Why did Jesus Choose the Sea of Galilee?

In the times of Jesus, there were hundreds of people living in caves in the cliffs bordering the Plain of Ginnosar, to the northwest of the Sea of Galilee. This cave-dwelling phenomenon began around 100 BCE and continued until the 3rd century CE. Current theories view these cave-dwellings as cliff-shelters for use in times of trouble, but do not explain why the caves were inhabited continuously, even in quiet times. This article offers a novel explanation for this activity and touches upon its contribution to the origins of Christianity.

Introduction

Those who have visited the Sea of Galilee and enjoyed its isolation may have found themselves pondering why Jesus chose to base his ministry in this remote lakeside area of Galilee, as the Gospels relate. It was not an obvious choice, for Jesus lived 20 miles away in Nazareth, had family connections in Judaea, and could have chosen to establish his mission in any other location. Why, then, did he settle for this frontier region at the northeastern corner of his homeland? Was it to fulfil Scripture (Mt 4,12-16), or to respond to the simple faith and prayers of its oppressed population, or to escape interference from the officials far away in Jerusalem? Did he choose this multiethnic crossroad in order to best prepare his apostles to go out and evangelize the whole world? All these proposals, and others, may have been factors, but they were not unique or specific to this location. In this essay, I would like to present one specific and neglected aspect of the geographical and historical background of the area that may have determined, more than anything else, why Jesus chose to start his mission here and make the Sea of Galilee the cradle of his messianic movement.

The Sea of Galilee lies in a basin, surrounded by mountains on three sides. To the east, the ground rises sharply onto the Golan Heights; to the north the hills ascend steadily up to the swampy Huleh Valley, and on the West the mountainous walls are interrupted at the northwestern corner of the lake by a fertile alluvial plain, 3 x 2 miles, called the Plain of Ginnosar. Except for the lakeside, this plain is also bounded by mountains. In the mountains to the south and north of the plain, there are tall cliffs made of limestone and etched into the cliffs are hundreds of caves.

What is so unique about this region is that dozens, rising to hundreds, of people inhabited these caves from the start of the 1st century BCE. The caves showing evidence of occupation are to be found mainly in the long ranges of cliffs skirting Mts. Arbel and Nittai, on either side of Wadi Arbel, whose stream empties into the Plain of Ginnosar from the south. From about the same period (100 BCE), there is also evidence of occupation in the numerous cave complexes high in the cliffs of Wadi Amud and Akhbara Rock, to the north (Figs. 1 and 2). The dating of this cave-dwelling phenomenon to the start of the 1st century BCE, according to the archaeological finds, coincides with a widespread ethnic shift in the Galilee region, from a pagan Syrophoenician population that had previously migrated eastwards from the coastal cities of Acre and Tyre, to a predominantly Jewish population immigrating from Judaea in the south. Judaea's borders were expanding rapidly northward at this time, as a result of a campaign of military conquest and occupation led by the ruling high priest and ethnarch of the Hasmonean dynasty, John Hyrcanus (134-104 BCE) and by his son and successor, King Aristobulus (104-103 BCE). The dating and archaeological finds confirm that the caves at these sites were prepared and occupied by Jews.

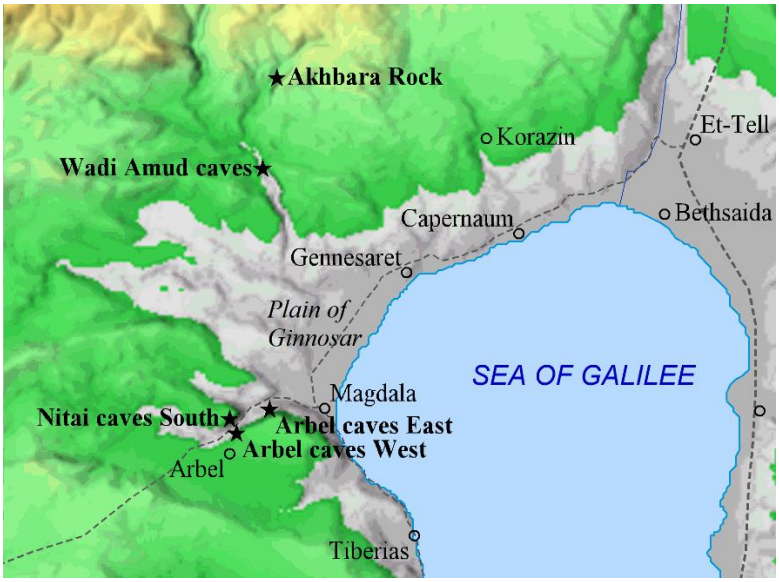

Fig 1: Map of the Plain of Ginnosar with the cave sites to the north and south (created using Bible Mapper 5.0)

Fig 2: View northeast over the Plain of Ginnosar from Mt. Arbel cliff-top

The cave-dwelling phenomenon lasted at least three centuries, from 100 BCE until 250 CE, when it began to decline. The cave population was flourishing in the early 1st century CE, when Jesus and his apostles preached the Gospel on the shores of the lake, just a few miles away. Although some of the more inaccessible caves were used sporadically as shelters from attack during the Civil War (40-37 BCE), and again during the two Jewish revolts (67-70 CE and 132-135 CE), the majority of the caves were inhabited continuously until the 3rd century CE. Due to the absence of historical documentation about the caves and their residents in the quiet times, most of what we know comes from archaeological surveys, excavations and explorations of the caves in question. The findings from these investigations can then be matched with the available records of local historical events, in

order to piece together the nature and purpose of this extraordinary, Hasmonean-era 'housing project'.

The Caves in Question

Thanks mainly to the work of the archaeologists Zvi Ilan and Uzi Leibner, and to the cave exploration of Yinon Shivti'el, we now know the precise number, distribution and contents of the caves in the mountains to the south and to the north of the Ginnosar plain.[1] In the cliffs of Mts. Arbel and Nittai to the south, on either side of Wadi Arbel, there are 530 caves, of which at least 400 show signs of human modification and occupation in the past, many of them dating from around 100 BCE.[2] For at least 150 of these caves, access is possible only by rope or rope ladders, and the remaining 250 can be reached on foot from the base of the cliff, although the climb is sometimes difficult and dangerous. Most of the cave-dwellings have been fashioned in separate clusters of 4 to 12 caves, at intervals along the cliffs, except for two particular sites in the Arbel range, where there are dense concentrations: one at the eastern end (Arbel caves East) and one at the western end (Arbel caves West) about a mile apart. The collection of cave-dwellings at the eastern end was called a 'cave village' by Zvi Ilan, the first archaeologist to investigate it.

