

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS: THE PRESENT STATE OF RESEARCH*

By Barbara Thiering

I have been asked to give some account of the effect the Dead Sea Scrolls have had on biblical scholarship since their discovery in caves at Qumran, at the north-west corner of the Dead Sea, almost thirty years ago.

There is no doubt that the primary effect of the scrolls has been on the understanding of the New Testament. Although the initial excitement was at the discovery of texts of the Old Testament which antedated those previously known by nearly one thousand years, the contribution to textual studies has proved to be of more limited value than was at first thought. The overall effect has been to confirm the reliability of the Massoretic text as a generally faithful witness to the original (although in some books the Hebrew behind the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Old Testament – has been shown to have much greater value than was previously held).

But at point after point in the New Testament, words, phrases, ideas and practices have been put back in their own environment, and may be studied against that environment. Historical judgements that were made on the basis of the “incompatibility” of certain New Testament ideas with one another, of their “remoteness” from the Jewish milieu at the time of Christian origins, have now had to be revised. These ideas have been found to be thoroughly at home in the Jewish milieu of the period, and to be consistent with one another within an outlook that had been well worked out before the rise of Christianity. The earliest Christian thought is now seen to have been in the closest dialogue with the preoccupations of a particular kind of Judaism in its period: not the vaguely defined kind of Judaism commonly called “rabbinic”, but a version that flourished within schismatic sects, themselves in opposition to the religious establishment. Sects such as Qumran had already taken up popular ideas of the period – often arising from the hellenistic thought-forms that had been gradually penetrating Judaism since 300 B.C. – and had used them to work out a neo-Israelite doctrine that was used in an attempt to reform official Judaism. Christianity arose from within these sects and developed its own modification of their outlook.

The parts of the New Testament which have been affected most dramatically by the

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new information are the books called the Johannine literature: the fourth Gospel, the three epistles of John, and the book of Revelation. This literature was once classified as the most alien to primitive Christianity. It is now seen to be the most at home in the setting which was the immediate environment of earliest Christianity.

In the fourth Gospel, there is a very different vocabulary and outlook from that of the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke). The theme of "light" runs through it. Jesus is the "light of the world" (8:12); his followers "will not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (*ibid*); they are the "sons of light" (12:36). There is a constant dualistic pairing of light and darkness, truth and falsehood, the world and the Christian community. Such dualism is not characteristic of the Old Testament, and, in these forms, is not prominent in rabbinic developments from it. Before the discovery of the scrolls, R. Bultmann¹, whose sources were the Mandaean literature, the Hermetica and Philo, found the explanation in the contact of primitive Christianity with Gnostic thought. He held that there was a Gnostic redeemer myth, showing how the world of light had become separated from the world of darkness; the redeemer descended in order to rescue those who still had fragments of the light. Christians in contact with such ideas had re-interpreted Jesus — originally a simple teacher and leader of the people — in terms of the highly sophisticated redeemer myth. Christianity was brought a long way from its original setting by these means.

But at Qumran, before the rise of Christianity, the sectarians called themselves "sons of light" (1QS *passim*), in constant enmity with the "sons of darkness", who were all those outside their community. They equated light and darkness with truth and falsehood (1QS 3: 15 ff), and believed that the two realms in the world were presided over by two personalities, the Prince of Light and the Angel of Darkness (1QS 3: 19-22). The origin of their dualism has been located by K.G. Kuhn² and H. Michaud³ in a particular kind of Iranian Zoroastrianism. It had been reworked into a Jewish form, and can now be seen to be part of the immediate background of Jesus and his disciples. The conceptual language of the fourth Gospel had been learned from the beginning. The Teacher of Righteousness called himself a "sevenfold light" to his disciples (1QH 7:24), drawing on the Temple imagery used for his community, in which the Menorah, the seven-branched candlestick, was prominent. There is no reason why Jesus, who spoke of the temple of his body (Jn 2:21), should not have called himself the "light of the world", and his followers the "sons of light".

The social background of the Johannine epistles is now better understood. Their repeated commands to "love one another", "love the brethren" (1 John 4:7, 3:1-2), while having no fellowship with outsiders (4: 4-6), are seen to reflect a setting in which

¹R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (S.C.M. 1955)

²K.G. Kuhn, "Die Sektenschrift und die iranische Religion", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 49 (1952)

³H. Michaud, "Un mythe zervanite dans un des manuscrits de Qumran" *VT*, 5 (1955) 137-147.

the church is still a sect within Judaism, fighting for its separate identity. These epistles therefore belong to a very early, not a later stage, of the church's development.

