

May 1995

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SOME COMMENTS ABOUT THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

Someone has sent me a photo-copy of an article by William F. Dankenbring, with a request for my comments. The article is 8 pages long and is entitled "NEW LIGHT! The DEAD SEA Scrolls and the Septuagint". There is no date on the article. The following are some comments on this article written by Mr. Dankenbring.

For a start, the whole article is based on the views of one single man, James C. VanderKam, who wrote the book "The Dead Sea Scrolls Today". This is the only researcher that Mr. Dankenbring quotes. Without other researchers offering counter-balancing views we can expect to find a biased presentation of the facts.

The article starts off with a reference to a letter supposedly written around the year 800 A.D. by a leader of the Nestorian sect. In this letter this leader refers to scrolls found in the Dead Sea caves. The letter states:

"We have learnt from TRUSTWORTHY JEWS who were then being instructed at CATECHUMENS IN THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION that some books were found 10 YEARS AGO in a rock dwelling near Jericho ...".

VanderKam quotes this letter in the introduction of his book, on page 2, to establish the foundation for his whole thesis. Where is this letter? Where can it be verified? Which other scholar supports the veracity of this letter? We are told nothing in this regard.

The letter simply does not ring true for a number of reasons.

First of all, around 800 A.D. Jews were not coming over to "Christianity" except in very, very rare cases.

Secondly, the details in this letter are clearly a parallel to the modern discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. An Arab hunter follows his dog into a cave and finds a whole lot of books. He then tells the Jews in Jerusalem about his discovery (why would an Arab hunter around 800 A.D. walk over 20 miles to do that?) who come out in their droves and find many books. The parallel to the way the Dead Sea Scrolls were actually discovered about 50 years ago is too obvious to be coincidental. Does history always repeat itself like that?

Thirdly, it is patently absurd to assume that those Jews around 800 A.D. who walked over 20 miles out to those caves would then have left those books behind to be rediscovered 1150 years later! After coming out all the way from Jerusalem they would surely HAVE TAKEN WITH THEM every single book that they could find. There would not have been any books left for "discovering" 1150 years later.

They would not have sat down and studied those books right there at the mouth of the cave, but taken them with them to study at home in Jerusalem. Having come out all the way from Jerusalem, they would also certainly have examined all of the neighbouring caves for similar "treasures". However, the Jews in general in 800 A.D. could no longer read Hebrew. At that time only a very small minority of all the Jews, those who specifically studied the Hebrew Scriptures, would have been able to read Hebrew.

This letter ignores the fact that by 800 A.D. none of the Jews in Jerusalem were using the Hebrew language. Most people do not realize that the Hebrew language had basically died out, and was only "resurrected" about 200 years ago! And it is only because the modern State of Israel had adopted Hebrew as the official language for the nation that Hebrew has experienced something of a revival. Yes, there may have been the odd "scholar" who was still familiar with Hebrew in the year 800 A.D.. But Aramaic had by then been the spoken language of the Jews for over 1000 years!

Next, in this letter, it implies that this leader of the Nestorian sect had himself gotten access to "AN EXPERT" who had STUDIED these books that had been found in this cave.

This Nestorian leader then very astutely and very conveniently asks the precise question that forms the thesis for VanderKam's whole book. This question is:

"Do these manuscripts contain passages that in the New Testament are considered quotations from the Old Testament but cannot be found in existing copies of Israel's scriptures?"

Now WHY would this Nestorian leader have thought of this question? Is that a question that would come to YOUR mind if you were given such an old document? The question itself reveals an obvious agenda! Can we see that?

And the convenient answer (convenient for the Nestorian leader, for VanderKam and for Mr. Dankenbring) was:

"He was assured that THEY WERE INDEED THERE."

So this Nestorian leader was given NO PROOF! He was given nothing more than a short pat answer that satisfied his agenda. How convenient!

