

Qumran and the New Testament

F.F. Bruce

Presidential Address, 2 June 1958

[p.92]

I

The most varied answers are given when we ask students of the Qumran texts what affinities exist between these texts and the New Testament. We are told that there are no affinities whatsoever; we are told that the career and passion of Jesus represent an 'astonishing remcarnatiou'¹—or, on the other hand, a pale reflection—of the activity and death of the Teacher of Righteousness; we are told that Jesus Himself was the Teacher of Righteousness of the Qumran texts, that the men of Qumran were Jewish Christians and that the Wicked Priest was the Apostle Paul;² we are told that the Qumran discoveries conclusively prove that Jesus never existed at all.³

All these answers cannot be true. But the intelligent layman need not stand in bewilderment before them, wondering which (if any) he is to believe. Much of the material on which these divergent accounts are based is accessible to him in one or more translations,⁴ and while some of these translations are defective in one way or another, he can see that some of the answers which are offered to him have little or no substantial foundation, while others deserve more serious attention.

One difficulty, with which we cannot deal here in detail, concerns the dating not only of the scrolls but of the original works which they reproduce, and not only of these works but of the persons and events referred to in them. In particular, to which generation should we assign the Teacher of Righteousness, the effective founder of the Qumran community? Did he meet his death under Antiochus Epiphanes (175-163 B.C.)? Did he flourish under one of the Hasnnonean rulers; and if so, should we date his ministry in the second half of the second century B.C. or in the first half of the first century? Or should we bring him down to the Roman period, even to the point of identifying him with Menahem, son of Judas the Galilaeen, whose attempt to seize

[p.93]

supreme power in Jerusalem in the autumn of A.D. 66 came to an end when he was captured and killed by Eleazar, captain of the temple, and his followers?⁵ It is clear that, to some extent at least, these chronological problems must affect the relevance of the Qumran literature for New Testament studies. In other places I have indicated my preference for the view that the Teacher of Righteousness flourished mainly in the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.), and thus far I have not been persuaded to change my opinion by the arguments either

¹ A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (1950), p. 99.

² J. L. Teicher in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 2 (1950), 94 ff., 121 ff.; 3 (1951), 53 ff., 128 ff.; 4 (1953), 53 ff., 102 f., 152 f.; 5 (1954), 38, 52 ff., etc.

³ *Konzsomolskaya Pravda* (Moscow), Jan. 1958, as reported in the British press.

⁴ See especially T. H. Gaster, *The Scriptures of the Dead Sea Sect* (1957).

⁵ Josephus, *Jewish War*, ii. 433 ff.

for an earlier or for a later dating. At any rate, the Qumran community was certainly flourishing during the ministry of Jesus and the apostolic age.

II

The men of Qumran went out to their wilderness retreat in order to organise themselves as a new Israel, rather after the fashion of the tribes under the leadership of Moses. The nation as a whole had proved unfaithful to the covenant with the God of their fathers, but these men regarded themselves as the righteous remnant of the nation, the hope of the future, a miniature Israel, whose faithfulness would be accepted by God as a propitiation for the unfaithfulness of the nation at large. They attached special importance to the maintenance of the priestly and levitical classes, in order that, when the new age dawned, a pure sacrificial worship might be restored without delay and administered by those who had not gone astray as the majority of the priests had done.

The believing community of New Testament times similarly regarded itself as a new Israel, 'a remnant, chosen by grace' (Rom. xi. 5), 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people' (1 Pet. ii. 9). The kingdom of God had been taken away from those who had shown themselves unworthy of their trust, and given to 'a nation producing the fruits of it' (Matt. xxi. 44). But instead of maintaining distinct priestly and levitical classes, as the Qumran community did, the Christian community was taught to consider itself corporately as 'a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. ii. 5). Both communities regarded themselves as the people of the new covenant, but the Qumran community thought of the new covenant as a restoration of the old one.

The Qumran community, moreover, lived in the conviction that the end of the age then present, the 'epoch of wickedness', was at hand. Its thought and life were dominated by this eschatological conviction.

