

Mt. Arbel, the Essenes and the Book of Parables (*1Enoch* 37–71)

Introduction

The Book of Parables (*1En* 37–71), or ‘Similitudes’,¹ occupies the central, longest and latest part of the first Book of Enoch (*1Enoch*), and addresses a persecuted community that worshipped together and are described countless times as the righteous, the chosen and the holy.² The Book of Parables immediately follows the Book of the Watchers (*1En* 6–36), to which it frequently refers. From this, it is evident that the author of the Parables had a good knowledge of the Book of the Watchers and crafted his book as a sequel to it.³ The origin of evil in the world, through the descent of the rebel angels onto Mt. Hermon (*1En* 6:6), is a major theme in the Book of the Watchers, and the imminent judgment of those fallen angels, together with the judgment of the kings, the mighty and the landowners is the main concern of the Book of Parables. Without going into further detail, it is clear that the author of Parables was continuing a tradition that began with the Book of the Watchers and that Mt. Hermon was an important point of reference for both.

Apart from the flashbacks to the rebellion of the angels, there is another important link between these two Enochic texts: the Book of Parables repeats, with some variation, the lists of the names of the angels, both good angels (*1En* 40:9; 54:6; 71:8-9) and rebel angels (*1En* 69:2-15), as they appear in the Book of the Watchers (*1En* 9:1; 20:1-8; and *1En* 6:3-8; 8:1-4). In both the Book of the Watchers and the Book of Parables, these lists not only stand out as fixed elements of an elaborate tradition about the names of angels, but also resonate loudly with the oath to ‘preserve the names of the angels’, which is listed by Flavius Josephus in his description of the Essene community.⁴ Rejecting the idea that this shared interest could be a mere coincidence, the presence of the angels’ names in these two books allows us to conclude that it was an Essene community that originally preserved and transmitted them. As this is a controversial assertion,⁵ some explanation is needed.

To determine whether a text belongs to a particular community, it is necessary to show some points of contact between the text’s contents and the practical life of that community. In this case, we turn to the description of the Essene way of life by Josephus. The reliability of his description of the

¹ The ‘Book of Parables’, ‘Parables of Enoch’ and ‘Similitudes of Enoch’ are the most commonly used titles for the text of *1Enoch* 37–71. However, the real title, according to ancient Hebrew tradition, corresponds to the first word or words of the text, which are “The Vision of Wisdom that Enoch saw” (*1En* 37:1).

² The communal dimension of this text is best described by Nickelsburg in *1 Enoch* 2, 65-66, 98-101, but his conclusion is surprisingly inconclusive: “the Parables derive from a provenance different from any of the persons, groups, sects or communities known to us by name. Their close relationship to the Book of the Watchers suggests some sort of communal continuity. While we may call this ‘Enochic Judaism,’ the use of the adjective reflects only the fact that all the texts have in common an orientation around revelations ascribed to that ancient patriarch” (op. cit. 66).

³ A detailed analysis of the literary relationship is given by VanderKam, “The Book of Parables”, 81-99.

⁴ Concerning the Essenes, the most important passages by Josephus are in *Jewish War* 2.119-161 and *Antiquities* 18.11,18-22. The oath can be found in *Jewish War* 2.142. Nickelsburg seems to have overlooked this point of contact, for he writes: “the Parables indicate no parallels to Josephus’s and Philo’s descriptions of the Essenes”, *1 Enoch* 2, 66.

⁵ E.g., Collins: “It seems to me then that to speak of the tradents of the Enoch literature as Essenes is to sow confusion”, “Enochic Judaism”, 83. Controversy exists because of the differences between the Book of Parables and the Dead Sea Scrolls, regarded as ‘the touchstone of what it meant to be an Essene’. However, defining ‘Essene’ by the documents copied or produced by the Qumran sect *alone* is liable to incur “selection bias”, giving a narrow, unrepresentative view of the whole Essene movement and eclipsing the other reports, especially those of Josephus, whose general reliability has been amply demonstrated (v.i.). In a less ‘biased’ definition, the Essenes would be “the Jews who swore the Essene oath of membership in those days and at any place”—thus creating some latitude for local and temporal variation in Essene practices, doctrines and literary output.

Essenes has been demonstrated in at least two studies comparing every detail with relevant information from the literature of the Dead Sea sect, now almost universally recognized as an Essene community.⁶ The correspondence is striking, allowing for the obvious differences in literary genre, personal participation, historical standpoint and geographical location. In a part of his description, Josephus catalogues a series of eleven oaths to which every new candidate must swear, in order to become a full member of the Essene community (*Jewish War* 2.139-142).⁷

In the last oath cited by Josephus, the candidate for Essene membership must swear that “*he will preserve in like manner both the books of their sect and the names of the angels*”.⁸ Firstly, this oath shows that the Essenes attached a high value to their books and especially to the books that record the names of the angels—books such as the Book of the Watchers and the Book of Parables. Secondly, the oath indicates that the presence of the angels’ names in these two books not only assured them a place among the ‘books of the sect’, but also guaranteed their preservation and transmission.⁹ Because of this oath, sworn by every new member, the presence of the angels’ names firmly identifies these two books as foundational texts for the Essenes. Furthermore, the privileged content of these books appears to have been kept exclusively by the Essenes and ignored by other contemporary groups, for Loren Stuckenbruck informs us that, apart from the Book of Giants, and “despite the influence of the Enochic accounts, the names of the chief angelic perpetrators of evil are conspicuously absent outside the earliest Enoch tradition”.¹⁰ The most plausible explanation for the Essene community’s exclusive custody of these lists of angels’ names arises from another oath taken by members on admission to the community: the eighth oath listed by Josephus enjoins “*secrecy concerning the sect to those outside, even if tortured to death*”.¹¹ In all likelihood, the names of the angels preserved in these two books were among the secrets withheld from outsiders.

The identification of the Book of Parables as a ‘book of the Essene sect’, which contained secrets of that sect, leads inevitably to the conclusion that its author was an Essene. As no part of the Book of Parables has been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, it is evident that he was not a member of the Essene community at Qumran and can therefore be identified, by exclusion, as a ‘non-Qumranic Essene’. This conclusion is supported by an examination of the literary characteristics of

⁶ The two studies are by Beall, *Josephus’ Description of the Essenes* (1988), and by Atkinson and Magness, “Josephus’s Essenes” (2010). In both studies, the comparison centres mainly on the rule-books (CD and 1QS) but extends to other relevant works in the DSS collection as well. The later study concludes by reinforcing the findings of earlier one “Over twenty years ago, Todd Beall assembled a comprehensive list of the parallels between Josephus’s description of the Essenes and the Qumran scrolls. His conclusion is even more valid today, with the completed publication of the scrolls and additional archaeological information: ‘the sheer number of parallels is striking, and puts the burden of proof upon those who would insist that the Qumran was *not* Essene’.”

