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OBSERVATIONS ON THE BIPOLAR THEORY OF SO-CALLED “QUMRAN SPELLINGS” AND ON OTHER FEATURES OF RECENT SCROLLS SCHOLARSHIP

I

The new electronic age, with all its advances over mid-20th-century technology, has in many ways been a blessing for investigators of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Khirbet Qumran — particularly for the quick access to worldwide information that it has provided, as well as regarding enriched opportunities (particularly thanks to the Internet) for debate on salient controversial issues surrounding these topics. As an example of the latter development, we may consider the evolution of the widespread belief that a Jewish sect inhabited Khirbet Qumran in antiquity.

Only a few years after discovery of the Scrolls in nearby caves, the view became rampant both among scholars and men of letters that inhabitants of the Kh. Qumran site were heterodox Jews and the very ones who had possessed these manuscripts. This in turn encouraged writers of textbooks and publishers of journals and encyclopedias to treat this idea about the new discovery as a factual truth. Readers need only consult editions of the *Britannica* and other world encyclopedias published between approximately 1955 and 1990 to perceive to what extent this was the case.

The assumed truthfulness of this idea was thereafter reinforced by the scholarly monopoly that had formed under the aegis of the Jordanian Government and Jerusalem’s Ecole Biblique, and which was responsible for propagating the selfsame view in publications of the Scroll texts controlled by its members. It was only as knowledge of opposition to this claim became widespread among a steadily growing host of readers, often deriving their knowledge of the debate from postings in the electronic media, that a change of mind on the fundamental issue became palpable. In a praiseworthy effort towards objectivity, general encyclopedias and other sourcebooks soon actually began characterizing the Qumran-sectarian interpretation as a *theory* — which it actually had been, despite public understanding to the contrary, from the very beginning.

Generally speaking, however, traditional Qumranologists did not buy into this new formulation, but persevered in their defense of the original *theory* without calling it by that name. This habit became particularly noticeable as official publication of the

manuscripts by Oxford University Press gradually resumed after the ostensible freeing of the Scrolls in 1992. The handpicked editors and translators of the texts for the most part treated them as writings possessed by a sect inhabiting Kh. Qumran, and this belief also characterized the interpretive comments imposed upon the public by the selfsame group of scholars in the same volumes.

A salient case in point is the treatment in the Hebrew texts of numerous spellings of words that do not conform in their orthography to their traditional spellings as known particularly from the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible. It should be emphasized that this phenomenon objectively speaking would appear to be no different than that preserved in other written languages before the age of dictionaries, characteristically exhibiting itself over large stretches of territory rather than within any single locality. However, as individual Scrolls came to be read by increasing numbers of scholars after the transfer of the monopoly into new hands, there were those who drew the conclusion that the growing variety and number of the texts more likely indicated their *Jerusalem* provenience; and this led to the alternative Qumranological *theory* that many, if not all, of the Scrolls had at some time been *transferred* by the claimed sectarians from their original Jerusalem precincts not directly to the caves but rather, beforehand, to the ostensible desert sectarian abode of Khirbet Qumran — and thus arose the ancillary theory that those particular Qumran texts showing *orthographic variations* were, by contrast with all the other Scrolls, the *ones actually written and/or copied* at Kh. Qumran.

This led in turn to the coinage “Qumran spellings,” which appears sporadically in the volumes of the Oxford Qumran series and is used to designate not orthographic deviations in the Scrolls as such, but rather what are asserted to be peculiar spellings employed by the claimed sectarian inhabitants of Kh. Qumran, as opposed to the other Scrolls having no serious orthographic deviations and which are claimed to come from Jerusalem or, as some very traditional Qumranologists have urged, from “elsewhere.”

By contrast, no alternative interpretations of these orthographic deviations would appear to be ever expressed in these Oxford volumes —this despite the fact that literate cultures generally speaking, and all the more so prior to the emergence of dictionaries, exhibit such deviations over a wide geographic range. One may often encounter this phenomenon, for example, in English orthography even as late as the mid-19th century, with increasing occurrence in earlier centuries; and of course it occurs also in many other languages including (e.g.) Greek, Latin, Coptic, Slavic, Irish, and inscriptional Hebrew. There would appear to be no evidence whatever that orthographic variations were limited to a single place within the geographical range of texts written in any of these languages, and no actual proof validates the assertion that a contradictory phenomenon is attributable to the Hebrew manuscripts found in the caves.

