

Damascus is Damascus: Revisiting the Birthplace of the Essenes

Abstract: The Damascus Document (CD) is the only text that gives information on the origins of the group that entered the ‘new covenant’ in the ‘land of Damascus’. This information is crucial to understanding the origins and subsequent development of the group, which became known as the Essenes. Yet for the last 60 years, scholars have been divided over the meaning of ‘Damascus’. Is it to be interpreted literally or non-literally, and if non-literally, how? A critical examination of the prevailing non-literal interpretations finds fatal flaws. Evidence for the literal reading of Damascus is presented and examined against contemporary socio-historical conditions and events. This evidence, and the absence of obstacles, point to a literal exile in the land of Damascus, during the last half of the 2nd century BCE.

Introduction

The *Damascus Document* (abbreviated CD) was so called because ‘Damascus’ figures prominently in its first section, the ‘Admonitions’. The name ‘Damascus’ is mentioned twice (VII 14-15.18-19) and ‘the land of Damascus’ is mentioned five times with one reference occurring in two parallel texts (VI 5.19; VIII 21=XIX,34; XX,12). Two incomplete copies of the original manuscript dating from mediaeval times (A and B) were discovered in the store-room (*genizah*) of an old Cairo Synagogue in 1897 and published as *Fragments of a Zadokite Work* by Solomon Schechter in 1910. Extensive fragments of the same document were later recovered from caves 4,5 and 6 during the explorations at Qumran from 1951-1956. Following this discovery, controversy arose among scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls concerning the whereabouts of the place called ‘Damascus’ and ‘land of Damascus’.

In an article he published in 1982, Chaim Milikowsky gave an eloquent and concise summary of this ‘Damascus controversy’: “Damascus is mentioned seven times in the CD; a journey to Damascus is reported and a “New Covenant” was entered into there. Until the discovery of the scrolls from Qumran, students and scholars had no hesitation in accepting the “literal” interpretation of these passages: some sect had travelled to Damascus and its members had made a covenant among themselves there”.¹

He then relates how “Not long after the discovery and publication of the Qumran documents, however, an “allegorical” or “metaphorical” interpretation of “Damascus” arose. This interpretation is directly tied to the discovery of the Qumran Scrolls....”. Several factors contributed to this move away from the literal meaning, he explains: firstly, as reported by I. Rabinowitz, the validity of the literal interpretation was doubted because there is no corroboration of a Damascus migration-sojourn in any scroll text, other than the *Damascus Document* (CD); secondly, paleographical analysis of the fragments of CD found at Qumran and archaeological investigation of occupation at that site combined to eliminate the possibility of a literal Damascus sojourn at any time between settlement of the site and its destruction in 68 CE.

¹ Chaim Milikowsky, ‘Again: Damascus in Damascus Document and in Rabbinic Literature’, *Revue de Qumran*, 11 (1982), 97-106, this and subsequent quotations are from 97-98.

Milikowsky continues “There has arisen, consequently, a scholarly consensus against understanding the allusions to “Damascus” in CD as referring to a migration or exile to the city of Damascus, especially anytime after we first get a glimpse of this community from archaeological or literary remains”.

In response, scholars adopted two non-literal interpretations of ‘Damascus’ and ‘land of Damascus’:

1. These are symbolic names for the area of Qumran.
2. The names refer symbolically to the historical exile of the Jewish captives in Babylon, after the destruction of the first temple. All the variations of this interpretation claim that the “sojourn in Damascus” in CD represents a sectarian re-reading of the Babylonian Exile and Restoration.

Views did not change significantly over the next 30 years, for in 2011 Geza Vermes could describe the situation in exactly the same binary terms: “... the Teacher and his remaining followers fled to a place of refuge called ‘the land of Damascus’: it has been suggested that this is a cryptic designation of Babylonia, the original birthplace of the group, or else that ‘Damascus’ is a symbolical name for Qumran”.²

Similarly, in 2010, John J. Collins wrote: “Damascus has been interpreted in various ways. Most often, it has been taken as a cipher for Qumran. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor popularized the view that it was a cipher for Babylon...”. However, Collins goes on to paint a slightly broader picture, observing on one hand that “Michael Wise has revived the view that it refers to a literal exile of the Teacher to Damascus”, and on the other hand that “We cannot even conclude safely that a specific place is involved. “Damascus” may simply indicate the state of withdrawal from the rest of Jewish society (the land of Judah)”.³

After nearly 60 years of research, experienced scholars were still unable to decide on an issue regarding the foundation of the group that produced the *Damascus Document*. It is not surprising, therefore, that many scholars around that time started to abandon historicizing interpretations of the Dead Sea Scrolls and to replace them with other hermeneutical approaches.⁴ In retrospect, one wonders whether stagnation over this particular issue—nothing less than the origin and birthplace of the group—may not have contributed significantly towards the shelving of the historico-critical method and its replacement by other methods.

If this suspicion is even remotely true, a critical review of the competing interpretations, those holding the field for so long, may help to clear the blockage. After rejecting the two non-literal interpretations mentioned above, a third possibility will be introduced, or rather

² Geza Vermes (ed and trans), *Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 50th anniversary edition, revised, London, UK: Penguin Classics, 2011; 63.

³ John J. Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2010; 30. Here Collins references a paper that adopts a ‘metaphysical’ approach to the ‘land of Damascus’: Liv Ingeborg Lied, ‘Another look at the Land of Damascus: The Spaces of the Damascus Document in the Light of Edward Soja’s Thirdspace Approach’, *New Directions in Qumran Studies*, Campbell, Lyons and Pietersen eds., London, UK: T&T Clark, 2005; 101-25.

⁴ E.g., Joseph L. Angel, *Otherworldly and Eschatological Priesthood in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Leiden: Brill, 2012; 2, 13-16.

re-introduced. As noted, the scholarly consensus against a literal migration to Damascus developed after “we first get a glimpse of this community from archaeological or literary remains”, which was around 100 BCE. Before that date, however, there is no literary, historical or geographical obstacle against a literal migration-sojourn ‘in the land of Damascus’. In fact, there is an accumulation of evidence in its favour.