The flaws with this "letter" should be immediately apparent:

- 1) VanderKam has a vested interest in this answer. He needs this answer to support his theory.
- 2) WHY would some Nestorian sect leader in the year 800 A.D. have been concerned about supposed differences between the Hebrew scrolls (which he himself could not read) and quotations from these scrolls in passages of the Greek New Testament, which did not affect any of the Christian teachings one way or the other?
- 3) How on Earth would this Nestorian leader have found "AN EXPERT", who had studied the content of these books that had been found? The Jews who he might have talked to and who were supposedly becoming "Christians" couldn't read the Hebrew writings. By 800 A.D. very few Jews, if any, were still "experts" in the written Hebrew language. They had stopped speaking Hebrew over 1000 years earlier. Even Jesus Christ conducted His whole ministry in the Aramaic language, though He obviously also spoke Hebrew.
- 4) Having found such a Jewish "expert" who had carefully studied these books that had been found 10 years earlier, HOW would such a Jew possibly also have had a VERY THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE of the Greek language New Testament books, to the point of knowing that some quotations from the Old Testament are an accurate reflection of the Masoretic text while others are minor deviations? In 800 A.D. you could not find a Jew who was AN EXPERT in both, biblical Hebrew and biblical Greek! There was NO MOTIVATION for any Jew to learn either of those two languages, let alone become an expert in

them.

5) This Jewish expert in 800 A.D. must supposedly have:

- had a thorough knowledge of the Greek N.T.
- had a thorough knowledge of the Masoretic Hebrew O.T.
- have CAREFULLY studied ALL of these books from the caves, since many would have reflected the standard Masoretic text. He would have had to spend YEARS sifting through all the scrolls and fragments of scrolls to reach that kind of conclusion.

6) What would have been the motivation for a "Jewish expert" in 800 A.D., who spent years pouring over manuscripts found in some cave, to tell some "Christian" leader that these newly-discovered books confirmed quotations found in the Christian New Testament, BUT DEVIATED FROM THE STANDARD MASORETIC TEXT? WHY would some Jewish "expert" even be motivated to "look for" deviations between these texts? Was such a Jewish "expert" critical of the Masoretic text to start with?

7) The carte blanche assurance that the New Testament quotations not found in the Masoretic text "WERE INDEED THERE" in these books from the caves shows this answer is contrived. It simply is not true!!!

- How many books were found in the caves?
- How many of them supported the Masoretic text?
- How many of them deviated from the Masoretic text?
- How many New Testament quotations are under consideration?
- How many of them were found in how many of these books?

These are the questions that needed to be answered by the astute Nestorian leader who was shrewd enough to suspect that unexpected cave-discoveries might yield a text different from the Masoretic standard. A carte blanche assurance is of no value at all!

8) Finding such "an expert" implies that this Nestorian leader travelled to Jerusalem himself. In that case he could have seen these books for himself. It was, after all, only 10 years after these books had been discovered. But if he had done this, he would surely have mentioned this in his letter. On the other hand, without travelling to Jerusalem himself, he had NO CHANCE of finding "an expert" who had pored over these books at great length.

When you ask these and many other penetrating questions, it quickly becomes obvious that this letter from a Nestorian leader in 800 A.D. is highly suspect. Yet this is used by VanderKam (and by Mr. Dankenbring) to set the stage for the theory that will be put forward.

Mr. Dankenbring next discusses the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. Amongst all the discoveries, those that represent the text of books of the Old Testament are in the minority! MOST OF THE SCROLLS DEAL WITH NON-BIBLICAL MATTERS. The vast majority of these findings were FRAGMENTS, often smaller than a postage stamp!

In the original "Cave 1" seven texts were found. They are:

- the Manual of Discipline;
- A COMMENTARY on Habakkuk;
- the "War Scroll";
- the Genesis Apocryphon (stories based on Genesis);
- the "Hymn Scroll";
- a copy of Isaiah;
- a partial copy of Isaiah.

These writings make clear that we are dealing with A RELIGIOUS SECT!

The "Manual of Discipline", the "War Scroll" and the home-spun stories from Genesis make this evident. They also had their own hymns. Very possibly they were the Essenes of New Testament times. They are not mentioned at all in the New Testament, and thus the indication is that Christ had no contact with them at any time.

In all, including findings in 10 more caves, "about 800 fragmentary documents have been discovered". This includes several apocryphal books (Tobit, Ecclesiasticus, etc.). These were books that were written under false pretences, pretending to be written by biblical authors in order to become accepted as part of Scripture. They have been correctly identified as imposters.

Here we are dealing with the writings of an extreme sect (to go and live in caves is rather extreme), who withdrew themselves from society. The vast majority of the writings that have been found are of a religious nature, but NOT A PART OF THE INSPIRED OLD TESTAMENT. The content of these writings also makes clear that we are dealing with unbalanced religious extremists. Many of the things in the OTHER books that were found are incorrect ... for example, the stories in the "Genesis Apocryphon" are not true reports, any more than the book "Tobit" is true. They are homespun stories.

