7. THE CALENDAR AT QUMRAN

Martin G. Abegg, Jr.
Trinity Western University

Calendars, or the writings that assume them, comprise a substantial percentage of the Dead Sea Scrolls. If not the prime intentional element among the Scrolls, it certainly is the calendar that in large part demonstrates that the corpus is the product of a particular ideology rather than an accidental collection of unrelated manuscripts. If we are to understand the Scrolls, we must come to terms with their practice of measuring time. I accordingly have designed this article to be a primer to the study of calendar reckoning, highlighting the chief components that are significant to an understanding of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The discussion is into four parts: 1) introductory comments concerning the still unsolved mysteries of the Qumran calendar, 2) a review of the eight cycles that describe the calendar’s function, 3) a review of the Qumran festival calendar, which is a key component to the calendar’s theological purpose, and 4) a table that plots a complete six-year priestly rotation, a helpful tool with which to understand various discussions throughout the article.¹

Introduction to Mysteries of the Qumran Calendar

In truth, before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls little was known of a detailed nature concerning the Jewish calendar in the

intertestamental period. It was clear that a calendar based on the approximately twenty-nine and a half day length of the lunar cycle was practiced widely throughout the Ancient Near East. That there were competing reckonings also became clear in the nineteenth century when the books of Jubilees and 1 Enoch became available to Western scholars. Both of these works revealed a “solar” calendar of three hundred and sixty-four days comprised of four quarters of ninety-one days—on the pattern of two thirty day and one thirty-one day month—which stood in clear opposition to the three hundred and fifty-four day lunar model. The calendar disputes of the Second Temple period began to become evident.

The pertinent elements of the framework describing the Qumran calendar were published by J.T. Milik, but the basic nature of the calendar had already been ascertained by S. Talmon from clues he discovered in the Habakkuk commentary (1QpHab 11:2-8):3

26 “Woe to the one who gets his friend drunk, pouring out his anger, making him drink, just to get a look at their holy days” (Hab. 2:15). This refers to the Wicked Priest, who pursued the Teacher of Righteousness to destroy him in the heat of his anger at his place of exile. At the time set aside for the repose of the Day of Atonement he appeared to them to destroy them and to bring them to ruin on the fast-day, the Sabbath intended for their repose.4

Talmon reasoned from the evident difference for reckoning the date of the Day of Atonement between the communities represented by the two priestly characters in the passage (the Teacher of Righteousness and the Wicked Priest) and from the discovery of fragments of Jubilees in the caves that the Qumran covenanters also used the jubilean three hundred and sixty-four-day calendar. He also helpfully assessed the role of the Qumran community in the calendar dispute:

... deviation from the official calendar is found to constitute a standard feature in Jewish sectarianism, especially during the centuries immediately preceding the Christian era and during the early Christian period.5

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3 It is only fitting that Talmon is also the official editor of the calendar manuscripts for eventual publication in DJD XXI.
4 All translations from M. Wise, et al., The Dead Sea Scrolls.