

# The Dead Sea scrolls and contemporary Christianity

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In 1946, an illiterate Bedouin goatherd discovered, in a cave, old pottery jars and ancient decomposing scrolls wrapped in fraying linen. His unusual discovery was to have implications for diverse groups of people in the twentieth century: Christians anxious to discover more about the beginnings of their faith, Jews looking to substantiate the Zionist claim to a homeland in Palestine, and Arab peoples - and Palestinian Arab peoples in particular - fighting to retain access to their traditional lands.

For nearly 40 years, these scrolls were the exclusive possession of select groups of initially predominantly Christian, and later, Jewish and Christian, biblical and Hebrew Scriptures scholars, and linguists specialising in Hebrew, Aramaic, and first century CE *Koiné*/Hellenistic Greek.

For scholars anxious to see for themselves what the scrolls contained, and to make their own connections between the scrolls and the archaeological reports of the nearby Qumran excavation site, and the implications of these discoveries for the Jewish and Christian faiths, the slow trickle of published original texts and second-language translations was frustrating. Some even suggested that the scrolls contained materials that would shake the foundations of Christianity, and were therefore being kept from public view by interested parties, including the Vatican. It is only in the last few years that the materials, popularly known as the Dead Sea scrolls, have been readily available in the public domain.

And with their widespread release, established positions and interpretations - known collectively as the 'consensus' position - have been challenged, and diverse hypotheses have been proposed relating to the implications of these scrolls and the nearby archaeological ruins, for contemporary understanding of the events in the first century CE, in particular the fragmentation and reformation of Judaism, and events surrounding the birth, development and consolidation of Christianity.

## The archaeological interpretation issue

Because the materials found in the Dead Sea caves included non-biblical or 'sectarian' texts previously unknown to contemporary Jewish and Christian antiquities experts, their discovery raised a plethora of hypotheses as to their origin and the reasons for their concealment.

Not far from the general cave area where most of the scrolls were re-

discovered, there was a small ruin or *tell*, popularly known now as Qumran. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, the site had only excited passing interest: there are many similar ruins in Palestine. It had been described as a military fortress by Gustav Dalman, who visited the area in 1914.<sup>1</sup> In 1953, Roland de Vaux and G. Lankester Harding<sup>2</sup> began excavating the site.<sup>3</sup> Coins found at the site established the beginning of the most recent phase of habitation as between 4 BCE and 1 BCE, and its abandonment, following a battle, in 68 CE.<sup>4</sup>

The ruins, uncovered by de Vaux's excavation team, consisted of a tower, which he presumed was either for defence or used as a watchtower; a long room which was positioned next to a kitchen-pantry and so was presumably an eating hall or refectory; a pottery workshop with two pottery kilns, with nearly a thousand storage jars nearby;<sup>5</sup> a second-storey room which he identified as a scriptorium complete with writing tables and two inkwells; various smaller storerooms and workshops; a mill; a cattle pen; an intricate water system linked to water cisterns; and an extensive cemetery.

De Vaux identified these ruins as a monastic establishment belonging to the Essenes, a Jewish sectarian group, who he hypothesised were also the people who wrote and preserved the scrolls, and stored them in the nearby caves. The organic connection between the archaeological site and the scrolls was established, for de Vaux, by three aspects of the discoveries in the ruins: the scriptorium, the pottery kiln and jars (since jars unearthed in the ruins were similar to jars found in the caves), and the water cisterns (which complied with the mention of adult baptism in the scrolls).

That the sect was Essene (a suggestion already made by Eleazar Sukenik, a Jewish scholar who obtained three of the first scrolls, in 1948) was grounded in the description of the Essenes, and their presence in the Dead Sea area, by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*:

On the west side of the Dead Sea, but out of range of the noxious exhalations of the coast, is the solitary tribe of the Essenes, which is remarkable beyond all other tribes in the whole world, as it has no women and has renounced all sexual desire, has no money, and has only palm-trees for company. Day by day the throng of refugees is recruited to an equal number by numerous accessions of persons tired of life and driven thither by the wave of fortune to adopt their manners.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the material in Pliny, the origin of the Essenes was nevertheless uncertain - although a tentative hypothesis has been put forward. In the second century BCE, the Maccabees began their guerrilla warfare against the Greek occupation of the Palestine region. They were joined by Hasidim, a group of extremely conservative Jews. However, when the Syrian Greeks appointed Alcimus as the High Priest in 162 BCE, the Maccabees opposed the appointment bitterly. In contrast, the Hasidim tentatively supported his appointment since at least he belonged to the priestly family line.