The claim of such a unique happening moreover implies something about the cultural nature of intertestamental Jewish society that is unwarrantedly strange and even bizarre: namely, that long before the age of dictionaries, the writers and scribes inhabiting Jerusalem and other nearby places wrote and copied their many texts while having full knowledge of the “correct” spellings of Hebrew words — while at the same time the

claimed Torah-loving scribes of Khirbet Qumran had no such knowledge and were unable to spell without committing orthographic deviations. The fallacy underlying this line of reasoning is that it arbitrarily attributes to this claimed Qumran group — still widely described as spending their days primarily engaged in copying manuscripts both canonical and otherwise — a knowledge of their craft far inferior to that of other scribes, e.g. those in Jerusalem who created, according to this novel orthographic theory, no such deviations, but instead were so very consistent with one another in their spelling habits.

The propounded theory is clearly grounded in an *antecedent belief* that a sect actually once inhabited Kh. Qumran. If one uncritically embraces this belief, flights of fancy, especially when sparked by lofty eisegesis of purely innocent statements in the Scrolls themselves, can of course easily follow, as witness such past and present proposals as that two types of Essenes, celibate and non-celibate, inhabited Kh. Qumran together; or that another sect, not Essenes, lived there; or that, whichever sect lived there, its members did so only *after* Kh. Qumran was used as a fortress during Hasmonaean times; or that the “sect” members were in reality Temple priests who benefitted from an outlying place of habitation at Kh. Qumran, where they sequestered manuscripts; or that the sect did not actually *live* at Kh. Qumran at all, but only in the surrounding environs; or that the Scrolls themselves could indeed, in whole or in part, originally have derived from Jerusalem libraries but were removed by members of the claimed sect —not directly to the caves where they were discovered, but rather first to Kh. Qumran and only later to the caves.

What may reasonably be termed the **bipolar theory** of the Scrolls’ orthography, clearly representing another shift in extant variations of the original Qumran-Essene paradigm, conveniently attaches itself to any of the above beliefs, further encouraging the almost palpable vision of these imagined scribes busily writing down, in a scriptorium of their very own, precious holy words with their strange spellings.

If, however, by virtue of the actual empirical reality affecting Kh. Qumran, one should choose not to suspend disbelief in this imagined scenario, it inevitably will fall to the ground for lack of convincing evidence. Sober analyses by seasoned archaeologists during the past two decades deny both Father de Vaux’s spiritually inspired vision of this wilderness site and variations of that vision. To cite only some of the most recent developments:

*Whereas the Israel Antiquities Authority in former decades fully supported Father de Vaux’s theories, since the new millennium archaeologists attached to the Authority have demonstrated that the so-called “Qumran” pottery is not by any means unique to that site and cannot legitimately be used to show any notable hints of sectarian asceticism there.

*New artifacts and installations discovered within the site during the latest excavations indicate that, after the Hasmonaean period and until the First Revolt, the site was utilized for manufacturing and commercial purposes and shows no evidence of abstemious sectarian activity.

*The so-called “mikveh immersion pools” were with but few exceptions water reservoirs not religiously utilizable for ritual immersion.

*The adjacent cemetery of approximately a thousand graves cannot in any sense be considered unique of its kind, instead showing similarities to various other such Judaeen gravesite fields and lacking any indication of original use by ascetic sectarians.

It must be emphasized that these findings have followed upon a considerable variety of earlier empirical indications pointing to the inadequacy of the original Qumran-sectarian theory and leading ineluctably to the recognition that (a) the Scrolls were hidden away directly in the caves by inhabitants of Jerusalem during the First Revolt, and (b) that these texts have never been demonstrated to contain evidence of organic interconnection with the Kh. Qumran site itself.

(In consonance with the emerging picture, another archaeological team attached to the Antiquities Authority has, by explorations during only the past few years, traced the likely flight of many of the city's refugees from underground tunnels within Jerusalem to the Siloam pool and thence, via the adjacent Qidron Valley, to the Dead Sea region of the Judaeen Wilderness where indeed all of the Scrolls were found, both those in the eleven caves near and to the north of Kh. Qumran — on the way, as it were, of those refugees fleeing to Machaerus —and those texts found further to the south, within the Masada fortress itself.)

In light of the totality of relevant evidence as known today, the basic historical significance of the orthographic phenomenon discovered within the cave manuscripts themselves is that the Palestinian Jews of the intertestamental period had not yet achieved full consensus on the precise spellings of many Hebrew words. While it may well be the case that the Temple priesthood and its scribes had been moving towards orthographic uniformity more resolutely than other groups in Jerusalem, no manuscript evidence either within or outside of the Scrolls demonstrates that even those Temple priests had yet arrived at such a stage of perfection. That would only happen with rise of the Tiberian Masoretic School several centuries later.

