

# The Concept of Community in the Qumran Literature

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The Qumran sectarians not only led a strictly communal life, but their religious idealism was determined by the consciousness that they were members of a distinctive community. Two terms are used predominantly as their self-designations: *yĥad* (community) and *berit* (covenant).<sup>1</sup> While *berit* is a term which occurs in the Old Testament quite frequently, *yĥad* is rare.<sup>2</sup> The community as envisaged by the Qumranites has a double aspect: it is a *visible* structured *society*, which has as its basis and aim the *spiritual fellowship* and communion of its members.<sup>3</sup>

## (i) Organizational Structure of the Community

If we put together the data found in the various writings of the sect, we get some idea of the organization and structure of their community. They had two different types of communities, namely, the "town communities" (CD 12:19) and the "camps" (CD 12:22-23) or desert settlements.<sup>4</sup> Because they considered themselves the true Israel, they maintained the structure of the Israelite people. The members of the sect were divided into clergy (Priests and Levites) and laity (Israel) and they had also symbolic divisions into twelve tribes and into smaller units of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens (CD 13:1-2). The priests had the supreme authority and they governed the sect through the Council of the Community consisting of themselves, the Levites and the lay leaders of Israel (I QSa 1:22-2:3). The smallest unit was the group of ten and it had a priest-president (I QS 6:2-5; CD 13:2-3) and a guardian or overseer (I QS

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<sup>1</sup> *Berit* is found no less than 142 times in the Qumran writings, cited by K. G. Kuhn, *Konkordanz zu den Qumrantexten*, Göttingen, 1960, of which 32 are in *The Manual of Discipline* and 42 in *The Damascus Rule*. *Yahad* as a noun is used about 66 times in *The Manual of Discipline* alone.

<sup>2</sup> In the OT *yahad* as a noun is apparently employed only twice, viz., in Deut. 33:5 and 1 Chron. 12:18, where it means "gathering," "togetherness."

<sup>3</sup> Cf. E. Koffmahn, "Rechtsstellung und hierarchische Struktur des *yĥad* von Qumran," *Biblica* 42 (1961), pp. 433-442.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. G. Vermes, art. "Dead Sea Scrolls" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, Nashville, 1976, pp. 210-19, esp. 214f.

6:14-23; CD 13:7-16). The sect as a whole was also governed by a priest-president and a guardian of all the camps (CD 14:6-12). *The Damascus Rule* mentions also ten judges, a tribunal of four priests and six Israelites (CD 10:4-10). At least in the last stage of the eschatological era, the sect was expected to have a supreme lay leader, the prince (*naši'*), who was to be identical with the royal Messiah (IQM 5:1).

All the members of the sect attended an annual General Assembly during the Feast of the Renewal of the Covenant, when new candidates were solemnly admitted to the community (I QS 2:19-22). Association with the sect began at a ceremony which marked the "entry into the covenant" (I QS 1:16-2:18; 5:8-10). Full membership was granted only to those who underwent two years of special training and rigorous scrutiny. The successful candidates were admitted to the Council of the Community with the right to active participation in all communal matters and in the common ownership of property (I QS 6:13-23). The Council of the Community held a nightly meeting of study and prayer (I QS 6:7-8) and some of the assemblies were accompanied by a solemn meal presided over by a priest who said a blessing over bread and wine (I QS 6:4-5; I QSa 2:17-21). A member of the Council found guilty of violating the law of Moses was expelled and no further contact with him was permitted (I QS 8:20-24).

## (ii) Theological Basis of the Community

Behind the external structure and organization there was the consciousness of the community of its identity and role that was determined by a theological vision. The description, attributes and designations of the community found in the Qumran literature give us a fairly good idea of its theological foundation.

