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Dead Sea Scrolls (3 books)

Eileen M. Schuller

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Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls

Hershel Shanks, editor

New York: Random House, 1992

Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls

James H. Charlesworth, editor

Anchor Reference Bible Library Series

New York: Doubleday, 1992

Responses to 101 Questions on the Dead Sea Scrolls

Joseph A. Fitzmyer

New York: Paulist Press, 1992

Now some forty-five years after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is still considerable interest in these ancient texts. In the last four or five years, there has been a rash of articles in the popular media—T.V., radio, church periodicals, *New York Times*, *National Enquirer*—often focusing on the most sensational ideas or theories. At the other end of the spectrum, there is an ongoing stream of very technical writing, in scholarly journals such as *Revue de Qumran* and in collections of papers from major international Qumran conferences. But what has been lacking are works of substance, geared to the general reader, which can treat the issues with the depth and subtlety which they deserve. Three recent books attempt, each in its own way, to fill that gap.

The subtitle, *A Reader from the Biblical Archaeology Review*, clearly acknowledges that our first book *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls* is not new material but rather reprints of articles from *Biblical Archaeology Review* and *Bible Review* with a brief overview article by Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*. As anyone familiar with these magazines will know, the articles are quite short (about 15 pages) and eminently readable; some of the fine photographs from *BAR* have been included, though unfortunately only in black and white.

The articles have obviously been selected so as to cover basic topics and provide a survey of the field as a whole, though as a series of independent articles, they do not provide a carefully planned, logical introduction. However, most major topics are covered in some way: an article by Harry Thomas Frank provides some human-interest details on the discovery of the scrolls; Frank Moore Cross gives a concise summary of the “classical Maccabean” theory of the origin and history of the group/community which produced the scrolls; Lawrence Schiffman presents his proposal for a “Sadducean origins of the Scrolls”, and James VanderKam challenges this proposal and offers a defense of the traditional identification of the authors

with the Essenes. Other theories about the nature and origin of the group producing the scrolls (e.g., a community in Babylon as early as the sixth century, or in Palestine in the third century) are introduced, but only very briefly. Two articles by Frank Moore Cross explain in a clear and precise manner his theories on how the text of the books of the Bible were transmitted down to us. One section of four essays explores the longest and most recent full scroll to be published, the Temple Scroll, again offering competing theories about how this document might be understood. The section on the Dead Sea Scrolls and Christianity includes a fine survey essay by James VanderKam which summarizes much of the research of the last forty years. Otto Betz gives a carefully nuanced answer to the question "Was John the Baptist an Essene?": his essay helps the reader to understand the basic issues which make such a question so difficult to answer.

For the most part, the choice of essays is perspicacious. I was especially pleased to see the article by the German scholar, Hartmut Stegemann, who has done pioneering work on developing methods for reconstructing the fragmented pieces into columns and whole manuscripts, insomuch as that is possible. The final group of essays on the controversy about the publication of the scrolls (specifically issues around John Strugnell and the charge of Vatican suppression) will soon be only time-pieces. Yet, when read as a whole, the book gives a good sense of current issues in Dead Sea Scrolls scholarship.

Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls is a book of twelve essays and, as the title indicates, is focused more specifically on the Scrolls and Jesus and early Christianity. Typical of the enthusiastic and somewhat hyperbolic style which characterizes much of Charlesworth's introduction is his claim: "these writings have revolutionized our understanding of Jesus' time, and—to a significant degree—of Jesus himself."

Charlesworth is writing, both explicitly and implicitly, against the background of recent media discussion, and some of the more extreme claims to "new interpretations" of the scrolls. Although he does not name names, one cannot but see the figures of Barbara Thiering and Robert Eisenman lurking in the shadows. Against this background, he wants to articulate "The Consensus", a list of statements with which, he claims, all major scholars from a long list of universities and institutions throughout the world would agree. The problem with his sixteen consensus points is that some would probably capture that wide agreement (e.g. that "the scrolls were authored by Jews and none has been edited by a Christian scribe", the languages of the scrolls, their dating on basis of paleography and Carbon 14 tests, that "none... refer to Jesus and they do not mention any follower of Jesus"). Other points, however, cannot claim such wide agreement today (e.g., the dating of the Qumran community to mid-second century BCE; Charlesworth's reconstruction of the history of the community and what we can know about the figure, Teacher of Righteousness; his claim that the Qumran covenantors did not marry). All of these are much more widely debated today than Charlesworth's consensus-model would suggest.

Where he does hint that there is some rethinking going on, his comments are so vague as to be of little help to the general reader (xxxvii, n. 14 "The reader deserves to know that some excellent scholars are questioning the attribution of Essene to Qumran.").

