



Reviews

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Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls*

Malcolm Edwards

THIS IS ONE of the latest books about the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is written by the man who co-authored *The Jesus Papyrus* with Matthew d'Anco, and who has written other books about Jesus Christ and the origins of Christianity. He is Professor of New Testament History and Papyrology at STH Basel, Switzerland, and also teaches at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel. He is also an Anglican minister.

The book is refreshing in that it is written from the standpoint of Christianity, whereas so many others books on the subject contain much anti-Christian bias. It appears in book shops on the same shelves as works by Barbara Thiering and Baigent and Lee, whose writings are now much outdated on the question of the identity of the writers of the non-Biblical scrolls, and of the period in which they wrote.

The Essenes

Professor Thiede dismisses as "wishful thinking" the view that the first Christians were Essenes, rightly pointing out that, since both groups were Jewish, they were obviously influenced by the same Hebrew Scriptures. He also rejects as "tendentious nonsense" what he calls "the myths about the machinations of secret agencies hiding controversial scrolls".

In addressing the matter of whether the Essenes ever dwelt at Qumran, he points out that the settlement there was not a secret retreat hidden amongst the terrain of the Dead Sea shore but was clearly visible on a plateau. He is also most sceptical about the accuracy of the Roman writer Pliny the Elder, who stated that the Essenes lived by the Dead Sea. He writes that if any Essenes ever lived at Qumran, he doubts that they did so during the reign of the Herods. He points out that a group commonly called Essenes replaced an earlier settlement during the reign of John Hyrcanus (135-104 B.C.), but that it was destroyed either by earthquake or by

fire, or possibly by enemies, between 39 and 31 B.C.

Dr Thiede also confirms that some of the literature that was used by the later Qumran group existed long before the origin of the Essene movement, and he seems positive, from information found in what is known as *The Damascus Document*, that the group was a breakaway from the Sadducean temple priesthood who went into exile about 196 B.C.

The much referred to Teacher of Righteousness, whom some writers about the scrolls have identified as Jesus and others as John the Baptist, arose as their leader in 176 B.C., long before Jesus and John were born. The other character from the same non-Biblical scroll at Qumran was the Wicked Priest, whom the author believes to have been the high priest Jonathan, who was in office between 160 and 142 B.C.

In discussing the Essenes of New Testament times the author relies mostly on the Jewish writers Josephus and Philo. He is convinced that there was an Essene community at Jerusalem during apostolic times, since Josephus mentions that there was a small city gate on the southwest hill called the "Gate of the Essenes". If Jesus or any of the apostles had wished to contact them they need not have travelled to Qumran to do so, as some scrolls writers have suggested. Whatever Essene groups there were in the land, they were either killed or dispersed during the Roman invasion of A.D. 68-70.

About the jars

The author reveals that placing documents in terra-cotta jars was a common method of scroll

* *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Jewish Origins of Christianity*, Carsten Peter Thiede. 250-page paperback with nineteen pages of useful notes. Published by Lion Publishing, Oxford, 2001. ISBN 0 7459 5050 7.

storage. He quotes Jeremiah 32:13,14 to show that even in Jeremiah's day legal documents were stored in earthenware jars: "And I charged Baruch before them, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Take these evidences, this evidence of the purchase, both which is sealed, and this evidence which is open; and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days".

He also quotes the third-century writer Origen as stating that in writing his own edition of the Hebrew and Greek Old Testament (A.D. 218-22) he had used an ancient copy of a Hebrew scroll containing the Psalms, which had come from a jar found in a cave near Jericho. However, since there are many caves nearer to Jericho than Qumran, it is not certain that the Qumran caves are meant. Some 500 years after this, a Christian bishop mentioned that "pious Jews" had told him about such a cave near Jericho in which were found books of the Old Testament and other writings.

Scrolls from the Masada area

Professor Thiede finds similarities between some non-Biblical scrolls and parts of the New Testament, but not to try to prove that the first Christians originated from the writers of the scrolls but simply to emphasise the Jewishness of both groups. For example, in caves near Masada three documents have been found dating to about A.D. 71, which consist of a promissory note, a marriage contract and a divorce certificate, which the author considers helpful to a better understanding of parts of the New Testament.

It is also most interesting that a scroll of Ezekiel 37:1-14, the 'dry bones' prophecy, was found hidden in the ruins of the synagogue in Masada, having escaped the Roman purge after the fortress was conquered. The Jews who had hidden the scrolls were obviously well acquainted with this prophecy and perhaps looked for its fulfilment in their times.

