

Were Temple Offerings Buried at Qumran?

DENNIS MIZZI

WE TYPICALLY THINK of cemeteries as places where people bury deceased family members and loved ones. But in the first century BCE, the inhabitants of Qumran, the famous site associated with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, also buried something else in their cemetery: sealed pottery jars. At least two graves at Qumran contained storage jars once filled with date honey but no human remains!

What is behind this strange custom, which is unique to Qumran?¹

The Qumran cemetery is located about 150 feet to the east of the main settlement and includes more than a thousand shaft graves arranged in parallel rows, mostly oriented north-south. The typical grave consists of a vertical shaft, about 2 to 6 feet deep, with a lateral burial chamber at the bottom, hewn along one of the shaft's long sides. On the surface, each grave

was marked by a heap or outline of stones. Given its proximity to the settlement and the artifacts retrieved from its tombs, the cemetery is generally dated to Qumran's main period of occupation, between the early first century BCE and the Roman destruction of the site in 68 CE.

The buried jars were found in the southeast part of the cemetery by Yitzhak Magen and the late Yuval Peleg during their excavations at Qumran between 1994 and 2004.² They came from two graves, each marked by a heap of stones. Instead of a human burial, one grave contained five jars; the other held ten.

Nearly all of the jars were found sealed with a stopper and lime, though small holes had been drilled through their bodies. They were deposited upright at the bottom of the graves, then buried and covered over with earth, like human burials. The jars date to the first

century BCE, and residue analysis revealed they were once filled with date honey.

What do we make of this phenomenon? Why were the jars filled with date honey and then sealed and buried in Qumran's cemetery, in graves remarkably similar to ones used for human burials?

Magen and Peleg propose that the jars were buried because they had come into contact with human

QUMRAN'S CEMETERY. Dotting the desert landscape near Qumran are nearly 1,200 stone circles that mark the graves of many of the site's ancient inhabitants. Two of the graves, however, contained not human remains but carefully buried storage jars once filled with date honey. Scholars have several theories as to why the jars were buried in the cemetery. Archaeologist Dennis Mizzi takes a fresh look at the evidence to see what these intriguing jar burials suggest about the religious beliefs of the Qumran community.





ZEV RADOVAN / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

DESERT LIFE (AND DEATH). This aerial view over Khirbet Qumran shows the excavated features of the main settlement, which dates to the first century BCE/CE, perched on a low ridge overlooking the Wadi Qumran where some of the caves that held the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. About 50 yards east of the settlement is the Qumran cemetery that includes more than a thousand graves. Two of the excavated graves contained mysterious jar burials.

corpses. According to biblical legislation, sealed vessels cannot become impure (Numbers 19:14–15), but the Temple Scroll—one of the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the vicinity of the Qumran settlement—stipulates that everything within a house where someone has died, including sealed vessels and anything in them, shall be deemed impure for the “pure man” (i.e., one who strictly adheres to purity practices) (11QT^a 49:5–10). In this light, archaeologist and Qumran expert Jodi Magness has argued that the practice of burying sealed jars reflects a specifically sectarian ritual custom.³

The problem with this interpretation is that the Book of Leviticus

and the Temple Scroll underline that impure ceramic pots cannot be purified and must be broken (Leviticus 11:33–35; 15:12; 11QT^a 50:17–19). Later rabbinic literature espouses the same view (*m. Kelim* 2:1). None of these sources prescribes that impure pottery vessels must be buried whole. Therefore, this interpretation fails to account for the Qumran jar burials.

Magen and Peleg also offer a more mundane explanation: The jars were buried to keep away scavengers and pests, such as birds, bees, and flies. However, this does not explain why the phenomenon is attested only at Qumran. If this were an ordinary method for dealing with pests, one would expect the practice to materialize more frequently in the archaeological record. Moreover, this explanation does not address why other pots and food remains were simply discarded in rubbish dumps around the site.

I propose a different explanation for this phenomenon. The high degree of care and attention invested in the burial of these jars indicates that they were considered

special. I argue that they were set apart and buried because they were deemed sacred and thus proscribed from use.

To unpack this idea, we must first understand how property in first-century Judea could be sanctified. Objects, animals, and food items were rendered sacred through their transfer to the Jerusalem Temple or its priesthood. Certain domesticated animals were deemed sacred when offered as sacrifices, while agricultural produce could be consecrated through tithing and offerings of firstfruits. Land, crops, and livestock could also acquire sacred status through vows and dedications. Once property had been consecrated (technically, becoming the deity’s possession), restrictions were imposed on who could consume or benefit from it.

But what happened if offerings could not be delivered to the Temple or a priest? What if there was no Temple to receive them?

Rabbinic literature—which addresses the situation after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

in 70 CE, when the Temple was no longer available for sacrifices and offerings—provides some answers: coins were to be thrown into the Dead Sea or some other body of water to ensure they remained permanently out of circulation; animals were to be locked up and left to die; agricultural produce could be left to rot; and clothes and vessels were to be burned or left to decay (*y. Shekalim* 8:6; *b. Yoma* 66a). Moreover, the Mishnah envisions special cases necessitating the burying or burning of dedicated animals as well as foodstuffs, such as leavened bread on Passover, mixed seeds, and the mixture of meat and milk (*m. Temurah* 7:1–6). Although we must be cautious not to project later rabbinic views onto the first century, it is not implausible that comparable methods were employed to dispose of sacred property that, for some reason or another, could not be delivered to the Jerusalem Temple or to trusted priests.

