



## What really are the Dead Sea Scrolls?

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### **What really are the Dead Sea Scrolls?**

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The recent controversies about the Dead Sea Scrolls, probably the most important archaeological discovery of the century, have left many people confused about their origins, date and significance. Most people do not even know the contents of this important library. In what follows we set forth the basic outlines of this material and its importance for the history of Judaism and the background of Christianity.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a collection of, for the most part, fragmentary remains of almost 850 ancient Jewish documents dating to

the pre-Christian period. The first seven scrolls were discovered in a cave at the shore of the Dead Sea in 1947.

Subsequently, between 1952 and 1956, an additional ten caves yielded scrolls and scroll fragments. These documents were painstakingly assembled by 1960, but for a variety of reasons most of the documents remained unpublished until their recent release by the Israel Antiquities Authority, after a public campaign led by the Biblical Archaeology Review. As a result, scholarly editions and translations of the remaining texts are rapidly being published and the entire corpus is now available for study.

It is generally believed that these scrolls were gathered by a sect which occupied the ruins known as *Khirbet Qumran* from some time after 150 BCE until 68 CE, when this site, adjacent to the caves where the scrolls were found, was destroyed by the Romans during the Great Revolt of the Jews against

Rome (66-73 CE). The composition of the texts included in the scrolls ranges over a very long period, beginning with the earliest books of the Hebrew Bible. The non-biblical works were composed from the third century BCE through the turn of the era. The date of the preserved manuscripts is from the third century BCE through the early first century CE, although the vast majority of the scrolls were copied in the first two centuries BCE. This dating, originally arrived at by paleography (the study of the history of writing) and the archaeology of the ruins, has been confirmed now by sophisticated carbon-14 dating. This means that most of the compositions preserved in this ancient library were not composed by the sectarians who inhabited the building complex at Qumran. It also means that the texts are pre-Christian and for this reason have no direct references to Jesus or John the Baptist.

Any evaluation of the scrolls collection

will depend to some extent on a judgment of who the people were who gathered the scrolls and placed them in the caves at Qumran.. From the earliest stages of Qumran research, it has been determined that the scrolls, the caves and the ruins were related. This is the case because the caves preserve a unique pottery assemblage, including a specific type of jar unique to Qumran in which some of the scrolls were found. There is only one exception, one exemplar from nearby Jericho, which was the nearest commercial center to Qumran.

The archaeological excavation of the ruins, carried out in 1951-56, determined that the site was occupied in a number of periods. Initially, this place served as a border outpost in the period of the divided monarchy, and some remains of an iron age cistern and some walls testify to this period. Thereafter, the core of the building complex seems to have been in use already by 150 BCE, as shortly

afterwards, the period of sectarian occupation seems to have begun. This period featured a large communal dining hall and a large number of ritual baths and Jewish burials. Some interruption of the occupation may have occurred in connection with the earthquake which hit Judea in 31 BCE, but otherwise the buildings continued to be used until the destruction of the center at the hands of the Romans during the Great Revolt of the Jews against Rome, most likely in 68 CE .

Since the remains at the site seem to provide appropriate facilities for a Jewish religious group (loosely termed a "sect") and since the documents include previously unknown compositions of such a group, it has been concluded that this sect occupied the building complex at Qumran, gathered the scrolls of the Bible, other authors and the group's own compositions, and hid them in the caves where they were found two millennia later.

The scrolls can be divided roughly into three separate categories: the first, approximately one third of the material, represents books of the Hebrew Bible, known by Christians as the Old Testament. Parts of all the books of the Hebrew Bible are found except for Esther. While some scholars believe that Esther was not part of the Bible at Qumran, others see its absence among the biblical fragments as mere coincidence. The second category is made up of apocryphal or pseudepigraphical texts (that is, Jewish texts from Second Temple times that in some way related to the Bible) which were part of the general literary heritage of the Jewish people at that time. In some cases, these books were previously known in Greek, Ethiopic or other languages, and the Qumran manuscripts preserved the text in the original language, but in many cases these are previously unknown works. The third category is that of the sectarian compositions, those works composed

and transmitted within the group that used the Qumran buildings, gathered the scrolls, and hid them in the caves in ancient times.

