Well over two hundred prayers, hymns, and psalms are numbered among the scrolls discovered in the caves at Qumran. The sheer quantity of material renders the find significant and also witnesses the importance of prayer for the Qumran community which preserved these texts. Indeed these sectarians, in the wake of their split with the Jerusalem Temple, cultivated prayer as a substitute for sacrificial worship. The sect's manifesto and laws not only apply sacrificial language to prayer but also explicitly make prayer the functional equivalent of sacrifice—an alternate, and even preferred instrument for atonement and service to God as long as worship in the Jerusalem Temple continued to be conducted in impurity.¹

The prayers from Qumran thus provide a key to understanding the life and thought of that community. Moreover, this corpus also sheds light on religious practice outside of Qumran. It enriches many fields—from liturgy, magic and mysticism to biblical criticism and interpretation.

This paper offers a programmatic and methodological approach to the study of Qumran prayer. It assesses the current state of research with a view to future progress and analyzes the relevant methodological problems. Four major issues are isolated in this paper:²


² This article is based on a paper delivered at the 1993 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature held in Washington, D.C. In conjunction with that
Identification and reconstruction of prayers from Qumran.

2. Provenance of the prayers found in the Qumran caves.

3. Liturgical practice at Qumran.

4. Qumran prayer in synchronic and diachronic perspective.

Identification and Reconstruction of Prayers from Qumran

The first task in the study of Qumran prayer entails sorting out what among the approximately 800 manuscripts preserved at Qumran may be classed as prayer. In order to allow the parameters of this corpus to be as broad as possible, I suggest adopting an inclusive definition of prayer as any form of human communication directed at God. The prayer text conveys the words of this communication.

Once a working definition is agreed upon, we encounter an array of technical and methodological problems. These range from the problem of assessing the literary character of fragmentary texts, a difficulty which typifies Qumran studies, to the more common problem of defining boundaries between prayers and other genres. Questions arise when a liturgical function of a text is not explicit or cannot readily be deduced, and, in particular, when the text's formal features suit different genres and functions.

What is the scope of this corpus at the present stage of research?