

**Recap of “Qumran and Biblical Interpretation” Conference  
Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary  
Cordova, Tennessee; Thursday April 23, 2009**

The Cordova conference is where I first made available copies of my *Jesus the Wicked Priest* summary to the general public and first presented my petition for the new SBL section “The Dead Sea Scrolls and Early Christianity.” It was also my first face-to-face meeting with internationally prominent DSS scholars: Tov, Shiffman, VanderKam and Flint.

Here is my recap of the conference and suggestions for further study for myself and other scholars. A schedule of the presenters and their papers is found at the end of this recap for follow up.

1. VanderKam’s paper the first day, “Eschatology in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” was closely related to my research. I will email him to see if he plans to publish this paper, and if not I’ll ask him if I can get a copy of it. VanderKam explained that, in his view, the eschatology found in the DSS was intensely nationalistic and militant. The Qumran community basically sought to bring in a new age of perfect submission to God through ethnic cleansing. VanderKam also presented the consensus view that the Qumran community expected two messianic figures: the Messiah of Israel would be king but would defer all spiritual authority to the priestly leader of the community, the Messiah of Aaron. (Note: this is essentially the same system that once governed Tibetan Buddhism; since the death of his regent the exiled Dalai Lama has now assumed both roles.) VanderKam also mentioned the DSS mention a “prophet,” whom scholars generally believe to have been a separate figure from the two other Messiahs.

In JTWP, I develop arguments that the “prophet” was John the Baptist; the Messiah of Aaron was the Teacher of Righteousness whom I believe to be Simeon, former High Priest; and the Messiah of Israel was Jesus. At least this was the original plan: when Jesus broke from the Essenes, he and the early Christians rejected the Teacher’s authority, and the Essenes thereafter referred to Jesus as a “Wicked Priest.”

2. Kilpatrick’s paper later that day, “The Messiah and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” pointed out that early Christians united the priest and king messianic figures into a single Messiah, like unto the priest/king Melchisadek discussed in the NT’s letter to the Hebrews. I allude to this in my book JTWP (but now realize I need to develop it more) that this is likely the explanation for the sobriquet “Wicked Priest.” Jesus was not a Levite, therefore when he decided to combine the two messianic roles unto himself, taking on the role of priest and king, the Essenes would’ve seen him as an illegitimate priest. I also argue in my book that the primary reason Jesus broke from the Essenes was their nationalism and militancy: Jesus taught universal love and nonviolence (see my Q and A with VanderKam below).

3. Written questions were collected for the panel discussion that evening. The conference was running a little late so the panel discussion was cut short. We had time for only one question and the directors chose mine. They read VanderKam my question. I'm paraphrasing this exchange from memory (I think the panel discussion was taped for future reference), but this was the gist of it:

Q: John H. Yoder, who also taught at Notre Dame, believed Jesus understood himself to have a universal messianic mission, which is, by definition, a pacifist mission. Jesus believed himself to be the Suffering Servant of 2nd Isaiah. Would you say that Yoder's view of Jesus was diametrically opposed to the militant and nationalist eschatology found in the DSS?

A: There have been some pacifist traditions within Christianity, but I think early Christians envisioned an eschatological war, also. I think Jesus's eschatology and that of the DSS were somewhat similar.

What's interesting about VanderKam's response is that he didn't want to compare DSS eschatology with Yoder's view of Jesus; he rejected Yoder and compared DSS eschatology with his own view of Jesus. I spoke with VanderKam privately as we were breaking and I rephrased my question. I asked if he believed the final war described in the DSS was in any way allegorical—could it be a pacifist war or was it a real war? He answered that he thought it was a real war, and I think he's absolutely right in that interpretation. I also asked VanderKam to confirm that he is a Calvinist, which he is.

I think this exchange confirms what I have long expected: many of the Christian scholars doing frontline DSS research are unable to see the Essene/Christian schism of which I speak because their Christian beliefs are too much like that of the Essenes. VanderKam jokingly remarked during his paper that the Qumran community believed in predestination, which suits his Calvinism just fine!

Unlike VanderKam, who's a Calvinist, I'm a Methodist by affiliation, and our two traditions are worlds apart. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, once wrote to a Calvinist friend, "Your God is my devil." Moreover, I'm very Anabaptist in my beliefs and that puts me at odds with most Catholic and Protestant DSS scholars. We Anabaptist believe Jesus's teachings on nonviolence were corrupted when Christianity became a state religion; we refer to this as the "Constantinian Fall of the Church." In contrast, Calvinism is arguably one of the most state-friendly and bellicose traditions in church history. VanderKam seems unable to grasp this schism of which I speak because he doesn't realize how different Christianity looked when it was fresh and new.

