

A Conversation with Hugh Schonfield at his home in London in January 1985

Greg Doudna

“A conversation with Dr. Hugh Schonfield, author of *The Passover Plot*, in Dr. Schonfield’s flat in London, England, January 13, 1985. This reconstructed conversation was written January 23, 1985, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, after returning from my trip to England.”

July 9, 2006. What follows, written Jan. 23, 1985, is a reconstructed conversation, meaning it is not from a tape recording. Hugh Joseph Schonfield (1901-1988) was 83 years old when I visited him in his apartment in London on Jan. 13, 1985. He was alert, with full white hair, dignified. It was a memorable experience to visit this author whose books I had read with such interest. The text which follows was my memory of this meeting set down on paper ten days after the meeting, written in the form of “exact words” even though they were from memory. Although I attempted accuracy, Schonfield himself objected, without stating specifics, to this document at the time. He stated that there were mistakes in it and he did not wish it circulated. I was unable to know or guess what were the mistakes or objections (I speculated: did he not wish to be quoted as joking that Jesus was a “pub-rounder”?, etc.). Nevertheless out of respect for Schonfield’s reaction I complied with his wishes until now (2006). I informed several friends who had copies of the writeup of Schonfield’s reaction and requested no further circulation of the text, and I did nothing further with the document until now. Now in 2006, a number of years after Schonfield’s death, I have decided to make this document available. I have made a judgment that the contribution to history, and my own knowledge that this document represents an honest, as distinguished from flawless, contemporary memory of a meeting with Schonfield, justifies its wider circulation. Because Schonfield did not identify where he saw mistakes, I am unable to propose corrections to the original document, beyond this general disclosure that Schonfield said there were mistakes in it. I present the document here unedited, as I typed it Jan. 23, 1985. GD.

Have you continued your research and writing?

Yes, writing books seems to be an addiction with me. My latest one is just coming out, *The Essene Odyssey*.

Can the Teacher of Righteousness be identified from history?

Probably not, because if he was a figure known to history he would have been identified by now. Even his name isn't known. He went under ciphers for names and I believe he died and is buried in Kashmir, India.

What will your next project be?

I'm making a revision of my translation of the New Testament, *The Authentic New Testament*, which is the only translation which was not done with theological motives. I translate it as a historian, not a theologian.

All the other translations?

All of them.

Revised Standard Version? Moffatt?

Yes. They don't understand that Jesus was messianic, rather than starting a new religion.

It's been some time since *The Passover Plot* came out. Do you still hold to what you presented in the book then?

Yes. I think it is gradually becoming more accepted and apparent with time.

You were certainly controversial. Do you remember *The Plain Truth* magazine, which said such a book couldn't be believed even by the author himself, and then after a letter from your attorney published an apology?

The Plain Truth? Yes, I remember. Another group in America even made a movie against the book.

I was a student at the fundamentalist Christian college which published *The Plain Truth*. That's past—I'm Quaker now—but I remember the impact of your books upon me and other fellow students, and our discussions of their ideas—

Good. That's what I need to know. Then they were serving their purpose.

In your books you present Jesus as messiah but not divine, which is objectionable to both Jews and Christians. What has it been like being unaccepted to either? You come from a Jewish background yet—

I *am* Jewish.

Well, are there any other Jewish groups or people which believe Jesus was the messiah but without the Christian doctrines of divinity and the rest?

No, apart from individuals. The groups of Jews who believe in Jesus usually accept all the Christian doctrines along with it.

What kind of reaction have your books and ideas received from Jews?

The climate in Judaism is changing. There is more toleration now for unemotional investigation of Jesus. Part of this is due to the creation of the state of Israel, and Jews became knowledgeable tour guides for Christians visiting their sites of history. And with the homeland there is something of a feeling of more security or willingness to re-examine Jesus, and reclaim Jesus' original Jewishness.

Was there ever a point in the first century when Jesus might have been accepted by the whole of the Jews or the Jewish mainstream?

I believe it came close to happening. James, or Jacob, the brother of Jesus at Jerusalem, was very highly esteemed among Jews everywhere, and the book of Acts shows many thousands in Jerusalem who accepted Jesus.

