

## The Dead Sea Scrolls and New Understanding of the Bible<sup>1</sup>

Torleif Elgvin

### Introduction

The Dead Sea Scrolls are the most important discovery of ancient texts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with repercussions for our understanding of early Judaism, the birth of Christianity as well as the Old and New Testament.

Most of the scrolls were found by Bedouin who sought around in the Judean Desert for ancient artefacts they could sell. The scrolls were found between 1946 and 1956. The archeologists came in on the heels of the Bedouin, trying to save as much as they could after the Bedouin's uncontrolled excavations. A few caves with remnants of ancient scrolls were subsequently found by the archeologists. The archeological excavations of the site of Qumran and the caves close to it in 1949–52 has given important data for interpreting both the site, the artefacts found there, and the texts.

In the Qumran caves one found remnants of 950 ancient book scrolls, written between 250 BC and AD 60, they can also be designated the “Qumran scrolls.” In caves elsewhere in the Judean Desert one found other documents, both biblical scrolls and letters from the second Jewish revolt against the Romans in AD 132-136.

### The great Isaiah scroll

The most famous of the scrolls is the large Isaiah scroll, 8 m long and comprising the full biblical book of Isaiah. This is the only biblical book preserved in entirety. But it is not exactly the same biblical text we know from Jewish or Christian Bibles today. Its two scribes from the early first century BC felt free to change the text in details where they saw it fit. At least once they changed the text to make a messianic interpretation more clear. The text is also full of corrections and additions in the margins, most of these added by later scribes.

Earlier scholars designated the great Isaiah scroll as a vulgar text, linguistically interesting because of the glimpse we got of spoken Hebrew around 100 BC. But it was not viewed as a high quality textual witness. Only a few times was a textual variant found here viewed as the more original (compared to the medieval codices) and used as basis for modern translations.<sup>2</sup>

But I have some unpublished news: the last couple of years my scholarly team has made precise mineral analysis by scanning small pieces that fell off this scroll in 1949.<sup>3</sup> This

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on lecture at Institute for Biblical Studies, Hunan University, September 19, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> One example is Isa 53:11, relating to the Servant of the Lord. The traditional text has “Because of his soul's anguish he shall see, he shall be satisfied in his understanding.” The Isaiah scroll contains the additional words “light and,” also found in the Septuagint, which gives us a better and more original text: “Because of his soul's anguish he shall see light and be satisfied in his understanding.”

<sup>3</sup> See Torleif Elgvin (ed.), *Gleanings from the Caves. Dead Sea Scrolls and Artefacts from The Schøyen Collection* (London: T&T Clark, 2016).

mineral analysis has given us new information about the techniques of preparing parchment in antiquity, techniques that were more advanced than we had anticipated—similar to those known from the middle ages.<sup>4</sup>

The parchment of the Isaiah scroll is of remarkably high quality, it must come from the best parchment workshop in ancient Judea. With so expensive parchment the text written on it must have been important too. The text was consciously written by two learned scribes and was highly valued in the Qumran community. These scribes felt free to update and slightly change the biblical text, since (according to their understanding) the holy spirit was poured out in their midst, making them close to direct successors of the biblical authors.

Another indication that Qumran was no peripheral site is lead that my team has identified both in the ink and the parchment of some fragments. Lead is not found naturally in Israel, but was used in water pipes in the Graeco-Roman world. Water pipes that utilized important lead have been identified in a few locations in Judea. The presence of lead in these fragments (the oldest of these is from around 125 BC) suggests that they belonged to scrolls that were prepared in basins fed by leaden water pipes. This feature points to central locations in Judea as places where these skins and scrolls were prepared. Clearly many Qumran scrolls were not produced in isolated corners of Judean society that we tend to associate with the term “sectarian.”

The Isaiah scroll was found wrapped in linen inside a ceramic jar. Alongside it was another Isaiah scroll, more fragmented—with around 30% of the biblical text preserved. And this second text is remarkably close to the biblical text we know of Isaiah. This text form was codified by learned priests in the Jerusalem temple around the time of Jesus, and we know this textual tradition from Hebrew codices from the tenth and eleventh centuries AD. So we learn that the Qumran community preserved biblical texts of the same book that were more or less different from each other.

