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P R E F A C E

The Dead Sea Scrolls may seem to be an unlikely candidate for inclusion in a series on “biographies” of books.

The Scrolls are not in fact one book, but a miscellaneous collection of writings retrieved from caves near Qumran, at the northwest corner of the Dead Sea, between the years 1947 and 1956. In all, fragments of some nine hundred manuscripts were found. They are written mostly in Hebrew, with some in Aramaic and a small number in Greek. They date from the last two centuries BCE and the first century CE.

The collection is not entirely random, and much, though not all, of it seems to reflect the thought of a Jewish sect, usually identified as the Essenes, around the turn of the era. But the degree of coherence is controversial. While the Scrolls are often presumed to be the remnants of the library of a community

that lived at the site of Qumran, this view seems increasingly unlikely. It is more likely that they were brought from several sectarian communities and hidden in the caves in the wilderness at the time of the Jewish Revolt against Rome (66–70 CE), although some presumably belonged to the community at the site. Unlike the Bible, which is also a collection of writings of diverse origin, the Scrolls were never known to constitute a distinct corpus in antiquity. Only after their accidental discovery in the middle of the twentieth century CE did the Scrolls become a corpus, or an entity that might be considered an appropriate subject for a “biography.”

Moreover, the “biography” of these Scrolls is somewhat like that of Rip van Winkle. While other texts from antiquity influenced the Renaissance or the Reformation, the Scrolls just slept. What we have witnessed in the last sixty-five years or so is not so much a biography as a post-resurrection afterlife, separated from the original environment of the Scrolls by an interval of two millennia.

Nonetheless, the Scrolls now exist as a distinct corpus, with a life of its own. That life has several dimensions. The Scrolls are a scholarly resource, studied intensively by an expanding community of scholars, and of interest not only to historians of Judaism and Christianity but also to sociologists of religion and even philosophers. They are also a

tourist attraction, in Jerusalem as well as in museum exhibitions throughout the Western world. Hundreds of thousands of people have waited patiently to catch a glimpse of selected illegible fragments in dimly lighted display cases and come away feeling that they have touched the past. In October 2011, when the Israel Museum launched a website featuring high-resolution photographs of five important Scrolls, the site got more than a million hits in the first week. Only a fraction of the people visiting the site are likely to have been scholars who could read the texts from the photographs. The Scrolls are fodder for the popular demand for “mysteries”—exotic, dimly understood lore that is paraded to stimulate curiosity in tabloid newspapers and television shows such as “Mysteries of the Bible.” They are also sometimes a political symbol—testimony to the antiquity of Jewish roots in the land west of the Jordan, or conversely of modern Israeli expropriation of artifacts that were discovered in territory that was then under Jordanian control and whose ownership remains in dispute.

The Scrolls have been described as the greatest archeological discovery of the twentieth century. They have certainly been the most controversial.

The Scrolls attract popular interest, and also spark controversy, because they are primary documents from ancient Judea, from around the time

of Jesus. Prior to the discovery of the Scrolls there were scarcely any Hebrew or Aramaic texts extant from that time and place. Inevitably, there has been an expectation, sometimes fevered, that these texts would shed light on Jesus or the movement of his followers. Several claims in this regard, beginning a few years after the discovery of the Scrolls and continuing into the twenty-first century, have been quite sensational, and it is precisely these claims that have attracted the attention of the wider public.

Controversy has been fanned by the fact that many of the fragmentary Scrolls remained unpublished for half a century. This delay has provided fertile ground for conspiracy theories, which were further nourished by the fact that several members of the official editorial team were Catholic priests—hence the suggestion that the Scrolls had been withheld from the public by order of the Vatican, because of the fear that they might undermine the historical credibility of Christianity. No serious scholars take such claims seriously, but they continue to stimulate suspicion and curiosity among the amateurs who flock to museum exhibits of the Scrolls.

