction to Hill’s sociological study on *The Religious Order* and permanent loan in 1988 of her now much-used copy of his book. After publishing “‘With the Oldest Monks...’...” I suggested the potential of Hill’s social typology for Johannine interpretation to my research student Timothy Ling (see his *Judaeian Poor*, p. xiii). Ling first presented his findings at a research symposium at St. Andrews University, Scotland, in July 2003, introducing the terminology of ‘virtuoso religion’ to biblical studies: ‘Virtuoso Religion and the Judaeian Social World’, in Louise J. Lawrence and Mario I. Aguilar, *Anthropology and Biblical Studies: Avenues of Approach* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2004), pp. 227–258. Lawrence took up Ling’s application of the ‘virtuoso religion’ model for understanding Essenism in a paper presented at the Bristol Colloquium on the Dead Sea Scrolls in September 2003: “‘Men of Perfect Holiness’ (1QS 7.20): Social-Scientific Thoughts on Group Identity, Asceticism and Ethical Development in the *Rule of the Community*”, in Jonathan G. Campbell, William John Lyons and Lloyd K. Pietersen, *New Directions in Qumran Studies: Proceedings of the Bristol Colloquium on the Dead Sea Scrolls, 8–10 September 2003* (London/New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2005), pp. 83–100. She again drew on Ling’s work when relating the Acts account of earliest Christian community of goods in Jerusalem to the model of virtuoso religion, also utilising my own work on the community of goods of Acts 2–6, see ‘Exhibit 6. Reading with Communities of Goods’ in her *Reading with Anthropology. Exhibiting Aspects of New Testament Religion* (Milton Keynes, UK & Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 152–171.

In these unusual circumstances the particular Judaeian response to the problems of subsistence in the ancient agrarian economy took an unusual form. In Judaea, the Essene movement developed widespread, well understood and judiciously regulated forms of economic sharing. The Essene pattern of social organisation was long established in Judaea by the first century AD. Philo and Josephus describe a prestigious ‘upper echelon’ of more than four thousand celibate male Essenes, whose many communities fully shared property.

This is demonstrated by that institution of theirs which will not suffer anything to hinder them from having all things in common; so that a rich man enjoys no more of his own wealth than he who hath nothing at all. There are about four thousand men that live in this way, (21) and neither marry wives, nor are desirous to keep servants; as thinking the latter tempts men to be unjust, and the former gives the handle to domestic quarrels; but as they live by themselves, they minister one to another. (22) They also appoint certain stewards to receive the incomes of their revenues, and of the fruits of the ground; such as are good men and priests, who are to get their corn and their food ready for them. They none of them differ from others of the Essenes in their way of living, but do the most resemble those Dacae who are called Polistae [dwellers in cities.]<sup>45</sup>

Although their figure of over four thousand<sup>46</sup> clearly enumerates only *male celibate* Essenes, Philo and Josephus are often wrongly taken to number the *whole* Essene movement at ‘over four thousand’. This misreading diminishes appreciation of the scale and importance of Essenism in the Judaeian social and religious world, and contributes in a quite constitutive fashion to the misconception of the broad sweep of the Essene movement around the turn of the eras as ‘sectarian’. The early first century writer Philo explains that on most days Essene celibate males, who lived in the villages of Judaea, worked as artisans and laboured in the fields of local estate owners.<sup>47</sup> In the evenings

---

<sup>45</sup> *Antiquities*, 18.1.5 §§20–22.

<sup>46</sup> Philo, *That Every Good Man is Free*, §75; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.1.5 §§20–21.

<sup>47</sup> Philo, *Apology for the Jews*, §§4–9; cf. Brian J. Capper, ‘The New Covenant in Southern Palestine at the Arrest of Jesus’, in James R. Davila, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls as Background to Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), pp. 90–116, see pp. 95–98.

they shared common meals,<sup>48</sup> open-handedly entertaining members of the order from elsewhere, who probably travelled to find work, disseminate news and socialise.<sup>49</sup> This cadre of Essene male celibates was distributed through the perhaps two hundred villages and towns of the Judaeian landscape in small communities of ten or more,<sup>50</sup> and occupied an important centre on the southwest hill of Jerusalem, where Josephus locates the ‘Gate of the Essenes.’<sup>51</sup> The celibate male order was associated with a ‘second order’ of marrying Essenes, as noted above, which was probably much larger.<sup>52</sup> The ancient sources give us no figures for this group, but since celibacy is always a less popular option than marriage, I would suggest it probably numbered at least several tens of thousands.

Hartmut Stegemann, one of the principal early researchers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, came to conclude that the Essene movement was the ‘main Jewish union of the second Temple period’.<sup>53</sup> I have argued, by a statistical method, that Essenism was economically capable of relieving destitution amongst the lowest classes of Judaea, and may have been a powerful social and religious force amongst the labourers, artisans and needy of its villages and towns.<sup>54</sup> I would also suggest that the Essenes were well represented amongst the poor urban population of Jerusalem.