Next, no one disputes that Greek translations of various books of the Old Testament were in existence in Egypt at the start of the first century A.D.. VanderKam himself states on page 124 of his book:

"OVER THE NEXT CENTURY OR TWO (!) all the books in the Hebrew Bible were translated into Greek and the WHOLE WAS GIVEN THE NAME SEPTUAGINT AFTER THE NUMBER OF SCHOLARS WHO, ACCORDING TO ARISTEAS, TOOK PART IN THE TRANSLATION OF THE LAW OF MOSES."

Two centuries to translate 22 books?? That's about one book every 10 years! Obviously there is ABSOLUTELY NO CONTROL over the competence or the integrity or the source documents used by numerous different people spanning two different centuries! The story of Aristeas is known to be totally fabricated and without any foundation in fact.

As I mentioned in my article about the LXX, it is ridiculous to claim that all these different translations represent "ONE UNIFIED TRANSLATION of the Hebrew manuscripts". Those individual translations were no more "inspired" than the translations of the apocryphal books, which were also translated and

included in what came to be known as the LXX.

It is a known fact that, especially in the second century B.C., there was a proliferation of mystical books and apocryphal books in the Hebrew script. Many of them attempted to emulate existing books and invented stories around known biblical characters (e.g. around Daniel). The same authors who fabricated stories with the desire to have these accepted as divinely inspired writings, very likely also made copies of existing books of the Bible, though not necessarily textually faithful copies.

The fact that they simply invented accounts about biblical persons shows that they could not be trusted to faithfully reproduce the text. If the translators of the NIV feel free to doctor their translation as they see fit (e.g. add the word 'Jesus' in Hebrews 8:6 although it is not found in any manuscript, etc.), why should these religious imposters have had greater integrity? People who simply make up stories will also not be averse to adapting the facts in existing accounts to their own particular preferences.

Thus, by the first century B.C. there may very well have been a few alternate versions in Hebrew for some of the books of the Old Testament. Some of them would also have circulated amongst extreme sects like the Essenes. And since many of the Greek translations of books that appear in the LXX were only made around 50 B.C. to 30 A.D., the translators of these books could very well have used wrong source documents, produced at the same time as the apocryphal works were proliferating.

Consider this:

The RELIGIOUS NON-BIBLICAL documents that have been found in the Dead Sea Caves heavily outnumber the biblical books that have been found there. Now the INTEGRITY of those cave-dwelling extremists has to be assessed by considering ALL the evidence available, not just the few BIBLICAL books that have been found.

When we examine this MAJORITY of the discovered scrolls, then it quickly becomes obvious that we are dealing with religious fanatics, whose ideas were not true in many areas of their beliefs. These other writings cannot be trusted to accurately reflect the truth! The "Genesis Apocryphon" is a case in point!

So where do we get the idea from that these religious extremists faithfully preserved an "original" and more ancient text than the Masoretes in Jerusalem, who were so meticulous that they counted every single letter of every single word in a scroll before they accepted it as an accurate copy ... and then promptly destroyed the old copy to prevent it being misused in any way? What is there to recommend the character and integrity of the people who authored the Dead Sea Scrolls? Absolutely nothing!!

What spirit is it that wants to impute wrong motives to those in a position of responsibility (the Masoretes), while at the same time expressing unqualified trust and confidence in a sect of religious fanatics who also accepted KNOWN fables (Tobit, Genesis Apocryphon, etc.)?

Let's consider the facts about quotations from the Old Testament appearing in the New Testament. The books of the N.T. contain the following number of quotations:

Matthew = 48

Mark = 23

Luke = 23

John = 17

Acts = 29

Romans = 60

1 Corinthians. = 18

2 Corinthians. = 11

Galatians = 10

Ephesians = 6

1 Timothy = 1

Hebrews = 36

James = 4

1 Peter = 9

2 Peter = 1

1 John = 1

Revelation = 6

The following 10 books do not contain any direct quotations from the O.T. : Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 2 John, 3 John and Jude.

Thus there are a total of 303 quotations from the Old Testament found in the New Testament. If we were to include all "mere allusions" and even "possible allusions" in this list, then we would have around 900 quotations from and "allusions" to the Old Testament.

I certainly grant that I may be in error with a few of these figures. The point is not that there are "EXACTLY" 303 quotations. The point is that these figures can give us some general indications of the scope we are dealing with. In general figures then: we have in the New Testament about 300 quotations from the Old Testament and a further approximately 600 "allusions" and "possible allusions" to the Old Testament.

