

**This article examines a series of false, erroneous, and misleading statements in Dead Sea Scroll museum exhibits. The misinformation can be broken down into four basic areas: (1) erroneous claims concerning Judaism and Jewish history; (2) speculative, arbitrary and inaccurate claims about the presumed “Essenes” of Qumran; (3) misleading claims concerning Christian origins; and (4) religiously slanted rhetoric concerning the “true Israel” and the “Holy Land.” The author argues that the statements, viewed in their totality, raise serious concerns regarding the manner in which the Scrolls are being presented to the public.**

**Norman Golb**  
*Oriental Institute, University of Chicago*

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## **RECENT SCROLL EXHIBITS AND THE DECLINE OF QUMRANOLOGY**

While significant advances have been made in Dead Sea Scrolls research over the past decade, defenders of the traditional “Qumran-sectarian” theory continue to use various publicity tools to push their agenda. These tools include, for example, the recent media campaign surrounding the claim that textiles found in the caves near Qumran “may” demonstrate that the site was inhabited by Essenes — a sensationalist argument that misleads the public with a mix of speculation and presuppositions.<sup>1</sup> The tools have also included museum exhibits where efforts, either overt or subtle, are made to convince the public that the traditional theory is still viable. If we focus merely on the museums, we find that a noteworthy aspect of the exhibits involves the dissemination of certain erroneous and misleading facts concerning Jewish history and Christian origins. I here discuss some of the more obvious distortions, quoting from various exhibits of the past two decades.

### **A. Erroneous claims about Judaism and Jewish history**

The great majority of the museum exhibitions have not only distorted the actual meaning of the Scrolls themselves, but also propagated various erroneous claims about Judaism and Jewish history relevant to the ancient period as a whole. Sometimes this simply involves a failure to provide enough information about historical events that play a

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<sup>1</sup> See Owen Jarus, “Mystery of Dead Sea Scroll Authors Possibly Solved” (LiveScience.com, Nov. 22, 2011). The key presupposition is that an organic connection exists between the inhabitants of Khirbet Qumran and the linen fragments found along with the scrolls in the caves. Great emphasis is put on the fact that the linens are white; but (1) white linens have been found elsewhere; (2) colors fade over time; and (3) the Temple priests are also known to have worn white linens. Thus, the conclusion that the linens demonstrate that Essenes “possibly” wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls is based on arbitrary speculation rather than critical reasoning. The claim being made avoids mentioning Josephus’ description of a “Gate of the Essenes” in Jerusalem. The members of the Essene community in Jerusalem must themselves have favored white dress; thus, even if one assumes that the linens found in the caves near Qumran may have belonged to Essenes, the connection with Qumran is still arbitrary and unproven.

significant role in current research on the origins of the Scrolls. For example, a prominent panel at the 2000 **Chicago Field Museum** exhibit stated, inter alia, that Roman domination of Judea

*eventually led to an uprising by the Jewish population [and that the] ensuing years of struggle culminated in 70 C.E., when the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Second Temple...*

What is missing here is any specific reference to the six-month siege of the city and its inhabitants that preceded its sacking. That actual historical event provides crucial evidence supporting the theory that the Scrolls were removed from Jerusalem libraries and hidden away in caves before or during the siege.

Sometimes the errors are simply incompetent *faux pas*, as when the 1994 **de Young Museum** exhibit audio guide (MacNeil, p. 3, lines 12-13) asserted that after the period of Herod the Great,

*for the next hundred years or so the Qumran settlement remained under Roman control.*

Since Herod died in or close to 4 B.C., the above ineptitude of the presenter would squeeze the Essenes altogether out of Qumran just at the time that the same audio guide was elsewhere describing the Essenes as inhabiting that site *precisely* in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century C.E. Were viewers of the exhibition supposed to come away believing that the Romans lived together with the Essenes at their claimed habitation of Qumran?

Many of the errors, however, present more serious problems. The same audio guide asserted that

*[artistic] images of Biblical scenes were not accepted by **the Jewish tradition**, because they were considered to be a violation of one of the Ten Commandments which forbade graven images (statement of L. Schiffman, *ibid.*, p. 7, lines 19-21).*

This statement paints a most misleading picture, which may well reflect particular faith-based attitudes, but only partially depicts actual historical Jewish tradition. The ancient transjordanian Dura Europus synagogue, for example, includes many different illuminated Biblical scenes, and this tradition was continued by various Jewish artists and communities in the Middle Ages. Even when the misleading nature of the statement was pointed out to them, the de Young Museum curators made no effort to rectify it. The exhibitors should have explained that it was communities following the traditions of Babylonian Jewry, not others, who hyper-literally interpreted the Biblical “graven images” passages.

