

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

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In today's society, many people are critical about the validity of the Bible. Archaeological excavations have unearthed many artifacts of the biblical time period, such as pottery, archives, and settlement remains, but Palestine had not produced virtually anything of extremely significant biblical evidence until 1947. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has clearly been "the greatest manuscript discovery of all time" (Mansoor 1). The successful findings of the eleven caves have increased the credibility of the translations found in Bibles today as well as enlightened modern readers on the writings of the different Old Testament texts (Hill & Walton 62).

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is very fascinating. In 1947 Muhammed-ad-Dhib, an Arab shepherd of the Taamireh tribe of Bedouins searching for his stray goat near the Dead Sea, stumbled upon a cave. What he found inside that Judean cave is what has been called the greatest archeological discovery of the 20th century (VanderKam 2). He stumbled upon ten ancient jars. Three of them contained three complete ancient scrolls that were written by a Jewish community living before and during the time of Christ. It is hypothesized that this community was the Essenes (VanderKam 3). The cave where this first discovery was made is located in a cliff within a mile of an old ruin named Khirbet Qumran (Millar 4). The scrolls get their name (Qumran) from this ruin.

Soon after the discovery, the three scrolls were brought to Bethlehem, the nearest market town, and attempts were made to try to sell them. When this failed, a Syrian

merchant, thinking the scrolls might be written in Syriac, sent word of them to the Monastery of St. Mark in the Arab part of Jerusalem. However, it turns out that the scrolls were actually written in Hebrew. During these turbulent days of Arab-Israeli conflict, Jerusalem was divided into two armed camps, and communication between the two was nearly impossible. After much confusion and mistakes the scrolls were split up and sold to two parties – one to Professor E.L. Sukenik of the Hebrew University and the other to Metropolitan Samuel of St. Mark's Syrian Orthodox Monastery (Pfeiffer 13). Eventually, Metropolitan Samuel brought their portion of the scrolls to the United States, where they were sold to the State of Israel. Now all of the scrolls from the initial find at that cave are together once again (Pfeiffer 16).

It is crucial to understand what information the Dead Sea Scrolls gave to biblical archaeology. When the cave at Qumran was investigated more thoroughly, they found four more completed scrolls. These seven scrolls in total are identified with a copy of the Old Testament book of Isaiah, the *Commentary on Habakkuk*, the *Manual of Discipline* (setting forth rules for a community), a collection of psalms and hymns known as the Thanksgiving Hymns, another partial copy of Isaiah, the War Scroll (a text describing the final war between the “sons of light” and the “sons of darkness”), and the Genesis Apocryphon (VanderKam 3).

“The first trickle of published statements concerning the scrolls soon swelled into a veritable flood” (Millar 18). Scholars from around the world became interested in what this find was all about. Although it may have been natural to assume that more scrolls may be found in the same vicinity as the first cave (Qumran), the scholars did not begin to look for them until after another cave had been found. However, this did not stop the

Bedouin of the Taamireh tribe from exploring, since they knew scrolls could bring them a decent selling price. “The Bedouin, with their desert experience, discerning eyes and limitless amount of time, were more capable of catching glimpses of rocky crevices and clefts that were likely to be of interest, than the scholars who could only stay in the area for short periods due to lack of means and trying conditions” (Yadin 57). In October of 1951 the Bedouin found another cave (referred to as Cave 2), a few miles from the first Qumran cave, with fragments of scrolls, which are referred to as Qumran 2. In March of 1952, scholars started to survey the entire cliff from north to south to try to uncover all its caves. They investigated 37 caves and found a plentitude of pottery and fragments of cloth. Also, in “Cave 3” they found “Qumran 3,” the first set of scrolls discovered by archaeologists (Yadin 58). The discoveries of that extraordinary year (1952) were not done yet. The Bedouin found Caves 4 through 6 just a few hundred feet from the building remains at Khirbet Qumran. Fragments from a few hundred documents were unearthed from them. From February of 1953 to April of 1955, professional archeologists found Caves 7 through 10, and in January of 1956, the Taamireh located the eleventh and final cave.



