12. BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AT QUMRAN

Craig A. Evans
Trinity Western University

Virtually every document at Qumran engages in or presupposes biblical interpretation. The most obvious examples are the so-called pesharim, or interpretations of Scripture. But even the Bible Scrolls themselves give evidence of interpretive tendencies\(^1\) (as seen, for example, in the “Great Isaiah Scroll” of cave 1).\(^2\) There are examples of “rewritten Bible” (such as the Genesis Apocryphon), liturgical materials, apocalyptic, wisdom, and didactic writings that in various ways interpret Scripture, either explicitly or implicitly.\(^3\) In the present essay most of the attention will be given to the pesharim, but examples of biblical interpretation in other writings will also be taken into account. We shall explore (1) the origin and definition of peshar, (2) the types of peshar found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and (3) biblical interpretation in other Scrolls.

Before probing the origin and definition of peshar, it must be emphasized that Scripture played a defining and life-giving role for the Jewish society that left behind the Scrolls near the Dead Sea. Not only is Scripture appealed to, as one would expect, in order to discover and defend Jewish law and therefore a lifestyle both sacred and mundane, and not only is Scripture appealed to in order to find the

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\(^3\) Illustrative is the recently published M.E. Stone and E.G. Chazon, eds., Biblical Perspectives: Early Use and Interpretation of the Bible in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Leiden, 1998).
community's origin and destiny—again, something that is not unusual in a Jewish context—Scripture informs the collectors and authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls as to how they differ from other Jews, especially from those who maintain the Temple in Jerusalem and also from those who belong to the other various religious-political parties (such as the Pharisees). Pesher interpretation permits the Scripture scholars of Qumran to find themselves—in contrast to and in distinction from other Jews—and their story in the sacred text, foretold by the prophets of old. This story involves the past, present, and future. Members of the sect (probably the Essenes, or a branch of the Essenes) can know why and when their movement arose, who are the faithful who belong to it and how they may remain in it, and what the future holds for them, for other Israelites, and for the gentiles, particularly the Romans. Pesher interpretation is, therefore, of vital importance for this community, equaling, perhaps even exceeding, the importance of midrash for later expressions of Rabbinic Judaism.

*Origin and Definition of Pesher at Qumran*

Pesher interpretation has its roots in Scripture itself. The overwhelming majority of occurrences are found in Aramaic Daniel, but one Hebrew example is found in Ecc. 8:1: "Who is like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation [pesher] of a thing [dabar]?" The Preacher's rhetorical question has in mind the interpretation of a saying, problem, riddle, or any matter (dabar, lit., "word") put before the wise man. But the explicit association of interpretation (pesher) and mystery (raz)—the essential vocabulary of pesher interpretation as it was pursued at Qumran—particularly a mystery of divine origin, is found in the book of Daniel. In this writing we find four major instances: in chapter 2, where Nebuchadnezzar wishes to know the significance of the image seen in his dream; in chapter 4, where Nebuchadnezzar wishes to know the meaning of his dream of the tree; in chapter 5, where Belshazzar wishes to know the meaning of the writing on the wall; and in chapter 7, where Daniel himself wishes to know the meaning of his heavenly vision.

In Dan. 2:4 the Chaldean magicians say to Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live for ever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation [pesher]" (also Dan. 2:5-7, 9, 16, 24-26, 30, 36, 45). The troubled monarch views his dream of the human image as a "mys-