The panels of the 2007 **Kansas City Discovery Place** exhibit repeatedly put forward historical misinformation, beginning with the assertion that

*Jerusalem and the Second Temple were destroyed by Titus, and the people were again sent into exile, marking the end of the Second Temple period.*

It is impossible to understand how the curators allowed such a misleading statement to appear in the exhibition. While many Jews taken captive during the war were indeed enslaved and sent to Rome, the great majority of the Jewish population of both Galilee and Judaea remained in Palestine and after a brief period following the Revolt were once again granted their internal autonomy. The process of rebuilding both their commerce and culture has been detailed by many historians who have not failed to describe the salient role of several generations of early rabbinic figures (*Tannaim*) in establishing academies of learning and stabilizing the study of Jewish law and culture in Palestine throughout this period.

Instead of describing this remarkable socio-cultural phenomenon of the first three centuries of the Common Era, the curators nullified it. A graphic time-line was presented in the exhibit that made no mention of Palestinian Judaism's survival and reconstruction, but instead left blank this entire part of the history of the Palestinian Jews, including even the Bar Kokhba revolt and the establishment of the Palestinian Patriarchate, and offered only the casual statement (3rd century CE timeline box) that "Rabbi Judah the Prince edits the Mishnah."

According to the same time-line, the

*3rd Century B.C.E... [marked the] completion of the Septuagint.*

This is a highly inaccurate statement. Only the Greek translation of the Torah, or Five Books of Moses, and by no means the Septuagintal translation of the entire Hebrew Bible corpus plus other additions, was completed as early as the 3rd century BC; the rest was completed only in the first few centuries CE.

The time-line also asserted that in the

*2nd Century B.C.E. ... a group settles in Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls are discovered.*

Again, this egregiously misinformed the public. As is by now well known, scrolls have never been discovered within the Qumran site. Furthermore, until the Roman capture of Qumran *circa* 72 CE, there is no material evidence Qumran was held by any other "group" than Jewish forces of the Hasmonaeans and their successors, just as they held various other fortresses of Judaea.

Yet again, the time-line wrongly stated that in the 1st Century CE occurred the

*Canonization of the Ketuvim [= the Biblical Writings (sic!) or Hagiographa].*

The canonization of the *Ketuvim* or Hagiographa (i.e., the third main section of the

Hebrew Bible) could not have been completed before the 2nd century CE, at which time the holiness of such writings as Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes was still being debated by the Tannaitic authorities.

The time-line also inaccurately asserted that in 68 CE

*Roman legions destroy the Qumran settlement.*

The year of destruction of Qumran by Roman forces, considered by Père Roland de Vaux, on the basis of the dating of some coins found there, to have been 68 CE, is far more likely to have occurred after the Romans had taken Jerusalem in 70 CE, according to Josephus' own account of the direction of movements taken by the Roman forces after their conquest of Jerusalem in 70 CE (Jewish War, VII, 163 ff.).<sup>2</sup> Jewish coins of 72 CE have also been discovered at Qumran — a discovery made, however, only after de Vaux passed away, but which his successors have not dealt with. The exhibit's curators apparently insisted upon championing de Vaux's theory without citing any of the contradictory evidence that had emerged during ensuing decades. In doing so, the curators not only misled viewers but also disregarded basic rules of fairness in museum presentations.

In addition to the above, under the rubric "Jewish Sects of [the] ... 2nd Temple period," the Kansas City curators stated that Josephus speaks of "three sects," and then continued:

*The Essenes were separatists and had several different communities, according to Josephus.... They were ascetic (self-denying) and lived in remote locations in order to escape the corruption of the cities.*

Under another rubric ("Diversity of Opinion") the authors nuanced the latter statement:

*Flavius Josephus wrote that (the Essenes) ... were scattered in various settlements.*

This treatment appears to hark back to Josephus's account in The Jewish War, but not also to his Antiquities, where a "Fourth Philosophy" (taken by some scholars to allude to the Zealots) is described in addition to Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. The treatment moreover misstates the description of Josephus who, instead of suggesting that the Essenes "had several different communities" that were "scattered," states that "they occupy no one city, but settle in large numbers in every town." Nor does Josephus ever indicate that Essenes "lived in remote locations ... to escape the corruption of the cities," which remark is, instead, a distorted version of Pliny the Elder's description of a single group of celibate Essenes living above En-Gedi after the Roman destruction of

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<sup>2</sup> The "official" IAA catalogue also misleadingly refers to "the destruction of the site, in 68 CE, at the hands of the Roman legions." No proof exists for this assertion of de Vaux's. According to Josephus, the push of the Roman forces into the Judaean Wilderness did not occur until after the taking of Jerusalem in the summer of 70 CE.

