

The Dead Sea Scrolls

by
Patrick Zukeran

Story of the Scrolls

Worship at the sacred Jerusalem Temple had become corrupt, with seemingly little hope for reform. A group of devoted Jews removed themselves from mainstream and began a monastic life in the Judean desert. Their studies in the Old Testament Scriptures led them to believe that God's judgment upon Jerusalem was imminent and the anointed one would return to restore the nation of Israel and purify their worship. Anticipating this moment, the Essenes retreated into the Qumran desert to await the return of their messiah. This community, which began in the third century BC, devoted their days to the study and copying of sacred Scripture and their theological and sectarian works.

As tensions between the Jews and Romans increased, the community hid their valuable scrolls in caves along the Dead Sea to protect them from the invading armies. Their hope was that one day, the scrolls would be retrieved and restored to the nation of Israel. In seventy AD, Titus invaded Israel and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its treasured Temple. It is at this time the Qumran Community was overrun and occupied by the Roman army. The scrolls remained hidden for the next two thousand years.

In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd named Muhammad Ahmed el-Dhib was searching for his lost goat and came upon a small opening to a cave. Thinking his goat may have fallen into the cave, he threw rocks into the opening. Instead of hearing a startled goat, he heard the shattering of clay pottery. Lowering himself into the cave, he discovered several sealed jars. Hoping to find treasure, he opened the jars. To his disappointment, he found them to contain leather scrolls. He collected seven of the best scrolls and left the other fragments on the ground and returned home.

Muhammad eventually brought some of the scrolls to a cobbler and antiquities dealer in Bethlehem named Khando. Khando, thinking the scrolls were written in Syriac, brought them to the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Mar Athanasius Samuel. Mar Samuel recognized that the scrolls were written in the Hebrew and suspected they may be very ancient and valuable. Mar Samuel eventually had the scrolls examined by experts at the American School of Oriental Research (ASOR) John Trevor, William Brownlee, and Millar Burrows. Trevor contacted the world's foremost Middle East Archaeologist Dr. William Albright and these men confirmed the antiquity of the scrolls and dated them to have been written between the second and first century BC.

After the initial discovery, archaeologist searched other nearby caves between 1952 and 1956 and discovered ten additional caves that produced thousands of ancient documents as well. Scrolls or fragments of them were found in all eleven caves. One of the greatest treasures of ancient manuscripts had been discovered: the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Date and Contents of the Scrolls

Scholars were anxious to find out if they had indeed found in the Dead Sea Scrolls the most ancient Old Testament manuscripts. In dating the scrolls, several methods were used. The three main methods were archaeology, paleography and orthography, which is the study of ancient writing forms and spelling, and Carbon 14 dating. Each method can derive accurate results. In cases where all three arrive at the same conclusions, there is increased reliability in the dating.

Archaeologists studied the pottery, coins, graves, and garments at Khirbet Qumran, where the Essenes lived. They arrived at a date ranging from the second century BC to the first century AD. Paleographers studied the style of writing and arrived at dates ranging from the third century BC to the first century AD. Scientists, using the radiocarbon dating method of accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS), dated the scrolls to range from the fourth century BC to the first century AD. With the three methods coming to similar conclusions, scholars are very confident of their conclusion. The scrolls date as early as the third century BC to the first century AD¹.

Eleven caves were discovered to contain nearly 1,100 ancient documents which included several scrolls and more than 100,000 fragments.² Fragments from every Old Testament book except for the Book of Esther were discovered. Other works included apocryphal books, commentaries, manuals of discipline for the Qumran community, and theological texts. The majority of the texts were written in the Hebrew language but there were also manuscripts written in Aramaic and Greek.³

Among the eleven caves, Cave 1, which was excavated in 1949, and Cave 4, excavated in 1952, proved to be the most productive caves. Some of the significant discoveries include the Isaiah Scroll which is a well-preserved scroll of the entire book of Isaiah.

The famous Copper Scrolls were discovered in Cave 3 in 1952. Unlike most of the scrolls which were written on leather or parchment, these scrolls were written on copper and provided directions to sixty-four sites containing hidden treasures located around Jerusalem. So far, no treasure has been found at the sites investigated.

