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Review of The Hidden Scrolls: Christianity, Judaism and the War for the Dead Sea Scrolls, by Neil Asher Silberman

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The Hidden Scrolls: Christianity, Judaism, and the War for the Dead Sea Scrolls, by Neil Asher Silberman. New York: Riverhead Books, 1994; London: Heinemann, 1995. Pp. xiv + 306. ISBN 0-434-70288-9.

Neil Asher Silberman, a popular writer and journalist who specializes in the area of archaeology and history of the Ancient Mediterranean, has written a fine book for the general public on the Dead Sea Scrolls in the tradition of Edmund Wilson's *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea*. Silberman has a knack for taking what would in other hands be dry, esoteric subjects and rendering them into a popular idiom without robbing them of their nuance and complexity. He also has a gift for description, bringing to life the characters and landscapes of the DSS in such a way as to capture the imagination and make the book an enjoyable "read."

The book has two purposes: to present the modern history of the DSS from the time of their discovery in 1947 until the copyright litigation over 4QMMT in 1993, and to offer a theory concerning the ideology of the scrolls and the people who owned them, as well as their connection to the events in the one hundred years that led to the Great Jewish Revolt against Rome in 66 CE. While most readers will be more interested in the former, it is through the latter that Silberman makes a contribution to Qumran scholarship.

It is in the recitation of events in the modern-day history of the

scrolls that Silberman's gift for description and character portrayal are most evident. Take, for example, his opening paragraph about the discoveries:

There is something mysterious and a bit unsettling to outsiders about the hot and barren coast of the Dead Sea. Even in winter, the midday heat there can be oppressive, and when the wind dies down, an unpleasant, sulphurous smell from the Dead Sea's bitter waters hangs in the air. Away from the main road, the silence is eerie, with craggy brown limestone cliffs baking under a relentless sun and a brilliant, cloudless sky. Down by the greasy, gray water and the muddy, black beaches, there is hardly a sign of any vegetation, except for the tough old thorns among the rocks and the thickets of reeds that clog the few fresh water springs. This is the surreal stage on which some of the most important scenes of the Dead Sea Scroll drama were enacted (p. 28).

Or his description of a DSS manuscript itself:

When you hold a Qumran text plate in your hands and tilt it slightly, you can see the subtle wrinkles and imperfections in the leather-and notice how the light plays off the ink. The boldness or ineptness of the penstrokes, the straightness of the lines or the sloppiness of the margins all create an indication that an *individual* has labored over this text. And rightly or wrongly, you almost cannot avoid forming an opinion about his intelligence and personality (p. 113).

Would that most Qumran books could be written in such elegant prose!

The events that Silberman relates are well-known and well-documented, and Silberman adds little that is new. He offers a more sympathetic portrayal of the actions and motives of the Ta'amireh Bedouin than the standard introductions, and brings to life some of the lesser-known characters of the saga, such as Archbishop Mar Athanasius Samuel of the Syrian Orthodox Church, John Trever of the American School of Oriental Research, and G. Lankester Harding of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities. Although Silberman is not particularly sympathetic to the members of the International Team assembled to publish the scrolls in the 1950's (phrases such as "arrogant behavior," "personal possessiveness," and "scholarly self-congratulation" crop up in his descriptions), he is careful to admire their accomplishments and erudition. And he offers a surprisingly sympathetic portrait of John Strugnell, the former editor-in-chief of the scrolls project and now Professor Emeritus at the Harvard Divinity School, who was at the center of the DSS controversy in the late 1980's and early 1990's.

Let the reader beware, however; Silberman barely conceals his mistrust of "tweedy" academics "who were themselves exiles from the rough-and-tumble of life beyond the ivy walls" (p. 11). He thus tends to dismiss out-of-hand the theories of most Qumran scholars as dry and unimaginative. Silberman reveals his own biases by embracing the theories of those outside the mainstream of Qumran scholarship, figures such as Robert Eisenman, who is described as having "maintained his integrity" and possessing "passionate conviction" (pp. 22-23).

