
The Dead Sea Scrolls on the High Street

Part 2

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Conspiracies and Cover-ups?

Everybody is attracted to an exciting story, not least those working in the media, and this is as true when it comes to the Dead Sea Scrolls as in any other field of interest. Indeed the DSS provide unusually rich ingredients for a drama: accidental discovery, political tensions, secret codes, hidden treasure and more. What more could a journalist ask for? Well, perhaps a religious scandal! The Scandinavian scholar Krister Stendahl writes:

It is as a potential threat to Christianity, its claims and its doctrines that the scrolls have caught the imagination of laymen and clergy.¹

Three books in particular have made the headlines in the last few years. Each one is distinctive in its particular slant on the DSS, but they are united in the claim that whatever new evidence they bring to the public requires a complete re-evaluation of historic Christianity. Another characteristic common to each of these volumes is that they have sold in vast numbers and, as the title of this article indicates, are found not simply on the dusty shelves of specialist theological or archaeological bookshops. Rather they sit brightly lit on the shelves of high-street newsagents, in railway stations and in airports. As an illustration of their widespread distribution, the author of this article walked into a second-hand bookshop in Inverness in the Highlands of Scotland (hardly a centre of DSS research!) and found a copy of each of the controversial volumes considered below (indeed, two copies of Eisenman and Wise's book). Of more mainstream books on the subject there was no trace.

The first book has the most dramatic title of the three: *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*.² This book, written by two journalists, Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, certainly made a big impact internationally. The German scholars Otto Betz and Rainer Riesner write that in Germany it,

appeared in September 1991 with a major advertising campaign, and within a month had begun to top the non-fiction best-seller lists, where it stayed for a year; to date [1994] more than 400,000 copies have been sold in Germany alone.³

It is surely clear from these comments that the Dead Sea Scrolls are big news and that a sensational story concerning them will find a very receptive audience. The sensational story in this case was the conspiracy between the Vatican and the Scrolls researchers to keep certain scrolls unpublished on account of the damage they would do to the Christian faith. The position of the two journalists becomes clear on only their second page of text:

we found ourselves confronting a contradiction we had faced before – the contradiction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.⁴

James VanderKam commends the authors for “a rather good start” to their book but states that it “quickly degenerates into a disgraceful display of yellow journalism.”⁵ They attempt to convince their readers of a Vatican organised conspiracy and it has to be said that the policy of the publication team did not help to build widespread confidence in their work. In 1977 the renowned DSS scholar Geza Vermes was warning that the lack of publication of scrolls 30 years after the first discoveries was threatening to become “the academic scandal *par excellence* of the twentieth century.”⁶ However, the scandal clearly had nothing to do with a Vatican conspiracy to hide devastating new revelations about the origins of Christianity. At the most obvious level, the team working on the scrolls included Protestants and Catholics and even an agnostic, Allegro. It should also be pointed out that several of the Protestants were liberal in their theology and were not committed to protecting the claims of orthodoxy at any cost. Also, several authors involved in bringing the scrolls to fuller publication in recent years are evangelical Christians, so it is highly unlikely that they have been working tirelessly to publish documents which they know will destroy their faith.

A much more plausible (but much less publishable) explanation than Baigent and Leigh’s is that the delay in publication was simply due to unwise management as scholars took on huge personal commitments which they were simply unable to fulfil. Foolish they may have been but conspirators they were not.⁷

It might be said that despite the wild claims of Baigent and Leigh, their work was part of a movement which convinced the scholars in charge of the scrolls that they could not keep them to themselves any longer, so that in 1993 a microfiche was published containing around 6,000 official photographs of documents from Qumran and the surrounding region. For Baigent and Leigh, however, this was perhaps less than great news for, as VanderKam comments, recent access to the scrolls has revealed nothing damaging to Christianity and shows their conspiracy theory to be baseless.

The second book came from an Australian called Barbara Thiering and is entitled *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls*.⁸ N.T. Wright comments

Of all the books I have ever read about Jesus, Barbara Thiering’s is one of the strangest. Entitled *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls*, it has been marketed vigorously in its native Australia and on both sides of the Atlantic. The most distinctive thing about the book, which has guaranteed it headlines all round the globe, is the suggestion that Jesus was married (to Mary Magdalene – might one have guessed?); that he had three children, a daughter and two sons, by her; that they then divorced, and that Jesus married again.⁹

With revelations like that, it was no wonder that Thiering’s book was snapped up in vast quantities but the obvious question that they raise is, Where did Thiering find such dramatic information? The answer, of course, is in the DSS.