What happened?

Several things, but the main thing was the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem by Rome. The Jewish Christians fled and did not take part in the revolt. After the destruction of Jerusalem rabbinical Judaism developed, which was no longer messianic. There is rabbinic Judaism and there is biblical Judaism. 90% of Judaism today is not biblical Judaism but rabbinical Judaism.

Of course Christianity became Gentile, but did any of the original Judeo-Christians survive in history?

Yes, some small groups have survived to the present day.

They have?! I thought no Nazarenes or Jewish Christians survived beyond the fifth century.

They aren't known as Jews or Christians today but rather survived under Islam. After fleeing Palestine before the fall of Jerusalem, some of these Judeo-Christians* settled in areas later conquered by the Moslems. They were required to outwardly accept Islam, which they did, but they retained their knowledge and memory of being believers in Jesus who fled Palestine in the first century. They could accept Islam outwardly because there is some common ground between Judaism and Islam. They didn't have to admit more than that Mohammed was a

* It is unlikely "Judeo-Christian" would have been Schonfield's term; more likely simply "Jews"—GD.

prophet, whereas the Moslems themselves regard Jesus as a prophet, and Islam didn't care what else their conquered peoples believed, so long as they acknowledged Mohammed. Some of these peoples have only recently been discovered.

Is there any book you could recommend or refer me to where I could learn more of these descendants of the original Judeo-Christians?

Right here. (Points to his book *The Essene Odyssey* on the table stand nearby. It is hardbound, not yet available from the publisher, but he lets me have the copy for cost.)

Do you have any thoughts on who the Beloved Disciple of the gospel of John might have been?

We know quite a bit about him. He was a member of the high priest's family in Jerusalem and it was at his house that Jesus kept the last supper. This house was where the disciples gathered in early Acts. His name was John. In the departure from Jerusalem of the disciples before Jerusalem fell, this John went to Ephesus. He wrote down his memories of Jesus. There was also a disciple of his, also named John, who rewrote and added to what John the Beloved Disciple had written, and that is where the gospel of John comes from. There are graves of two Johns, both of these Johns, in Ephesus today. This second John, the disciple of the Beloved Disciple, was the Elder who wrote the epistles of I, II, and III John. The first John, the Beloved Disciple, meanwhile, had been sent to the isle of Patmos during the Roman persecution of the Christians under the reign of Domitian and wrote much of Revelation. He was sent as prisoner to the island rather than killed because he was an important person.

So the Beloved Disciple could not have been James, the brother of Jesus? The reason I ask this is because of Jesus turning over his mother to the Beloved Disciple, and James is the next oldest brother.

No, James was not the Beloved Disciple. James is well-known by his own name and would have been referred to by his own name. The reason Jesus turned his mother to the Beloved Disciple John in Jerusalem is because he had a home in Jerusalem where his mother could stay.

You mentioned Revelation being written in the time of Domitian. Do you give any credibility to the early dating theory which says Revelation was written before the fall of Jerusalem?

No. Domitian demanded emperor worship. He demanded everyone who addressed him to call him "My Lord and My God." When Thomas says this to Jesus in the gospel of John, this is the title Domitian demanded for himself.

Is there any evidence that the seventy weeks prophecy of Daniel was used by Jews to mean 490 years and to expect a Messiah in the first century?

Very much so. This figured strongly in the messianic expectations of the general time period, in the first century BC and the first century AD.

Were the sabbatical and Jubilee years known?

Yes. The sabbatical years were known and figure in the story. My book *The Jesus Party* discusses this. (Pulls the book off a nearby shelf and opens to the page where first century sabbatical years are listed, e.g. 26-27 AD, 33-34, 40-41.) The Jubilee year followed every seventh sabbatical year.

Which was the Jubilee year?

It is not known which sabbatical year the Jubilee year followed. It could have been any of the first century sabbatical years.

Do you know anything more about Annas the high priest?

Nothing more than what is known from history.

Are you familiar with the book by William Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* He says that he was.

