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REVIEW

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS TODAY. By James C. VanderKam. Pp. xii + 208. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994. Paper, \$12.99.

The Dead Sea Scrolls Today is the best of the new “introductions” to the Dead Sea Scrolls which have been published in the last two or three years. The author, James VanderKam, is a senior member of the international publication team working to publish the Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts under the leadership of Emanuel Tov of the Hebrew University. Thus, he is at the forefront of Scroll research. In this volume, VanderKam has used his intimate knowledge of the Scrolls to present the reader with a thorough, scholarly, yet accessible treatment of the major issues surrounding Dead Sea Scroll research.

The book is divided into six parts. The first two parts discuss the discovery of the Scrolls, the site of Qumran, and the contents of the manuscripts. Parts three and four deal with the identification of the group who lived at Qumran and their way of life. In parts five and six, VanderKam discusses the relation of the Scrolls to both the Old and New Testaments. Finally,

a very brief final chapter discusses the various controversies that have surfaced about the Scrolls in recent years.

Chapter 1 begins with an account of the discovery of the Scrolls in the 1940s and 1950s. Much of this material is by now well-known, and the cast of characters, Muhammad ed-Dhib, Kando, Mar Athanasius Samuel, Eleazar Sukenik, and Roland de Vaux, are extraordinarily familiar. VanderKam also briefly discusses the archaeological excavations at Khirbet Qumran, located near the manuscript caves. However, what is new here is VanderKam’s discussion of the various methods for dating the Scrolls and the artifacts from Qumran, a topic that has generated some controversy in the scholarly community but has not received too much attention from the general public. Arriving at a date (or range of dates) for the settlement at Qumran and the copying of the manuscripts has an enormous impact on reconstruction of the history of the community and the interpretation of the Scrolls, so methods of dating deserve the rather lengthy treatment that VanderKam gives them here. He discusses the methods of paleography (the study of the development of ancient scripts), accelerator mass spectrometry (a more refined form of carbon-14 dating), historical allusions within the Scrolls themselves, and the dating of coins. He concludes by giving the generally accepted dates for the occupation of Qumran: the last two centuries B.C. and the first century A.D. He then mentions two alternatives to the generally accepted consensus first put forward by de Vaux: Norman Golb’s theory that Qumran was a military fortress unrelated to the Scrolls, which VanderKam rightly dismisses as “implausible,” and Pauline Donceel-Voûte’s theory that Qumran was a Herodian villa. VanderKam feels that the verdict is not yet in on Donceel-Voûte’s theory but points out several difficulties, such as the fact that what she has identified as couches in the dining room are not attested in that form elsewhere.

Chapter 2 contains a thorough survey of the manuscripts, divided the usual categories of biblical scrolls, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and “other texts,” which are then divided among various literary genres. As VanderKam rightly points out, however, these anachronistic labels are given for the convenience of a twentieth-century audience and are meant to indicate nothing about how the authors themselves (or their audience) understood these texts. As more and more texts become known, these types of surveys become more and more complex.

Chapters 3 and 4, the centerpiece of the book, delve into the once-again controversial question, “Who wrote the Scrolls?” VanderKam begins investigating the “Essene hypothesis” first proposed by Eleazar Sukenik which

became the consensus opinion for a generation but is now increasingly being questioned. VanderKam gives a judicious review of the evidence from the Scrolls themselves, the archaeological remains, and outside sources such as Josephus and reaches the (I think correct) conclusion that “many strong arguments point to the residents of Qumran being Essenes, and no certain points tell against that identification” (p. 92). However, he does devote some space to the opposing theories that the Qumranites were either Sadducees or that they had nothing to do with the Scrolls. He concludes that the Sadducee argument is more a matter of terminology than differing identification and dismisses the second hypothesis (again, correctly) for not taking sufficient notice of all the evidence. VanderKam has made these same arguments and reached the same conclusions in other venues, so no one who follows his work will be surprised at the outcome of this chapter. Chapter 4 contains a brief overview of the history of the Qumran Essenes and their beliefs and practices.

Chapters 5 and 6 introduce the reader to the relation between the Scrolls and the Old and New Testaments. The very title of chapter 5 points to perhaps the only major problem I had with the book: why does VanderKam use the purely Christian appellations Old Testament, B.C., and A.D.? In a work intended for a general, non-denominational audience, this seems unnecessarily theological. However, the problem may lie not with VanderKam but with the fact that the book was first published in England.

That aside, VanderKam metes out his usual even-handed treatment of the evidence. He gives particular attention to the question of canon at Qumran (while their “canon” was similar to the present-day Jewish Bible, it did not contain all the same books, and may have contained some books, such as Enoch, now considered non-canonical) and, in the chapter on the New Testament, looks at ideas and motifs common to the Scrolls and early Christianity while making it clear that he does not believe that the Qumran community was Christian or knew anything about the early Christians.

All-in-all, this is an excellent book, suitable for graduate surveys, undergraduate courses, and private use by interested persons. It is an attractive book as well, easy to read and with excellent photographs. VanderKam has rendered a much-needed service to the Dead Sea Scrolls by presenting such a thoughtful, well-reasoned and balanced treatment.

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