Overpopulation and scarcity of resources characterised the ancient agrarian

---

<sup>48</sup> Philo, *Apology for the Jews*, §§10–11.

<sup>49</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.4 §§124–125.

<sup>50</sup> 1QS VI.3–4; Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.9 §146 and *Antiquities*, 18.1.5 §§20–21; Philo, *That Every Good Man is Free*, §75.

<sup>51</sup> *Jewish War*, 5.4.2 §145; cf. Bargil Pixner, ‘Mount Zion, Jesus and Archaeology’, in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus and Archaeology*, pp. 309–322; Rainer Riesner, ‘Essener und Urkirche auf dem Südwesthügel Jerusalems (Zion III)’, in Nikodemus C. Schnabel, ed., *Laetere Jerusalem* (Münster: Aschendorf, 2006), pp. 200–234; Capper, ‘Palestinian Cultural Context’, pp. 341–350; Capper, ‘Monks’, pp. 19–36.

<sup>52</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.13 §§160–161. See note 37 above.

<sup>53</sup> H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 140–153; idem, ‘The Qumran Essenes – Local Members of the Main Jewish Union in Late Second Temple Times’, in J. Treballe Barrera and L. Vegas Montaner, eds., *The Madrid Qumran Congress* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 83–166.

<sup>54</sup> Capper, ‘Essene Community Houses’, ‘The New Covenant in Southern Palestine’, ‘The Church as the New Covenant’ and ‘Two Types.’

economy. The needy were frequently compelled to work on large estates as servants or slaves, or forced into soldiering, or compelled to migrate to the large coastal cities to find work as sailors or in trading. Women were frequently forced into prostitution. Essenism offered different options for the needy of Judaea. Children who could not be fed in poor local families could be adopted into Essene communities, where they received training in work, economic security, and education in holy tradition.<sup>55</sup> By this route many male children of the poor came as adults to renounce the pleasures and social standing of normal family life, enjoying instead highly honoured status as Essene celibates and a replacement form of fictive kinship in an extensive and loving religious order. There may also have been honoured Essene orders for widows or life-long celibate women.<sup>56</sup> The Essenes laboured amongst the mass of the Judaeen population who found it hard to garner sufficient to support themselves and their families, as Essene frugality, sharing of possessions, and adoption of the children of poor families all show.<sup>57</sup>

Josephus tells us that the Essenes were ‘lovers of each other’, *philalleloi*, more than other Jewish groups.<sup>58</sup> Philo emphasizes mutual service in menial tasks, care of the sick, and care of the old by the young.<sup>59</sup> Since numerous males did not father children, but cared for those of others, Essene celibacy came to function, in the Judaeen heartland, as an important rectifying mechanism against overpopulation and inadequate nourishment. This is an important socioeconomic observation and points to a very practical factor which may have contributed to the Essene view of the vicarious and atoning value of the voluntary suffering taken on by a few for the whole people of God

---

<sup>55</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.2 §120.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. the “mothers” of the community in 2Q270 7.i.13–14 and CD XIV.15–16.

<sup>57</sup> Full analysis of the social location of the Essenes as labourers and artisans and their work with the destitute is given in Capper, ‘Essene Community Houses’, pp. 480–498, and ‘The New Covenant in Southern Palestine’, pp. 95–113.

<sup>58</sup> *Jewish War*, 2.8.2 §119.

<sup>59</sup> *That Every Good Man is Free*, §§79, 87–88.

(cf. 1QS VIII.2). Josephus notes that Essenes studied the treatment of disease and medicinal roots. Both Essene houses and traveling Essene celibates probably offered care for the sick; Josephus' understanding may have included this when he wrote that male celibate Essenes offered assistance to outsiders.<sup>60</sup> Some scholars have explained the name 'Essene' from the Aramaic 'sy', 'healers'.<sup>61</sup>

The population of Jerusalem in the first century AD was c. 60,000–80,000.<sup>62</sup> The population of rural Judaea was of a similar size, the two hundred or so villages and towns averaging a few hundred souls each, including children.<sup>63</sup> The more than four thousand celibate male Essenes, I estimate about three per cent of the total Judaeen population, were sufficient in number to form core communities of from ten to twenty monks in most, if not all, of the towns and villages in the region. This powerful, firmly united 'core' of over four thousand skilled, educated and highly disciplined male celibates was supported by, I would suggest, at least several thousand families of the second Essene order. The Essene 'house of the community' in each village and town, staffed and funded by Essene celibate males, most of whom worked in the local economy, was also supported by regular contributions from local families of the second order. This collective support meant that children unsupported by local kinship structures could be adopted into the Essene community houses.<sup>64</sup> Such adoptions probably led, over time, to the loyalty of a large proportion of the smallholders, small tenant farmers, labourers and artisans of the Judaeen population to the extensive network of Essene poorhouses. Indeed, for every child adopted by the Essenes, a reciprocally grateful family of limited means may have joined the married Essene order.

