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In the Fullness of Time

When Alexander the Great vanquished Darius III in 331 BC and wrested from him the rule of the entire ancient Near East, a completely new era in world history opened up.[1] Following the Macedonian conqueror, there came east not only the Greek language which rapidly replaced Aramaic as the language of administration in his unwieldy new empire, stretching as it did from Athens to the Indus, but also the Greek or 'Hellenistic' culture, modes of thought and way of life. Alexander himself died within a decade (323 BC), with no true successor. His generals carved up the gargantuan empire among themselves, so that by 300 BC Ptolemy (I) held Egypt, and Seleucus (I) Syria and (initially) Mesopotamia, while others took over Anatolia and Greece itself. Palestine fell to the share of Ptolemy I of Egypt. A century later, in 198 BC, Antiochus III of Syria defeated the forces of Ptolemy V, and so Palestine (including Judea) came under a new master. Greek was everywhere the language of civilised intercourse, and Hellenistic culture the mode, attracting many Jews and weaning some away from the traditions of their forefathers.

However, a flashpoint came when Antiochus IV Epiphanes endeavoured to impose Hellenism more directly upon Judea, following upon intrigues over the high-priestly succession in Jerusalem. These moves culminated in 167 BC with the official proscription of normative Judaism, the conversion of the Jerusalem temple to the worship of Zeus—the 'abomination of desolation' announced in

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Daniel (9:27, etc.). Persecution resulted in resistance, eventually led by Mattathias and his sons, notably Judas Maccabaeus. From repeated wars emerged an embattled but independent Jewish kingdom until, in the last century BC, Rome's power totally supplanted the collapsing realm of the Seleucids of Syria, and in time replaced the Maccabees by a new ruler over Judea—Herod the Idumean, 'Herod the Great', from 40/37 to 4 BC. Thereafter, Palestine was divided into fiefs among his sons into the first century AD, under the strict rule of Rome—a series of procurators ruled Judea in the emperor's name, the most notorious being Pontius Pilate. In the first decades AD, we are in the world of the New Testament.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

1. *The World of the Dead Sea Scrolls*

Within the Jewish community in Judea, various internal religious groupings grew up, partly through the impact of Hellenism. Hebrew had largely been replaced by Aramaic in everyday use while, as we have seen, Greek was the language of government and international culture. So pervasive had the use of Greek become that, from the mid-third century BC, the Old

[1] Among treatments of the Hellenistic period, cf. W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 1957 ed., pp. 334 ff.; J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 1972, ed., pp. 414 ff.; F. F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations*, 1969 ed., pp. 120 ff.; C. F. Pfeiffer, *Between the Testaments*, 1959 & reprs.

Testament scriptures were translated into Greek by Jewish scholars in Alexandria, ending up with the Greek translation of the Hebrew text today known as the Septuagint.[2] The 'parties' that emerged within Palestinian Judaism included the Sadducees who accepted the ancient written Law, but not all the orally-transmitted interpretations and supplementary rulings that had grown up; they leaned also towards Hellenism in some measure. Their rivals were the Pharisees, from a more traditional devotional background, who were the expounders of the Law and of the growing mass of supplementary tradition that formed 'a fence about the Law'. Various other movements arose, notably the Essenes who maintained their own separate communities and groups. Such groups had the ideal of a purer, more 'spiritual' religious faith, and despised what they saw as the 'establishment' time-serving authorities of the Jerusalem temple.

One such group (Essene or otherwise) was the community that built itself a centre on the marl plateau overlooking the north-west corner of the Dead Sea in the second century BQ This lasted until the great earthquake of 31 BC, was deserted during Herod's reign (37-4 BC), after which the community re-established itself there into the first century AD. Then, with the crisis of the first Jewish

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revolt against Rome (66-70 AD), the sect hid its precious library of scrolls in the nearby caves and fled. The Roman Tenth Legion destroyed the place and the group never returned, leaving its scrolls unwittingly to posterity. For a time, the Romans kept a small, military guard-post on the site (up to about 100 AD), and later it was briefly occupied by Bar-Kokhba's men during the second Jewish revolt (132-135 AD). Thereafter, the site fell into oblivion until modern times.

