In this article I address the issue of “ritual density” in Qumran sectarian practice. “Ritual density” is defined by Catharine Bell as “why some societies or historical periods have more ritual than others.” It implies a distinction between a group’s ritual activity and the other components of which its life consists, and on that assumption represents the measure of one in relation to the other at any given point in the group’s history. Ritual density, it may be said, is the degree to which rites play a role in the life and/or piety of any given society; otherwise put, it is the ratio of ritual to other aspects of life in the day-to-day operations of a community. Conclusions about such a ratio will, of course, depend on how broadly or narrowly one defines “ritual.” But, bracketing that ambiguity for the moment, the objective is worth considering. When applied to the Qumran sect, ritual density can offer a valuable lens for assessing the community’s fundamental character.

Measuring ritual density in sectarian practice faces a number of challenges, especially when one seeks to do it through the group’s texts. Some of these challenges obtain for any reconstructive work done on the Dead Sea Scrolls. Others, however, pertain more specifically to the issue of sectarian ritual: determining what amount of rites

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3 E.g., hazarding reconstructions from the meager amount of texts preserved (or preserved intact enough to offer meaningful data); tracing halakhic changes through redactional strata; judging whether a document (and its halakhah) is “sectarian” or not and, if so, whether it would have been currently in use, antiquated, eschatological, or schematic.
prescribed in a document were actually performed; reconstructing the sect’s nonritual life, against which its ritual activity is to be weighed; and, as Ithamar Gruenwald has recently suggested, uncovering ritual details behind summary headings and commentary. The problem engaged here is the reticence texts sometimes have about ritual. Halakhic documents, even the most forthcoming of them, often assume as much as they state when prescribing rites: where, in some instances, not all the ritual stated was actually performed, in others, not all the ritual performed may have been stated. Several reasons for this could be adduced: an oral tradition working in tandem with the written one; an “in-house” audience, expected to be familiar with fundamental customs; the use of literary genres, such as “rules,” that are less exhaustive compilations than they are suggestive digests. The result, however, is the same. Even the richest and best preserved of sectarian writings may rehearse less ritual in their directives than was actually performed by their practitioners.

A way forward on this matter may be found by considering further the approach that Jacob Milgrom has taken to Leviticus. Milgrom’s method has already been applied to Qumran studies, as a means for understanding the way the sect read Torah (see below). Here I will press further, suggesting that the same method can be applied to the way we read sectarian halakhah. In what follows, I will explore the dimensions this method can bring to the search for ritual density in Qumran practice. First, I will articulate the specific aspect of Milgrom’s approach that forms my point of departure. Second, I will apply that aspect to one rite in one sectarian document—ablutions as prescribed in the Serekh Ha-Yahad. Third, I will offer a caveat to Milgrom’s method by noting two counterexamples. And finally, I will outline the complexity this caveat brings to the issue, revisiting the topic of ablutions in the Serekh Ha-Yahad.

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