In the 1990s I raised the question of whether the scrolls in the caves of Qumran had been deposited as late as the first century BCE. This was the first since the excavation of Qumran in 1951 that that had been questioned. I argued that the scroll deposits appeared to predate the first century CE in their entirety and had nothing to do with the First Revolt of 66–70 CE. This argument was joined by Ian Hutchesson (1999), Alan Crown (2005), Ian Young (2002, 2005, 2013), and David Stacey (2013). However nearly two decades later the questioning of the existence of First Revolt scroll deposits remains regarded as an outlier argument, barely making a ripple in much mainstream discussion. When I consider the underlying facts and force of the argument this response puzzles me. Here I review this question, but first a preliminary point.

In looking for a correct earlier context for the scroll deposits I focused on the end of what Qumran excavator Father Roland de Vaux called Qumran’s “Period Ib.” This focus involved regrettable mistakes on my part at earlier stages involving the dating of the end of Ib. In the 1990s de Vaux’s date for the end of Ib of 31 BCE had been widely and long accepted. Another analysis was that of Ernest-Marie Laperrousaz who dated the end of Ib to 67–63 BCE. And a third date, 40–37 BCE, earlier held but abandoned by de Vaux, also retained adherents.

The publication of the pottery of the Netzer excavations of Jericho by Rachel Bar Nathan in 2002 made it clear that all of those dates for the end of Qumran’s Period Ib were incorrect; they were all too early. Jodi Magness was right in 1995 and 1998 in dating the end of Ib later in the reign of Herod, toward the end of the first century BCE. The present argument embraces the corrected ending of Qumran’s “Period Ib” toward the end of the first century BCE. Yet fundamentally the argument is that the traditional dating of the scroll deposits of the caves of Qumran to as late as the time of the First Revolt is supported by neither evidence nor plausibility. This argument stands independently of whether a specific earlier context for the deposits is correctly identified, which is a distinct issue.

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It is well recognized that there is no allusion in the Qumran texts to anything later than the second half of the first century BCE. The many allusions in the texts to figures, events, and contexts in the first century BCE drop at some point in the second half of the first century BCE to flat-line zero thereafter. In contrast to dozens of Qumran texts composed in the first century BCE, not a single text composed in the first century CE exists in the finds from the caves of Qumran.

A 2003 study of Michael Wise remains the most comprehensive attempt to inventory the historical allusions in the Qumran texts. Wise counted what he defined as “first-order” allusions, and not “second order” allusions (allusions which depend on the correctness of a prior allusion identification), which Wise suggested would have increased—perhaps doubled—the numbers if that were done. Wise counted 6 allusions in the second century BCE, rising dramatically to 25 in the first century BCE ending at 37 BCE. Then, 0 for the final third of the first century BCE, 0 for the first century CE, 0 for second century CE, etc. Other studies have found this same pattern of distribution.

Wise likened the absence of first-century CE allusions in the Qumran texts to the Sherlock Holmes dog which did not bark. Sherlock Holmes remarked in one of his cases that he was puzzled by “the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.” He was told, but the dog did nothing in the night-time. Holmes replied, “Yes, that was the curious incident.” As Wise noted, the complete absence of newly composed texts throughout the first century CE from a sect which up to that point had been prolific in composing new texts is indeed a very curious thing.

Scholars who hold to the First Revolt endpoint for the scrolls of the caves of Qumran have never satisfactorily explained this phenomenon. Why would a group stop composing new texts and switch to only copying old texts for nearly a century? What kind of sense does that make? Attempts to explain this odd behavior according to the First Revolt assumption have the ring of “just-so” ad hoc explanations.

The apparent oddity is an artificial creation of the premise of the First Revolt endpoint for the texts. In fact the end of allusions in the Qumran texts after a certain point in the second half of the first century BCE—the “radio silence” from that point forward—in a database the size of the Qumran cave finds is one of the clearest signals that the scroll deposits were earlier than commonly supposed. An earlier dating of the scroll deposits themselves is the simplest way to account for the total silence in those texts after late first century BCE.

After the Dead Sea Scrolls came to light in 1947 the latest scrolls were dated palaeographically to mid-first century BCE by Solomon Birnbaum and William F. Albright. After Qumran Cave 1Q was excavated in 1949 Albright assessed on ceramic typology grounds that the cylindrical, wide-mouthed “scroll jars” and two “hellenistic” lamps associated with the scrolls preceded a Romanization of pottery in Judea which started in the second half of the reign of Herod late in the first century BCE. Albright and the other archaeologists noted that a small quantity of later Roman period domestic pottery and lamps had also been found in Cave 1Q, but they considered that pottery intrusive and later, not associated with the scrolls and scroll jars. Albright considered the evidence conclusive:

6 Geza Vermes, “Historiographical Elements in the Qumran Writings: A Synopsis of the Textual Evidence,” JJS 58 (2007): 121–39; Kenneth Atkinson, “Representations of History in 4Q331 (4QpapHistorical Text C) 4Q332 (4QHistorical Text D), 4Q333 (4QHistorical Text E), and 4Q468e (4QHistorical Text F): An Annalistic Calendar Documenting Portentous Events?” DSD 14 (2007): 125–51. I differ from Wise in interpretation of several of the allusions; for the same allusion passages used by Wise I count 21 agreements and 10 differences (cf. Doudna, “The Sect of the Qumran Texts”). Retabulating Wise’s list according to my analyses of the same text passages my counts come to 6 for the second century BCE, 23 for the first century BCE ending ca. 50 BCE, 0 for the final third of the first century BCE, 0 for first century CE, 0 for second century CE, etc.—despite differences on individual datapoints, the exact same shape of the graph.