

Norman Golb
Oriental Institute, University of Chicago

THE “QUMRAN SECT” REVINDICATED?

New Efforts to Protect the Belief a Religious Brotherhood Lived Near the Dead Sea Shore

The extensive archaeological findings of Yitzhak Magen, Yuval Peleg, and their colleagues and associates at Khirbet Qumran, revealed during a ten-year period of research ending in 2002, has understandably caused varying reactions among scholars of the Scrolls and their associates. The original theory of early Scroll scholars had been that the manuscripts were written and possessed by a Jewish religious sect inhabiting the Judaeen Wilderness site of Khirbet Qumran. After the new archaeological findings were made public, those researchers who during the past few decades had come to harbor doubts about the original theory tended to consider positively the main thrust of the new findings. Those findings, as it happens, support the theory first expressed by me in 1970: namely, that the Scrolls were writings taken from Jerusalem’s libraries by Jews fleeing the Roman onslaught on the capital, and which they sequestered in caves and other hiding places of the Judaeen Wilderness as they made their way to the Jewish redoubts of Machaerus and Masada.

Yet various scholars have continued to maintain a wholehearted belief in the original theory and have set out to defend it, even in its pristine form; while other traditionalists have suggested *variations* to the old theory that ostensibly take the new archaeological findings into account while possibly having the potential to garner the approval of colleagues, students, and the reading public.

Among the theories of these latter is the view developed by Père Jean-Baptiste Humbert of Jerusalem’s Ecole Biblique. This is to the effect that the claimed sectarians did not necessarily live within Kh. Qumran but rather in surrounding areas. “We refuse,” he stated at the Brown University symposium on the Archaeology of Qumran, “to limit the ‘community of Qumran’ to a single, ‘unique’ site and instead emphasize that the sectarians preferred living in the surroundings of the Dead Sea...”

He also states in virtually the same breath, however, that “the Qumran site is a sectarian complex among others” and that the “theory of the Essene settlement is more than probable....” (Humbert in Galor et al.[eds.], *Qumran — the Site of the Dead Sea Scrolls...*, Brill 2006, p. 36.) Père Humbert’s nuance amounts to a reiteration of the old

belief that Essene sectarians inhabited Kh. Qumran, with the enigmatic qualification that the main body of these Qumran-Essenes actually preferred to live outside the precincts of the claimed settlement. This confounds the original theory, itself still not demonstrated by actual evidence, with further hypothetical additions likewise devoid of an empirical basis. In its own way, Humbert's formulation is in the nature of an imaginative apologetic effort to substantiate the essence of the Qumran-Essene theory developed by the Ecole Biblique's Père de Vaux in the 1950s and '60s

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Père Humbert's watered-down version of the de Vaux theory, offered without a semblance of proof, is emblematic of attempts to produce but a single genuine Qumran artifact that might once and for all actually demonstrate a sectarian habitation at that site. The original initiative in this direction was the 1997 claim, presented in a news release of the Israel Museum dated 14 April 1997, to the effect that a Qumran ostrakon included the Hebrew word *Yahad* (the term designating a brotherhood group whose ideas appear in several texts discovered in the caves). The museum asserted in its news release that this was

“the first archaeological proof for the traditional claims of Scroll researchers who are of the view that a connection exists between the Qumran site and the Scrolls found in nearby caves.”

Precise palaeographic examination of the claimed word, however, has never substantiated its presence in the ostrakon's text; nor has the word been found to date on any other of the ostraca discovered at Kh. Qumran. Père Emile Puech of the CNRS, well known for his many editions of Qumran texts, acknowledged as much in his article appearing in the recent Festschrift honoring Prof. Garcia-Martinez — but he does this only to claim that *another word in the same ostrakon* demonstrates a connection with Kh. Qumran. This time it is the word *mebakker* (=inspector) which Puech claims to find at another point on the same ostrakon; and since the same term appears in *Yahad*-related texts as the designated title of that group's overseer, Puech makes the same claim for *it* that his predecessors had made for the term *yahad*. However, in addition to the facts that the ostrakon's own wording locates it as a deed written not at Kh. Qumran but at **Jericho**, and also that the term *mebakker* is not limited in antiquity to Qumran texts, there is likewise no palaeographic evidence that the term *mebakker* actually *appears* in this ostrakon. See my examination of the text and of Puech's claim at:

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

Both the *yahad* reading and the *mebakker* claim are clearly in the nature of imaginative text-readings seemingly inspired by a perceived need to shore up the traditional Qumran-Essene theory of Scroll origins. Devoid of any bona fide palaeographic, documentary, or historical support, however, these claims have left the failed 1997 assertion of the Israel Museum in fact to mean that that the museum's

collaborators have until now identified no archaeological proof whatever demonstrating an intrinsic bond between Kh. Qumran and the Scroll caves.

