

## **Who Were the Essenes**

According to the prophet Ezekiel, only the descendants of Zadok the priest are worthy to serve as high priests in the Temple of Jerusalem. The lineage of high priests in Jerusalem of the house of Zadok continued until the High Priest Onias III and his brother Jeshua. Antiochus IV "*Epiphanes*" deposed the Zadokite priests from the Jerusalem Temple and appointed non-Zadokite priests in their place. A priestly family from Modiin - the Hasmoneans - formed an army and succeeded in liberating the land of Judah from Antiochus's rule. Along the way, they also assumed the high priesthood at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Onias III received an invitation from King Ptolemy VI to establish a temple in Egypt modeled after the one in Jerusalem. He assigned his son, Onias IV, to undertake the task. The latter built in Egypt a temple to worship Yahweh, but it was also exposed to Egyptian pagan inspiration, including those of the goddess Isis. This goddess was believed to have the power to resurrect the dead. Priests from Onias' temple came to Judah and brought with them the belief in resurrection. The dominant priestly sect in Jerusalem at that time - the Hasmonean dynasty - rejected

entirely the idea of resurrection. Because the power to resurrect the dead was attributed to the goddess Isis, the priests who came from Egypt were mockingly labeled “Essenes” (“Issiyim” in Hebrew) by the Hasmonean priests and their Sadducean supporters. This derogatory name was not entirely baseless, since Onias’ temple was exposed to influence by the Egyptian pantheon. The historian Josephus, descended from the Hasmonean priestly family. He adopted the derogatory nickname as if it were their real name, and that is how he presented them.

Being direct descendants of Zadok the priest, they proclaimed themselves the true heirs of the high priesthood in the Jerusalem Temple. But the Hasmonean priests refused to relinquish the high priesthood they had attained as ripe fruit. The Hasmonean responded with vicious warfare, slander, and persecution. Due to these persecutions, many of them went into hiding.

Among the caves of the Judean Desert, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. We refer to their owners as “The Scroll Community” and other names, but “Essenes” is not one of them. Among the scrolls was one describing the war between the *Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness*; the

Sons of Light are the good people, and the Sons of Darkness are the bad ones. Among themselves, they did not accept the name “Essenes,” as recorded by historians of that period – Josephus Flavius, Philo of Alexandria, and Plinius the Elder – but called themselves by names reflecting their values, beliefs, and way of life, emphasizing their commitment to the Torah, community, spiritual purity, and withdrawal from worldly life. Due to their conflict with the Hasmonean priests and their Sadducean supporters, they presented themselves as “The Good” and their opponents as “The Bad.” The Scroll Community referred to themselves as the “Sons of Light” and their enemies as the “Sons of Darkness.”

The Judean Desert caves provided a good hiding place for the persecuted righteous priests, thanks to their difficult access on the one hand, and proximity to Jerusalem on the other. From this we can almost certainly conclude that the Scroll Community members were those who were named “Essenes.”

The people of this sect, like people of several other Judahite sects at that time, were destroyed by the Roman rulers of Judea. Yet their legacy survives until today through the

principles of Christianity. This religion maintains symbols and rituals that were practiced in the Temple in Jerusalem, such as: an altar, wine libation, a hierarchy of priesthood, the Mass ceremony (which continues the idea of sacrifice and thanksgiving that was practiced in the Temple), prayer at times corresponding to the Temple's daily offerings, use of incense, priestly vestments, sacred vessels, reading of holy scriptures in public, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), baptism, confession and more...