Damascus as a Symbolical Name for Qumran

There is no need to dwell at length on this proposal for it patently contradicts the text of the *Damascus Document*: “The Well is the Law, and those who dug it were the converts of Israel (שבי ישראל) who went out of the land of Judah (היוצאים מארץ יהודה) to sojourn in the land of Damascus (ויגורו בדמשק)” (CD VI,5).⁵

According to grammatical principles, the action of the converts of Israel to ‘dwell in Damascus’ (ויגורו בדמשק) is a temporal or logical sequel to their ‘departure from Judah’ (היוצאים מארץ יהודה), which is a state that is continuing at the time of writing, and whose onset is determined by the context.⁶ The context, in this case, is indicated by the allusion to the Greek King Antiochus IV Epiphanes in CD VIII,11, and by the temporal markers in 1,5-11 (v.i.), which is to say, at some point during or after the Maccabean revolt.

The ‘converts of Israel’ refer to members of the new-covenant group whose origins are described in this section (cf. IV,3), and this passage is telling us that they left the land of Judah in order to go and dwell in the land of Damascus. As Qumran has always remained within the boundaries of the land of Judah, especially during the rule of the Hasmonean dynasty when the *Damascus Document* was originally composed, it cannot logically be identified with the place to which the converts travelled, after they ‘went out from the land of Judah’.

With this in mind, Philip Davies pulls no punches: “Finally, we can dispose of the argument (though it is rather more assertion) that “Damascus” = Qumran, which was never supported by exegesis. Instead, an interpretation, necessitated by a hypothesis about the origin of the “Qumran community” is here imposed on the text regardless of the usual conventions of sense context or consistency”.⁷ Considering the name ‘Damascus’ to be

⁵ All quotations to the Dead Sea Scrolls in this paper are from Vermes, *Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 2011.

⁶ According to *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, by E. Kautsch, 2nd ed, trans A.E. Cowley, Oxford, UK: OUP, 1910: “The period of time indicated by (a) a participle active, either as an attribute or predicate, must be inferred from the particular context” (§116, 2a, p.356). Furthermore: “The imperfect with waw consecutive (...) serves to express, actions, events, or states which are to be regarded as the temporal or logical sequel of actions, events, or states mentioned immediately before” (§111, p. 326). Finally: “The more precise determination of the range of time to which an imperfect consecutive relates must be inferred in each case from the character of the preceding tense (or tense-equivalent), to which it is attached, in a more or less close relation, as temporal or logical sequence. Thus the imperfect consecutive serves... (§111, 4b, p. 328) “...to represent present actions, &c, in connection with tenses, or their equivalents, which describe actions or states as being either present (continuing in their effect); so especially...” (§111, 4b(2), p. 329), “...In dependence on participles, which represent what at present continues or is being repeated, e.g. Nu 22¹¹, 1 S 2⁶, 2 S 19² (...), Am 5⁸, 9^{5f}, Na 1⁴, ψ 34⁸, Pr 20²⁶, Jb 12^{22ff}, but cf. e.g. Jb 12⁴...” (§111, 4b(2)(δ), p. 329).

⁷ Philip R. Davies, ‘The Birthplace of the Essenes: Where is “Damascus”?’, *Revue de Qumran*, 14, 4 (56) (1990), 509-10.

symbolical does not mean that the referent can be literally anywhere, and least of all somewhere in the land or wilderness of Judah.

Damascus as a Symbolical Name for Babylon

The scholars who argued that ‘Damascus’ and the ‘land of Damascus’ symbolically represent Babylon and Babylonia have constructed a coherent account of the origins and early history of the new-covenant group, elsewhere called the Essenes.⁸ It is a massive historico-critical undertaking and large parts of it remain standing to this day. In their exegesis of passage quoted above (“The *Well* is the Law, and those who dug it were the converts of Israel who went out of the land of Judah to sojourn in the land of Damascus”, CD VI,5), the departure from the land of Judah is said to refer to the exile of the Jews following the destruction of the first temple in 586 BCE. At that time, the exiles were taken north, via the land of Damascus and beyond, to settle in Babylon and its environs. For these scholars, therefore, Damascus symbolically represents Babylon in the text, and the foundational event in this account is the Babylonian exile.

Although the reconstruction is impressive, and was promoted by two of the most articulate scholars of their generation, there is a flaw in the foundation, sufficiently serious to bring down much of the edifice. In his exposition, Jerome Murphy-O’Connor stresses the need to understand ‘went out from Judah’ (in CD IV,3 and VI,5) at face value, as meaning a literal exodus from Judaea, because “it is a question of a return from exile with adequate qualifications to gain acceptance in Jerusalem”.⁹ As to how ‘a literal exodus from Judaea’ can possibly refer to ‘a return to Judaea from exile’, Murphy-O’Connor admits that he has adopted the exegesis of Samuel Iwry.¹⁰ Iwry’s exegesis is carefully explained in his original papers, but does not stand up to scrutiny. After stating the critical passage (CD VI,5) as “The penitents of Israel who left the land of Judaea and went to dwell in Damascus”, Iwry complains that the translation does not convey the fullness of the author’s message and “furthermore suggests that these people, being possessed of a spirit of repentance, and calling themselves שבי ישראל, felt compelled to abandon the land of Judea and sojourn in Damascus. This raises more problems than we could ever untangle”.¹¹

In a second article, published 20 years later, Iwry admits “In my lecture at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, I stood the entire problem of leaving the land of Judah for Damascus on its head. I stated then, as I do today, that the rendering of the pivotal sentence should be: ‘The priests and the laymen who joined them (הכהנים בני צדוק והגלויים) (אחריהם, are Israel returnees (הם שבי ישראל) who hail or originate from the (biblical) land of Judah (היוצאים מארץ יהודה) and sojourned (up to now) in the land of Damascus (ויגורו (בדמשק).’ Not that they had abandoned, had left or went out from the ‘Yehud’ country, the second Jewish commonwealth.... Just the opposite, this community of diaspora Jews were indeed, the ones to make aliya; they came back as repatriates to the old, liberated

⁸ For the identification of the new-covenant group with the Essenes, v.i.: Supplementary Evidence for Literal Damascus, 1. The Name ‘Essene’.

