
The Qumran manuscripts containing wisdom texts are very fragmentary and often difficult to transcribe, translate, and interpret. In 1996 I provided for a general audience a sketch of what could be said with some certainty about these works under the title Wisdom Texts from Qumran (London: Routledge). I described it as “only a beginning” (91). Now some ten year later, after the full publication of these texts in the DJD series and many scholarly treatments of them, Goff, Assistant Professor of religion at Florida State University and author of The Worldly and Heavenly Wisdom of 4QInstruction (STDJ 10; Leiden: Brill, 2003), has written for a more specialized audience a comprehensive and up-to-date synthesis regarding the content of the Qumran wisdom texts and recent research on them. It is exactly what is needed at the present time. It is both a repository of past research and an impetus to move forward in the study of these notoriously difficult texts.

After an eight-page introduction, Goff deals with the Qumran wisdom texts under the following headings: a wisdom text with an apocalyptic worldview—4QInstruction (1Q26; 4Q415–418, 423); eschatological wisdom—the Book of Mysteries (1Q27; 4Q299–301); gendered wisdom—4QWiles of the Wicked Woman (4Q184); the rewards of wisdom—4QSapiential Work (4Q185); wisdom for the Yahad—4QWords of the Maskil to All Sons of Dawn (4Q298); wisdom and halakah—4QWays of Righteousness (4Q420–421); practical wisdom—the Instruction of 4Q424; wisdom and Torah—4QBeatitudes (4Q525); songs of wisdom—wisdom psalms in the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea scrolls (11QPs); and the minor wisdom texts. In each chapter he provides a summary overview of the composition, identifies its main themes and concerns, and treats issues such as genre classification and provenance. In deciding whether a text is sapiential or not, Goff establishes four guidelines: pedagogical intent, thematic affinity, key phrases and motifs, and innovation in the wisdom tradition.

Goff concludes that the Qumran sapiential texts provide “an impression of the variety of Jewish wisdom during the late Second Temple period” (308). He notes that the Qumran wisdom literature is pedagogical and eudemonistic, interested especially in character formation and providing practical instruction related to ordinary spheres of life. It is especially noteworthy for the influence on it from apocalyptic tradition (especially in 4QInstruction and Mysteries), for an emphasis on the highest wisdom as revelation from God and as especially to be found in the Torah (in 4Q185 and 4Q525), and for a strong interest in piety and worship. While most of these texts seem to have been composed in the second and first centuries B.C.E., they represent a variety of life settings and literary genres and so cannot be traced to a single school. Goff observes that “when considering the
biblical and non-biblical Jewish wisdom texts together, the loose nature of wisdom as a genre appears even looser” (307).

Goff’s survey is much more than a simple report on scholarship. Rather he offers fresh analyses of key passages among the wisdom texts, often commenting on or correcting the readings and interpretations proposed by others. Moreover, in the footnotes he provides extensive bibliographies concerning editions of the Qumran wisdom texts and the scholarly books and articles on them. A full bibliography is provided on pp. 309–36. In both his main text and the footnotes Goff frequently enters into dialogue with other scholars and offers evaluations of their interpretations and suggestions. His judgments are generally polite and cautious, most often noting the lack of clear textual evidence or calling them too speculative. His critiques and challenges should encourage other scholars to rethink their views and make stronger cases where possible.

In his discussions of the Qumran wisdom texts, Goff makes abundant use of the Wisdom of Ben Sira (Sirach) as a major point of comparison. This work, of course, is the largest extant Jewish wisdom text written in Hebrew and translated into Greek from roughly the same period. And so Goff’s work will be of special interest to the many scholars today working on Ben Sira as well as to Qumran specialists. He takes a fairly conventional view of the Qumran library and the history of the community there (with which I agree), and thus helps to fill in some aspects of the paradigm. For example, he regards the non-Qumranian (in origin) 4QInstruction and Mysteries with their blend of sapiential and apocalyptic elements as influencing the language and content of the Treatise of the Two Spirits (1QS 3:13–4:26). He regards the exhortations in 4QWords of the Maskil (4Q298) as an original product of the Dead Sea sect, and 4QWords of Righteousness (4Q420–421) as evidence that the Dead Sea sect could revise and adapt sapiential compositions. In other cases (as in 4Q424) he finds no intrinsic connections with the Qumran group beyond the fact the text became part of the community’s library.

In addition to specialists in Ben Sira and Qumran literature, Goff’s handbook deserves the attention of the larger circle of biblical scholars. Those whose interest is the Hebrew Scriptures will find in these texts evidence for how various sapiential elements were taken up and developed in later Jewish wisdom texts and how traditional wisdom concepts came to be expressed in even more fluid literary categories. The debate about the origins of apocalyptic from wisdom is not resolved by these texts and (if anything) has been made more complex. The lack of explicit interest in theodicy (as in Job) and in the figure of Lady Wisdom (as in Prov 1–9 and Sir 24) is striking.

For New Testament scholars the merging of sapiential and apocalyptic features in 4QInstruction and Mysteries needs to become part of the debate about the origin and development of the Sayings Source Q. Moreover, the emphasis in those texts on “the mystery that is to be” might serve to illumine further the Gospels’