

On the Jerusalem Origin of the Dead Sea Scrolls

Following upon the first discoveries of Scrolls in the Judaean Wilderness (1947/1948), Prof. Eliezer Sukenik proposed, primarily on the basis of his reading of the *Serekh Hayahad* (Discipline Scroll of the Unity Brotherhood), that they were writings of the Essene sect. Pliny the Elder, after all, had described that sect as having settled in the Judaean Wilderness as refugees from the destruction of Jerusalem, and as being near the settlement of En Gedi. During that same early period of discoveries, the Dominican scholar-priest Roland de Vaux expressed the opinion that these Essenes (whom Pliny had described as celibates) had lived near the area where the original Scroll cave — and others being discovered nearby, for a total number of eleven — were located. On this basis de Vaux began exploring and excavating the nearest place of habitation, namely Khirbet Qumran, and eventually announced that he had uncovered the very settlement of the Essenes described by Pliny; he went on to offer specific interpretations of structures within the settlement, such as “The Scriptorium,” the Essenes’ “Refectory,” and “Ritual Baths” that facilitated the claimed Essenes’ purification — interpretations that appeared to justify his designation of the settlement in its entirety as the “Laura,” or monastery, of the Essenes.

Almost unanimously, researchers around the world concerned with the study of the antiquities of ancient Israel and the Second Temple period accepted, and to a considerable extent still accept, Pere de Vaux’s interpretation of the site. In retrospect, however, it may be seen that he expressed his views without waiting at least some years after asserting them for the possibility of specific material proof that might emerge to substantiate his theory. It may be noted that no Scrolls had been discovered within Kh. Qumran itself during the period of his excavations, and none were ever to be found there.

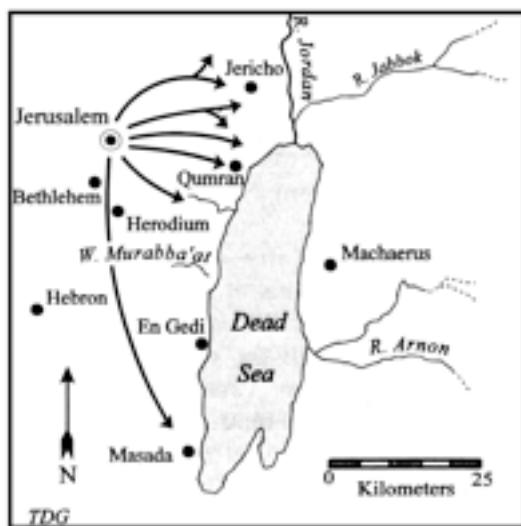
In the course of time, however (approximately between 1955 and 2000) specific pieces of evidence would indeed be discovered that contradicted, and today increasingly contradict, de Vaux’s opinion and that of all writers who have continued in essence to support his view. The major findings include the following:

- **Discovery of the Copper Scroll in Cave 3:** This text, first unrolled in 1955, describes the hiding of scrolls and of gold and silver ingots, but also — as has been shown particularly by B.Z. Luria in his study of this manuscript — of vessels and related objects carrying the same names as those of objects and implements used by the Jerusalem priesthood in Temple rituals. Among the place-names mentioned in this Scroll in connection with the sequestration of the various items are places near Jericho (itself also mentioned by name), the Wadi Achor, and a specific place within the Wadi Qidron — which according to recent discoveries by Israeli archaeologists was evidently one of the wadis

whereby inhabitants of Jerusalem fled, during the Roman siege of 70 C.E., to regions of the Judaean Wilderness. The likely home of the Copper Scroll thus appeared to be Jerusalem. However, Père de Vaux's reaction to the discovery— which posed an obvious danger to his theory —was simply to label it a forgery.

