

The Ancient ‘Library’ of Qumran between Urban and Rural Culture

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The scrolls found in the caves near Qumran are archaeological artefacts that belong to the settlement, but the question is what the exact significance is of the scrolls lying in those caves. Is it a coincidence and did the scrolls somehow end up there during the revolt against Rome, at which moment the inhabitants of Qumran helped because they were around? Or is it less of a coincidence that the scrolls ended up in those caves? If some scrolls were present at the site before the revolt broke out and if some of the inhabitants were collectors and copyists of scrolls then the site of Qumran in combination with the nearby caves in which the scrolls were found represents a fascinating mixture of rural and regional material culture on the one hand and, on the other hand, urban and high literary culture. Comparative analysis of the text finds in the Judaeen Desert highlights two issues.¹ First, the find sites indicate the spread of literary texts within various strata of ancient Jewish society, outside of urban centres such as Jerusalem. Second, the context, number of literary texts, and character of texts of the Judaeen Desert text finds reveal a differentiated engagement with literary texts by different kinds of people in Jewish society at the time. The movement behind the scrolls can be characterized as a milieu of Jewish intellectuals or scholars who were engaged at a very high level with their ancestral traditions.

Qumran from a Rural and Regional Perspective

There has been much debate about whether the scrolls were directly related to the inhabitants of the Qumran settlement, i.e. whether or not they were the owners of the scrolls hidden in the surrounding caves. Since the excavations of Roland de Vaux most scholars have assumed that the scrolls from

¹ This article is largely based, especially in the second and third part, on Mladen Popović, “Qumran as Scroll Storehouse in Times of Crisis? A Comparative Perspective on Judaeen Desert Manuscript Collections,” *JSJ* 43 (2012): 551–94. I thank the editors of this volume, Sidnie White Crawford and Cecilia Wassen, and the editor of the *STDJ* series, George Brooke, for inviting me to return to this article from 2012 and add some further reflections.

the surrounding caves once belonged to the inhabitants of the Qumran site. Some scholars, however, suggested the scrolls to have a different origin than the Qumran site.² Already early on in scrolls research Karl Rengstorf argued for a Jerusalem temple origin.³ Norman Golb argued the scrolls represent a cross-section of early Jewish literature that originated from various Jerusalem libraries.⁴ Following Golb, Yizhar Hirschfeld argued for various Sadducean libraries in Jerusalem, which, possibly via a priestly connection, found their way to Qumran, where the inhabitants helped to safeguard the precious texts at the time of the Jewish revolt against Rome.⁵ These explanations are deficient with regard to their characterization of the scrolls collection(s), but that does not rule out the option that (all or some) scrolls originate from elsewhere than Qumran.

The issue of whether elements of Qumran's material culture are extraordinary or not has long dominated the discussion of the relation between the scrolls and the site. From the perspective of material culture scholars seem more and more to agree that Qumran was an integral part of the regional context, but disagree whether the site did or did not stand out.⁶

As at most other Judean Desert sites, the Qumran pottery assemblage is for the most part made up of simple, everyday ceramics. That is why Jodi Magness characterizes it as monotonous, simple, and repetitive. Regarding everyday pottery Qumran does not stand out; most types found at Qumran also occur at other sites. But when compared to the upper-class mansions in Upper City Herodian Jerusalem, the palaces in the Judean Desert, in the Jordan valley

2 Katharina Galor, Jean-Baptiste Humbert, and Jürgen Zangenberg, eds., *Qumran: the Site of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Archaeological Interpretations and Debates* (STDJ 57; Leiden: Brill, 2006); Yitzhak Magen and Yuval Peleg, *The Qumran Excavations 1993–2004 Preliminary Report* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2007).

3 Karl H. Rengstorf, *Khirbet Qumrân und die Bibliothek vom Toten Meer* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960).

4 Norman Golb, "Khirbet Qumran and the Manuscripts of the Judean Wilderness: Observations on the Logic of Their Investigation," *JNES* 49 (1990): 103–14; idem, *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls? The Search for the Secret of Qumran* (New York: Scribner, 1995).

5 Yizhar Hirschfeld, *Qumran in Context: Reassessing the Archaeological Evidence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

6 For recent overviews see, for example, Eric M. Meyers, "Khirbet Qumran and its Environs," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. T.H. Lim and J.J. Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21–45; Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of the Holy Land: From the Destruction of Solomon's Temple to the Muslim Conquest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 108–32; Eric M. Meyers and Mark A. Chancey, *Alexander to Constantine: Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 83–112.