#### The settlement at Qumran and its inhabitants

From its beginning the center at Qumran probably served as a small fortress for the Judean Hasmonean (Maccabean) kingdom, in a row of fortifications established in the late second century BC. The site was strategically located at the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. The Hasmonean kingdom expanded rapidly around 100 BC and covered a larger area than any earlier Israelite entity. From some time in the first century BC—perhaps when Herod the Great took the power from the Hasmoneans around 37 BC—the site was inhabited by a pious Jewish group belonging to the larger Essene movement.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Making parchment involved application of de-hairing liquid or dough, scraping, drying under tension, and a light tanning of the upper surface. The high quality scrolls show that one added alum and calcium on the hair side (the side of writing) in the process. Scrolls of poorer quality had undergone vegetable tanning.

<sup>5</sup> For this reconstruction of the history of the Qumran site, see Joan Taylor, *The Essenes, the Scrolls, and the Dead Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2013, 195–201, 247–65, 275–97. The excavator Roland de Vaux suggested a sectarian settlement from the last quarter of the second century, while Jodi Magness dates it to the early first century BC. These two scholars do not think a Hasmonean fortress preceded the sectarian settlement: Roland de Vaux, *Archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

The Essenes who later settled Qumran were opponents of the Hasmonean leadership. In contrast, Herod may have given the Essenes some protection, and at this time there was no longer need for a border fortress here. So Herod may have handed the site over to the Essenes. According to ancient Jewish writers (Philo and Josephus) there were 4000 Essenes around in Judea, spread in towns and villages. From the time of Herod the Great there was an “Essene Gate” in the Southwestern wall of Jerusalem, so scholars assume there was an Essene quarter close to the gate, either inside the walls or in the direction towards Bethlehem.

From ancient authors such as Philo, Josephus, and Pliny we know about the Essenes, a pious Jewish movement that kept clear borders to the rest of the Jewish people. Pliny locates the Essenes at the northwestern shores of the Dead Sea. Both Philo and Josephus try to present the Essenes in a favourable light for their Greek-reading authors. But there are so many parallels between the Essenes, especially as they are described by Josephus, and the group reflected in many Qumran writings, that most scholars assume that the “Qumran community” was a branch of the larger Essene movement. In their writings we encounter a theologically conservative group, led by priests who were at odds with the Hasmonean leadership and their supporters. Qumran writings testify to strong polemics against the early Pharisees, who enjoyed the support of some Hasmonean leaders (such as queen Alexandra Salome, who reigned 76-67 BC).

The center at Qumran was inhabited until AD 68, when the settlement was laid waste by the Roman soldiers who crushed the first Jewish revolt—Roman arrowheads have been found in the ruins. It seems that mainly men lived at this Essene center, probably for reasons of ritual purity. The graveyards contained more than thousand graves. From the skeletons that were examined it seems that only (or mainly) men were buried in the main cemetery. In the extensions of the graveyard there were a few women and children. This is very untypical for ancient graveyards, in those days 50% of the graves would normally be children graves. And the graves in Qumran were made in a particular way in the stony soil, to prevent the bones from being crushed, the deceased would lie there waiting for the resurrection on the last day.

Some scholars have suggested different understandings of the site: a military fortification all through, a rural agricultural estate, or a pottery production center. But the majority of the scholars still subscribe to the basic view of the excavator Roland de Vaux: the site was inhabited by a purity-oriented group, the same group that possessed the scrolls found in the caves. Jars of exactly the same type – the peculiar cylindrical “scroll jar” were found buried in the settlement and in the caves, and this type of jars have no parallel elsewhere. Further, one has to walk through the settlement to get to some of the caves (4, 6, 7–10).

### Overview of the scrolls

The caves unearthed remnants of around 950 scrolls. A quarter of them were biblical scrolls, books of the Old Testament. The caves contained every OT book apart from Esther and Nehemiah, many in multiple copies. 40% of these fragmentary texts were in versions close to the later Hebrew standard text, a few were closer to the Septuagint, some scrolls of the books of Moses were close to the Samaritan version, and many were different from these previously known versions, to a smaller or larger degree. The high number of biblical scrolls teaches us that biblical writings were viewed as authoritative for the Essenes.

