Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The title of the book aptly explains what it is about: in order to represent correctly the sectarian movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is a need to move beyond the “Qumran community.” Why are scholars no longer satisfied with the traditional theory of the Qumran community—of a remote sect which belonged to the Essene movement, was dissatisfied with the Jerusalem priesthood, and lived at Khirbet Qumran close to the Dead Sea in celibacy, practicing utmost perfection and strict purity?

The book offers an up-to-date analysis of the state of Qumran research. Alternative theories of the site (Khirbet Qumran) have emerged, and revisions in the archaeology suggest that the occupation of the site began in the first century B.C.E. instead of the second. Views on the rule documents (Damascus Document and Community Rule especially) are being refined in light of the Cave 4 copies. Scholars have begun to demand that the scrolls be primarily read without the lens of Josephus’ account of the Essenes. The nature of the historical evidence found in the pesharim is being re-evaluated.

At present, there is no clear consensus on these issues: whether they were sectarians who lived at Khirbet Qumran or not (and if yes, when they lived there), whether the rule documents speak of the same or different communities, whether the communities of the scrolls have a historical connection to the Essenes or not, and how to understand and date the Wicked Priest and the Righteous Teacher of the pesharim. Collins provides his own views on these topics.

The book has five main chapters. First, Collins discusses the nature of the “new covenant” described in the Damascus Document (D) and recognizes possible precursors to it. Secondly, he discusses the nature of the “yahad,” mainly represented by the Community Rule (S). The relationship between the major rule documents is also discussed. Chapter Three, “The Historical Context,” seeks to place these rule documents into context by discussing the dating of the main figures in the pesharim. The fourth chapter compares the evidence of the Essenes from the classical sources to the scrolls, including appendices on the name “Essenes” and on the Therapeutae in Philo. The final chapter, “The Site of Qumran,” introduces Roland de Vaux’s stratigraphy of the site, presents major theories (villa, fortress, pottery factory, religious settlement) and discusses controversies over the archaeology of Qumran.

Many parts of the book serve well as a textbook, and Collins presents up-to-date discussions on major issues. It is an admirable achievement to be able to present past scholarship on complex issues and texts in an accessible form. On the other hand, the book perhaps best serves those readers who are already familiar with the scrolls, or even more: those readers who have tried to solve some of the
puzzles in scrolls scholarship themselves. If one has not tried to work with these complexities oneself, many of the nuances and possibilities of agreement or disagreement with Collins’ work might actually be missed.

Some of the most important new arguments, or recently presented arguments strongly supported by Collins, are the following. 1) The origins of the movement are not to be sought in any quarrel about high priestly succession in the mid-second century B.C.E., but rather in halakhic disputes. The self-understanding of the members as “Sons of Zadok” is not to be interpreted as a genealogical designation. 2) The communities represented by D and S were not separated by schism but belonged to the same movement. Both D and S reflect a movement with multiple communities. The community at Khirbet Qumran is, at the most, only one among many communities in the yahad. 3) Celibacy is not proven by the present data but remains a plausible interpretation, at least for some members. Mostly, the movement was family-based. 4) Some members were set apart within the yahad as an elite group, as those who ideally fulfill perfection. 5) The common dating of the historical data in the scrolls to the second century B.C.E. is challenged on three fronts: first, the archaeology of Khirbet Qumran moves the occupation to the first century B.C.E. Second, the paleography of the scrolls is only relative and never precise. Thirdly, the “390 years” mentioned in CD 1 is not to be taken literally. Moreover, eroding the theory of high priestly conflict also removes the necessity to date the origins of the movement to the second century B.C.E.

The present reviewer welcomes especially the first two points: halakhic tensions were the major reason for the creation of the movement. Besides calendar issues, cultic matters, and purity rules, a major theme of dispute, which Collins discusses very briefly, was wealth. Despite the fact that the legitimacy of the high priest was not the issue, conflicts between leading persons may have had a bearing in the formation of the movement. Matters of disagreement tend to be personalized, either initially, so that certain people come to be regarded as the main representatives of the sides in a conflict, or later on, when succeeding groups of people attempt to make sense of what the previous lines of thought were.

Secondly, there is little direct evidence for seeing the Community Rule as a document of a schismatic group and the Damascus Document as a whole as a document of a parent movement. I consider Collins to be correct in the view that both D and S can be read as reflecting multiple communities, and the discourse on the movement as if it were only a single sectarian community (at Qumran or elsewhere) should be abandoned.

I am less convinced on the latter three points, which will continue to be debated: the possible celibacy, the elite group theory, and the dating of the Wicked Priest. First, although Collins is balanced in saying that celibacy was not demanded (58), he regards it as a plausible interpretation of the evidence, on the basis of both CD 7 and the silence on women in S. However, S is silent about many things, not just women and children. Our concern should be more on the kind of documents