Jerusalem. Josephus explicitly mentions a “Gate of the Essenes,” presumably in the area where Essenes were living, in (pre-destruction) Jerusalem, which was certainly a large city not devoid of corruption. The omission of these facts by the curators was consonant with an apparent effort to convince viewers of the cogency of the idea that Essenes once actually lived in the desert, i.e. at Qumran.

History was altogether eschewed in the 2007 **San Diego Natural History Museum** exhibit catalogue, except at a single point where readers are first informed that some authors have characterized the battle described in the manuscript known as the War Scroll as “highly choreographed,” and then are abruptly confronted with the observation that the

*Judaeans did wage war against the Romans in 66 CE, resulting in a terrible defeat and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE.*

This statement seems to be the only observation of a genuine historic nature that the catalogue’s authors have chosen to divulge to their readers. One finds nothing about the political figures in Judaea during the time that the Scrolls were being written, the various parties, sects, and charismatic figures described by Josephus and the early Rabbinic figures, the influence of Hellenism upon the Palestinian Jews during late Second Temple times, or any other of the major historical topics and events germane to that period in Jewish history. The lack of any reasonable explanation for this puzzling omission is an embarrassment, particularly in light of the large amount of empty space in the catalogue.

In a class by itself is the claim found on a plaque in the exhibit currently taking place at New York’s **Discovery Center**, informing visitors that most Jews, during the time the Scrolls were being written, “were barely literate.” The Discovery Center exhibitors fail to supply any information as to their sources for this claim. It is based on the unwarranted and dogmatic assumption that the Dead Sea Scrolls were written by a presumed sect living at Qumran, and not by the Palestinian Jews at large.<sup>3</sup> The claim receives comfort from the belief in an “oral law” — i.e., the orthodox Jewish belief that rabbinical law was given simultaneously with the written Biblical law to Moses by God on Mount Sinai, and that it was then passed down “orally” from one generation to the next and put in writing only by the final generation of the Tannaitic rabbis (third century C.E.). Unfortunately, discussion of the legendary nature of this belief is often avoided by scholars.<sup>4</sup> The claim of Jewish illiteracy, based on dogma and faith rather than science, is highly dubious and should not have been featured in a public exhibition of the Scrolls.

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<sup>3</sup> The assumption figures, for example, in C. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 81, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001). On p. 426 of that work, the author asserts: “... the practice of literary composition and writing amongst the Qumran group cannot be considered representative of contemporary Palestinian Judaism as a whole.” The assertion begs the question, since no one has ever demonstrated that any of the Scrolls were written by a group living at Qumran, rather than by multiple groups living in an urban center: Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., the words of L. Schiffman (who is acting as consultant for the Discovery Center exhibit), in *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls* (The Anchor Yale Bible: Doubleday: New York, 1994), xix: “In the Jewish tradition, the Oral Law — the unwritten, revealed tradition — bridges this chasm. This Oral Law, when it was finally committed to writing in the third century or later in a text known as the Mishnah, preserved traditions from a much earlier period.” The author initially acknowledges that the idea is a “tradition,” but then slides into treating it as a fact, without explaining to his

## B. Claims about the “Essenes” of Qumran

Regarding the Essenes themselves, already the 1993 **New York Public Library** exhibit asserted that

*during this Hasmonaean period, many religious groups were formed, some of which bore the seeds of Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity. One of these groups was the relatively small group called the Essenes, who eventually seceded from mainstream Judaism.*

It is unknown, however, if the Essene communities were actually formed during the Hasmonaean period rather than subsequently to it. According to Maccabees (I. 12.35), it was the group known as Hassidim (= pietists) who came to the aid of the Hasmonaean in opposing the Syrians, but we have no evidence of a connection between Hassidim and Essenes. By assuming that the Scrolls were written as early as the Hasmonaean period, the exhibitors were in effect pushing proto-Christian speculation to an earlier period than the known evidence warrants. The exhibitors coupled this misrepresentation with the misleading claim that the Essenes were not simply one of the Jewish parties described by Josephus, but actually “seceded” from mainstream Judaism. The secession claim is based on the unwarranted assumption that the Essenes were actually the group described in the “MMT” text, whose Hebrew idiom belongs to the first century C.E. at the earliest, and which is the only Dead Sea Scroll mentioning a movement of secession.

