

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 cave containing hidden manuscripts. They turned out to be the records of a Jewish sect living near by, identified by most scholars with the Essenes, and known previously only through the writings of the ancient historians.

On December 16, an exhibition of some of the manuscripts from this and near-by 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 mediaeval 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 as Zealots, place the events underlying the writings to the First Jewish Revolt, which ended with the taking of Masada in AD 73. In any case, the differences between the scholars are not nearly so marked from the point of view of chronology as they once were.

Much more puzzling to the interested observer of the Scrolls conflict has been the almost total disappearance of the war which once seemed to be brewing between the secularists and the Christians on the importance of the Scrolls for the study of Christian origins. Sparked off initially by Professor Dupont Sommer of Paris and on a more popular level by Edmund Wilson in the *New Yorker*, this battle of the Scrolls seemed likely to bring to the fore some of the questions which had tormented the minds of believers and unbelievers for a long time past.

What happened was that Dupont Sommer's belief that he had found in Jesus 'an astonishing reincarnation' of the Essene Teacher of Righteousness fell foul of one misreading of a word in one document. The Christian scholars lost no time in dismissing the whole thesis, and Dupont Sommer in his later writings seems reluctant to press the matter further. Edmund Wilson's onslaught in the magazine article and in its revised and expanded version *Scrolls from the Dead Sea* was a brilliant effort, but his own readily admitted non-specialist approach left him even more open to counter-attack from the religionists, smarting under his accusations that they were afraid to delve too deeply into the Scrolls for fear of what they may find harmful to their faith.

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There followed a spate of popular and semi-popular works so full of arguments and counter-arguments and so uniform in their conclusion that nothing in the Scrolls could affect the faith of the believer that before long the faithful and the infidel alike subsided into mental torpor.

Now, nearly twenty years after the first discovery, the crucial questions raised by the Scrolls still remain unsolved and hardly even considered. It is true that a large body of the evidence still remains unpublished. Some of it lies in a safe in the Jerusalem Museum while the trustees try to 'sell' the publication rights in order to reimburse their funds for the outlay required to rescue the manuscripts from the Bedouin. All the same, it is extraordinary that a Semitist of such renown as W. F. Albright, who, at the beginning of the Scrolls story, believed that they would 'revolutionise our approach to the beginnings of Christianity,' just recently had occasion to deplore the fact that 'there is still a partial boycott of the Dead Sea Scrolls on the part of New Testament scholars' (*Journal of Bible and Religion* 31, April 1963).

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 parsons who can preach 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 apologist found that his lay inquirer had begun posing very much more difficult questions about the Jewish origins of Christianity. The Essene scrolls from Qumran had suddenly begun to fill in the sectarian background of New Testament Christianity in a wonderful way. 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 leader and the Essene Teacher of Righteousness, the Scrolls were offering a climate of sectarian Judaism into which Christianity 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 parson seized eagerly upon the popular apologetic literature already referred to and induced the required soporific effect among his inquirers.

However, one must regret the temporary withdrawal of the lay gadfly. He probably did more to stimulate interest among the professional Christian in the origins of his faith than all the goading of generations of university dons. Nevertheless, the questions then being posed still clamour for answer, even though they may not now hit the headlines. Does the story of Jesus owe anything at all to a forerunner of a century before? Can the difference between them, so emphasised 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 uncorroborated witness of the 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 traditions can never be the same again. It stands among the earliest of the New Testament strata and stems from the common terrestrial home of Essenism and Christianity. Nevertheless, the central problem facing the historian remains unsolved. How is it that this strange Gospel, in its origins an expression of a fervent, even fanatical, 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 transmutation 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 platitudes of the Christian apologist the Scrolls only emphasise the unreality of the situation presented by the Gospels and Acts.



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

It appears, then, to me that the most profitable line of research in future Scrolls studies is to discover the means 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, the names and functions of his chief officers, their healing faculties, and even the raw material of such miracles as the Nativity and the crowd-feeding. I venture to suggest the vital clue to the actual process of deriving the

myths from certain key Old Testament passages may not lie far off recognition.

What is still so appalling, 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 escapade for at least another generation.

Spectator's Notebook

ONE of the minor irritants of the Rhodesia situation is that events always happen on Wednesdays. For a weekly like the *Spectator* this is the worst possible time. Our function is to comment and to put events into perspective. As we have dealt with Rhodesia in the past this is what we have tried to do. 'Crisis' is an artificial, inflated word. It occurs when people panic and lose sight of their longer-term objectives. In this sense the Rhodesia situation need never have been critical, though it was always in danger of becoming so.