---

<sup>60</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.6 §§134, 136.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. G. Vermes, 'The Etymology of Essenes', in his *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1975) pp. 8–29.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Reinhardt, 'The Population Size of Jerusalem and the Numerical Growth of the Jerusalem Church', in R. Bauckham, ed., *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, pp. 237–265.

<sup>63</sup> Capper, 'Essene Community Houses', pp. 473–476 and 492–493; 'The New Covenant in Southern Palestine', pp. 91–95 and 104–108.

<sup>64</sup> CD XIV.12–17, cf. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.2 §120.



It would not be surprising if over time most rural clans and families had expressed gratitude to the Essene movement by such secondary association. Many wealthy of Judaea, seeing such good works, may have become patrons of the Essene community-houses. The two Essene orders, acting in concert, probably exercised great influence upon the social, political and religious world of Judaea's rural villages. The longstanding, honoured presence of the celibate male Essene order throughout Judaea, its intimate connections through adoption with the local population, and its willingness to assist rural families facing economic crisis when there were too many mouths to feed,<sup>65</sup> may indeed mean that virtually all the families of Judaea's villages, and many labourers and artisans in Jerusalem, had been absorbed into the second Essene order by the time of Jesus.

### **John and the Essene locations near Jerusalem**

Now that I have located the ancient Essenes as a form of virtuoso religion on both the schema of modern sociological analysis and the ancient Judaeian cultural and socio-economic landscape, I turn to more specific points where the Essenes and their outlook intersected more particularly with the ministry of Jesus and the roots of the Johannine tradition.

#### **i. Hospitality at Bethany**

There is some evidence of Essene settlement in the two locations where Jesus had, especially according to John's Gospel, personal connections in the Jerusalem area. All the Gospels show that Jesus made his place of lodging Bethany, where his commands concerning the collection of the colt for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem show he had long-standing personal acquaintances.<sup>66</sup> Since Jerusalem raised special issues of ritual purity, it is likely that the Essenes would care for the sick outside the holy city. A

---

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.2 §120 (adoption) and 2.8.6 §134 (almsgiving and assistance outside the individual Essene's group).

<sup>66</sup> Matthew 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-38; cf. John 12:1-19.

passage of the *Temple Scroll* prescribed the establishment of three places to the east of Jerusalem, one of which was to be for the care of lepers. The passage also defines a radius of three thousand cubits around the city within which nothing unclean should be visible (11Q19 XLVI.13–18). The three villages east of Jerusalem, Bethany, Bethphage, and En-shemesh, correspond well with the prescription of the *Temple Scroll*. It is striking that Jesus is found, at Mark 14:3–10, dining in the house of Simon the leper at Bethany. The correspondence suggests that the story of an Essene care-centre at Bethany is continued in the Christian Gospels, and that the healer Jesus was welcomed there. Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus, also received care at Bethany when ill (John 11:1–12:11).

The name Bethany (Greek *Bethania*) suggests a word-play on the village's function as a centre for care of the poor and sick. Jerome's *Onomasticon* defines its meaning as *domus afflictionis*, 'house of affliction'. Jerome derived the name from the Hebrew *beth 'anî* or Aramaic, *beth 'anyâ*, 'house of the poor (man)'. The Christian Palestinian and Syriac versions of the New Testament both give the Aramaic version of this name and confirm Jerome's understanding.<sup>67</sup> It is sometimes suggested that the form Bethany represents a contraction from Beth Ananiah; Ananiah appears as a place name at Nehemiah 11:32. This contraction is unattested, but is fairly close to a known pattern (cf. the common shortening of *Chananiah* to *Choni* in Hebrew). Both of these connections may be valid. *Beth Ananiah* may have been shortened in common parlance to *Beth-'anyâ*, the abbreviation becoming universal since it conveniently alluded, by a typical Semitic word-play, to Bethany as the 'house of affliction' or 'house of the poor', alluding to the situation and work of a major Essene centre for care of the poor and sick.

---

<sup>67</sup> A later resident of Bethlehem, about six miles to the south, Jerome knew Hebrew and local tradition. His explanation trumps the modern derivation of 'Bethany' from *Beth hini*, 'house of figs'. Although nearby *Bethphage* was the 'house of unripe figs' (*phagîm*), the a-vowel of Bethany's second syllable cannot be accounted for from *hini*.

