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QUMRANIC METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

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Introduction¹

Discovered in 1947, the seven leather scrolls stumbled upon by desert shepherds in the caves of Qumran have spurred a stream of scholarly research on what are now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. These manuscripts now contained in museums across Palestine are over eight hundred in number and the amount of research carried out on the study of these scrolls has multiplied exponentially.² Though in the past half century our understanding of the scrolls and the community from which they emanated has increased in volume and depth of understanding, the Qumran community is still, to a great extent, shrouded in mystery and vagueness. Scholars of the highest caliber have placed at the pinnacle of their academic career the aim of understanding the intricacies of this sectarian group. Behind every advance made, however, there exist a number of difficulties that remain clouded by enormous ambiguity. Nevertheless, our understanding of the Qumran community and those who inhabited it allows us to probe quite intensely into the interpretive methodology utilized by this remarkable Jewish sect.

¹Some editing of the document has been done in to bring the format of the paper closer to the Turabian guidelines (Dr. Cranford).

² Frank Moore Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 19.

The Interpretive Methods of Qumran

Before examining the interpretive methods of Qumran, it would serve well to understand the community itself. This community settled in the desert on the fringes of the Dead Sea found themselves also situated on the fringes of Judaism. Though a throng of Qumran scholars and researchers identify the inhabitation of the community as Essenes, a few are still in disagreement.³ Bray qualifies this identification with the stipulation that if the Qumran community is to be identified with the Essenes, “it is likely that the community represented a fairly extremist wing of the Essene movement.”⁴ Descriptions of a community in the wilderness comprised by Essenes are found in the writings of both Pliny and Dio Chrysostomus, strengthening the notion held by many scholars concerning the Essene identity of the Qumran Community.⁵ Above all else, it is certain that the Essenes were a sect of Judaism far removed from the main branches of Jewish religion.

The meaning of the name “Essene” is somewhat unclear, though suggestions have come from ancients like Philo, as well as modern scholars such as A. Dupont-Sommer. Philo proposes a meaning derived from the Greek *hosioi*, derived from ὁσίοις, meaning “holy” or “pure,” while Dupont-Sommer suggests the meaning “council” or “party” derived from the Hebrew word

³ Cross, 54.

⁴ Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past & Present* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 52.

⁵ Cross, 66.

ezah.⁶ The name “Essene” never appears in the scrolls, though the writers use a variety of other names to refer to the community (i.e. “community of the covenant,” “the sons of light”). Thus, it is thought by many that “Essene” may be a name give to the group from outsiders.⁷ Though the etymology of the name is uncertain, the purpose of this desert dwelling could be no clearer. From many quotes found within the scrolls, the unambiguous purpose of this wilderness sect was “to separate themselves from the abode of perverse men.”⁸

Archeology has contributed greatly to the understanding of the establishment of this sectarian dwelling, providing significant information concerning the building of the community. Archeologists suggest that the structures were built by the Essenes atop the “shattered foundations of an Israelite fortress” that remained deserted from the time of the sixth century B.C.⁹ The date of the settlement in the Qumran setting, though somewhat uncertain, is estimated to have begun no later than 103-76 B.C., though this date may have been much earlier.¹⁰ The time of the destruction of the community dwelling is certain, however. The Jewish Revolt brought on an armed attack of the Qumran community that culminated in its destruction just prior to A.D. 70.¹¹

Fortunately for scholars, when the Qumran community met with their destruction at the hands of Vespasian’s troops, they left behind a wealth of knowledge tucked safely away in the

⁶ Marcel Simon, *Jewish Sects At The Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 49-50.

⁷ Simon, 60.

⁸ Cross, 68.

⁹ Cross, 58.

¹⁰ Cross, 59.

¹¹ Cross, 60.

caves nearby the community dwelling.¹² This treasure of manuscripts lay in the caves of Qumran for centuries until two shepherds, searching for a lost animal, threw a stone into a cave. The sound they heard that day in the spring of 1947 led to the exploration of the cave and the finding that would impact the world of biblical and Judaic studies like no other.¹³ Until this discovery, all knowledge of the Essenes arrived to us second hand from Philo, Josephus, and Pliny the Elder.¹⁴ These historians all wrote of the Essenes approximately 100-150 years after the founding of the community.¹⁵ Never had scholars possessed the first-hand-knowledge of manuscripts written within the Essene community by its own members. The Dead Sea Scrolls have been, for the past half century, the best source of information available in the study of the Essenes and remains the cornerstone of research conducted on this community at Qumran.

