

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Intro: Perhaps you noticed some time ago an ad in the newspaper about a display at the Murfreesboro center for the Arts. The exhibit will begin on April 6th is called "From the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Forbidden Book". Among the artifacts in this particular exhibition will be some fragments of the now famous Dead Sea Scrolls.

Probably all Christians have heard of these scrolls; but beyond that they remain a mystery. What are they? How were they discovered? And why are they important? In this lesson, I hope to give a general overview of the scrolls and their significance to Christians today. "Questions people may ask about the Dead Sea Scrolls."

What are they?

The Dead Sea Scrolls have been called the greatest manuscript discovery of modern times. The Dead Sea Scrolls are comprised of the remains of approximately 825 to 870 separate scrolls, represented by tens of thousands of fragments. (It is some of these fragments and not the major scrolls that will be exhibited in Murfreesboro. The major scrolls were purchased by the State of Israel for \$250,000 in 1955 and they alternate on display in the Shrine of the Book Museum in Jerusalem). The texts are most commonly made of animal skins, but also papyrus and one of copper. They are written with a carbon-based ink, from right to left, using no punctuation except for an occasional paragraph indentation. They are called "the Dead Sea Scrolls" because they were discovered in an area near the sea. Other names would be the Qumran Library or 'Am Feshka Scrolls.

When and how were they discovered?

They were discovered between 1947 and 1956 in eleven caves along the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. In the spring of 1947 Bedouin goat-herds, searching the cliffs along the Dead Sea for a lost goat (or for treasure, depending on who is telling the story), came upon a cave containing jars filled with manuscripts.

The first discoveries came to the attention of scholars in 1948, when seven of the scrolls were sold by the Bedouin to a cobbler and antiquities dealer called Kando. He in turn sold three of the scrolls to E. L. Sukenik of Hebrew University, and four to Metropolitan Mar Athanasius Yeshue Samuel of the Syrian Orthodox monastery of St. Mark. Mar Athanasius in turn brought his four to the American School of Oriental Research, where they came to the attention of American and European scholars.

Between 1949 and 1956, in what became a race between the Bedouin and the archaeologists, ten additional caves were found in the hills around Qumran, caves that yielded several more scrolls, as well as thousands of

fragments of scrolls: the remnants of approximately 800 manuscripts dating from approximately 200 B.C.E. to 68 C.E.

To whom did the scrolls belong and how did they get into the caves?

The answer to this question has been the subject of controversy and is based on evaluation of evidence from the caves and from the ruins of a nearby village named Qumran. (It sometimes called “Khirbet Qumran”= in Arabic “ruins of Qumran”).

The predominant theory for the first few decades has been that the scrolls were the possession of a Jewish sect that lived there. Some have identified them with a sect mentioned by ancient writers called Essenes. Evidence from some of the “secular” writings discovered suggests that residents lived in a communal setting, seemed to be connected to the priesthood, were led by priests, disapproved of the Jerusalem priesthood, encouraged a strict and pious way of life, and expected an imminent confrontation between the forces of good and evil. According to this conjecture, the scrolls were collected and copied by the people who lived there. They appear to have been hidden in caves shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 perhaps due to imminent threat to the Qumran compound. This view is most often presented in articles in Bibles and encyclopedias based on the traditional viewpoint.

However more recently, as the scrolls have been made available to more scholars, another theory has been offered that challenges the traditional interpretation of the evidence. It has been suggested that the scrolls were sent to this location from Jerusalem shortly before the Roman invasion in AD 70 to protect them from being destroyed.

We may never know the answer to this question; but it does not in any way diminish the value or importance of the find. In either case, scholars agree that the documents date from 200 BC to the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. These dates have been corroborated by coins found in the caves of the same period, carbon 14 dating, and the other artifacts found with the scrolls.

What scrolls are of interest to the Bible student?

The Dead Sea Scrolls can be divided into two categories—biblical and non-biblical. The manuscripts of the Qumran caves include early copies of biblical books in Hebrew and Aramaic, hymns, prayers, Jewish writings known as pseudepigrapha (because they are attributed to ancient biblical characters such as Enoch or the patriarchs), and texts that seem to represent the beliefs of a particular Jewish group that may have lived at the site of Qumran.