⁹ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *The Essenes and Their History*, *Revue Biblique*, 81, (1974), 221.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Samuel Iwry, ‘Was there a Migration to Damascus? The Problem of the שבי ישראל’, in the W.F. Albright Volume, *Eretz-Israel*, 9, (1969), 86.

Judea under the rule of the enlightened Hasmonean prince-priests...”.¹² A strong wind of Zionism blows through Iwry’s exegesis.

Upon this outpouring of Zionist enthusiasm, conceived in the wake of the Six-Day War, at a time when it was inconceivable that Jewish penitents would have departed from the land of Judah to live in the diaspora, Murphy-O’Connor’s “Damascus is Babylon” hypothesis was established. The Zionist ‘transformation’ of this passage would certainly not be acceptable today, unless it were supported by sound exegesis. As it turns out, Iwry’s exegesis is also unacceptable, for without any grammatical backing he changes the time-frame of the sentence into the completed past by reading the present participle (היוצאים) and the imperfect waw consecutive verb (ויגורו) as pluperfects.

The first step in Iwry’s exegesis is to abandon the traditional translation of שבי ישראל, as the penitents/converts of Israel, and replace it with ‘the returnees of Israel’, i.e., those of Israel who have simply returned to their homes in Judaea. The second step is to translate היוצאים מארץ יהודה as ‘who hail from or originate in the pre-exilic land of Judea’, instead of ‘those going out of the land of Judah’, and the third step is to treat ויגורו בדמשק as if it means ‘who had sojourned during their exile in Damascus’, instead of ‘and dwelt in Damascus’.

The end result of Iwry’s manipulation of the text is not a reliable translation but a tendentious paraphrase, which he proceeds to justify on the basis of a parallel in Ezra (2,1), repeated verbatim in Nehemiah (7,7), which was likely to have been in the author’s mind: “These are the people of the province who came up from the diaspora, whom Nebuchadnezzar the King of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia, and they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town”.¹³ Excluding the explanatory relative clause about Nebuchadnezzar, the basic grammatical construction of this statement is indeed parallel to our passage in CD VI,5, and could have been deliberately used as a model by its author:

- 1) the subject (the penitents of Israel [שבי ישראל] // the people of the province [בני המדינה]);
- 2) present participle (those going out [היוצאים] of the land of Judah // those going up [העולים] from the diaspora);
- 3) imperfect waw consecutive verb (and dwelt [ויגורו] in Damascus // and returned [וישובו] to Jerusalem and Judaea).

What Iwry would not want to recognize, however, is that the meaning has been reversed, and is now the opposite of the situation under Ezra-Nehemiah. Far from confirming a return to the land of Judaea from the exile, this is an ‘ironic reversal’ of the statement from Ezra-Nehemiah, and now signifies a departure from the land of Judah and a sojourn in the diaspora. It cannot, therefore, be used to justify overturning the former interpretation of this passage as a migration from Judaea to Damascus, as Samuel Iwry has attempted to do.

¹² Samuel Iwry, ‘Further Notes on the Damascus Document’, *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division A: The Bible and its World*, (1989), 207 [URL <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23530826>]. NB: In his quotation from the *Damascus Document*, Iwry has combined CD IV,3 and VI,5 in a single composite statement.

¹³ אלה בני המדינה העולים משבי הגולה אשר הגלה בנכדנצר מלך בבל לבל וישובו לירושלים וליהודה איש לעירו.

Of course, neither should it be embraced by Dead Sea Scroll scholars looking for a way to expand an ongoing sojourn in Damascus into a replay of Ezra's mission to Judaea. The skewed exegesis of Samuel Iwry is not a sound basis for the 'Damascus is Babylon' hypothesis, especially as he later rebuffs any attempt to substitute Damascus with Babylon.¹⁴

Having criticized the exegetical basis of Murphy-O'Connor's hypothesis, however, there is clearly some historical truth to his insistence on a connection between the new-covenant group, whose origins are referred to in the *Damascus Document*, and the Jewish communities who remained in the Babylonian diaspora, and this may explain why it has received widespread acceptance.

In a chapter on 'The Sectarian Element in Early Judaism' in his book *Judaism: The First Phase*, Joseph Blenkinsopp traces the roots of sectarianism back, through Scripture, to the times of Ezra and Nehemiah (circa 5th–4th century BCE)—the model leaders whose recolonizing missions from Babylonia to Jerusalem and Judaea already reveal distinctive sectarian characteristics. Looking at the *Damascus Document*, Blenkinsopp notes the author's concentration on the Babylonian exile and his identification with the first to return from Babylon, the "founding fathers" (CD IV 6,8): "A prominent feature of late Second Temple sectarianism, most explicitly enunciated in the *Damascus Document*, is the concern to link up with the survivors of the Babylonian exile regarded as the prophetic remnant and the founders of a new community with whom the sectarians felt themselves to be in continuity. As they saw it, linkage with the generation of the exile and return had the effect of devaluing or simply cancelling out the history from the exile to the emergence of the sect in question. This retrospective tendency is already in evidence in the traditions about Ezra and Nehemiah".¹⁵ This tendency is just that, and does not prove, or even support, the claim that the new-covenant group was 'made in Babylon'.

