

JESUS

A chessboard with alternating black and white squares. In the foreground, a silver king chess piece lies on its side on a white square. In the background, a gold king chess piece stands upright on a black square. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the metallic textures of the pieces.

GOD, MAN
OR PARTY LABEL?

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS' MESSIAH CODE

CHRIS ALBERT WELLS

Jesus:
God, Man, or Party Label?

The Dead Sea Scrolls' Messiah Code

Chris Albert Wells



Strategic Book Group

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Dedicated to Edmund Wilson. Chronicler for the *New York Times*, he boldly suggested fifty years ago that Christians should look more in the direction of Qumran than Bethlehem and Nazareth to find their roots. Wilson was right, but for reasons he ignored.

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Introduction

Contrary to accepted evidence, the Gospels do not narrate the story of a Messiah, Son of God, as seems reported by independent eyewitnesses (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) writing more than a generation after the events of Jesus. The evangelists offered an account of community conflicts recorded at successive stages of their evolution, explaining the odd differences between them.

However strange the affirmations may seem, intrigued readers can expect to be steered through unspoiled paths that prepare them to face the unexpected: Jesus Messiah, neither God nor man but reliant on both, was initially coined as a *party label*, as were the previous Essene Messiahs. The evangelists had in mind to coordinate an antiestablishment splinter group (against the Pharisees) that was also housecleaning within its own ranks (against soft Essene traditionalists). Furthermore, Jesus Messiah, unifying ancient Essene thought and contemporary avant-garde Essene planning, was only one of the party labels that expressed the evangelists' deliberations.

Revealing how the early Gospel writers identified their group as forward-looking activists militating against others, will take many by surprise. As a result, readers receptive to the trick cards ancient Essene writers had up their sleeves will be rewarded, as though the ingenuity of a magician's masterpiece delusion had been successfully disclosed to them.

The book's renewed focus gives the evangelist's writings back to local and regional Levantine History, from where they originated. The first Gospels were composed within a Jewish community turning Christian in Antioch (Northern Syria), with deep roots in Essenian culture. They were certainly not written with the preconceived ambition of offering a new

religion to Rome, the then Imperial overlord whose Legions had destroyed Jerusalem five years before. Spreading to the West was merely an accident in the later course of their history.

Scrutinizing the evangelist's intentions had previously mainly focused on the quarrels opposing historicity versus myth. We will leave these debates aside because participants were unaware that Jesus was the opinionated ensign of a pressure group, a mistake that can now be repaired.

Biblical clarification often proceeds by waves that wash preconceived ideas away before withdrawing into calmer waters. The Dead Sea Scrolls produced several unexpected waves. Found in 1947, the scrolls were considered the most fabulous archaeological discovery of the century. After painstaking restoration and translation by eminent scholars, they revealed striking affinities between the Essene Scroll community and the early Christians in terms of dogma, organization, and wording, indicating a same family of thought. Facing such evidence, the Church could no longer claim Christianity as a revealed religion without antecedents. The Scrolls had proved their ability to disturb and some felt that they enclosed a powerful genie that had been unwisely let loose by rubbing the ancient jars that sheltered the manuscripts.

The genie soon intervened again. Within this disturbing context questioning the uniqueness of Christianity, French scholar Dupont-Sommer shed new light on the Scrolls and produced a "tidal wave" that was brought to general public knowledge by Edmund Wilson, first in the columns of the *New York Times* and then in the book he later wrote narrating the ideas stirred by the controversies.¹ Who still remembers what all this was about? In those days, with the numerous similarities in the background, stress reached heights when Dupont-Sommer exposed close parallels between the Teacher of the Dead Sea Scroll community of Qumran

1. Edmund Wilson. *Israel and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Fontana Books. 1955.

and Jesus. He found that in many respects Jesus appeared as an astonishing reincarnation of the older Qumran Master; thus, implicitly introducing suspicion over the historicity of the Christian Messiah. The Church had to react. Confronted to such a sore disclosure, cardinal Danielou, a French Jesuit, wittingly opposed Dupont-Sommer's views, defending that if any of the Gospel actors could be considered close to the Teacher of Qumran, he would favor John the Baptist who also expected a Messiah to come. Furthermore, Jesus had never baptized anyone with water, a detail that separated the Christian Messiah from the older school. Many other scholars intervened within the agitated debate showing that the Qumran Teacher was also reminiscent of other Gospel actors such as James and Peter, adding to the general confusion.

