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Evaluating the Qumran Manuscripts

SOME archaeological discoveries, however important in themselves, serve mainly in the shaping and clarifying of theories already formulated on the basis of earlier discoveries. Hence they seldom arouse much controversy. Others, like that of the Qumran scrolls, are entirely unexpected and open up a new field of thought and knowledge. It is to be expected that at the first they will call out contradictory, and sometimes sensational interpretations. This is particularly the case, when, as was the case with Qumran, the discoveries impinge on our understanding of the Bible. It is natural for scholars, and for writers who can hardly claim to be scholars, to look for proofs of their views in the new discoveries.

The first of the Qumran scrolls were discovered in 1947, and they became public news in 1948, but it was not until 1955 that the journalistically brilliant article by E. Wilson in *The New Yorker*, published as *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea*, revealed to a wide public the potential dynamite in them. His views about the relationship of the scrolls to the early Church were reinforced the next year by A. P. Davies, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. The remarkable feature is that the following six years have seen not merely the withering away of these extravagant theories but also an almost universal acceptance of the main lines of the theory put forward by A. Dupont-Sommer in 1950 in his *Aperçus préliminaires sur les manuscrits de la Mer Morte* (English translation, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 1952).

One reason for the disappearance of wild hypotheses is that the serious reader is in a position to study the manuscripts in adequate translations. Apart from the translations offered by Millar Burrows in *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (1955) and *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (1958) there was the brilliant, but sometimes erratic rendering by T. H. Gaster in *The Dead Sea Scriptures* (1956). This has to a great extent been replaced by the more pedestrian but more reliable work by G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Pelican, 1962). The latter has the advantage of being able to include various fragments which have become known since Gaster's work. Unfortunately the non-expert, who is confined to English, has not yet the advantage of a work like J. Maier's two-volume work *Die Texte vom Toten Meer* (1960),

which by its very full notes gives the reader a chance of making up his own mind in cases of disputed renderings.

The earlier remark about the withering away of extravagant theories must not be over-stressed. They still appear and will continue to do so. One example is Upton C. Ewing, *The Essene Christ* (Philosophical Library, New York, 1961). Although the publishers make great claims for both the author and his work, it is doubtful whether it should be regarded as a scholarly work at all. By a suitable choice of quotations, often from authors who would never be regarded as authorities today, the veracity of the Gospels is questioned and an idealised picture of the Qumran Covenanters, identified with the Essenes, is offered. In spite of the balance of evidence both in the manuscripts and from the excavations they are presented as rejecters of animal sacrifices and vegetarians—the advocacy of vegetarianism is one of the main purposes of the book. It is assumed as certain that both John the Baptist and Jesus were brought up among them. He does not seem to realise that to quote A. P. Davies and D. Howlett (*The Essenes and Christianity*) as authorities is quite inadequate, when their views have been seriously discredited by competent scholars. It is disingenuous to quote W. H. Brownlee's summary of Dupont-Sommer's early views of the similarities between the Teacher of Righteousness and Jesus, when he should know that the whole underlying interpretation of the texts is seriously challenged.

This façade of scholarship is used to justify the writing of a new gospel, 'The Covenant of Love', which would probably have astonished the men of Qumran almost as much as the evangelists. In it the first temptation of Jesus is to eat meat; the nets break in the miraculous draught of fishes (Luke v. 4-10) to show the disciples they must not catch fish; the demons do not enter the swine (Matt. viii. 31); the fig tree is blessed, not cursed; the miracle at Cana of Galilee is a sermon on the merits of water; the cleansing of the Temple is an attack on animal sacrifice; and the prodigal's 'fatted calf' turns into 'best ripe fruits, the pulse, the honey of the comb, the bread, the cakes and the wine'. The crucifixion was a purely Roman action drawn on himself by Jesus by his insult to the Roman gods by condemning animal sacrifice. It need hardly be mentioned that the resurrection is not even hinted at.