So, while hesitant on the immediate origins of the new-covenant group, Blenkinsopp agrees that their parent body may have existed in Babylon from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and that there must have been much coming and going between Babylonia and Judaea during the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Summing up, Blenkinsopp writes: "The idea of Babylon as the principal, though perhaps not the only, source of sectarian ideology may therefore be correct for the later Second Temple period, as it certainly is for the Neo-Babylonian and early Persian period".¹⁶

Against this background, Blenkinsopp explains how William Foxwell Albright was the first to claim a direct Babylonian origin for the Essenes, the putative addressees of the *Damascus Document*, on the basis of their apparent interests in divination, astrology, the virtues of plants and stones, their frequent lustrations, as well as their prayer to God for sunrise, performed daily before dawn, facing eastward. Albright proposed that they migrated to Judaea around 160-140 BCE, inspired by the Maccabean victories or threatened by Parthian invasions.

¹⁴ Samuel Iwry, 'Further Notes on the Damascus Document', 88.

¹⁵ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Judaism: The First Phase, The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism*, Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2009: 216.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

Some years later, Albright's hypothesis was more fully developed by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor. He envisaged an Essene migration from Babylon in the second half of the 2nd century BCE, to engage on a mission to reform Jewish religious life in Judaea, motivated, perhaps, by eschatological calculations circulating at the time. Accepting Samuel Iwry's tendentious exegesis of CD IV,3 and VI,5, Murphy-O'Connor claimed the *Damascus Document* supported his hypothesis. Eventually, this was vigorously endorsed by Philip Davies.¹⁷ For the reasons set out above, we must now reject the specific claim to identify the birthplace of the new-covenant group as Babylon, while acknowledging the long history of sectarian policy among Judeo-Babylonians and their various recorded (Ezra and Nehemiah) and unrecorded attempts to impose it on the Judaeian homeland.

The Literal Interpretation of Damascus

There is only one realistic alternative to the two non-literal proposals rejected above, and that is the literal interpretation of 'Damascus' and 'land of Damascus'. Before the discoveries at Qumran, this was the consensus view of the scholars and it has never completely disappeared from the horizon. Because the city and land of Damascus is the most natural reading of the text, when interpreted according to grammatical principles (v.s.), it does not need an elaborate exegesis to explain or defend it. Here are the relevant passages:

"The *Well* is the Law, and those who dug it were the converts of Israel who went out of the land of Judah to sojourn in the **land of Damascus**" (VI, 5)

"They shall keep the Sabbath day according to its exact interpretation, and the feasts and the Day of Fasting according to the finding of the members of the New Covenant in the **land of Damascus**" (VI,19).

"When the two houses of Israel were divided, Ephraim departed from Judah. And all the apostates, but those who held fast escaped to the land of the north; as God said, *I will exile the tabernacle of your king and the bases of your statues from my tent to Damascus*" (VII 14-15).

"The *star* is the Interpreter of the Law who shall come to **Damascus**; as it is written, *A star shall come forth out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel...*" (VII,18-19).

"None of the men who enter the New Covenant in the **land of Damascus** and who again betray it and depart from the fountain of living waters, shall be reckoned with the Council of the people or inscribed in its Book from the day of the gathering in of the Teacher of the Community until the coming of the Messiah out of Aaron and Israel" (VIII 21=XIX,34).

"They shall be judged in the same manner as their companions were judged who deserted to the Scoffer. For they have spoken wrongly against the precepts of righteousness, and have despised the Covenant and the Pact—the New Covenant—which they made in the **land of Damascus**. Neither they nor their kin shall have any part in the house of the Law" (XX,10-13).

Firstly, the context is important: these passages are embedded in the part of the text that is tellingly called the 'Admonition' or 'Exhortation', which is to say that it is primarily addressed to the members of the group that is mentioned, to encourage them to remain faithful to the new-covenant they made in the 'land of Damascus'. The last few lines seem concerned to heal a split that has taken place within the group (CD VIII,21; XIX,33–

¹⁷ Philip R. Davies, 'The Birthplace of the Essenes', 503-19.

XX,34). Some of the hearers or readers may have been present at the making of that covenant, or they may have known others who were present. If writing allegorically, the author usually gives the necessary interpretation, so unless specifically indicated in the text, we would do well to assume that the author, as another member of the group, is communicating directly and honestly to his fellow covenanters. Therefore, our reading of the relevant passages should at least begin with a ‘presumption of historical reliability’.

The ‘land of Damascus’ occurs four times in these passages and is evidently the author’s preferred way of describing his group’s location. ‘Damascus’ alone occurs only twice and, on both occasions, it refers to the same quotation from the prophet Amos (5,26-27). From the repeated and consistent use of the term ‘land of Damascus’ for the group’s location when the covenant was made, we can infer that 1) the author is certain that this information represents the location of the new-covenant group, which is to say, at a place in the country near the city of Damascus; 2) the author wants his readers to accept this information as factual: the Teacher and his followers really did make a new covenant in the land of Damascus, and the reader should accept it literally as a *fait accompli*.

In contrast to the author’s factual use of the term ‘land of Damascus’, his double reference to ‘Damascus’ alone is purely literary, and stems from Bible prophecy. It occurs only twice, both times in reference to a single biblical passage (Amos 5,26-27), which is quoted to justify and explain, from a scriptural point of view, why the Teacher and his followers came to the region of Damascus. A close look at the author’s treatment of this passage reveals an unexpected source of confirmation for the literal interpretation of the location. It is described clearly by Geza Vermes, as follows:

“In the Bible these verses convey a divine threat: the Israelites were to take themselves and their idols into exile. ‘You shall take up Sukkuth your king and Kaiwan your star-god, your images which you made for yourselves, for I will take you into exile beyond Damascus’. But the Damascus Document transforms this threat into a promise of salvation; by changing certain words in the biblical text and omitting others its version reads: ‘I will exile the tabernacle of your king and the bases of your statues from my tent to Damascus’.”

“In this new text, the three key phrases are interpreted symbolically as follows: ‘tabernacle’ = ‘Books of the Law; ‘king’ = ‘congregation’; ‘bases of statues’ = ‘Books of the Prophets’ Thus the Books of the Law are the *tabernacle* of the king; as God said, *I will raise up the tabernacle of David which is fallen* (Amos ix,11). The *king* is the congregation; and the *bases of the statues* are the Books of the Prophets whose sayings Israel despised.”

