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The Tension that drove Qumran Sectarianism

Jewish sectarianism has evolved over many centuries providing us the factions that many know today as the divisions of orthodoxy, conservatism, and the reform movement. However, during the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls, religious groups felt the need to dissent from the Jewish mainstream presiding in Jerusalem to form sects that most accurately demonstrated the proper way of religious practice. The divides that separated factions from each other resulted in tension that culminated in particular sects pursuing their own versions of Jewish worship. Tension while the Qumran community was in Qumran was a result of the dissatisfaction of a branch of the mainstream removing itself from Jerusalem. The writing by the community at Qumran shows evidence of their discontent depicting their status as the righteous ones maintaining purity in order to achieve salvation that was unobtainable in the society they left existing in Jerusalem.

In order for a sect to form there must be an originating religious group from which it derives. Various authors offer definitions of a sect that feature a variety of focuses; some definitions harped on membership, some on religious divide, and some on the tension from which the sect was born. Jutta Jokiranta uses Albert Baumgarten's notion of the "developmental aspect of sectarianism" to identify sects origins as a "response to the realities of [sects] social setting, and actual sectarian groups can be distinguished from the antecedents and forerunners that preceded them".¹ The typical behaviors of a sect originate at the grassroots of the sect's formation. Whilst accruing membership and leaders, a sect exhibits its

¹ J. Jokiranta "Social-Scientific Approaches to the Dead Sea Scrolls." *Rediscovering the Dead Sea Scrolls: an Assessment of Old and New Approaches and Methods*. Ed. Maxine L. Grossman, 247.

qualities until it reaches full maturity. Jokiranta summarizes Baumgarten's arguments and determines that this type of definition is *etic*, one that views the cult from an outsider's point of view.² Baumgarten clearly lays out his definition focusing on the qualities of the membership of a sect as, "a voluntary association of protest, which utilizes boundary making mechanisms – the social means of differentiating between insiders and outsiders – to distinguish between its own members and those otherwise normally regarded as belonging to the same national or religious entity".³ David Chalcraft uses Max Weber's approach to assert that as a sect forms, the identity that its membership embodies determines how similar it ends up being to the "church" it originated from or rather how different its offshoot's practices may be. "Thus degrees of 'sectness' are possible (Chalcraft, 75). Distinction between a sect and its origin is crucial to identifying its individuality, differentiating it from the father religion from which members were frustrated with a lack of fervor. Chalcraft proposes membership is one of the defining qualities of a sect noting that, "A sect's membership is constituted by volunteers who have freely applied to join and have proved themselves worthy" (Chalcraft 74). Their voluntary status emits authenticity as a membership; those who are chosen to join the sect demonstrate the characteristics necessary in fortifying the sect's legitimacy. However, these definitions focus mainly on the membership of a cult rather than the tension and qualities that caused its membership to originally amalgamate against the religiously dilapidated members that surrounded them.

A sect's qualities are unique – a religious group must correspond to a specific formula to constitute as a sect. Stark and Bainbridge begin to classify these particular religious

²J. Jokiranta, "Social-Scientific Approaches", 249.

³J. Jokiranta, "Social-Scientific Approaches", 246-254; but originally derived from A. I. Baumgarten, *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era*, 6-7

offshoots stating that, “A sect is not a new Church, but a restored original” (Stark and Bainbridge, 99). The idea that a sect emerges from a grander religious faction requires certain catalysts that motivate a specific grouping of members to feel that in order to achieve proper religious observance they must secede from their father religious entity and return to the ways they believe their religion demands. Another revered sociologist, Bryan Wilson offers three criteria from which the formula of a sect is based. He notes that protest, deviance, and tension combine to assert a religious group’s identification as a sect.⁴ This definition allows for an outsider to examine a religious uprising’s authenticity and determine if they are truly a sect formation. While other authors offer great insight as to other components of a sect’s make-up, in this paper I will attempt to define the tension of the Qumran sect based on those qualities that Wilson identifies as the essential aspects in classifying a religious offshoot as a sect.

