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# Disclosure and Deception

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Rabbi Johanan, living in Palestine during the third century C.E., is reported to have said, "Israel was only exiled when it had become twenty-four sectarian groups." Although he refers to the exile following the destruction of the first Jerusalem temple in 586 B.C.E., his statement is also emblematic of the period preceding the destruction of the second temple in 70 C.E. Modern scholars, especially since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, have increasingly come to view Jewish society of late second temple times more in line with Rabbi Johanan's "twenty-four" (figurative of a large number) sects than with the first-century historian Flavius Josephus's "four philosophies" of Judaism. Josephus's schematic divisions have proved too neat and the philosophical differences between his groups too tame to account for the plethora of contending yet intersecting groups and subgroups that populated Roman Palestine in the years before the second temple was destroyed. These groups defined *themselves* less in terms of philosophical questions of fate and free will, or the destiny of the soul after death, than in terms of practical matters of contending cultic calendars, scriptural canons and interpretations, priestly politics and purity, Sabbath and sexual practices.

We are interested in this critical period not only for its own sake but because of the higher stakes involved in identifying the roots of what followed it: early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. For all would agree that out of or in response to this variegated matrix of Jewish sects and parties the two great religions eventually emerged and solidified within the Greco-Roman cultural world. But how continuous are the lines of practice and self-understanding that connect second temple Jewish

*The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*
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movements with post-temple rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity? Are there historic grounds for the self-legitimating claims of each successor to be the direct descendant of one or some combination of second-temple movements? Here is where the stakes of ancient Jewish and Christian historical scholarship are the highest.

Here also is where the scholarly going is the most treacherous. Our evidence for most second temple groups comes from their successful successors – hence our tracings back may prove more circular than linear. Descriptions of second temple Jewish groups from later Jewish and Christian accounts – the writings of Josephus, the New Testament, rabbis, and Church fathers – all suffer (for the historian) the *disadvantage* of hindsight. They color them, positively or negatively, as they might want themselves or their adversaries to be seen. We have the words and deeds of the founders only as they are construed and constructed for the self-understandings of their successors. Similarly, most extant writings of these second temple groups have been preserved in the canons of their Jewish or Christian successors, sometimes in "newly improved" editions or translations.

We may now appreciate what is so revolutionary about the Dead Sea Scrolls, first discovered in 1947 and still being published. Here is a vast collection of Jewish writings that derive *directly* from the time of the late second temple. These writings, roughly speaking, are of three kinds: biblical scrolls disclosing the textual state of what was to become the scriptural core canon of both Judaism and Christianity; legal, liturgical, and exegetical writings by and for the group whose "library" this was; and the pseudepigraphic writings of other, perhaps allied (and as yet unidentified) Jewish movements. The group responsible for producing and then hiding these scrolls is most commonly associated with the Essenes, previously known from classical sources (mainly Josephus, Philo of Alexandria, and Pliny the Elder). Here they can be referred to simply as the Qumran community, after the name of the settlement near the caves on the Dead Sea's western shore, where they were found.

The Qumran community understood itself to be in temporary wilderness exile from the defiled Jerusalem temple. It awaited the imminent consummation of the "end of days," confident that its people alone were the true covenantal Israel and its priests alone the true "sons of Aaron."

The members of the Qumran community were justified in this self-understanding by their collective life, conducted according to the divinely revealed legal dictates and historical plan as contained in the Scriptures they shared with others but whose full meaning was disclosed, they claimed, only to them. They received ongoing revelation in their daily worship and study under the inspired guidance of their priestly and levitical leaders, beginning with a shadowy figure called the Teacher of Righteousness. The community's opponents, whether the Jerusalem officialdom or groups that had broken from Qumran, followed the wrong way, having been deceived by their lying leaders. The war with Rome was anticipated as the earthly manifestation of the cosmic battle between the forces of light and darkness, out of which the sectarian elect, as the "sons of light," would emerge vindicated for their suffering exile to participate in an eschatological temple.

