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# The Maritime Wars of 4Q285 and Revelation

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## Abstract

This article is a brief discursive comparison of the eschatological maritime battles of 4Q285 (*Sefer haMilhamah*) and John's Apocalypse. The depictions of eschatological warfare in these texts share elements which indicate common traditions, a shared catalogue of sacred authoritative writings, and together speak to the Jewish underpinnings of Christian apocalypticism. While legitimate textual comparisons of nearly any sort may be made across vast differences in genre, culture, and historical periods, the connective lines between the *yahad* community of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) and that of the early Christian movement are not so distant as to render such comparisons insignificant to the interests of the study of Christian origins and early Christian history.

**Keywords:** Revelation; John's Apocalypse; War of the Messiah; *Sefer haMilhamah*; Qumran; 4Q285; holy war; Christian origins

## Textual Comparison

The conventional and historical reputation of the Jewish people in antiquity is that of being committed land-dwellers who understood the sea to be a highly treacherous environment filled with monsters and that had to be avoided at all costs.<sup>1</sup> This is understandable in light of the strong emphasis on the land (אֶרֶץ) found in the Torah, but this reputation does not tell the entire story, and both 4Q285 and John's Apocalypse help paint a somewhat larger picture. In this article we will compare the scope of apocalyptic discourse between 4Q285 and Revelation regarding the motif of maritime eschatological warfare.

Starting with the more ancient of the two texts, in 4Q285 we find the remaining fragments of a writing that is in some way related to the Qumran War Scroll (1QM), but questions remain as to what the relationship between the two may have been.<sup>2</sup> It has been suggested that 4Q285 constituted a conclusion or amendment to 1QM. While enticing, this notion has been demonstrated to be largely untenable.<sup>3</sup> The document is also well known for generating controversy and excitement when, upon its publication in 1991, it was announced that the text reflected the possibility that a messianic figure (the "Leader of the nation—the Bra[nch of David]" from 4Q285 frg. 5:4), would be put

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- 1 Among the mysterious and dangerous creatures are the תנין (*tyn*) of Gen 1:21, and the לוייתן (*liwyātān*) of Job and Psalms. For a review of Jewish interactions with the sea and a reflection on ancient Jewish perspectives regarding the depths of the ocean beyond what is normally assumed, see Patricia J. Berlyn, "Down to the Sea in Ships," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2009): 73–79.
  - 2 "Sefer haMilhamah" is a designation intended to retain the connection between 4Q285 and 1QM. It is a text supplemented by 11Q14, another fragmented document which does not mention the elements this article is concerned with. The text is also referred to as "The War of the Messiah."
  - 3 Among the reasons given is the very element we are examining in the present article, namely the maritime war. According to Brian Schultz, "Re-Imagining the Eschatological War—4Q285/11Q14," in "Go Out and Study the Land" (*Judges 18:2*): *Archaeological, Historical and Textual Studies in Honor of Hanan Eshel*, ed. Aren M. Maeir, Jodi Magness, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 197–212, there is no indication that 1QM expected such a feature in its eschatological battles, and every reason to conclude it would have been incompatible with the agenda of the War Scroll. Other aspects which make the case *against* 4Q285 as an ending to 1QM would be the highly active participation on the part of the Leader of the Congregation in 4Q285 (a feature which is non-existent in 1QM), as well as the mention of the Kittim in the sections of 4Q285 which do appear to align between the two texts (specifically 1QM cols. 15–19 which do not mention the Kittim). Also, the use and disuse of rams' horns in either text appears incongruent. Schultz argues cogently that a fundamental incompatibility exists between the texts based on these discrepancies, although he acknowledges their similarity in terms of the overall model of an eschatological war in which the Sons of Light (not mentioned in 4Q285) are able to defeat their enemies through divine assistance. I agree with Schultz in all these observations, with the caveat that further pursuit of this issue is worth investigation. (Compare, for example, the listing of angelic names in 1QM 9:15–16 with those of 4Q285 frg. 10:1–3.) In support of Schultz's observations, we also note that the texts were found in different caves (1 and 4), and this should not be ignored as a factor. In addition, regarding 11Q14, another fragmentary document which is closely associated with 4Q285 in that it is used to fill in missing textual elements of the *Sefer haMilhamah* text, it should also be noted that these fragments are derived from different caves (4 and 11).

