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Wealth at the End of Days: The Importance of Poverty in 4QInstruction

Eve Woogen

INTRODUCTION

Included in the corpus of the non-biblical texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls found near Qumran are several works belonging to the tradition of wisdom literature, and among these is the document known as 4QInstruction (previously *Sapiential Work A*). Although few concrete details are known about the origin or purpose of this text, as one of the few wisdom texts from the first and second centuries BCE it is uniquely useful for tracing the development of sapiential thought during this time.¹ While written in an instructional format very similar to other wisdom literature, several aspects of 4QInstruction mark key points of departure from these earlier works. One of these unique aspects is the text's strong focus on the poverty of its addressee. Poverty and finances are certainly not rare topics in biblical and other Israelite literature, but only in 4QInstruction are the poor themselves directly addressed. Furthermore, it is because of the addressee's poor status and lack of material prospects that he is then instructed to attend not merely to concerns of the present world – the sole focus of earlier wisdom literature – but also to concerns of a future eschaton and spiritual, not material inheritances. These inheritances are introduced as a predetermined part of the created world, just as the theme of creation features prominently in earlier sapiential works.²

In this way, a context of poverty in 4QInstruction is used to thematically connect its sapiential and eschatological strands, which are not combined like this in any other known work

¹ Before the discovery of the scrolls, in fact, there were no known wisdom texts from the period between the times of Ben Sira and the compilation of the Mishnah (around 175 BCE to 200 CE). Matthew J. Goff, *Discerning Wisdom: The Sapiential Literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1.

² For an overview of wisdom literature in the Hebrew bible and the theme of creation therein, see James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

prior to this period. Such a connection demonstrates that 4QInstruction represents not a later compilation of two disparate strands of thought into one text, as is sometimes claimed, but rather an overt effort to present an eschatological discourse through the vocabulary of wealth and poverty. The role played by poverty will be examined within this article by looking first at the general nature of 4QInstruction and its relation to other works, and then at its specific presentation of poverty. The eschatological content will then be introduced more fully, with explanation of how this content is presented through the context and language of poverty.

RELATION TO THE WISDOM TRADITION

In addition to the wisdom books that are a part of the Hebrew Bible, such as Job, Proverbs and Qohelet, several previously unknown texts with wisdom characteristics were found at the caves near Qumran. 4QInstruction is the longest of these, consisting of the scroll portions designated as 1Q26, 4Q415-418 and 4Q423. While all parts are in a similar Herodian script, indicating a late first century BCE date of composition, the original order of the more than 425 fragments making up the text cannot be determined.³ The only clue to this order is the wide right margin of 4Q416 1, a likely indication that it was the beginning of the work.⁴ The contents of 4QInstruction make it clear that this work came out of the wisdom tradition, which originated in Near Eastern works such as those from Egypt and Mesopotamia. The works of this tradition, however, constitute an only minimally unified genre, as there is great variance in form and focus among them. What unification there is occurs as common themes and strands of thought, although no one strand can be found in all of the works commonly classified as wisdom or sapiential. Very common themes, however, include “self-evident intuitions about mastering life

³ D. J. Strugnell, S.J. Harrington, and T. Elgvin, in consultation with J. A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Qumran Cave 4.XXIV: 4QInstruction (Mûsār l^e Mēvîn): 4Q415 ff* (DJD 34; Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 21.

⁴ Strugnell, 8.

for human betterment, gropings after life's secrets with regard to innocent suffering, grappling with finitude, and quest for truth concealed in the created order and manifested in a feminine persona."⁵ There is also great variety in form, but works are mainly expressed as instructions, collected sayings, exhortations and reflections.⁶ 4QInstruction follows this instructional format closely, with little variance from the larger tradition in this respect. The specific instructions given are also in large part on fairly standard practical matters, with, as discussed later, a main focus on finances. Topics include avoiding debts, honoring parents, and leading a just life, similar to the focus of other Near Eastern and Hebrew wisdom works.