In a long essay (74 pages with 343 footnotes) Charlesworth attempts to lay out the Major Similarities and Major Differences between Jesus and the Essenes. Certainly there is a wealth of information here and the general reader will be able to get a sense of the issues, but Charlesworth sketches with a very broad brush, almost to the point of caricature. Take just one example of an area in which I have been working recently: women. Charlesworth says that "Jesus included women in his group, considered them his friends, taught them scripture"—every phrase of that statement is problematic and his comment that similar views are held by scholars such as B. Witherington and E. Schüssler Fiorenza is at best misleading to readers who may not realize that these two scholars hold very dissimilar views on Jesus' relationship with women. In reading this section, I found myself repeatedly circling statements where Charlesworth claims he "knows" with certainty.

The other essays in this volume are for the most part more specific in topic. Some, though fascinating in and of themselves, are only marginally related to the scrolls (e.g. Joe Zias and J. Charlesworth on Crucifixion; Alan Segal on Angelic Mediator Figures). A few of the essays have been published elsewhere in very similar form (e.g. Morton Smith "Two Ascended to Heaven—Jesus and the Author of 4Q491). Some present views which are considerably more controversial and speculative than the general reader might realize (e.g. Rainer Riesner, "Jesus, the Primitive Community and the Essene Quarter of Jerusalem" which draws extensively on the work of B. Pixner to situate an Essene settlement in Jerusalem). Many of these essays need to be read as scholarly, often preliminary, explorations of specific topics rather than any type of consensus or general introduction.

The final book reviewed is Joseph Fitzmyer's *Responses to 101 Questions on the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Fitzmyer has been involved with the scrolls since his early years as a student in Jerusalem when he worked on preparing the first hand-written concordance of Cave 4 texts; at present he is assigned the first edition of the Hebrew and Aramaic fragments of the book of Tobit. Although the *101 Questions* format and the upside down Hebrew scroll on the cover might not initially inspire confidence, this is both a scholarly and a popular work. Given the limitations of the question-answer approach, the basic plan of the book is clear and comprehensive. Systematically it works through questions about the discovery of the scrolls, the archaeology of the site, the contents of the most significant scrolls, the distinctive beliefs and practices of the community, the relationship with and influence on the New Testament, and recent controversies about publication and accessibility. With the help of the topical index and the index of modern authors it is possible to find where specific issues are treated quite easily. The book is up-to-date until approximately mid-1992. In a single book of 200 pages

many issues must necessarily be treated very briefly and superficially, but I was repeatedly surprised at how much Fitzmyer does manage to say on a given question in a very short space. On controversial issues he tends to adopt a middle-of-the-road approach but gives enough information to make the reader aware of alternative views (e.g. on marriage, the dating of the site). As a one-volume introduction to the scrolls for the general reader and even for those with some background, this is, in many ways, our best and most affordable resource to date.

Eileen Schuller
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario

Writings from Ancient Israel

Klass A.D. Smelik

Translated by G.I. Davies

Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991

In his preface (vii–ix), the author proposes to emphasize the historical importance of discoveries relating to texts rather than a focus on epigraphy, as well as giving literal translations to the Hebrew. Chapter 1 contains a number of points: Hebrew writings and language and other matters and relates these to Israel's history, sociology, economics, and religious life. The chapter deals with the history of writing from 3,000 BCE and onward. The author describes the Sumerian language and Cuneiform and their spread to Syria-Palestine. Smelik refers, in one instance, to the Tell El Amarna Letters, the letter from Abdu-Kheba of Jerusalem addressed to Akhenaten. This chapter also treats the Ugaritic alphabet where one Cuneiform sign relates to one alphabet letter (a notable feature in the development of the alphabet). However, it was the proto-Canaanite alphabet that became the forerunner of the Hebrew language.

Ten chapters (18–167) form the body of the book. While each chapter is rich with information, a few examples are noted here. The Mesha Stele (ch. 3) is valuable among other things for the insights it provides on relations between Moab and Israel. The Samaritan Ostraca (ch. 4) are dated to the reign of Joash and Jeroboam II, 794–793 and 773. But they also remind us of Omri (who founded the capital city) and wider backgrounds to Israel's history. The Lachish Ostraca (ch. 9) reflect tensions of the impending Babylonian invasion of the city. The letters are pleas for help. The text about Balaam, Son of Beor (ch. 6), found on pieces of lime plaster at Deir Alla, 1967, is a fascinating discovery. Some connection with the Balaam of Numbers 22–24 suggests the Israelite story used Balaam to defend Israel against hostile neighbors on the east and south. This may date Numbers