For the Bible student the most important scrolls are the copies of our OT books. Fragments of every book of the Old Testament (Hebrew canon) have been discovered, except for the book of Esther. Now identified among the scrolls are 19 fragments of Isaiah, 25 fragments of Deuteronomy and 30 fragments of the Psalms. The virtually intact Isaiah Scroll, which contains

some of the most dramatic Messianic prophecy, is 1,000 years older than any previously known copy of Isaiah.

In addition to the biblical manuscripts, there are commentaries on the Hebrew canon, paraphrases that expand on the Torah, community standards and regulations, rules of war, non-canonical psalms, hymnals and sermons. Most of the texts are written in Hebrew and Aramaic, with a few in Greek.

Why are they Important?

The Dead Sea Scrolls provide insight in the accuracy of the transmission process.

Before the discovery of these manuscripts our earliest known manuscripts of the OT dated to about 900 AD. Our OT is based on the work of a group of scribes called “masoretes” who carefully preserved the ancient text from 500 to 900 AD. Due to the large gap between the original text (700 BC vs. 900 AD) it was believed that our text might contain numerous changes and alterations over time. How could we trust the Scriptures in view of this fact?

Based on various dating methods, including carbon 14, paleographic and scribal, we now know that the Dead Sea Scrolls were written during the period from about 200 B.C. to 68 A.D. Many crucial biblical manuscripts (such as Psalm 22, Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 61) date to at least 100 B.C. This meant that they were nearly a thousand years older than any extant Biblical manuscript before their discovery!

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls confirmed the accuracy of the transmission process over a period of a thousand years!

For example, the nearly intact Great Isaiah Scroll is almost identical to the most recent manuscript version of the Masoretic text from the 900's AD.

Scholars have discovered a handful of spelling and tense-oriented scribal errors, but nothing that would alter a single Bible doctrine or OT prophecy.

In addition, the Dead Sea Scrolls are of value in the more general area of textual criticism and assists in determining what existing variants might be closest to the original autographs.

Dramatic Evidence for the Reliability of Messianic Prophecy

We now have absolute evidence that Messianic prophecies contained in today's Old Testament (both Jewish and Christian) are the same Messianic prophecies that existed prior to the time Jesus walked on this earth. This shows that the Messianic prophecies were not made to conform to Jesus' life; but were in existence at least a hundred years before he lived.

This fact had already been established by the existence of the Septuagint translation (a Greek translation made a couple of

centuries before the time of Christ). But now it is also confirmed by the Dead Sea Scrolls.

For example consider the Scroll of Isaiah: As far as dating, it appears that pieces of the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIs-a) have been carbon-14 dated at least four times, including a study at the University of Arizona in 1995 and a study at ETH-Zurich in 1990-91. The four studies produced calibrated date ranges between 335-324 BC and 202-107 BC. There have also been numerous paleographic and scribal dating studies conducted that place 1QIs-a at a date range of approximately 150-100 BC. (See Price, *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 1996; Eisenman & Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, 1994; Golb, *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?*, 1995; Wise, Abegg & Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls, A New Translation*, 1999.)

Isaiah has been called the Messianic prophet since he gives so many statements concerning the coming Messiah. These prophecies existed in the same form we find them in our present Bibles based on the much later Masoretic text.

Helpful confirmation of the disputed book of Daniel

Liberal critics of the book of Daniel, operating from an anti-supernatural bias have rejected the book of Daniel as prophetic and insisted that it was written by an unnamed author around the Maccabean revolt in 167 BC.

Evidence from Qumran indicates that the people who lived there regarded Daniel as a prophet and that this work was considered canonical and important.

One fragment of Daniel has been dated to the late 2nd century BC. The writing styles of Daniel in both the Hebrew and Aramaic sections differs from the language of the intertestamental period as indicated by the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Insight into Jewish Messianic expectations and culture

The Qumran library has proven to be enormously informative. From these texts we have not only increased our understanding of the transmission of the Bible, we have also learned more about the development of early Judaism, and we have gained insight into the culture out of which emerged both Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. What is clear is that pious Jewish people were anxiously awaiting the coming of their Messiah!

Conclusion: Perhaps in God's providence, at a time when the word of God suffers such disrespect among secularists God has given yet another reason to trust the Scripture that came through His prophets. We can be assured that our OT Scriptures are complete and accurate and that they give solid evidence of a coming Messiah, evidence which finds its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth!