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The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception

Michael Baigent & Richard Leigh

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About the Book

The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in caves 20 miles east of Jerusalem between 1947 and 1956. Now Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, co-authors of *The Holy Blood* and *The Holy Grail*, uncover what has been called 'the academic scandal par excellence of the twentieth century': the story of how and why up to three-quarters of the eight hundred ancient Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts, hidden for some nineteen centuries, have, until very recently, remained concealed from the world.

Through interviews, historical analysis and a close study of both published and unpublished material, the authors reveal the true cause of the bitter struggle between scholars. These documents disclose nothing less than a new account of the origins of Christianity and an alternative and highly significant version of the *New Testament*. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception* is the sensational true story behind the religious scandal of the twentieth century.

About the Author

MICHAEL BAIGENT was born in New Zealand in 1948, and obtained a degree in psychology from Canterbury University, Christchurch. Since 1976 he has lived in England.

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From the Omens of Babylon

Ancient Traces

THE
DEAD SEA
SCROLLS
DECEPTION

MICHAEL BAIGENT &
RICHARD LEIGH



arrow books

Dedication

L'abbaye de la fontaine vive,
Avec sa chapelle lucide
Ou Nostres Dames nous genent
D'y habiter dans la cave
Voutée.

Les rouleaux de foins
Sous un linceul de sel,
Et la cloche au ficelle
Ou se trouve un seul moin
Maussade.

Mais autour du chastel
L'héraut proclame
La sorcellerie
De la druidesse-dame
Et sa chat séduit le soleil.

Jehan l'Ascuiz

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We should like to thank Mrs Joan Allegro for the access she provided to her husband's material and for her sympathy and support in our undertaking.

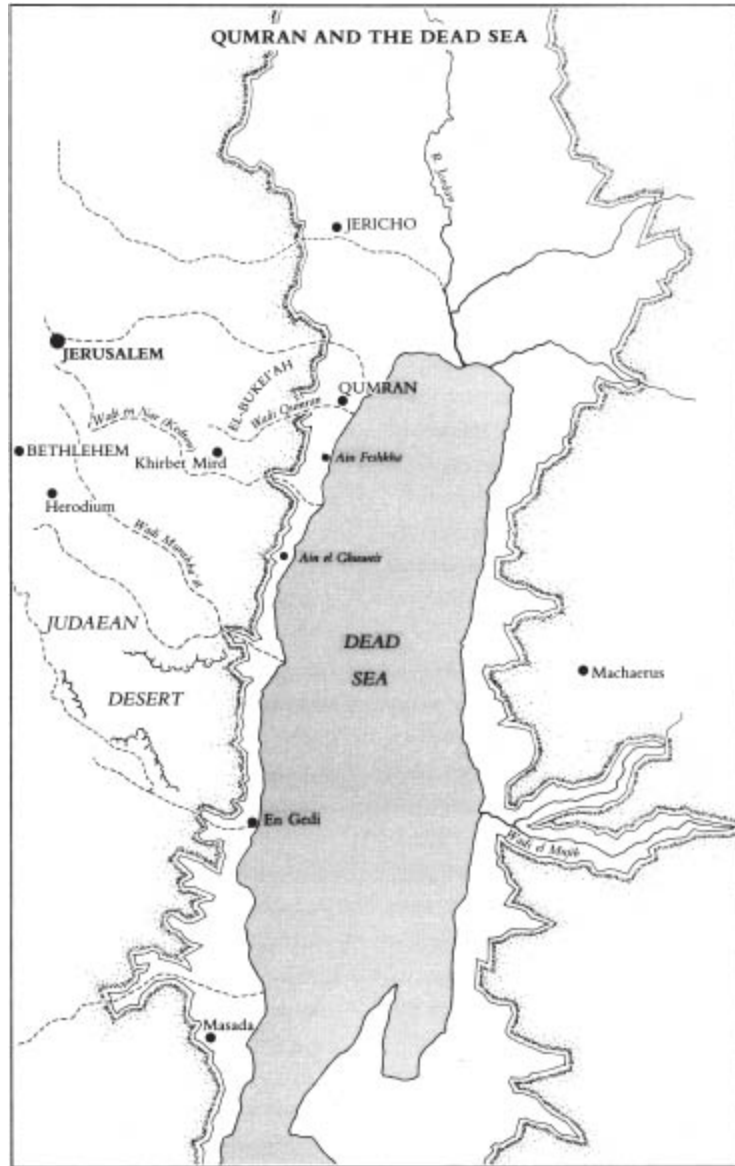
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Finally, we should like to thank the staffs of the British Library Reading Room, and of the London Library.

