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Unwelcome Voices from the Dust

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14

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The mystery of the nature and organization of the Primitive Church has recently been considerably illuminated by the discovery of the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls. There is increasing evidence that these documents were deliberately sealed up to come forth at a later time, thus providing a significant parallel to the Book of Mormon record. The Scrolls have caused considerable dismay and confusion among scholars, since they are full of things generally believed to be uniquely Christian, though they were undoubtedly written by pious Jews *before* the time of Christ. Some Jewish and Christian investigators have condemned the Scrolls as forgeries and suggest leaving them alone on the grounds that they don't make sense. Actually they make very good sense, but it is a sense quite contrary to conventional ideas of Judaism and Christianity. The Scrolls echo teachings in many apocryphal writings, both of the Jews and the Christians, while at the same time showing undeniable affinities with the Old and the New Testament teachings. The very things which made the Scrolls at first so baffling and hard to accept to many scholars are the very things which in the past have been used to discredit the Book of Mormon. Now the Book of Mormon may be read in a wholly new light, which is considered here in Lessons 14, 15, 16, and 17.

The Mystery of the Primitive Church

One of the great mysteries of history has been the nature and organization of the Primitive or original Christian Church, that is, the tangible Church founded by Christ. Was there a church organization at all? If so what became of it? Did they really expect the end of the world? Were they for the law of Moses or against it? It is hard for us to realize how completely in the dark the scholars have always been on these vitally important matters, how varied and

contradictory their theories, how weak and speculative all their evidence.¹ Only with the discovery of vitally important documents, beginning with the Didache in 1875, did the dense, impenetrable fog that already baffled the great Eusebius in his researches into the Primitive Church begin to lift.² We cannot discuss here the many sensational discoveries that have forced the learned, with the greatest reluctance, to acknowledge that the strange and unfamiliar form that is becoming clearer every day through the rising mists is the solid reality of a forgotten church that once truly existed. But we cannot avoid touching upon the most sensational find of modern times—that of the Dead Sea Scrolls. For the Scrolls put us constantly in mind of the Book of Mormon and, we believe, confirm it on many points.

Certitude and the Dead Sea Scrolls

At present [1957] the Scrolls are floating in a sea of controversy, but there are certain things about them which have either never been disputed or have now become the object of universal consensus. It is to such noncontroversial things that we shall confine our study, for obvious reasons. It is universally agreed today, for instance, that the Dead Sea Scrolls were produced by a community of Jews living in the desert of Judaea a long time ago, a community of whose existence no one was aware before the present decade.³ Even the terrible Professor Zeitlin, though he claims that the sect was not nearly as ancient as the other experts believe it was, and insists that the writer or writers of the Scrolls were disgustingly ignorant and wrote only nonsense, would agree to that much. And that is all the information we need to make a very significant comparison between what we find written in the Scrolls and what we find written in the Book of Mormon. Furthermore, the finding of writings in not one or two but in more than thirty caves (and that by men whose competence ranges from that

of illiterate Bedouin boys to that of the very top men in Hebrew and Christian studies) does away with the argument once vehemently put forward that the Scrolls were a plant or were never found in the caves at all. The excavation of extensive ruins lying in the immediate vicinity of the most important caves has brought forth a wealth of artifacts (notably certain jars of peculiar shape) resembling those found in the caves and nowhere else, along with more than 400 coins which make it possible to determine the date of activities in the desert with great accuracy. "Excavation of the settlement at Khirbet Qumrân has established beyond doubt that all the material was deposited in these caves late in the first century A.D."⁴ That, of course, is only the terminal date; the life of the Qumran community belongs to the preceding centuries.⁵

"Sealed Up to Come Forth in Their Purity"?

Even before one knows what is in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the story of their coming forth, "a marvelous account," as Dupont-Sommer rightly calls it, immediately puts the Latter-day Saint in mind of the Book of Mormon.⁶ In 1953 the author of these lessons wrote of the Scrolls:

The texts that have turned up with such dramatic suddenness in the last few years, as if a signal had been given, are the first ancient documents which have survived not by accident but by design.

