

## The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christianity

The Dead Sea Scrolls do nothing to challenge core Christian beliefs, but they do much to help illuminate the context out of which Christianity grew – a very Jewish context, but not necessarily the Jewish context that was assumed before the discovery of the scrolls.

Prior to the discovery of the scrolls, most of our views on what comprised Judaism at the time of Jesus came from the only group which survived the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. – the Pharisees (which would become the rabbinical Jewish movement that is still with us today). With the discovery of the scrolls, we find that Jewish theology was much more varied than has been previously thought.

The Jews of the scrolls show us a theology that was much more apocalyptic and much more messianic than was understood before the discovery. Prior to the discovery of the scrolls, most Christians and Jews viewed Jewish apocryphal, apocalyptic works such as 2 Esdras or Enoch (I) as oddities. The scrolls would seem to indicate that such apocalyptic writings may have represented the mainstream Jewish thought of at least one of the three major Jewish sects at the time of Christ.

The scrolls indicate that many doctrines that would later take hold in Christianity grew out of the soil of an older Jewish tradition. Predestination, belief in angels, a well-developed concept of hell and the devil (Sheol/Abaddon and Belial, in the scrolls), and even (possibly) the belief in a divine messiah who would suffer at the hands of his doubters are all found in the scrolls.

Does this challenge the validity or originality of Christianity? Not at all. Christians have always viewed that the Old Testament was a precursor to the New – and that the Old Testament describes a divine Messiah that would find his fulfillment in Jesus Christ. But the Old Testament ends about 400 years before the birth of Christ.

The scrolls help fill in the theological gaps in the development of (some) Jewish thought in the inter-Testamental period. The gaps in question help explain why Jesus, who did not fit the traditional messianic warrior/king profile that we had heretofore thought was expected in Israel 2,000 years ago, might have been accepted as readily as he was. There appears that there was a Jewish tradition of a “suffering servant” messiah; and there may even have been a tradition that the “suffering servant” would be divine.

This in no way suggests that the sectarians were prototypical Christians – the sectarians had a strong belief that upholding the Mosaic law and adhering to ritual purity were the paths to salvation – hardly doctrines of Pauline theology! However, the scrolls do describe elements of a tradition that existed in Judaism that would eventually split off into Christianity and rabbinical Judaism:

“Second Temple Judaism can now be seen as a transition period in which the sectarianism and apocalypticism of the period gradually gave away to rabbinic Judaism, on the one hand, and Christianity, on the other. Indeed, it is now clear that the Second Temple period was a kind of sorting process.” (*The Significance of the Scrolls*, Lawrence Schiffman, Bible Review, Oct. 1990)

The scrolls speak a language that would have been understood by the early Christians, and is recognizable even today. Two examples follow.

Compare scroll 4Q525 (Cave 4, fragment 525) with Mat 5:3-11:

4Q525 “Blessed the man who has attained Wisdom and walks in the law of the Most High/...[Blessed is he who speaks truth] with a pure heart and who does not slander with his tongue/...Blessed is he who seeks (Wisdom) with pure hands and who does not go after her with a deceitful heart...” (Shanks, p. 64)

(Mat 5:3-11 NIV) “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”

Compare scroll 4Q521 with Mat 11:5:

4Q521 “[The hea]vens and the earth will listen to His Messiah...Over the poor His spirit will hover and will renew the faithful with His power...He...liberates the captives, restores sight to the blind, straightens the b[ent]...The Lord will accomplish glorious things which have never been seen...He will heal the wounded, and revive the dead and bring good news to the poor.” (Shanks, p. 65)

(Mat 11:5 NIV) “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”

### **Messianic comparisons**

The scrolls seem to indicate that the sectarians may have been expecting a divine messiah that would suffer at the hands of his detractors. Christians have long interpreted the “suffering servant” passages in Isaiah to pertain to the messiah. The scrolls give added support to this view.

One enigmatic scroll seems to discuss the messiah being (depending on the translation) “begat”, “engendered”, or “fathered” by God:

1Q28a/1QSa “This is the assembly of famous men, [those summoned to] the gathering of the community council, when [God] **begets the Messiah with them.**” (Translated by Florentino Garcia Martinez, Shanks, p. 66)

In a commentary on 2 Samuel 7:14, a messianic figure from the line of David is discussed – who will rule at the end of time:

4Q174 “...he is the Branch of David who shall rise...[to rule] in Zion [at the end] of time.” (Shanks, p. 68)

(2 Sam 7:14 NIV) “I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men.”