RELATION TO QUMRAN

In this sense then, the work can be understood as bearing a much greater resemblance to works of this earlier tradition than it does to other documents found near Qumran with more specifically sectarian elements. Within 4QInstruction the word *yahad* (יחד) is used to refer to a community only in a general rather than specific sense, and "there is no awareness whatsoever of the Teacher of Righteousness or the offices of leadership described in the *Community Rule* and the *Damascus Document*."⁷ Furthermore, a secular setting is clearly described by the instructions referring to business dealings and family life, aspects of life that are presumed to be either absent or minimal in the sectarian community connected to the scrolls, if such a community was indeed a celibate one. Despite this, however, there are some indications that the document was of importance to the sect. As many as seven copies of it were found in the caves,

⁵ Crenshaw, 11.

⁶ John J. Collins, "Wisdom Reconsidered, in Light of the Scrolls," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 4 (1997): 266.

⁷ In these and other sectarian texts, but not in 4QInstruction, *yahad* is used as an official term for the community being described. Matthew J. Goff, "Recent Trends in the Study of Early Jewish Wisdom Literature: The Contribution of 4QInstruction and Other Qumran Texts," *Currents in Biblical Research* 7 (2009): 398.

and there is some evidence that two of these copies were still in use as late in the sect's history as 68 CE.⁸

There is also one primary thematic element of 4QInstruction that is more in line with sectarian ideas than with those of the wisdom tradition, and that is the work's eschatological component. In addition to the practical everyday advice, advice is also given pertaining to the future. These references to the future express eschatological ideas very similar to those found in several of the sectarian documents such as the *Rule of War* and the *Damascus Document*. These similarities include the idea of a dualistic split of humanity between "sons of truth" (4Q418 2:2) and "sons of iniquity" (4Q418 69:8),⁹ and the idea that a future eschaton will be ushered in through battle between these two groups, also referred to in sectarian texts as "sons of light" and "sons of darkness." Further similarities also exist between 4QInstruction and the *Hodayot* (*Thanksgiving Hymns*) another sectarian composition, such as the shared line, "[ac]cording to their knowledge they are glorified, one more than his neighbor, and according to each one's intelligence his splendor is increased" (4Q418 55:10 and 1QH 18:28-29).¹⁰ On the basis of these similarities, one possible theory is that while composed prior to the formation of the sect, 4QInstruction contained similar eschatological themes, about which more will be said later, and was an influential source for some of the later sectarian documents, the *Hodayot* in particular.¹¹

⁸ This specific date and theory of active use are both proposed by Torleif Elgvin based on the unusual method in which these copies were rolled. Torleif Elgvin, "Early Essene Eschatology: Judgment and Salvation According to Sapiential Work A," in *Current Research and Technological Developments on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen David Ricks (New York: Brill, 1996), 127.

⁹ These and all subsequent translations of the scrolls are the work of Florentino García Martínez, unless otherwise noted. Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

¹⁰ These lines are identical at least in this translation by Matthew Goff; slightly different wording is used in each as translated by García Martínez. The *Hodayot* (specifically 1QH 5:19) also contains the only other instance within the corpus of scrolls in which the term *rāz*, mystery, is tied to the concept of creation, as it is throughout 4QInstruction. Matthew J. Goff, "The Mystery of Creation in 4QInstruction," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 10 (2003): 180.

¹¹ Goff 2003, 180.

AUDIENCE AND PRESENTATION OF POVERTY

Apart from clearly addressing someone of meager means, as discussed below, 4QInstruction does not offer much identification of its intended audience. While much of its advice is directed towards a second-person male singular subject, referred to only as a *mēvîn* (מבין), or “understanding one,” at times this word and other terms of address, such as son, *bēn* (בן), appear in the plural. Even more perplexing, the second-person feminine form is also used occasionally, particularly in sections of 4Q415 that instruct a female on the importance of honoring both her father and her marriage.¹² Furthermore, there are allusions to multiple distinct occupations; farming advice is imparted in several fragments, and parts of 4Q418 refer to the wisdom of hands, *hōkmat yādīm* (חוכמת ידיים), taken to imply skills possessed by artisans.¹³ In light of this, 4QInstruction can be interpreted as having multiple addressees. Regardless of the number, however, the financial situation of the addressee remains consistent and is an explicit focus. The bulk of the advice relates to monetary matters such as debts and loans, and is imparted with a frequent refrain, unique to this text, reminding the addressee “you are poor.”¹⁴

The poverty of this addressee is not merely a metaphor; rather, much of the advice presented in the traditional instructional format is sound financial advice for the protection of the addressee’s meager resources. Matthew Goff goes so far as to connect this implied poverty with a historical context, as “economic distress for ordinary Palestinians was heightened in the third century under Ptolemaic rule and continued into the second,” prior to the document’s assumed first century BCE composition.¹⁵ There are signs that the addressee is not in a truly destitute situation, though, as he is assumed to have some resources. Advice such as “if there are no

¹² Goff 2007, 49.