In the mountains to the north of Ginnosar plain, Yinon Shivti'el has counted a total of 304 caves at three separate sites in the cliffs of Wadi Amud, of which 250 show signs of occupation from the first century BCE, and a little further to the north, in the cliff of Akhbara Rock (at 430 feet it is the highest vertical cliff in Galilee), there are 127 caves in total, of which a few are accessible only by rappelling down from the top of the cliff. In summary, there are about 400 caves with signs of occupation in the Arbel/Nittai cliffs to the south of the Ginnosar plain, and about 350 in the Amud/Akhbara cliffs to the north. Of these, a substantial minority (up to 35% in Arbel/Nittai cliffs) are accessible only by professional rock climbers using sophisticated climbing equipment.

Before considering the historical background for the cave-dwelling phenomenon in this region, a brief description of the cave contents and archaeological findings is needed. The cave-dwellings have all been laboriously carved, to a greater or lesser extent, large enough to accommodate a person standing upright. Shivti'el discerns a difference in construction style between those carved in the early 1st century BCE and those in the later part of that century: "Based on the pottery finds, the caves were divided into two main periods. Small natural caves with signs of rough, undressed hewing that probably date from the Hellenistic period, and a second group of larger caves, all man-made and cut with straight sides, dated to the early Roman period. A few of the rock-hewn caves contain two or more chambers, some of which are long and narrow. In various cases passages were found between caves on different levels and some had shafts cut in them to move from one to another. Access ladders were probably erected inside chambers that were completely hidden from the outside".[3]

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[1] Much of the information in this paper is taken from the works of these three investigators, especially Zvi Ilan, "Reviving a 2,000-Year-Old Landmark", *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/1989; 60-69;
Uzi Leibner, *Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Galilee*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 127, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009; Yinon Shivti'el, "Artificial Caves Cut into Cliff Tops in the Galilee and their Historical Significance", Hypogea 2015, *Proceedings of International Congress of Speleology in Artificial Cavities*, Rome, March 11/17, 2015, 67-76; and *Cliff Shelters and Hiding Complexes in the Galilee During the Early Roman Period: The Speleological and Archaeological Evidence*, Novum Testamentum Et Orbis Antiquus—Series Archaeologica; Gottingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht GmbH & Co, 2019.

[2] *Cliff Shelters*, 53.

[3] *Cliff Shelters*, 57.

Within the caves, plastered cisterns have been found, fed by carved channels running from the cliff-face, or from internal seepage, and at each site at least one stepped-pool has been discovered and identified as a *miqveh* (a ritual bath for purification). Both cisterns and *miqva'ot* are particularly numerous in the cave collection at the eastern end of the Arbel cliff range (Arbel caves East), where 35 cisterns and 5 *miqva'ot* have been identified to date. Mention should also be made of the two fortress-like structures at this site, the first is a large cave with an ancient wall at its entrance, dating to the Hasmonean era (more will be said about this later), and the second is a much larger, walled construction on three levels with guard towers, in the making of which most of the original cave-dwellings and water installations in that part were erased. It was built in the 17th century by the Druze overlord Fahr a-Din II and is called the Qala'at Ibn Ma'an fortress.

Many of the cave-dwellings have carefully carved fittings, such as wall niches for oil lamps, floor pits for storage jars and carved slits at the entrances to attach ropes for hauling and climbing. Outside the entrance, some caves have a hewn ledge likely used as an observation point. Findings from the caves and their ledges include ceramic sherds, coins and the occasional Roman-army arrowhead. Study of the ceramics from all the sites show similar patterns, indicating occupation from the late Hellenistic, or Hasmonean, period (110-50 BCE), increasing through the early Roman period (50 BCE-135 CE), and declining towards the end of the mid-Roman period (135-250 CE). In some sites, there appears to have been temporary reoccupation during the mid and late Byzantine times. The coins found in or near the caves confirm the chronological range of ceramic fragments, with a preponderance of coins from the reigns of the two Hasmonean rulers, John Hyrcanus (134-104 BCE) and Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE).

Finally, it should be noted that the cave-dwellings described here were all built in the vicinity of a town or village. The two cave-dwelling sites in the cliffs of Mt. Arbel, Arbel caves East and Arbel caves West, as well as the southern caves on Mt. Nittai, are all built within 1½ miles of the ancient town of Arbel, which, according to good archaeological data, was established at about the same time, in the late Hellenistic period, or to be more precise, during the reign of John Hyrcanus. The caves at the northern end of Mt. Nittai are dated a little later, to the start of the early Roman era (50-40 BCE), and coincide with the establishment of the village at the foot of Mt. Nittai (Horvat Vradim or Hamam). At the other sites, north of the Plain of Ginnosar, the caves in the cliffs of Wadi Amud were connected by a path to the ancient village of Kur (Kahal) and were also close to other settlements in the vicinity (Huqoq, Shuna and Nashi). Similarly, the cave-dwellings in the Akhbara Rock are adjacent to the ruins of the ancient village of Akhbara.

The Purpose of the Caves

There is a wide scholarly consensus that the cave-dwellings at these sites were constructed by the neighbouring villagers as shelters and refuges in times of trouble, and were actually used for this purpose during the Civil War against Herod (40-37 CE) and during the two Jewish Revolts against Rome (66-70 CE and 132-135 CE). After investigating the Mt. Arbel caves in 1989, the archaeologist Zvi Ilan was the first to propose this explanation for their construction, arguing from similarities to the 'refuge caves' that had just been discovered in Judaea. This explanation has been endorsed and developed in the last decade by the courageous work of Yinon Shivti'el, who has surveyed the most inaccessible cave-dwellings in the region, and termed them 'cliff shelters'[4] to

[4] Shivti'el's definition of 'cliff shelters' was adopted by scholars of the Cave Research Center in Israel, as follows: "caves occurring naturally near the top of steep cliffs in Galilee, close to settlements and with signs of human adaptation for use as shelters and hiding places. Cliff shelters had links with the fugitive's home settlements", *Cliff Shelters*, 47

distinguish them from the other types of shelters described to date, namely the isolated, rocky 'refuge caves' and the urban, subterranean 'hideout complexes'. He writes "The phenomenon of preparing cliff shelters and the findings discovered in them… indicate that they were meant for survival and in a collective organization around the need to defend and safeguard the living in a situation of deep distress. This was true during the Hellenistic period and, even more, during the period of the Great Jewish Revolt against Rome".[5]

However, by focusing on the use of these caves in times of distress, the 'cave shelter' explanation proposed by Ilan and Shivti'el overlooks the intense and continuous use of the majority of caves at other times too. This objection is most clearly stated by Uzi Leibner, "The significant Early Roman finds might support the assumption that these caves indeed served as places of refuge for rebels during the First Jewish Revolt, however, this cannot be proven and there is a considerable amount of pottery from other periods as well".[6] Arguing from the results of his Eastern Galilee settlement survey, Leibner admits that although "these cave assemblages are not similar in terms of their function to ordinary civilian settlements," he nevertheless includes them in his estimates of settlement size, precisely because "the archaeological evidence indicates continuous settlement here through several periods and the finds attest to the caves having served as permanent dwellings during certain periods".[7] Leibner's survey evidence directly contradicts the theory that the caves were used only in times of trouble.

