

The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christianity

Edward J. Young

[p.35]

Nine years ago an Arab shepherd boy found some old manuscripts in a cave near the northern end of the Dead Sea in Palestine.

Since then, those manuscripts and others that were found in the same area have been the center of attention in many quarters, and today even daily newspapers and magazines are regularly keeping their readers informed about them. Those manuscripts are the now famous Dead Sea Scrolls, one of the most important Biblical finds of the present generation.

THE SEVENTH SCROLL

For some time one of the scrolls could not be unrolled and interpreted. This scroll was brittle and tightly pressed together so that the least bit of handling might easily destroy it. To open it would be to incur a great risk, for the scroll, through careless handling, could be lost entirely. Now at last, we are informed, the seventh scroll has been opened and its contents are known. For months the scroll was subjected to controlled humidity, and finally, as a result of this treatment, the leather became sufficiently flexible to be unrolled. The unrolling of this scroll represents a remarkable achievement for science, and the scholarly world can truly be grateful for the care with which this difficult task was carried out.

[p.36]

At the present, according to reports, four pages of this particular scroll have been unfolded. Each of these pages contains 34 lines, and there are five pages which are not in sufficiently good condition to be entirely deciphered. The scroll was once known as the scroll of Lamech. Now, however, it appears that it is a work written in Aramaic, presenting the text of Genesis with some enlargements. It has been suggested that it be designated as the "Scroll of the Patriarchs," and if this name proves to be accurate, the scroll may become known by that name.

No technical accounts of this scroll have as yet been published, so that it continues to be necessary to rely upon the accounts which appear in the newspapers. These accounts are not always so reliable as one might desire. It would seem that the scroll contains numerous additions to the text of Genesis. For example, in the thirteenth chapter of Genesis there is an account, told in the first person, of what Abraham is supposed to have seen as he walked through the length and breadth of Palestine. In the fourteenth chapter of Genesis further topographical details are said to be given. For example, the explanatory phrase, "which is Jerusalem," is added after the words, "kings of Salem" (Genesis 14:18). In the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, Abraham and Sarah have a discussion between themselves on the subject of the promised son.

It is yet too early to seek further to categorize the type of literature which we have in this seventh scroll. Without doubt scholars will have to work for years before the

scroll is fully understood. Meanwhile, we may truly say that its unrolling is a real milestone in the progress that is being made in the study of these remarkable manuscripts.

THE ISAIAH MANUSCRIPT

When the scrolls were first being studied, it seemed as though they would be of interest primarily for students of the Old Testament. Of them all, the Isaiah scroll is without doubt the most important. It has proved on the whole to support the text of the Hebrew Bible, as we now have that text. More than that, it has become a weapon which may be used by believers in the Bible.

As is well known, modern scholarship with respect to Isaiah has very largely been under the influence of Bernhard Duhm. Duhm maintained that the book of Isaiah, as we now have it, was not the work of Isaiah the son of Amoz. Isaiah, according to Duhm, wrote comparatively few verses of the book. At chapter 40 there is a break, asserted Duhm, and the chapters through 55 are not to be attributed to Isaiah but to someone else whom Duhm called the second Isaiah. Duhm further affirmed that these chapters were not written in Babylon but in Phoenicia, about the time of the exile. At chapter 56 another break must also be made, and chapters 56 through 66 are to be attributed to another man, whom Duhm called third Isaiah. This writer lived about one hundred years after the exile. The entire book was edited and did not receive its present form until the first Christian century.

To say that this is a radical view is to put it mildly. One thing, however, is clear. If the recently discovered scroll of Isaiah is from the first century before Christ, it follows that Duhm's theory is wrong, and that the book in the finished form was known long before the time maintained by Duhm. Furthermore, it is most interesting to note the manner in which the beginning of chapter 40 appears on the scroll. Chapter 39 ends one line from the bottom of the page, and chapter 40 begins on the last line of the same page. Between the two there is no unusual break of any kind. This is passing strange if the critical theories are correct. It is true that there are different hands at work in the copying of the scroll, but this does not mean that the copyists regarded different sections of the scroll as originally having emanated from different authors. As the scroll stands, it is a witness for the unity of the prophecy of Isaiah, and consequently it is in agreement with what the New Testament teaches about the unity of the prophecy. From this fact Christians may indeed take courage.

THE QUMRAN MONASTERY

Near the shores of the Dead Sea the ruins of an old monastery have now been excavated. It is probably safe to call it such for there is clear evidence that at one time a number of people lived there, people who seem to have banded together for religious purposes. There was an old scriptorium (writing room) and remains of the writing desks have been discovered. Even some of the ink has been preserved. Copying and editing manuscripts seem to have been some of the principal occupations of those who dwelt in this monastery.

There was also a swimming pool, and a kitchen or refectory. At the time of our Lord this monastery was evidently occupied. Here lived some men who believed that they were devoted to the service of the

[p.38]

Lord. From the wilderness of Judea came John the Baptist preaching repentance. Did John know anything about those who lived in this monastery? Had he had any contacts with them? There are those today who answer these questions with a strong affirmative. It has been suggested that John the Baptist was adopted by the inmates of this monastery. It has also been suggested that John may have been a member of the group and that he studied at the monastery. Before we seek to comment upon such suggestions, let us ask who were the men that lived at Khirbet Qumran? Is there any way of identifying them?

