The Ancient “Library” or “Libraries” of Qumran: The Specter of Cave 1Q

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Introduction

In 2006, the 50th anniversary of the discovery of Cave 11Q passed by almost unnoticed. 2007 and 2008, however, saw a number of conferences devoted to the 60th anniversary of the discovery of Cave 1Q. This is significant.

The consensus view of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which links the caves, the scrolls and Qumran and takes them as a unitary find, was affected—we might even say, determined—by the discovery of Cave 1Q. From the moment the rock struck the pot, this page of scholarly history was set. The scrolls, according to the consensus view, are an Essene library hidden in caves near the Essene community’s center at Qumran. Philo, Josephus and Pliny provide the supporting evidence. Such is the force of the whole construct that it has become very difficult to even suggest an alternative scenario. The Yahad holds the field.

But what if that stone had landed elsewhere? What if it had landed, for example, in Cave 11Q? It seems highly unlikely that an Essene hypothesis for this manuscript collection would ever have been proposed if only Cave 11Q had been discovered. Other groups might well have been suggested instead.

This essay argues that on the basis of differences in calendars, location, halakhic practice, liturgy, terminology, paleography, eschatology, and material culture, the Dead Sea Scrolls do not represent the holdings of a single group. Although the Yahad character of Cave 1Q is clear, it is not clear for the other caves. The calendars found among the Dead Sea Scrolls provide the most compelling evidence that the scrolls belong to more than one Jewish group of the late Second Temple Period.

After briefly retracing the history of scholarship that brought us to the current consensus, we will examine more closely the distinguishing features of the scroll collections which enable us to suggest links with groups other than the Essenes.

The Allure of Cave 1Q

What is now known as Cave 1Q quickly became known as the “Grotte des manuscrits” or the “Manuscripts Cave.” And indeed it was the “Scroll Cave” par
excellence. It had it all: biblical scrolls, sectarian scrolls, commentaries, hymns, calendars, rule books, and descriptions of a future battle. Many pseudepigraphic works were discovered in their original languages for the first time.¹

There appeared to be a single copy of each of the essential volumes of a library belonging to one group. Eliezer Sukenik first suggested identifying the owners of these scrolls with a monastic Jewish order known as the Essenes, which were described by Philo, Pliny the Elder and Josephus. This identification was affirmed by Roland de Vaux and a long list of other scholars. Though some remained skeptical, subsequent discoveries worked in favor of the growing consensus.

In December 1951, four years after the discovery of Cave 1Q, Roland de Vaux connected its manuscript remains to the nearby site of Khirbet Qumran when he found one of the unique cylindrical jars typical of Cave 1Q embedded in the floor of the site. The power of this suggestion was such that, from that point on, as each successive Judean Desert cave containing first century scrolls was discovered, they too were assumed to have originated from the site of Qumran. The original “Manuscripts Cave” was renamed “Cave 1Q.” Excavations at Qumran appeared to confirm the communal and religious nature of the inhabitants, with numerous immersion pools, large community pantries, and abundant scribal implements, accompanied by a virtually all-male cemetery. All of this was considered compelling evidence for connecting this site not only with the scrolls from the caves but also with the Essenes described by Josephus, Philo and Pliny.

For scholars, Cave 1Q was the prototype. It became the cave against which every subsequently discovered cave was to be compared. As the number of scrolls grew, the manuscript collection of the first cave, with its predominantly Yahad character, continued to be considered as typifying the central core of what was perceived to have been a single, cohesive library spread among a number of caves. This rather naïve presupposition became the governing assumption that underlies the specter of Cave 1Q.

But, again, what if Cave 1Q had not been the first to be discovered? What if Cave 11Q had been discovered first? Or what if Cave 11Q was the only cave to have been discovered? If one of these alternate scenarios had occurred, the key elements which helped the first scholars to connect the scrolls to the site of

¹ The first publication of the scrolls was in 1950 and 1951 by M. Burrows of the American Schools of Oriental Research (Isaiah, Habakkuk Commentary; Community Rule). This was followed by: E. Sukenik of Hebrew University (Isaiah, Thanksgiving Hymns, War Scroll, 1955); R. de Vaux of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française (Chief Editor of the first five volumes of Discoveries in the Judean Desert, henceforth DJD); D. Barthélemy (biblical fragments) and J.T. Milik (non-biblical fragments, published in DJD 1).