I'm not familiar with the book. Jesus certainly wasn't married. He left his own family, his responsibilities as oldest son, his widowed mother, because of his messianic calling.

Do you have any further light on the temptations of Jesus?

It happened following his baptism by John the Baptist and realization that he was to be the messiah. The three temptations represent ideas of what the Messiah ought to be that Jesus rejected.

Has your life's work devoted to the study of Christian origins been worth it? Would you do it again?

It has been my calling. Yes, I think its been worthwhile. All of my life I've been conscious of being prepared in various ways for my work. The tools, the knowledge of languages, documents and manuscripts have seemed to come to me when I needed them. For example, I discovered the Hebrew original of Matthew and translated it—

You have the Hebrew original of Matthew?!

Yes. (He says where it was from) ... and it came into the hands of a dealer in rare and old books here in London who would call upon me from time to time to identify manuscripts. He called me about this one, and I saw that it was earlier than the oldest known Greek version and that it had a superior text, and I translated it.

And this has been accepted by the scholarly world?

It's generally been accepted by those who know of it, yes. Let me show you just one example, a minor thing really, of the kind of thing this manuscript clears up. Matthew says there are forty-two names in his genealogy of Jesus. Three groups of fourteen. But hardly anyone actually counts the names. There are only forty-one. But the Hebrew manuscript has the missing name, the full forty-two. (Here he takes his copy of the book from the shelf and opens it to a page where he shows me very similar-looking Hebrew or Greek characters.) What happened was in the translation from Hebrew to Greek this particular name's translation into Greek looks the same in Greek as the Greek for "begat." A later copyist thought the manuscript reading "begat begat" must have been a mistake so left out the second set of characters, not realizing he was omitting a name which would have been apparent from the Hebrew. Therefore all Bibles today based on the Greek text of Matthew omit the forty-second name, which my translation restores.

Interesting! Do you think there are other significant manuscripts or discoveries over there in the Middle East which will emerge of significance comparable to, say, the Dead Sea Scrolls?

Yes, and it is remarkable how much already has been discovered in our time, when our world is in the state it's in. Perhaps it is not coincidence. The Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, these are major findings. Right now there are reports of the existence of the original gospel written in Hebrew which precedes the four we have today, and which was used by the synoptic gospel writers, which has long been known about but never discovered. It is reported to be in a monastery in Iraq. This would have major effect on biblical studies. Unfortunately no one can get to it because it is in the middle of the Iranian-Iraqi war going on, so we'll have to wait until the war there ends.

Have you ever felt there was a barrier or end to the progress which can be made in understanding events of the time of Jesus, that at this distance there are things we can't know and limits to what we can? Have you ever felt stopped at a certain point and felt there was no way of going further?

No, I've never felt like I've gone to where I can go no further. In fact new material and discoveries are coming to us in this time such that knowledge of our

past is increasing, not decreasing, with time. We are progressively becoming more informed and knowledgeable about events in ancient times the further chronologically we go from them. The discoveries are revealing Jesus' messianism at the very time in our world when it needs messianism today most.

The "Commonwealth of World Citizens" which you founded and to which you allude in your books—is that a practice of what you see messianism in our world today?

Yes. Jesus was not starting a new religion but was fulfilling the messianic expectations of Jews of his time. Christians have a false idea that the Jews had an idea of a conquering mighty messiah and Jesus was not at all like these messianic expectations so the Jews rejected him. I have shown in my books that the concept of a servant-messiah which Jesus was was highly developed among the Essenes and sectarians and other Jews of his time. Messianism is the only hope for the world. Nothing else will work.

Not even the Greens?

No. Nothing else will work.

Was Jesus pacifist?

Yes.

So Jesus didn't see himself as part of the Children of Light executing the wrath of God upon the wicked by slaying the Children of Darkness at the day of the Lord in an eschatological holy war like the Essenes thought?

No. The Essenes had developed concepts of the messiah being a man of peace and a servant king. They did not believe the messiah would lead them in a holy war. They believed God would execute judgement, not that the messiah would lead them in doing this themselves.