These texts are the most important for the discussion of the identification of the sect. However, the collection as a whole must be studied to illumine the history of Judaism in that period and its relation to the later developments in Judaism and to the rise of Christianity.

The debate over the identity of the sect actually started before the discovery of the scrolls in the Judean Desert in 1947. In 1910 two fragmentary medieval manuscripts of a previously unknown work recovered from the Cairo *genizah*, the storehouse of the Ben Ezra synagogue in old Cairo, appeared in England. These manuscripts would later turn out to be part of the Dead Sea Scrolls when 10 partial copies of the same text were found in the Qumran caves. The publication of this text effectively began the debate over the identity of

what would become known as the Dead Sea Sect.

At the time, virtually all the same theories later put forth were already suggested. The scrolls sect was identified as Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Christians, Zealots and the medieval Karaites. Some argued that these were the documents of a previously unknown group.

With the discovery of the Qumran scrolls in 1947, most scholars agreed with those who had suggested that the scrolls sect was to be identified with the Essenes, a group mentioned by Josephus, Philo and other ancient writers. This view remains the majority view among scholars of the scrolls even though the precise meaning of the word "Essene" is not certain and it does not occur in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Recently, some have concluded that the Jewish legal tradition of the sect stems from that of the Sadducees, and this has led to some modifications in the Essene theory.



Some scholars now believe that the group called Essene developed from a group of Sadducees who split from their brethren in the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt (168-164 BCE). Others have called for a redefinition of the term "Essene" to designate a type of sectarian group but not necessarily one particular sect.

The scrolls have done much to illumine the state of the Hebrew Bible in the two centuries BCE. The scrolls provide early evidence for the concept of a three-part biblical canon – Torah, Prophets and Writings – such as is found in the Rabbinic tradition. While all the books which are part of our canon were also considered holy by the sectarians (with the possible exception of Esther), it is possible that they also included a Jubilee and a version of the Testament of Levi in their "Bible."

Within the books there is also evidence for textual variation. Indeed, the sectarians tolerated multiple texts of the same

book, in a way that later Jews would have found unacceptable. A few biblical fragments show evidence of the Hebrew text which was translated into Greek as the Septuagint. A few others are evidence of the text which formed the basis for the later Samaritan Torah. The vast majority of texts are either of the proto-Massoretic variety, pointing toward the fixed texts of the Talmudic Rabbis, or of a mixed type which often included the linguistic forms known from the compositions of the Qumran group. Yet the text was already on the way to standardization, and by the time of the Masada and Bar Kokhba texts, from the first century CE, the proto-Massoretic text has become standard. We should note, also, that no New Testament texts have been found at Qumran.

Regarding the history of Judaism, the scrolls have taught us of the rich variety of approaches to Jewish law and theology in the second and first centuries BCE. In

addition, they have also made clear the extent to which messianic speculation was practically the norm in many Jewish groups at that time. They have indirectly thrown much light on the early history of the Rabbinic tradition since they polemicize so extensively against the approach of the Pharisees, the forerunners of the Rabbis. These arguments have shown us that much of what we know as the Rabbinic tradition in the Mishnah was already the norm among the Pharisees in that period, and this conclusion has confirmed the historical value of both Josephus and later Rabbinic accounts.

Regarding the origins of Christianity, the scrolls help us to understand the nature of the approaches to Judaism which existed when Christianity came into being. Much of what may have been previously taken to be foreign influence is now understood to stem from Jewish roots. Further, we can now

better understand where Jesus differed from the Jewish groups of his time. Yet no direct links can be shown between Jesus and the scrolls, and, in fact, many substantial differences exist between his teachings and those of the Qumran sect, and these militate against any simplistic judgments on this question.

All in all, the scrolls have opened up for us a new chapter in the study of Judaism precisely when it was involved in fateful developments for the history of Western civilization. The study of these documents is really only at its beginnings and we can hope for many more important conclusions as research proceeds.

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