John appears interested to note that Bethany was fifteen stadia (about two miles) from the holy city (11:18), a distance which placed Bethany comfortably beyond the purity perimeter defined in the *Temple Scroll*. The village was invisible from the city and Temple since it lay on the further slope of the Mount of Olives, fulfilling Essene purity requirements. The last station on the pilgrim route up from the Jordan valley to Jerusalem, the Essene hospice of Bethany was apparently where pilgrims who arrived by this route could receive assistance near the end of their journey, find lodging, bathe and set their dress in order before entering the holy city. Hence Jesus billets in Bethany his Passover pilgrim party from Galilee in the Gospels.<sup>68</sup> When Jesus washes his disciples' feet in John's Gospel, he speaks of Peter's recent bath; only Peter's feet needed to be washed, since after preparation at Bethany he had walked the dusty path to the room of the last meal in Jerusalem (13:10). Amongst the evangelists, John appears to be uniquely acquainted with Jesus' associates in the Essene environment of Bethany and other activities there.

## **ii. Hospitality in Jerusalem**

It is striking that John offers a much longer account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples (John 13–17) than do the Synoptic Gospels. This major structural distinctive of his Gospel may suggest an interest in the meal's location and its function as a place of private instruction. Yet he omits to describe the peculiar story of how Jesus directed his disciples to seek out this room (Mark 14:12–16). Perhaps he preferred not to explain its location, keeping it secret; or he may simply give the perspective of an insider who was the host who welcomed Jesus and his disciples into this place. Certainly the 'Beloved Disciple' was present at the meal, for it is here that his intimate connection with Jesus is emphasised. Guests at a formal meal reclined on their left elbow and ate

---

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Capper, 'The New Covenant in Southern Palestine', esp. pp. 109–116.

with their right hand. The Beloved Disciple ‘lay in the breast of Jesus’ at the meal (13:21–28). This expression explains that the Beloved Disciple reclined on Jesus’ right. Jesus, as the guest of honour, took the place to the left of the Beloved Disciple, the host. Peter, the principal disciple, seems to have been seated in the second place of honour, to his host’s right. Hence when Peter did not understand Jesus’ words, he could lean discretely back towards his host, asking him quietly to enquire of Jesus. The Beloved Disciple was able to do this discretely because he reclined at Jesus’ chest. Jesus obliged, whispering his explanation about the sop he then distributed.<sup>69</sup>

As Jesus’ host, the Beloved Disciple seems to have had charge of the premises in Jerusalem where Jesus ate with his disciples, and was thus either the *oikodespotes* mentioned in the ‘external’ perspective of the Synoptics or a close associate of this figure (Mark 14:14–15, cf. Matthew 26:18). Only John may know that on account of his local premises, Jesus was able from the cross to entrust his mother into the Beloved Disciple’s care (19:25–27). The event suggests that a form of ‘fictive kinship’ involving mutual support existed between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, and perhaps also that the Beloved Disciple’s premises may have accommodated a community of co-religionists with whom a member’s elderly dependants might by arrangement find lodging, food and care. The Beloved Disciple’s premises appear to have been substantial, and oriented towards hospitality: he was able to accommodate Jesus’ large traveling party at Passover; he could instantly accommodate Jesus’ mother; his ‘upper room’ became the regular meeting place of the earliest post-Easter community of Jesus’ followers, who numbered one hundred and twenty (Acts 1:13, 15; 2:1). Members of this community soon engaged in major events of property-surrender and common meals, suggestive of a common life akin to Essene community living (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–

---

<sup>69</sup> D. E. H. Whiteley, ‘Was John Written by a Sadducee?’ *ANRW*, series II, Vol. 25.3 (1985), pp. 2481–2505, see 2494.

5:11; 6:1–6). Their communal way of life appears to have followed the pattern of a local Essene group, for while Josephus locates the ‘Gate of the Essenes’ on the south-west hill of Jerusalem,<sup>70</sup> later church tradition<sup>71</sup> locates the ‘upper room’ also on the southwest hill, some one hundred and fifty yards to the north of the remains of this gate.<sup>72</sup> On this part of the southwest hill an Essene ‘holy congregation’ probably pursued the highest Essene ideals of property-sharing and mutual service in a community respected by all Jerusalem. The social form of this community necessarily involved a degree of segregation from the outside world, as it pursued its mysticism and high standards of purity. However, it entertained good relations with the high priesthood and the Temple.<sup>73</sup>

Thus both of the places of Jesus’ intimate personal connections in John’s Gospel in the Jerusalem area, Bethany and this part of Jerusalem’s southwest hill, are linked by tantalising strands of evidence to Essenism. The Essene almshouse of Bethany and the Essene congregation on Jerusalem’s prestigious, highest hill were probably the most important Essene centres in the Jerusalem area. It appears that, since John’s Gospel knows most about Jesus’ activities in these places, the origins of this Gospel’s tradition bears a unique relationship with Jerusalem Essenism and these two important Essene communities.