⁷ At the end of his section on the oaths, Beall concludes “Thus, while the oaths listed by Josephus are not specifically mentioned as oaths in Qumran literature, many are set forth in 1QS 1:1-15. Furthermore, as the preceding discussion has shown, all the oaths are in harmony with Qumran thought”, *Josephus’ Description of the Essenes*, 89. Clearly Josephus did not just copy these oaths from 1QS. Nevertheless, the detail is remarkable, given that most of this material would have been inaccessible to outsiders. The best explanation is the one given by Josephus in *Life* 9-11, that at the age of 16 (53/54 CE) he was a guest at an Essene community for a few months. His recollection of the details of the admission oaths indicates that he may have studied them with a view to becoming an Essene himself. By referring to them as “awesome oaths”, he gives the impression he was intimidated by them, and by the consequences of transgression, thus indicating why he decided not to join. Nonetheless, in all his writings, he retains the highest regard for the Essenes.

⁸ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.142, quoted from Beall, *Josephus’ Description of the Essenes*, 19.

⁹ Given the interpolative character of *1En* 69,2b-3, and perhaps also 69:2a,4-12 (cf. Nickelsburg, *1Enoch* 2, 298-300), one wonders whether the insertion of the lists of angels’ names, here, was not a ploy to ensure the preservation of the book and/or this particular version of the list of names.

¹⁰ Stuckenbruck, *The Myth of the Rebellious Angels*, 82.

¹¹ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.141, quoted from Beall, *Josephus’ Description of the Essenes*, 84. This is not the place to attempt to explain why the names of the angels were so important to the Essenes.

the Book of Parables. Although its terms, expressions, themes and technical formulations exhibit many similarities to those of the Qumran scrolls, the substantial differences argue against its origin in the same community. At the end of her recent study, Devorah Dimant sums up the complex literary relationship as follows: “In consequence, the *Book of Parables* should be viewed as having been created by circles close but not identical to the Qumran group, or by those who have drawn upon its legacy”.¹² Although she does not identify the author of Parables as a non-Qumranic Essene, her findings would appear to be entirely consistent with this conclusion.

Background

In the 2005 Camaldoli Seminar on the Parables of Enoch, a consensus was reached among the scholars that, from internal cues, “the Book of Parables can be dated to the end of or shortly after the reign of Herod the Great, toward the end of the first century B.C.E. or early first century C.E.”.¹³ In his 2012 commentary, Nickelsburg concurs: “I date the Parables between the latter part of Herod’s reign and the early decades of the first century C.E., with some preference for the earlier part of this time span”.¹⁴ Regarding the provenance of the Book of Parables, however, there is no such consensus. Instead, Nickelsburg admits “the text’s communal and geographical provenance remain a mystery”.¹⁵

Moving on to the year 2013, James Charlesworth co-edited a book¹⁶ in which he and the Israeli archaeologist Mordechai Aviam not only located the birthplace of the Book of Parables to Eastern Galilee, but more specifically to the town of Magdala, which was the administrative centre of that area at the time.¹⁷ Charlesworth gives three main reasons for locating the origin of the text in Eastern Galilee:

1. The author of the Book of the Watchers locates his vision of the origin of sin and heavenly ascent specifically to Mt. Hermon and its foothills (*IEn* 6:6; 13:7,9). This vision is recalled frequently in the Book of Parables (e.g., 39,1-2; 54,1-6; 56:1-4; 64:1-2), which is written as a sequel to the same heavenly revelation. It is not unreasonable to think that this continuity was catalyzed by the author’s proximity to, and view of, Mt. Hermon. In due course, the geographical location of this mountain does seem to have given rise to a tradition of visionary, prophetic and mystical activity in Eastern Galilee.¹⁸
2. Elements of Babylonian astronomy in the Book of Parables (i.e. *IEn* 43:1-2; cf. *IEn* 72-82) betray a certain Babylonian influence, best explained by the known connections between Eastern Galilee/Golan and the East.
3. Above all, the emphasis on the divine condemnation of the rulers, the mighty, and especially the landowners, indicates that the Book of Parables was written at a location where the ruling classes were using their power to seize the land of the lower classes. Charlesworth then

¹² The quotation is from Dimant, *From Enoch to Tobit*, 155. In the same study, Dimant gives examples of the ‘contiguity between certain formulations in the *Book of Parables* and the content and terminology of the Qumran community literary output’, *From Enoch to Tobit*, 139-155. Examples of common terms and expressions are also given by Greenfield and Stone, “The Enochic Pentateuch”, 56-57; and common themes are outlined by Fröhlich, “The Parables of Enoch”, 348-349.

¹³ Walck, “The Son of Man”, 300, quoted by Sacchi, “2005 Camaldoli Seminar”, 511.

¹⁴ Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *I Enoch* 2, 62-3.

¹⁵ Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *I Enoch* 2, 66.

¹⁶ *Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, eds. Bock and Charlesworth.

¹⁷ Charlesworth, “Did Jesus Know”, 184-191; Aviam, “Galilean Archaeology and Landscape”, 159-69.

¹⁸ Nickelsburg, “Enoch, Levi, and Peter”.

explains it is “in Galilee, we find the economic crises and sociological disenfranchisement reflected in the *Parables of Enoch*. Anthropological and sociological reflections lead us to emphasize that few things were so catastrophic for Galilean Jews than loss of land. The land is where grandparents and parents (and maybe children) were buried; and it is the Land promised by God to Jews, Abraham’s descendants”.¹⁹

In their specific identification of Magdala as the birthplace of the Parables, both Charlesworth and Aviam explain how the wealth, sophistication and long history of support for the Hasmonean dynasty suggest this town was the home of the author. Aviam takes the suggestion a step further by linking the image of the divine throne-chariot, carved on the back panel of the recently excavated, first-century, Magdala synagogue stone, to the mystical visions in the books of Daniel, Ezekiel and the contemporary Book of Parables.²⁰ He concludes: “I am convinced that in an urban center like Migdal-Tarichaeae there was a society and administration which could support scribes and intellectuals like the one who wrote or edited *I Enoch* and especially the *Parables of Enoch*. It seems important and plausible to me to connect the decorated stone from the Migdal synagogue and its symbolism to the mystic and apocalyptic sphere which is represented in *I Enoch* 14:19 and 71:7-12 (the *Parables of Enoch*)”.²¹

There is no doubt that Magdala was pro-Hasmonean. It was established as an administrative centre by the Hasmonean rulers, sometime after their conquest of Galilee in 103 BCE, and its people remained staunchly pro-Hasmonean throughout the civil war (40-37 BCE), at which time they were fiercely anti-Herodian and anti-Roman. Towards the end of that war, the town witnessed the drowning of Herodian collaborators by their subordinates in the Sea of Galilee.²² It is highly likely that the pro-Hasmonean and anti-Herodian stance of the population remained strong for decades after the civil war.²³

There is, therefore, one major objection to the suggestion that an Essene author lived and composed his Book of Parables in Magdala. The Essenes supported Herod before, during and after the civil war, and received royal prerogatives in return.²⁴ Their support dates from Herod’s childhood, when an Essene prophet told him he would be ‘King of the Jews’, apparently basing

¹⁹ Charlesworth, “Did Jesus Know”, 185. It is generally agreed that these conditions were experienced intensely by the people of Lower Galilee, during the reign of Herod (37-4 BCE), cf. Gabba, “Social, economic and political history”, 108-10; 122-24. As Herod’s heavy taxation drove more and more village farmers into debt, they lost their smallholdings to the wealthy, often absent, landowners whom the king had rewarded with estates in this area, and they were forced to earn their living as tenant farmers or day-labourers. Although their taxes went to pay for Herod’s grandiose building projects, it is noteworthy that King Herod did not build anything in Galilee. Some have interpreted this neglect as a sign of Herod’s resentment against the local people for the violent opposition he had experienced there during the civil war (e.g., Aviam, “People, Land, Economy”, 16). Herod’s selective neglect of this area also raises the suspicion that he may have enacted a scheme to impoverish and demoralize this population, who remained firmly pro-Hasmonean and anti-Herodian, by gradually depleting them of land and financial resources (see also n. 23 below).

