

*At the 33rd AJS Conference which took place in Washington, D.C. a special session was convened to celebrate the accomplishments of two noted Dead Sea Scroll scholars, both of whom spent their academic careers in the Washington area. Yaakov Elman discussed the work of Professor Joseph Baumgarten, formerly of Baltimore Hebrew College, and Lawrence H. Schiffman discussed Professor Joseph Fitzmyer of the Catholic University of America. Each of these legendary scholars, reflecting widely different faith commitments, profoundly influenced the modern study of the Dead Sea Scrolls within ancient Judaism.*

**I**t is one of the great curiosities of the way in which academic fields are defined in our not-so-perfect world that use of classifications for the work of individuals of great and important scholarly contribution often ends up limiting our ability to understand them and their work.

And so, the attempt to describe the contribution of Joseph Fitzmyer, Aramaist, New Testament scholar, Dead Sea Scrolls scholar, and I do not know how many more, will ultimately end up in either a gross understatement of his contribution to these various fields, or in the creation of multiple Fitzmyers. The

## Joseph Fitzmyer: An Appreciation

attempt to classify our distinguished colleague as a scholar of Judaic or Jewish studies is bound to raise even greater confusion. Probably no one would think at first glance to identify Joe Fitzmyer this way despite the fact that his contribution to our understanding of the Jews and Judaism in Late Antiquity is not only profound, but runs through virtually all of his supposedly other contributions like a leitmotif.

Joseph A. Fitzmyer was born in Philadelphia in 1920, and entered the Society of Jesus in 1938. After extensive studies in Classics and Theology in Chicago, Maryland, Belgium, and Germany, he received his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins in 1956, studied at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem. He

became assistant professor of New Testament and Biblical Languages at Woodstock College in Woodstock, MD, rising to the rank of full professor in 1964. At the same time he taught Semitic languages part-time at Johns Hopkins and eventually became visiting professor of New Testament

at Yale Divinity School. He taught at the University of Chicago, Fordham University, the Weston School of Theology, Cambridge, Mass., and Oxford University. In 1976 he became professor of New Testament at Catholic University of America, and he retired from teaching—but not from active scholarship—in 1986.

In addition to teaching, Joe Fitzmyer has served as editor of major biblical journals such as the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, and *New Testament Studies*. He has advanced Roman Catholic scholarship and served on the Pontifical Biblical Commission. His many students, graduate students, and colleagues have been able to learn from him and benefit from his rigorous scholarship and pleasant personality.



Very early on in Joe Fitzmyer's work, he set the agenda for his life's work. Already in the first few of years of his publications, in the 1950s, he had written on the Hebrew Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament, and individual Aramaic texts. These scholarly interests he continued to advance as his large and impressive bibliography grew. He never let up on research and publishing, and for each year the number of his publications was more than the last. He also wrote many reviews of the publications of others in the many fields in which he is expert.

In addition to many articles, he has authored

full-length biblical commentaries such as his translation and commentary of the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel according to Luke for the Anchor Bible series. His editions and commentaries on the Genesis Apocryphon and the Aramaic Tobit materials are classics of Qumran studies and harness all his other interests and skills.

To sense the breadth of his contributions, one has only to open the two volumes of his collected studies, *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* (1971) and *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (1979) now published together under the title *The Semitic Background of the New Testament* (1997). Many of these essays are distinguished for presenting analyses of Qumran material designed to illuminate issues of New Testament Studies. In these essays it is Fitzmyer's balance and fair reading of the Jewish materials that insures uniformly the success of his studies. The Judaic scholar will often find here a convenient point of entry into the early Christian materials important for the history

of Judaism. For example, his article, "Jewish Christianity in Acts in Light of the Qumran Scrolls" is a must for any scholar of the Judaism that spawned the rise of Christianity and the early church. His studies of the Aramaic background of the New Testament are a goldmine for scholars of ancient Judaism, and even articles like "The New Testament Title 'Son of Man' Philologically Considered" contribute immensely to our understanding of the Judaism that provides the background for the rise of early Christian concepts and

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terms. His studies of the Job Targum from Qumran and Aramaic Epistolography, and so many other topics have simply become keys to central aspects of Jewish thought and Jewish history in Second Temple and early Rabbinic times.

To strengthen this point I decided to perform an act of bibliomancy. I randomly opened his commentary to Acts in the prestigious Anchor Bible series. My eyes immediately found their way to the following words, "a teacher of the law esteemed by all the people." I had hit pay dirt, having fallen upon Fitzmyer's consideration of the speech in defense of Peter and the apostles by Gamaliel I, known better to most of us as Rabban Gamliel ha-Zaken. The Sadducees and the high priest had arrested them and they had somehow escaped and were preaching in the Temple. Gamaliel defended them before the Sanhedrin and argued the lack of wisdom in persecuting them. As a result the apostles were released.

Because Gamaliel refers in his speech to the movements of Judas

the Galilean and of Theudas, who actually appeared a decade later, Fitzmyer has to survey the discussion of these two figures in Jewish history. In the course of this discussion comes an analysis of problems in the Greek text of Josephus. And remember that my encounter with these details came only as a result of arbitrarily opening an 800-page book!

Let me finish with a few personal remarks. Joe Fitzmyer is a person of great character and integrity. His devotion to the pursuit of academic research and academic excellence cannot be rivaled. But he also brings to his work a sense of dignity and

respect for his colleagues that we all should emulate. I know from personal experience. He knows how to disagree with you, even to argue with you, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and friendship. It has been a privilege to learn from him and to work with him in a variety of contexts, and to honor him, for he is truly "a teacher of the law esteemed by all the people" (Acts 5:34).

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