These scrolls also establish that at that period educated Jews were bilingual in Aramaic and Greek but had no interest in literary Latin.

The Cave of Horrors

The Cave of Horrors, as it has come to be called, was discovered in 1961 in the Nahal Hever area of the Dead Sea, between Engedi and Masada. The cave contained skeletons of about forty men, women and children said to have been starved to death by the Romans during the Bar Kochba

rebellion of A.D. 135. In the same cave were found fragments of a leather scroll of the Minor Prophets, written sometime between 50 B.C. and A.D. 50, but in the Greek language.

In these writings, however, the Name of God (YHWH) was not written as *kurios* (Lord), as in the Septuagint version, but in an ancient Hebrew script of the pre-Exile period. It is not clear why this was done, but the most likely reason was to discourage the reader from audibly pronouncing it, in keeping with the practice of Jews of that period and onwards.

In the Cave of Letters nearby, a legal document emerged, which, when studied, confirmed Luke's record of the census registration that compelled Joseph and Mary to journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Arguments about the Qumran ruins

Over the years, views have changed as to what the Qumran ruins had been. The author disagrees with modern Israeli archaeologists who maintain that it was once a Jewish winter villa, or possibly a fortress, and that the supposed scriptorium was a dining room. He inclines to the original theory that the Qumran ruins were once a kind of monastery, with a library, and a scriptorium for scroll writing. In doing so he also contests the more recent opinion that the scrolls from the nearby caves were written elsewhere and brought to Qumran for safekeeping during the A.D. 68-70 war. He thinks that the buildings were at some time used for scroll writing, but accepts that the absence of windows in the adjacent rooms argues against the use of them as reading rooms, as was once thought. He believes that some of the caves themselves were roomy enough to have served that purpose, but one would think that even large caves would require artificial lighting.

Thiede's main reason for returning to these original views seems to be based on unpublished scientific testing of the scroll jars. Samples from the jars were taken for testing by irradiation, and the results have confirmed that those jars tested, at least, were not imported, but had actually been made from local clay for the specific purpose of storing scrolls. There is also evidence that a kiln existed at Qumran for this kind of work. Until the results of all the tests are made public, however, there must still be doubts. In any case, it could be argued that many of the scrolls might have been written elsewhere, even though the storage jars were made locally.

The scroll grouping

There is a chapter that gives the key to the caves, and also a grouping of the scrolls and fragments. This is too lengthy to reproduce here, but the following is a brief outline:

Biblical texts. All the books of the Old Testament except Esther. This category includes the Targums, which are Aramaic translations/interpretations of Hebrew books.

Pseudepigraphical books. Already known theological writings not considered part of the Scripture canon, such as the *Book of Enoch*, the *Book of Noah*, and the *Book of Jubilees*.

The Apocrypha.

Sectarian Writings. Previously unknown writings, such as *The Community Rule*, *The Copper Scroll*, *The Damascus Document* and *The Letter of the Teacher of Righteousness*.

Commentaries. These are also called *pesharim*, the most notable being a commentary on Habakkuk.

The scrolls and the Septuagint

A significant aspect of the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls is what has emerged about the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, which was generally thought to be inferior to the Hebrew Massoretic text from which our Old Testament has been translated.

The author comments that the Septuagint was very popular amongst Greek-speaking Jews of Roman Palestine, and points out that fragments of an ancient Hebrew text of one of the books of Samuel found in Cave 4 was closer to the Septuagint than to the Massoretic text. He adds: "It is no longer possible to claim that the Greek Bible which was the one almost exclusively used by Jews outside the Holy Land in New Testament times—and by the authors of the New Testament themselves—is automatically less authentic, less reliable, when it differs from the standard Hebrew text in modern translations".

New Testament fragments?

Much controversy has raged around what are called fragments 7Q4 and 7Q5, which are identified by some with 1 Timothy 3:16–4:1 and Mark 6:52,53. These were found in Cave 7, and the author considers that they are indeed Greek fragments of those two New Testament writings. Scrolls experts have debated for years whether or not this is the case, but what concerns ourselves is whether it really matters and how much it affects Christian faith. Well-known scrolls

scholar Geza Vermes considers the assumption to be "unsound", from which one can gather that the evidence is far from conclusive.