The identity crisis—echoed through disputes within scholarly circles—strengthened the impression that *something* was linking Christianity one way or another to that particular Qumran Essene community, the reasons and connecting systems still not being correctly understood. Who influenced whom, when, and how? The present study sets the academic quarrels in proper perspective and shows why contributors to the identity crisis proved unable to assemble the different arguments into a more coherent ensemble that would explain proximities and distances between the Qumran Master and the main Gospel actors. This book intends to make the reader discover how and to what extent they are related or disassociated.

After the crisis and the pressure had receded, scholars and Church officials nourishing the hope to settle the matter once and for all carelessly denied the Scrolls any ability to further question the originality of Christianity. Pr. Albright, eminent scholar and universally acknowledged founder of the biblical archaeology movement, made imprudent declarations. Abusively using arguments of authority, he claimed: “The historian cannot control the details of Jesus’ truth and resurrection and thus has no right

to pass judgments on their historicity.” Such denials illustrated that many were troubled by the Scroll’s out-of-control genie and wanted it to be restrained.

As they stand today, over fifty years later, the Scrolls have unfairly lost the public’s interest through lack of clear conclusions due to intense scholarly debates. This was nevertheless a necessary phase where ideas were tested however contradictory they seemed to be. Specialists had to sober down and hope that a refreshed understanding would at long last make everything work out. Meanwhile, the general public remained perplex, and the status quo of the Gospels was maintained because the appropriate keys to unlock the mystery were missing.

The key to understanding was still hidden within the scrolls. To discover the concealed evidence we needed to neglect the impulsively purported inhibitions some leading scholars formulated and learn to focus our minds differently.

Looking at the scrolls from a changed angle, I began challenging the commonly accepted scholarly *proof* that the Essene Dead Sea community unanimously expressed hope in the return of *two* Messiahs: a Priestly one and a Davidic one. This very official position seemed a priority well established by the scrolls themselves. According to consensus, gazing into the skies while waiting for *two* Messiahs to deliver them from earthly bonds and mistakes efficiently sets the ancient Scroll community expectations in total opposition to the advent of a *single* Christian Messiah announced by John the Baptist. Two Messiahs on one side and a unique Messiah on the other have been used as a very strong and irrefutable argument to definitively segregate the Essene outlook from the early Christian ones. There is absolutely no way one can cross the border and go from the first community to the other . . . or is there?

As we will see, regardless of powerful academic denials, the Scroll's genie intervenes once more and points to the unsuspected area of the Dead Sea Scroll community where all the future developments are embedded. The Scroll's double-Messiah scheme, contrary to previous affirmations, is precisely the breach that exposes Jesus. And here is why.

First of all, history often replays recognizable patterns, and nothing is more common than a charismatic leader who leaves behind a community that soon divides. This ordinary situation receives in Qumran an unusual spark of originality: their executed Teacher is expected to come back alive, staging a Messiah. With the end of days at stake, the expectation conferred to him the rare authority to arbitrate any posthumous changes in community strategies. Responding to this unusual setting, this book will show how the two Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls symbolized two clans within the orphaned community, divided after their Teacher's violent death.

Secondly, labeled by their respective Messiahs, each clan played on a different comeback identity portraying the Teacher, making him support dissimilar policies.

As a result, their two Messiahs not only stood as discriminating party stickers within the Teacher's school after his death sentence in Jerusalem, but also involved the Teacher's support. Ultimately, who would be right or wrong? Mistakes would weigh heavily on projected salvation. Clans or parties imply dissent and competition between partisans and opposition. Each Qumran clan, personified by its respective Messiah, was waiting for its own side to win. Heavenly matters were mirroring their earthly concerns.