We then quoted a passage from the apocryphal Assumption of Moses, in which Moses before being taken up to heaven is instructed by the Lord to "seal up" the covenant:

Receive this writing that thou mayest know how to preserve the books which I shall deliver unto thee: and thou shalt set in order and anoint them with oil of cedar and put them away in earthen vessels in the place which he made from the beginning of the creation of the world.⁷

The purpose of this hiding, we are told, is to preserve the books through a "period of darkness when men shall have fallen away from the true covenant and would pervert the truth." We then pointed out that the Dead Sea Scrolls had been preserved in just such a manner as that prescribed to Moses:

In specially-made earthen jars, wrapped in linen which was "coated with wax or pitch or asphalt which proves that the scrolls were hidden in the cave for safe preservation, to be recovered and used later again." By whom? The peculiar method of storage also indicates very plainly that the documents were meant for a *long* seclusion, . . . and to lay a roll away with the scrupulous care and after the very manner of entombing an Egyptian mummy certainly indicates a long and solemn farewell and no mere temporary storage of convenience.⁸

Since these words were written, it has been pointed out in high places that "those who hid their precious scrolls did not return to claim them."⁹ And that while "in the case of our scrolls and wrappers, they may, as suggested, have been concealed in the cave in a time of national panic, but it is important to remember that burial in caves was the custom of the country, and so this concealment may only be the equivalent of the correct cemetery burial of the contents of a *Genizah*."¹⁰ That is, it is now suggested that the scrolls were not hidden away temporarily during a time of crisis and danger, as has been generally held, but were actually given a formal burial in the manner of books laid away in a *Genizah*. A *Genizah* was a walled-off bin in an ancient synagogue in which old worn-out copies of scripture were placed to be gotten out of the way and forgotten forever. They could not be destroyed since they contained the sacred Tetragrammaton, the mysterious name of God, yet the old tattered texts were no longer usable—and so they were pushed behind the wall and forgotten. But the Dead Sea Scrolls were not thus thrust aside. The whole

emphasis in the manner of their bestowal was for preservation—preservation over a very long time, and since the Ascension of Moses is actually one of the fragments found in the caves, it is certain that these people knew all about the tradition according to which the righteous men of one dispensation would hide up their records, “sealed up to come forth in their purity, according to the truth which is in the Lamb, in the own due time of the Lord, unto the house of Israel” (1 Nephi 14:26). From this and many other considerations it is apparent that the people who left us the Dead Sea Scrolls had something of the Book of Mormon idea concerning books and records.

Israel and the Church: Were They One?

Another important disclosure of the Dead Sea Scrolls to the world, and one of which scholars are now well aware, was the discovery of large areas of Jewish and Christian doctrine and practice of which the scholars had been totally ignorant; and these areas, far from being mere bits of obscure detail, lie at the very heart of Judaism and Christianity in their older and purer forms. The discovery of the scrolls has proven very upsetting to the experts. The Jewish scholars who twitted the Christians for being alarmed by the discovery that the religion of Christ was not a novel and original thing suddenly introduced into the world for the first time with the birth of Jesus, were in turn thrown into an even greater turmoil by the discovery that doctrines which they had always attributed to Christian cranks and innovators were really very old and very Jewish. Israel and Christianity, heretofore kept in separate and distinct compartments by the professors of both religions (except for purely symbolic and allegorical parallels), are seen in the Scrolls to have been anciently confounded and identified. Suddenly a window is opened on the past and we behold Israel full of what is Christian and the early Church full of Israel! With this discovery, as we have pointed out else-

where, "the one effective argument against the Book of Mormon (i.e., that it introduces New Testament ideas and terminology into a pre-Christian setting) collapses."¹¹

On the one hand, the Jewish nature of the scrolls could not be denied. It is only fair and right that the Hebrew University should in the end have been willing to pay the high price for the possession of these old texts that no one else was willing to pay, and that the study of the scrolls, originally left largely to the Christians, is now rapidly becoming a Jewish monopoly.¹² On the other hand, none could fail to see that the scrolls talk a language very like that of the *New Testament*. The manner in which the scrolls treat the scriptures, for example, "has no parallel either in Hellenistic or Pharisaic Judaism, in allegory, philosophizing exegesis or in legalistic interpretation. But it precisely falls into the pattern of the New Testament exegesis of the Law and the Prophets."¹³ Professor Harding notes that "many authorities consider that Christ himself . . . studied with them [the 'Scrolls' people]," and he is personally quite convinced that John the Baptist did.¹⁴

