

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

ASPECTS OF THE ETHICAL TEACHING OF THE QUMRAN COVENANTERS

by J. G. HARRIS

DR. HARRIS'S investigations of the inwardness of the thought and life of the Qumran community are already familiar to us from his article in our April-June number, 1964, on "Early Trends in Some Biblical Commentaries as Reflected in Some Qumran Texts". We are glad to publish this further study.

THE literary remains of the Qumran Community which flourished near the Dead Sea from the second century B.C. until the final destruction of their monastery in the Roman War of A.D. 132-35, have enriched our knowledge and understanding of several aspects of the life and thought of sectarian Judaism around the turn of the era. The contribution made by the Qumran Covenanters to the moral thought and practice of their own times, and, indeed, to the total moral thinking of mankind, is worthy of the most careful evaluation. Although after critical examination the ethics of the Qumran sect may be seen to be a blending of the borrowed and the acquired with the indigenous, the moral principles here enunciated will stand comparison with the world's leading ethical systems.

Under the communal rule of the Covenanters ethics developed as a science of living. The prescribed ethical code ensured that the members of the community regulated their behaviour and conduct under the supreme, authoritative and formative principle of the Communal Rule. Accordingly, ethics assumed the function of regulating individual piety and virtue, and also of prescribing a science of social and communal behaviour.

All ethical systems involve some metaphysics. At Qumran the ethics derived from a divine metaphysics. Theological presuppositions, derived from a dominant Bible-centred mode of thought, provided the basis of all moral and ethical postulates. The speculative question of the dependence of morality on religious belief does not seem to have arisen. It was taken for granted that the standards and sanctions of morality were firmly grounded in religious faith. This alone was the sanction of the communal life enjoyed at Qumran, and life under the Rule of the Community implied moral potency and moral reactions. Implicit obedience to the Rule of the Community implied the acceptance of the moral obligations and the awakening of the moral consciousness to their

acceptance. The idea of God current among the Qumran sectaries was intensely moral. His habitation was holy and His name was holy. The final abode of the faithful is in the midst of the Holy Beings who dwell in God's habitation. Faith and morals belong together. Hence every neophyte into the Qumran community must before all else seek God, and therefore do what is good and upright in His sight (1QS).¹

Morality demands a transcendental basis. The motivation of the ethical life is the pledge made to God. At Qumran such a pledge inspired the ethical ideal. The ideal was "to do what is good and upright in God's sight" (1QS). The ideal is the *summum bonum*, but the 'good' is derived from the vision of God and His commandments. This 'good' is brought to life in the normative ethics of the sect, and is made real in human life and in human society. This is expressed in the sectarian ideal of "loving all that He has chosen" and in "keeping from evil" (1QS). The particularity of ethical love, as understood by the sectaries, is made explicit by the prior divine love for them as God's elect within the Covenant (CDC ii. 2-13).²

The particularity of ethical love, as derived from the awareness of divine love, is to be seen in the injunction to the members of the community that they must "bring into a bond of mutual love all who have declared their willingness to carry out the statutes of God" and also "to love all the children of light" (1QS).

The obligation of extending love to the fellow members of the community became the primary social duty under the Qumran ethical code. It was binding upon every member. It was the corollary of allegiance to God, was derived directly from a transcendental principle, and secured to a divine sanction. The *modus operandi* of the principle of brotherly love was truthfulness, righteousness, and justice. These moral principles were intended to reflect the essential moral attributes of the character of God Himself, whose ordinances are truthful, and whose judgments are righteous (CDC xx. 27-34). The concept of the ideal ethical character in the Qumran community was one who acts truthfully, righteously, and justly. These qualities express the vitality of ethical love, and must be directed to social ends. Thus the faithful covenanter must be truthful, that is, he must act truthfully, and this is only possible if the motive of his action is pure and unimpeachable. The inner motive is all important, for "the origin of truth lies in the Fountain of Light" (1QS). Truth in speech and

¹ 1QS—Manual of Discipline (Rule of the Community).

² CDC—Zadokite Document.

action are the outward expression of truth embedded within. It was the same with regard to righteousness and justice, which must be extended to all members of the community, but which furthermore "was to be performed on the earth" (1QS). This extension of right behaviour to those without the covenant community is important, as it shows how moral principles can transcend even the somewhat rigid and confined communal principle that held the Qumran sect together. Those without the Community were thought to reside in the sphere of evil and darkness, and to perform the works of darkness. Association with such persons is frowned upon, yet at the same time there will come a day when God's truth will emerge triumphant over the world, and perversity and shame shall disappear. In readiness for this day God has chosen those who are blameless in their moral life to be partners with Him, and their works must be manifested in the world.