Because of the difficult living conditions in the caves at Wadi Amud, and the extremely difficult access, Leibner also challenges the assumption "that the settlement caves during this period pertained to a civilian population from the nearby abandoned villages that remained to work their lands. There is no unequivocal proof regarding who inhabited these caves at that time".[8] In summary, we may know when and for how long the cave-dwellings were inhabited, but the question about who inhabited them, and why, is not adequately answered by the prevailing 'cliff-shelter-in-times-of-trouble' hypothesis.

Matching Archaeological Findings with Local History

Clearly, living in caves is not everyone's preference, so those who did must have had a valid reason. This reason may indeed have been to ensure personal security, but insecurity comes in many forms, not just with invading armies. In this respect, it is significant that the Mishnah mentions a renowned Torah scholar by the name of Nittai (or Mattei) the Arbelite (m. Avot 1:6-7; m. Hagigah 2:2), who is said to have been the vice president of the Sanhedrin during the reign of John Hyrcanus, c. 120 BCE. It is not known how he came to live in the town of Arbel, which was just coming into existence at this time, but it must have been no coincidence that precisely at this time, the ruling ethnarch and high priest, John Hyrcanus, expelled all members of the Pharisee party from their positions of authority and indeed from Jerusalem. According to Josephus, this was collective punishment for suspecting Hyrcanus was an illegitimate high priest, based on the allegation that his mother was once imprisoned and raped by the Greeks (*Antiquities* 13.288-296). True or not, the exile and persecution of the Pharisees continued for the next forty-five years, until the end of the reign of John's son, Alexander Jannaeus in 76 BCE, when Queen Salome Alexandra readmitted them to positions of authority in the ruling institutions of the State (*Antiquities* 15-16.398-415).

[5] "Artificial Caves Cut into Cliff Tops in the Galilee", 74-75.
[6] *Settlement and History*, 240.
[7] *Settlement and History*, 241, cf. 146, 214, 239.
[8] *Settlement and History*, 146.

Expelled from Jerusalem around 120 BCE, we can assume Nittai took up residence at Arbel and continued to study Torah. Many more Pharisees would have followed him there and set up a synagogue and *Beit Midrash* in the newly built town. Within a short time, John Hyrcanus had conquered Samaria and Scythopolis (Beit She'an), opening the way for large-scale immigration of Jews to Galilee, and putting Arbel within range of the king's reprisals and persecution. Now the caves not only offered some protection against royal retaliation, but also obliged their residents to adopt the ascetic practices most fitting for Torah study. So, the exiled community of Pharisees set about adapting the caves nearest to Arbel for semi-permanent inhabitation, at least until their fortunes might change and persecution cease.

Although this explanation of the origins of the cave-dwelling phenomenon at Arbel is somewhat speculative and incomplete, it is corroborated not only by the dating of the foundation of Arbel (c. 120-110 BCE) and the earliest cave-dwellings (c. 100 BCE), but also by a curious reduction in the population of the Arbel West cave-dwellings (Fig 3), those closest to the town of Arbel, at the end of the Hellenistic period (c. 70-50 BCE).[9] This would indeed coincide with the return of many Pharisees to Jerusalem, following their rehabilitation under Queen Salome Alexandra.

Fig 3: View of the Arbel caves West, the caves closest to the town of Arbel on the plain above.

Having put forward the case for religious persecution as the original motive for the cave-dwelling phenomenon in this area, we must allow local history to complete the picture. Informed by Roland Deines when he reports that this border territory of Galilee became attractive for those who "needed or wanted to escape the political hornet's nest of Jerusalem and its surroundings without going abroad", and also for those who "wanted to stay below the radar of the Hasmoneans in Jerusalem",[10] we should not be surprised if other persecuted religious groups or individuals sought refuge in this corner of Galilee at the same time as the Pharisees, around 100 BCE. With the return of many

[9] *Settlement and History*, 241.

[10] "Religious Practices and Religious Movements in Galilee: 100 BCE–200 CE", in *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods*, Vol 1: Life, Culture, and Society, eds. David A. Fiensy and James Riley Strange, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014; 83-84.

Pharisees to Jerusalem from 70-50 BCE, the other religious group or groups would have been left in the majority.

Concerning the identity of this majority, there are clear historical footprints of an Essene presence on Mt. Arbel by the time that Herod appeared on the scene. Josephus informs us that Herod and the Essenes had a close and deeply respectful relationship, which he dates to Herod's earliest years, when an Essene prophesied to Herod that he would be king (*Antiquities* 15.372-79). The Essenes would therefore have viewed Herod's push for the throne during the Civil War (40-37 CE) as divinely willed and worthy of their wholehearted support. Against this background, it is highly significant that, in 38 BCE, Herod chose to establish a base for his army at Arbel, while conducting his lengthy Galilean campaign against the supporters of his Hasmonean rival, King Antigonus II (Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.305-316; *Antiquities* 14.415-431).

At the start of this campaign, Josephus reports that Herod set up a camp for his army at Arbel: "Having sent in advance three battalions of infantry and a squadron of cavalry to the village of Arbela, he joined them forty days later with the rest of his army" (*Jewish War* 1.305; cf. *Antiquities* 14.415-416; Fig 4).[11] The plain meaning of this statement is that the advance party (about 750 men and 30 cavalry) took 40 days to set up the camp, before Herod arrived and stayed there with his whole army (about 3000 infantry and 600 cavalry). Soon after his arrival, Herod and his army were attacked by a rebel army on the Arbel plain and routed them. The subsequent clean-up campaign continued intermittently over the next 9-10 months, during which time the camp at Arbel would have served as the base for Herod's army.

