

JESUS AND QUMRAN: THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

by John M. Allegro.

(Presented on Friday, April 19, 1985, at an International Symposium on Jesus and the Gospels entitled "Jesus in History and Myth", at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, April 19-20, 1985, Session II: Historical Problems, with Vern Bullough, Dean of Natural Sciences, SUNY College of Buffalo, N.Y., in the Chair.)

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Introduction:

The category under which this paper is included, "Historical Problems", assumes the self-evidential thesis that there are elements in the Gospel narratives which do not ring true to social and religious conditions as we otherwise know them to have existed in Palestine at the turn of the era. Much of what we have heard and shall hear during the course of this Symposium supports this point of view. But any constructive analysis of the New Testament records cannot rest content with a simple arithmetical equation: 'fact' = 'the possible' minus 'the less likely and downright impossible', that is, that if we go on peeling away the skins of improbability from the onion we shall end eventually with a small kernel of historical fact on which to build some new theory about the historical Jesus: who he was, who his parents were, where he was really born and lived, how he spent his formative years, whether he was a well-meaning if somewhat ineffective political subversive, or just a religious reformer who annoyed the Roman and Jewish authorities and paid the price of nonconformity. It has all been done before, and there never seems to be a year that passes without the publication of some fresh fanciful reconstruction of Jesus's life and death. That kind of speculative exercise may be commercially profitable, but is of no real consequence. For the impact made by Christianity and the Church on two thousand years of western culture owes little to the comparatively trivial circumstances of its supposed Founder's birth, life, and death, but much to the strangely compulsive nature of a faith that can turn sinners into saints, and charming old men into "born-again" politicians not entirely averse in the name of the Lord to blasting the rest of the world into a philosophic conformity. The importance of this Symposium seems to me that we are able to look at the Christian story in this larger perspective, and to discuss the wider issues that take us beyond the minutiae of textual and historical criticism.

The Contribution of the Dead Sea Scrolls:

The discovery of Essene texts from the Qumran caves presents us with a rather similar dual perspective. Donning our short-focus spectacles, we can for the first time clarify the Semitic background of some technical religious phaseology in the Greek testament; appreciate hitherto unrecognized specific doctrinal allusions; trace the extra-canonical sources of some elements of Christian teaching; and match the manner and substance of certain kinds of biblical interpretation. In the sectarian rules of conduct we can even see clear patterns for the organizational structure and discipline of the early Christian communities, like the institution of the presbytery and bishopric, disciplinary procedures, standards of communal behaviour, methods of joint

funding, attitudes to women and sex, the theological basis for the practice of spiritual healing, and so on. But to appreciate the main importance of the Scrolls for an understanding of Christian origins we need to raise our eyes to a much wider perspective. As never before it is becoming possible to understand how an exclusive, nationalistic movement like post-exilic Judaism could combine with an alien dualistic philosophy to produce a kind of Jewish gnosticism; and then in due course, under the heat and pressures of certain socio-political events over the turn of the era, be transformed into the even more unlikely hellenistic hybrid of a messianic mystery cult, a scandal to any decent-minded Jew, and sheer nonsense to an intelligent Greek.

Jesus and Qumran:

How then, on such a long view, can the Scrolls help us to understand the person of Jesus of Nazareth? Well, not much, I think. In those early heady days after the public became aware that caves in the Judaeian wilderness had turned up really ancient Jewish documents dating from around the supposed time of Christ, popular speculation centred on the person of the man Jesus and his relationship to the Essenes. Had he perhaps been a member of the Qumran community at some time? Had those 'forty days' in the wilderness been spent in the monastery by the Dead Sea? Were the parallels between some aspects of his teaching and Essene thought due to such direct contact, or came they by way of that mysterious prophet of the wilderness, John the Baptist?