Although strongly of the view that the fragments are part of Mark's and Paul's writings, our author, who, it must be remembered, is an Anglican minister, does not think that it affects Christian belief one way or another. But if the texts are of the New Testament one wonders how they came to be in the Qumran caves. The answer could be that the rabbis of that late first-century period were not averse to studying Christian writings if they could acquire them. For example, when James sent out his own letter to the scattered "twelve tribes", copies could easily have found their way from Jewish homes into synagogues and been retained for study, either out of interest or for the purpose of combating Christian doctrine.

Whatever is the case, any first-century evidence of apostolic writings can only be a plus for the truth of Christianity, so we should welcome it, considering that critics love to remind us that the earliest manuscripts of Christian writings are from the fourth century.

Jesus and the Essenes

The latter part of the book deals with the attempts by some scrolls writers to belittle the origins of Christianity by trying to link Jesus with the Essenes at Qumran. The author cites news headlines in the *Sunday Times* of 7 November 1999, which proclaimed, "Scroll names Jesus as sect member". The scroll in question is called *The Angel Scroll*, which was said to be in the process of being studied in a monastery on the German-Austrian border. The story was eventually debunked by Bargil Pixter, an expert on Essenism, even though he himself has long sought to establish a connection between Jesus and the Essenes.

Professor Thiede is quite scathing about writers who have fantasies that some of the Dead Sea Scrolls are coded messages about Jesus and the apostles, and quite obviously he includes Barbara Thiering amongst these people. He continues: "Thus it is sobering and healthy to realize that many, if not most of the central early tenets of the Christian faith have no parallels, no 'inspiration' as it were, in the Scrolls from Qumran. Here are two Jewish movements who both drew on the same sources".

Summarising on the possibility of New Testament links with the Dead Sea Scrolls, the author

comments that we should be more surprised at their *absence* than their presence. He speaks of connections sometimes made between the religious practices found in the *Community Rule* and among the early Christians as “weak”, and in regard to the mention in one scroll of the new covenant, he quite correctly comments that, whereas both groups independently refer to Jer-

emiah 31:31-34, the last verse of this passage, about the forgiveness of sins, was fulfilled only in the Son of God.

There is much more in the book of a technical nature for those who wish to delve deeper, but sufficient has been said to make it absolutely clear that the Dead Sea Scrolls present no challenge whatsoever to Christian faith.



Science

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Science and the Creator

“To shake terribly the earth”

David Burges

THE PSALMIST, contemplating the glory of the night sky, rejoiced that “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth His handywork” (Ps. 19:1). But the heavens also conceal more sinister objects, which, it is now realised, could pose a real danger to the earth. Every few months there are sensational headlines in the media because an asteroid has been reported to have passed close to the earth, only narrowly avoiding the peril of a catastrophic impact. Hollywood has cashed in on the concern with more than one ‘disaster movie’ based upon the idea of heroic efforts to save the earth from devastation by an asteroid impact.

Asteroids

In fact scientists are now taking seriously the potential hazards because improved observation techniques have shown that there are a large number of such objects in earth-crossing orbits, and also there is ample evidence of past impacts.¹

The moon and the other inner planets, Mercury, Venus and Mars, are all covered in impact craters. The Apollo missions to the moon confirmed conclusively that its craters were formed by the impact of asteroids or comets and not by volcanic action. Moreover, radar mapping from space has likewise revealed many such cra-

ters on the earth’s surface, in addition to the famous Arizona Crater, even though most are less obvious because of erosion and vegetation cover.

Asteroids are irregular pieces of rock varying in size from less than a kilometre to several hundred kilometres across. Some 8,000 of them occupy the asteroid belt orbiting the sun in the region between Mars and Jupiter, but many others have been identified in elongated orbits which cross those of the inner planets, including the earth. It is thought that these have been shaken from the asteroid belt by the gravitational influence of Jupiter.

The danger they pose to the earth arises from their enormous kinetic energy, resulting from their mass and high speed, typically fifty kilometres per second. It has been calculated that an object only ten kilometres across striking the earth would generate a blast far greater than any nuclear explosion that man has released. And this in turn would produce firestorms, vast clouds of smoke, bringing an extended period of darkness and cold,² as well as widespread hurricanes, poi-

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1. “Bolts from the blue”, John and Mary Gribbin, *New Scientist—Inside Science No. 113*, 12 Sept. 1998.
 2. Similar to the so-called ‘nuclear winter’ which it is predicted would result from a nuclear war.