

Were We Deceived about the Dead Sea Scrolls?

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The delay in publishing the Dead Sea scrolls, long a quiet academic scandal, was recently thrust into the forefront of the news by *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception?*. Its authors, M. Baigent and R. Leigh, two qualified experts in discerning arcane conspiracies, manifestly find the world a threatening place. They give reality to their nightmare of Vatican world domination by claiming that the moment the scrolls were discovered a prescient Vatican, foreseeing the damage that first-century documents (then still unread!) must inevitably cause the faith, inserted its inquisitorial minions, the Dominicans of the *École Biblique* in Jerusalem, at the beginning of a process which to date they have consistently subverted. An hilarious thesis to those who know the facts, but disturbing to those forced to rely on titillating innuendo.

A major archaeological discovery is usually a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Time and time again chance, not planning, is the decisive factor. Had Heinrich Schliemann dug another sector of Troy, he would never have found the spectacular gold objects he identified as Priam's treasure. If Kathleen Kenyon had placed her main trench 15 metres further north she would never have brought to light the 8000 BC tower which is the earliest evidence of urban organisation.

How the Dominicans got Involved

The involvement of Dominicans in the on-going saga of the Dead Sea Scrolls was precisely the same sort of fortuitous accident. The invitation came from an English Protestant, Gerald Lankester Harding, then Director of Antiquities in Jordan, and he chose them only because they were on the spot and had the qualified manpower that his fledgling department lacked.

In fact the first Dominicans to see some of the scrolls did not recognise them for what they were. In the last week of July 1947 Father J. van der Ploeg, OP, Lecturer in Old Testament and Hebrew at the

University of Nijmegen, accompanied by Father S. Marmadji, OP, Professor of Arabic at the École Biblique, recognised the Isaiah and Habacuc scrolls among the four shown him by Archbishop Samuel at St Mark's Monastery in the Old City, but could not accept that they were 2000 years old. Texts of such antiquity had been found in Egypt, but not in Palestine and when van der Ploeg recounted his experience at recreation that evening, his French colleagues gleefully recalled the Shapira forgeries of the beginning of the century which, originating in Jerusalem, had cost the British Museum the then astronomical sum of £100,000 before a sceptical French scholar revealed the truth! Much was to happen in the next four years to change van der Ploeg's opinion. In 1951 he presented the first complete translation of a text from Qumran, and in 1957 published the first popular Roman Catholic introduction to The Dead Sea Scrolls, which Kevin Smith translated into English as *The Excavations at Qumran. A Survey of the Judaean Brotherhood and its Ideas* (London Longmans, 1958).

Gerald Lankester Harding came into the picture only towards the end of January 1949 when a scouting party of the Arab Legion led by Captain Akkash el-Zebn found the cave in which the scrolls had been discovered. Once their authenticity had been asserted by William Foxwell Albright, it had become imperative to establish their provenance. Harding invited Father de Vaux, OP, then Director of the École Biblique and the only archaeologist to be based full time in what had become the Jordanian sector of divided Jerusalem, to participate in the excavation of the cave (henceforth known as Cave 1), which took place between 15 February and 5 March 1949. The fact that de Vaux published the report of the excavation in 1953 reflects, not his dominance over Harding, but the absorption of the latter in setting up and administrating the embryonic Department of Antiquities of Jordan in the aftermath of the war.

That first volume of *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* (the series in which the manuscripts are officially published) also contained the fragmentary documents found in the cave. The non-biblical texts were treated by J T Milik, a Polish priest studying at the École Biblique. The biblical texts were the responsibility of a young Dominican, Dominique Barthélemy. Now Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at the University of Fribourg Switzerland, he taught at the École Biblique from 1951–1954 having been a student there for two years (1949–51). The long days of intense concentration, the consequence of his desire to publish as quickly as possible, led to a breakdown which necessitated his return to Europe in 1954. Prior to that, however, he had made a crucial discovery. He was the first to reconstruct the Essene calendar

according to to which Passover always fell on a Wednesday. A Catholic scholar at the Sorbonne, Annie Jaubert, immediately realised the implications for the chronology of the passion of Jesus, and postulated that Jesus celebrated the Last Supper according to this calendar which would place it on the Tuesday evening of Passion week and not on Thursday. The reverberations of this novel idea swept across the world, but there was no interference from the Vatican, even though it contradicted traditional liturgical practice. Such tolerance of complete freedom in historical research has been maintained throughout all subsequent discoveries.

A Library of Manuscripts

No one expected further manuscript discoveries, but the greed of the Bedouin had been stimulated. Whereas the desert had been to them but grazing and water, its unexplored caves now promised gold. They examined every crack and crevice. In October 1951 significant new fragments came on the market, and Harding invited de Vaux to participate in the excavation of Khirbel Qumran, the only ruin in the vicinity of the caves. While the dig was in progress (24 November–12 December 1951) there began a trickle of further fragments which quickly became a flood. In order to raise prices the wily Bedouin tried to play off the three possible buyers against one another, the Department of Antiquities, the Palestine Archaeological Museum, and the École Biblique. Such exploitation was quickly stopped by Harding and de Vaux who both, in addition to their directorships, sat on the board of the Museum.

The full extent of the work-load concerning the scrolls now became apparent to Harding. He would have to supervise the buying (which in practice involved interminable haggling with multiple owners), continue the excavation of Qumran, explore all accessible caves, discover where the non-Qumran material was coming from, and prepare the texts for publication. And all this in addition to running a government department! Moreover, though a trained archaeologist, he had no competence in ancient biblical texts. De Vaux, on the contrary, was both an exegete and an archaeologist. Moreover, he was in fact the only one to whom Harding could delegate authority. American scholars came to Jerusalem for only limited periods, and the Israelis were excluded by the harsh realities of the political situation. With his characteristic energy de Vaux committed himself totally. In January 1952 he persuaded the Bedouin to reveal the location of the Wadi Murabba'at caves, and excavated there with Harding (21 January–3 March 1952). A week later

(10–29 March) he organised and participated in the systematic search of the cliffs behind Qumran in which 275 caves and crevices were thoroughly investigated. The following spring he returned to Khirbet Qumran, the second of five seasons of excavation (1951, 1953–56).

By this point the scholarly world was in a ferment, and for most of the 1950s what H. H. Rowley rightly called ‘the battle of the scrolls’ raged fiercely. Some eminent scholars considered the documents modern forgeries while others dated them in the middle ages. De Vaux’s meticulous archaeological skills became the key factor which demonstrated that the scrolls had been deposited in the caves in the first century A D. Hence, they must be of that period or older. This conclusion was confirmed by palaeography, the science of dating manuscripts by the type of writing; these experts had nothing to do with the Dominicans or the *École Biblique*.

The Editorial Team

While this argument raged about him, de Vaux was also deeply concerned to speed publication of the texts. These were now so numerous and so fragmentary that it was obvious that the *École Biblique* could not accept sole responsibility; it had neither the men nor the means. Since the scrolls belonged to the world and not to any one nation or religious community, de Vaux decided, with the consent of the Jordanian government, to recruit an international and interconfessional editorial committee.

The only one placed on the team by de Vaux was Father Josef Milik. He had exhibited extraordinary ability as an epigrapher in the publication of the texts from Cave 1, and had expressed a desire not to return to communist-controlled Poland. For the others de Vaux appealed to colleagues and scientific bodies, for example, Professors Driver and Rowley in England and the American Schools of Oriental Research in the United States, for names and funds. The response was not overwhelming, but by 1954 the team was complete. Two were French (M. Baillet and J. Starcky), two American (F. M. Cross and P. W. Skehan), two English (J. Allegro and J. Strugnell), and one German (H.-Hunzinger). Four were Catholics (Milik, Baillet, Starcky, Skehan), three Protestants (Cross, Strugnell, Hunzinger), and one an agnostic (Allegro). Others were coopted on an ad hoc basis, thus P. Benoit, OP for the few Greek and Latin fragments and A. Grohmann for the five Arabic fragments. In view of the political realities, which excluded Jews from Jordanian territory, it would be difficult to imagine a fairer balance of nationalities and religious affiliations.

The documents found in the caves were very diverse, ranging from copies of biblical books to texts written in code. Their division among the team members was not the prerogative of de Vaux; it was a matter not of their individual talents, tastes, and research facilities. As soon as the material had been closely surveyed and definitively distributed, however, de Vaux published the assignments so that the scientific world would know what to expect. There were no secrets. A single room at the Palestine Archaeological Museum contained all the texts spread out on long tables; none was ever kept at the École Biblique. Each member of the team was free to inspect the fragments assigned to everyone else, because a mistake might have been made, and a fragment assigned to one lot might actually belong to another.

This point is important in order to refute allegations that de Vaux adopted a deliberate go slow policy on publication in order to bury material detrimental to the faith. John Allegro, for example, who later fell out with de Vaux and other team members, had free access to the entire documentation for many years, and yet never quoted an unpublished text in support of his claim that the scrolls would destroy the traditional view of the origins of Christianity. The reason, of course, is that there were none!

