David Stacey and Gregory Doudna

Qumran Revisited: A Reassessment of the Archaeology of the Site and Its Texts

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In Qumran Revisited: A Reassessment of the Archaeology of the Site and Its Texts, David Stacey and Gregory Doudna challenge the validity of the Qumran Essene hypothesis by offering a number of new interpretations and theories to account for the archaeological and textual evidence from Qumran. In the first of the book’s three main chapters, entitled “A Reassessment of the Stratigraphy of Qumran,” Stacey contemplates the relevant archaeological evidence so as to determine the date of Qumran’s various phases of construction and the possible function(s) of the site in antiquity (7–73). Starting with an overview of earlier interpretations of the site and an examination of the main aqueduct and water-collection system, Stacey carefully scrutinizes Roland de Vaux’s field notes, methodology, and the photographs from the excavations (11–23). At the culmination of this discussion, Stacey concludes that the main aqueduct, in contrast to the interpretation of de Vaux, who argued that Qumran’s aqueduct and main buildings were completed between 100 and 31 BCE, was actually completed between 31 and 15 BCE. In support of this argument, Stacey points to a preponderance of Herodian period pottery in the loci that were directly affected by the construction of the aqueduct and to the presence of a water-raising dam, an installation apparently unattested in ancient Palestine before the Herodian period (21). By suggesting that the construction of the aqueduct and the main buildings of Khirbet Qumran took place in the early Herodian period rather than the
Hasmonean period, Stacey calls into question the commonly held assumption that the site had been expanded considerably at the tail end of the second century BCE.

The central section of the essay (34–51) paints a startlingly different portrait of the construction of Qumran than the one articulated by de Vaux and subsequently refined by Jodi Magness. According to de Vaux, Khirbet Qumran’s first incarnation was as a modest desert fort in the eighth century BCE (i.e., de Vaux’s Period I), which was built some six centuries before the members of the nascent Qumran community retreated into the wilderness to claim Qumran as their own (Period Ia; ca. 130–100 BCE). Shortly after acquiring the site, the Essenes enlarged Qumran and used the site as a quasi-monastic complex until a massive earthquake devastated the region in 31 BCE (Period Ib; ca. 100–31 BCE). After the site was abandoned for nearly three decades, de Vaux argued, the community eventually returned to Qumran, effected repairs, and lived at the site and its environs until its destruction at the hands of the Romans (Period II; ca. 4 BCE–68 CE), who used a portion of the site as a military outpost both during and after the First Jewish Revolt (Period III; ca. 68–74 CE). In contrast to de Vaux, Stacey does not affiliate the site with a Jewish sectarian community and argues that Qumran was throughout most of the Hasmonean period a relatively small manufacturing compound with only a handful of rooms, a tower, two pottery kilns, and a severely limited water collection system (i.e., Stacey’s Hasmonean I and II; 100–31 BCE). Stacey argues that in the decades after 31 BCE Herod the Great expanded Qumran into a seasonal manufacturing complex in a possible bid to strengthen his country’s economic infrastructure at the northern end of the Dead Sea. The Herodian renovations at Qumran included the construction of an aqueduct, cisterns, numerous rooms, and storage facilities (Herod I–IV; 20–1 BCE), which would have greatly improved the site’s productivity. After the death of Herod in 4 BCE, however, Qumran went into a period of decline and relative disuse until the Romans destroyed the site in the second year of the First Jewish Revolt.