Religious Levantine groups had the tendency to define institutions and divisions by emblematic figures. It was already the case in the Old Testament, with Moses and Aaron personifying different Abraham inspired shrines in the southern and northern Highlands. Therefore, Scroll Messiahs being used as emblematic figures standing for respective factions should

not seem strange to Biblical scholars. Or to millions of electors who address their hopes to the “elephant” or the “donkey” that represent two sides of the same American democracy. Priests, Messiahs, and donkeys efficiently rank as team symbols of the old and new world.

The initial temporary conclusion reached is that the sectarians were not waiting for two Messiahs to come back. Each delegation defended its own party, labeled by its Messiah affiliation. There finally emerged a winning clan and a losing one. The clan of the Priestly Messiah, chosen or engendered by God, outshined the lesser Davidic Messiah clan as is inscribed within the Messianic Rules found among the Qumran cave Scrolls.

Pulling on Qumran’s Messiah threads is only the epicenter of the story. What follows is of greater magnitude. Once the sesame is disclosed, a second tidal wave starts rumbling, just as powerful if not more than the previous one for which the book follows the devastating consequences on traditional Gospel reading.

Considering the many similarities between Essenes and Christians recognized by scholars and Church alike as well as possible contacts due to alleged first century AD coexistence of both groups, an obvious question arises: Do the Gospels also relate an intra-community division symbolized by two different Messiahs? Again, most people are liable to jump to their feet and defend that there is only a single Messiah in the Gospels, his name is Jesus. Nevertheless, and contrary to all common beliefs, the Gospels do in fact actually display two Messiahs and one winner. However unusual the statement appears to unprepared ears, exposing a second Gospel Messiah is straightforward and does not imply elucidating complex enigmas.

The Gospels were written by supporters of the winning clan registered under Messiah Jesus, engendered by God and of Davidic ascent. This “two titles in one” is already reminiscent of the double titles in use in Qumran. The second and losing Messiah is John the Baptist.

John the Baptist, as most scholars recognize, has something to do with Qumran and was also an allegory of Elijah, the Jerusalem Temple's Messiah. In the minds of his biographers, Elijah was an ascetic prophet dressed in camel clothes. Evangelists Matthew and Luke confirm the Elijah connection beyond doubt. John the Baptist, therefore, had implicitly a messianic touch and personified a clan supporting that the Messiah will come back with the powerful spirit of Elijah on him. Thus, John the Baptist represented a more traditional Essene group that scrupulously followed Jerusalem Temple culture. The Elijah belief, incarnated by John the Baptist, was just not the one the Antioch evangelists were hoping for. Elijah was even rejected during the Gospel's Transfiguration scene on the mountain. During this heavenly coup-d'état, Elijah who was expected to come back at the end of days and Moses, the receiver of the Old Law, are dismissed. Unwanted!

Only in the later Gospel of John, written in a different city and context, is John the Baptist separated from Elijah, (John 1:19-26), bringing more confusion to those who still want to be confused.

Investigating how evangelist Mark made the two Messiahs interact, like recording the minutes of a Community Council Session or an online debate listening only to one of the two candidates, we can ascertain that the nascent Church originated from a clash between two clans holding incompatible views. We can also safely consider that the Gospels used the same *modus operandi* as the Scroll Community, setting Essenes and Christians in observable continuity.

Here again, a Messiah engendered by God, has reached a dominating position. Messiah Jesus represented the avant-garde that is tenaciously contesting certain Temple teachings. The group's most important legal issue is announced by: "The son of man is master of the Sabbath," meaning that they want the rules to change. Just as today many Christians would like

some very backward Church positions to evolve and represent the modern era and not rule in favor of those 2,000 years ago. Messiah John the Baptist caricatured the Essene traditionalists, comfortable with their old culture and who were at home with their eschatological (afterlife) expectations.