Later exhibits have provided further misinformation. The 2004 **Israel Museum** exhibition, for example, abundantly quoted Josephus on the Essenes, juxtaposing his statements with certain of those appearing in the “Manual of Discipline” — which latter text, the presenters asserted, was the operative one adhered to by the claimed “Qumran-sectarians.” This gave the impression that Josephus had an intimate knowledge not merely of the Essenes in general, but of the claimed desert “sect.”

In his writings, however, Josephus states only that while in his teens he underwent serious trials studying with Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes; it was with the ascetic hermit Bannus, not the Essenes, that he studied in the desert. Of the Essenes he writes that there were 4000 adherents living throughout Palestine. He never states that Essenes lived in the desert. This silence on the part of Josephus was not as much as mentioned anywhere in the Israel Museum exhibition or its offshoots.

Pliny the Elder had knowledge of a group of strictly celibate Essenes living “among the palm-trees” above En Gedi after the Second Temple had been destroyed, but in quoting him the 2004 exhibitors omitted Pliny’s telling statements about their strict celibacy, their residence above En Gedi, and Jerusalem’s prior destruction. Since the exhibitors also failed to state that no Qumran scroll espouses celibacy, and insofar as they failed to juxtapose Pliny’s statement with the fact that graves of women were found in the

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readers that the legend actually originated as a response to the arguments of early Christian polemicists who sought to delegitimize rabbinical authority by pointing out that the rabbinical laws were different from the Biblical laws.

Qumran cemetery, uninformed visitors had no opportunity to draw reasonable conclusions about the controversial identification of Qumran with the site described by Pliny.

The “official” **IAA catalogue** (2007) of the exhibits gives an even more confusing account. It begins by asserting that the

*Essenes persisted in a separatist existence through two centuries, occupying themselves with study and a communal way of life that included worship, prayer and work. It is clear, however, that large groups of adherents also lived in towns and villages outside the Qumran region.*

The idea that the Essenes “persisted in a separate existence” — i.e., at Qumran — is precisely contrary to Josephus, who is then thrown into the bargain with the contradictory admission that “large groups” also “lived in towns and villages.” Josephus says nothing about the Essenes living a separate existence, and describes them as being located in all the towns of Palestine. The catalogue’s authors fail to cite Josephus’s and Philo’s statements to the effect that throughout the country there were approximately four thousand Essenes altogether.

Yet further confounding matters, the catalogue also asserts that

*the Essenes were separatists, **part of a group** forming an ascetic monastic community that retreated to the wilderness.*

That the Essenes were *part of a larger ascetic and monastic group living in the wilderness* appears to be still another wild new theory. It conflicts with the description of Josephus, who, again, never states that the Essenes lived in a wilderness — but only in various towns throughout Palestine — and who affirms that there were also non-celibate, marrying adherents among them. Such curatorial statements are unworthy of the high standards the IAA should obviously be implementing in its descriptive treatment of the sites and holdings under its jurisdiction.

To make matters worse, the catalogue suggests that the Essenes seceded

*from mainstream Judaism ... when the Maccabean ruling princes, Jonathan (160-142 BCE) and Simeon (142-135 BCE), usurped the office of High Priest — a position which included secular duties — to the consternation of many **conservative Jews**. Some could not tolerate the situation and denounced the new rulers.*

The notion that the Essenes were “conservative” is highly tendentious, and should never have been presented to the public in a governmentally sanctioned museum catalogue. Neither the Yahad brotherhood group described by the authors of the Manual of Discipline nor the Essenes as described by Josephus and others warrants their classification as “conservative.” Qumran text statements concerning the Yahad group

depict that group as far more radical than conservative.

The catalogue also asserts that

*... The retreat of these Jews [the Essenes] into the desert would enable them “to separate themselves from the congregation of perverse men” (Community Rule 5:2).*

This also is pure speculation lacking any documentary or historical basis. The assertion implies the existence in the Manual of Discipline or some other Yahad text of an actual doctrine of retreat into the wilderness, whereas (as already indicated above) there is no such doctrine in the Scrolls, but only a single passage in the Manual that interprets the statement of Isaiah concerning “clearing a way in the wilderness” as referring to the study of the deeper meaning of scripture (in the Hebrew text, *zeh midrash hatorah*).

After engaging in considerable speculation about the “sectarian group” which, according to Père de Vaux, lived at Qumran, the IAA catalogue asserts that its “brief survey” of the Scrolls

*demonstrates the major role played by the Dead Sea Scrolls in our understanding of this pivotal moment in Jewish history.*

Nowhere, however, in its 20-page defense of the traditional theory does the catalogue describe any “pivotal moment in Jewish history.” By reducing the vastly important Dead Sea Scrolls to a sparse and narrow sectarian characterization, the writers in effect deprive them of the major role they should and actually do in fact play in our understanding of the genuinely pivotal moment in that history. That moment consisted, of course, in the effort of Jerusalem’s Jews to hide their writings and treasures as part of their final resistance to Roman rule — a subject which Père de Vaux and his colleagues, to judge by their writings, apparently had no interest whatever in investigating.

