

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Qumran Revisited

J. J. Kavanagh

Philippine Studies vol. 8, no. 4 (1960): 789–801

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Qumran Revisited

J. J. KAVANAGH

FEW scholars today would disagree with the statement that the Dead Sea Scrolls constitute "the most important manuscript discovery of modern times." An excellent article on the subject appeared in this review four years ago¹. The article indicated some of the pertinent literature which had appeared up till that time, surveyed the history of the discoveries and their content, and discussed the sensational, though un-scholarly and misleading theories of Messrs. Dupont-Sommer, Wilson and Allegro, who, on flimsy evidence and to the detriment of Christianity, exaggerated the resemblances revealed in the scrolls between Christianity and the Qumran sect. The present notes will attempt to bring the story of the scrolls up to date.

The literature on the scrolls continues to increase at a very rapid rate. Among the books which have been published since the appearance of Father Cronin's article in 1956, the following may be recommended unreservedly: *TEN YEARS OF DISCOVERY IN THE WILDERNESS OF JUDEA* by J. T. Milik, translated into English by J. Strugnell (Naperville, Ill., Alec R. Allenson Inc., 1959). Father Milik is a Catholic priest, and Mr. Strugnell a Protestant scholar; both are members of the eight-man international board of scholars entrusted with the task of preparing the scrolls for publication. Another member

¹ Richard J. Cronin, "Edmund Wilson and the Dead Sea Scrolls," *PHILIPPINE STUDIES* 4 (1956), 411-431.

of that same international board is the author of another excellent study: *THE ANCIENT LIBRARY OF QUMRAN AND MODERN BIBLICAL STUDIES*, by Frank Moore Cross, (Garden City, N. Y. Doubleday & Co., 1959).

THE EXCAVATIONS AT QUMRAN by J. Van der Ploeg, O.P., translated by Kevin Smyth (London-New York-Toronto, Longmans Green, 1958) has been hailed as the "best popular" book on the subject. Especially helpful is the final chapter, which is directed primarily against the excesses of Wilson, Allegro, et al.

Millar Burrows, whose first book was recommended in Father Cronin's article as an "excellent and absorbingly readable work", has since published a second volume no less deserving of commendation: *MORE LIGHT ON THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS* (New York, The Viking Press,, 1958). And finally to name only one more of several that might be mentioned, there is the brief but adequate treatment of the scrolls and their relation to the bible, *THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AND THE BIBLE*, by Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm. (Maryland, The Newman Press, 1957). Father Murphy's book is perhaps the best for ordinary students or laymen who may have been disturbed by the theories propounded in works like that of Edmund Wilson.

THE STORY RESUMED

Familiar though it undoubtedly is, it may be of help to present here a brief recapitulation of the story of the scrolls.

The discoveries began in 1947 and are still continuing. Ancient manuscripts inscribed on leather or papyrus in scroll form, and containing both biblical and non-biblical material, were discovered in three different areas along the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea: 1) At Qumran, eleven or twelve kilometers south of Jericho; 2) at Wadi Murabba'at,² approximately twenty kilometers south of Qumran; and 3) at Khirbet Mird, five kilometers west and slightly south of Qumran.³ These

² A *wadi* is a dry river bed which storms transform into a turbulent torrent.

³ *Khirbet* means "ruins".

three sites and the manuscripts found at them are not inter-related.

Khirbet Mird are the remains of a Byzantine monastery which flourished around the year 600 A. D., and the scrolls found in the underground ruins of its library are for the most part of Christian provenance. At Wadi Murabba'at, caves of enormous dimensions cut into the cliffs served, during the second Jewish revolt against Rome, 132-135 A.D., as a last-stand refuge and citadel for the Jewish forces serving under the famous Ben Kokhba, or, as he himself signed his name on one of the documents discovered, Simeon Ben Koseba. The manuscripts found at Murabba'at originally belonged to the Jewish followers of Ben Koseba, and are to be dated, for the most part, in the decades immediately preceding the revolt.

