
The Dead Sea Scrolls on the High Street

Part I

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Introduction

The year 1997 marked (almost certainly) the fiftieth anniversary of the discovery of the first Dead Sea Scrolls and so, once again, the significance of these ancient documents is a matter of great public interest. Already, volumes have been published to mark this jubilee in which highly competent scholars discuss questions of a technical nature.¹ A recent (May 1998) international conference held at New College, Edinburgh, indicates that academic interest is as strong in the author's homeland Scotland as in the rest of the world.

However, it is not only specialists who are interested in the Dead Sea Scrolls (hereafter, DSS). There is widespread public interest in the subject also and this, in certain respects, is something to be warmly welcomed. This is true simply because of the value of the DSS to archaeology; they have been described as "the greatest MS [manuscript] discovery of modern times",² and it is always valuable to be aware of developments in our knowledge of the ancient world. However, the fact that during the 1990s the DSS have been at the centre of some of the most startling, dramatic, and controversial events imaginable, leading to massive publicity in both the academic and popular press, has surely added to the public interest in these documents.

The phenomenal interest in the scrolls is once more demonstrated in the Scottish setting by the important exhibition, "Scrolls from the Dead Sea" which ran from 1st May to 30th August 1998 in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow. Thousands of people flocked from all over the country (Glasgow was the only British venue for the exhibition) to see the tiny fragments of ancient leather parchment and to hear experts lecture on their significance.

Given the great interest in these ancient documents, it is worth our while taking some time to learn a little more about them. But when authors make claims about the Christian faith on the basis of the supposed contents of these documents, it is important that we are able to tell fact from fantasy, so that we neither lose our confidence in the certainty of our salvation in Christ, nor reject the valuable insights which these amazing discoveries have brought to light.

The Story So Far³

The first scrolls were discovered in 1947 by a Bedouin shepherd boy who, according to the most familiar account, tossed a stone into a dark cave in the Judean wilderness as he searched for a lost sheep and was surprised to hear the sound of pottery breaking. When he entered the cave he found several clay jars which contained leather scrolls. The region in which the cave is situated bears the Arabic name, Khirbet Qumran.

It appears that the Bedouin were not particularly impressed with the new

discoveries. Edward Cook cites the recollections of the shepherd boy:

We kept them lying around the tent, and the children played with them. One of them broke in pieces and we threw the pieces on the garbage pile. Later we came back and found that the wind had blown all the pieces away.⁴

When one considers the vast amount that has been written about even the smallest sections of text from the scrolls, it is fascinating to imagine how much material became play material for Bedouin children. However, the Bedouin knew that Western scholars were often willing to pay substantial amounts of money for ancient documents so they took the scrolls to a dealer in Bethlehem known as Kando.⁵ Since he suspected that the strange writing on the scrolls might be Syriac, he and a friend took them to the Archbishop of the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop of Jerusalem, Mar (his ecclesiastical title) Samuel in April 1947.

Mar Samuel recognised the writing as Hebrew, and asked to buy the scrolls. Unfortunately, when the Bedouin and the dealers returned, the gatekeeper of the monastery turned them away. Mar Samuel eventually realised the mistake and persuaded some of the Bedouin to sell him four scrolls.⁶ However, others had been so aggrieved that they went elsewhere, and a batch of three scrolls came to an antiquities dealer called Salahi who contacted the professor of archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, EL Sukenik. Sukenik's training and experience were ideal for making sense of this ancient writing. Sukenik bought the three scrolls; two of them on November 29 1947, "the very day on which the United Nations passed the resolution to create the state of Israel."⁷

The remaining four scrolls were still in the hands of Mar Samuel who was by now finding that these ancient documents were not so easy to sell. This led him to the most startling method of selling ancient documents: he placed an advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal* of June 1, 1954 (p. 14). It read,

"The Four Dead Sea Scrolls" Biblical Manuscripts dating back to at least 200BC, are for sale. This would be an ideal gift to an educational or religious institution by an individual or a group.⁸

The advertisement was placed in the category of "Miscellaneous For Sale"! As strange a course of action as this sounds, it was effective because Professor Sukenik's son, Yigael Yadin, a military officer who was in the United States at the time, arranged to purchase the scrolls for a sum of \$250,000. They were then presented to the State of Israel and, together with the three already held by Sukenik they are now housed in the "Shrine of the Book" in the Israel Museum.

