

QUMRAN STUDIES - CHALLENGE TO CONSENSUS

Robert B. Crotty

In May 1955 a journalist Edmund Wilson published an article on the Dead Sea Scrolls in *The New Yorker*.¹ It caused consternation particularly among readers with a Christian background since it implied that Christian scholars feared the consequences of dissemination of the text of the Scrolls² and any popular knowledge of the archaeological discoveries made at the area known as Qumran.

To recapitulate very briefly, in the spring of 1947 a young Bedouin called Muhammad ed-Dhib, while looking for a lost goat, chanced on a cave in the Dead Sea area. The cave, upon investigation, contained pottery jars, some intact and some already shattered. Some of the jars contained manuscripts written on leather skin and other material. Eventually some of the material taken from this cave was sold in Jerusalem. These scrolls were recognised as "the greatest manuscript find of modern times" by the doyen of Middle Eastern scholars, William F. Albright. The area in which the manuscripts had been found was systematically combed by both Bedouin and archaeologists in the subsequent months and years. From eleven manuscript-bearing caves a total of 625 complete and fragmentary texts were recovered. In one of these, cave 4, there were fifteen thousand fragments which made up something in the vicinity of four hundred texts. The publication of this trove of texts has been slow. For example, of those four hundred texts from cave 4 only seventy-five have been definitively published and another fifty partially published.

These scrolls represented all the books of the Hebrew Bible apart from the book of Esther, some in multiple variants. But there

were also non-biblical documents. The most important of these latter were considered to be the Manual of Discipline (abbreviated as IQS) the Rule of the Congregation (IQSa), the *Hodayot*, hymns of thanksgiving (IQH), the Damascus Rule (CD), the War Scroll (IQM), the Copper Scroll (3Q15) and various commentaries on the Hebrew prophets and the book of Psalms, called *pesharim*.

Naturally the findings around the Dead Sea aroused questions: who had placed the scrolls in the caves, when and why? Not far from the general cave area there was a ruined habitation in a region known geographically as Qumran. Only passing attention had been paid to it previously, since Palestinian archaeology had shown little interest in anything that post-dated the Herodian period and the settlement had been considered a Roman fortress or even a Crusader construction. In 1950 Roland de Vaux, on behalf of the *École Biblique* at *Archéologique Française* began excavating and his findings have largely remained unchallenged.³

As they stand the ruins have been identified as a monastic establishment belonging to the Essenes, a Jewish sectarian group. It is claimed that they were responsible for copying the manuscripts and eventually for storing them in the adjacent caves. The settlement had begun as a military outpost in the eighth century, but destroyed and abandoned in the next century. A fresh occupation would have taken place around 150 BCE with restoration of building and the addition of new rooms. During the reign of John Hyrcanus I (134-104 BCE) there was a substantial increase in building activity with the addition of a two-storied tower, presumably for defence but perhaps only for vigilance, an assembly hall, a refectory, workshops and intricate water installations. This phase came to a dramatic close about 31 BCE when an earthquake split the monastery, caused a fire, and brought about abandonment of the site.⁴

The settlement was abandoned until the beginning of the Christian era. During the first decade of that era a second major archaeological phase can be validated, continuing to the final destruction of the habitation in 68 CE. For some little time thereafter the ruins would have been inhabited by Roman troops, presumably the Tenth Legion.

These archaeological findings have been seriously challenged only on non-substantive features and they therefore define those parameters within which discussion on the Qumran phenomenon can be undertaken. Thus, the copying of the scrolls, their seclusion and all events related in them must have taken place before 68 CE. References to persons and events connected with the foundation

of the sect, found in the non-biblical texts, given a period of occupation from 150 BCE, would seem to be situated in the second century BCE. Departure from such a general framework of reference would seem to require substantiation. What now follows is the consensus view on Qumran, the events leading to its foundation and the identification of its inhabitants. This consensus view has emerged only after considerable academic vacillation, made more confusing by the incomplete dossier of published manuscripts.

The origins of Qumran, according to the consensus view, are to be sought in the middle of the second century BCE when a group of Essenes went out into the desert and began rebuilding a ruined Jewish fortress. Their founder and leader was a figure mentioned prominently in the sectarian documents, the Teacher of Righteousness. The sect was confronted by a Wicked Priest, mentioned particularly in the *pesher* on Habakkuk, a renegade who sought to kill the Teacher. The consensus view identifies the Wicked Priest with one or other character of the Hasmonean period, usually Jonathan (160-143 BCE) but sometimes Simon (142-134) although the latter identification raises problems. The commentaries relate that the Wicked Priest died a horrible death at the hands of the Gentiles.⁵ Indeed, Jonathan was executed by the Seleucid general Trypho, after an imprisonment, while Simon was murdered by his brother-in-law Ptolemy.

Another important figure in this founding period was the 'Man of the Lie', usually distinguished from the Wicked Priest. He caused a schism in the sect's following. The troubles of the period are demonstrated by the text of a commentary on Nahum which describes Jerusalem, symbolically depicted as 'Nineveh', inhabited by 'lions', each of which is then equated with a specific gentile. Of highest significance was the 'Lion of Wrath', identified by the consensus view with Alexander Jannaeus who crucified many Pharisees in 88 BCE. The *pesher* on Nahum maintains that the enemies of the 'Lion of Wrath', who are called the 'seekers after smooth things', were hanged on a tree. This seems to fit the Alexander Jannaeus incident, although he was a Jewish king and not a gentile.

The sect was dissipated following the earthquake in 31 BCE. The consensus view maintains that it regrouped in the early Christian era with substantially the same category of followers. It continued at Qumran until the settlement was destroyed by the Romans in 68 CE at which time the scrolls had been deposited in the caves.

Within the consensus view there is obviously room for variants. We could take two principal examples of variant. H. Stegemann⁶

attributes the origins of the sect to the outrage felt by Hasidim at the increasing hellenization of their compatriots in Jerusalem. In several centres they formed groups willing to resist that process but, due to their involvement against Antiochus Epiphanes, they were eventually forced out into the desert areas. The Teacher of Righteousness joined such a group. He was a High Priest⁷ of Jerusalem, ousted by Jonathan in 152 BCE, already identified as the Wicked Priest. The teacher consequently took refuge in one of these already existing communities of Hasidim.

The arrival of the Teacher of Righteousness led to a schism. 'The Man of the Lie', also known as the 'Spouter of Lies' and the 'Man of Mockery' abandoned the group with a substantial following of sectarians. Stegemann explains the split as being due to a clash of authority with the Teacher, who still claimed the eminence of the authentic High Priesthood. 'The Man of the Lie' formed a separate group who were to become the Pharisees. The Teacher, now established as the leader at Qumran, developed his own teaching as the new law for the true Israel.

The second example of a variant is that of Jerome Murphy-O'Connor.⁸ He maintained that the origins of the sect are to be discovered in groups of Jews who returned from Babylon, where their forebears had been exiled in the sixth century, to Palestine in the second century BCE. They had been encouraged to return upon hearing of the successes of Judas Maccabaeus and the restoration of a theocracy in Jerusalem. Murphy-O'Connor sees a substantial vindication of this position in the text:

The Well is the Law, and those who dug it were the converts of Israel who went out of the land of Judah and sojourn in the land of Damascus (CD 6, 4-5).

'Damascus', he claims, is a symbolic name for Babylon. The returnees were disenchanting with Jerusalem and its priesthood and retired to the desert. It was amongst these recluses that the Teacher, a High Priest prior to Jonathan who was the Wicked Priest, took refuge. The 'Man of the Lie' split from the community because of the Teacher's proposal to take the group out into the desert region of Qumran so as to fulfil the requirement of Isaiah 40:3:

A Voice cries: 'Prepare in the wilderness
a way for Yahweh.
Make a straight highway for our God
across the desert'.

The schismatic group led away by the Man of the Lie were those Essenes later mentioned in the writings of Philo and Josephus.

Despite the variations there is a consistency in the framework of the consensus view, even though there is diversity in the details. Likewise, while it is apparent that there are similarities and parallels between the sectarian writings and the New Testament there are considerable variations in the way in which this relationship is explained even within the consensus framework. The most radical position is taken by those who hold that Jesus and the earliest Christian followers belonged to Qumran and broke away from it in the first century CE.⁹ Thereafter, the Essenes of Qumran and the Christians lived a separate existence. The most conservative position is that the early Christians and the Essenes simply shared a common thought-world and a common Jewish background. Inevitably this would mean that there would be commonalities of expression and practice. However, the Christians and the Essenes would have no historical involvement, shown by the fact that the Essenes are not even mentioned in the New Testament, at least explicitly. Between these two positions would come those who maintain that at least some of the followers of Jesus, notably John the Baptist, were previously inhabitants of Qumran. They would have brought to Christianity ideas and practices known among the sectarians.