The Book of Revelation was always recognized as a fine piece of Jewish apocalyptic, but the scrolls have provided further contemporary examples of the same kind of highly organised fantasy. The details of the birth of the Messiah in Rev 12:1-17 have close parallels in the Qumran Hodayot (Hymns of Thanksgiving). There is also at Qumran a plan of the New Jerusalem, as in Rev 21:10-21, and a more recently discovered scroll (found in 1967) describes the New Temple as the sect hoped it would be. The War Scroll contains the detailed outworking of a highly unrealistic plan for the great final battle in which all the forces of wickedness in the world would be overcome by the sons of light, the members of the sect. The centrality of such literature at Qumran indicates that it must be taken seriously when it appears in the New Testament. It was a popular genre of writing within which theological themes were worked out, and the requirements of the genre, e.g. the use of mythological language and systematised symbolism, have helped determine the development of the themes. They include such central issues as the nature of history and the redemption of society, which are wholly expressed through apocalyptic imagery, but may be separated from that imagery to be allowed to say something of the greatest interest to modern Christian thought.

The contribution of the scrolls to the elucidation of the conceptual language and thought-forms of the New Testament has, then, been enormous. They have continued and expanded the work undertaken by Strack and Billerbeck⁴ in relating the ideas and terms of the New Testament to their Jewish background.

They have also opened up some important questions about the immediate historical background of Christianity. J.A. Fitzmyer⁵ has pointed to the remarkable organisational parallels between the Qumran sect and the Way, the earliest form of the church as it was found in Jerusalem in its first few years. The Qumran sect also called itself the "Way", the word being used absolutely (1QS 9:17-18; CD 1:13, 1QS 9:21). It sometimes called itself *qahal*, the word translated *ekklesia*, "church" in the Septuagint. Its combined council was called "the Many": the church used an equivalent term, *to plethos*. Its practice of community life and common property, and its daily communal meal, were similar to those of the early church. Fitzmyer believes that there must have been influence on the early Christian community coming from Qumran. We must even reckon with "direct imitation" of Essene usages. But he also points to many differences, particularly the fact that the Jerusalem church was not closed and exclusive, as the Qumran sect appears to have been.

K.G. Kuhn⁶ brings forward literary arguments for a "continuity of tradition"

⁴H.L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (1906-).

⁵J.A. Fitzmyer, "Jewish Christianity in Acts in the Light of the Qumran Scrolls", in *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament*, (London: Chapman, 1971).

⁶K.G. Kuhn, "The Epistle to the Ephesians in the Light of the Qumran Texts", in J. Murphy-O'Connor (ed.), *Paul and Qumran*, (London: Chapman, 1968).

between the two groups. There are some striking points of contact between the Epistle to the Ephesians and the Qumran texts. They include several passages showing a similar paraenetic tradition, including 5:3 on the three capital sins (cf. the "three nets of Belial" in CD 4:15). Even more significantly, the idiosyncratic style of Ephesians, so alien to a normal Greek style, is accounted for. The Hymns of Thanksgiving are written in "long-drawn-out, loosely connected tapeworm sentences". Similarly in Ephesians, there are unusually long sentences made up of "rather loosely joined phrases with rows of relative clauses, participial constructions, compound prepositional expressions, infinite clauses etc, with a very frequent use of *pas*, 'all'". A highly idiosyncratic style points to the same school. Kuhn says "it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the relationship of the language and style of the Epistle to the Ephesians to that of the Qumran texts can hardly be explained except on the basis of a continuity of tradition."

A similar conclusion must be drawn from the appearance in one of the Pauline letters of a passage which must be a quotation from the literature of Qumran, although its exact equivalent does not appear in the scrolls. Benoit⁷ has called it a "meteor fallen from the heaven of Qumran into Paul's epistle". It is 2 Cor 6:14-7:1, and it exhorts believers to keep apart from unbelievers, in a manner quite uncharacteristic of Paul. It uses the name "Belial", found frequently in the scrolls but nowhere else in the New Testament, and bases the argument for separation on the fact that believers form a holy temple: a basic Qumran doctrine. It appears to have been inserted, either by Paul himself in order that his letter should comment on it, or, more likely, by a glossator, trying to refute Paul's arguments with a passage that would have some authority with his readers.

There may be a direct reference to Qumran writings in Matt 5:43: "You have heard that it was said: 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'". It is hard to find a source for these words in the Old Testament, but they are clearly set out in the Qumran Manual of Discipline, 1:9-10: "that they may love all the sons of light . . . and hate all the sons of darkness". Sectarians were also called "neighbours" or "brothers".