I believe the buried Qumran jars are a material manifestation of such practices. The date honey in the jars may have been consecrated because it was set aside as a tithe or a first-fruits offering. This view is particularly compelling given that one of the primary sources of revenue at Qumran was the date industry, and thus date honey was likely a product of the site. The jars, then, were buried to ensure that no one and nothing violated sacred property, not even by accident. Burning the produce might not have been enough if the jars themselves were also consecrated. In fact, the holes in the bodies of the jars may have been drilled on purpose to make them unusable but perhaps also to mark the jars as ritual deposits. A similar practice of drilling holes in cooking pots and other vessels is attested in second-century BCE Maresha and first-century CE Jerusalem and may represent a process of ritualization that marked out the

disposal of vessels that had been used in sacrificial or other ritualized meals. By marking the burials with a heap of stones, paralleling human graves, the Qumran inhabitants ensured that the buried jars were not disturbed by later activity in the cemetery.

So, why did the jars remain undelivered? It is possible that the produce was never transferred to the Jerusalem Temple due to the

POT CEMETERY. While excavating the Qumran cemetery, archaeologists found two graves that, though nearly identical to the graves containing human burials, were used to bury more than a dozen storage jars. The jars were carefully sealed and placed upright in the bottom of the tombs, but were also pierced with small holes that would have rendered them useless as containers (see right). This unusual treatment suggests the jar burials were ritual or sacred deposits intentionally left by Qumran's inhabitants.



BOTH PHOTOS: STAFF OFFICER OF ARCHAEOLOGY DEPARTMENT OF THE CIVIL ADMINISTRATION IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA

HEAVENLY DATES. One of the earliest domesticated fruit trees and one well suited to the dry climate of the Dead Sea, date palms produce a delicious fruit rich in energy and vitamins. The people of ancient Qumran grew dates and likely produced date honey or syrup, which would have been a key source of revenue for the isolated desert settlement. Given its importance to the Qumran community, date honey was also likely consecrated as a firstfruits offering to Israel's God and then buried in pierced jars that marked the contents as sacred.

inhabitants' reluctance to participate in a religious system they deemed impure and corrupt, a view one finds in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g., *Damascus Document*; 4QMMT; 1QS). Moreover, the scrolls, echoing biblical legislation, underline that tithes and firstfruits should go directly to priests, perhaps in response to Hasmonean innovations that directed these offerings to the Temple (e.g., 4QMMT; 11QT^b; 4Q251; 4Q270). If the Qumran inhabitants held this position, it is possible that they believed there were no trustworthy priests—presumably from within their same sectarian circles—to whom the tithed date



PETER VAN DER SLUIS, CC BY-SA 3.0, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

honey could be transferred. This could imply that, contrary to what many scholars think, the population at Qumran did not necessarily have a priestly component, at least not throughout the entirety of its existence.

The jars are all of the same type,

which suggests that the practice of burying jars was discontinued by the end of the first century BCE. This may be indicative of a change in the social structure of Qumran's inhabitants, with priests now making up part of the local population, or the creation of new social networks, which brought the inhabitants into contact with priests to whom consecrated items could be delivered. Alternatively, the evidence may indicate a change in custom. For example, the inhabitants may have decided to stop setting aside offerings altogether or else to participate anew in the Jerusalem Temple.

In any case, the evidence reflects a dynamic picture and serves as a pointed reminder to avoid static reconstructions of daily life at Qumran. **■**

¹ For more detailed discussion, see Dennis Mizzi, "The Burial of Sealed Jars in the Qumran Cemetery: Disposal of Consecrated Property?" in Dennis Mizzi, Tine Rassalle, and Matthew J. Grey, eds., *Pushing Sacred Boundaries in Early Judaism and the Ancient Mediterranean: Essays in Honor of Jodi Magness* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), pp. 349–373.

² Yitzhak Magen et al., *Back to Qumran: Final Report (1993–2004)*, JSP 18 (Jerusalem: IAA & Civil Administration of Judea and Samaria, 2018), pp. 59, 100, 123.

³ Jodi Magness, "Qumran, the Site of the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Review Article," *Revue de Qumran* 22 (2006), pp. 641–664.



ZEV RADOVAN/BIBELANDPICTURES.COM

THE TEMPLE SCROLL. Discovered in Cave 11, the Temple Scroll is the longest non-biblical scroll among the Qumran texts. Its modern name reflects the fact that most of its content relates to the Jerusalem sanctuary. In its prescriptive presentation of purity laws and ritual practices, it echoes the biblical legislation of the books of Numbers and Leviticus. With them, it states that impure ceramic vessels cannot be purified and must be broken, but it also says that firstfruits were to go directly to priests. If Qumran's inhabitants saw the Jerusalem Temple as corrupt, it would explain why the already tithed date honey would not be transferred to the Temple but rather buried at Qumran.