

Shock and scroll

Helen Jacobus meets a controversial scholar who claims Jewish academics have swallowed anti-Jewish propaganda

Few scholars have so vociferously torn apart the theories of their colleagues as Dead Sea Scrolls specialist Robert Eisenman, professor of Middle East religions and archaeology at California State University.

And few scholars of such standing have had their theories, in turn, so ignored by their peers.

Eisenman accuses his fellow academics of falsely dating the scrolls. He claims that these 2,000-year-old Jewish writings show the New Testament to be anti-Semitic propaganda — and that there was no historical figure called Jesus. “He’s a fictional compendium of revolutionary Jewish leaders who were crucified by the Romans,” he asserts.

The New Testament, Eisenman says, was written when Jews were being massacred throughout the Mediterranean region. The authors, who included Paul and his circle, created anti-Jewish literature with the approval of the Romans, Eisenman claims. This blames the Jews for the killing of “Jesus” — a character, Eisenman insists, who was created as a Graeco-Roman hero by “Hollywood-style scriptwriting.”

Jesus, he says, embodies “all the ideas of the Greek mystery religions and Plato’s view of Socrates.” Socrates was the philosopher who “turned the other cheek, refused to flee his executioners and was a good and righteous man done to death by an unjust society.”

Professor Eisenman was in London to talk about his new, and controversial, book, “James the Brother of Jesus,” a 1,000-page tome suggesting that James — or Jacob, in Hebrew and Jacobus in Greek — was a leader of the “Poor Ones of Piety,” a violent, “anti-Roman and xenophobic” Jewish messianic movement, and that his accidental death, in 62CE from a Roman missile, triggered the first Jewish revolt.

For all the professor’s impressive academic

credentials, the book is published not by an academic publishing house but under an esoteric and New Age imprint. “You take your publishers where you can find them,” he says.

A large, fast-talking man, Eisenman is passionately enthusiastic about his theories. Jewish scholars who argue for the existence of a historical Jesus “don’t like me,” he says. “These people are quasi-Christians in their outlook. They’re trying to assimilate Jesus into Judaism and I’m not doing that at all.

“The Gospels flatter the Romans and demonise the Jews — that’s what you had to do to survive at that time. It’s children’s literature,” he continues. “The exorcism of spirits, curing people — it’s nothing to do with history.”

James, on the other hand, he says, was an historical figure who is known from extra-biblical sources, and was “totally Jewish, totally Torah-orientated.”

The Jewish messianic movement in first-century Palestine prepared itself for the apocalypse. Its members purified themselves in readiness for the angelic host who would rid the world of evil. “It’s really crazy, I admit, but they knew they weren’t strong enough to take on the Roman Empire by themselves.”

Eisenman claims they were a mass movement, not a minority sect, and that they opposed the Pharisees, who accommodated the Romans — though falling far short of the gospel-writers. “You don’t render unto Caesar. Only God rules,” he says, mischievously reclaiming a celebrated utterance of Jesus’s.

The messianic movement’s writings are contained in the Dead Sea Scrolls, material which was “hidden in caves,” concealed from their enemies. By comparing the Dead Sea Scrolls with the gospels, Eisenman maintains, “we can see how the writers of the New Testament transformed a movement which was apocalyptically Jewish, even more extreme than the rabbinical parties, into its mirror opposite.”

This brings us on to the dating controversy. Eisenman alleges that his colleagues have “pushed back the chronology” of the scrolls. “They don’t want this to be the messianic movement of Palestine. They want the messianic movement of Palestine to be their scripture... They understood that you couldn’t have two competing messianic movements in Palestine at the same time.”

“The resurrection is not in the scrolls. They can’t find it. That’s why they say the scrolls pre-date Christianity. So they have to say they were written earlier.”

There is no scientific evidence to refute Eisenman’s theory, as the scrolls are famously difficult to date. Carbon-dating techniques can give the age only of the leather upon which the scrolls were written — not the date when they were composed — and the margin of error, of 50 to 100 years, is too wide to settle the argument. Similarly, the study of 2,000-year-old

Aramaic handwriting styles is inconclusive, as there are so few existing independent

documents of similar age with which to compare them.

Ever since the Dead Sea Scrolls were first discovered by Bedouin in 1947, they have been at the centre of conspiracy theories, and the secrecy surrounding them was denounced as the “academic scandal of the century.”

All that changed 10 years ago when the scrolls were unofficially published, due in no small part to Professor Eisenman’s persistent attacks on the lack of accessibility to scholars outside a small team of, mainly Catholic, editors.

“I wanted a thousand voices to sing,” Eisenman lyrically remarks. “I wanted to break the [Christian] interpretation and take it away from the ecclesiastical church-minded people who had controlled the scrolls for 40 years.

“But it didn’t happen. The monopoly has reformed again and they [Jewish academics] have all totally accepted those ideas.”

Not only does Eisenman believe himself to be frozen out by Christian scholars, he also feels that Jewish academics have completely misunderstood him. This is because, he alleges, of his insistence that Jews should read Christian literature.

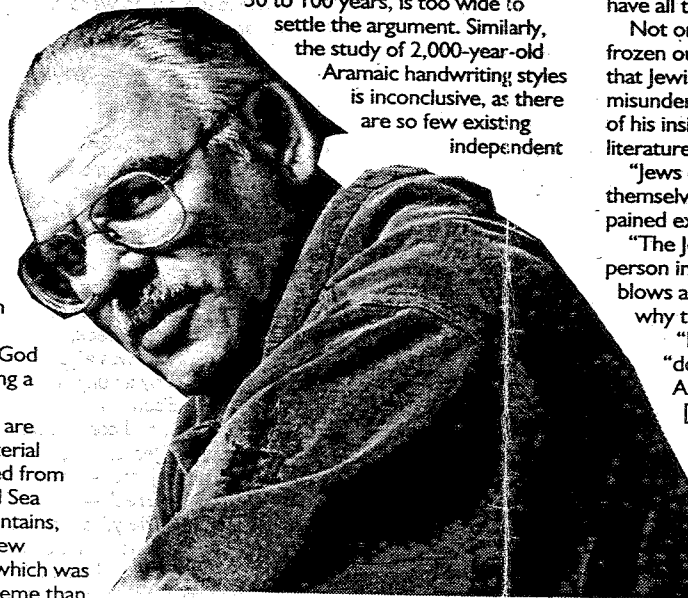
“Jews consciously avoid acquainting themselves with Christianity,” he sighs, with a pained expression.

“The Jewish people is like a blindfolded person in a room who doesn’t know where the blows are coming from and he doesn’t know why the blows keep coming,” he says.

“He” — this “blindfolded” Jew — “doesn’t know the source of this animus. And, unfortunately, the source is in the [Christian] documents themselves.

“The Christians, at least, know the documents and know their weaknesses.

“But Jews accept the Christian documents as historical. They, in effect, say: ‘Yes, we killed him.’”



Out on his own: Robert Eisenman PHOTO: PENNY WOLIN

“James the Brother of Jesus” is published by Watkins at £14.99.

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