



## SCROLLS, SITE, SECT AND SCHOLARS

*The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Biography*, by John J. Collins, Princeton University Press, 2013, 271 pp.

Reviewed by RIVKAH FISHMAN-DUKER

The discovery of manuscripts hidden in jugs inside caves near Qumran close to the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea remains one of the major archeological finds of all times. Mostly written in Hebrew, with some in Aramaic, the Dead Sea Scrolls are dated mainly from the second century BCE to the mid-first century CE. Found by accident by a Bedouin shepherd looking for his goat late in 1947, the scrolls have been the subject of enduring fascination, disputed interpretations, academic scandals, and bitter litigation over the decades. The interest in them lies in the fact that these first-hand documents, preserved because of the dry climate of the Judean Desert, date from the period of the renewal of Jewish sovereignty under the Hasmonean dynasty (142–38 BCE); the rise of Roman domination; and the emergence of what would become Christianity and normative Rabbinic Judaism, respectively. Therefore, they constitute an unprecedented breakthrough in the study of the Jewish past at a particularly creative and tumultuous period of Jewish history.

The decipherment and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls—an ongoing process for the sixty-five years since their discovery—and the archeological excavations at the site of Qumran have led most scholars to come to certain conclusions. To begin with, the scrolls essentially were a library which belonged to a group or sect which resided at Qumran during the mid-second century BCE to the first century CE. The manuscripts include the earliest version of the text of the Hebrew Bible, interpretations of books of the Bible, prayers, apocalyptic literature, rules, and calendars. According to these scholars, a careful reading of the scrolls shows that this group lived by strict monastic rules and spent their time copying texts, praying, taking ritual ablutions, and eating at the common table. They were extremely strict observers of the Sabbath. The members were largely celibate, shared property in common, followed a solar calendar which differed from that of other Jews (copies of which were found among the manuscripts), and were obsessive about ritual purity. They did not participate in Temple rituals, disagreed with the prevalent Pharisaic interpretations of Torah, and viewed the high priest and ruling establishment as illegitimate, to be overthrown at end-time with the coming of two Messiahs: a priest and a nonpriestly redeemer who would rid the world of the

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wicked “sons of darkness,” namely, all of humanity except for the members of the sect, the righteous “sons of light.” The founder of the sect, called “the Teacher of Righteousness,” led his followers to the desert in order to live according to their interpretation of the Torah. He apparently was killed by the “Wicked Priest.” Scholarly consensus has held and even maintains today that the sect at Qumran, known as the Dead Sea Sect, were identical to or resembled the Essenes, a monastic Jewish group described by ancient writers such as Josephus, Philo, and Pliny the Elder. There are important scholars, however, who disagree with the majority view of the scrolls, the site, and the sect.

### THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

John J. Collins, professor of Old Testament criticism and interpretation at Yale University, has written a relatively brief, highly readable book about the Dead Sea Scrolls as part of the series of “Lives of Great Religious Books,” which includes works such as Augustine’s *Confessions* and the Book of Genesis, and a long list of forthcoming publications of religious classics. The approach of this series treats the content of the work under discussion and its importance as religious expression and pays much attention to its author and to the conclusions of scholarship and research regarding the book. The particular work essentially acquires a life of its own much like a person whose background, accomplishments, and faults are placed under the meticulous scrutiny of the biographer. The author of the biography, a prominent scholar in the field, organizes his material both chronologically and thematically.

As Collins’s study of the Dead Sea Scrolls covers a corpus of works written by various, anonymous authors at different times, and the copies of the text of the Hebrew Bible found at Qumran, it differs from a study of a single work written by a single author. Whether one can call a general work on such a corpus a biography in the literal sense is questionable. That being said, Collins, a well-known scholar of Jews and Judaism in the Greco-Roman world, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and ancient Jewish apocalypse, approaches his subject thematically. The topics covered in his biography include: a preface on the discovery of and initial arrangements regarding the scrolls; the identification of the Qumran community and the scrolls with the Essenes and its problems; the archeological excavations at the Qumran site; separate chapters on the relationship of the scrolls to Christianity, Judaism, and the Bible, respectively; and a lively finale on the “battle for the Scrolls” which treats the scholarly controversies over the publication of the texts, the personalities involved, and the court cases. Prof. Collins discusses each subject chronologically (in biographical fashion), which helps organize the material for reader, student, and teacher, and provides a state-of-the-art bibliography of

further reading at the end of each chapter. The book also contains a helpful appendix entitled “Personalities in the Discovery and Subsequent Controversies,” and a glossary of important terms, events, persons, and places necessary for understanding the historical and religious context of the documents. As far as information and evaluation are concerned, *The Dead Seas Scrolls: A Biography* certainly is the most up-to-date, accessible, informative, and well-written volume on the subject. Collins skillfully conveys a maximum of information in a minimum of words with excellent craftsmanship.

### THREE MAJOR CONCLUSIONS

The book leaves the reader with several conclusions about the scrolls. For the scholar and teacher of ancient Judaism, some of them may be subject to further questions and study. Nevertheless, Collins does present cogent arguments which support his assertions. We shall mention three of them.

