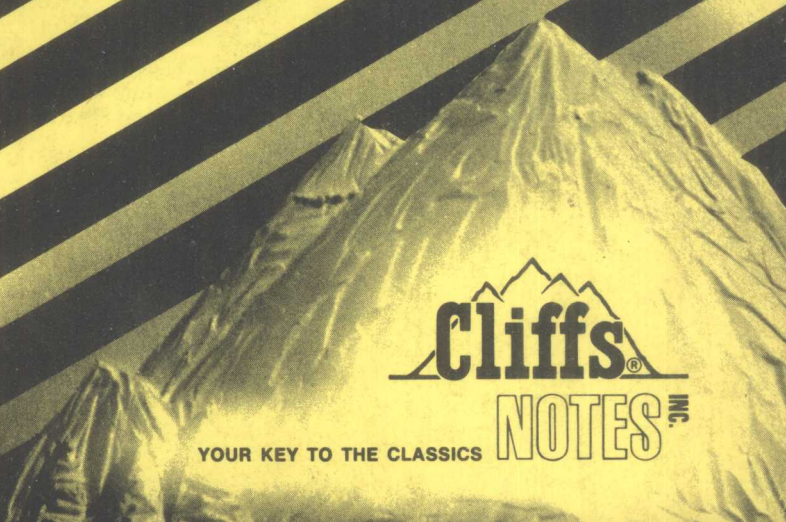


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THE

NEW TESTAMENT

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"There is no book in the English language that we quote oftener and understand less than we do the New Testament."

—Kee and Young
Understanding the New Testament

THE NEW TESTAMENT

FOREWORD

There is no single book that has influenced the course of Western civilization more than the New Testament. This in itself is sufficient reason for saying that some familiarity with its contents as well as appreciation of their worth is an essential element in what is generally known as a liberal education. Like other great books of the world its full meaning and significance cannot be grasped all at once. It requires something more than a rapid reading of the text and there is no short and easy way to acquire an adequate understanding of it. Certainly this little book of notes is not intended to provide the means for doing this nor should it be regarded as a substitute for studying the text itself. Its purpose is rather to provide some guidance for the student who wants to study the New Testament himself but who feels at a loss to know how to go about it. There are numerous questions which he feels must be answered before he is prepared to begin the study. Should he start reading it without any knowledge of the background from which it came into existence? Should the various writings be read in the order in which they are now arranged? Would it be better to study them in the chronological order in which they were written? Should an attempt be made to harmonize the writings with one another or should each one be considered by itself? Would a topical approach in which all of the materials having to do with a particular subject are assembled together have a particular advantage? Should one regard the New Testament as a divine book, a human book, or a combination of the two? These questions along with many others of a similar nature are pertinent to the study of the New Testament and the way in which they are answered will have an important bearing on the outcome. It is hoped that these notes will be helpful toward providing the best possible answers to them.

Books about the New Testament have been written from many different angles and it is possible to gain much valuable information from them. But the number and variety of these books often constitute a source of bewilderment unless one is guided in his selection of them. These notes are intended to be helpful in this respect although their primary purpose is to stimulate the student to read and to think for himself. No attempt is made here to force upon the reader any particular point of view or to tell him what he ought to believe about the New Testament. In the final analysis that is something which the student must do for himself. However, in doing this he should bear in mind that it is his responsibility to do it correctly or

at least to come as close to that goal as he can. This means that in order for his interpretation to have any lasting value or permanent significance it must be formulated in the light of relevant facts and with due regard for consistency both with reference to itself and any known facts. If these notes can contribute something toward this end their purpose will then be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

The New Testament is a collection of writings in which different persons have set forth their convictions concerning the meaning and significance of the earthly career of Jesus of Nazareth. No one of these writings appeared until some years after Jesus had died. He left no written records concerning himself and any information about him must be gained from what other people have written. By the end of the first century of the Christian era, or thereabouts, several biographies of Jesus were written and four of these are now a part of the New Testament. Before any of these biographies were written Christian communities or what was later known as churches had been established and letters were sent to them for the purpose of instructing the members concerning the Christian way of life and telling them how to deal with local problems that had arisen in their midst. Some of these letters were written by a man named Paul who though he had been brought up in the strict traditions of the Jewish religion had been converted to Christianity and who spent the remainder of his life as a missionary founding new churches and nurturing the members in their newly acquired faith. After his death other leaders of the movement continued to write letters to churches and in this way they hoped to strengthen the organization and prepare its followers for any emergency which might arise. As the number of Christians increased and their influence came to be felt in various parts of the then known world opposition to the movement came from different quarters. Some of it came from the Jews who deeply resented the fact that many of their own people were forsaking Judaism and becoming Christians. The most severe opposition came from the Roman government which tried in various ways to suppress if not to annihilate the whole Christian movement on the grounds that it constituted a danger and a threat to the security of the empire.