(The Brown Symposium article by Dr. James Strange —the scholar responsible for locating this virtually radioactive potsherd — appears to reflect an uncertainty on his part as to what to make of it; cf. “The 1996 Excavations at Qumran and the Context of the New Hebrew Ostrakon,” *op. cit.*, pp. 41-54. Nowhere in his article does Dr. Strange discuss the character or significance of the ostrakon itself — a fact that may be reasonably attributed to the Israel Museum’s highly questionable claim and its aftermath.)

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In a review of the same Brill volume devoted to the archaeology of Kh. Qumran, S. W. Crawford of the University of Nebraska focuses particularly on the contribution of Magen and Peleg to the understanding of that subject as developed in their monographic article “Back to Qumran” (pp. 55-113 of that volume). Crawford states (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 [2009], p. 436) that

their reconstruction of the site “suffers from a weakness that can be found in every attempt I have read to disprove the Qumran-Essene hypothesis. They refuse to treat the scrolls as archaeological data equal in value to the other archaeological data from the site. [They] ... do not completely ignore the scrolls, but they rely on the easy explanation that the scrolls were hidden in the caves by refugees from Jerusalem and other towns during the Great Jewish Revolt.... This hypothesis ignores important aspects of the scrolls....”

However inadvertently, the reviewer must surely be mistaken in so abruptly assuming the disdainful tone of her critique. The Scrolls are not “archaeological data” as such, but constitute historical, literary, and palaeographic data *discovered* archaeologically (albeit in some cases haphazardly) in caves near Khirbet Qumran. The reviewer’s assertion misleadingly describes the Scrolls as “data equal in value to *other archaeological data from the site.*” (My italics.) The archeological site of Khirbet Qumran, however, can only be mentally merged into a single identity with the caves that harbored the Scrolls — i.e. those caves stretching northward over a mile from a point adjacent to Kh. Qumran — by those traditional scholars who deeply *believe* there was a bona fide organic connection between the two entities. This fact is hardly made clear in Dr. Crawford’s critique. Despite the assertive claim made in her review, the far more serious weakness, found in every attempt to *prove the Qumran-Essene theory*, is that the theory obviously does not rest upon anything like a solid apodictic basis. Dr. Crawford’s apparently wholehearted acquiescence in Père de Vaux’s theory does not make it anything more than a theory expressed prior to the actual recovery of contravening evidence.

The highly problematic formulations of the reviewer serve as an apparent background to her assertion that the Magen-Peleg reconstruction of the site

“suffers from a weakness that can be found in every attempt I have read to disprove the Qumran-Essene hypothesis.”

If one may best understand this assertion as the reviewer's personal way of describing the continuing effort of independent scholars to investigate, by inductive means and on the basis of empirical evidence, the historical significance of the Scrolls and the gradations of verisimilitude that attach to the various theories informing this subject, one can surely perceive no reason for the reviewer's evident concern.

As for the hypothesis of Jerusalem origin of the Scrolls: surely that cannot reasonably be considered what Dr. Crawford calls an "easy explanation" of Scroll origins unless the author of such a peculiar remark is willing to admit that the Qumran-Essene hypothesis constituted, in its time, a much easier explanation. Looking for the source of the Scrolls in the closest nearby site of habitation to the caves was hardly a case of *res severum verum gaudium*. The original theory was formulated in the infancy of Scrolls studies and quickly published in the fifties when, as one can see by going back to the early contributions of de Vaux, Dupont-Sommer, Frank Cross and other writers of that period, only a small fraction of the total evidence had been studied; but the reviewer hardly encourages readers to journey back to that early period. The theory of Jerusalem origin of the Scrolls was first presented as an Albright Institute lecture in Jerusalem in 1970, but not put into published form until 1980 (and not in the "nineteen-nineties" as Crawford mistakenly asserts) — and was gradually formulated on the grounds of specific empirical evidence gathered over a lengthy period of time, and after far more had come to be known about the Scrolls' contents than was available in the 1950s. Although Dr. Crawford appears to be deeply in the thrall of the original Qumran-Essene theory, the present totality of textual evidence reduces by a very large percentage the number of manuscripts that can reasonably be demonstrated to reflect ideas of the Yahad brotherhood, whose recorded beliefs played such an important role in the thinking of Qumranologists during the 1950s and 1960s. Most of the extant texts as known today in their relative fullness do not reflect the ideas of the Yahad brotherhood.