“The omission of any reference to the ‘star-god’ is made good by introducing a very different ‘Star’, the messianic ‘Interpreter of the Law’ with his companion the ‘Prince of the congregation’. The star is the Interpreter of the Law who shall come to Damascus; as it is written, *A star shall come forth out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel* (Num xxiv, 17). The sceptre is the Prince of the whole congregation...’.”¹⁸

Confirmation of the literal interpretation lies in the change from ‘*beyond Damascus*’ (מֵהַלְאָה לְדַמְשֶׁק), in the prophecy of Amos, to the expression ‘*from my tent to Damascus*’

¹⁸ Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 128.

(מֵאַחֶרֵי דַמְשֶׁק) in the *Damascus Document*. The deliberate removal of ‘beyond’ from ‘beyond Damascus’, through metathesis, has the effect of circumscribing Damascus as the stated location. It is perhaps the clearest single piece of evidence showing that our author intended Damascus literally, and not somewhere far ‘beyond’ that city, like Babylon or Mesopotamia.

Other important inferences can be made from the extraordinary transformation of the text from a divine threat of exile and into a promise of refuge and salvation. The change is so drastic, so radical, that only a person of great authority could have conceived and applied it to his situation, and that of the new-covenant group. This person was most probably the Teacher himself. His precise situation can only be surmised, but it does appear that he found himself in a certain location by way of necessity, without a suitable biblical justification for being there. His response was to rewrite a biblical passage to provide the necessary justification. It is doubtful that he would go to these lengths if the place names, ‘Damascus’ and ‘land of Damascus’, were code-names for his real location elsewhere. In that case, he could just have changed the name to match the Scripture, rather than changing Scripture to match the name.

Social and Historical Setting

Apart from the exegetical and literary features presented above, the argument for the literal interpretation of (land of) Damascus in the *Damascus Document* must also grapple with contemporary social, geographical and historical contexts, in so far as they are known, as well as recent archaeological and paleogeographical findings.

Damascus is one of the oldest cities in the world, with evidence of city life dating back the 2nd millennium BCE. For a short period at the start of the first millennium, the city was conquered by King David (II Sam 8,5-6), but freed itself from Israelite control during the reign of King Solomon, and remained the capital of the kingdom of Aram until it was destroyed by the Assyrians in 732 BCE. During the Persian period it was an important administrative centre, and was likely the capital of the satrapy of Trans-Euphrates. Following the invasion of the Near East by Alexander the Great in 333 BCE, Damascus became a Macedonian colony that frequently changed hands between the Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasties. It later became the capital of southern Syria (i.e. Coele-Syria) and Phoenicia (111 BCE) until its conquest by Pompey in 64 BCE, when it was absorbed into the Roman Province of Syria.

Due to internal disputes among the later Seleucid rulers, the Hasmoneans leaders frequently became involved in conflicts Southern Syria and Damascus, but for most of the time Damascus remained out of the reach of the rulers of Judaea. Though only 250 kms from Jerusalem, and only 50 kms from the frontiers of the territory controlled by the Hasmonean dynasty, it was a convenient refuge for those who had fallen out of their favour. Nevertheless, it is significant for this study that the ethnarch Jonathan Maccabee became commander-in-chief of Coele-Syria (1Macc 11,57-62) and visited Damascus at least twice towards the end of his reign (c.145-143 BCE): “The city is mentioned several times in the Hasmonean era in connection with the conquests of Jonathan (1Macc 11:62), who appointed his brother Simeon commander-in-chief at the Ladder of Tyre and after his conquest of Gaza in the south returned to Damascus. The army of Demetrius came to

Kedesh in Galilee to thwart him but was defeated. Subsequently (ibid. 12:24-32) there is mention of another battle with the army of Demetrius in the land of Hamath, when Jonathan again was victorious and returned to Damascus”.¹⁹

On his way back from Hamath to Damascus, “Jonathan turned aside against the Arabs who are called Zabadeans, overwhelming and plundering them” (1Macc 12,31). As noted by Schürer, some scholars have attempted to link this vengeful act with a passage in Megillath Taanith §33: “On 17 Adar, as the Gentiles rose against the remnant of the scribes in the districts of Chalcis and Zabadaea, deliverance came to the House of Israel”, although nothing else is known of this event or the scribes involved.²⁰ One other relevant fact should be noted: it is precisely at this point in his *Antiquities*, between the reports of Jonathan’s battles at Kedesh and Hamath, that Josephus Flavius writes: “**At this time** there were three sects among the Jews ... the one was called the sect of the Pharisees, another the sect of the Sadducees, and the other the sect of the Essenes” (*Antiquities* 13.171-173, cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.119-161; *Antiquities* 18.11,18-22).

The Essene ‘hunter’ could be forgiven for thinking he had picked up the trail here. Unfortunately, however, archaeology in Damascus begins with the Romans: “Very little archaeological data is known about the pre-Classical city of Damascus, except for a few chance finds”.²¹ Palaeography is more helpful, telling us that the earliest extant manuscripts of the *Damascus Document* date from about 100 BCE: 4Q266 is estimated to have been written from 100-50 BCE, and 4Q267 has the similar range of 100-80 BCE. Radiocarbon dating is even less precise. According to Michael Knibb, the earliest fragments of the *Damascus Document* “date back to the first half of the first century BC, but the work may well be older than this. Some of the sources used in its composition probably date from the second century BC”.²² In summary, palaeographic evidence for the *Damascus Document* is consistent with its composition in the last quarter of the 2nd century BCE, the final part of the group’s sojourn in Damascus.

Damascus was the oldest Jewish settlement outside of Judaea and “It may be assumed that this thickly populated commercial city situated at a major crossroads attracted Jews from various places... In the course of time a large and important Jewish community was established in Damascus”.²³ The numbers in the first century BCE are not known, but by 66 CE, when the entire Jewish community in Damascus was massacred by the Romans, there were about 10,000-20,000 Jews living there (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.561; 7.368).

