CHAPTER 5

Some Thoughts about the Diffusion of Biblical Manuscripts in Antiquity

The purpose of this paper is to offer some thoughts on the diffusion of biblical manuscripts in antiquity and to find out whether our knowledge of the Dead Sea Scrolls aids us in understanding the state of affairs in the period when the scrolls were written as well as in earlier periods. The available evidence is limited, but nevertheless we will be able to obtain some valuable insights.

When speaking of the diffusion of the biblical scrolls, we refer to the number of copies that were circulating, their origin and possible patterns of distribution.

1 The Number of Scripture Scrolls Present at Qumran

The number of Scripture texts circulating in ancient Israel when the Dead Sea Scrolls were written is unknown, but the Judean Desert sites at least provide some clues for that region. Some 230 fragmentary biblical scrolls were found at Qumran alone and some 25 at other sites, totaling 255 scrolls. On the one hand, I would deduct around fifty from the list of Qumran texts that, in my view, are not biblical;1 on the other hand, we would have to add an unknown number of texts that have perished since 68 ce. We therefore retain the number of 230 texts for Qumran.

In the last centuries BCE and the first century CE, Scripture books circulated separately, and while 230 sounds like a large number, these scrolls represent only individual books and not collections (complete Bibles, in modern parlance). This number equals approximately ten complete copies of the Bible if we calculate according to the traditional reckoning of twenty-four books in the

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1 For example, I consider most of the Qumran Psalms texts to be liturgical and not biblical. See chapters 16 and 22 in this volume as well as my study “The Authority of Early Hebrew Scripture Texts,” in Journal of Reformed Theology 5 (2011): 276–295. By the same token, I would disregard scrolls containing only part of a book such as 4QDeutq probably containing only the Song in Deuteronomy 32, and three scrolls containing only Psalm 119 (4QPsq, 4QPsb, 5QPs). All these are not Scripture scrolls in the usual sense of the word.
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Bible. This would be a very rough calculation since the biblical books are represented in the Judean Desert in different quantities. For example, the Torah is represented more frequently in the Judean Desert finds than the other books. Further, some books are represented at Qumran by many copies, while others are only infrequently seen among the Qumran scrolls.

The number of 230 biblical scrolls represents the sum total of the manuscripts found at Qumran when the community was destroyed in 68 CE. Since the material of the scrolls was preserved for many centuries in the dry climate of Qumran, the 230 items represent scrolls taken to Qumran during the whole period of its occupation as well as those written on site. This calculation pertains to the six or seven generations of settlement at Qumran, from 100–50 BCE onwards, according to the revised chronology of Magness, until 68 CE.

We now turn to some speculations regarding the scrolls found at Qumran. These speculations are interesting in their own right, and also have a bearing on scroll production in ancient Israel as a whole.

The dates assigned to the Qumran scrolls, summarized in Table 1, reveal the presence of differing numbers of scrolls in the various time periods, which may be interpreted in different ways.

Starting with the earliest scrolls found at Qumran, dating to 250–200 BCE, an increasingly larger number of scrolls was found for each subsequent period. The peak years of scroll production, at least for those found at Qumran, were between 100 BCE and 50 CE, again in ever-increasing numbers. These numbers reflect the copying of scrolls at Qumran and elsewhere and they refer only to the production date of the scrolls and not to the date of their introduction to the Qumran community. Nevertheless, there is a striking correlation between the peak years of Qumran scroll production and the dates of Qumran settlement (that is, in their most comprehensive understanding, between 100 BCE and

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2 Within the biblical corpus, a special interest in the Torah is visible at all the sites in the Judean Desert: 87 texts or 43.5 percent of the Qumran biblical corpus represent the books of the Torah. At sites other than Qumran this percentage is even greater: fifteen of the twenty-five biblical texts or 60.0 percent represent the Torah.

3 For example, Deuteronomy is represented by 30 copies and Isaiah by 21 copies.

4 For example, only two copies of Joshua and three copies of Judges were preserved at Qumran.

5 J. Magness, *The Archeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 65. At an earlier stage of the research, the occupation of Qumran was usually accepted as being from 130 BCE following the chronology of R. de Vaux, *Archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Schweich Lectures, British Academy, 1959; London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

6 The numbers are based on the list of B. Webster, “Chronological Index of the Texts Found in the Judaean Desert,” in *DJD* xxxix, 351–446.