²⁰ Aviam interprets its symbolism as follows: “If my interpretation is correct, then what we see depicted on the back side of the Migdal stone is a mystical, allegorical view directly into the Holy of Holies, through its architectural frame into the place of the Divine Spirit, represented by its chariot” (“The Decorated Stone”, 213). In subsequent studies, both Binder (“The Mystery”, 28-30) and Bauckham (“Further Thoughts”, 118) concur with Aviam’s interpretation of this panel as a representation of the mystical vision of the divine throne-chariot.

²¹ Aviam, “Galilean Archaeology and Landscape”, 169.

²² Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.328-330; *Antiquities* 14.452. Quotations are from the Loeb Classical Library translation by H. St. J. Thackeray et al, unless indicated otherwise.

²³ Cf. Leibner, *Settlements and History*, 336: “It seems that zealotry originating from Hasmonean ideology is recognizable among the inhabitants of the region even five or six generations after the Hasmonean conquest, up to the days of the First Jewish Revolt”.

²⁴ Cf. Richardson, *Herod*, 256-59.

himself on the interpretation of an ancient prophecy (Gen 49,10).²⁵ After Herod became king, the Essenes were given the Essene Quarter in Jerusalem, located behind Herod's Palace, and the whole community were exempted from the loyalty oath that Herod imposed upon other groups. Josephus sums up the relationship as follows: "...Herod had these Essenes in such honour, and thought higher of them than their mortal nature required" (*Antiquities* 15.372, trans William Whiston).²⁶ There is little doubt that the Essenes were Herod's greatest supporters among the Jews, for they saw his reign as divinely sanctioned. Precisely because of their affiliation with Herod, it appears that the local Galileans referred to the Essenes pejoratively as 'Herodians', as in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew (Mt 22,16; Mk 3,6; 8,15 in P^{47} ; 12,13).²⁷ Under these circumstances, it is inconceivable that the author of the Book of Parables, a true Essene, could have lived in Magdala, which was known for its strong pro-Hasmonean and anti-Herodian orientation. He would certainly not have been welcome there during Herod's reign, and for some time thereafter.

In this context, tracing the Book of Parables to Magdala is clearly based on some confusion about the author's Essene, pro-Herodian identity. Because of its prophetic denunciations of the 'mighty' rulers and landowners, some scholars have labelled the Parables an 'anti-Herodian polemic', implying the author was 'anti-Herod' and engaged in a campaign against him.²⁸ However, it would be quite misleading to characterize this work as a polemical or political statement against Herod, who had just died or was very close to death, according to the text (*1 Enoch* 67:5-13; cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 17.171-173). Rather, the Book of Parables presents itself as a divinely-inspired prophetic message exhorting faith in divine justice and judgment. Although the Essenes had supported Herod politically, they had done so in order that prophecy would be fulfilled. Consistent with this attention to the divine will, the Book of Parables reflects their prophetic duty to denounce Herod's injustice, albeit pseudonymously and posthumously, and warn of its spiritual consequences.²⁹

On reflection, none of the arguments proposed for Magdala provenance actually require the Essene author of the Book of Parables to have lived and composed there. To explain the mystical representation on the synagogue stone, all that was necessary was that the Book of Parables was well received there. Its divine condemnation of the kings, the mighty and the landowners must have been easily recognized as a thinly veiled criticism of the recently deceased Herod and of his reign. It would have been popular with the local inhabitants and, as a result, Magdala may have become a centre for its diffusion, not only among the locals, but to people far and wide, in Jerusalem, Damascus and beyond.

So, although it is inconceivable that the author, being an Essene, could have been a resident of Magdala, it is quite conceivable, even highly likely, that he lived in a community in the vicinity of Magdala and the lakeside villages. Although we do not yet have any direct or indisputable evidence

²⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.372-79. For the origin of Menachem's prophecy, see Taylor, *The Essenes*, 124-30; also Adler, "The Apocalyptic Survey", 232-38.

²⁶ An analogous remark was made by Philo of Alexandria in his *Quod omnes probus liber sit*, 90-91.

²⁷ For a persuasive argument identifying the Herodians with the Essenes, see Taylor, *The Essenes*, 109-30. Also Yadin, *The Temple Scroll*, 80-83.

²⁸ E.g., Charlesworth, "The Date and Provenience", 53.

²⁹ Josephus explains this ambiguity from Menachem's prophecy to Herod, when he was still a child. The Essene prophet warned him that, in the midst of his happiness, he "wilt forget piety and righteousness; and these crimes will not be concealed from God at the conclusion of thy life, when thou wilt find that he will be mindful of them, and punish thee for them", *Antiquities*, trans Whiston, 15.373-376.

of an Essene presence in this area, there is a great deal of indirect, or circumstantial, evidence showing us where to look.

Historical Evidence

In the light of this close relationship between Herod and the Essenes, dating back to Herod's earliest years, it is highly significant that Herod chose to establish a base for his army at the village of Arbel, while conducting his lengthy campaign against the Galilean supporters of his rival for the throne, the last Hasmonean king, Antigonus II (40-37 BCE). Josephus is absolutely clear 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).³⁰ 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, and then Herod arrived and stayed there with his whole army (about 3000 infantry and 600 cavalry).³¹ The campaign continued intermittently for 9-10 months, during which the camp at Arbel would have served as the base for Herod's army.

It is often stated by historians and archaeologists that Herod came to Arbel because it was a Hasmonean military settlement, a 'hotbed of Hasmonean resistance'.³² 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 force (*Jewish War* 1.305). There is no historical or archaeological record of fighting in the village itself at this time. On the contrary, the 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... 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 of this account, whose ultimate source is likely to have been Herod's close friend Nicolaus of Damascus, is that Herod established his army camp at Arbel in order to defend its inhabitants from attack by an enemy, which also happened to be Herod's enemy, thus confirming that they were on the same side in this struggle. In this context, Herod would have relied on the Arbel residents to support him and provide food and supplies for his troops. Since his main supporters among the Jews at this time were the Essenes (see above), it is reasonable to conclude that there was a large community of Essenes in the village of Arbel, which had been founded by Jews

³⁰ 'Arbela' is the Aramaic name for the place that is called 'Arbel' in Hebrew. It refers to the same location.

³¹ It is not known exactly where Herod's army established their camp, but in 1988 the Israeli archaeologist Zvi Ilan saw the remains of what appeared to be a Roman camp on the flat area near the cliff about 700 m. north-east of the ancient village of Arbel (cf. "2,000-Year-Old Landmark", 69 col 3). A good archaeological survey of this area would establish whether this was indeed the site of Herod's camp.

³² 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", reported by Leibner, *Settlements and History*, 254. Ilan and Izdarechet also have the rebels firmly established in the village of Arbel: "... when Herod fought the Galilean Zealots, the Hasmonean loyalists fortified themselves in Arbela" ("Arbel", 87); more recently, Shviti'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 villagers of Arbel were enemies of Herod.

around 120-100 BCE.³³ Their support for Herod during this campaign was exceptional, as most of the surrounding population sided with Herod's Hasmonean rival, Antigonus II.