The most significant discoveries, in number and importance, are those made at Qumran. The majority of the manuscripts found there seem clearly to have belonged to a religious sect now generally identified as Essenes. The Essenes were a priestly apocalyptic sect which separated from orthodox Judaism around the middle of the second century B.C. and established their principal center at Qumran. Not all the Essenes were concentrated at Qumran. Josephus says that in his day they numbered 4000, and it is unlikely that the community at Qumran was ever larger than two hundred at any one time. The members of the sect who did reside at Qumran lived a monastic sort of life. They appear to have practiced voluntary poverty and celibacy, and were bound to a strict observance not only of the Mosaic Law but of their own rules and constitutions as well. They had ritual baths and sacred meals which have been likened to Christian baptism and the Mass. They held in high reverence one of the earlier members — perhaps the founder — of their sect, called the Teacher of Righteousness; they considered themselves to be the elect of the New Covenant and were awaiting the imminent establishment of the Kingdom of God upon earth, in which establishment they believed themselves divinely destined to play a major role. Their settlement at Qumran came to a disastrous end around the year 70 A.D.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE DISCOVERIES

1947

SPRING. Mohammed edh Dhib and Ahmen Mohammed, Bedouin shepherds of the Ta'amireh tribe, discover *Cave I*, with its scrolls.

JULY. A Bethlehem merchant, acting as agent for the Bedouin, thinking the script on the scrolls to be Syriac, sends them to a prospective purchaser—the Syrian Orthodox monastery of Saint Mark in Jerusalem. Eventually the Syrian archbishop, Athanasius Samuel, obtains possession of four major manuscripts from Cave I: the Isaias scroll, the Habakkuk commentary, the Rule of the Community, and the Genesis Apocryphon.

NOVEMBER. Dr. E. L. Sukenik acquires from a Bethlehem dealer for the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, three other Cave I manuscripts: a second Isaias scroll, the Thanksgiving Hymns, and the "War of the Sons of Light".

Dr. Sukenik died in 1953. In the following year, his son, Yigael Yadin, on behalf of the Israel Government, and through the generosity of a New York industrialist, Mr. Samuel Gottesman, succeeded in purchasing for the sum of \$250,000 the four manuscripts owned by Archbishop Samuel. At the present time, the seven great scrolls from Cave I are preserved at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

Immediate exploitation of the discoveries in the Dead Sea region was rendered impossible by the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and the Arab nations in November of 1947.

1949

JANUARY. A United Nations officer, and men of the Arab Legion, rediscover Cave I, and find it had been visited several times before their arrival by unauthorized, clandestine diggers.

FEBRUARY. During February and March a scientific exploration of Cave I is carried out by G. Lankester Harding and Roland de Vaux, O.P.

In addition to the seven scrolls which were recovered almost intact, Cave I also yielded the following material: fragments of some seventy-five manuscripts, biblical, apocryphal, apocalyptic and liturgical in character; fragments of at least 50 clay jars with their covers, some of which served as containers for the scrolls; pieces of at least forty linen cloths of which some at least also served as wrappers for the scrolls; remnants of three phylacteries, and two pieces of a wooden comb.

Practically all of the above material was cached in the cave before 70 A.D.

1951

NOVEMBER. First of a series of excavations of the ruins at Qumran, located a kilometer or so south-southeast of Cave I.

1952

JANUARY. Discovery by Bedouin and subsequent exploration by archaeologists of huge caves in the region of Wadi Murabba'at, the second site of manuscript discoveries. The finds are not related to those of Qumran. They include the following: (1) the oldest known Semitic papyrus, a non-biblical palimpsest dating from the eighth century B.C. (the language is Hebrew, the Script Phoenician); (2) biblical fragments of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy and Isaias in Hebrew; (3) a complete phylactery and several inscribed ostraca; (4) a contract in Greek dated in the seventh year of Hadrian (124 A.D.); (5) several documents referring to the second Jewish revolt, among them two letters signed by the leader of the revolt, Simeon ben Koseba. Most of these finds belong to the era of the second Jewish revolt (132-135 A.D.) and the decades immediately preceding.

