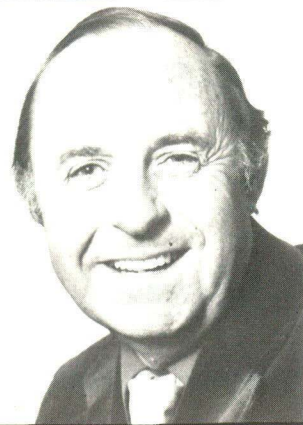

Keeping the Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls



Ever since their sensational discovery in 1947 in a cave near Qumram, Jordan, the meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Essenes has been highly controversial. Yet only 20 percent of these remarkable documents have ever been published. John Allegro claims that there have been inexcusable delays and perhaps even a coverup.

John M. Allegro

“**P**erhaps it would have been better,” said the professor ruefully over his port, “if the Scrolls had been left at the bottom of the Dead Sea.” It would have saved a good deal of contention, certainly. The learned professor, holding one of the senior chairs of the Old Testament in an English university, was bemoaning the fact that at the time, in the fifties, controversy was raging over almost every aspect of these famous documents—on their finding, dating, origin, interpretation, and the manner of their editing—to the exclusion, it seemed to him, of every other subject in the field of biblical studies. He could not believe that they were worth the trouble.

In the past thirty years, the amount of attention devoted to these important documents has declined, not least for want of fresh evidence, since a great deal that was recovered from the caves has yet to appear in edited form. But the professor was wrong: The Dead Sea Scrolls were, and are, worth the trouble. However, the essential consideration in any piece of original research is that the inquirer wants to know the answer, and, unhappily, many of those first charged with the study and interpretation of the Dead Sea Scrolls were interested in only part of the answer, or were fired less with enthusiasm for seeking completely new perspectives on their subject than with countering claims that what had come from the dust of the caves necessitated a radical reassessment of traditional views on the nature and origins of Christianity.

Nevertheless, there have been and are real problems in the editing and interpretation of the scrolls. First, as with so many of the great archaeological discoveries of the past, the initial find was quite accidental. In 1947, a young Arab shepherd had followed a straying animal from his flocks up a steep cliff on the western side of the Dead Sea. He came upon a cave con-

taining several tall earthenware jars, in which were seven parchment scrolls in varying states of preservation. The largest turned out to be a copy of the biblical book of Isaiah, dating probably to the first or second century before the turn of the era, a thousand years or so older than any Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament then known. Exciting though this discovery was, the Isaiah scroll was not the most important of the documents from that cache. Included also was a treatise that its American editors called the “Manual of Discipline”—the rules for the internal government, doctrines, hymns, and prayers of a Jewish sect known from history as the Essenes. Most of what had been hitherto understood about this fringe group of Judaism had come from the writings of early historians like the first-century Josephus, Philo of Alexandria, and the natural historian Pliny the Elder, but this was the first original evidence for their doctrines and discipline that had been seen. The discovery was the more welcome because archaeologists had always maintained that no really old manuscripts would ever be found in Palestine, since they could not have survived the damp climate prevailing in that country. The experts, of course, had overlooked the extremely dry western fringes of the Dead Sea, deep in the great Rift Valley. With an average rainfall of some two inches a year in that area, the interiors of the deep limestone caves are as dry as any Egyptian desert. When systematic searches began to be made along the coast after the shepherd’s sensational discovery, it became apparent that this part of the Judaean Wilderness was a veritable treasure-house of antiquities, and not only of early manuscripts, but of wooden artifacts dating from Chalcolithic times, 3000 to 4000 B.C.E.

