Peter W. Flint

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Core Biblical Studies


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Peter Flint presents a new introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls in twelve chapters, making it readily adaptable as an undergraduate textbook. Although not explicitly divided as such, the chapters fall roughly into three main parts, and the comparative lengths of treatment of these readily reveal Flint’s emphasis in the book and set it apart from other introductions to the Dead Sea Scrolls of similar length (e.g., James VanderKam, The Dead Sea Scrolls Today, rev. ed. [Eerdmans, 2010]; John Collins, The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Biography [Princeton University Press, 2012]).

The first part covers the material finds in three chapters: “The Discovery of the Scrolls,” the “Archaeology of the Qumran Site,” and “Dating the Scrolls Found at Qumran.” Together, these are treated in about thirty-five pages (in contrast to the forty-six pages in VanderKam and over sixty pages in Collins).

The second part explores what is to be learned about the nature and development of the Jewish Scriptures through the Dead Sea Scrolls, in five chapters: “The Bible before the Scrolls,” “The Biblical Scrolls,” “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Biblical Text,” “The Scrolls, the Apocrypha, and the Pseudepigrapha,” and “The Shape and Contents of the Scriptures Used at Qumran.” Flint devotes sixty-eight pages to these chapters, the most detailed of the book (in contrast to about fifty pages in VanderKam and twenty-eight in Collins on
these topics). The main distinctive of Flint’s introduction is to be found here, as he devotes much more attention to matters of textual criticism and canon—with examples—than in any other comparable introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls. This introduction would work well in a course on the Dead Sea Scrolls that devoted significant time to textual criticism and the early development of the Bible, using The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible (ed. P. Flint and M. Abegg [HarperSanFrancisco, 1999]) as an accompanying textbook, alongside The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation (ed. M. Wise, M. Abegg, and E. Cook, rev. ed. [HarperSanFrancisco, 2005]). All the examples and translations in the book are from these two volumes of translations.

The remaining four chapters treat the beliefs, practices, and nature of the sectarian movement. This includes a survey of the “Nonbiblical Scrolls,” organized by genre and distinguishing between sectarian and nonsectarian texts, and discussions of the identity of “The Movement Associated with Qumran,” the “Religious Thought and Practice Reflected in the Qumran Scrolls,” and “New Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls.” Together these amount to about ninety-five pages (VanderKam and Collins both devote about 150 pages to similar content, with more attention to describing ideology and practices). In chapter 10 on the identity of the movement, Flint compares the data from the sectarian scrolls and the site of Qumran with what is known of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes and affirms the majority view that these were related to the Essenes mentioned in classical sources. Flint is careful to distinguish between the settlement at Qumran, which he identifies with the yahad in the Rule of the Community, and the wider sectarian movement, which he finds reflected in the Damascus Document as new covenanters. Alternative theories (e.g., the scrolls were brought from Jerusalem) are briefly mentioned with the comment that scholars have not found them persuasive, but with no discussion. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the history of the movement, drawn especially from the Damascus Document, the Rule of the Community, and some of the pesharim. Unfortunately, there is no discussion of the significant problems in using such idealized texts for historical reconstruction. Also, Flint leaves unclear exactly how he understands the role of such functionaries as the maskil and mebaqqer, and there is no significant discussion of the question of development in the authority structures of the community, such as reflected in the different recensions of the Rule of the Community (e.g., 1QS 5 versus 4QSb frg. 5 and 4QSa frg. 1).

Chapter 11, “Religious Thought and Practice Reflected in the Qumran Scrolls,” discusses six topics. (1) The “concept of God” is given a brief discussion, mostly limited to the motif of God as Creator. (2) Flint addresses the motifs of predeterminism and dualism in relation to the movement’s reflections on the presence of evil in the world, which posits the supernatural origins of evil. This is a helpful way to frame these prominent aspects of ideology in the sectarian scrolls, but the discussion seems to gloss over the tension
between the myth of the rebellion of the Watchers found in Jubilees and 1 Enoch and the Belial myth found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the latter, Belial is created by God to lead the realm of darkness for a predetermined period, and there is little place in this deterministic scheme for a rebellion against God’s purposes. (3) Flint identifies divine law as an overall ordering principle both for nature (including calendar) and humanity. (4) Interpretation of Scripture involves the revelation of divine mysteries. (5) In their temporary alienation from the temple, the yahad experienced closeness with God and union with the angelic congregation through prayer and mystical experience. (6) The sectarians believed they were living at the end of days and hoped in the imminent arrival of two or even three messiahs: priestly, royal, and possibly prophetic. In this last section, the discussions of the interpreter and the prophetic messiah (180) are confusing: concerning the former, it is not clear why Flint implies that the maskil (see 1QS 9:12) is a messianic figure and identified with the Teacher of Righteousness; concerning the latter, the relevant passage should be 1QS 9:10–11.

The final chapter is on the “New Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls.” After a brief discussion—and dismissal—of theories that the Dead Sea Scrolls include fragments of the New Testament and refer to the early Christian movement, this chapter summarizes important areas where the Dead Sea Scrolls do shed light on the New Testament. For the most part, this is in the form of listing topics with key passages relevant to Jesus (187–89) and Acts and the New Testament epistles (192–93). It would have been helpful to have even a single sentence for each of these highlighting the importance of the comparisons. Flint does expound on several important examples at length: the use of Isa 40:3 concerning John the Baptist and the Essenes; Jesus as royal and prophetic messiah; and Jesus as priestly messiah and high priest analogous to Melchizedek as heavenly high priest. He also treats in detail the relationship between Revelation and the Dead Sea Scrolls, especially the eschatological war traditions in the War Scroll, visions of the eschatological holy city in the New Jerusalem text; and the temple and ritual purity in the Temple Scroll.

The book includes two very helpful lists at the beginning: “Abbreviations, definitions, and key words” and “Ancient groups and figures.” At the end Flint provides a select bibliography (general works for further research and items mentioned in the book) and an index of modern authors. There is an accompanying website with supplementary online materials that should be useful for students and readers who wish to explore further (the link to the publishers website at http://www.abingdonacademic.com/dsscrolls does not seem to be updated, but the material is available instead on Peter Flint’s personal website at deadseascrolls.org/www/Site/thedss.php). This includes a detailed table of contents; study questions for each chapter in the book; indices of ancient sources, subjects, and modern authors; links to websites with online images of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
This introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls by a prominent expert is a welcome addition. It is a systematic and authoritative guide suitable for any interested reader, but it is most suitable as an undergraduate textbook where it will be accompanied by other supplementary information. Any introduction must make compromises to stay at a reasonable length (around two hundred pages). The choices made in this volume—to prioritize a detailed discussion of textual criticism at the expense of comparatively less attention to ideology and practice and the implications for understanding Judaism in general—make the volume distinctive and will suit some readers and course syllabi more than others.