FEBRUARY. Discovery of *Cave II* in the Qumran region, containing manuscript fragments of minor importance.

Soundings are made by archeologists in some 200 caves in the same area; in about 25 of them pottery is found similar to that of Cave I. It is probable that the pottery-bearing caves were used as dwellings by some of the members of the Qumran community.

MARCH. Discovery of *Cave III* containing manuscript fragments and two copper scrolls. The latter, inscribed in Hebrew and dating from around 50 A.D., contain a list of about 60 places in Palestine, in which vast treasures are said to be hidden.

SUMMER. Manuscript discoveries by Bedouin in caves whose location the Bedouin refuse to reveal. They probably lie to the south of Wadi Murabba'at. The discoveries include a copy of the Minor Prophets in Greek, a lost recension of the Septuagint.

At about this time, too, tireless Ta'amireh Bedouin discover a cave in the marl terrace supporting Khirbet Qumran, two hundred meters or less from the ruins; and there, some feet beneath the modern floor of the cave, find a matted and decaying mass of manuscripts. It is *Cave IV* in which the bulk of the Qumran library appears to have been hurriedly deposited—probably on the approach of the Roman troops from the north between 68-70 A.D.

SEPTEMBER. Discovery of *Caves V and VI* containing significant but minor finds.

Scientific exploration of the rich *Cave IV*. Its contents include tens of thousands of fragments representing perhaps 400 leather or papyrus manuscripts. 382 manuscripts have been identified thus far. Of them about 100 are biblical. All the books of the Hebrew canon are represented except the book of Esther. The most popular books of the bible among the Qumranites, judging from the number of copies found, were: Deuteronomy, 14 mss; Isaiah, 12; Psalms 10. Perhaps the oldest of the lot is a scroll of the Book of Samuel dating from the last quarter of the third century B.C.

Among the non-biblical writings are manuscripts in both Hebrew and Aramaic; apocryphal works like the Book of Jubilees, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, etc.; biblical commentaries on the Psalms, the prophets Osee, Nahum, etc.; and Essene sectarian works such as the Rule of the Community, prayers, hymns, liturgies, etc.

1953

FEBRUARY. Excavations at Khirbet Mird and Wadi en Nar, the third known site of manuscript discoveries; first found by Bedouin in the summer of 1952. Khirbet Mird are the ruins of an old Byzantine monastery which was itself built on the site of a Hasmonean fortress, the Hyrcanion. The remains of the monastery library were recovered from an underground chamber. They include: fragments of Greek uncial codices of the Books of Wisdom, the Acts of the Apostles, the Gospels of John and Mark; Syriac fragments of Joshua, Luke, John and Colossians; manuscripts of books of the New Testament in Christian Palestinian Aramaic. Probably all the foregoing material dates from the 5th-8th centuries A.D. In addition there were some personal letters written in Arabic on papyri dating from the 8th-9th centuries.

The manuscripts discovered at Khirbet Mird bear no perceptible relation to the finds made at Qumran and Murabba'at.

1955

SPRING. *Caves VII-X* are discovered in the marl terrace near *Cave IV*. They yield only a handful of fragments.

1956

JANUARY. In the vicinity of *Cave I*, more than a kilometer to the north of the ruins, the most recent discoveries of importance are made in *Cave XI*. Ta'amireh Bedouin find two almost intact scrolls and fragments of at least five others.

The relatively intact scrolls are: a magnificent manuscript of the canonical Psalms, and a copy of Leviticus in a late paleo-Hebrew script. Among four or five non-biblical books are two of special interest: a fragmentary copy of the "Description of New Jerusalem", and a lost targum of the Book of Job.

MARCH. Termination of the archeological excavations at Khirbet Qumran. There were five campaigns in all. The ruins uncovered by the excavators, exclusive of the cemetery which lies to the east, extend over an area approximately eighty meters square.