Lying on the busy road between Jerusalem and the Babylon Diaspora, there would have been a continuous traffic of Jews passing through Damascus in both directions. Recalling the observations of Joseph Blenkinsopp, it is probable, though still in the realm of

¹⁹ Abraham Lebanon, ‘Damascus’, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed, vol 5 (2007); 391.

²⁰ Emil Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev and ed by G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black, in 3 vols, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973; vol 1, 185, n. 34.

²¹ Abraham Malamat/Shimon Gibson, ‘Damascus’, *Enc Jud*, 2nd ed, vol 5, 391.

²² Michael Knibb, *The Qumran Community*, Cambridge Commentaries vol 3, Cambridge: CUP, 1987; 15. If the last part of the Admonition is the final attempt to heal the internal split that began to divide the new-covenant community several years before, then it can be dated by its content to the time between the death of the Teacher (c.130 BCE, v.i.) and the settlement of the Essenes at Qumran according to the latest archaeological estimates (c.100 BCE).

²³ Lebanon, ‘Damascus’, *Enc Jud*, 2nd ed, vol 5, 391.

speculation, that a large proportion of the Jewish population of Damascus was of Babylonian origin, who had settled in Damascus for sectarian reasons, which is to say, they either opposed the religious institution in Jerusalem or had been prevented from serving in the Jerusalem Temple for lack of genealogical proof. In short, from the time of the return from exile, there would have been a large community of Judeo-Babylonians in Damascus, many of whom would have been dissident priests, Levites and scribes.

From this review of the socio-historical landscape, there was certainly no obstacle to the migration of group of Jews from Judaea to Damascus and its environs, at some time during the second century BCE. There would have been a large and thriving community of Judeo-Babylonians there, who for the most part would have been receptive to a group of pious and ultra-observant Jews arriving from Judaea.

The Visit of the Wicked Priest to the Teacher's 'House of Exile'

One consequence of adopting the literal interpretation of the 'land of Damascus' and 'land of Judaea' is that it becomes logical and consistent to attribute some degree of historical reliability to the stated time periods as well. To this must be added the group's interest in astronomy and calendrical calculations, fueled by their concern to observe correctly the Sabbaths, feasts, Sabbaticals and Jubilees, for which they kept a book called the *Book of the Divisions of the Times into their Jubilees and Weeks* (CD III,13-17; XVI,1-4). In brief, it is difficult to imagine this particular group erring significantly with their recording of dates and times, or intentionally using them inaccurately, even if they do form part of a chronological scheme or eschatological timetable.

In the opening section of the *Damascus Document*, it is related how the community began 'in the age of wrath, three hundred and ninety years after God had given the Israelites into the hand of the King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon'. At this time, God called a group of pious Jews, priests and laymen to a holy life of repentance, and twenty years later sent them a leader called the 'Teacher of Righteousness' (CD I, 5-12). After a while, this 'Teacher' was deserted by a substantial faction of these pious Jews, who are then described as 'seekers of smooth things' and accused of religious laxity and infidelity to the law. In fact, it appears they turned away in order to follow another leader variously called the 'Scoffer', 'Liar' or 'Spouter of Lies'. The increase of tensions between the two groups caused the 'Teacher' and his faithful followers to go into exile 'in the land of Damascus' where they entered into a 'new covenant', and where the Teacher eventually died. Following the death of the 'Teacher' in Damascus, about 40 years would pass before the demise of all those who originally deserted the 'Teacher' and became violent enemies of his followers (CD XX,13-15).

It is certainly true that the number of 390 is mentioned by Ezekiel (Ezek 4,5), for the number of days he must lie on his left side, representing the number years of Israel's sin, but it does not include the 40 days he must lie on his right side for the 40 years of Judah's sin, both amounting to 430 days for the siege of Jerusalem that the prophet is required to symbolically enact. In brief, the reference to 390 days/years in Ezekiel has very little significance, symbolical, prophetic or otherwise, for the mention of 390 years in the *Damascus Document*. For this reason, many scholars are willing to accept it as an attempt

to give the literal span of the stated period, allowing for inaccuracies due to the method of calculation used at the time.²⁴

So, the first sign of the Essenes appears during the ‘Hellenistic crisis’, 390 years after the exile in 586 BCE, which takes us to 196 BCE. Allowing for the slight inaccuracy, a fair estimate would be around 185-180 BCE. These penitent forerunners of the Essenes were then leaderless for 20 years until they were joined by the Teacher of Righteousness, which would be around 160 BCE. The date of the Teacher’s death can be estimated approximately from the curious information that ‘after the death of the Teacher, about 40 years will pass before the demise of all those violent men who originally deserted him’ (CD XX,13-15). Elsewhere ‘the period of the 40 years’ is identified as the time remaining until final judgment (4Q171 II,10). Evidently, the Teacher’s community recognized a timetable of events up to the judgment, seemingly based on the prophet Daniel’s period of 490 years (Dn 9,24), putting the earliest calculated date of the judgment and messianic age around 90 BCE.²⁵ 40 years before this date would place the death of the Teacher at around 130 BCE.²⁶

Sometime before the death of the Teacher, *Pesher Habbakuk* describes a fateful meeting between him and his chief antagonist, who is here called the ‘Wicked Priest’, in addition to his other epithets (‘Scoffer’, ‘Liar’ and ‘Spouter of Lies’).²⁷ The dramatic encounter took place when the Wicked Priest “pursued the Teacher of Righteousness to the house of his exile that he might confuse him with his venomous fury”, confusing his community and causing them to stumble while they fasted on the Essene Day of Atonement (1QpHab XI,6-8). On that occasion, it is recalled that “the House of Absalom and the members of its council were silent at the time of the chastisement of the Teacher of Righteousness and gave him no help against the Liar who flouted the Law in the midst of their whole congregation” (1QpHab V,9-12). Because of his wickedness against the Teacher and his elect, the Wicked Priest was later delivered into the hands of his enemies “to be humbled by means of a destroying scourge, in bitterness of soul” (1QpHab IX, 9-12), by “inflicting horrors of evil diseases and taking vengeance upon his body of flesh” (1QpHab IX, 2-8). “As he himself plotted the destruction of the Poor, so will God condemn him to destruction” (1QpHab XII,5). Two important historical details are added by the Commentary on Psalms (Ps 37): firstly, that the Wicked Priest planned to slay the Teacher of Righteousness, “because of the ordinance and the Law (Torah) which he sent to him”

²⁴ For an alternative view of the 390 years, see Collins, *Beyond the Essene Community*, 92-94.