It is Silberman's reconstruction of the meaning of the scrolls (by which term he is essentially referring to the scrolls found in the eleven caves in the vicinity of Qumran) and the community that preserved them that is a genuine contribution to the field of DSS study. Silberman understands the literature of Qumran as an "expression of protest" which "offers us a glimpse of the mindset of an ancient people on the receiving end of Roman oppression and exploitation" (pp. 253-54). That is, Silberman conceives the scrolls to be the collection of a particular group of Jews, disenchanted enough with the rulers of Judea to retreat to a desert refuge to write of an apocalyptic cataclysm that would overthrow the tyrants and restore the righteous to their proper place. The rulers he equates with the Herods and the Romans, rejecting the hypothesis that the inhabitants of Qumran opposed the Hasmoneans, and the righteous with all Jews who oppose the rulers. Thus, the community at Qumran was "part of a vast popular movement in Judea" which "all expressed a common passion for resistance to Rome" (p. 116). Silberman does not perceive the Qumran community as isolated from its fellow Jews, but right in the center of the turbulent events that led up to the Great Jewish Revolt. Further, he sees many ties of theology and ideology between the Qumran community and other opposition groups of the period, including the Zealots and the followers of Jesus of Nazareth (not yet Christians in the modern sense of the term). In his theory Silberman acknowledges his debt to Robert Eisenman, who has long held a radically different view of the scrolls.' He is also drawing on the work of New Testament social scientists such as Richard Horsley (cited in the bibliography).

There is much in Silberman's theory to recommend it. It is true that many early commentators neglected the period of the Herods and Romans and the community's place in it to concentrate on the group's proposed origin in the time of the Hasmoneans. Further, it begins to seem less and less likely that the community dwelled in such complete isolation that it was cut off from the ideas and events in the rest of Judea. Thus, Silberman's proposal to interpret the documents from

Qumran in the light of the corruption of the Herodian dynasty, the iron-fisted rule of Rome, and the popular foment in Palestine in the decades leading up to the revolt, as has been done in recent decades with early Christian literature, is sound and should be followed more thoroughly. Second, his challenge that connections between the theology of the Qumran scrolls and other Jewish writings of the period, especially in the area of messianism, should be taken more seriously is already being answered (although not explicitly) in the work of John Collins, Craig Evans and others. However, Silberman's proposal is not without flaws as well. First, his contention that scholars have ignored the apocalyptic implications of the DSS (p. 77) is simply untrue. J. T. Milik wrote in 1957:

The *Rule* [for the War] was composed shortly after the death of Herod, at a time when tensions between Jews and Roman authorities was mounting and on the way to burst into explosion in the First Jewish Revolt. The notion of a march of the Forces of Light, led by the Messiah, from the "Desert of the Nations" to do battle before the walls of Jerusalem occurs also in the *pešārīm*. Beneath the walls of the Holy City he will give battle to the troops of the Kittim who will arrive from the plain of Acre. This apocalyptic march of the Roman army is prefigured, in the eyes of the author of the *Commentary on Isaiah*, by the route of the Syrian invader, described in Isaiah.²

Second, Silberman's almost total emphasis on the apocalyptic character of the Qumran scrolls ignores the variegated character of the Qumran collection. Besides documents like the War Scroll and the pesharim which reflect events in the first centuries BCE and CE, the Qumran caves yielded documents that are very difficult to date historically and are positively irenic in tone. These include 4QMMT, which presents arguments over halakhah and probably dates to the early years of the Qumran community; 4QReworked Pentateuch, an expanded Torah that was probably redacted before the community came into being, and 4QTales of the Persian Court (4Q550), a fragmentary Aramaic document that contains stories of Jews in the Persian Court, similar to the Book of Esther. Silberman's tendency to ignore documents like these in favor of the apocalyptic texts and passages leads to a skewed picture of the collection and the community that owned it.

Overall, *The Hidden Scrolls* is one of the better non-scholarly DSS books available, although, since it ends in 1993, in the fast-moving world of scroll scholarship it is slightly out-of-date. However, when

read with the warnings issued above in mind, it serves as an excellent introduction to the world of the scrolls, and perhaps may propel the general reader into the more academic books available.

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¹ Eisenman does not merely see connections between the Scrolls and nascent Christianity. Rather, he sees the scrolls as the product of Jewish Christians, led by James the Just, the brother of Jesus, identified by Eisenman as the Teacher of Righteousness. This community is opposed by the Apostle Paul, identified by Eisenman as the Wicked Priest. This view is rejected by most scholars.

² J.T. Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea* (Studies in Biblical Theology 26; trans. J. Strugnell; Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1959) 122–23.