to death by the enemy of his people, in this case the king of the Kittim, the leader of the forces of Belial. But this was not an accurate reading of 4Q285 which in fact depicts the opposite, namely, a militant Davidic king in the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures who puts to death his enemies. As a result of this correction the sensationalism surrounding 4Q285 has died down, and fortunately so. And while many scholars and interested parties have long hoped for ground-shifting data to be extracted from the DSS, an up-ending of conventional Christian paradigms and essential theologies has not occurred, nor has there been any historical insights which would overturn or revolutionise our understanding of Christian origins.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the *Sefer haMilhamah* text remains relevant to DSS studies and biblical studies at large.

As suggested, the most intriguing and anomalous feature that sets 4Q285 apart from other DSS war texts (as well as the Hebrew Scriptures themselves) is the naval battle depicted in frg. 4:1–10. The text reads as follows:<sup>5</sup>

1. [...] wickedness will be smitten[...]
2. [...the Prin]ce of the Congregation and all Isra[el...]
3. [...as i]s written[ in the book of Ezekiel the Prophet: “*I will strike your bow from your left hand*”]
4. [and will make your arrows drop from your right hand. ]On the mountains of I[srael you shall fall, you and all your hordes”]
5. [...the king of the] Kittim
6. [...the Pr]ince of the Congregation [will pursue them] towards the [Great] Sea[...]
7. [...and] they [shall flee] from before Israel. At that time[...]
8. [...and] he shall make a stand against them, and they shall arrange themselves against them[...]
9. [...] and they shall return to the dry land. At th[at] time[...]
10. [...]and they shall bring him before the Prince[ of the Congregation...]

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4 For example, F. García Martínez has said regarding the prospect of the DSS shedding deeper insight on Christian origins, “The hope thus that the manuscripts found in caves between 1947 and 1956 could illuminate the origins of early Christianity and the New Testament’s formation were logical and well-founded indeed. But the results have been disappointing and, in spite of the thousands of books written on the matter during the fifties and sixties, no real consensus among scholars was reached. The quest has been practically abandoned, and the relationship between the two corpora is only sporadically treated.” It is this very matter of establishing historical connections between the DSS and Christian origins which the present article presumes modestly to address. See Florentino García Martínez, “Qumran Between the Old And the New Testament,” in *Echoes from the Caves: Qumran and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1–6.

5 The DSS translations in this article are combinations of renderings from Timothy H. Lim and Philip S. Alexander, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Reference Library* (Leiden: Brill, 1997) and Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg, and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996).

At the outset we note the reference to Ezekiel the Prophet (frg. 4:3), a quote derived from Ezek 39:3, a reference to the luring of “Gog” to attack Israel from the northern lands. The passage in Ezekiel goes on to declare that the forces of Gog will be fed to the predatory birds and animals (Ezek 39:4). Also, in the immediate context of the section is the declaration that the God of Israel “will send fire upon Magog and those who inhabit the coastlands in safety” (Ezek 39:6). Thus, already we have references that dovetail with both the Qumran war texts (see 1QM 11:16) and John’s Apocalypse (Rev 20:8), which make mention of these foreign enemies.

Beyond this, in the rendering of Wise, Abegg, and Cook, the “Great” Sea at 4:6 is assumed to be the “Mediterranean” Sea, a supposition which is only logical given the dominance of that body of water in the region, although the damage to the text prohibits complete certainty where such a gap exists. Regarding the maritime battle specifically, Schultz notes that Israelite naval success (or lack thereof) as found in 1 Kgs 22:48<sup>6</sup> points to a record of general failure at sea on the part of the Israelite tribes, and that oceanic endeavours are characteristically successful when executed by foreigners, as in 1 Kgs 10:22.<sup>7</sup> This, however, does not paint the full picture, as we are told in 1 Kgs 9:26–28 that Solomon built a fleet of ships which successfully brought back gold from their expeditions.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, as P. Berlyn catalogues, there are many biblical passages in which the Israelites positively interacted with the seas in terms that were legislative, poetic, and theological, which include references to sea creatures and ships, illustrating a knowledge and experience that was not restricted to an isolated or “land-locked” existence.<sup>9</sup> Granting that the Jews of antiquity were not at all distinguished by their naval skills, their interactions with the coastal tradesmen together with residence along the Mediterranean provided for an informed awareness of sea life. All of this is to say that the presence of a maritime war in a Jewish eschatological text such as 4Q285, while certainly running against the grain of Jewish aversion to the chaos of the deep,