¹³ Goff 2007, 48.

¹⁴ This phrase is first used in 4Q416 2 2:20 and then repeated many times after that.

¹⁵ Goff 2003, 185.

glasses, do not drink wine; and if there is no food do not seek delicacies” (4Q416 2 2:19), imply that he is not completely lacking basic necessities such as food and drink. In spite of this, however, Samuel L. Adams makes the convincing argument that while “admonitions in 4QInstruction frequently resemble Proverbs and Ben Sira [...] the language in this text suggests a more precarious financial situation for the intended audience.”¹⁶ While “Ben Sira’s teaching about wealth and poverty [...] reveals that he was probably instructing young men who would make their way into public service and who would occupy a social position below that of the rich and above that of the poor,”¹⁷ the same can not be said of 4QInstruction. Ben Sira’s implications of public service and advice related to socializing with the rich are absent in 4QInstruction, suggesting that such interactions with higher classes were not likely situations for the addressee. Throughout the whole text, in fact, references to the wealthy are unusually lacking; in terms of social class, the focus is entirely on the poorer class to which the addressee belongs. This focus is reflected in the language of the text; only one word, *hôn* (חון), is used for wealth, in contrast with the multiple terms employed in Ben Sira and other texts. 4QInstruction instead includes a variety of terms for poor, *’evyôn* (אביון) and *dal* (דל); poverty, *rêš* (ריש); and lack, *maḥsôr* (מחסור).¹⁸

In addition to this linguistic variation from other works, the fact that in this text it is the addressee himself who is poor, and that this point is repeated so insistently, marks a crucial departure from the wisdom tradition. While “the plight of the poor is a frequent topic in the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East,” in this literature, unlike in 4QInstruction, “the poor

¹⁶ Samuel L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition: Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 233.

¹⁷ Benjamin G. Wright, “The Categories of Rich and Poor in the Qumran Sapiential Literature,” in *Sapiential Perspectives: Wisdom Literature in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Proceedings of the Sixth International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, 20-22 May, 2001*, ed. John Joseph Collins, Gregory E. Sterling, and Ruth Clements (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 119.

¹⁸ Wright, 110.

themselves are not addressed.”¹⁹ Direct comparison of 4QInstruction’s specific monetary advice with that of other sapiential works reveals the extent of this shift in address. For example, in *The Instruction of Amenemope*, an instructional manual from around mid-eighth century BCE Egypt, one piece of advice reads, “If you find a large debt against a poor man/Make it into three parts;/Forgive two, let one stand” (*The Instruction of Amenemope* 16:5-7).²⁰ In contrast, while debts are also a topic addressed in 4QInstruction, there they are done so in the context of advice to the poor debtor himself, who is told to pay back his debts quickly to avoid further poverty, and so on (4Q416 2 2:4-6). In the biblical Proverbs also, a work with numerous parallels to *The Instruction of Amenemope*, references to the poor are numerous, but almost always in the context of an outside perspective rather than direct addresses to the poor. These references alternatively disparage the condition of poverty and praise the act of charity towards the poor. Proverbs 14:20, for example, states that “Even by his neighbor the poor will be hated,” and Proverbs 15:15 that “all the days of the poor are bad,” while Proverbs 22:9 reads, “He that has a generous eye will be blessed for he has given of his bread to the poor.”²¹ The addressee of 4QInstruction, on the other hand, while told, “do not despise your life” (4Q416 2 2:21), despite his poverty is not told such lessons of charity, implying that he is too poor to be in a position to help others and is instead more likely to be the recipient of help.

POVERTY AND THE ESCHATOLOGICAL THEMES

This specific financial situation, then, is the context with which the eschatological content is introduced in this sapiential work. Torleif Elgvin and others have argued that these mixed contents “[represent] a conflation of two literary layers: (1) an older layer of admonitions

¹⁹ Goff 2003, 130-132.

