The study of the pesharim, the formal commentaries on prophetic texts from Qumran, has undergone a transformation in the last twenty years or so. In the early days of research on the Scrolls, the pesharim were regarded as atomistic compositions which paid little attention to the literary or historical context of the prophetic text,¹ and were studied largely as sources for the history of the sectarian movement led by the Teacher of Righteousness, and especially for the light they might shed on its origins.² In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, several scholars raised objections against this procedure. It was pointed out that “the author of the pesharim is somewhat constrained by the datum of the biblical text.”³ George Brooke, building on the work of his teacher William Brownlee, emphasized the exegetical aspect of the pesharim, and noted that they often draw language from passages other than the primary one under consideration.⁴ Philip Davies argued that the author may have inferred historical events from the biblical text, and also inferred them from the Hodayot, read as autobiographical poems of the Teacher.⁵ Philip Callaway found that even the most event-like statements “were found to lack specific information

⁵ Davies, “History and Hagiography.”
necessary for reconstructing history."6 Scholars drew different conclusions from these observations. Brooke concludes that “Any history they [i.e. the pesharim] represent is in the first instance the history of the period of their composition; say at the turn of the era, or even later. We have no reason to suppose that their author or authors had actually lived through the earlier events they may purport to describe.”7 Davies has gone so far as to assert that the Wicked Priest is an entirely fictional character.8 Of course such skepticism is by no means universally shared. Michael Wise has published a new attempt to date the Teacher, mainly on the basis of the references to the Wicked Priest in the pesharim.9 James Charlesworth has written a spirited defense of the value of these texts as an historical source. Yet Charlesworth also begins by criticizing an earlier generation of scholars who “mined the pesharim for historical information without allowing sufficiently for the hermeneutical nature of the documents.”10 He calls for a “middle course,” that respects the literary character of the commentaries but does not abandon the quest for historical information. Even Davies, in his 1987 article, allowed that “wherever there is presented as an interpretation of a biblical text information which is not derivable from the text but seems gratuitous, then that information may be regarded as potentially of historical value,”11 although he also raised the possibility that the pesharim may also generate pseudo-historical information from other sources.12

---

7 Brooke, “Kittim in the Qumran Pesharim,” 137.
11 Davies, “History and Hagiography,” 92.
12 Timothy Lim qualifies Davies’s point by insisting that material derived from biblical texts may also have historical value. T.H. Lim, *Pesharim* (London: Continuum, 2002), 68–69.