But the accidental nature of that first find meant that, for many valuable months, nothing was known of the discovery in the outside world, and the manuscripts and accompanying archaeological evidence were dispersed, making certain dating more difficult and allowing the widest range of speculation about the provenance of the scrolls. When the cave itself was rediscovered and searched and the manuscripts brought together and edited, the evidence had to be separately assessed in an unhappy country sorely divided politically and, in the most crucial period, militarily. For this was the time of the establishment of the State of Israel and the tragic division of Palestine into warring factions. Three of the seven scrolls from the shep-

John M. Allegro was appointed the first British representative on the international editing team called together in 1953 to edit a newly discovered cache of Dead Sea Scroll fragments. In 1961, he was appointed by H. M. King Hussein as honorary adviser to the Jordanian Government on the Dead Sea Scrolls. His many books include the recently published Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth (Prometheus Books).

herd's cave had been taken into custody by a professor from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; the other four were smuggled from Jordan by an ecclesiastic and sold in New York for a quarter of a million dollars, and only then taken back to rejoin their fellows in the Israeli side of the divided city. Meanwhile, the Bedouin tribesmen of the Dead Sea area had been alerted to the potentialities of their old grazing lands as a rich source of antiquities, and they went scroll-hunting in earnest. Soon other caves were found near the original one, yielding scraps of parchment and papyrus that the Jordanian authorities with their very limited funds had to buy into safety, ever mindful that they could be too easily smuggled from the country and perhaps lost forever. The biggest cache of all was recovered by the Bedouins in 1952, and, to the chagrin of the archaeologists, it was found only a stone's throw from the excavations they had been supervising.

When the shepherd's cave was located by the Jordanian authorities—itsself an arduous and time-consuming process, the principals initially involved in the recovery and dissemination of the first scrolls having, by oversight or design, omitted to inform the antiquities department—the archaeologists set about looking for other material remains of the owners of what appeared to be an important library. A mile or so away from the first cave were the tumbled and dust-strewn remains of an ancient settlement, long-noticed but never before investigated. This site was excavated over the next five seasons and turned out to be the Essene monastery whose existence by the shores of the Dead Sea had been noted by Pliny in the first century. The workmen employed for the excavation included local Bedouin shepherds. Showing more resourcefulness and imagination than their employers, they searched the immediate vicinity in their spare time and in 1952 found a chamber artificially hollowed out of the marly plateau on which the settlement was sited. In the absence of the archaeologists, the Bedouins scrabbled in the dust chamber floor and soon came upon tens of thousands of manuscript fragments of parchment and papyrus—the remains, as it subsequently transpired, of some four hundred different documents of the Essene library. In this case, presumably because danger from attack threatened the monastery, the inhabitants had torn up their precious scrolls and thrown them into the chamber they had previously prepared, perhaps for just this kind of emergency, and left them to rot. So while the first scrolls were comparatively well preserved, having been stored in jars and wrapped about in linen cloths for the intervening two thousand years, these small fragments, many no larger than a fingernail, have had to be individually cleaned, photographed, painstakingly pieced together as far as possible, identified, although usually out of literary context, and then edited for publication.

Clearly the work was more than could be accomplished by one or two scholars, and it was decided by the Jordanian authorities that an international team of editors (of which I was a part) should be called together to work in Arab Jerusalem for as long as it took to prepare this new, exciting cache for publication. They knew it would take several years, but no one then guessed that the work would drag out for three decades and that by 1984 only a small part of the material would have

been published. Many different factors have caused this delay, not the least being that not all the team members have shown as much enthusiasm for distributing the texts in their charge as quickly as the rest of the scholarly world might reasonably expect. Also, although the eight of us ranged in our religious affiliations from Jesuit to Lutheran Protestant to myself, an unbeliever, no Jews were present, since they of course would not have been politically acceptable in a Muslim country at that time. So the team was from the first philosophically, religiously, and denominationally unbalanced, where perhaps a wider spread of faiths or allegiances might have introduced some measure of competition and urgency into what has become an altogether too leisurely process.

The excuses now being advanced to explain the unacceptable delay in the publication of some 80 percent of the fragmentary material include the political state of the country since 1967, when the Israelis took over East Jerusalem and could determine the fate of antiquities remaining in Jordanian territory west of the Jordan and the Dead Sea. In fact, the Israeli authorities permitted the work of editing to continue in Jerusalem. Only I was barred from returning, but not, as far as I am aware, by the Israelis but by the then editor-in-chief, the late Father Roland De Vaux. I had, in any case, already completed the major part of my work, and had published the most important documents in my section in preliminary form over the years since 1953 in the learned journals. A year later, in 1968, my whole group appeared in its definitive edition in the Clarendon series.