²⁵ I was alerted to this ‘eschatological timetable’ and its baneful effects by Kenneth Atkinson’s article “Understanding the Relationship Between the Apocalyptic Worldview and Jewish Sectarian Violence: The Case of the War Between Alexander Jannaeus and Demetrius III”, *The Seleucid and Hasmonian Periods and the Apocalyptic Worldview*, eds. L. Grabbe, G. Boccaccini and J. Zurawski, London and New York: T&T Clark, 2016. Cf. William Adler, ‘The Apocalyptic Survey of History Adapted by Christians: Daniel’s Prophecy of 70 Weeks’, *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity*, eds. J. VanderKam and W. Adler, Assen/ Van Gorcum, Minneapolis/Fortress Press, 1996; 201-217; Roger T. Beckwith, *Calendar and Chronology, Jewish and Christian: Biblical, Intertestamental and Patristic Studies*, Boston, Leiden: Brill Academic, 2001; 260-75.

²⁶ According to the Damascus Document (CD), the history of the Teacher’s community is tidily summarized as a final 100 years before the final judgment: 390 years after the start of the Babylonian exile, they wander without a leader for 20 years, then for 40 years the Teacher is with them, before he is ‘gathered in’ 40 years before the final judgment.

²⁷ The ‘Wicked Priest’ is a translation of ‘hacohen harasha’ (הכהן הרשע) which is a pun on ‘hacohen harashi’ (הכהן הראשי), meaning the ‘head priest’. For ‘Scoffer’ and ‘Man of Lies’: CD I,14-15; XX,11.15.

(possibly 4QMMT), and secondly that he was himself delivered “into the hands of the nations, that they may execute upon him judgment” (4Q171 IV,5-11).

Since the meeting between the Wicked Priest and the Teacher takes place in the latter’s ‘house of exile’, an opportunity arises to test our conclusion that the Teacher’s house of exile was in the ‘land of Damascus’. It is therefore significant that towards the end of his rule, Jonathan’s military campaigns against King Demetrius (II Nicator) took him twice to Damascus (1Macc 11,62; 12,31), around 144-143 BCE.²⁸ One of these visits could have been the occasion for the infamous meeting between high priest Jonathan, identified as the Wicked Priest, and the Teacher (cf. 1QpHab), which seems to have marked the beginning of the division among the members of the new covenant, as described in the *Damascus Document* (CD VIII,21; XIX,33–XX,34). The death of Jonathan soon after (142 BCE) is alluded to with recognizable fidelity to the facts recounted in the first book of Maccabees, describing how he was indeed captured, imprisoned and finally murdered by the Greek general called Trypho (1Macc 12,39-13,30). We can safely conclude that the literal interpretation of the ‘land of Damascus’ and the chronology given in the *Damascus Document* matches historical events known from other, more reliable, sources.

Supplementary Evidence for Literal Damascus

1. The Name ‘Essene’

The finding of extensive fragments of ten manuscripts of the *Damascus Document*, in caves 4, 5 and 6 at Qumran,²⁹ has cemented the association of this document with the Essene sect, who were the occupants of Qumran according to scholarly consensus (Qumran-Essene Hypothesis), and are readily identifiable, from the contents of the document, as the new-covenant group referred to therein. However, neither in the *Damascus Document*, nor in any other manuscript among the Dead Sea Scrolls, is the name ‘Essene’ attested. Since this name is only mentioned in Greek and Latin sources,³⁰ it is likely that it was given to the sect by outsiders and was not a self-designation used by themselves. Much scholarly ink has been spilled trying explain the derivation of this name.

Both Philo and Josephus report that the Essenes numbered more than 4,000 and lived in communities, some all-male, others mixed, in towns and villages throughout the land of Judaea. Philo adds the intriguing information that they were also to be found in Syria and that they “derive their name from their piety (*hosios*), though not according to any accurate form of the Grecian dialect”.³¹ Along with many others, we therefore take the

²⁸ Cf. Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, vol 1, 181-88.

²⁹ 4Q265-73; 5Q12; 6Q15. Cf. Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 127.

³⁰ Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.119-61; *Antiquities* 18.18-22; Philo of Alexandria, *Quod Omnis* 75-91; *Hypothetica* 11,1-8; Hippolytus of Rome, *Refutation of All Heresies*, book 9, chs. 13-22.

³¹ Philo, *Quod Omnis*, 75. Philo usually uses the term Judaea when speaking of the Jewish homeland, but here he uses the term Syria-Palestine. Louis H. Feldman observes: “The one passage that is difficult to explain is the one (...) in which he declares that Palestinian Syria has not failed to produce high moral excellence. He also states that a considerable part of the Jews live there, and cites as an example the Essenes. Perhaps the explanation is that Philo is trying to indicate that the Jews inhabited an area that transcended Judaea proper and that he sought a term that would indicate the larger area”, ‘Some Observations on the Name of Palestine’, *HUC Annual*, vol 61, (1990); 1-23. Another explanation would be that the sect originated in Damascus, were first given a name there, and continued to live in the surrounding areas, even after other members had migrated back to Galilee and Judaea.