The definitive break between the Hasidim and Maccabees occurred in 152

BCE when one of the Maccabee brothers, Jonathan, accepted the High Priesthood from the Greek, Alexander Balas, despite the fact that he had no priestly lineage. Some scholars suggest that this breakaway Hasidim group later became known as the Essenes. Scholars adopting the consensus line claim that the Essenes left Jerusalem and established a new settlement in the Judean wilderness, at Qumran. Their leader, given the title the Teacher of Righteousness, would also have been a legitimate claimant to the Jewish High Priesthood.

There is, however, no evidence to substantiate a simple identification of the Essenes with the group who occupied the Qumran site.<sup>7</sup> After all, both Josephus and Philo described the Essene movement as widespread; the facilities at Qumran would probably never have accommodated more than several hundred people.<sup>8</sup>

The Qumran settlement would thus have been a marginal phenomenon, perhaps a group of Essene priests who followed a leader, the 'Teacher of Righteousness', mentioned several times in the sectarian texts. This ultra-conservative<sup>9</sup> group separated themselves from the rest of Israel, including the other Essenes, and established an alternative religious community at Qumran. Their return to the wilderness in search of purification and renewed commitment to YHWH is in line with the mainstream Jewish tradition, as presented in the Hebrew Scriptures, of the wilderness as the place of purification.

## **The Consensus Position**

The mainstream archaeological interpretation, proposed by de Vaux, claimed that the settlement at Qumran had begun as a military outpost, constructed by one of the kings of Jerusalem - possibly Uzziah - in the eighth century BCE. The original settlement consisted of a simple rectangular building with an attached water cistern. It was destroyed and abandoned in the next century.

A later period of occupation, by the disenchanting Essenes, would have taken place around 150 BCE. This period of settlement included the restoration of the main building. New rooms were added to the original building. Some scholars assume that during this stage, the site operated as an Essene monastery. From archaeological evidence and the human remains discovered during the excavation of the cemetery, the group would have numbered some fifty persons.

According to the sectarian scrolls discovered in the Dead Sea caves, the infant sect, led by the Teacher of Righteousness, was confronted by a 'Wicked Priest'; both epithets are mentioned in the sectarian scrolls. The latter was presumably a renegade who sought to kill the Teacher, and has variously been identified with one or other character of the Hasmonean period, usually Jonathan (nicknamed Apphus; 160-142 BCE), but sometimes Simon (also known as Thassi; 142-134 BCE) or John Hyrcanus (134/5-104 BCE). The sectarian texts relate that the Wicked Priest died a horrible death at the hands of the Gentiles. Indeed, Jonathan was executed by the Seleucid general Trypho (in 142 BCE), after his imprisonment in Ptolemais; his

brother Simon was murdered by his son-in-law, Ptolemy (134 BCE).

A third important figure - mentioned in the same texts as present during this founding period - was the 'Man of the Lie', usually distinguished from the Wicked Priest. He was said to have caused a schism in the sect.

During the reign of John Hyrcanus 1 (Simon's son; 134-104 BCE) there was a substantial increase in building activity with the addition of the two-storeyed tower, presumably for defence but perhaps only for vigilance, an assembly hall, dining hall, kitchen, store rooms, scriptorium, workshops and the intricate water installations. The cemetery was located outside the perimeter of the main building.<sup>10</sup>

This phase of occupation came to a dramatic close when some disaster overtook the monastery. A fire - either accidental, the result of a natural disaster, or part of an attack or defence strategy - led to the abandonment of the site towards the end of the BCE period. The date and cause of the disaster is disputed. It could have been an invasion by Romans in the 60s or Parthians in the early 30s. However, de Vaux was confident that it was an earthquake - described by the historian Josephus as occurring 'in the seventh year of Herod' - which would make it 31 BCE.<sup>11</sup> In any case, archaeological excavations demonstrate that the monastery was covered with ash; there was also evidence of a deep layer of mud in many places, presumably due to cisterns being cracked by intense heat or soil movement.

