The purpose of this essay is to offer a systematic, though partial, overview of the understandings of biblical interpretation in the Dead Sea Scrolls that have been offered since their first discovery in 1947. It will not be possible to cover all aspects of the topic in a study of this kind; indeed, the manuscript discoveries from the eleven caves at and near Qumran have stimulated so much interpretative activity that several valuable surveys of the various kinds of biblical interpretation in the ancient sources now exist (see, e.g., Vermes 1976, 438–41; Bernstein 2004) and some of those touch on the approaches of modern interpreters. What is important in this contribution is the structure of my overall schematisation of the approaches of modern interpreters, and what that might mean for how the exegetical practices, the hermeneutics, and the interpretation of authoritative texts can best be understood.

It has become increasingly obvious over the years that there have been several different approaches to the topic of biblical interpretation in the scrolls. Some particular issues come immediately to mind and can be noted by way of setting the scene for the principal points that I wish to make.

**Preliminary Issues**

*The Inappropriate Preeminence of Pesher*

To begin with, it is often assumed or even stated explicitly that the biblical interpretation to be found in the scrolls can be summed up in the one word, *pesher* (or *pesharim*) (e.g., Chilton 1988, 122–27). “All research on Qumran exegesis focussed for a long time on Pesher interpretation” (Maier 1996, 126), notes Johann Maier correctly. There are

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1 Maier cites as examples of such focus, M.P. Horgan (1979); B. Nitzan (1986); H.-J. Fabry (1993).
several assumptions behind such a restricted viewpoint. Amongst these are that the biblical interpretation to be found in the Dead Sea (Qumran) Scrolls can be found exclusively in the so-called sectarian scrolls and that the overwhelmingly dominant view of authoritative scripture is that it is unfulfilled prophecy of some kind. One immediately suspects that this is predominantly a Christian reading of the evidence, since for some Christians the Old Testament from start to finish is just that: prophecy to be fulfilled—indeed the structure of the Christian canon, from Genesis to Malachi, generally reflects such a view. As a result, often for unstated reasons, the *pesharim* have become an assumed control over how Qumran sectarian exegesis, indeed the exegesis of the whole Qumran literary corpus should be understood. Everything is *raz*, “mystery,” awaiting divinely inspired insight.

Perhaps because the *pesharim* seem to give access to the history of the Qumran community and the wider movement of which it was a part, the predisposition of giving priority to the *pesharim* in interpretative matters has not entirely disappeared, as can be seen, for example, in the relatively recent work on such texts by James Charlesworth (2002). However, most scholars have recognised that there are many more types of interpretation to be found amongst the scrolls than the prophetic alone. In several studies I myself have tried to present a fivefold classification of scriptural interpretation in the compositions found at and near Qumran, each class having its own distinctive character (e.g., Brooke 2000a, 2006). Alongside (1) the prophetic interpretation most readily discernible in the *pesharim* with its characteristic atomistic tendency of identifying items in the authoritative text with matters in the commentator’s present or immediate future, the following should also be noticed. (2) There is legal interpretation of which the major characteristic that is shared with much other Jewish (and even non-Jewish) legal interpretation is the neat juxtaposition of two or more earlier authoritative traditions to form the basis of new rulings and fresh insights to the ongoing significance of old ones. (3) There is narrative interpretation of which the most significant characteristic is the explanatory expansion of an earlier narrative sequence. (4) There is exhortatory or homiletic interpretation (what some might call paretic interpretation) in which the hallmark is the use of authoritative texts as a source of examples of negative and positive behaviour in order to elicit a particular response in the audience. (5) There is poetic or hymnic interpretation of which the key characteristic is allusory