Qumran 2 contained fragments belonging to many Biblical books such as Jeremiah, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Ruth, and Psalms. There were also fragments of scrolls belonging to non-Biblical books such as Jubilees and documents from the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome (VanderKam 10). Qumran 3 provided fourteen manuscripts including the beginning of Isaiah and the infamous Copper Scroll, which lists treasure sites. There are only a few words that remain on these two small scrolls made of copper due to the oxidation of the metal, but they certainly started a wave of excitement over hidden treasures. “It appears that the scroll contains a long list of hiding places of treasures to the amount of some six thousand gold and silver talents” (Yadin 158). According to the scrolls, the treasures are hidden in wells, tombs, and near trees and springs. From the rest of the caves they found a copy of the Damascus Covenant, parts of the Book of Tobias, pieces of phylacteries, fragments dealing with the “End of the Days,” and fragments from Samuel with a different text from the traditional Hebrew Masoretic (Yadin 59). However, in none of the discoveries so far known to the world have any complete manuscripts been found.

To summarize, from 1947 to 1956 eleven caves containing written documents of remains were found around a set of building ruins by the Dead Sea. Similar artifacts connected all the caves. The Bedouin located the three richest caves (1, 4, and 11) as well as two others (2 and 6), while the professional archaeologists succeeded only in finding Caves 3, 5, and 7-10, none of which included significant manuscript remains (VanderKam 12).

One key factor in what makes the Dead Sea Scrolls so significant is how old they are. Archaeologists date them to about 150 BC (Hill & Walton 18n). This means that

they provide manuscripts of the Old Testament more than a thousand years older than any previously available. Scientists agreed on this date through paleography, archaeology, and Carbon 14 testing. Paleography is the study of ancient scripts. By observing styles of letter formation, a paleographer can hypothesize as to where on the line of development a particular document lies. One hint provided in the scrolls is that in one scroll Yahweh's name is written in early Hebrew script. Paleography is done with such a high level of precision that paleographical analysis of these texts can trace the date to within twenty-five or fifty years from when it was copied (VanderKam 17). Another method for dating the scrolls is through Carbon 14 testing, which was discovered in 1947 and agrees with the time period which paleographers concluded.

W. F. Albright, the "father of Palestinian archaeology" said, "What an absolutely incredible find! And there can happily not be the slightest doubt in the world about the genuineness of the manuscript" (Pfeiffer 25). The Dead Sea Scrolls have truly made a profound contribution to the Old Testament. One of the biggest contributions is that it proves that the Bible we read today is genuine because 95% of the text is identical to later Masoretic manuscripts. The other 5% is due to "slips of the pen and spelling differences" (Hill & Walton 18n). Up until 1947 Christians only had Greek translations of 285 BC to 150 BC, Aramaic translations of the second century AD, and Latin translations of about 400 AD. Each one is slightly different from the Masoretic text and from each other (Palmer 88). This may have created doubts in the minds of some would-be Christians. However, because of what the Dead Sea Scrolls prove, now every Bible reader can have faith that what he or she is reading is pure and not distorted from the inspired truth of Yahweh.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have heavily enlightened the Biblical scene. It is especially noteworthy how the scrolls contain the entire sixty-six chapters of the biblical book of Isaiah, except for a letter or two here and there. The spelling and vocabulary exhibited in the scrolls show how Hebrew was pronounced at the time when the manuscripts were copied. In this way, the scrolls and fragments represent stages in the history of the language earlier than what can be seen in the Masoretic text of the Old Testament.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have been a vital step in biblical archaeology. Through the eleven cave findings, a new wealth of insight and knowledge into biblical times and language is gained. It also ensures people around the world that the Bible truly is the inspired word of God. From just fragments of these manuscripts, it is apparent that the Bible we read and depend on today is the same as it was thousands of years ago when it



was written. For these reasons and more, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is “by far the most sensational archaeological event of our time” (Yadin 1). Hopefully, it and other future biblical findings will help to affirm the notion to unbelievers that God does exist, and we have a Savior.

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