THE ‘SECTARIAN’ CALENDAR OF QUMRAN

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In their insularity and over-specialization, Qumran scholars have unwittingly mimicked their own object of study—I am probably not the first to have remarked this. But if Qumran Studies has become a sect within Biblical and Jewish Studies, scholars of Qumran calendars have become a sub-sect within it—probably because of the perceived complexity of the Qumran calendars and calendar texts. And yet this has not prevented Qumran scholars, and Jewish historians in general, from recognizing the centrality of the calendars to Qumran culture and more particularly to Qumran sectarianism. Already in the first decade of Qumran scholarship, Shemaryahu Talmon went as far as arguing that the calendar was one of the cornerstones of Qumran’s sectarian schism.1 This argument has been reiterated many times since, but perhaps not subjected to the same level of criticism as have been the other early Qumran theories (such as the Essene identification, the interpretation of the Qumran site, etc.). The purpose of this article is to reconsider whether the calendar of Qumran was itself sectarian, and to what extent it contributed to the sectarian identity of the Qumran community.

The scrolls discovered near Qumran, or at least a significant proportion of them, have traditionally been labelled as ‘sectarian’, but without much attention given to the meaning of this term.2 This is not

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2 More recently, scholars have been identifying Qumran texts as ‘sectarian’ and ‘non-sectarian’ on the basis of linguistic and literary features, without attempting to make any historical or sociological claim about the contents of these works, their authors, and their background. ‘Sectarian’ and ‘non-sectarian’ thus become purely literary categories, but the choice of these labels and their inherent meaning are not questioned or discussed. See D. Dimant, ‘Sectarian and Non-Sectarian Texts from Qumran: The Pertinence and Usage of Taxonomy’, *Revue de Qumran* 24/1 (2009), 7–18; F. Zanella, ‘Sectarian’ and ‘Non-Sectarian’ Texts: A Possible Semantic Approach’, *ibid.*, 19–34.
the place to survey the various uses that have been made of this term in relation to the Dead Sea Scrolls, or of the various interpretations that have been assumed with regard to sectarianism in Qumran scholarship, although a survey of this kind would be quite instructive.\(^3\) The principal reason why texts such as the *Community Rule* and *Damascus Rule* have been identified as sectarian is perhaps their distinctive calls for separatism, insularity, and rejection of the outside world, which are commonly regarded as essential features of sectarian religious groups.\(^4\) These features will be treated in this present article as definitional of sectarianism, even if this definition is arbitrary and only reflects what I believe, without much evidence, to reflect a certain scholarly consensus.

Another reason why some Qumran sources have been labelled as sectarian is that their contents—halakhic, exegetical, ideological—appears original and differs from what is found elsewhere in ancient Judaism. This criterion, however, is highly problematic, because ancient Judaism is generally known—through its literature (biblical, apocryphal, pseudepigraphical, Hellenistic, early Christian, rabbinic, etc.) and through historical accounts (especially Josephus)—as varied, divided, and diversified. One should be reluctant to characterize the whole of ancient Judaism as ‘sectarian’ purely because Jews in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods frequently disagreed on the interpretation of the Bible and specific laws: rarely does one find evidence, indeed, that differences of opinion or practice among various Jewish groups were associated with the other ‘sectarian’ features enumerated above, i.e. insularity and rejection of the outside world. In this light, the original, peculiar aspects of Qumran literature in terms of ideology, biblical interpretations, and religious teachings cannot be regarded *ipso facto* as sectarian. In this article, I shall argue the same regarding the calendar of Qumran: although its structure differed radically from that of other, contemporary Jewish calendars, the assumption that this difference was ‘sectarian’ or the foundation of Qumran sectarianism remains entirely to be justified.