The oldest known piece of biblical Hebrew is a fragment from the book of Samuel labeled 4Qsam^b discovered in Cave 4 and is dated to be from the third century BC.⁴ The War Scroll found in Caves 1 and 4 is an eschatological text describing the forty-year war between the Sons of Light and the evil Sons of Darkness. The Temple Scroll discovered in Cave 11 is the largest of the scrolls and describes a future Jerusalem Temple that will be built at the end of the age.

Indeed, these were the most ancient Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament ever found and their contents would soon yield valuable insights to our understanding of Judaism and early Christianity.

¹ James Vanderkam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (San Francisco, CA.: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), 20-32.

² Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out*, (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), p. 278.

³ Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, (Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 1985), 513-517.

⁴ James Vanderkam and Peter Flint, 115.

The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text

The Dead Sea Scrolls played a crucial role in determining the accurate preservation of our present Old Testament text. With hundreds of manuscripts from every book of the Old Testament except Esther, there are many comparisons that can be made with our present day text.

Our present Old Testament text is translated from the Masoretic Text. The Masoretes were Jewish scholars who between 500 AD and 950 AD, gave the final form of the text to the Old Testament. Before 1947, the oldest Masoretic Text was the Aleppo Codex which dates to 935 AD.⁵

With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we now had manuscripts that predated the Masoretic Text by one thousand years. Scholars were anxious to see how the scroll documents would match up with the Masoretic Text. If a significant amount of differences were found, we could conclude that our Old Testament Text had not been well preserved. Critics along with religious groups such as the Muslims and Mormons often make the claim that the present day Old Testament had been corrupted and not well preserved. According to these religious groups premise, this would explain the contradictions between the Old Testament and their teachings.

After years of careful study, it has been concluded that the scrolls give substantial confirmation that our Old Testament has been accurately preserved. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found to be almost identical with our Masoretic text. Hebrew Scholar Millar Burrows writes, "It is a matter of wonder that through something like one thousand years the text underwent so little alteration. As I said in my first article on the scroll, 'Herein lies its chief importance, supporting the fidelity of the Masoretic tradition.'"⁶

A significant comparison study was conducted with the Isaiah Scroll which was a copy of the entire book of Isaiah dated 100 BC. After much research, scholars found that the two texts were practically identical. Except for minor details such as spelling, no variants affected the meaning of the text.

One of the most respected Old Testament scholars, Gleason Archer, examined the two Isaiah scrolls found in Cave 1 and wrote, "Even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1 near the Dead Sea in 1947 were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known (980 AD) they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The five percent of variation consisted chiefly of obviously slips of pen and variations in spelling."⁷

Despite the thousand year gap, scholars found the Masoretic Text and Dead Sea Scrolls to be nearly identical. The Dead Sea Scrolls provided valuable evidence that the Old Testament had been accurately and carefully preserved.

⁵ Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out*, (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), p. 280.

⁶ Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, (New York: Viking Press, 1955), p. 304, quoted in Norman Geisler and William Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 367.

⁷ Gleason Archer, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), p. 25.

The Messianic Prophecies and the Scrolls

One of the evidences used in defending the deity of the Christ is the testimony of prophecy. There are over one hundred prophecies regarding Christ in the Old Testament.⁸ These prophecies were made centuries before the birth of Christ and were quite specific in their detail. Skeptics questioned the date of the prophecies and some even charged that the messianic prophecies were not recorded until after or at the time of Jesus and therefore discounting that they were prophetic in nature.

There was strong evidence that the Old Testament Canon was completed by 450 BC. The Greek translation of the Old Testament the *Septuagint*, is dated about 250 BC. The translation process occurred during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus who ruled from 285 to 246 BC.⁹ We can conclude that a complete Hebrew text from which the Greek translation would build on, must have existed prior to the third century BC.

