The Dead Sea Scrolls Controversy

By John Allegro

Nearly twenty years ago an Arab shepherd, on the trail of a lost goat from his flock near the north-western shores of the Dead Sea, stumbled upon a cache of ancient, fragmentary, parchment manuscripts. They turned out to be the records of a Jewish sect living near by, identified by most scholars with the Essenes, and known ever since by the writings of the ancient historians.

On December 16, an exhibition of some of the manuscripts from this and nearby caves subsequently found is to open in the British Museum and thereafter tour the country.

What was once described as a ‘storm over the Dead Sea’ seems to have blown itself out. To the onlooker it appears as though there is scarcely a ripple to disturb the surface. The big controversies that rocked the scholarly world soon after the Scrolls were found in 1947 have apparently subsided. Have we now, after nearly twenty years of research, really reached such unanimity of opinion? I doubt it.

The first controversies concerned the date of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The suggestions ranged from medieval times to the period of the Maccabees in the second century BC. Most scholars now are seemingly content to follow the original palaeographical and archaeological arguments and date them between the second or first centuries BC and AD 68, with a few of the earliest Biblical fragments perhaps going back into the third pre-Christian century. Those who, like Dr. Driver of Oxford, identify the writers of the Scrolls with the Essenes, are now reviving the idea of the Essenes writing the Old Testament.

This ‘partial boycott’ is probably only in small measure due to a reluctance on the part of the Christian scholar to deal with new evidence that might affect his faith. Not a little of this slowness to grasp the unique opportunities offered by the Scrolls lies in the appalling ignorance of so many Christians, teachers and laymen, of the Jewish origins of their religion. The Old Testament and intertestamental literature has been neglected for years in our seminaries, and the number of persons who can read from an Old Testament text that they have read for themselves in the original must be fast diminishing. Today it is quite normal for a theological graduate to have done no more than one year’s Hebrew in his three- or four-year course at a university, and very many more will have achieved a kind of degree without ever once having opened a Hebrew grammar. Of the non-graduates among the clergy and those teaching ‘religious knowledge’ in our schools, perhaps the less said the better in this regard.

It is thus hardly surprising that the Scrolls found a Christian theological world almost completely unprepared. Accustomed to fighting off the attacks of the rationalist on such minor fronts as to the truth of stories about a man changing water into wine or walking on the sea or even disappearing into thin air, the apologists found when his lay inquirer had begun posing very much more difficult questions about the Jewish origins of Christianity. The Essenes, who from Qumran had suddenly begun to fill in the sectarian background of New Testament Christianity in a wonderful way, were here were ideas, even actual phrases, in their original Semitic form which clearly underlay the Greek words of the New Testament. Quite apart from the real or supposed parallels between the Christian New Testament and the Essene Teachings of Righteousness, the Scrolls were offering a climate of sectarian Judaism into which Christianity could fitted to a remarkable degree.

The lay Christian, as well as the uncommitted inquirer, asked with ever-increasing urgency, how far were the correspondences going to be drawn before the uniqueness of Christianity stood in peril? Small wonder that the bewildered parishioner seized eagerly upon the popular apologetic literature already referred to and induced the required sordid effect among his inquirers.

However, one must regret the temporary withdrawal of the lay glibly. He probably did more to stimulate interest among the professional Christian scholars than the origins of his faith in the history of the piling of generations of university dons. Nevertheless, the questions then being posed still clamour for an answer, even though they apologized for the headlines. Does the story of Jesus owe anything to all to a forerunner of a century before? Can the difference between them, as explained by the Christian apologist, be explained otherwise than by recourse to pleading the divine nature of Jesus, or the uniqueness of his teaching that stood out so very remarkably against the stream of current religious opinion? Have the Scrolls provided any contemporary evidence to support the otherwise incontrovertible claim of New Testament to the very existence of Jesus, let alone the historicity of the miracle stories?

A tremendous amount of profound and honest scholarship has been applied to the Scrolls and the New Testament by Jewish as well as Christian specialists. We have certainly gone a long way and, for example, our understanding of the place of the Johannine literature in the development of Christian tradition is not the same as before the scrolls. It stands among the earliest of the New Testament strata and stems from the common terrestrial home of Esseneism and Christianity. Nevertheless, the central message of the historian remains unaltered. How is it that this strange Gospel, in its origin an expression of a fervent, even fanatic, Jewish patriotism, committed to the violent overthrow of the Gentile world and the establishment of a Jewish dictatorship in Palestine, became so transformed that it could offer a faith for the very people destined to wallow in their blood at the Last Trump? As I have said elsewhere, it was tantamount to ‘selling’ Zionism to President Nasser.

