SOCIAL IDENTITY IN THE QUMRAN MOVEMENT:
THE CASE OF THE PENAL CODE

Jutta Jokiranta

1. Introduction

The Qumran movement existed between the second century B.C.E. and the first century C.E. The term “movement” is here used intentionally, instead of the more common “Qumran community,” since this ancient social movement was probably not restricted to a single community or location (however, we know of this social movement through the texts found at Qumran, and thus the name “Qumran”), and since it fits in the social-scientific description of religious movements, groups seeking to cause or prevent social change, rather than religious institutions, which adapt to change, according to the definitions provided by Stark and Bainbridge (1987). Many aspects in the Qumran movement represent religious sectarianism—or fundamentalism, if this term is understood as demanding a return to previous religious values. As such, it provides an ancient counterpart to the modern fundamentalism which Pascal Boyer has analyzed from the cognitive point of view (2002: 327–40).1

The Qumran movement demanded a return to the Law of Moses; it cherished scriptural ideals and scriptural language and opposed any relaxation of the correct praxis and legal interpretations as it understood them. Purity laws, the distribution of wealth, marriage laws, Sabbath practices and the legitimate calendar were their most prominent areas of concern.

Judaism of the Second Temple Period is a complex phenomenon which varied according to location and time, between political and domestic spheres (Esler 2001: 25–28), and among various subgroups.

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1 Boyer views fundamentalism as a phenomenon in which people focus on a return to religious values and are ready to accept violence to further this cause. The Qumran movement attacked outsiders and defended itself in words, but there is little, if any, evidence for actual violent acts towards other groups in the Dead Sea Scrolls. For Boyer’s approach to social coalitions, see also footnotes 28 and 40, and Luomanen’s essay in this volume.
The Qumran movement is often regarded as a special case within Judaism. The movement had a clear organization, and it was extreme in many aspects, however, it remained within the boundaries of the Israelite identity. Normally, it is taken for granted that, since the Qumranites were so strict in their interpretations of the Law (halakhot), they formed a strict and closed community, or, vice versa, since the community was exclusive, it had to have strict rules. In this essay, I would like to discuss the make-up and identity of the movement and, more specifically, the role of a specific rule collection in the Qumran texts, the penal code, in relation to this identity. Seemingly strict regulations cannot be taken as evidence of extreme fundamentalism or sectarianism without a more careful analysis of how these regulations relate to the overall ethos and identity within and around the movement. I shall utilize the social identity approach, and explain the penal code from that perspective.

The social identity approach provides a wider perspective on the issue at hand since it focuses on intergroup relations and the formation of social identities: what social psychological processes underlie the situation in which people act as group members rather than individuals? What are the effects of group membership on individuals, their behavior, perceptions and attitudes? The social identity approach also addresses questions of social change. How does a group achieve and maintain a positive social identity when it cannot perceive a (desired) change in its circumstances? These questions are relevant to the understanding of the Qumran movement, which criticized the society of its time but was not able to change it. Instead, it formed a subculture, which changed the lives of individuals who joined. Maintaining the desired social identity in such a subculture is a challenge throughout its existence.

2. Rule Documents: the Damascus Document and the Community Rule

The rule documents are texts which most explicitly describe and reflect the life and practices in the Qumran movement. The Damascus Document is unique among the Qumran corpus since it has been preserved in two medieval manuscripts, in addition to the ten fragmentary manuscripts from Qumran. The expression “land of Damascus” stands for the loca-