It is often asserted by scholars that Herod came to Mt. Arbel to fight against the town, because it was a Hasmonean military settlement, a 'hotbed of Hasmonean resistance'.[12] However, this does not tally with the account of Josephus, where it is clear that the advance party met no resistance whatsoever when they arrived at Arbel, nor for the next 40 days until Herod arrived with the rest of his army, at which point they were attacked by a formidable military force (*Jewish War* 1.305). There is no historical or archaeological record of fighting in the town of Arbel at this time, so it would appear the combatants had approached Herod's camp from elsewhere. Furthermore, the initial deployment of an advance party indicates that Herod had coordinated the arrival of his army at Arbel with the residents. In the wording of Josephus' account, there is even a hint that Herod undertook this campaign in response to their request for help against the rebels occupying the caves nearby: "he…

[11] 'Arbela' is the Aramaic name for the place that is called 'Arbel' in Hebrew. The precise site of Herod's camp has not yet been confirmed, but surface features were identified by the archaeologist Zvi Ilan in 1988/9, who wrote "Before closing I would like to add that in the flat area near the cliff of Mount Arbel, we have found the remains of what may be a Roman way-station or military encampment. The remains are comprised of walls enclosing an area which was cleared of rocks. They have not been identified with any certainty at this stage, and they are not crucial to the identification of the Arbel cave village. But if they are indeed what we think they are, they will add another aspect to our knowledge of Arbel and the battle fought there" ("Reviving a 2,000-Year-Old Landmark", *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/9; 69 col 3). This is the site that we have indicated on the map in Fig 4. It is the best information available, until further investigation can be done.

[12] For example: in 1989, Shimon Applebaum postulated that the people of Arbel were "either military settlers who had been placed in the fertile Arbel Valley by the Hasmoneans, or perhaps a Hasmonean garrison from a nearby fortress", cited by Leibner, *Settlement and History,* 254; Ilan and Izdarechet also have the rebels firmly established in the town of Arbel: "… when Herod fought the Galilean Zealots, the Hasmonean loyalists fortified themselves in Arbela" ("Arbel", *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed E. Stern, Vol 1, Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society/Carta, 1993; 87); more recently, Shivti'el has the entire population of Arbel escaping to the caves when Herod arrives: "During the suppression of the Jewish rebellion against Herod (in 37 BCE), the population of Arbela hid in the caves…", *Cliff Shelters*, 34. All these statements presume that the townspeople of Arbel were enemies of Herod.

then started on a campaign against the cave-dwelling brigands, who were infesting a wide area and inflicting on the inhabitants evils no less than those of war" (*Jewish War* 1.304).

The simplest interpretation is that Herod established his army camp at Arbel in order to defend its inhabitants from attacks by an enemy, which also happened to be Herod's enemy, thus confirming that they were on the same side in this Civil War. In this context, Herod would have relied on the Arbel residents to support him and provide food and supplies for his troops. As noted, the Essenes were Herod's main supporters among the Jews at this time, so it is reasonable to conclude that there was a large community of Essenes in the town of Arbel. As most of the surrounding population sided with Herod's Hasmonean rival, Antigonus II, their support for Herod would have been provocative and unpopular. This is likely to have been the reason the Essenes were henceforth called 'Herodians' by the local people (cf. Mt 22,6; Mk 3,6; 8,15 in $\mathfrak{P}^{45}$; 12,13),[13] who remained pro-Hasmonean for many generations. It may also explain why King Herod gave the Essenes, as a reward for their support at Arbel, the land behind his palace in Jerusalem, which then became known as the Essene Quarter.

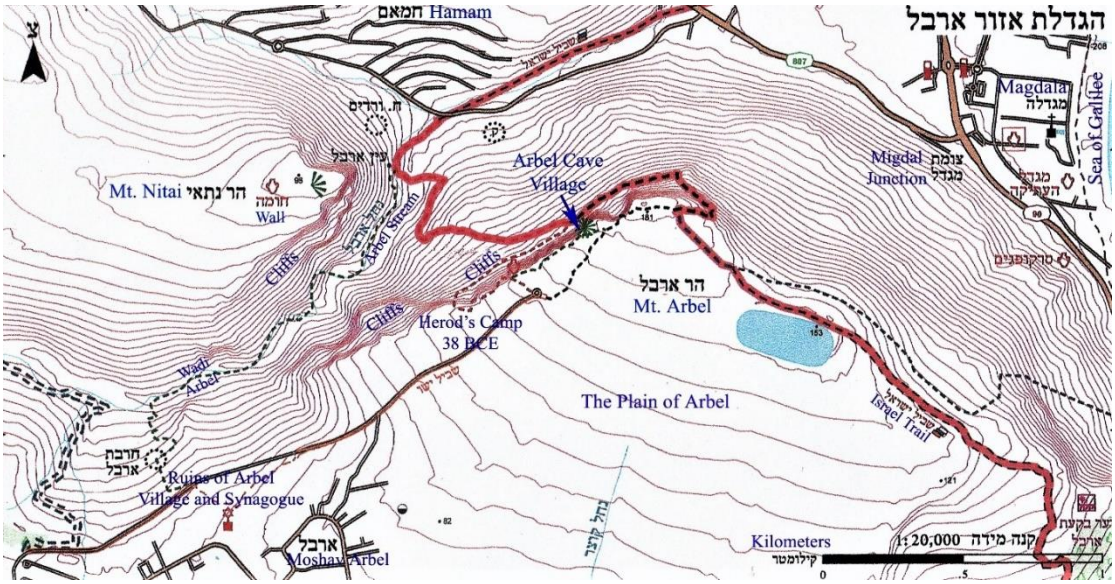

Fig 4: Enlarged map of Arbel Area: adapted from the Galilee and Israel Trail Map, no. 2 in the 'Touring and Hiking Map' series of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), 2018 Edition, reproduced with kind permission from the society's Israel Trails Commission.

Returning to Arbel, we find other footprints of an Essene presence in the town:

1. Apart from its *Beit Midrash*, Arbel also became known for its flax cultivation and linen production (the only other source for linen at this time was at Beit She'an). This industry was essential for the Essenes, as they were only permitted to wear clothes made of linen.[14] The ropes used in the caves, and in the ships on the lake, would also have been made from the flax plant.

2. There are many cist tombs in the Arbel cemetery with an unusual north-south orientation. This is also the orientation of the tombs at Qumran and at other cemeteries thought to have been used by Essene communities (e.g., 'Ain el-Ghuweir, Beit Safafa).

