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**THE CURRENT NEW YORK EXHIBITION
OF THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS:
*AN APPRAISAL***

Two salient theories concerning the Dead Sea Scrolls, each diametrically opposed to the other, today confront the public in its quest to fathom the nature of these ancient manuscripts. The one theory — developed only a few years after discovery of the first seven scrolls in 1948 — holds that they are writings hidden away in Judaeen Wilderness caves by an ancient Jewish sect claimed to have had its headquarters at a site known as Khirbet Qumran, located near to where they were found. This view held sway universally for over thirty years and came to be treated in countless books and encyclopedia articles not as a theory but as a fact of history.

On the other hand, the theory of Jerusalem origin holds that the Scrolls were Palestinian Jewish writings originally housed in various libraries of the capital and removed, along with other valuable items, to caves of the Judaeen Wilderness as a necessary response to the impending or actual Roman siege on the city of 70 A.D. This theory was first expressed by the present writer in a 1969 Jerusalem lecture and thereafter in a variety of articles and a 1995 book, and has since come to be supported both by Israeli archaeologists who have explored the Khirbet Qumran site over a period of approximately 15 years, as well as by a variety of other scholars — while at the same time continuing to be opposed by traditional Qumranologists who vigorously defend the earlier interpretation.

Since approximately 1995, numerous variants to each of these two theories have appeared in print, none of which, however, has been supported by actual empirical evidence. Moreover, many readers are undoubtedly aware that exhibitions of the Scrolls taking place in museums both here and abroad over the past few decades have continued to promote and defend only the older interpretation of Scroll origins — while at the same time, as a rule, discouraging open debate in public forum between scholars adhering to mutually opposing views on this topic. The ancient proverb that “as iron sharpens iron, so does man sharpen the countenance of his friend” is, however, not merely a moral nicety, but in effect a rule of civilized investigative procedure governing all branches of learning — and museum efforts to disregard that rule have not only served as a loss to the public but have also raised questions as to what kind of prior agreements may have influenced the exhibits.

In articles written over the past several years, I have called attention to the problems inherent in the museum initiatives pursued both here and abroad, but only now am able to suggest that a turning-point appears to have been reached in the public

presentation of the Scrolls. I refer particularly to the exhibition now taking place at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan.

In viewing the exhibit, readers should first be aware that, since 1948, successive phases of dynamic development in the discovery and investigation of the Scrolls and the Khirbet Qumran site have taken place. The present totality of evidence has inevitably led various scholars in Europe, Israel, and the States to conclude that the original theory of Scroll origins is unworkable. The further evidentiary conclusion is that the original theory must eventually give way to the recognition that these manuscripts have no organic connection with any particular sect claimed to inhabit the area where they were discovered, and that they originally came from Jerusalem rather than any other place.

The theory of Jerusalem origin could hardly have been suggested by the discovery and reading of the first seven Scrolls (1948-1950). Prof. Eliezer Sukenik's almost immediate conclusion was that the **Manual of Discipline** (also called the **Community Rule**) was an Essene writing; Père Roland de Vaux latched on to this idea and initiated an ambitious excavation project at the nearby site of Khirbet Qumran that led, one might say ineluctably, to his eventual claim that he had found the long-lost *laura*, or monastery, of the Essene celibates of the Dead Sea region described by Pliny the Elder. In the early 1950s there was scarcely a scholar in the world who did not believe that claim — and yet anomalies in the theory began to emerge even before completion of de Vaux's excavations in the mid-1950s, by which time discoveries of many more manuscripts had been made in caves stretching northward, from near Khirbet Qumran, a distance of at least two kilometers. The anomalies include the following elements:

(a) De Vaux urged that the claimed Essenes had hidden their manuscripts in the caves upon hearing that Roman troops were about to come down from Jericho to attack them; but he did not explain why, by that token, those putative celibates moved northwards with their manuscripts — i.e., *towards Jericho* — rather than southwards away from the direction of the supposed pending attack.