Apart from biblical books there were other writings that belonged to the ancient heritage of

Israel, books from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC. Some were identified as books written by Jews in Hebrew or Aramaic, and later transmitted in Greek version in the early churches and therefore known to us:

- books in the collection later called Old Testament Apocrypha, added to the early Bible codices of the fourth century: Sirach and Tobit. Sirach is wisdom instruction in the style of Proverbs, Tobit a Jewish novel from the region of today's Iran.
- many copies of *I Enoch*, which influenced a number of New Testament writings and later was taken into the Ethiopian Christian Bibles. This collection that carries the name of the biblical sage Enoch is in fact from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cent BC. It contains both wisdom exhortation, woes on the rich, and end-time visions.
- the *Book of Jubilees*, a priestly retelling of Genesis and Exodus, which grew together in the second and first centuries BC. Both this book and the books (sub-units) of *I Enoch* were probably seen as authoritative by the Qumran community.

Then we encountered around 350 early Jewish writings that were altogether new to the scholars, some in multiple copies. Between 50 and 100 of these bore the stamp of the Essene community at Qumran: a community that saw their members as the only righteous ones in Israel: the Sons of Light allied with God and his angels, while other Israelites belonged to the Sons of Darkness. The community waited for God's end-time intervention, where this group would be the nucleus in the renewal of Israel.

Most of the books were not produced by these Essenes, they belong to the wider literary tradition of the people of Judea. If we sort these writings according to genre, the following picture emerges:

- Biblical books, by themselves different genres. The same book could be preserved in different editorial versions.
- Commentaries on biblical books. These commentaries demonstrate that biblical writings were already received as authoritative, as words inspired by God. In particular there were commentaries on Prophets and Psalms. These books gave the community (led by the holy spirit) direct revelation on contemporary events and central figures in the Community and among its opponents. A similar "presentic and eschatological" reading of Old Testament passages are found in the New Testament.
- Rewriting of biblical books. Even the Books of Moses were subject to editing, passages were added and others were deleted. We scholars were astonished to see how freely these scribes worked with authoritative texts, writings we thought had received their final form around 200 BC.
- New texts inspired by biblical writings—books written in the name of biblical sages such as Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. These could be new stories about biblical heroes, prophecies or prophetic descriptions of past and future history. Again, their authors probably had some kind of charismatic self-understanding. And they did not see it dishonest to publish their books in the name of a sage greater than themselves.
- Instruction for the right life: catechisms, rule books, laws, calendars.
- Prayers and liturgies—for the individual and the community; liturgies for each weekday, for the Sabbath and the festivals. Some liturgies were inherited from the Jerusalem temple from which the Essene leaders departed in the mid-second century,<sup>6</sup> while other prayers were

---

<sup>6</sup> Most scholars date the exodus of the priests of the community from Jerusalem to the mid-second century. Josephus first speaks about the Essenes connected to the rule of Jonathan the Hasmonean (160–143 BC). However, a few scholars (John Collins, Michael Wise) find the references to the community's main opponent, "the evil priest," to fit better either Alexander

composed within this pious community.

- Psalms: beautiful Hebrew hymns of various categories.
- Visions on the end-time, on the final war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, with detailed prophecy about future history and architectural descriptions of the future temple.

Summing up: Suddenly we have access to a large Jewish library from the time of Jesus and Paul, with many writings we did not know before. We see that Judea of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC had a productive literary milieu. Judea was pouring over with religious sentiments, frustration, anger, joy, hope, and expectation for the close future and the end-time. These writings fill out the space or time between the Old and the New Testament.

And these were the generations immediately preceding the birth of Jesus and John the Baptist. Suddenly we had access to books from the bookshelves of Jesus' synagogue teacher in Nazareth – this is my guess. And for sure we got to know books from the bookshelves of the priests in Jerusalem and the rabbinic teacher of the apostle Paul during his study days in Jerusalem.

After this survey I will first talk about new light from the scrolls on our understanding of the Old Testament. Thereafter I will review what the scrolls can teach us on the New Testament in its Jewish setting.