When persecution of the Christians became extreme, messages were sent to them by leaders in the church. These messages were usually in the form of letters or public addresses. Their purpose was to encourage the ones who were suffering and to advise them concerning the way in which they should respond to the demands which were being made upon them.

Some of these messages are now a part of the New Testament. Other letters were written to counteract false doctrines that had arisen within the churches and several of these have been preserved. It is well, however, to bear in mind that none of these writings were intended by their respective authors to be regarded as sacred literature comparable to the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament. Eventually, Christians did come to think of them in this way but the transition from a collection of writings designed originally to meet certain local problems to the status of sacred scriptures either replacing or else being added to the Old Testament required a comparatively long period of time. There are twenty-seven of these writings in the New Testament today. These were selected from a larger list of writings and it was not until the fourth century of our era that any general agreement was reached among the Christian churches as to the exact number and selection of writings which should be included. It is true that the Gospels and the letters of Paul were generally accepted prior to that time but there were other writings concerning which their inclusion in the canon of sacred scriptures was a matter of serious controversy.

In view of these facts it becomes obvious that an adequate understanding of any of the books in the New Testament cannot be obtained apart from some knowledge of the historical background from which they were written. Just how this knowledge can be obtained presents something of a problem. Our chief source of information is the New Testament itself. It is true that this is not our only source for there are some references to Jesus and the Christian movement in Roman history and in Jewish literature pertaining to the period in which he lived. But these non-Christian sources are very meager and we have good reasons for believing they were somewhat biased. Christian sources were no doubt biased too but in the case of both Christian and non-Christian sources we know the direction in which each of them is biased and we can make proper allowances for them. Since it is only in the Christian sources that we have any detailed account of the life and teachings of Jesus and the general character of the early Christian movement we need to center our attention on them.

It is in the New Testament biographies of Jesus, usually known as the four Gospels that we find the most extensive records of what Jesus did and of what he taught. But it is also in connection with these same biographies that the student of the New Testament encounters one of his difficult problems. How are these records to be evaluated? To what extent do they reveal what actually happened and to what extent do they merely indicate what the author believed to have happened? It will not do to answer these questions by asserting that these are all inspired writings and are therefore infallible in every respect. Divine inspiration is always and necessarily a

two-fold process involving both a giving and a receiving. The giving may well be regarded as the divine part but the receiving or the understanding of whatever it is that has been revealed is the human part and that which is human is never infallible. Anyone who is at all sympathetic with the meaning and message of the New Testament will not be hesitant about regarding it as a divinely inspired book but if he is intellectually honest he will also recognize that there is a human element involved in the receiving and interpretation of that revelation. It is the human element which one must try to understand first for this is the medium through which the divine element must be communicated.

The human element which is present in the Gospel accounts is necessarily conditioned by the circumstances under which they were written. Since they were not written until approximately forty years after the death of Jesus they must be viewed from the perspective of the conditions which prevailed at that time. It is important to remember in this connection that the Christian community had been in existence for a considerable period of time. It came into existence because a group of people believed that the man Jesus who had been crucified was the long looked for Messiah. They were convinced that his life had met with divine approval and his death was not the result of any wrongdoing on his part. He had died for a righteous cause and in so doing he had achieved victory over the forces of evil for he had not yielded to any of their temptations in order to save himself. He was, in their judgment, the Messiah about whom the Old Testament prophets had spoken. By the time the Gospels were written stories which had been preserved orally by those who had been associated with Jesus were now viewed in the light of more recent events and interpreted in accordance with the beliefs which had become firmly established in the minds of the biographers. To reconstruct the original stories as they existed prior to the later interpretations placed upon them has been one of the main tasks of what is known as "form criticism." Although the methods used for this purpose have their limitations they are of value as a means toward understanding the New Testament.

