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**The Thanatology of the Qumran Community in the Frame
of the Ideological System and Practice of the Second Temple
Period**

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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I. Preliminaries and aims of the dissertation

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was followed by great interest: scholars from different fields of research studied it from different points of view. In the focus of the studies stood the relation of the scrolls, the settlement and the Essene community (already known before from ancient sources). After the offset of the intensive archaeological research the cemetery nearby came to the forefront. It has an important role also in the mapping of the above mentioned triple system of connections: even its existence serves as an argument both pros and cons. Moreover, the cemetery raises many issues in itself, mainly as examined together with the scrolls.

In the cemetery located some 30-40 meters far to the east from the ruins of Khirbet Qumran there were ca. 1100-1200 tombs arranged in neat rows marked with an oval heap of stones found. In each one of these one person was interred, without remarkable grave goods. The graves are dug into the marl of the terrace to an average depth of 1.5-2 metres. At the bottom of each tomb a burial niche, *loculus* was dug along the length of the shaft, which was sealed by stone slabs or mud bricks. The most peculiar characteristic of the cemetery is the north-south orientation of the graves. It is interpreted and reasoned with the cosmology of the community (with the Paradise northward), while others support the opposition to the cult of the Jerusalem Temple as reason behind.

The aim of the dissertation is to reveal the attitude and relation of the Qumran-community to death and dying: beginning with the tiniest ideas in their writings, until the examination of the tombs visible on the surface, and to place it in the system of burial customs and rites in the Second Temple

Period. My further aim is the study of the role of death and burial as an act in the life of the individual and the community. Several attempts have been made to compare the archaeological results and the written sources, but up to now no study has been written examining all of these together, also with the possible parallels, placing it into the world of general second Temple burial practices, and analyzing the possible reasons of discrepancy.

During the research it is important to examine besides the thanatology of the community its relation to contemporaneous Judaism and other religious streams, groups. Hopefully the study of the differences will help us in easier orientation among theories and customs of the Second Temple Era. In my thesis I study my topic in aspects not yet discussed before, with the help of which we can interpret the relationship of the cemetery and the community of Khirbet Qumran from new viewpoints.

We cannot forget the fact, that only a minor part of the cemetery has been excavated professionally up to now, therefore conducting statistical examinations (even if many has already done that) is impossible, cannot give proper results. My aim is to study this topic comparing and analyzing the archaeological finds and the text of the scrolls with no misrepresentation. Based on these I study the relation of the community towards death, burial and afterlife.

II. Methods and structure of the dissertation

In the preface of the thesis I set two main aims. The former one was to map the ideas of the Qumran community about death, and to examine their practical realization. The latter one was to place all of these in broader context, i.e. to compare it with the Jewish cult of the dead and the burial customs in the Second Temple Period.

As one can see in the chapter dealing with the history of research, after the discovery of the caves much more attention was drawn towards the settlement and the cemetery. Several papers dealt with them and on the basis of the few revealed graves research started in order to find its possible parallels. Based on the anthropological analysis of the skeleton remains statistics were made (e.g. in the point of view of the ratio of men and women or supposed professions of the dead), but the results of these works are misleading because of the low number of the excavated graves. In the Chapter 3 I focused my attention on the connection of the settlement and the cemetery which is one of the biggest problems of the research of Qumran. In the point of my thesis it is important to emphasize that I accept the *communis opinio* that the settlement revealed at Khirbet Qumran and the scrolls found in the caves belonged to the Essenes, already known from Josephus. The scrolls were composed and written by the members of the community and they reflect their beliefs. The members of the community were buried in the cemetery located nearby the settlement. This hypothesis is also confirmed both by the antique sources (Josephus Flavius, Philo Alexandrinus and Pliny the Elder) and the archaeological finds.

During the examination of the chapters of the scrolls dealing with the death I came to the conclusion that the most important topic of the research is the question of purity/impurity and the prominent role of the 'holy'. The holy must be kept as far as possible from everything being impure, mainly from the highest source of impurity: the corpse. In the case, if the holy becomes impure, it must be purified according to strict prescriptions. The community of Qumran interpreted this principle that had already existed in the general Jewish tradition in its own way. Distinction can be made at two main points. On the one hand the Essenes interpreted the *halakha* the possibly strictest way, thus they set a system of severe rules in order to regulate the purification (obligatory already on the first day of becoming impure) and the protection of the integrity of holy. On the other hand they defined themselves as a holy and pure group, so they applied these laws also to the settlement and its members.

