

The Mystery of Existence: The Construction of Authority in 4QInstruction



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In late 1947, a small fragment (1Q26) of a previously unknown Hebrew document was discovered in Cave 1 near Khirbet Qumran. In 1952, at least six more manuscripts of this same text were found in Cave 4 (4Q415-418, 4Q418*, 4Q423). In 1999, John Strugnell and Daniel Harrington published the critical edition of these manuscripts in the Discoveries in the Judean Desert series and since that time this composition has attracted considerable attention. Today, this document is known simply as 4QInstruction and is believed to have been composed around the mid-2nd century BCE. Even after considerable efforts to reconstruct the scroll from multiple copies, what remains is likely only thirty percent of about thirty columns. Found in the remaining passages are frequent admonitions to understand the “mystery of existence.” What is the nature of this mystery and how does this scroll fit into the religiosity of ancient Palestine?

The character of 4QInstruction is unusual in that it offers teachings about mundane matters in daily life (i.e., traditional sapiential themes) and intertwines these with ideas about concealed, heavenly knowledge, angelic beings, and future judgment (i.e. “apocalyptic”). This unexpected combination of ideas raises serious questions about how

scholarly categories have been established, leaving us with the task of constructing meaningful conversations, having only recently abandoned assumptions built up over generations. The project I developed in the past year offers the first rhetorical approach to the document and a new way of assessing its particularities.

4QInstruction forces us to take seriously that individuals in antiquity, just like us, do not act in the compartmentalized way in which we would like them to act. Studies on 4QInstruction have often been shackled by perceptions of particular genres, and yet even after it has been recognized that our categories are in conflict, there has been little done to break away entirely from an approach that is tethered to this beginning point. The book that I am bringing to completion at the end of my time at the Albright Institute is an investigation of 4QInstruction that considers the individual who moved among these genres. My questions relate to how authority is constructed in the document. At stake in the way that we understand the boundaries between “wisdom” and “apocalyptic” are our assessments of ancient Jewish thought and practice and the origins of Christianity. 4QInstruction has significant ramifications for how the development of wisdom in the period is understood, how the historical Jesus is perceived, and the manner and degree to which other-worldly views permeated religious life.

Despite the tremendous amount of work that has been done to reconstruct 4QInstruction, it has been necessary to consult individual fragments in the process of this research. Access to the scrolls at the Israel Museum, and especially the help of the staff at the IAA, have allowed me to offer several new reconstructions and confirm others. The resulting monograph offers a fresh approach to 4QInstruction that rigorously engages the material fragments and also offers new translations on this basis.

The Albright Institute has provided a rich context to research and write. The opportunity to dialogue and build relationships with such a diverse and talented community has been immensely profitable. Likewise the faculty and staff at the Orion Center at Hebrew University, École biblique, and IAA have made my project and visit fruitful and most enjoyable.

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