A resident population of Essenes at Arbel from antiquity may also explain how this village, on the plain above the cliffs, became famous for its cultivation of flax and production of linen. The first report of this crop dates from the end of the 3rd century CE, although the finding of flax pollen in specimens from Bethsaida, across the lake, indicates that flax production goes back at least as far as the 1st century CE and probably even further.³⁴ Beit She'an was the only other place in the country where flax was grown and linen produced. Flax cultivation at Arbel reflects an Essene population, because Essenes were obliged to wear garments made of linen. Undoubtedly flax was also used to make rope for scaling the nearby cliffs and hauling materials up and down.

An Essene presence may also explain the unusual features of the large, two-storey synagogue recently excavated at Arbel, some of which indicate that it was founded on an earlier building that had been secondarily enlarged and extended in the 4th century CE to give it a north-south axis facing Jerusalem.³⁵ In this context, the frame of the main entrance is of particular significance: not only is it carved out of a huge, single stone, but also it is located on the east side, close to the back of the surviving structure and facing onto an ancient paved courtyard. As one modern researcher has already proposed, this monumental entrance may have originally served a smaller transverse edifice, with a very uncommon east-west orientation.³⁶ Such an orientation would indicate Essene influence and design, for, according to Josephus, their early morning prayers were not directed towards the temple in Jerusalem, but rather to the sun rising in the East.³⁷

A population of Essenes in the ancient village of Arbel may also explain the north-south orientation of the neatly ordered rows of individual, rock-cut 'cist' tombs in the village cemetery on the upper slopes of Wadi Arbel, 200 metres northwest of the village ruins. Although individual rock-cut tombs are not uncommon in the region, most are carved in an east-west direction. In distinction to contemporary Jewish burial practice in late second-temple times³⁸ the finding of individual, rock-cut 'cist' tombs with a north-south direction begs to be compared with the large number of 'cist', or 'shaft' graves at Qumran and at Beit Safafa near Jerusalem, which were also made for individuals, aligned in neat rows, and orientated in a north-south orientation. So unusual are these features, with respect to the prevailing Jewish burial practices, that many archaeologists have concluded they represent the burial custom of the Essenes of Qumran.³⁹ By reason of common origin, we suggest they could represent the burial custom of Essenes in other locations as well, thus hinting at an Essene presence at Arbel.⁴⁰

³³ Cf. Leibner, *Settlements and History*, 250-65.

³⁴ Leibner, *Settlements and History*, 256-59.

³⁵ Cf. Ilan and Izdarechet, "Arbel", 87-89.

³⁶ As Yeivin proposed in his 1971 doctoral thesis "*Seker Yishuvim beGalil*" (Hebrew), 56-63, 85, 85a and 125.

³⁷ Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.128. As shown by Atkinson and Magness ("Josephus's Essenes"), Josephus had a surprisingly good working knowledge of the Essenes and their way of life.

³⁸ Contemporary Jewish burial practice in late second-temple times is characterized by randomly orientated, rock-cut, subterranean chambers with branching loculi, or *kokhim*, used and maintained over many generations by single families.

³⁹ Cf. Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community*, 197-204; Hachlili, "Burial Practices and Qumran"; "The Qumran Cemetery"; Zissu, "Qumran Type Graves in Jerusalem".

⁴⁰ It is to be admitted that north-south orientation is only one of at least four criteria needed for certain identification, according to Zias: "...orientation, tomb architecture, demographic disparity and few if any personal grave goods", "Cemeteries of Qumran", 244. Allowing for regional differences in tomb architecture (rock-cut not shaft), and for what was probably a mixed-sex Essene community at Arbel, the fourth criteria (the finding of grave goods) is unverifiable due to the poor state of tomb preservation at this site.

According to the historical data presented above, the village of Arbel should certainly be considered in the search for the home of the Essene author of the Book of Parables. However, the same historical source, Josephus, mentions another location with a similar name. Writing more than 100 years after the civil war that brought Herod to power in 37 BCE, Josephus also had personal knowledge of the area as a military commander and, in his autobiography, he mentions Arbel in a list of the places he fortified in preparation for the Roman invasion (66-67 CE): “In Lower Galilee I fortified the cities of Tarichaeae, Tiberias, and Sepphoris, and the villages of the Cave of Arbela (κώμας δὲ Ἀρβήλων σπήλαιον...), Beersubae, Selame, Jotapata, Kapharath, Komus, Soganae, Papha and Mount Tabor. These places I stocked with ample supplies of corn and arms for their future security” (*Life* 188).

Significantly, Josephus is not referring to the village of Arbel here, as before (*Jewish War* 1.305), but to the ‘village of the Cave of Arbel’ (κώμη δὲ Ἀρβήλων σπήλαιον), which corresponds to “the caves in Lower Galilee in the neighbourhood of the lake of Gennesaret” in the parallel account in his *Jewish War* (2.573). This raises the question of the location of ‘the village of the Cave of Arbel’ (or ‘Arbel Cave village’) and its relationship with the village of Arbel. These questions lead us to consider the archaeological findings in this area.

Archaeological Evidence

The ruins of the ancient village of Arbel sit on the western edge of the plain of Arbel, just as it begins to slope down towards the stream at the bottom of Wadi Arbel. Coins and pottery findings confirm that the village was founded around 120 BCE, during the reign of the Hasmonean ethnarch and high priest, John Hyrcanus (134-104 BCE), which is at least 10-20 years before the official annexation of Galilee by his son and successor, Aristobolus 1, the first Hasmonean to claim the title of king (104-103 BCE).⁴¹

To the north-east of Arbel village, Wadi Arbel passes between two high mountains with rising ground topped by very steep cliffs on both sides, Mt. Arbel on the East and Mt. Nitai on the West. In these two ranges of limestone cliffs there are 530 caves in total, at least 400 of which show signs of modification and occupation, many of them dating from about 100 BCE.⁴² About 250 of the modified caves are to be found in the cliffs of Mt. Arbel, to the north-east of the village of Arbel.

