

The Dead Sea Scrolls

By Rebecca S. May and Clark Blanchard

- **What are the Dead Sea Scrolls?**
- **Are the Dead Sea Scrolls significant?**
- **What can we learn from the Qumran community?**

The Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) are ancient writings found in 11 different caves in the Judean Desert from 1947 through 1962. The first scrolls (7 total) were discovered by Bedouins in a cave at Qumran, a city which is near the Dead Sea in Israel. Included in the DSS discovery were secular writings, non-canonical texts (pseudepigraphal or false religious writings), and biblical manuscripts.

The secular writings would include cultural laws, practices and customs of ancient Judaism and its various sects (the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes).

The pseudepigraphal scrolls are religious writings which are not included in the canon of Scripture. They would include well known texts like the apocrypha as well as Jewish psalms such as “Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice.”

These non-canonical religious writings reveal a transitioning Jewish community from biblical Judaism (adherence to the laws of the Old Testament) to what we now call modern Judaism (adherence to the laws of the rabbis through the Mishnah).

The tens of thousands of fragments discovered among the DSS represent close to 900 different texts. Of that 900, approximately 200 are Bible manuscripts. They include a complete copy of the book of Isaiah, substantial portions of Leviticus, Isaiah, and the Psalms, important portions of Daniel, as well as thousands of fragments representing every book of the Old Testament with the exception of Esther.

The Location of the Scrolls

Because of its low elevation and its position in a deep basin (averaging about 1000 feet below sea level), the climate of the Dead Sea is unusual. Its very high evaporation produces a haze, yet its atmospheric humidity is low. Adjacent areas are very arid and favorable for the preservation of material like the Dead Sea Scrolls (www.ibiblio.org).

The Qumran community, which apparently copied and housed the scrolls, was most likely part of an isolated community of Jewish separatists. The city appears to have either been a retreat center or perhaps a type of monastery for the Essene sect. This second Temple community was founded during the rule of the Maccabees around 150 B.C. and was abandoned two years before the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.

They were neither Orthodox Jews nor Christians but seemed to incorporate portions of Old Testament Judaism. They did have a messianic hope, but it was one they themselves created by combining different religious beliefs and practices of their time (as all cults do).

The Date of the Scrolls

There were several dating methods applied to the DSS. Archaeological dating (pottery, coins, etc., found on site), Paleographical dating (comparative writing forms), orthographical dating (spelling comparisons), and carbon 14 dating. All together, these indicate a possible range of 250 B.C. to 68 A.D. for the DSS.

The Significance of the Scrolls

The DSS discovery was very significant. Prior to finding the DSS, the earliest manuscript available for translation was dated approximately 1000 A.D. The DSS discovery predates that copy by more than 1000 years. Having gotten a lot closer to the original, one might assume that the text we had prior to 1947 would require significant adjustments. Amazingly, this is not the case, which only goes to prove the great care and devotion given over thousands of years to the copying of the texts of Scripture.

More importantly, this authenticates the Hebrew Scripture we have. With respect to the Isaiah scrolls, it proved to be word-for-word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling (“Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics,” page 187).

Lessons from the Essene Community at Qumran

Positive Lessons

- (1) The community held the Scriptures in the very highest regard. Only their best scribes were allowed to copy canonical texts. Scriptural copies were often done in ancient (*paleo*) Hebrew to show special respect.
- (2) The community required and received the highest commitment from its members.
- (3) The community valued the spiritual far above the temporal and material.

Negative Lessons

- (1) They isolated themselves from those with whom they disagreed. In the same time period and same spiritual environment, Christ confronted those with whom He disagreed.
- (2) They blindly followed a single (nameless) human leader called “The Teacher of Righteousness.” This became, in effect, a legalistic personality cult, and dissent appears to have been absent.
- (3) They suffered from very poor methods for determining the meaning of Scripture (exegesis). For example, the Nahum Commentary Scroll (4Q169/ 4QpNah) is a line-for-line commentary on the book of Nahum. There is no evidence of the three-step approach of observation, interpretation, and application that we (should) use today. The commentary consists entirely of applications to their immediate situation at Qumran and the sect’s core beliefs. No consideration was given to what the author would have meant in his historical context. This is probably a major contributor to their strange exclusionary non-biblical beliefs.

Questions and Answers

Q: *What are the Dead Sea Scrolls?*

A: The DSS are approximately 1000 ancient Jewish writings (secular, religious, and biblical) found in the Judean Desert in 1947.

Q: *Are the Dead Sea Scrolls significant?*

A: With respect to the Bible, they are one of the most significant archaeological discoveries ever made. They lend support, credibility, and authenticity to the canon of Scripture.

Q: *What can we learn from the Qumran community?*

A: See the last section.