THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS IN POPULAR CULTURE:
“I CAN GIVE YOU NO IDEA OF THE CONTENTS”

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I want to begin my response to these thoughtful papers with an illustrative quotation that Professor du Toit uses in her paper. Du Toit tells us that while offering to procure scrolls for McGill University, G. Lancaster Harding wrote, “I can give you no idea of the contents of what I propose to buy for you.” This phrase is emblematic of the relationship between scholars and the various publics who have been interested in the scrolls from their discovery down to the present conversation. Something of great interest and importance is happening with the discovery, study and publication of the scrolls, but we can give you no idea of their contents.

There are of course genuine difficulties in talking about the content of the scrolls. Even to someone like this respondent, who comes from another field and whose biblical studies never went far beyond basic seminary courses taken twenty-five years ago, it is evident that the scrolls are fragmentary and written in ancient languages understood only by a few specialists. They have to be translated, typed by genre, related to other documents and to historical events. It is often hard for academics to talk in accessible ways about such matters. In addition to our difficulty with talking to the public about our work is the impact of state and academic politics, differences over the significance of the scrolls for understanding Judaism and Christian origins, and the question of whether and how they impact the translation and interpretation of the existing scriptural canon. It is not surprising that different audiences have read onto the inaccessible scrolls a variety of contents.

Our authors, with varying degrees of good humor and frustration, identify these popular hopes for what the scrolls might accomplish and their annoyance at popular misunderstandings of the content and implications of this material. In fact, these writers share an assumption that scholarly insiders, at least biblical scholars, understand the actual
content of the scrolls and their implications, but no one articulates that understanding. In such a situation it does seem clear that the scrolls have functioned as open signifiers, in Professor Grossman’s terms. This seems to happen both because it has been difficult for the public to get a clear and consistent explanation of their content and implications and because of structures of the popular media and imagination.

By asking how the scrolls function in the popular imagination, the panelists turn our attention to the scrolls’ contemporary location. For at least a little while, our interest is not in what they meant to the Essenes, to the development of Judaism in the Common Era, or to the emergence of early Christianity. We are looking at how our contemporaries make sense of the scrolls as popular phenomena by examining their appearance in everything from BBC documentaries to supermarket tabloids. Our answers must take seriously the fact that we live in a mass-media-saturated culture with a high focus on the importance of celebrity.

In thinking about what happens when the scrolls become symbolic objects within contemporary western culture, I would like to focus briefly on three topics: first, the role of scholars and popular perceptions of scholarship, second, the mass media and how they function, and finally, the scrolls themselves.

Scholars

In considering popular images of the scholar, and how they inform the situation of the scrolls in the popular imagination, I think of two images. First, I recall a friend of mine saying that in his church, whenever someone disagrees with the pastor about some matter of biblical interpretation, the pastor responds, “Well, if you could read the original language you would see that I am right.” That pastor fits one image of scholars that has informed the way the public thinks about the scrolls. Scholars act superior to others while hiding behind our arcane knowledge to avoid providing clear explanations of our positions. When we are clear, it is not always evident what difference our insights will make in everyday life, thus confirming the perception that academics live in an ivory tower disconnected from daily life. There is perhaps a bit of this elitist attitude evident when we complain about the popular press printing scroll fragments upside down. While the error is glaring to the scholar versed in ancient languages, and perhaps to a more general Jewish audience, one must wonder whether the