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The Dead Sea Scrolls, 1947-1969 Edmund Wilson

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help to show that the demand for the "operationalizing" of natural law rests on a misconception of man's experience of order. Man must act and be responsible for his actions in specific empirical situations. Natural law—or, better, the "right by nature"—cannot serve as a set of detailed instructions for the *a priori* guidance of action. On the other hand, although reasoned awareness of the right by nature cannot really tell us what to do in a given concrete situation, it can tell us that there are ultimate boundaries to human action, that there are some acts and decisions which are never permissible because they fundamentally violate human dignity. Such a view would presumably be objected to by the author on a number of grounds, one of them being that it comprises the sovereignty of God who is thereby made subordinate to "nature" or "Being." But, we might ask, what effect does the rejection of any concept of an objective limit to human action have on the sovereignty of God and on his relation to men? How can we continue to speak of "man" at all? What exactly lies "beyond human nature"? The superman?

I am sure that the author would reject any such attempt at *reductio ad absurdum*—or rather *ad Nietzscheum*. I do not get any sense from his monograph that his position is at all congenial to that of Nietzsche, who proclaimed, after all, the "death of God." And yet it does appear to me that he needs to spell out much more fully than he has done the implications of his alternative position. Unfortunately—and this is the principal defect of his study—he only addresses himself to the question of elaborating a political theory on "nominalist" grounds, a political theory that looks "beyond human nature for an understanding of man and a basis for value commitments"—in the last four pages of the book. This leaves his work—especially given his choice of main title—an unfinished symphony.

EDMUND WILSON. *The Dead Sea Scrolls, 1947-1969*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969. 320pp. \$6.50.

(Reviewed by Richard Lloyd Anderson, professor of history and religion at Brigham Young University. Dr. Anderson, former book review editor of *Brigham Young University Studies*, has specialized in ancient history, New Testament

Wilson's updating of his readable summary is of interest to *BYU Studies* mainly because of his eight-page treatment of Mormonism in closing. As an eminent critic and author, Wilson has shown himself a man for all subjects. Though a self-confessed nonexpert on the scrolls, his narrative powers brought his work wide attention as a model of conciseness. Incorporated with small modification into the new edition, the original six chapters average some twenty pages each. But the revision's main characteristics are shown in roughly doubling the length by adding seventeen chapters, averaging some ten pages each. The result is a series of vignettes, at first on the significance of post-1955 discoveries, followed by essentially impressionistic travelogue. Thus personal tastes of the author predominate, both on the main subject and the closing incidental comments on Joseph Smith.

The revision continues to popularize a point of view that has caused distinct Christian squirmings. "A born shrinker of myths" (p. 275), Wilson has thrown the light of the scrolls on "the myth of the origins of Christianity" (p. 276). New environmental parallels, he believes, would tend to reduce Christian "divine revelation" to a mere "episode of human history" (p. 109). Messianic proof-texts, similar programs of the scroll brotherhood and John the Baptist, indicate that Qumran "is perhaps, more than Bethlehem or Nazareth, the cradle of Christianity" (p. 98). But there is a paradox in method here. Such conclusions are based on the certainty of knowing Essene teachings through scrolls of the same period as the oldest Gospel manuscripts, which Wilson finds essentially untrustworthy in recording the history and teachings of Jesus. Human proneness to the legendary he considers a sufficient explanation of Christian origins. In a similar fashion, the creation of the mythology of Mormonism "right under our noses . . . and as lately as the last century" (p. 279) shows how imagination and pretense may produce a "metamorphosis" resulting in prophethood for Joseph Smith, and perhaps even Messiahship for Jesus. Concerning Wilson's writings in general, one scholar finds the "characteristic vices" of "irritability, resentment, the impatient dismissal of what cannot be absorbed without a basic recasting of his own fixed attitudes." This

may be more the real issue than specific data about either Jesus or Joseph Smith, since Wilson confesses inability "to identify myself imaginatively with the Christian who believes that Jesus was actually the Son of God . . ." (p. 287) and admits that "one cannot help feeling a certain contempt" for human supernaturalistic cravings that permitted acceptance of Joseph Smith (p. 278).

But if a thorough-going humanist finds the miraculous inconceivable, scholars of either persuasion must meet on the ground of accurate facts. To be blunt, Wilson has not yet read enough Mormon history to understand Joseph Smith's career. We read of the Prophet's home "just north of the Fulton Lakes" (displacing him to the Adirondack wilderness), where he claimed to find plates and translate the story of Lehi sailing to the new world "in barges" (the case with Jared, not Lehi) containing "specimens of all the species of animals" (untrue of any Book of Mormon migration). At organization in 1830 the Church had "a congregation of six" (merely the formal incorporators in a much larger gathering of members), and Joseph soon "moved" to Independence, Missouri, (never his residence) to dedicate a temple site "as a result of having been tarred and beaten in Ohio" (an event of 1832 postdating the temple dedication almost eight months.) Perhaps such misconceptions do not really bear on the central thesis that Mormonism arose in deception, but they display a shallow means of reaching this conclusion—reliance on preconceptions and evidently a single guide to the subject.