We have devoted so much to this book because it is typical of the wrong way to approach the Qumran discoveries. The future will doubtless see other ingenious theories based on them. When we turn to true scholarship, however, we find increasing agreement and a dis-

inclination to listen to siren voices attracting down new paths. As a result attractively argued theses like that of C. Roth in *The Historical Background of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (1958), identifying the Qumran Covenanters with the Zealots, or K. H. Rengstorff's *Hirbet Qumran und die Bibliothek vom Toten Meer* (1961), arguing that the manuscripts represent remnants of the official library of the Temple stored away before A.D. 70, have few to follow them.

The ordinary reader wishing to know what is known about Qumran cannot do better than turn to the second edition of F. F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Paternoster Press, London, 1961). Although the book was written for the ordinary intelligent reader, its qualities of clarity, fairness and balance brought many appreciative remarks from scholars. The many new discoveries since the first edition in 1956 have caused the book to expand by about a third (the re-setting of the type makes an accurate estimate of the increase difficult) and there can be hardly a page that has not been altered. For all that we have noted only one comparatively unimportant point where the writer has changed his mind, viz. the etymology of the name Essene. Curiously enough, this is one of the few points where we disagree with him. Probably his first thoughts were better, when he maintained that it was derived from the term Hasidim, even though the history of the development may be complicated, as suggested by Matthew Black (see below, p. 14). It is questionable whether the ordinary reader will for a considerable time need more than this book and the same author's *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts* (Tyndale Press) for an adequate appreciation of the Qumran discoveries.

Some of the deeper implications of the discoveries are suggested by Matthew Black in his *The Scrolls and Christian Origins* (Nelson, 1951). His argument that the Qumran Covenanters were Essenes seems irrefutable, and he is particularly valuable in his closer examination of the sect and its probable origins. There seems to be somewhat too much unprovable theory involved for us to accept some of his more far-reaching theories. What evidence is there that the Hasmonean priest-kings were not of Aaronic origin? Though it is frequently affirmed today, there seems to be no evidence for it. The denial of legitimacy does not of necessity deny descent. In British history the Jacobites in denying the legitimacy of the Hanoverian kings did not question that they had Stuart blood. It is most improbable that the Pharisees would have tolerated a non-Aaronic high-priesthood. In addition the Essene objection was based quite as much on character as on legitimacy.

It is here that we meet one of the major weaknesses of the work. To look for accurate information about heretics and schismatics in the traditions and writings of enemies, or even of the inquisitive, e.g. some of the early Christian fathers, can be dangerous. The pre-Maccabean evidence needs to be handled with much more, the early Christian with a good deal more care than is here in evidence. We can, however, accept his conclusion that in first-century Judaism, both B.C. and A.D., beside the Pharisees and Sadducees and their allies there were a large number of groups sharing approximately the same type of outlook although they were not linked with one another and in some cases might be openly hostile. The Essenes of Qumran will have been one of the most influential of these groups.

This puts his study of the similarities and dissimilarities between Qumran and the Church into a new light. Not only does he show that the dissimilarities are in certain respects more important than the similarities, but many of the latter need not be specifically due to Qumran at all and may be derived from a common non-Pharisaic background.

In fact many of these similarities link with the customs of the Primitive Church rather than with teaching and acts of Jesus. Here again we must exercise caution. Black stresses the hieratic or sacerdotal character of the Church from its earliest beginnings (p. 80) in contrast to the Synagogue. But this is to overlook that so long as the Temple stood the Synagogue, in Palestine at any rate, never stood in opposition to it but rather presupposed it. Some of the most striking similarities are based on post-Apostolic evidence and often in heretical or semi-heretical settings. It may well be that we here have a clue to the remarkable collapse and disappearance of the Jewish-Christian church. We are all familiar with the concept of the Pharisaic element within it predisposing it to legalism. It is likely, however, that the collapse of A.D. 70 will have brought in many of the disillusioned Essenes and people of similar outlook, who will have found suitable soil for the propagation of their particular views and practices. It may be that beside the Hellenistic perversion of New Testament thought, which is so often stressed today, we shall in the future have to speak of a parallel Essene or Jewish sectarian perversion.

The study of individual Essene concepts is excellent, and we are brought to see that there has been perhaps a premature acceptance of the view that Qumran expected two Messiahs. It may be added that the work contains some outstandingly fine photographs.