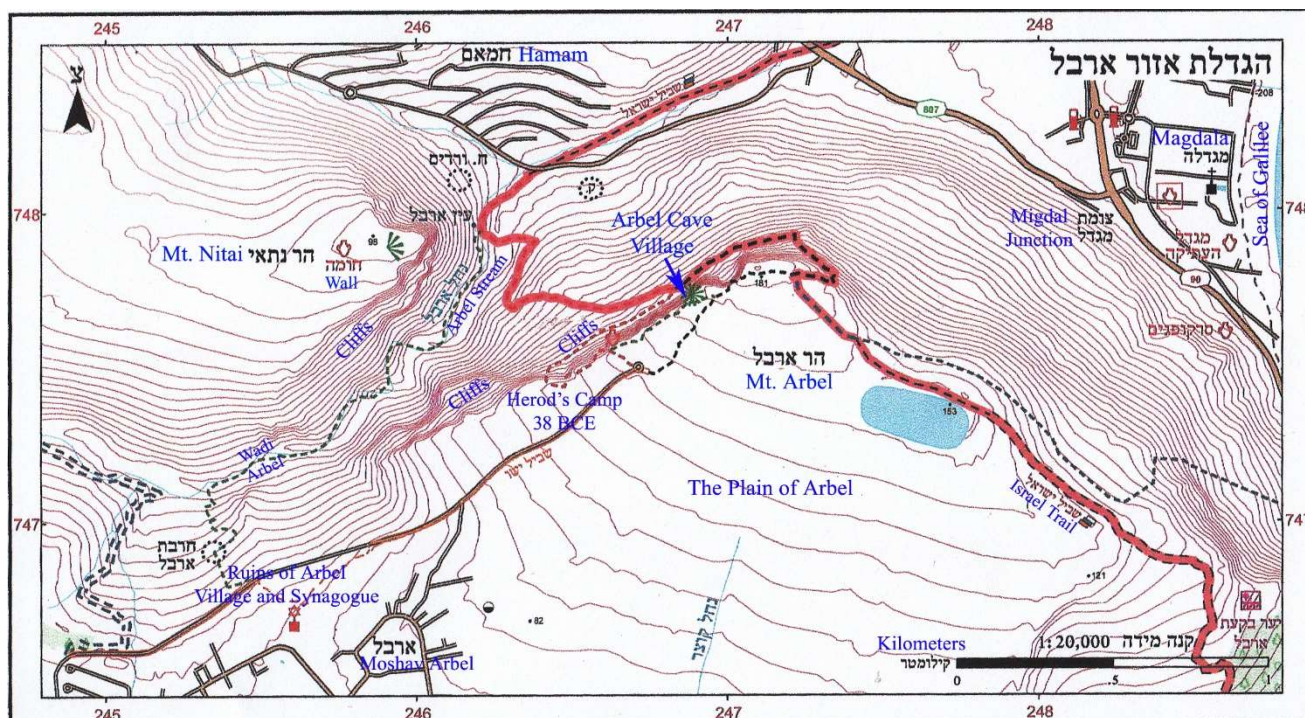
The coin and pottery findings from the earliest modified cave-dwellings in the cliffs are so similar to those of the village of Arbel, that it is almost certain that they were hewn and prepared for occupation during the same period as the village was being built. The archaeologist Zvi Ilan summed up the relation between the village of Arbel and the nearby cave-dwellings as follows: “The archeological finds indicate that the built and hewn settlements existed simultaneously: the built settlement may have been founded a short time prior to the cave-village, and its inhabitants may have been the hewers of the stone shelters”.⁴³ Basing himself on the finding of refuge caves elsewhere in the region, and in the country, the same archaeologist explained the caves, and their relation to the village, as shelters for the residents of Arbel in times of attack: “It seems that every settlement in the area around the Sea of Galilee had hewn refuge caves, protected by their very location on cliffs and

⁴¹ For the accuracy of this dating, see Leibner, *Settlements and History*, 263.

⁴² The statistics are from Shivti’el: “I myself identified approximately 400 caves on both sides of the valley as cliff shelters out of a total of 530 caves on Mount Arbel and Mount Nittai”, *Cliff Shelters*, 53.

⁴³ Ilan, “2,000-Year-Old Landmark”, 68.

by front walls which blocked the openings”.⁴⁴ Following his extensive surveys of the caves of Mt. Arbel and Mt. Nitai, and elsewhere in Galilee, Yinon Shivti’el has recently endorsed the theory that these caves were prepared by the residents of nearby villages as shelters in times of distress, especially during times of invasion by a foreign army, as in the Great Revolt (66-70 CE) and the Bar Kochba Revolt (132-135 CE). To distinguish these shelters from the ‘hideout complexes’ and ‘refuge caves’ at other sites in Galilee and in Judaea, he has named them ‘cliff shelters’.⁴⁵



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.

However, by focusing on the Roman invasions of the 1st and 2nd centuries, and by generalizing his conclusions to all the caves in the area, Shivti’el seems to have missed some important features that are unique to the caves of Arbel.⁴⁶

Although the caves on Mt. Arbel extend over 1.5 kms of cliff, they are not spread out evenly. About 1.7 kms north-east of the ancient village of Arbel, at the base of the cliff that rises to the summit of Mt. Arbel, there is an unusually large cluster of around 100-120 hewn caves, on many levels, within a 200-metre section of cliff. Zvi Ilan identified this concentration of caves as the cave-village referred to by Josephus in the list of places he fortified, quoted above (*Life* 188).⁴⁷ Ilan called

⁴⁴ Ilan, “2,000-Year-Old Landmark”, 69 col 1.

⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁶ Leibner actually warns against making these assumptions: “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”, *Settlements and History*, 240.

⁴⁷ “It was amid this lack of consensus that we began our exploration of the caves on Mount Arbel in 1987. Since then, we have amassed so much information that we can now say with certainty that we have found the “Arbel cave village”, which was first built in Hasmonean times, and continued to function in the Great Revolt against the Romans, the

this the Arbel ‘cave-village’, but it is especially significant that Josephus refers to it as ‘the village of the Cave of Arbel’.⁴⁸

Ilan then went on to describe a huge cave which had been quarried and shaped into a gigantic hall 75 metres long, 14 meters wide and 10-12 metres high, divided into two halves by a short section of rock with several hewn caves on three levels. Although the natural canopy of this cave and most of the wall covering its entrance have long-since collapsed, the remains of a fortified guardhouse and wall can still be seen at the north-eastern end of the original entrance of this cave. Some of the largest blocks (ashlars) in the wall remnant have finely cut margins dating back to Hasmonean or Herodian times, indicating an origin contemporary with the earliest hewn caves. The fortification prompted Zvi Ilan to see this site as a fortress, but my personal impression is that it was a large public building, or community centre, with a dining room in the eastern half, storerooms for equipment, food and fuel in the central hewn caves, and a kitchen in the western section. Three vertical fluted channels in the rear wall of the western section may be the remains of chimneys. Due to its enormity and prominence, it seems fair to conclude that this cave is ‘the Cave of Arbel’, from which the ‘village of the Cave of Arbel’ takes its name. The remains of the fortification that can be seen at the eastern end can now be identified with the fortification, or rather, re-fortification commissioned by Josephus in 66 CE.⁴⁹

As the name ‘village of the Cave of Arbel’ suggests, the massive quarried cave forms the centerpiece of the whole cluster of smaller hewn caves in this short section of cliff, many of which are accessible from the ground, and would not therefore have served as a good defence against a determined army like that of the Romans.⁵⁰ The archaeological findings also confirm that many of them were in use from around 100 BCE, well before the Roman invasion and the re-fortification ordered by Josephus in 66-67 CE.⁵¹

Five plastered ritual baths (*mikva'ot*) and thirty cisterns have been found within this cave-village, with plaster that has been dated to the late Hellenistic period, though no synagogue has yet been identified here, nor any agricultural installation. In the 17th century, a Druze overlord named Fahr a-Din II, converted the south-western part of this site into a walled fortress, called Qala'at Ibn Ma'an, incorporating the original hewn caves into larger spaces and destroying many of their water

Byzantine period, and all the way up to the eighteenth century, the time of the Ma'an dynasty, which built the fortress. We learned that about one hundred caves were hewn or adapted on the cliff for residential purposes....” Ilan, “2,000-Year-Old Landmark”, 66-67.