The site remained uninhabited until the beginning of the Christian era. Archaeological evidence supported a second major phase of occupation during the first decade of this era, which continued until the final destruction of the site by the Romans in 68 CE. Some scholars have conjectured that, prior to this final destruction, the scrolls were taken and hidden in the caves. Scholars have also suggested that some of the caves could have served as the normal everyday repositories for the community library.<sup>12</sup> For a short period after the destruction, the ruins may have been used by Roman troops as a military outpost.

This interpretation of the archaeological findings, known as the consensus position, has been widely accepted among a wide ranging group of scholars. It is generally accepted by this group of scholars that the copying of the scrolls, their seclusion in the caves where they were discovered, and all the events related in them, must have taken place before 68 CE. These scholars also maintain that references to persons (such as the Teacher of Righteousness and the Wicked Priest), and events connected with the foundation of the sect - such as can be interpreted from the sectarian texts - should be situated in the second century BCE, since the archaeological interpretation of the monastery ruins places the sect's origins at that time.

## **Why is the consensus position widely accepted?**

The consensus position suited both the mainly Christian group of scholars headed by de Vaux, and the Jewish scholars. For Christians, it protected the

uniqueness of their founder, Jesus.

For these scholars, the scrolls provided background material for the study of the Christian Scriptures and the history of the early Christian church, but no more than that, since the beginnings of Christianity postdated the establishment of the Qumran phenomenon. As a community isolated by choice from the mainstream of life in Jerusalem and its environs, and seeking purification through their seclusion in the desert, the group at Qumran would not have invited communication and accepted influence from groups outside their community.

The paradigm of a single Essene group, who had gone out into the wilderness to seek a purer relationship with their God, suited this consensus group of scholars and their essentially exclusivist appreciation of Christianity.

It also demonstrated that mainstream Judaism of the Second Temple period was regarded even by some of its Jewish adherents as flawed, and that there had been attempts at revitalisation from within Judaism prior to the development of the Christian breakaway group. The Essenes tried to reform their faith but failed; Christianity, at a later date, uniquely achieved this revitalisation, and in the process established a new faith.

The consensus position also suited the Jewish and Israeli scholars. The Essene sect behind the scrolls were Jews who had anticipated even the bloody struggle of 1948 and its aftermath. They may have been pacifist in principle, but they were driven to belligerence by the secular and defiling Roman occupation, just as contemporary Israelis had been forced to fight for survival against their hostile Arab neighbours. The parallel between the Jews in modern Israel, and the consensus theorists' reconstruction of the Essenes, was obvious. Thus, the consensus position became the paradigm for scroll interpretation for both Jewish and Christian scholars.

## **Consensus under threat**

The scrolls are now in the public domain, and readily accessible in both microfiche and translation, and the archaeological interpretation of the *tell* at Qumran has been declared open. How do these two developments affect the study of early Christianity?

Obvious structural similarities between the Qumran Essenes and the early Christians had been noted from the earliest days of scroll research. The meal of bread and wine, baptism as a rite of initiation, the council of twelve lay members and three priests, leadership under a 'bishop', the messianic expectation (even if it was directed at two messiahs), esteem for celibacy and the practice of communal poverty are the more striking similarities between the two initially predominantly Jewish breakaway groups. The Essene group's negative attitudes towards wealth and divorce were similar to those of the Christians. When the actual wording of the scrolls' text is examined more closely, it is apparent that the Qumran sectarians referred to themselves as 'the way', 'the sons of light', 'the new covenant', and 'the light of the

world'. They were exhorted to 'walk in the light' and to await the 'spirit of truth'. These phrases are reminiscent of the gospels, particularly the gospel of John; other passages in these sectarian texts throw light on some texts in the Pauline materials.<sup>13</sup>

On the basis of such comparisons, the case for some sort of contact, perhaps close contact, between Qumran and early Christianity was an instinctive deduction for scholars to make. Despite the intensive search for signs of influence and similarity, however, the differences between the two groups were never glossed over.