[13] For other arguments identifying the Herodians with the Essenes, see Joan Taylor, *The Essenes, the Scrolls and the Dead Sea, Oxford: OUP, 2012*, 109-30.

[14] Cf. Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002; 193-202.

3. The monumental main entrance of the remains of the 4th century synagogue in Arbel is orientated to the East, and may indicate the original plan of an earlier, smaller, East-West orientated synagogue at the rear of the 4th century reconstruction, in which the orientation was changed to Jerusalem in the south.[15] The Essenes directed their morning prayers towards the sunrise in the East, according to Josephus (Jewish War 2.128).

Needless to say, the presence of Essenes in the town of Arbel gives grounds for suspecting they might have been present elsewhere in the area.

The Arbel Cave Village

In his profile of the Essenes, Josephus reports the existence of two orders of Essenes, who disagree only over the importance of marriage and procreation (*Jewish War* 2.160-1). Those who chose to marry lived in a mixed community with their wives and children and worked to support them. If it is granted, on the evidence presented above, that there was an Essene community in the town of Arbel, it is likely to have been a mixed community of this sort, working together to cultivate the fields and provide for all its members.

There is now growing evidence that only a mile away, in the dense collection of caves at the eastern end of the cliffs of Mt. Arbel (Arbel caves East), there was another Essene community. The ruins of a huge fortified cave, at its eastern limit, help to identify this 'cave village' with the village 'of the Cave of Arbela' mentioned by Josephus in the list of villages he fortified before the Great Revolt (κώμας δὲ Ἀρβήλων σπήλαιον …) and "stocked with ample supplies of corn and arms for their future security" (*Life* 188). In the parallel account in his *Jewish War* (2.573), this village corresponds to "the caves in Lower Galilee in the neighbourhood of the lake of Gennesaret". Indeed, this Arbel Cave village, carved into a 300-yard section of cliffs at the northeastern part of the Mt. Arbel range, is only 1½ miles from Migdal (Magdala) and the shores of Lake Gennesaret (the Sea of Galilee).

Fig 5: View of Arbel Cave village: the remains of the great cave span the base of the massive cliff on the left

[15] As Ze'ev Yeivin proposed in his 1971 doctoral thesis "Seker Yishuvim beGalil u-veGolan meTekufat haMishnah ve-haTalmud laOr haMekorot", Jerusalem: Hebrew University doctoral thesis, 1971 (Hebrew), 56-63, 85, 85a and 125.

Foremost among the Essene features of the Arbel Cave village (Fig 5) are the following:

1. The great cave, which gave the cave village its name, enclosed a gigantic hall about 75 yards long, 15 yards wide and 12 yards high, which was divided into three sections, once protected by an outer wall. Each section has features that allow provisional identification: the smaller central section consists of 3-4 mini-caves, excavated on 3 levels, giving the impression it was once a large storeroom; to the west of this storeroom is a large room with 3 broad vertical conduits in the back wall, which appear to have been channels funneling smoke upwards and outside. If so, this section is probably the remains of a kitchen. The third and longest section, to the east of the storeroom, is a large vacant space, entered through an antechamber at the eastern end. This certainly appears to have been an assembly room, but because of the wide corridor connecting this room to the kitchen, passing by the storeroom, we can go further and propose this was also a communal dining room. What we have described is a dining room, storeroom and kitchen complex, joined under what was once the overhanging canopy of a great cave, with a sturdy wall running along its length, of which a few Hasmonean ashlars remain. The structures still visible in this great cave bear all the hallmarks of a communal meal complex serving an Essene community of about 75-100 members (cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.129-33). Because of the Essene law prohibiting lifting or moving cooking vessels on the Sabbath (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.147), especially between buildings (CD 11.7-9), it was imperative that the kitchen and dining room were under the same roof.[16] A similar arrangement has been documented at Khirbet Qumran and 10 miles to the south at 'Ein el-Ghuweir.[17]

2. In the most ancient section of this cave village (c. 100 BCE), the very close-packed arrangement of the cave-dwellings contrasts with the spacing and separation of the cave clusters elsewhere, and reinforces the impression that the occupants at this site were members of a close-knit community. On the same note, many of the caves are connected by internal tunnels, hewn horizontally and vertically on many different levels, allowing passage from one cave to another. In this short 300-yard section of cliff, the cave entrances are carved in long rows up to 7 levels high, looking much like a modern high-rise apartment block (Fig 6). Calculating one person per cave in this section of cliff-face, we can estimate a population of 100-120 people in the community. This may be related to the number of members needed to serve in the Essene high court, reported to be 'no less than one hundred' by Josephus (*Jewish War* 2.145). If we assume the whole community was involved in judging offences, then this particular community was large enough to have been the regional administrative center of the Essene party.

[16] Cf. Kenneth Atkinson and Jodi Magness, 'Sabbath Observance' in "Josephus's Essenes and the Qumran Community", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol 129, no. 2, (2010); 333-334.

[17] Pesach Bar-Adon, "Another Settlement of the Judaean Desert Sect at 'En el-Ghuweir on the Shores of the Dead Sea", in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 227, (Oct 1977); 1-25. The same arrangement can be discerned at Khirbet Qumran, if we take the 'pantry' (L86 and L89), adjacent to the large assembly room/refectory (L77), to have served as a kitchenette as well as a pantry. At a third the length of the assembly room, it would certainly have been large enough.

Fig 6: Close up of the original accommodation block at Arbel Cave village

3. Compared with the other cave-dwelling sites in the Ginnosar area, an exceedingly large number of water installations have been found in the Arbel Cave village, including 35 cisterns and 5 *miqva'ot*[18] (Fig 7). These totals do not include the many cisterns and *miqva'ot* that were destroyed in the building of the Druze fortress, when dozens of the original caves were obliterated to create large halls. Fragments of plaster recovered from these halls are of the same type and antiquity as that used in the surviving water installations. If those that were destroyed could be counted and included, the totals would increase substantially. As at Qumran, the large number of *miqva'ot* indicates the presence of a religious community with concerns about purity.[19] This finding is entirely consistent with the Essene practice of twice-daily immersion before meals as described by Josephus (*Jewish War* 2.129-33; cf. 1QS 3:4-5; 5:13-14).

[18] Totals from the other sites: Arbel caves West: 2 cisterns, 1 *miqveh*; Mt. Nittai caves: 1 cistern, 0 *miqva'ot*; Wadi Amud: 25 cisterns, 1 *miqveh*; Akhbara Rock: 5 cisterns, 1 *miqveh*.