In Chapter 5 I examined the most important practical aspect of this all, the effect of purity in forming space: we can meet impure people and things only moving away from the holiest space. The determining element of the concentricity of the system described above is the cemetery, and the impurity caused by the corpse. In Chapter 6 we could see how this all appears in the texts and burial practice (e.g. the location of the cemetery, way of purifying after burial). The next chapter focuses on the texts: in the first half of it I studied the expressions in the scrolls, applied (in many cases in a figurative sense though) to my topic (e. g. pit, worm, eternal flame). In the second half I collected the passages pertaining to death and burial in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

In the centre of the next unit of the thesis stands the cemetery. Beside the graveyard adjacent to the settlement, similar structures from other sites

were presented as well. It becomes clear from the chapter dealing with the general burial customs of the Second Temple Period, that in what degree the practice in Qumran differs both from the usual in the Holy Land and in the Diaspora.

III. Main results of the thesis

The statement, occurring at several points of the dissertation - that the sources concerning the thanatology of the community in Qumran are very sporadic - proved false while coming to the chapter of summary: we could see, that searching for parallels (both theoretical or practical) can open new directions in the research.

In my thesis the most important new perspective is the study of the importance of purity and space. As we could see in Chapters 5 and 6 the question of purity had a decisive role in the everyday life of the community. To such an extent, that the most important appearance of the question of death and burial in the Dead Sea Scrolls is connected with the impurity caused by the corpse (mainly in the Temple Scroll). The fear from it, and the endeavour to preserve the purity of everything being holy forms their spatial theory: the most important goal is to exclude the impure, and to preserve the integrity of the holy.

On the basis of some texts we can conclude that the community held itself and its residence to be so holy, that it completely excluded corpse impurity with its laws and practice. E.g. it placed the cemetery to proper distance according to the Jewish law, built several *miqvaot* for the ritual of purification.

A basic question of the research of burials in Qumran is that besides this endeavour to such strict purity, why the description of the proper burial, the construction of graves, etc. do not occur in the scrolls. A possible answer to this question can be the above mentioned theory: the ‘holy’ community kept itself far away from the impurities caused by the dead even in such a way that there is even no mention of that in the scrolls. On the other hand, it must be mentioned that after the adventurous discoveries of the scrolls the existence of a text dealing with this topic never can be ruled out.

It has to be mentioned that similarly to death, there is hardly any reference in the texts concerning birth; especially its practical side remains unknown with the exception of questions of purity in *halakhic* texts. The parallel is obvious: as both events were present in their everyday life, even if birth occurred more frequently among the group of Essenes living in towns in families. In my opinion the reason for this phenomenon was the idea of the “holy community” mentioned above: both birth and death are impure events, that together with the person becoming impure had to be separated from the community.

Another possible answer to the silence of the texts regarding the question of burial practices arose after the study of the supposed parallels of the cemetery. As we could see in the chapter dealing with the Book of Tobit the author of the book had to know the practice of simple shaft graves, and it was adequate that the pious Tobit buried the corpses found by him in similar graves. As there is no mention in the book about Tobit having built any grandiose grave monument for himself and for his family – though he could have afforded it according to the text – we can assume that both him, and his wife was interred in this simple way. Accepting the Palestinian background

of the book we can suppose that the author chose the most general and simple burial method to show the 'simplicity' and piety of his hero.

As we could see in the chapter concerning the burials of the Second Temple Period simple shaft graves are hardly known from the most important necropoleis (Jerusalem, Jericho). On the other hand, one has also to keep in mind that the survival of the simple graves cannot be compared to the grandiose rock-cut tombs, because they could easily be eroded from the surface.

The usage of such simple pit graves (without any remarkable grave-goods) could suit perfectly to the puritan way of life of the community in Qumran; mainly, as in some of the scrolls the community called itself 'poor' or 'the community of the poor' several times. Questions can arise while reading about graves of similar type described in Chapter 10: what could be the connection between the persons buried there and the Essenes? Can these graves be called Essene or Qumran-type? In my opinion this connection cannot be proven this way, we can only say that those, who buried their dead there could have similar beliefs concerning death and afterlife as the community of Qumran. They did not consider external formalities to be important, their graves were undecorated in contrast to the general practice of the period, and the dead were buried without any or with poor grave-furniture. On the other hand, marking the graves with heaps of stones on the surface, and their thorough arrangement in rows was important for them, also to preserve the individuality of their dead.

Most of the papers dealing with the cemetery and burial customs of the community of Qumran end with the sentence stating that the thanatology of the community can be reconstructed only after the revealing of the whole

cemetery and publication of the finds. An aim of my thesis was to point out that it is indispensable only for the answering of certain questions and problems (mainly concerning the community); but means only a partial problem in giving answers to other questions. Much more problematic is the silence of the written sources, behind which – as we could see in many cases - consciousness can be supposed.