Then in 1947, after being stumbled on by a local goatherd, the scrolls came to public knowledge as the 'Dead Sea Scrolls', creating a sensation. They contain four classes of ancient writings, mainly in Hebrew, some in Aramaic. *First*, copies of the books of the Old Testament, every book being attested (even if only by scraps) except Esther. These MSS vary in preservation from one splendidly complete scroll of an entire biblical book down to the merest scraps. *Second*, copies of other known religious writings such as the Apocrypha—works like Tobit, Enoch, Jubilees and so on—besides similar works entirely new to us. *Third*, sectarian biblical commentaries, taking the form of verse-by-verse commentaries on Old Testament books (especially the prophets) from the community's own particular viewpoint. *Fourth*, writings that were composed by and about the community itself—its beliefs and rules—that inspired such works as the Manual of Discipline, Thanksgiving Hymns and the like.[3]

2. *The Scrolls and the Old Testament*

Ultimately, by far the most important contribution of the Dead Sea Scrolls for biblical study lies in their witness to the recopying and transmission of the Hebrew text of the books of the Old Testament. Until these manuscripts were discovered, our earliest complete copy of the Hebrew Old Testament text was the 'Leningrad Codex' of about 916 AD. As the scrolls date variously from the second century BC to the first century AD, they take us back virtually *a*

[2] From the legend that seventy scholars were responsible for the translation.

[3] For a convenient survey in outline, see F. F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on, the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 3rd ed., 1966. [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/book_dss_bruce.html]

thousand years in the history of the recopying of the Old Testament books. What is more, for the most part they very substantially support the traditional consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible, demonstrating the very high level of reliability with which it has been copied during that thousand years from (say) 100 BC to 900 AD. Occasionally, a minor improvement in reading is offered by the Scrolls; oftener, the traditional text is superior to the minor divergencies found in the Scrolls. Some scrolls provide what may be (a) form(s) of Hebrew text underlying some readings presupposed by the Greek (Septuagint) translation of the Old Testament, and perhaps even of the Samaritan version of the Pen-

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tateuch. However, the importance of these should not be exaggerated, particularly as—again—the traditional Hebrew text is in any case generally so greatly superior in its readings to these versions. A point of great importance is that the Dead Sea Scrolls represent a 'lay' text-tradition, distinct from the official texttradition of the Jerusalem temple. It is the close agreement of the two separate and parallel traditions of text that strengthens our confidence in the basic text to which they both bear witness.[4] Furthermore, if the Hebrew text of the Old Testament books has been so well transmitted by successive generations of careful copyists for the last thousand years between 100 BC and 900 AD, then surely it is in order to suggest that comparable care was also probably exercised by copyists in the centuries between the actual composition of the various books and the Dead Sea Scroll copies of the second and first centuries BC. Certainly, in the ancient Near East within which the Old Testament books were first written, such scribal care is amply attested among the Hebrews' neighbours on all sides for many centuries.

3. *The Scrolls and the New Testament*

For the New Testament, the impact of the Scrolls is rather less direct. They certainly illustrate at first hand the currents of thought and of eager expectation of a messiah (or messiahs) in Judaism in the first centuries BC and AD into New Testament times. Just as such books as Deuteronomy, Isaiah and the Psalms are particularly quoted in the New Testament, so, too, the Scrolls community at Qumran turned most often to these same books. In the early years, various hasty comparisons were made with the New Testament that have not stood the test of time. There was the case of the 'Teacher of Righteousness' (more accurately and less cosmically, 'righteous teacher'), alleged to have been a kind of messiah, crucified and then raised to confound his foes, a 'first Jesus' so to speak. In reality, the 'righteous teacher' had been merely the devout scripture-expositor of the sect, and the manner of his death is unknown to us. Far from experiencing a sudden resurrection, the 'righteous teacher' was simply expected (like many another pious Jew) to rise again 'at the end of the days', at the general resurrection. He was never regarded as any kind of messiah. Various features of the Scrolls community can be compared with usage in the New Testament, but they often exhibit notable differences. For example, the practice of holding all goods in common occurs both in the Scrolls Manual of Discipline (vi:22) and in Acts (4:32 ff.). However, with the Scrolls community this practice was *compulsory* and *regular*; in the early church, it was a

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[4] Cf. W. J. Martin, *The Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah*, 1954, (Sixth Campbell Morgan Memorial Lecture), pp. 19-21 on this point [on-line at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_isaiah_martin.html], plus A. R. Millard, 'Text and Comment', in G. Tuttle (ed.), *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies*, 1977/78, in press.

voluntary and temporary feature, later replaced by freewill offerings of a proportion of one's goods or income.[5]

Archaeology and the New Testament

The relation of archaeology to the New Testament is twofold. First, through the discovery of ancient manuscripts of New Testament books, it gives us direct evidence on the reliability and preservation of the New Testament text (as do the Scrolls for the Old Testament). Second, as for the Old Testament, a whole variety of discoveries in Palestine, the Near East and the Roman Empire give us a rich background for the people, places and events of the New Testament.