[19] Invoking Magen Broshi on the large number of *miqva'ot* found at Qumran, John J. Collins writes, "As Broshi has argued, the existence of ten *miqva'ot* in an area no larger than an acre is the strongest archaeological reason for defining Qumran as a religious site. Even allowing for the fact that all ten may not have been in use at the same time (…), the concentration is unparalleled outside Jerusalem" *Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2010; 205.

Fig 7: A *Miqveh* within the 17th century Druze fortress, Arbel Cave village

4. The harshness of the physical environment made it totally unsuitable for raising children and caring for the infirm, which means that family life was excluded and that women would have found no place in the cave village community, in its original organization. It would be reasonable to conclude that this was an all-male community.

5. The harsh and ascetic life-style imposed on the Arbel Cave village residents is outwardly similar to that of the Qumranites, and the rocky surroundings are comparable. The similarity of population size and sex, and the approximate dates of foundation of the two communities, around 100 BCE, are also noteworthy. The profusion of water installations and *miqva'ot* is a feature of both sites, indicating a common discipline, and the absence of a synagogue at either site is significant, virtually ruling out all contemporary religious communities except those that keep the Essene rule.[20] As of yet, the cemetery of the cave village has not been found, but if and when it is

[20] In a *Ha'aretz* article, on 27.04.2012, reporting the discovery of the 5th *miqveh* in the Arbel Cave village, Shivti'el attributes the installation of the *miqva'ot* there to a group of priests who fled to Galilee following the first or second Jewish Revolt. Shivti'el's proposal alludes to an ancient list of the heads of the 24 priestly courses (as in 1Chr 24,1-17) paired with 24 Hasmonean-era settlements in Galilee, suggesting that the living members of these families settled in Galilee at an undetermined time in the past. Richard Bauckham interprets the lists to be historically true, and argues that the priestly families arrived c. 103 BCE, at the time of the Hasmonean conquest of Galilee (*Magdala of Galilee: A Jewish City in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*, ed. Richard Bauckham, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018; 287-305). However, even if it were true that priestly families settled in Galilee villages at some stage (including Arbel), it is inconceivable that they and their families would have occupied the caves in this dangerous, difficult and desolate environment. More significantly, the historical veracity of the priestly lists and the presence of priestly families in the Galilean villages has been refuted by Uzi Leibner (*Settlement and History*, 404-19). The list appears to have been

located, the burial style and orientation will help to determine the closeness of the relationship between the Arbel community and that of Qumran.[21] The many similarities to the Qumran scribal community, identified so far, raise the question as to whether the residents of the Arbel Cave village were also scribes, writing and interpreting Scripture as at Qumran. This is an important question for further research, but it may be aided by the fact that the largest natural habitat of papyrus outside the borders of Egypt was growing only 23 miles away, in Lake Semechonitis (Lake Huleh).

Subject to verification by further archaeological investigation, these are the main indications that the Arbel Cave village was an Essene settlement, or 'monastery', similar to Qumran in size and way-of-life. The co-existence of Pharisees and Essenes in this small geographical area, at a time (c. 110-65 BCE) when they were both needing to avoid contact with the ruling Hasmonean authorities, reinforces the suggestion that the original motive for the cave-dwelling phenomenon was not shelter from military attack, but rather refuge from religious persecution.

The proximity of these two religious groups may not have been coincidental, for only 30-40 years had passed since they separated from each other: according to our view,[22] the Pharisees separated from the other followers of the 'Teacher of Righteousness' in 152 BCE, over the legitimacy of Jonathan Maccabee's claims to the high priesthood.[23] The Pharisees accepted it and remained in Jerusalem, while the Teacher and his other followers went into exile in 'the land of Damascus', literally understood. There, they formed an alliance, a 'new covenant', with the community of dissenting priests and Levites known for their pseudepigraphal writings in Enoch's name (the 'Enochians'), and the members of this new covenant became known as Essenes. Following the death of their Teacher around 130 BCE, however, they divided again into the loyal followers of the Teacher, who migrated to Qumran around 100 BCE, and a more moderate branch, who appear to have reconnected with the Pharisees at Arbel and become their neighbours. With the rehabilitation of the Pharisees by Queen Salome Alexandra in the 70's BCE, and their return to Jerusalem, the Essenes of Arbel became the predominant religious group in the area. For those Pharisees, Essenes or non-denominational individuals who wished to live a more independent and solitary way of life, not to mention those who had been judged and expelled from Essene fellowship (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.143-145), there were plenty of other caves in the area where they could live. This could explain the occupation of the more outlying caves, such as those at Wadi Amud and Akhbara Rock.

If this sketchy outline is correct, the convergence of so many devout and educated people in the same area, far from the corrupting influence of political power, had the potential to bring about a

composed between 135 and 290 CE, in an attempt to keep alive hopes for national restoration following the catastrophe of the second Jewish Revolt. In the 6th cent. CE, it was adopted into the synagogue liturgy in the form of *piyyutim*.

[21] There are at least four criteria identifying Essene burial practice, according to Joseph E. Zias: "… orientation, tomb architecture, demographic disparity and few if any personal grave goods", "The Cemeteries of Qumran and Celibacy: Confusion Laid to Rest", in *Dead Sea Discoveries*, Vol 7, 2 (2000); 244.

[22] This can be accessed at www.academia.edu under the title "New Light on the Origins and History of the Essenes: Implications of the Essene Settlement at Mt. Arbel in Galilee", by John Ben-Daniel.

[23] This original 'separation' would explain why they came to be known as Pharisees, i.e., 'separatists'.

blossoming of religious piety, scholarship and creative literary activity, on such a scale as to rival Qumran in originality and intensity.[24]

A case in point is the Parables of Enoch or Book of Parables (*1En* 36-71). Granted that the author was an Essene,[25] then the reflection of certain aspects of the history and landscape of the Arbel Cave village, in the text, reinforce the suspicion that he wrote from that location.[26] Examples include the author's reference to the descent of the rebel angels on Mt. Hermon (*1En* 39:1-2; cf. *1En* 6:6; 13:7,9), which was visible from the cave village on a clear day (Fig 8); his description of the three stages of eschatological war (56:5–57:3) as if recalling from memory the most dramatic moments of the Civil War witnessed from his cave in the cliffs; his choice of metaphors evoking local realities (the collection of 'dwellings' or 'resting places' of the righteous in heaven, 39:4-5; 41:2; the 'ropes' of the righteous, 61:3; the mountains and deep valleys of judgment, chs. 52-54); and his profile of the rebel angel *Penemue*, who taught men to write 'with ink and papyrus' (69:9), which grew abundantly nearby and sounds like a personal grouse against writing on papyrus. Temporal clues in the text have allowed a majority of scholars to agree that it was written at the end of King Herod's reign (4 BCE), or shortly after.[27]

Fig 8: Mt. Hermon on the horizon, looking northeast from the summit of Mt. Arbel.