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6 “Jehoshaphat made ships of Tarshish to go to Ophir for gold, but they did not go for the ships were broken at Ezion-geber” (1 Kgs 22:48, NASB)

7 “For the king had at sea the ships of Tarshish with the ships of Hiram; once every three years the ships of Tarshish came bringing gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks” (1 Kgs 10:22, NASB). See Schultz, “Re-Imagining the Eschatological War—4Q285/11Q14.”

8 The narrative in this case dovetails with general Hellenistic Jewish sensibility regarding King Solomon, as seen in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon (*Wis* 5:9), which refers to ships and the “keel of the waves.” Similarly, *Sir* 33:2 instructs, “A wise man hateth not the law; but he that is a hypocrite is like a ship in a storm.” These and other such nautical references indicate a cultural viewpoint that is not unfamiliar with oceanic realities.

9 Berlyn, “Down to the Sea in Ships,” also points out that tribal allotments placed Zebulun on the coast (Gen 49:3), and there are references to Dan and Asher being placed there as well (Judg 5:17). Berlyn says of the ancient Israelite tribes, “They were familiar with the sea and the creatures that dwell therein and the ships that sailed upon it. They knew its vastness and its depth and its wildness, that they understood as demonstrations of the wonders of the Lord’s Creation and the omnipotence of His rule over it” (79).

should not be seen as an impossibility, in particular by the time of the Roman Empire in which ships were an indispensable means of uniting disparate lands.<sup>10</sup>

A second passage in 4Q285 which is relevant to our purposes is frg. 7:1–6, which reads as follows.

1. [As it is written in the book of] Isaiah the prophet: “*Cut down shall be*
2. [the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon by a majestic one shall f]all. And there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
3. [*and out of his roots a sapling will grow.*”] the Branch of David, and they will enter into judgement with
4. [...] and the Prince of the Congregation, the Bran[ch of David,] shall put him to death
5. [Then all Israel shall come out with timbrel]s and dancers, and the [High] Priest shall order
6. [them to cleanse their bodies from the guilty blood of the c]orpse[s of] the Kittim.

The Isaiah passage referred to here is based on Isa 10:34–11:1, a text that is markedly Davidic, and, as with the Ezekiel passage above, one which John’s Apocalypse also hearkens to, as we shall see. Thus, what we have in 4Q285 so far is the depiction of an eschatological naval battle (frg. 4:6), wherein a Davidic ruler (frg. 7:3) pursues his enemies (the Kittim) out into the waters of the Mediterranean, then, after bringing their leader back to dry land (frg. 4:9), he ultimately destroys his enemies to the great rejoicing of his people (frg. 7:4–5). The battle is couched in the background texts of Ezek 39:3 and Isa 10:34–11:1.

A blessing is pronounced afterwards (4Q285 frg. 8:1–12), which echoes the Aaronic benediction of Num 6:24–26 and entreats God to bestow on his people the treasures of heaven, an abundance of food, the absence of wild animals and disease (including miscarriage in frg. 8:7), and the presence of God and his angels in the holy congregation. That text reads as follows.

1. [...And he shall bless them in the name of the God of Israel, and he shall answer]
2. [and say] before [all the sons of I]srael: [Blessed are you in the name of the Most High God]
3. [...and ble]ss[ed is his holy name for] e[v]er and ever.[ And blessed are...and blessed are]
4. [all the angels of His Holiness. May] the Mo[st High] God [bless] you. [May he cause his face to shine upon you and may he open]
5. [for you his] good [treasury whi]ch is in heaven to [bring down upon your land showers of blessing.]