Thiering believes that early Christianity developed out of the Qumran community. She identifies the Teacher of Righteousness with John the Baptist and the Wicked Priest (or the Man of the Lie) with Jesus.¹⁰ These two figures led two factions of the community. The faction led by Jesus/the Wicked Priest produced the Gospels and Acts, which, claims Thiering, must be regarded as encoded documents and must be interpreted in the manner of “pesher” interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures.¹¹

Edward Cook draws out some of the interesting codes she identifies:

by reading the Gospels as a text concealing esoteric symbolism, Thiering claims that even the most innocuous words in the Gospels are laden with meaning: The word *all*, for instance, refers to the king Herod Agrippa I; *apostles* refers to John Mark; *crowds* also refers to Agrippa I, as does the expression *disciples of John*; *earthquake* refers to the head of the Egyptian branch of the Essenes; *elders* means James the Just, as does *Joseph of Arimathea*; *Jews* means the head of the circumcised Gentiles; *leper* and *lightening* refer to the heretic Simon Magus; *the Pharisees* equals the high priest Caiaphas; *Zacchaeus* is the high priest Ananius; and so on.¹²

Cook and Wright both point out that Thiering's proposals are hopelessly flawed, not just in the eyes of conservative Christians but to almost all who examine them. In particular, Tom Wright identifies two fatal flaws. First, the scrolls simply were not written when Thiering suggests they were; they belong to a time before Jesus and the Christian church were on the scene of Palestine. Secondly, the peshet method which she places at the centre of her argument was never used as a method for encoding the life of the community in a document which someone else must decode. Rather, it was a way of seeing the present life of the community in the pages of scripture. Thiering's theory requires that she rewrite the rules of the method she claims was used. Wright says,

There is nothing in the writing of actual "peshet"-style works which corresponds in any way to what we find in the gospels.¹³

The third and final controversial book which I wish to mention is another collaborative effort entitled *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* by Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise.¹⁴ This book is interesting in that it is written by one of the most maverick of modern scholars but co-written by an evangelical scholar. It seems that Wise, the evangelical, was not as wise as his name would promise and got involved in a project that was neither credible nor entirely appropriate. He later apologised to fellow experts for aspects of the work. However, his part in the work was to provide texts and translations of some previously unpublished documents. The book is therefore valuable for the access it gives to these. However, Eisenman provided the commentary and it has no credibility whatsoever.¹⁵ He believes that the Teacher of Righteousness is James, Jesus' brother, and this underlies his commentary at many points. This view suffers from much the same weaknesses as does Thiering's: the dating of the scrolls makes this view impossible and the anonymity of the Teacher of Righteousness leaves Eisenman's view unverifiable. It is interesting to note that Eisenman's work lies behind much of the thinking of Baigent and Leigh in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*.

In a somewhat different category to the previous works is the view of Father Jose O'Callaghan that a tiny fragment from cave 7 (7Q5) is a fragment of the Gospel of Mark which, if true, would have implication for the common assumptions about the dating of the New Testament documents. This argument has been taken up and forcefully presented by a German evangelical scholar, CP Thiede but most scholars are not convinced, largely on the basis that the argument depends on a reconstructed text and several alternative reconstructions are possible. The argument (regardless of who has the better of it) may be a valuable warning that a position should be adopted because of good evidence, not because it helps conservative conclusions!

It should go without saying, however, that these books are not the only ones which have been written in recent years.¹⁶ Evangelical scholars, in particular, have produced particularly valuable works on the scrolls.¹⁷ It is encouraging to see a growing number of evangelicals involved in the process of scroll translation and the communication of its results. However, it remains a fact that while some rather maverick volumes fly immediately to the top of the best-seller charts, the most sane and reliable volumes seldom gain the same publicity and shelf-space. But then sanity and reliability never did make fortunes.

