The Sect of the Essenes

Meaning Of Their Name: According to Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher who wrote during the first half of the First Century AD, the Essene name somehow related to their piety or observance of the Law.27

Origin: There is no definitive understanding as to when this sect began. Philo of Alexandria (mentioned above) was the first ancient author to mention them as a distinctive group, locating them in the region of Judea & southern Syria (basically the ancient “Promised Land”) and estimating the number of adherents of this sect to be about 4,000. I would guess that the philosophical practices of Essenes may have developed at the same time as the initial Maccabean revolution (c. 175 – 134 BC)28 or possibly during a decline in Jewish morality after the righteous passion of the Maccabean revolution had cooled.

Jewish Sources of Primary Information:

- Philo
  - “Every Good Man”, Sections 12-13
  - “Apology for the Jews” Section 11

- Josephus
  - Wars of the Jews, Book 2, Sections 8
  - Antiquities Book 18, Section 1.5

27 “Every Good Man Is Free” Section 12.
28 Dating it from the rise of Antiochus IV as his appointment of a Jewish High Priest who was committed to “Hellenizing” (“making Greek-like”) the Jewish people, until the death of the High Priest Simon, the last surviving brother of Judas Maccabee.
Basic Philosophies:

- Fate controls everything.
- Physical bodies are corruptible. Souls are immortal. Therefore, physical death frees the soul from the prison of the body.
- There are eternal rewards & punishments after physical death.
- Men should be treated with equal respect. Essenes did not have slaves & were well known for their respectful behavior.
- Women & minor children were intrinsically selfish and manipulative.29 Essene communes were made up of adult men, particularly much older men.

Specific Beliefs & Practices:

- They associated physical pleasure with sinful covetousness. They rejected the idea of pursuing personal property.
- They lived in communes, typically in less populous settings such as out in the country, in villages or in smaller cities. This was primarily because they believed sinful practices were as contagious as diseases and that both ran rampant in heavily populated areas.
- They sent sacrifices to the Jerusalem Temple to be offered on their behalf, but did not go there to worship, since their ceremonial cleansing rituals did not match those customarily practiced at the Temple and they were therefore not allowed to enter the Court of Israel.
- They repudiated marriage as an institution; and if already married, abstained from sexual activity within marriage. (There was one order of Essenes that did permit marriage, but sexual activity was engaged in only to produce children in order to keep the human race viable.)
- Having no minor children within their communes, their numbers grew and were maintained by adding new adult adherents on a regular basis.
- Members of the commune worked long hours in peaceful vocations (agriculture, animal husbandry or some non-violent trade), putting their produce or their pay into the hands of a communal custodian who insured that the necessities were kept on hand.

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29 “…because woman is a selfish creature and one addicted to jealousy in an immoderate degree, and terribly calculated to agitate and overturn the natural inclinations of a man, and to mislead him by her continual tricks; for as she is always studying deceitful speeches and all other kinds of hypocrisy, like an actress on the stage, when she is alluring the eyes and ears of her husband, she proceeds to cajole his predominant mind after the servants have been deceived. And again, if there are children she becomes full of pride and all kinds of license in her speech, and all the obscure sayings which she previously meditated in irony in a disguised manner she now begins to utter with audacious confidence; and becoming utterly shameless she proceeds to acts of violence, and does numbers of actions of which everyone is hostile to such associations; for the man who is bound under the influence of the charms of a woman, or of children, by the necessary ties of nature, being overwhelmed by the impulses of affection, is no longer the same person towards others, but is entirely changed, having, without being aware of it, become a slave instead of a free man.”

Philo, “Apology”
The communal day would begin, before sunrise, with traditional, rote prayers. Everyone would then work until about 11 AM, at which time they would gather for a communal midday meal. Before eating they put on white clothing, bathed themselves in cold water and a priest would offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the simple meal. During the meal they took turns speaking, one at a time, with no clamorous discussion. After the meal, another prayer of thanks was offered for the food consumed, everyone changed out of their white clothing and then they would all go back to work until after the sun had set. Afterward, they would repeat the communal meal process. Apparently, before retiring for the evening, they engaged in the study of the Jewish Scripture.