Evangelist Mark, as a puppeteer, was manipulating in one hand the strings that articulated his rising marionette Jesus, and in the other, distorted the strings that entangled the one who must fall: John the Baptist. What does Mark's first page already tell us? The introduction, as in any founding document, gives the primary intentions of the author. Not representing the doctrine Mark defended, John the Baptist announcing that someone more powerful than he is coming, is simply being dismissed. His role evolves in the following Gospels, mirroring how the writers' expressed community changes.

From here on, a new book surfaces and explains what the texts really meant to those who wrote them. The early Gospels were not approximate editorials humbly relating the wisdom and deeds, fortunes, and misfortunes of God's only Son remembered over a generation later by eyewitnesses, their independence supposedly explaining the observed variations between writers' memories. The evangelists composed a collection of short stories giving an account of community struggles expressed by two emblematic Messiahs, evolving from opposition to healing, vividly reporting noteworthy stages of community history. Consequently, we must completely change the platform onto which to understand the Gospels and weigh the baffling discrepancies. Set in a new frame, the differences are no longer contradictory and are consistent with the intervals between Gospels giving time for the community to change and with the sequence of their publications: Mark, then Matthew, followed by Luke.

A community dispute portrayed by two Messiahs also means that Jesus and John the Baptist were literary creations due to the first evangelist Mark

around AD 75, and that the earlier Jerusalem background was no more than a historical niche that suited the writer's purpose.

The stage having been set for a different play that does not correspond to the synopsis the catechism gives, the actors, and the events described in the Gospels need to be entirely revised.

This book answers the questions, supporting that all the Essene Messiahs, as well as *both* Gospel Messiahs, draw on the ancient founder, but in different contexts, explaining that traits reminiscent of his mission could be found in Jesus as well as in John the Baptist. Neither Messiah was a real person. They were emblematic and virtual cartoon figures recalling the Master with which the community regulated its dissents, asking him once again to arbitrate between the two factions. The cauldron that was simmering in Qumran started bubbling in Antioch. Likewise, the two Gospel Messiahs also personified two different community projects. Quarrels emerge at every corner of Mark's Gospel.

The avant-garde's Messiah Jesus, monopolizing the wisdom of the "old timer", was making collective memory weigh on their party. The traditionalist's Messiah had initially nothing to say: a mocked caricature to be eliminated. Ancient community history that primed the canvas is mixed up with contemporary concerns, aiming to criticize the evangelist's opponents. These are not only the Pharisees but also the Essene brothers who, while revering their Teacher's wisdom, remained close to the Temple and synagogue. Community frictions clarify, on behalf of the more intransigent avant-garde gathered under the Messiah Jesus label, the balance between devoted affiliations toward the by-gone Teacher and rejecting his obsolete positions.

As an emblematic and virtual figure representing an Essene party, Jesus, however, is not only a cartoon sketched by using elements of the Qumran Master's teaching and biography. Jesus is a composite creation, shaping

the complex dossier of a community revision. Thus, Mark also uses well-known features belonging to Prophet Elijah, the roaming predicator in Galilee. Jesus' Galilean ballade was there to show that Jesus Messiah is just as worthy as Elijah Messiah, so much better known and famous in those days within Jewish communities. Jesus later on also borrowed from Moses when Matthew sets his hands on revising the texts. Escaping the massacre of the innocents is typically reminiscent of Moses' own narrow escape; the ill famed king Herod replacing foul Pharaoh. Many other examples can be given.

Jesus, in Levantine prose, is thus presented as the party of the new Elijah and the new Moses. Partisans of this "Jesus" opposition group bring down both ancient actors valued by the traditionalists. The avant-garde also wants to revise certain official issues.