Among works of classical (Greek and Latin) literature, the writings of the New Testament—4 gospels, 21 letters, the history of Acts and visions of Revelation—have a manuscript attestation second to none, and superior to most. No one blinks an eyelid at depending for the Latin text of Julius Caesar's *Gallic War* (composed within 58/56 BC) upon manuscripts all of which are 900 years later than Caesar's time, only nine or ten of the manuscripts being good textual copies. No-one doubts that we still read the real text of the works of Herodotus or Thucydides (450 BC), even though the oldest available full manuscripts (only eight or so) date from 1,300 years later![6] For the New Testament, how different and how vastly superior is the manuscript evidence. Some 5,000 Greek MSS (whole or fragmentary) are known, not a mere eight or ten. The most notable MSS are the Codexes Vaticanus and Sinaiticus of *c*. 350 AD—only 250 years after the end of the New Testament period (100 AD), not 900 or 1,300 years! Older still are the Chester Beatty and Bodmer biblical papyri, including six new Testament MSS of the second and third centuries AD, only 150 years after the New Testament period. Further back still, there is the Rylands fragment from a manuscript of John's gospel (18:31-33, 37f.), datable by its script to about 130 AD—little more than a generation after the New Testament period itself. As this fragment came from Egypt, it is evident that John's gospel had been composed, recopied, and begun to circulate well beyond Palestine before 130 AD. Hence, on this evidence alone, it must have been composed (at latest) by 90/100 AD, and more probably earlier. Thus, the manuscript-attestation for the New Testament is of the highest quality in terms of date, and the sheer wealth of MSS also enables textual scholars to determine very closely indeed the correct readings of the New Testament's basic text—'both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New

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Testament may be regarded as finally established', as Sir Frederic Kenyon, an acknowledged master in this field, wrote some forty years ago.[7] The continuing discoveries and work of the intervening decades have not changed, merely enhanced, the truth of his judgement.[8]

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[5] Cf. Bruce, *Second Thoughts...*, 1969, ed., pp. 136 ff.; E. Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures*, 1973, pp. 138-147.

[6] For these examples (among others), cf. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents, are they Reliable?*, 5th ed., 1960, p. 16 f.

[7] Sir F. G. Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology*, 1940, p. 288 f.

[8] Only an extremely ill-informed tyro speaking from a position of invincible ignorance could possibly allege these days that 'the Gospel texts... are pretty corrupt', unless the wish be father to the thought (*Radio Times*, 9th/15th April, 1977, p. 4).

Turning from the text itself to its content, again, the general picture is a remarkably rich one. Ever since the Anatolian explorations and discoveries of (Sir) William Ramsay earlier this century, the accuracy of Luke as a historian and reporter has been upheld by a multiplicity of details, particularly in the book of Acts. He assigns the right titles to the proper officials at the correct periods of time in question. Such are the proconsul in Cyprus (Acts 13:7) and of Achaia (Acts 18:12), the Asiarchs at Ephesus (Acts 19:31), among others. Back in Palestine, among Herod's heirs, Luke was careful to entitle Herod Antipas the *Tetrarch* of Galilee, not loosely 'king' as many of his subjects flatteringly did (Luke 3:1, 19; cf. Matthew 14:1, 9).

Luke's writings are not alone in being sober records of reality, archaeologically speaking. The repute of Herod the Great as a builder, at the stones of whose temple Jesus's disciples and others marvelled (Luke 21:5; cf. John 2:20) has been fully borne out by recent work at Jerusalem at the site of the temple enclosure,[9] and by work at his fortress-palaces elsewhere,[10] as at Herodium[11] and Masada.[12] From Corinth to Rome, Paul sent greetings in his letter to the Romans, including from Erastus the treasurer (Romans 16:23). The selfsame individual was most probably the donor of a pavement of the first century AD at Corinth, inscribed in the name of one Erastus, curator of public buildings.[13] And so on. Not surprisingly, trained historians of the Graeco-Roman world have repeatedly commented favourably upon the high historical value of the New Testament writings, and of Luke-Acts especially.[14] Needless to say, problems of interpretation in detail exist in this field just as in any other, but are not necessarily insoluble.[15] Certainly the evidence derived from this field of study calls into question the groundless scepticism underlying much German New Testament scholarship, based as it is (like its Old Testament counterpart) upon hypothetical theories of form criticism, redaction 'history' of the writings and so on, unrelated to observed literary usage in the surrounding world. Even in a 'visionary' book like Revelation, one may perceive the subtle undertones that relate the letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3) to the local features and background.[16] Thus, for example, Laodicea was a rich banking-centre in a fertile countryside at an important junction of routes in Roman Asia. It lacked, however, a direct water-supply.

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Therefore its supplies had to be piped some distance from the hot springs, and were probably disappointingly lukewarm on arrival at the city-end, 'neither hot nor cold' (cf. Revelation 3:14-22, esp. 16).[17]

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[9] Cf. account in M. Avi-Yonah (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, II, 1976, pp. 604 ff.
[10] On the Herods and their works, cf. the readable accounts by Stewart Perowne, *The Life and Times of Herod the Great*, 1957, and *The Later Herods*, 1958.
[11] Cf. G. Foerster in M. Avi-Yonah, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of ... Excavations ...*, II, 1976, pp. 502-510.
[12] Cf. Y. Yadin, *Masada*, 1966.
[13] Cf. (e.g.) F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents, are they Reliable?*, 1960 ed., p. 95.
[14] Cf. the sample citations given by E. Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures*, 1973, pp. 94-97.
[15] E.g., the celebrated problem of the role and dating of Cyrenius (Quirinius) as governor of Syria in Luke 2:2; cf. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents...*, pp. 86-87, and Yamauchi, *op. cit*., pp. 97-98.
[16] In outline, cf. J. A. Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology*, 1965, pp. 413-420; and in J. D. Douglas et. al. (eds.), *New Bible Dictionary*, 1962, under each city.
[17] Cf. M. Rudwick in *New Bible Dictionary*, 1962, pp. 716-717.

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In Conclusion

In the foregoing pages, we have travelled far in space and time—across hundreds of miles and through several thousands of years. We have visited not one, but half-a-dozen civilizations: Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian in Mesopotamia (Iraq), Hittite and Hurrian in Anatolia, Egyptian and Nubian in the Nile Valley, Eblaite, Ugaritic, Canaanite, Moabite, Philistine and others in Syria-Palestine. One and all, neighbours of the Hebrews and their ancestors.

Yet we have only touched on a sampling of the aspects and topics that might be surveyed under the broad heading of the Bible in its world—a world of archaeology and sites, of ancient objects and buildings, a world of texts and inscriptions that speaks eloquently of the hopes, fears, beliefs and doubts, joys and sorrows, loves and hates, of our distant precursors on history's stage. Whole realms of specialised study still await dedicated minds to explore them thoroughly and systematically. Even matters that have received full examination and technical publication cannot be more than sketched or outlined in brief works such as this present one.

Nevertheless, some salient points may be worth noticing in closing. The first is the immense revolution in our knowledge of the ancient past over the last two hundred years, and the growing precision and detail in that knowledge during the last thirty years or so in particular. A second is the fact that, just as texts on their own can be just disembodied voices speaking out in a vacuum, so also 'dirt-archaeology' of walls, pots and levels can often say remarkably little, and is often very incomplete, unless its evidence can be wedded to, and supplemented by, that of the texts and inscriptions. It may be undesirable (as well as uncomfortable!) to actually dig up the ancient East with Bible in one hand and spade in the other. But for any site dug which is thought to occur in written sources it is absolutely essential to do two things: to dig with the fullest care to recover all real evidence for the nature and history of occupation of a site—and to check up all the ancient sources for the places that the site might be supposed to represent, including the data in the biblical writings when they happen to be part of the available written record. Few ancient sites mentioned in the Bible are so perfectly known that one can afford to dispense with *any*

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written data, biblical or otherwise. Thirdly, it is not the basic purpose of orientalists or archaeologists either to prove or disprove any particular ancient document, the Bible included. It is their purpose to obtain the fullest and clearest possible picture of antiquity (biblical and otherwise) for the common benefit of all, be they biblical students or otherwise. If in the course of a fair and full investigation of the total available resources, the verdict is frequently a high measure of agreement between the Bible and the world that is its ancient and original context, then this result should not be specially prized or despised, but used quietly and sanely to gain a good understanding of both. When problems arise (as they do in all fields of study, without exception), usually from incomplete or defective information, then they should be treated alike in all cases (biblical and otherwise)—critically, sympathetically, thoroughly, drawing only provisional conclusions when lack of data makes final ones impracticable. The biblical world has yet much treasure to yield to us in times to come (Ebla is but one example), yet in human experience, none to be compared with the Bible itself.

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