WHAT HISTORY CAN WE GET FROM THE SCROLLS,
AND HOW?

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I. What History?

The ‘what history’ of my title does not mean ‘how much history?’ but ‘what kind of history?’ The conventional kind of history, the one that we would perhaps like to get from the Scrolls, and that many of us have been trying to get, aims first to reconstruct a narrative, then to locate that narrative, with its people, places and events, into the narrative of the wider historical world. The traditional historical model is of a single universal human history, an objective and coherent series of facts; something that we can say ‘really happened’.

At first sight Qumran scholars appear to have the necessary resources to achieve this goal. We have literary texts, primary and perhaps also secondary, and plenty of archaeology. But after initial confidence, we have now reached a state where the exact connections between the primary and secondary texts and between the texts and the archaeology are controversial and even elusive. It is frustrating that the story behind such a unique resource cannot be told. The Scrolls tell us an enormous amount about early Judaism or Judaisms, and quite a bit about the emergence of Christianities too, but they do not actually offer much by way of discrete and identifiable persons and events. This may or may not be deliberate on the part of the authors, but it is unfortunate. While the historian is focussed on the past, they were clearly more concerned about the future. There is no historiography at Qumran, and real names are reserved for bit-players like King Jonathan, Shelomzion, the Seleucid Demetrius or the Roman Aemilius Scaurus. The central characters of sectarian history all have sobriquets, nicknames. This usage serves to underline the typological or symbolic nature of the events and persons being alluded to; the individual identity of the characters is simply not as important as their roles in a pre-ordained divine plan. The only real historical agent is God himself.

In her instructive and entertaining book Reading for History in the Damascus Document, Maxine Grossman argued that literary-critical
readings ‘produce’ history of a kind; but these histories belong to a dynamic, and ideologically driven process of constructing and reconstructing textual meaning.¹ This is true of the ancient histories that texts produce and of the modern histories generated by modern-day exegesis of those texts. The following quote from Grossman’s book in my view applies to all the Qumran texts,

A reading of the Damascus Document tells us more about what the covenant community thought of itself, or could potentially understand itself to be, than it tells us, in any objective way, about ‘what really happened’ in the history of this community.²

II. Cultural/Collective Memory

Haggadah and historiography, which are arguably inseparable in the rabbinic corpus, are very hard to disentangle in other ancient texts, and certainly in the Scrolls. Both modes of storytelling share the purpose of creating or modifying a perception of the past in a way that the realities of the present require. What we encounter in the Damascus Document, for example, is not what happened, but what we would call ‘social’, ‘collective’ or ‘cultural’ memory. This concept was invented by Maurice Halbwachs,³ and has been taken up fitfully into biblical and early Jewish and Christian studies; the best systematic application is the study of Moses by Jan Assmann, the Heidelberg Egyptologist, who has also coined a term for it: ‘mnemohistory’.⁴ Cultural or collective memory⁵ is not to be understood in the sense of a reliable recollection.

² Grossman, Reading for History, 209.
⁵ I am aware that some exponents draw distinctions between ‘collective,’ ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ memory. I find the distinctions unhelpful and regard these terms as interchangeable, though I accept that each scholar may find one term more acceptable or accurate than another.