Almost immediately after their discovery, a consensus developed that the Scrolls belonged to the (Jewish) sect of the Essenes, who had long been regarded as forerunners of Christianity. This con-

sensus has aroused the wrath of dissenters to an extraordinary degree. The passion of the debate can hardly be explained by the ambiguities of the evidence. The same is true of the interpretation of the site of Qumran as an Essene settlement. At stake is the relevance of the Scrolls for mainline Jewish tradition, or the degree to which they should be taken to reflect a marginal form of Judaism, closer to Christianity than to the religion of the rabbis.

For a long time, the Scrolls were thought to be of greater interest to Christian scholars than to their Jewish counterparts. This impression was due in some part to the fact that no Jewish scholars were included in the editorial team, at the insistence of the Jordanian government. After the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, and the Israeli conquest of East Jerusalem where most of the Scrolls were housed, that picture began to change. When all the Scrolls became freely available in the 1990s, scholars who had been trained in rabbinic literature realized that there was plenty of material to interest them in the Scrolls. Consequently, the pendulum has swung from issues that were primarily of interest to Christian scholars to matters bearing on the distinctively Jewish character of the Scrolls and the continuity of the Scrolls with the later rabbinic tradition. Debates on all these issues have been heated, and have led to court proceedings in at least two cases—one

involving the rights of editors of ancient texts and one involving attempts to defame a prominent scholar, as a way of advancing the views of a maverick in the field. These proceedings reflect a level of personal acrimony that is rare in the world of academic scholarship.

The story of the discovery of the Scrolls has often been told, and their contents have been amply described. There are also accounts, some of them self-serving, of “the battle for the scrolls,” the controversies that led to the end of the monopoly of the editorial team and granting of access to any qualified scholar. The purpose of this volume is different.

Our purpose is to ask what difference the Scrolls have made to the study of ancient Judaism and early Christianity, and to probe what has been at stake in the debates that have often been so acrimonious. Are the Scrolls really worthy of all the attention they have received and continue to receive? Or are they only of curiosity value, as relics of an obscure and idiosyncratic sect that happened to live in the same time and place as Jesus of Nazareth? What is their enduring value likely to be?

For most of us who work in the field of biblical studies or ancient Judaism, these questions often seem unnecessary. Of course the Scrolls are of great historical value. In fields where new data rarely come to light, the Scrolls have seemed to be manna

from heaven. They shed light on the two main religions of the Western world at a crucial time of transition for the one (Judaism) and the time of origin of the other (Christianity). In the case of Judaism, the Scrolls provide primary evidence for a period where it had been lacking. In the case of Christianity, the light is indirect, by illuminating the context in which Jesus and his earliest followers lived. This light is seldom of the sensational, headline-grabbing kind that popular writers on the Scrolls have repeatedly sought. But it is of fundamental importance for understanding the nature of Judaism and Christianity, and their tumultuous relationship over the centuries.

But are the Scrolls just something that God has provided for scholars to be busy with, as the book of Ecclesiastes might have suggested? It is unlikely that anyone's views about religion or life have been changed because of the discovery of the Scrolls. While the significance of the Scrolls lies mainly in the light they shed on ancient Judaism and early Christianity, the "biography" of the Scrolls is also an interesting study in the ethos of the scholarly community and modern media. The scholarly community is generally collegial and mutually supportive, but the Scrolls have brought to light some glaring exceptions that remind us that this community is no more free of original sin than any other seg-

ment of the human race. The story of the Scrolls also provides for an interesting study in the use, and manipulation, of scholarly data in the popular media. No doubt, the free press is one of the glories of democracy, but it can sometimes behave as indiscriminately as a hungry beast that only seeks whom it may devour.

The biography of the Scrolls, in short, touches on a range of interests that go beyond the historical value of the ancient texts. A major discovery like this shakes up the conventional world of scholarship in various ways, both on the level of ideas and on the level of human behavior. We will consider some of these ways in the following chapters.