- **Discovery of manuscript fragments at Masada:** According to Josephus, large numbers of inhabitants of Jerusalem fled to Masada during the siege and subsequent Roman onslaught — and the Scroll fragments discovered there are clearly material evidence pointing in this direction. This discovery (1963 – 1965), which occurred almost a decade after the decipherment of the Copper Scroll, was in itself of such nature as to cast doubt on Père de Vaux's opinion that the hiding of the earlier-found Scrolls in the 11 caves was specifically because of their proximity to the claimed Essene settlement; for with this new evidence common sense dictated that the hiding might more likely have been accomplished by Jerusalemites fleeing eastward and southward towards both Masada and that other great fortress of the Jews which was Machaerus, east of the Dead Sea (cf. the descriptions of Josephus, and map below). This configuration of events was further indicated by the fact that the church father Origen had utilized a Greek Bible translation discovered, according to him, together with other Hebrew and Greek books “in a jar near Jericho,” and by a report written circa 800 A.D. by the Nestorian Patriarch Timotheus I concerning the discovery of various writings in Hebrew script, Biblical and otherwise, in a cave “near Jericho.” (The proposal of the late Prof. Yadin, chief excavator of Masada to the effect that these fragments were brought to Masada specifically by the claimed *Essenes of Qumran*, is supported by no piece of historical evidence, and even many traditional Qumranologists would eventually begin shying away from it, as they also began abandoning de Vaux's claim that the Copper Scroll was a forgery.)
- **Discovery of phylacteries among the various manuscripts of the caves:** Approximately thirty phylactery texts were discovered, but the Torah passages found within them were far from uniform in content. This fact ran directly counter to the rule of the Brotherhood order (i.e., the Yahad) described in the Discipline Scroll — which de Vaux and most later Qumranologists have asserted was the operative doctrinal text utilized by the claimed sectarians of Khirbet Qumran — requiring that all members of the Brotherhood follow uniform ritual practices. In publishing those phylactery texts under his control, Père Josef Milik asserted that, specifically with respect to the phylacteries alone, each of the claimed Essenes of Qumran was allowed to follow his own predilection — but Milik never explained the rationale of such a notable deviation. Prof. Yadin in his edition of different phylacteries from the caves, was on the other hand altogether silent with respect to a solution of this problem. (Moreover, neither Milik nor Yadin could cite a single text pertaining to the Yahad brotherhood which implied any duty at all on their part to wear phylacteries.) Based on the philological evidence of the texts

themselves, the variations testify to the fact that those who hid the phylacteries in the caves did not constitute a particular sect following uniform discipline, but rather belonged to disparate groups of individuals fleeing eastward from the Roman onslaught on the capital — in consonance with the evidence of the Copper Scroll and the Masada text-fragments.



Geographical Representation of Jerusalem Hypothesis

The Scrolls found in caves near Khirbet Qumran and Jericho, as well as those found at Masada, represent remnants of an extensive Hebraic literature hidden by inhabitants of Jerusalem, making use of the underground tunnels leading eastward to wadis lying outside of the city, before and during the Roman siege of 70 A.D. Khirbet Qumran itself was a strategic Hasmonaean fortress reused by Jewish fighters during the First Revolt (66-73 A.D.). Refugees fleeing towards Machaerus would have had to traverse the desert area near Kh. Qumran on the way to their destination, and are responsible for the sequestration of many of the scrolls and phylacteries found in the caves.

- **Publication of photographs of all the Dead Sea Scrolls under Israel's control:** This event, which transpired as a result of the freeing of the Scrolls (1992 and thereafter), opened the eyes of researchers to the fact that, according to their individual handwritings as then revealed, only very many scribes, approximately to the number of 500, could have copied down the Scrolls. This development moved more than a few of the traditional Qumranologists to distance themselves from Père de Vaux, now indicating in contrast to him that it was possible or even likely that many of the manuscripts were not copied at Kh. Qumran but rather brought from Jerusalem or perhaps other places as well — to nowhere else than the claimed “sectarian center” of Qumran. This unlikely claim,

however, did not satisfy other researchers, who by then had begun to perceive that no certainty whatever could be attributed to the Qumran-Essene theory, and that the Scrolls as a whole might very likely have been of Jerusalem origin and hidden in the caves out of necessity during the First Revolt.

- **Publication of the Scrolls virtually in their entirety, subject by subject:** From studies of the specific texts among the virtually forty volumes now published under the sponsorship of the Israel Antiquities Authority, it has become evident that the texts attributed to the Yahad brotherhood, while reflecting a most interesting social and religious phenomenon, constitute only a minority of the great number of Scrolls and Scroll fragments now known, most of the others having no demonstrable connection with the writings of the Yahad group.
- **Further results of investigation of the manuscripts:** The manuscripts as known in their fullness during the past several years have made clear the fact that the encouragement or practice of actual celibate asceticism is not to be found in any of the known texts. This fact cannot but militate against the claim of Pere de Vaux and his present-day followers that the inhabitants of Kh. Qumran were those very celibate ascetics described by Pliny as living above En Gedi. This has opened the way yet wider to the problem of identification of the inhabitants of Kh. Qumran, while simultaneously raising with yet greater concern the question: "Who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?"
- **Recent archaeological investigations:** During the past twenty years, archaeologists of professional standing and competence have conducted extensive excavations of Kh. Qumran and detailed studies of the resultant artifactual findings. They have shown that the nature of the evidence uncovered reveals no positive indication that either Essenes or any other specifically sectarian group inhabited that site. (Investigations by Donceel and Donceel-Voute; Hirschfeld; Magen and Peleg.) For the most recent analysis dealing specifically with the cemetery adjacent to Kh. Qumran, see Gideon Avni, "*Mi nitman bebet haqebarot bequmran?*, **Qatedra** 131, pp. 43-64; cf. the number given on p. 55 of 37 males and between 13 and 17 females analyzed so far, a proportion comparable to that of other Palestinian gravesites discussed by the author.). As notably indicated by the Kh. Qumran tower's strategic position midway between the Hasmonaean fortress of Machaerus and Jerusalem itself, recent scholarship also supports identification of the site as a Hasmonaean fortress erected during the 2nd century B.C., in line with considerations first advanced in my book on the Scrolls, pp. 3-41. (Cf. *Haaretz*, 30 July 2004, and the extensive scientific reports preceding and following that article.) Given the configuration of material evidence as now known, and keeping in mind Josephus's careful description of the plight of Jerusalem's inhabitants which led to the hiding of their goods and treasures as the siege tightened, one cannot reasonably escape the conclusion that the