The Essene sect, developing around the second century B.C., withdrew from Jerusalem and rejected the priesthood therein.¹⁶ Along with the leaving behind of the priesthood, the Essenes also refrained from very much participation in sacrifices of the alter. Those who chose to enter the community subsequently turned over all earthly wealth to the community for the good of all who lived there.¹⁷ Though the price of entrance into the community was high, including all of one's possessions, the way into the community was not all-inclusive. For one to be permitted

¹² Cross, 62.

¹³ Cross, 20-21.

¹⁴ Simon, 50.

¹⁵ Duncan Howlett, *The Essenes and Christianity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 79.

¹⁶ William Sanford LaSor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 57.

¹⁷ LaSor, 74.

into the group, one must first go through an arduous process of examination.¹⁸ During the years of preparation for entry into the community, one would undergo a series of ritual baths, evidently a vitally important part of community practice. Once a potential member of the community made it successfully through the two years as a novitiate, they must take an oath, swearing to convert “to the Law of Moses,” and “be separated from all perverse men who walk in the way of wickedness.”¹⁹ Last, upon acceptance into the community, the new community member would be allowed to participate in the community meal. It was zeal for the cause of virtue that drove this devout group of men into the desert to separate themselves from a society that they believed to be wicked and a religious practice that seemed completely corrupt.²⁰

To properly understand the interpretive methods of Qumran, one characteristic detail stands above all others concerning the Essene community. This characteristic is that of the apocalyptic nature of the sect and the eschatological themes present in the community and its writings. The community living at Qumran was penetrated to its very core with thoughts of the end-times and the community’s special role in the final judgment. It is evident from an examination of the scrolls that the community thought of themselves as a remnant, “living in the ‘end-time of anger,’ a ‘root of planting’ who had recognized their sins, whom God had remembered and for whom He had raised up a ‘teacher of righteousness.’”²¹ At the time the Dead Sea Scrolls were produced, the apocalyptic worldview was somewhat new on the scene of ancient Judaism. John Collins suggests that this worldview and “hope of otherworldly salvation, arose from a state

¹⁸ LaSor, 57.

¹⁹ A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Essene Writings from Qumran* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), 45.

²⁰ Dupont-Sommer, 44.

²¹ LaSor, 46.

of alienation and dissatisfaction with the circumstances in which the authors found themselves.”²²

Whatever the reason for holding such a belief in the imminence of the end-time judgment, there is no question whether the community was acting on that belief. Based on information contained in the scrolls, the Qumran community was preparing itself for an eschatological war. This war was to be a war of “vengeance upon its enemies and the enemies of God.”²³ Based on scripture commentary found in the scrolls, the new covenant described in Jeremiah 31:31 which God would make with His people was thought to have been made with the Essene community.²⁴ For the people, this meant that the judgment of the wicked was soon to come and the reward awaiting the good would soon be bestowed upon the community at Qumran.²⁵

For the Essenes at Qumran, no thought was more prevalent than that of vindication at the end of time. This would be the time when God would bring judgment upon those wicked enemies who were opposed to God. From quotations found in the scrolls, it is evident that much of the wickedness and corruption spoken of by the Essenes was concentrated on Jerusalem and the priesthood. 1QpHab 12:7-9 (Habakkuk Commentary) says of the city, “The city is Jerusalem in which the wicked priest did works of abominations and defiled the Temple of God.”²⁶ One example pulled from the scrolls cannot adequately represent the extent to which the community

²² John J. Collins, *Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London: Routledge, 1997), 154.

²³ Kurt Schubert, *The Dead Sea Community* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1959), 88.

²⁴ Schubert, 83.

²⁵ Schubert, 106.

²⁶ LaSor, 47.

dishonored the city of Jerusalem and the religious practice therein. The commentary also speaks of the priesthood as those “who heap up wealth and unjust gain from the plunder of the people” (1QpHab 9:4-5).²⁷ No doubt, much of the social and religious tension felt within the ranks of the Qumran community had at the hub of its focus the priesthood of Jerusalem. It is then understandable that the Qumran community felt little obligation to use an interpretive framework in line with the main branches of Judaism centered in Jerusalem and associated with the Temple.