4. The Ortiz paper the second day, "Myth, Media Hype, and Multivocality: Storytelling and Qumran Archaeology," spoke of the growing use of multivocality in Qumran archaeology—bringing in scholars with different backgrounds so that only one ethnocentric view doesn't dominate. I think there is a tremendous need for multivocality in DSS hermeneutics and that's one of the goals I'm trying to accomplish with this new SBL section.

5. Schiffman's paper the first day, "Purity as Separation: Comparing Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament," brought out numerous contrasts between the strict purity laws described in the DSS and the lack of purity observed by Jesus and his disciples described in the NT, e.g., Matthew 23. I couldn't agree more. I discuss these very differences in my book and argue they suggest an Essene/Christian schism.

6. The second day during one of the breaks Tov and Schiffman walked up to my petition table. Tov was visibly stunned when he picked up and read the title of my petition. I handed Schiffman copies of all three of my papers and we talked a bit. This is my recollection of the exchange:

Schiffman: So we're going to have two Qumran sections now?

Vining: Well, I think some diversity is needed for my research to emerge.

Schiffman: You've heard these presentations. Who talks more about Christianity than me?

Vining: Actually I agree with much that you say. Yesterday you discussed how, in Matthew 23, Jesus rejected the purity laws found in the DSS. I think this is one of the reasons Jesus broke from Qumran.

Schiffman: Jesus was never associated with Qumran.

And then off went Schiffman to present his second paper, "Israel, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Jewish History." It's a pity Schiffman didn't have time to study my JTWP summary in depth before he presented his paper, for he was very insistent in his paper that there is no direct connection between Jesus and the DSS. In fact, Schiffman argued 1QpHab and 4Q171, the very texts I cite in my JTWP summary.

The point I wish to make: Schiffman's comment about the new SBL section raises a very serious concern. There is a possibility if this new section takes off it could splinter Jews and Christians into opposing forces. Surely one of the reasons Schiffman argues so vehemently against a Christian interpretation of the DSS is because Qumran research has finally brought Jewish and Christian scholars together—which is a very good thing. Flint said during his presentation that proper Qumran research should involve Jews and Christians to keep everyone honest. I would supplement this comment with the need for multivocalism argued by Ortiz I mentioned above. Not only should we bring together scholars who are Jews and Christians because of our direct interest in the subject matter, but also *different types* of Jews and Christians so there's a healthy diversity of viewpoints.

7. In "Israel, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Jewish History," Schiffman did a real hatchet job on 1QpHab. He said that some scholars have tried to associate this scroll with Jesus, but claimed radiocarbon dating placed it at 145 BCE, which rules out any such interpretations. Evidently what Schiffman did here was give only the lower range of a now outdated test (which I can't find, but as I recall previous tests showed an even later date). Schiffman made no mention of the 1994 Arizona test that dated 1QpHab

from 120 to 5 BCE, nor did he mention variance that could allow this scroll to refer to Christian events. Schiffman presented the 145 BCE date as indisputable fact. Frank Cross dated 1QpHab from 30 to 1 BCE using paleography, a very near miss for my theory. No mention was made of this either.

Then Schiffman did something I found laughable. He argued that 1QpHab and 4Q171 speak of the torture and execution of the Wicked Priest, but not the Teacher of Righteousness. In fact, Schiffman argued that, to be consistent with 1QpHab, the ambiguous pronoun “him” in 4Q171 (the one I discuss in my JTWP Summary on p. 6 and n. 33 on p. 38) refers to the Wicked Priest, not the Teacher. Since early DSS scholars like Allegro had argued that the Teacher of Righteousness in these scrolls referred to Jesus, Schiffman argued that his interpretation discredits the view that these scrolls refer to Jesus in any manner whatsoever. In other words, Schiffman argued against only the Jesus as Teacher view, not the Jesus as Wicked Priest view, and supposed he had made his case against both theories—the classic logical fallacy of equivocation. As I anticipated, no mention whatsoever was made that the 1994 Arizona AMS test dated 4Q171 in the Christian era, from 5 to 111 CE.

Then to really poison the well, Schiffman said that a student came to him once who believed Jesus was crucified at Qumran and buried in Cave 4. When Schiffman pointed out that Cave 4 might have been a latrine, the student saw no reason why this would make a difference. Schiffman said at that point he knew it was “hopeless.” And the crowd laughed. Doubtless Schiffman was alluding to Thiering’s widely discredited view that Jesus was crucified and buried at Qumran, which makes a handy straw man to prop up and blow over.