Positions vary as new evidence appears. The publication of the Temple Scroll by Yigael Yadin demonstrates that there were some considerable divergences between the early Christians and the Essenes on ritual observance and regard for the exact enactment of the Torah of Israel. This needs now to be taken into account if a theory is to fit.

It is at this point that we can interpose a new theory that is not a variant but a challenge to the consensus view. In particular it offers a new perspective on the question of relationship between the sectarian group and the New Testament community. It is the position held by Barbara E. Thiering of the University of Sydney.¹⁰

Thiering points out, in the first place, that the Teacher is not mentioned in the writings of Josephus or Philo which, she claims, makes it most unlikely that he was involved in the origins of the sect such as the consensus view would posit. Secondly, the 'Wicked Priest' should be identified with the 'Man of the Lie' as one and the same person. This person belonged to the group and was not a Hasmonean High Priest as the consensus view maintains. The 'Lion of Wrath' was a gentile but in the Roman period as the text of the *peshet* on Nahum demonstrates. Therefore he cannot be Alexander Jannaeus but must be chronologically much later.

One of the cornerstones of Thiering's theory is her translation of CD, ch.1. She renders it:

In the Period of Wrath, the 390 years for the giving them (*letitto 'otam*) into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, he [God] visited them and caused to shoot from Israel and from Aaron a Plant-root (*sores matta'at*) to inherit the land and to grow fat in the goodness of his soil. They understood their wrongdoing and knew that they were guilty men. But they were like blind men, groping for the way, for twenty years. God then observed their works, that they sought him whole-heartedly, and he raised up for them a Teacher of Righteousness to guide them in the way of his heart.¹¹

She maintains that 'Babylon' in the text should be referred symbolically to Rome and that the 390 years is used as a prophetic estimation of the length of Roman domination. The two possible dates for such an onset would be 63 BCE when Pompey arrived in Palestine or 6 CE when direct rule from Rome was imposed on the Jews. The latter event was accompanied by widespread revolt and is preferred by Thiering as the 'Period of Wrath'. It would be at this point that the *sores matta'at*, which was an Essene group but not the original founding group at Qumran, came into being.

This significant change in periodization she claims to be confirmed by the *pescharim*. *Pescharim* are based on prophetic or Psalm texts at Qumran. They are partly commentary, partly interpretation and partly an elucidation of the hidden significance of a particular canonical passage. They apply the passage to specific contemporary events. Since the *pescharim* refer to the Romans (under the guise of *Kittim*) and they also refer to the Teacher and the Wicked Priest it is more likely that they are contemporary with these characters. In fact, their physical script shows that they are datable to the Herodian period, which stands in opposition to the consensus view.¹²

Having thereby established the beginnings of the specific Essene group, with the code name Plant-root (*sores matta'at*), to around 6 CE Thiering then can date the Teacher to some twenty years after, that is approximately 26 CE. There is, she claims a *prima facie* case for identifying the Teacher of Righteousness with John the Baptist. That leaves the Wicked Priest, whom she has identified with the 'Man of the Lie' and who claimed to be the Messiah of Israel. This man, subsequently, according to the sectarian texts, was put to death in a horrible fashion by the gentiles. He is easily identifiable with Jesus of Nazareth.

In order to test this hypothesis Thiering analyses the Christian scriptures, specifically the gospels and the book of the Acts of

the Apostles. If the early Christians, identified now with the schismatic group led from Qumran by Jesus, the Wicked Priest, wrote a new scripture, then they would undoubtedly have used the typical genre of the sect, the *peshet*. Thiering applies the *peshet* method to the texts, intending to bring to light the earliest statements of the new sect and, hopefully, a more coherent account of the founding events than has hitherto been known of Christianity. Briefly put, the Thiering thesis runs thus: The Scrolls and the gospels/Acts recount the same story when the *peshet* mode of interpretation is applied. The Scrolls engage in a polemic against a schismatic leader, known to them by several pseudonyms but known to us as Jesus of Nazareth. He had apostatized and broken away from the following of the Teacher of Righteousness, who is confidently identified with John the Baptist. The gospels/Acts refer to Jesus and his schismatic group positively from the side of those who admired and themselves followed the schismatic leader. The Scrolls, on the other hand, refer to Jesus negatively and pejoratively. References in the gospels/Acts to the origins of the Christian group are veiled allusions to the Essene and Zealot community and the breakaway movement engineered by Jesus. Christianity is therefore the descendant of the Qumran community. Thiering can conclude:

But the Word had been brought to Rome, and the Kingdom in its new form survived to conquer paganism and become the religion of the Empire. By the shores of the Dead Sea a beautiful and enduring work of the human spirit had been made, and would survive to be a civilising force for far longer than the thousand years of its founders' hopes.¹³

As would be expected the Thiering thesis encroaches on typical mainstream Christian belief, in a way not encountered in the consensus view. Many *a priori* religious reservations would be breached by her conclusions. For example, in explaining the early chapters of Matthew and Luke, Thiering refers to the practice of female Nazirites passing through three stages of Virgin, Sister/Wife and Widow. In the second stage the female Nazirite would be betrothed to a man of the order of Judah, remaining a Virgin for a while and then, after some time, a first marriage would take place. If pregnancy occurred within three years then a second and permanent marriage ensued. If, during the long betrothal, sexual intercourse (in contravention of the prevailing discipline) took place and pregnancy resulted then it could be said: "A Virgin has conceived". Thiering adds:

This was the history of Joseph and Mary, presented through the language of special meanings by Luke and Matthew, who had reasons for giving outsiders the impression of a virgin birth. Jesus was the physical son of Joseph, who was descended from King David, as the genealogies in both these gospels show.¹⁴

Her account of the resurrection of Jesus, based likewise on the *pesher* methodology, interprets the event as a resuscitation which presumably would be unacceptable to many committed Christians. She maintains, on the basis of the texts, that Jesus was crucified, at Pilate's command, with Judas Iscariot and Simon Magus on either side. He was offered poison so that he could die nobly by suicide. The first time he refused the potion but the second time he accepted (Mk 15:37 par). His abdomen swelled up as a result of the internal action of the poison. A decision was made, by Pilate, to change the manner of execution. The three would be interred alive in a tomb. The legs of Judas and Simon were broken but Jesus, who was spiritually dead (Jn 19:33), was, at that point, presumed to be physically dead. Jesus' abdominal region was pierced and a serosanguinous discharge poured out. John Mark, a Roman centurion and also a doctor, saw the discharge and realized the truth — that Jesus was still alive. He later gave solemn testimony to the fact (Jn 19:35). The three were then lain in a tomb, Jesus for burial and the other two to await death. The tomb was guarded. Simon Magus was also a doctor and once inside the tomb he, despite broken legs, went to work on medicinal material secreted by Nicodemus among Jesus' grave clothes — large amounts of myrrh and aloes. The juice from aloes acts as a purgative and myrrh stimulates the function of mucous membrane. Jesus was given the medicinal aids and recovered within the tomb. Later the three were rescued from their grave, Judas to die subsequently. Thiering bases her reconstruction both on the *pesher* interpretation of the gospels and Eusebius' citation of Papias.

By thus questioning the Virgin Birth and the physical resurrection of Jesus, Thiering has, in the view of many Christian scholars, changed the face of Qumran scholarship. Religious orthodoxy and the consensus view now seem to be linked in a logical chain. There are extraneous reasons for accepting the palaeographic evidence for a Hasmonean date.

Qumran studies have reached, therefore, something of an impasse. A fairly predictable pattern has emerged. After the sensational period of the discoveries there emerged theories that to a great extent defused the texts' impact and integrated their

novelty into pre-existing, Christian scholarship. The consensus view defines the limits within which legitimate scholarship is able to proceed. No-one challenging that consensus view will be treated kindly. One reviewer complained of Thiering:

For my part, I cannot see that any of the canons of sane historical exegesis are respected. If T.'s book makes a positive contribution to Qumran studies it can only be to force the reexamination of certain passages. Its central thesis does violence to the texts, and on palaeographic grounds must be dismissed as impossible.¹⁵

But what if the palaeographic evidence is sustainable as some others at least admit?¹⁶ The reviewer quoted above in fact demonstrates the tenuous palaeographic ground on which the consensus view's maintenance of an Hasmonean date stands. Not all agree that the consensus view is absolutely convincing. While the Thiering position would certainly challenge many entrenched Christian beliefs and would be anathema to many Christians, period, there would doubtless be Christians who could live with it and adapt to it. In a scholarly debate on ancient texts religious sensitivity is not the real issue but, in fact, it is very relevant. Kuhn's theory of paradigms and paradigm shifts¹⁷ would be applicable in the present instance. perhaps it can be said that Thiering has demonstrated at least that the debate over the Qumran scrolls will not, in any foreseeable future, be consigned to academic obscurity.