While it is conceivable that such a transformation in this kind of Jewish sectarianism could have taken place outside the cockpit of Jewish politics and more particularly after the fall of the Temple and the temporary eclipse of the Jewish hopes, it becomes in the light of the Scrolls more and more unbelievable that such a pro-Gentile gospel could have been openly preached in Jerusalem around the time of Pontius Pilate. There is, in fact, much in the New Testament story that rings horribly untrue to the historian, and for all the plausibility of the Christian apologists the Scrolls only emphasize the unreality of the situation presented by the Gospels and Acts.

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My advice is to put it into some nice little 6 per cent.

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It appears, then, to me that the most profitable line of research in future Scrutts studies is to discover the truth by which essentially Essene ideas and history could possibly have been woven into an entirely mythical framework of miracle stories relating to a messianic figure and his followers. Much of the material is already apparent: the New Testament chronology that puts the Messiah in Pilate's time, his birth thirty years before these verses and functions of his chief officers, their healing faculies, and even the raw material of such miracles as the Nativity and the crowd-feeding. I venture to suggest the vital difference to the actual process of deriving the myths from certain key Old Testament passages may lie far off recognition.

What is still to be discovered, however, is that this generation can offer so few scholars of the front rank capable of dealing with this new material. An even greater tragedy, it seems to me, is that of that number even fewer are likely to be able to bring a sufficiently uninhibited mind to questions which must bear so acutely on the central figure of their faith. Even among Jewish scholars there is an understandable reluctance to tread, at least publicly, on such delicate ground. Perhaps, after all, the shepherd lad's goat should not have begun his escape for at least another generation.

My message for resistance to Nanny in recent weeks goes to the oil companies who suddenly shift their backbones and reject Mr. Lee's request to them not to advertise their wares, and so take advantage of the nationalised industries. Mr. Lee, although you wouldn't think it, is Minister of Power.

There is another medal to be won. This time for opposing a more formidable Minister, Mr. Crossman. There is already disagreement amongst the building societies and the builders concerning Mr. Crossman's cheerful suggestion that they should join him in a planned reduction of the number of houses that could be built for home ownership. They should unite in telling Mr. Crossman that it is now their business to reduce or rationalise output of a commodity in strong demand. Mr. Crossman's invitation is, of course, more subtle than Mr. Lee's. He is a more subtle man. But it is just as imperious.

One Hour

To get the best, or indeed any, results from Socialist ministers you have to beat them regularly like women and gongs. It is because painfully clear now that Mr. Wilson's energetic flourishes over Rhodesia since just before UDI have not been at all taut. He must have been wise soon on Mr. Ian Smith's first visit to London. The early history of the bread dispute is another illustration of lack of tenacity. Mr. Gunter may be working better now, but at the crucial moment he needed a rest too soon. There was never a dispute which was easier to settle on reasonable terms. Certainly the Ministry of Labour knows this and its minister ought to. Yet the key talks at St. James's Square lasted only one hour. No gods, an hour! In these ponderous confrontations that is hardly time enough for an exchange of civilities. Mr. Gunter should not have expected results in an hour, nor yet in a weekend. Some of the negotiations on the third day he and his excellent staff would have brought it off—that is, of course, if George Brown had kept up his. A little more sticking power, please. A little earlier action. A little less of the hands to sleep.

Opposing the General

Of the candidates standing against General de Gaulle's Gaullists consider Mr. Mitterrand is likely to clean up most of the opposition votes. If he collects less than 25 per cent he will have done surprisingly badly. His candidate, however, seems to me to have the advantage. Mr. Mitterrand is the opponent of 'personal power'; that is the main reason for his standing, and why the Communists support him. But he himself is the candidate of personal impotence. His left-wing alliance has no platform and no real unity. He is playing the General's game of turning the elections into a contest between the fourth and fifth republics, which only the General can win.

His real challenge to this game comes from the Christian Democrat M. Jean Lecanuet. He may be lucky to pick up more than 10 per cent of the votes, but if it comes to a second ballot (I am not saying it will) it is M. Mitterrand who should stand down. It is doubtful if Mitterand could pick up a single extra vote in the run-off. Lecanuet could. He would still be far short of winning, but his support comes from the centre as 'does so much of the General's. Guillec may lose. Lecanuet's guts at the moment are a big boy will need to turn to such men after the General. If the centre is not encouraged now, I do not see a very happy future for France.

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