

QUMRAN EVIDENCE FOR THE RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPELS

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Conservative New Testament scholarship is confronted with the view that the canonical Gospels are mainly fictitious creations of second or third generation Christianity. It is held that the earliest Christians were apocalyptically minded, looking for the Messiah to come speedily but placing no emphasis upon the earthly Jesus. Later, when the Parousia did not immediately happen it became necessary to find Messianic significance in the earthly life of Jesus.¹ The Gospels are outgrowths of that attempt. We are encouraged to believe that the problem of the "Messianic Secret" is solved when we see that Jesus did not proclaim himself to anyone as Messiah during his earthly life. It was only later that this belief arose. In the "Messianic Secret" of the Gospels then we see a combination of the early belief that Jesus was not Messianically significant in his earthly life and the later belief that he was. The earliest of the Gospels, Mark, has a pretty strong mixture of both ideas. The later Gospels show the increase of the latter belief, until in John the earlier belief is almost entirely absent.

Bultmann believes that the process of increasing attention to the earthly Jesus in later Christianity was continued in the apocryphal Gospels.² In these works, names are supplied for anonymous people of the canonical Gospels. Other details are added and there is evidence for the creation of tradition about events in the life of Jesus. Believing that these apocryphal Gospels are a continuation of the process which produced the canonical Gospels, he postulates that the farther back we go toward earliest Christianity the less interest there is in Jesus of Nazareth. The full conclusion is that most of the Gospel material is a fabrication. We cannot then know very much of Jesus at all.

Until the discovery at Qumran we had little evidence that this could not have been the situation in Christianity. The scrolls are of great importance in showing us the beliefs and practices of a group very similar to early Christianity and from about the same period. In this paper the writer hopes to show that the Qumran sect was a group that combined belief that history was significant with a strong hope for the future. This combined attitude can be shown to be similar to that displayed in the Gospels. The import of this is that we now have a precedent for believing that the earliest Christians could have had *both* strong apocalyptic hopes and an interest in the historical Jesus. This means that the Gospels

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1. See for example Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, trans. and ed. by Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Meridian, 1960), p. 37.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

can be accepted as reliable reflections of earliest Christian thought and as reliable sources for knowledge of the historical Jesus.

I. *The Qumran Evidence*

The people of Qumran were eschatological in outlook. They believed that they were the chosen remnant and that they were about to witness the consummation of God's redemptive plan. They had gone out into the desert to "prepare the way" for the Lord.³ They looked for a great future battle in which the Lord and his saints would overcome the hosts of darkness. In preparation for this fight the community thought of itself as a military group. The War Scroll is evidence for this belief.⁴ In the commentary on Habakkuk, the community repeatedly refers to the day of judgment when the enemies of God's elect will be destroyed (2:11, 18, 20).

At the same time that the sect looked toward the future for the consummation of the redemptive activity of God, they also viewed certain events of history as important. It was these very events which had signaled the beginnings of the imminent end. They saw in history events which were the key to the understanding of the truth.

DSH in many places shows us the events which were of importance. Some of these key events were (1) the rise of the Kittim who were heathen conquerors overthrowing rulers and destroying lands, (2) the activity of the Wicked Priest and his cronies in opposition to (3) the appearance of the Teacher of Righteousness who came expounding the prophetic oracles and gathering a company of faithful.

For example, in DSH 1:5, "traitors" are mentioned who refused to accept the authority of the Teacher. Note also the fulfillment of 1:13 by cowards who did not defend this Teacher from the "man of lies" who persecuted him. The coming to power of a wicked priest and his ugly death are related as fulfillments of the prophecy too (2:5-7). This wicked priest burst in on the Teacher and his followers in an attempt to cause them to sin—all in the plan of God (2:15).

The attempts to relate these events to what we already know of intertestamental history have not been lacking. As Cross put it, "For the most part these attempts at synthesis have failed, and the number of theories evolved almost equals the number of scholars who have put their hands to the task."⁵ Still, Cross does not allow this to prevent his attempts to identify the events and figures. On the basis of paleography he limits the events as falling within 150 to 100 B.C.

3. Frank Moore Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), pp. 162f.
4. Lucetta Mowry, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Early Church* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 132.

F. F. Bruce attempts an identification of the figures. He also admits that there are many other theories which command respect.⁶

Dupont-Sommer is one of the more radical scholars who has approached this problem. His thesis is that the Teacher is the man the Christian community adopted as its founder and hero.⁷

While all these attempts to identify the figures mentioned in the Qumran literature have not come to universal agreement, nearly all scholars of the subject believe that there is history behind these figures. We have in Qumran then apocalyptic people who also are interested in history. As a matter of fact, these events of history are the basis for their apocalyptic hope.⁸ They look to the future but are not oblivious to the immediate past. Rather, the immediate past is the assurance of the future. This is so because they believed that the events of the Teacher's life and that of the community were end-time fulfillments of the OT. Stendahl has shown that the community was under "the conviction that the prophecy had received its fulfillment in the events which occurred with the Teacher of Righteousness and the community he gathered together and founded around himself."⁹

Though it is agreed that the references to historical happenings in the Qumran literature are genuine, it has already been noted that it is difficult to tie down with certainty these references to information we already have about events of the same period. There are reasons why this is so and these reasons are really further descriptions of the attitude which Qumran had toward history. We shall therefore mention them because they will assist us in comparing that attitude with that in the Gospels.

