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ON THE CURRENT EXHIBIT OF DEAD SEA SCROLLS AT THE MILWAUKEE PUBLIC MUSEUM

Late in January of this year, the Milwaukee Public Museum inaugurated its own exhibit of the Dead Sea Scrolls with an interesting nuance: the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue would have as their concern not only the Scrolls themselves, but also Biblical writings as such plus ancient archaeological artifacts, the full title of the exhibit and its accompanying catalogue being *Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible*, with the subtitle *Ancient Artifacts – Timeless Treasures*.

As the catalogue's introduction makes clear, the over 160 *artifacts* on display have been mostly borrowed from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, while the *Scroll fragments* presented are from collections housed outside of Israel proper, including locations in Jordan, France, and the United States. (In contrast to previous American Scroll exhibits, holdings of the Israel Antiquities Authority are not represented in this exhibit.) The catalogue itself does not describe most of the individual artifacts but, in keeping with the main theme which it heralds, does offer descriptions and photographic images of the exhibit's written texts.

One group of these writings includes small pieces of Biblical manuscripts originally found in Qumran Cave One and containing no extraneous embellishments, but also fragments of several other scriptural texts supplemented by *commentaries* of anonymous Jewish interpreters who were active during the age that preceded the hiding of the Scrolls in the caves. It is at this point that the text-descriptions show promise of fulfilling the expectation, inherent in the catalogue's preface, that through the exhibit, "one can experience what life was like in the Holy Land during a pivotal period in the development of Judaism and the birth of Christianity...."

To the extent that this experience should include a description of what the *manuscripts* actually say that might give rise to a better understanding of the thought, values and beliefs of the people who composed and originally possessed the Scrolls, it is as a rule the non-Biblical scroll texts that are best suited to cast new light on this subject — rather than the Biblical ones that, with the exception of occasional variant readings in the manuscripts, have been known and studied through the ages.

As it happens, however, the fragments of commentaries presented in the catalogue are only those initially found in Cave One and published already in 1955. (The many Cave 4 commentary fragments are in the care of the Israel Antiquities Authority and were thus not included in this exhibit.) Of the very fragmentary commentary on **Micah** (the first item discussed), the catalogue correctly states that it contains references to a

-*The introduction to the catalogue indicates that the manuscript selections and explanations thereof were undertaken by Dr. Weston Fields of the Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation.

“Teacher of Righteousness” and a “Spreader of Lies” in “the context of the Community which produced the commentary,” but then enigmatically adds that this is “*possibly the community at Qumran*” (my italics).

Earlier exhibitions and their appended catalogues had more baldly stated that this and the other Qumran Biblical commentary fragments were assuredly sectarian writings specifically composed and/or harbored by a religious group living at Khirbet Qumran. This is however made into a mere possibility in the present catalogue — and yet its author refrains from *discussing other possibilities*. The catalogue never acknowledges that opponents of the Qumran-sectarian theory adduce evidence that during the Roman siege of 70 A.D. scrolls were brought from Jerusalem directly to the Judaean Wilderness caves, and also point out that to this date material evidence showing specific Essene or other sectarian communal habitation of Kh. Qumran has never been demonstrated.

The brief descriptions of fragments of this and other Qumran Biblical commentaries which follow point to similar or analogous problems in the construction and message of this catalogue. Further regarding the Micah commentary, for example, the catalogue interprets some of its partially extant consonants to mean that “The teacher [of righteousness] will be saved on the day of judgment in contrast to those who follow the “Spouter of Lies”..... Here the actual manuscript fragments are so damaged that the proposed interpretation relies more on one’s supplying missing words than on those that have survived. (For example, the word meaning “day” is legible, but “judgment” was entirely supplied by the original 1955 editor; the expression “teacher of righteousness” is there mostly by conjecture, and so on with the majority of the words supplied; compare the photographs of these portions of the text in Barthelemy and Milik, *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert I*, Oxford 1955, plate XV, 14, fragment 10).