There are many points of similarity (and some of dissimilarity) between the Qumran community as it emerges from its writings and from descriptions of the Essenes in classical sources. But more important, and largely unanticipated by the classical sources, the scrolls display many legal, liturgical, hermeneutical, literary, and ideational formations that intersect previously known second temple Jewish writings and subsequent rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity. The hope of tracing later Judaism and Christianity back to antecedents in the period of the second temple is thus doubly encouraged. Notwithstanding the many leads that extend from Qumran synchronically into other varieties of second temple Judaism and diachronically into rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity, however, the overall complex of practice and self-understanding that was constructed at Qumran, particularly its combination of intensive legal piety with imminent messianic expectation, remains unique and irreducible to proto-anything. Even so, the Dead Sea Scrolls will remain essential mining for those who seek at least a part of the roots of what later became rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity.

This explains why so much controversy has surrounded the slow pace of disclosing to the public the 40 to 50 percent of the scrolls yet to be published, some forty years after their discovery, and the extreme measures some have recently taken to make those scrolls available as soon as possible. A book that recounts the history of the Dead Sea Scrolls'

publication, explains the reasons for its delay, and suggests what might be gained in our understanding of ancient Judaism and Christianity from the disclosure of the remaining scrolls should be especially welcomed at this time. This is what Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh promise in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception.* But their promise is unfulfilled, in large part because of their sectarian slant on the debates surrounding the scrolls.

The first part of Baigent and Leigh's book chronicles the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls generally but soon gets to the story of the Cave 4 scrolls (some six hundred or so), discovered in 1952, housed in the Rockefeller Museum in East Jerusalem, and controlled by an international editorial team closely connected, until recently, with the Dominican Ecole biblique, also in East Jerusalem. Here the authors frequently confuse the inexcusably slow pace at which the Cave 4 scrolls have been published (only about one hundred have appeared thus far) with the fairly good rate at which the scrolls from other caves (two hundred or so), containing most of the relatively complete scrolls, have been published, and assume that the international team's control over the as-yet-unpublished Cave 4 fragments constitutes a monopoly over all Dead Sea Scroll scholarship.

This distortion is the product of the authors' dualistic reduction of the situation to a conflict between "insiders" and "outsiders." The "insiders" – the international editorial team, dominated, according to Baigent and Leigh, by Catholic clerics – are the villains of the story (the arch-villain, or Wicked Priest, having been Father Roland de Vaux, the first head of the international team). They establish and ruthlessly enforce the "consensus" interpretation of the scrolls (and not just those in their control). By keeping the scrolls from outsiders, they manipulate them into accepting the consensus. The heroes of the story are those few outsiders who have refused to be manipulated or intimidated, having sought both to obtain access to the scrolls and to challenge the consensus. The arch-hero of the story is the independent scholar Robert Eisenman, whose consensus-shattering views the authors are rather alone in accepting.

What, then, are the main points of the orthodox consensus? First, the Dead Sea Scrolls refer to events in Hasmonean times (circa 150–50

B.C.E.), and in any case predate Christianity, the Romans having destroyed the Qumran community in 68 C.E. Second, the Qumran community can be identified with the Essenes of classical sources. Third, the Essene-Qumran community was a pacifist, quietist, reclusive enclave, isolated from larger political events and religious movements. It had no relation either to the early Christian (or Jewish Christian) movement of Jesus' and Paul's time or to the nationalist Zealot movement(s) of the period of two wars with Rome (70 and 135 C.E.).

To the extent that a consensus exists, it is not nearly as monolithic as Baigent and Leigh suggest. Most scholars agree in general with the consensus dating. But although they accept the association, if not the identification, of the Qumran community with the Essenes, they caution that the Essene movement might have been larger and more variegated than classical sources suggest, and hardly static over time. And the third point in the authors' consensus is a gross oversimplification; most scholars find no hard evidence for *direct* links between the Qumran community and the Zealots, but they understand the Qumran community to have been very much a part of late second temple Judaism, with possible links to such groups as the Pharisees and Sadducees, and such figures as John the Baptist, as well as to apocalyptic circles, even though the extent of these links is uncertain. The choices need not be reduced to either quietist recluses or militant revolutionaries.