(b) Pliny the Elder asserted that his celibate Essenes lived “with only the palm trees for company” — whereas the fact that Kh. Qumran was, by contrast, a well-built stone site with a tower did not elicit an explanation by de Vaux. De Vaux insisted that the Qumran site housed celibate Jewish monks — whereas his own excavations were already producing evidence of the presence of females there. He recognized that a cemetery of virtually a thousand graves was present on the very plateau of Kh. Qumran, without explaining how the purity-loving brethren reflected in the Community Rule could allow such a **graveyard proximate to the inhabitants' living quarters**.

(c) When the **Copper Scroll**, discovered with other manuscripts in Cave 3 (1952), was deciphered, it was seen by the first scholars who actually read it to describe the hiding in Judaeian Wilderness sites of treasures, scrolls and artifacts whose palpable place of origin was Jerusalem. This was the first *documentary evidence* pointing to that city as the place of origin of the Scrolls — but Père de Vaux, without offering any specific proof, simply pronounced the Copper Scroll a forgery.

(d) Thereafter, when Yigael Yadin's Masada expedition (over 50 kilometers south of the Qumran area) revealed other scrolls of the same character as those found earlier in the Qumran caves, Yadin claimed that they were brought there by those same claimed "Essenes of Qumran" — even though Josephus had described in painful detail, as an eyewitness, the flight of the Jews from Jerusalem to Masada in the wake of the Roman siege. The Masada *text-evidence*, when added to the documentary evidence of the Copper Scroll, logically pointed to a different explanation for the hiding of the Scrolls than that proffered by Père de Vaux and his followers.

(e) The seven or eight researchers working with de Vaux in the decades before the Scrolls were freed provided no information concerning the number of scribes who copied them. Yet as more and more scrolls came to be published after 1992, it could be perceived that the copyists had, as shown by their variegated and individual handwritings, numbered no fewer than **several hundred scribes**. This new finding led inevitably to the recognition that the Scrolls could have been produced only in a heavily populated cultural center from which they could be readily removed and hidden — thus reinforcing the earlier-discovered evidence pointing to the Scrolls' Jerusalem origin.

Nevertheless, it is an unfortunate fact of contemporary cultural history that exhibitions of the Scrolls mounted world-wide since 1992 have offered no serious description of these facts or any other piece of documentary evidence pointing to the Jerusalem origin of the Scrolls. This has continued to be the case even after well-trained European and Israeli archaeologists who have studied the Kh. Qumran site over the past two decades have concluded, independently of one another, that the site offers no evidence of notably sectarian occupation or engagement in bookmaking or literary activity. Even while traditional Qumranologists continue to assert that multifarious "ritual baths" dominated the site, the Israel Antiquities Authority team in its archaeological reports on those installations states that that they were, with one or two exceptions, water reservoirs having no particular ritual implications. (*Magen and Peleg, 2006.*) On that basis, nothing unusual was discovered; ritual bathing was a general rule in Palestinian Jewish society, not limited to radical sects, while reservoirs were necessary, in inhabited sites of the Judaean Wilderness, to sustain life during the long summer season of drought.

The archaeological findings are of course significant, but we may note that their primary value in terms of the salient question of Scroll origins is the confirmation they provide for the earlier-created theory of Jerusalem origin of the Scrolls — an interpretation arrived at not primarily by the study of archaeological evidence but rather through the testimony of written texts. At all events, and despite the above developments, exhibits of the Scrolls since 1992 have remained notably one-sided in their treatment of the fundamental question, at times even to the point of dogmatic recidivism. (See my earlier on-line reviews at: <http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/projects/sctr/>). For this reason, it surely is a matter of surprise, even of wonder, that the exhibition now taking place in New York can be read as a somewhat dramatic *volte face* from the entire range of previous Scroll exhibits.

In no uncertain terms, an introductory wall text asks, in reference to the Scrolls: “Who wrote and used them?” in response stating that scholars “have two basic theories” about these manuscripts. The one is that they “all belonged to a single religious sect that probably lived at the settlement of Qumran;” while the other is that they were “a random collection of texts reflecting the beliefs of several distinct Jewish groups” representing “either a single priestly or public library, or the sacred texts of various Jewish communities from Jerusalem and elsewhere in the Land of Israel....”

The interested reader will find no such balanced avowal in the records of any previous exhibit of the Scrolls. And to support the theme thus expressed, the museum through the medium of large wall hangings quotes the views of several scholars adhering to one or the other of these basic theories. Then again, in another wall panel, the museum itself ventures yet a new interpretive turn, stating that perhaps “the most significant revelation provided by the scrolls is the richness and diversity of Judaism in the late Second Temple period.... They provide a direct window into a world in which Jews were exploring and disputing how best to serve God.”

Many of these words echo my own expressed views on the value of the Scrolls — but yet oddly conflict with other statements in the exhibit, particularly in descriptions of individual manuscripts. Thus for example we read in a description of the famous **Community Rule** that its dictates are those of “the Dead Sea community” — an expression repeated in other panels of the exhibit — and that the (mostly fragmentary) twelve copies of this work “are indicative of its importance to the sectarians.” This theme appears to take its inspiration from a statement in the introductory panels to the effect that the Scrolls include “the writings of Jews whose belief and practice sometimes diverged from those of their fellow Jews, and that “these sectarian writers ... called themselves ... “the Yahad (Community)....” The impression conveyed by these statements is that, in addition to non-sectarian writings, the Scrolls reflect the ideas of *a single sect*, namely that group described in the Community Rule and several related texts.

Contrary to this claim, however, publication of virtually all of the Scrolls as now known, in their variety and with their mutually conflicting ideas, has resulted in a situation where only the most traditional Qumranologists would still now claim that they describe but a single heterodox group. What is more, it cannot be proven that the actual evidence discovered at Khirbet Qumran, and much more fully known today than in the mid-1950s, indicates that *any* single group — including the authors of the Community Rule — lived and had their headquarters at that site. Père de Vaux made this claim circa 1950 as a consequence of his belief that the home of his favored group should be sought in the near vicinity of the caves where they were found; but the arguments subsequently made by him that Kh. Qumran was that site are not objectively sustainable by empirical evidence. (*Donceel, 1994; Hirschfeld, 2004; Magen and Peleg, 2006; Bar-Nathan, 2006.*)

To avoid the obvious confusion into which museum visitors might be led in confronting expressions of apparent curatorial support for the old single-sect theory while at the same time pondering the museum’s contradictory assertion that “Judaism was far

from monolithic at that time,” the Yahad-single-sect theory could simply have been described not as a given fact but rather as a view still espoused by certain traditional Qumranologists but not necessarily by others. All that can be said of the single-sect theory is that it is an opinion not yet proven to mirror an historical reality.

The confusion is more obvious in the descriptions of the manuscripts on display, which also appear to be based upon the same assumption of veracity of the single-sect theory. Thus the description of the composition known in English as the “**Words of the Luminaries**,” while first correctly stating it to be “a sequence of Hebrew prayers intended to be recited on fixed days of the week,” goes on to state that “The sectarians rejected the way that sacrifices were conducted in the Temple, and believed that God should be worshipped only with prayer until the end of days....” But can there be found in this fragment or in any other portion of the “Luminaries” ideas that may legitimately be perceived as supporting the theory that it is a work of sectarian origin, or that its author opposed the contemporary Temple sacrifices?

In the history of Scrolls scholarship, the idea of sectarian origin of this writing arose only out of several fundamental prior assumptions: namely that the authors and scribes of the texts found in the caves lived as a sect at Kh. Qumran; that the writings of this sect included only Biblical and Apocryphal texts plus the works of a single sect; that the various poetic texts found in the caves are to be included in the latter category; and that hence all of the ideas expressed in those poetic writings were shared by the entirety of the claimed sect supposedly inhabiting that site. This was the line of reasoning initiated by Père de Vaux and followed by Père Baillet and Père Puech in their studies of this text. These assumptions, however, have never been demonstrated to have a factual basis. (On the poetic texts, including the “Luminaries,” cf. particularly *Falk, 1999*.)

