

Norman Golb

The Mystery of National Geographic's "Dead Sea Scrolls Mystery Solved?" *An Open Letter to the Geographic*

It is always refreshing to read new proposals from scholars about the origin of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but a matter of disappointment and sometimes even dismay to encounter misleading claims about this subject. This is especially the case when the claims in question emanate from so respected an institution as **National Geographic**. It is no pleasure for me to call the attention of readers to the Geographic's relevant assertions, as put on-line just this past week in the context of your current television show entitled "Writing the Dead Sea Scrolls."

1. The Geographic states (p. 1) that "new research suggests many of the ... Scrolls" came not from Qumran but from "elsewhere, and were written by multiple Jewish groups, some fleeing the ... 70 A.D. Roman siege that destroyed the legendary Temple in Jerusalem." Later on (p. 3) you state that an Israeli archaeological team "recently discovered ancient sewers beneath Jerusalem" including artifacts "dated to the time of the siege" — suggesting "that the sewers may have been used as escape routes by Jews, some of whom may have been smuggling out cherished religious scrolls, according to *Writing the Dead Sea Scrolls*."

However, it was not "new research" but first of all the descriptions by the historian Josephus Flavius of the tunnels and of the refugees' flight therefrom —written late in the 1st century A.D.— that specifically led to discussions, already in my 1995 book on the Scrolls, of the multiple groups of refugees and their flight from Jerusalem.

The finds in the tunnel did indeed lead Dr. Reich and his team to propose that it was used as an escape route for refugees via Wadi Qidron to the Dead Sea area — but only in my subsequent article in *The Forward* (24 Oct., '07) was the inference drawn that the refugees were able *to take scrolls with them* as they fled through the tunnels and thereafter to hide them in various caves. As one may readily gather from the description of Josephus, they would then have continued heading eastward to Machaerus and southward towards Masada —in which latter place more scroll fragments, of the same general type and character as those found in the 11 caves near Kh. Qumran, were discovered during the archaeological expedition of Yigal Yadin and his team to that site (1963— 1965).

As far as I can perceive, what you here refer to as "new research" is in reality the growing recognition by many scholars, basing themselves mostly on increasing empirical evidence uncovered earlier on (i.e., approximately from the time of discovery of the Copper Scroll in the 1950s until completion of the archaeological dig under the direction of Dr. Yitzhak Magen early in the present decade) that the traditional Qumran-sectarian paradigm is burdened by irreconcilable anomalies. While you claim that this vaunted "new research" shows that "many of the ... Scrolls came not from Qumran but

from” elsewhere,” this of course implies that scrolls *not* from “elsewhere” were written or copied at Kh. Qumran. This bit of coaxing, however, is unaccompanied by the slightest piece of evidence pointing to the actual production of literary texts of any sort at Kh. Qumran. The belief in such activity at Qumran is merely an unproven dogma of various traditional Qumranologists — a fact which, however, is never as much as hinted at in your article.

2. You quote your informant to the effect that the Scrolls “describe communal dining and ritual bathing instructions consistent with Qumran’s archaeology,” without further elaboration. You refrain from mentioning that the last three groups of professional archaeologists who investigated Kh. Qumran in depth found no such consistency. Instead, what you allow to be entered into your program is the suggestion that findings of one member of the latest team, Yuval Peleg, “are challenging long-held notions of who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls,” and that artifacts “discovered by Peleg’s team...suggest Qumran once served as an ancient pottery factory.” In point of fact it was Dr. Yitzhak Magen, the actual director of the latest dig over the entire course of investigation of the site, who took the lead in challenging those long-held notions, recognized virtually all of the so-called “ritual baths” to be reservoirs, and garnered the support of his excellent *associate* Yuval Peleg in recognizing the fallibility, from an archaeological perspective, of the original Qumran-Essene theory of Scroll origins.

