Introducing the Dead Sea Scrolls to an LDS Audience

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Abstract Review of *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Questions and Responses for Latter-day Saints* (2000), by Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks.

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This little book is a succinct overview of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) and their importance for Latter-day Saints. It is judicious in its setting out of evidence and avoids finding Latter-day Saint practice and doctrine where there is none, yet specifically addresses questions of interest to Latter-day Saints, such as "Are there any references to Christ or Christianity in the scrolls?" and "Do the scrolls refer to Joseph Smith or other latter-day figures?" The authors are cautious when there is insufficient evidence. For instance, one could interpret the ritual immersions at Qumran as baptisms since there are obvious similarities with John the Baptist's and Jesus' baptisms, but in other respects there are differences, and the authors point these out.

Besides issues of doctrine and practice, the authors mention LDS scholars who are helping to publish editions of the scrolls (Donald Parry, Dana Pike, David Seely, and Andrew Skinner), as well as Scott Woodward's work with DNA analysis to help identify the scroll fragments. FARMS's important DSS computer database is also discussed.

In addition to LDS interest in the DSS, the authors discuss some of the main issues that DSS scholars themselves have debated. The

authors provide helpful explanations of opposing views regarding unresolved issues, such as who wrote the Qumran texts and how these texts are related to those who lived at Qumran.

Overall, the book is a series of seventy questions with brief answers, a little more than one page per question, beginning with "What are the Dead Sea Scrolls?" and ending with "Where can I learn more about the scrolls?" This format is similar to Joseph Fitzmyer's *Responses to 101 Questions on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Paulist, 1992), but Fitzmyer's book is, of course, addressed to a more general audience than the LDS one.

Parry and Ricks' book is organized into eight parts:

1. Description, Discovery, and Disposition of the Dead Sea Scrolls
2. The Writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls
3. Translation and Publication Information
4. The Dead Sea Scrolls and Modern Technology
5. The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Old Testament
6. The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament
7. Specific Texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls
8. Specific Insights into the Dead Sea Scrolls

The book contains photographs and maps, although some of these visual aids could have been a little larger. It would also have helped, I think, to have seen a couple more photographs of the highly fragmented remnants of the many manuscripts found in Cave 4. More examples would have given the reader a better idea of why work on putting the scroll puzzle together has taken so long and been so difficult. Page 31 has a picture of John Allegro—of the original DSS team—separating out some fragments from Cave 4, but a full picture of a group of these fragments would help support the authors' conclusion that there was no conspiracy to hold back the findings of the original Dead Sea Scrolls team of researchers.[1]

Several questions were discussed that I feel the authors did not treat sufficiently. For each of these questions, a connection with LDS scripture and practice is drawn, but the apparent connection is not as strong as the authors suggest:

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1. For examples of such photographs, see M. Gerald Bradford's *Ancient Scrolls from the Dead Sea* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997).

Question 35: "Does the text of the *Great Isaiah Scroll* support the Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon that differ from those in the King James Bible?" (p. 44).

I would say that there is not as much support as the authors propose. Septuagint readings are frequently offered as support for some Book of Mormon readings of Isaiah, yet the text of the Septuagint (an early Greek translation of the Old Testament) often attempts to smooth out the reading (that is, make it easier to be understood). Similar smoothing tendencies are found in the Book of Mormon versions of Isaiah. For instance, in 1 Nephi 20:11 (Isaiah 48:11), there is some evidence that the Book of Mormon text here was later emended, that the original English-language Book of Mormon text read much closer to the King James text.[2] The authors also refer to singular/plural differences between the King James and the Book of Mormon texts (for instance, "inhabitant[s] of Samaria"), but such differences may easily be due to scribal errors in the early transmission of the Book of Mormon text. Similarly, the authors' other examples are quite minor and could well be simple scribal accidents (an *and,* a plural verb, and the use of the word *dry*). In my estimation, the DSS lend no strong support for the major textual differences found in the Isaiah quotations in the Book of Mormon.

Question 43: "Are there similarities between the beliefs of Christianity and those of the Qumran group?" (p. 53).

Baptism: The authors claim that the Qumran immersion in water has "nothing to do with Jesus Christ or the remission of sins" (p. 54). This is undoubtedly true under a literal interpretation, but on the other hand I would probably mention that both the Qumran immersions and Christian baptisms do involve the symbolism of cleansing.

The Twelve and the Three: The authors' discussion here neglects to note that the New Testament provides no evidence that the three apostles Peter, James, and John were ever separated from the rest of the Twelve into their own governing body. In other words, no evidence exists that the three ever became a kind of first presidency distinct

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2. See my article, "Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations in the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon,* ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 382–84.

from the Twelve during the New Testament period. True, there was the early desire (see Acts 1) to maintain twelve apostles, but Acts provides no evidence that Peter, James, and John are ever separated out as a distinct group of leaders, despite Jesus' having these three accompany him separately from the rest of the Twelve on several occasions prior to his death and resurrection. In Acts, the Twelve often operate much like the LDS Quorum of the Twelve did for the three years following the death of Joseph Smith until late in 1847 when Brigham Young reorganized the First Presidency. It is true that the twelve and the three at Qumran do appear like the LDS Church leadership today, but that system of organization does differ from New Testament governance. This distinction would have been helpful because a number of LDS observers have made this strong connection between Qumran and LDS governance.

Question 64: "What about the name Alma, discovered in one of the Bar Kokhba texts?" (p. 79).

In Hebrew the name *Alma* actually reads only with consonants (no vowels), first as *ʾlmʾ* (where ʾ is the glottal stop), then second as *ʾlmh*. I think it is fair to point out that the name is not written consistently in the document and that in both cases the name is written without vowels (as is the norm in Hebrew writing). The two *a* vowels were supplied by Yigael Yadin in 1962, representing his conjecture based undoubtedly on what sounded best to him as a speaker of Hebrew. Completely ignoring collocations of vowels and consonants, one could facetiously argue that the name *Alma* could be *Elmo* or *Alamo!* Of course, the argument for the *a* vowels has been made.[3] In any event, the normal LDS reader will probably assume from the authors' explanation that this Bar Kohkba fragment literally reads as *Alma.*

Despite these minor technical issues, this little book is, I believe, an excellent introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls for a Latter-day Saint audience. I highly recommend it.

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3. See, for instance, Paul Hoskisson's article, "Alma as a Hebrew Name," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 72–73.