THE TIME OF THE TEACHER: AN OLD DEBATE RENEWED

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In a 2003 article in the Journal of Biblical Literature, Michael Wise re-opened the question of the date of the Teacher of Righteousness.\(^1\) This question was debated extensively in the early years of Scrolls study,\(^2\) but by the end of the 1950s a consensus had emerged that the Teacher should be dated to the middle of the second century BCE. This consensus was formulated with minor variations by J. T. Milik, F. M. Cross and G. Vermes.\(^3\) The flood of publications following the release of all unpublished scrolls in 1991 has shed little direct light on this issue. No new texts have been found that mention the Teacher, or that provide chronological information about the origin of the community. Consequently, the most authoritative surveys of Scrolls studies in recent years have re-affirmed the consensus that the activity of the Teacher should be placed in the mid-second century.\(^4\) Nonethe-


\(^2\) A summary of the early debates can be found in M. Burrows, The Dead Sea Scrolls (New York: Viking, 1955) 123–23.


less, much has changed in the study of the Scrolls since Cross and Milik wrote. Several of the pillars on which the consensus was based have eroded, and there is good reason to ask whether it still deserves the status it has enjoyed. Wise has revitalized the issue by arguing boldly for a first century BCE date both for the Teacher and for the *floruit* of his movement, a position similar to that championed half a century ago by A. Dupont-Sommer.\(^5\) I agree with Wise that the old consensus is not well-founded. His alternative proposal also presents some problems, and can only be maintained with some modifications. In the end, however, we must admit that the evidence is fragmentary and ambiguous, and that any historical reconstruction must be extremely tentative.

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Several of the considerations used to support a mid-second century date have been called in question in recent years.

Roland de Vaux had proposed that the settlement at Qumran had been established in the mid-second century BCE, perhaps under one of the predecessors of John Hyrcanus, but he admitted that the earliest phase was poorly attested.\(^6\) Jodi Magness, one of the most sober and less radical voices in the debate about the archeology of Qumran, points out that neither the pottery nor the coins provide evidence for any settlement before 100 BCE, and concludes that “it is reasonable to date the initial establishment of the sectarian settlement to the first half of the first century BCE (that is, some time between 100–50 BCE).”\(^7\) It should be noted that there is no hard evidence linking the

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*Qumran History. Chaos or Consensus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002)


\(^7\) J. Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (SDSRL series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 65. See her refutation of attempts to see Qumran as a country villa, (pp. 90–104). Some scholars deny that Qumran was a sectarian settlement at all, e. g. N. Golb, *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?* (New York: Scribner, 1995) and Y. Hirschfeld, “Early Roman Manor Houses in Judea