First, Collins definitely links the site and caves at Qumran with the scrolls. He thus agrees by and large with the designation of the residents at Qumran as a community which existed during the Second Temple period. Furthermore, for the most part, he regards the community as largely resembling the Essenes described in contemporary literature such as the works of Josephus. By doing so, Collins casts doubts on recent theories which eschew any link between alleged residents at the site and any type of sect or religious community and any connection between the site and the scrolls. However, unlike the earliest scholars of the scrolls and many of their successors, Collins does not adhere to a strict and exclusivist identification of the scrolls as Essene writings from Qumran. He also partially adopts the idea that the caves at Qumran served as a repository for scrolls and written material before and during the Great Revolt against Rome (66–70 CE). Controversial scholars, such as Prof. Norman Golb, argue that the scrolls constituted a library brought to the Judean Desert from Jerusalem in order to save the works from destruction. Collins, however, maintains that the scrolls constituted the contents of a library most likely collected from several Essene-like communities in the area near Qumran. He bases his conclusion on recent archeological excavations and written sources, and it seems plausible.

Second, Collins emphasizes the importance of the scrolls for the study of ancient Judaism as opposed to their revealing hidden aspects of the Jesus movement and early Christianity. Many of the initial scholars and excavators were Roman Catholic clergymen or devout Protestants who were hostile toward Judaism and Jews. They published their findings while Qumran and East Jerusalem were under Jordanian rule. Many of their studies sought to link the scrolls and the community to contemporary figures such as John the Baptist, Jesus, and the disciples. More

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recent scholarship definitely focuses on the documents' importance for the study of Second Temple Judaism and the foundations of Rabbinic Judaism. Here, Prof. Collins dismisses both the subtle and overt attempts to distance the scrolls and the Jesus movement from the context of Second Temple Judaism. As Jesus has been reclaimed by Jewish scholars, such as Profs. Geza Vermes of Oxford and the late David Flusser of the Hebrew University, the Dead Sea Scrolls have been included as part of a Jewish, albeit sectarian, cultural and religious milieu which did influence what would become normative Rabbinic Judaism. Prof. Lawrence Schiffman of New York University presented this approach to the scrolls in the 1990s. While the extent of that influence remains debatable, the fact that Collins devotes attention to its existence indicates the long-term reorientation in the study of the scrolls as more Jewish scholars from Israel and the Diaspora with an interest and background in rabbinic literature entered the field.

Third, Collins differs regarding the generally accepted date of the formation of the community and its break with the ruling establishment and the Temple in Jerusalem and removal to Qumran. Most scholars date these events to the rule of Jonathan the Hasmonean (161/0–142 BCE), brother of Judah the Maccabee who purified the Temple in 167 BCE. Jonathan became the high priest, thereby ending the high priesthood which descended from Zadok, the high priest at the time of David and Solomon. This new priestly leadership, which followed the upheaval of the Hellenists, was not accepted by all Jews, and emphatically rejected by the Dead Sea Sect. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus dates the emergence of the different "schools" of Judaism (Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes) to this period. Collins, however, dates the final break between the Qumran, Essene-like group and the Jerusalem establishment to the mid-first century BCE, during the reign of the Hasmonean high priest John Hyrcanus II (63–40 BCE), when Pharisaic (proto-rabbinic) influence was militant and dominant. He bases his claims on the Halakhic Letter (Hebrew, *Mikzat Ma'asei ha-Torah*, abbreviated as *MMT*), a document found at Qumran but only revealed to the larger scholarly community in the mid-1980s after arguments and scandals. *MMT* showcases the debates between the Qumran community and the Pharisees in interpretations of Jewish laws. Therefore, by dating the break on the later side, Collins differs from Vermes, Schiffman, and others on this matter of historical importance. Plausible arguments exist for each interpretation.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY

*The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Biography* is an important contribution because Collins analyzes and summarizes the essence, content, and problematic aspects of the Dead Sea Scrolls and their scholars. He clears the air about sensationalist conspiracy

theories of maverick professors who claim that the interminable delays in publishing many scrolls and their lack of accessibility until the 1990s originated in the Roman Catholic Church and were pursued later on by collusion between the Church and the Israel Antiquities Authority. Collins rightly dismisses this as nonsense. Similarly, by placing the Qumran community, the scrolls, and the site clearly as part of Judaism and Jewish history in Jewish Judea, Collins performs a service for truth. Palestinian Arab claims that the scrolls and the site belong to the Palestinian Authority because Qumran was located in the Kingdom of Jordan between 1948 and 1967 are rendered baseless and irrelevant, just as the earlier arguments that they were essentially Christian and not Jewish.

In today's politicized world of academia, unfortunately, the Jewish context and content of the scrolls and the site and the Jewish world of Jesus and his disciples must be restated and demonstrated constantly. Accordingly, John Collins's book contributes to debunking fraudulent political claims against the presence of Jews and the very essence of Jewish history and Jewish religion in the Land of Israel.

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### THE MAN WHO SAVED THE HONOR OF THE FRENCH CHURCH

*La Protestation, 23 août 1942 (The Protest, August 23rd, 1942)* Yves Belaubre, Paris: Ed. Nicolas Eybalin, 2012, 296 pp, (in French).

Reviewed by MICHELLE MAZEL

France is still coming to terms with “La Collaboration”, that dark period in French history which saw the Vichy government and all official branches of the administration collaborating with Nazi Germany and persecuting the Jews with indecent zeal while Frenchmen as a rule looked the other way. The Catholic Church has come under much criticism. While the Protestant Church was taking a courageous stand and helped the persecuted Jews, the Catholic Church was conspicuously silent for a long time, though individual members of the clergy did not hesitate to risk their lives to save Jews. Still, there was growing unease when details of the way Jews imprisoned in camps in France were treated filtered. Then Vichy authorities started sending the Jews from the camps in the so called free zone to Drancy, near Paris, from where they were put on the dreaded convoys to the camps in Germany