Maneuvering this quarrelling community, the tone of voice escalated to a climax translated by the Resurrection. The event has always been questioned as myth or reality. Rising from the dead has profound roots within Judean culture, and was considered a sign that Yahweh had started rewarding the pious or punishing the unfaithful. Declaring a resurrection connects Mark's party with eternal life, denying the privilege to other groups. The book discloses that the formidable event was steered by Isaiah's famous "Apocalyptic" chapters that say, "They have transgressed the Law. . . . They are dead, they shall not live." Typically mimicking sectarian-style exegesis, the assembled verses are interpreted as: "Those who transgress the *New Law* will be dead for always." Isaiah's warning is in the background to legitimate the empty tomb story, showing which Messiah was the elect of God, winning the eternity contest against Elijah's supporters.

The Resurrection slogan, boasting an open door and an empty tomb, aimed the Temple affiliates as well as the Essene traditionalists. This was the "tilting point" where a discernible Christian identity appeared within an

Essene community. The Resurrection argument was the ultimate anathema thrown into the face of the others that said: never will any of you be saved. A death sentence, expected to convince community members to join the avant-garde, is pronounced against Temple teachings. Those who do not join the new party, rejecting Elijah, must feel unsafe and fear that their sealed tombstone is never going to open at the end of days!

Behind the debates, who were the real actors? The question does not aim at the men to whom the Gospels are attributed, but those who ran the established Essene School in Antioch that Mark is criticizing. What does his Gospel have to say? Being under fire, we can expect offenders to be discernible. Thus, the actors who wanted to restrict Jesus in His own house are named: James, Simon, and Jude. Are they the same James, Simon, and Jude identified by Church Fathers as the earliest Antioch community leaders? If such is the case (a highly probable assumption), then the local culprits who wanted to restrict Jesus and considered Him insane represented the community leaders of the Traditional Essene School before turning Christian. The same names constitute also the bulk of the enlisted apostles, leading to consider that they initially represented an *opposition* group. It's no wonder then that scholars always found that the apostles were a rather dumb lot who nearly always failed to understand what Jesus had to say. They simply weren't enrolled on Mark's side, and personified reticent leaders unprepared to witness Jesus' teaching. The community context having been revised, the undecipherable "traitor-disciple" Judas-Ischariot registered with the apostles also receives a different light.

Set in observable continuity by the double Messiah schemes, the bridge connecting Essenes and Christians amplifies available ancient information. Acts of the Apostles tells us that the first community to be called Christian was in Antioch, in Northern Syria. Church Father Epiphanius informs that the community was called Essene before being called Christian, not only

indicating an intra-community change, but also that an Essene community pre-existed in Antioch. Furthermore, Church Father Eusebius, looking for antecedents, announces that the ancient writings of the founders of the Scroll community (Qumran) may well have been the Gospels and the Epistles before they were written.

This book also shows that the second Gospel written under the name of Matthew recorded the healing process of the divided community. The avant-garde is winning and Matthew included the losers into a more federating project. The different perspective, in contrast to Mark's quarrels, is very visible when one compares the interactions between the two Gospel Messiahs. John the Baptist is no longer rejected and the traditionalists he stands for are accepted as belonging to the avant-garde community culture. This is precisely what the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist means: we are indebted to the old Essene school.

Evangelist Luke, who so obviously centered his Gospel within Jerusalem, had a wider outlook. He was trying to steer the New Law closer to Temple culture and antecedents, attempting to heal the divided Sons of Israel and earn Institutional recognition.

Clear cuts within any discipline, contradicting views of so many scholars and believers, are bound to ignite strong reactions. But those who question the traditional Gospel story will find here a completely renewed approach offering a constructive support to their skeptical views. They will at long last understand what the Gospel writers had to say. To all these readers, the Gospels will gain in realism and lose in mystery and myths.

The Gospels didn't return home from Antioch and as they headed westward in the hands of Paul, the newcomers to Messiah Jesus picked off the cherry of eternal life, unaware of the sour cake of community struggles.