Without the imposition of an (imagined) intermediate plateau between the original copying down of the Scrolls on the one hand and their sequestration in the caves on the other, the orthography of the manuscripts shows no characteristic fundamentally different from that observable in other known written languages before the emergence of dictionaries. Orthographic deviations abound in the Scrolls, but what they help to reveal in and of themselves is the dynamic, albeit non-uniform, state of Hebrew scribal practice in Jerusalem during the years leading up to the destruction of the Second Temple. The orthographic state of the manuscripts offers no indication whatever that any of them were written, copied or studied at the Khirbet Qumran site.

II

While the results of various professional archaeological investigations of the past two decades have not been a source of encouragement to those scholars who still insist that members of a Jewish sectarian movement once inhabited Kh. Qumran, the full range of purposes of the site after the Roman conquest of Judaea (63 B.C) has remained something of an enigma, at least until the beginning of the First Revolt (66 A.D.). This may well be due in good part to the fact that the ancient Hebrew name of the Qumran area and/or of Kh. Qumran itself is not known with any certainty and cannot be linked to any specific event described by Josephus or other ancient writers.

The geographical term Sekhakha, mentioned several times in the Copper Scroll, is claimed by some scholars to refer to Kh. Qumran, but this is no more than a stab in the dark, devoid of a genuine epigraphic, phonetic, or toponymic basis. On the other hand, my earlier suggestion — *viz.* that the unique Bar Kokhba text referring to an otherwise unknown Metzad Hasadin (Fortress of the Hassidim=Assidaioi of I Maccabees) may be the ancient Hebrew name of Kh. Qumran — while topographically suitable, also lacks a phonetic or epigraphic underpinning. The Arabic toponym Qumran (most forms of whose root, QMR, have to do with the moon or moonlight) is phonetically related to none of the known ancient designations of the fortresses of the Judaeian wilderness. (The main ones were, running from north to south, Cypros, Hyrcania, Herodion, and Masada, plus Machaerus on the eastern side of the sea, somewhat to the south of Herodion and considerably to the north of Masada on the western side)

Although perhaps never referred to by name in preserved written sources, Qumran and its ruins do indeed evoke the salient aspects of a Hasmonaean fortress — as recent scholarship, in the wake of my earlier proposal to that effect,* has tended to acknowledge. The site's azimuthal coordination vis-à-vis Machaerus and Jerusalem implies its own strategic role in what was manifestly the carefully planned protection of Hasmonaean Jerusalem against enemy attack from the Nabataean region — for which Josephus's accounts of the First Revolt and antecedent historical events offer ample testimony. Particularly in view of the proximity of three fortresses — Cypros, Hyrcania, and Herodion — already guarding the northwestern seacoast, the Hasmonaean need for still another at Kh. Qumran is fundamentally explicable only on the basis of an instant communicative linkage there between Machaerus and the capital.

*Cf. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49 (1990), p.105; *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?*, p. 36. The *Wikipedia* article on the Dead Sea Scrolls surprisingly states that the identification of Kh. Qumran as a Hasmonaean fortress was originally suggested by the late archaeologist Pesach Bar-Adon. That author did publish a Hebrew article entitled "The Hasmonaean Fortresses and the Status of Khirbet Qumran" in the *Y.Aharoni Festschrift* (Jerusalem 1961), but he there draws a distinction (p.349) between the fortresses on the one hand and Kh. Qumran + En Feshkha on the other, designating the latter as "sites which are accepted as habitations of the Judaeian Desert Sect." No evidence suggests he ever recognized Kh. Qumran to be a Hasmonaean fortress.

By the same token, there is no substantive basis for the apparently rampant belief that the site lost its strategic importance in the wake of the decline and fall of the Hasmonaean rulers. It may well have been occupied by Roman troops during the initial period of turmoil engendered by Pompey's arrival at Jerusalem— turmoil which included, for example, the intrigues of Hyrcanus II, Antipater, Aristobulus, and others. That, despite the upheavals and military dangers those intrigues engendered, a peace-loving group, either such as the Yahad brotherhood described in some of the Scrolls or an order of studious and contemplative Essene scribes, would have been able or likely to settle during this period in the desert emplacement of Kh. Qumran — isolated from their Jerusalem compatriots and at the potential mercy of both nearby Roman garrisons and, all the more, of Idumeaean warriors virtually within striking distance — is an idea that challenges the imagination.