3. On p. 3 of your text, you proceed from discussion of the archaeological investigation of Kh. Qumran to a series of speculations that can only confuse thoughtful readers. The emphasis here is no longer on actual events of the Jewish War, but rather concerns ideas and beliefs of present-day individuals for most of which, contrary to normal reporting practice, no reasons are given, no attributions made, and no proofs offered. The following are some details:

- a. Contrary to the *ad hominem* exegesis regarding the cryptically-inscribed cup found on Mt. Zion, which your informant suggests may have been the work of Temple priests, it must be pointed out that from its actual shape or wording one cannot divine the particular Jewish doctrinal group, if any, to which the inscriber belonged.
- b. No proof has yet emerged demonstrating that priests of the Temple used encrypted messages more than other inhabitants of the capital.
- c. There is no evidence in Josephus or any other ancient source for your suddenly appearing claim (or what your text refers to as an unattributed “emerging theory”) that the Essenes at some time in their history “may have actually been Jerusalem Temple priests who went into self-imposed exile....” The Yahad Brotherhood text known as the Manual of Discipline merely stipulates that Aaronide priests should be given spiritual deference within that order, but the wording of the Manual as a whole indicates that its members were mainly non-Aaronides.

- d. One cannot but ponder the sense of your informant's claim that "it's possible ... that some of the scrolls weren't written at Qumran but were instead spirited away from the Temple for safekeeping." This assertion contradicts both the same individual's earlier statement (p.1) that "Jews wrote the Scrolls,...but it could have been groups of different Jews;" and his later statement (p. 5) that "Essenes or not, the ...Scrolls give us a rare glimpse into the vast diversity of Judaism — or Judaisms — in the first century."
- e. With respect to that last proposed idea, it may be noted parenthetically that what I concluded some fifteen years ago —i.e., considerably before the so-called "new research" —is that the Scrolls are the remnants "of a hoard of spiritual treasures of the Jewish people of Second Commonwealth times" and are "the heritage of the Palestinian Jews of that time as a whole, according to various parties, sects and divisions that served as the creative source ...of a multitude of spiritual and social ideas." If New Researchers now share the same view, should they not acknowledge as much?

4. On p. 4 of your publication you return to an earlier claim with the statement that the "***jars in which the scrolls were found*** may provide additional evidence that the ... scrolls are a collection of disparate sects' texts." From what you later add, it becomes clear that the implication you obviously mean to have drawn from this statement is that while some or many scrolls may have come from "elsewhere," *other scrolls* were indeed found within Khirbet Qumran and were written and/or copied there — and of this there is no actual proof whatever. Please note:

The statement of J. Gunneweg that you quote in this context is about the chemical analysis of pottery, but you bend his conclusion to mean that "**only half of the pottery that held the Dead Sea Scrolls is local to Qumran**" (my italics). The words "that held the Dead Sea Scrolls" are not in Gunneweg's statement. The Y. Magen-led investigation of Kh. Qumran over a decade of time revealed a great amount of pottery, but not a single scroll at that site. Several jars, broken or whole, were found amongst the fragments of approximately 500 manuscripts discovered within the *caves*, and the refugees (whom you describe elsewhere in your text) may have asked the pottery manufacturers of the nearby settlement (i.e., Khirbet Qumran) for some of them, but there is no evidence that the vast majority of the hidden manuscripts were ever put in jars prior to their hiding. The Scrolls were not found in jars. Regrettably, your description — specifically, the words "***the jars in which the scrolls were found***" — is given as a *statement of fact*, which can only have the effect of misleading your audience.

Incidentally, the most accurate and up-to-date analysis of the pottery of Qumran is the detailed study published in 2006 by Rachel Bar-Nathan of the Israel Antiquities Authority ("Qumran and the Hasmonaean and Herodian Winter Palaces

of Jericho”) who concludes by stating that “the pottery from Qumran does not assist in differentiating the community at Qumran from that of other Judaeen sites, especially in the Dead Sea region.” Traditional Qumranologists who persist in the (unfounded) belief that a particular religious sect inhabited Kh. Qumran in antiquity, do not to the best of my knowledge make a point of calling attention to the findings contained in Bar-Nathan’s article.

