

FINAL YEAR DISSERTATION

Pini Dunner April 1996

**Sectarian movements in the late Second Temple period
in the light of discoveries at Qumran**

Summary

The dissertation aims to highlight the new discoveries about religious sectarianism in the late second temple era, whilst examining preconceived historical beliefs based on primary sources and secondary historical opinions, and putting them into perspective. Within this framework, the study will also examine new material published about the scroll known as MMT and integrate the findings into the final analysis.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have created more problems than they have solved, both for religious scholars and historical scholars. Although they have added an immense amount of knowledge concerning the dynamics of their period, they have left the door open for numerous questions regarding previously undebated historical data, handed down over many hundreds of years. This study hopes to clarify some of those questions whilst dealing with overall issues that require, in some cases, complete revision.

INTRODUCTION

The historiography of the late second temple period can be divided into three separate parts. There is the long stretch that is pre-1947, then there is the 1947-1991 period, and finally there is the post-1991 era that is the present. These dates are all hinged on the discoveries starting in 1947 of numerous scrolls deposited in eleven caves, by a sect living in Khirbet Qumran near the Dead Sea, during the Second Temple period. These are the scrolls that are universally known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Until 1947, the history of the Second Temple period in Judaea was known from a variety of primary sources. Chief amongst these was the work of the Jewish historian, Josephus Flavius, *The History of the Jewish war against the Romans*, known by its abbreviated title, '*The Jewish War*'¹; and his other major work, *The Antiquities of the Jews*.

Originally written in Aramaic, and subsequently translated into Greek, these works chart the history of Judaea from circa 200 BCE until the end of the Jewish Revolt in 73 CE (*Antiquities* mainly consists of a pre-history of the Jews from the time of Abraham).

Although not written with total historical precision, the work provides a detailed picture of the era. Other primary sources with valuable information with regard to this era were the apocryphal books, the Pseudepigrapha, the New Testament, the works of the philosopher Philo of Alexandria, and the Mishnah – the 'textbook' of Jewish law compiled in the third century.

There were, however, big gaps in the history as taken from the aforementioned primary sources, especially with regard to the beliefs of the sects prevalent during the era, almost all of whom disappeared after the destruction of the Second Temple in 69AD. Although these various sects are mentioned and discussed in many of the primary sources, all the descriptions are brief and are also written from the perspective of the respective primary source, perhaps not doing justice to the reality of these now extinct distinct sects.

When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered accidentally by a Bedouin searching for his herd of goats, it did not take long for the experts to realise that this was probably the most important historical discovery of the twentieth century. Written texts, which experts dated as being written almost a millennium before any other comparable material, would surely shed light on an era, not only fascinating from an historical point of view, but essential in the understanding of two of the World's major monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity.

The subsequent treatment of the Dead Sea Scrolls by scholars is deserving of a lengthy discussion of its own². This is the reason for what I have termed the 1947-1991

period of Second Temple historiography. Many are the voices who criticise the group of scholars who were originally assigned to research and publish the Dead Sea Scrolls. Even the mildest of such commentators fail to see how over a period of more than forty years only a handful of publications were ever produced by the appointed team of scholars.

Stronger voices object to the actual research that was produced, as well as the researchers, criticising their lack of academic impartiality, and the attitude of secrecy and 'nepotism' employed by them during this lengthy, frustrating period.

There is no doubt that now, in the post-1991 period, certain theories popular during the middle period are subject to serious doubt. Following the release of all the scrolls into the public domain in 1991, it is almost as if they have been rediscovered. Until then it was mainly the scrolls that were either of a biblical or similar nature, or those related to the sectarians themselves, that had been available for study. This created a distorted view, as it was anyone's guess as to how the Qumran sect related to other sects of their era. The problem was especially exacerbated, according to some scholars, because of the efforts made by the official team to link the scrolls to early Christianity.

Since 1991 there have been multiple articles and publications, including the long awaited official team's publication on the Halakhic Letter known as MMT, which have finally opened the window on the origins and 'position' of the sectarians in the jigsaw that is late Second Temple history. Finally the historian can examine the origins of Sectarianism with a more complete overview of the period, assisted not only by the original primary sources, but now supplemented by the previously unheard voices of the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls.