Lawrence H. Schiffman


This volume brings together twenty-five articles originally published between 1987 and 2007, along with one previously unpublished essay. As Schiffman notes in the preface, however, this is not simply a random sample of his earlier work but a collection of revised and reorganized pieces intended to “express the overall thesis that serves as the basis of these various studies” (x). That overall thesis has three major components: first, that the Qumran scrolls and the community that produced them are closely related to and integrally connected with the broader context of Second Temple Judaism; second, that the Qumran sectarianists emerged out of a Sadducean/Zadokite priestly milieu and drew on Zadokite traditions that predate the Hasmonean period; and third, that halakhah was at the root of the Qumran sectarianists’ dispute with their opponents. To build his argument, Schiffman considers aspects of Jewish law attested at Qumran (chs. 8–12), various theological perspectives of the Qumran community (chs. 13–18), and the historical and social context of the Qumran movement (chs. 4–7, 19–23). The volume also includes several valuable chapters focused explicitly on the history of scholarship and on the impact of broader social and political issues on the study of the scrolls (esp. chs. 1–3, 24–25). As a whole, this collection demonstrates Schiffman’s critical role in dismantling two scholarly trends that held sway for much of the latter part of the twentieth century: the tendency to view the Qumran scrolls as the product of a marginal group whose beliefs tell us more about the background of early Christianity than about Second Temple Judaism, and the tendency to view the literature and ideology of the early rabbinic movement as largely disconnected from ideas and practices that flourished prior to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. Although Schiffman covers some of the same basic ground already in his 1994 popular book *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls,* the essays collected here (all but four published after 1994) provide a much more detailed and up to date presentation of his arguments.

Schiffman’s thesis centers around 4QMMT as a source of evidence for the origins of the Qumran group and the nature of its disagreements with its opponents (see especially Chapter 6, “The New Halakhic Letter (4QMMT) and the Origins of the Dead Sea Sect,” and Chapter 19, “The Pharisees and Their Legal Traditions according to the Dead Sea Scrolls”). The halakhic disputes reflected in MMT focus on sacrificial and purification rituals, demonstrating not only a legal but also a priestly context. The direct correspondence of several of the
group’s positions with those attributed to the Sadducees in tannaitic materials, and those of the group’s opponents with those attributed to the rabbis’ own Pharisaic forebears, indicates to Schiffman “only one possible explanation”: the Qumran sect began as a group of Sadducees who objected to the infiltration of Pharisaic ideas into the ritual practice of the Jerusalem temple following the Hasmonean revolt (119–20). More broadly, MMT attests to a pre-Hasmonean body of Sadducean halakhah also witnessed by the Temple Scroll and other texts (“Pre-Maccabean Halakhah in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Biblical Tradition,” 184–96). Although the sectarians continued to refine their ideology as the rift with the rest of Judean society became more permanent, the Qumran movement continues the basic Sadducean halakhic perspectives articulated in MMT (“The Place of 4QMMT in the Corpus of Qumran Manuscripts”; 123–39).

The main lines of Schiffman’s argument are compelling; indeed, they have already shaped study of the scrolls and of Second Temple Judaism over the past twenty years. For scholars of my own generation, the impact of the scrolls on our understanding of early Judaism is well-established, as is the significance of halakhah to all Second Temple groups. And although many scholars would still call the Qumran group “Essenes” (rather than Sadducees/Zadokites), that label is now generally regarded with more nuance than in the classic “Essene hypothesis,” such that origins in a Zadokite priestly milieu need not contradict an identification of the movement as “Essene.”

As convincing as the larger picture is, though, the same cannot be said for some of the details. For instance, Schiffman clearly demonstrates, via 4QMMT and other texts, that halakhic debates described in rabbinic literature do in fact date to the Second Temple period. But the specific dating of MMT to early Hasmonean times, and indeed, the identification of the opponents as Pharisees, depend on correlating the unnamed disputants in MMT with parties in specific historical episodes recounted by Josephus and the rabbis. In my view, such a correlation is not self-evident. Also problematic are the assertions that the key criterion in sectarian halakhic disputes was that all laws must be “justified by biblical exegesis” and that the epithet הדורשי חלקות, “seekers of smooth things,” “refers specifically to their [the Pharisees’] acceptance of laws not derived from exegesis of scripture as halakhah” (327). Although this hypothesis accords well with Josephus’ description of the Pharisees as adherents of certain “traditions of the fathers,” it does not find support in the Qumran texts themselves. In several cases, such as the rejection of uncle-niece marriage, it is rather the Qumranites who espouse a position less closely related to the biblical text than that of their opponents. Aside from Schiffman’s interpretation of הדורשי חלקות and an additional cryptic epithet בני החיצים, “builders of the wall,” which Schiffman relates to the rabbinic practice of “building a fence around