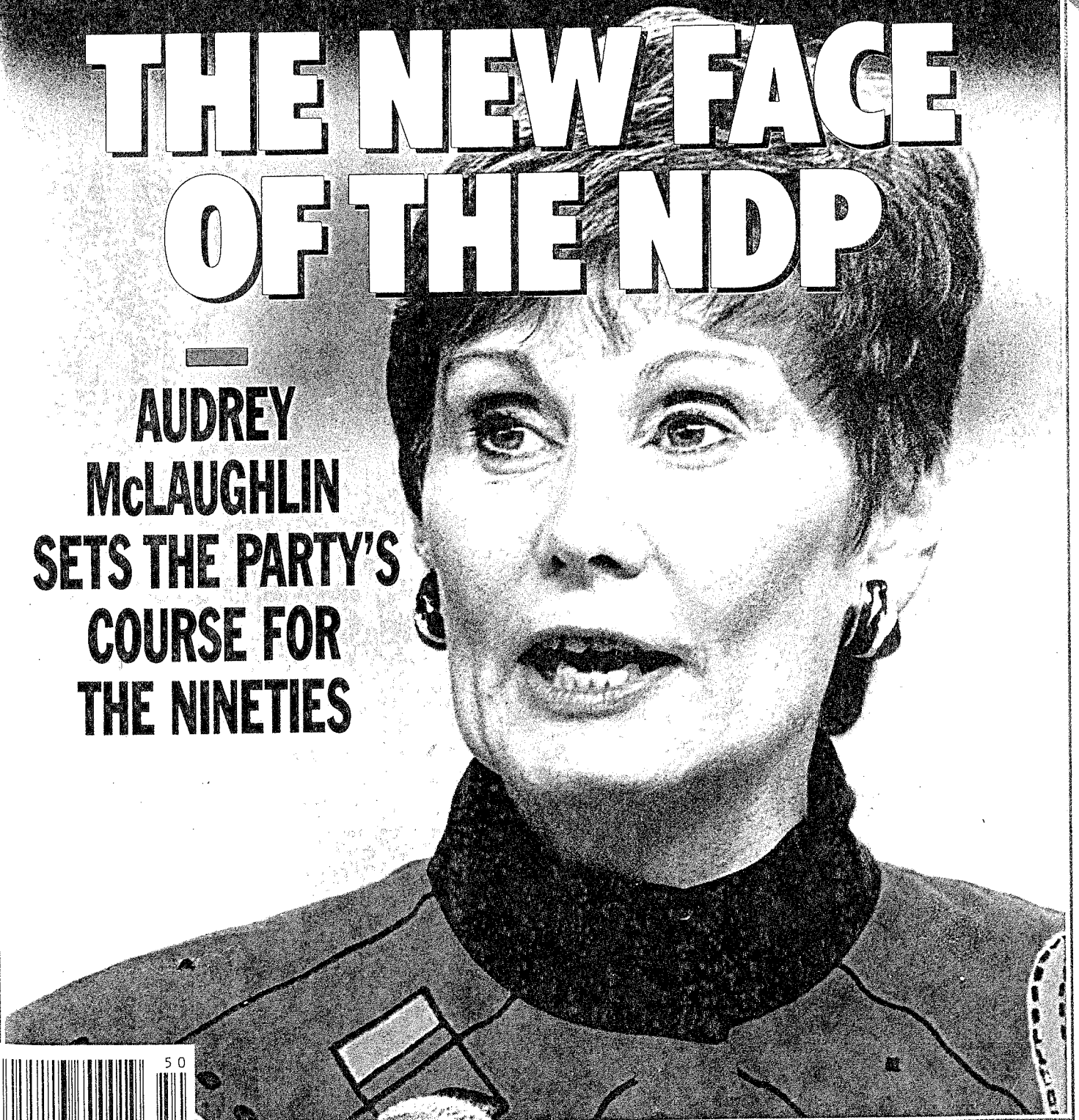


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The mystery of the Dead Sea Scrolls