Alarm of the Christian World

Since the first publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, devout scholars have been busy reassuring their co-religionists that "no Christian need stand in dread of these texts,"¹⁵ while admitting, for example, that "the Isaiah scroll was received with consternation in some circles,"¹⁶ and that "the results were shocking," when they started to study the new-found text of Samuel.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the defensive tone of such reassurances, with their frequent references to alarm and misgiving, shows plainly enough a "startling disclosure: that the sect possessed, years before Christ, a terminology and practice that have always been considered uniquely Christian;"¹⁸ and this has administered a severe shock to the complacency of conventional Christianity. "It is as though God had added to his 'once for all' revelation,"

writes a devout Presbyterian scholar,¹⁹ while the readers of the *Catholic World* are assured that "it is only to be expected that there will be certain likenesses between . . . the community at Qumran and the Church of the New Law, both of them 'seeking' the true God and striving to be perfect, each in his own way. . . . The revelation of the New Testament was not, so to speak, built up on a vacuum."²⁰

If that is "only to be expected," why has the Book of Mormon been so savagely attacked by ministers on the very grounds of likeness between the Book of Mormon pre-Christian churches and the Christians?²¹ If it was "only to be expected," why did it prove so startling and upsetting? Because of the scrolls, writes Frank Moore Cross, "the strange world of the New Testament becomes less baffling, less exotic."²² The charge of being "baffling," "strange," and "exotic" is that most constantly hurled at the Book of Mormon description of the religious world of the ancient Americans. Have the scholars any reason to believe it was any less so than the relatively familiar "world of the New Testament"?

Neither Christian nor Jewish – Yet Both!

The Jewish scholar Teicher avoids the embarrassment of having to accept an early Judaism shot through with Christian ideas by denying that the scrolls are Jewish at all. He points out that the teachings of the scrolls exactly correspond to those of the Primitive Christian Church, especially with regard to the Messiah:

The judge of mankind on the Last Day is thus, according to the Habbakuk Scroll, the Elect, the Christian Messiah, that is, Jesus. Is then Jesus referred to explicitly in the Scroll? He is; under the appellation of *moreh ha-šedeq*, which should be correctly translated the 'True Teacher' – the title applied to Jesus both in Mark and among the Jewish-Christian sect of the Ebionites.²³

His conclusion from this is that the Scrolls *must* be a

Christian production, yet his Jewish colleagues do not agree with him. The scrolls are typically Christian and yet they are Jewish, typically Jewish and yet Christian! Moreover, they are typically biblical in style and composition, and yet not biblical. "The hymns in the collection are reminiscent of the latest biblical psalms, and more especially the psalms in the prologue of Luke. They draw heavily on the Psalter and Prophetic poetry for inspiration, and borrow direct phrases, cliches, and style. However, neither in language, spirit, nor theology are they biblical."²⁴ How can such a thing be possible? The Book of Mormon holds the answer, or, the other way around. However you may hate to accept the thesis of the Book of Mormon, the "marvelous finds" of Qumran certainly confirm its position. The Book of Mormon is Christian yet Jewish, it is biblical yet not biblical.

Can the Scrolls Be Read?

In studying the Dead Sea Scrolls there is first of all the little problem of translation. Recently Dr. Zeitlin has stated flatly that the scrolls cannot be translated:

Even the best scholar of the Hebrew medieval period could not do justice in translating these scrolls because most of them are untranslatable. It is indeed folly to attempt to translate these scrolls into any modern language. It would be a waste of time.

Then he quite undermines his own position with the following dictum: "In rendering an ancient text into a modern language the translator must not add words to or subtract words from the text."²⁵ That is a meaningless statement if there ever was one, for "so completely does any one-to-one relationship vanish between the vocabularies of languages that reflect widely different cultures that it may be necessary to translate one line of a text by a whole page or a page by a single line!"²⁶ If one insists, with Dr. Zeitlin, on a literal word-for-word translation, one might as well

insist on a letter-for-letter translation. The only alternative is Willamowitz' definition of a translation as "a statement in the translator's own words of what he thinks the author had in mind." There is no such thing as a text that can be read but not translated; whoever can read a foreign language so that it means something to him can certainly express that meaning in his own words – and such an expression is no more nor less than a translation. If one cannot express it in one's own words, one has not understood it. Zeitlin is wrong on both points. Any text that can be read can be translated, but no text can ever be translated literally.