The letters written by the Apostle Paul constitute nearly one-third of the New Testament. They were written long before any of the Gospels which we have now were in existence. Paul evidently knew something about the life of Jesus although he had not seen him in the flesh. His information, so far as we can determine, must have been obtained from the oral traditions which had been passed on to him by those who had been associated with him. Paul reports very little concerning the teachings of Jesus but his interpretation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has had

a profound influence on Christian history. The remaining portions of the New Testament while concerned primarily with specific problems and situations do nevertheless reflect the generally accepted beliefs concerning Jesus which were current among Christians at that time. Written accounts of what Jesus did during the course of his life were not considered necessary by the earliest Christians. They believed he would return to earth and establish the messianic kingdom in the very near future. Until that time the memories of his disciples and friends would be sufficient to preserve his deeds and his teachings. It was not until many of those who had been associated with him had died that the need for written records came to be recognized. After all that is included in our New Testament had been written it was some time before the manuscripts were assembled in their present form and used along with the Old Testament scriptures in the worship services of the Christian churches. Their status as inspired writings which were authoritative for the establishment of doctrines came about in response to a whole series of situations which developed within the Christian movement.

There are several different ways in which the study of the New Testament may be pursued. While there are benefits which may be derived from any one of them it does not follow that one method is as good as any other one. A brief statement with reference to various methods should make this clear. For example, one may begin by reading the books of the New Testament in the order in which they are now assembled. This will mean that one reads first of all the Gospel of Matthew. This was not the first Gospel to be written. It was placed first in the New Testament because it was regarded as the most important of the Gospels. Understanding the contents of this Gospel is difficult if not impossible until one sees it in relation to the other Gospels and to the historical situation from which it was produced. One needs to know the sources from which the author obtained his materials and the scheme which he followed in their selection and organization. It is also essential to know the purpose which he had in mind and the way in which his materials were used for the accomplishment of that purpose. Elements of the Gospel which appear to be in conflict with one another can scarcely be understood until one becomes familiar with the background from which each of them was derived. These difficulties along with many others are necessarily involved in the use of this method.

Another way of studying the New Testament consists in putting together all of the material found in any of the writings on a given subject. If this could be done successfully one might speak about the New Testament teaching on such subjects as money, divorce, Sabbath observance,

spiritual gifts, and many other topics. Aside from the fact that an enquiry of this kind would be practically endless because of the number of topics that are mentioned, there is the more serious difficulty of fitting together the statements made by different persons under different circumstances and from different points of view. Nor can it be assumed without evidence to support it that different writers thought alike about any given subject.

Studying the books in the chronological order in which they were written does have some advantages in that it enables one to trace more directly the development of Christian thought through the period during which the New Testament was in the making. The chief objection to this method lies in the fact that Christianity was a going concern before any portion of the New Testament was written. The literature which it contains was the product of the Christian movement rather than the cause of it. It is for this reason that an understanding of what was written presupposes a certain familiarity with what had taken place before the writing began. When Paul wrote his letters to the Christian churches of his day he was writing to people who already knew something about the life of Jesus and the significance of what he had done. This, they must have obtained from oral traditions, because the sources from which we derive our information about him had not been written. Hence, it is necessary for us to consult the later literature of the New Testament in order to understand what was known earlier. In the case of the Gospels and other portions of the literature it is quite impossible to comprehend what the respective authors were saying apart from the beliefs which they were trying to establish.

