The Qumran “Library” and Other Ancient Libraries: Elements for a Comparison

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So easy to look at, so hard to define.

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What is a Library?

The special theme of the Qumran session at the Amsterdam SBL International 2012 meeting was “the nature of the ‘library’ at Qumran.” The organizers stated:

The overarching question we wish to consider is whether or not the documents from the different caves make up a library of a particular group or another type of collection.

It is interesting to note that the word “library” has been put between quotation marks in this call for papers to underline the fact that the very concept of library at Qumran, although widely used, is by no means obvious. Thus, before addressing the question of the texts making up our library it will be helpful to analyze in some detail the very concept of “library” and to ask ourselves what a library is.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary,1 in modern usage a library may be defined as:

a building or room containing collections of books, periodicals, and sometimes films and recorded music for use or borrowing by the public or the members of an institution: such as a university library. A library, however, is also a collection of books and periodicals held in a library, or a room in a private house where books are kept.

Except for what concerns movies and recorded music such a definition could also suit ancient libraries. Moreover, today there is a clear-cut distinction

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1 It will suffice to mention here the online definition: http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/library, accessed January 2, 2014.
between libraries and archives, an archive being a collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people. In ancient times, though, this distinction was not so clear-cut.²

**Some Examples of Ancient Libraries**

Before we discuss the situation at Qumran, we shall analyze some examples of libraries in the ancient world, focusing on different Graeco-Roman, Near Eastern and Jewish socio-cultural contexts.³

Justus Lipsius (1547–1606), an important scholar of the European Renaissance, published a treatise on ancient libraries, *De bibliothecis syntagma*, in 1602 and in a revised edition in 1607.⁴ As the prototype of early library historical writing, it set the standard for survey studies for the next 250 years. Justus Lipsius noticed that libraries are as ancient as the invention of writing:⁵

Collections of books, bibliothecae, date from the earliest days, and, if I am not mistaken, were established as soon as letters were invented. The art of writing must have arisen almost as soon as man began to learn and to think; and this art would not have been profitable if books had not been preserved and arranged for present and future use.

The most ancient examples of libraries are found in an ancient Near Eastern context.⁶ A temple in the Babylonian town of Nippur, dating from the first

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⁶ See the standard work by Olof Pedersen, *Archives and Libraries in the Ancient Near East 1500–300 BC* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1998); see also Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World*