What was Jesus' view toward the Temple? He calls it his Father's house yet he seems to have said something about seeing it destroyed, and the Essenes did not like the temple.

Jesus took part in the Temple worship and believed in the Temple. As for the statements about destroying the Temple in three days, we don't know that Jesus said that. After the destruction of the Temple and the split with the Jews, the Christians put things into Jesus' mouth. The Essenes weren't against the Temple. And Jesus was not an Essene.

The Essenes were not against the Temple—they just wanted to see its worship reformed instead of desecrated?

Right.

Why do you say Jesus was not an Essene?

The Essenes had retreated because they were holy, and they were secretive. Jesus did not believe in being secretive like the Essenes. He said let your light shine rather than putting it under a bushel, and whatever you hear in secret shout from the housetops. Jesus and his disciples were influenced by Essene concepts and teachings, yes, particularly the concept of what the messiah would be. But Jesus was never an Essene. These ideas that Jesus was an Essene or studied with them are wrong. Jesus was a Pharisee. He said, “The Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat.”

That’s a strong way to put it—“Jesus was a Pharisee.”

I put it in that strong way because people assume he was against the Pharisees. He was part of them.

What then was going on with the animosity the gospels reveal between Jesus and the Pharisees?

There are two things going on here. From Jesus’ side, Jesus was against the Pharisees not living up to their own standards. The Pharisees, on the other hand, objected to Jesus associating with the kinds of people a holy person should not associate with—Jesus was not acting like they thought a holy man should. Jesus associated with prostitutes and publicans and people who drank. Jesus was a pub-rounder (laughs).

If Jesus was a Pharisee and practiced the Jerusalem Temple worship, then he did not use the different Qumran calendar for the holydays?

Correct. He used the Jerusalem calendar, not the Qumran calendar.

Which calendar do you think was right—or does it matter?

The different calendar ideas spring from things like when the new moon is observed. If its a cloudy night then it can become quite arbitrary. I don’t think you can say either side was “right.”

What did Jesus have in mind for his disciples to do in Jerusalem after he would go through with his crucifixion and resurrection?

He didn’t have in mind anything for them, because he believed the Kingdom would be set up immediately. Remember he said to Caiaphas the high priest, “*You will see the Son of Man coming in clouds of glory.*” Jesus did not expect any time gap or interim period.

Obviously these eschatological expectations did not happen in the first century. With our Western ways of thinking today, it's hard to imagine things happening like that today—the signs in the heavens and the rest of what they expected. Is it relevant for us today?

Jesus fulfilled biblical messianism for the Jews, and that is relevant. They were wrong about the eschatology and signs in the heaven. That isn't going to happen that way. But messianism is the hope for the world. Jesus came to be messiah as one man for Israel. He came to Israel only because one man can't save the world. But the nation of Israel would in turn be the messiah for the world. This is why Jesus told his disciples not to go to the Gentiles—his mission was to Israel only. But Israel in turn would be the means for saving the world. So the world is included in the picture of messianism.

What about the role of Paul—was he a good guy or a bad guy?

After Paul's conversion he would go to the synagogues in the various cities to preach Jesus. There would be Gentile proselytes in each of the synagogues who would be interested in Paul's message. The word would spread and more Gentiles who weren't proselytes would come to the synagogue to hear Paul, the synagogue being a natural place to reach the public. Paul believed Jesus was messiah for the nation of Israel and that one had to be part of the nation of Israel to be saved. The question was how were the Gentiles to be incorporated into the nation of Israel which would be God's messianic servant nation to the world? Paul believed the Gentiles had to keep the full law of Moses, too. But Paul argues that by being part of Jesus the Gentiles were part of the nation of Israel since they were part of the messiah of Israel, and that Jesus had kept the law of Moses for them. Paul argues this to the rest of the Jewish Christians, and he argues this as a Pharisee, using logic of a Pharisee. The other Jewish Christians were not against the idea of Gentiles coming into the movement. They knew that the messiah would be for all peoples not just Israel. But where they differed was they felt the Gentiles should come to the synagogue and go through the training of a proselyte. They felt that some training and time were required to become part of the new messianic Jewish nation, whereas Paul felt the Gentiles could become part of it instantly without such training. Paul's vision of including Gentiles was right, and it was shared by the rest of the Jewish Christians, but historically Paul's instant universalism without the training to be prepared for it backfired. This is largely why Christianity developed as a Gentile religion with pagan, non-Jewish character, and why the original Jewish messianism was cast aside and forgotten.