In view of these considerations it seems wise to begin the study of the New Testament with a survey of the historical background which is implicit in the literature itself. This will necessarily include a brief survey of some of the more important elements in the religious life of the Jewish people prior to the beginning of the Christian era. It must also include an account of the religious hopes and ideals that were current among the Gentile or non-Jewish parts of the population. Some familiarity with both of these backgrounds is a prerequisite for the study of the New Testament for while Christianity had its earliest beginnings among the Jews it was not long until it began to spread among the Gentiles. For each of these groups its meaning had to be formulated in terms of the ideas and concepts to which they were accustomed. Knowing something about the religious beliefs and practices of these two groups together with the more pertinent facts in connection with the life of Jesus as it was understood by the early Christians prepares one for a more intelligent reading of the literature included in our New Testament.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Christian churches of the first century drew their membership from both Jews and Gentiles. The first Christians had been Jews and their first missionary activities had been directed toward winning members from this group. It was not long, however, before their activities were extended to include Gentiles and many of those who had been non-Jews were welcomed into the newly formed Christian communities. The common element which was shared by both those who had been Jews and those who had been Gentiles was loyalty to the person known as Jesus of Nazareth. Both groups recognized him as a man of God and they looked forward to a time when the message which he had proclaimed would be spread throughout the world bringing salvation to all those who would receive it. But while both groups were loyal to this person they did not as a rule interpret his life and ministry in the same way. It could not reasonably be expected that they would. Each group found it necessary to interpret him in terms of the religious concepts with which they had long been familiar. For those who had been reared in the Jewish faith he was the Messiah, the anointed one, the chosen of God, about whom the Old Testament prophets had written. He was the one under whose guidance and leadership the kingdom of God would be established thus bringing about the full realization of the divine purpose in history. But while the Messiahship of Jesus meant a great deal to those whose training had been in Judaism it meant very little to the non-Jews or Gentiles. They were accustomed to think of religion in terms of the ideas and concepts associated with the mystery religions. To them Jesus was comparable to the heroic redeemer of the mystery cults. These cults were numerous in the Graeco-Roman world of New Testament times. Members of these cults were concerned primarily with the idea of salvation from physical death to be followed by participation in the life of another world which would be free of all the trials and hardships so characteristic of this present life. It was the chief function of the heroic redeemer to bring this about. It was believed that he would be a heavenly being who would descend to earth and after a life of service and self-sacrifice he would rise from the dead. By achieving a mystical union with him his followers would likewise gain the power to triumph over death. For many of the Christians who had been Gentiles it seemed perfectly natural to think of Jesus as one who had fulfilled the role of the heroic redeemer and it was on this basis that they accepted him. The different conceptions of Jesus which are found in the various writings of the New Testament can be understood only in the light of the different backgrounds from which they were developed.

THE JEWISH BACKGROUND

Christianity began with the belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. He could not have been the Messiah if no one had believed he was the Messiah and the belief would not have occurred unless the Messiah had been expected. Hence the origin and development of the messianic idea among the Hebrew people has an important bearing on the literature of the New Testament. As far back as the eighth century B.C. the prophets of the Old Testament had expressed their conviction that some day a leader would arise in their midst and under his guidance a kingdom of justice and righteousness would be established here on this earth. During the centuries which followed this belief was modified in various ways but it was never completely abandoned. Three different stages can be noted in the development of the messianic idea. The first one may be designated as *prophetic* messianism. The other two are known respectively as *apocalyptic* messianism and *revolutionary* messianism. All three had to do with the establishment on earth of the kingdom of God. This was regarded as the ultimate goal of history or the final realization of the divine purpose in regard to the destiny of the human race. The three types of messianism differed with one another in respect to the time and manner of its accomplishment. Prophetic messianism taught that this goal would be reached with the coming of the Messiah or anointed one. It was believed that he would be an actual king who would reign over the Israelite nation and so direct its affairs that the evils in society would be overcome and peace and happiness would be the lot of all.

When Saul was chosen to be the first king of Israel we are told that he was anointed with oil by the prophet Samuel in the presence of a multitude of people. This was an important ceremony for it symbolized the hope that this "anointed one" would be the Messiah under whose leadership the divine purpose would be realized. Saul's reign did not turn out very well and when things were going rather badly David was anointed to be king in place of Saul. David's reign was in many respects more successful. Later generations looked back upon it as a kind of golden age in the history of the Israelite people. The hope for the coming of the Messiah was emphasized more and more in the teachings of the prophets. Because so many of Israel's actual kings had been so disappointing in what they did the prophets talked about the coming of an ideal king who would appear in the future and do for his people that which other kings had been unable to do. This king, it was said, would be like King David. Later on it was maintained that he would be a descendant from the line of David. This idea is expressed in the writings of the prophet Isaiah.

