Cecilia Wassén (ed.)


This is the Swedish version of a book which also has appeared (in the year 2009) in Norwegian, Danish and Finnish, as the result of a collaboration of a group of Qumran scholars belonging to the Nordic Network in Qumran Studies. As indicated by the title, which in translation reads “The Dead Sea Scrolls: Content, Background and Significance,” it is an introductory book with a broad take on the material. The intended audience is university students as well as the general public, and the Swedish version is to be complemented by an annotated translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls into Swedish, which is currently under preparation.

The book is divided in five parts, containing in all twenty-eight chapters written by fifteen scholars. The first part of the book, entitled “The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls and the publication of the texts,” relates the complicated story of how the scrolls came into the hands of scholars, as well as the no less complicated story of how they were made public. This is interesting reading and definitely has its place in a book of this character, but some readers would perhaps not regret if the perpetual *topos* of the so-called academic scandal around the publication of the scrolls were finally left to rest in peace. Last in part one is an overview of the Qumran texts. For simplicity’s sake, the complex problem of distinguishing between sectarian and non-sectarian texts is postponed, and the overview is organized by means of the simple main categories “texts known from outside the finds of Qumran” and “texts not found outside the finds of Qumran.”

Part two, “The surrounding world of the Qumran texts,” deals with the geographical and political background of the Qumran texts (Kasper Bro Larsen), religious groups (Håkan Bengtsson), family life and education (Cecilia Wassén).

The third part of the book, “The identity of the Qumran movement,” starts with a rather theoretical discussion by Jutta Jokiranta in which the Qumran movement is classified as a sect. The conclusion is convincing, although the treatment of the early sociological theoreticians Weber and Troeltsch appears somewhat inadequate. The central chapters of part three deal with the connection of the textual finds and the settlement at Khirbet Qumran (Jokiranta), the origin and identity of the Qumran movement (Wassén), and the general archaeological description of the settlement (Juhanna Saukkonen). The reconstruction is very balanced, and various competing hypotheses concerning the historical reconstruction are given due consideration. In the end, the opinions arrived at tend to be rather mainstream: the texts are the remnants of a
library belonging to a sectarian religious community settled in Qumran. The community had connections with the Essene movement described by ancient sources, and it has its origins in priestly circles sometime during the second century B.C.E. Their settlement in Qumran is thought to have begun about 100 B.C.E., in accordance with the new chronology suggested by Jodi Magness. A slightly dissenting tone can be detected in Anders Klostergaard Pedersen’s methodological reflections on the importance of letting the archaeological data speak for themselves, but for all his unease with how the traditional Essene hypothesis became general consensus, he offers no alternative. Hanne von Weissenberg’s chapter “Qumran and ‘the Bible’” touches on the issue of identity, but is on the whole somewhat peripheral to the main thrust of this part of the book.

Part four brings together various aspects of “Beliefs and life within the Qumran movement.” This theme encompasses the sociological aspects of membership (Jokiranta), religious practice and the festival calendar (Søren Holst), the priestly character of the movement and the issues of purity and holiness (Årstein Justnes), Qumranic halakha and scriptural interpretation (Holst, Bodil Ejrnaes), the genre of wisdom (Jesper Høgenhaven), and various facets of the Qumran worldview such as the notion of the covenant (Ellen Juhl Christiansen), theology and anthropology (Justnes), apocalypticism (Wassén), eschatology (Håkan Ulfgard), and the belief in angels and demons (Wassén). This part, which makes up the bulk of the book, synthesizes the content of the scrolls in a clear and comprehensive way, and serves as an excellent guide for the perplexed stranger in the world of the Qumranites. Some issue could probably be taken, for instance with Christiansen’s refusal to read the notion of the “new covenant” in the Damascus Document in connection with prophetic texts like Jeremiah 31:33.

The fifth part, “The significance of the Qumran texts for biblical, linguistic and rabbinic research” rounds off this volume with one chapter each for the Hebrew Bible (Raija Sollamo), the New Testament (Mikael Winninge), the rabbinic literature (Sarianna Metso), and the Hebrew language (Holst). In the chapter on the Hebrew Bible, Sollamo argues, not without some cogency, that the wealth of biblical manuscripts from Qumran motivates an eclectic critical edition of the Hebrew Bible. However, the question of the advantages and disadvantages of eclectic and diplomatic editions could be more thoroughly addressed, and besides The Oxford Bible Project and the Biblia Hebraica Quinta, which she mentions, I miss here a reference to the Hebrew University Bible project. Holst, in his chapter, states with some confidence that Qumran Hebrew was colloquial, but he also mentions the opinion that it was a literary language.