The Dead Sea Scrolls provided further proof that the Old Testament canon existed prior to the third century BC. Thousands of manuscript fragments from all the Old Testament books except Esther were found predating Christ's birth and some dating as early as the Third Century B.C. For example, portions from the Book of Samuel ((4QSam), date to the third century BC.¹⁰ Fragments from Daniel (4QDan_[c]), date to the second century BC.¹¹ Portions from the twelve minor prophets (4QXII) date from 150 BC to 25 BC.¹² Since the documents were found to be identical with our Masoretic Text, we can be reasonably sure our Old Testament is the same one the Essenes were studying and working from.

One of the most important scrolls found is the Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa). This twenty-four foot scroll was well preserved and contains the complete book of Isaiah. This scroll was dated 100 BC and contains one of the clearest and most complete prophecies of the Messiah in chapter fifty-three, the "Suffering Servant." Although some Jewish scholars teach that this refers to Israel, a careful reading shows that this prophecy can only refer to Christ. Here a just a few reasons. The suffering servant is sinless (53:9), he dies and rises from the dead (53:8-10), and he suffers and dies for the sins of the people (53:4-6). These characteristics are not true for the nation of Israel. The Isaiah scroll presented a manuscript that predated the birth of Christ by a century containing some of the most important messianic prophecies. Skeptics could also no longer contend that portions of the book were written after Christ or that first century insertions were added to the text.

The Dead Sea Scrolls provided further proof that the Old Testament canon was completed by the third century BC and that the prophecies foretold of Christ in the Old Testament predated the birth of Christ.

⁸ J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1984), 665-670.

⁹ Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 503-504.

¹⁰ James Vanderkam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (San Francisco, CA.: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), 115.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹² *Ibid.*, 138-139.

The Messiah and the Scrolls

What kind of messiah were the first century Jews expecting? Was he to be a conquering king, a suffering servant, or something else? Critical scholars allege that the idea of a personal messiah was a later interpretation of Christians. The messiah they assert was actually the nation of Israel and represented in Jewish nationalism.

The Dead Sea Scrolls provided documents written by Old Testament Jews and revealed the messianic expectations of first century Jews. Studies uncovered several parallels to the messianic hope revealed in the New Testament but there were also some significant differences.

The similarities to the New Testament included the following. First, they were expecting a personal messiah, an individual, rather than a nation or a sense of nationalism. Second, the messiah would be a descendant of King David. Third, the messiah would confirm his claim by performing miracles including resurrecting the dead. Finally, He would be human and possess some divine attributes.

A manuscript found in Cave 4 entitled the *Messianic Apocalypse* (4Q521), copied in the first century BC describes the anticipated ministry of the messiah. The text states,

“For He will honor the pious upon the throne of His eternal kingdom, release the captives, open the eyes of the blind, lifting up those who are oppressed... For He shall heal the critically wounded, He shall raise the dead, He shall bring good news to the poor, . . .”

This passage describes the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. In Luke 7:21-22 John the Baptist’s disciples come to Jesus and ask him if He is the messiah. Jesus responds, “Go tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news brought to them.” The ministry of Jesus fulfilled some of the Jewish messianic expectations.

Along with these similarities, there are also significant differences. Christians have always taught that Jesus is the messiah while the Essenes believed in two messiah figures, one an Aaronic or priestly messiah and a Davidic or royal messiah who leads a war to end the evil age.¹³ The Essenes were strict on matters of ceremonial purity while Jesus often criticized these laws, often doing what was defiling such as socializing with tax collectors and lepers. Jesus taught to love one’s enemies while the sect taught hatred towards their enemies. The Essenes were strict Sabbatharians and Jesus often violated this important aspect of their law. The Qumran community was also exclusive in regard to women, Gentiles and sinners while Christ reached out to these groups. The many differences show that the Essenes were not the source of early Christianity as some scholars proposed. Rather, Christianity derived its source from the Old Testament and Jesus’ teaching.

¹³ James Vanderkam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (San Francisco, CA.: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), 265-266. .

Two Major Prophets and the Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls has been an asset in the debate regarding two major and well disputed books of the Old Testament, Daniel and Isaiah. Conservative scholars maintained that Daniel was written in the sixth century BC as the author declares in the first chapter. The New Testament writers treated Daniel as a prophetic book with predictive prophecies. Liberal scholars began teaching in the eighteenth century that it was written in the Maccabean Period or the second century BC. If they are correct, Daniel would not be a prophetic book that predicted the rise of Persia, Greece, and Rome.