It now appears, from a recent broadcast interview by Professor Yiggaël Yadin, former deputy Prime Minister of Israel, that, following the Six-Day War, he had been under considerable pressure by his academic colleagues to defy international conventions and seize the scroll fragments from the Rockefeller archives in order to hand them out to Jewish scholars to edit and publish. He resisted these attempts and made an agreement with De Vaux to allow time for the original team to complete their work. He now wonders whether this was an overgenerous act on the government's part and feels that the impatience of his friends cannot be restrained much longer. In fact, from my own observation, the fragments have periodically been brought over into East Jerusalem for much-needed conservation treatment, even exhibited in the so-called Shrine of the Book museum devoted to the display of the scrolls in Israeli hands.

Much has been said about the inevitable delays caused by the physical difficulties of our work. It is true that working with such small pieces of parchment, and even more with tiny squares and rectangles of disintegrated papyrus documents, is very time-consuming and often extremely tedious and eye-straining. Many of the parchments had over the centuries become blackened with age, often eaten at the edges by worms, or still showed the rough handling they received when they were wrenched asunder by the Essenes themselves, who were fearful of their secrets being revealed to unauthorized eyes. The result was that we could often be sure that the piece was inscribed at all only by studying infrared photographs to penetrate the blackness of the skin. Even when, through matching scribal hands and general context, we could be sure that we had adjoining parts of this massive jigsaw puzzle, the depreda-

tions of worms or skin warping, made edge-to-edge joins impossible.

So sustained work on the fragments was necessary, and most of us were only able to come to Jerusalem to work in the room that we called the "Scrollery" at the Rockefeller Museum as and when other duties and finances permitted. In this last respect there was a fund available, instituted by the Rockefeller trustees, but as time went on this ran short, or so we are told, and in any case it was intended to subsidize the cost of publication of the definitive edition of the texts as well as to pay traveling expenses. I myself had only one such grant from this fund and was otherwise subsidized on one occasion by a subvention from a British educational foundation and at other times from my own meager resources, which were fortunately enhanced at the time by royalties from a successful book on the scrolls published by Penguin Books in 1956. My American colleagues found their universities more generous in financing overseas travel and study, and of course the Catholic fathers experienced no difficulties in undertaking protracted periods of attendance at their work and were boarded in nearby religious institutions for as long as they wanted. In any case, when we were away from Jerusalem we took with us the infrared plates of our documents so that editing could continue at home away from the originals. It cannot therefore be maintained that shortage of funds really accounts for the long delay in publication.

Of course, there are great difficulties in working with texts of works never before seen, or versions of previously known writings differing in language or textual tradition from the norm. For instance, works of the Pseudepigrapha—apocalypse-like parts of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Enoch, and Jubilees, well known in later translations, such as Greek, Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, and so on—have now appeared in the Essene library for the first time in their original Hebrew or Aramaic. These fragments have first to be recognized for what they are by careful comparison with known translations, a major undertaking in view of the hundreds of documents represented in the cache and the fragmentary nature of the new exemplars. Even biblical texts that, in comparison, might be thought more easily identified pose their own problems. Our concordances are, of course, based upon the received, or standard (Massoretic) text of the Bible, the medieval exemplars of which have hitherto been our earliest recensions. But it is now clear that before the end of the first century of our era, when this standard form of the text was designated the "official" version and other variant forms allowed to go out of use, there existed other recensions that had free circulation. One good reason for believing this prior to the discovery of the scrolls was the existence of significant variants in the Greek edition of the Old Testament, the so-called Septuagint, the Bible of the early church, and of Jews in the Greek-speaking communities around the Mediterranean for whom the translation had been made. It has always been recognized that this Greek version probably presupposed an original Hebrew text differing from the received edition that is the basis of our Hebrew Bibles. That this is certainly so has now been dramatically demonstrated by the recovery from the Essene library of biblical fragments that show differences never before seen or supported by later translations. Clearly, in such cases our concordances

are of limited use, and a great deal of patient work and ingenuity have to be employed in identifying chapter and verse, or even in deciding whether the fragment under scrutiny is biblical at all.