And, it goes without saying, we should like to thank our ladies.



Preface

THE FOUR DEAD SEA SCROLLS

Biblical manuscripts dating back to at least 200 BC are for sale. This would be an ideal gift to an educational or religious institution by an individual or group. Box F 206.

Such was the advertisement that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on 1 June 1954. Were an advertisement of this sort to appear today, it would no doubt be thought some species of practical joke, not entirely in the best of taste. Alternatively, it might be regarded as a coded message - to mask an arms deal, for example, or something involving espionage.

Today, of course, the Dead Sea Scrolls are well enough known, if only by name. Most people, while having an extremely nebulous idea of what they are, will at least have heard of them. If nothing else, there exists an awareness that the scrolls are in some way genuinely precious items, archaeological evidence of immense importance. One doesn't expect to find a specimen of them while digging in one's back garden. One doesn't regard them even as one might the rusted weapons, the domestic utensils and appliances, the remnants of equipment or apparel that might be found at, say, the site of some Roman excavation in Britain.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 generated a flurry of excitement both in scholarly circles and among the general public. But by 1954 that excitement had been skilfully defused. The scrolls, it was assumed, had revealed

everything they were going to reveal, and this was made to seem less dramatic than had been expected. In consequence, the advertisement for their sale elicited no particular public interest when it appeared on page 14 of the *Wall Street Journal*. Immediately below it was an advertisement for industrial steel tanks, electric welders and other equipment. In the adjacent column were lists of premises for rent and situations vacant. It was the equivalent of offering items of Tutankhamun's treasure amidst lots of surplus plumbing or computer supplies. This book will show how such an anomaly could have occurred.

In tracing the progress of the Dead Sea Scrolls from their discovery in the Judaeen desert to the various institutions that hold them today, we found ourselves confronting a contradiction we had faced before - the contradiction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Our investigation began in Israel. It was to extend to the corridors of the Vatican, and, even more ominously, into the offices of the Inquisition. We also encountered a rigidly maintained 'consensus' of interpretation towards the content and dating of the scrolls, and came to understand how explosive a non-partisan examination of them might be for the whole of Christian theological tradition. And we discovered how fiercely the world of orthodox biblical scholarship was prepared to fight to retain its monopoly of available information.

For Christians today, it is perfectly possible to acknowledge the Buddha, for example, or Muhammad, as historical individuals, just as one might Caesar or Alexander, and to differentiate them from the legends, the traditions, the theologies that have become associated with them. So far as Jesus is concerned, however, such differentiation is altogether more difficult. At the very heart of Christian belief, history and theology are inextricably entangled. Each suffuses the other. Yet each, if looked at separately, is

a potential threat to the other. It is therefore easier, and safer, to blur the demarcation lines between them. Thus, for the faithful, two quite distinct figures are fused into one. On the one hand, there is the historical individual, the man who, according to most scholars, actually existed and walked the sands of Palestine two thousand years ago. On the other hand, there is the man-god of Christian doctrine, the divine personage deified, extolled and promulgated by St Paul. To examine this personage as an historical individual - to regard him, that is, as one might regard Muhammad or the Buddha, Caesar or Alexander - is still, for many Christians, tantamount to blasphemy.

During the mid-1980s, we were engaged in precisely such blasphemy. In researching the project we'd undertaken at the time, we were trying to separate history from theology, to distinguish the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith. In the process, we blundered head-on into the muddle of contradictions that confronts all researchers into biblical material; and like all researchers before us, we found ourselves bewildered by that muddle.

