Book review:

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The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English

Florentino García Martínez
Translated by Wilfred G. E. Watson


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It is with great pleasure that we welcome Florentino García Martínez's The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English, a translated and revised version of his Textos de Qumrán (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1992). For the first time since their discovery, the English-reading public now has access to 270 of the most important non-biblical Dead Sea manuscripts (from a total of more than 800 including biblical works), as well as an up-to-date list of the manuscripts, including the biblical and unpublished materials.

In addition, we can appreciate Martínez's effort to provide the complete picture of Qumran. He not only establishes a clear context for the scrolls by summarizing their findspots and providing a concise history of their discovery and publication, but he also devotes attention to the dispute over the authenticity and antiquity of the scrolls. Before moving to the translations, which comprise the brunt of this work, Martínez concludes his introduction by discussing the various theories concerning the identity and origins of the Qumranites.

The author's aim to provide the public with access to the scrolls (p. xxv) explains why there are no footnotes (except in the introduction) and why he gives simpler titles for the manuscripts alongside the more cumbersome scholarly sigla of the official publication. While the author admits that the lack of notes potentially could prevent the student from grasping "the literary, historical, and theological problems" (p. xxviii) which the scrolls present, the benefits of this volume to the interested reader will outweigh by far any drawbacks. Other English versions of the scrolls pale in comparison (cf. the now out-of-date Gaster [1956] and the incomplete Vermes [1995], the latter of which translates only 70 manuscripts).

This book has many positive attributes. The line numbering informs the reader exactly where words appear in the texts. In addition, we may thank Martínez for keeping restorations to a minimum, despite the fragmentary nature of many of the scrolls. Excessive restoration of any ancient text almost always leads to a misunderstanding of that text. Compare, for example, the recent edition of some of the scrolls by Eisenman and Wise (1992), wherein restorations appear far too frequently and carry too much interpretive import.

The book's organization also successfully reflects the homogeneous nature of the Qumran materials. Martínez remarks:

The material has been set out systematically, which enables the internal relationships among the different manuscripts to be perceived and highlights the homogeneity of content of the Qumran library (p. xxvii).

Martínez also is sensitive to contradictions in theology and practice represented in the various scrolls, for which he accounts by positing a gradual theological transformation within the Qumran community.

Clearly, a group that persisted for centuries could not have maintained a monolithic uniformity throughout its whole history. It must have undergone intense development in its theology, its halakhah, and in its very organization (p. 1).

The group with which Martínez identifies the people of Qumran is the Essenes, and it is here, in this reviewer's opinion, that a few critical remarks are warranted.

While the debate on Qumranic origins has been raging for some time in scholarly circles, the general public has had little access to the scrolls and the complex issues involved with interpreting them other than through sensationalist tabloids and non-scholarly books.
As a result, old theories concerning the origins of the Qumran community, which should be discarded, continue to impress the popular media. Thus, it will be worthwhile to summarize briefly the competing theories.

The first is the claim that the scrolls are Christian writings. While the manuscripts do provide some background for the emergent Christian movement, they do so only within the context of ancient Judaism. They never mention Jesus, John the Baptist, or any other New Testament figure and, in fact, with few exceptions, the scrolls antedate the rise of Christianity.

Another theory is that the Qumran library belonged to the Jerusalemite Temple whose priests hid the scrolls from Roman invaders. However, this too is unlikely because the Qumran texts, especially the Halakhic Letter (4QMMT), suggest that the legal practices of the Qumranites were in opposition with those of the Jerusalemite priesthood. For this same reason, the hypothesis that the Qumranites were a Pharisaic or Pietist (i.e., Hasidic) faction also is untenable.

The dominant theory, and one to which Martínez subscribes with some modification, is that the inhabitants of Qumran were Essenes. However, this theory can no longer be maintained unless we admit that the portrayals of the Essenes' way of life by Philo Judaeus, Josephus Flavius, and Pliny the Elder are not entirely commensurate with the practices of the group at Qumran. Alternatively, we may posit that within the Essene movement were various subgroups.

However, these looming issues do not seem to trouble Martínez, who insists on portraying the Qumranites as an Essene splinter group.

The Qumran community, instead, has its origin in a rift which occurred within the Essene movement. This rift was to cause those siding with the Teacher of Righteousness to set themselves up with him in the desert, until 130 BCE (p. liii).

As mentioned above, the enigmatic origin of the Qumran community cannot be explained so easily. Indeed, the name "Essene" appears nowhere in the scrolls. Moreover, in a series of articles, Lawrence H. Schiffman has demonstrated convincingly that the Temple Scroll (11QT) and the Halakhic Letter (4QMMT) reflect a Sadducean approach to Jewish law. Martínez' theory of theological development cannot account for this. Thus, Schiffman argues:
allow his nakedness to be seen, he will be punished thirty days."