#### Old Testament, the last stage of its editing and transmission<sup>7</sup>

What have we learned about Old Testament books? First, they still had not reached their final precise form, agreed by all, around the turn of the era. There are small textual differences between different scrolls of the same book.

- A few scrolls of the books of Moses are remarkably similar to the version of the Samaritans, who finally separated from the Jews in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.
- A high number of scrolls are quite similar to the later standard text.
- 20% of the biblical texts display similarities with the great Isaiah scroll: the scribes behind them felt free to update and change the biblical text in small details. This seems to be typical of the Essene scribes of the Qumran community.

Some scrolls of Samuel and Jeremiah are closer to the Greek version of the scriptures, which in these cases preserve an earlier version than the later Hebrew standard text. Here we learn more about the growth and editorial processes behind Old Testament books. Scribes and theologians felt free to update and enlarge books that carried the names of sages of the past, Moses, Samuel, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, Daniel. In the second temple period, the 5<sup>th</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC, biblical books went through processes of growth and literary editing. In a few cases, Qumran scrolls preserve different recensions of the same biblical book.

---

Yanneus (104–76) or the last Hasmonean high priest, Hyrcan II (67–40 BC). See J. J. Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 88–121, 166–208. In my view, a dating to the time of Hyrcan II does not concur with the early palaeographical date of some central community writings—the earliest copy of the *Community Rule* is dated to 125 – 100 BC.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent survey, see Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Developmental Composition of the Bible* (SupVT 169. Leiden: Brill, 2015).

Three groups of texts, the Books of Moses, the history books from Joshua to Kings, and the Prophets had basically reached their final literary form around 200 BC. The Book of Sirach, written in Jerusalem around 190 BC, refers to these as authoritative books. But as long as the temple stood (until AD 70) one could still preserve variant editions of biblical books.

The quotations of the Old Testament in New Testament writings give another glimpse into the same picture. If we compare these quotations with the source text as we know it, we encounter a textual variation, both in Hebrew and Greek.

The remainder of the Old Testament, centered around the Davidic book of Psalms and Solomonic book of Proverbs, grew slowly together and were given authority in a process that lasted up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. With one exception the books themselves were written and edited before 150 BC. I am presently writing on the Song of Songs, which uses daring sexual images and presents itself as some kind of a Solomonic book. And I propose that this book is the latest in the growing collection, written in stages during the last century BC.<sup>8</sup>

The scribes and readers at the Essene center at Qumran knew that Jeremiah was an inspired prophet. But these scribes were well aware that the book of Jeremiah existed in two very different literary forms—today we know that the Septuagint preserves an earlier and shorter recension, while the longer version (that later became the standard text) continued to grow until the early third century BC. There were textual differences between the six Jeremiah scrolls from which we have found smaller or larger parts, three side with the Hebrew standard text, three with the Septuagint version. For the scribes and readers all these scrolls were displaying the Word of God, but as the later rabbis said: “the Word of God is given to us in different forms,” and even small variants between them could provide illumination in dynamic ways. In the Essene movement they still felt able to update the books, linguistically or thematically, trusting in the inspiration of God’s holy spirit, seeing themselves in a continuum with the biblical authors.

Through study of the Scrolls we have learned that the Septuagint, the collection of Greek translations of biblical books, made in Egypt between 280 BC and AD 70,<sup>9</sup> often build on Hebrew scrolls of high quality, which may preserve older editions of some biblical books than what we find in the later standardized Hebrew versions (this is the case for Samuel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel).

The “pre-Samaritan” scrolls of the Pentateuch reveal that Samaritan scribes were in active contact with Judean colleagues until the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.<sup>10</sup> Only when the Hasmonean ruler John Hyrcanos (135–105) burned the Samaritan temple in 113 BC and destroyed their city Shechem close by, did their ways finally part. When we hear in the Gospel of John that

---

<sup>8</sup> Torleif Elgvin, *The Literary Growth of Canticles in the Hasmonean Period*. Leuven: Peeters, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> The Septuagint is no textual or stylistic unity. We encounter translators with different techniques and attitudes to translating or rendering/interpreting the Hebrew text they had before them. Ruth, Lamentations, and Canticles were translated in Judea around the mid-first century AD—see Dominique Barthélemy, *Les Devanciers d’Aquila* (SupVT 10; Leiden: Brill, 1963), 47, 158–66.

<sup>10</sup> Esther and Hanan Eshel, “Dating the Samaritan Pentateuch’s Compilation in Light of the Qumran Scrolls,” *Emanuel. Studies in Hebrew Bible, Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls*. Fs. E. Tov (Sup VT 94; S.M. Paul et al., eds; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 215–40.

“Jews have no fellowship with Samaritans” (John 4:9), we know more about the historical background of this separation as well as their common roots. The Samaritans were Israelites who parted from Nehemiah and the Jerusalem establishment in the fifth century BC, and soon built their own temple on Garizim.

The commentaries on the Davidic book of Psalms and books of the Prophets, commentaries written in the early first century BC, teach as that the books they comment upon are inspired books: words of God, where even small differences between two scrolls can carry hidden meanings. We shall see that we find similar interpretation in the New Testament.

What can radical rewriting of biblical books teach us? First, biblical books can inspire new stories. Scribes of a later generation feel free to fill in “gaps” in the biblical text. Even after the Books of Moses had reached their final literary form around 200 BC, scribes could produce new versions where they added some paragraphs and omitted others. An inspired rewriter could write what (in his mind) “Moses really meant.” Thus they produced a text that they thought communicated better what was on God’s heart for their generation. Some of these texts were treated with high respect in the circles of these scribes, but they had no chance to get into the collection all Israel regarded as authoritative books.

In the last century BC we encounter a process toward standardization of the various biblical books. Between 50 BC and AD 60 priestly scribes in the Jerusalem temple chose a model scroll for each biblical book, scrolls that were copied by circles close to the temple. And “relatives” of these model scrolls were found in Qumran, together with scrolls that are different from them. In scholarly hindsight we can say that the priestly scribes made good choices, with one exception, the Books of Samuel, where the Septuagint translation and Qumran scrolls testify to more original texts of higher quality.

From the two Jewish revolts, around AD 70 and 135, we have found biblical scrolls that are remarkably identical with the later Hebrew standard text (the Masoretic text represented by codices from the tenth and eleventh centuries), which means that the various biblical books had found their ultimate shape among temple scribes at least in the mid-first century AD. But it still took around two generations to agree on the final books to be included in the collection: Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, Esther, and to exclude books such as Sirach and 1 Enoch, two books that were important for many Jews including New Testament writers.

Two factors enhance this process of standardization and authorization:

- 1) The two Jewish revolts, the destruction of the Temple, and the following devastation of Judea made the people so poor that there were few scrolls around. The population of Judea was also highly decimated. Then it became easier for the text earlier chosen in the temple to influence the few scribes available.
- 2) Christianity chose to circulate its writings in Greek from Judea and westward, the churches around the Mediterranean did not compete in the market for Hebrew scrolls (only in Syria and the East did scribes continue to work in Aramaic, a sister language to Hebrew, with learned scribes being able to read Hebrew biblical scrolls). Further, the Christians chose the format of the codex, the bound book, while the Jews continued to use scrolls of parchment or papyrus. The church basically received the “canon” of the Jewish people, but in their Greek version, the Septuagint writings. And the early Christian codices of the fourth and fifth century chose to include the Apocrypha, which obviously were dear to many Christian readers.

The Scrolls have influenced modern translations of the Old Testament. A number of times the scrolls preserve a more original text of the version in question, and as Bible translators we have imported a number of these readings into modern Bibles. The recent Norwegian Bible from 2011 even imported some full verses that had fallen out of the standard text.<sup>11</sup>

### What do we learn about Jesus, the early Jesus movement and the New Testament?<sup>12</sup>

Jesus, John the Baptist or other New Testament figures are not mentioned in these scrolls. We deal with a pre-Christian collection of writings. None of them are authored after 50 BC, although some received editorial polishing up to the time of Jesus' ministry in AD 27 – 30. Sensational books claiming that we have radical new information on Jesus, John the Baptist, Paul, or James are plainly distorting the texts.