In the kind of research we'd embarked on, scriptural accounts, needless to say, could provide only the most meagre aid. As historical documents and testimony, the Gospels, as every scholar knows, are notoriously unreliable. They are essentially accounts of stark mythic simplicity, seemingly occurring in an historical limbo. Jesus and his disciples appear centre stage of an extensively stylized tableau, from which most of the context has been stripped away. Romans and Jews mill confusingly in the background, like extras on a film set. No sense is conveyed of the social, cultural, religious and political circumstances in which Jesus' drama is embedded. One is, in effect, confronted with an historical vacuum.

The Acts of the Apostles fleshes out the picture only slightly. From the Acts, one derives at least a tenuous sense of a milieu - of internecine strife and doctrinal squabbles

amongst Jesus' immediate followers, of a coalescing movement which will gradually take the form of 'Christianity', of a world that extends beyond the circumscribed confines of Galilee and Judaea, of the geographical relation of Palestine to the rest of the Mediterranean. But there is still no accurate rendering of the broader social, cultural, religious and political forces at work. Everything is focused on, and restricted to, St Paul. If the Gospels are stylized, the Acts are no less so, albeit in a different way. If the Gospels are reduced to the stark oversimplification of myth, the Acts comprise a kind of picaresque novel - a picaresque novel, moreover, intended for specifically propagandist purposes and with Paul as protagonist. There may be some insight into Paul's mentality, attitudes and adventures, but there is no reliable perspective on the world in which he moved. From the standpoint of any historian, any responsible chronicler, no account of the epoch would have been complete without some reference to Nero, say, and the burning of Rome. Even within Palestine, there were developments of momentous importance to those living at the time. In AD 39, for example, Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee, was exiled to the Pyrenees. By AD 41, both Galilee and Judaea - administered by Roman procurators since AD 6 - had been conferred on King Agrippa, and Palestine was united under a single non-Roman monarch (puppet though he might be) for the first time since the days of Herod the Great nearly half a century before. None of these developments is so much as mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. The effect is akin to reading a biography of, say, Billy Graham which makes no mention of his friendships with presidents and other prominent individuals, no mention of Kennedy's assassination, no mention of the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, the transformation of values during the 1960s, Watergate and its aftermath.

Contrary to Christian tradition, Palestine two thousand years ago was as real as any other historical setting - that of Cleopatra's Egypt, for example, or of Imperial Rome, both of which impinged upon it. Its reality cannot be reduced to a bald mythic simplicity. Whoever Jesus or Paul were, and whatever they did, must be placed against the backdrop of broader events - against the swirl of personalities, groups, institutions and movements that operated in 1st-century Palestine and composed the fabric of what is called history.

To obtain any real sense of this period, we, like every other researcher, had to turn to other sources - Roman accounts, historical chronicles compiled by other writers of other orientations, allusions in later documents, apocryphal texts, the teachings and testimony of rival sects and creeds. Jesus himself was, needless to say, seldom mentioned in these sources, but they furnish a comprehensive and detailed picture of the world in which he moved. In fact, Jesus' world is better documented and chronicled than, for example, that of King Arthur, or of Robin Hood. And if Jesus himself remains elusive, he is no more so than they.

It was therefore with surprise and zest that we plunged into the background of the 'historical Jesus'. But no sooner had we done so than we found ourselves confronted by a problem that besets all researchers into biblical history. We found ourselves confronted by an apparently bewildering spectrum of Judaic cults, sects and sub-sects, of political and religious organizations and institutions, which seemed sometimes to be militantly at odds with one another, sometimes to overlap.

It quickly became apparent to us that the labels used to differentiate between these various groups - Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, Nazorenes - were neither accurate nor useful. The muddle remained, and Jesus seemed to have connections of one kind or another with virtually all its components. Thus, for example, insofar as

anything could be established about him at all, he appeared to have come from a Pharisee family and background, and to be steeped in Pharisaic thought. Several modern commentators have stressed the striking parallels between Jesus' teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount, and those of Pharisee exponents such as the great Hillel. According to at least one commentator, Jesus 'was himself a Pharisee'.