Another group of writings from the caves, those for which I had responsibility, present an intriguing mixture of biblical text and commentary: A few words from the prophets, for instance, are followed by a passage of exposition in Essene terms, often fancifully interpreting (or, we might say academically, misinterpreting) the scriptural words to give some valuable insight into their expectations for the future, or explanation of the past, in the history of the sect, or of its encounters with spiritual and political enemies.

Now this kind of study is exciting to the specialist scholar, but also very time-consuming. There has to come a point in our work where we have to admit that, for the purposes of disseminating the texts of the documents as quickly and efficiently as possible, such detailed treatment by the first editors is unnecessary. What our colleagues around the world really want at this stage are the infrared photographs, a transliteration of the script into printed form (always with the proviso that we may be reading the script wrongly, for the quality of handwriting varies considerably and the surface of the skin is often too rubbed or broken to make identification of the letters quite certain), and our suggested translations where they may be necessary or helpful. There is some evidence that not all of us see our work quite this simply; one suspects that some members of the team are reluctant to let the world see the precious texts in their charge before they have extracted every scrap of information they can from them to swell the initial presentation of their material. This can only mean that their definitive editions will be overburdened with their doubtless valuable, but not entirely indispensable, comments, and publication must be almost perpetually delayed. This may be human nature in conflict with scholarly objectivity, but it is extremely frustrating to other specialists who have been waiting thirty years to further their own research and have been unable to complete it for want of new information they know to be lying unpublished in some desk drawer until the appointed editor can spare enough time from his teaching or other official duties to make the final, definitive statement on the new text.

Such monopolistic tendencies in the academic world are not, of course, new. Something of the same regrettable possessiveness occurred in the story of the treatment accorded the comparably important Gnostic documents from Nag Hammadi in Egypt, which were discovered in 1945 in not dissimilar circumstances from that attending the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Again, in the past century, a cache of important medieval Hebrew documents was found in the *genizah* or storeroom of an old Cairo synagogue. Their editor is said to have made a condition of his depositing them in the library of a British university that no one but he should have access to them, not only while he was actively working on their editing but for fifty years after his death! To the eternal shame of that institution's trustees, they apparently accepted this outrageous condition, with the result that the hoard, far more than could ever be handled by one scholar, however prolific, is still not fully published or is ever likely to be.



A fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

In the case of the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is a further consideration that cannot fail to be far from the minds of disinterested observers. It is well known that these documents are of most importance for the light they can throw upon the origins and nature of early Christianity. The Essenes had long been suggested as the possible "missing link" between normative Judaism and the church, and examination of their firsthand records indicated from the first that this would be their main interest, and also their most controversial. The late Edmund Wilson, in his series of articles for the *New Yorker* magazine in 1955, suggested that the church might be reluctant to accept conclusions from the new studies that detracted from the originality and thus the uniqueness of the faith and that this would affect the Christian attitude toward the discoveries and their editing. I well recall the heated reaction of my ecclesiastical colleagues in the Scrollery when these articles appeared. It seemed to them an insult to their scholarly integrity that they should wish to withhold information from the documents on which we were working or that they could be anything but enthusiastic for new information or ideas about the origins of their religion. Besides, they were at one in rejecting the very idea that anything in the scrolls could possibly conflict with the revealed truth as dispensed by the church. That was, indeed, the official line taken by the Vatican, in order to quiet the fears of the faithful about the new finds from the Dead Sea.