[p.94]

They believed that in the very near future all that the Old Testament prophets had foretold would be accomplished; indeed, they believed that their predictions had already begun to be fulfilled in the emergence of the community and the activity of the Teacher of Righteousness. Similarly, the early Christians looked upon themselves as those upon whom 'the end of the ages' had come (1 Cor. x. 11); for them, indeed, the new age had already dawned, although the old age had not completely passed away; they lived in the 'last hour' (1 John ii. 18), between the ascension of Jesus and His manifestation in glory.

In both communities this eschatological emphasis appears most clearly in their interpretation of the Old Testament. The commentaries discovered in the Qumran caves show us well enough how the Old Testament was interpreted there; the New Testament writings indicate plainly how it was interpreted in the primitive Church.

According to the Qumran commentaries, God revealed His purpose to His servants the prophets, but His revelation (particularly with regard to the time when His purpose would be fulfilled) could not be understood until the key to its understanding was placed in the hands of the Teacher of Righteousness. To him the mysteries were made plain by divine illumination, and he made known to the last generations what God was going to do in the last generation of

all.⁶ He taught his followers that all that the prophets had spoken referred to the time of the end, a time which was now almost upon them; and he so interpreted all that the prophets had spoken as to teach his followers their duty both while the end-time was coming and when it came.

Here we find a striking parallel with something that is emphasised time and again in the New Testament. The age of fulfilment has dawned. The prophets who foretold the blessing into which Christians were to enter 'searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory' (1 Pet. i. 10 f.). Much had been revealed to those prophets, but not everything. But those Christians to whom Peter wrote these words had no need to search and inquire in order to ascertain what person or time was indicated by the prophecies; they knew. The person was Jesus; the time was the time in which they were living. Words spoken by Peter on another occasion sum up the early Christian attitude to the Old Testament: 'This is what was spoken by the prophet' (Acts ii. 16). And again: 'Moses... and all the prophets who have spoken, from

[p.95]

Samuel and those who came afterwards, also proclaimed these days' (Acts iii. 22, 24).

If it was the Teacher of Righteousness who taught the Qumran commentators their Old Testament exegesis, we need not search and inquire very long to discover who taught the apostles theirs. This note of fulfilment runs throughout the public proclamation of Jesus. 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand' (Mark i. 15). 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke iv. 21). 'Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desire to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it' (Luke x. 23 f.). 'Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled' (Luke xxiv. 44). The Old Testament exegesis which pervades the apostles' preaching is that which they learned from Jesus on every occasion when He 'opened their minds to understand the scriptures' (Luke xxiv. 45).⁷

Here, then, we have an important point of resemblance between the founder of the Qumran community and the founder of the Christian community, in that each imparted to the community which he founded its distinctive principles of Old Testament exegesis. But every time that we observe a resemblance between the two founders or the two communities, we observe a contrast within the resemblance; and such a contrast is apparent here. To the early Christians Jesus was the central theme of Old Testament revelation, which indeed found its fulfilment in Him. But to the Qumran sectaries the Teacher of Righteousness, while he was certainly a subject of Old Testament prophecy, was not its central subject; Old Testament prophecy reached out beyond him for its fulfilment. For Jesus appeared to His followers as the Messiah, to whom all the prophets bore witness (John v. 39; Acts x. 43); the Teacher of Righteousness, in spite of the great veneration with which his followers regarded him, was not the Messiah—not even a Messiah. He was to them pre-eminently just what they called him—the Teacher of Righteousness.

⁶ 1 Qp Hab. vii. 1-5; Zad. i. 10-12.

⁷ Cf. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (1952).

III

A number of Qumran documents show us the form which messianic expectation took at Qumran; and it is reasonable to suppose that the community learned its messianic expectation, as it learned so much besides, from the Teacher of Righteousness. This expectation was

[p.96]

directed towards two distinct individuals who would arise in the end-time—a great priest and a great king. The great priest, the 'Messiah of Aaron', would be the head of the state in the new age.⁸ The great king, the 'Messiah of Israel', was the promised prince of the house of David who would lead the people of God to victory over all their enemies in the eschatological warfare which the prophets had predicted. In the new age he would be subordinate to the 'Messiah of Aaron'. With these two Messiahs was associated a third figure, who did not, however, receive the messianic title; this was a great prophet, the second Moses of Deuteronomy xviii. 15 ff.⁹