Scrolls found both at Masada and in the caves in our own time are surviving remnants evoking that experience.

These are only some of the main pieces of evidence inevitably leading to rejection of the traditional Qumran-Essene theory and its variants, which remain marked by internal weaknesses not capable of withstanding critical inquiry. Yet the posted signs and expositions presented at Kh. Qumran itself, as at the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, continue to be the product of that original theory, without indication of any endeavor to deal with its problems. Both in the State of Israel and abroad, the actual body of evidence now favoring the theory of Jerusalem origin continues to be almost consistently missing from exhibitions of the Scrolls, along with any ensuing debate about it — a situation obviously calling for remediation. It is as though, for no obvious reason, there still remains a pressing need to support the old Qumran-Sectarian theory — an unsubstantiated belief now in troubled waters for a good many years.

Still more significantly, what appears to be totally missing from most of the posted explanations, as from the defense put forth by individual Qumranologists, is any effort to describe or otherwise deal with the experience of Jerusalem's inhabitants at the moment of their greatest danger. Through this disregard, even the trenchant testimony imbedded within the Scrolls themselves, pointing above all else to the literary fecundity of the Palestinian Jews during Intertestamental times, somehow remains basically unacknowledged in the realm of traditional Qumranology.

And as it now stands, the belated suggestion being widely employed — that *scrolls were removed by claimed sectarians from Jerusalem to Kh. Qumran where they were studied by those sectarians before being transferred to the caves* — amounts to no more than a rhetorical stratagem devoid of material proof. Drawing, as it may well do, the attention of readers away from the situation in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., while simultaneously deflecting one's possible contemplation of the capital's literary history in Intertestamental times, this effort can hardly be said to have genuine cultural value.

One might instead have thought that the acknowledgement of various scholars — many traditionalists now among them — that scrolls were indeed brought to the Judaean Wilderness from Jerusalem at the same time that a war happened to be raging in that part of the country, would carry with it the obvious intellectual responsibility to reach out towards an explanation of this bipolar phenomenon. Even Père de Vaux, at the dawn of Qumranology, perceived that there was a connection of some sort. He ended up by proposing that the claimed Essenes hid their scrolls in the eleven caves because they had learned that Roman troops *then engaged in that war* were on their way from Jericho (north of Kh. Qumran) to attack them. By that token, however, the claimed sectarians should obviously

have fled to hide their manuscripts not northward — where the scroll caves were discovered — but southward, away from an attack of this kind.

The surprise discovery of manuscripts at Masada — a decade after Père de Vaux's proposal — provided the empirical basis for an interpretation of Scroll origins not entrammeled by the embarrassment inherent in the earlier explanation of de Vaux but consonant with historical events:

- (a) Josephus describes the mass movement, during the siege, of refugees from Jerusalem via (still extant) tunnels, and describes their eventual gathering both at Masada and Machaerus;
- (b) The Jerusalem tunnels lead to the wadi system branching out in both an eastward and a south-eastward direction;
- (c) According to Josephus, the refugees eventually arrive both at Masada (with the exception of those slain in the Forest of Jardes) and Machaerus; and
- (d) Scrolls are discovered both at Masada itself as well as in areas of the northern Judaean Wilderness that refugees fleeing toward Machaerus would have been prone to traverse. (See map above.)