⁴⁸ Ilan did not seem to realize that the name given by Josephus in *Life* 188 gives additional information: it describes not just a village composed of many cave-dwellings, but rather a village of many cave-dwellings centered on a central cave named ‘the Cave of Arbela’. This is surprising in view of the fact that Ilan was the first to draw attention to the ‘gigantic cave’ with remains of a Hasmonean/Herodian wall covering its entrance and perfectly answering to the name ‘Cave of Arbel’ (see next paragraph in the text).

⁴⁹ See Leibner *Settlements and History*, 339-41; for the evidence that “Josephus’ activity, if any, appears to have involved mere restoration or re-use of existing fortification systems” (op. cit. 341).

⁵⁰ Neither do they fit the standard definition of cliff shelter used by Shviti'el himself, see n. 45 above.

⁵¹ Shviti'el discerns an earlier and a later 1st cent BCE cave-construction style: “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”, *Cliff Shelters*, 57. Both styles are present and readily distinguishable in the Arbel Cave village, with caves of the earlier style situated closer to the large cave structure called the Arbel Cave.

installations in the process. Nevertheless, one *mikveh*, several cisterns and fragments of plaster have been found within the area of the fortress.

The immense investment of labour and resources needed to create the original cave village, with its numerous installations and extensions, is one good reason for doubting the view that it was created only for use in times of distress. If more evidence is needed, the findings of an archaeological survey confirm intense, continuous and permanent settlement here for at least three and half centuries after about 100 BCE, when the stonemasons first started to work on the caves and rocks in this area. It is worth quoting from Leibner's archaeological analysis of this site: "Numerous building remains, reservoirs, *miqva'ot*, small finds and a considerable amount of pottery scattered in front of and at the foot of the cave openings attest to intensive activity and permanent settlement in this group of caves during certain periods. In the absence of pottery clearly earlier than the Hellenistic period, the intensive activity here appears to have begun only in that period. The Hellenistic period pottery, the most dominant (31% of the finds), corresponds to the Seleucid and Hasmonaean coins found at the site. Over a third of the Hellenistic finds are Long Rim SJ jars typical in Jewish settlement areas from approximately the early first century BCE. Intensive activity is also apparent here during the Early (26%) and Middle (19.6%) Roman Period, while a sharp decline in activity is noted during the Late Roman period (5.7%). There is not a single sherd that must be dated to the Early Byzantine period. Sparse activity here was noted for the Middle Byzantine period (5.7%), which strengthens in the Late Byzantine Period (11.5%)".⁵²

The final point about these caves is that although many of them could have been reached from the ground, access was certainly difficult and even hazardous in many places. The upper levels would have been accessible only with the help of ropes, or rope ladders, most probably made from the flax cultivated on the plain of Arbel and produced by the inhabitants of Arbel village (see above). This environment would have excluded the regular presence of elderly, infirm, women and children in these cave residences. The occupants would not have been seeking to lead a normal family life in this setting, leaving us to infer that they were able-bodied men, living in an all-male community.

In summary, although a definitive archaeological evaluation has yet to be done, there is already enough information available to give us a good profile of the village of the Cave of Arbel. It appears to have been inhabited continuously, permanently and intensively from about 100 BCE to at least 150 CE, and probably longer, by a community of ascetic, able-bodied males. The presence of five or more *mikva'ot* in this community implies that they were a Jewish religious community, although they do not appear to have needed a synagogue. Instead they congregated in a gigantic fortified cave, which seems to have functioned as a large dining hall, storehouse and kitchen all-in-one. Assuming full occupancy of the adjacent collection of caves,⁵³ this was a community of 100-120 men, but without archaeological remains of any agricultural installations or land cultivation it is fair to assume that they were dependent for food and clothing on the sister community in the village of Arbel, which farmed on the plains above the cliffs.

The evidence is neither complete nor incontestable, but the surface features of the Arbel Cave village outlined above are strongly suggestive of, and entirely consistent with, occupation by a male

⁵² Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 238-9. The dates of the periods are: Hellenistic; c.300–50 BCE (Late Hellenistic c.120–50 BCE); Early Roman 50 BCE–135 CE; Mid Roman 135–250 CE; Late Roman 250–350 CE; Early Byzantine 350–450 CE; Mid Byzantine 450–550 CE; Late Byzantine 550–650 CE; from Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 6.

⁵³ This is a reasonable assumption in view of the large investment of labour that went into fashioning the caves and installations. It is doubtful that a surplus of cave-dwellings was prepared for inhabitation, initially at least.

Essene community. The gigantic cave is a particularly strong marker of Essene presence, if indeed it served as the place where members of the community assembled twice daily for their sacred meals.⁵⁴ Its historical, geographical and social connections with the village of Arbel, which we have identified as a pro-Herodian Essene community, is further evidence. The collaboration of these two Essene communities fits the Essene model of male communities dedicated to study and mixed communities supporting them. The number of members of the male community (100-120) corresponds with the minimum number of jury members needed to pronounce the verdict in trials of Essene law-breakers,⁵⁵ implying that this community at the village of the Cave of Arbel constituted the local administrative headquarters of the Essene Party. Interestingly, the estimated population of Qumran was about the same.⁵⁶ We therefore propose that this was the headquarters of the Essene community in the Eastern Galilee region, and the home of the author of the Book of Parables.

Literary Evidence

Apart from the socio-economic evidence of Eastern Galilean provenance presented by James Charlesworth and Mordechai Aviam, and mentioned above,⁵⁷ there are other features of the Book of Parables that locate the author specifically in the village of the Cave of Arbel:

Firstly, most specialists have commented on the similarity of the description of the eschatological war in *1 Enoch* 56-57 to aspects of the civil war in the area from 40-37 BCE. It is generally agreed that the author had in mind, as a model, the Parthian invasion in 40 BCE, to enthrone Antigonus II in Jerusalem, and this helps to date the text to the reign of Herod, who overthrew Antigonus three years later with Roman military support. However, it is equally clear that the author is referring to a future eschatological war, a war that will lead to the judgment of the oppressors and the wicked, and bring blessing to the righteous. Perhaps the author and his community had expected this result during the reign of Herod, but it did not materialize to their great disappointment. Evil and oppression continued and, for the local population, became even worse under Herod than under his Hasmonean predecessors. The Book of Parables appears to be a response to this situation of delayed judgment, reassuring hearers and readers that it will come soon, even on the kings and mighty like Herod, upon whom such great hopes had rested. The events of the past civil war became a model to articulate the future final battle, which, though delayed, will repeat the same pattern.

This setting may explain why the description of the future and final battle in the text of the Parables (*1 Enoch* 56-57) reads like a memorized account of the most dramatic and pivotal moments of the civil war from 40-37 BCE. Even more significantly, it reads as if it is being recalled by an observer who was stationed high-up in the Arbel cliffs, overlooking the Vale of Ginnosar and seeing the following events from that lofty vantage-point, that is, by someone who has personally observed:

⁵⁴ Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.129; 1QS 7:1-8. Communal meals in an appropriate structure were an essential part of Essene life at Qumran and elsewhere (cf. Atkinson and Magness “Josephus’s Essenes”, 341). A similar complex consisting of a large hall, large kitchen and storerooms was excavated in the early 1970’s at En el-Ghuweir, 15 kms south of Qumran. Finding no evidence that it served as living quarters, the archaeologist, Pessah Bar-Adon, concluded that “it was a large public building which served as a meeting place for the sect” (“Another Settlement”, 20). A thorough archaeological excavation of the great Cave at the centre of Arbel cave-village may reveal the same defining features.

