

Essenes' Myth: Fabricating The "Essenes Monks"

Excerpt from Volume 1 of "*Le messie et son prophète*" ("*The Messiah and His Prophet*", 2005, p. 104-111 – the numbering in 1.1.1 is that of the book) + an excerpt from an editorial on Qumran, from the [website](#) of the same name

by Edouard M. Gallez

1.2.2 From The 17th Century To The Present Day

It was in the West, especially in the 18th century, and then again in the 20th century, that the commonplace notion of "Essene monks" took form. This notion is still current and is the basis of the question: is Christianity post-Essenism? [Siegfried Wagner](#) traced the origin of these debates which agitated French and German speaking countries, following the publication of books by [Carne Daniel a Virgine Maria](#) in the 1680s. [1]

For almost a century this commonplace gave rise to heated discussions in Italy and Spain, for reasons that may escape the gaze of too lay an historian. Indeed, in the wake of the reform of the Order of Carmel (female and male) in Spain, some Carmelite Fathers wanted to demonstrate at all costs the continuity that existed between the prophet [Elijah slaughtering the prophets of Baal](#) on Mount Carmel and the first Western Christian monks who settled there in the 12th century (and who soon formed the [Carmelite Order](#)). There is nothing to indicate that the caves of the mount had ever been inhabited by monks before them; and two millennia separate Elijah from the sons of the great [Teresian reform](#). But no one bothered with such details. The missing link indeed had been found – the "Essene monks". [2]

As early as 1596, the historian [Baronius](#), who was very close to the Roman Curia, had protested against these claims known as the [Elianic succession](#); and then the [Bollandists](#) (Jesuits) took charge. But the Carmelites succeeded in getting the Inquisitor of Spain on their side. And soon a first decree was issued in 1639, approving four proposals which affirmed that under the Old Law, there existed a true "monachate and religious order." A second decree confirmed the first in 1673. [3]

When these decrees became known in Northern Europe and encountered the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the debate soon took a different turn. Indeed, the question now became – is monasticism of Christian origin [4]? Which then turned into the question – does Christianity really have an origin of its own? In this way, the path was paved for **Voltaire** who took up the idea of the "brotherhood of the Essenes," with the aim of showing Christianity's lack of originality. Jesus, he explained, had been an Essene! [5] After the succession of revolutions, the controversy soon resumed in France in academia, down the Voltairian line, which [Ernest Renan](#) (1823-1892) popularized with the famous formula – "Christianity is a successful Essenism." Despite the discovery of many manuscripts during the 19th and especially the 20th century (in particular those of Qumrân), the debate has curiously hardly evolved up to our day; or up till very recently – when we began to radically question the very concept of "Essene monks."

But cracks are appearing today among the learned but narrow defenders of the idea of “Essene monks.” Jean-Baptiste Humbert thus summarized the conclusions of a multidisciplinary conference, organized in November 2002, which brought together specialists from various (not to say divergent) fields, in these words:

“[De Vaux’s](#) thesis – a self-sufficient Essene complex that allegedly managed the caves and established its own cemetery – is under attack from several sides at once. The conference had the merit of underlining the coexistence of two tendencies: the ‘Old one,’ attached to the vulgate of [de Vaux](#), or to other theories... and the ‘New ones,’ which want to move forward...”.[\[6\]](#)

The discoveries of Qumran could have been the occasion for a revival of the exegesis of the texts of Pliny, Philo and Josephus. That did not happen. In fact, the debate was closed before it even began. As early as 1950, when the texts of Qumran were just beginning to be deciphered, [André Dupont-Sommer](#) proclaimed the “Essene” identity of the Qumranian site.[\[7\]](#) This was widely covered by the press.