Whether ancient or modern, any religious group believing themselves to occupy a unique and distinctive place at the end of time will have a strong propensity toward utilizing interpretive methodology that supports that belief when approaching sacred texts. For the Qumran community, this meant that nothing happened without an eschatological purpose.²⁸ The extent to which apocalyptic thought played a foundational role in the interpretive framework of the Essenes at Qumran cannot be over emphasized. For one to understand the method of interpretation utilized without first coming to grips with the eschatological overtones intensely present in Qumranic thought would be virtually impossible. Nothing happened in the history of the group that was not thought to have special significance to the role that the community would play in the rapidly approaching end-time.

The implication that the community’s eschatological and apocalyptic orientation has upon its interpretation of the Biblical text of the Old Testament is enormous. In this vein, both Dupont-Sommer and Brownlee, two eminent Qumran scholars, agree that the purpose of the interpretive work at Qumran was to “transpose the truth revealed to the prophets by God on to a

²⁷ LaSor, 47.

²⁸ Schubert, 89.

new historical and theological plane.”²⁹ This so-called “fulfillment-interpretation” of Scripture purposes to indicate how the prophecies of scripture are fulfilled in the current generation.³⁰ Even the writing style of the commentaries on scripture found at Qumran exhibit a strong apocalyptic style, utilizing symbols and nicknames to give contemporary significance to ancient prophecy.³¹ No parallel can be found in either Rabbinic Judaism or Philonic Judaism to the type of apocalyptic interpretation utilized by the Essenes in the Qumran community.³²

One must recognize at this point some of the opposition encountered by the Essenes concerning their apocalyptic interpretative methodology. Above all others, rabbinic Judaism vehemently rejected the development of apocalyptic literature such as that of the sect at Qumran. The priesthood of Jerusalem is said to have attempted on occasion to silence the teachings of the Essenes at Qumran and are believed to have been ardent persecutors of this sectary group.³³ No doubt, this persecution from the outside only fueled the passion of the Qumran community, much like persecution conscious religious groups of today are spurred on in their efforts by maltreatment and harassment. The community found its solace in the knowledge that it was the remnant that was elected by God to fulfill a specific role in history, persecution included.

A second subject, vital to a proper understanding of Qumranic methods of interpretation, is the mysterious figure called the “Teacher of Righteousness.” The identity of this teacher remains very much an enigma to modern scholars. Due partially to the fact that the Essenes would

²⁹ Lucetta Mowry, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Early Church* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 107.

³⁰ Mowry, 107.

³¹ Dupont-Sommer, 257.

³² Cross, 157.

³³ Mowry, 109-110.

neither speak nor write the name of the Teacher of Righteousness out of respect, we are left guessing at the identity of this obscure religious figure.³⁴ Dupont-Sommer believes the Teacher to have been a priest, a zealous reformer, and a mystic. He goes on to say, “he was the resolute enemy of the official priesthood which he reproached for their contempt of the Law and for their impiety.”³⁵ To be sure, the Teacher of Righteousness holds a crucial key to the understanding of the interpretative framework of the Qumran community.

According to the Essenes at Qumran, the Teacher of Righteousness fulfilled the prophesized role of “expected last prophet.” According to the Habakkuk Commentary, “God made known to him all the mysteries of the words of his servants the prophets.”³⁶ With this lofty position within the community, it is no question that the Teacher of Righteousness exerted a monstrous influence over the interpretative practices of the community. Some scholars suggest that the Teacher fulfills the role of the Messiah from Aaron spoken of in Numbers 24:17, while others simply regard the teacher as the messianic prophet.³⁷ No matter what designation given to the Teacher, it can be said with some certainty that this figure was a descendent of a priestly family.³⁸

The words of the Teacher of Righteousness are recorded in select manuscripts found at Qumran and indicate that the role this figure fulfilled was that of prophet and interpreter. The Teacher says of himself, “And Thou [hast instructed me in] Thy Covenant and my tongue has

³⁴ Dupont-Sommer, 358.

³⁵ Dupont-Sommer, 359.

³⁶ Schubert, 114.

³⁷ Schubert, 116.

