

Episode 153 The Dead Sea Scrolls, Part 2

Tim Lim

Hello, I'm Timothy Lim. I'm the Professor of Hebrew Bible at Second Temple Judaism at the University of Edinburgh.

David Capes

Hi, everybody, this is David Capes with The Stone Chapel Podcast. If you didn't hear part one of my discussion with Dr. Timothy Lim about the Dead Sea Scrolls, go back and listen. It is important and will give you the context to understand part two. In this podcast, we're talking about the shape of the biblical canon. We'll also be talking about a particular style of commentary that's not completely unique, but it's still fairly unique to the Qumran community called *peshet*. And then as always, we've got the nugget of wisdom at the end. So standby for that.

Dr. Timothy Lim, Timothy, great to be with you again on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Tim Lim

Thank you for having me again, David.

David Capes

It's a delight to be in your home and to be in your city, one of my favorite cities in the world, the city of Edinburgh. We got off to a great start but one of the things we haven't talked about was the shape of the biblical canon. We said a few things about which books were included and which books were not included. But we didn't really talk about the overall. Because when you talk about the biblical canon, my understanding is that there are a lot of different canons in existence. What have the Qumran scrolls, the Dead Sea Scrolls, told us about the shape of the biblical canon?

Tim Lim

Yes, it's told us quite a lot of things about the biblical canon in process. In order to make that clear, let me just give some context and background. First of all, as you say, there are different canons. And that's really weird, even though we call 'the' Hebrew Bible with a definite noun like that, there are actually different kinds of Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible collections. Some are bigger than others, they share a common core. When we talk about the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, we're often thinking about the Protestant version of the Old Testament. And that Protestant version of the Old Testament is identical to the pharisaic canon. The Pharisees had a canon that became the canon of Rabbinic Judaism. That's exactly the same canon. So that's the context and background. What the scrolls have done in terms of contributing to this higher understanding is that the sectarians who are writing did not have a clear concept of canon. Their understanding was much more in process, we see that formation of the canon coming through. We see the edges of that canon, but we don't see the clearly defined one. What I mean by clearly defined one is a list of all the books that are in the canon.

David Capes

You couldn't put the entire Bible (as we know it) in one book, because the length of the average scroll was around 28 feet. So, any length beyond that, you really couldn't physically manage it.

Tim Lim

Yes. The physical aspect of it is one part. 28 feet is an average, because with the Minor Prophets scrolls for example, they're too short. In fact, that's why they put the Minor Prophets together. They're not called minor because they're less important. They're called minor, because they're shorter. They come as 12 prophets all together, and usually in one scroll. In terms of the canon, what you find in the Dead Sea community, and among the Essenes is this evolving canon. And that means that they believed in the authoritative status of certain writings. Because the canon isn't there yet. To call it canonical, is a little bit anachronistic or is not quite right. The Essenes held to the authoritative status of a number of books that ended up in the canon. In fact, all the books except Esther, ended up in the canon. But they also held on to different authoritative writings as well. For example, their own rules, their own kind of manuals, or discipline, as it were. If you think about your own church situation, you read the Bible, the Old Testament and New Testament. That is the authoritative text, but you also have all kinds of other things such as in the Anglican service, they use the Book of Common Prayer.

David Capes

And creeds. They have certain authoritative status.

Tim Lim

Exactly. What you have in the Dead Sea Scrolls is two things. One thing I would describe as dual authority. There's scriptural authority, and there's also their own writings that interpret Scripture.

David Capes

That's a part of the commentaries we'll talk about shortly.

Tim Lim

Right. So, it's not just Scripture, in its absolute sense. But it's also the interpretation that gives it its authority, by saying that's the way you need to interpret or understand the texts.

David Capes

One of the things I find fascinating is that among the collection you have multiple copies of certain books. You don't just have one copy of Isaiah, for example, or one copy of Psalms.

Tim Lim

No. So both of those have numerous copies. Psalms has almost 40 copies if I remember correctly. There are also numerous copies of Isaiah. And the books that have the most numerous copies are Isaiah, Psalms, and I Deuteronomy. And it just so happens that they are also the most commonly cited books in the New Testament.

David Capes

Yes, So it seems like there's a little bit of connection going on, or a little bit of listening into each other's conversations. Well, let's talk about the *pesharim*. Because you talked how the canon is coming together at this point. And this notion of authority is now being extended. So not only is there a book of Habakkuk. But there's also a commentary on the book of Habakkuk. And there's the book of Nahum and a commentary on Nahum. Because one of the things you have just been so clear about is this whole notion of the *pesharim*. And these particular commentaries. You're actually the editor for the *Oxford Commentary on the Dead Sea Scrolls*. And you're pulling together lots of experts from all over the world, which is a huge help and a gift to academics!