Suggestions are not lacking as to the identity of the inhabitants of Khirbet Qumran. One is reminded of the statements in Pliny, Josephus and Philo concerning a group known as the Essenes. According to Pliny, the Essenes lived near the Dead Sea in Palestine. It is, therefore, easily understandable that some scholars would maintain, and do in fact maintain, that the inhabitants of the monastery were Essenes. Now the Essenes are not mentioned at all in the New Testament. Furthermore, when one begins to study what Philo, Josephus and Pliny have to say about the Essenes, he begins to realize that there were some differences in practice between the Essenes of these well-known writers and the practices of the sect from Qumran.

But how do we know what this sect believed and what it practiced? Some of the manuscripts which were discovered seem to have a relation to the sect. One of these in particular, because it gives the rules of a certain organization, has come to be known as the "Manual of Discipline." This manual would seem to have been a kind of book of rules for membership in the sect. At the same time this fact, if it be a fact, cannot be proved. The manuscripts which were found in the vicinity of the monastery were in all probability copied by members of the monastery. At the same time it must be remembered that they do not necessarily reflect the teachings or the practices of that monastery. They may have been copied merely in order that they might be kept in the library. The library of a modern theological seminary, for example, will contain many books which do not represent the teachings and beliefs of the seminary in question.

Assuming, however, that the manuscripts do reflect their practices and beliefs, does it necessarily follow that the sect of the monastery was a sect of the Essenes? This conclusion has been confidently brought forth. It cannot, however, be proved. It seems best therefore to acknowledge that we do not know the precise identity of those who dwelt in the monastery. In the light of the fact that at present some are asserting that the origin of Christianity is to be found among the Essenes, this is of particular significance.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE SCROLLS

What relationship is there, however, between Christianity and the teachings of the Dead Sea Scrolls? Whoever the inhabitants of the monastery of Qumran were, is it to

them that we must go if we are to find the forerunner of Christianity? Did John the Baptist learn from them, and more important, did the Lord Jesus find in them that from which He might learn? Were they forerunners of Him?—Some are busy answering these questions in the affirmative. It is of course true that there are certain superficial resemblances between that which is found in the "Manual of Discipline" and the New Testament. But such resemblances are at best of a formal nature. It is to be expected that there would be such resemblances.

If the group which lived at Qumran was a Jewish group, and there certainly seems to be no reason for denying that, they would have derived many of their practices from the Old Testament. In this way any resemblances between Christianity and the sect of Qumran may be explained. The sect studied the Old Testament and learned therefrom. John the

[p.39]

Baptist did the same. The resemblances which exist between the sect and the practices of Christianity become insignificant before the tremendous differences which separate the two. It is these differences which cannot be ignored nor avoided.

THE TEACHER OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

One of the manuscripts, the so-called "Habakkuk Commentary," mentions an individual whom it designates the "Teacher of Righteousness." Dupont-Sommer, the French scholar, has spoken of Jesus Christ as an "astonishing reincarnation" of this teacher. The daily newspapers have reported lectures in this country in which it has been asserted that this Teacher was actually crucified. The impression is being given, and it is an utterly erroneous impression, that the Teacher was a forerunner of the Lord, and that the Lord in fact took over much that had characterized this Teacher.

When all is said and done, the Dead Sea Scrolls did not have very much to say about this Teacher. They do not even tell us his name, nor when, precisely, he lived. And it is quite striking to note that neither Pliny, Josephus nor Philo, in writing of the Essenes, even mentions a Teacher of Righteousness. If the group at Qumran were Essenes, and the Teacher was their leader, the fact is that his influence seems to have died out almost immediately. We do not know what kind of teacher he was. None of his sayings or teachings has remained. Whether he was a good or bad teacher, we simply do not know. He was not regarded as the Messiah, and, despite what the newspapers may report, he was not crucified.

This Teacher seems to have been a prophet, and one to whom God had revealed the secrets of the prophets. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, was a unique Teacher. He spoke not as did the prophets; He spoke in His own right, and never did man speak like Him. Furthermore, Jesus Christ is the Son of Man, identifying Himself with the Heavenly Figure of the book of Daniel. And Jesus Christ died a death in obedience to the will of His Father, a death whereby, our great High Priest, He brought a sacrifice which would satisfy the demands of the Law.

Nothing that even remotely resembles these facts can be said of the Teacher of Righteousness.

THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

It has been asserted that the doctrine of justification by faith is to be found in the "Habakkuk Scroll." This assertion is simply contrary to the truth. There is a comment upon Habakkuk 2:4 which speaks of men being justified on account of their works (their toil) and their faith in the Teacher of Righteousness. This, however, is not justification by faith. If one is justified by faith he is not justified by works; and if one is justified by works he is not justified by faith. It is clear that the commentator had no real understanding of justification by faith, else he would never have introduced the word "toil." For that matter, he probably mentions the word "faith" only because it is to be found in the text of Habakkuk.

No doubt attempts will continue to be made to discover in the teachings of these scrolls the origin of Christianity or of various aspects of Christianity. This, of course, is an impossible task, impossible for the simple reason that the origin of Christianity is to be found elsewhere.

Where shall we look for the origin of Christianity? There is no new place to which we may go. There is, in fact, one place and one alone. Christianity is a revelation from the one living and true God. In that fact resides its uniqueness. Other religions in a formal way may approximate or imitate it; they can never explain it. For the ideas which come to expression in Christianity were not conceived in the sinful minds of men, but were revealed from Him who is Truth itself.

© 1956 *His* (<http://www.studentsoul.org/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in February 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
