THE QUESTION OF SCRIBAL EXEGESIS AT QUMRAN

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There is an idea abroad in Qumran scholarship that exegesis in Dead Sea sectarian literature is generically ‘scribal’. It is commonly supposed that scribes are responsible for the literary content of Dead Sea sectarian literature. Hence, this literature emerges as a kind of internal scribal dialogue in which sectarian exegesis is produced by scribes for scribes and is thereby distinct from that produced by ‘non-scribal’ Jewish exegetes of late antiquity.

This idea has its roots in the classical image of the ‘scribal community’ at Qumran whose members composed exegetical literature and copied it alongside biblical works in their ‘scriptorium’ (De Vaux 1961; 1973; Reich 1995; cf. Stegemann 1998, 51–55 on the entirely local production of manuscripts). Over recent decades a sharpening awareness of the extent of the textual and literary variety within the biblical and non-biblical corpora from Qumran has lead to a widespread acceptance that not all of the late Second Temple scrolls found in Dead Sea coastal caves originated at the Qumran site. Thus, scholars now approach the ‘classical’ image of ‘scribal community’ at Qumran with more caution. The identification of a distinct group of sectarian scribes, who produced a number of manuscript copies and some of the literary compositions contained within them,¹ has helped to relieve our discussions of early assumptions that all literature found at Qumran is uniformly ‘sectarian’ and has removed some urgency from the question of how much of the corpus was produced at Qumran itself. Yet despite this awareness of the variegated nature of the corpus as a whole, when we think of the authors, copyists, and users of the scrolls and when we talk of Dead Sea sectarian ‘exegetes’, the notion of the ‘scribal community’ at Qumran lurks in our minds. The pervasiveness of this notion often leads to an implicit idea that any exegesis in any sectarian composition from Qumran is generically ‘scribal’.

¹ See discussion of M. Martin and E. Tov, below.
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I hasten to add that I do not consider this notion to be wrong but rather to be more problematic than is often assumed. And like most problems it also provides an opportunity to reconsider the way we talk about, and conceptualize the groups envisaged in the sectarian literature. Here I offer some thoughts on the question of the scribal nature of Dead Sea sectarian exegesis.

The prevalence of the notion of a generically scribal exegesis in Qumran scholarship dawned on me within a particular context. My doctoral research has focussed on the question of the textual variety exhibited by the passages of Greek Jewish scripture that Paul cites in his letters.2 An influential strand of Pauline scholars hold that Paul was unaware of the different text-forms whose wording his citations variously presuppose. They express the question (and their answer to it) in terms of Paul's access to scrolls. They reason that Paul, tramping around Asia Minor, could not have accessed and compared multiple copies of the same biblical work in order to cite a preferred text-form of a given passage.3 Significantly, D.-A. Koch and M. Hengel's disagreement on this point revolves around the question of whether Paul was a scribe.4 Both implicitly agree that only a scribe could have been aware of multiple text-forms of a given biblical work.

The general attitude to Dead Sea sectarian exegetes is distinct. Many Qumran scholars have observed that the sectarian exegetes who composed the Pesharim and other exegetical literature made use of multiple ‘versions’ of the same biblical passage. The ‘scribes’ of Qumran are deemed naturally to have been able to compare multiple copies of a work in their library or their scriptorium. The same reasoning presumably underlies K. Stendahl’s (1967) proposition of the scribal

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2 Paul’s citations often presuppose the Old Greek (exemplified by the Göttingen LXX) but in other cases they presuppose some other text-form, notably κόρη-Theodotian in particular cases (cf. Koch 1986, 71–77).

3 Vollmer (1895, 33), Koch (1986, 80) and Stanley (1992, 71) all explicitly state their doubt that Paul could compare multiple copies of the same work. Deissmann (1925, 80–81) implies this. Those who believe that Paul frequently preferred a given text-form conversely assume, on the basis of Acts, that he accessed and compared multiple scrolls exhibiting various text-forms of the same work whilst preaching in synagogues in Asia Minor (Michel 1929, 112–13; Ellis 1957, 19[5]; Hengel 1991, 22, 34; Lim 1997, 154, 161f.).

4 For Koch (1986, 92–93), since Paul was not a scribe (γραμματεύς is lacking in Phil 3:5), he was unaware of multiple text-forms of Isaiah. Hengel (1991, 233, cf. 213, 232) retorts that Paul was indeed a γραμματεύς and was therefore aware of multiple text-forms of Isaiah. The debate may go back to Jeremias’ (1923–37 2b.101–03) claim that Paul was a ‘scribe’ (Schriftgelehrte).