But if Jesus' words were often interchangeable with those of official Pharisee doctrine at the time, they also appear to draw heavily on mystical or 'Essene' thought. John the Baptist is generally recognized as having been an Essene of some sort, and his influence on Jesus introduces an obvious Essene element into the latter's career. According to scriptural accounts, however, John's mother - Jesus' maternal aunt, Elizabeth - was married to a priest of the Temple, thereby giving both men Sadducee connections. And - most sensitive of all for later Christian tradition - Jesus clearly seems to have included Zealots among his followers: Simon Zealotes, for example, or Simon the Zealot, and possibly even Judas Iscariot, whose name, as it comes down to us, may derive from the fierce Sicarii.

In itself, of course, the mere suggestion of association with the Zealots was highly provocative. Was Jesus indeed the meek lamblike saviour of subsequent Christian tradition? Was he indeed wholly non-violent? Why, then, did he embark on violent actions, such as overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple? Why is he portrayed as being executed by the Romans in a fashion reserved exclusively for revolutionary activity? Why, before his vigil in Gethsemane, did he instruct his followers to equip themselves with swords? Why, shortly thereafter, did Peter actually draw a sword and lop off the ear of a minion in the High Priest's entourage? And if Jesus was in fact more militant than generally depicted, was he not also, of

necessity, more politically committed? How, then, could one explain his preparedness to 'give unto Caesar' what was Caesar's - assuming that to be an accurate transcription and translation of his words?

If such contradictions surrounded Jesus during his lifetime, they also appeared to have survived him, continuing for at least another forty-odd years after his reported death. In AD 73, the fortress of Masada, having withstood a sustained Roman siege, was at last overrun, but only when its defending garrison committed mass suicide. The defenders of Masada are generally acknowledged to have been Zealots - not a religious sect, according to conventional interpretations, but adherents of a political and military movement. As it has been preserved for posterity, however, the doctrine of the garrison's defenders would appear to have been that of the Essenes - the allegedly non-violent, mystically oriented sect who were believed to have disowned all forms of political, not to say military, activity.

Such were the contradictions and prevailing confusion we found. But if we were flummoxed by it all, so, too, were professional scholars, 'experts' far more deeply versed in the material than ourselves. After threading a path through the maze, virtually every reliable commentator ended up at odds with his colleagues. According to some, Christianity arose as a quietist, mystery-school form of Judaism, which couldn't therefore have any connection with militant revolutionary nationalists such as the Zealots. According to others, Christianity was itself, at first, a form of revolutionary Judaic nationalism, and couldn't possibly have anything to do with pacifist mystics like the Essenes. According to some, Christianity emerged from one of the mainstreams of Judaic thought at the time. According to others, Christianity had begun to deviate from Judaism even before Paul appeared on the scene and made the rupture official.

The more we consulted the 'experts', the more apparent it became that they *knew*, effectively, little more than anyone else. Most disturbing of all, we encountered no one theory or interpretation that satisfactorily accommodated all the evidence, all the anomalies, inconsistencies and contradictions.

It was at this point that we came upon the work of Robert Eisenman, Chairman of the Department of Religious Studies and Professor of Middle East Religions at California State University in Long Beach. Eisenman had been an undergraduate at Cornell at the same time as Thomas Pynchon. He studied Comparative Literature there under Vladimir Nabokov, receiving his BA in Physics and Philosophy in 1958, and his MA in Hebrew and Near Eastern Studies from New York University in 1966. In 1971 he was awarded a PhD in Middle East Languages and Cultures by Columbia University, having concentrated specifically on Palestinian history and Islamic law. He has also been an External Fellow of the University of Calabria in Italy and a lecturer in Islamic law, Islamic religion and culture, the Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian origins at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In 1985-6, he was Research Fellow in Residence at the William F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem, and in 1986-7 Visiting Senior Member of Linacre College, Oxford, and Visiting Scholar at the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies.