A startling passage from the scrolls talks of a figure that will have “everlasting sovereignty”, and will be called “Son of the Most High”. Compare this with Luke 1:32-33:

4Q246 “Affliction will come to earth...[] and great carnage among countries...[] the kings of Assyria [and Eg]ypt...[he] will be great on earth...all will serve...he will be called great...and by his name he will be designated...’Son of God’ will he be called and ‘Son of the Most High’ they will call him....His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom and all his ways will be truth. He will jud[ge] the earth in truth and all will make peace. The sword will cease from the earth and all provinces will worship him. The great God will be his patron...His sovereignty is everlasting sovereignty...” (Shanks, p. 69)

(Luke 1:32-3 NIV) “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

### **Other theological similarities**

There are other similarities between the scroll theology and Christian theology. For example, the Thanksgiving Psalm talks about how righteousness only comes from God. Compare to Paul in Romans:

*Thanksgiving Psalm* “I know that righteousness does not belong to a man, nor to a son of man blamelessness of conduct; to the Most High God belong all works of righteousness” (Burrows, p. 334)

(Rom 1:17 NIV) “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’

(Rom 3:10-11 NIV) As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.’”

As in Christianity, the scrolls attach great importance to the influence of the Holy Spirit on individuals:

*Thanksgiving Psalm* “A man’s way is not established except by the Spirit which God created for him

to make blameless a way for the sons of man.” (Burrows, p. 335)

*Damascus Document* “And he caused them to know by his anointed his Holy Spirit and a revelation of truth.” (Burrows, p. 350)

*Manual of Discipline* “But in a spirit of true counsel for the ways of a man all his iniquities will be atoned, so that he will look at the light of life, and in a holy spirit he will be united in his truth; and he will be cleansed from all his iniquities; and in an upright and humble spirit his sin will be atoned, and in the submission of his soul to all the statutes of God his flesh will be cleansed, that he may be sprinkled with water for impurity and sanctify himself with water of cleanness.” (Burrows, p. 373)

The scrolls indicate a strong belief in predestination:

*Manual of Discipline* “In these two spirits are the origins of all the sons of man, and in their divisions all the hosts of men have their inheritance in their generations. In the ways of the two spirits men walk. And all the performance of their works is in their two divisions, according to each man’s inheritance, whether much or little, for all the periods of eternity.” (Burrows, p. 375)

And finally, the scrolls seem to illuminate a language that would later be echoed in the Gospel of John. Because of the references to *logos*, and the comparison between light and darkness in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, poor John has been accused of everything from being too Hellenized, to (gasp) being a secret gnostic! The scrolls seem to indicate that John’s introduction to the Gospel of John has not Greek or gnostic roots, but...Jewish roots, which is, of course, exactly what we should expect from John!

*Manual of Discipline* “Everything that is he establishes by his purpose, and without him it is not done”

*Manual of Discipline* [God] “created man to have dominion over the world and made for him two spirits, that he might walk by them until the appointed time of his visitation; they are the spirits of truth and of error. In the abode of light are the origins of truth, and from the source of darkness are the origins of error. In the hand of the prince of lights is dominion over all sons of righteousness; in the way of light they walk. And in the hand of the angel of darkness is all dominion over the sons of error; and in the ways of darkness they walk. And by the angel of darkness is the straying of all the sons of righteousness...but the God of Israel and his angel of truth have helped all the sons of light.” (Burrows, p. 374)

(John 1:1-6 NIV) “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

## Summary

The Dead Sea Scrolls, the greatest archaeological find of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have much to tell us about the Jewish roots of Christianity, and provide a richer illumination of Judaism at the time of Christ than was heretofore possible. In the words of Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*:

“While the scrolls tell us nothing directly about Jesus or early Christianity, they tell us a great deal about the language Jesus spoke, about such concepts as ‘Messiah’ and ‘Son of God,’ about the way Jesus and early Christians understood and interpreted the Hebrew Bible, about modes of thought of Jesus’ contemporaries, and about the other Jewish movements that were swirling around in the ideological and theological maelstrom of Judea at the time. If the scrolls emphasize anything with regard to Christianity, it is that Jesus and his message were very much related to – were part of and grew out of – what was happening in the contemporaneous Jewish world.” (Shanks, p. 198)

(Article by Presbyterian Elder Robert Jones at <http://www.sundayschoolcourses.com/deadsea/deadmain.htm#Christianity>)