So the questions are as follows:

1) Of these 300 quotations:

A) How many agree with the Masoretic Text?

B) How many agree with the LXX text?

C) How many agree with the Dead Sea Scrolls?

2) Of the biblical texts that were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls:

A) How many agree with the Masoretic Text?

B) How many disagree with the Masoretic Text?

3) Of the 300 O.T. quotations found in the N.T.:

A) How many DISAGREE with the LXX text?

B) How many disagree with the Masoretic Text?

C) How many disagree with those Dead Sea Scrolls where the Dead Sea Scrolls happen to agree with the LXX text?

4) Of the 300 quotations from the O.T. found in the N.T.:

A) How many are actually found in at least one of the Dead Sea Scrolls?

B) Are there in fact a large enough number found to be reasonably representative?

5) Of that number found in the Dead Sea Scrolls:

A) How many agree with the Masoretic Text AND ALSO at the same time differ from the LXX text?

B) How many of them agree with the LXX text and also at the same time disagree with the Masoretic Text?

6) Aside from the quotations that are found in the N.T., let's look at the whole texts that were found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Comparing the whole Old Testament Text (as much as is represented in the Dead Sea Scrolls), in places where the Masoretic Text and the LXX text differ:

A) How many places in the Dead Sea Scrolls AGREE with the Masoretic Text,?

B) How many places agree with the LXX text?

C) How many places disagree with BOTH texts???

It is questions like these that need to be answered before we can consider accepting that the Dead Sea Scrolls are a more ancient, and therefore supposedly more accurate, text of the books of the Old Testament.

To find half a dozen or so places where the Dead Sea Scrolls happen to agree with the LXX text is not meaningful at all!

What is never mentioned by authors who are pushing the idea that the LXX is a more accurate text is this: there are many instances in the Dead Sea Scrolls where they DISAGREE with other Dead Sea Scrolls! In plain language: different copies of the book of Isaiah that were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls don't necessarily agree with each other! It is not as if all of the findings among the Dead Sea Scrolls represent ONE SINGLE UNIFIED TEXT THAT AGREES WITH THE LXX AND DIFFERS FROM THE MASORETIC TEXT!

Not at all!

Researchers interested in trying to prove that the LXX text is the more ancient and correct text, conveniently overlook all those texts that don't fit in with their theory. The fact is that many of the books

found among the Dead Sea Scrolls also agree with the Masoretic Text ... but that's not of interest to "researchers". Instead they will focus on the 3 or 4 small fragments of a scroll that supposedly prove how remarkably accurate and factual the LXX is.

For example, in the conclusion of his article, on page 8, Mr. Dankenbring writes:

"... there are serious questions about various passages (in the Masoretic Text) where it differs from the Septuagint, the Samaritan, and SOME of the Qumran scrolls." (my emphasis)

Did you notice that admission? Do you realize that not all of the Qumran scrolls necessarily agree with the LXX or with the Samaritan text, or even amongst themselves? But the point is this: those passages that agree with the Masoretic Text and disagree with the LXX are carefully ignored!

Further on, also on page 8, Dankenbring writes:

"The evidence of the Dead Sea scrolls IN MANY CASES exonerates the Septuagint. MANY PASSAGES AGREE with it as opposed to the Masoretic Text." (my emphasis)

Again, this is also an admission that MANY CASES DON'T "exonerate the Septuagint" at all! They agree with the Masoretic Text! But all of these passages are totally ignored in Mr. Dankenbring's article.

With 300 Old Testament quotations found in the New Testament we need FACTS! When 5 or 6 quotations found in the New Testament agree with the LXX, while 280 or more agree with the Masoretic text, what conclusion should we reach? The total unreliability of all the non-biblical writings found in the Dead Sea Caves in the midst of the few biblical texts is in itself a strong indication that whatever biblical texts they may have had are highly suspect! Their non-biblical writings identify them as an extremist group that had their "favourite" books of the Bible.

Mr. Dankenbring's article is a very one-sided and biased presentation. The extremely questionable letter from a leader of the Nestorian sect is planted at the start of the article (and at the start of VanderKam's book) as a setup! That letter is just as questionable as the supposed letter of Aristeas.

I don't see any need to discuss the rest of the article. The other arguments presented are equally transparent. So much for the religious value of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Frank W. Nelte