II. DEAD SEA SCROLLS
CHAPTER THREE

INTERPRETIVE AUTHORITY IN THE STUDYING COMMUNITY AT QUMRAN

1. Introduction

The complex and continuous process by which the Hebrew Bible took shape as canon is usually connected, but not necessarily in a simple linear way, to the movement from inner-biblical interpretation to postbiblical commentary. Occupying an important place along this continuum is the Jewish sectarian community at Qumran, whose history, ideology, and practices scholars seek to reconstruct from the community’s writings preserved among the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls contain a wealth of biblical texts, still in a fluid state, sectarian as well as non-sectarian works of biblical interpretation, and texts that describe the place of Scripture and its interpretation in the community’s

1 Let me here register some introductory caveats: 1. By “community at Qumran” or “Qumran community” I refer not just to those who lived at or around the ancient encampment at Khirbet Qumran on the western shore of the Dead Sea, the yahad of the Community Rule (1QS), but the larger movement of which scholars believe this settlement was the center. It has long been acknowledged (as early as the first century historian Flavius Josephus) that the center and its satellites were not alike in all aspects of their practice. Nor, for that matter, were they static over time. Furthermore, certain texts or parts of texts may be reflective either of different “branches” of the movement or of its different stages, including perhaps pre-settlement at Qumran. However, with regard to the topic of this study I find such differences to be unnoticeable, or only faintly traceable. Both the central and branch camps were constructed as studying communities, such study being similarly self-defining for both. This will justify, therefore, my synthetic treatment of the “Qumran community” in this respect, even as I hope that future studies might draw finer distinctions than are possible here. 2. Since many if not most of the texts found in the caves near the Qumran settlement are not necessarily products of that movement itself, but perhaps originating in some stage of its “pre-history” or brought to its “library” from without, my evidence is drawn solely from those texts which by scholarly consensus are of sectarian provenance, having been produced or at least copied for Qumran use some time from about 150 B.C.E. to 68 C.E., with most deriving from the latter half of that period. 3. The Qumran community’s portrayal of itself and its practices is to varying degrees idealized. Thus, my description of the “Qumran community” as a “studying community” should be understood as one not simply of what that community was, but of what, in part through its very study, it sought to be. I shall return to this point and its implications at the end.