### **C. Claims concerning Christian origins**

Another area of speculation and misleading claims in the exhibitions has concerned ostensible links between the putative “Qumran Essenes” and Jesus or Christianity.

Thus, the 1994 de Young guide (Charlesworth, *ibid.*, p. 9, lines 27-30) stated that

*Another link between the Essenes and the early Christians is the concept of a Messiah. Unlike the Christians, the Essenes were looking for the coming of two Messiahs: a priestly one and a lower ranking king. Christians, of course, affirm their belief in Jesus as the only Messiah.*

One of the strange aspects of this very dubious formulation is that the Yahad texts, as has been often acknowledged in scholarly discussion, themselves include contrary passages,



some espousing a belief in one Messiah and some in two. But neither belief actually matches up with Josephus' description of the Essenes. It is also strange that the guide contrasts a Messianic belief of "Essenes" with that of Christians, without mentioning that the concept of a Messiah is found not only in a few of the Yahad texts but in other Scrolls not demonstrably connected with the "Yahad" group and also in ancient Jewish texts far more generally speaking.<sup>5</sup> No scholar has yet demonstrated either that the Yahad brotherhood consisted of Essenes or that the Essenes as described in historical sources believed in the advent of two Messiahs.

This omission in itself would not be so troubling were it not for a yet more remarkable one (Charlesworth, *ibid.*, p. 10, lines 27-30), viz.:

*...the Essenes taught hatred, and they cursed all other Jews ... anyone who was not a member of their community. As we well know, Jesus taught the complete opposite, the concept of love. He even urged people to love their enemies.*

It is true that an opening section of the Manual of Discipline (= Community Rule), having no apparent connection with the subsequent columns, expresses unremitting hatred toward its enemies. That is precisely why more than a few researchers have been unwilling to identify the authors of this text as Essenes, who according to both Philo and Josephus were the most peace-loving of men. Even worse than the presumption that the Essenes wrote the Manual, was the failure of the authors of the guide at this juncture to signal ancient Jewish teachings of the same tenor as those attributed to Jesus — as when, e.g., Ben Sira urged his fellow Jews to "forgive your neighbor the hurt he has done you."

The 2000 Chicago Field Museum panel entitled "The scrolls and Christian writings" also contained wording and omissions that could only have the effect of misleading the public. These include:

*(a) The Dead Sea Scrolls and Early Christian writings contain similarities. Both embody specific religious concepts: the expectation of a Messiah, the importance of baptism, the term "the new covenant"...*

The concepts of baptism and the New Covenant are, however, both already found in the Hebrew Bible; see, e.g., Jeremiah 31.31. By failing to mention the relevant passages, the exhibitors misled the public into thinking that there was something special about the Dead Sea Scrolls that separated their authors from early Judaism in a particular, proto-Christian manner. At the very least, the gross generalizations "the Dead Sea Scrolls" and "early Christian writings embody" should have been toned down to state that "*some* of the DSS..." and "*certain* early Christian writings embody" one or another specific religious concept.

*(b) Yet they have important differences. Although Jesus may have known of the*

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<sup>5</sup> S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and in Later Judaism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956).

*Essenes, the Scrolls contain no evidence for this. Further, Essene dogma tended toward elitism and separatism; Christian dogma was aimed at a broader audience. And finally, the Messiah is described differently: some of the scrolls, for example, mention two Messiahs.*

Here again the “Qumran Sect” theme was wrongly presupposed, and (as at the 1994 de Young exhibition) the assertion about two messiahs egregiously misled the public. Some of the scrolls mention *two* Messiahs, but others mention only *one*. A verbatim admission of this fact in the exhibition, against the background of other doctrinal differences among the Scrolls, would have pointed to their heterogeneity. Under the Jerusalem theory, the several texts containing ideas later found in one or another book of the New Testament simply represent aspects of Jewish thinking in Intertestamental times that eventually made their way quite naturally into the nascent Christianity of 1st- and 2nd-century C.E. Palestine. Here again, the failure on the part of the curators to say anything about these matters seems to reflect a fixation with the belief promulgated by Père de Vaux and his followers.