Wilson's suggestion that the church was none too happy to see fresh, uncontrolled evidence appearing on the admittedly shadowy background of Christianity proved in the event a remarkable stimulus to general interest in the scrolls. Many speculations were advanced to account for the significant parallels that were being adduced between the documents and the New Testament: that Jesus had been himself an Essene; that John the Baptist had been a member of the Dead Sea community and passed on Essene ideas to the Nazarene master and his friends; that the story of Jesus owed much to the history of the Essenes' own leader, the so-called Teacher of Righteousness, and so on. The church's reaction to all such suggestions was in general predictable: The parallels adduced, even when substantiated by their own scholars, were interesting but of limited consequence, for the differences were far greater. As far as the "Teacher of Righteousness" was concerned, he was not regarded with the awe accorded Jesus by the church, was not

claimed to be the Messiah by his followers, let alone the Son of God, and had not risen from the dead. Nothing in the Gospels could be said to reflect the person, character, or fate of the Essenes' Teacher.

About that time, a fresh consignment of scroll fragments was received in the Scrollery from the Bedouins, part of the cache from the underground chamber by the monastery. Among them were several large pieces, obviously part of a biblical commentary on the Book of Nahum, and thus falling into my section for editing. They contained the first of the very few references we have seen to actual historical events. The Essenes were not, as a rule, interested in the history of their time or of their immediate past: Their eyes were set on the future, and the coming of their Messiah, or Christ, and the Millennium. The particular event noted in the scroll was the revolt against the hated priest-king Alexander Jannaeus and his terrible revenge against his own Jewish subjects, when, in 88 B.C.E., he had several hundred of them crucified before him under the horrified gaze of the victims' wives and children. Clearly these happenings had affected the Essenes greatly, to the extent that they could regard them as one of the "signs of the times" of cosmic significance. I felt that this was too important a document to be left to the final publication of my section, and I gave it preliminary exposure in a specialist journal as soon as possible. I was also able to include the gist of it in my Penguin volume previously mentioned, then in preparation, and to speak of it in a broadcast I gave on a British radio station, coupling the crucifixion reference to the suggestion that the reason for the Essenes' interest in the awful event could most probably be explained by assuming their own participation in the revolt against Jannaeus and the possibility that their Teacher had, like Jesus, been crucified. We knew from references elsewhere in the scrolls that the Teacher had been persecuted by his enemies and that on one occasion, a Day of Atonement, he had been dramatically confronted by his arch-enemy, the so-called Wicked Priest. This suggestion added so much fuel to the fire of speculation about parallels with the Jesus story that while I was in England my colleagues in the Scrollery banded together to write a letter to the *London Times* dissociating themselves from my thesis, and denying that anything in the document I had edited gave any reason for linking Jesus with the Teacher, or even that it provided evidence for his death by crucifixion. The division of interests between myself and my religious colleagues could not have been more forcefully illustrated; and it did little to quell the suspicions aroused by Edmund Wilson that the church was at the least touchy, if not paranoid, over the newly recovered evidence from the Dead Sea caves.

I continue to publish the most important pieces of my section of documents in advance of the final, definitive volumes. My colleagues published very few, though urged to do so from all sides. In 1952, an extraordinary new discovery was made, this time by the archaeologists themselves. It comprised several parchment scraps from the Essene library found in a cave to the north of the monastery, and with them, in two pieces, a scroll that had been inscribed, quite uniquely, on copper sheets and riveted at the edges in imitation of the sewn skins in a

normal parchment scroll. The copper had completely oxidized over the two millennia it had lain in the cave, and for three years the brittle scroll lay in a showcase in the Rockefeller Museum, defying all attempts to open it by normal means and remaining the subject of much speculation about its contents. At length, I suggested to the director of Jordanian Antiquities that in my own university the necessary enterprise and technical skills might be found to cut the scroll open, since it was clear that there remained no other way of ascertaining its message. The Jordanian government agreed to the attempt, and in 1955 and 1956 the pieces were brought to England and operated on in the then College of Science and Technology (now the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology). I supervised the work on the behalf of the Jordanian government, and, as the strips of cut scroll came from the operator, I read the message concealed for two thousand years. It was, in fact, an inventory of buried treasure—the last thing we expected to find in a community dedicated to voluntary poverty. Almost certainly the treasure referred to was the wealth of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, hidden away by the Zealots who had control of the sanctuary before the Romans arrived in C.E. 70 and destroyed it by fire. The hiding places were in various locations in and around Jerusalem and included, in my opinion, the site of the Essenes' own settlement by the Dead Sea. Indeed, the archaeologists had earlier found, buried under the floor of one of the monastery rooms, a cache of three jars filled with silver coins in mint condition.