We came upon Eisenman's work initially in the form of a slender text cumbersomely entitled *Maccabees, Zadokites, Christians and Qumran*, which was published in 1983 by E.J. Brill of Leiden, Holland. The book was precisely the sort of thing one might expect from such an author writing for an academic publisher. There were more footnotes than there was text. There was a presupposition of enormous background knowledge and a forbidding welter of sources and references. But there was also a central thesis of

exhilarating commonsense and lucidity. As we hacked our way through the density of the text, the questions that had perplexed us began to resolve themselves, clearly and organically, without ingeniously contrived theories, and without crucial fragments being ignored.

We drew extensively on Eisenman's work in the first section of *The Messianic Legacy* (London, 1986). Our conclusions owed much to the perspective he had opened for us on biblical scholarship and the historical background to the New Testament. However, certain questions remained unanswered. We could not have known it at the time, but we had overlooked a crucial link – a link that has, over the last five years, become a focus for controversy, a topic for front-page articles in national newspapers. That link proved to be the information provided by the Dead Sea Scrolls.

At the centre of the puzzle, we were to discover, was a hitherto unknown connection between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the elusive figure of St James, Jesus' brother, whose dispute with Paul precipitated the formulation of the new religion subsequently known as Christianity. It was this link that had been painstakingly concealed by a small enclave of biblical scholars, whose conveniently orthodox interpretation of the scrolls Eisenman came to call the 'consensus'.

According to Robert Eisenman:

A small group of specialists, largely working together, developed a consensus ... In lieu of clear historical insight ... preconceptions and reconstructions, such as they were, were stated as facts, and these results, which were used to corroborate each other, in turn became *new* assumptions, that were used to draw away a whole generation of students unwilling (or simply unable) to question the work of their mentors.¹

The result has been the upholding of an official orthodoxy of interpretation – a framework of assumptions and conclusions which, to outsiders, appears to have the solidity of established and undisputed fact. In this fashion, many of the so-called *données*, the ‘givens’ of history, were produced. Those responsible for developing the consensus view of Christianity have been able to exercise a monopoly over certain crucial sources, regulating the flow of information in a manner that enables its release to serve one’s own purpose. This is the phenomenon explored by Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose*, where the monastery, and the library within it, reflect the medieval Church’s monopoly of learning, constituting a kind of ‘closed shop’, an exclusive ‘country club’ of knowledge from which all but a select few are banned – a select few prepared to toe the ‘party line’.

Those purveying the ‘party line’ can bolster the authority they arrogate to themselves by claiming that they alone have seen the relevant sources, access to which is closed to all outsiders. For outsiders, assembling the disparate available fragments into a coherent order amounts to an exercise in semiotics – and in the realm of semiotic exercises it becomes perfectly possible to hold the Knights Templar responsible for everything, and Umberto Eco himself responsible for the collapse of the Banco Ambrosiano. Thus, most outsiders, in the absence of any access to the relevant sources, have no choice but to accept the interpretations of the ‘party line’. To challenge those interpretations is to find oneself labelled at best a crank; at worst, a renegade, apostate or heretic. Few scholars have the combination of courage, standing and expertise to issue such a challenge and hold on to their reputations. Robert Eisenman, whose currency and credibility have placed him among the most prominent and influential figures in his field, has done so. His story provided the impetus for this book.

I
THE DECEPTION

1

The Discovery of the Scrolls

EAST OF JERUSALEM, a long road slopes gradually down between barren hills sprinkled with occasional Bedouin camps. It sinks 3800 feet, to a depth of 1300 feet below sea-level, and then emerges to give a panoramic vista of the Jordan Valley. Away to the left, one can discern Jericho. In the haze ahead lie Jordan itself and, as though seen in a mirage, the mountains of Moab. To the right lies the northern shore of the Dead Sea. The skin of water, and the yellow cliffs rising 1200 feet or more which line this (the Israeli) side of it, conduce to awe - and to acute discomfort. The air here, so far below sea-level, is not just hot, but palpably so, with a thickness to it, a pressure, almost a weight.