#### **D. The “true Israel” and “Holy Land” themes**

The “official” IAA catalogue asserts that the apocalyptic visions described in some of the Scrolls

*included the overthrow of the “Wicked Priest” of Jerusalem and, in the dawn of the Messianic Age, the recognition of their community as the **true Israel**.*

The linkage between the “dawn of the Messianic age” and the once rampant idea of a “true Israel” represents a specifically Christological concept having no legitimate place in a Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit intended for the general public. This concept, which forms a prolonged part of the history of anti-Semitism, is nowhere mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and there is no evidence that it existed before being invented by early Church fathers, who claimed that Christians, and not Jews, were the “true Israel.” (See, e.g., Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel*, English translation, Oxford 1986.)

The websites of both the **North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences** in Raleigh, and the San Diego Natural History Museum thereafter also erroneously informed the public that the Essenes saw themselves as the “true Israel.” At the Discovery Center exhibit currently taking place in New York, the claim has been replaced with the equally problematic assertion that the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Christians both saw themselves as the “*ideal* Israel.” The exhibitors go on to state that

*Judaism and Christianity emerge from the same religious tradition — that of ancient Israel — **at the same time**. Both claim to embody “Israel.” Indeed, both initially define themselves as the children of Israel, and not as Jews or Christians.*

This claim (“at the same time”) mirrors the rhetoric of the early Church Fathers,

and can only seem true if the entire history of pre-rabbinic Judaism — that is, of Judaism of the period between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament — is swept aside. The standard term for this period is *Intertestamental Judaism*, referring to the period *following* the lengthy era normally designated as “Ancient Israel,” but the exhibitors have chosen to avoid that term and to replace it with a historically false assertion.<sup>6</sup>

In a similar vein, the catalogue of the Discovery Center exhibit asserts that the scrolls included “the oldest existing copies of the Hebrew Bible, **written when Judaism and Christianity were just taking form.**” It is a basic historical reality, however, that Christianity did not take form until many years after the Scrolls (and all the more so the books of the Hebrew Bible) were written. By suggesting the contrary, the current exhibitors are misleading the public.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever their motivations, the Discovery Center exhibitors have expanded on these claims with several additional inaccuracies, including that

*By the end of the fourth century, after Emperor Constantine’s adoption of Christianity (313 CE) ... the region of Israel had become **predominantly Christian.***

In fact, while specialists in this area remain uncertain about the precise dates, there is broad agreement that the demographic expansion of Christianity in Palestine dates from the middle of the fifth to the middle of the sixth centuries.<sup>8</sup> That majority status, in turn, lasted only until the Persian invasion of the early seventh century (which was followed by the Muslim conquest of Palestine).

The misrepresentation involved here, however, goes far beyond a mere question of chronology: the exhibitors inappropriately present the Christianization of Palestine as a natural religious process, while refraining from mentioning the violent persecutions of Jews sanctioned and encouraged by Constantine and various (but not all) later Byzantine emperors. The persecutors included the fanatical monk Bar Sauma who (during the *fifth* century) complained of the predominant Jewish population in Palestine and marauded around the land with his cohorts assaulting synagogues. Not only have the exhibitors failed to mention the persecutions; they have also failed to describe the tenacity of the Jewish population, and of rabbinical culture, in the face of repeated acts of violence.

Similarly, on a plaque entitled “The Sign of the Cross,” the exhibitors assert that:

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<sup>6</sup> For the standard terminology, see, e.g., G. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); D. Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Among the innovations introduced by Intertestamental Judaism was the emergence and development of Jewish proselytism, which legitimized conversion to Judaism by former pagans and eventually others.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Jews under Roman and Byzantine Rule: the Political History of Palestine from the Bar Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest* (Jerusalem: Magnus Press, 1984), 220ff., 259ff. Here as elsewhere, the Discovery Center exhibitors provide no information as to their sources.

*When Constantine became a Christian and legalized the practice of Christianity in the Roman Empire, Israel became the “Holy Land,” the place of Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection.*

Again, this is not true. As early as in the sixth century B.C., the Judaeen prophet Zechariah used the term “Holy Land” (*Admat Haqodesh*) to designate Israel, and an early rabbinic passage speaks of the Land of Israel as having the highest of the “ten degrees of holiness (*qedushah*).” (See Zechariah 2:16; Mishnah Kelim 1:6-9.) The early Church Father Justin Martyr apparently used the same term, but there is no proof early Christianity as a whole ever considered Palestine a “holy land” as such; rather, Christians considered sites related to *Jesus* to be holy. The Arabic term meaning “the Holy Land” is also used several times in the Koran (see, e.g., Sura 5:21); by the Middle Ages, it had become popular among Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. The simple reality is that both Christians and Muslims adopted an ancient Jewish concept and applied it to their own purposes — a fact distorted by the exhibitors’ statement that Palestine “became” the Holy Land after Constantine’s conversion.