Then again, while the few fragments of the **Zephaniah** commentary do preserve some lines of the portentous warning of this prophet and his interpreter, the catalogue turns this into the most dire of predictions, namely that the ancient commentator “understands the divine anger spoken of there to be directed against the people of Judah” [sic.] What is actually preserved are only small pieces of three lines which include the two Hebrew words that in translation are “The Land of Judaea,” — the original editor having *conjectured* the prior missing words as “*upon all the inhabitants of.*” The present catalogue dutifully follows that half-century-old conjecture, without cautioning readers to the effect that a passage in the 4Q commentary on Psalms, published many years later, contains a line referring to the “*despoilers of the covenant who are within the house of Judea*” — that is, some among others, rather than the Judaeans in their entirety.

And when the author follows this by explaining that “both [the Scroll commentaries on] Micah and Zephaniah use the paleo-Hebrew (archaic) script for the proper name of God (Yahweh, Jehovah) to *remind readers that it is not to be pronounced*” (my italics), he enters upon an exegetical quicksand worth quickly fleeing from. The most ancient sources on this subject offer no evidence that scribes of this and other Dead Sea Scrolls preserved the Tetragrammaton in paleo-Hebrew script for the

reason given by the author; the Hebrew Biblical text (Ex.XX.7) only cautioned against *taking up* that name *lashav*, i.e. in vain or for naught. The writing of this four-consonant name YHWH in archaic Hebrew script may surely be recognized as an example of *ancient scribal pietism* of the Intertestamental period; using the archaic form may also possibly have served as a reminder to ancient readers of the relevant Biblical passage to take special care in inscribing it. One mainly finds that aspect of pietism extended to the concept of *oral* expression in Tannaitic and post-Tannaitic times (viz., early 2nd century A.D. onward) and more generally in medieval and modern orthodox circles emphasizing aspects of religious fervor and mysticism.

The catalogue author's treatment of the commentary on **Psalm 68** reveals yet other problems. Mentioning again the "scrolls community" and its putative enemies, he indicates that this text pertains particularly "to the battle between the Teacher of Righteousness and the Wicked Priest," and that it contains a specific reference to the (wicked) Kittim. In the photograph of the actual fragment as shown in the original 1955 publication, however (plate XV, 16, no. 9), there is no mention at all either of the Teacher of Righteousness or the Wicked Priest (cf. also the printed text *ibid.*, pp. 81-82). In addition, the single word which the original editor read as *Kittim* is missing an initial consonant; the word could just as well be construed as [P]tayyim, "*simple ones*," constituting an allusion not to the Romans but to the "*simple ones* of Judah, doers of the Law" mentioned elsewhere in the Scroll commentaries themselves.

With respect to the rendering of a passage in Psalm 68.31, the words "*You have rebuked the swamp beast, the herd of bulls, the gentle heifers; he tramples on bars of silver*" are treated in the catalogue as *part of the commentator's own interpretation*, whereas in fact they are part of the Biblical passage itself.

In its presentation of the two Scroll fragments of the Book of Daniel now possessed by the Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church for the Eastern USA, the catalogue states that the text on display "is one of few passages in the Old Testament ... in Aramaic." Yet only portions of the last four lines of the second part of the text are in Aramaic, most of the extant text shown in the catalogue being in Hebrew, as is the case with the great majority of the Scrolls in general.

The author of the catalogue thereafter asserts that the sense of the **Commentary on Isaiah** fragments on display should be understood in light of the fact that "Like other Jewish communities at the time, the scrolls community interpreted the Bible in light of their own time and circumstances." However, while time and circumstances certainly influenced the ancient interpreters, the idea that all of the Scrolls were the writings of a single "community" had its genesis only with the start of the discoveries in the Judean Wilderness, when most of the Scrolls were still unknown. Analysis of the texts following publication of virtually all of the approximately 800 scrolls in recent years has made it abundantly clear that they cannot by any means all be attributed to a single spiritual group of authors or interpreters, but rather reflect varying trends of thought among the Jews of Intertestamental times. The Yahad (= Unity) group, responsible for some of the writings (and which are the ones mainly featured in the Milwaukee catalogue) certainly

deserve the close attention of scholars, but the Scrolls attributable to this particular brotherhood group contain no lines whatever which could reasonably be construed as encouraging them to leave their homes so as to live as pietists in the desert.

