RETHINKING THE NOTION OF "SCRIPTURE" IN THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS: LEVITICUS AS A TEST CASE

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The study of scripture in the Dead Sea Scrolls is shaped by the rock-solid conviction that "the Bible" for the Essenes was a revered textual object which they interpreted at will in the course of expressing their theological convictions. Hence scholars are preoccupied with establishing the scope of the Essene's Bible, the precise character of the biblical text, and the nature and consequences of their exegetical methods. Yet the results of the search for the Qumran canon, text, and interpretive method urge us to adopt a very different notion of scripture among the Essenes. We have discovered that there was no canon at Qumran, only an open-ended appreciation of a vast number of texts and traditions, many of which are not in our Hebrew Bible. We have learned that the biblical scrolls exhibit unrestrained textual diversity, a fact that seemed not to worry the Essenes. And we have determined that their exegetical practices, although in some respects like those of the Jews of their day, were just as often their own unique methods of making sense of the texts and traditions they inherited. In short, we discover—with the help of the following survey of research and glimpse into the presence of Leviticus at Qumran—that scripture for the Essenes was no static entity, a revered textual object that could be manipulated at will. Instead, in the words of William Graham, "'scripture' is not a literary genre but a religio-historical one"; as such it should be studied not as a static textual reality, but as a relational phenomenon, a dynamic human process.¹

The Study of Scripture in the Dead Sea Scrolls: a Critical Review

Interest in the Qumran "canon" has been driven in part by an even greater interest in ascertaining the moment when the Hebrew

Bible/Old Testament canon first took its present shape.² In any case, besides pointing to possible “canonical” language in the scrolls,³ scholars have sought to determine the Essenes’ authoritative texts by a variety of criteria:⁴ the number of times a book appears in the community library,⁵ the quotation of a book with a citation formula,⁶ or


³ See 1QS 1:1–3, which urges the maskil to instruct the community to “seek God with all their heart and with their soul, to do that which is good and upright before him, just as he commanded through Moses and all his servants the prophets”, and 4QMMT C 9–10, “that you may have understanding in the book of Moses [and] in the book[s of the p]rophe[t]s and in Dav[id].”

⁴ In addition to those listed here, others cite the presence of God’s direct speech in a work (11QTemple) or the presence of unusual graphic characteristics (e.g., the separation of lemmata from interpretive comments in the pesherim).

⁵ By this measure the Psalms (36), Deuteronomy (29), Isaiah (21), Exodus (17), Genesis (15), and Leviticus (13) would be the most important books for the community, and books like Joshua (2), Proverbs (2), Ezra (1) would be the least significant. Completely unimportant would be Nehemiah and Esther, no copies of which survive!