Manuscript 4Q252, or Commentary on Genesis A, is small in terms of physical appearance. There are six fragments assigned to the manuscript and the manuscript originally consisted of six columns on a single piece of leather. Remains of all six columns are preserved. The column width ranges from 6.5 cm to 9.25 cm and the height of the manuscript was originally ca. 15 cm. On the basis of paleography the manuscript is generally dated to the second half of the first century BCE (Brooke 1996c, 186–92). The editio princeps of 4Q252 was published in the Discoveries in the Judaean Desert series by George J. Brooke (1996c, 185–207).

A lively discussion concerning the form and content of 4Q252 had started before the editio princeps was published. In terms of content 4Q252 clearly merits attention quite out of proportion to its humble size. It is an interesting selection of passages from Genesis and their interpretations. When read as a whole the manuscript is somewhat confusing. It is difficult to see the links that keep the textual sections together and there is no obvious overarching theme in the manuscript. The techniques and methods employed in the interpretation of scriptural passages vary greatly. Moreover, the manuscript is difficult to classify with regard to its literary genre and different sections of the text clearly represent different literary forms.

The author—or the compiler—of 4Q252 has obviously used earlier sources in the composition. This does not, however, answer the questions about the motivation and rationale behind the composition.

The nature and purpose of the composition have been described in rather different terms by different scholars. The main debate has been between Brooke and Moshe J. Bernstein. To roughly simplify the discussion, Bernstein (1994a; 1994b; 1994–1995) sees 4Q252 as a representative of “simple-sense exegesis,” or a selection of exegetical cruces from Genesis with no need to expect any thematic unity—let
alone a specific, “sectarian” theology or ideology—behind the text (see also Niccum 2006). Brooke (1994a; 1994b; 1994c; 1996a; 1996b; 1998c; 1999), conversely, assumes that there is a theological, Qumranic agenda behind the composition (see also Fröhlich 1994).

Notes on Form, Focus, and Technique of Interpretation

In order to assess the question of the genre of 4Q252, it is necessary to discuss different elements that contribute to our perception of the genre of an exegetical text. Due to the ongoing debate and confusion as to what constitutes a genre, there is no single, accepted list of such elements; scholars use varying criteria and definitions. This could be seen as somewhat symptomatic of the whole idea of assigning genre classifications to ancient Hebrew texts. They very rarely contain any explicit metatextual references to genres, and therefore modern scholars are left to their own devices. We must define genres on the basis of features observed in the ancient texts. This is not to say that genres did not exist in the minds of the authors of these ancient texts, but we have no way of knowing whether their genres coincided with our genres at all.

Brooke (1981, 483–94) discusses the dilemma of genres, particularly from the point of view of the Qumran pesharim, and suggests a division into primary (form, content, setting, etc.) and secondary (mainly stylistic) factors. With this division in mind Shani L. Berrin (2004, 9–12) defines Qumran peshar based on “features pertaining to form, content, motive and methods.” I will examine 4Q252 with the aid of a slightly modified list consisting of form, focus, and technique of interpretation. One reason that 4Q252 is such an intriguing manuscript is its pluriformity in all these aspects; its textual sections reflect not only different exegetical techniques but also different literary forms and focal points. I will return to the question of the genre of 4Q252 at the end of this essay.

Literary Forms

There is no generally accepted, standard system for classifying exegetical literary forms in the Qumran texts or Second Temple literature—usually, however, different scholars’ systems of classification are variations of each other. I propose a simple and rough, but nevertheless comprehensive classification that comprises four main categories: rewritten scriptural text, exegetical paraphrase, commentary, and anthological exegesis.