²⁰ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings Volume 2, The New Kingdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 155.

²¹ All quotes from the Hebrew bible are my own translation.

advocating traditional sapiential viewpoints, and (2) a younger, more apocalyptic layer consisting of longer discourses.”²² However, the consistent focus on the addressee’s poverty across the two layers suggests a stylistically unified and more deliberate combination rather than a later redaction. The apocalyptic discourses are not merely inserted amidst practical advice, but mixed throughout, sometimes within the same fragment and column. As “words having to do with riches and poverty are scattered throughout even the very small fragments,”²³ this vocabulary serves as a binding element for this varied content. While maintaining much of the same terminology and imagery, the author smoothly shifts back and forth between discussion of actual material wealth, and the spiritual wealth that is given to the righteous in an eschatological future. For example, the image of scales, associated with financial measurements, is also employed metaphorically as the instrument used by God “to weight out a person’s ‘portion’ and to assess them in the final judgment”²⁴ in 4Q418.

The primary vehicle linking the two strands, however, is the idea of an inheritance, *nah̄lâ* (נחלה). While used extensively in the clearly eschatological sense of the spiritual inheritances that the righteous and the wicked will each receive in a future judgment, the same term is also used (both elsewhere in this work and in earlier wisdom texts) in an economic sense. One piece of advice in Proverbs, for example, states, “An inheritance hastily won at first, its end will not be blessed” (Prv 20:21). 4QInstruction, on the other hand, talks of inheritances of not only material gain but in terms of what will be spiritually inherited at the time of judgment. For

²² Torleif Elgvin, “Wisdom and Apocalypticism in the Early Second Century BCE: The Evidence of 4QInstruction,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years After Their Discovery: Proceedings of the Jerusalem Congress, July 20-25, 1997*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Emanuel Tov, James C. VanderKam, and Galen Marquis (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society in cooperation with the Shrine of the Book, Israel Museum, 2000) 226.

²³ Wright, 110.

²⁴ Catherine M. Murphy, *Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Qumran Community*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah, v. 40 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 174.

the wicked there will be “injustice” (4Q416 2 1:6), while the righteous will be rewarded with inheritances of “glory” (4Q416 2 1:6), “truth” (4Q418 55:6) and “life eternal” (4Q418 69:13).

This spiritual reward that is possible for the just and understanding is further presented to the addressee through an explicit link with his material poverty. As argued by Adams, this link is made to frame the spiritual inheritance as a direct replacement for “the traditional promise of money and status,”²⁵ as such gains are unrealistic given the addressee’s poverty. If righteous and understanding, for example, he is promised the inheritance of “an eternal possession” (4Q418 55:12), presented as compensation for his lack of material possessions. The addressee is told to refrain from claiming, “I am poor and cannot seek knowledge” (4Q416 2 3:12-13), for it will be through the obtainment of this knowledge that God will have “from poverty [...] lifted your head and seated you among nobles” (4Q416 2 3:11). If he is just and righteous, then, he will be rewarded by being lifted out of poverty (both actual and metaphorical) and sharing in the lot of a spiritual nobility. This group of nobles is sometimes understood to include not only righteous men but also angels, those “holy ones [...] formed as a model” (4Q417 2 1:17).²⁶ While, as discussed earlier, 4QInstruction is notable for directly addressing the poor and thus lacking references to an economic upper class, these references to spiritual nobles may offer an additional explanation for this absence. In keeping with the work’s eschatological concerns, the addressee should aspire not to association with the materially rich, a group whom his precarious financial situation makes dealings with unlikely anyway, but to association with the spiritually rich, the righteous group who will be rewarded in future life.

²⁵ Adams, 241.

²⁶ John J. Collins discusses other disputed references to humans sharing in the lot of angels in the text, and cites these references as further links with the apocalyptic books Daniel and Enoch. John J. Collins, “The Mysteries of God: Creation and Eschatology in 4QInstruction and the Wisdom of Solomon,” in *Wisdom and Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Biblical Tradition*, ed. Florentino Garcia Martinez (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 296.