The beauty, the majesty and the silence of the place are spell-binding. So, too, is the sense of antiquity the landscape conveys - the sense of a world older than most Western visitors are likely to have experienced. It is therefore all the more shocking when the 20th century intrudes with a roar that seems to rupture the sky - a tight formation of Israeli F-16s or Mirages swooping low over the water, the pilots clearly discernible in their cockpits. Afterburners blasting, the jets surge almost vertically upwards into invisibility. One waits, numbed. Seconds later, the entire structure of cliffs judders to the receding sonic booms. Only then does one remember that this place exists, technically, in a state of permanent war - that this side of

the Dead Sea has never, during the last forty-odd years, made peace with the other. But then again, the soil here has witnessed incessant conflict since the very beginning of recorded history. Too many gods, it seems, have clashed here, demanding blood sacrifice from their adherents.

The ruins of Qumran (or, to be more accurate, Khirbet Qumran) appear to the right, just as the road reaches the cliffs overlooking the Dead Sea. Thereafter, the road bends to follow the cliffs southwards, along the shore of the water, towards the site of the fortress of Masada, thirty-three miles away. Qumran stands on a white terrace of marl, a hundred feet or so above the road, slightly more than a mile and a quarter from the Dead Sea. The ruins themselves are not very prepossessing. One is first struck by a tower, two floors of which remain intact, with walls three feet thick - obviously built initially with defence in mind. Adjacent to the tower are a number of cisterns, large and small, connected by a complicated network of water channels. Some may have been used for ritual bathing. Most, however, if not all, would have been used to store the water the Qumran community needed to survive here in the desert. Between the ruins and the Dead Sea, on the lower levels of the marl terrace, lies an immense cemetery of some 1200 graves. Each is marked by a long mound of stones aligned - contrary to both Judaic and Muslim practice - north-south.

Even today, Qumran feels remote, though several hundred people live in a nearby kibbutz and the place can be reached quickly and easily by a modern road running to Jerusalem - a drive of some twenty miles and forty minutes. Day and night, huge articulated lorries thunder along the road, which links Eilat in the extreme south of Israel with Tiberius in the north. Tourist buses stop regularly, disgorging sweating Western Europeans and Americans, who are guided briefly around the ruins, then to an air-conditioned bookshop and restaurant for coffee and cakes.

There are, of course, numerous military vehicles. But one also sees private cars, both Israeli and Arab, with their different coloured number-plates. One even sees the occasional 'boy racer' in a loud, badly built Detroit monster, whose speed appears limited only by the width of the road.

The Israeli Army is, needless to say, constantly in sight. This, after all, is the West Bank, and the Jordanians are only a few miles away, across the Dead Sea. Patrols run day and night, cruising at five miles per hour, scrutinizing everything - small lorries, usually, with three heavy machine-guns on the back, soldiers upright behind them. These patrols will stop to check the cars and ascertain the precise whereabouts of anyone exploring the area, or excavating on the cliffs or in the caves. The visitor quickly learns to wave, to make sure the troops see him and acknowledge his presence. It is dangerous to come upon them too suddenly, or to act in any fashion that might strike them as furtive or suspicious.

The kibbutz - Kibbutz Kalia - is a ten-minute walk from Qumran, up a short road from the ruins. There are two small schools for the local children, a large communal refectory and housing units resembling motels for overnight tourists. But this is still a military zone. The kibbutz is surrounded by barbed wire and locked at night. An armed patrol is always on duty, and there are numerous air-raid shelters deep underground. These double for other purposes as well. One, for example, is used as a lecture hall, another as a bar, a third as a discothèque. But the wastes beyond the perimeter remain untouched by any such modernity. Here the Bedouin still shepherd their camels and their goats, seemingly timeless figures linking the present with the past.