"Hand" in this case is too literal and makes little sense. Moreover, that Martinez does not shy from employing the word "penis" in another text (p. 78) makes the translation "hand" in the aforementioned pericope even more glaring.

Another mistranslation occurs in the quotation of Deut 32:33, "their wine is serpent's venom and the head of cruel, harsh asps" (pp. 38, 45), where Hebrew אָדָם does not mean "head," but rather "poison."

In addition, there are a few stylistic inconsistencies. For example, the author informs us that he will translate the sacred name "Yahweh," commonly called the tetragrammaton, as ***(p. xxxvi). However, frequently one finds the name's transliteration "YHWH" (e.g., pp. 241-243, 281-287, 303-316). Furthermore, as many English Bible translations prefer to translate the name Yahweh as "Lord" out of reverence, one wonders whether the Hebrew personal name "Yahweh" or the noun "Adonai" (lit. "Lord") lies behind the translation "Lord" on pp. 361, 366, 394, and others. Similarly inconsistent are abbreviations for biblical books. Compare, e.g., "Dt" (Deuteronomy) on pp. 137-139, but "Deut" elsewhere; "Is" (Isaiah) on p. 185, but " Isa" elsewhere.

Martinez also translates copies of the Damascus Document that were discovered in the famous Cairo Genizah, a storehouse for manuscripts found in the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat, Old Cairo (pp. 33-47), but does not include a discussion of these extremely important documents in the introduction, where all other Qumran-related finds are outlined (pp. xxxii-xxxv).

In a tome this large, typos are unavoidable, and it is only with respect for the author and for his major accomplishment that I list the following.

p. xxxii "Alexander the Great in 331 BCE" lacks a period.

p. xxvii-xxviii "bible" should be capitalized.

p. lxiv "after 70 CE It achieves no more" lacks a period between sentences.

p. lxvi contains an upside down question mark before "Judas Macabeo."

p. lv "Pharisees and Sadducees There is an" lacks a period between sentences.

p. lvi "effected" should read "affected".

p. 2 "but its is impossible" should read "but it is impossible".

p. 64 "And how, listen to me" should read "And now, listen to me".

p. 82 "[not] enter (the pure)" should read "[not] enter (the pure)".

p. 88 "Unclean, unclean, he will shout" lacks inner quotation marks.

p. 94 "pesharim" should be italicized (cf. second time it occurs on p. 94 where it is italicized).

p. 112 "he will the covenant of Israel shine with joy" lacks the verb "make".

p. 131 "Adom and Moab" should read "Edom and Moab".

p. 167 "shall not enter my temple with their soiled impurity" should read "shall not enter my temple with their soiled impurity".

p. 196 "He will hate them and loathes them" should read "He will hate them and loathe them".

p. 246 "God, who lives [for eternity] has made all these works." should read "God, who lives [for eternity] has made all these works.".

p. 247 "They become pregnant by them. and [gave birth] should have a comma and not a period.

p. 303 "a prophets' dream" should read "a prophet's dream".

p. 315 "Man will not prevail" should read "Man will not prevail".

p. 325 "because you done all this." should read "because you did all this."

p. 478 "contains" should read "contains".

p. 357 "if you not steady my feet." should read "if you do not steady my feet."

p. 360 "presumptious" should read "presumptuous".

p. 370 "and those who fall to earth" lacks a period.

p. 372 "shame of ones face" should read "shame of one's face".

pp. 377-378 "it will not make reach you" should read "it will not reach you".
Finally, I offer two suggestions for future editions. The first is to supply the reader with a few photos of Qumran and with maps, both of its archaeological layout and of the several Qumran-related discovery sites. The second is to provide a glossary of terms to aid the "reader, without any knowledge of the original language" (p. xxv) for whom this book was intended. Few non-scholars will understand the terms midrash, shekinah, gamul, debir, sikkut, pesharim, hodayoth, brontologion, or several others which are given without explanation.

Let me state clearly, however, that I do not want to give the impression that this work is seriously flawed. On the contrary, the translation of this vast corpus of Qumran materials is a veritable tour de force, one that certainly will become useful in classrooms. Moreover, Martinez has undertaken this monumental project with sensitivity and expertise. The public now can join the scholarly world in fascination of these most intriguing documents.

Select Bibliography

Golb, N. "Khirbet Qumran and the Manuscripts of the Judean Wilderness," JNES 49 (1990), 103-114.

Footnotes

1. For a similarly critical review, see Martinez (1993).
2. See Martinez (1988) for a more thorough expression of his views on this subject.
3. For a more detailed argument, see Golb (1990), especially p. 108.
5. For an elongated, yet unconvincing argument, see Golb (1990), especially p. 109.
6. See, Koehler and Baumgartner (1990), p. 1089. Some polysemy doubtless was intended.