But these texts teach us a lot about the background of the New Testament, of the Jewish literature and culture from which Jesus and his disciples came, a culture that set its stamp on the emerging Jesus movement.

New Testament authors see a direct continuation from the Old Testament and its people of Israel to Jesus and his ministry, and then to the Jesus movement springing forth in Judea. The community understands itself as a direct successor of biblical Israel, much in the same way as the scribes of the Qumran community.

The Scrolls have demonstrated how Old Testament writings still were edited and polished up to the time Jesus was born, in many ways the form of the Word of God was still fluid. Thus, also from a historical point of view it is possible to see the Jesus camp as a direct successor and heir of the people of Israel from Old Testament times and its literature. Still it remains an issue of faith whether one wants to accept this presupposition from the Jesus camp. Jews and Christians give different answers.

The New Testament writings were authored in a period where the borders of the Hebrew Bible were not fixed. They are written in the second half of the first century, while the earliest

---

<sup>11</sup> - Ps 145 is an alphabetic psalm, the verses open with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, 22 letters altogether. But in its transmitted form this psalm only contained 21 verses, the verse opening with the letter N (*nun*) was lacking. But this verse is present in the Qumran version of this psalm, with the same wording as the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible. And therefore we can add the lacking verse: "Trustworthy is the Lord in all He says, faithful in all His deeds."

- In 1 Sam 1:24-25 two lines had fallen out of the transmitted Hebrew text, which reports how the parents brought the boy Samuel to the temple: "She brought with her three bulls, flour, and a skin of wine. And the boy ... boy and they slaughtered the bulls, and they brought him to Eli the priest." Here two lines had fallen out between "boy" and "boy" in the standard Hebrew manuscripts. Reading the longer text from the Septuagint and Qumran, we get a longer and more precise version: "She brought with her a three-year old bull, flour, and a skin of wine. And the boy was with them, and they brought him before the Lord. His father slaughtered the sacrifice, as he did every year before the Lord. He brought forth the boy and he slaughtered the ox, and Hannah his mother brought the boy to Eli the priest."

<sup>12</sup> For good surveys, see George J. Brooke, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005); and the thematic issue of the journal *Mishkan* 44 (2005).



authoritative Jewish source, the *Mishnah*, is from the early third century only. So the time gap is smaller from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament than to rabbinic writings. Rabbinism (the faith of the later synagogue) and the Jesus movement are sisters, not mother and daughter, and the Jesus movement is not the younger sibling.

In the second century the church decided to receive the Bible of the Jewish people as authority. But they proclaimed that Jesus is the direct continuation of the Old Testament. Therefore they put the prophets at the end of the Old Testament in their codices – as promises that soon would see their fulfillment, as reported in the gospels. A reader would go directly from the prophet Malachi to the Gospel of Matthew. The sequence is different in the Hebrew Bible codices of the middle ages.

There is hardly any time gap between the Old and the New Testament, between the last editing of biblical books, and the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus. But there is a lot of Israelite history and literature between the Book of Daniel, the last major addition to the collection, edited around 160 BC, and the New Testament. This “intertestamental” and pluriform Judaism is of key importance to understand the New Testament better. And here the Scrolls are our best tools to illuminate New Testament texts.

The New Testament is written in Greek, the common language over the Western part of the world they knew in those days. Greek was known by learned people also in the East as far as Northern India – thanks to Alexander the Great and his conquests. But Jesus spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, and held his main speeches in Hebrew. In the Dead Sea Scrolls we come closer to the Hebrew and Aramaic of Judea in that time than in any other sources. There are Greek words and terms used in an original way in the gospels—earlier scholars would say without any parallel, and then we find the exact counterpart in Hebrew in the Scrolls (such as “sons of light,” “men of [God’s] goodwill”).

There are many parallels between the self-understanding of the Jesus group and that of the Qumran community— an elite part of the larger Essene movement, probably represented in many localities in Judea, and with a scribal center in Qumran.

Both saw themselves as the nucleus of the renewed people of Israel:

- as a community elected by God with a central task in his end-time plan, viewing their community is a direct successor of biblical Israel;
- they asserted to have received God’s holy spirit in a special and penetrating way;
- they saw themselves as living on the threshold of the end-times;
- they read the Old Testament as prophecies that spoke directly about themselves, their anointed leader and his being persecuted by enemies within the people.