The course of Hebrew history over the centuries did not bring about a fulfillment of their hopes. Instead, one disaster after another overtook the nation. After the death of King Solomon, Israel was divided into a northern and a southern kingdom. Each of these went through a series of tragic experiences. In 722 B.C. the northern kingdom was taken into captivity by the Assyrians. A century and a half later the southern kingdom suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Babylonians. Eventually a Hebrew state was restored for a time but conditions were far from ideal. Internal strife was present and the nation was under a constant threat of destruction by foreign enemies. Under these conditions prophetic messianism began to wane and a new type known as apocalyptic messianism appeared in its place.

The dominant characteristic of this new type was a conviction that the kingdom of God would not come about by a gradual transformation of society under the leadership of a great and good king. Rather, it would be brought about by a sudden supernatural intervention. When the right time arrived God would act bringing punishment to all the forces of evil and establish his kingdom as a dwelling place for the righteous for all time to come. This event was referred to as the coming of the "day of the Lord." It was described as a great catastrophic event, an end of the world, and the ushering in of a new age. Although there are variations in the different apocalyptic writings some of them convey the idea that the Messiah will be a heavenly being who will descend to earth and inaugurate the new era. His appearance will bring destruction to the wicked and deliverance to the righteous. There will be a resurrection of the dead and a judgment of all the people who have lived on the earth. After the wicked have been completely destroyed there will be a new heaven and a new earth in which only justice and righteousness will prevail.

Apocalyptic messianism was especially meaningful in times of crisis and for the Jews this meant most of the time. The book of Daniel in the Old Testament was written primarily for those who were suffering persecution from the Syrians under Antiochus Epiphanes during the period which preceded the Maccabean wars. In New Testament times it was the Roman government which persecuted the Christians and the book of Revelations did for the Christians of that day what the book of Daniel did for the Jews of an earlier date. In both instances the message conveyed had a similar import. It assured those who were suffering for their faith that although the evil forces in the world were then in the ascendancy the time was not far distant when God would intervene bringing an end to the reign of evil and establishing a kingdom of righteousness in which those who had proved faithful through all of their trials and afflictions would dwell in peace forever.

Not all of the Jews were satisfied with the notion that they should endure suffering and persecution while waiting for God in his own good time to intervene in their behalf. The *revolutionary* messianists argued that God would come to their aid only after they had done all that they could for themselves. Accordingly, they believed that the "Day of the Lord" would be hastened if they would take up arms against their enemies and fight for their own freedom and independence. In other words God would use his own people as the instruments through which he would bring punishment upon the unrighteous nations. The belief that God would aid them in doing this was strengthened by what they had experienced during the period of the Maccabean wars. When Mattathias and his little band of renegade fighters took up arms against the Syrians they actually achieved one remarkable victory after another. In spite of the fact that they were greatly outnumbered by Syrian soldiers they were able to win back the territory that had been taken from them. They regained possession of the city of Jerusalem and restored the worship services of the Temple. All of this was interpreted to mean that God would protect them in battle and give them victory over their enemies. What he had done for them in times past he would do again if they would only follow a similar course. After the Romans had conquered Palestine and made the Jews subjects of their dominion, revolutionary messianists continued their efforts by calling upon Jews to launch a revolt against the government of Rome. Not long before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, a certain Judas of Galilee claiming the messianic role for himself had organized a revolt which the Romans had put down with unmistakable cruelty. It was this fear of rebellion which made the Romans suspicious whenever it was rumored that a Jewish Messiah had appeared among his people.

Another important characteristic of Judaism can be seen in their conception of the Law and its relation to the conduct of people. According to their tradition the Law was from God. It had been revealed to Moses and through him it had been communicated to the entire Israelite nation. Because God was the author of the Law it was believed that the precepts contained in it were binding for all time to come. The Law was as unchangeable as God himself. The Law included not only the ten commandments but all the statutes and ordinances found in the "Book of the Law" or what is now recognized as the first five books of the Old Testament. Many of these laws were no doubt added to the original codes long after the death of Moses. Nevertheless, tradition had attributed all of them to Moses and taken as a whole they constituted for the orthodox Jew the standard of righteousness according to which not only the people who were living then but all succeeding generations would be judged. Obedience with reference to the laws which God had commanded was the measure of goodness. This

