

So you are the Essenes!

Key information to read and discuss:

(Pronounced phonetically as Es-seens, and run these two together as one word Esseens)

The Essenes

The Essenes are not mentioned in the [New Testament](#); the information concerning them is derived from other sources. Since 1947 manuscript and archaeological [discoveries have been made at Qumran](#) on the north-west shore of the Dead Sea, and they are thought to derive from the Essenes who dwelt there.

The Essenes were a protest movement which withdrew from the world. They believed that the high priest of the Jerusalem [Temple](#) was elected on false pretences, which invalidated the whole Temple cult. In addition, the calendar used by the Essenes and their way of interpreting and observing the Law of Moses differed from the rest of [Judaism](#).

The Essene community of [Qumran](#) saw itself as the only true Israel, "children of light" as distinct from the "children of darkness" and their corrupt religious practices. The members of the community lived a disciplined life dictated by the regulations and a strict system of values. At the same time they - like many of their contemporaries - expected that God would soon intervene in the course of history in a decisive manner.

From:

http://www.helsinki.fi/teol/pro/_merenlah/oppimateriaalit/text/english/judaism.htm#The%20Qumran%20Discoveries

Essenes - a smaller group or "sect" that lived a communal "monastic" lifestyle at Qumran (near the Dead Sea) from 2nd century BCE through 1st century CE; the "Dead Sea Scrolls" found in this location in 1947 are usually associated with them.

- Originally a group of priests, founded and/or led by a "Teacher of Righteousness" during the early Maccabean/Hasmonean era.
- They regarded the Jerusalem priests as illegitimate, since those were not Zadokites (from the family of the high priest Zadok).
- They rejected the validity of the Temple worship, and thus refused to attend the festivals or support the Jerusalem Temple.
- They expected God to send a great prophet and two different "Messiahs" (anointed leaders), one kingly and one priestly.
- They live a communitarian life with strict membership requirements, rules, and rituals; they probably also practiced celibacy.
- Mentioned by Josephus, but *not in the NT* (although some scholars think the "Herodians" in the NT refer to Essenes).
- Some scholars think John the Baptist (also Jesus?) was closely associated with the Essenes, but a direct connection is unlikely.

- Monastery destroyed by the Roman Army ca. 68 AD, during the Jewish War against Rome, which Essenes probably considered the final battle between the forces of good (the true Israelites) and evil (the Romans and their collaborators).
- Dozens of complete scrolls and thousands of written fragments were discovered from 1947 to mid-1950's in caves near Qumran.
- The Scrolls contain copies of almost the entire Hebrew Bible, some older non-canonical texts, and dozens of the Essenes own writings.

From: http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Jewish_Groups.htm

Essenes Many scholars identify at least one branch of the Essenes with the community that lived in the desert wilderness at Qumran (although other scholars reject this connection). Qumran is the site on the northwestern end of the Dead Sea at which the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls were found. The Qumran community was governed by a strict hierarchy headed by priests; the so-called Teacher of Righteousness (often mentioned in the scrolls) was apparently the founder of the community. The community seems to have begun when a group of priests left Jerusalem because of a dispute with the Temple priesthood. They disagreed with the interpretation of Torah practiced by the Jerusalem priests, and especially with interpretation of laws of purity. It is likely that the Qumran community members, with their belief that only a Zadokite should be high priest, rejected the non-Zadokite Hasmonean high priests. The community further disagreed with the Hasmonean adoption of a solar calendar in place of the old lunar one. This dispute was important, as knowing the precise date was essential for keeping the festivals mandated in the Torah. The Dead Sea Scrolls include many copies of biblical books, commentaries on Scripture, hymns, prayers, and rules for governing the community. One scroll, the "War Scroll," describes a final battle at the end of history in which the Sons of Light (the Qumran community), aided by God, will destroy the powers of darkness (the forces of the community's Jewish opponents as well as Gentiles). With their withdrawal into the wilderness, their strict lifestyle, and their emphasis on God's coming judgment, the members of the Qumran community are similar to John the Baptist, who preached his apocalyptic message of repentance in the Judean desert. Some scholars, in fact, speculate that John was once a member of the Qumran community. The Gospel writers associate Isaiah's prophecy "A voice of one crying out in the desert: / 'Prepare the way of the Lord, / make straight his paths'" (Mark 1:3, see Isaiah 40:3) with John the Baptist; the Qumran community applied this same prophecy to their own group. The Essenes thought of themselves as the only faithful remnant of Israel; they believed their community replaced the Temple as the site of the true, uncorrupted worship of God.

https://www.smp.org/dynamicmedia/files/Ofd53742db7ecdea61a6b02c15ad6150/TX001327_1-Background-Political_and_Religious_Structure_in_Jesus_Time.pdf

Questions to discuss:

Essenes, where do you live? Why?

What's important to you? (Rituals for cleanliness is one thing, which the video below highlights.)

What's your big issue with the Jerusalem priests?

Why do you refuse to worship at the Temple?

What do you believe about the Messiah? (Well, you don't actually believe in one Messiah!)

Interesting things your group could highlight:

There are many interesting things you can highlight about the Essenes (from questions above).

You could also point out that although there are no direct Gospel references to the Essenes, there is a fascinating story of how the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered (and students love this story!):

<https://www.deadsea.com/explore/historical-sites/biblical-sites/the-dead-sea-scrolls/#:~:text=Probably%20the%20most%20significant%20finding%20in%20the%20history,a%20jar%20containing%203%20ancient%20Dead%20Sea%20scrolls.>

The above site contains a video (Also found at <https://youtu.be/u3CIVePRuCW>). This would be great to share with the whole group as it tells the story of finding the Dead Sea Scrolls and shows the remains of the Essene community. The Dead Sea Scrolls show that there was very little change to the Old Testament texts over thousands of years.

Essenes – stand up and tell the Jerusalem priests exactly what you think of them and their Temple. Point the finger at all the other groups for not understanding life as you know it. After all, that's why you broke away and became your own group / sect, living near the Dead Sea. Seriously, none of them are living strictly enough or cleanly enough. They probably won't even recognise any Messiah when he comes because they're only looking for ONE Messiah! You are the only Jewish group who really understand the truth, and what's important in life.

Imagine what else could still be found from the Gospel or other NT manuscripts! Imagine if you were the one who found these!