While the Qumran community, to judge by the literature thus far published, never seems to have reached the point at which they believed the Messiah (or Messiahs) to have come, the New Testament is dominated by the announcement that the Messiah has come. And while the Qumran community distinguished the prophet, the priest and the king who were to arise at the end of the age as three individual personages, the New Testament presents Jesus as the prophet of whom Moses spoke, the heir to David's throne, and the perpetual priest of Melchizedek's order acclaimed in Psalm cx. 4. The traditional Christian doctrine of the 'threefold office' of Christ goes back to the earliest days. Jesus, of course, could not be regarded as a 'Messiah of Aaron' because He did not belong to the tribe of Levi; the one New Testament document which enlarges on the priestly aspect of His messianic work funds Old Testament authority for ascribing to Him a greater priesthood than Aaron's.¹⁰

But the prophetic portrayals of the prophet, the priest and the king do not exhaust the New Testament presentation of the Messiahship of Jesus. He Himself did not often voice a messianic claim; in view of popular expectations, such a claim would probably have been misunderstood. But on one notable occasion when He did claim to be the Messiah, He identified Himself not only with the Messiah who is invited in Psalm cx. 1 to sit at God's right hand, but with the 'one like a son of man' who comes with the clouds of heaven in Daniel vii. 13 to receive everlasting dominion (Mark xiv. 62). Indeed, His commonest designation of Himself was 'the Son of man'. But as He used the title, He identified the Son of man with the obedient and suffering Servant of the Lord in Isaiah xlii-liiii; and it is the figure of the Servant

[p.97]

that controls Jesus' whole conception and fulfilment of His messianic mission.

The Qumran community, too, attached great importance to the Old Testament figures of the Servant of the Lord and the Son of man, but they do not appear to have interpreted them messianically. Instead, they believed that their own community was called upon corporately

⁸ Zad. xii. 23-xiii. 1; xix. 33-xx. 1; 1Q Sa ii. 11-22; 1Q Sb.

⁹ 1QS ix. 11; 4Q *Testimonia*.

¹⁰ Heb. v. 6; vi. 20 ff.

to fulfil what was written concerning both the Servant of the Lord and the Son of man. As they devoted themselves to the study and practice of the holy law, as they endured persecution at the hands of the 'Wicked Priest' and other ungodly oppressors, they believed that they were accumulating a store of merit which would avail not only to procure their own justification in God's sight but also to make propitiation for the sins of their misguided fellow-Israelites,¹¹ just as the Servant by his suffering was to bear the sin of many and make them to be accounted righteous (Isa. liii. 11f.). But they also believed that when the epoch of wickedness came to an end, it would be their duty and privilege to undertake the rôle of the Son of man and execute judgment on the wicked—the wicked rulers in Israel as well as the wicked nations around.¹²

The New Testament presents the apostles as sharing in the mission of the Servant of the Lord (Acts xiii. 47) and declares that 'the saints will judge the world' (1 Cor. vi. 2), but both these activities are a participation in work which belongs primarily to Jesus as the Messiah.

As for the judgment which the men of Qumran expected to execute in the end-time, the *Rule of War* and other texts show that it was envisaged in traditional terms of military conquest and extermination. Nothing more unlike the achievement of Jesus could be imagined. Even when this traditional language is used of the triumph of Jesus in the New Testament (as it is in the Apocalypse), its meaning is transmuted as it declares the victory of the Messiah who conquered through suffering; it is in the rôle of the Lamb led to the slaughter that the Lion of the tribe of Judah prevails.¹³ But there is nothing metaphorical in the use of military terminology in the Qumran literature.

IV

Considerable interest has been aroused by the discovery of certain affinities of thought and language between the Qumran texts and St.