The Sabbath was observed with strict abstinence from “work” of any sort, eating (“finger”-?) food prepared the previous day. (They even tried to avoid emptying their bowels on the Sabbath.) They spent the day at the synagogue, with the older men explaining the Scripture to the younger men.

The communal custodian provided clothing & supplies to the members of the commune out of the community stores, as needed. Essenes tended to use this items until they were completely worn out.

Those wanting to become an Essene must live the disciplined lifestyle outside the communal house or compound for a total of one year before they can participate in a ceremonial washing. (Presumably, during this time, the initiate would be giving their income to the communal custodian & receiving from him whatever clothing & items needed, as well as doing all the other things done within the commune only on their own.) After being washed, the initiate must live another two years in this fashion before they were permitted to enter the communal home and to eat of the communal meals. At the time of their acceptance they were also expected to make specific oaths along the following lines:

- They would be pious toward God.
- They would be just toward all men.
- They would physically harm none, either by their own choice or by the command of others.
- They would hate the wicked & assist the righteous.
- They would show respect to all, including those in authority. If in authority, they would not make themselves more noticeable than those subject to them.
- They would love truth & reprove liars.
- They would not steal nor profit unlawfully.
- They would not keep information from other Essenes, nor share private Essene information with others.
- They would not change Essene doctrine.
- They would “take up the cause of the sect” regarding the books (probably meaning any copies of Jewish Scripture kept at the commune).
- They would also do the same regarding “the names of the angels,” meaning either the reputation of human “messengers” from within the Essene community or some knowledge the community had about supernatural “messengers.”
• Essenes from one commune could visit & draw upon the resources of another commune during their travels.
• Traveling Essenes were specifically permitted to carry personal weapons for self-defense.
• Essenes took care of their sick & aged.
• Failure to follow the community rules resulted in excommunication. Since there was apparently also an oath to abstain from foods prepared by those outside the community, Josephus reports that some of those excommunicated pretty much starved to death, trying to live by eating grass. However, he also writes that some were let back into the community just shy of death under the assumption that they had paid for their sin.
• Condemnation was by the community. The court seldom consisted of less than 100.
• Blasphemy of Moses, like that of God, was a capital offense.
• It was thought by many that all Essenes had the ability to prophesy.
• Because of their well-known piety, Essenes were typically excused from making oaths (either of loyalty or of court testimony) to those outside their community.

Post-Temple Existence: Only a handful of years after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, a respectable Roman author known as Pliny the Elder described how the Essenes were then concentrated in a community immediately west of the Dead Sea, not far from En-Gedi.

“Lying on the west of Asphaltites, and sufficiently distant to escape its noxious exhalations, are the Esseni, a people that live apart from the world, and marvellous beyond all others throughout the whole earth, for they have no women among them; to sexual desire they are strangers; money they have none; the palm-trees are their only companions. Day after day, however, their numbers are fully recruited by multitudes of strangers that resort to them, driven thither to adopt their usages by the tempests of fortune, and wearied with the miseries of life. Thus it is, that through thousands of ages, incredible to relate, this people eternally prolongs its existence, without a single birth taking place there; so fruitful a source of population to it is that weariness of life which is felt by others.”

Natural History, Book 5, Chapter 15 on Judaea

Possible Relationship to the Dead Sea Scrolls: Since their discovery in 1947, at the Qumran Caves near the NW shore of the Dead Sea, it has been speculated that these scrolls were produced by an Essene community. No indisputable evidence has surfaced to solidify this speculation.

Possible Relationship of John the Immerser to the Essenes: While it has been suggested by some (especially since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls) that John was an Essene, or that his ministry was influenced by the Essenes, there are no Biblical references or primary historical records regarding John which make this claim. I personally doubt it.