The buildings include: a strong tower, originally three stories in height and more than twelve meters square; a kitchen with rudimentary fireplaces; a lavatory (or laundry); a scriptorium, on the site of which were found a narrow plaster table five meters long with a low bench, and two shorter tables; two inkpots in one of which there were still traces of dried ink; and a plaster wash basin which it is thought may have been used for ritual hand washing before the Qumranites sat down to their work of transcribing sacred manuscripts.

To the south of the scriptorium the archeologists uncovered the largest room (22 by 4 1/2 meters) in the whole complex of ruins; it contained at one end a circular, slightly elevated paved spot which probably supported a pulpit or lectern. In this room the community undoubtedly met for liturgical prayer and reading, and for sacred meals; adjacent to it was found a "pantry" containing 1080 pieces of pottery tableware — plates, bowls, etc. The monastery seems to have been used not as residence for the Qumranites, but as a meeting place for prayer, eating, working, etc.

In addition there were found a cornmill, a baker's oven, silos for fruit and grain, a well-preserved pottery works with kilns, and a stable for eight pack-animals. Also seven great and six lesser cisterns into which water was brought by an aqueduct connected with a dam at the foot of the cliffs draining into Wadi Qumran. One of the cisterns dates from the 8th century B.C., and some bits of pottery that were turned up come from that early era too. However, the major portion of the ruins dates from the period between 150 B.C. and 70 A.D.

Also discovered were forty enigmatic deposits of animal bones buried in jars.

Although no coins were found in the Qumran caves, coins were found in almost all the rooms of the Khirbet. Among them were: 15 from the reign of John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.); 86 from the

reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.); 6 from the span between 76-37 B.C.; 5 from the reign of Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.); a number from the second and third year of the first Jewish revolt (67-68 A.D.). There were, besides, 558 silver coins of Tyrian stamp in three jars, from the first century B.C. Also a few coins apparently left behind by the Roman garrison who occupied the site after the Essenes had fled.

1958

MARCH. Termination of archeological excavations at Ain Feshka a site about four kilometers south of Qumran, which had been begun in 1956.

The excavations uncovered a fairly large structure with two doors facing east; it consists of a courtyard surrounded by storage rooms and living quarters. Pottery and coins found at the site show that the building, an agricultural center, was occupied during the same period as Khirbet Qumran.

South of the main building is a large enclosure with a paved area perhaps for drying dates. To the north there is a courtyard containing several tanks connected by canals. Father de Vaux tentatively identified these as a tannery, but subsequent investigations have rendered that hypothesis unlikely.

1960

SPRING. Exploration by a team of Israeli archeologists of caves in the Dead Sea region south of Wadi Murabba'at. Results have not as yet been published, but the finds include at least one batch of what seem to be ancient papyri.

SIGNICANCE OF THE SCROLLS

The most obvious and perhaps the most easily appreciated result of the manuscript discoveries is that we are now in possession of copies of the Hebrew bible older by a thousand years than those we had before the Dead Sea caves yielded their treasures. Our modern bibles, whether in the original languages or vernacular translations, depend upon older copies, and they in turn ultimately upon early manuscripts. The earliest manuscript of the Hebrew bible hitherto available was one that had been transcribed roughly nine hundred years after the time of Christ. Now we have copies that were transcribed before our Lord was born. And these ancient texts are

substantially identical with the text in our modern bibles. It is convincing proof that the Scriptures have been transmitted with substantial accuracy and fidelity down through the centuries.

In assessing the less obvious results of the scroll discoveries prudence must be exercised. Frank Moore Cross in his book referred to at the beginning of these notes points out that over a decade has passed since the initial discoveries, and that although the publication of the manuscripts has proceeded at an unusually rapid rate, it will probably take another half century before the finds can be assimilated by scholars and their significance properly assessed.