Where do innovative ideas come from? The question sounds as hopeless as asking why pain hurts. Brainteasers nonetheless leave no respite as they take command over an inquisitive mind, and the Gospels had endless riddles to solve. After having struggled to push through layers of enduring thought, the “penny drops” and apples fall on famous heads. As though everything in life depended on them, suddenly scattered essentials crystallize into evidence. The imperceptible becoming so incredibly observable, it becomes difficult to master enthusiasm and perpetuate doubts.

I started understanding the Old Testament through D. Redford’s² scholarly book. His insights were later to be confirmed by the easier to read *The Bible Unearthed*³. From these authors, it became apparent that everything we had previously learned and relied on was biased by habits of teaching. Dates and events were misleading and even great Egyptologists were caught trying to make the established history of Egypt concord with untested Scripture. The Biblical stories of Exodus and the conquest of the Promised Land were pointing to a sixth century BC political situation. Ending his section on Canaan, Redford slipped in a premonitory warning: “As for the New Testament, it is a different story.” Redford didn’t give an answer, and that is how everything started some fifteen years ago. What did the Gospels mean to those who wrote them? Could dates, names, and events have a very different meaning to what is commonly accepted?

In no time I renewed my interest in the Gospels^{4 5} and their strange speech of which catechism taught me only the clichés. And I became keen on the Dead Sea Scrolls and Inter-testamentary writings for which I fathomed scholarly interpretations. According to a widespread consensus,

2 D. Redford. *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times*. Princeton University Press, 1993.

3 Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman. *The Bible Unearthed*. The Free Press, 2001.

4 *New Revised Standard Version*. Harper-Collins 1998

5 *Chouraqui Bible*. Desclée de Brouwer 1984

the scrolls belonged to a period that overlapped the historical Jesus and the nascent Church.

“You are wasting your time,” friends told me, and occasionally I felt that they were right. I had repeatedly addressed the same warning to myself. So many people, amply qualified, have broken their teeth on trying to make the Gospels dialogue with them. But something was definitely intriguing with the Dead Sea Scrolls, however they are considered today as being inoffensive toward Christian dogma. Sixty years before, the genie had jumped out of its lamp, giving powerful information to the ones who rubbed it into our world. Having entangled scholarly minds and stressed the Church, the genie was forced back into its confined space not to disturb the public. And Qumran receded into shady areas as though in hiding. But the worm was already in the fruit gnawing into brains—mine in particular. Shall we rub the lamp once more? The temptation was great, and I found myself waking up in the middle of the night anxious to scribble a few lines before they changed into ghost memories so easily lost. My pen was equipped with small batteries and a light not to disturb my wife.

Then one night, the three kings of Epiphany, holding presents in their hands, visited me. These were guidelines to solve enigmas! They told me that the emblematic figures of the Old Testament represented institutions rather than precise living people of the past. And they told me to look again into the Qumran Messiahs and ask if they too, represented some aspects of an institution. They argued that the Old Scripture was the deeply rooted culture of the sectarians and Qumran scribes who would be using the same editorial techniques. They reminded me that in Scripture, two great tendencies were fighting for the leadership of a rising religion in the footsteps of an old sage named Abraham. In their quest for legitimacy, both sides claiming allegiance to Abraham, Moses was opposed to Aaron; Jerusalem to Beth-El; Southern clergy versus northern clergy; and the

Cherubim shrine was hostile to the Bull shrine with Yahweh against El. Divisions and oppositions were expressed through emblematic actors. Did the three kings want me to establish parallels between Old Testament symbolic figures agitated by discord and the dissident sectarian community? Did strong currents, priests claiming allegiance to their Teacher, agitate the holy sanctuary below the calm surface of visible devotion?

A separatist community issued from the Holy Book, following the teachings of a different prophet, is looking at Jerusalem and cursing the leaders. They believe representing the True Palestine and consider that the old country is led on wrong paths; that the country belongs to them and all must submit. After the death of their charismatic leader, they try to maintain his doctrinal line. But divisions soon appear among his followers. Some are for a conciliatory dialogue with their enemies; others support radical opposition. The initial consensus between them turns into violent opposition and is on the brink of a civil war with one group trying to overpower the other. The community I have briefly outlined is not Qumran but the Gaza strip, internal cohesion broken by the intransigent Hamas against the more conciliatory Fattah.

