Charlesworth, James H.

The Pesharim and Qumran History: Chaos or Consensus?


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This very readable monograph on Qumran peshar and history will, deservedly, become an obligatory item in the syllabi and reading lists for undergraduate courses in Qumran studies and related fields. It is thus essential that educators and students are clear about what this important book achieves and what it does not. Charlesworth has digested and distilled a prodigious amount of scholarship pertaining to peshar and historical inquiry and has produced an accurate, comprehensive, and clear representation of relevant scholarly debate and conclusions. An introductory section is devoted to “the hermeneutics of the pesharim,” in which it is rightly stressed that these texts are to be characterized as “fulfillment literature.” The main body of the work actually consists of two, somewhat overlapping, segments. Pages 17–66 address general issues of Qumran history, within the framework of de Vaux’s five archeological phases for the site. Pages 67–116 focus upon the pesharim, specifically the identification of the numerous sobriquets employed in the texts. Two useful appendices by Lidija Novakovic are included, the first listing biblical quotations in the pesharim and related documents and the second listing textual variants in these documents. (The selected texts are those that are included in James H. Charlesworth et al., eds. The Dead Sea Scrolls: The Pesharim, Other Commentaries, and Related Documents. [PTSDSSP 6B; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002].)
In his preface to the monograph Charlesworth states that the “central question” to be addressed is “how and in what ways, if at all, can one obtain reliable historical data from the pesharim?” (x). The reader might reasonably expect the work to begin with a programmatic delineation of methodological concerns and strategies to be implemented throughout the book. In actuality, the discussion of “methodology” takes place halfway through the book (70–77) and seems more like a post facto description or justification of how scholars read the pesharim for history rather than a prescriptive guide as to how the enterprise should be undertaken. Charlesworth aims to move beyond what he characterizes as the “generic methodology” put forth by Frank M. Cross, who advocated the use of the scrolls for historical reconstruction, within the limitations set by “outside controls” such as archaeology and paleography. Charlesworth carefully attempts to develop “clear, yet fluid, means” for employing the pesharim as historical sources without enforcing a rigid “set methodology” that would misconstrue the pesharim as historical compositions. He presents six distinct “methods for discerning history in the pesharim” (73), particularly stressing “coherence”: (1) multiple attestation within Qumran literature (primarily the repeated use of technical terms and sobriquets); (2) multiple attestation from non-Qumran literature in early Judaism; (3) coherence within Qumran sectarian literature; (4) coherence with non-Qumran literature; (5) coherence with archaeological insights; and (6) historical allusions not generated by Qumran theological tendencies. The difference between items 2 and 4 seems to be that the former refers to “multiple attestation” of specific figures or details, whereas the latter describes a larger contextual framework, “a universally accepted grid of persons and dates [within which] to understand events and persons in antiquity.” In general, these are reasonable observations but not methodological criteria. Ultimately, the reader is left with the sense that a great deal of subjectivity remains in scholarly interpretation of the pesharim. (Moreover, in response to point 6, it might be argued that sources exhibiting clear Tendenzen can often provide valuable historical insight of a certain type, as has been demonstrated by recent trends in Josephan studies).

If Charlesworth has not persuasively demonstrated how to go about gleaning history from the Qumran corpus, he has effectively recounted how modern scholars have actually proceeded to do so. In the opening section of the work (4–5) he outlines three approaches to the endeavor: (1) an initial “historicizing” approach, in which early Qumran scholars approached the pesharim as though they were similar to Hellenistic historiography or “Jewish histories like 1Maccabees and Josephus’s War and Antiquities” and related works; (2) a skeptical “backlash” among scholars in the last twenty years who argued that the pesharim should not be used for historical inquiry at all; and (3) the approach taken by those moderate scholars who have “charted a middle course in searching for history in the pesharim.” Charlesworth does not put a chronological tag on this last group, implying
perhaps that this has been the most responsible approach all along as well as the current perspective of the majority of scholars. Naturally, Charlesworth himself treads this middle road, which he identifies as the consensus position. He maintains that the “chaos” that is sometimes believed to be pervasive in Qumran scholarship is actually far less pronounced than the high degree of consensus in the field.

It has been observed that a “moderate” may be defined as a person who shares one’s own views, while the “extremists” are all those to one’s left or right. On this basis, it might be perceived as tautological to put forth a claim of consensus and then to proceed to demonstrate this consensus by citing scholars who agree with the stated position. Charlesworth deftly manages this problem so that the reader is genuinely impressed by the hitherto unappreciated observation that most mainstream scholars adhere to a mainstream view. Establishing a broad definition of “consensus” on pages 20–22, he successfully substantiates that, on key issues at least, there is a high degree of basic agreement among the “vast majority of Qumran experts working in Israel, Europe, Canada, and the United States.” Particularly in his discussions of general Qumran history, Charlesworth consistently presents the views of a number of scholars who diverge from “the consensus” on any given issue. For example, he acknowledges dissenting opinions on the nature of the Qumran site (including, e.g., those of Norman Golb, Alan Crown, and Lena Cansdale) and responds to them seriously, while arguing for the primacy of the “consensus” position that the site was inhabited by an Essene community (59–62). Similarly, although Charlesworth himself maintains that the “Teacher of Righteousness” cannot be identified with any named historical figure known from other sources, he records over a dozen individuals whom have been so identified by various scholars (32–34). In the discussion of the pesharim themselves, less attention is given to divergent views, and there is a greater attempt to smooth over or downplay scholarly disagreements. Most notably, since the monograph was written before the publication of Gregory Doudna’s *4Q Pesher Nahum: A Critical Edition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), only cursory mention is made of the challenges posed by some of Doudna’s rather iconoclastic claims.

Any attempt to summarize the key elements of the consensus affirmed in this work will inevitably distort the construction, since its effectiveness is greatly dependent upon Charlesworth’s rich and nuanced presentation and his careful selection of key publications for citation in the footnotes. With that caveat, the following salient claims bear mention. First, in regard to the larger picture of Qumran history, multiple phases of development in the sociology and theology of the Qumran community are manifested in the textual corpus and the archaeological evidence of the site; this community is to be identified as Essenes of some sort; specifically, the site of Qumran functioned as a center for a celibate group of Essenes living in accordance with the *Community Rule*. In regard
to particular sobriquets in the pesharim and in the larger textual corpus, the Teacher of Righteousness cannot be positively identified and was not the founder of the community, but he was a priest (perhaps a high priest) who moved from Jerusalem to Qumran with his followers, who probably composed some of the Hodayot (thanksgiving psalms) and who taught his followers the hermeneutics of pesher interpretation; the “Wicked Priest” refers to Jonathan the Hasmonean and/or perhaps Simon and possibly subsequent Hasmonean rulers; the “Man of Lies” was a traitorous figure who had initially been affiliated with the Qumran community; the Seekers-After-Smooth-Things are “most likely” the Pharisees, also termed Ephraim; the Kittim are “almost always” the Romans.

As a group, the above statements somehow appear utterly reasonable, overly positivistic, and meaninglessly vague—all at the same time. Most likely, this observation reflects the fact that there remains some genuine “chaos” in the details within the larger “consensus” of current scholarly opinion on the history of the Qumran community. Charlesworth points out a number of times that the pesharim are opaque and oblique compositions and do not offer the “pellucid” historical account we might have wished them to provide; nonetheless, they can yield significant historical data to the cautious scholar who is mindful of coherence among the sources. In The Pesharim and Qumran History Charlesworth himself has imposed structure and coherence upon the often-chaotic discourse among modern Qumran scholars and produced a pellucid overview of the consensus view(s), accompanied by judicious treatment of some competing theories.