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Re-covering the texts

John Ray

‘The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception’  
Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh  
268pp. Cape. £14.99. 0 224 027611

Nine years ago Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh graced the world of scholarship with ‘The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail’, a remarkable volume in which it was concluded that Jesus had an affair with Mary Magdalene and produced offspring. Mary Magdalene escaped with the children to the South of France, and lineal descendants of the said union are at this moment poised to seize world domination by assuming the throne of the European Community. The reason why this news came as a surprise to many was that it had been the object of a 2,000-year cover-up by a Masonic-style organization comprising such sinister figures as Isaac Newton, Jean Cocteau and Claude Debussy. (These people apparently communicate through the small-ad columns of Continental newspapers.) It also seems that the late Archbishop Lefebvre knew more than he was letting on; hence the Pope's concern. One cannot resist the quotation from a review by Anthony Powell on the dust-jacket: “If you like this sort of detective work on the past, you will like this book very much. ”

That book was received in a lukewarm way by academics, and presumably by the Vatican. It would be cruel to suggest that the present volume, ‘The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception’, is an attempt at revenge on both, since the authors on the face of it have chosen a good target. Since their discovery in 1947 and the years immediately following, the scrolls from Qumran by the Dead Sea have been studied mainly, though not entirely, by a team of scholars based at the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. The task is a daunting one: the language of the texts is formalized and the subject-matter obscure. Many texts exist only in brittle fragments, which need to be conserved, photographed, and pieced together before they can be edited. The scholars are able to work only in time spared from other commitments. In some respects, it is an amateur attempt, and it is hardly surprising that the task is far from completed, especially given the constant problems of Middle Eastern politics.

Unfortunately, an outsider must also conclude that the team has had more than its share of jealousies, obscurantism and lack of cohesion: one of the collaborators went freelance and wrote a book arguing that Christianity was a side-effect of hallucinogenic mushrooms, and the former chief editor, a Roman Catholic, gave an interview to an Israeli newspaper denouncing Judaism. This was hardly streetwise, especially as Israeli scholars are making an important and efficient contribution of their own study of the Scrolls.

At the moment, it is impossible to tell whether the Qumran community were BC Essenes or AD Zealots, or indeed why, where, or when the Scrolls were written in the first place. The slow rate of publication means that it is now essential for a facsimile edition of all the material to be made available, as soon as possible. (It should not be difficult to finance such a project, given the worldwide interest in these texts, and such an edition is now promised.) For Baigent and Leigh, however, this is not enough. For them, the real reason for the delay is that the Scrolls contain evidence so damaging to the Christian religion that they are being suppressed by the Holy Inquisition. The Israeli government, for some reason, is also involved the cover-up. The Qumran community are early Christians, followers of Jesus' brother James the Just, St Paul is exposed as a Roman supergrass, and more revelations are hinted at, involving new excavations and the clandestine scroll market.

In the absence of facts, the Scrolls have spawned fantasies. One of the best appeared some time ago, in paperback. In this, the author describes in a preface how he was accosted by a strange man in the washroom at Tel Aviv airport. The stranger offered him the memoirs of Judas Iscariot, which the author fortunately had time to translate before catching his plane. (Scroll editors, please note.) It was reassuring to discover from the translation that Judas was a concerned human being with a truly Californian world-view. Baigent and Leigh are a similar example of Chesterton's observation that, when men cease to believe in religion, they do not believe in nothing: they believe in anything. The Dead Sea Scrolls delay looks more like the result, not of a conspiracy, but of the flaws in human nature, especially when it is formed into academic committees. Reality is untidy, and often unexciting, and that is what conspiracy-theorists find impossible to accept. 'The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception' is a trivial book, although a better one than 'The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail'; but if it succeeds in advancing the publication of the material from Qumran, it will have achieved genuine good.

John Ray is Herbert Thompson Reader in Egyptology at the University of Cambridge.

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NB: The entire translation of all the texts of the Non-Biblical Dead Sea Scrolls was published in 1997.  
Geza Vermes, The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls In English, Penguin Books.

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