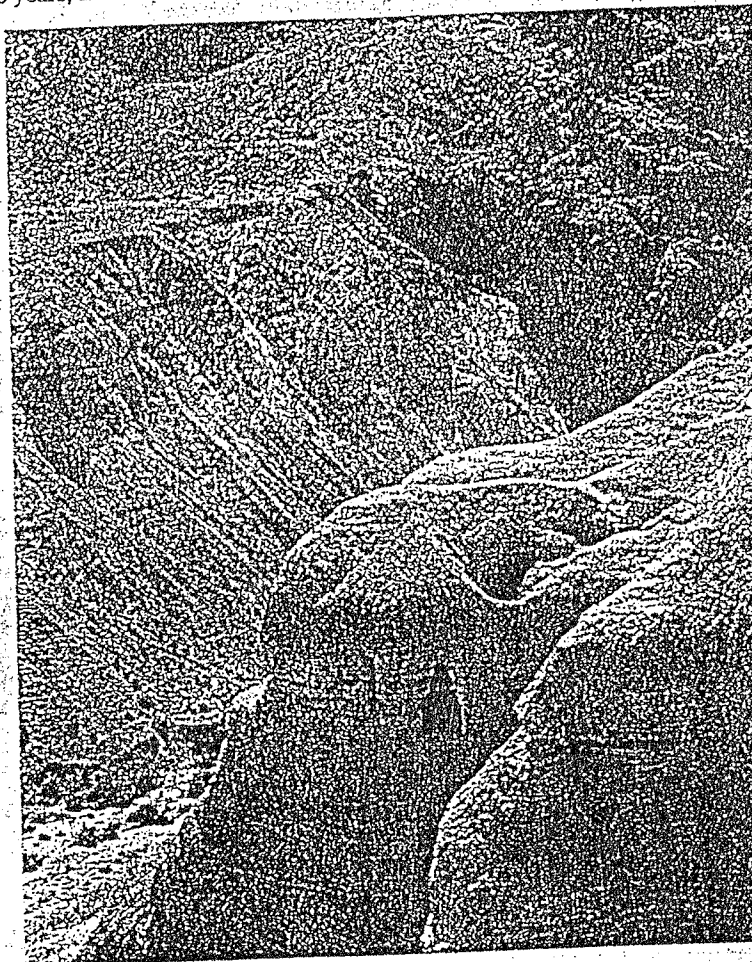
New theories emerge about the contents

In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd boy stumbled across one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the century. Concealed in a cave on the shores of the Dead Sea, about 25 km from Jerusalem, he found a collection of seven ancient leather and papyrus manuscripts. During the next 10 years, archaeologists and Bible scholars found thousands of fragments from at least 800 texts in nearby caves. Experts concluded that the scrolls, written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, were part of a huge Jewish library hidden from invading Romans around the time of Christ. Now, more than 40 years after the scrolls were discovered, a controversy has erupted over the fact that about half of the scrolls have not been published or even translated. Indeed, one scholar in California claims that the men in charge of the scrolls may be trying to hide the fact that some of them depict an early form of Christianity that was vindictive and vengeful.

Controversy over the unpublished documents has flared at a time when some scholars are questioning fundamental beliefs about the scrolls. For years, many scholars have said that the scrolls were probably the work of a small Jewish religious sect known as the Essenes. But now, academics like Norman Golb, a professor of Jewish history and civilization at the University of Chicago, express a different theory. Golb said that the scrolls may in fact represent the accumulated wisdom of a number of different streams of Judaism. As such, said Golb, they could give historians and theologians a new perspective on the influence of Judaism on early Christianity.

Because of the new theories about the scrolls, some academics say that it is all the

more important that all the scrolls be published. Said Magen Broshi, curator of the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, where the seven original scrolls are on display: "It's true that scholars have been dragging their feet for the past 40 years. It's an absolute scandal." Robert Eisenman, chairman of the department



Dead Sea cave where the scrolls were discovered: new controversy

of religious studies at California State University at Long Beach, told *Maclean's* that he believes the unpublished scrolls may describe an early form of Christianity that is at odds with the Christianity that he says was heavily influenced by St. Paul. Said Eisenman: "The scrolls believe in hating your enemies."