Father Milik, who realizes as does Mr. Cross that it is still somewhat premature to pass definitive judgment on the full significance of the discoveries, nevertheless does point out some of the fruits that have already been reaped. He discusses the importance and significance of the scrolls under at least seven heads:

1. The variety and range of the documents discovered. The manuscripts cover a span of years from the 7th century B.C. to the 10th century A.D. Moreover they constitute the *only* manuscript discoveries made in Palestine proper, with the exception of some relatively late finds in the Negev.

2. Linguistics. Eight languages are represented, although the great majority of the scrolls were written in Hebrew or Aramaic. The Aramaic manuscripts are especially important since before their discovery almost the only Aramaic writings extant were the few passages in the biblical books of Daniel and Esdras. The scrolls have also resurrected the old problem concerning the language or languages which our Lord spoke. It has been generally held that Hebrew was a dead language in the time of Christ and that He and His countrymen in Palestine all spoke Aramaic. However, since it is clear from the scrolls that Hebrew was known not only to the residents of Qumran, but to the Jewish fighting forces during the second revolt, Milik does not hesitate to assert, perhaps more categorically than the evidence warrants, "that copper scrolls

and the documents from the Second Revolt prove beyond reasonable doubt that Mishnaic [Hebrew] was the normal language of the Judean population in the Roman period." His statement is, it should be noted, limited to the *Judean* population. Aramaic was the language of the Galilean Jews.

3. Paleography. Paleography is the study of ancient forms of writing. It is of great importance for the dating of ancient manuscripts. The variety and number of the Qumran scrolls will throw considerable light upon the development and evolution of the various Semitic scripts.

4. Historical and onomastic importance. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls there were very few sources of information for the historical background of the period immediately preceding and following the birth of our Lord. The scrolls provide additional first-hand information. As one example of such a contribution, Father Milik in a note at the end of his book states: "Further study of the documents from Murabba'at has enabled me to reconstruct in greater detail the military and political course of the Second Jewish Revolt."

5. The legal importance of the texts. Through the contracts discovered at Murabba'at "we have direct contact with the legal institutions and customs of the Roman period and their appropriate formulae, matters which hitherto we had to deduce indirectly from rabbinic texts . . . It is becoming apparent that there are points of contact with the forms we find in Babylonian contracts, Aramaic contracts from Elephantine, and Greek papyri in Egypt as well as with later Talmudic legal practice."

6. The Qumran texts and Hebrew literature. The Qumran library provides us not only with strictly Essene writings, but also with a selection of other books they copied, mainly pseudepigraphical, liturgical and sapiential writings. Before these discoveries our knowledge of Hebrew literature, apart from the books preserved in the bible and a few apocryphal writings, was exceedingly sparse.

7. The discoveries of the Judean desert and the history of religions. "The importance of these discoveries for the re-

ligious history of the Jewish people cannot be overestimated." The texts from Murabba'at provide valuable information concerning orthodox Judaism between the two revolts. It is quite clear from the biblical manuscripts discovered at Murabba'at that what is known today as the massoretic text of the Hebrew bible had already attained its final, fixed form by the time of Ben Koseba. The consonantal text of the Hebrew bible had by then been established in minute detail, and was transcribed and transmitted according to definite laws. Only the books of the Hebrew canon were admitted. The Sabbath was scrupulously observed. The same messianic hopes that had inspired the Essenes were still very much alive. Indeed this was the dominant factor in the second revolt. "For the rebels and the masses believed that the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel with its two Messiahs, the King and the High Priest, was about to come to pass. The military leader of the revolt, Simon Ben Koseba, was hailed as the "Star of Jacob" and "Prince of Israel", titles used of the Messiah also at Qumran. The title of "Prince of Israel" stamped on the dictator's [Koseba's] coins is also found in the Murabba'at texts."

