

New Light Dawns on the Dead Sea Scrolls

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On November 19, 1991, in New York City, Dr. James M. Robinson, noted editor of the Gnostic library from Nag Hammadi, along with Professor Robert H. Eisenmann of California State University at Long Beach and Hershel Shanks of the Biblical Archaeology Society, announced to a shocked news conference that a two-volume set of photographic plates of the previously unpublished portion of the Dead Sea Scrolls had just been published under their joint auspices. Robinson and Eisenmann had been working for over a year from a set of photographs of the scrolls they received as a donation from an anonymous patron. Speaking of this effort, Dr. Robinson said, "Our goal was to open up the study of all the scrolls to the broadest range of scholars. Publishing the remaining scrolls in this most convenient form - a book - should do just that."

Bitter disputes, conspiratorial obfuscation. arrogant claims to scholarly monopoly - such has been the history of the Dead Sea Scrolls in recent years and indeed for decades. Ever since a young Bedouin shepherd threw a rock into a cave in the mountains of Qumran in 1947 and accidentally came across these documents, their fate has been shrouded in mystery and conjecture. Unlike the Nag Hammadi library, which were found only two years before the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Qumran scrolls have never been translated or published in full to this day. The new facsimile edition of the large missing portion edited by Robinson and Eisenmann is the first giant step toward public access to the documents after a wait of thirty-four years.

The first reaction of the scholarly world to the discovery of the scrolls in the 1940s was incredulity. Many said the documents must be fraudulent. The soil of Palestine, unlike that of Egypt, was regarded as being too humid to preserve parchment and similar perishable materials. But by 1949 all doubt had vanished, and the scrolls were admitted to be genuine. An international team of scholars gathered and began to edit them. The members of the team were almost exclusively clergymen, the majority of them Roman Catholics. The lone exception being the late Dr. John Marco Allegro, a maverick scholar whose interests ranged from heterodox religions of antiquity to the use of the sacred mushroom in Biblical times.

The scrolls might have remained a relatively obscure item known only to specialists had not the noted American literary figure Edmund Wilson decided to publicize them in a 1955 series of articles in *The New Yorker* magazine. Wilson indicated that the scrolls alarmed various religious authorities, who feared that the documents might reveal information that would detract from the unique claims of Christianity, as well as showing the Jewish establishment of New Testament times in an unfavourable light.

Soon after Wilson's work appeared, the volume of published translations

diminished and ultimately ceased. It is generally agreed that most of the theologically sensitive material was given to a Polish Roman Catholic priest from France named Josef Milik. Almost all of this material has remained unpublished in the hands of Milik to this day. The editorial team maintained a monopoly over the publications, imposing a sort of Iron Curtain on research into the scrolls until recently. For some time the only voice of protest was that of Dr. Allegro, who stated at a 1985 conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan: "Why are my dear colleagues sitting on the stuff? It has driven me mad.... It's a scandal. The public has got to be made aware; then maybe people will be asking questions." It was not until six years later that the words of this courageous maverick began to bear fruit.

Today it seems quite certain that the long dark night of the monopoly exercised over the scrolls has given way to a new dawn of openness and freedom. The credit for this happy new situation belongs almost exclusively to American scholars and archivists. For a few years now, Hershel Shanks has published indignant articles in *Biblical Archaeology Review* (of which he is the editor) attacking the dilatory behaviour of the monopolists. Largely as a result of this publication, the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, decided in September 1991 to make its collection of the photographs of the unpublished scrolls available to scholars. From then on events moved ever more quickly, culminating in the publication of the photographs in book form.

It will be useful to address two questions which may shed light on the present furore and place the scrolls in a helpful perspective
The first question why the delay?

For a long time the suspicions of many critics were concentrated on the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps the priestly scholars, particularly Milik, discovered such "dangerous" material in the scrolls that they felt it necessary to conceal them? (Milik has since left the priesthood. Some have wondered whether the content of the documents destroyed his faith but not his commitment to the concealment.)

What is far less well known is that the Israeli authorities seem to be at least as deeply involved in the apparent conspiracy as the original, largely Catholic, commission. In an article for the *Washington Post* last September, Hershel Shanks bluntly accuses the Israeli authorities of complicity in the affair. Although originally there were few friendly feelings between the editing team and the Israelis, who were regarded as interlopers by the original scholars, the two parties cooperated closely in the task of concealment. The Israeli Department of Antiquities acted as the chief protector of the editing team. The same authorities greeted the Huntington Library's announcement with "unrestrained fury," in the words of Shanks.

