

## Mysteries of the Essenes and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Report of a talk by Gloria Moss

Visiting Qumran on the Dead Sea today, you may be surprised to hear that this secluded site with its barren landscape and neatly labelled 'Refectory', 'Scriptorium', cemeteries and baths has been the subject of so much controversy. There is general agreement among scholars that Qumran was home to a group of Essenes in biblical times, and most scholars would have us believe that these individuals were a very pious and impoverished group spending their days isolated from the world, praying and purifying themselves in the many baths the area provided. One person who has seriously challenged this view is Gloria Moss, who recently talked to TEMS members at a meeting in Wimbledon.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, she told members, are highly likely to have been written by the Essenes for two main reasons. Firstly, they were found in caves near the site of Qumran (considered to be intimately connected with them) and secondly, statements made in the scrolls correspond very closely with what Josephus - a "reliable" historian and chronicler of the Essenes' way of life - has to say about the Essenes.

The Dead Sea Scrolls refer repeatedly to the "Secrets of the Sect" which were considered so important that anyone revealing them would be exiled to the desert and left to face certain death. Josephus tells us that the Essenes swore awesome oaths to maintain the secrets of the sect, and showed extraordinary zeal in studying the works of the ancients (especially those relating to healing of the body and soul). What were these secrets, and can a study of the Qumran site help us to understand anything about them? Gloria believes it can, and led us on a fascinating slide-illustrated trail, the evidence from which suggested that the Essenes at Qumran may not have been the isolated, pious group historians would have us believe.

### Good connections

To begin with, there is evidence that, in biblical times, Qumran was far from isolated and was in fact very well-connected to other areas by road and sea. Three roads ran to the site - two from Jerusalem and one from Jericho - and archaeological evidence also reveals that there were four ports within easy travelling distance. A steady stream of visitors is known to have come to the site and Pliny has described these as *vita fessos*. Rackham translates this phrase as meaning "tired of life" but Gloria prefers Dupont-Summers' "wearied by the fluctuations of fortune" or better still "debilitated by wounds received in the course of life".

### Too many bodies

Qumran is reckoned to have housed at the most 200 souls, yet the area contains four separate cemeteries and far more people are buried there than can be simply accounted for by their likely lifespan and the length of time the community spent there. Not only have the bodies of women been found, but those buried here were of diverse ethnic and occupational origins (including labourers, horsemen and scribes). These bodies were all buried, rather than entombed in sarcophagi above the ground, and all those that have been exhumed have been found to contain madder (*rubia tinctorum*) in their bones. The only use for madder at this time was as a medicine (which could be used as a diuretic, to cure jaundice, sciatica and paralysis among other things) so it would appear likely that the substance had been ingested for medicinal purposes.

### The tower

The first building you see when you arrive at Qumran is a tower whose walls are between four and five feet thick and whose rooms interconnect but do not open to the outside. The appearance of this tower, at the entrance to the site, is of a closely-guarded storehouse, suggesting that one of its functions was to protect precious commodities. But what could these have been if the Essenes were as poverty-stricken as historians would have us believe? At En Gedi (another Essene site on the Dead Sea) says Gloria, there is a similar tower which was used to store precious aromatics such as balsam, and since balsam may well have been grown at Qumran (the Essenes being experts in the cultivation of plants) it is surely not inconceivable that the Qumran tower was used for a similar purpose.

### The profusion of baths

Even if the Essenes *did* spend a fair amount of their time purifying themselves, the number of baths and cisterns at Qumran would have been far greater than they would have needed. The design of the baths - with wide steps - made it easy for a large number of people to bathe at once and the immense size of some of them suggest that the local people were not the only ones to use them. Similar baths in other areas have been clearly associated with healing purposes. The waters flowing through Qumran had powerful anti-carcinogenic and other healing properties, so did people come from far and wide to 'take the waters' here?

### **Refectory or...?**

Of the areas you see if you visit Qumran, one is labelled 'Refectory'. However, Gloria's research has cast serious doubt on the accuracy of this label. Finds from this area include 709 bowls, 210 very small plates and 100 goblets - not exactly what one would expect if the area had been used purely as an eating area. The floor of the 'refectory' was sloping - was this to allow water to enter at one end and run out at the other? At another site on the Dead Sea, a similar area is known to have been used for the preparation of medicinal herbs.

### **Scriptorium?**

Another area labelled 'Scriptorium' is supposedly where the monks wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls but was that its actual use? Historical sources suggest that monks did not use desks to write, but sat with scrolls on their knees, and benches found at Qumran are not large enough to have taken a lot of seated individuals, but *are* exactly the same width and height as benches found at Asclepian medical centres all over Greece, where they are thought to have been used for patients to lie on.

### **The juglet**

A juglet found in the caves near Qumran is not particularly exciting to look at but it has survived for 2000 years and the liquid found in it, which was subjected to analysis in the 1980s, provides further fuel for Gloria's argument. The liquid was of the same chemical composition as that of date stones, which are known to have been used medicinally in the past. Dioscorides recommended the substance as a cure for haemorrhages and "female conditions" while Pliny noted its use in eye-salves and washes for eyebrows.

### **Scroll jars**

Most of us have probably accepted the conventional wisdom that the pottery jars found in the caves containing the Dead Sea Scrolls were containers for these documents. The evidence, says Gloria, strongly contradicts this view. Not only were the scrolls not found in the jars, but the jars are twice as high as would be necessary to accommodate the scrolls. Gloria's view is that it is far more likely that these jars were used to store medicinal herbs, and she has seen very similar jars found at the site of a renaissance pharmacy.

### **Items not on the inventory**

In the 1990s a young French archaeologist was given the task of comparing the Qumran finds in the archaeology museum with the original inventory and found that apart from the fact that one third of the coins listed in the original inventory had gone missing, there were a large number of items which had not been included on the original inventory, including stoppers with tubular orifices (used for aerating or testing medicinal substances?) and a number of glass containers and juglets which may have contained balsam - one of the most precious substances of the day and highly valued for its medicinal properties. Could it be that the secrets the Essenes were sworn to protect related to the growing and processing of medicinal substances such as balsam? With herbal medicine one of the few available treatments for illnesses of all kinds, access to these substances and to medicinal baths may have been very much sought-after.

### **An alternative view**

So perhaps, suggests Gloria, the Essenes were *not* a reclusive little group of monks only interested in praying and purifying themselves. Perhaps the truth is that they played a pivotal role in the provision of highly sought-after medical treatment which brought visitors from far and wide to their 'health spa' to be treated for their ills. In biblical times, she observes, medicine consisted of a mixture of surgery and 'natural remedies' (including hydrotherapy and herbal medicine). In the third millennium, she suggests, we may be witnessing a gradual return to the balance between 'alternative' and 'orthodox' medicine that existed 2000 years ago.

Many thanks to Gloria Dixon for an excellent presentation. Peter and Ann have copies of two journal articles written by Gloria which can be photocopied for a small charge if anyone would like to have them.

### **Ann Hopkins**