## Significant challenges to the consensus position

Broadly, among scholars interested in the study of early Christianity, there have been three positions on the scrolls. A minority have seen them as the literature of proto-Christians, a group who in some way transmogrified into the Christian church.<sup>14</sup> This stance made observant Christians uneasy since it challenged the uniqueness of Christianity. Other scholars, still within the consensus position, recognised in the scrolls the literature of a Jewish group from whom some of the early Christian disciples, for example John the Baptist,<sup>15</sup> had originated. A much larger group, including the majority of the consensus group, maintained that the scrolls belonged to a Jewish sect which flourished at the same time as early Christianity; this group, however, did not accept there was direct contact between the two groups.

However, more widespread access to the texts, and the current openness to revision of the archaeological interpretation, have highlighted anomalies that beset the consensus position, and disturb the balance of the positions outlined above.<sup>16</sup>

1. Reinterpretation of the archaeological discoveries at Qumran suggests it is not certain that the archaeological site is a 'monastery'; the defensive tower is a feature rather out of place in a monastic establishment. It is feasible that it was a military installation used by Jewish defenders against the Romans.

2. Female skeletons discovered in the cemetery are not easily explained if the Essenes were a celibate community. There also seems to be too many graves for a community of the limited size estimated from the facilities available at the Qumran site.

3. More importantly, the graveyard is only about 35 metres from the living quarters, which would have been contrary to the rules of cleanness for an observant Jewish sect.

4. The 'scriptorium' did not yield any fragments of parchment during the excavations - as would be expected in a place dedicated to centuries of writing. The two 'inkwells' could be interpreted as normal facilities in another sort of room, for example a dining room. The 'writing desks' do not conform to any known type depicted or unearthed elsewhere in the Middle East; they have been reinterpreted as containers (by upending them) or tables set against the wall of a *triclinium* or Roman style dining room.

5. Scrolls similar to those found in the Qumran caves have since been found at Masada, where Zealots, not Essenes, are known to have fought against the Romans.

6. From close observation of the scripts used in the scrolls - now available for widespread inspection in photographic reproductions - it has been estimated that some 500 individual scribes were involved in their transcription, far more than could be envisaged during the two centuries of any presumed Essene presence at Qumran. Many texts must have been brought to Qumran from outside.

7. Furthermore, the gamut of 'sectarian' writing has been interpreted as being too diverse to represent one religious mindset. Rather, it contains several distinct perspectives, and is not easily attributable to any single Jewish sect.

## Alternatives to the consensus position

These anomalies have generated new hypotheses. If the archaeological site is not interpreted as a 'monastery' but as a fortress, used for example by the Hasmoneans and then by Jewish defenders up to the 70s CE, then the organic connection between site and scrolls is broken.

Norman Golb has strenuously maintained that the scrolls, which include a variety of Jewish viewpoints and presumably a variety of provenance, could have been hidden in the latter period of the Jerusalem siege of 70 CE by Jews who eluded the Roman forces and deposited Jewish libraries from Jerusalem for safekeeping in caves in this desert region not controlled by the Romans.

The hypothesis of the caves being used as a *geniza* has also been suggested.<sup>17</sup>

Robert Eisenman, the professor of Middle Eastern Religions at California State University, published two books on his interpretation of the scrolls.<sup>18</sup> His findings were in conflict with significant aspects of the consensus position, claiming that many of the sectarian scrolls should be dated to the Christian era, not the pre-Christian period.

Further, he maintained that the sectarians were not Essenes but Zealots, descendants of the Maccabees, who went by a variety of other names, including Nazoreans or early Christians. The Teacher of Righteousness was not some pre-Christian figure, but the person known in the Christian Scriptures as James the Just, brother of Jesus and his successor in the early Christian movement. In addition, he regarded James as the leader of a group of observant and pious Jews who were determined to put down Roman rule forcibly.

James, as the Teacher of Righteousness, was, according to the Eisenman thesis, confronted by the 'Man of the Lie', Paul of Tarsus (known as St Paul to Christians), perhaps working as an undercover Roman agent. Eisenman also claimed Paul joined the Qumran group and then seceded, founding another religious faction which welcomed non-Jews and based itself on the worship of Jesus himself, rather than on the Jewish teaching of Jesus. The original Jewish faction, from which Paul had seceded to form his Jesus-cult, was belligerent and volatile; they had resisted Paul's false

teachings vigorously, and had gone down fighting.