Alas, the Scrolls make no mention of the Nazarene Teacher by name. Indeed, the gospel tradition of a wine-bibbing associate of whores, pimps, and Quislings, a friend of Roman officers and an advocate of paying taxes to the enemy, has no parallel at all in what little we can glean from the Scrolls about the manner of life of Jesus's Essene counterpart, the so-called Teacher of Righteousness. But then, the Qumran writings have no literary parallel to the synoptic Gospels, nor do the Essenes seem to have shown any interest in recording events in such narrative form. For them the experience of their forefathers chronicled in the Bible was all the history they needed; their own situation was but a repetition of what had gone before. In taking up their station on the outskirts of the Promised Land, they believed they were re-enacting the events of Joshua more than a millenium earlier, when he led the Chosen People across the Jordan to prepare themselves for their entry into the land God had promised them. The Essene sojourn in their so-called House of Exile was for these latter-day Covenanters merely the turn of the circle, the foreordained rehearsal for the establishment of the New Israel and the institution of God's Kingdom on earth.

In other words, where there are parallels in the Scrolls to the Christian story they are, for the most part, more likely to be in the nature of a common mythology; and to seek in the documents detailed correspondences of time, place, and persons is to misunderstand the nature of the Qumran texts and their authors' attitudes to history. The events that had affected them in ~~the~~ their past were significant only so far as they could be related to biblical prophecy: they then served as 'signs of the times', to be noted, sometimes - though rarely - recorded, and then interpreted by their seers to determine their place in the eschatological time scale, factors in the cosmological almanack by which men of understanding could recognize the proximity of the End-time and the appearance among of them of the Messiah, or Christ, 'him who is to come'. The question we have now to ask is whether the New Testament traditions, despite their easily read narrative style, are not

to be understood similarly: whether our onion-peeling in search of the kernel of the historical Jesus is not itself misconceived. I believe it to be so. Even if there was a sectarian Jewish Teacher living in Palestine during the first part of the first century called Joshua, or Jesus, he had nothing at all to do with the crucified Christos of Paul's theology, and thus had no part to play in the formation of that distinctive amalgum of faiths that eventually swept the world. I believe that the innocent collection of tales and sayings which was apparently allowed to pass freely among the beleaguered cells of believers, in hourly danger of discovery and execution, was but a cover-story.

From that highly improbable account of a gentle rabbi, friend of little children, Roman tax-collectors, and ladies with gynaecological problems, could be distilled by skilled interpreters, well versed in the art of rabbinic exegesis as well as the abracadabra of gnostic mysticism, secret passwords and sayings, the formulae for medicaments and hallucinatory drugs, the therapeia in practice and prescription which had earned them their reputation and name of Asayya, Essenes, 'Physicians'. In the stories and adventures of the Master and his followers may also be found more day-to-day reminders of communal regulative disciplines, and of the titles, qualifications, selection, and duties of their administrators, the bursars, presbyters and bishops. As I have tried to show in my recent book, The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth, the stories of Peter in particular are nothing but a dramatized mnemonic of the credentials and responsibilities of the Essene Mebagger, Guardian. Peter's activities can be paralleled at practically every point by the regulative manuals among the Scrolls. The Guardian of the Scrolls community was early on recognized by scholars as the exact counterpart in name and function of the Church's episkopos, 'bishop'. The small parchment scrap from the Fourth Cave whose editio princeps I publish in an appendix to that book seems to me to offer the first real evidence we have yet seen for the technical meaning of the title Cephas, 'physiognomist, scrutineer', by which alone Paul refers to the first 'pillar' of the Jerusalem Church. And that in turn helps us understand the underlying significance of the story in Matthew Sixteen of Peter's power of spiritual discernment by which he could recognize the Master's messianic status and special relationship to God. That story alone should have given us pause before dismissing similar verbal puns and 'nicknames' in the gospel narratives as examples of the trivial banter to be expected among friends, particularly when, as in the case of the brothers Boanerges, the name is accompanied by a patently false 'translation'. We have been too ready to shrug off such solecisms as mere faults in transmission by linguistically incompetent scribes. And once we begin to treat those 'onion skins' more seriously, we shall begin to recognize beneath their surface other meaningful concepts, and to find their source in key biblical texts whose manner of interpretation is now explicable in terms of the Essene pescharim, or commentaries, from the Qumran library.