### **iii. The Common Purse at Bethany and in Jerusalem**

The sharing of Jesus’ post-Easter disciples described early in Acts appears to have been a natural continuation of the practice of common life amongst Jesus’ party of traveling disciples. However, the very rapid expansion, to which Acts bears witness, of this

---

<sup>70</sup> *Jewish War*, 5.4.2 §145.

<sup>71</sup> Beginning with Epiphanius, *On Weights and Measures*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Capper, ‘Monks’, pp. 26–29 and 36–47; ‘Two Types’, pp. 117–118; ‘Community of Goods in the Early Jerusalem Church’, pp. 1752–1760; ‘Palestinian Cultural Context’, pp. 341–50; Rainer Riesner, *Essener und Urgemeinde in Jerusalem* (Giessen: Brunnen Verlag, 1998), pp. 2–55.

<sup>73</sup> Capper, ‘Monks’, pp. 13–15 and 29–36.

economic form suggests that it was a pattern of economic and social life well understood by many early Judaeen adherents of Jesus' movement, and indeed that many of these adherents may have derived from Essene or Essene-like groups in Jerusalem and Judaea. Jesus had formed his largely Galilean traveling group after the model of the *Judaeen* practice of communal sharing. It is probable that Jesus' understanding of the virtuoso religious life of service owed much to his reading of a model from early Israelite life, the devotion of the 'son of the prophet' to his master and guide, such as we see in Elisha's service to Elijah, while the Judaeen version of religious virtuosity may have focused more on imitation of the devoted lives of priests while on service in the Temple.<sup>74</sup> However, both roots of the virtuoso life (which we might term 'ideal prophet' and 'ideal priest') could be worked out in the south as in the north from a determined reading of the Jewish scriptures, and should not be contrasted. In Judaea the virtuoso Essene life, in view of its orientation towards new revelation through intense study and interpretation of the prophets and the Law of Moses, would quite naturally claim to be heir to both the priestly and prophetic traditions. Jesus returned to Judaea<sup>75</sup> with the group he had assembled and trained largely in the north, and may have incorporated it into an already-existing Essene congregation in Jerusalem, which similarly shared all its property in a common life of intense religious devotion and discipleship, a group with which he had long-standing associations, perhaps often conducted in secrecy (cf. John 7:1–11).

We have no reason to doubt the existence of the common purse of Jesus' traveling

---

<sup>74</sup> I have detailed the evidence for the importance of the Elijah/Elisha narratives and the 'sons of the prophets' model of prophetic discipleship to the presentation of discipleship to Jesus, and common life with him, in my 'Jesus, Virtuoso Religion and Community of Goods,' in Longenecker and Liebengood, *Engaging Economics*, pp. 67–71. Otto Betz argued for the importance of the common life of priests on service in the Temple for understanding the roots of the common life evidenced in 1QS in 'Le Ministère cultuel dans la secte de Qumrân et dans la Christianisme primitif' in Jan P. M. Van der Ploeg (ed.), *La secte de Qumrân* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959), pp. 163–102. Cf. also his 'Jesus Heiliger Krieg', *Novum Testamentum* 2 (1957–1958), pp. 116–137.

<sup>75</sup> The Jews of the south, Judaea, may be seen as 'his own' in John 1:11, making Judaea, the place of Jesus' rejection and death, his true home, cf. 7:1–11.

party. However, it is striking that only John's Gospel makes explicit reference to this common purse, and that John's Gospel only mentions the common purse at the locations of Bethany (12:6) and the room of the last supper (13:29). I therefore argue that we see in these two incidents and locations an insider perspective on Judaeen virtuoso religious practice. Many Judaeen communities of co-religionists collected their wealth into a common purse and lived frugally together from this fund, also making disbursements to relieve the poor and support other charitable works. Aid for the destitute and close identification with them through frugality and voluntary renunciation of personal property was intrinsic to the life of these Judaeen *religious virtuosi*. Jesus' anointing at Bethany is the only account in the Gospels where we find mention of care for the poor on the lips of Jesus' disciples. Their embarrassment may suggest that Bethany had an unusual function as a place of care for the poor, a function which Jesus appeared to threaten by allowing his expensive anointing. Hence Jesus justified his anointing in terms I would argue were typical of the service rendered to the poor of Judaea by Judaeen religious virtuosi, facilitated by their occasional wealthy patrons — the pious service of burial of the those who died in destitution (Mark 14:4–8). In view of the strands of evidence noted above which suggest that both Bethany and the southwest hill of Jerusalem were the location of Essene communities, it may be correct to deduce that John understood that the practice of Jesus' disciple-group mirrored the Essene property-sharing practices in these locations. The generous, self-denying economic practice of Jesus and his disciple-group was closely similar to the economic practice of their hosts, who included Essene *virtuosi*, and did not fall behind it in virtue.