The strategic purpose which Kh. Qumran and its tower served —and for which the Hasmonaeans evidently established it — can, moreover, hardly be said to have vanished with the arrival of Pompey and the immediately following turmoil in the declining ranks of the Hasmonaeans. During this period as well, the most efficient method of contacting the capital's military leadership from Machaerus was, according to the available lines of sight, still by way of the Kh. Qumran tower: signals from Machaerus could be sent directly to it, and thence to a well-known point high on the eastern extremities of Jerusalem from which, even today, there is a direct line of sight down to the Dead Sea itself.

The subsequent rise of Herod the Great and his formal recognition — in the wake of the (brief) Parthian capture of Jerusalem — by the Roman senate as King of Judaea (40 B.C.) marked a significant turning-point in the history of Roman Judaea, and renders the “Essene Scribes” theory and its variations yet more enigmatic. For after subjugating the Parthians and consolidating his rule (37 B.C.), Herod set about strengthening and rebuilding Jerusalem and its protective fortresses (*Ant.* XV.292-298) — including Machaerus. (This latter stronghold had been destroyed by Roman forces under Pompey's legate Gabinius in 57 B.C., cf. Josephus, *War*, ed. Thackeray, VII, 171). In speaking of the Machaerus restoration, Josephus mentions that at its summit, Herod had 60-cubit high towers erected in its corners (*ibid.* 174) and indicates that the purpose of these towers was to guard against incursions from the “Arabian” south; but at least one of them was undoubtedly used for sending signals to fortresses *west* of the Dead Sea so as to provide for coordinated defense efforts in the event of enemy action against the capital. For this purpose, however, the Qumran tower remained essential.

Yet careful excavations of Kh. Qumran over the past two decades have made evident the fact that it came to be exploited for agricultural and — still more obviously — for commercial purposes that included the manufacture of high-quality pottery items. As Josephus makes clear during his lengthy descriptions of Herod's career, the latter himself, despite many horrendous deeds perpetrated during his four-decade rule, at the same time strove to develop his lands to their fullest potential, through a multitude of building projects, commercial enterprises, and agricultural endeavors. The latest archaeological investigations at Kh. Qumran show that the site was rich in natural resources required for

pottery manufacture, raising the likelihood that Herod's agents would have welcomed the opportunity to have it developed for that purpose. That should not be taken to imply, however, that the strategic nature of the site was at any time disregarded by Herod or those rulers who followed him.

On the other hand, only a relatively small garrison would have been required in order to maintain the tower and thus facilitate communications between Machaerus and Jerusalem. This activity would have not seriously interfered with manufacturing activity at the same site. The nearby Hyrcania fortress — from a strategic point of view undoubtedly one of those refortified during Herod's reign, and relatively close at hand to Kh. Qumran — was well situated to respond to actual attacks from the Nabataean region.

Under these conditions it would be folly to assume that a pious and/or esoteric Jewish brotherhood had been granted long-term residential access to Kh. Qumran at any time during the rule of Herod the Great (37 B.C - 4 A.D). On the other hand, to the (slight) extent that the Yahad brotherhood might be identifiable with the Essenes — whom Herod, according to Josephus, actually respected (*Ant.* XV, 371 ff.) — Herod would far more likely have granted them substantial living quarters in Jerusalem, one would surmise in an area adjacent to the *Gate of the Essenes* (*War* V.145) which was located to the west of the Hippicus tower, and where they might consider themselves relatively safe in pursuing their unusual social and religious activities.

Nor was sectarian habitation of Kh.Qumran likely under Herod's son Archelaus, who during the single decade of his rule (4 B.C.-6 A.D.) battled multiple enemies until his banishment and the reversion of his territories to the status of a Roman province. The safeguarding of Judaea, and particularly its capital, had during this period become as important to the Romans as it had to the Jews.

All of Judaea, Idumaea, and Samaria remained in a similar condition through several prefecturates and until the tetrarchy and reign of Agrippa I (39 - 44 A.D.) Five Roman procurators then succeeded one another in ruling over the Jewish lands. In reaction, by 60 A.D. the *sicarii* had begun to emerge, and six years later the Zealot party was spearheading the First Revolt.

The beginning of the Revolt (66 A.D.) at first threw the Roman forces off guard by reason of the ferocity and surprising military prowess of the rebels. As Josephus writes, the commanders appointed over the rebels included, for Idumaea, Jesus son of Sapphas and Niger...the Peraean; for Peraea itself (the region stretching from Machaerus northward), the otherwise unidentified Manasseh; and for the *district of Jericho*, Joseph son of Simeon. (*War* II, 566, ed. Thackeray, p. 540/541). Other leaders of the revolt took command in the Galilee and elsewhere. By the end of 67 A.D., the Galilean revolt had been suppressed, and Roman forces then moved as far south as Jericho in order, as Josephus writes, to prepare for the siege of Jerusalem. (According to him, other staging grounds for the Jerusalem campaign were Haditha, near Lydda, and Jerash, in Peraea.)

Josephus describes a foray, by some of the Roman troops stationed at Jericho, to the Dead Sea in order to test its buoyancy, but says nothing about any movement of theirs further south at that time (*War* IV, 476-477). It was only after the subjugation of Jerusalem (summer, 70 A.D.) that Roman forces would move against Herodium, Machaerus and, subsequently, Masada (*War* VII, 163-165).

While studying the results of his investigations at Kh. Qumran, Père de Vaux on valid archaeological grounds reached the conclusion that during the period of the Revolt there had been an attack against Jewish forces that resulted in Roman subjugation of this site. The evidence mainly consisted of iron arrowheads of Roman type discovered in the ruins, the undermining of portions of the surrounding wall, and indications that severe damage to the site was dealt at the time of the attack. The original team had presumed even before the excavations that Kh. Qumran was the site of the Essenes described by Pliny the Elder in his *Historia Naturalis*, and that it was they, the claimed Essenes, who had fought the Romans: but as the excavation proceeded this idea shifted to an alternative one — namely, that the peace-loving Essenes had left the site before the Roman attack and been *replaced* by Jewish warriors who were the ones that actually attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to withstand the Roman troops.

The explanation that Jewish forces, whether *sicarii*, Zealots, or others came to occupy Qumran with or soon after the outbreak of hostilities in 66 A.D. obviously represents the more reasonable scenario, but it may be noticed that, particularly in light of the convoluted and fraught political history of Judaea in the decades after 63 B.C., it requires *no reliance whatever* on a prior theory of Essene or other sectarian occupation at Qumran — just as the recognition of orthographic deviations in the Scroll texts are in no need of, and do not benefit from, the imposition of a jejune theory of orthographic bipolarity of the manuscripts. Josephus's description of events in Judaea can hardly be said to support the idea that benign and pensive Jewish sectarians gained possession of a militarily and commercially significant strip of land bordering the northwestern Dead Sea shore either during the tumultuous period of Hasmonaean sovereignty or in the following several decades of political intrigue and rule by the sword.

The insurgents, whether *sicarii*, Zealots, or others, may have found Qumran to be either unoccupied or insufficiently defended when the Revolt first broke out in 66 A.D., and apparently had little difficulty in seizing the site. Moreover, Josephus, as indicated above, makes clear that Machaerus was still in Jewish hands before and during the Roman siege on Jerusalem (*viz.*, at least until the summer of 70 A.D.). The advantage that Kh. Qumran offered for efficient communication between the trans-Jordanian fortress and the capital, prior to the summer of 70 A.D., was reason enough to seize it. On the other hand, the archaeological evidence unearthed by Père de Vaux's team does indeed indicate that the warriors occupying the site were eventually attacked and vanquished by Roman troops.

Basing himself on Jewish coinage dated to Year 2 and Year 3 of the Revolt (=67/68 A.D.) discovered among numerous other coins in the site's rubble, Père de Vaux expressed the belief that the Romans had attacked Kh. Qumran already in 68 A.D. — *i.e.*,

when the coins were new. However, because Josephus to the contrary described a different strategy — namely, the direct movement of the Roman troops from Jericho to Jerusalem and the penetration of Judaean Wilderness sites only *after* the fall of the capital (*War* VII.163 ff.)— I proposed instead (*Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?*, p. 12 .) that, according to indications in the historical record, the fall of Kh. Qumran to the Romans could have occurred, at the earliest, only late in 70 A.D., i.e., *after* the fall of Jerusalem and during the course of the Roman march towards Machaerus. Publications appearing between 1996 and 2006 of numismatic research on the coinage discovered within Kh. Qumran support this later timeframe for the Roman attack on the site. Following Josephus with a map in hand, we may perceive that the attack on Qumran would have most likely taken place after the subjugation of Herodium (*War* VII.163) and prior to the siege of Machaerus (*War* VII.164 ff). This marked the end of Jewish habitation of the Kh. Qumran site in antiquity.

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

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N.B. All citations from and references to **Josephus Flavius** are based upon: Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*; *The Jewish War*; *The Life*; *Against Apion* (ed. and trans. Thackeray, Marcus, Wikgren and Feldman), 9 vols.: Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge (USA) and London, 1926-1965.