Yet despite this confluence of evidence, traditional Qumranologists who now concede the likelihood of all or part of the Scrolls' Jerusalem origins never appear to discuss the fact of that War, or to recognize its impact on the Palestinian Jews, or to assent to the likelihood that it was that War which resulted in the transfer of scrolls from Jerusalem to both Masada and the Judaean Wilderness. Instead, the paradigm shift being espoused by them is generated particularly by the awareness that *several hundred scribes* copied just those Scrolls that survived — a fact ineluctably pointing to the primary cultural center of Jerusalem as the home of the Scrolls.

It is this factual evidence, which has come fully into play only with the increased tempo of Scroll manuscript publications after 1992, that has finally turned so many traditional scholars away from the original Qumran-sectarian paradigm — but only to the extent of their suggesting a mere insignificant episode in the Scrolls' history prior to their imagined arrival at the claimed "laura in the wilderness." In this mindset, what appears to be in need of guarding at all costs is the concept of a sect living at Kh. Qumran in possession of at least some of the manuscripts originating among Jerusalem's inhabitants, for at least part of the time (circa 70 B.C.–70 A.D.) that Père de Vaux had in mind.

To support this idea, it has even been suggested by some writers that it was only, or mainly, those Scrolls which exhibit deviational spellings of Hebrew words that would actually have been written at Kh. Qumran. In this way, the conceit has become widespread that a special "Qumran Hebrew" developed or was created at the site of the claimed sectarian laura. Of this belief likewise, however, not a single proof exists. Prior

to the age of dictionaries and their widespread use, deviations in orthography were a common feature of written language expression in the greatest of cities. Examples that come to mind are the numerous orthographic variations in documentary Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts of the Cairo Genizah, or hand-written and printed works in many languages produced in European cities at least until the 18th century.

And in recent years these various proposals and assertions have been yet further confounded by the claim of an Ecole Biblique scholar once closely allied with the late Père de Vaux, to the effect that this enigmatic group of pious sectarians did not actually live at Kh. Qumran at all, but only in the surrounding desert area — an idea for which that author also can cite not a single piece of actual evidence.

In effect, no proof has yet materialized to support any of these claims: neither that a group of sectarians lived round-about Kh. Qumran, nor that a sectarian community settled at Kh. Qumran either for a few or several generations, nor that such a group wrote scrolls there which contained orthographic deviations while receiving others from Jerusalem which did not, nor that this group was succeeded by eventual sectarians who took many of the texts and marched *northward* so as to hide them in some of the caves — in the very face of the claimed mortal enemies advancing from Jericho.

The inadmissibility of any and all of these paradigms is demonstrated by their proponents' disregard of other relevant factors requiring concomitant explanations that are never offered. While the evidence of the Copper Scroll could, in terms of the paradigm shifts in question, conceivably be dismissed on the claim that this scroll is merely one of those ostensibly brought to Kh. Qumran from Jerusalem before being hidden in Cave 3, that can hardly be done with the other impeding evidence, namely:

- 1) The historical record is to the effect that the inhabitants of Jerusalem did flee to both Machaerus and Masada;
- 2) Hebrew manuscripts were discovered both at Masada itself as well as in a region of the Judaean Wilderness that refugees would have had to traverse in fleeing towards Machaerus;
- 3) The phylacteries found in the caves strongly imply an activity of individuals who did not adhere to any single sectarian group; and
- 4) The War itself represented the major calamity of the Palestinian Jews during the 1st Century A.D., one of whose consequences, as Josephus writes, was the dire need of the inhabitants of Jerusalem to hide those items and possessions valuable to them.

As historical evidence, all of these factors —*in addition to* the presence of large numbers of scribal handwritings so far discovered — obviously have to be taken into consideration in drawing reasonable conclusions about the origin of the Scrolls; and in this light, the unadorned testimony of the Copper Scroll can hardly be ignored. The

artifacts it describes include not only scrolls, but objects such as are associated with the Temple, as well as large sums of gold and silver ingots evoking not the gleanings of a small sect but an institutional treasure such as the Temple's holdings or a royal hoard. Moreover, the over sixty hiding places described in the Copper Scroll, most of them in the northern part of the Judaean Wilderness, reveal a much wider phenomenon of sequestration than that attributable to a small sect supposedly living in the desert.

While first expressed by traditional Qumranologists in the early 1980s, the claim that "some," "many," or even the majority of the Scrolls were first brought from Jerusalem (or "elsewhere") to Kh. Qumran, before being deposited in the caves, is an assertion which reached its apogee only in the 1990s, when the clear evidence of multifarious scribes had fully emerged. The failure, however, of those writers to bring their recognition of the multiplicity of scribal hands into line with the other discoveries already well known by that time reveals a continued effort to validate the idea of a sectarian community in the desert by use of an imaginative, but until now unproven, nuance — a fallback position in what has come to represent a classical case of circular reasoning. While this effort has had the ephemeral effect of papering over the actual configuration of historical evidence pointing to the sequestration of the Scrolls, both in the eleven caves and at Masada, by inhabitants of Jerusalem in the course of their flight from the city, no evidence has yet been discovered which demonstrates that a Jewish religious sect ever inhabited Khirbet Qumran.