Ling has observed that while the poor feature rarely in John's Gospel compared with Jesus' frequent references to poverty and wealth in the Synoptic Gospels, it is precisely in Bethany and in the room of the last supper on Jerusalem's southwest hill

that we find John's only two references to the poor. John only mentions the poor at the dispute over the apparent waste of expensive perfumed oil at Jesus' anointing at Bethany (12:5–8), and when the disciples conjecture that Judas departed from Jesus' last supper to give alms to the poor from the common purse (13:29). Ling quite correctly suggests that this reflects John's 'social witness' to local, indigenously Judaeans virtuoso religion.<sup>76</sup>

### **The Virtuoso Religious Group's Influence upon the Wider Spiritual Community**

Michael Hill emphasizes a basic distinction between the 'charismatic' and the 'virtuoso'. The virtuoso aims, through rigorous reenactment of religious tradition, at 'revolution by tradition', while the charismatic opposes tradition. The charismatic devises a new basis for normative obligation, but the virtuoso forcefully restates tradition and emphasizes *practice*. Virtuosity is disciplined and sustained in character, while charisma is intrinsically volatile. "Charismatics proclaim a message; virtuosi proclaim a method."<sup>77</sup> The virtuoso group, because of its emphasis on discipline, method and practice, is able to maintain a distinctive social form and identity while remaining connected with its wider social world. The virtuoso religious group thus forms "an alternative structure within society at large," rather than *apart from* wider society.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, although liminal to society, religious virtuosi have a disproportionately large influence upon their surrounding social world because their practice commands wide respect. The high *honour* in which the practice of religious virtuosi is held affords their exhortation of the outside world considerable leverage. The emphasis of religious virtuosi on practice and their marked wider social effect may be compared with the love commandment of Jesus, which is unique to John's Gospel and understood to be the principal mode of witness. It is by the visible love of Jesus'

---

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Ling, *Judaeans Poor*, pp. 170–181.

<sup>77</sup> Hill, *Religious Order*, p. 2

<sup>78</sup> Silber, *Virtuosity*, 40.



disciples for one another that all will know they are his (13:34–35). Similarly, the only macarism (beatitude) of John’s Gospel is upon mutual service, also a part of Jesus’ instruction following his washing of his disciples’ feet (13:17).<sup>79</sup>

A few years ago,<sup>80</sup> an example of the high social impact and worldly involvement of religious virtuosi was played out on news-screens across the world. In Myanmar, thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns were leading demonstrations against the military government, supporting the Burmese people in their protests against sharply rising food prices and demands for democracy. The monks’ distinctive maroon robes and saffron sashes made them easy targets, the nuns’ saffron sashes and white or pink over-garments over red tunics equally so. Yet government troops were initially cautious in their response to the ‘Saffron Revolution’,<sup>81</sup> since all shared a common cultural respect for the learning, religious devotion and self-deprecation of the nuns and monks. Respected religious virtuosi are not lightly attacked. Soon after, Buddhist monks in Tibet were involved in protests against China; an early incident is a non-violent sit-down protest by monks. For Peter Firstbrook, producer of the BBC series *A Year in Tibet*, “China’s crackdown on monk-led rallies in Lhasa is part of a long history of state control of monasteries... Buddhist monasteries are among the few institutions in China which have the potential to organize resistance and opposition to the government — so the Chinese Communist Party constantly worries about them.”<sup>82</sup>

The four thousand white-robed<sup>83</sup> Essene celibate males of the small Temple state of ancient Judaea probably exercised similarly disproportionate influence, which the Herodian establishment successfully harnessed. Religious virtuosi can, paradoxically,

---

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Ling, *Judaean Poor*, pp. 114–144 and 207–209.

<sup>80</sup> From September 2007.

<sup>81</sup> See ‘100,000 Protestors Flood Streets of Rangoon in “Saffron Revolution”’, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2007, at [http://www.novinite.com/view\\_news.php?id=85644](http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=85644), and ‘Nuns Join Monks in Burma’s Saffron Revolution’, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2007, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article2516773.ece>

<sup>82</sup> See ‘Tibetan monks: A controlled life’ at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7307495.stm>

<sup>83</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.3 §123.

speak loudly to their surrounding world from their liminal social position. It would be equally erroneous to caricature the present-day Buddhist monks of Myanmar, the male celibate Essenes of Judaea in the Herodian period, or the Gospel of John, as commending disinterest in the wider world and complete withdrawal from it.