I find that this contemporary example of community resentment is helpful to frame ancient history. Both groups are fighting back so that righteousness may be re-established. But the common enemy outside of its borders is not enough to keep community ambitions and local party oppositions permanently under control. The parallels, violence omitted, were numerous.

It took time, however, before realizing that the Council described in the saved fragments of the Scroll's Messianic Rules was giving us *a pie chart* of Qumran's local assembly and that we were dealing with a left-wing Messiah versus a right-wing Messiah. Their attitude toward Jerusalem and vis-à-vis their ancient culture had divided them.

Everywhere one looks, unity and divisions are within our personal spheres of family, politics, and profession. And similarly, gazing toward the heavens, interrogating the two Qumran Messiahs, different delegations also had a choice of one or the other.

I was also eager to find contemporary examples of men posthumously made to support, as the Teacher 21 centuries ago, *both sides* of conflicting ideals. Situations where praising a bygone man are used to expose community identity or support diverging political orientations.

Probing history again, I was looking for leaders who still today are instrumental in representing incompatible strategies drawn from their achievements. I searched among activists who had been acclaimed and rejected, who had generated after tragic or peaceful death powerful feelings. And I selected, not Martin Luther King Jr. or Gandhi, but China's bygone president Mao who still remains a multi-faceted political star and legend in his own country. On Shanghai market stalls, his innumerable statues can alternatively flirt with drawings praising Confucius, or share the enthusiasm of youthful revolutionary red-guard dolls, or parade next to a photo of President Nixon. In each situation, Mao implicitly sides with ideologies that are poles apart ranging from traditional Chinese philosophy to heroic communist up-risings, and finally to the devil of capitalism! The three programs have little in common, except for being supported by the same icon and being used by China's modern politicians to back tradition or changing tactics. Mao is associated to party dogma he is no longer there to control. Posthumous Mao is as a chameleon. He takes the colors of the environment he is placed in, competing factions asking his support for different party policies. So was the Qumran Teacher, arbitrating strategies for the end of days.

Looking for my own way, I also wondered into which category fell the scholars that I admired for all the work they had dedicated to the

Scroll controversies. Many were committed to objective research and some represented scribes with faulty pens. Scholars with the most intellectual courage surfaced above all others regardless of how right, wrong or incomplete they were. Seeing further only means that I had climbed on their shoulders, and while still attempting to secure my unstable foothold, I express all the gratitude I have developed for their great contributions. Hershel Shanks for instance, founder of the Biblical Archaeology Review and president of the Biblical Archaeology Society, dedicated energy to spread the Scrolls beyond a restricted clique, and published the best introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls for the general reader.⁶ Dupont-Sommer ignited a strong controversy by considering that Jesus was in many respects a reincarnation of the old Teacher. Such politically incorrect assumptions earned him great amenity. However imperfect, he was on the right path even though the Teacher would never have recognized himself had he been presented to Jesus! Cardinal Danielou who refuted Dupont-Sommer's findings was also partly right. John the Baptist *caricatures* the historical Teacher's ideals. Scholar John Allegro who strongly supported equating the Teacher and Jesus, considering the Gospels as the prophetic book of the Qumran Master, was also searching in the right direction without reaching a plausible conclusion. He finally wrote the most unacceptable rubbish, Jesus becoming a mushroom psyche.⁷ Robert Eisenman, whose courage and stubbornness, refusing any paleographic data, led him on entirely false paths⁸ at least tried to extract interpretations from the official tracks. Scholars obviously did not speak with one voice and too many parameters entered their partitions.

