not a historical figure of the first century CE, but a late fiction constructed by the evangelists, mainly on the basis of Pauline statements about Jesus.

The radical scepticism towards the gospels as historical sources (which includes dating them extremely late) left aside, the weakest point of Ellegård's theory is his construction of "Diaspora Essenism." The possibility of Essene connections to the Diaspora cannot be excluded (cf. Philo's descriptions of Essenes and Therapeutae), but Ellegård goes far beyond what the evidence allows. He is bound to postulate some quite far-reaching differences between the Essenes of Palestine and of the Diaspora, and he comes close to making most, if not all, Diaspora Jews in antiquity Essenes.

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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.