Tim Lim

And there's a great deal of labor! We have a very good group of scholars working on this *Oxford Commentary on the Dead Sea Scrolls*. We have ten volumes planned. And two of them have already been published. The Damascus document by Steven Fried of Yale University, and the *peshet* Habakkuk that I published. And then there's a third one that is on the way. And that is the volume on the Rule of the Community and its associated texts. And that's been published by John Collins of Yale University, and James Knotty Jesuit School of Theology.

David Capes

So how did you become editor of this project?

Tim Lim

It was my idea from the very beginning, and I suggested it OUP and they thought it was a great idea. So I thought about the people who would be best placed to write each volume. I gathered a group of eminent scholars as my board of advisors. And we invited the scholars. There's no volunteering for the series! Some examples of upcoming volumes are one by Carol Newsome, formerly of Emory University, on the Thanksgiving Scroll, and there's the Temple Scroll by Sidney Crawford.

David Capes

Each of these are fascinating. We can have a whole podcast on each of them.

Tim Lim

That's right. And we have plans in the future, to expand this series. When I began this series, I thought, well, I really need to make sure that I don't overextend myself. Ten volumes is quite enough. Because I don't want to be one of those editors who create a long list of volumes, and never get to them. And I also wanted to see how well they are reviewed. And it happens that the first two volumes were reviewed well. That gives us a reason to go on.

David Capes

The documents that you've chosen are some of the most influential, and significant. There are other books as well, but you don't want to work on them for the next 120 years of your life! Now you've done a lot of work on these commentaries, and we've been using this word *pesharim*. Let's define that for people because that's not a common word? What is *peshet* or *pesharim*?

Tim Lim

So *peshet* is the singular and *pesharim* is a plural. What it means is literally 'interpretation'. It's either interpretation or interpretations. Now the term *peshet* is used in scholarship, as a title for the genre of a particular kind of interpretation of biblical texts. But it is also used as a technique, an exegetical technique. You have these two uses, the titular one, and also the exegetical or hermeneutical, principle one. So, the *peshet* is essentially an interpretation. It follows a particular structure. It cites a passage, and then it follows with an introductory formula that is an important intellectual spacer. It says that from here on in, we're no longer citing scripture, but the scripture's interpretation. And the word is quite often *peshet* but not invariably *peshet*. So often that word comes up, and that's where scholarly construct creates the genre of *peshet*. We don't actually have a title that said *peshet*. It's a scholarly construct of it. When we have that particular structure, you have the biblical quotation, which we call the lemma, the introductory formula that introduces the sectarian interpretation, and then the sectarian interpretation. That's how they start.

David Capes

So that's the literary piece, but as you said, it's also a technique.

Tim Lim

Yes. It's a bit like modern commentaries. If you read a modern commentary, you often get biblical texts repeated to you. So that it refreshes your mind and then you get an interpretation of it.

David Capes

But in the interpretive process, what are the guiding principles for *peshet*? They're not a modern commentary. Because a modern commentary would follow a different set of methods to dissect and work with the text. What are the methods at work here?

Tim Lim

The hermeneutics of *peshet* is that they believed in the continuing revelation of God. That's the fundamental principle that guides their interpretation. They believe that God revealed the prophecy to Habakkuk so many years ago. And that revelation continues to their community. And that continuation is through the revelation of God, to this 'Teacher of righteousness'. And that 'Teacher of righteousness' then speaks completely, in their mind, about the revelation of God. And that revelation is also a revelation about what the prophecy means to their time.

David Capes

I've often heard it referred to as modernizing the text or bringing it into their modern moment. Is that a good way of thinking about it?

Tim Lim

I'm not sure because modern period typically really refers to the last few centuries.

David Capes

Yes, so it would be modernizing it from their standpoint. So, making this ancient text say what Habakkuk was talking about here, actually refers to the 'Wicked Priest', or the 'Teacher of righteousness'.

Tim Lim

Right, exactly. In scholarship, it's referred to by two terms, one is contemporizing. So that would work.

David Capes

Yes, that's a better word. Give us an example of one of these texts now. And I know in a minute if we have time, and I hope we do, we're going to talk about Habakkuk 2:4. Which is very important in Paul's writing. But it's also very important here, in the *peshet* of Habakkuk.