Before the discovery of the scrolls, critical scholars argued that the Aramaic language used in Daniel was from a time no earlier than 167 BC during the Maccabean period. Other scholars, such as well-respected archaeologist Kenneth Kitchen, studied Daniel and found that 90 percent of Daniel's Aramaic vocabulary was used in documents from the fifth century BC or earlier.¹⁴ The Dead Sea Scrolls revealed that Kitchen's conclusion was well founded. The Aramaic language used in the Dead Sea Scrolls proved to be very different from that found in the book of Daniel. Old Testament scholars have concluded that the Aramaic in Daniel is closer to the form used in the fourth and fifth century BC than to the second century BC.

Critical scholars challenged the view that Isaiah was written by a single author. Many contended that the first thirty-nine chapters were written by one author in the eighth century BC and the final twenty-six chapters were written in the post-Exilic period. The reason for this is that there are some significant differences in the style and content between the two sections. If this were true, Isaiah's prophecies of Babylon in the later chapters would not have been predictive prophecies but written after the events occurred.

With the discovery of the Isaiah Scroll at Qumran, scholars on both sides were eager to see if the evidence would favor their position. The Isaiah Scroll revealed no break or demarcation between the two major sections of Isaiah. The scribe was not aware of any change in authorship or division of the book.¹⁵ Evidence from Ben Sira (Second Century BC) Josephus, and the New Testament writers regarded Isaiah as written by a single author and containing predictive prophecy.¹⁶ The Dead Sea Scrolls added to the case for the unity and prophetic character of Isaiah.

Inventory of the Scrolls

The following is a brief inventory provided by Dr. Gleason Archer, of the discoveries made in each of the Dead Sea caves.¹⁷

Cave 1 was the first cave discovered and excavated in 1949. Among the discoveries was found the Isaiah Scroll containing a well-preserved scroll of the entire

¹⁴ Randall Price, *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House, 1996), p.162.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 154-155.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 156-157.

¹⁷ Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 513-

book of Isaiah. Fragments were found from the other Old Testament books which included Genesis, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel, Ezekiel, and Psalms. Non-biblical books included the Book of Enoch, Sayings of Moses, Book of Jubilee, Book of Noah, Testament of Levi and the Wisdom of Solomon. Fragments from commentaries on Psalms, Micah, and Zephaniah were also discovered.

Cave 2 was excavated in 1952. Hundreds of fragments were discovered including remains from the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Job, Psalms and Ruth.

Cave 3 was excavated in 1952. Here archaeologists found the famous Copper Scrolls. These scrolls contained directions to sixty-four sites containing hidden treasures located around Jerusalem. So far, no treasure has been found at the sites investigated.

Cave 4, excavated in 1952, proved to be one of the most productive. Thousands of fragments were recovered from nearly four hundred manuscripts. Hundreds of fragments from every Old Testament book were discovered with the exception of the Book of Esther. The fragment from Samuel labeled 4Qsam^b is believed to be the oldest known piece of biblical Hebrew dating from the third century B.C. Also found were fragments of commentaries on the Psalms, Isaiah, and Nahum. The entire collection of Cave 4 is believed to represent the scope of the Essene library.

Cave 5 was excavated in 1952 and fragments from some Old Testament books along with the book of Tobit were found.

Cave 6 excavated in 1952 uncovered papyrus fragments of Daniel, 1 and 2 Kings and some other Essene literature.

Cave 7 –10 yielded finds of interest for archaeologist but had little relevance for Biblical studies.

Cave 11 was excavated in 1956. It exposed well-preserved copies from some of the Psalms including the apocryphal Psalm 151. In addition, a well-preserved scroll of part of Leviticus was found and fragments of an Apocalypse of the New Jerusalem, an Aramaic Targum or paraphrase of Job, was also discovered.

Indeed these were the most ancient Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament ever found and their contents would soon reveal insights that would impact Judaism and Christianity.

¹⁸ Randall Price, *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House, 1996), p.162.

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