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Between Text and Archaeology¹

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Abstract

Historical research on the Qumran manuscripts, despite being provided with archaeological and external literary evidence, has generally suffered from a lack of discussion and application of methodology, which could easily have been instructed from the scholarship in biblical history. Despite the fact that the Qumran caves and their contents form part of the site of Khirbet Qumran, archaeology has very little to contribute to understanding the manuscripts, while the manuscripts make no reference to the settlement. External sources relate mainly to the possible identification of the authors *and* the site as Essene—an important consideration. But the scrolls' authors exhibit little or no interest in the contemporary world outside their sectarian boundaries. The historian is able only to retrieve information about the movement's own memories of its past, which will have been shaped by its own processes of identity formation and maintenance. But even to do this, it is indispensable to engage with the history of the documents themselves through detailed literary-historical exegesis, and this has yet to be realized by many Qumran scholars who seek history from the scrolls.

Keywords

Qumran; history; archaeology; social memory

¹ I take this opportunity to record my appreciation of Hanan Eshel and his scholarship. He was a man of erudition, energy, curiosity, enthusiasm and kindness, all of which I personally appreciated, regardless of the fact that we do things differently—as we both realized. His loss to the society of Qumran scholars is considerable.

Lessons from Biblical History

During my scholarly career my interests have veered between the Hebrew Bible and the Qumran manuscripts, and I have found the two areas mutually illuminating. I have explored—as have many others²—the overlap between the two fields, reluctant to see the Qumran archive as “postbiblical” but rather as analogous to, and contemporary with, the process of canon closure and its adoption as the religious scriptures of a still evolving Judaism. I have been absorbed especially in the similar problems facing the historian in each field. Three kinds of evidence present themselves in each case: a corpus of texts; excavation and survey data (archaeology); and external evidence, usually textual.³ For the biblical historian, the “external” evidence may be parabiblical texts in the broadest sense, that is, derived from or connected to the scriptural corpus (e.g. Ben Sira, the Enochic literature, the Qumran Scrolls), or entirely independent (mostly inscriptions). Each of these three kinds of sources may tell or imply different stories of the past, and biblical historians (a convenient if inappropriate term) continue to learn important lessons in how the sources and their stories may be correlated; recent years have seen much open critical discussion about presuppositions and methods.⁴ There has, unfortunately, been much less attention to methodology in the field of Qumran studies, and such consideration is long overdue.

Important lessons have been learned from biblical historical scholarship, among them the following:

1. Ancient texts are historical and cultural artefacts. It is necessary to determine the historical and social context that generated them before addressing the reliability of what they narrate. Furthermore, even when contemporary with the events they claim to describe,

² E.g. Stephen Hultgren, *From the Damascus Covenant to the Covenant of the Community* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Judaism, the First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009).

³ On these three kinds of evidence and their use, see Philip R. Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

⁴ Extensive discussion may be found in the European Seminar on Historical Methodology series (London: T&T Clark, 1997–), edited by Lester L. Grabbe, and especially vol. 1, *Can a “History of Israel” Be Written?* (1997).