Over the decade following the first discoveries of 1947, a total of eleven caves were found, including cave 4 which contained a vast number of fragments but mostly in very poor condition. It was generally agreed that this represented the library of a monastery inhabited by the most sectarian members of a Jewish group known as the Essenes. Some of the documents were written by members of this group while others were brought to the site from elsewhere. There is still broad agreement on this view, although other views have been proposed.⁹

Clearly a vast amount of time was required to be spent on these texts by experts in Hebrew and Aramaic. The task demanded the formation of a team of specialists, and such a team was duly assembled. However, the composition of that team was to prove

the beginning of the rumours of conspiracy.

Before we come to these matters, however, we will consider some of the documents themselves.

Some Significant Documents

Numerous documents and fragments of documents have been found since the first discoveries in 1947, so that a collection of more than 6,000 photographs of scrolls or fragments of scrolls has recently been published. The word “fragments” is important, however, since many of them are very tiny with only a few characters on each. The number of documents which are either substantially intact, or significant, is much smaller.¹⁰

Before we get into the details of the individual scrolls, a word about the way in which the scrolls are normally identified. Each scroll or fragment is normally identified by means of a standard formula. It is very common to find reference to the scrolls in modern books about the Bible and so it is useful to know what the formula signifies. The formula begins with a number to identify the cave in which the document was found, followed by a capital Q to indicate that it was found at Qumran. Then follows the specific identification of the individual document, by means of either a number, an abbreviation, a group of letters, or a combination of these. Let us take two documents as examples. First we can take one of the first documents to be discovered, the interpretation of the OT book Habakkuk. This scroll was found in cave 1 (the first cave to be discovered) at Qumran, and so the formula begins 1Q. Next we discover that it is a “peshar” (or interpretation) which is identified by means of a lower case “p”, and that it relates to Habakkuk which is abbreviated to Hab. Thus the formula reads 1QpHab, and actually tells us quite a bit about the origin and content of the scroll.

The second example is the “Testimonia”, which quotes portions from several OT books. It is identified by the formula 4Q175, which tells us that it also is a Qumran document but found in cave 4. However, the number tells us nothing about the content of the scroll and is useful only for classification purposes. The first scrolls to be found were named rather than numbered because nobody expected to find so many more!

I will now identify a few of the most interesting scrolls or fragments. Some of these are very large but it should be said that some of the most interesting and controversial texts from Qumran are very small in physical size. However, we will begin with one of the largest scrolls discovered at Qumran:

The Isaiah Scroll Among the very first documents discovered in the first cave, there were two copies of Isaiah. This part of the find generated particular excitement since one of them contained virtually the complete text of the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah. (It became known as 1QIsa^a.) What was it that excited the scholars so much?

The answer, surprisingly enough, is that what they had found was almost exactly the same as what they had already. The significant difference was that the copy of Isaiah scholars now possessed was around one thousand years older than the oldest copy previously available.¹¹ The significance of this find was enormous! This was now the oldest copy of *any* OT book available and since two texts separated by about one thousand years proved to be virtually identical, the reliable transmission of the OT text was demonstrated in a way not possible previously. Many whole or partial copies of books which we find in our OT were among the documents found in the caves at

Qumran. Indeed, every one of our 39 canonical OT books was represented in the finds, with the exceptions of Nehemiah and Esther. However, Nehemiah, is not really an exception since in Hebrew it was bound with Ezra to form one document. Thus only Esther is not represented among the texts so far discovered. But this does not prove that Esther was not used at Qumran. Some of the larger books of the OT are only represented at Qumran by a few lines on a disintegrating fragment or two. All we can say is that any copies of Esther which may have been used at Qumran have not been preserved. These finds help to confirm that the Jews of Qumran held the documents of our OT in high regard, and that there was already an agreed collection of “canonical” texts.¹²

The Damascus Document Abbreviated as CD (for Cairo Damascus, since it was first discovered in a synagogue in Cairo in 1896), this scroll is one of the legal texts of the community.