In my recent books, in particular The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross, The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth, and the forthcoming Physician, Heal Thyself, I have tried to demonstrate something of the multilayered structure of the gospel narratives and teachings. Their 'decipherment' is difficult and was intended to be so, just as the Essene secrets were not for the eyes of the uninitiated: even their written works were wrapped up and hidden in caves or, in the final emergency, simply wrenched apart and thrown into a secret underground chamber. Their most vital mysteries were never committed to writing, as Josephus makes clear (War II 141), but passed only by word of mouth under awful oaths of silence, and we have found fragmentary

documents among their scrolls which were encoded in cyphers of their own devising.

Similarly, the inner councils of the Church were aware of secret writings which were not to be promulgated, even among the faithful. As the second-century Church Father, Clement of Alexandria, said in a letter recently recognized and published by Professor Morton Smith (The Secret Gospel, 1974), "not everything that is true needs necessarily to be divulged to all men." That was in connexion with part of the Marcan Gospel whose circulation the Church's elders had deemed wisest to restrict to "those who had been initiated into the great mysteries." It had to do with the story in the Second Gospel of the rich young man who approached Jesus and whom we now learn was initiated by the Master into "the mystery of the Kingdom of God" during the course of a secret nocturnal ceremony. Once we can bring ourselves to admit that early Christianity, like Essenism, was an esoteric faith offering access to the divine mysteries, and never the open, evangelistic Gospel of the Church's defensive propaganda, we can begin more realistically to probe the depths of the New Testament writings, and to set the faith in its proper historical and religious perspective. As far as the gospel narratives of Jesus are concerned, we may free ourselves for ever from the need to lay bare a reality on which to base a more historically convincing portrait of a first-century Teacher who, in three short years, was supposed to have founded a new religion, or so transformed an existing messianic faith that it could become almost immediately acceptable to a gentile world. We are dealing with myth, not history.

Jesus, the Lamb, the Word of God.

The question we have now to ask is, what was the nature and purpose of that myth? And for the answer we must turn our attention away from the more immediately comprehensible and popular accounts of the Synoptics, to the abstruse interpretations offered by the Fourth Gospel, and the related Johannine works. And it is significant that it is just here that we come closest to Qumran, as was very early on recognized by scholars. The Dead Sea Scrolls have completely upset the accepted view of the place in Christian tradition of the Johannine witness. Far from its being thought the least representative of early Christian thought and the most alien to the Palestinian homeland, we have had to recognize that it is among the earliest, and firmly rooted in native soil.

For the writer of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus was the Logos, the Word (1:1). And when he has John the Baptist proclaim, "Behold, the Lamb of God" (1:29), he symbolizes, in what is probably the most significant verbal pun in the New Testament, the whole essence of the transformation of the Jewish substitutive ritual of the Passover sacrifice and the concept of the Messiah, into the self-immolation of the Saviour-god of the hellenistic mystery cults and Pauline Christianity. And that was the faith that won the allegiance of the western world. The pun itself was no more than the inter-dialectal homonym of the Hebrew 'imerah 'word' with the Aramaic 'immera', 'lamb'. Its graphic representation assumes the nature of the bizarre, when the Apocalyptist has the Lamb marrying the Church (19:7-9), leading the white-robed martyrs as a shepherd to the Throne of Grace (7:13-17), having seven horns and seven eyes (5:6), able to break open documentary seals (6:1), and to terrify the world's rulers with its wrath (7:16), and so on. But the myth's imagery is no more important than the stories of Jesus's conjuring tricks with water and wine, or

his demonstrations of water-walking and levitation. What is vital to our understanding of the Christian revelation was that the Jewish passover victim was identified in this extraordinary mixture of traditional Judaism and hellenistic mysticism with the Logos, Divine Wisdom, the Essene and Christian 'Knowledge of God', whose mysteries initiates were invited to share in the secret rituals of the gnostic cults.

The Crucifixion.

