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The Dead Sea Scrolls

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The Dead Sea Scrolls

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Quite apart from the contents of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the history of their discovery and the account of what has happened to them in the meantime has proved to be a subject as fascinating as some of our bestselling books of fiction. The Qumran scrolls are to the 20th century what Tischendorf's discovery of the Codex Sinaiticus was to the 19th (Kraeling). Albright called the scrolls "the greatest manuscript discovery of modern times." For Edmund Wilson the scrolls are "the most valuable manuscript find since the Renaissance." Theodore Gaster observed that "they recover for us . . . the backdrop of the stage on which the first act of the Christian drama was performed." In its summary, *Time* magazine reported, "The scrolls do not shake the foundations of

Christianity; but they do greatly contribute to the understanding of those foundations."

The full impact of the scrolls may not be felt for another 20 or 30 years. They were found in a series of caves along the northwest shore of the Dead Sea during the years 1947—1956. Near the caves excavators also discovered the ruins of a monastery known as Khirbet Qumran, which, according to the coins found in it, was occupied well into the first century of the Christian era. The people who lived in the monastery and who wrote the scrolls are generally held to be members of the Essenes, a Jewish sect that flourished around the time of Christ. In all likelihood this Essene monastery was destroyed by the Roman armies about 68 A.D. It is assumed that the Dead Sea Scrolls were put into caves by the monks in order to save them from invading Romans.

This article is the third in a series titled "Reading Programs in Theology," inaugurated in the October 1966 issue of this journal under the sponsorship of the Department of Continuing Education of Concordia Seminary. The series is designed to provide reading courses in various areas of theology. It offers brief introductions to limited fields of theological study together with a recommended bibliography for further study by individuals or groups. Enrollees are entitled to purchase the books discussed in the courses at a 15 percent discount through the Seminary Store. For more information, interested persons may contact Professor David S. Schuller, head of the Department of Continuing Education. A new course will appear each quarter. The accompanying study guide on the Dead Sea Scrolls was prepared by Alfred von Rohr Sauer, professor of Old Testament in the Department of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Seminary.

I. THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT CAVES

1. Cave One was discovered in 1947. It contained the largest number of reasonably complete manuscripts. These are seven in number, now on permanent display in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, Israel. They include: (a) the so-called St. Mark's Isaiah Scroll, covering the complete text of the book of Isaiah in 54 columns; (b) a second, fragmentary Isaiah Scroll; (c) the Habakkuk Commentary comprising the first and second chapters of the book of Habakkuk with verse-by-verse comments; (d) the Manual of Discipline, the handbook of the sect that lived at Qumran, listing requirements for entry into the sect, the ritual of initiation, and the rules of

discipline; (e) the Genesis Scroll, an Aramaic commentary on Gen. 12—15, describing among other things Sarah's physical beauty and Abraham's cross-country journey through the land of Palestine; (f) the War of the Sons of Light with the Sons of Darkness, outlining plans for a battle between Levi, Judah, and Benjamin on the one hand and Edom, Moab, Ammon, Philistia, and Greece on the other; (g) the Thanksgiving Psalms, preserving more than 20 (increased by later discoveries to more than 30) psalms that resemble the canticles of the New Testament both in language and in style.

2. In 1952 Cave Four, the outstanding fragment cave, was found. Thousands of manuscript fragments in it point to the fact that the main library of Khirbet Qumran was left in this cave. Every book of the Old Testament except Esther is represented. The fragments are kept in the Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem, Jordan.

After a number of years of work, 382 manuscripts from Cave Four have been identified. About 100 of these are Biblical. Cave Four contained 14 fragmentary copies of Deuteronomy, 12 Isaiah fragments, and 10 Psalm texts. This suggests that the Qumran group gave priority to the same Old Testament books that the New Testament preferred.

There is a Daniel Scroll written in a script paleographers identify with that of the last part of the second century B. C., which is claimed to be only about a half century later than the original edition of Daniel. The Nahum Commentary has the first specific references in the texts of Qumran to known historical figures such as Demetrius and Antiochus.

3. The discovery of Cave Eleven took place in 1956. The contents of this cave came into the direct possession of the government of Jordan. A manuscript containing about one third of the Old Testament Book of Psalms, but in a sequence that differs from the traditional one (and with several additional psalms), has been published. Substantial sections of Leviticus and of a commentary on Job were also found in this cave.

II. LIGHT ON THE BIBLE FROM THE SCROLLS

A. *The Scrolls and the Old Testament*

The scrolls show that no book in the Old Testament canon is later than the Maccabean Period (165 B. C.). The current trend to place the latest canonical psalms into the Persian Period (before 325 B. C.) is supported by the findings of Qumran.

Our printed Hebrew texts of Isaiah are based on a manuscript in Leningrad which is dated about 1000 A. D. The new St. Mark's Isaiah Scroll from Qumran comes from about the year 100 B. C. That makes it more than a thousand years older than the oldest previously known Isaiah text. In fact, this is the oldest complete manuscript of any book of the Bible that is known to us.

What differences become evident after over a thousand years of transmission? There are no differences that are important theologically. The Revised Standard Version adopted 13 readings from the St. Mark's Isaiah Scroll in its translation of Isaiah. These may be recognized by the footnotes that refer to "one ancient Ms." Another dozen variants have been pointed out by Biblical scholars. Thus the St. Mark's Isaiah Scroll shows how reliably the text

of this book was transmitted to us during a period of one thousand years.

Fragments from First and Second Samuel found in Cave Four throw important new light on the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. At many points these Hebrew fragments agree with the Greek version of the books of Samuel, but they differ from the Hebrew transcripts on which our printed Old Testament is based. This suggests that as far back as the second or third century B.C. there may have been two distinct texts of the Books of Samuel, and further study will have to show which of these is closer to the original.