That is not to say, however, that claims asserting the existence of such evidence have not been made in past years. News releases once heralded the announcement, for example, that DNA analysis would likely prove that the parchments on which the Scrolls were inscribed actually came from herds living in the Judaean Wilderness near Kh. Qumran, but no evidence to this effect has ever subsequently been published. More recently, a claim about the Dead Sea's chemical composition and its effect on the Scrolls' parchments has surfaced, likewise implying, without warrant, a particular connection with Kh. Qumran. A few years ago news items announced the discovery of an "Essene latrine" in the vicinity of Kh. Qumran, whereas what was found consisted only of undatable fecal remains in a patch of soil.

A more serious claim was made in 1997 in advance of the Israel Museum's 50th anniversary celebration of the Scrolls' discovery, when a press release was issued by the museum announcing that an actual artifact — an ostracaon inscribed with Hebrew writing — had been discovered at Kh. Qumran constituting "the first archaeological proof" that an actual connection existed between Kh. Qumran and the manuscripts found in the caves. The claimed "proof," promulgated by a few traditional Qumranologists, consisted of a single word within the text — ostensibly the word *yahad*, meaning "unity" — which is also a word used in some of the Scrolls to designate the Unity Brotherhood. Magnification of the crucial line of the text, however, failed to show actual evidence of the word *yahad*. Although the museum, even until today, has refrained from issuing a retraction of its original claim, writers on the Scrolls generally do not cite this text as evidence of Père de Vaux's theory, leaving the claim of discovery of "the first

archaeological proof” of sectarian habitation at Kh. Qumran without scientific moorings of any kind.

In the meanwhile another traditional scholar, while acknowledging that the crucial word in question is not to be found on the ostraca, has claimed that a different word in the same text, this time the term *mebakker*, or “overseer” — designating a supervisor, such as those who occasionally have a role in the Brotherhood texts — can be found *elsewhere* on the same ostraca. Once again, however, under magnification of the crucial line evidence of this other word is also entirely lacking. On these and other efforts to find an actual proof of sectarian settlement at Kh. Qumran cf. the documentation in my articles at

<http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/projects/scr/>
<http://home.uchicago.edu/~ngolb/>

It is not difficult to understand why such efforts have come to take place and why they will be likely to continue into the future. With the passage of time, and notwithstanding Père de Vaux’s imaginative scenario, not a single Scroll fragment or other written text discovered to date proves that a sect inhabited Kh. Qumran; in addition, during the past few decades archaeologists of professional standing who have investigated that site with increasing care have likewise found no evidence that scribes composed or copied manuscripts there or that sectarians, ascetic or otherwise, lived there during the period of the Second Jewish Commonwealth. Such beliefs, created in the infancy of Qumranology, today still remain simply that — beliefs unsupported by actual empirical evidence. Traditional Scroll scholars regrettably have come to insist on begging the fundamental question, advocating the correctness of unsupported and unlikely ideas while defending the scientific righteousness of revered scholarly figures of the past who created those ideas. The resultant mode of developing activity thus inevitably partakes less of objective investigation than of scholasticism, which during its medieval heyday was characterized by deference to the concepts of earlier charismatic thinkers and by efforts not to reject those concepts but rather to endeavor to harmonize them with newly emerging ideational and empirical realities, even by heroic acts of intellectual legerdemain.

A clear and certain sign pointing to this gradual transformation in the nature of the Scrolls debate is the clearly documented one-sidedness of the great majority of relevant museum exhibitions taking place over the past several years, and the adoption within them of highly questionable claims similar to those mentioned above. It may well happen that such efforts will continue until appropriate inquiry is made into unacknowledged and until now unrevealed background influences possibly fueling these efforts. The movement towards utter transparency in the debate over Scroll origins is only now beginning to develop.

Meanwhile, despite various claims that continue to entice, if not to befuddle, countless well-intentioned readers, it may surely be hoped that those who have followed with care the trail of developments now characterizing the struggle over the origin and meaning of the Scrolls will, in openness of spirit, be able to perceive that the surviving

remnants of manuscripts here discussed still have the power to remind us of what was lost, and what was saved, at that unique turning-point in the history of Israel which was the First Revolt and Jerusalem's destruction at the hands of Roman troops.

http://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/jerusalem_origin_dss.pdf