For one thing, the history which the sect records is selective history. They of Qumran record events as they relate to the community. The Teacher and his followers were regarded as the key figures in the accomplishment of God's eschatological program. Therefore those events which did not greatly affect them are treated as unimportant.

From the point of view of the critical historian, this means that major political events, Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem, the death of a king, are judged significant according to their direct bearing on the life of the sect, while insignificant events, the rebuke of an Essene leader, the disturbance of a festal celebration, become turning points in world history.¹⁰

6. F. F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 100 ff. For other evidence of the acceptance of historicity behind the Qumran literature see Lucetta Mowry, *op. cit.*; Yigael Yadin, *The Message of the Scrolls* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957); H. H. Rowley, *Jewish Apocalyptic and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London: Athlone Press, 1957).
7. A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Macmillan, 1952).
8. F. F. Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
9. Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew* (Uppsala, 1954), p. 190.
10. Frank M. Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

The selection of events which might not be of sufficient importance to be included by other historians makes it difficult to tie together the record of Qumran to other records.

Second, we note that Qumran records of events often do not arrange them into a sequence. Part of regular historical description is to arrange events in a sequence. In Qumran literature however the sequence is not important. If some events in history are omitted because they are not seen as significant not being fulfillments of the OT (as shown above), sequence is often neglected perhaps for the same reason. In DSH none of the events are related in a sequence. The fact that events "A" and "B" happened is enough, for it fulfills the OT. The question of whether event "A" came before event "B" is not a question of fulfillment and is not important. The only real sequence that is emphasized is that the Teacher has appeared and that he is a forerunner of the Messiah, who is to appear shortly.¹¹

Third, identification of figures and events of the Qumran documents is made difficult because the figures are called by terms meaningful to the sect but not of significance to us. We ask questions such as "What is the name of the Teacher?" "Who was the Wicked Priest?" Investigation has pretty well agreed upon some of the figures. Many now believe that the Kittim were the Roman armies, for example. But the fact that the sect attached titles to figures—titles which communicated their attitudes toward these figures, rather than the regular names—makes it difficult to fully identify the events and figures mentioned by Qumran.

Fourth, there is little attempt in Qumran to relate the events of importance to Qumran to the chronology of the times. We do not know the reign of the emperor in which the Wicked Priest burst in upon the Teacher and his followers (DSH 2:15), or even when the Teacher appeared or died. Without these references we are seriously hindered in exact historical investigation of these events.

We have already noted reasons for the first two peculiarities of Qumran reference to history. There is a very good reason for the latter two as well. The community was not interested in calling for national repentance.¹² They did not address themselves to evangelism.¹³ The literature then was a recording of things well known to the sect. They could use titles for key figures without explanation because those reading already knew who these figures were. They could omit mentioning when these events took place because those reading already knew. They did not have to defend the events because they were not questioned by those who read.

With all these peculiarities of dealing with history the fact remains

11. F. F. Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

that in Qumran we have a group of Jewish apocalypics of the period of the early church or more probably immediately prior to that period who saw redemptive significance in certain events of near contemporary history. Their apocalyptic hopes did not cause them to dismiss all of history as worthless or of no value. Instead, they saw certain events as already the beginning of their eschatological hopes. The Teacher was an eschatological figure—they were also. Indeed these events in history were grounds for hopes for the future. We are not correct in assuming that an eschatological orientation and apocalyptic hopes would preclude an interest in historical events if these events were also considered eschatological.

II. *The Gospels' Attitude*

We are well aware that the Gospels are a mixture of hopes for the future and attention to historical events. Bultmann finds in Mark a combination of what he believes to be two views—the early view being an expectation of the Messiah shortly, and the later view being that there was Messianic significance to Jesus' earthly life.¹⁴

In Mark there is obvious emphasis upon hopes for the future manifestation of the Son of Man in power. Mark 8:38 speaks of this topic. Note also 10:30-31, chapter 13, and 14:25, 62.