[24] Awaiting further research, we are speaking about the source of those Essene works that were not found at Qumran (the Parables and Epistle of Enoch, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs) as well as many other first-century-BCE works, including the Aramaic Targums and the Life of Adam and Eve.

[25] Since no trace of this book has yet been found at Qumran, its identification with the Essenes is not accepted by many scholars, neither by Nickelsburg in his commentary on the Parables of Enoch (George W.E. Nickelsburg with James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch 2: A Commentary on the Book of Enoch chapters 37-82*, Hermeneia series, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012; 65-66). However, if we accept the reports of Philo, Josephus and Hippolytus indicating that the Essene movement was much larger and more diverse than the Qumran community, then the definition of what constitutes an Essene text should not be restricted to what was found at Qumran. A new definition should include works by any author who had sworn the oath of Essene membership. By citing the list of the good angels (1*En* 40:9; 54:6; 71:8-9) and rebel angels (*1En* 69:2-15), the author of the Parables of Enoch, like that of the Book of the Watchers before him (*1En* 9:1; 20:1-8; 6:3-8; 8:1-4), is showing that he had sworn the oath obliging every Essene member to "preserve the names of the angels" (Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.142). He was an Essene, whether or not his writing was accepted or rejected by the Essenes of Qumran.

[26] The details have been presented at length in my article "Mt. Arbel, the Essenes and the Book of Parables (*1En* 37-71)" at www.academia.edu.

[27] Cf. Nickelsburg, *1Enoch 2*, 58-63. Writing before 2012, the same scholar was unable to identify the Parables' geographical provenance (op. cit. 66). A year later, however, James Charlesworth and Mordechai Aviam, trace the Parables to Magdala, 1½ miles from the Arbel Cave village (*Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, eds. Darrell L. Bock and James H. Charlesworth, London: Bloomsbury, 2014; 173-91; 159-69). In a personal communication (23.09.2019), Charlesworth commented "I have often been pulled to Arbel. I have published my conclusion that the ParEn were composed in Migdal, perhaps on the western edge of the synagogue. But, you raise a major point. From the Arbel it is much easier to see the Hermon on which the Watchers descended."

Why did Jesus choose the Sea of Galilee?

Arriving at the public ministry of Jesus, at the end of this journey through the mists of time, we find a large Essene community in the vicinity of Magdala, on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, differing in certain ways from that of Qumran, but especially in its rapport with the Pharisees and its involvement with the surrounding population. If the identification of the Essenes with the Herodians in the Gospels is accepted (as explained above), it is clear that they were actively involved in local religious affairs, debating infractions of the Torah with the Pharisees outside the synagogue in Capernaum (Mk 3,6). They also had disciples and could be recognized by their own distinctive teaching, metaphorically branded the 'yeast of the Herodians' (Mk 8,15 in $\mathfrak{p}^{45}$), just as the Pharisees and Sadducees had their own distinctive 'yeast' as well (Mk 8,15; Mt 16,6.11-12; Lk 12,1).

Yigael Yadin has identified one example of their distinctive teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus proclaimed to the lakeside crowd "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you…" (Mt 5,43-44). The command 'to hate your enemy' exists nowhere in Jewish law except in the Community Rule of the Essenes (1QS 1:9-11; 2:4-9), and so Yadin aptly concludes "it is my opinion that the people he [Jesus] was addressing were familiar with this Essene injunction, having perhaps been close to the Essene sect and believed its doctrines, but who had now converted or were about to convert to the views of Jesus, and follow him".[28] In places where the Essenes, that is, the Herodians, associated with the villagers and townspeople, as in this area of Galilee, their writings and teachings were disseminated and well-known, even among the general public.

The influence of Essene teaching was nowhere more evident than in their messianic prophecy. In the times of Jesus, in the early first century CE, messianic expectation had reached a climax, as there may have been a timetable in circulation, fixing the early first century as the time of fulfilment.[29] If we accept the Arbel Cave village as the home of the Parables of Enoch (*1En* 37-71), then its messianic prophecy would have been widely known, recited and discussed around the lake. Differing substantially from the prophecy emanating simultaneously from Qumran,[30] the Parables of Enoch announced the imminent appearance of the Messiah from heaven, that 'Son of Man', to judge the rebel angels, wicked kings, mighty ones, landowners and sinners. First, however, the prophecy gives

[28] Yigael Yadin, *The Temple Scroll: The Hidden Law of the Dead Sea Sect*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985; 241-2. According to Stuckenbruck, there have been few objections to the claim that Jesus is specifically concerned about a tradition associated with the "Essene" community, but notes that although "the Qumran text provides a better parallel, the notion of hating one's enemy could be taken for granted as emerging from the Jewish Scriptures (esp. 2Chr 19:2; Ps 5:5; 26:5; 31:6; 45:7; 97:10; 119:104,163; 139:21-22; Hos 9:15; Amos 5:15)", Loren Stuckenbruck, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament", in *Qumran and the Bible: Studying the Jewish and Christian Scriptures in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Leuven/Paris/Walpole MA: Peeters, 2010; 131-70, quote from 156.

[29] "Essene expectation must have reached fever-pitch towards the end of the first century B.C., with the eschatological war already overdue, and the Messiahs of Levi and Israel expected in the last of Daniel's 70 weeks, between 10 B.C. and A.D. 2", 'The Year of the Messiah: Jewish and Early Christian Chronologies, and their Eschatological Consequences', Roger T. Beckwith, *Calendar and Chronology, Jewish and Christian: Biblical, Intertestamental and Patristic Studies*, Boston and Leiden: Brill Academic, 2001; 217-75, quote from 265.