The second element in the Jesus myth, his crucifixion, was equally significant. Now whether there ever was a Jewish messianic pretender named Joshua or Jesus who was crucified at the instigation of his fellowcountrymen in the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate, we shall probably never know. It hardly matters. For the 'Christ crucified' of Pauline theology has little to do with the fate of some poor wretch in or about AD 33. The highly developed theology expounded by Paul on the theme of the crucified Saviour was surely the fruit of much longer pious speculation than the intervening decade or two allowed by traditional chronology, and the product of a continuing school of thought rather than the inspired deliberation of one man. If we seek a more suitable point of historical reference, it might be a century or so earlier, when the hated Jewish priest-king Alexander Jannaeus took a terrible revenge against the Jews who had rebelled against him and had some hundreds of them crucified in Jerusalem. An Essene commentary on Nahum refers specifically to that revolt and its terrible outcome, and this seemed to me particularly significant when I first published the manuscript some thirty years ago. I suggested then that such an unusual historical reference in Essene literature implied some very special eschatological interest in the event, and that this could best be explained if the community's own beloved Teacher of Righteousness had been caught up in that rebellion and had shared the fate of the other victims of the so-called Lion of Wrath. Be that as it may, it is important to note that the later Essene commentator shows himself fully aware of the theological significance of that particular form of execution when he speaks of the victim as "the one hanged alive upon a tree", a clear reference to the Deuteronomic curse that the hanged man shall be "accursed of God" (21:22-23), and one that is taken up in the New Testament (Galatians 3:13).

When we examine the history of the practice in the Old Testament its theological importance becomes clear. For 'hanging before the Lord' was not just another barbaric form of execution: it was regarded as a propitiatory offering to the deity to allay the divine displeasure that had manifested itself in some inexplicable natural calamity or other affliction. Its essential feature was that it exposed the body of the victim to the elements and clearly goes back to a very old fertility concept of substitutionary sacrifice to the creator god. So, to bring an end to a punitive famine, the Gibeonites requested that the seven sons of King Saul be given them "so that we may hang them before the Lord ..." and they were duly put to death "in the first day of the harvest, at the beginning of the barley harvest." (II Samuel 21:6,9). The Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land had flirted with local cults encountered on their way and suffered plagues as a result. In an expiatory ritual Moses had the tribal chiefs, as representatives of the nation, executed by exposure to the sun's heat, "that the fierce anger of the Lord might turn away from Israel" (Numbers 25:4). The Hebrew word used in these passages means properly 'dislocate, be torn away' and is variously translated in the ancient versions as 'impale', 'expose (in the sun)', 'make an example of', 'put to shame', or 'crucify'.

The execution of the Teacher might have been viewed by his followers at first as a mere tragic accident, a temporary set-back to the progress of the movement, but later reflection must have brought home to their interpreters its theological significance, particularly when, as would appear from their use of common titles, the idea suggested itself to them that the historic Teacher of Righteousness, the Priest, the Law Interpreter, would reappear at the End-time as the Messiah, that second Joshua/Jesus who was to lead his people to the New Jerusalem. It was but a step then for their Christian successors to identify that messianic figure who had once been offered as a propitiatory sacrifice to God by the crucifixion ritual, with the self-immolated Saviour-god of gnostic theology, who afforded the means by which the initiate could mystically apprehend the Knowledge of God, or Logos, or, as Paul puts it, "be crucified with Christ" and thereafter have the Christ "live within him" (Galatians 2:20).

If, then, we project the Essenism of Qumran forward in time and place from the Dead Sea Scrolls to the New Testament, we can see a clear line of theological speculation which transformed an exclusive Jewish sectarianism into a hellenistic mystery religion which could attract the allegiance of all men, Jew or Gentile, bond or free. But the kind of Christianity we arrive at is not that of a faith committed to the historicity of Jesus and the gospel tradition, and the imposition of a single canon and a tyrannical Creed, but that gnostic "heresy" whose essential individualism was so abhorred by the so-called Great Church and which became the target of a persecution no less ruthless than that of the movement's first political and religious enemies. And to judge from the Church's subsequent history as well as the illegitimacy of its claims to primacy, one cannot help feeling that the wrong side won.