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10 Just as certain tribes were known to live along the coastal areas, the Maccabees were known to have interacted with Rome in terms that included a military alliance which dealt specifically with ships among other weapons of war. Cf. 1 Macc 8:23–28.

6. [dew and] rain, the ea[rly ra]in and the late ra[in] in its time, and to give[ you the fruit of the produce of corn,]
7. [wine and o]il in plenty. And [may] the land [prod]uce for [you delightful fruits. And may you eat]
8. [and may y]ou [grow fat]. And may there be no-one miscarrying [in yo]ur l[and,] nor[ sickness]. May [blight and mildew]
9. not be seen in [its] produ[ce. May there be n]o affliction,[ or (cause of) stumbling in your congregation, for wild beasts have ceased]
10. from the land. And may there be no pestil[ence in yo]ur [land]. For God is wi[th you and the angels of his holiness are standing in your congregation, and the name]
11. of his holiness has been proclaimed ov[er you...]
12. for a [com]munity. And in your midst [...]

Thus, for our purposes, there are already a number of observations to catalogue: (1) The concept of a maritime war was unusual if not counterintuitive to Jewish sensibilities in antiquity, (2) the Davidic leader of the congregation is cast in the form of a traditional conquering military ruler, (3) the text of *Sefer haMilhamah* draws inspiration from Ezek 39:3 and Isa 10:34–11:1, and (4) the final outcome of the battle will be a return to dry land with heavenly blessings that culminate in the presence of the holiness of God and his angels (frg. 8:10–11). The text of 4Q285 stands as a unique perspective on apocalyptic/eschatological holy war, clearly expanding its range and scope, while retaining the markings of the Jewish prophetic traditions that support it.

Turning to Revelation, John of Patmos begins in the setting of the Grecian archipelago, an immediate indicator that he had been unmoored from the relative safety of the Judean homeland, and at the same time painfully familiar with travel by boat. His apocalypse provides an eschatological war of immense scope which takes into account the ancient cosmological understanding of heaven above and the abyss below, wherein the land is viewed as being disc-shaped and surrounded by the oceans.<sup>11</sup> In John’s Apocalypse the land becomes a residence of heaven, and the depths of the ocean are characteristically viewed as being a treacherous and watery abyss. This is evident in the pairing of the two terrestrial elements, when the sea (like death and Hades) is said to give up its dead:

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one *of them* according to their deeds.  
(Rev 20:13, NASB)

When the destruction of Rome occurs (depicted as Babylon and the harlot in Rev 18), the text reads as an echo of the pronouncement of judgement on the coastal city of Tyre in Ezek 27:1–36. The prosperous maritime commerce is at once destroyed, and the cargoes are listed. In Rev 18:15–19 the financiers are left weeping, and “every

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11 See excurses on cosmology in David E. Aune, *Revelation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 317–19.

shipmaster and every passenger and sailor, and as many as make their living by the sea,” all are shown to wail and cry: “Woe, woe, the great city, in which all who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth, for in one hour she has been laid waste!” The counter-response in heaven is rejoicing.

This is in keeping with the mass destruction of the sea itself, as in Rev 8:8, where the blowing of the second trumpet causes the following reaction: “A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.” Indeed, the Exodus plague motif of waters turning into blood occurs repeatedly in John’s text, as seen in Rev 8:8, 11:6, and 16:3–4. The sea itself undergoes judgement and is ultimately eradicated. Its demise begins in Rev 7:1–3, where we are shown four angels who hold back the winds to prevent them from blowing over the sea. These angels, we are told, have the power to harm the sea. When the angel of Rev 8:8 blows his trumpet and a huge mountain-like object is thrown into the sea,<sup>12</sup> and similarly when the angel of 16:3 pours out a bowl of wrath onto the sea, resulting in the death of “every living thing in the sea”—these actions constitute holy warfare, and it is waged in both a cosmological and maritime setting. This is also in keeping with the description of the judgement of Tyre in Ezek 27.