Tim Lim

So let me read you one. I'm looking at the text itself. And this has to do with Habakkuk, 2:4b. So, the lemma or the biblical quotation, "But the righteous will live by his faith or faithfulness". And for those of you who are very familiar with Paul's letters, that immediately jumps out at you as something very familiar. So that quotation is then followed by the introductory formula. And the introductory formula says, its interpretation concerns, the word interpretation that it's translated there refers to *peshet*. So that's the Hebrew word that is being translated into 'interpretation' in that introductory formula. So you now have the lemma or quotation, the introductory formula, and here comes the sectarian interpretation. It says its interpretation concerns all doers of the law in the house of Judah, whom God will deliver from the house of judgment, on account of the suffering, and their faithfulness in the 'Teacher of Righteousness'. So that's an example of the sectarian interpretation called *peshet*.

David Capes

How does Paul do interpreting it compared to sectarians?

Tim Lim

Very close, I would say. Because I think Paul understands it in a way that is both about salvation. Belief in Jesus is salvation from judgment. But also, both belief in Jesus and belief in the salvation or deliverance from judgment. And both those things as you heard me read is also in the text itself. Within the prophecy of Habakkuk. This Habakkuk 2:4b is actually in the center of the prophecy of Habakkuk. The prophecy of Habakkuk has in its received form, three chapters. But in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the interpretation is only of the first two chapters.

David Capes

Because the third chapter is a separate unit.

Tim Lim

Right. It's a separate unit with its own title, "The Prayer of Habakkuk". So the interpretation is only of these two chapters. And if you look at this, within this first two chapters, the center of that prophecy is Habakkuk 2:1-4. Why? Because they were waiting, at the beginning. Habakkuk proclaims that he sees a vision or prophecy. And then he complains about theodicy, the wicked, the typical wicked flourishing, the righteous suffering. And why don't you save us type of question, and then he's waiting for the second vision. It's either the second vision or the same vision coming back again, it's not quite clear. But in any case, those four verses Habakkuk 2:1-4, is really the center where it turns. Because from 2:5 onwards, it gives you five different oracles against various wicked people.

David Capes

So, does the New Testament engage in any kind of *peshet* -like readings of Scripture?

Tim Lim

In the past, scholars have argued that there are all kinds of *peshet* type of interpretation in the New Testament. I think that was in vogue at one time, but the kind of understanding of *peshet* is a very simple one. For example, Earl Ellis described it simply as an x equals y type of interpretation. X is equivalent to what's written in the biblical text and Y is how we interpret it. But it's so much more interesting than that.

David Capes

Yes, it's more complex than that. There is this contemporizing of maybe using different methods. But seeing in their own history, that yes, God's will is being done. That was pronounced originally in the prophets.

Tim Lim

In fact, the really interesting thing is that the *peshet* Habakkuk also makes hermeneutical statements. And one of the most fascinating ones is that it says when God revealed it to Habakkuk, he didn't understand it. It's only in the fulfillment of time that the Teacher of righteousness, understands the whole thing. So, the Prophet was a kind of conduit for divine revelation, but he didn't understand what he's saying, or maybe didn't understand the full import of it. That would probably be the more accurate one. So, the sectarian said, well, our Teacher of righteousness, knew what it meant because there's continuous divine revelation. And here it is.

David Capes

Well, for people who've ever been to the Lanier Theological Library, you'll know that we have a facsimile of the *peshet* of Habakkuk. They're one of seven in the world, and they are forgery quality! As my lawyer friend Mark Lanier likes to say! We also have the Community Rule. We also have the Great Isaiah Scroll. So, you can see those and see pretty much what the Dead Sea Scrolls themselves look like. Because we do also have one of four of the Dead Sea Scrolls jar in private hands. A jar from one of the caves that has come out and put back together.

Tim Lim

And it's been authenticated?

David Capes

Yes, it's been authenticated. You can come and see all that at the Lanier Theological Library. But the Dead Sea scrolls have made a tremendous impact on the way we understand Jews and Judaism at the time of Jesus. But also, the formation of canon and the bringing together of this new community called the New Covenant Community of Jesus. Because this group called itself in one of the documents, I don't know where it is, but the New Covenant Community. There are people the New Covenant, but they envisioned that one way and early Christians viewed it another way. Dr. Timothy Lim we're so grateful for you spending time with us today, here on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Tim Lim

Thank you, David.

Here's a nugget of Wisdom form Dr. Timothy Lim.

So, all my life, one of the things that has guided my life in terms of as a biblical scholar is that I focus on the reading of texts, primary sources, the scriptural texts, of course, but also other texts. Because I believe that Scripture didn't come to us in a vacuum. That we must read other texts. But the other thing is not just to read the texts in an English translation, but rather to try and study the original languages. So that would be my little nugget of wisdom.