Conclusion

The Dead Sea Scrolls have captured the attention of scholars and Christians in the churches, the academics and the readers of popular paperbacks. It really is possible these days to find the DSS on every High Street in the country. However, “let the buyer beware”! Many of the volumes on the shelves of the bookshops and newsagents will give an impression of the scrolls that would not be accepted by the most competent researchers and may lead interested Christians to doubt the credibility of their faith. It may be that the interested reader has to search a little off the beaten track to find the most reliable guides.

But after all the fuss is gone, do these scrolls leave the Christian with his or her faith in shreds? The answer must be a resounding, NO! This is not primarily because the authors of the scare-mongering paperbacks have been proved to be either manipulative or selective with the evidence (though they have indeed been shown to be guilty on this score). Rather it is because there is no evidence at all that challenges the truth of Christianity. One of the original team of experts, Dr Millar Burrows, with no particular desire to uphold Christian orthodoxy, wrote as follows:

It is quite true that as a liberal Protestant I do not share all the beliefs of my more conservative brethren. It is my considered conclusion, however, that if one will go through any of the historic statements of Christian faith he will find nothing that has been or can be disproved by the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is as true of things that I myself do not believe as it is of my most firm and cherished convictions. If I were so rash as to undertake a theological debate with a professor from either the Moody Bible Institute or Fordham University [a Catholic institution, *author's note*] – which God forbid – I fear I should find no ammunition in the Dead Sea Scrolls to use against them.¹⁸

As Christians who trust the Bible to tell us the truth, both about God's plan for his people, and about how he worked that plan out among the first Christians, we have nothing to fear from the DSS. Again I say, this is not because we reject the false teaching of the scrolls regarding Christian belief but because the scrolls say nothing about Christian belief.

In fact we should rejoice that in God's providence he has made these fascinating ancient documents available to us and in a future article I hope to indicate some of the benefits of having discovered these fascinating documents.

References

- ¹ *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1958) p. 1.
- ² M Baigent and R Leigh, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception* (London, Cape, 1991).
- ³ Betz and Riesner, *Jesus, Qumran and the Vatican*, p. 1.
- ⁴ Baigent and Leigh, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*, p. 12.
- ⁵ VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, p. 198.
- ⁶ Cook, *Solving the Mysteries*, p. 61
- ⁷ See the comments of G Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Qumran in Perspective* (London: SCM, 1994), p. 5: "It should have been evident to anyone with a modicum of good sense that a group of seven editors was insufficient to perform such an enormous task on any level." Vermes further notes (p. 9) that the team assembled by the current chief editor, Emanuel Tov, "consists of some sixty scholars compared to the original seven!"
- ⁸ New York: Doubleday, 1992. Paperback edition, Corgi, 1993.
- ⁹ NT Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (London, SPCK, 1992)
- ¹⁰ *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 26.
- ¹¹ Thiering devotes chapter four of her book to the issue of "pesher" interpretation, *Jesus the Man*, pp. 28-35.
- ¹² *Solving the Mysteries*, pp. 143-44.
- ¹³ Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* p. 27.
- ¹⁴ Element, 1992.
- ¹⁵ For this account of the division of labour, see Betz and Riesner, *Jesus, Qumran and the Vatican*, p. 29.
- ¹⁶ The name most associated with responsible scholarship on the Dead Sea Scrolls is Geza Vermes. He has provided the most accessible translation of the Scrolls which has been revised several times as new material has been made available. He has also written a very useful introduction to the Scrolls entitled *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Qumran in Perspective*. More recently, an excellent introduction to the Scrolls has been produced by James C. VanderKam of the University of Notre Dame, entitled *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*. The reader will recognise the author's debt to VanderKam by a quick glance at the footnotes. (The various volumes mentioned in this, and the following, note have been used in the preparation of this article. Publication details may be found on the first citation.)
- ¹⁷ The most readable book on the scrolls by an evangelical Christian is that of Edward Cook called *Solving the Mysteries of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. The reader who seeks a good, lively introduction to the subject will find this book a dependable guide. At a more demanding level, the German evangelical Rainer Riesner has co-written a book with Otto Betz called *Jesus, Qumran and the Vatican* which provides more in-depth discussion of some of the issues. The recent translation, *The Dead Sea Scrolls – A New Translation* (Harper, 1996) by Wise, Abegg and Cook, also reflects the high standards of evangelical scroll scholarship.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in Cook, *Solving the Mysteries*, p. 128.

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