Dr. Crawford asserts, as her main defense of the old theory, that the Scrolls include texts of a sectarian nature; but archaeologically speaking that can mean no more at face value than that those who hid the texts consisted in part of heterodox groups, and there is no reason why anyone should deny the existence of such groups in the first century B.C. and A.D. However, until today no proof has surfaced that demonstrates the hiders of the texts ever lived at Kh. Qumran or wrote and copied manuscripts there. The place of origin of such groups is far more likely to have been Jerusalem — as not only highly competent archaeologists such as Hirschfeld, Magen, Peleg and others, have come to recognize, but also many otherwise traditional Qumranologists.*

Special pleading, however, such as Dr. Crawford's relative to the way certain individual Scrolls were placed in one or another cave, is hardly a satisfactory response to

* (The general fall-back position of these last-mentioned Qumran scholars has been to claim that the presumed sectarians took their texts, both heterodox ones and others, from Jerusalem and "elsewhere," but then (so the claim continues) that they first settled down in Kh. Qumran, wrote and/or copied other scrolls there, and only afterward hid them all in the caves.

these developments. Dr. Crawford states that the theory of Jerusalem origin of the Scrolls “ignores certain aspects of the scrolls,” explaining that they “comprise religious documents almost exclusively, some of which are clearly sectarian in nature.” That in no way implies, however, that the inhabitants of Jerusalem did not include heterodox groups or that they themselves failed to produce and study texts of a spiritual nature.

Hiding behind Dr. Crawford’s claim appears to be the highly popularized notion that the devout Jewish sect of the Essenes sought the spirituality of the desert and eschewed urban life—but Josephus tells us no such desert habitation stories about them. Pliny the Elder knows of Essene refugees who settled in the heights above En Gedi, but according to his account this would have been at a time when Kh. Qumran was firmly in the hands of Roman troops. The finding of Hebrew manuscripts, including those of a spiritual nature, in caves near Kh. Qumran carries no implication whatever that a religious sect once inhabited Qumran itself. What is missing from Dr. Crawford’s peroration is any consideration of the flight of refugees from Jerusalem during the siege or the directions taken by them in the course of that flight, as succinctly described by Josephus. Does none of this matter to traditional Qumranologists in pursuing their historical reconstructions?

Dr. Crawford further asserts that the various literary and/or religious scrolls found in the 11 caves spreading north from Kh. Qumran differ in character from what she terms the “contemporaneous” group of fragments discovered in Wadi Murabba’at, and which consists mostly of legal deeds. The Murabba’at deeds, however, are not contemporaneous with those of the caves near Kh. Qumran, but belong to the period of the Bar Kokhba revolt. The legal deeds found at Nahal Hever, on the other hand, are indeed, as the reviewer states, of the same general period as the Qumran texts—but according to key words in them they were mostly possessed by Jews living in En Gedi and nearby localities who hastily fled to the Nahal Hever area and, as their remains show, never made it to Masada. There is no reason to believe that these refugees had the leisure to gather up literary manuscripts before their flight, assuming they even had them; all they apparently had time to seize were their most essential legal deeds and the clothing on their backs. One can hardly infer, however, that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were in precisely the same situation. Their own flight, first through the underground tunnels of the city and then by way of the wadis descending eastward, led them down to the Dead Sea region. One stream of refugees then moved southward to Masada, while another moved eastward to Machaerus. Josephus describes both flights.

Given the essentials of Josephus’s account, it is quite evident that those refugees heading eastward toward Machaerus first hid many of their literary manuscripts and other possessions in caves and other hiding places situated in the northeastern extremities of the Judean Wilderness, before continuing their flight. From the clear example of En Gedi/Nahal Hever, one may infer at all events that those headed towards Machaerus likewise made efforts to hold on to their most important personal possessions; but the terrain of the Transjordanian fortress, high above the sea and barren for centuries, no longer reveals any traces left by the refugees at that time pressed together, as Josephus writes, in the confines of that bastion.

Dr. Crawford, to be sure, seems not to be concerned with this actual history, but rather merely questions why the cave scrolls “collection,” as she calls it, was “hidden at Qumran and not elsewhere, or in more widely scattered caves of the Judaeen Desert...” By this phrasing, the reviewer seems to have in mind the situation that presented itself at the beginning of Scrolls research, when it indeed seemed that the contents of the eleven caves represented the sum total of the Scrolls phenomenon. However, this early concept has long been vitiated by subsequent discoveries. Scroll fragments of a similar nature to those uncovered in the eleven Qumran caves were not only eventually found at Masada in the early 1970s but, in addition, scholars have long ago called attention to reports of the actual discovery, in both the 3rd and 9th centuries, of Hebrew manuscripts in the vicinity of Jericho.