It is generally agreed that John the Baptist had something to do with the Essenes. He worked in the same area, the Wilderness of Judea, went there in response to the same biblical text "Go into the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord" (Isa 40:3), was an ascetic, and taught the same doctrine of a coming judgement by fire and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. W. Wink⁸, after a recent study, has concluded that "the church stood at the centre of John (the Baptist)'s movement from the very beginning and became its one truly great survivor and heir". This link suggests the nature of the historical bridge between the Essenes and the early Christian church.

H. Braun's massive work *Qumran und das Neue Testament*⁹ collects all the available data on the contacts between the two movements.

⁷P. Benoit, "Qumran and the New Testament", *op. cit.*, note 6.

⁸W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (C.U.P., 1968).

⁹H. Braun, *Qumran und das Neue Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1966), vols. 1 & 2.

In contrast to the wealth of the results in the field of Christian origins, the scrolls have yielded up surprisingly little about their own history, the identity and career of the Teacher of Righteousness, their great leader. The most recent writers in this area have been G. Jeremias¹⁰, H. Stegemann¹¹, J. Murphy-O'Connor.¹² All have testified to the greatness of the personality of the Teacher. Jeremias has isolated the Hymns written by him, on the basis of their distinctive vocabulary and style, and concludes from his analysis of the Teacher's self-confessions that he is "the greatest personality of later Judaism known to us". W. Grundmann¹³, after studying the claims made by the Teacher on his followers, concludes: "here is a claim to importance whose like has not yet been found in later Judaism". The Teacher was a source of spiritual life to his followers, the means by which God revealed the "true" meaning of the Old Testament prophets, the centre of the event to which all Old Testament history had led up. Members must obey his voice and have faith in him. He was their "father", they were his "sons".

It is astonishing that no trace of this figure has been found in the contemporary histories dealing with the time of Essene origins, 150-100 B.C. Stegemann and Murphy-O'Connor have developed a clue given by Josephus, who says that there was an Intersacerdotium of seven years between the death of the high priest Alcimus and the appointment of Jonathan Maccabeus as high priest. There must have been a high priest during this period, as the Day of Atonement could not be celebrated without one. They argue that he must have been the Teacher of Righteousness, a Zadokite, who was replaced when the Hasmonean house finally gained the high priesthood (illegally, from the sectarian point of view). He remained high priest to his followers, and they retreated to Qumran. But this argument is obliged to dismiss another statement by Josephus, that Judas Maccabeus, the predecessor of Jonathan, had been popularly accepted as high priest for some years, although not legally appointed (*Ant* 12:414, 434, *Ant* 20, 237).

The present writer¹⁴ has recently challenged the reading that the "Wicked Priest", the Teacher's enemy, was a reigning high priest. Stegemann and Murphy-O'Connor hold, with others, that he must be Jonathan, but in fact, the only correspondence that can be found between him and Jonathan is — as Jeremias points out — that he was put to death at the hands of Gentiles. This is not sufficient to establish identity. The opinion that he is a reigning high priest depends on a plausible interpretation of an episode in the Commentary on Habakkuk, together with the general role played by this enemy in the scrolls. A closer examination of the terms used to describe him suggests that he may, rather, be the sectarian enemy of the Teacher with whom many of the scrolls are intensely concerned. The identification with a reigning high priest may have led to the

¹⁰G. Jeremias, *Der Lehrer der Gerechtigkeit* (Göttingen, 1963).

¹¹H. Stegemann, *Die Entstehung der Qumrangemeinde* (Bonn, 1971).

¹²J. Murphy-O'Connor, in a series of articles in *Revue Biblique*, esp. "The Essenes and their History", *RB*, 81 (1974), 215-244.

¹³W. Grundmann, "The Teacher of Righteousness of Qumran and the question of Justification by Faith in the Theology of the Apostle Paul", *op. cit.* note 6.

¹⁴*Journal of Biblical Literature*, 97 (1978), 191-205. See now also my *Redating the Teacher of Righteousness* (Theological Explorations: Sydney, 1979).

following of a false historical trail.

The scrolls are widely available to the general reader in English translation, in G. Vermes' *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Pelican). The translation is reliable, and reproduces the spirit of the sect who wrote them. Photographic reproductions of fragments and complete works have been available at all stages of publication. Lavish colour photographs of the major scrolls are now available in an expensive library edition (ed. J. Trever). There still remain a large number of Cave 4 fragments to be pieced together and published. When this is done, further light may be thrown on the many mysteries still remaining about this band of Jewish reformers whose influence found a permanent place in the outlook and organisation of early Christianity.