HOLINESS AND LAW IN THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

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The interpretation of biblical law found among the Qumran sectarians is a vital key for understanding the sect’s self-identity.\(^1\) While the documents containing organizational laws at Qumran do fluctuate over time and reveal different communities behind them, the biblical laws remain relatively unaffected by these changes and repeatedly reflect a common bias in interpretation.\(^2\) Examination of these biblical laws reveals a common ideology that undergirds the sect’s identity.

What are scholars saying about the central ideological components of the sect? Some suggest that cultic purity is most important to the sect.\(^3\) But, the question remains, why is purity so important to the

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\(^1\) P.R. Davies, “Halakhah at Qumran,” A Tribute to Geza Vermes: Essays on Jewish and Christian Literature and History (eds P.R. Davies and R.T. White; JSOTSup 100; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), offers a good definition of halakhah: “a body of law governing Jewish behaviour which in practice or in theory derives from Scripture and acquires its authoritative status thereby.” The halakhic documents found at Qumran are primarily: 4Q266-273, 5Q12, 6Q15 (fragments of the Damascus Document); 4Q159, 4Q513, 4Q514 (Ordinances); 4Q394-399 (4QHalakhic Letter or MMT); 4Q251 (4QHalakha), Purification Rule, 4Q274-278 (4QTohorot), 4Q284a (4QLeqet). Also halakhah is found in parts of 1QS (the Community Rule), 1QM (the War Scroll), and 4Q174 (4QFlorilegium).


group? Others focus on the sect’s apocalyptic bent as central to its worldview. However, apocalypticism does not explain the matter entirely because other Jewish apocalyptic groups existed in antiquity with very different attitudes toward Scripture than those found at Qumran, with some groups discarding the ritual law altogether. Still other scholars simply regard the sectarians as paranoid fanatics, constantly fearful that they might violate Scripture unintentionally. However, this answer too fails to satisfy completely since the sectarians sometimes add rulings which sound biblical but are far beyond the letter of the law by any definition, for example, the ritual slaughter of fish (CD 12:13-14), the prohibition of disabled persons from the holy city (11QTa 45:12-14; 1QM 7:3-5; MMT B 42-57), and bathing before meals (1QS 5:13). Thus, none of the above explanations answers the question completely because they do not explain why a particular notion was central to the sect nor how it fits together with the other important components of the sect’s ideology. While all of these matters were clearly of great concern, how do they fit together in terms of priority and goal? What was the driving motivation undergirding these attitudes?

Before attempting answers to these questions, let us describe briefly the law at Qumran. It is well understood that an analysis of a com-

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5 Indeed, the sectarians themselves accuse their opponents of interpreting the law in too lenient a fashion; Y. Sussmann, “The History of the Halakha and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Preliminary Talmudic Observations on Miqṣat Ma’ase Ha-Torah (4QMT),” in Qumran Cave 4.V: Miqṣat Ma’ase Ha-Torah (eds E. Qimron and J. Strugnell; DJD 10; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 196; cf. CD 1:20; 2:18-21; 4Q171 1-2 i 19. The sectarians regarded themselves as true scholars of the Law (1QM 10:10; cf. 1QH 2:17), while others, in the sect’s view, were satisfied with superficial conclusions (CD 1:18), and “falsehood was in their study” (4QpNah 2:8). Only the sect fulfilled the Torah according to its “correct interpretation” (CD 6:18-19). D.R. Schwartz, who has compared Qumranic and rabbinic halakhah, explains the strict legal interpretation at Qumran by pointing to its priestly constituency. As priests, their authority was secured by genealogy. They were not interested in alleviating difficulty in observing the law, but rather they focused on what they considered to be the perfect will of God, whether clearly stated in the law or not. They were interested in settling ambiguity not simply in a manner compliant with the law, but in whatever way would, in fact, most please God. As Schwartz explains, the Rabbis depend on the law for their authority. The priestly community of Qumran did not have to defend their authority since they were born with it as priests. It was more important that the law be defended, from the Rabbis’ point of view, than that one seek to uncover the fine points of the divine will (cf. b. B.M. 59b), D.R. Schwartz, “Law and Truth: On Qumran-Sadducean and Rabbinic Views of Law,” The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research (eds D. Dimant and U. Rappaport; STDJ 10; Leiden: Brill, 1992) 237-38.