But this expansion of maritime warfare is augmented even further by the appearance of the Beast which comes out of the sea (Rev 13:1–8). It is presented as a terrifying visage, conjuring images of chaos from the primordial waters of creation, combining characteristics of the Leviathan with Danielic world empires.<sup>13</sup> At the head of the passage we are told the *dragon* stands on the shore of the sea, presiding over the beasts which arise, and the appearance of these beasts (from both land and sea), is justification for waging war on both land and sea. Furthermore, it is the casting of the dragon out of heaven, which causes “woe” to be pronounced on the earth as well as the sea, in Rev 12:12. As a result, John expands his war beyond the terrain of the holy land and moves it out into both the known and unknown parts of the world/cosmos. He does so by including cosmic maritime warfare, which effectively takes the concept of the “Promised Land” and expands it beyond the ancient boundaries of the tribal allotments of Israel into a larger realm. In light of the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, if in fact it had been destroyed by the time of his writing, this expansion would be both ambitious and fitting to the scope of his theology. It also coincides with the somewhat novel but equally ambitious expansion of eschatological warfare out into the waters on the part of 4Q285.

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12 This imagery is thought to be based in part on the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. See Aune, *Revelation*, 519–20. Also see Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 169, and Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 186.

13 Cf. Gen 1:2; Job 3:8; 41:1; Ps 74:14; 104:26; Isa 27:1 (twice).



Furthermore, John wants his readers to understand clearly that God alone is master of the seas. An enormous angelic figure is shown standing with one foot on land and one in the waters, symbolising dominance over both (Rev 10:2, 5, 8).<sup>14</sup> Although the recreation of the heavens and the earth explicitly indicates “there was no longer any sea” (Rev 21:1), one cannot help but suppose that this eradication does not apply to the throne room of God, which is described repeatedly as having sea-like qualities. Thus, Rev 4:6 describes a “sea of glass, clear as crystal,” and Rev 15:2 describes a similar “sea of glass mixed with fire.” These images are combined with the Tabernacle imagery that accompanies the Ark of the Testimony (Rev 15:5), along with the appearance of those who are shown to be victorious over the beast. Clearly, while John has a massive visionary range, he also gives close attention to such details. One cannot come away from his apocalypse and have any doubt as to what the outcome of the conflict will be as it pertains to maritime warfare. We would further note that while John’s Apocalypse appears to be less concerned with conventional naval battle, focusing predominantly on warfare on a cosmic scale, so unheard of is the depiction of maritime warfare in the Hebrew Scripture that 4Q285 (along with the passages it relies on), seems to presage Revelation in this expanded range of aggression.

Most importantly, for our comparison to be complete, we must consider the use of the two passages mentioned previously. Both 4Q285 and Revelation draw from the context of Ezek 39:3, and from Isa 10:34–11:1 directly. The fact that these quoted references have been even partially preserved in *Sefer haMilhamah* may be considered something of a small miracle, as the fragments have been shredded into pieces so small that they no longer indicate the edges of a scroll.

Ezekiel 39:3, as referenced above, is the contextual setting for war against Gog, and by extension Magog in 39:6. The two are combined in Ezek 38:2, and John combines them as well in Rev 20:8. These foreign armies are not to be understood as attacking via naval warfare. Rather, they are associated with lands far from Israel, beyond the natural geographic boundaries of the fertile crescent, and the Zagros mountain range. The ancient Jewish understanding was that somewhere out beyond the Mesopotamian region where their ancestor Abraham came from, there were other people, other tribes, and that real hostilities lay beyond those regions. In this sense the chaos of the lands of Gog and Magog along with the turbulence of the seas marked out which not-so-vague borderlands to avoid. To travel beyond these God-given boundaries was to invite grave danger. This makes it even more intriguing that both 4Q285 and Revelation dive headlong into the unknown realms of oceanic chaos and death.