The man who leads the group of scholars in

charge of the scrolls rejects claims that his group is moving too slowly. "We're not running a railroad," said John Strugnell, a professor of Christian Origins at Harvard Divinity School and editor-in-chief of the scroll project. Many of the scrolls consist of blackened, moth-eaten fragments that must be painstakingly pieced together. Strugnell said that all of the scrolls should be published by the end of the century. He has rejected demands that his group release photographs of the unpublished scrolls to enable other scholars to examine them. Said Strugnell: "My problem is to get the scrolls published, not satisfy the vanities of particular scholars."

When the scrolls were first discovered in the caves at Qumran, the area was controlled by Jordan. Jordan's monarch, King Hussein, awarded exclusive rights to study the scrolls to a team of seven academics. After Qumran and other Jordanian territory fell into Israeli hands in 1967, the Israeli government maintained the group intact. Still, under pressure from prominent Bible scholars, Strugnell's team was enlarged in the early 1980s to about 20, and more graduate students were brought in to help.

Although they object to the delay in publishing the scrolls, most experts dismiss suggestions that anything is being hidden. Declared Hershel Shanks, editor of the Washington-based bimonthly *Biblical Archaeology Review*: "I object strenuously to the secrecy. We don't know what the scrolls contain because they won't let us see them. But I strongly believe that the scholars with the scrolls are honest, unbiased and conscientious, and would never have any part in suppressing material." Others say that Strugnell and his colleagues are deliberately delaying publication to keep control of an important scholarly field. Eisenman said that Strugnell and his team are deeply committed to the conviction that the scrolls are the work of the Essenes and now have an academic investment to protect. Dating roughly from the end of the second century BC to the first century AD, the scrolls published so far illuminate Jewish life up to the time of Jesus. Declared Rudolph Cohen, deputy director of the Rockefeller Museum in Jeru-

salem, where nearly all of the original fragments are kept in air-conditioned aluminum boxes: "The Dead Sea Scrolls provide a missing link between Christianity and Judaism. They help us understand how Jesus arrived at some of the teachings he preached." Still, the scrolls published so far mainly concern the pre-Christian period, including scrolls that proved

to be the earliest known copies of most of the Old Testament books. Experts say that it is sectarian material dealing with Jewish religious thought and the history of Christ's time that remain the most closely guarded.

Eisenman, for one, says that both the unpublished and published scrolls may reflect an early form of Christianity, before it was reshaped by St. Paul, a Jew who at one time fiercely opposed Christianity, but became its leading missionary. According to Eisenman, Paul, in his biblical writings, displays a familiarity with the documents that are now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. But, said Eisenman, Paul turned the content of the scrolls "on its ear and reversed it."

According to Eisenman, the published scrolls contain references to a "Paul-type character . . . who is called a liar and is the enemy of a righteous teacher" who may in fact represent James the Just, the head of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. He adds that the scrolls depict the two figures as representing opposing movements within the early Christian church. Said Eisenman: "The scrolls say that the Paul character does not follow the Jewish Law and that he rejects the law." In Eisenman's view, the James figure depicted in the scrolls represented ethical beliefs that are totally different from those of later Christianity. "The scrolls are vindictive," said Eisenman. "They are full of a jealous desire for vengeance. The scrolls are not interested in sinners. My theory is that we have a version of Christianity in the scrolls, Palestinian Christianity. The implications are explosive."

Eisenman added that Strugnell and his group may want to delay publication of the remaining scrolls because they think that there is a danger of the material being misunderstood. "There is a psychological urge to distance these materials as far as possible from the origins of Christianity," said Eisenman, "and that is one reason why they are going slow and we don't get to see [them]."

But the scholars in charge of the scrolls point out that the published documents referred to by Eisenman date from the first or second centuries before Christ and cannot refer to Christianity. Pressed by Eisenman, Strugnell's group agreed last October to submit the scrolls in question to carbon-14 testing to determine their age. The results are expected to be available early next year.

Meanwhile, the debate over the long-delayed publication of hundreds of scrolls is likely to continue. Eugene Ulrich, a professor of theology at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Ind., who is one of the scholars working on the scrolls, rejected claims that some documents are being suppressed because they might be embarrassing to Christians or Jews as "absolutely baseless." Still, as pressure builds for publication, curiosity about the content of the unpublished scrolls can only grow.

MARK NICHOLS with WILLIAM LOWTHER
in Washington