Therefore there must be thematic and phraseological parallels between these two movements. I will give some of examples of how the scrolls may cast light on New Testament writings.

\* Acts 4 reports that the Jerusalem high priests persecuted the apostle Peter and his group. The disciples assembled and read Psalm 2 as a prophecy about what is happening: “You, Lord, said by the Holy Spirit through king David, these words: ‘Why did the gentiles rage? The kings of the earth took their stand and gathered together against the Lord and his anointed messiah.’ – And indeed, here in this city Herod and Pontius Pilate together with the people of Israel gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. Lord, look at their threats, and grant your servants to speak your word with boldness, stretch out

your hand to healing, to signs and wonders in the name of Jesus.’ When they prayed, the place trembled by the presence of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:25-31).

The Jerusalem church read this psalm as the Qumran people did: prophecies by king David on their own time and the end-times. So the scrolls have given us a better perspective on the way the New Testament quotes and relates to Old Testament texts.

\* In Matthew 12:9–13 we hear that Jesus walks into a synagogue on the Sabbath day, and there he encounters a man with a withered arm. Jesus is known as a healer, and some Pharisaic opponents ask, “Is it allowed to heal on the Sabbath?” Jesus responds: “If you have a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, would you not lift it out? A human being is more valuable than a sheep – therefore we learn that it is allowed to do good on the Sabbath.” Then he stretches out his hand and cured the sick arm.

The Pharisees would agree to Jesus’ counter-argument: Yes, if one of our animals falls into a pit or a well on the Sabbath, we would help it out and save its life. But if you look to the more stringent rules of the Essenes, as documented in a Qumran text, it says: “If an animal falls into a pit or a well on the Sabbath, it is forbidden to pull it up during that day” (Damascus Code 11.13–17)—this is regarded as work, labor, which should not be done on the seventh day. Thus we learn that Jesus is trying to pull the Pharisees toward himself: you and I agree on helping the animal on the Sabbath—different from those narrow-minded Essenes—then you should think through once more and hopefully agree with me on helping a sick man, who is more important in God’s eyes.

\* In the Sermon of the Mount Jesus says: “You have heard it is said: ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy’.” The problem is that earlier scholars never found a Jewish source commanding to hate one’s enemy. Was Jesus or Matthew inventing something? But the main catechism of the Qumran Essenes, the Rule of the Community, opens with the admonition to the Sons of Light to hate the Sons of Darkness, the ungodly Israelites. So both Jesus and Matthew were well oriented about various Jewish traditions of their times.

What about messianic promises of the Scrolls? Do they conform with expectations reflected in the New Testament, or do they differ? In the Scrolls we encounter a number of different or supplementing promises of a future messiah and expectations for the messianic age.<sup>13</sup>

- a son of David: an end-time king sent by God to save the people from their enemies.
- an end-time prophet: a messenger telling God’s word and will to the people (4Q175).
- an end-time high priest, spiritually online with the heavens. This priest will suffer at the hand of his people, as prophecied in Isaiah 53, before God uses him to illuminate and renew the world (4Q471c; 4Q491; 4Q541 9).
- a heavenly messiah enthroned above (4Q521).
- the community itself is a messianic sign of the end-time (1QS 8–9).

All these messianic images recur in the NT. The central catechism speaks first about the prophet of the last days, and then comes forth the messiah of Israel in pair with the priestly messiah, the anointed end-time high priest (1QS 9.11). These two will be presented first to the Essene congregation, where the anointed priest is placed liturgically before the royal messiah (1QSa II). Thereafter follows the renewal of all Israel.

---

<sup>13</sup> The best survey (even if I at times disagree with the author), is still John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star. Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd ed. 2010).

In the New Testament John the Baptist is asked, “Are you the messiah, are you the prophet, or are you Elijah who shall return?” (John 1:19-23). John was born in a priestly family, so the dialogue presupposes the question, “Are you the priestly messiah?” Later Jesus confirms that John indeed was the promised prophet (Matt 11:1–19).