However, not only was the debate closed, it was written in advance. It is indeed surprising to see the idea of the existence of a convent of “Essene monks” near the Dead Sea put forward **twenty years earlier** by another Frenchman, the novelist [Maurice Magre](#). In [one of his novels](#), a character, initiated into an esoteric secret society, says:

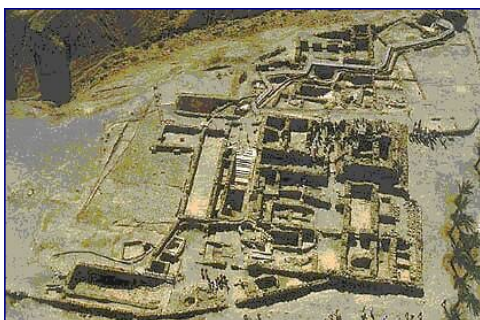
“During my trip to the East, I went to the shore of the Dead Sea to contemplate the place where the Essenes had once lived, those wise and perfect men, in the midst of whom Jesus was instructed... Actually, not very far from the place where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, there is a monastery, a monastery without a chapel and whose threshold is not dominated by any cross...”

Earlier in the novel, another equally esoteric character is presented:

“He had, he said, sought in Palestine and in Syria the traces of the ancient Essenes. He had therefore stayed in various monasteries, in particular in that of Baruth, built on the remains of an old maritime fortress of the Templars. There, he had rummaged in a library buried in dust and neglected by ignorant monks. He had discovered forgotten manuscripts, and learned of lost secrets.”[\[8\]](#)

Then, [Jean Hubaux](#) comments:

“It should not be assumed that, as early as 1929, Magre had predicted the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but it should be noted that as early as 1929, maktub, it was written that on the day when ancient manuscripts would be found in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, these documents could only be Essene”.[\[9\]](#)



We should also add that the ruins, described as a monastery and located on the shore of the Dead Sea, were more or less long declared as “Essene,” for the site of Qumrân was known in France, in fact, since the middle of the 19th century [\[10\]](#). The “Essene” narrative was already written in advance.

As a result of thousands of articles, or scholarly books, praised by the press, what should have remained a working hypothesis turned well-nigh into dogma, going so far as to “reconstruct” a life-like “Essene scriptorium” (in the current archaeological museum of Palestine), even though “reconstruction” is hardly the proper term for a work of the imagination, which is itself based entirely on what we know about the rooms of medieval monastic copyists. By a ripple effect, this Palestinian museum’s scriptorium has served as a reference for many authors and illustrators of the supposed life of the monks of the “monastery” of Qumrân. [\[11\]](#) (cf. 1.3.1.1) Who could possibly doubt the existence of copyists in the face of such a wealth of colorful details?

Thus, curiously, the modern commonplace of the “Essene monks” is the result of a motley alliance between Carmelites imbued with their own importance, the Spanish Inquisition, the Freemason Voltaire, King [Frederick II](#), and finally a scholar who obtained a chair at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. Now, given that the supposed explanation of the cave manuscripts existed years – or rather centuries – before their discovery, whoever hastened to proclaim said explanation without verification might not deserve the kudos. One former student of the manuscripts, [Ernest-Marie Laperrousaz](#), himself a former excavator of Qumrân, alongside Father de Vaux, summed up the situation as follows:

“Dupont-Sommer, a former priest, was tempted to downplay the value of Christianity by making it a pale imitation of the Essene movement.”

Such a view was facilitated by the context of traditional Western moralism, which had tended to make Jesus more of a timeless model than a son of Jewish history and nation. However, Laperrousaz explains, it was necessary to come back to this primary evidence:

“Faced with the similarities between these texts and the New Testament, we just forgot that Jesus was a Jew and that the commonalities between the Gospel and Qumran were not in themselves surprising.” [\[12\]](#).

This commonsense conclusion is even more enlightening when one perceives to what extent the tree constituted by the idea of an “Essene sect” was able to hide the forest of Jewish associative realities in antiquity, which obviously did not exist, and thus had disappeared neither in [68 AD](#), nor in any other year.

Hereunder, follows the final outline of the dossier of the “Essene monks.” Their “invention” is a phenomenon that must be followed step-by-step from the 3rd century to the present day. [\[End of the 8 pages excerpt\]](#)

[\[Excerpt from an editorial on Qumran – 2010\]](#)

It is totally impossible, from an archaeological point of view, that a religious community ever inhabited the site of the ruins of Qumran, and the manuscripts found around there have thus been misattributed.