THE *RĀZ NIHYEH* AND CONNECTIONS TO CREATION

Understanding these spiritual inheritances, then, is presented as a vital part of the addressee's quest for knowledge precisely because of his lack of material inheritance. This concept of eschatological inheritances is further expressed in the text of 4QInstruction with the phrase the *rāz nihyeh* (רז נהיה). There can be no exact translation of this phrase, due to the implications of past, present and future in the word *nihyeh*²⁷. Common translations, however, include “the mystery of existence,” or “the mystery that is to be,” referring to the mystery of what will occur when the righteous and wicked receive their inheritances. This phrase is one of 4QInstruction's most intriguing characteristics, as it is so dominant throughout this text yet so rare outside of it.²⁸ While the Aramaic word *rāz* by itself is used in the Hebrew Bible (although solely in the book of Daniel) and elsewhere, the full phrase is used only sparingly in two other scrolls found near Qumran, the *Book of Mysteries* and the *Community Rule*. Within 4QInstruction, the *rāz nihyeh* is presented as “the necessary object of the pupil's attention,”²⁹ the same central role that wisdom itself, often personified in female form, plays throughout earlier sapiential literature. 4QInstruction's addressee is charged to “[day and night meditate on the mystery of exis]tence and always investigate” (4Q417 2 1:6), and to “consider” (4Q416 2 1:5), “investigate” (4Q416 2 3:14) and “pay attention to” (4Q417 2 1:18) it. If this is done, the addressee is promised knowledge of “truth and injustice” (4Q417 2 1:6) and “the inheritance of every living creature” (4Q417 2 1:19) and “what is bitter for man and what is sweet for a man” (4Q416 2 3:15).

²⁷ The form is best understood as a Nif'al participle, although the perfect aspect cannot be ruled out. Strugnell et. al., 32.

²⁸ The entire phrase occurs thirty-times throughout the text, in comparison to only four occurrences in other works found at Qumran. Strugnell et.al., 28-32.

²⁹ Adams, 246.

Understanding the inheritances of the *rāz nihyeh* also means understanding that these inheritances were initially determined by God as part of his creation of an ordered world. This creation is the focus of some of the earlier Hebrew wisdom works, which express the belief that “human destiny, history, and eschatology are all bound up with the structure of the universe” and stress the importance of understanding this predestined structure.³⁰ In these earlier works, however, such as in the biblical Proverbs, God is primarily glorified for acts of physical creation. He created an ordered universe by establishing entities such as the heavens, oceans, mountains and clouds.³¹ In 4QInstruction God is again praised because it is he who “has made everything,” but this phrase is then followed by, “and causes each man to inherit his portion” (4Q418 81:2-3). In this way these portions are explicitly associated with the rest of God’s creation, and the ordered universe is understood to encompass these future inheritances as well as the physical, earthly creations described elsewhere. In this way, the understanding of the created world discussed in wisdom literature is expanded to also encompass an understanding of set fates for the just and unjust. This idea, which “all those wise at heart understand” (4Q418 81:20), is more reminiscent of those in apocalyptic works such as Enoch and Daniel than in earlier wisdom works dealing with creation.³² The presentation of these fates as inheritances with monetary undertones is what links the earlier works focused on earthly creation and financial advice with later apocalyptic works focused more on the spiritual world of the future.

CONCLUSION

This shift in focus – from practical concerns of this life to spiritual ones of the next – is the crucial point of divergence for 4QInstruction from the earlier wisdom tradition, and a mark of

³⁰ John J Collins, *Seers, Sybils, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 324.

³¹ These acts are described in Proverbs 8:22-31, among other places.

³² Collins 1997, 278.

the tradition's adaptability in incorporating influences from sources such as apocalyptic literature. While there are other works among the scrolls that also combine sapiential and eschatological elements, 4QInstruction is unique in using a context of poverty and related terminology to do so. It is on account of his lack of material wealth, a context introduced by economic advice in traditional wisdom form, that the addressee is entreated to understand the metaphoric wealth available to him in an eschatological future. This understanding of spiritual, rather than material, inheritances as the fates of the righteous and the wicked destined at creation is embodied in the phrase that is the work's primary subject of contemplation, the eternal mystery of the *rāz nihyeh*. This expression of apocalyptic themes in terms of future inheritances smoothly interweaves the document's varied elements and concepts drawn from both sapiential works of the Near East and later apocalyptic literature. Such a smooth link and unified theme of poverty can only indicate an intentional combination of these elements in this work, rather than simply a later fusion of disparate texts.

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