I reported my readings immediately to the antiquities department in Jordan and to my colleagues in the Scrollers. There came no response. Eventually, I was told formally that a decision had been made to release news of the successful cutting operation, but that I was on no account to reveal to the press anything about the contents of the strange document. Apparently the archaeological authorities were fearful lest the news should stimulate local treasure-seekers to dig up every site in Palestine looking for the Jews' buried treasure. It seemed to me to set a very unwise precedent to deliberately withhold information about the contents of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, however religiously uncontroversial. However, six months after the scroll's opening, news of its contents was released, coupled with what seemed to me an arbitrary and insufficiently supported opinion that the inventory was the work of imagination, inscribed (presumably at considerable cost in materials and effort) by a "fanatic"; it was said to have no historical or actual relevance and was of comparatively little importance. The responsibility for the press release was given to the technician concerned with the opening, and once again I was told to stand well back and contribute nothing to the official statement.

One cannot help wondering, then, with that precedent set on a matter involving only apprehensions about the safety of archaeological sites, whether such restraint might not be far more readily shown by ecclesiastics in the publication of documents relating to religiously sensitive issues. This is not to say that such concerns necessarily lie behind the thirty-year delay in the publication of the scroll fragments. Nor should we accord any significance to the interesting fact that the Catholic scholar responsible for most of the unpublished, nonbiblical, and thus

theologically most interesting material latterly obtained a dispensation from his church to leave the priesthood and marry. The inexplicable delay is, nevertheless, bound to raise the same questions posed by Wilson at the start of the scrolls' story. And with the unhappy record of the church for destroying documents and whole libraries of which it disapproved, as well as its predilection for controlling the reading habits and opportunities of the faithful, one can only continue to be apprehensive about the church's attitude when religiously sensitive information comes into its hands, as could very well happen under the kind of circumstances attending the discovery of the Nag Hammadi documents and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

It is customary now for scholars to brush aside suggestions that there is anything in the still unpublished material that could prove embarrassing to the church. That view was recently put in a broadcast by the Jewish custodian of the Israeli scrolls in Jerusalem, who has seen the fragments in the Rockefeller Museum, even if he has not studied them all in detail. He assured his listeners that there was nothing there that was not already generally known. Yet I have recently published in an appendix to my recent book *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth* a document that has never figured in any review of the contents of the cache and which I for one consider of first importance for an understanding of the Essenes, the meaning of their name, their therapeutic practices, and for the significance of the title Cephass accorded Peter in the New Testament. It so happened that although this piece was not in my original section of material and was therefore not for me to include in my definitive volume, I had arranged some thirty years ago with the Catholic scholar referred to previously to publish it provisionally if the occasion offered in return for transferring into his section a very much longer text that fell between our respective genres of literature. I had long been aware of the importance of this small piece, but fully expected my colleague to publish it earlier, either in provisional form or in his long overdue definitive edition. Since I needed its evidence to supplement the thesis of the book, I decided to present it in this publication, along with a short philological commentary and infrared photograph. So one may well inquire that if this small but significant document has remained unnoticed for so long, how can any person who has not studied in the fullest details every one of the several hundred works lying unrevealed in that large group talk so dismissively about what importance may or may not be attached to them? The fact is that no one but the appointed editor has had the opportunity to submit the scroll fragments to such intensive examination as would warrant any assumption about their significance, and even then a fresh eye can often detect a meaning of vital relevance unsuspected by one to whom the text has become perhaps over familiar.

Perhaps there is no way of ensuring that purposeful suppression of information from new discoveries does not ever happen in the future. At least, the public should be aware of the dangers that exist, even in this supposedly enlightened age, and by demanding the prompt publication of all newly acquired documents as soon as reasonably possible, and the free and unrestricted discussion of all matters affecting the issues involved, we might do something to ensure that truth is not made subject to the strictures of any one interested party. ●