### **Concluding observations**

In 2005, a front-page article of the *Wall Street Journal* pointed to the ‘leverage’ exercised by religious virtuosi. The article explained how two white-robed Catholic Sisters of the Poor in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania regularly and successfully cajoled generous donations of food from market traders and warehouse-owners. They were compelled to do this because the elderly for whom they care in nursing homes could not fund their own meals, and because no sufficient funding was forthcoming from any other sources, state or private. These nuns did not even own the clothes they themselves wore. Their energetic and all-embracing work of service to the poor was well understood and respected by the local populace. Hence, when they begged alms for the elderly in their care, they could not be accused of seeking material resources for themselves, and gifts were generously given because the deserving need of their charges was fully understood. Formal, voluntary personal poverty and enlistment for service to the poor *enabled* these nuns to be a trustworthy channel of material resources from the well off to those who did not have enough.<sup>84</sup> I would argue that Jesus’ disciple-group functioned in a similar fashion, effectively stimulating care of the wealthy for the poor, as it traveled with only a common purse, renounced personal wealth, and exhorted those with more than enough to generosity. The celibate Essenes of Judaea also functioned as conduits of economic redistribution, perhaps even of supplies cajoled from local wealthy patrons or received by royal patronage from Herodian granaries (at least until

---

<sup>84</sup> Clare Ansberry, ‘Sister Rosemarie Wants You’, *The Wall Street Journal* CCXLVI.132 (December 17–18, 2005), A1 and A6.

the time of Archelaus' demise). What later (perhaps after a year or two of the community's life) probably became an inner core within the Jerusalem congregation of believers in Jesus acted similarly, renouncing personal property (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–5:11) but administering meals at which many were fed (cf. 2:46; 6:1–6), perhaps supported by wealthy patrons. Such was the highly effective practice of Judaeen *religious virtuosi*; in such service of the poor we see a confluence of the Judaeen, Essene tradition of religious virtuosity and early discipleship to Jesus.

The preceding discussion has shown that from a point in Herod the Great's reign most celibate male Essenes were not 'sectarian' but belonged to a Judaeen *religious order*, part of a broader non-sectarian 'movement' which also contained an order for married members and perhaps also an order for celibate females and widows. Moreover, there is evidence of Essene settlement in the two locations of Jesus' most intimate connections in the Jerusalem area according to John's Gospel, Bethany and some premises on the southwest hill of Jerusalem. Since the Johannine tradition bears particular witness to Jesus' connections in these locations, we may discern in these connections, especially through the Beloved Disciple, the historical and geographical conduit through which Essene concepts attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls first exerted influence on the Johannine presentation of the story of Jesus. The examples given immediately above show the exegetical usefulness of a model of 'virtuoso religion' for approaching John.

I raise in closing two further possibilities. The first concerns the appearance in John of a disciple uniquely loved by Jesus. As noted above, Josephus characterises the Essenes as 'lovers of each other', *phillaleloi*, more than other Jewish groups.<sup>85</sup> In this expression he encapsulates, particularly, the familial character of the Essene celibate

---

<sup>85</sup> *Jewish War*, 2.8.2 §119.

male communities, their mutual service, and their sharing of all possessions. Does this use of ‘love’ explain why a particular Jerusalem disciple of Jesus, of whom Jesus can demand accommodation when he requires it (Mark 14:12–16), could be designated ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’? Might the claim of the unique witness behind John’s Gospel be that of one with whom Jesus shared an especially committed relationship as a fellow member of a Jerusalem *religious order*, a relationship which pre-dated Jesus’ formation of his group of twelve traveling disciples? Were Jesus and the Beloved Disciple ‘brothers’ within a Jerusalem religious order? Did this mutually committed relationship provide a fictive kinship basis for Jesus’ transferal of his filial relationship with Mary to the Beloved Disciple (John 19:26–27)? Were Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Jesus’ acquaintances in Bethany, whom he also ‘loved’ (John 11:3, 5, 36), also his companions in this religious order? At Bethany Jesus could take property for his own use if needed. Jesus’ assumption that he may take the colt when he needed it for his triumphal entry and return it later<sup>86</sup> bears comparison with Josephus’ description of the common use of possessions amongst the Essenes: “There is no buying or selling amongst themselves, but each gives what he has and receives in exchange something useful to himself; they are, moreover, freely permitted to take anything from their brothers without making any return.”<sup>87</sup> In Jerusalem soon ‘need,’ the only justification for use of resources within a communal economy, would become the criterion of consumption within the community of Jesus’ post-Easter followers (Acts 2:45; 4:35).

The second possibility concerns Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet, also uniquely recorded in John’s Gospel. Jesus’ action shocked his disciples; he had clearly not done this before. Jesus had apparently traveled with the Twelve for more than two years by this time, as we know from the three Passovers chronology of John’s Gospel.

---

<sup>86</sup> Matthew 21:1–9; Mark 11:1–6; Matthew 21:1–3; Luke 19:28–31.

<sup>87</sup> *Jewish War*, 2.8.4 §127.

Does John, therefore, depict Jesus training these special disciples over a period of two to three years, a training of similar duration to that of the Essene novice,<sup>88</sup> after which Jesus initiated them into a permanent life of complete mutual service and community of property?