In 1947, when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, Qumran was very different. At that time the area was part of the British mandate of Palestine. To the east lay what was then the kingdom of Transjordan. The road that runs

south along the shore of the Dead Sea did not exist, extending only to the Dead Sea's north-western quarter, a few miles from Jericho. Around and beyond it there were only rough tracks, one of which followed the course of an ancient Roman road. This route had long been in total disrepair. Qumran was thus rather more difficult to reach than it is today. The sole human presence in the vicinity would have been the Bedouin, herding their camels and goats during the winter and spring, when the desert, perhaps surprisingly, yielded both water and grass. In the winter, or possibly the early spring, of 1947, it was to yield something more - one of the two or three greatest archaeological discoveries of modern times.

The precise circumstances attending the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls have already passed into legend. In a number of particulars, this legend is probably not entirely accurate, and scholars were bickering over certain points well into the 1960s. It remains, however, the only account we have. The original discovery is ascribed to a shepherd boy, Muhammad adh-Dhib, or Muhammad the Wolf, a member of the Ta 'amireh tribe of Bedouin. He himself later claimed he was searching for a lost goat. Whatever he was doing, his itinerary brought him clambering among the cliffs at Qumran, where he discovered an opening in the cliff-face. He tried to peer inside but, from where he stood, could see nothing. He then tossed a stone into the blackness, which elicited a sound of breaking pottery. This, needless to say, impelled him to further exploration.

Hoisting himself upwards, he crawled through the aperture, then dropped down to find himself in a small cave, high-ceilinged and narrow, no more than six feet wide and perhaps twenty-four long. It contained a number of large earthenware jars, about two feet tall and ten inches wide, many of them broken. Eight are generally believed to have been intact, though the quantity has never been definitively established.

According to his own account, Muhammad became frightened, hauled himself back out of the cave and fled. The next day, he returned with at least one friend and proceeded to explore the cave and its contents more closely. Some of the earthenware jars were sealed by large 'bowl-like' lids. Inside one of them, there were three leather rolls wrapped in decaying linen - the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls to see the light in nearly two thousand years.¹

During the days that followed, the Bedouin returned to the site and at least four more leather rolls were found. At least two jars were removed and used for carrying water. When proper archaeological excavation began, it revealed a substantial number of shards and fragments - enough, according to reliable estimates, to have constituted no fewer than forty jars. There is no way of knowing how many of these jars, when first discovered, were empty and how many actually contained scrolls. Neither is there any way of knowing how many scrolls were taken from the cave and, before their significance became apparent, secreted away, destroyed or used for other purposes. Some, it has been suggested, were burned for fuel. In any case, we were told that more scrolls were taken from the cave than have previously been recorded, or than have subsequently come to light. Altogether, a total of seven complete scrolls were to find their way into the public domain, along with fragments of some twenty-one others.

At this point, accounts begin to grow increasingly contradictory. Apparently, however, thinking the scrolls might be of some value, three Bedouin took all they had found - three complete parchments according to some sources, seven or eight according to others - to a local sheik. He passed the Bedouin on to a Christian shopkeeper and dealer in curios and antiques, one Khalil Iskander Shahin, known as 'Kando'. Kando, a member of the Syrian Jacobite Church, contacted another Church member

residing in Jerusalem, George Isaiah. According to reliable scholars, Kando and Isaiah promptly ventured out to Qumran themselves and removed a number of additional scrolls and/or fragments.²

Such activities were, of course, illegal. By the law of the British mandate – a law subsequently retained by both Jordanian and Israeli governments – all archaeological discoveries belonged officially to the state. They were supposed to be turned over to the Department of Antiquities, then housed in the Palestine Archaeological Museum, known as the Rockefeller, in Arab East Jerusalem. But Palestine was in turmoil at the time, and Jerusalem a city divided into Jewish, Arab and British sectors. In these circumstances, the authorities had more pressing matters to deal with than a black market in archaeological relics. In consequence, Kando and George Isaiah were free to pursue their clandestine transactions with impunity.