Even more troubling is the authors' assertion that scholars who accede to the consensus are simply dupes of the insiders. Several of the harshest critics of the way the international team has discharged its scholarly responsibilities (for example, Geza Vermes of Oxford) have also given the most articulate expression to the consensus, such as it is. The idea that the consensus was created and is enforced by the international team because it controls the unpublished Cave 4 fragments is simply unproven and improbable. That the authors' heroes have, for the most part, not convinced other outsiders of their revisionist theories, including many who are just as critical as they of the slow pace of publishing the Cave 4 fragments, has to do with their failure to marshal convincing textual evidence in support of their arguments, rather than with deception or manipulation by the insiders.

But the authors go further, hinting that the international team must

be suppressing something that, if disclosed, would enable their heroes to topple the consensus and its perpetrators. At stake, they argue, is not simply scholarly vanity or ambition but the very foundations of the Catholic church. In the second part of their book, Baigent and Leigh thus argue that the international team centered in the Ecole biblique is controlled by the Vatican, since the head of the Ecole biblique sits on the Vatican's Pontifical Biblical Commission, whose head, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, also heads the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the successor to the Holy Inquisition. This inquisitional church hierarchy, according to Baigent and Leigh, is preventing disclosure of the scrolls, controlling Dead Sea scholarship, and even intimidating the Israeli government, which since 1967 has had overall authority over the Cave 4 fragments housed in the Rockefeller Museum. So long as the international team connected with the Ecole biblique is allowed this hegemony, it will continue to sit on scrolls it deems potentially explosive for Christian, and especially Catholic, doctrine. But the authors provide no hard evidence that such potentially explosive texts exist. Nor do they give examples of how their chain of associations has silenced any voices critical of the Qumran consensus, or has denied access to the scrolls specifically to enemies of the church. Rather, the authors inadvertently suggest the opposite: a strong critic of the international team, Father Joseph Fitzmyer of the Catholic University, a leading Dead Sea Scroll scholar, is a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and yet was denied access to Cave 4 scrolls that he required for his research. Conversely, one of the staunchest challengers of the consensus, Eisenman, had one of his revisionist books published by a Vatican press.

What is it, then, that Baigent and Leigh consider to be so potentially damaging to the church and that the international editorial team is so intent on suppressing, to the point of preventing texts from being published? As they state it, at the beginning of the third and longest part of the book:

> One is compelled to ask . . . whether some other vested interest may be at stake, a vested interest larger than the reputations of individual scholars – the vested interest of Christianity as a whole, for example, and of Christian doctrine, at least as propounded by

> the Church and its traditions. Ever since the Dead Sea Scrolls were first discovered, one single, all-pervasive question has haunted the imagination, generating excitement, anxiety, and, perhaps, dread. Might these texts, issuing from so close to "the source," and (unlike the New Testament) never having been edited or tampered with, shed some significant new light on the origins of Christianity, on the so-called "early Church" in Jerusalem and perhaps on Jesus himself? Might they contain something compromising, something that challenges, possibly even refutes, established traditions?

Although the authors have no proof that such texts exist in the hands of the international team, they believe they must exist, if not in the Rockefeller Museum, then in the private hands of collectors or dealers in antiquities, or perhaps still waiting to be uncovered in as-yet-unexplored Dead Sea caves: "There are substantial grounds for believing that other documents – *documents of a much more explosive nature,* utterly unique and undreamed of by the world of scholarship – also exist" (emphasis added). The authors are convinced not only that such "explosive" texts exist but that when disclosed they will confirm Eisenman's revisionist thesis, "dismantle the 'orthodoxy of interpretation' promulgated for the last forty years by the international team," and thereby "might just conceivably demolish the entire edifice of Christian teaching and belief."

What, then, is Eisenman's thesis, which has won so little support among scholars of ancient Judaism and Christianity but which earns Baigent and Leigh's unreserved support? Stated simply here (but argued at length by the authors in their book and by Eisenman in two volumes), it amounts to replacing the three tenets of the supposed consensus stated above.