view that the name ‘Essene’ comes from the Greek transliterations, *essēnoi* and *essaioi*, of the Aramaic words *ḥasin* and *ḥasayya*’ respectively, which are cognates of *ḥasidim* in Hebrew and mean the ‘pious’, or ‘holy ones’ (plural). This theory about the derivation of the name ‘Essene’ supports the ‘Hasidic hypothesis’, which views the Essenes as the successors of the Hasidim, or *Asidaioi*, who were the Judaeen supporters of the Maccabean revolt mentioned in the books of Maccabees (1Macc 2,42; 7,13; 2Macc 14,6). It was, in fact, the most broadly accepted theory until Geza Vermes and others pointed out that the Aramaic forms *ḥasin* and *ḥasayya*’ are attested primarily in a central Syrian dialect of Aramaic (Palmyrene), but not in Judaeen Aramaic, which was the common language in Judaea.³² However, far from disproving the link between the Essene movement and the Hasidim, this observation resonates with Philo’s comment that the Essenes were also found in Syria, and indicates the name may indeed have originated there. The etymology of the name ‘Essene’ can therefore be added to other evidence for the group’s sojourn in Syria, or more specifically in the ‘land of Damascus’.

2. The Thanksgiving Hymns Interpreted by Michael Wise

On the basis of his research on the Thanksgiving Hymns, the Scroll scholar Michael Wise has concluded that at least nine of the twenty-three surviving Thanksgiving Hymns, or parts of them, were authored by the Teacher of Righteousness himself and “Together they constitute his spiritual testament—the Testament of the Teacher”.³³ Wise interprets the sixth hymn (1QH XIII,5-19) as the Teacher’s personal reflection on exile in the ‘land of Damascus’:

“I thank you, O Lord, that You have not abandoned me while I sojourn among a grim-[faced] people... [nor] have you judged me as my guilt might have required. You have not deserted me when, as is my nature, I acted wickedly. Instead, You have protected my life from destruction and [made Your servant a fugiti]ve among lions who are appointed for the children of guilt—lions who are about to break the bones of powerful men, about to drink the blo[od] of warriors. You have made me a sojourner among many fishermen who cast their nets upon the water; among hunters of the children of perversity. As a judgment You have established me there. Yet You have actually fortified the secret truth within my mind—the water of the covenant for those who seek it...
...So that You may publicly manifest Your mighty power through me, You have done miracles on behalf of the poor one. You have brought him into the crucible, like gold to be wrought by the flame, as silver is refined in the furnace of the smith, becoming sevenfold more pure. Just so the wicked of the Gentiles rush against me with their afflictions, seeking every day to crush me. Yet You, O my God, have settled the storm to a whisper! You have rescued the poor one like a bir[d from a trap], like prey from the mouth of lions”.³⁴

In attempting to answer the question about where the author was sojourning, Wise goes first to the *Damascus Document*: “Scholars often have been unwilling to take its testimony at face value (although, in my view, without good reason)”.³⁵ On more shaky ground,

³² Cf. John Kampen, ‘A Reconsideration of the Name “Essene” in Greco-Jewish Literature in Light of Recent Perceptions of the Qumran Sect’, *HUC Annual*, vol 57, (1986); 64-66. For an update see John J. Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community*, 156-60; and Simon J. Joseph, *Jesus, the Essenes and Christian Origins: New Light on Ancient Texts and Communities*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018; 32-34.

³³ Michael O. Wise, *The First Messiah: Investigating the Savior Before Christ*, New York: Harper Collins, 1999; 44-46, quote from 46.

³⁴ Wise, *The First Messiah*, 134-5; referring to 1QH XIII 5-9; 15-19.

³⁵ Wise, *The First Messiah*, 135.

however, he argues that the Teacher's exile must have been between 95-64 BCE, while Damascus was the capital of Coele-Syria. It is debatable whether the Teacher was still alive at this time (v.s), and in the absence of textual evidence his reasoning seems unnecessarily speculative. From echoes and verbal associations, Wise links the Hymn with passages in Deuteronomy, Daniel, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, arriving at the conclusion that the Teacher is dwelling in the north, from where the invaders will come to punish the wicked in Judaea. Perhaps less convincing are his speculations on how the Teacher was able to survive in that place (as a 'brigand' in the steppes of Trachonitis) and in what way his predictions may have come true (with the invasion of the Romans in 63 BCE). Except for giving us a paradoxical 'Brigand of Righteousness', the basic premise of Wise's work seems sound: this particular composition of the Teacher (Thanksgiving Hymn XIII) has the appearance of being his personal reflection on the experience of exile in a hostile country, somewhere to the north, and quite possibly 'in the land of Damascus'.

Conclusions

The main difficulty in giving a historical interpretation to the apparently 'historical' references and allusions in the Dead Sea Scrolls, including those in the *Damascus Document*, is the inability to identify actual geographical places and factual historical events with some degree of certainty. Apart from one specific text, mentioning Kings Demetrius and Antiochus and unmistakably describing King Alexander Jannaeus (*Peshar Nahum*, 4Q169 I,1-8), it has not been possible, up to now, to anchor the corpus of texts to fixed historical and geographical coordinates and to unravel the story from that point, filling in the gaps with what is known from other sources. As the *Damascus Document* refers to the origin and early history of the community at the centre of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the identification of its historical and geographical references would appear to be crucial for this task.

In this paper, evidence has been presented in favour of a literal interpretation of the 'land of Damascus' and against the recognized alternatives. It points to a literal exile in the land of Damascus, during the last half of the 2nd century BCE. If accepted, it is hoped that the group's sojourn in the 'land of Damascus' will become the much-needed anchor, so that confidence in the historical interpretation of the Dead Sea Scrolls can be restored and the story of the elusive Essenes can be fully unravelled and widely known.³⁶

John Ben-Daniel,
Old City, Jerusalem,
August, 2021

³⁶ My attempt to do precisely this was inspired by the discovery of a cave-village in the cliffs of Mt. Arbel, Galilee, which shows convincing evidence of Essene occupation in the first century BCE:
https://www.academia.edu/44053351/New_Light_on_the_Origins_and_History_of_the_Essenes_Implications_of_the_Essene_settlement_at_Mt_Arbel_in_Galilee.