being true it was a matter of great importance to know exactly what the requirements of the law were and how these were to be applied to particular cases. This was not always an easy matter to determine for instances would occur where different laws would appear to be in conflict and one would be at a loss to know just which one he ought to follow. One of the main tasks of the Scribes was to determine matters of this kind. It was their job to state precisely the conditions under which a given law would be applicable. Frequently it would become necessary for them to state when exceptions should be made to certain laws. Further than this, occasions would arise when they would have to make exceptions to these exceptions. It was a very complicated and confusing process. Nevertheless it was an important one for if a person was to be judged solely on the basis of whether he had obeyed the law there must be some authoritative way of knowing exactly what the law required under a given set of circumstances. It may be remembered that throughout the Gospels of the New Testament the chief accusation brought by the Jews against Jesus was that he was a law-breaker.

Although Judaism is often referred to as a single type of religious belief and practice it would be a mistake to suppose there was complete agreement among all the Jews concerning either doctrine or manner of living. We can in fact distinguish several sects or parties within Judaism itself. It will be sufficient for our purpose to mention a few of the more important ones. The largest and most influential of these sects was known as the *Pharisees*. They were the ones who took their religion most seriously. This was especially true with reference to their attitude toward the Law. They believed the Jews were God's chosen people, distinguished from all others by the fact that God had revealed his standard of goodness to them, and they alone were the ones who lived in conformity with it. Their zeal for the Law made them appear exclusive and self-righteous to those who did not belong to their group. They avoided contact with foreigners and their customs so far as it was possible for them to do so. They were especially antagonistic toward the influences derived from the culture of the Greeks and the Romans. Their motive was to avoid contamination with the evil ways of the world. They believed in a life after death in which the righteous would be rewarded and the sinners punished for the deeds which they had committed. In many parts of the New Testament the Pharisees are severely criticized but we need to bear in mind that these accounts were written by people who did not belong to their group. Without doubt the accounts given are accurate with reference to some of the Pharisees but it would be a mistake to think they were all like that. Many of them were men of the finest character representing in some instances Judaism at its very best.

The *Sadducees* were another sect, smaller in number than the Pharisees, but very influential in determining the policies which affected the life

of the people as a whole. In some respects they were a conservative group for they held a strict and literal interpretation of the written Law as it was recorded in the Torah or the first five books of the Old Testament. They rejected the so-called oral law which consisted of the comments and interpretations of prominent rabbis made over long periods of time. Neither did they take seriously many of the ideas presented in the later books of the Old Testament. For example, they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead as it is set forth in the book of Daniel. But in their attitude toward Hellenic culture and Roman law they were far more liberal than the Pharisees. They took the position that while some important truths had been revealed to the Jews other nations had an important contribution to make as well. This being true they advocated an intermingling of the various cultures of their day thus giving to each group the opportunity of an enrichment of their own understanding through contact with others. Because the priesthood was in the hands of the Sadducees and the appointments made had to be confirmed by officials of the civil government this sect was able to exercise political power. Sometimes this power was used more to promote selfish interests than for the benefit of the people as a whole.

A third sect was known as the *Essenes*. It was this group that produced the famous Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in recent times. From these scrolls much has been learned concerning the history of the period which preceded the writings which make up the New Testament. The Essenes were a group of Jews who were seriously disturbed by the way things were going in and around the city of Jerusalem. It seemed to them that the religion of the fathers proclaimed by priests and prophets of old had ceased to have any meaningful relation to the lives of the people. They saw so much wickedness in the society around them that they felt impelled to move away from it all and live in a secluded colony where they would be sheltered from the evils of the day. In this respect their attitude was similar to that of the medieval monks of later generations who withdrew from a worldly society in order to live a holier type of life. At first the Essenes like the later monks advocated celibacy hoping to maintain their numbers by adding new converts to their order. Later, marriages were permitted but the people of both sexes were required to conform to a very rigid set of disciplinary rules. They were a communistic society sharing their goods with one another and making spiritual preparations for the end of the world and the setting up of the messianic kingdom which they expected to take place in the near future. Much of their time was spent in study and in copying the manuscripts of the Old Testament writings. Besides the works which they copied the Essenes produced a considerable amount of literature of their own, some of which describes their manner of living along with the rites and ceremonies which they observed.