[30] Namely, the War Scroll (1QM), which prophesied and gave instructions for the final war between the armies of the 'sons of light' on one side, led by the Prince of the Congregation and the High Priest, and on the other side the 'sons of darkness', the forces of Belial, which included the armies of the Kittim (the Romans) and many of Israel's ancient enemies. With the aid of 'the mighty hand of God', an 'everlasting blow' falls on 'Belial and all the host of his kingdom'. It is a vision of worldly military confrontation that contrasts sharply with the divine judgment conducted by the heavenly Messiah Son of Man, as prophesied in the contemporary Parables of Enoch. Clearly, these were competing eschatologies, with little in common.

sinners an opportunity to repent and be counted among the righteous (*1En* 50:1-4).[31] It found a strong voice in John the Baptist, who preached repentance for the forgiveness of all those who received his baptism (e.g., Mk 1,2-8). Then, by embodying the greatness and universality of God's mercy, Jesus came to perfect and complete the Baptist's mission of repentance and forgiveness, while promising to return at the end of the age, to sit in judgment as that 'Son of Man'. The long delay in the 'Second Coming' of that Son of Man should not obscure the close alignment of the ministry of Jesus with the Essene prophecy from the Arbel Cave village. On the contrary, the continuing expectation for his Second Coming takes us back to his first coming and to the main reason why Jesus chose to establish himself by the Sea of Galilee: prepared by the messianic prophecy in the Parables of Enoch, the local population was waiting faithfully for the anointed, chosen, righteous 'Son of Man', whom they readily identified with Jesus.

In his public ministry, Jesus was not only aware of the Essene principle that one should hate one's enemies, but also set about publicly correcting it. Referring to known Essene positions on other issues related to divorce, Sabbath observance, oath-taking and ritual purity, Jesus adopts a similar corrective approach. In other ways, though, he remains closer to the Essenes, for example, in their ideal of celibacy, their practice of poverty, their fulfilment of functions normally related the Temple, their challenge to the adequacy of the Mosaic Torah, their recourse to the principles of creation, and their reference to the prophecies of Isaiah to explain their mission (e.g., Lk 7,22 and Mt 11,5; cf. 4Q521 2ii + 4.1-2). In brief, similarities as well as differences characterize the relationship between Jesus and the Essenes, but in such a way as to indicate his thorough familiarity with their teachings, terminology and worldview.

Prompted by the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, there has been a surge in studies over the last 30 years to determine the precise relation between the Essenes and the early Jesus movement, although it has mostly been limited to comparison between the content of the Dead Sea Scrolls and that of the New Testament. One of the most recent and comprehensive of these studies is by Simon J. Joseph, who summarizes his findings as follows:

> "If we presuppose points of both similarity and difference with the Essenes, the historical Jesus can be understood as the leader of a movement that rejected some of the halakhic conclusions while engaging others. The "parallels" between Jesus and the Essenes—in such close sociological, geographical, and chronological proximity—require explanations more compelling than coincidence, "common tradition," and "parallel development". While no single parallel may persuade us of relationship, their cumulative effect and combined evidentiary weight suggest that the similarities and differences add up to a more complex but coherent narrative of Christianity's emergence within early Judaism. This does not mean that everything in the early Jesus tradition is "paralleled" or precedented in the Scrolls. What it does mean is that future discussions of the historical Jesus can now acknowledge the Essenes

[31] I am grateful to Gabriele Boccaccini, founder of the Enoch Seminar, for his interpretation of the Parables, his focus on the message of repentance and forgiveness therein and for affirming the close links with John the Baptist. For what follows, Nickelsburg's interpretation of ch. 71 as an appendix, added on after the completion of the rest of the book, is the one accepted here (*1Enoch 2*, 330-32). This is the chapter in which the seer himself, Enoch, is identified as the Son of Man. There seem to be two important versions in the history of the text: the first version, ending at 1En 70:2, was written around the end of Herod's reign and disseminated in the early first century CE, especially around the Sea of Galilee (this is the version that prepares for the missions of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ and also for the text of John's Apocalypse), and a second version, with ch. 71 added, circulating around 70-90 CE, as a precursor to the later Enoch writings (i.e., 2Enoch, 3Enoch).

as a major part of the cultural matrix of the early Jewish Jesus movement. Was the historical Jesus influenced by the Essenes? Yes. Was the Jesus movement influenced by the Essenes? Yes. Did the early Jesus movement develop in ideological proximity and relationship to the Essenes? Yes. Is the Jesus movement to be identified as "Essenic"? No".[32]

These findings immediately raise the question of personal contact. There is no compelling evidence that Jesus was ever a member of the Qumran community or ever visited Qumran, but with the discovery of an Essene community in the Arbel Cave village, only a day's walk from Nazareth, an alternative possibility opens up. When he was only twelve years old, Jesus preferred to discuss the Sacred Scriptures with the teachers in the Temple at Jerusalem than to return home with his parents (Lk 2,41-52). Furthermore, the Essene Community Rule (1QS 6:13-23) allows for approved young men to join the Essene communities for three years of training and instruction before having to commit permanently, by taking the oath of membership. Josephus confirms this option not only in writing (*Jewish War* 2.137-142), but also in practice, by staying with an Essene Community when he was 16 years old (c. 53-54 CE), in order to learn more about this sect (*Life* 2). It is entirely possible, therefore, that while still an adolescent, the Scripture-loving Jesus may have chosen to visit the Essene community at Mt. Arbel for a limited period of time. This would have the advantage of explaining Jesus' detailed knowledge of Essene *halacha*, customs, traditions and worldview, without assuming some kind of relationship with the community at Qumran.

Fig 9: View of Mt. Nittai, Nittai caves South and Wadi Arbel, with the modern town of Hamam beyond.

Perhaps a local tradition about Jesus' sojourn at Arbel would explain why, in the Byzantine period, many of the caves in the cliffs of Mts. Arbel and Nittai were inhabited by Christian monks, no doubt believing their master had lodged in that place[33] (Fig 9). Indeed, sometime after leaving the Arbel Cave village, Jesus might have stayed in one of those caves, to be alone with God and prepare for his

[32] *Jesus, the Essenes, and Christian Origins: New Light on Ancient Texts and Communities*, by Simon J. Joseph, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018; 164. For a different, but also thorough, analysis of the comparison, see Loren Stuckenbruck, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament", in *Qumran and the Bible*, 131-70.

[33] Not only did the monks carve a small alcove into the back wall of their caves, to place their objects of devotion, but archaeologists have recovered coins and small religious items from the caves they occupied.

future mission. This would have given him an excellent knowledge of the area, and another reason to base his ministry in nearby lakeside Galilee (Fig 10).

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February, 2021

Fig 10: Dusk over the Sea of Galilee from the Arbel Cave village