Eisenman therefore contended that Christians of today are descended from this Paulinised style of Christianity, which has obviously lost its Jewish moorings. The logical conclusion to his theory is that present day Christianity has been established by an aberrant malcontent, who had hijacked a Jewish faction for his own ends.

Eisenman demanded access to the unpublished scrolls so that his theory could be tested. His voice swelled the rising clamour from Israeli and Jewish scholars for action over the unpublished scrolls. They felt, with some justification, that the Christian editorial board were excluding them from their own heritage, and would continue to do so unless Jewish and Israeli authorities did something. It would seem that Christian scholars like Pierre Benoit, the successor to de Vaux as editor in chief of the scrolls material, regarded scholars such as Eisenman as mavericks, whose unorthodox theories indicated that their access to the scrolls would be counter-productive. He exerted pressure to protect the materials from the access of such radicals!

## **Consensus responses to challenges**

Theorists within the consensus position have reacted to certain of the alleged anomalies noted earlier. In response to the assertion that the site is more likely to have been a fortress, some have explained that though the site was originally constructed as an Hasmonean fortress, it was subsequently handed over by Herod the Great to the Essenes after 40 BCE. This would explain the martial structures and also the proliferation of graves and their proximity to the living quarters, since they would have contained those killed in military campaigns during the Hasmonean period.

Mainstream consensus thought, however, still rejects the evidence for major reinterpretation of the site. Scholars within this group assert that Qumran was always an Essene monastery; the buildings do not conform to a fortified structure since the external 'wall' is no more substantial than the exterior wall of the internal building; these buildings could never have been intended to withstand any military attack.

Others are willing to concede that some or even many of the scrolls were written elsewhere and brought to Qumran by Essenes - hence, the variety of scribal hands is explained. These Essenes would, however, only have brought scrolls which were compatible with their own ideology. The existence of a variety of viewpoint within Essenism accounts for the evidence for competing ideologies within the materials. The presence of similar texts at Masada is explained by the fact that as Qumran fell prior to Masada, some surviving Essenes could have fled to Masada, taking their precious scrolls with them.

In short, it seems that the consensus position, strengthened by some of the adjustments scholars have been forced to make in response to the publication of

anomalies, is still 'alive and well'.

## The Dead Sea scrolls and Christianity

Reviewing the literature, we see no immediate reason to reject the general tenor of the consensus position that the *tell* was an Essene monastery, not a fortress, belonging to a dissident group who had separated from their parent Jewish community. There is still a good case for maintaining an organic connection between this Essene group and the scrolls found in the adjoining caves; it is also probable that some of these texts would have been brought to Qumran from other sources. The Essene group were not monolithic in their thinking or in their preference for texts.

What can be said of the value of the Qumran texts for the study of early Christianity? Qumran provides biblical scholars with invaluable knowledge of the essential matrix for first century developments within Christianity. Before Qumran, scholars could only compare Christianity to Rabbinic Judaism. That comparison yielded a conclusion that Christianity was esoteric, different, unique.

But we now know, from the broad range of ideas within the Qumran library, that first century Judaism was essentially diverse and very complex. There was no such thing as a single 'Judaism', not even a 'mainstream' Judaism. The Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity that developed after 70 CE emerged from an amalgam of Jewish movements in the first century CE period. Both movements were survivors, adaptations and reworkings traceable to a previous Jewish sect.

In opening up the matrix, Qumran also illustrates the wide variety of apocalyptic and messianic expectations which had percolated through Jewish thought and experience over a long period: the Davidic messiah, the priestly messiah, the prophet to come, another Moses, and a diarchy of messiahs.

In the light of these and other findings from Qumran, we therefore propose that Christianity should be interpreted as a Jewish sect that proposed one messianic sequence, involving a single messiah. In the process, in their presentation of the life and activity of Jesus, the early Christians drew on the matrix they inherited from Judaism,.

Finally, we do not think there is sufficient evidence, or any need, to posit any direct contact between the world of Qumran and the world of early Christianity. Both groups developed side by side, overlapping in time but without direct historical interaction.