Regev offers, according to Stark and Bainbridge’s original assertion, a religious offshoot is indeed a sect if it, “is a religious group in a state of tension with its surrounding sociocultural environment” (Stark and Bainbridge, 23). The environment is a product of where the religious group has found discontent with the barriers that the powerful have erected to maintain influence over the poor and less fortunate. Wilson adamantly includes protest as an essential component to the birth of a sect stating, “In particular, it is important to divest ourselves of theological conceptions of religious protest”.⁵ Protest is crucial because it is the basis from which the emerging sect members initially vent discontent with the mainstream and thus begin to question the current unjust practices. Provided a proper

⁴ E.g., B. R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium*, 11-30; *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 89-115; *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism*, 46-48, 66-68.

⁵ Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium*, 12.

environment, the protest will lead to disagreement and commence in formation of charged factions ready to make substantial changes to the current course.

Wilson goes on to explain that perhaps the most crucial aspect of a sect that distinguishes it is its divergence from the mainstream orthodoxy.⁶ This deviance “with respect to the larger world” is one of the most essential fundamentals when identifying a sect.⁷ Yet the idea that will be discussed primarily in this paper is Wilson’s final characteristic of a sect, and that is tension. Tension arises when a group of selected members of a religious faction identify what separates them from the mainstream and voice a need to return to a lifestyle that promotes their desired level of religious observance. This grouping is carved out by the cleavages, which are products of stratification in the community. Stark and Bainbridge emphatically state that it is these forces that “will greatly facilitate the outbreak of conflict and thus danger of schism – the exodus of one subnetwork to form a new organization” (Stark and Bainbridge, 102). As each grouping gains momentum and leadership their desire to disaffiliate increases based on their discontent with the direction of the original mainstream to form their ideal sect. Wilson describes the purpose of the sect and how it employs these aspects affirming, “sects represent a powerful return to what they regard as having been the pristine message of the faith, in response to which they call for a new level of dedication and performance”.⁸ The renewed dedication of a seceding sect embodies the purpose of being the sole option for salvation.

The schisms between subnetworks within the greater religious group were a product of the “lines of cleavage” created by the powerful and the poor. (Stark and Bainbridge, 101).

⁶ Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium*, 16.

⁷ J. Jokiranta, “Social-Scientific Approaches”, 248.

⁸ Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 95.

When internal conflict arises within a group it is most commonly along the clique lines. Friends within social subnets join together to criticize or break away from other subnetworks. Stark and Bainbridge offer the reasoning for these cleavages stating that, “cleavages are a result of geographic barriers, political boundaries, cultural or language barriers...” (Stark and Bainbridge, 102). Stratification is the culprit in these circumstances of cleavages within religious groups. And this stratification is a product of the power associated with worldly rewards. As soon as the powerful seek to maintain their authority and control they reduce the tension by emphasizing the otherworldly compensation to combat an unequal divide or scarcity of worldly rewards. (Stark and Bainbridge, 103). Stark and Bainbridge suggest that the sources of conflict arise when the powerful offer that the highest religious compensators include total rejection of worldly material objects. However, while they do this, at the same time the powerful continue to accrue vast amounts of earthly rewards. These powerful members slowly erode the fabric in which the religion abides by which leads to the poor seeking out a membership more similar to their own situation to restore religious sanctity.

As the wealthy and powerful struggle with how to create and continue a system that repeatedly pays them worldly rewards while assuring the poor that otherworldly compensation is greater, the poor devise a way to alleviate their discontent. The tension that has arisen is mitigated in the best way the poor know how, rather than reform the corrupt existing religious group, the poor seek out a group of members that reduce the tension by better serving the needs of the majority of members. Once the majority can select leaders, a movement towards another religious sect grows. The motivation for these new leaders lies in the potential of leadership; they are attracted to the idea that while they may be a mere lay leader in their present religious affiliation, leaving it to start a new sect will give them greater responsibility and authority in a newer and smaller sect. However, the costs of religious

dissention is two fold, not only must a potential member weigh the price of leaving their diluted religious group, the environment as a whole must be appropriate for another religious faction to emerge. “Thus, the sect formation will be most frequent when the environment is the most tolerant of religious diversity” (Stark and Bainbridge, 105). Stark and Bainbridge continue to note that a variety of factors affect the environment in which a sect emerges. If the economic or political forecast at the time is promoting a greater number of members with deprivation then there is a greater potential for sect formation. Thus, tension breeds change.

