

TRANSCRIPT OF CONVERSATIONS ON THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

The school auditorium is packed to capacity. Hundreds have gathered to listen to the foremost authorities discuss issues of a biblical nature. For two hours four scholars have held forth their positions. By some unforeseen act, the recording equipment was non-functional for the first hour and a half. The following is a transcript of the statements by the faculty of the Dead Sea Scrolls Academy located on the Jordanian side near the Dead Sea. The four scholars are:

Orientalist: Sabra Goren, a trained Egyptologist but an Assyriologist by trade, is a master of Fertile Crescent materials; a revisionist professor whose restatements of biblical historical events are fresh and new.

Classicist: Herr Gunkel, a scholar whose acquaintance with Greco-Roman epic poetry and myth and Semitic literature is unparalleled, and whose specialization is also philological: tracing the historical contours of classical Indo-European word-stems.

Historian: Jack Beamer, an agnostic, with a newly minted doctorate from the Sorbonne, is on the fast track to writing on nearly every aspect of the Ancient Near East, and is one whose exacting love for ancient peoples and their histories crosses all Mediterranean terrains, pushing into Sanskrit territories.

Theologian: Johan Lundquist, is a Patristics scholar, Talmudist and Renaissance literature specialist and a believer that God's Words have been 'preserved' in Traditional Texts; his wide expansive explorations as an academic-researcher is tempered by his exposition of biblical texts amid other parish duties.

The moderator has been David Schmole, an avid fan of biblical studies and a distinguished emeritus professor of Old and New Testament studies.

This portion of the conversations picks up at the beginning segment of (what will be) a very heated discussion on the topic of The Dead Sea Scrolls.

D. Schmole: What are the Dead Sea Scrolls and is there any significance to them for today's bible student?

S. Goren: They are documents lately discovered in desert caves of the wilderness of the Dead Sea in about 1948. In 1947 a young Bedouin boy was looking for a lost goat in the desert and threw a rock into a cave. He heard a sound which led him to believe he had damaged something. He entered the cave and found small jars with scrolls wrapped in badly aged cloth. Later two men, Metropolitan Athanaius Yeshue Samuel and Father Butros Sowmy of St. Marks in Israel brought them to a man named John C. Trever for examination, and as the story continues, Trever then made a phone call to W.F. Albright, who, upon seeing the script dated them to about 100 BC in 20 minutes or less. The timing on how long it took him to date it varies according to who is telling the story, but it was in a very short period of time.

J. Beamer: The origins of the scrolls aroused the ire of many. Professor S. Zeitlin of Dropsie College led a small vanguard against any supposed early dating. He placed them in the medieval period or middle ages. Moreover the early opinions of the scrolls were that they were placed in these upward caves on the sides of the mountains by a sectarian group of religious men who lived in a kind of communal setting at Qumran. The early archaeologists assumed—since each of them were mostly Christian background—that these scrolls could shed new light on the New Testament world specifically, and open windows on Judaic ancient worlds in general. So there was a lot of Christian language adapted to

their origins. Personally I believe this had more to do with raising funds for the research than anything else.

H. Gunkel: The scrolls were evenly split between materials in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. All the Old Testament books or Hebrew Scriptures were represented except the book of Esther. This was of significance because our oldest Masoretic text dated to approximately 1100 AD. Now we had extant scraps which were 900 to 1200 years older. It stimulated a whole new era in Hebrew textual criticism. Even still, here we had these obviously Jewish documents being handled by eminent Christian scholars who controlled not only access to the scrolls but also the theories later arising from their discovery. It was a tense and very perplexing time. News notices went out everywhere but only a handful had seen them.

D. Schmole: You mentioned their use in textual criticism. By this you mean..?

H. Gunkel: Textual criticism (in any context) is patchwork duty. It is like plastering together material in order that some form of cohesiveness may result. Typically it consists of rightly determining the earliest reading of a particular text. One may need to harmonize variant words in differing MSS; in any case, a conclusion will result in restoring some form of sense to a text's strata. It may require an addition or deletion of a letter which might have been altered or changed during the process of transmission and/or preservation. One might even have to transpose some lines that appear out of sync or out of place in the context of a narrative.

A brief interruption at this point..

J. Lundquist: As the audience is well aware, this is where the point of departure for me in my own scholarship branches out. There are some historical-theological issues, which have never been resolved, controlling this whole academic thought process of Dead Sea Scroll research. First of all, no one has adequately established just who the authors of these texts are.

We are certain that in mainstream Judaism these texts differ widely from the Mishnaic and Talmudic citations of Hebrew Scriptures. And so, care should be taken in how subtle new theologies are introduced into the text. Albright's disciples carried forth his opinions in a systematic and professional, albeit, tyrannical manner (as described by some). Look how long it took for them to finally be published: more than five decades. The notion that they were Essene monks has never been adequately proven, yet this idea of a sectarian residence at Qumran has popularized the texts and given them a prominence, which in my opinion, is unduly deserved at this time. In fact, were it not for the Qumran-Essene theory, no person would use the DSS texts to emend or attempt to fix the Masoretic-traditional texts, which have a direct line of antiquity and continuity of more than 2000 years.