George Isaiah reported the discovery to his ecclesiastical leader, the Syrian Metropolitan (i.e. Archbishop) Athanasius Yeshua Samuel, head of the Syrian Jacobite Church in Jerusalem. Academically, Athanasius Yeshua Samuel was a naïve man, untutored in the sophisticated scholarship needed to identify, much less translate, the text before him. The late Edmund Wilson, one of the earliest and most reliable commentators on the Qumran discovery, wrote of Samuel that he ‘was not a Hebrew scholar and could not make out what the manuscript was’.³ He even burned a small piece of it and smelled it, to verify that the substance was indeed leather, or parchment. But whatever his academic shortcomings, Samuel was also shrewd, and his monastery, St Mark’s, contained a famous collection of ancient documents. He thus had some idea of the importance of what had passed into his hands.

Samuel later said he first learned of the Dead Sea Scrolls in April 1947. If chronology has hitherto been vague

and contradictory, however, it now becomes even more so, varying from commentator to commentator. But some time between early June and early July Samuel requested Kando and George Isaiah to arrange a meeting with the three Bedouin who'd made the original discovery, to examine what they'd found.

When the Bedouin arrived in Jerusalem, they were carrying at least four scrolls and possibly as many as eight - the three they'd originally found themselves, plus one or more from whatever they or Kando and George Isaiah had subsequently plundered. Unfortunately, the Metropolitan had neglected to mention the Bedouin's impending visit to the monks at the monastery of St Mark. When the Bedouin appeared with their dirty, crumbling and ragged parchments, themselves unshaven and insalubrious-looking, the monk at the gate turned them away. By the time Samuel learned of this, it was too late. The Bedouin, understandably resentful, wanted nothing further to do with Metropolitan Samuel. One of them even refused to have any further dealings with Kando, and sold his portion of the scrolls - a 'third' share which amounted to three scrolls - to the Muslim sheik of Bethlehem. Kando managed to purchase the shares of the remaining scrolls, and sold them in turn to the Metropolitan for a reported £24. This cache was believed at first to consist of five scrolls, but proved eventually to contain only four, one of them having broken in two. Of the four texts, one was a well-preserved copy of the book of Isaiah from the Old Testament, the parchment of which unrolled to a length of twenty-four feet. The other three, according to the nomenclature later adopted by scholars, included the 'Genesis Apocryphon', a commentary on the 'Book of Habakkuk' and the so-called 'Community Rule'.

Shortly after the Bedouin's abortive visit to Jerusalem - in late July according to some reports, in August according to others - Metropolitan Samuel sent a priest to return with

George Isaiah to the cave at Qumran. Being engaged in illicit activities, the pair worked by night. They examined the site at length and found at least one additional jar and some fragments; they also conducted, apparently, some fairly extensive excavations. When the first official research party reached the location a year later, they discovered an entire section of the cliff-face had been removed, making a large entrance into the cave below the smaller hole originally explored by the Bedouin. What this enterprise may have yielded remains unknown. In researching this book, we interviewed certain people who insisted that George Isaiah, during the course of his nocturnal explorations, found a number of other scrolls, some of which have never been seen by scholars.

Having obtained at least some of the scrolls, Metropolitan Samuel undertook to establish their age. He first consulted a Syrian expert working at the Department of Antiquities. In this man's opinion, the scrolls were of fairly recent date. The Metropolitan then consulted a Dutch scholar working with the Ecole Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem, an institution run by Dominican monks and financed, in part, by the French government. He was intrigued, but remained sceptical about the scrolls' antiquity, describing subsequently how he returned to the Ecole Biblique and consulted 'a prominent scholar' there, who lectured him about the prevalent forgeries floating around amongst dodgy antique dealers.⁴ As a result, he abandoned his research on the matter, and the Ecole Biblique lost its opportunity to get involved at the beginning. Only the relatively untutored Metropolitan, at this point, seems to have had any inkling of the scrolls' age, value and significance.

In September 1947, the Metropolitan took the scrolls in his possession to his superior, the Patriarch of the Syrian Jacobite Church in Homs, north of Damascus. What passed between them is not known, but on his return the