If there is validity to the claim of many scholars that the Book of Daniel comes from the first half of the second century B.C., then the Daniel fragment from Cave Four, dated in the second half of the second century B.C., is especially significant. This fragment will then be closer to an autograph (the original recording of a Biblical book) than any other writing of the Old Testament.

B. *The Scrolls and the New Testament*

On the basis of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament, a French scholar, Dupont-Sommer, pointed out what he thought were very striking similarities between Christianity and the sect of the Essenes as well as alleged similarities between Jesus Christ and the Teacher of Righteousness who lived at least a hundred years earlier. French Catholics took issue with the claim of Dupont-Sommer that the Teacher of Righteousness was regarded by his community as a divine being who had become man, who was slain by his enemies, and whose resurrection was anticipated.

The theories of Dupont-Sommer were popularized in this country by such writers as Edmund Wilson, A. Powell Davies, and John Allegro. The uniqueness and divinity of Jesus were brought into question. Finally Dupont-Sommer was asked by the *Saturday Review* whether he continues to believe that there is evidence in the scrolls which may deny the uniqueness and divinity of Jesus. The question was put to him thus: "Do you find any new evidence for believing that orthodox Christian thinking may have to be revised in the light of the Dead Sea Scrolls?" The French scholar answered in writing: "I believe that the Dead Sea Scrolls do not deny the divinity of Jesus even in the sense of Son of God Incarnate. In a general sense, viewed as a whole, the originality of the Christian Church seems to me to remain unchallenged." (*Saturday Review*, March 3, 1956)

Today similarities between Qumran and the New Testament are acknowledged, but radical differences are also pointed out. Both the Qumran community and the earliest Christian community had a membership called "the many" from which "the twelve" were chosen. Both groups shared their material goods and had penalties for fraud. Both groups required that private admonition must precede public censure. Qumran had a collection of sacred scriptures like that of Christianity. The Essenes practiced ablutions that resembled Baptism. They also partook of a sacred meal that was similar in its external form to the Eucharist. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that Qumran was a closed community, whereas Christianity looked to the world. The communal ownership of the Christians was on a voluntary basis, but

Qumran made the sharing of goods compulsory. The eschatology of the New Testament is prophetically rooted, while that of Qumran has priestly roots. The Qumran sons of light are directed by an angel; in the New Testament, Jesus Himself is the light and life. Neither a passion or a resurrection of the Teacher of Righteousness is referred to in the scrolls.

TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

The Scrolls have provided us with the oldest known complete manuscript of a Biblical book, the St. Mark's Isaiah Scroll. They have furnished us with hundreds of fragments of the texts of every book of the Old Testament except Esther, all of which are centuries older than the texts we had possessed previously. They have greatly enriched the storehouse of apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature which aids us in understanding how the New Testament is related historically to the Old Testament. They have given rise to a lively debate concerning the relationship between the Essenes of Qumran and the early Christian church. They have revealed points of similarity and dissimilarity between the scrolls and the New Testament in the areas of church organization, sacred scriptures, religious practices, and messianic figures.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following books on the Dead Sea Scrolls are divided into two groups. The first group is for those readers who desire a quick survey of the faith and life of the people of Qumran. The second group is for those Bible students who want to probe more deeply into the scrolls themselves and compare them with the writings of the Bible.

1. Brownlee, William Hugh. *The Meaning of the Qumran Scrolls for the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, 309 pages.

One of the two American scholars who were first to see the scrolls gives his interpretation of them.

Cross, Frank Moore, Jr. *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies*. New York: Doubleday, 1958, 196 pages. Revised edition, 1961, 260 pages.

One of the two American team members of the Qumran Research Committee gives the most definitive analysis of the scrolls.

Mansoor, Menahem. *The Dead Sea Scrolls*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, 210 pages.

This volume was prepared as a study guide to introduce students to the contents of the Qumran documents as well as the "Bar Kochba scrolls."

Milik, J. T. *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judea*. Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1959, 160 pages.

A European Catholic member of the Qumran Research Committee surveys the first 10 years of study on the scrolls.

Ringgren, Helmer. *The Faith of Qumran*. Philadelphia: Fortress Paperback, 1963, 310 pages.

A Scandinavian Lutheran Old Testament scholar appraises the religion of Qumran from the viewpoint of one who was not associated with the original discovery.

Scharlemann, Martin H. *Qumran and Corinth*. New York: Bookman Associates, 1962, 75 pages (paperback).

This book investigates the parallels and contrasts between the religious communities of Qumran and New Testament Corinth.

Vermes, Geza. *Discovery in the Judean Desert*. New York: Deslee Co., 1956, 237 pages.

A thorough evaluation of the scrolls from the viewpoint of French Catholicism.

2. Black, Matthew. *The Scrolls and Christian Origins*. New York: Thomas Nelson, 1961, 206 pages.

The Scottish editor of *New Testament Studies* examines the influence of the scrolls on early Christianity.

Gaster, T. H. *The Dead Sea Scriptures in English Translation*. New York: Doubleday, 1956, 350 pages. Revised and enlarged edition, 1964, 420 pages and bibliography.

A brilliant American Jewish poet translates the original Hebrew texts into free and readable English.

Ginsburg, C. D. *The Essenes, Their History and Doctrines*. New York: Macmillan, 1956. 245 pages.

A reputable Jewish author describes the Jewish sect with which the monks of Qumran have been identified.

Stendahl, Krister. *The Scrolls and the New Testament*. New York, 1957, 308 pages.

This volume presents a collection of essays on the Dead Sea Scrolls edited by a Harvard New Testament expert.

Vermes, Geza. *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962, 254 pages.

Vermes provides an excellent English translation of the scrolls that should be used for comparison with the Gaster translation.

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