The Prime Minister's statement in the House on the dispatch of a British force to Zambia is still news to us. But it seems to be fraught with danger. The British policy of imposing sufficient strain on the Rhodesian economy until negotiations could be resumed was well known. Dr. Kaunda's fears of repercussions on Zambia were understood and his request for British protection in the event of an emergency could hardly have been refused. Nevertheless, by the terms in which he has acceded to it Mr. Wilson has taken one more step down the slippery slope of yielding to international pressure, and of getting into action against his own better judgment. It was never very likely that Rhodesia would attack Kariba. There is now, however, an open invitation for anyone who wants to trigger off further British action to indulge in sabotage. It would never be easy to establish where the sabotage came from and the clamour for a British invasion would then be stronger than ever. The Prime Minister may well consider it irresistible. Yet if he has any faith in his own earlier policy, he will have to resist. That policy was based on the belief that Rhodesia would yield in time. She has had so far only three weeks. It was further based on the belief that Britain must handle the situation herself. From both those beliefs the Prime Minister now seems to be retreating.

Another retreat seems implicit in the new sanctions announced on Wednesday. Mr. Callaghan's measures—which include a savage attack on all pensioners living in Rhodesia—seem almost designed to destroy the national unity on this issue.

Sad Reading

There are admirable people on the Press Council, but I wonder if they could not employ their time more fruitfully. The annual report issued this week makes sad reading as one ploughs through the accounts of the cases of complaint referred to this august body. The main impression left on this reader at least is that of the sheer futility of the exercise. My sympathies are with the editors who have to waste their time in explanations. Only three complaints out of some 300 received in the year

are of real interest, and two of them affected the Royal Family—although any other family or individual could equally have been the complainant. One concerned an invasion of privacy, and the other the interesting point as to whether it is 'fair' to comment on words that were not used: in this case, words deleted from the handout before delivery of a speech by Princess Margaret. The Press Council held that the action of half a dozen newspapers in drawing attention to the omission was wrong. I think the Press Council was wrong.

One can at least agree with the Council's chairman, Lord Devlin, when he urges in his foreword reform of the libel laws with regard to the press. The introduction of a statutory defence of qualified privilege based on good faith and an adequate basis of evidence would help and not hinder responsible journalism.

Lord Monckton

Walter Monckton, of all the men I have met in my public life, was the gentlest and the best loved. So even though the tiny village church at Folkington in Sussex is somewhere near nowhere, it was crowded on Sunday when a simple plaque was unveiled to his memory. That the congregation included Harold Macmillan, Lord Radcliffe and Peter May is the best proof of the wide sweep of Walter's interests and of his friendships. The service started with a splendid village incident. It was clear even to my untuned ears that in the first hymn the organist was thumping out one tune, and we were singing another. For a verse and a half this dogged duel continued. Then the parson stopped us and announced that the organist had embarked on the first hymn selected for the earlier service in the next village—so would we please start again? And as we left the church in lovely November sunshine, one of the many judges present murmured to me, 'Walter would have loved that opening no-ball, wouldn't he?' Yes, he would.

70 m.p.h.

In my occasional appearances as a poor man's Peter Simple I fire salvos in the direction of what I call the Nanny State. Mr. Fraser is, although you wouldn't think it, the Minister of Transport. He has come forward with the perishing nonsense of a plan for a 70 m.p.h. speed limit even on motorways. Doesn't he know that for many cars built today 70-80 m.p.h. is the normal safe cruising speed? Doesn't he realise that his new restriction is as unenforceable as it is undesirable? And why doesn't he follow his own logic and (in order to cut out accidents altogether) go back to where we started with a 5 m.p.h. limit and the man with the red flag?

My medal for resistance to Nanny in recent weeks goes to the oil companies who suddenly stiffened their backbones and rejected 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 not their business to reduce or ration 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 impertinent.

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 becoming painfully clear now that Mr. Wilson's energetic flourishes over Rhodesia since and just before UDI were all too late. He stopped arguing too soon on Mr. Ian Smith's last visit to London.

The early history of the bread dispute is another illustration of lack of tenacity. Mr. Gunter may be working hard now, but at the crucial moment he needed a rest too soon. There never was 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 one hour. Ye 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 day. Somewhere around two in the morning on the third day he and his excellent staff would have brought it off—that is, of course, if George Brown had kept out of it. A little more sticking power, please. A little earlier action. A little less folding of the hands to sleep.

Opposing the General

Of the candidates standing against General de Gaulle, M. François Mitterand 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 candidature, however, seems to me futile and harmful. M. Mitterand 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.

The 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. Mitterand who should step 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. Gaullists may loathe Lecanuet's guts at the moment, but they 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.

QUOODLE