Features Of A Misconception

The mistake did not come only from the undue connection made between the ruins and the manuscripts – a connection all the more arbitrary since manuscripts had been found in ten [\[now eleven\]](#) other caves, and that the placing in the cave of the manuscript jars had to be subsequent to the abandonment of the premises. What also played a role was the desire to give a historical substrate to the old legend of the Essenes, which dates back to antiquity but had already been used a lot in the 18th century in the Voltairian argument against the originality of Christianity.

Thus, for fifty years, ideological postulates were able to silence archaeological research which was going in the opposite direction, where the buildings of Qumrân, before being abandoned, formed a place of production of expensive ointments, taken from the balsam trees which, at the time, grew thick in the region and became the basis of the feminine perfumes and oils used in the Temple. Those who lived at Qumrân were rich people (which is proven by the decorative elements found on the site). But it was necessary, to accredit the legend, to say that, on the contrary, these were poor “monks,” busy copying books in a “*scriptorium*” – all straight out of the imagination of Western academics (but then the press had a lot to do with it, too).

One of the oldest proponents of this Essene fiction, [André Paul](#), changed course in 2007 [in 2008



he published “*Qumrân et les Esséniens*” (“*Qumran And The Essenes*”) with this evocative subtitle: “*l'éclatement d'un dogme*” (“*The Bursting of a Dogma*”). The dogma was starting to crack. However, it has still not yet been understood enough that the Essene fiction in and of itself has been harmful; and it also prevents us from seeing a major reality of history, in the way that a tree can hide the forest.

The Tree That Hid The Messianist Forest – And Its Continuation In Islam

The problem has been the content or, so to speak, the dominant ideology of the unbiblical religious manuscripts found in the caves. In their themes and expressions, they are often related to various apocalyptic and sectarian texts that have been known since antiquity, or which had been discovered for a century or two before. Now, could some of these texts, which call for taking power over the world, be pre-Christian, especially when we see links with the New Testament, for example in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*? “Essene” dogma certainly said so. As a result, this dogma prevented the entering into the subtleties of this Messianist ideology, and above all, it made this ideology disappear during the first “Jewish War,” during the presumed destruction of the site of Qumran.

However, the messianists who wrote these writings had nothing to do with Qumran or even with the cave region. They lived everywhere, with or without strict rules. They stemmed above all from a religious state of mind inspired by biblical and then Christic revelation, and which today we

would call “revolutionary.” And, of course, they had not disappeared in 70 AD. On the contrary, it is from this year, marked by the ever-shocking destruction of the Temple, that their politico-religious “ideology” would be structured, spread and influence groups far from sources originally located in the Holy Land, among very diverse peoples and cultures. This is where the link to Islam comes in.

This link is not only one of “politico-religious” ideological resemblance, by way of a certain number of avatars, as can be said of Arianism. This is a much more direct continuity, because of the action of the descendants of these early messianists – the [Judeo-Nazarenes](#). At the time of the politico-religious project around Muhammad, those who saw themselves as saviors of the world, elected by God, were not yet the Arabs but those Judeo-Nazarenes who, recently, had undertaken to rally some of their Arab neighbors to their crazy project of conquering the world. This proto-Islam, although hidden under a formidable legendary apparatus, still forms the mainspring of Islam today.

In a way, the “Essene” fiction has helped to make the historical origins of Islam more incomprehensible than ever. One can quickly fabricate an untruth. But it takes a lot of time and effort to get out of it afterwards. A barrier to the accessibility of these origins is disappearing. Other obstacles have emerged or strengthened in the meantime. The work continues.

[1] Cf. Wagner Siegfried, *Die Essener in der wissenschaftlichen Diskussion*, in *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift zur die Alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft*, n° 79, Berlin, Töpelmann, 1960, p.3. This author's account of the discussions is far from complete.