At the same time that Mark looks for the future work of Jesus as Messiah, he records much of the earthly life of Jesus as significant. This interest in the earthly Jesus does not conflict with the future hopes though. For what Mark records of the earthly Jesus, he does because it too was eschatologically important. For example, some 209 verses of the total 666 verses (to 16:8) in his Gospel deal with miracles of Jesus. As Richardson has shown this interest in miracles of Jesus stems from the belief that they were eschatological events—fulfilling the OT.¹⁵ These miracles were Messianic signs and provided a basis for the futuristic hopes. Also as to the events of the Passion and resurrection, which occupy a large part of Mark's Gospel, they are recounted because they are fulfillments of the OT and are assurance for future hopes. In 14:27 the desertion of the apostles fulfills the OT. In 14:24 the death of Christ is the inauguration of the New Covenant of Jer. 31:31. Note that even the gambling for Jesus' clothes is mentioned because it too is fulfillment.

In Mark's Gospel then we see an attitude very similar to Qumran. Mark awaits the future consummation but still can recognize certain events in the historical Jesus as of significance. Mark's attitude toward these events does not reveal conflict with his future hopes and orientation. These events must be seen as the basis for his future hopes, as the historical events of Qumran were basis for the hopes of that sect. What

14. Rudolph Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

15. Alan Richardson, *The Miracle Stories of the Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 82.

Jesus receives stress in John as Messianic, but it is not fair to say that John does not look for a future Messianic activity.

It may very well be that the reason behind this emphasis on the earthly Jesus involves a rejection of Bultmann's views of early Christian beliefs. For rather than John reflecting a new and late development of interest in the historical Jesus as Messianic, it may be an attempt to counter a late development and *departure* from early belief, which departure disregarded the earthly Jesus. There is substantiation that in the late first and second centuries A.D. rather than in earliest Christianity, this thought was on the rise, as evidenced by the Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi. It is in these second century texts that the passion and resurrection of Jesus are counted as unimportant.

I repeat, because John lays emphasis on the significance of the earthly Jesus does not mean that he did not look for a future consummation. As Howard states, the teaching of the Fourth Gospel is that the glory of God was revealed in Jesus but also that it was only apparent to believers. Many disbelieved and so did not see who Jesus was really and did not receive eternal life. "A final *denouement* is impending to vindicate both Christ and those who are one with him. . . St. John has not given up his expectation of a consummation. . . . And just because he holds fast to this expectation of the end. . . John takes his place in the organic unity of primitive Christianity."²¹

Conclusion

It is best then to see in all four Gospels a mixture of faith in the future and in the past. And it is not necessary to try to trace an evolution in the four Gospels from one faith to the other. The Qumran literature has demonstrated that a group of the same period and background as earliest Christianity can look to the future for the outworking of redemption and yet look to history for its beginnings and assurance. Qumran has shown that the two attitudes are not contradictory. There is precedent for believing that the earliest church did have a strong interest in the historical Jesus since they saw in him the beginning of that for which they searched the future. The basic attitude toward Jesus' life as fulfillment of eschatological hopes and assurance of coming redemption is an interest in history similar to that of Qumran. We may note further similarities in treatment of history. First, it is obvious that events are dealt with in the Gospels as they relate to Jesus and his followers. The events of the Empire or even other events of Palestine are ignored. To the average critical historian Pilate, Herod, or even Jesus himself were all really minor characters in the stream of history, were it not for the

Gospel records and emphasis. The execution of John the Baptist, the betrayal of Jesus, even Jesus' ministry and execution did not seem to greatly affect the Empire to historians of the day—but for the Gospels they are turning points in history. This all accords closely with the way Qumran regards history.

Note also that in the Gospels often sequence is unimportant. We are well aware of the way the Gospels arrange events differently. In the Gospels as in Qumran literature the sequence of events may not be followed strictly because that sequence was not itself eschatological fulfillment of the OT. The events still held their value regardless of the sequence—this too is similar to Qumran handling of events.

This similarity in attitudes between the Gospels and Qumran argues for a placing of the Gospels in an early stage of Christian thought near the period of the Qumran sect. The Gospel attitude is far closer to Qumran than to the climate of later times as shown by the Nag Hammadi texts and apocryphal gospels. In both the Gnostic texts and the apocryphal gospels the canonical attitude toward the Jesus of history seems lost. For Gnosticism, the historical events of Christ's life are valueless for salvation. They pay no attention to history. The apocryphal gospels have a great fascination for history even to the point of fabrication but that fascination is not like that of the NT. The apocryphal gospels are not a development of the historical interest of the canonical Gospels. In the latter, Jesus' life is important because it is redemptive fulfillment seen against a background of OT promise. The apocryphal gospels treat Jesus as a hero, a wonder-worker, and a God-man, but they lack any centralizing philosophy of Jesus' life. There is an almost morbid curiosity.

Since we have precedent for believing that the earliest Christians were interested in the historical Jesus we have evidence that we can learn something of what he did. We can be far more optimistic and see the chance of trusting and heeding what the canonical Gospels tell us of him.

Last, since the attitude toward history of the canonical Gospels is similar to that of Qumran, can this not be taken as literary critical evidence that the Gospels were actually written within a first century and authentic Christian context?

21. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

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