This type of error raises an important issue involving the religious nature of these exhibits in general, which have been taking place for the most part in museums that present themselves as performing a scientific or educational service. The “Holy Land” theme, for example, made itself felt at the 2010 **Milwaukee Public Museum**, where the catalogue asserted that, by means of the exhibit,

*one can experience what life was like in the Holy Land during a pivotal period [and that through seeing] actual documents of the time, visitors will come to appreciate how the words of the Bible have been transmitted over centuries, cultures, and various languages to people today who are reading, writing and believing the same stories and sacred expressions as 2,000 years ago.*

Unfortunately, the Milwaukee exhibit did *not* give viewers an accurate image of the life, thought and experience of the Palestinian Jews either before or during the time that the Dead Sea Scrolls were being composed and eventually hidden away. The actual “experience” created for visiting parents and children by the Milwaukee Public Museum curators may be felt in the translations of Scroll passages and quotations from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and related literature arbitrarily appended in the exhibit catalogue, some of them as headlines in large bold script. The translations used were those of the New International Version published by Zondervan of Grand Rapids, Michigan, which is described in its publications as “an international Christian media and publishing company” and “a founding member of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association.” In the *Revised English Bible* translation (Oxford and Cambridge, 1989), certain of these passages read as follows:

*(Ex. 32.15) Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands.*

*(Deuteronomy 8.19) ... I give you a solemn warning this day that you will certainly be destroyed.*

*(Isaiah 5.11) Woe betide those who rise early in the morning to go in pursuit of drink, who sit late into the night inflamed with wine.*

*(Gospel of Luke 6.9) ... I put this question to you: is it permitted to do good or to do evil on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?*

*(Gospel of Matthew 26.26) Take this and eat; this is my body.*

*(Romans 13.8) He who loves his neighbor has met every requirement of the law.*

Nowhere is the religiously slanted ideology expressed in the exhibits more manifest than in the choice, among the multitude of Biblical passages of possible inspirational value to the general public, of precisely these somber, fearsomely admonitory citations. What is the purpose of displaying the words from the Gospel of Matthew, "Take this and eat; this is my body."? Are these words in any way relevant to the study or appreciation of the Dead Sea Scrolls?

Paradoxically, the religious slant of Scroll presentations has not been limited to American museum exhibits. The "official" catalogue issued by the IAA contains many religiously pregnant statements that are either erroneous or inaccurate, including repeated references to the "Old Testament" (the neutral ecumenical term is "Hebrew Bible") and to Aramaic as the language of "Christ."

The claim that Jesus spoke Aramaic is apparently an inducement meant for only one segment of the viewing public: with the discovery of the Scrolls and the fact that the great majority of them were written in Hebrew rather than Aramaic or Greek, the dubious nature of the old belief, based on several brief Gospel passages, that Aramaic was the chosen language of either Jesus or his early followers has become apparent. In recent years, various New Testament scholars have concluded that the Gospels themselves may actually have been written outside of Palestine. The use of Aramaic by Christians appears to have advanced only gradually with the spread of that language in Palestine during the third and subsequent centuries C.E.

Nor is traditional Christianity the only inducement used to attract unsuspecting members of the public into the web of misinformation created by the exhibitors. Readers of the 2007 **San Diego Natural History Museum** exhibit catalogue were offered a particularly gratuitous case of the "link to modern religions" theme. The authors of the catalogue call an interesting Bar Kokhba deed (not itself one of the Dead Sea Scrolls) that was displayed at the exhibit "the 'Alma' Scroll," and assert that it is of special interest to Mormons because one of the names mentioned in it is "Alma son of Judah," which is

*the oldest known occurrence of this name that is also found in the Book of Mormon.*

To be sure, Yigael Yadin did spell the name this way (“Alma”) in a 1962 publication. However, *the scientific edition* of the Nahal Hever papyri transcribes the term as Allima, indicating that while the vocalization is uncertain, the name may reflect the Aramaic term meaning “the strong one.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of the misleading, no-holds-barred method by which the Mormon-Alma theme is introduced, the catalogue’s authors should obviously have informed readers that while one scholar has transcribed the name as “Alma,” the transcription is speculative and disputed.<sup>10</sup>

## E. Conclusion

The erroneous and misleading claims examined above are so egregiously indefensible, the arguments that support them so arbitrary and speculative, that the question must necessarily arise whether, or to what extent, the exhibitors actually believe them to be true. Otherwise we would have to conclude that they failed to perform the basic research and quality control that it is their duty, as curators, to perform. To the extent that they *do* believe such claims, it is decidedly not to their credit.