NOTES

1. The Scrolls from the Dead Sea, *The New Yorker*, May, 1955.
2. The term 'Dead Sea Scrolls' is sometimes used in a broad sense for texts deriving not only from Qumran but also from Masada, some other areas south of Qumran and Khirbet Mird. This article will confine itself to the texts strictly from Qumran.
3. Standard reference work on the archaeology of Qumran is R. de Vaux, *Archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, London, Oxford University Press, 1973 which is an English translation, with some revisions, of the Schweich Lectures 1959. See also E.-M. Laperrousaz, *Qumran: L'établissement essénien des bords de la Mer Morte. Histoire et archéologie du site*, Paris, Picard, 1976.

4. The date is established by reference to Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* IV, 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 Judaea, such as had not been seen before".
5. The text of 1QpHab 10:3-4 reads: "In that God brings about the judgement over him (i.e. The Wicked Priest) in the midst of many nations".
6. H. Stegemann, *Die Entstehung der Qumrangemeinde*, Bonn, 1971.
7. Three times the Teacher is called *ha-kohen* (the priest), a term only otherwise applied to the High Priest. There is a silence in the sources about a High Priest in the period immediately preceding Jonathan. Josephus (*Antiquities* XX, 237) says that the office was vacant which would be most unlikely.
8. J. Murphy-O'Connor, The Essenes and their History, *Revue Biblique* 81, 1974, pp.215-244.
9. Consternation was felt in the academic community in the last decade when J. O'Callaghan maintained that some of the fragments from Qumran were in fact New Testament texts. *Papiros neotestamentarios en la cueva 7 de Qumran*, *Biblica* 53, 1972, pp.90-100.
10. B. Thiering, *Redating the Teacher of Righteousness*, Australian and New Zealand Studies in Theology and Religion, Sydney, 1979; *The Gospels and Qumran: A New Hypothesis*, Sydney, 1981; *The Qumran Origins of the Christian Church*, Sydney, 1983. Thiering presented an updated, but summary, position paper at the Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Sydney, August 1985. Her paper was entitled "The Qumran Origins of the Christian Church".
11. Thiering denies that *letitto* can mean 'after he gave', thus providing a starting-point for the 390 years with Nebuchadnezzar's attack on Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Instead it means 'at the time of his giving' or 'to the time of his giving' or 'as of his giving'.
12. Judgements on handwriting are based on the number of strokes used to compose a letter, the starting point and shape of the letters and the *ductus* of the letter. Four basic periods are recognised covering the era with which the scrolls deal: Archaic or proto-Jewish script (250-150 BCE); Hasmonean script (150-30 BCE); Herodian script (30 BCE-70 CE); Post Herodian or Ornamental Script (70 CE — second century).

Thiering maintains that 1QS and 4QpIsa^c, which both mention the Teacher, are not Hasmonean semiformal but Herodian script influenced by Palmyrene characteristics.

13. *Qumran Origins of the Christian Church*, p.269.
14. *Ibid.*, p.48.
15. J. Murphy-O'Connor, Review of *Redating the Teacher of Righteousness*, *Revue Biblique* 87, 1980, pp.429-430.
16. A more conciliatory review is that of M.P. Horgan in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43, 1981, pp.143-145. Horgan writes after surveying the palaeographic contention: "This inquiry into the historical setting of the Teacher of Righteousness compels rethinking of some long-accepted hypotheses but by no means proves that they should be abandoned". Likewise P.R. Davies in a review in *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* 18, 1980, pp.123-127 concedes that the book ". . . will best serve as an invitation to reconsider more sceptically some of the 'assured results' of Qumran research; and consequently, one hopes, as a challenge to others to attempt fresh reconstructions.
17. T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1969.