For the life of moral and ethical excellence the inner impulsion rather than external compulsion is the mainspring. Thus the Qumran sectaries must apply to the practice of morality all their inner resourcefulness, that is, their mental and spiritual powers, as well as their physical strength, for according to their outlook even the physical life must be maintained on the same high level of purity as the life within. According to the *Manual of Discipline* the inner spiritual qualities that must be cultivated, and then expressed in moral action, include humility, patience, abundant compassion, perpetual goodness, insight, discrimination, the spirit of knowledge, and purity. These are the spiritual qualities that derive from a sense of the divine power operative in the faithful, and from the reliance upon God's plenteous and sufficient mercy. These qualities reform the life and conduct of man and they determine the course of all right action. "These are the things that come to man in this world through communion with the spirit of truth" (1QS).

The application of these principles to the larger and higher interests and the relationships in which the lives of the covenanters were to be socially completed is a main preoccupation of the ethical teaching of the Qumran sectaries. The members of the community were presented with an enlarged and an enhanced concept of social and communal life through the acceptance and the operation of a particular social ideal. Morality must be socially expounded and expressed. Thus at Qumran some distinctive forms of social obligation emerged. These included (1) concerted moral action on the part of all members of the community. Only by so joining together in common action could the "practice of truth,

humility, righteousness, justice, charity and decency" (1QS) become possible. (2) Social, as well as individual, regeneration was required (and this implied rebirth into right moral conduct), in order to ensure the health of the community as a whole (and this meant its moral and religious well-being as well as its status and independence). (3) The whole membership of the Qumran order were to strive to establish Israel as a wholly moral community in which truth would abide and flourish. Indeed it was believed that God had "raised up for Himself duly designated men, so that He might provide survival for the earth" (CDC). But it was essential, and inevitable, that such men should be moral. (4) For this purpose the members of the community were to be bound together in an indissoluble fraternity. There could be no room for the deceitful, the unbrotherly, the unloving, or the treacherous. The bonds of union were deeply grounded in an ethical covenant, and to violate this was to place oneself in jeopardy. (5) Even so, it is human to err, and there was room in the Qumran system for forgiveness to operate. But forgiveness was given a social connotation.

The *Zadokite Document* from among the Qumran scrolls sets out at some length the social obligations of the members of this sect. Here the ethics of social behaviour are presented in a negative and positive way. There must be no robbery, or prey of widows, or murder of the fatherless. The poor must be helped, the stranger and the needy must be cared for, and every man must love his neighbour as himself. No one must bear a grudge against another or bring a charge against him, but every man must seek the welfare of his fellow, for these are the laws of holiness.

The emphasis on social duties and responsibilities within the Qumran community is well matched by the statutory moral obligations to individuals. The position of the superior within the sect was to be honoured by all, and he was to receive the obedience of his subjects. This obedience was to be shown in acceptance of his ruling, in the performance of work, in the economic planning of the community's affairs, for all wealth was communally held. Furthermore, those in authority were to be accorded precedence, as ranks and orders were to be recognized. At the same time, there was a wide area of communal equality between the members of the sect, particularly in such matters as worship, feeding, and taking counsel.

Reference may also be made to the importance of self-discipline in the conduct of the Qumran sectaries. The control of the tongue is one example of this. Right speech was valued highly. There was a keen awareness of the danger of unruly, indiscriminate use of

the tongue. Defiant and brusque speech, or speech fired by anger, must be punished, as being unworthy of the ethical standards by which this community lived. Slander was a grave offence. Deliberate and unjust defamation of a neighbour would place one outside the state of purity which was enjoined on everyone, whereas slander against the community was punished by expulsion.

The elevated principles which dominated the ethical system of these ancient covenanters commend themselves to everyone who is sensitive to the promptings of the moral consciousness. It is not easy to characterize this system. In some respects it may be described as an ethical system founded upon the acknowledgement of the moral sovereignty of God and operated through the principle of love. On the other hand, it may deserve to be dubbed a system of *interim* ethics. The moral behaviourist at Qumran was not only zealous for his God and for His commandments, but he had to be ever watchful for the coming judgement of God. He practised his ethics completely abandoned to God, as he also waited for God's coming. As he blessed God through his exemplary moral behaviour he also practised vigilance as he awaited the reward of his well doing, which was "eternal blessings and everlasting joy in the life everlasting, and a crown of glory and a robe of honour, amid light perpetual" (1QS).

In any comparative study of the ethical systems of the world the contribution of the Qumran sectaries stands high. The principles here enunciated have been prominent in other systems, and are part of the ethical heritage and thought of mankind. In some respects we are reminded of the ethical teaching of Israel's great prophets of the eighth century B.C., notably of Amos's demand for righteousness and Micah's pleas for justice. It shares with the ethics of the Old Testament a common basis of the good life rooted in religious faith. Thus far it may be claimed that the ethics upheld at Qumran stand in the main stream of classical Jewish teaching. In many aspects of the moral teaching of Qumran we have affinities with the ethical teaching of Jesus. In the Christian claim that love is the dominating motive of all right behaviour towards others we find an echo of some of the requirements laid upon the covenanted community of Qumran. Our Lord was insistent that He came not to destroy the best in the moral teaching of Judaism but to show the way of fulfilment. His way of fulfilment may have embraced aspects of current concepts and standards of morals which have come to our notice through the life and witness of the ancient Qumran community.

Croesyceiliog, Mon.