D. Schmole: For those in the audience, please, allow me to make a brief statement. Prof. Lundquist mentioned the Essenes. Some of you may wonder who they were. Historically, most of our info on them is traceable to one, Josephus. He was a Jewish man who wrote a number of long historical works. He lists a number of sects prominent in early and late Second Temple Judaism. This is a period we will date from BC 300 to AD 132. Some have averred that John the Baptist was Essenic because he dwelt in the deserts for a time. And the desert is where Josephus claims an esoteric group of men dwelt and they maintained practices that were exclusive from what later came to be known as Rabbinic Judaism.

S. Goren: Thank you Mr. Moderator. As you could hear from Johan's statement, this is a major battleground in the academy presently. The traditional elements of Judaism and Christianity are less interested in the plausible theories of scientific inquiry and are more interested in maintaining the status quo.

D. Schmole: Well, do you really believe this to be the case and is there any leeway in all this for a reorientation of positions?

S. Goren: It certainly sounds to me like the efforts of “science” are downplayed in order to buttress faith assumptions.

J. Lundquist: This is all too fascinating (*So looking at the audience he states*) My complaint in all this is that modern scholarship wants to be able to control how theologians read and interpret scripture. Archaeologists today take a skeptical approach to scripture’s veracity—even though in the past century they have historically conducted all Palestinian archaeology according to the place-names and story-texts of Scripture. This was always their starting point! So if we refuse their reconstructions they slander us as non-professional or un-critical. Yet they have no desire or inclination to “believe” historical events to be true—although they use them as guideposts. Thus they want us in the synagogue and church to allow them to inform us of what is true and false in our own liturgical texts.

It is an amazing act of arrogance carried forth annually in hundreds of publications. As for the leeway you mentioned, if there is any change, for some reason or another, it must always take place on our part because archaeologists claim *they* only go where the facts take them. This is partly true. Their interpretations of events guide their reconstructions and I really believe that some misreading is going on here. They said for years King David was not a literal figure. Then archaeologists began to find inscriptions and the like. Why can’t archaeologists move beyond the “doubting Thomas” form of archaeology which only believes what it sees? What if I had doubted the existence of Prof. Goren and issued papers concerning this disbelief of mine. I might have been able to make a fortune, that is, until he one day entered the room. Then I could have revised my whole thesis and gained a new crowd of friends.

The audience laughs, a few sporadic hand-claps can be heard.

J. Beamer: Let us now take this discussion in another direction. As a historian whose vocation is the study of ancient history I value human traditions. But, to blindly

follow a written text as if it is inerrant seems silly in these days when there is so much proof that some errors of fact are actually present in the biblical texts. Truthfully, it would be best to recognize one essential idea as one approaches scripture: it is accepted today to say that the bible no longer provides “secure foundations” for faith. Being agnostic this allows me and other historians to apply a close reading to a text in a thorough yet rigorous manner apart from the colored shades of religious bias. And in the end we hope to have provided a context for revisions of traditionally held precepts. It is not the custom of historians to offer value judgments on anyone’s beliefs but to merely transcribe them as they were acted upon in the past.

D. Schmole: Even I am not so sure that you, as an agnostic, can claim total objectivity while asserting, ‘believing adherents’ of a faith to be, as you say—“Blind” and reading it with “colored shades”.

J. Beamer: I might add that the best critical textbooks on the market today are written from an interdisciplinary approach. This stance removes the negative verbiage so often suffuse on the pages of the religious and it provides a new methodology for reading the texts in a sensitive way. Religious types tend to be bigoted and aggressive in their attacks. If we do not revise all history then we will continue in the rut dug out by historical religionists all over the world.

At this point there is a hush throughout the auditorium and a few on the front rows appear offended by Beamer’s statements. The notion that religious people perverted the facts of history and that non-religious people are the only ones who can set them right seems baffling.

H. Gunkel: Reading texts is a difficult task. And having listened to Prof. Beamer it ought to be apparent that he has brought as much baggage to his interpretations of history as the religious folks he claims are writing up facts unjustly. At rock bottom, we all write with an axe to grind--as we understand the text to be guiding us. Philology too is

historical in that we attempt to settle definitions diachronically or synchronically. Meanings tend to change through time. And we do want to be able to read the transitions. This is where the Dead Sea Scrolls are significant. We are able to compare some older texts with what has been traditionally received. In a scientific way it would be presumptuous to require or even expect Jewish or Christian believers in God to follow the presumptions of many in our field who possess no faith at all. It is true that our conclusions often guide the field but this is only because the opposition has not often taken up pen to wield it in such a way that spurious hypotheses can be withstood or overturned. The believing community must work to separate the wheat from the tares; to quote their own scriptures.

D. Schmole: Is this not difficult to do when nearly all universities employ professors who are genuinely liberal in their outlook and beliefs. How often do you meet a “literalist” in university circles these days?