Toward the end of his discussion Stacey entertains a number of possible uses for the water-collection system and manufacturing facilities at Qumran. Among the activities he considers are the production of leather, glue, wool, dyeing, pottery, medicine/perfumes, rope making, flax retting, basket/mat making, the collection of salt and bitumen, and the production of lye (53–61). “Of all these activities,” argues Stacey, “there is positive evidence for the ceramic industry, tanning and, less certainly, rope making [at Qumran]” (61). According to Stacey, rather than being an isolated monastic community or an independently owned industrial complex, Qumran was a readily accessible seasonal manufacturing facility that fell under the purview of Herod’s estate in Jericho: “The economic importance of the royal monopoly over the industries in the region underscores the unlikelihood that the King would tolerate competition from a self-governing community in Qumran” (62). While Stacey tentatively acknowledges that there
is a connection between the Dead Sea Scrolls and Khirbet Qumran, he simultaneously affirms that this fact “does not establish an intimate and direct connection, nor that the settlement was sectarian” (63). Rather, Stacey maintains that the caves may have functioned as *genizot* for “the royal entourage moving between Jerusalem and Jericho” and/or as a place for the temple establishment to dispose of “heterodox or seditious writings generated by any subversive sects to prevent them from influencing others” (63). Either way, Qumran would have been under the auspices of the royal estate in Jericho and would have functioned as a “seasonal site, producing, by processes that were unpleasant, articles that were necessary; a place bustling with activity for a few weeks a year, but, during the harsh heat of the summer, lying empty and abandoned to the thirsty desiccating sun” (73).

In Doudna’s contribution to the volume, entitled “The Sect of the Qumran Texts and Its Leading Role in the Temple in Jerusalem during Much of the First Century BCE: Toward a New Framework for Understanding,” the author endeavors to dismantle many of the arguments that undergird the Qumran Essene hypothesis so as to promote the theory that the Qumran community was founded in the first century BCE and was synonymous with the Hasmonean priesthood. Starting with the commonly held assumption that the Qumran community was established in opposition to the temple in the mid- to late second century BCE, Doudna challenges the notion that 1QS contains an antitemple polemic as well as the idea that the Damascus Document’s admonition (CD 1–8) can be used to construct a legitimate timeline for the emergence of the Yahad in the second century BCE (75–78). Doudna’s subsequent arguments include the claim that the Yahad and Hasmonean priests would both have identified themselves as descendants of Zadok, as opposed to this being a unique feature of the Yahad (78); the argument that the Qumran community was never at odds with the temple over calendrical issues, which is the opposite of what many scholars have argued since the late 1940s (78–79); and the observation that there are no anti-Hasmonean polemics in the scrolls regarding the combination of the high priest and king into a single person or of the Hasmonean ruler being non-Davidic (79–80, 103), thereby implying that the Yahad was never at odds with the Hasmoneans.

Mining Pesher Habakkuk and Pesher Nahum for historical allusions, Doudna continues his assault on the Qumran Essene hypothesis by claiming that the references to the Kittim should be identified with the Romans, thereby indicating that the setting for the contents of the Pesharim should be dated to the middle of the first century BCE rather than the second century BCE, as most have argued (82). By redating the setting of Pesher Habakkuk and Pesher Nahum, Doudna attempts to reinforce his theory that the Qumran community was founded in the first century BCE and sets the stage for one of his overarching goals: to present an alternative history for the development of the Essenes.
Regarding the latter, Doudna argues that Josephus’s Essenes were nothing more than a fictional or “phantom” title for a preexisting group or movement. Pointing to the limited number of references to the Essenes prior to 100 BCE, and relying upon the work of those scholars who have observed that some of the halakic positions in the Dead Sea Scrolls parallel those of the Sadducees, Doudna argues that the Essenes, and by extension the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, were actually Sadducees during the Hasmonean period. In an effort to explain this evolution, Doudna claims that, after the death of Antigonus Mattahias and installation of Herod the Great as king in 37 BCE, the Essenes experienced a dramatic rise in popularity while the supporters of the Hasmonean dynasty (i.e., the Sadducees) entered a period of decline. “It is difficult to escape an inchoate sense,” argues Doudna, “that in some manner these Herod-era Essenes are successors of Hasmonean-era Sadducee activity” (86).

The final section of Doudna’s essay covers a wide variety of subjects, including a (re)interpretation of various geographical references and sobriquets in the Pesharim, which Doudna connects to people and places from the first century BCE (89–98); historical references in the scrolls and their potential connection to first-century events, as described Josephus (98–107); interludes on radiocarbon dating, ceramics, and paleography, which are meant to function as rebuttals to those who see the presence of first-century CE documents at Qumran as a stumbling block for Doudna’s hypothesis (108–15); a discussion on the pluraformity of the Masoretic Text at Qumran versus the relative uniformity of the MT at Masada and elsewhere, which suggests that the texts at Qumran were deposited in the caves before the MT was stabilized (115–16); and a commentary on the dearth of references in the Dead Sea Scrolls to Herod the Great or to historical events after his installation as king (116–17), which “suggests that the texts do not go much later than the date of the last allusion [to Herod]” (117). At the culmination of his discussion Doudna concludes that the Dead Sea Scrolls are the “literary remains of a sect organized and led by priests associated with the temple during the greater part of the 1st century BCE, texts from the inner world of this sect, texts from inside the 1st century BCE temple” (124).

In the third and final essay of this volume, Gideon Avni offers a piece entitled “Who Were Interred in the Qumran Cemetery? On Ethnic Identities and the Archaeology of Death and Burial.” In this brief yet well-balanced piece Avni convincingly argues for a cautious and judicious approach to the archaeology of the Qumran cemetery and its interpretation. Framing his essay as a test case for the challenges that archaeologists and anthropologists face when attempting to identify the ethnicity of an ancient population based on the recovery of material culture, Avni walks the reader through the history of scholarship on the Qumran cemetery and its excavations while simultaneously attempting to show how the interpretations of the cemetery have been unduly influenced
by the Qumran Essene hypothesis (125–26). This is followed by an evenhanded description of the data from the Qumran cemetery, including a summary of the various excavations, the number of graves excavated, the architecture of the individual tombs, the orientation of the graves, the age and gender of the skeletons, the artifacts recovered, and the location, size, and shape of the cemetery (126–30). After summarizing the relevant data and observing that the Qumran cemetery seems to have been used by multiple ethnic and religious populations from the Second Temple period forward, Avni concludes: “The archaeological data from the graves is [sic] insufficient to pinpoint the social and religious identity of those buried in it, their occupation or lifestyle, whether they lived only in the neighboring settlement or roamed the Judean Desert highlands and the Dead Sea area” (130–31). Given that only 5.5 percent of the graves from Qumran have been excavated to date and that archaeologists have subsequently identified several thousand Nabataean graves conforming to the same burial architecture as that of Qumran (126, 129–30), Avni’s conclusion that “the archaeological and environmental arguments from the cemetery are in themselves insufficient to resolve disagreements among scholars about the nature of the Qumran settlement during the Second Temple period” is both academically sound and a clarion call for subsequent studies on the Qumran cemetery (131).

On the whole, Qumran Revisited is a thought-provoking and challenging publication. Stacey’s contention that Qumran was a seasonal manufacturing facility with ties to the Herodian dynasty raises some profoundly challenging questions about those who may have occupied the site, the feasibility of living in the Judean desert year round, and the relationship between the scrolls and site’s occupants. Similarly, Doudna’s radical reappraisal of the scrolls and the Qumran Essene hypothesis forces readers to reevaluate their presuppositions about the founding of the Yahad while simultaneously inviting them to consider the merits of his unorthodox yet fascinating (re)interpretations. Finally, in my opinion Avni’s essay on the archaeology of the Qumran cemetery will likely become the definitive statement on the subject and should be consulted by anyone interested in working on the Qumran cemetery. Although Stacey and Doudna occasionally engage in overt speculation, the volume’s primary shortcoming is that its organization and structure are uneven and inconsistent. Of the three chapters in Qumran Revisited, only one makes use of footnotes (Stacey’s), and there are no indices to help the reader navigate the volume’s contents. Particularly challenging is the fact that Doudna’s essay is presented as a collection of sixty untitled subsections, which, when combined with his rapid-fire prose, makes it difficult to follow the trajectory of his arguments. The latter is especially problematic in that Doudna’s essay is not only the most controversial and aggressive piece in the book but is so far removed from the consensus position on Qumran that any impediment to understanding Doudna’s arguments only serve to alienate the reader and
lessen the force of his interpretations. Notwithstanding these criticisms, *Qumran Revisited* is a provocative and stimulating publication that will no doubt generate many lively discussions among Dead Sea Scrolls scholars and their graduate students for many years to come.