

## How Can we learn Political History from the Dead Sea Scrolls?

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The library discovered at Qumran contained religious texts such as Biblical Books, Greek and Aramaic translations of the Bible, narratives about biblical figures, collections of laws and prayers of various types. Such texts are not dated and usually do not contain historical references. This obviously increases the value of the few historical allusions that do appear in the Qumran scrolls, most of which are found in "contemporizing" interpretations of biblical verses--couched in the context of the sect's times. This method of interpretation is known as "*Pesharim*". The *Pesharim* allude to historical events which concerned the inhabitants of Qumran. In addition, the Damascus Covenant contains such historical data. These few references facilitate our efforts to reconstruct the history of the religious group that was dwelling at Qumran at the end of the Second Temple period.

A significant portion of the scrolls discovered at Qumran were the work of scribes belonging to a religious group who believed that their era was The End of Days, i.e., the eve of the "Day of God". They composed texts called "*Pesharim*" to prove that redemption was at hand. In these scrolls, the Qumran authors interpreted the words of the prophets and hymns from the book of Psalm as referring to events current in their own era. They argued that, as the prophecies regarding those events had just been fulfilled, it should be assumed that the descriptions of the redemption appearing in these same prophecies, may also be expected to be fulfilled in the near future. The *Pesharim* manifest a unique method of interpretation which was developed during the Second Temple Period. After the author quotes a verse, he adds the following words: פשר הדבר על "This is the interpretation of..." or פשרו על "Peshar of..." as an

introduction to his interpretation of the verse as describing events unfolding in his own era.

The Qumran authors expressed these interpretations covertly. They concealed their true intentions, either out of fear of reprisal from their opponents--in the event of discovery--or out of a desire to have the texts remain the exclusive property of the members of the sect--who were the only ones who could understand these interpretations. For this reason, the *Pesharim* and the *Damascus Covenant* refer to the historical figures who had an impact on the history of the Qumran sect, by epithet, using what was probably their conventional nicknames. Thus, for example, the name of the priest who led the sect and established its character, is not explicitly named. He is consistently referred to as the מורה הצדק “The Teacher of Righteousness”. The opposing Pharisaic leader against whom the Teacher of Righteousness disputed, is known as איש הכזב “The Man of Lies”. The priest who pursued the Teacher of Righteousness and attempted to cause his death is called הכוהן הרשע “The Wicked Priest”. Other Judean political leaders were referred to as כפיר החרון “The Lion of Wrath” or איש הבליעל (=‘Man of Belial’). The authors of the *Pesharim* called their group “Judah”, the Pharisees were called “Ephraim” or “*Dorshei Ha-halakhot*” (=‘Seekers after Smooth things’) while the Saducees were referred to as “Menashe”. The authors of the *Pesharim* were successful in camouflaging their intended interpretations and therefore, for the last fifty years, scholars have been debating about the identity of a number of the figures hinted in these *Pesharim* and in the *Damascus Covenant*. In this lecture I will provide a summary of the historical details regarding the Qumran sect and its members, as gleaned from three scrolls.

Of the 900 scrolls discovered at Qumran, Only ten scrolls contain names of historical figures, including few which were apparently not written by sectarian

authors. These scrolls identify the following Jewish leaders: Onias (probably one of the High Priests who served in the Jerusalem Temple prior to the Hasmonean Revolt), Jonathan and Simeon (probably the sons of Mattathias), John (probably John Hyrcanus I), King Jonathan (who should be identified as Alexander Jannaeus), Shlomozion and Hyrcanus (the son of Alexander Jannaeus). The scrolls also mention Antiochus and Demetrius two Seleucid kings, Ptolemy (who might be one of the Ptolemaic rulers), and Aemilius, a Roman general whose full name was Marcus Aemilius Scaurus and who was appointed by Pompey as the governor of Syria in 63 B.C.E. The Scrolls note a certain Potlaim, probably a Jewish officer who commanded a military unit in Judaea between 57 to 53 B.C.E. These individuals were active from the middle of the second century B.C.E (Onias and Antiochus) to the middle of the first century B.C.E. (Aemilius and Potlaim). As I will try to show in this lecture, there is evidence that the epithets, or the conventional nicknames are referring to historical figures of the same period.