But how can we know if we are understanding a text correctly? Zeitlin admits loudly and often that the scrolls make no sense to him, they are not in his language; yet he heaps scorn on "all the scholars who deal with the scrolls with the aid of a dictionary."²⁷ Since nobody alive speaks the language of the scrolls, it is hard to see how anyone can get very far without a dictionary. The same is true of any ancient language – yet ancient languages are read! The first rule of exegesis is that if a text means something it means something! That is to say, if a writing conveys a consistent message to a reader there is a good chance that that text is being at least partly understood correctly. The longer the text is that continues thus to give forth consistent and connected meaning, the greater the probability that it is being read rightly; and the greater the number of people who derive the same meaning from a text independently, the greater the probability that that meaning is the right one. It should never be forgotten, however, that the interpretation of an ancient text never rises above the level of a high plausibility – there is no final certainty. The history of scholarship is the story of one man who dares to rebuke and correct all the other scholars in the world on a point in which they have been in perfect agreement for hundreds of years – and proves them wrong! That is one reason why an inspired translation of the Book of Mormon is infinitely

to be preferred to the original text, for if we had the original *all* the scholars could very easily be wrong in their reading of any passages. None the less, in the long run the statistical argument is the one we must appeal to in cases of doubt.

From first to last the scrolls have told a single consistent story; their message has been picked up independently by scores of scholars, and the fact that they have recognized a single message, even though they have found it strange and disconcerting, is ample proof that a real message has been conveyed. This is the message we convey here. Every one of our "dictionary translations" that follow can be substantiated by the independent verdict of far better scholars than we are, and in cases where our interpretation may seem extreme or forced we have called upon such men for confirmation. If the scrolls were only a few scattered fragments of half a dozen lines or so, one would always be in doubt, but we have to do here with a good-sized book whose contents are ample and varied enough to make the test of internal evidence alone quite decisive.

Connections Everywhere

From the first, scholars recognized that the scrolls talked the familiar language of certain canonical and apocryphal writings. It was not difficult to detect in the first fragments discovered close affinities to the Gospels (especially John), and Epistles,²⁸ and also to such important apocryphal writings as the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Book of Enoch, Sibylline writings (Jewish and Christian), the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Assumption of Moses, the Psalms of Solomon, the Lives of Adam and Eve, the Apocalypse of Abraham, and others.²⁹ Moreover, the scrolls used the peculiar language and expressed the peculiar ideas found in the earliest Christian writings after the Apostles, especially in the Pseudo-Clementine writings to which we have so often referred in other places as the key to the thinking of the Early Christian Church.³⁰ As if that were

not enough, the scrolls "may be said, with some slight exaggeration, to have been written in code" and to employ the devices of cryptography of secret Jewish sects.³¹ "The intertestamental works soon reveal their identity by key words and characteristic phraseology," writes Cross, noting that the scrolls teach us for the first time "the theological vocabulary of contemporary Judaism in both its Hebrew and Aramaic branches."³²

The Emerging Pattern

That we have in the scrolls and the New Testament a single tradition is admitted, however reluctantly, by most scholars today. That they are also in direct line of descent from the Old Testament prophets as the traditional teachings of certain Jewish sectaries has also been pointed out. Furthermore, aside from being found in the same sacred library with a great many works of the Jewish Apocrypha, they contain many surprising ties with the later Christian apocryphal writings. Moreover, these connections are by no means haphazard. There is a definite tendency behind them. What indicates a revision of conventional ideas about early Christianity, for example, is not the discovery of new doctrines and ideas (Zeitlin makes great to-do about the complete *unoriginality* of the scrolls), but the emergence of a pattern of emphasis and orientation which had not been heretofore attributed to Christians; it is the emphasis and orientation found in the Book of Mormon and discussed in our last lesson. In the Dead Sea Scrolls we have a fairly large body of *datable* documents that seem to be a common meeting ground for Jewish and Christian ideas expressed both in the canons of the Old and New Testament and in the Jewish and Christian Apocrypha.

At last enough of the hitherto hidden background of the Old and New Testament is beginning to emerge to enable students before long to examine the Book of Mormon

against that larger background of which it speaks so often and by which alone it can be fairly tested.

Questions

1. What are the Dead Sea Scrolls?
2. What is peculiar about the nature of their preservation?
3. What is significant for Book of Mormon study in the discovery of pre-Christian texts that speak the language of the New Testament?
4. Why has the message of the scrolls been an unwelcome one to certain Christians?
5. Why to the Jews?
6. How can scholars prove their claim to be able to read ancient records?
7. With what other ancient documents do the scrolls display affinity?
8. What possible connection can exist between the Qumran people and those who produced other writings resembling the scrolls?
9. How do objections to the authenticity of the scrolls resemble those brought forward against the Book of Mormon?
10. Are the Dead Sea Scrolls scripture?