### (a) *The True Israel*

The Qumranites, who had separated themselves from mainstream Judaism with its official centre in Jerusalem, thought of their community as the true Israel (I QS 5:5-6; CD 8:16-18). In their own eyes, they were the champions of authentic belief and practice. They considered themselves the remnant chosen by God to inherit the covenant. Their life was characterized by a strict and faithful observance of the law of Moses as preached by the Teacher of Righteousness, the founder of the community, and as authentically interpreted by the sons of Zadok, the priestly hierarchy (I QS 1:1-15; 5:1-3, 8-10). God appointed the Teacher of Righteousness to guide this remnant of Israel according to the divine will (CD 1:11). For this God granted him a special gift of knowledge: "To him God made known all the mysteries of the words of His servants the prophets" (I QpHab 7:4-5). His teaching is therefore the norm of conduct for those who strive for salvation. A clear statement to this effect is found in the Habakkuk Commentary. Hab. 2:4b, "But the

righteous shall live by his faith," is understood as referring to "all those who observe the Law in the House of Judah, whom God will deliver from the House of Judgement because of their suffering and because of their faith in the Teacher of Righteousness" (I QpHab 8:1-3). Here the "suffering" and "faith in the Teacher of Righteousness" are complementary; the suffering is the opposition and persecution those who followed the Teacher of Righteousness had to endure.<sup>5</sup> Thus the basis of the community is the law of Moses as revealed to the community through the mediation of its founder. It is the acceptance of this revelation and its application to life that bestowed on the community its unity and distinctiveness. Consequently, we find among the Qumranites a strong tendency towards exclusiveness. Righteousness and salvation belong solely to those who accept the creed and practice of the community. They are the children of light, the men of truth, and they are opposed by the children of darkness, the men of falsehood. The Qumranites are, consequently, expected to separate themselves from the men of falsehood (I QS 5:1-2, 10-11) and even to hate them (I QS 1:10).

### (b) *The Community of the Elect*

Although they became the members of the community through their own free choice and decision, the Qumranites, nevertheless, are conscious that membership of the community is a gratuitous divine gift. In their view, they are God's people whom he has chosen for an everlasting covenant (I QS 4:22; I QSb 1:2), and the term "elect" has become their designation (I QS 9:14; 11:16). The other terms also which they use to describe themselves indicate that they have been chosen by God out of his pure graciousness: they are "the men of the lot of God" (I QS 2:2), "the sons of grace" (I QH 7:20), "sons of God's benevolence" (I QH 4:33; 11:9).

### (c) *A Holy Community*

The Qumranites, in their own view, were a community of those who had been purified from sin. The members underwent a ritual purification marking their entry into the community (I QS 3:4, 9; 5:13). It symbolized the interior cleansing from sin through God's forgiving act. Forgiveness of sins is the first effect of joining the covenantal community. Not only has God forgiven on account of the covenant those who have already joined the community (CD 3:18; 4:6-7, 9), but he brings in new members and forgives them their sins, as he has done to the first members, and will continue to do till "the age is completed."<sup>6</sup>

To become beneficiaries of this forgiveness, certain dispositions and conditions are demanded from those joining the community: humility, uprightness, fidelity to the community, confession of sins

<sup>5</sup> Cf. I QS 1:16-18; 3:23-24.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. CD 4:6-11; 20:34; I QS 11:14-15; I QH 7:30-31.

and, above all, submission to the law of God as revealed exclusively to the community,<sup>7</sup> without which the ritual purification is of no avail (I QS 2:25-3:6, 9). In short, for receiving forgiveness from God, a real conversion is the necessary prerequisite (CD 2:4-5; I QH 6:6). God's purpose in forgiving and purifying his chosen ones from sin is to prepare them for communion within his holy community and with the heavenly host, to consecrate them to himself and to establish them before him for ever (I QH 3:21-22).

Besides the initial forgiveness and purification which God has granted them, the necessity of a continuous purification through the divine spirit of holiness, namely, through God's sanctifying power, is acknowledged by the Qumranites (I QH 16:11-12). This process will culminate in an outpouring of God's spirit of truth and holiness on man at the end of times, at the time of "God's visitation," cleansing him perfectly, destroying all the roots of sin in him and establishing him for ever in the covenant (I QS 4:20-23).

