
David Flusser (September 15, 1917–September 15, 2000), formerly Professor of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, was a remarkable scholar in many respects. Fluent in well over a dozen languages, Flusser was enormously prolific and produced pioneering work in several academic fields, including the history and literature of Judaism, particularly of the Second Temple period, the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Christianity. A founding member of the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research, he gained international recognition, particularly for his work on the origins of Christianity and on the Gospels.

And yet, Flusser’s influence was felt strongest in Israel. This is in part because many of his publications appeared in Hebrew, scattered widely, and were not easily accessible to international readers. In consultation with the late David Flusser, Serge Ruzer edited two volumes of previously published articles in Hebrew, Judaism of the Second Temple Period: Qumran and Apocalypticism (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi/Magnes, 2002), and Judaism of the Second Temple Period: Sages and Literature (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi/Magnes, 2002). The present volume is the English translation of the first of these two books.

This important collection of twenty-two articles is the product of a collaborative effort: of the two original publishers, Hebrew University Magnes Press and Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Press, of the publisher of the English volume, Eerdmans, and of the translator, Azzan Yadin, Professor of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University, who produced an excellent English translation and to whom the reader is particularly indebted. The articles, which appeared over the span of several decades, bear witness to Flusser’s highly original—albeit at times somewhat idiosyncratic—contributions to scrolls research. (Curiously, there is no information in the book about the original place and date of the articles’ first publication. This is unfortunate, not least because Flusser wrote his essays as the scrolls were being published. In several cases it would be important to know which scrolls had been published when Flusser wrote which article.)

In the introduction to the volume Flusser tells his readers that he did not feel compelled to update his articles, a remarkable statement in light of the rapid changes the study of the Qumran literature underwent during his lifetime: “Though some of these studies were published years ago, I chose not to needlessly update them. I have spared the readers many of the hypotheses put forward by some scholars, primarily because I do not wish to take part in the creation of the ‘phantasms’ that seem to have sprouted like mushrooms…” (xi). Flusser maintains a focus on the primary material and interacts with the field of scholarship only sparingly in the notes.
The articles that are here collected cover a wide array of themes in Qumran and, to a lesser degree, in early apocalyptic literature. In many of his essays, Flusser’s command of the material and his vast knowledge become evident, particularly when his observations anticipate what would later emerge as the consensus in the field. In the opening article, for example, “The Dead Sea Sect and Its Worldview” (1–24), Flusser defends the hypothesis that the Qumranites were Essenes and then goes on to describe their apocalyptic worldview. The article was originally published only a few years after the discovery of Cave 1 (the entire argument is based on Cave 1 material: 1QM, 1QS, 1QpHab, plus CD), yet much of what Flusser writes about the sectarian community’s dualistic beliefs and the doctrine of predestination was later corroborated by the discovery and publication of more scrolls.

Rather than dealing with particular text passages in any detail, Flusser prefers to write about larger themes (e.g., “The Essene Worldview,” 25–31; “Apocalyptic Elements in the War Scroll,” 140–58; “The Eschatological Temple,” 207–13), making references to a broad spectrum of texts, including the scrolls, the Jewish Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, rabbinic literature, the New Testament and early Greek authors. Most of the essays have a comparative angle. In a long article titled “4QMMT and the Benediction Against the Minim” (70–118), for example, which he wrote even before 4QMMT was published in its entirety, Flusser compares the Qumran material with several rabbinic texts and argues that the Birkat ha-Minim, the blessing against heretics in the Amida prayer, was originally aimed against the Essenes. In his article “The ‘Book of Mysteries’ and the High Holy Day Liturgy” (119–39), Flusser compares the Book of Mysteries, a text that would later attract much scholarly attention, with the Jewish liturgy and asserts that Essene thought influenced the Rosh ha-Shanah liturgy. In other articles Flusser draws on his knowledge of early Christian texts. In “The ‘Flesh-Spirit’ Dualism in the Qumran Scrolls and the New Testament” (283–92), for example, Flusser juxtaposes passages from 1QS, the Hodayot, Wisdom of Solomon and 1 Corinthians, texts in which he finds a similar dualistic tendency to contrast the spirit and the flesh. And in “The Isaiah Pesher and the Notion of Twelve Apostles in the Early Church” (305–26), he relies primarily on the pesher text from Qumran and on the book of Revelation, arguing that “the Christian institution of the twelve apostles emerged out of a merger of two eschatological Qumran institutions, that is, the twelve priests and the twelve chiefs of the tribes of Israel” (321).

Much of what we read in these pages is no longer tenable or, at the very least, in need of significant revision. The main value of this important collection is not its contribution to the cutting-edge of scholarship on the scrolls, a field that continues to evolve rapidly. Rather, by making accessible to the English-speaking reader the significant contributions of David Flusser, a towering figure in the first generation of scholars working on the Dead Sea Scrolls, this book documents an important stage in the history of scrolls research.