Another text on display consists of two (from amongst many) fragments of a scroll of the **Book of Exodus** (chaps. 6-37) in the possession of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. The catalogue indicates that the expanded version of Exodus in this scroll is closely similar to that preserved by the Samaritans. This is certainly interesting information, particularly in view of the fact that this scroll has until now been seen by relatively few people; an additional feature is its use of palaeo-Hebrew script throughout the entire text. The editor then goes on to say, however, that peculiarities in the nature of the script, the use of palaeo-Hebrew, the vertical and horizontal rulings of the text, and the way the text has been prepared “have led scholars” —he does not tell us how many or who they are — “to believe that the document may have been copied locally at Qumran rather than imported from elsewhere.”

Yet no material evidence has in the past been uncovered either to prove that intensive writing and/or copying of the Scrolls ever took place at Kh. Qumran, or that any of the Scrolls were imported to the Kh. Qumran site before being sequestered in the 11 caves where they were later discovered. The present catalogue likewise adduces no proof for either of these ideas. The writer’s casually introduced and arbitrary assertion is vaguely reminiscent of that other claim of some traditional Qumranologists to the effect that the unusual spellings discernible in various Scrolls in some way prove that they were composed or copied at Kh. Qumran —a claim likewise unsupported by material evidence and which disregards the widespread phenomenon of orthographic variation in the texts of various languages before the age of dictionaries. The writer also fails to state that scholars other than those to whom he cryptically alludes do not necessarily hold such beliefs.

Still more enigmatic is the catalogue’s juxtaposition of the idea of Scrolls ostensibly been copied “at Qumran” with those that supposedly came from a mysterious “elsewhere.”

Both at this point, as earlier on in the catalogue, the author had the opportunity to indicate to his readers, in consonance with ordinary standards of transparency expected of public museums, that various scholars in this country and abroad can find no material evidence that would warrant their acquiescence in these entirely rhetorical arguments to which he would appear to be deeply attached. The writer clearly could and should have pointed out to possibly unsuspecting museum visitors who may now be studying this catalogue that his suggestion of monk-like scriptorium activity at Kh. Qumran has never been actually demonstrated — and that those scholars who oppose this idea reject it on the basis of countervailing indications explained in their writings, while reasonably pointing to Jerusalem as the original home of the Scrolls. Surely there must be some way that balance and academic fairness might be achieved in exhibits of the Scrolls, in consonance with the basic principle of comity encouraged by museum associations.

This latter thought is encouraged all the more by the description of still another manuscript featured in the catalogue — namely the Copper Scroll, of which the Milwaukee Public Museum received a portion from Amman for display at the current exhibit. The catalogue is correct in stating that this scroll was cut open in 1955, but the author refrains from indicating that Pere de Vaux, after having been apprised of its contents, became vexed to the point of sending telegrams to learned societies of Paris and London declaring it to be the forgery of a crazed Essene (see the details in my *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls*, pp. 120 ff.).

This scroll carefully describes places of sequestration of scrolls and of a large number of precious items which often indicate, by the specific nomenclature given in the manuscript, their provenience in the Jerusalem Temple. In the manuscript, however, they are mostly described as having been sequestered in hiding-places in the general region of the caves where the Scrolls were found. The demonstrable link with Jerusalem Temple treasures plus the description of their subsequent concealment in the that same northern Judaeian Wilderness area constituted direct evidence against Pere de Vaux's theory of Essenes at Qumran, by contrast indicating the removal both of pecuniary treasures and scrolls from Jerusalem to the same general area where scrolls were discovered in the eleven caves. Despite Père de Vaux's ad hominem assertion, he never offered a single empirical proof for his claim of forgery with respect either to the wording of the text or to its use of copper to preserve the recorded inventory.