5. On p. 5 of your publication, you state that the Scrolls, according to certain writers if they “are correct,” might be “not wholly the work of isolated scribes.....”. Since the only “isolated scribes” discussed in your article and otherwise talked about in discussions about the Scrolls are those supposedly once inhabiting Kh. Qumran, the fundamental claim of those certain writers to whom you allude, given the singular addition of the words “not wholly,” is that scribes indeed inhabited Kh. Qumran and wrote or copied most of the Scrolls there. However, despite the fact that your article never admits as much, as of today there still is no bona fide proof that a sect of scribes lived in that desert location.

You then add, confusingly enough and as though dealing with sound-bites, that these same writers claim that “they,” i.e. the Scrolls, may be “*the unrecovered treasures of terrified Jews*” which they “*entrusted to the desert for safekeeping*” (my italics). For this conclusion, unlike the favorite belief of traditional Qumranologists, there is ample evidence in the writings of Josephus as well as in the empirical findings of modern scholars. The above italicized passage, it must be added, is not a sample of “new research” but merely a doctored form of the conclusion expressed in my original 1980 article on the problem of the Scrolls (PAPS, 1980), that

“these manuscripts stem from first-century Palestinian Jews and are remnants of a literature showing a wide variety of practices, beliefs and opinions, which was removed from Jerusalem before or during the siege, brought down to the Judaeen Wilderness and adjacent areas, and there, with the aid of inhabitants of the region, successfully hidden away for long periods of time.”

6. What stands out most enigmatically in this publication of the **National Geographic** is the lack of any treatment precisely of *pertinent geographical and historical characteristics* illuminating the larger environment surrounding the Scroll discoveries. E.g.:

a. While rhetorical efforts keep surfacing in your presentation that appear calculated to justify the Essene theory of Père de Vaux and his disciples and followers, you offer no hint of the presence of the **Hasmonaean tower of Kh. Qumran** that, as even de Vaux acknowledged, had military use. By contrast, the Essenes according to Josephus were not warriors but “the most peaceful of men.” You refrain from stating that not a single Scroll discovered so far espouses celibacy, which — according to Josephus — was practiced by most Essenes.

b. You say nothing of the topography of Kh. Qumran itself, which as Père de Vaux also acknowledged, included a commanding view over the entire northern half of the Dead Sea. You offer not a word about the Herodian and post-Herodian Jewish states or their military exploits and defense efforts.

c. Your staff was in Jerusalem to conduct research, but seem not to have observed, and evidently did not report, that at a certain high point within the city one may look straight down to the Dead Sea itself at the very area where Kh. Qumran, with its tower, is located — pointing to the good possibility in ancient times of direct communication between that site and Jerusalem.

d. Although Josephus describes the flight of masses of refugees not only to Masada but also to the then-Jewish fortress of Transjordanian Machaerus — which lay just across the sea from the approximate areas where the refugees gathered after fleeing the city via tunnels and wadis (cf. e.g. your article, p. 4), — you show no map, and make no mention whatever, of this important geographical site which was evidently capable of direct military communication with Jerusalem via the Kh. Qumran tower.

For all the above reasons, it seems clear that your present text, unlike past **Geographic** articles known to me, does not fairly or even coherently describe the present state of actual knowledge concerning either the very important Dead Sea Scrolls themselves or the site near which they were discovered. You ask the question whether the Dead Sea Scrolls “mystery” has been solved, but if there is a mystery in any of this, it is why the **Geographic** decided to present so confusing a potpourri of Hollywoodian-style ideas rather than concentrating on the sizeable body of actual empirical evidence that now informs this subject.

Cordially,

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