Unless introduced as a requirement imposed by others, it is difficult to perceive how the museum itself could come to share this by now largely discredited idea of de Vaux and his followers. Were a translation of the fragments of this text as a whole but available to viewers, they would be able to perceive without fail that the poet who composed this work was not only a writer of lofty ideals and keen inventiveness, but one who praised the Jewish nation in its entirety without sectarian rancor or divisiveness of any kind.

When taken together with the descriptions of the other Scroll texts presented in the exhibition, it becomes all the more clear that the writer responsible for them represents the thinking of the old Qumranological guard. To be sure, this is not the case with the opening statements concerning the Biblical Book of Jeremiah, including the fact that this figure “prophesied disaster and annihilation for the Judaeon kingdom.” But why then is there an additional statement on the same descriptive panel to the effect that the “thirty-nine copies of the biblical books of the prophets found in the Qumran caves *testify to their importance as scripture in this period*.”? (My italics.) The author of the panel descriptions does not explain how this is so — and indeed it is not so, particularly since the Biblical scrolls are far outnumbered by other Hebrew manuscripts once hidden in the

caves most of which have never been demonstrated to have the status of Jewish scriptural holiness.

There can be little doubt that the concept of holiness of certain writings other than the Pentateuch was gradually developing among the Palestinian Jews in Second Temple times. However, that all of the writings eventually considered as canonized prophetic books had actually *attained* that exalted level before the time of the Tannaitic masters (2nd-century A.D.) has never been demonstrated, and the mere presence of a certain number of Biblical prophetic texts among the Scrolls does not change that picture. “Scripture” is normally defined as *holy writ* — in Hebrew, *kitbé haqodesh*; and it should be kept in mind that no such expression appears in the Scrolls, which predate the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D.

Josephus, whose career mainly spanned the second half of the 1st Century A.D., does, it is true, write of the Jews having — besides the Pentateuch and four books of hymns and precepts — thirteen *hieroi biblioi* (sacred books) dealing with the “conduct of the Kings and Judges” (*Contra Apion* I.40), and he elsewhere occasionally refers to or quotes writings of six of the Biblical prophets plus Daniel, but nowhere does he make mention of the prophets Amos, Hosea, Joel, Obadiah, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Zechariah or Malachi. Among the latter Scroll texts are fragmentary *commentaries*, *inter alia* those on Habakkuk and Hosea, but it cannot be determined whether the (probably heterodox) interpreters responsible for them wrote as they did because there was a general belief in their holiness, or merely on the grounds that they opined, as individuals, that those writings should have that status.

The same puzzling type of treatment appears in explanations of other texts on display. In the case of the small fragment of a copy of the **Community Rule**, the explanation offered is that it contains instructions “concerning the *everyday conduct of the Dead Sea community*” (my italics). Viewing this in tandem with similar expressions used in the descriptions of other Scrolls on display (cf. above), one might almost be moved to notice an unusual perseverance in the effort to protect the single-sect theory. The polemical nature of the underlying claim could easily have been modified by a change of wording to “the everyday conduct of the *Yahad* community.”

The scroll in question contains descriptions of ideas and conduct espoused by the Yahad brotherhood, but also statements implying that the members of that group lived in various Palestinian towns and cities — but without a single reference to communal habitation in the Judaean Wilderness or along the shore of the Dead Sea. The additional descriptive statement that “the members lived *a communal life of abstinence* (italics mine) according to strict rules” is far more a description of the celibate Essenes described by Josephus than it is of the members of the Yahad brotherhood. The observance of purity laws, the sharing of wealth, and the holding of special group meals and discussion sessions are traits considerably more reminiscent of brotherhood groups of Hellenistic times — by now quite well known thanks to the research of recent scholars — than they are of the activities of the genuinely abstemious Essenes as described by Josephus, Pliny the Elder, and Philo.