Although it is God who takes the initiative to sanctify them, from their part there should be an adequate response in the form of a sincere effort to lead a holy life. They have joined the community to observe the law of God perfectly, "to seek God with a whole heart and soul, and do what is good and right before Him as He commanded by the hand of Moses and all His servants the prophets; that they may love all that He has chosen and hate all that He has rejected; that they may abstain from all evil and hold fast to all good; that they may practise truth, righteousness and justice upon earth, and no longer stubbornly follow a sinful heart and lustful eyes committing all manner of evil" (I QS 1:1-7). Consequently, the life within the community is considered to have an expiatory value both for the sins of the members (I QS 5:16) and for the land (I QS 9:3-4). Their concern for holiness and purity is reflected also in their laws of cleanliness and uncleanness, and the ordinances concerning purification by water.<sup>8</sup>

#### (d) *A Community of Those Who Have Received the Knowledge*

To have a share in the knowledge imparted by God to the Teacher of Righteousness was the aspiration of the members of the community. Those entering it expect from God "enlightening of heart, life-giving wisdom and eternal knowledge" (I QS 2:3). The Qumranites acknowledge that God "opens their heart to knowledge and has taught all knowledge."<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, in *The Damascus Rule* (CD 23:4) the Isaian expression with eschatological tenor, "disciples of God" (Isa. 54:13), is employed to describe the members of the community and their interpretation of the Torah.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. I QS 3:6-12; CD 4:6-10; 20:27-34.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. CD 10:10, 13; I QM 14:2-3; I QS 3:4-5; 5:13.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. I QS 11:15-18; see also I QH 11:9-10; CD 6:2-4.

The gift of this knowledge is associated with the spirit God has given to the members of the community. The Qumran psalmist, as their true representative, acknowledges with gratitude that God has given him, put within him, his holy spirit. Through this spirit God has strengthened him to remain in the covenant (I QH 7:6-8, 13-14). It is through this spirit that he has come to know God and possesses the divine knowledge (I QH 12:11-13; 13:18-20; 14:12-13), and, consequently, "to cleave to the spirit" is equivalent to "to hold fast to the truth of God's covenant" (I QH 16:7).

(e) *Community, the Temple of God*

The temple of Jerusalem, which was according to the Jewish law the sole place of sacrificial worship, had become a place of abomination in the view of the Qumranites. Its precincts were considered defiled, the priests wicked and the liturgical calendar prevailing there unlawful. The sectarians, therefore, spiritualized their own worship. The community considered itself the temple of God.<sup>10</sup> Their principal aim was to lead a life of continuous worship (I QS 9:3-5), in which they joined the angels (I QH 11:9-14; I QS 11:7-9). The sacred meal of the sect was a substitute for the sacrificial meals of the Jerusalem temple.

(f) *Community of the New Covenant*

In the Qumran writings, as we have seen, the terms "covenant" and "community" as used to signify the sect are synonyms. The members of the community had entered the covenant in order to be united: that they might remain united to God (I QS 1:16-17), that they might be united in the counsel of God (I QS 1:8), that they might join the holy congregation (I QS 5:20), that they might be one with the children of God's truth (I QH 11:11). Their communion was manifested in their common life and mutual love. They ate in common, prayed in common and deliberated in common (I QS 6:2-3); and the property of those who were admitted to the Council of the community was "merged" (I QS 6:22). They were expected to have "a great love" for the fellow-members of the community (I QS 1:9; 4:5), and failures in this were met with adequate punishment (I QS 5:25-6:1; 7:4-8). They had also a certain communion with the angels (I QS 11:7-8), and anticipated the day when their divine fellowship would be perfected.

The covenant they had entered into was called "the new covenant,"<sup>11</sup> which recalls the promise of a "new covenant" in Jer.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. I QS 5:5-7; 8:4-10; 9:3-6; 4 QFlor 1:1-13. See esp. B. Gartner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament*, Cambridge, 1965, pp. 16-46; A. Jaubert, *La notion d'alliance dans le judaïsme aux abords de l'ère chrétienne* (Patristica Sorbonensia 6), Paris, 1963, pp. 152-63.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. CD 6:19; 8:21; 19:33; 20:12; I QpHab 2:3.

31:31-34 and its parallels, especially Ez:k. 36:22-32.<sup>18</sup> The main blessings of the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah and others, namely, purification from sin, the law and the divine spirit as interior gifts, perfect obedience to the law, knowledge of God and an intimate and everlasting relationship with God, were seen to be in the possession of the community to a certain extent; the full realization of them was, however, awaited at the end of days. At the same time this "new covenant" which they entered into was basically the renewal of the Mosaic covenant. Thus the community of the Qumranites was one rooted in the past and tending to the future.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. esp. R. F. Collins, "The Berith-Notion of the Cairo Damascus Covenant and Its Comparison with the New Testament," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 39 (1963), pp. 555-94, esp. pp. 565-82; Jauvert, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-49.