Two major explanations suggest themselves for all this curious behaviour on the part of Christian scholars and Jewish authorities. The first is that the entrenched custom of academic monopoly had been defended by those who had an interest in maintaining it. The other is the fear, felt both

consciously and unconsciously by representatives of the two great Biblical religions, of the possible impact of these scriptures on our culture. In view of these startling details that have surfaced from this hitherto hidden material, the latter possibility appears the more likely.

This brings us to the next question: what do we know of the content of the scrolls? The truthful answer is that at this point we still know very little, but what we have come to know is quite intriguing. The scrolls were hitherto, assumed to be concerned with one or two heterodox Jewish movements, one almost certainly being the sect of the Essenes. Now it appears that the scrolls may represent a sort of missing link joining certain forms of ancient Judaism with early Christianity. A recent news item informs us that a small fragment of a scroll written in Greek and dating from about 50 A.D. is thought by some scholars to be a portion of the Gospel of Mark. It true, this could confound modern Biblical scholars who have asserted for some time that the gospel of Mark was not written until much latter. Much of the New Testament interpretation of the past century might have to be revised

Another remarkable find comes from Cave Seven in Qumran and appears to contain a portion of Paul's First Epistle to Timothy. Inasmuch as most academics long held that Paul's two epistles to Timothy, along with the one to Titus, were forgeries perpetrated at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century A.D., this find is a momentous one. No less an authority than Professor Emil Puech, one of the best-known Qumran scholars, has endorsed the theory that the fragment is from 1 Timothy.

Another unpublished text, leaked to Biblical Archaeology Review, bears a striking resemblance to the annunciation scene in the Gospel of Luke, wherein the angel tells Mary that she will bear a child who will be called "Son of God" and "Son of the Most High." The Qumran fragment, written in Aramaic, and at least several decades older than the assumed date of the Gospel of Luke, contains a prophecy of the imminent birth of the Messiah using these very expressions. In the light of these discoveries, the once-sharp lines dividing mainstream Judaism, the teachings of the Essenes, and early Christianity seem to blur. New definitions, new images and visions, are in order.

Some of the emerging fragments shed light not only on Jewish and Christian canonical scriptures and teachings, but on alternative traditions such as Gnosticism. Gnostics have long been known, sometimes derisively, as dualists. The dichotomies of light and darkness and good and evil emphasized by the Gnostics were usually attributed to Greek and Persian influences. Seldom was it recognized that Gnostic dualism might be a world view rooted in Jewish thought. The scroll named after the War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, translated some years ago, revealed a good deal of dualistic thought coming from the writers of Qumran.

Now we hear more about similar material. One scholar speaks of a "starkly dualistic view" revealed by some of the newly available writings, and connects some of these with the Gospel of John, which for many centuries

has held the distinction of being the most Gnostic of the canonical Gospels. This Gospel was assumed by scholars to reflect Greek influences and to have been written in the second century. Now, on the basis of evidence provided by the scrolls, the date of the Gospel is moved back into the first century. It is also admitted that there was no need for Greek influences, for the contemporary Jewish ones sufficed. The authority in question, a certain Dr. Carson, writes: "With the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls we have found the imagery of John was familiar in Jewish thinking. It was there early on in this conservative Jewish sect."

The current excitement centring on the scrolls brings to mind a historical parallel from long ago. About 1460, a Greek manuscript was brought to Florence from Macedonia by an agent of Prince Cosimo de' Medici. It contained a copy of the Corpus Hermeticum, a document of ancient wisdom so precious that the prince ordered it to be translated before the works of Plato. The great work of Greco-Egyptian gnosis was supplemented by books on the Jewish Kabbalah brought to Italy from Spain. As most historians today agree, these two mystical traditions were instrumental in bringing about the Renaissance and thus giving a new turn to the development of culture in Europe. The late 1940s saw the rediscovery of two more bodies of esoteric religious literature, one of Gentile authorship (the Nag Hammadi library), the other (the Qumran texts) of Jewish origin. Now that the Jewish gnosis of the Dead Sea Scrolls is becoming available and can be added to the Christian Gnostic wisdom from Nag Hammadi, who is to say but that a new Renaissance may beckon to us in the future'?