Nor is it the case that the text on display condemns “the religious laxity of ... fellow Jews.” The words used in the manuscript are “*ma’al anashim*,” “the wickedness of men” — not, in this case, the wickedness of the sons of Israel. As contrasted with wording in the manuscripts that condemns the writers’ own people, the passage in question, as well as various additional statements in writings of the Yahad brotherhood and others, are clearly meant to be construed as ideas expressing moral concern on a general human level.

The writer of the manuscript descriptions appears to be intent, however, on squeezing all such passages into the narrow bed dictated by the single-sect theory. This is all the more apparent from the writer’s description of the heavily apocalyptic **War Rule** (=War Scroll) first published in 1962 by Yigael Yadin (who himself supported that theory and contributed to its spread). Thus we find the writer stating that this manuscript “describes the final war at the end of days between the Sons of Light (*presumably sect members*) and the Sons of Darkness (possibly the Romans)...” (My italics.)

However, the brotherhood group designated in the Community Rule by the expression *anshé hayahad* (“men of the Yahad society”) is never mentioned in the War Scroll. The War Scroll, on the other hand, describes *various nations*, not only the presumed Romans, as being included amongst the Sons of Darkness. Moreover, in the War Scroll the “Sons of Darkness” are vanquished by the “Sons of Light,” but the latter are described, over many columns of the text, as including all Israelites except the most rebellious sinners. (Some writers claim that the words “sons of light,” appearing in three columns which they treat as the beginning of the Community Rule, refer to the Yahad brotherhood, but careful readers will observe that there is no palpable organic connection between those three columns and the others, which describe only the Yahad brotherhood without any mention of the “sons of light” doctrines.)

A subsequent portion of the museum’s description states that “The sectarians held that *the time of this battle was near and would be heralded by the messianic coming, a belief later shared by early Christians...*” (My italics.) There is, however, no reference to a Messiah, or to a messianic coming, in the War Scroll. We do find there (column 11, lines 6ff of the Yadin edition) a quotation of the famous Biblical passage (Numbers 24.17f) announcing that “A star will tread forth from Jacob, a scepter will rise from Israel” etc., but the words that both precede and follow this quotation in the scroll interpret the declaration not as the hint of a future personal Messiah such as early Christians claimed for it, but rather as a foreshadowing of the Lord’s own might.

The **Book of Tobit**, according to the museum’s description, was “one of the Second Temple Jewish compositions that *were not part of the Hebrew Bible* (italics mine) — once again implying a static rather than dynamic conception of the process of Second Temple Biblical canonization. Perhaps a more temperate formulation would be that Tobit and other such Hebraic texts *never became* part of the Hebrew Bible either in Second Temple times or thereafter. The description adds that eventually Tobit and certain other such texts “were adopted...by the Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches as

Old Testament.” This reflects a common enough confusion; in fact such writings were adopted by them as *deuterocanonical writings* within the body of texts designated by Christians as the Old Testament.

Since the **Aramaic Apocryphon of Daniel** has elicited great interest on the part of those exploring Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, here too a dose of caution would be salutary. The description states that this text “refers to a figure — *either a messiah or a historical king* — who will arise and be called “great,” Son of God,” and Son of the Most High.” (My italics). The particular interpretation being offered here is assisted by the profusion of capital letters introduced into the translation; but the actual gist of the passage is that a false savior will arise whom people will naively adopt as a godly personage, speaking of him as a heavenly creature (*bar elyon*) tyrannizing the nations until the true people of the Lord arise and cause peace to blanket the earth. In describing the period of tyranny, the ancient author for good reason does not use the term *mashi'ah* (=messiah), nor is it found or implied anywhere else in the manuscript.