In one of his speeches Peter calls Jesus both the messiah and the promised prophet (Acts 3:18-26). The gospels may portray Jesus as an end-time prophet, but New Testament writings more commonly identify Jesus with the Son of David, the royal messiah.

In the New Testament only the Letter to the Hebrews calls him the ultimate high priest, who fulfills what earthly high priests have sacrificed in a preliminary form in the Jerusalem temple. This writing has a priestly background. Priestly circles imagined their high priest to be on-line with the sanctuary before God’s heavenly throne. So when the high priest on earth during the Day of Atonement brings forth a bloody sacrifice in the Holy of Holies, his heavenly counterpart, the archangel Melchizedeq, does the same in God’s presence—this we have learned from the Scrolls. Hebrews calls Jesus high priest in the image of Melchizedeq, who on the cross presented himself as the ultimate sacrifice for mankind, offering himself at the same time on earth and in heaven.

Priestly writings among the Scrolls thus show us the background of two priestly writings in the New Testament: Hebrews and the Revelation of John. Both stress the centrality of the heavenly temple, the archetype of the earthly one.<sup>14</sup>

A Qumran end-time vision opens “Heaven and earth shall obey God’s messiah,” (4Q521 frg. 1), probably an interpretation of the heavenly Son of Man in Daniel 7:9–14.<sup>15</sup> These words are very close to Jesus’ concluding words according to the Gospel of Matthew: “All power in heaven and earth is given to me” (Matt 28:18). The Qumran text goes on speaking on how God will comfort and heal the poor and be present with signs and wonders in his people. Jesus uses similar words when he will demonstrate how God’s kingdom has come near through his own ministry (Matt 11:1–5).

In the Scrolls we find critical echoes of the Jewish priestly rulers 163 – 63 BC, the Hasmoneans. They were ruling priests who multiplied the size of the state. Through their military campaigns they included Golan, most of the Galilee, Samaria, Gaza, the South (Idumea) and the region East of the Dead Sea (Perea)—a state later inherited by Herod. For the first time in more than 400 years the Israelites were ruling their own territory. Many in the people held that the Hasmonean rulers fulfilled a number of messianic promises from the Bible, acting as successors of David and Solomon. Their supporters saw them as small messiahs—rulers and priests sent by God to save the people and liberate them from their

---

<sup>14</sup> Torleif Elgvin, “From the Earthly to the Heavenly Temple. Lines from the Bible and Qumran to Hebrews and Revelation,” *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Early Christianity: Questions of Origins and Relationships* (Craig A. Evans, ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2011), 23–36.

<sup>15</sup> Torleif Elgvin, “Texts on Messianic Reign from the Hasmonean Period: 4Q521 as Interpretation of Daniel 7,” *The Seleucid and Hasmonean Periods and the Apocalyptic Worldview* (L. Grabbe, G. Boccacini, eds; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 169–78.

enemies, forerunners of the final messiah or messiahs to be sent by God.<sup>16</sup> In a similar way the New Testament preaches that the messianic age broke into the world through the ministry of Jesus, but the final messianic time is still to come.

### Concluding words

I have occasionally been asked if the Dead Sea Scrolls can prove or disprove if Jesus was God's final prophet and messenger to mankind, if he was God's son and Messiah. My answer is: the Scrolls cannot prove or disprove such a statement of faith. But the scrolls are a main factor in seeing how Jesus from Nazareth fits into first century Judea and the pluriform Judaism of his day. He clothes himself as a Jew, lives as a Jew, preaches and acts as a radical Jewish prophet. The picture the four New Testament gospels draw of him is no second century Greek invention. The gospels draw upon genuine historical information, the portrayal they give of Jewish milieus in Galilee and central Judea is trustworthy. But if Jesus is the messiah, rose from the grave and is elevated to God's heaven as God's second-in-command—this remains a matter of faith.

The scrolls do give us many answers. But questions remain, both on history, theology, and matters of faith.

---

<sup>16</sup> Torleif Elgvin, "Violence, Apologetics, and Resistance: Hasmonaean Ideology and *Yahad* Texts in Dialogue," *The War Scroll, Violence, War and Peace in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature* (STDJ 115, K. Davis et al., eds.; Leiden: Brill, 2016), 319–340.