Within the emerging subculture of a sect, antagonism formed. This antagonism states that a particular sect has the exclusive legitimacy of religious practice and belief system thus meaning that all other worship is incorrect. Additionally, this antagonism promotes distrust in others and in the event that one cannot be converted to the sect, the sect members seek to not only separate themselves but to shun the disbelievers. (Stark and Bainbridge, 56). Jokiranta suggests that this antagonism is the ideological element of the tension between a sect and its father religious group.⁹ By embracing the sectarian set of principles, members vow to disassociate from society in its entirety and pledge their entire adherences to the identity of their new sect.

The third distinctive quality according to Stark and Bainbridge, reiterated by Regev and Jokiranta is the separation that occurs between the sectarians and the rest of society. Because of their belief system and failure to perpetuate the social norms, their actions foster a restriction of social engagement. Without the option to marry, let alone socialize outside the confines of the sect, the environment breeds a society of close knit relationships within the sect. These developments, encapsulate the sect, creating a closed social environment (Regev, 34). Because members choose to join the sect, they agree to the notion that their social

⁹ J. Jokiranta, “Social-Scientific Approaches”, 250.

network will solely include those that choose to pursue the same goals and values that they themselves elected to engage in. Separation is not only necessary due to lack of social connectivity, but also in order to preserve salvation. This preservation of holiness is essential to the sect's objective of seeking otherworldly compensation (Stark and Bainbridge, 103). The members of the Qumran sect concerned themselves with diligent worship in an effort to obtain the otherworldly rewards rather than indulge in the sin of earthly wickedness. While each trait of the tension is fundamental to the establishment of the sect's identity, "the three elements are in close interplay and any one of them adds to tension usually by strengthening one or both of the other elements as well".¹⁰ As the collective strengthens, so does the support for the cause, leading to eventual maturity of the sect. At that point, the sect is able to create for itself a membership and leading body to follow through in their desires to live their lives of devotion without the interference of outsiders.

The Qumran sect saw themselves as a group that could no longer trust in the lost leadership in Jerusalem and in such dire need of reclamation that the only option was to reject the world around it and create a pure society. However, in doing so, the Qumran sect not only rejected those around them but also was rejected by the world.

Baumgarten identifies 1 Enoch and the book of Jubilees as forerunners of the Qumran sect. However, like Jokiranta references, Baumgarten equates the Qumran's beginning as "a product of their differing reactions to Hellenism, the successful revolt against Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and the rise of the Hasmonean state".¹¹ This idea may be the seed from which all Jewish Sectarianism derived. Obviously the situation in Jerusalem must have been tainted to the point that a variety of groups, divided by the proper expectation of religious fervor,

¹⁰ J. Jokiranta, "Social-Scientific Approaches", 250.

¹¹ J. Jokiranta, "Social-Scientific Approaches", 247.

thought it necessary to reestablish Jewish sanctimony by other means. Just imagine how defiled Jerusalem must have been to prompt its most dedicated followers to abandon the holy Temple to establish a community in the desert that would more appropriately carry out God's will.

Regev spends a great deal of time elaborating on the antagonism of the *yahad* in relation to the society that the Qumran sect chose to leave. He provides textual evidence of their religious supremacy quoting 1QS 5 as to what the righteous men are supposed to do. "They are to separate from the congregation of 'perverse men'. They are to come together as one with respect to Law and wealth" (Wise 122). This quotation implies that these Qumran members saw themselves as "Sons of Light" (1QS 1:9) and that they must avoid those who "walk along the path of wickedness" (1QS 5:10-11). The Qumran sectarians went to great lengths to record the righteousness of their community and degrade their counterpart in the outside world. Different translations offered by Wise and Vermes both refer to the congregation of the unjust or unrighteous. To me, this passage speaks of the disparity between those that lived outside of the pure society that the Qumran Sect built and those that chose to volunteer to do God's will through the sociocultural community created by the Qumran sectarians. As noted above, the Qumran sect indicates through their writings that their path is the only one towards salvation and that all others are consorting with wickedness. The Qumran sectarians wrote that the outsiders were "the sons of the pit" and to "abstain from wicked wealth, which defiles" (CD 6:14). Indulging in these earthly temptations would only destroy the community that they had built in Qumran that fostered purity and righteousness.