In contrast to the manuscript descriptions, which in the end can only appear to come from an entirely different source than the introductory curatorial statements, it may be perceived that the object labels appended to the various *artifacts* on display mainly partake of the objective spirit expressed in those latter statements. For example, the label describing the so-called “**scroll jar**” first describes the original view positing an organic link between such jars and the manuscript-bearing caves, but then adds that “recent scientific analyses of the pottery composition of the jars suggests a more complex picture, with clays or the jars coming from several other sites in the area.” (Still more to the point, but not mentioned in the exhibition, are the findings of the Israeli archaeologist Rachel Bar Nathan, who has made a comparative study of the northern Judaeen Wilderness pottery and writes that “the scroll jar is a well-known vessel within the repertoire of the Second Temple period, particularly in the plain of Jericho and the Dead Sea region....The pottery from Qumran does not assist in differentiating the community at Qumran from that at other Judaeen sites, especially in the Dead Sea region.” (*Bar-Nathan, 2006.*)

Similarly, regarding the ancient **sandals** on display, which contain nails, the appended label first states that they “were interpreted as evidence that the inhabitants of Qumran visited the caves often,” but then is careful to point out that “... only Roman soldiers wore sandals constructed with nails.”

In describing the **phylacteries (tefillin)** discovered in some of the manuscript caves, the museum acknowledges — for the first time anywhere in a Scrolls exhibit — that they “comprise several different versions,” and that scholars “have interpreted this either as evidence for the diversity of Second Temple Period Judaism, or as proof that the scrolls could not have belonged to a single sect.” (Here the only point of concern with the wording is that in fact the conclusion of diversity of the Scroll texts flows first and foremost from our present knowledge of the doctrinal diversity of the Scrolls as a whole,

but is *further abetted* by the recognition that not one but several groups must have been responsible for the phylacteries.)

With regard to the **scroll wrapper** from Cave 4, the commentary focuses on the fact that “the very fine weaving ... and the use of expensive, imported indigo dye suggest a certain level of wealth on the part of those who cared for the scrolls...” — hinting at the embarrassment this finding poses for the question of a claimed presence at Qumran of wealth-eschewing groups such as the Essenes or the Yahad brotherhood.

Presenting an **inkwell** discovered at Ein Feshkha, the commentary first states that the several inkwells excavated within Khirbet Qumran were originally “cited as evidence that the ... Scrolls were written by scribes from a religious sect living at Qumran,” but thereafter emphasizes that “many text scholars posit that all the scrolls could not have been written at this small settlement, since they represent some five hundred different examples of handwritings and varied scribal traditions.” Left unsaid is the fact that no evidence has ever been found within Kh. Qumran for intense scribal activity even on the part of a small group. But the balance obviously sought by the curator is reflected in a subsequent statement that “archaeologists debate whether the number of inkwells from Qumran make the site unique, since such objects were found at other sites in Israel.”

The curatorial objectivity of this portion of the exhibition is further shown by the treatment of the **shekels from Tyre** found within Khirbet Qumran. “If the residents of Qumran belonged to a religious sect,” states the commentary, “the hoard could have been communal property.... Alternatively, the cache could have constituted ... the half-shekel taxes that the sect members refused to send to the Temple.... For those who propose that Qumran was an ordinary villa, farm or industrial site, the hoard represents the wealthy owner’s savings or commercial profits.”

By this and the other above-cited descriptions of artifacts, as well as by the studied impartiality of the introductory panels referred to earlier, the Jewish Museum leads the way, in an historical departure from all preceding exhibitions, towards a sane and balanced curatorial treatment of the Scrolls and their historical importance. The puzzling lack of reasonable objectivity and common sense displayed in the descriptions of the *individual manuscripts* on display — descriptions which have the character of an intrusive imposition — cannot be attributed to any fault of the museum itself, but nevertheless raises serious questions. Nor, at the same time, can it be said that the museum presents, as fully as it could or should have in its curatorial discourse, the actual documentary evidence supporting the described scholarly opinions. Nevertheless, as for the educational value of the exhibit as a whole, it indeed represents an important and until now a unique museological contribution to the understanding of a highly significant period in the history and culture of the Jews during Second Temple times. Working against formidable odds, the Jewish Museum and its curator are to be congratulated for the fairness and integrity of their achievement. {Works cited ⇒}

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