JOHN J. COLLINS

The Life Angelic, according to the Dead Sea Scrolls

Sixty years have passed since the first Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in a cave near Qumran on the shore of the Dead Sea, south of Jericho. Eventually, fragments of more than 800 manuscripts were pieced together. These texts date from the centuries before and after the turn of the era, i.e. the period that saw the conquest of Judea by the Romans and the birth of Christianity. Prior to the discovery of the Scrolls, we had scarcely any literature in Hebrew and Aramaic from this period, although we had a small corpus of literature that had been preserved in translation.

The finds included copies of nearly every book in the Hebrew Bible. (The book of Esther is the exception). These manuscripts are a thousand years older than the manuscripts on which printed editions of the Bible are based. On the whole, they testify to remarkable accuracy in the transmission of the text, but there are some notable variations. In some cases, the scrolls are closer to the ancient Greek translations (the Septuagint) than to the traditional Hebrew (Masoretic) text.



Professor John J. Collins
Yale University Divinity School, USA
E-mail: john.j.collins@yale.edu
CAS Fellow 2006/2007

The Scrolls have shed light on numerous aspects of ancient Judaism. The interest in religious law (*halacha*) that is typical of rabbinic Judaism is now seen to be well developed before the rise of Christianity. The scrolls provide material for the early history of Jewish liturgy, and of biblical interpretation. A series of commentaries on the prophetic books, called *pesharim*, are the oldest known biblical commentaries. The style of interpretation in these books has significant similarity to the way in which scripture is interpreted in the New Testament. In both cases, it is assumed that the prophets wrote about the end of history, which was now at hand. Other important similarities to early Christianity concern the expectation of messiahs or savior figures. One Aramaic text (4Q246) speaks of a figure who will be called 'Son of God' and 'Son of the Most High' in terms very similar to those used with reference to Jesus in the Gospel of Luke.

A sectarian movement

The Scrolls, however, are not simply a cross-section of Judaism around the turn of the era. They are the library of a sectarian movement which is usually identified as the Essene sect, also known from ancient Greek and Latin authors (VanderKam, 1994, Vermes, 2004). One of the first texts found at Qumran is a Community Rule, dubbed "the Manual of Discipline" because it provides the regulations for a community that lived a quasi-monastic life. Another rule book, called the Damascus Document because it mentions Damascus several times, seems to describe an earlier stage of this movement. (Part of this Rule had already been discovered at

the end of the 19th century in a Cairo synagogue). At some time in the second century BCE, a group of Jews were dissatisfied with the way the religious law (the Torah) was being observed, and formed a new covenant, with its own provisions for admission and expulsion. Points of disagreement included various matters relating to purity, which were thought to defile the temple cult, and the religious calendar. The latter point was crucially important since it determined the days on which the festivals were celebrated. The movement described in the Damascus Document had not completely withdrawn from the rest of Jewish society. We are told that they lived in camps according to the order of the land, and married and had children. Parents were expected to enroll their sons in the new covenant. Members contributed two days' salary a month to the common fund. There was strict community discipline, however. Permission was required for marriage or divorce, and a penalty is prescribed for "fornicating with one's wife" (perhaps for having intercourse during her menstrual period).

The Community Rule is clearly related to the Damascus Document, and repeats many of its regulations, but it envisions a stricter form of community. Members must now merge all their possessions with the common fund, and there is no mention of women or children. They still had many settlements, but they had more intense community life. Most scholars believe that one settlement of this community was located at Qumran, near the caves where the scrolls were found. The ruins admit of explanation as a community settlement (Magness, 2002). They had several large cisterns, presumably to provide water for ritual washing, and some large assembly rooms. There is a cemetery with approximately 1100 graves adjacent to the site. The caves where most of the scrolls were found could only be reached by going through this settlement. A vocal minority of scholars (Golb, 1995, Hirschfeld, 2004) deny that the site was a sectarian settlement, and suppose that the scrolls were brought from Jerusalem. However, this is a difficult supposition in view of the proximity of the caves to the site.

The community described in the Community Rule seems to prescribe a holier kind of life than was required in the Damascus Rule, although the latter continued to be copied and preserved. The reason for the stricter form of life was that the community took it upon itself to atone for the land, in place of the temple cult, which was rejected. They did not make animal sacrifices, but their whole lives were to be an offering to God. They were to enter into communion with the angels, who were constantly engaged in praising God. Fellowship with the angels required a high degree of purity. This also explains why there is no mention of women in the Community Rule.

According to the ancient Greek and Latin accounts, the Essenes were celibate, although the Jewish historian Josephus allows that one branch of the movement accepted marriage. The scrolls never make celibacy an explicit requirement. Consequently, there is ongoing controversy as to whether the sect should really be identified as the Essenes. A few female skeletons were found in the cemetery, but mostly in peripheral areas. Not enough of the cemetery has been excavated to clarify the extent to which women were present in the community. Moreover, while the ancient accounts describe a process of admission and community life very similar to what we find in the Community Rule, they show no awareness of the

concern for religious law or the messianic and apocalyptic expectation that characterize the community. Yet the absence of women from the Community Rule is striking, and it is highly compatible with the emphasis in the Scrolls on fellowship with the angels. The existence of another rule book (the Damascus Rule), which provides for marriage, is quite compatible with Josephus' report of two branches of the Essenes.

The strict community life described in the Community Rule is an anomaly in ancient Judaism. The accounts of the Essenes provide by far the closest parallels. (The Jewish philosopher Philo describes a somewhat similar group called the Therapeutae in Egypt, who practiced celibacy but included women as well as men). A few hundred years later, Christian religious communities would arise in the deserts of the Near East. They also practiced celibacy and pursued an angelic life. It is not possible, however, to establish any connection between the community of the Scrolls and Christian monasticism. We know that the settlement at Qumran was destroyed by the Romans in 68 CE. The movement described in the Scrolls, whether or not it should be identified with the Essenes, also disappeared from history at that time, only to re-emerge from the caves more than 1900 years later.

References

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