What about the belief in a resurrection? Could Jesus and the movement around Jesus have existed at all without it? The Jewish belief in a personal resurrection seems to enter around the time of the troubles with Antiochus Epiphanes, as a way of making martyrdom worthwhile, and this seems to continue in early Christianity, with Paul saying if the dead don't rise then why go through suffering and martyrdom at all—the idea of

expecting a resurrection seems foreign to the way we think today, yet could first century Christianity have existed without it?

Its probably true that first century Christianity could not have existed without a belief in the resurrection.

Then would messianism today require believing something so foreign to our Western ways of thinking?

Only if you see resurrection in terms of individual identity. But if you see yourself as part of a larger whole of the universe, not as a separate atomic being, then resurrection can have meaning for us today.

So if we individually suffer or even die for doing the right thing, it is redeemed in the long run by the redeemed humane world we helped bring about? And the resurrection of Jesus would become a symbol for this kind of restored earthly creation, just as the deliverance of Israel from Egypt is a symbol for deliverance from oppression and release from sin?

Yes.

What of the recent discoveries related to early Gnostic Christianity, which was so different from the Christianity we know from history, and which did not survive? The Gnostic Christians' claims that they were associated with Mary Magdalene in opposition to the Christians of history centered around Peter—could this be true?

A lot of the differences in the kinds of Christianities discovered have to do with geographical differences. The Gnostic Nag Hammadi manuscripts come from Egypt. It has long been wondered why the New Testament ignores mention of Alexandria, which was a major center for Jewish learning and culture. Probably the New Testament letter to the Hebrews was written from Alexandria by Apollos, and—

Do you mean Apollos of the book of Acts?

Yes. He was from Alexandria. The gospel of Matthew also probably came from Alexandria. The four gospels were chosen from the four directions of the compass when the New Testament was being put together, so as to represent all areas of Christianity. Mark coming from the west, Luke from the north, John from Ephesus in the east, and Matthew from Alexandria to the south. This is why Matthew has Joseph and Mary spending time in Egypt after Jesus was born, for example.

What was the reaction of your family to you as a Jewish boy taking such an interest in Jesus?

I was always asking questions as a boy. They didn't know what to make of me. They regarded me like Joseph of the Old Testament—a dreamer of dreams. When I was a young boy Jesus wasn't mentioned. Then I heard one day that Jesus was Jewish, so I became curious. I borrowed a Bible from our family's landlady who was a Christian, because we didn't have a New Testament in our house. My lifelong interest in Jesus started with that. My parents were upset about it for a few years.

Did your wife appreciate and support your work?

Yes, she was totally with me. I married my childhood sweetheart. She shared with me my calling for my life's work. She died six years ago, after fifty-two years of marriage. After she died, I discovered among her papers poems she had written about me when she was a child—which she had never told me about.

That is touching. And you're still continuing your work?

I'll keep on until my work is finished. My books will be my legacy.

He showed me a collection of artifacts in a nearby bookcase, ranging from prehistoric times to the present. "The history of our world on two shelves," he calls it. "Will the story continue?" I ask. "I think it will," he answers. He tells me about his close friend H. G. Wells, whose chair he has been sitting in during the course of our conversation. I acquire from him a copy at cost of his *The Essene Odyssey*, not yet out in bookstores, and he autographs it for me. Then he gives me as a gift a copy of his book *The Politics of God*, and says, "This will commemorate our visit." Reading the book on the long flight back to the United States from London, I am stunned by the power and force of his conception of the non-coercive, non-geographical nation and government he envisions and founded, the Commonwealth of World Citizens, his vision of the messianic servant-nation in the midst of the world's nation-states, the inspiration of which is drawn for him directly from the figure of Jesus so long ago.

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