J. Beamer: It is rare, and thankfully the day of religious control of the school programs is gone.

J. Lundquist: Yes, one philosophy has now been replaced by another. Still, this new humanistic agenda is secular, anti-God and extremely expensive to pay for. And it seems to put out a professional class that is indifferent to all historical truths.

S. Goren: Archeologically, we try to be respectable. Our fundamental problem is that our excavations lead us to publish preliminary reports which may not only be wrong but may change with the next assessment of a pot or interior wall. Gaining a consensus is difficult nowadays when so many departments of science are involved with one dig. Sure I am an Orientalist and am familiar with multiple Near East languages, but today’s scholar is also a specialist in his field and may be equally strong in an adjacent field of mine. As an example, let me cite the on-going controversy over the origins of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It used to be taken for granted that the authors of the scrolls were an Essene sect who literally

resided in Qumran and used the facility for religious purposes. Even today the film shown at the Dead Sea Scrolls Museum site in Israel still follows this line of thought.

But in recent years more and more voices have been raised against this theory of origin. Norman Golb began sounding the alarm decades ago. His 1995 book--*Who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls*, has led many to shift gears and rethink some of these traditionally guarded beliefs. Also the archaeologist, Y. Magen—of the Israeli Antiquity Authorities, published a new excavation report stating that there was no way possible that Qumran was ever inhabited by a group of religious Essenes as described by the traditional Qumranologists. Like Golb, he has embraced the idea that they are texts from Jerusalem, placed there for safekeeping during the time of the Roman Wars of the first century AD. The text themselves may be older but the timing of their placement in the Qumran caves is a highly disputed topic.

H. Gunkel: We still are debating the use of the Hebrew, “Unity” or “Yahad”--<y-h-d>. The locution comes up in only a few of the Hebrew texts but some pretty hefty tomes contain article after article on it when it may or may not be the proper ascription for any particular group of people. So if I might return to a statement made by Beamer earlier, he said that “it is not the custom for historians to make value judgments”. This, itself is a misreading of history and if I applied it to my philological work in the Dead sea Scrolls I would only be a collector of statistics and not true to the work of defining past meanings. Whether one reads Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy Polybius or Tacitus: all historians are unraveling historical events from a particular perspective. Think about it, the author chooses which events he wants to include as worthy of mentioning in his narrative.

To imply that someone does not offer any “value judgments” is a sleight of the hand game. It might fool the novice, but the advanced participant in historical adventures will not fall for the same literary tricks over and over again. We must make

the Dead Sea Scrolls accessible to a wide readership, while at the same time, rendering our own conclusions for the reader-scholar to judge for himself. Anything less than that is beneath the dignity of scholarship. This is why I contend the Hebrew Text along with an accompanying translation should always be issued. Also, the critical editions of the Dead Sea Scrolls should have also consisted of editors who did not support the traditional theories, that is, if it wanted to truly be critical.

D. Schmole: Are we to assume that there is a degree of deficiency in the critically published Dead Sea Scroll volumes?

J. Lundquist: There are varying degrees of deficiency in any first edition of printed texts presented to scholars and laymen. The idea is to put forward the research and allow other eyes an opportunity to view; they may be able to offer advice and admonition for future editions. It is doubtful, in my opinion; the DSS problem will be resolved anytime soon. First of all, Rabbinical and Patristic scholars are not able to display evidences that these DSS texts were in use at all. The caves could have been Genizahs for all anyone knows. The arguments are swinging back and forth all over the place. I am not positing a new theory for geniza caves, only that the subject is still too unstable. For me, I believe the new critical editions of the DSS are driven by agendas: offering the view, Essenes lived together like monks and composed these texts.

J. Beamer: This may be the only place Johan and I find common ground. The ancient near East is huge and typological studies are vastly overlooked, except in this genre of DSS materials. They have been compared to and contrasted with the Masoretic texts for so long that a whole department has developed. And most believe their work to be scientific even though the basic tests of provenance have never been established. One of my specialist professors at the Sorbonne found it curious that staff scholars of the DSS, publishing supposedly “critical” texts would be so resistant to criticisms.

Motioning to the speaker in order to interrupt..

D. Schmole: It looks as though we must end here. We have simply run out of time. Will the audience please give our panelists a round of applause please?

As loud and excited applause bursts forth in the auditorium, one can only surmise that many questions still remain unanswered for many of the listeners. As each man descends the stairway from the platform to the audience floor, each is surrounded by throngs of persons who yet have more questions, and others, who now have taken sides on the issue of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Settling biblical text riddles has never been an easy matter. Most topics of a critical nature involve details of scholarship far out-of-bounds of the layman's traditional sphere of understanding. But the panelists sought to publicize some issues which have alarmed not a few persons; to the point that the bulk of publications issued from publishing houses are believed by a select few to be antiquated at the date of publishing. Battle lines are drawn, more skirmishes will follow but who will be in the right in the end?

Nebraska

Pastor Darrell Sutton