We can reconstruct unambiguously the following elements of the burial practices at Qumran:

- On the basis of the scrolls: because of the high-polluting rate of the corpse everybody and everything getting in contact with that falls under severe purification rules; the dead must be located in a well defined and delimited space; we know about cemeteries, but have no descriptions of them.

- On the basis of archaeological excavations: there is a low number of excavated tombs in the cemetery of the Khirbeh; even less are well documented; the importance of purification rituals (*miqvaot*).

- On the basis of parallels

- a) archaeological parallels: descriptions of cemeteries in Chapter 10;

- b) literary parallels: the practice of burial into shaft tombs based on the Book of Tobit.

Furthermore, we can sum up the following: the simple burials into shaft tombs at Qumran are rare in Second Temple Judaism, but –even if no direct connection can be detected- not unparalleled. The most possible reason of this burial practice is that, as the general burial method of the poor, the ascetic community of Khirbet Qumran simply adopted it. In my opinion, the

divergence from the average practice is not a specific Essene feature, but in some way is because of the special nature of our sources: both the grandiose rock-cut tombs and most of the literary sources represent a small segment of the society: the intellectual and financial elite. Meanwhile, the simple shaft-tombs of the poor are vanished not only from the surface of the ground, but also from the sources. In my opinion, the examination of the cemetery of Khirbet Qumran can shed light also on this missing segment.

IV. List of publications

- Sources of Ancient Jewish Mission. (in Hungarian) In: *Orientalista Nap 2005* (Budapest, 2007) 28-37.
- Jewish Burial Practices from the Hellenistic Era until the Abandonment of the cemetery at Beth She'arim. (in Hungarian) In: *Tanulmányok évezredek történelméből*. PPKÉ-BTK:Piliscsaba (forthcoming)
- The Terminology of Death at Qumran. In: K.D. Dobos – M. köszeghy (eds.), *With Wisdom as a Robe. Qumran and Other Jewish Studies in Honour of Ida Fröhlich*. (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2009) 339-348.
- Burial Practices of the Community of Qumran (in Hungarian). In: *Studia Biblica Athanasiana* (forthcoming)
- מֵתָא entry. In: *Theologisches Wörterbuch Qumran* (forthcoming)
- Burial in the Book of Tobit and in Qumran. In: *Proceedings of the 'DSS in Context Conference'*, Vienna. (Leiden: Brill) (forthcoming)

Reviews

- Rachel Hachlili: Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period. Leiden, Brill, 2005 In: *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* Tomus LVIII 2007, 222-225.
- Xeravits Géza: Könyvtár a pusztában. Bevezetés a holt-tengeri tekercsek nem-bibliái irodalmába (Library in the Wilderness. Introduction to the Non-Biblical Literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls). Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2008 In: *Katekhón* (V/1) 2008 146-150.

Conference papers

- 18 May 2006: Space in History (PPKE-BTK, Piliscsaba) *Jerusalem as Sacred Space in Ancient Jewish Burial Practices* (in Hungarian)
- 26-28 May 2006: VII. Conference of Hungarian Studies of Antiquity (University of Debrecen): *Jewish Burial Practices in the Second Temple Period* (in Hungarian)
- 15 December 2006: Oriental Day (ELTE, Budapest): *Sources of Ancient Jewish Mission* (in Hungarian)
- 15-20 July 2007: International Organisation for the Study of Old Testament/International Organisation of Qumranic Studies XIX. International Congress (Ljubjana): *To Die in Qumran*
- 22-26 July 2007: Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting (Vienna): *The Terminology of Death at Qumran*
- 16 November 2007: I. Seminary for Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (PPKE-BTK, Piliscsaba): *The History of the Rechabites – Rechabites in History* (in Hungarian)
- 11-14 February 2008: The Dead Sea Scrolls in Context Conference organised by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the University of Vienna (Vienna): *Burial in the Book of Tobit and in Qumran*
- 3-6 August 2008: European Association for Biblical Studies Annual Meeting (Lisbon) Session: Sacred Space and the Bible: *Death, Burial and Sacred Space in the Temple Scroll*

- 18 November 2008: II. Seminary for Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (PPKE-BTK, Piliscsaba): *“Where are they come from, and where have been buried” – the Memory of the death of Prophets in Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (in Hungarian)
- 1-2 February 2009: I. Meeting of the Society of Jewish and Biblical Studies in Central Europe (PPKE-BTK, Piliscsaba): *To Die as a Stranger – Jewish Burial Practices in the Diaspora in Antiquity*
- 14 June 2009.: Seminary on the Tobiads (Universität Wien, Institut für Judaistik): *Death, Burial and Sacred Space in Qumran*