Even more fascinating is the use of Isa 10:34–11:1 by both texts. We have already discussed the controversy and sensation that 4Q285 caused in the first flush of excitement over the possibility that the text described a Davidic ruler who is put to death,

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14 This figure is thought by some to have been drawn in part from the Colossus of Rhodes. See, for example, Aune, *Revelation*, 556–57.

but that (Christ-like) ruler is not the figure who appears in *Sefer haMilhamah*. In this case the warlord who appears is more akin to Revelation's rider on the white horse (19:11–16) in that he is *militant*. 4Q285 frg. 7:2 appeals to “a shoot from the stump of Jesse,” and frg. 7:3–4 refers to the “branch of David” twice. It is this figure who will “put him (i.e., the king of the Kittim) to death” (frg. 7:4). This is in direct reference to the Davidic imagery of Isa 11:1, and we should note that in the description which follows we are also told, “He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth” (Isa 11:4). I suggest 4Q285 has quoted these Davidic passages in keeping with the practice of ancient aural cultures in order to call to mind the full description of the passage to the reader/hearer, including the rod placed in the mouth of the ruler, which he uses to strike the earth. While the fragmented text of 4Q285 does not retain this element, it would be an integral part of the “echo” of the text.

John of Patmos picks up on all these aspects. In descriptions of Christ, he is called “him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David,” and the “Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the root of David.”<sup>15</sup> In Rev 22:16, Jesus proclaims, “I am the root and the descendant of David.” The intentional Davidic connection to Isa 11:1 could not be more evident. Moreover, the rider on the white horse appears with a sword in his mouth (symbolising his word), to strike down the nations (Rev 19:15). The connection to the imagery of a righteous ruler judging the earth in Isa 11:4 is nearly impossible to miss, and the fact that both 4Q285 and John's Apocalypse draw from the same Isaianic passage is noteworthy.

But herein lies a key theological difference between the two texts under consideration. Had the early misreading of 4Q285 been correct, thus showing instead a “victorious” ruler being put to death, then the slain lamb imagery of Rev 5:6 would have aligned perfectly with the Davidic figure in *Sefer haMilhamah*. As it stands, however, he aligns more readily with the militant rider on the white horse of Rev 19:11–16, whose robe is dipped in blood from trampling the winepress of God's wrath, and who strikes down the nations with the sword in his mouth. What we have then is a significant theological disconnect, bringing up once again the age-old questions regarding the historical origins of Christian theology, in which a victory can be attained through (or despite) death. This stands on the opposite side of the fence from its traditional Jewish background, as reflected in 4Q285. Hence, according to the understanding of *Sefer haMilhamah*, “winning by dying” was not a concept embraced by this text or its adherents. John's Apocalypse, however, would not be the same without it.

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15 Revelation 3:7 and 5:5, respectively.

## Conclusions

I suggest that several key points can be taken away from this examination.

1. The impulse towards sensationalism which surrounds DSS and apocalyptic literary studies must always be kept in check, and balanced scholarship must be brought to bear. The hope of finding a “holy grail” in the caves of the Judean Desert is and will remain overblown.
2. The “parting of the ways” between Jewish and nascent Jewish-Christian theological sensibilities still stands as a hard dividing line which we have not been able to erase. I am aware of *no* ancient Jewish text which predates the Christian movement that overtly endorses a Christian theology regarding the doctrine of a risen Christ, and to hope for such an artifact is to hope for the discovery of a unicorn.
3. Despite this fact, the study of the DSS (and the wider body of Second Temple literature) in conjunction with the Christian Scriptures is not a fruitless endeavour. The inclination to divide these literatures into silos which cannot be compared with one another is equally misguided.
4. Most germane to our study, the concept of a maritime holy war found in 4Q285 is salient enough on its own to warrant attention. The *expansion of scope* beyond the usual boundaries of the Promised Land (as sharply delineated in 1QM 2:10–14) is a cue that Jewish perspectives of the time had grown beyond the boundaries of Judea and Samaria, and that an awareness of the need for the holiness of God to rule the entire world would require an invasion of foreign lands, and a dominance over the seas as well. This global picture is one shared by John’s Apocalypse, and despite the different methods these two texts call for to achieve these ends, the expansionist agenda was the same in both cases.

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