
In his book, Yizhar Hirschfeld, who passed away on November 16th, 2006, has the intention “to examine the archaeological remains at Qumran in their own right, without the religious connotations ascribed to them […], and in isolation from the content of the scrolls that were indeed found near the site but not within its remains” (xv).

In five chapters, H. argues that Qumran was not isolated but occupied an important place in the region’s network of roads and “within the highly developed agriculture based economy of the Dead Sea region in the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods” (14). Discussing the scrolls’ origin, H. states that the great literary variety of the scrolls reflects the heterogeneity that characterized Jerusalem in these periods. As no scrolls were found at the site itself as well as any structures that indicate a public library of the sort known in the Hellenistic world, the scrolls cannot come from Qumran, but must have come from Jerusalem. Arguing that Roland de Vaux’s chronological phases are without a sound stratigraphic basis, H. suggests a new division, one that is primarily based on an analysis of the architectural plan. Qumran stratum II (130-37 B.C.E.) was a Hasmonean field fortress, indicated by its square structure and its fortified tower. Herodian Qumran (stratum III, 37 B.C.E.-68 C.E.) changed from a military into a civilian site, a fortified rural estate complex or manor house, expanding to all sides with workplaces and installations for agricultural and industrial products, such as dates and balsam for commercial sale. The owner, one of Herod’s favorites, occupied the estate during his visits there. An estate manager, servants, and slaves would have lived there permanently. At ‘Ein Feshkha, belonging to the estate of Qumran, balsam perfume essence as well as date wine and honey were produced. H. argues that the architecture, pottery and small finds point to the affluence of Qumran’s owner and should be understood in their regional context. The identification of numerous mikveh ʿotb indicates his priestly orientation and point to Jerusalem or Jericho. The remains at Qumran contradict identification with the Essenes. H. locates the Essenes at dwellings on one of the mountain slopes above En-Gedi. He takes Jerusalem libraries of Sadducean priests to be the origin of the scrolls: “They delivered them […] to someone close to them, apparently of the same social status, the owner of the estate at Qumran. He may have also supplied the jars in which some of the scrolls were found” (243).

Key issues of this book are the origin of the scrolls and the identity of Qumran’s inhabitants. H. makes a good case for viewing Qumran within its regional context and this is the book’s strength. The picture he draws of the site’s agricultural and industrial functions within the regional network deserves further study. H.’s
reconstruction of the site’s chronology, however, is not strong and seems to con-
trast with his explanations for its function in the different periods. For example,
its architectural layout limited to the main building is dated to the Hasmonean
period and interpreted as a military fortress. With the expansions dated to the
Herodian period comes its rural, civilian interpretation. However, their architec-
tural parallels, the fortified manor houses (222-230), only correspond to the plan
of main building, which weakens their explanatory force. Here, chronology, func-
tion, and architectural parallel seem not to be clearly delineated. As to the identity
of Qumran’s inhabitants, the site’s agricultural and industrial function can be har-
monized with the religious orientation of its inhabitants, as H. himself admits
when positing the priestly orientation of the owner.

To my mind, H.’s regional approach of Qumran does not at all preclude the
possibility that many of the scrolls originated there. H. makes a selective and
rather naïve use of the description of the Essenes as provided by some ancient
authors and states that they rule out that the inhabitants of Qumran were Essenes
(cf. 230, 233, 241). Such reasoning has not much to do with archaeology, even
less with history. It also contradicts with the author’s aim to examine the archaeo-
logical remains at Qumran in their own right. Whether the Essenes, or for that
matter a separated faction of Essenes, are the people behind the Dead Sea Scrolls,
the more important question is whether the scrolls should be understood in direct
relation to Qumran, which is something else than that the scrolls’ content deter-
mines the interpretation of the site. H. states that the pottery provenance of some
of the “scroll jars” from Qumran does no more than show a close connection
between the scrolls’ owners and the inhabitants of Qumran at the time of the
scrolls’ deposition in the caves (43, 147). Rather, I would say, it simply shows a
close connection and makes all additional assumptions about a Jerusalem origin
unnecessary and redundant (such as that the owner of Qumran had a priestly
orientation and was related to the scrolls’ owners in some way). H.’s discussion of
the scrolls’ origin is flawed and raises more questions than it can answer. By positing
their origin from various Sadducean Jerusalem libraries, H. disregards the
composite nature of the Dead Sea Scrolls, shown for example by the quantitative
distribution of different copies among the caves. He exaggerates the heteroge-
neous character of the collection and he does not reflect on the matter that certain
texts (such as Esther, Judith, and 1 Maccabees), which might be expected if the
collection were typical of Second Temple period Jewish literature, are missing.
The close proximity of the caves to the site warrants seeing the scrolls as artifacts con-
ected with Qumran, especially so if the writing on a jar from Cave 4 is similar to
that on three jars from the settlement, as A. Lemaire argues.

H.’s attempt to place Qumran in its regional context is very much welcomed,
but his effort to dissociate the scrolls from the settlement is forced, not well
argued, and unnecessary from an archaeological point of view. It is to be regretted