[2] “The Carmelite authors of old, writes Bruno de Jesus-Marie, who is a Carmelite himself, considered the Essenes as theirs and not only in the broad sense of a monachism having Elijah as its inspiration [but] *Ergo Esseni simpliciter et absolute fuerunt alumni religionis carmelitanae* (Philippe de la Trinité, *Theologia carmelitana*, Rome, 1665, p.142)” (in *Puissance de l'archétype*, in Coll., *Elie le Prophète*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1965, t.2, p.12 n° 3).

[3] Louis-Marie du Christ, *La succession élianique devant la critique*, in Coll., *Elie le Prophète*, ... p.123-124. The exact dates of the two decrees are December 9, 1639 and March 6, 1673. The author does not specify which translation of the 1639 decree he is quoting in Old French.

[4] In France, this question gave rise to a fierce discussion in libels, from 1709 to 1719, between Dom Bernard de Montfaucon, a Benedictine, and Jean Bouhier, president of the Dijon Parliament. In summary, Bouhier argues that Philo's “therapeutists” are monks and that they cannot be Christian because there were no Christian monks at the time. Montfaucon thinks they really were monks.

[5] Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, art. *Esséniens*, Paris, re-edition Ménard et Desenne, 1825. King Frederick II of Prussia followed Voltaire in stating in a letter to d'Alembert: “Jesus was definitely an Essene” (cf. Hadas-Lebel Mireille, *Les manuscrits de la mer Morte* in *L'histoire* n° 161, 1992 dec., p.10).

Mentioning Voltaire, Alain Pons explained that “his anticlericalism was the great affair of his life”. Actually, Voltaire painted this one at first as the hideous type of fanaticism common to all religions

(in the play created in 1741, *Mahomet the prophète*). But, in his *Essai sur les moeurs* (1756), he portrays the founder of Islam as a genius filled with human wisdom and tolerance. It is this Voltairian approach that still prevails today (*Voltaire dans tous ses éclats*, in *L'express*, 1993-02-19). Ernest Renan's admiration for the founder of Islam was particularly expressed in his *Etudes d'histoire religieuse*, Paris, 1857.

[6] Humbert Jean-Baptiste, *Pour une archéologie nouvelle à Qumrân* in *Le Monde de la Bible*, n° 151, juin 2003, p.51.

However, we may note that in 1949, following his survey of the Qumran site, de Vaux wrote: "There is no archaeological evidence to connect this human settlement with the cave [Cave I] where the manuscripts were concealed" (*La grotte des manuscrits hébreux* in *Revue Biblique*, 1949/4, t.56, p.586 /note 2).

[7] Dupont-Sommer André, *Aperçus préliminaires sur les manuscrits de la mer Morte*, Paris, Maisonneuve, 1950.

[8] Magre Maurice, *Lucifer*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1929, respectively p.202 and p.85. In this novel, Maurice Magre readily claimed to be a theosophist and occultist.

[9] Hubaux Jean, *Pline et les Esséniens*, in *Bulletin de l'Académie Royale de Belgique*, t.44, 1958, p.475-495. The author suggested: "It is not impossible that *serious* historians and geographers frequent the works of novelists or, who knows, the novelists themselves". André Dupont-Sommer's personal history makes a possible affinity with Maurice Magre plausible. Would Hubaux have known anything about it?

[10] F. de Saulcy de Saulcy first explored the site in 1851 – cf. *Voyage autour de la mer Morte et dans les terres biblique, exécuté de décembre 1850 à avril 1851*, Paris, 1853 (Volume 2, p.165-166 for Qumran), quoted by Ernest-Marie Laperrousaz, art. *Qumrân* in *DBS*, tome IX, 1979, col.738.

[11] For example Davies Philip R., Brooke George J. & Callaway Philip R., *The Complete World of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2002 (p.69).

[12] Laperrousaz Ernest-Marie, *Archéologie-fiction. Propos recueillis par Samuel Pruvost*, in *France Catholique* n° 2890, 11/07/2003, p.22.