The relationship between Essenism and early Christianity is discussed by Father Milik under three aspects, literary, institutional and doctrinal. Between the Synoptic Gospels and the scrolls literary parallels are few; it is with John and Paul that the greatest number of points of contact, both literary and doctrinal, have been discovered. This has had an interesting effect on the attitude of scholars towards the composition of the Johannine literature, especially the Gospel. It is well known that John's Gospel differs considerably in its language, style and presentation from the other three canonical Gospels. This difference, it was formerly claimed, is to be attributed to Gnostic and Greek influences, to which the author of the fourth Gospel was exposed. To allow time for these influences to have exercised their effect, the composition of the Gospel of John was often dated in the second century. However it now appears that the Gospel of John both in its style and language shows great affinity with Qumran sectarian writings; in other words, it is quite thoroughly Jewish, need not have been influenced to

any great extent by either Gnostic or Greek thought, and consequently could very well have been written within the first century. In fact the pendulum of opinion is tending to swing to the opposite extreme; some have already proposed the view that John's is the earliest of our Gospels and the most semitic.

Institutional parallels may be observed in the organization of the early Church and that of the Qumran community. Milik thinks, however, that the parallels are more prominent in the later history of the early Church than in the generation of our Lord and His first disciples when "there are hardly any similarities" at all. The similarities, however, between Essene and authentic early Christian doctrine are numerous.

Both hold the eschatological concept of the true Israel ruled by twelve rulers; both believe that they have already in this life a foretaste of the blessedness that the end of days will bring about; both believe that the spirits of good and evil are engaged in struggle both in the cosmos and in the soul of each man, and in both systems the believer shares already in the life of the angels. In early Christianity, however, all these features and many others, too, are taken up into a new doctrinal structure, and the integration of these elements with the central beliefs of the new faith transforms each one of them. Sometimes the transformation is merely qualitative, certain elements being more stressed and assuming a greater importance in the new system. For instance, both groups believe that the call to salvation is addressed to all men, without ethnic or social limitations, and that men are brothers, and God a Father to every man; both Communities of the Elect live in an atmosphere impregnated with forgiveness and love. But in other cases the adoption of Essene beliefs into an organic unity with the new doctrines completely transforms them. So, for instance, the period of the End has for the Christian already been inaugurated with the coming of the Messiah. Further, the sinfulness of human nature is so radicalized that a merely human mediation of the New Covenant and a merely human Messiah would no longer seem effective. God must become Man and make the covenant by atoning himself for our sins. God meets man in the intimacy of his being, and this meeting bears its fruits in a "rebirth" where a "new creature" is "born from on high".

Accordingly, although Essenism bore in itself more than one element that one way or another fertilized the soil from which Christianity was to spring, it is nevertheless evident that the latter religion represents something completely new which can only be adequately explained by the person of Jesus himself.

It might be well in concluding this review of the story of the Dead Sea Scrolls to insist upon these words with which Father Milik ends his book. Christianity "represents something new which can only be adequately explained by the person of Jesus himself." Despite the similarities that exist between Essenism and Christianity, common traits and common doctrines have been caught up in a new synthesis in Christ which has transformed them. All things in a sense are recapitulated in Christ (Ephesians 1/10), in Him all things are made new.

Men like Dupont-Sommer and Allegro went astray precisely when they attempted to extend to Christ Himself the parallels and similarities which exist between the Community of the Scrolls and Christianity. Their conclusions, based as they were on inference and conjecture rather than on evidence from the scrolls, subsequently had to be abandoned or greatly modified. The uniqueness of Christ stands, as Dupont-Sommer later explicitly admitted, untouched. And since in a very true sense Christianity is Christ, we may say that the truly essential dogmas of Christianity remain unaffected and unparalleled by the contents of the Qumran scrolls. Christ is the Son of God, who, existing from all eternity as the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, assumed a human nature and became man in order to redeem men by His vicarious sufferings and death. Of this basic and fundamental doctrine of Christianity there is nothing to be found in the Qumran writings.

In this connection, Millar Burrows, in the book referred to above, wrote:

In my first book I recorded my conviction that the Dead Sea Scrolls would not require the revision of any basic article of Christian faith. That statement elicited the comment that this depends on what is considered basic... Let me therefore try to clarify the point before we go further. What I meant by basic articles of faith was not those beliefs which mean most to me, but the outstanding traditional tenets of the Christian churches through all the centuries. 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.