However, we do think that Qumran, because it gives the scholar an entrée to the religious matrix of late Second Temple Judaism, is an indispensable prerequisite for understanding the departure point of early Christianity.

## Notes

1. See G. Dalman, *Palästina Jahrbuch des Deutschen evangelischen Instituts für*

*Altertumswissenschaft des heiligen Landes* 19 (1914) 9–10.

2. Lankester Harding, an agnostic who loved all things oriental, was in charge of the Department of Antiquities in Jerusalem.

3. They made a preliminary investigation of the site in 1951. The ruins were excavated between 1953 and 1956. The standard reference work on the archaeology of Qumran is R. de Vaux, *Archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (OUP: London, 1973) - an English translation, with some revisions, of the 1959 Schweich Lectures. See also E.-M. Laperrousaz, *Qoumran: L'établissement essenien des bords de la Mer Mort* (Picard: Paris, 1976).

4. See F.G. Martinez, *The Dead Sea scrolls translated: the Qumran texts in English* (Leiden, Brill, 1994) xl

5. The inordinately large number of jars has always tested the interpreters. A recent theory suggested that Qumran was a centre for perfume-making and these were perfume containers.

6. *Natural History*, 5.15.73, in H. Rackham, trans., *Pliny the Elder: Natural History* (London: Loeb Classical Library, vol. 2, 1942) 277. Josephus also made mention of the Essenes, describing them as one of the three main 'philosophies' within Judaism in *Antiquities*, 18:20.

7. F.G. Martinez, op. cit., lii, asserts this connection is impossible.

8. J. Murphy-O'Connor, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992, vol. v) 591, uses de Vaux's claim that the cemetery indicates a 'sizeable population', estimated at 'about 200'.

9. 'Conservative' is not used as a pejorative term in this context; the Essenes at Qumran wanted a return to a more disciplined and sectarian Jewish faith. In that sense, they were a group attempting to 'conserve' the values of an earlier period. In a similar way, the group behind the writing of the Ezra–Nehemiah texts sought a return to a more disciplined and separate/sectarian faith for the people of Israel on their return from the exile. From one of the sectarian documents found at Qumran, known as *Miqsat Ma'asei ha-Torah* ('Some of the Works of the Law'), their separation could be explained on the basis of the introduction of a new calendar by the Jerusalem priesthood; improper sacrifices; lax interpretation of purity rules; consistent impurity within the holy city of Jerusalem because of the presence of animal skins, dogs, the blind, the deaf, lepers, corpses, unlawful marriages of priests and laity; and other issues which loomed large in their collective ethical mentality.

10. The main cemetery contains about 1100 graves.

11. The date is established by reference to Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15:121: 'Meanwhile the battle of Actium took place between Caesar and Antony, in the seventh year of Herod's reign, and there was an earthquake in Judea, such as had not been seen before'.

12. Cave 4, described by Martinez, op. cit., xlii, as the hiding place for 'the remains of the central library of the Qumran community', is an obvious example.

13. For example, passages such as 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 can be better understood against the literary and contextual background of the scrolls.

14. This was first suggested by E. Wilson, *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea* (Collins: London, 1955); but see B. Thiering, *Jesus the Man* (Doubleday: Sydney, 1992), and R. Eisenman, *James the Just in the Habakkuk Peshet* (E.J.Brill: Leiden, 1986), for more startling hypotheses in this line.

15. See O Betz, 'Was John the Baptist an Essene?' in H. Shanks, *Understanding the Dead Sea*

*Scroll*, (Random House: New York, 1992) 205–214.

16. See in particular N. Golb, *Who wrote the Dead Sea scrolls?: the search for the secret of Qumran* (London: New York, Sydney, Toronto, BCA, 1995).

17. This hypothesis has its own difficulties. The purpose of a *geniza* was to store unwanted sacred texts until they naturally disintegrated. Storing scrolls in jars and wrapping them in linen would not seem to be in line with such a purpose.

18. R. Eisenman, *Maccabees, Zadokites, Christians and Qumran* (E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1983); *James the Just in the Habakkuk Peshet* (E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1986).