³⁸ Schubert, 115.

been as the tongue of Thy disciples...”³⁹ Dupont-Sommer labels the Teacher as the “prophet *par excellence*” and builder of the community who is the “key to all ancient revelation” and “the chief object of faith.”⁴⁰

Bary equates the role that the Teacher of Righteousness played in the community as a type of papal authority exerted over the group.⁴¹ Whether this is an apt description or not, it can be said with certainty that no individual held more sway over the interpretation of the Biblical texts in the Qumran community than the Teacher of Righteousness. He was venerated as the Teacher to whom had been revealed “a gnosis which, by a unique privilege, has revealed to him the secrets of the final age.”⁴² Perhaps it was for this reason that when persecution was heaviest against the Qumran sect, it was the Teacher of Righteousness who was “arrested, judged, maltreated and very probably put to death.”⁴³

With the understanding of the central role the Teacher of Righteousness played in the religious life and interpretative activities of the group, a word must be said about what those activities consisted of. The evening of each day was dedicated to liturgical assemblies that consisted of prayer and the reading and explanation of the sacred writings.⁴⁴ Clearly, these meetings of study and worship are of central importance to an exploration of the interpretative methodology

³⁹ Dupont-Sommer, 361.

⁴⁰ Dupont-Sommer, 258.

⁴¹ Bray, 60.

⁴² Simon, 82.

⁴³ Dupont-Sommer, 360.

⁴⁴ Simon, 71.

of the Qumran community. It was the nightly gathering where method turned to practice and the texts were interpreted for the community.

At the nightly meetings, scholars agree on the utilization of commentaries among the Qumran Essenes for the purposes of interpretation and teaching of scripture. According to the Manuel of Discipline, the recorded rules and guidelines of the community, “it was the duty of everyone present to search diligently for any hidden meaning in the Scriptures...the inspired person should not hesitate to express what might be the key to understand a difficult passage.”⁴⁵ The probable structure of these meetings would consist of a brief reading of a section of the text followed by an explanation and discussion of its meaning.⁴⁶ Imperative to these meetings is the presence of one who interprets the law. The Manuel of Discipline stipulates that whenever ten or more members of the community are present, a “man who studies (searches in) the Law” should also be in attendance.⁴⁷

Among the scrolls discovered at Qumran are the commentaries on the sacred texts. These commentaries were probably utilized quite extensively in the nightly meetings where interpretation took place. The commentaries were divided up in such a way that one could use them to study the text in successive small portions. First in the commentary would be recorded the Biblical passage, sectioned in single verses, multiple verses or a fraction of a verse. Following this, the interpretation of the passage is rendered. Typically, an introductory formula intro-

⁴⁵ Mowry, 94.

⁴⁶ Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 9.

⁴⁷ Ringgren, 9.

duces the interpretation with the words “The explanation of this is that...”⁴⁸ The commentary would resume this pattern until the complete text was interpreted.

The type of interpretation rendered by the Essene commentaries of Qumran can be described by the Hebrew word *peshet*, simply implying an “explanation of the hidden significance,” or a “revelation of the secrets concealed in the divine books.”⁴⁹ As stated above, the Essenes had no concern for objective interpretation within the context of the passage. Instead, through the method of *peshet*, they diligently searched for the hidden meaning applicable to the current context of the Qumran community.

To aid in this interpretative endeavor, the Teacher of Righteousness established a school for the purpose of education in the way of the community’s biblical interpretation. Rewards are said to have been given out annually to those who excelled in the work of interpretation, thus furthering one’s rank in the community.⁵⁰ It is obvious from the examination of the evidence that the Essenes at Qumran placed an extraordinarily high importance on the interpretation of scripture through the method of uncovering secondary meanings in the text. While the rabbis of Jerusalem were fairly unconcerned with the eschatological, the Qumran sect frequently turned to the Old Testament for a word that speaks to their social, cultural, and religious context and provides hope for what was believed to be the last days of history.⁵¹

One need not strain to find parallels between the Qumranic method of interpretation and the method of interpretation utilized by Jesus and the New Testament Church. A first point of

⁴⁸ Dupont-Sommer, 256.

⁴⁹ Dupont-Sommer, 255.

⁵⁰ Mowry, 94.