[p.98]

John's Gospel.¹⁴ However do these affinities may be evaluated, they provide additional evidence in support of the basically Hebraic character of this Gospel. They must not be exaggerated; and it might be good to bear in mind that practically every new discovery in Near Eastern religious literature of the late B.C. and early A.D. epoch has been hailed by someone as supplying the key to the problem of this Gospel. The Old Testament rather than the Qumran literature is the sourcebook of the Fourth Evangelist, but it is the Old Testament as fulfilled by Jesus. The Old Testament is also the source-book of the Qumran literature, but it is the Old Testament as it had passed through the mind of the Teacher of Righteousness and perhaps other interpreters of similar outlook. The opposition between light and darkness (to take one instance of the dualistic phraseology which the Qumran literature and this Gospel have in common) goes back ultimately to the first chapter of Genesis. Yet the way in which light and darkness, truth and falsehood, and so forth are opposed in the *Rule of the*

¹¹ 1QS iii. 6-12; iv. 20 f.; v. 6 f.; ix. 3-5.

¹² 1QS viii. 10; 1Qp Hab. v. 3-6.

¹³ Rev. v. 5 f.

¹⁴ See Lucetta Mowry, 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel of John', *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 17 (1954), 78 ff.; W. F. Albright, 'Recent Discoveries in Palestine and the Gospel of St. John', in *The Background of the NT and its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (1956), pp. 153 ff.

Community, for example, reminds us particularly of the language of the Johannine Gospel and Epistles.

It has frequently been pointed out that the early chapters of St. John's Gospel deal with a phase of Jesus' ministry which was concurrent with the later ministry of John the Baptist. The dispute about purification mentioned in John iii. 25 is the sort of dispute which must have been very common in the Jordan valley and the Dead Sea region at a time when so many competing 'baptist' groups inhabited those parts.¹⁵ The disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus were not the only people engaged in baptising there in those days. The men of Qumran had their own ceremonial washings, and so had other communities.

Now the unnamed disciple of John the Baptist who attached himself to Jesus along with Andrew (John i. 35 ff.) has been identified, very reasonably, with the disciple whose witness attests the record of the Fourth Gospel (John xxi. 24). If the beloved disciple was indeed at one time a follower of John the Baptist, this may indicate an indirect contact with Qumran. For, among all the theories which have been propounded to establish a connection between the Qumran movement and primitive Christianity, the least improbable are those which find

[p.99]

such a connection in John the Baptist, on the ground that he may well have been associated with Qumran before the day when the word of the Lord came to him and sent him forth to preach his baptism of repentance for the remission of sins in view of the approach of the Coming One.¹⁶ If there is any substance in such theories, John's baptismal ministry must imply that he had discovered that the way of Qumran, noble as its ideals were, was not the way in which preparation should be made for the divine visitation.

In connection with the Gospels it may be added that a study of the calendar used by the Qumran community has strengthened the reasons for thinking that the discrepancies between the Synoptists and John regarding the chronology of Holy Week are due to the following of two distinct calendars.¹⁷

V

Another New Testament document in which affinities have been traced with the Qumran sect is the Epistle to the Hebrews. Dr. Yigael Yadin, in particular, has argued that the 'Hebrews' named in the traditional title of this epistle were Jews originally belonging to the Qumran sect, who were converted to Christianity but carried with them into Christianity some of their former beliefs and practices, with which the writer takes issue. Among these beliefs Dr. Yadin makes special reference to the idea of the angels' eschatological rôle (Heb. ii. 5), and to the conceptions of a priestly Messiah and of the prophet to appear in the last days. 'It is my sincere hope,' he says, 'that more competent students in the field of NT studies will either refute this suggestion or, if they agree to it—wholly or partially—will submit more data in its support.'¹⁸

¹⁵ Cf. J. Thomas, *Le mouvement baptiste en Palestine et Syrie* (1935).

¹⁶ Cf. W. H. Brownlee, 'John the Baptist in the New Light of Ancient Scrolls', *Interpretation* 9 (1955), pp. 71 ff.; A. S. Geysler, 'The Youth of John the Baptist', *Novum Testamentum* 1 (1956), 70 ff.

¹⁷ See A. Jaubert, *La date de la Cène* (1957).

¹⁸ Y. Yadin, 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews', *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, 4 (1957) 36 f.

