THE CENTRALITY OF THE TEMPLE IN 4QMMT*

HANNE VON WEISSENBERG

In the earliest decades of Qumran scholarship, the scholarly reconstructions of the history and identity of the Qumran community were largely based on the documents found in Cave 1 and the Damascus Document. It was furthermore assumed that this Qumran community was somehow affiliated, even though not entirely identical, with the Essenes, known from the classical sources such as Josephus, Philo of Alexandria, and Pliny the Elder. This Qumran group, or its predecessors, was in disagreement with the Temple establishment over certain religious matters, such as the high priesthood, the festival calendar, halakhic and purity issues. This disagreement created an increasing tension with the Temple establishment, ultimately leading to the separation and isolation of the Qumran group, and the rejection of the Jerusalem Temple as polluted. The break with the Temple is often understood in contemporary scholarship as a dramatic turning point in the community’s history.

When one of the most important documents from Cave 4, the legal text called 4QMMT, was first announced and published, it was thought that this fascinating text would solve the question of the origins of the Qumran movement, and the reasons for their schism with the rest of Judaism. 4QMMT was dated by the editors, Elisha Qimron and John Strugnell, to around 150 BCE and it is generally considered one of the earliest Qumran writings or, alternatively, pre-Qumranic in its origin. In the subsequent scholarly discussions the authors/redactors of 4QMMT were identified as representatives of the Qumran movement or their ancestors. The early dating for this text was partly based on the assumption that the moderateness of the document’s polemical tone must reflect the early history or prehistory of

---

*I would like to thank Prof. Ian Werrett and Hanna Tervanotko MA for their valuable feedback. I am grateful to Dr. Charlotte Hempel for inviting this contribution to her volume.


the Qumran community. At this point in the community’s history, an
eirenic discussion between the Qumran community, and those outside
of the group would have been possible.\(^3\)

Against the historical background sketched above, 4QMMT has
been interpreted in a variety of ways. The interpretations vary in their
details; however, in most cases 4QMMT has been defined as the very
document explicating the main disputes of the Qumranites or Qum-
ran-Essenes with the Temple establishment in Jerusalem. Its purpose
is viewed and summarized by most scholars as a document created
to justify the sectarian schism”.\(^4\) In several, slightly variant, interpre-
tations of 4QMMT it is assumed that the document was addressed
to a group of ‘outsiders’, probably the Temple establishment, either
just before the rift or soon after it. After the break with this group,
the Qumran community’s relationship with their opponents remained
hostile and defensive, and no more efforts were made toward recon-
ciliation or reformation of the situation in the Jerusalem Temple.\(^5\)

For instance, according to Eyal Regev, 4QMMT was originally writ-
ten during the early history of the Qumranites with the purpose of
reforming the practices at the Temple. After failing in this effort, the
“Qumran sectarians” simply removed themselves from the Temple
cult, whose rituals and practices were considered to be morally defil-
ing. In Regev’s opinion, after the failed attempt of a reform, the Temple
with its rituals became irrelevant for them.\(^6\) Stephen Hultgren, on the
other hand, agrees with the scholarly consensus about the early dat-
ing of 4QMMT and places it in the pre-Qumranic period. He further
states that the “group behind 4QMMT has already decided to boycott
the Temple”—but they are still cherishing a hope of return, and the
author(s)/redactor(s) of 4QMMT may still have been in Jerusalem at
the time of the document’s composition.\(^7\)

---

\(^3\) Qimron and Strugnell, *Qumran Cave 4*. V, 117.

\(^4\) The phrase is used by L. H. Schiffman in his article “Miqtsat Ma’asei ha-Torah,”
New York: OUP, 2000), 1: 558–560, here 558. See also A. I. Baumgarten, *The Flourish-
ing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era: An Interpretation* (JSJSup 55; Leiden: Brill,
1997) 75.

\(^5\) One of the most recent advocates of this view is E. Regev, “Abominated Temple
and a Holy Community: The Formation of the Notions of Purity and Impurity in

\(^6\) Regev, “Abominated Temple and a Holy Community.”

\(^7\) S. Hultgren, *From the Damascus Covenant to the Covenant of the Community:
Literary, Historical and Theological Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (STD) 66; Leiden:
Brill, 2007), 251, 256–257.