6. Hershel Shanks. *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Vintage Books, Random House, N.Y. 1993

7. John. M. Allegro. *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. Doubleday 1970.

8. Robert Eisenman *James the Brother of Jesus*. Watkins publishing, 2002. 80-85

Could I do better? While working on the Dead Sea Scrolls and learning how they relate to the Gospels—the community having been Essene before becoming Christian—I always kept Ernest Renan’s prophecy in mind to support my enterprise. He said that critical studies on the origin of Christianity would only be successful and conclusive when undertaken by a layman with an independent mind. One who progresses according to the methods of impartiality the Greeks, Arabs, and Sanskrit used, with no thought of moralizing or scandalizing, and is devoid of intentions either to defend the dogmas or to destroy them.

It has been a fascinating and initially intimidating task, confronting all the preconceived ideas we have. The end result is a book that is handling a renewed interpretation that goes against the official traditions. I decided to write this book because none of our most respected scholars have seriously tried to depart from the conventional story, and most forbid to consider Jesus other than a real person who lived during the first three decades of the new era.

All recent publications by Hershel Shanks (*The Dead Sea Scrolls and Why They Are Important; Jesus, Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*), by Geza Vermes (*The Passion, The Nativity, Search for the Historical Jesus*), by David Freedman (*The Dead Sea Scrolls and Why They Matter*), Niel Silberman (*The Hidden Scrolls; Christianity, Judaism and the War for the Dead Sea Scrolls*), as well as many other books, strictly remain within the paths of a historical early first-century person. A scholarly agreement even considers disdainfully that only people with marginal and fringe opinions still support that Jesus did not exist historically as an identifiable individual during the period the Gospels have assigned to Him.

Institutionalized legends, of which the religious worlds are generous, end up being considered as incontrovertible truth. Power, propaganda, and societal fabric stand behind them, and trespassers are discouraged as long

as these religions are in power. We just have to look at bygone religions to grasp the evidence and remember that questioning the Old and the New Testaments was also previously illicit and punishable. Under past Church dictatorship, many lost their lives in doing so, or had to retract. Today, inquisitive minds are freer to probe the meaning of the ancient texts. With fresh insight given by archaeology, it is easier to see how the Old Testament writers built up a fabulous saga that Israel be united to Judah, under one crown and one faith manipulated by the Jerusalem clergy. The wishful thinking turned into an aborted invasion with Egypt reacting against the attempted territorial annexation. Now let those with ears and eyes penetrate into embryonic Christianity. Dissident religious groups who had the same Mosaic culture, who knew what the old texts meant, and who were opposed to many aspects of the previous teachings, composed the Gospels. To them, Moses was not a great voice of eternal life and Elijah a usurper. The Jesus Messiah party fortified afterlife expectations and sharply competed against Essene traditionalists and Pharisees, campaigning bitterly to expand their influence under cover of their party banner. Virtual and multi-faceted Jesus secondarily became perceived as single and real, letting us inherit a new set of institutionalized legends.

Faith used to be the cornerstone of civilization, tribal or imperial. Times have changed and accepting today or rejecting the manipulated historical accounts dictated by spiritual authorities is no longer the unique measure that establishes integration within a given society.

Discovering the Levantine trick-cards will take the reader by surprise and understanding their implications may be deeply disturbing. But no inquisitive mind should stop searching into the consequences of the detected illusions however thorny they may be and as a result be amazed.

Believers will always be believers, regardless of counter-evidence. But to those who question the Gospels, with their guts or their brains, with arguments derived from intuition or rationality, I can promise strong scaffoldings that will offer a most constructive support to their doubts. But however far away from Church dogma the book takes us, a disclaimer is necessary: there was no intention, while testing the subject, to pour vitriol over beliefs but only to understand what the Gospels meant to those who wrote them.

My main hope is that the renewed understanding of the Gospels will ignite interest among people who are skeptical and among all those who are interested in the meaning of these ancient texts. Finally, everything is true in them, but our interpretation was far behind Near-Eastern thought. And short of the political maneuvering that would soon intervene outside Palestine, where Jesus is made to change from the Son of Yahweh to the Son of a different Heavenly Father. Because in the beginning was the Word and not chaos.

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