The Manual of Discipline Edward Cook tells of the interesting background to the name of this scroll:

Burrows gave the name *Manual of Discipline* to the scroll...because it reminded him vaguely of the Methodist *Manual of Discipline* which he had in fact never read.¹³

It has been described as the equivalent of the constitution of the community and contains rules and regulations relating to the ongoing life of the community.

The Habakkuk Commentary This is a commentary on the first two chapters of our canonical OT book. Clearly the third chapter did not serve the purposes of the author. The method of interpretation known as “pesher” attempts to show how the events in the life of the Qumran community are found in the pages of scripture. This document gives us a fascinating insight into how the community read the Hebrew Bible and it also contains a famous description of the conflict between the “Teacher of Righteousness” (the founder of the Qumran sect) and “the Wicked Priest” (possibly the High Priest in Jerusalem at the time, though we cannot be sure).

The War Scroll This document tells of a forty-year war between the “sons of darkness” and the “sons of light”. It is clear that this is no ordinary battle but it is the final war. Members of the Qumran community will fight alongside angels and will at last know the blessing of God.

Some of the Works of the Torah Also known as 4QMMT (the letters represent the Hebrew words¹⁴ for the title), this letter is believed to have been written from the Qumran community (perhaps by their leader, the Teacher of Righteousness, to their priestly counterparts in Jerusalem).

The Copper Scroll This is one of the most startling finds among the Qumran scrolls. It is exactly as it sounds; a document “written” (or hammered) onto a sheet of copper which was then wound as a normal scroll. When it was found in Cave 3, however, it was impossible to open due to corrosion. It had to be taken to Manchester University where it was cut into thin vertical strips. It does not make for scintillating reading! However, its contents have got at least a few people excited, as we shall see.

4Q285 Known as Serekh ha-Milhamah, this text has been understood by some to speak of a “slain Messiah” with the verb “slain” bearing the meaning “pierced”. This is then linked to the notion of a crucified Messiah and the claim is made that this is a precursor of the crucifixion of Jesus. The text is very badly deteriorated, however, so

that any reading requires a lot of reconstruction. That being the case, we should note that several scholars have argued that the text actually speaks of a messiah who pierces. However, even if the translation “pierced messiah” is accurate, in the context of the text that simply describes the mutilation of a body on the battle field. Any theory that claims so much on the basis of such shaky evidence must be treated with extreme care.¹⁵

We could also have mentioned the longest scroll, the Temple Scroll, and the various hymns which indicate the piety of the community, but these will be left for the readers personal investigation!

Publications and Tried Patience

One of the fundamental objectives of the research committee was to make the contents of the scrolls available to the wider world (or at least the wider world of scholars) as soon as possible. Initially this appeared to be happening at a steady pace with several of the team producing initial publications at a relatively early stage – the original seven scrolls were all published within a decade of their discovery. Notable in this respect was one John Allegro who was a very capable researcher (he worked alongside FF Bruce for a short time at Manchester University). Unfortunately for everyone, Allegro did not restrict his literary output to his translation of the scrolls. Allegro was a self-confessed atheist who had quite open contempt for the religious convictions of his Christian (mainly, but not solely, Catholic) colleagues. While difference in religious perspective should not have impeded the task of transcription and translation in principle, Allegro’s public and virulent attacks on his colleagues’ religious beliefs led to significant tensions between the members of the translation team.

Allegro’s reputation as a serious academic researcher was seriously damaged by two further events. Firstly, in the mid-fifties, Allegro gave a BBC radio lecture in which he announced that research on the recently discovered scrolls had revealed that they worshipped a crucified Messiah and that they waited for him to return in glory. This being the case, it was clear that Christianity was not historical but was simply a repetition of beliefs previously held by a Jewish sect.