Of yet more importance was the actual discovery of the Copper Scroll in the early 1950s, with its exacting descriptions of sequestered Temple artifacts, silver and gold ingots, *and scrolls* located, according to the engraved descriptions, in various sites of the Judaeen Wilderness rather than only the area of the eleven caves. Dr. Crawford does not as much as mention either the discovery of the Copper Scroll in Cave 3 or the earlier reports of other discoveries near Jericho. The reviewer refers to the Scrolls found in the caves as a “collection” apparently because of an assumption that they were the library of a single sect or party. However, by now virtually all the texts have been published, and they demonstrably reveal wide differences of belief and practice among the very large number of authors who composed them; so that designating these multifarious writings as a “collection” can obviously confuse readers.

Crawford states (p. 436) that “cave 4, the largest cave, located directly across the Wadi Qumran from the ruins, is a manufactured cave, not a randomly chosen hiding place,” and this may certainly be true; but what possible significance can this have with respect to the problem of the Scrolls’ origins and sequestration unless one believes *a priori* that a sect actually lived there? Khirbet Qumran was certainly an inhabited site during the period of the First Revolt, but the presence of a manufactured cave close by it in no way proves that a religious sect ever occupied this site. Even Père de Vaux recognized its military nature, and it is unfortunate that he and those who worked with him became entangled in a theory that gave birth to mutually contradictory theses having little to do with inductive investigation rooted in empirical evidence. In this way they ended up teaching their students a doctrine from which the latter have been unable to free themselves.*

*On Père de Vaux’s claim that the Copper Scroll is the forgery of a crazed Essene, cf. the specific quotations plus my observations in *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?*, pp. 117- 130 and *passim*. For a summary of the fundamental objections to the Qumran-Sectarian theory and its variations, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 141-143. More recent analyses may be found online at <http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/projects/scr/dss.html>.

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A review of the totality of articles in the Brown volume, by Dr. K. Atkinson of the University of Northern Iowa, may be found in *RBL* 03/2008. Upon analyzing the various categories of presentations included in the conference, Dr. Atkinson concludes that, overall, the Brown volume “reflects the current state of Qumran studies — chaos.”

Dr. Atkinson may possibly have good reason for his characterization as it applies to current opinions being expressed by archaeologists concerned with Kh. Qumran; other readers of the Brown volume, however, may draw a more positive conclusion about the value of the proceedings — namely, that they actually followed laudable academic procedure in allowing the expression of mutually countervailing views on the subject of the archaeology of Khirbet Qumran. In that respect, what is puzzling in Dr. Atkinson’s critique is his silence regarding the omission, in the printed proceedings, of any discussions or debates that must surely have followed the individual speakers’ presentations. Also not alluded to anywhere in his critique is the troubling statement of a conference organizer (as related in J.N. Wilford’s *N.Y. Times* “Science Times” report of 24 Dec. 2002) to the effect that the entire subject of Qumran was so contentious that “some scholars who were invited agreed to attend only if some others of opposing schools of thought were excluded.”

Regarding Dr. Atkinson’s assertion that the Brown volume “reflects the current state of Qumran studies,” it must be emphasized on the contrary that the expression “Qumran studies” implies far more than archaeological investigation. Qumran studies obviously encompass both the palaeography and philology of the texts themselves found within the 11 caves near Kh. Qumran — including of course the Copper Scroll — as well as the analysis and evaluation of any and all other manuscripts (e.g. the scroll fragments of similar content discovered at Masada) and ancient writings (e.g. the works of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus) composed close to the period in which the Scrolls were first composed and thereafter copied. If carried out professionally and with scrupulous fairness, archaeological investigations of the Kh. Qumran site clearly have a scientifically important supportive role in the analysis and evaluation of what, according to the totality of evidence so far attained, now proves to be a ramified *historical* phenomenon. Despite Dr. Atkinson’s interesting method of juxtaposing and contrasting the contributors’ arguments with one another, no reviewer has yet, to the best of my perception, adduced, on the basis of the Brown articles themselves, any actual evidence, archaeological or otherwise demonstrating the existence of an ancient Jewish religious sect at the Khirbet Qumran site, or the likelihood of such a phenomenon having occurred there.

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