Thus, the possibility emerges that the exhibitors have pressed, for example, the “Christian Holy Land” theme not because they actually believe in it, but because the theme is either known or thought to appeal to the imagination of a wide segment of the public. In other words, scientific values appear to have been set aside in favor of the popular enthusiasm that a religiously slanted exhibition could potentially generate. If financial profit is the goal, it may be convenient to put forward all sorts of misleading assertions; but this can only take place at the cost of sacrificing the legitimacy that comes from abiding by the rules of scientific discourse to which educational institutions and their employees are normally required to adhere.

The contrast, however, between scientific values and personal interests also leads to a third possibility. Arguably, the public history of Scrolls scholarship, beginning with the restrictive measures established by Père Roland de Vaux — involving, in part, the exclusion of most scholars from a monopoly that hoarded, for nearly half a century, physical access to a collection of ancient Hebrew manuscripts — has for many years been characterized less by reasoned investigation than by passions generated through the dynamic of social groups.

“Qumranology,”<sup>11</sup> that most speculative of all fields of historical research, itself

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<sup>9</sup> See Y. Yadin, J.C. Greenfield, A. Yardeni and B. Levine, eds., *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters II. Hebrew, Aramaic and Nabataean Aramaic Documents (Judean Desert Studies 3)*, Jerusalem 2002, 45, 47; the work is cited elsewhere in the San Diego catalogue, and was hence known to the catalogue’s author.

<sup>10</sup> For additional problems with the San Diego exhibit and the “Virtual Qumran” show that was shown to the public in the museum’s auditorium, see my articles at [http://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/dss\\_review\\_sandiego\\_catalogue\\_2007.pdf](http://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/dss_review_sandiego_catalogue_2007.pdf) and [http://home.uchicago.edu/~ngolb/san\\_diego\\_virtual\\_reality\\_revised.pdf](http://home.uchicago.edu/~ngolb/san_diego_virtual_reality_revised.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> In using this term, I refer to pseudo-scientific aspects of research on Qumran, e.g., the unwarranted methodological expansion of the Khirbet Qumran site to include the surrounding area of the Judaean Wilderness.

from the start resembled a faith or credo more than a domain of critical inquiry. The personal interests of the monopolists — including, above all, their interest in preventing criticism of their work, and in maintaining the privileges they had earned as members of the “editorial team” — rapidly took precedence over the critical pursuit of the truth. The group’s image, in turn, was cultivated, “packaged,” and projected to a public enraptured with the myth of the charismatic archaeologist and bible investigator who, armed with a spade and bucket, had set out to reveal, from the hidden recesses of history, the wonders of our spiritual origins.

The implications of this history suggest that we may well be seeing, with the institutionalized “packaging” of the Dead Sea Scrolls museum tour, a further sign of the decline and fall of an academic discipline. Erroneous and misleading claims have, during years of lax standards, been casually allowed to substitute themselves for the “morality of science.”<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, as the weakness of the Qumran-sectarian theory has become more and more apparent, those same lax standards have allowed exhibitors to avoid engaging in a critical re-examination of the evidence. Instead, those standards have led towards the substitution of other, equally misleading claims, even as the exhibitors appear to defend the traditional theory only with increasing discomfort.

A particularly insidious example of the substitution is seen at the current exhibit taking place at New York’s Discovery Center, where a virtual abandonment of the usual impassioned defense of the traditional theory appears to be compensated for by the remarkable claims that the Jews of Palestine were “barely literate” and that Judaism and Christianity both emerged simultaneously from a claimed “Israelite” past. In their Times Square appearance, the Dead Sea Scrolls come to play second fiddle to a presentation of “Life and Faith in Biblical Times” (the exhibit’s subtitle) in which the salient thrust is to the effect that Second Temple Judaism, i.e., the Judaism of intertestamental times, was actually just part of a nebulous and undefined *pre*-Judaism. The broader issue that emerges from the many misleading statements featured in the current exhibit is the responsibility of exhibiting institutions in leading the public towards a better understanding of the difference between “faith” and knowledge, passion and reason, ideology and history.

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<sup>12</sup> J. Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals* [La trahison des clercs] (Paris: Grasset, 1958), 80, explains that in its preoccupation with method, scientific morality “constrains us to constantly watch over ourselves, to constantly renounce seductive views, to constantly struggle against facile satisfactions....” (my translation). Qumranology has repeatedly fallen short of Benda’s standards — a particularly serious problem with respect to research in this field undertaken in secular educational institutions.