Two other points are worth noting. No important manuscripts were assigned to Dominicans. Benoit had only minor texts in Greek, and Barthélemy's manuscripts concerned the Minor Prophets. Moreover, once manuscripts had been assigned to members of the team, de Vaux had no authority to permit them to be seen by anyone else, and no authority to forbid the team members to show them to outsiders. Some members in fact did just that, notably Strugnell, Cross and Starcky. It was not de Vaux who drew a cloak of secrecy over the scrolls. He was not in a position to do so, even had he wished.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission

Much is also made in certain circles of the fact that de Vaux was a member of The Pontifical Biblical Commission. The suggestion is that his attitude towards the scrolls was dictated by the wishes of the Vatican and not by his academic conscience, and that he controlled the publications of the Catholic members of the team in order to bring them into line with Vatican policy. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Biblical Commission to which de Vaux was appointed in 1956 was not the watchdog organism of the Modernist crisis. The change had taken place normally the year before when it was announced that the draconian historical decrees issued by the Biblical Commission at the

beginning of the century were no longer binding. The Commission which de Vaux joined, far from dictating conclusions, was above all concerned to ensure that Catholic biblical scholarship was thoroughly critical in its methodology, e.g. its instruction on the historical truth of the gospels (1964), which made source and form criticism mandatory.

Pope Paul VI reorganised the Biblical Commission in 1971 (the year de Vaux died) and made it an advisory committee to the Doctrinal Congregation, but its members were (and continue to be) drawn from the most liberal and original minded Catholic scholars. Conservatives within the church consider the Biblical Commission to be staffed by dangerous subversives without any respect for the Magisterium! The idea that the Biblical Commission would have interfered in a purely historical matter such as the interpretation of fragmentary documents as ludicrous as the idea that de Vaux could have dictated the scientific opinions of his tough-minded collaborators. A number in fact disagreed with him publicly on particular points. He welcomed such debate and willingly changed his mind when convinced he should do so. The integrity of his scholarship was rewarded by numerous honorary doctorates (among them Aberdeen, Vienna, and Yale) and the Stillman professorship at Harvard (1964–65). It is difficult to conceive such independent institutions honouring a tool of the Vatican dedicated to obfuscation!

Dominicans Finish Their Tasks

By the time de Vaux died (10 September 1971) the chairmanship of the editorial team had been reduced to a purely administrative function. All the key decisions had been made; it remained only to see that the team members actually published the documents confided to them. The choice of the editorial team fell on Pierre Benoit, OP, then Director of the *École Biblique*. Whether they had the authority to make such an appointment remains unclear, but the debate becomes irrelevant in view of Benoit's exceptional qualifications. His international reputation as a scholar (honorary doctorates from Munich and Durham) made him acceptable to both the Jordanian and Israeli governments. He had been de Vaux's closest collaborator, and so was familiar with all the administrative details. More importantly, he had already published the Greek and Latin texts entrusted to him, and thus was in a position to insist that others fulfil their obligations. His repeated requests were unavailing. Only two volumes of *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* (1977 and 1982) appeared during his tenure. His final despairing gesture came in a letter dated 15 September 1985 asking each member to

furnish a timetable for publication. The speed of the responses boded ill for the completion of the tasks.

What might be termed 'official' Dominican involvement with the Dead Sea scrolls ended with Benoit's death. The chairmanship of the editorial committee passed to Professor John Strugnell of Harvard. Dominicans entrusted with documents had either published them (the case of Benoit) or formally transferred the responsibility to others (the case of Barthélemy who passed not only his texts but all his notes to Professor Emmanuel Tov of the Hebrew University). The name of the École Biblique continues to be associated with the project merely because Strugnell used to rent a room in the compound when in Jerusalem, and because one of those with still unpublished manuscripts, Emile Puech, a French secular priest attached to the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, works out of the École Biblique. As Jean Starcky's collaborator he was the obvious choice to assume his responsibilities when Starcky died in 1988.

De Vaux, however, had never completed the publication of the excavation of Qumran. His preliminary reports and synthesis were admirable, but could not replace a full final report, particularly since a number of his conclusions had been challenged. In 1987 the École Biblique discharged its responsibility to the scientific world by commissioning Professor Robert Donceel of the University of Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium to prepare such a report. He has access to all de Vaux's data, but is expected to make entirely independent judgments. Such liberty is characteristic of the ethos of the École Biblique as I know from personal experience. While still a young scholar I challenged the consensus upheld by de Vaux and Benoit by claiming that the Essenes originated, not in Palestine, but in Babylon. They did not agree, but nonetheless published my articles; authority is not abused by the open-minded and truly confident.

The motto of the École Biblique is that of the Dominican order, namely, *Veritas* 'truth', and in the saga of the scrolls that has always been its beacon.

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