Several years ago the traditional Qumranologist Père Emile Puech of Paris, apparently recognizing Père de Vaux's dilemma, sought to resolve it by publishing a new edition of the text in which he claimed that the treasures were actually those possessed by the putative *Essenes of Qumran*. This effort would of course protect Père de Vaux's original Qumran-Essene theory, were there any actual *proof* that a sect both lived there and in addition actually possessed great wealth in their desert abode — characteristics which directly clash, however, both with Josephus's description of wealth-eschewing Essenes living in their various Judaeian towns, and with Pliny the Elder's description of refugee Essenes living above En-Gedi. In effect, Puech glossed over de Vaux's dilemma by implicitly relying on the circular argument that the Copper Scroll was written at Kh. Qumran because that is where the Scrolls came from, while Kh. Qumran was understandable as the home of the Scrolls altogether because the wealth implied by the Copper Scroll evoked an aura of prosperity at Qumran justifying the concept of a sect actually living there.

In contrast to Puech, many scholars would now have to admit that growing evidence points to Jerusalem as the original home of the Scrolls and — in consonance with Josephus's description — to the flight of the city's refugees, by way of its underground passages, towards Machaerus and Masada. These elements ineluctably link up with the written testimony that scrolls and treasures were hidden in caves and other hiding-places of that same region. While there is no actual written testimony that the hiding was done by those refugees, that is a matter of common sense validated by Josephus's detailed description of Jerusalem under siege in 70 A.D. The sequestering of

their possessions emerges as a far more direct and historically justifiable understanding of the events than the obviously forced explanation of Père Puech.

What is fundamentally at fault with the description in the current catalogue is some acknowledgement of the opposite position regarding the scroll's authenticity now espoused by various scholars, namely that its origin may be traced to the Jerusalem priesthood charged with the responsibility of guarding the Temple treasury. This is the one single view consonant with historical testimony and with the nomenclature of the vessels described in the Copper Scroll itself. The author of the catalogue, however, does not appear to wish to divulge it. Instead, he paradoxically presents himself here not as one filling an objective curatorial role, but rather as the champion of a particularly difficult interpretation of the Copper Scroll's origin, thus disregarding the ethical imperative of "reflecting different views striking a balance" as emphasized, for example, by the well-known Museums Association Code of Ethics. Instead of serving as the spokesman for Père Puech, he could far more appropriately have handled the ethical problem by stating the two fundamentally opposing views in an objective and balanced manner.

Given the totality of examples addressed above, it is quite clear that the catalogue of the Scrolls exhibit now taking place in Milwaukee represents the current debate over the meaning and significance of the Scrolls in such a way as to apparently encourage readers, subtly or otherwise, to incline towards acquiescence in the believability of the original Qumran-Sectarian theory — however much that theory is now being challenged by reputable scholars who, increasingly, treat those texts within the parameters of historical events taking place in Palestine during late Second Temple times.

It is thus hardly possible to agree with the statement of the catalogue's preface asserting that, by means of the exhibit, "one can experience what life was like in the Holy Land during a pivotal period..." Yet more deeply to be pondered is the additional statement made there, that through seeing "actual documents of the time, visitors will come to appreciate how the words of the Bible have been transmitted over centuries, cultures, and various languages to people today who are reading, writing and believing the same stories and sacred expressions as 2,000 years ago." There will be some who, while appreciating the interesting implements and other artifacts on display, might find themselves more inclined to conclude that the written texts, in their present curatorial treatment in Milwaukee, unfortunately tell us virtually nothing about the life, thought and experience of the Palestinian Jews either before or during the time that the Scrolls were being composed and eventually hidden away.*

***The catalogue also appends the translations of sundry Scroll passages and quotations from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and related literature, some of them as headlines in large bold script. In the *Revised English Bible* (Oxford and Cambridge, 1989), certain of these passages are translated as follows:**

(Ex. 32.15) Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands.

(Deuteronomy 8.19) ...I give you a solemn warning this day that you will certainly be destroyed.

(Isaiah 5.11) Woe betide those who rise early in the morning to go in pursuit of drink, who sit late into the night inflamed with wine.

(Gospel of Luke 6.9) ...I put this question to you: is it permitted to do good or to do evil on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?

(Gospel of Matthew 26.26) Take this and eat; this is my body.

(Romans 13.8) He who loves his neighbour has met every requirement of the law.

(The translations used in the current Milwaukee exhibition are those of the NIV [=New International Version], published by Zondervan of Grand Rapids. Mich.

http://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/milwaukee_dss_exhibit_2010.pdf