1996

Review of Lawrence H. Shiffman "Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls. The History of Judaism, the Background of Christianity, The Lost Library of Qumran"

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pupils and by the team of the Rev. J. Carmignac, but it seems that nobody is continuing their efforts now. The British book market is dominated by the very well known anthology of Qumran texts by G. Vermes. The Finnish scholars have decided to prepare their own translation, and the first volume appeared in 1992.

The publication of the second volume of the Russian translation, edited and mostly written by K. B. Starkova, is a great event. The volume will be a good help for any translator into the Slavonic languages. But other translators, if they know Russian, could profit greatly not only from Starkova's understanding of the texts, but also from her introductions and philological comments. Her deep knowledge of Hebrew, of the Bible and of the Qumran literature is evident from every page of her book. We congratulate her on this brilliant result of her painstaking work and wish her every success in the publication soon of the next volume of translations, with the Temple Scroll.

I wish to express my thanks to Dr. Igor R. Tantevskij for kindly and promptly supplying me with a copy of volume 2 of the series 'Teksty Kumranu'.


This latest book from this well-known Jewish Qumran scholar is a welcome addition to the wealth of literature being produced about the Dead Sea Scrolls. The book's title sums up the author's aim in writing: to reclaim the scrolls for Judaism. In contrast to a general tendency to interpret the scrolls almost exclusively in relation to the origins of Christianity, Schiffman's goal is to put Qumranic studies into the context in which he feels they rightly belong, namely that of the history of Judaism. The discovery of the scrolls obviously does have importance for the study of earliest Christianity, as the author himself clearly acknowledges, but the implications of the scrolls for the study of the development of Judaism from sectarianism to rabbinic Judaism have all too rarely been explored in any detail. In Schiffman's own words, "This book aims to correct a fundamental misreading of the Dead Sea Scrolls. For some forty-five years, the scholars publishing and interpreting the scrolls have focused almost single-mindedly on the scrolls' significance for our understanding of early Christianity. This is the first work ever written to explain their significance in understanding the history of Judaism" (p.xii). This book is also distinctive in that it is only since the release of the previously unavailable scrolls that it has become possible to attempt to give a comprehensive account of their contents and significance.
Schiffman's presentation of the scrolls includes all the standard introductory information relating to this field, such as an account of the discovery of the scrolls, and of the controversies leading up to their publication. Other sections cover subjects such as the community's structure and leadership, issues of canon and biblical interpretation, messianism, mysticism, and nationalism. A discussion of controversial texts, such as the so-called 'Pierced Messiah' text, is also included. Rather than speak primarily of the group's 'theology', Schiffman entitles the section relating to the group's beliefs 'To Live as a Jew', reflecting the emphasis in the Qumran community, as in early Judaism in general, on halakhah rather than on speculative or philosophical theology. This latter emphasis has generally been obscured in literature about the scrolls; frequently these Jewish texts have been in the hands of Christian scholars, who have left crucial halakhic texts until last for publication. A number of other aspects of the community's thought are given a more detailed treatment here than in other introductions to the scrolls, such as the community's attitude to gentiles. A helpful glossary is provided, as is a guide to the scrolls cited in the book, which gives the location of full translations of the relevant texts. A comprehensive treatment, this book contains well over 500 pages of helpful information. References are given in end notes, which are listed in relation to pages and subjects rather than numbers, making the work readable for beginners while still providing the bibliographical support which scholars will require.

Schiffman's book fills an important gap in the field, and is clearly to be regarded as a welcome addition. However, a number of weaknesses detract from what could perhaps otherwise have been described as an ideal textbook on the Dead Sea Scrolls. Schiffman has a tendency to make sweeping, polemical statements, which he only later counterbalance with more careful ones. For example, the book argues for a Sadducean origin for the Dead Sea Sect, and in the earlier parts of the book the impression is given that this is an alternative to the Essene hypothesis, which is the current scholarly consensus (see, e.g., p. 51). Yet later on, Schiffman makes clear that he is using 'Sadducean' in a broad sense, with a meaning closer to 'Zadokite' (p. 71), and the assertion that the Qumran group's origins were among the Zadokite priests is hardly controversial. Further, Schiffman really does not have anything against the idea that the Qumran group formed part of a wider Essene movement (see pp. 129f). Schiffman's fault is less in what he affirms than in the way that he affirms it, namely by making sharp statements, which he eventually goes on to balance and discuss in detail later on. While such instances are not frequent in the book, they occur in relation to important subjects, and thus form a blemish on what is an otherwise extremely important and valuable treatment of these issues.