⁵¹ Mowry, 103.

contact between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament is the strong dualism present in the Scrolls and the writings of John and Paul. In the *Manuel of Discipline* (III, 19), the text speaks these words: “In the source of Light are the origins of Truth and from the spring of Darkens the origins of Evil.”⁵² Similar sounding words are recorded by the apostle Paul in the New Testament in his second letter to the Corinthians (6:14-16). Here Paul questions his readers concerning what fellowship light can have with darkness. The Qumran sect, of course, uses this dualism to further separate themselves from those outside of the community. This is especially evident when, in the *Manuel of Discipline*, those wishing to join the community are instructed to “love all the Children of Light” and “hate all the Children of Darkenss.”⁵³ This dualism of light and darkness, good and evil, can be found throughout the Scrolls, as well as all through the documents of the New Testament.

A second point of common ground between Qumran and the New Testament are the similarities with regard to the “fulfillment-interpretation” utilized in the communities from which both originated. As stressed heavily in the preceding pages, the Qumran community diligently searched the Old Testament scriptures for hidden meanings of contemporary significance. Though not done through nightly meetings of prayer and interpretation, the New Testament authors nevertheless utilize the Old Testament to substantiate the biblical significance of current events. An example of which may be found in the birth narrative of the Gospel of Matthew when, repeatedly, a detail of the birth of Christ is conveyed, immediately followed by a quotation of an Old Testament text foretelling the event.

⁵² David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Ahva Cooperative Press, 1988), 25.

⁵³ Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 127.

A third and final common element in both the New Testament and the Qumran community concerns the community's own view of its role in God's covenant. Both the early Church and the sect at Qumran believe themselves to be the recipients of the promise first given by God to Abraham.⁵⁴ Each community shared the belief that they were living near the end-times, as evidenced by much of the teaching within the New Testament. Eschatological beliefs had a profound impact on the teaching of both communities and shaped the documents formed within each.

As a last point of inquiry into the interpretive methods of Qumran, the canon of the community must be questioned. Among the scrolls found at Qumran, many were biblical texts and still many others were extra-biblical. This raises the question concerning what was considered sacred or divinely inspired. It is felt that many of the texts that contained variant readings from manuscript to manuscript were probably not considered canonical, due to their changing nature in response to the community's needs.⁵⁵ However, it is probable that the words and writings of the Teacher of Righteousness were considered as divinely inspired.⁵⁶ The exalted view that the community possessed concerning the Teacher can be illustrated with these words from the Habakkuk Commentary: "This refers to all those who obey the Law among the Jews whom God will rescue from among those doomed to judgment, because of their suffering and their loyalty to the Teacher of Righteousness" (8:1-2).⁵⁷ Such a high view of the Teacher certainly leaves open the possibility that his words were considered to be divinely inspired, thus enlarging the canon at the community of Qumran.

⁵⁴ Mowry, 125.

⁵⁵ Schubert, 13.

⁵⁶ Schubert, 14.

Conclusion

Prior to 1947, no one could have imagined what a significant impact two simple shepherds could have upon the world of biblical scholarship and Judaic studies. However, with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, modern understanding of the remarkable sect of Judaism called the Essenes has escalated dramatically and scholarly study continues to be published at a swift pace.

The interpretive issues that must be dealt with when studying the sect at Qumran are numerous and the ambiguity often present is sometimes difficult to surmount. However, through study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the community from which they are preserved, one is allowed a first-hand look into a world of biblical interpretation that remained on the fringes of Judaism, yet paralleled many of the interpretative stances of the early Christian Church.

Apocalyptic overtones, the mysterious figure of the Teacher of Righteousness, dualistic imagery and a host of other characteristics help to paint an apt picture of this sectarian community with its rich history of interpretative methodology. Though a study of the Qumran community leaves many issues in a haze of ambiguity and obscurity, it also yields a great number of answers to questions concerning the Qumranic methods of interpretation. Such methods have been utilized outside of the Qumran community and, to some extent, still remain in use today among end-time scholars of the futurist and dispensationalist schools of thought. Shrouded in mystery, the Essens at Qumran are of great importance to the world of historic Judaism and even New Testament studies. Certainly, the scrolls of this fringe religious group will continue to inform

⁵⁷ Wise, 119.

scholars for centuries to come on issues of great importance to the study of biblical interpretation.

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