First, the consensus dating, predicated on the desire to disassociate the scrolls from early Christianity so as not to compromise its uniqueness, is buttressed by faulty archaeological and paleographic evidence. Rather, the authors follow Eisenman's method of dating the scrolls by their "internal" evidence, by which they mean their presumed historical referents. By this argument, the scrolls date from the period of Jesus (circa 30 C.E.), Paul (circa 50 C.E.), and the Gospels (circa 90 C.E.). This chronology has recently been contradicted by the carbon-14 datings of a

number of the scrolls, tests that Eisenman had demanded but whose results he now rejects.

Second, the Qumran people, if they were Essenes, were not the reclusive Essenes of the classical sources but closely allied if not identical with the "early Church" of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, under the leadership of James after Jesus' death. The authors, again following Eisenman, go beyond the common noting of similarities of language and institutions between the two communities to claim that the Damascus to which Paul (as Saul) goes in Acts 9 to persecute Christians only to be converted was none other than Qumran (symbolically called Damascus in the scrolls). It is Paul who, after his apostasy from this Jewish Christianity, is the Liar in Qumran texts, who deceives community members into leaving for laxer ways, possibly being a Roman agent. It is he who "hijacked" the "early Christianity" of the Qumran community and transformed it into something alien. The Wicked Priest who persecutes the Teacher of Righteousness is the High Priest Ananas, while the Teacher himself is the martyred James the Just, Jesus' brother and, according to the authors, the true leader of the Jerusalem "early Church" after Jesus' death. This James, whose story had been suppressed in the New Testament and Josephus, is finally disclosed, with the help of the Dead Sea Scrolls and later Christian literature.

Third, the Qumran sectaries were not the quietist recluses of the classical sources, far removed from tumultuous political events. Rather, they were at the center of a broad-based movement of messianic revolutionary fundamentalists, or Zealots. They were the militant descendants of the Maccabees and the instigators of revolt against Herod and his successors. They were the zealous upholders of the law and national pride against the collaborationist and legally lax Sadducean and Pharisaic establishment in Jerusalem. They were no less than the final defenders of Masada, and possibly even the followers of Bar Kochba in his second revolt against Rome in 135 C.E. In short, they are the authors' ancient heroes. Though known by many names and living at many times, they were all one and the same movement.

Questionable textual readings, internal inconsistencies, reductive reasonings, and a priori assumptions about the representational, rather than rhetorical, nature of the Qumran texts abound. Precisely what

Baigent and Leigh find "inescapable" in this collapsing of a variety of Jewish groups into one is what most scholars of ancient Judaism and Christianity find so uncompelling: "Eisenman's research has revealed the underlying simplicity of what had previously seemed a dauntingly complicated situation."

*The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception* is not without redeeming qualities. It contains some previously unpublished material, namely the excellent photographs of, as well as fascinating correspondence between the early editors of the Cave 4 scrolls. Baigent and Leigh provide a well-written and fast-moving story, albeit error-ridden and sharply skewed. Their book, with the popular appeal of its conspiracy theory, will likely bring greater attention to the need to open the remaining unpublished scrolls and fragments to a wider range of scholars and readers, but, one hopes, without compromising or pirating the editorial work of textual specialists.

In the end, the authors' masterplot of theological deception does not convince. Qumran scholarship remains vibrant, with a healthy exchange of interpretations and counter-interpretations in journals and books and at academic conferences. The longest and most clearly sectarian scrolls have long been available for study, and many of them have never received rigorous analysis and commentary. There is no shortage of Qumran texts to be studied and on which to test ideas about the Qumran community or ancient Judaism and religion more generally. Certainly, new scrolls and fragments are eagerly awaited, especially the *Miqsat Ma'ase Ha-Torah* (4QMMT) and the Qumran fragments of the Damascus Document. But these will enliven the interpretive debate, not settle it. Scholars have every right to challenge however much of a consensus exists and to expect peers to judge their arguments fairly. But they cannot be expected to be taken seriously if, when they fail to convince, they confect a conspiracy, pinning their hopes on the disclosure of as yet unattested – so surely suppressed – texts. These are forms of sectarian *self-deception,* of which we have much to learn from the rhetorical constructions of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and many other ancient Jewish and Christian texts already before us.