The attempt to place the Qumran texts into the stream of Jewish (as opposed to Christian) history is extremely useful and makes an important contribution. However, he gives the impression that his reading of the text in the light of subsequent developments in Judaism, and especially the rabbinic Judaism which eventually became normative, will avoid distorting the text in the way that an overtly Christian reading does. In fact, it is more accurate to say that both readings distort the texts, since neither can be said to provide an unbiased viewpoint. Whereas Schiffman's reading provides a helpful counterbalance to the interpretations of many other scholars (and his presentation of Qumran beliefs and practices in Jewish rather than Christian terms helps put the Dead Sea Scrolls into perspective and avoid wrong assumptions and misinterpretation on the part of Christians - see especially p.18), Christianity arguably did preserve many elements of early Jewish diversity which rabbinic Judaism sought to exclude. His 'rabbinic' reading, in playing down elements of Qumran belief which have similarities with Christianity, is in all likelihood playing down what were very important and widespread beliefs in Judaism in the period in question.

These points should not be allowed to overshadow the importance or value of Schiffman's contribution. He provides an excellent introduction to most aspects of Qumran studies, and offers cogent arguments challenging a number of widely assumed points (such as the view that the Qumran sectarians practised celibacy). Whether these arguments will ultimately find general acceptance in the scholarly community is another question. But Schiffman's provision of a detailed, thorough and generally well-balanced introduction to scrolls...
research, as well as of interesting suggestions and proposals concerning alternative understandings of the evidence, means that, in spite of any shortcomings, Schiffman’s book will be one which scholars and students will certainly want to have on their shelves.

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This latest book by Dr. Barbara Thiering is certain to attract much attention. In it, she takes up her approach to the Gospels and the Dead Sea Scrolls in her controversial book, Jesus the Man, and applies it here to the Apocalypse of John. Her thesis, as in her earlier work, is that the pesher form of exegesis, found in many of the commentaries discovered at Qumran, actually provides the key to interpreting the New Testament (pp.IX-X). Whereas the simple believers in the early church, those who had an immature faith, needed miracle stories and supernatural tales, the mature, according to Dr. Thiering, knew the truth: that the Book of Revelation, like the four Gospels, is actually written in code, and those who are initiated into this special knowledge can understand these stories for what they are, a history of the intrigues, conflicts and other experiences of the earliest church. According to Thiering, the Book of Revelation is really about how Jesus and his sons led this revolutionary movement as it moved from Palestine and spread through the Roman empire.

Thiering’s monumental thesis is expounded in a massive volume of some 462 pages. Readers familiar with either the New Testament or early Judaism will be surprised to learn that Hillel was the leader of a Jewish mission to the diaspora, complete with the baptism of Jews into a ‘new Israel’, and as such was the first ‘pope’ (he apparently even sold indulgences!) (see pp. 8,36), and that the Sadducean high priests believed themselves to be God incarnate (pp. 10f). But such minor surprises are only to break the reader in and prepare him or her for what is to come, the revelation that Jesus survived the crucifixion, and that the reader can be initiated into Thiering’s secret knowledge and learn the truth about him and his earliest followers. The initiate learns that the ‘Restoration’ mentioned in Acts 3 is a reference to the restoration of the Herod dynasty (which is what ‘all things’ stands for in the pesher, in case you did not know). And Armageddon “meant, to the initiated, ‘a sanctuary priest who is in the unclean place, the latrine’” (p. 93). Although to most people the Apocalypse represents a bizarre world of imagery from an ancient time, to those initiated by reading Thiering’s book, the work supposedly becomes a crystal clear history of the early church.

There is really only one thing that Thiering’s thesis lacks, but unfortunately for her that one thing is proof: The need for proof, and a substantial amount of it, is something which Dr. Thiering acknowledges in her introduction (p. xlv), but unfortunately fails to provide. The book actually contains a detailed glossary of the deeper meanings of the words used in the Apocalypse (pp. 201-304), after which the reader is given a detailed pesher of the Apocalypse (pp. 305-411), where the reader will find the text of this NT document given in small snippets, each followed by an explanation of its true meaning. One thing which can be said with some certainty is that Dr. Thiering learned about exegesis from Qumran. However, at Qumran they found actual pesher commentaries for a number of books from the Hebrew Bible, whereas the only copy of the pesher of the Revelation of St. John is found in the last part of Thiering’s book, and is acknowledged as her own composition. What this commentary in fact represents is the document which Thiering would have to find in order to prove her case. As it stands, scholars of both the New Testament and early Judaism will find themselves compelled to reject Thiering’s thesis, not because she is bringing to light new and controversial insights which challenge the way people think about Jesus and early Christianity, but because she is reading things into these ancient texts without any evidential basis whatsoever. Not that Thiering is wrong to suggest that the Apocalypse itself suggests a symbolic reading (pp. xii-xiii); but as most scholars would agree, proposed interpretations of the sym-