Books on Subjects Related to the Historical Jesus


More than a decade after its original publication in 1994, The Dead Sea Scrolls Today by James C. VanderKam (University of Notre Dame) has been updated in a second edition. While retaining all that was valuable in the original structure and content of the earlier text, this new edition accounts for a number of important new developments that have emerged in Qumran Studies in the intervening years.

The first chapter chronicles ‘Discoveries’ regarding most of the material features of the Scrolls and Qumran. After a narrative of the original Scrolls’ discoveries and the eleven caves, VanderKam turns to the archaeology of Qumran itself and the scientific methods utilized for dating the finds. An important new contribution of the second edition reviews recent scholarship of two especially problematic areas of interpretation: (1) the dating of the original occupation of the site, and (2) the study of human remains from the Qumran cemetery. On the former point, VanderKam regards Magness’s later dating of occupation at Qumran to the first half of the first century B.C.E. to have the greatest explanatory power among archaeological interpretations of Qumran subsequent to de Vaux; and on the latter, he suggests, though with some warranted caution, that recent studies of the Qumran cemeteries ‘may corroborate other evidence that a male sectarian group used the site of Qumran in the Second Temple period’ (p. 33).

A ‘Survey of the Manuscripts’ then classifies the more than 900 scroll remains into three categories of (a) biblical manuscripts, (b) apocryphal and pseudepigraphic writings and (c) other texts, a division that surveys most of the writings previously unknown prior to the discoveries, including biblical commentaries, paraphrases, legal texts, writings for worship, eschatological writings and wisdom texts. Of especial value in this section, the author not only documents the evidence for apocrypha and pseudepigrapha at Qumran, but equally poses the implications of the Qumran evidence for understanding the literary history of crucial works like Tobit, 1 Enoch and Jubilees.

The Essene hypothesis remains the centerpiece of a chapter on ‘The Identification of the Qumran Group’, which presents determinism, the afterlife, the nonuse of oils, shared property, pure meals and treatment of bodily functions as among the clearest intersections between how the ancients depicted the Essenes and what the Scrolls themselves reveal about the character of the movement that preserved them. On the other hand, VanderKam sensitively presents the dissonances that exist between the Scrolls and ancient descriptions of the Essenes: these include discrepancies in how the evidence treats initiation into the community and the issue of marriage. Even considering such lacunae in the evidence for the Essene hypothesis, however, ‘many strong arguments point to the residents of Qumran being Essenes, and no certain points tell against the identification’ (p. 118).

In light of a survey of its writings and its identification, how may one reconstruct a larger portrait of Qumran’s history, distinctive beliefs and position within Jewish
culture of the late Second Temple period? A chapter on ‘The Qumran Essenes’ describes the profile of a religious movement that found its origins in the middle of the second century B.C.E. with the ‘Righteous Teacher’ and his conflict with the early Hasmonean high priests. One observes here an important way in which the later archaeological dating at Qumran has reshaped a significant feature of the movement’s historiography: ‘... if it is true that the archaeological data from Qumran point to a use of the site after 100 B.C.E., it is unlikely that the Teacher led his followers there ... we do not know whether the Teacher was ever at Qumran, though he was admired by the people who were there and who preserved texts that were about him and perhaps by him’ (p. 132). Beyond the murky period of its origins, VanderKam then proceeds to describe the nature of the community at the Qumran site ca. 100-50 B.C.E. (Phase 1), reading literary evidence from the earliest strata of the Rule of the Community (1QS 8.1-9.26) and other writings for clues; and he concludes this historical sketch with a view to the community’s interests in Phase 2 (ending at C.E. 68), with attention to the War Scroll and prophetic commentaries (Pesharim) as evidence revealing its later religious interests.

While it is ‘not easy to provide a systematic account of a theology that is never set forth systematically in the texts’ (p. 137), the generative principles of Qumran’s religious outlook include predeterminism, a dualistic two-way theology, their self-understanding as members of a renewed covenant community and a rereading of earlier scriptures in which this community realized themselves as the locus of prophetic fulfillment. As a community that embodied the proper practice of worship during an age of wickedness, they also eagerly anticipated the end of history and the advent of latter day deliverers, including royal and priestly messiahs. Within the larger diverse range of Jewish movements in its era, Qumran’s legal and theological outlook was perhaps most in conflict with the Pharisaic movement, which VanderKam identifies in the Scroll’s cryptic references to the ‘seekers of smooth things’ (pp. 147-155). Like the NT authors and perhaps Jesus himself, the Qumran community objected to the legal traditions of the Pharisees, yet for different reasons: ‘In the Gospels they are sticklers for legal detail, for putting their traditional understandings of the law above the weightier matters of religion; in the Scrolls they are criticized for not implementing the law in all its strictness, for looking for easy ways out of obeying it properly. The Pharisees could not win’ (p. 154).

When charting the contributions that the Scrolls offer for the study of the Hebrew Bible, VanderKam introduces the reader to the Masoretic, Septuagintal and Samaritan textual traditions, illustrating how specific Qumran manuscripts (4QDeut1, 4QLev, 4QSamᵇ) exhibit agreements and variants with the three. The theories of ‘local texts’, ‘textual plurality’ and ‘successive literary editions’ are further reviewed, as contemporary theories for explaining both the continuities and variations among the scriptural witnesses attested at Qumran. Concluding the chapter is an important survey that moves beyond these more narrowly text-critical concerns by treating two additional issues: (1) what specific biblical texts looked like at Qumran, including Psalms and Daniel, and (2) what the larger collection of ‘authoritative literature’ looked like at Qumran prior to the later closure of the Jewish canon of Scripture. The study of authoritative literature at Qumran yields a portrait in which the Torah, Prophets and Psalms had already achieved a strong and stable position in the community’s collection.