THE AGE OF THE SCROLLS 1)

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1. THE DEPOSIT OF THE CAVE

Sukenik attempts to show that the Cave was a kind of Geniza. He maintains that the fragmentary scroll of Isaiah was already in pieces and improper for the Divine Service when it was deposited in the Cave. But the condition under which the Cave was found at the time of the excavation hardly permits such conclusions. From the number of bases and covers of jars found in the Cave de Vaux concludes that there must have been at least 50 jars in the Cave and he supposes that in these jars 150-200 scrolls may have been deposited. Of this great deposit only 7 scrolls have been found, besides a great mass of little fragments. In order to form an opinion of the original condition of the Cave we have to depend on the best preserved pieces, and we must suppose that all the fragments belonged originally to scrolls which were complete at the time of the deposit, enveloped in linen, impregnated with wax and asphalt and deposited into the covered jars. They could thus be preserved for a long period. This is quite different from a Geniza, into which, besides other things, only fragments of manuscripts were brought, not to be preserved there, but eventually to perish in it or to be destroyed.

Besides, a Geniza is either connected with a Synagogue or situated in the neighbourhood of one. No traces of a Synagogue appear to have been found near the Cave. I think the excavators are perfectly right in supposing that the Cave was a hiding place for a comparatively large library, that all the manuscripts were deposited there at nearly the same time, and that nothing was added afterwards.

This becomes especially clear when we compare the texts coming from the Cave with the fragments found in a Geniza, the Cairo Geniza, the best one known. The Cairo Geniza may have been installed in the 10th century, shortly after the Christian Church of St. Michael had been converted into a Synagogue. It contained, besides older material for which we are especially interested, even recent material, including fragments which may have been written or printed up to the 18th or 19th centuries. I have investigated with care the older Biblical fragments found in the Geniza. All these are written on parchment, and they all show vowel signs or at least traces of them, and the different types of these vowel signs enable us to give an approximate date to these Biblical fragments. There are such which must have been written in the 7th or even 6th centuries A.D. The oldest pieces of Jewish origin found in the Geniza are the Aquila Palimpsests written on parchment in the 5th century. Into the Geniza material was brought in the course of 8 or 9 centuries, whereas into the Cave the material was deposited at a particular time. The manuscripts deposited into the Cave had certainly not been written at one and the same period. That has been seen already by the first scholars who tried to date the manuscripts coming from the Cave. I have the impression that the interval of time between the date of the oldest and the latest manuscripts deposited there was greater than first assumed and that we have to reckon with an interval of several centuries.

On the other hand it is in my opinion certain that the latest manuscripts deposited in the Cave must be dated centuries before the oldest manuscripts coming from the Geniza, if only from a paleographical point of view. Further, the manuscripts of the Cave were written on leather and—a few—on papyrus. All the older fragments coming from the Geniza appear to have been written on parchment, the others on paper. Parchment was invented in about the 2nd century A.D. and came into general use in the 4th century. We should expect to find manuscripts or fragments of manuscripts written on parchment, if the deposit was made in the 4th century or later. But as far as I know no piece of parchment was found in the Cave. In the manuscripts of the Cave pronunciation of Hebrew is indicated by plene script and no trace of any vowel sign is to be found. Already the oldest Biblical fragments in the Geniza show vowel signs.