⁵⁵ Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.145.

⁵⁶ Estimates of the population of Qumran vary from about 15 (Humbert) up to 200 (de Vaux), with most opting for somewhere in between (75–100), see Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community*, 180-83.

⁵⁷ In the section on ‘Background’.

a) The trampling of the agricultural crops in the Vale of Ginnosar by the Parthian cavalry, on their way south to take Jerusalem and place the Hasmonean Antigonus II on the throne in 40 BCE:

“In those days, the angels will assemble themselves,
and hurl themselves toward the East against the Parthians and Medes.
They will stir up the kings, and a spirit of agitation will come upon them,
and they will shake them off their thrones.

They will break out like lions from their lairs,
and like hungry wolves in the midst of their flocks.

**They will go up and trample the land of my chosen ones,
and the land of my chosen ones will be before them like a threshing floor and a (beaten) path;
but the city of my righteous ones will be a hindrance to their horses”** (*1Enoch* 56:5-7).⁵⁸

b) The violence between Jewish supporters of the Hasmonean Antigonus II (the majority in the lakeside area) and the Jewish supporters of Herod. Someone living in the Arbel cave-village would have witnessed scenes of great violence at close-hand when the Herodian army took several weeks to forcefully remove their Hasmonean rivals from the neighbouring caves in 38 BCE (Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.305-316; *Antiquities* 14.415-430) and a short time later the same observer could have heard, if not actually seen, the drowning of the Herodian collaborators by their Hasmonean subordinates in the Sea of Galilee near Magdala (Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.450):

“**They will begin (to make) war among themselves,
and their right hand will be strong against them(selves),
a man will not acknowledge his brother,
nor a son, his father or his mother.**
Until the number of corpses will be enough due to their slaughter,
and their punishment will not be in vain.
In those days Sheol will open its mouth,
and they will sink into it.
And their destruction will be at an end;
Sheol will devour the sinners from the presence of the chosen” (*1Enoch* 56:7-8).

c) The thundering advance of the Roman army chariots across the Vale of Ginnosar, moving south from Damascus to Jerusalem, to retake Jerusalem in 37 BCE and place Herod on the throne instead of Antigonus II:

“**After that I saw another host of chariots and people riding in them,
and they came upon the winds from the East and the West toward the South,
and the noise of the rumbling of their chariots was heard.**
When this commotion took place,
the holy ones took note from heaven,
and the pillars of the earth were shaken from their bases.
It was heard from one end of heaven to the other in one moment,
and they all fell down and worshipped the Lord of Spirits.
This is the end of the second parable” (*1Enoch* 57:1-3).

The second ‘localizing sign’ in the text is the author’s description of the heavenly dwellings, or resting places, of the righteous in *1Enoch* 39:4-5 (also 41:2; 48:1), which appears to have been modelled on the cave-dwellings of the author’s community. In the earlier Book of the Watchers (*1En*

⁵⁸ All quotations of *1Enoch* are from *The Hermeneia Translation*, by Nickelsburg and VanderKam.

6–36), the righteous were seen awaiting the final judgment as a crowd gathered together, around a bright fountain of water, in a deep, smooth hollow that had been carved out of a “great and high mountain of hard rock” (*IEn* 22:1,9). Although the rocky mountainous setting can be assumed to be the same, the eschatological dwelling-place of the righteous described in the Parables of Enoch is no longer a single collective abode as in *IEn* 22:1,9, but a collection of many individual dwellings (*IEn* 39:4-5), a concept which has been carried over into the Fourth Gospel (cf. Jn 14,2).⁵⁹ We suggest that this change in the author’s conception of the afterlife was inspired by the very unique arrangement and remodeling of the caves in the Arbel cave-village. Taking this to be the case, we can conclude that the residents of the cave-village considered the caves of their community to be an anticipation, or foretaste, of the heavenly dwellings of the righteous mentioned in the Book of Parables, and it can therefore be inferred that they believed themselves to be the representatives of the righteous on earth, a view that would be entirely consistent with Essene identity.⁶⁰ This association of the cave-dwellings with the heavenly dwellings may also partly explain why the community chose to inhabit this rocky location.

The third and most intriguing of the localizing signs in the text is the use of the metaphor ‘ropes of the righteous’ (*IEn* 61:3, cf. 46:8). In the same way as the individual rock-cut cave-dwellings became symbols for the dwellings of the righteous in heaven, it appears that ‘the ropes of the righteous’ have become symbols for the strong faith that bind the righteous to the ‘name of the Lord of the Spirits’. Ropes would have been a vital accessory in the daily lives of the Arbel cave-village community, as many of them lived high up in the cliff face, in caves that could have been reached only by means of ropes. The lives of these cave-dwellers relied so heavily upon the strength of the rope that it is easy to see how the rope itself came to be understood as a symbol of faithful dependence on the name of God: “And the angel who went with me said to me, “These will bring the measurements of the righteous, and the **ropes of the righteous** to the righteous; so that they may rely on the name of the Lord of Spirits forever and ever” (*IEn* 61:3).

Fourthly, and finally, mention must be made of magnificent views of the Hermon massif, which lies 70 kms to the north. When the atmospheric conditions permit and the air is clear, this mountain can be seen from the majority of cave-dwellings in the village of the Cave of Arbel. Even though the Book of Parables refers only fleetingly to the descent of the rebel angels on to this mountain, and does not even mention Mt. Hermon by name (*IEn* 39:1-2; 64:1-2), the names of these angels, the consequences of their evil action, their punishment and their imminent judgment are recalled in such graphic terms and images that Enoch’s initial vision of their descent on to Mt. Hermon (*IEn* 6:6) is always in mind. The Book of Parables is so interwoven with the previous Book of the Watchers that Mt. Hermon becomes an important point of reference in this text as well, not just a powerful symbol for the origin of evil, but also a majestic physical landmark arousing petitions for divine judgment. The choice of this specific location, with its excellent views of Mt. Hermon, is a further piece of evidence uniting the Book of Parables to an author living in the village of the Cave of Arbel.

Having presented the reasons for linking the Essene author of the Parables of Enoch to the village of the Cave of Arbel, it only remains to find archaeological evidence of contemporary writing media or materials in these caves, in order to prove the point. If this search is ever undertaken, it will take time. In the meantime, we can only speculate on the writing media that was used by this and other scribal communities in the area. This is aided by the fact that the largest natural habitat of

⁵⁹ “... there are many abodes (μοναὶ πολλαί) in my father’s house” (Jn 14,2). In Hebrew, the equivalent words would be *mishkenot/menuhot*.