I think this is exactly how the sociological barriers I describe in my petition came to be. Students at large conferences just like these, all over the world, go on to become editors in the scholarly establishment. Schiffman could never get away with these tactics in small conferences for there would be follow up questions. In fact, the ideal forum to keep proponents of particular theories honest would be an Oxford-style debate where each advocate could debate his or her position with rebuttal. I challenged Schiffman to such a debate at NYU last year but I doubt he will remember my letter. Hopefully he will remember me now.

8. I think Tov’s paper, “The Scribes of Qumran,” was very supportive of my Essenes/scribe exegesis. Tov pointed out that to be a first-century Jewish scribe was to practice a very specialized trade: one had to tan the hides, prepare the ink, etc. Tov pointed out that Ethiopian scribes still practice their trade today, much as the Qumran scribes did two thousand years ago. Since archaeologists have found no other MSS from first-century Judaism except at Qumran, and since 62 references to the scribes are found in the NT, we now have all the more reason to believe the Essenes were the NT scribes.

9. I met a German woman at my petition table who knew Otto Betz at Tübingen. I explained that the purpose of my petition was not to embarrass Betz, but merely to call attention to the sociological barriers to DSS research that bound Betz himself. I explained, as I did to Frau Betz (Otto’s widow), that I dedicated my book to Betz because I believe in years to come scholars will honor him for his contribution.

All in all, I'd say it was a really fruitful conference. Hopefully three years from now, the next time MABTS holds its next DSS conference, I'll be invited back as one of the presenters. Regardless, even if I die tomorrow I will die satisfied. I circulated about 70 copies of my JTWP summary. The students really showed interested in my work, and once the next generation takes interest in my work I know it will survive.

Marvin Vining

Conference Schedule (Contact director Steve Cox at MABTS for follow up.)

**Thursday, April 23, 2009**

2:00-2:10 p.m.–Prayer, Welcome, and Instructions

2:10-2:15 p.m. – A review of the Speakers

2:15-2:45 p.m. Steven L. Cox, Ph.D. Professor of New Testament and Greek, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Cordova, TN "Qumran, the Temple, and the Essenes"

2:50-3:30 p.m. Peter Flint, Ph.D. Canada Research Chair of the Dead Sea Scrolls; Director, Dead Sea Scrolls Institute; Professor of Religious Studies, Trinity Western University "The Biblical Scrolls and Various English Bible Translations: Towards a new Edition of the Hebrew Bible."

3:30-4:00 p.m. Refreshment Break

4:00-4:40 p.m. James VanderKam, Ph.D. John A. O'Brien Professor of Theology, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN "Eschatology in the Dead Sea Scrolls"

4:40-5:20 p.m. R. Kirk Kilpatrick, Ph.D. Dean of the Masters and Associates Programs, Professor, Department of Old Testament and Hebrew, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Cordova, TN "The Messiah and the Dead Sea Scrolls"

5:30-6:45 p.m. Banquet Dinner The Betty Howard Room

7:00-7:45 p.m. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Ph.D. Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University, New York "Purity as Separation: Comparing Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament"

7:50-8:30 p.m. Emanuel Tov, Ph.D. Department of Bible, Hebrew University, Jerusalem "The Biblical Dead Sea Scrolls"

8:35-8:55 p.m. A Panel Discussion with Speakers on Select Topics

**Friday, April 24, 2009**

8:30-9:10 a.m. Michael R. Spradlin, Ph.D. President, Chairman of the Faculty; Chairman and Professor, Department of Evangelism; Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew, Practical Theology, and Church History, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Cordova, TN "The Isaiah Scroll of Qumran: Current Analysis, Opinion, and Implications"

9:15-9:55 a.m. Steven M. Ortiz, Ph.D. Associate Professor of Archaeology and Biblical Backgrounds, Director of the Charles C. Tandy Archaeology Museum, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas "Myth, Media Hype, and Multivocality: Storytelling and Qumran Archaeology"

10:00-10:40 a.m. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Ph.D. Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University, New York "Israel, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Jewish History"

10:40-11:15 a.m. Refreshment Break

11:15-11:55 a.m. James VanderKam, Ph.D. John A. O'Brien Professor of Theology, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN "High Priests in the Dead Sea Scrolls"

12:00-12:40 p.m. Emanuel Tov, Department of Bible, Hebrew University, Jerusalem "The Scribes of Qumran"