Jesus washed his disciples' feet in the Upper Room of the Beloved Disciple, soon after the locus of the first post-Easter fellowship of Jesus' disciples (Acts 1:12–14), within which property was notably shared (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–5:11; 6:1–6). This property-sharing seems to bear some relationship with the sharing of Essenes already resident on the southwest hill of Jerusalem.<sup>89</sup> Was Jesus, in washing the disciples' feet, initiating them into the life of complete mutual service in the community of which the Beloved Disciple, his host, was already a part? At the last supper, Jesus promotes his disciples to the status of 'friends', with profound emphasis on the total commitment demanded by the New Covenant of mutual love (John 13:33–34; 15:12–15). Jesus becomes what they are no longer to him: their servant. Yet he exhorts them to profound mutual service (13:14) symbolised by washing each other's feet.

We may in this event be witnessing the disciples' incorporation into an established *virtuoso* social form which included mutual service and the full sharing of property. Philo reports that there were no slaves amongst the Essenes, "but all being free perform menial services for each other."<sup>90</sup> Philo's report of Essene mutual service is directly comparable with Jesus' action and instruction. Jesus would apparently have his disciples form a society of friends in which there are no slaves, yet one in which all are to act as slaves of each other. Moreover, the establishment of a mutual slave relationship implies the complete sharing of property, since a slave cannot own property

---

<sup>88</sup> 1QS VI.13–23; Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.7 §§137–142.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Capper, 'Community of Goods in the Early Jerusalem Church', 'Palestinian Cultural Context' and 'Two Types'.

<sup>90</sup> *That every Good Man is Free*, §79.

independently of his master.<sup>91</sup> As Jesus commanded his disciples to serve each other as slaves after the model of the Essene fully property-sharing communities, he may have been constituting them as a new, local, abiding property-sharing community of religious *virtuosi*, who were to share life and property completely. Or, he may have incorporated them into an existing community, which fully shared all life and property on the southwest hill of Jerusalem. Their obviously symbolic number, twelve, both parallels the number of the phylarchs and bears comparison with the early Essene founding group of twelve plus three.<sup>92</sup> Jesus may have been installing his ‘freshly graduated’ group of twelve traveling disciples as the leadership of an already established virtuoso community in Jerusalem no longer allegiant to such a council. Or, he may have been establishing them in Jerusalem as a group around which he hoped local communitarians would coalesce. In this we may have grounds for finding traces of an actual social programme within Jesus’ intentions for his expanding movement. The Essenes of Jerusalem may have long rescinded allegiance to a council of fifteen (twelve lay and three priests) at Qumran (cf. 1QS VIII.1–10a), perhaps during the reign of Herod the Great. Jesus’ intense interest in matters of wealth and poverty is clearly discernible from the Gospels and suggests that he and his disciples must have discussed and evaluated the organised Essene method of caring for the poorest stratum of Jewish society in Judaea. Were many Essenes of the Jerusalem area now drawn into allegiance to Jesus’ group of Twelve, also, and necessarily, integrating sectors of their own structure of social support for the Judaeian poor into Jesus’ movement, under the authority of Peter, leader of the Twelve?

As the community of Jesus’ disciples expanded after Pentecost, they were at the heart of a property-sharing community (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–5:11). Their early converts

---

<sup>91</sup> Cf. the discussion in *b. Kiddushin* 23a concerning how a slave, who has no independent power to acquire property, can legally acquire a document from his master giving him his freedom.

<sup>92</sup> 1QS VIII.1–19.

seem to have joined them in a life of intense social and religious fellowship and mutual service, a *virtuoso* religious life. In the perspective of Christian history this group stands as the first church of Jerusalem, and the perspective and intellectual framework of ‘church history’ may tend to separate it from its local precursors and connections in Jerusalem, interestedly regarding it as a *novum*. However, this first Jerusalem congregation may initially have functioned as a *religious order within Judaism* rather than as a distinct group substantially separated from its surrounding, Jewish spiritual community. The Johannine tradition may bear witness to its originally *virtuoso* social form and its liminal relationship with its wider Jewish social world, which combined a distinctive inner religious life (and perhaps developing high Christology) with social care for the poor of the wider Jewish community of the Jerusalem area, amongst whom it advocated belief in and obedience to Jesus as Messiah. We may fairly assume that the highly integrated common life of the first Jerusalem congregation of believers in Jesus became the social pattern of an inner group of the Jerusalem church, as clear boundaries between the wider group of believers in Jesus and the surrounding Judaeans Temple-worshipping populace started to form, perhaps by the end of the first or second year of the Twelve’s preaching about Jesus in Jerusalem and beyond. The distinctive character of the later Johannine tradition, however, may suggest that at least this strand of early Christianity preserved aspects of the high social integration and distinctive common life of the first Jerusalem congregation of believers in Jesus, perhaps along with a well informed tradition about Jesus’ activities in Jerusalem and his relations with his closest early disciples there.