Each of the aforementioned textual evidence conveys a similar attitude of the sectarian scribes at Qumran. As I evaluate the text I notice that each word passage ensures that the people on the outside of the Qumran community know of their inferiority. Not only is their

inferiority important to the scribes but that their eternal destination will hold the same fate. Using the term “wicked wealth” also implies that seeking material rewards only taints their present lives. Non-believers were incapable of redemption without conversion and their fate was sealed both on earth and in the world to come.

The reasoning behind the Qumran sect’s withdrawal from Jerusalem during the Temple period can be traced back to the tension that emanated between the different classifications in Jerusalem. Regev asserts, “the tension stems from the group’s rejection of the social order at large and its subsequent development as a separate sub-culture” (Regev 34). Separation as well as antagonism and difference are the critical source components of the blatant tension between subnetworks within the religious groups. Difference is a product of the stratification of a religious group. Because a subnetwork has dissimilar standards of living, their norms are not identical to the powerful or politically elite. Continually within the texts found at Qumran there is a distinction between the sect members and their outsider counterparts. Textual evidence backs up this claim within the 1QS document recovered in Qumran.

This text contains a variety of phrases that speaks to the difference as well as the antagonism. However, the testimony that Regev refers in his work is exemplified in the Community Rule passage. Sectarian members state their vow “not to walk anymore in the stubbornness of a guilty heart and of lecherous eyes performing any evil; in order to welcome all those who freely volunteer to carry out God’s decrees into the covenant of kindness” (1QS 1:6-8). Clearly there was an understanding of those that chose to volunteer for this introversionist sect to rid themselves of the wicked or unclean from which they were surrounded by and forge a separated society that fulfilled God’s teachings. Reading this passage, I key in on particular words that carry the Qumran sectarians’ passion. “Guilty heart”

speaks volumes about the mental and emotional states that the Qumran sectarians felt as they were immersed in the outsider society. They recognized the sin of “lecherous eyes” and expressed a commitment to no longer walk in the ways of evil in order to carry out God’s will on earth. This commanding passage also highlights the fervor with which the Qumran sectarians believed their interpretation to be true. Expression with such definitive words leaves no gray area for readers and clearly speaks to the devotion and certainty to which they saw the need to live their lives accordingly.

There were a variety of factors that led to the demise of mainstream Judaism in Jerusalem during the Temple period. Sectarianism in Qumran evolved from a discontent with the incoming Hellenistic concepts and eventually forced the dissention of a variety of religious groups. As Hellensitic values breeched the diverse Jewish culture, many citizens found that the broad level of observance being implemented within the Temple walls was no longer suitable in the eyes of God. The powerful continued to reap worldly rewards while the poor spiraled into deeper poverty, keeping devotion with the promises of compensation in the world to come. However, after repeated lies and transgressions the poor concluded that the only way to break free of the corruption now rampant inside Jerusalem was not only reject society’s idea of worship but to completely reject it in a process of geographic location.

The Qumran sectarians saw themselves as a religious following that no longer integrated with the others, deviating from the social norms by many. This deviance and cultural loneliness led to antagonism that prompted followers to view their religious practices not as a higher way but as the only way to worship. They discredited the devotion of the outsider society, feeling that the only way to properly devote themselves was to relocate to a location where they could give the proper attention and adulation to a God demanding his sons to rid themselves of wickedness and evil. Through out the texts codified by the Qumran

sect, it repeatedly shows that the Qumran members wrote about their discontent of the religiously impure outside of their community and that only they were capable of salvation.

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