Allegro’s colleague could not remain silent, and so a letter was printed in *The Times* signed by the key figures in scroll research – de Vaux, Milik, Starcky, Skehan, and Strugnell. Edward Cook cites it as follows,

We are unable to see in the texts the “findings” of Mr Allegro ... It is our conviction that either he has misread the texts or he has built up a chain of conjectures which the materials do not support.¹⁶

Allegro retracted his claims but his determination to undermine Christianity was made clear. His was only one of numerous similar attempts in following years. The second blow to his credibility was somewhat different, however. In 1959-60 Allegro organised a treasure hunting expedition with the intention of discovering the staggering quantities of gold (it would be measured in tons) mentioned in the Copper Scroll. As I mentioned before, several members of the research team believed the descriptions to be fictitious and intended to fit into the setting of folklore. Allegro thought that this was simply a way of keeping others away from the real treasure and anyway, he supposed, the hunt might lead to new scrolls being discovered. Unfortunately for Allegro, neither treasure nor scrolls were found. He did, however, spoil part of the archaeological dig and attract

the anger of de Vaux, the team leader, who described his actions as “infantile behaviour”.

These incidents only go to show the kind of very human ambitions, jealousies and follies which have been all too evident through the years of scroll research. Perhaps it was because of distractions like these that progress in publication of scrolls slowed down dramatically but that reality certainly provided fuel for the fire of several conspiracy hunters and it is to them we shall turn in the second part of this article.

To be continued.

References

- ¹ One of the first of these is the important volume *The Scrolls and the Scriptures*, edited by S. E. Porter and CA Evans (Sheffield: SAP, 1997).
- ² William Foxwell Albright on seeing the photographs of the first scrolls to be discovered. See JC VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (London: SPCK, 1994), p. 5.
- ³ Here I rely particularly on O Betz and R Riesner, *Jesus, Qumran and the Vatican* (London: SCM, 1994), pp. 3ff., and VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, pp. 1-12.
- ⁴ Cook, *Solving the Mysteries*, p. 12.
- ⁵ His real name was Khalil Iskander Shahin (Cook, *Solving the Mysteries*, p. 12). The fact that he was also a shoemaker once again raises other fascinating possibilities regarding what might have happened to these leather scrolls!
- ⁶ VanderKam (*The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, p. 4) indicates that the purchase price was £24 for all four scrolls!
- ⁷ VanderKam *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, p. 4.
- ⁸ See the photograph in VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, plates between p. 83 and p. 84.
- ⁹ See G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Qumran in Perspective* (London: SCM, ³1994), pp. 18-21. He highlights the alternative views of Garcia Martinez and van der Woude (Groningen Hypothesis – community was an Essene “splinter group”), and Golb (settlement was a fortress where Jerusalem library or libraries were hidden).
- ¹⁰ A very good survey of these is found in VanderKam’s book, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*.
- ¹¹ See VanderKam, p. 126, who dates 1QIs^a to approximately 100 BC, compared with the standard Hebrew text (the Masoretic Text or MT) dating to around AD 900.
- ¹² VanderKam, who is generally a particularly helpful guide in this subject area, is less convincing in his argument that the sectarians had a fairly open attitude to the canon (see especially his conclusions on p. 157). He appears to blur the important distinction between authoritative documents and canonical documents. There is no doubt that the sectarians regarded non-biblical documents as authoritative (as many churches regard various confessions, for example), but that does not imply that they regarded them as canonical.
- ¹³ Cook, *Solving the Mysteries*, p. 30
- ¹⁴ Miqsat Ma’aseh ha-Torah.
- ¹⁵ See particularly the rather technical but excellent article by M. Bockmuehl, “A ‘Slain Messiah’ in 4Q Serekh Milhamah (4Q285)” *Tyndale Bulletin* 43.1 (1992) pp. 155-169.
- ¹⁶ Cook, *Solving the Mysteries*, p. 47.

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