

## JESUS AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

### BARBARA THIERING'S THEORY

Another new theory that claims to reinterpret, maybe even disprove, orthodox Christianity is to be found in Barbara Thiering's, "Jesus the Man - A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls" (Doubleday, 1992). If you have not read it, perhaps you have seen some of the reviews and are wondering what all the fuss is about. What are the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) and what relevance do they have on our understanding of Jesus?

The DSS were written by a monastic Jewish sect circa 200BC to 70AD. They were hidden from the approaching Roman army in 70AD and were not recovered until 1947. Their discovery and publication have opened up new vistas for New Testament study by providing background to the Jewish roots of Christianity. However, they have also been used to support a variety of weird and wonderful theories. Barbara Thiering, for example, uses them in a futile attempt to show that Jesus did not die on the Cross but survived and went to live at Qumran, the home of one of the communities responsible for producing the DSS. In saying this, Thiering is very much alone, although she has been promoting similar ideas since 1979. The following quotation is taken from a very useful review in issue 96 of "The Briefing":

*Reviewing her 1979 book, "Redating the Teacher of Righteousness", Jerome Murphy O'Connor (Review Biblique, 1980) said that it demonstrated '(a) her uncritical acceptance of any opinion (however subjective) that fits into her theory, (b) her disregard for any known form of logic, and, (c) her preference for unjustified assumptions. Morton Smith, in "Journal of the American Academy of Religion" (1981), concluded that 'the case is weak because*

*arguments for it are often based on absurd exegeses, some made up ad hoc..., others cogently deduced from absurd principles.' Ben Zion Wacholder argued that 'she manufactures a chronology reducing a clear passage to gibberish... The author's main thesis can only be characterized as utterly implausible' (Journal of Biblical Literature, 1982). She has Protestant, Catholic and Jewish scholars against her.'*

On 31st May 1992, Thiering was challenged on Australian radio by Geza Vermes, Emeritus Professor in Jewish Studies at the University of Oxford and translator of "The Dead Sea Scrolls in English" (Penguin, 1968) together with Dr. Max Wilcox, Senior Lecturer in Ancient History at Macquorie University, Sydney. David Peterson comments on this debate in "The Briefing":

*She would not concede at any point that she could be wrong. She would not allow that her theories could be in need of the slightest modification. This is not normally considered evidence of great scholarship, but the sign of a closed mind. Genuine scholars are part of a world-wide community of people in the same field of research. They listen to the criticisms of others and do not simply adopt their own standards of argument and logic.*

### THIERING'S TECHNIQUE

Thiering's technique involves what is known as Peshar. This is recognized by Old Testament scholars as a form of coded commentary on OT texts. But Peshar has never been used on this scale on the NT and several difficulties arise:

1) The Qumran community was not orthodox by Jewish standards and had little, if any, contact with the church. Using the DSS in an attempt to understand the NT is rather like trying to construct a picture of contemporary Christianity

by a detailed study of the publications of a fringe denomination.

2) Thiering does not explain how she understands and uses Peshar. Thus, she can say much as she pleases.

3) To accept Thiering's theory, we must presume that the true Gospel message was lost for almost 2,000 years and that only Thiering's disciples can know the truth.

4) Thiering assumes the DSS to be more recent than the NT and that therefore the DSS offer comment on the NT. It is true that both were finished before the end of the first century AD but the DSS were started as early as 200BC. It is more likely that the NT writers knew of the DSS than vice versa. Geza Vermes is particularly scathing about this:

*There are three points in Barbara Thiering's book where we are in agreement. One is that the DSS cover a period of roughly 200BC to 70AD. Secondly, Jesus' activity happened under the governorship of Pontius Pilate, that is 26-36AD and I am also in agreement with all the translations in the book which have been borrowed from my own. But beyond this, I think we are in fundamental disagreement practically on every single point.*

*For instance, the chronological question. Clearly the DSS and the story of the NT partly coincide. Now the enormous problem that faces Dr. Thiering is to argue that all the DSS with NT relevance belong to the latter part of the first century and not before. I submit that this is absolutely impossible to prove, statistically unlikely and that it is nearly certain that a number of the scrolls are dated far enough from the period of Jesus to have no relevance.*

5) Thiering's methodology is weak. She moves from historical reconstruction based on documentary evidence to speculation presented as fact. It does not matter how many pages of

footnotes she supplies - it is still only guesswork. Because of limited space just a couple of examples will have to suffice. Here is a paragraph from page 65:

*In AD23 Joseph died. Mary, his widow, the 'crippled woman' (meaning that she was in the class of the aged) was 'bound by Satan'. Now a celibate woman preparing to exercise a form of ministry, that of the order of the widows, she was under the authority of 'Satan', a name for the chief Scribe.*

This is her Peshet of Luke 13:10-17, but: i) is Mary the crippled woman? ii) is the crippled woman a widow? iii) is Satan the chief Scribe? It is not at all convincing.

Later, Thiering infers that the Evangelist Matthew became High Priest. Her premises: i) Matthew's Gospel appears to be written by a Jew for a Jewish readership ii) Josephus records that there was a High Priest named Matthew. Yes - and I know a lady called Elizabeth therefore I know the Queen! This is not good enough.

#### A MONUMENTAL HOAX ?

But let us allow two experts to have the closing words, Max Wilcox first, then Geza Vermes:

*It is very difficult to see how anyone could convince themselves in the face of so many questions... There is not an atom of tangible evidence anywhere in this. It is an extrapolation, building hypothesis on hypothesis and at a certain point isn't hypothesis at all - it trails out into the realms of fantasy. there is still no evidence that would convince me that the NT can be used for the interpretation of the Qumran texts or vice versa.*

*There is still no rock solid evidence upon which we are authorized to build such far-reaching hypotheses. And finally, let me come to the point where I think the game is given away. On page*

*111 of the book, it is stated that Pilate and Herod rushed to Qumran in the Passover period to examine three zealots; Simon, Judas and Jesus. Now anyone who can believe this can believe anything so, for this reason, I think this book is a monumental leg-pull and hoax.*

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**The foregoing is adapted, courtesy of the author, from an article by S.K.Whitehead in Issue 27 of The Eye Opener (G.A.Fisher, Aylesbury).**

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#### INVINCIBLE

**Attempts to prove the Lord Jesus did not rise from death always fail. On the other hand, the historical practice, since NT times, of baptism (the immersion of the repentant believer in water for the forgiveness of sins) remains unequivocal testimony to His death, burial and resurrection. Acts 2:38, Rom. 6:1-4, Col. 2:12.**

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