In the form in which Dr. Yadin defends his thesis, it probably cannot be sustained. But the material which he has adduced must be added to the evidence already at our disposal for the presence in the early Roman church of elements derived from sectarian Judaism. Such elements are attested, for example, by the *Apostolic Tradition* ascribed to Hippolytus, early in the third century A.D. And there is little doubt in my mind that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written to a

[p.100]

Jewish-Christian group in Rome in the sixties of the first century. I think that the work of the late William Manson put the Roman destination of the epistle on a firmer basis than ever before.¹⁹ If, then, the new evidence indicates that the Judaism to which this group was in danger of slipping back exhibited features similar to those found in some Qumran texts, this will confirm an impression already formed by a comparison of certain allusions in the epistle (e.g. the 'instruction about ablutions' in Heb. vi. 2) with indications that the Jewish substratum of early Roman Christianity had affinities with some of the 'baptist' movements already mentioned. Some at least of these movements may be called Essene; this term was probably used to cover several religious groups in the Jordan valley and Dead Sea region which differed from one another in details but presented to the outsider a general resemblance in essentials.

VI

These are not the only parts of the New Testament which present parallels with the Qumran literature. Resemblances between the Qumran community and the milieu in which the First Gospel took shape have been traced by Krister Stendahl in *The School of St. Matthew* (1954). It may well be that some of Luke's special material was derived from Christian circles sharing in certain respects the outlook of Qumran. And Paul's use of the Old Testament occasionally reminds one of the methods of the Qumran commentators. But these and related fields of study cannot be surveyed here.

There is some reason to believe that, when the Qumran community was broken up towards A.D. 70 (as archaeological evidence indicates), some of its members (together perhaps with members of other Essene groups) made common cause with another body of refugees—the fugitive Church of Jerusalem which left its doomed metropolis and settled east of the Jordan. Some of the distinctive features of those Ebionites, as they are described by Christian writers of later generations, could be accounted for in terms of influences exercised by such a body as the Qumran community.²⁰ The presence of Essene influence in Ebionitism has long been recognised—by J. B. Lightfoot and F. J. A.

[p.101]

Hort, for example.²¹ If in fact some of this influence came from the Qumran community, it may be that those Qumran refugees who joined the Ebionites came to acknowledge that their messianic hopes were fulfilled, not along the lines laid down by their former instructors but in

¹⁹ W. Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (1951).

²⁰ Cf. O. Cullmann, 'Die neuentdeckten Qumran-Texte und das Judenehrentum der Pseudoklementinen', in *Neutestamentliche Studien für Rudolf Bultmann* (1954), pp. 35 ff.

²¹ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle to the Colossians* (1879), pp. 82H.; F. J. A. Hort, *Judaistic Christianity* (1894), pp. 201 f.

the person of Jesus of Nazareth, envisaged more particularly in terms of the 'Prophet like unto Moses'.

A real disservice is rendered to the cause of historical research, whether our primary interest be the Qumran community or the origins of Christianity, when students propound theories which outrun the available evidence and present them to the public as if they were established facts. The discoveries at Qumran, with the light they throw on Old and New Testament studies alike, are sufficiently exciting without the sensational interpretations which have sometimes been placed upon them. They do not present, as the publisher's blurb on one popular work on the subject says, 'the greatest challenge to Christian dogma since Darwin's theory of evolution' (a gem of wishful thinking this!) but they do provide us with new and most welcome background material against which we can study the New Testament and the beginnings of Christianity with greater understanding. Of course, when any object is viewed against a new background, the object itself takes on a fresh appearance; and against the background supplied by the Qumran discoveries several passages in the Gospels and in the rest of the New Testament take on a new and vivid significance. For example, those passages which express the eschatological outlook of early Christianity, or its 'remnant' consciousness, take on a new significance, both by comparison and contrast, when they are viewed in the light of this contemporary movement which was also characterised by an eschatological outlook and a 'remnant' consciousness.

Finally, we should be restrained from premature dogmatism when we consider how fragmentary is our knowledge of the Qumran community as yet. Indeed, when everything that has been discovered is published—and this will be the work of years—the realisation that even that is but a fragment of what the library originally contained will continue to impose counsels of caution. But one thing is sure: the real *differentia* of Christianity is the person and achievement of Jesus (not, as is popularly supposed, His teaching by itself); and the appreciation of His essential uniqueness which the new knowledge has underscored is

[p.102]

likely to be enhanced, not diminished, as further additions are made to this knowledge.