Since Wilson says Fawn M. Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* is such a "documented and honest description" of Joseph Smith, he admittedly draws his evidence from the authority of her research. But this poses a great problem of accuracy. Many specialists in Mormon history maintain that Brodie has merely selected the most unfavorable contemporary evaluations of Joseph Smith. Consequently, Wilson's selection of the most unfavorable from Brodie becomes an intense distillation of hostile opinion. If some neighbors doubted Joseph Smith's integrity, it has been shown that many others did not, and the most skeptical of the family (younger brother William) insisted that since Joseph always told the truth about other things, the entire family (no small one) trusted his Book of Mormon story implicitly. Wilson brushes aside the later career of the

Prophet by asserting that he "continued to have a bad reputation" among those "who were not converted." Evidence to the contrary would easily fill a book. For instance, the Prophet's non-Mormon attorneys were generally an unsentimental lot, but four of them left personal statements of admiration for his strength of character, including distinct indications of his spirituality.

The sophisticated tone of Brodie's biography has unfortunately misled Wilson into thinking her documentation sound, when it is actually weakest on the very point both are anxious to prove, the untrustworthiness of Joseph and the witnesses who claimed direct experience with the plates. All of Brodie's sources quoted by Wilson to create this image contain serious flaws, but space will permit a single example of distortion. Thomas Ford, the Illinois governor who failed to prevent Joseph Smith's murder, considered it "most probable" that the witnesses of the plates were simply conspirators. Including an alternative explanation without fully trusting it, Ford mentioned that "men who were once in the confidence of the prophet," informed him that an empty box was shown to the would-be witnesses, who after seeing nothing were so humiliated by Joseph for their lack of faith that after "more than two hours" of fervent praying, they again peered into the box and "were now persuaded that they saw the plates." Such naive malleability hardly fits the witnesses, whose generally stubborn independence bent before none, Joseph included. Ford's informants represented the drama of the empty box as a "different account" given out "privately" by the Prophet, an implausibility for almost any theory of his character. Furthermore, Ford wrote after the assassination and main Mormon exodus, and as an attorney he well knew the necessity of specific evidence from identified sources, the opposite of these unnamed individuals not really trusted by Ford himself, which reduces such information to the probable scoffing of frontier humor. Like Ford, Brodie uses the story while confessing misgivings because "it is difficult to reconcile this explanation" with the physical descriptions of those who described handling the plates.

This anecdote no doubt improved in the telling before reaching Ford, for both Brodie and Wilson have touched up its vagaries without consciously trying. Whereas Ford gave out the story in explaining the "certificates" of both the three and

the eight witnesses, Mrs. Brodie applies it specifically to the latter. The generality of those, according to Ford, "once in the confidence of the prophet," becomes, according to Brodie, several of Joseph's key men," by implication high officials. Next, Wilson gives his version. Brodie's "key men" now become the "Eight Witnesses" themselves: "they said that at first when the box was opened, it had seemed to them to be empty till Smith had exhorted them to get down on their knees and pray for more faith" (p. 284). So the "metamorphosis" that can be proved in this case is not of Joseph, but of the documents used to ridicule him. On some 250 known occasions, the Book of Mormon witnesses reaffirmed their printed testimonies, often in the face of searching cross-examination, and their recorded words have nothing to do with the Ford-Brodie-Wilson yarn.

The faith of the "American Unitarians" Wilson considers "least disturbed by the implications of the scrolls" (p. 127). Ironically, the "farrago of balderdash" (p. 281) otherwise known as the Book of Mormon had long been criticized mainly for depicting at length an anticipatory Christianity; this is precisely the "new" information from Qumran that potentially threatens the orthodox. Not only did this general discovery fit the pre-Christian period in the Book of Mormon, but Dr. Hugh Nibley has since utilized the Dead Sea finds in three major books to show the intricately authentic Jewishness of the Nephite scripture. For instance, one strikingly non-Western form of literature at Qumran consists of "ostensible commentaries" on Old Testament books that narrowly particularize and are therefore "actually half-disguised records of events in the history of the Sect itself" (p. 153). This precise method of interpretation fills the Book of Mormon and is described by one of its prophets: "for I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning" (1 Ne. 19:23). Thus responsible investigation must modify the conclusion that Joseph Smith produced "nonsensical scriptures" (p. 279). Is it entirely disreputable to believe that metal plates were anciently placed in a stone box in western New York, to be miraculously discovered and translated in the nineteenth century? It perilously borders on the miraculous that ancient Jewish believers sealed their scrolls (including metal ones) in jars and caves, to be inadvertently discovered and translated in the twentieth