⁶⁰ Cf. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 181-83; Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *1 Enoch* 2; 98-101; 64-66.

papyrus outside Egypt was found at Lake Semechonitis (Lake Huleh), a mere 20 kms from the caves, and in the marshes at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. It would be surprising if a scribal community living in the locality, like that of the Essenes at Arbel, did not exploit this readily available resource for its writing media. On the other hand, if papyrus scrolls were prepared at Arbel in antiquity, it would be the first time that papyrus manufacture has been identified beyond Egyptian borders.⁶¹

Of relevance to this topic is the following passage in the Book of Parables: “And the name of the fourth [rebel angel] is *Penemue*. This one showed the sons of men the bitter and the sweet and showed them all the secrets of their wisdom. He gave humans knowledge about writing with ink and papyrus, and therefore many went astray from of old and forever and until this day. For humans were not born for this purpose, to confirm their trustworthiness through pen and ink. For humans were not created to be different from the angels, so that they should remain pure and righteous. And death, which ruins everything, would not have laid its hand on them. But through this, their knowledge, they are perishing, and through this power it devours us” (*IEn* 69:8-11).⁶² The disclosures of this rebel angel seem to refer to the consequences of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (*Gen* 3,1-7; cf. *IEn* 69,6), with the added bonus of instruction on how to write with ink on papyrus—a surprisingly negative comment in a book (*IEnoch*) whose written character is emphasized (*IEn* 82:1-3; 104:12-13) and whose author is an esteemed scribe (*IEn* 13:4-6; 15:1; 40:8, 92:1; 83:2). One wonders if this damning judgment about the origin of writing is not a criticism of all the literary activity taking place in the author’s neighbourhood, most of it worthless and full of deceit (cf. *IEn* 98:15). Regardless of meaning or motive, however, this curious passage is clear confirmation of the use of papyrus in the place where the book was composed.

Nevertheless, papyrus decomposes quickly in the moist conditions of lakeside Galilee, so it is highly unlikely that any of this material would have survived from ancient times in the natural environment, unless it had been carbonized by fire. On this point, Josephus reminds us that some of the caves were set on fire: “The same method of assault was made use of the next day; and they went farther, and got out in baskets to fight them, and fought them at their doors, and sent fire among them, and set their caves on fire, for there was a great deal of combustible matter (ὄλη) within them” (*Antiquities* 14.428, trans William Whiston). In the setting of an invasion of caves belonging to the Essene community of Arbel, by non-resident enemies of Herod, it is not absurd to think that some of the ‘combustible matter’ that ignited the caves could have been papyrus, and that carbonized fragments of papyrus may have been preserved in some of these places. Though theoretically possible, it seems unlikely. Without doubt, archaeologists would be more likely to find the remains of ancient writing equipment: pens, ink containers or ink. We can do no more than wait for the results of their investigations.

Conclusion

After arguing that the Essene oath to ‘preserve the books of the sect and the names of the angels’, cited by Josephus, ties the Book of Parables to the Essene community, this study presents a chain of historical, archaeological and literary evidence identifying the village of the Cave of Arbel (Arbel Cave village) as the home of the author of Parables and of his community of male Essenes. For some readers, the evidence will be sufficient to support the conclusion, but for others further

⁶¹ Cf. Millard, *Reading and Writing*, 25.

⁶² See Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch* 2; 301-2, for full discussion of this passage.

archaeological investigation will be needed to confirm it, primarily by determining the social function of the great Arbel Cave, but also by finding material residue of scribal activity, or Essene-style burials. If confirmed, Mt. Arbel will not only join the small number of sites that, up to now, have been linked to the Essenes (Khirbet Qumran, En Feshka, En el-Ghuweir, Mt. Zion/Essene Quarter of Jerusalem, and the cemetery at Beit Safafa, south of Jerusalem), but more importantly it will open a large window on the social and religious life of this enigmatic, second-temple, religious association.

In order to arrive at our conclusion, we have had to deal with several misunderstandings, which continue to obscure the evidence. It is worth restating them in order to bring them up for discussion and, if necessary, for further investigation:

The first concerns the Essene identity of the author of the Book of Parables which has been obscured by a tendency to undervalue Josephus' description of the Essene way of life, and use a narrow, "Qumran-centric" definition for identifying who was an Essene.⁶³ A more accurate and authentic definition would be "the Jews who swore the Essene oath of membership in those days and at any place". This definition would allow for some local variation in practice, doctrine and literary output under the 'Essene umbrella'. The discovery of a new Essene community at Mt. Arbel in Eastern Galilee is a push in this direction and a step in the search for traces of non-Qumranic Essene communities elsewhere in the land of Israel.

Secondly, there has been a serious misunderstanding of Josephus' account of Herod's campaign at the village of Arbel (*Jewish War* 1.305; cf. *Antiquities* 14.415-416). Herod and his army camped there, not to attack the residents of this village, but to take on the rebels in the surrounding area who were hiding in the nearby caves and harassing them. The Arbel residents can therefore be identified as Herod's friends and supporters, a strong indication that they were Essenes.

Thirdly, as a member of the pro-Herodian Essene community, the author of the Book of Parables would certainly not have been welcome in Magdala, which was staunchly pro-Hasmonean at the time, and supported the side that fought against Herod and his army in the civil war (40-37 BCE).

Fourthly, the content of the Book of Parables had a universal appeal, and was by no means a partisan or polemical work. It presents itself as a divine revelation prophesying the imminent judgment of the wicked, the powerful and the wealthy. Under the circumstances prevailing at the time, at the end of Herod's reign, this prophecy would have been well received by the opposing parties, reducing tensions between the rival camps and steering the hopes of the local population towards the coming of divine judgment under the Messiah Son of Man. This message may have helped to 'prepare the way', around the Sea of Galilee at least, for the mission of Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples a mere 10-20 years later.

Finally, by focusing on the use of the caves as shelters during the Jewish revolts in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, and by generalizing their findings to all the caves in the area, investigators have overlooked the features of the Arbel Cave village that link it with the Essenes. In particular, the great 'Arbel Cave' has never been excavated. Also overlooked is the link between the origin of the hewn

⁶³ The "Qumran-centric" definition identifies an Essene either as a faithful follower of the Teacher of Righteousness, or as an orthodox exponent of the sectarian doctrines expressed in the Qumran scrolls, or just as someone living at Qumran.

cave dwellings in the early 1st century BCE, the history of the Essene movement⁶⁴ and the outbreak of severe religious persecution against the Pharisees, at this time, by the Hasmonean rulers in Jerusalem, John Hyrcanus and his son Alexander Jannaeus.⁶⁵ If one conclusion needs to be emphasized above all, it is that the origin and proliferation of the cave-dwelling phenomenon, in this area of Eastern Galilee, deserves much greater attention.

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⁶⁴ A reconstruction of Essene history that takes account of the evidence presented here can be found in ch.1 of *Saint John and the Book of Revelation: From Essenes to End-Times*, John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2019; 21-42 (accessible at www.newtorah.org). At this website there is also a gallery of photographs, arranged in the form of a virtual tour, of the sites mentioned in the article.

⁶⁵ To have a sense of what is intended, it is worth recalling Nitai (or Matai) the Arbelite, a leading Pharisee, vice-president of the Sanhedrin during the high priesthood of John Hyrcanus (*m.Pirke Avot* 1:6-7). We suggest his residence in Arbel was precipitated by Hyrcanus’ expulsion of all the Pharisees from positions of power and from Jerusalem (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.288-296). Over the next 30-40 years, many others may have come to Arbel to avoid persecution. As Roland Deines aptly reports, this border territory of Galilee “became attractive for those who wanted to stay below the radar of the Hasmoneans in Jerusalem”, those who “needed or wanted to escape the political hornet’s nest of Jerusalem and its surroundings without going abroad” (“Religious Practices”, 83-84).

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Dr John Ben-Daniel,
Old City, Jerusalem
Shavuot/Pentecost, 2020