

# Bibles That Changed the World

The Dead Sea Scrolls



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## The Dead Sea Scrolls

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## The Dead Sea Scrolls

### INTRODUCTION

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In early 1947, less than 30 miles east of Jerusalem, a young Bedouin shepherd named Muhammed ed-Dib was trying to retrieve a goat that had wandered away from his flock. Up in the craggy, limestone hills on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea near Qumran, he began throwing rocks into caves to determine which one the animal might have wandered into. From the mouth of what is now known as Qumran Cave 1, Muhammed heard what sounded like breaking pottery. Too frightened to enter alone, he returned the next day with companions to investigate. When they entered the cave, they saw tall, cylindrical clay pots, which contained rolls wrapped in linen. Today, these and other artifacts found in the area are known as “The Dead Sea Scrolls.”

### EXAMINING THE ARTIFACT

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We’ll examine the Dead Sea Scrolls by looking at four related topics, starting with the scrolls themselves. What are the Dead Sea Scrolls, and how did they survive for almost two thousand years before being discovered?

The shepherds who first discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls had no idea of their value. They took them to a leatherworker and antiquities dealer called Kando who bought them for a small sum. When he noticed lettering on the scrolls, he sold them to Archbishop Samuel of the Syrian Orthodox Monastery of St. Mark in Jerusalem. At first, the discovery went largely unnoticed. But in the next year, Gerald Lankester Harding, Chief Inspector of Antiquities in the British Mandate of Palestine, and Father Roland de Vaux, Head of the *École Biblique*, began excavating the caves. This led to the discovery of hundreds of documents. Some were nearly complete scrolls. Many others were just fragments of documents. And some fragments were so small that it was impossible to identify them with a specific document.

For almost 1900 years, the scrolls at Qumran had remained undisturbed. But why were they there in the first place? Well, although no one knows for sure, the available evidence seems to suggest that during the war against the Jewish people in Judea and Galilee, between A.D. 66 and 73, either the Romans destroyed the community that kept the scrolls, or the community abandoned their location. But at some point before disappearing, they put the scrolls into clay jars and stored them in caves, leaving them to be found almost 2000 years later.

**Well, we know what happened to the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls is a little bit of a mystery. We know the site was destroyed by the Romans, but what happened to the people is unknown. There’s a good chance that some of them made their way down to Masada**

**because some of the texts found in the excavations at Masada are only known also at the excavations at Qumran. So, there could have been a group that fled Qumran when the Romans were coming, joined up with the rebels down at Masada, and they all ultimately met their demise there.**

— Dr. Robert Duke

So, how did these artifacts survive so long in such a relatively stable level of preservation? Well, many of the things that destroy parchment, papyrus and leather — mold, rats, direct water damage — depend on an abundance of moisture. Since the scrolls were stored in a very dry area, and were shielded even further by being in jars and caves, many of the factors that could degrade the scrolls simply weren't present.

Since the 1950s, biblical scholars and archeologists have painstakingly pieced together thousands of fragments, written mostly on parchment in Hebrew, comprising over 800 documents. Their work of reconstruction, analysis and translation has identified three main groups of texts: biblical, sectarian, and extra-biblical religious writings from the Second Temple period.

Biblical texts comprise approximately 40% of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These texts are by far the earliest manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible known to exist. Carbon and paleographic dating suggest that the scrolls were created from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. to the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the earliest known Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible were the Masoretic texts produced by the Masoretes in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Every book of the Hebrew Bible is represented, except Esther. The “Great Isaiah Scroll” — now housed at the Shrine of the Book in the Israeli Antiquities Museum — is the largest and most well-preserved scroll. It contains all 66 chapters of Isaiah.

Sectarian texts account for about 30% of the findings. These are texts particular to the community at Qumran. Texts like “The Rule of the Community,” found in Cave 1, are extremely valuable to archaeologists and scholars. They detail the governance, worship and biblical interpretation practices of the community that left the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Extra-biblical religious writings make up the remaining 30% of the documents found. These include commentaries on biblical books, retellings of biblical stories, and additional psalms and prayers, which were probably used by the community in their corporate worship. A small group of these manuscripts may not have been produced at Qumran, but rather, visitors to the community or others who came from outside to join the sect may have brought them. For example, “The Psalms of the Sabbath Sacrifice” are a series of 13 songs, each for a separate sabbath celebration. Most scholars believe these particular psalms were not limited to use in the Qumran community. There have been copies found elsewhere, and the language is somewhat different than the language in the sectarian texts.

## THE QUMRAN COMMUNITY

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Finding the Dead Sea Scrolls has been one of the greatest discoveries of modern times. Now, let's consider what they tell us about the Qumran community that stored these manuscripts.

Of course, we can't know everything in absolute detail about the community at Qumran. But still, we can learn much from what others wrote about them and especially from the writings they themselves left behind. Some scholars think that they may have been Sadducees or perhaps members of some unknown religious sect. But most scholars believe that the community at Qumran was related to a sect within Judaism known as the Essenes. There were groups of Essenes throughout Judea and Galilee, and they had a reputation for being strict observers of the Mosaic Law. Most groups of Essenes lived in closely connected, insular communities within cities or villages, often holding their material goods in common.

First-century Jewish historian Josephus described the Essenes in Book II, Chapter 8 of *The Jewish War*. He wrote:

**Three forms of philosophy are pursued among the Judeans: the members of one are Pharisees, of another Sadducees, and the third [school], who certainly are reputed to cultivate seriousness, are called Essenes; although Judeans by ancestry, they are even more mutually affectionate than the others... No one city is theirs, but they settle amply in each. And for those school-members who arrive from elsewhere, all that the community has is laid out for them in the same way as if they were their own things, and they go in and stay with those they have never even seen before as if they were the most intimate friends.**

The term "Essenes" was actually originally a pejorative designation of a number of Jewish sects and groups of people as early as the second century before Christ and at least as late as the second Christian century. Now, most scholars rightly believe that the term was applied to the Qumran community at the Dead Sea. The isolated Jewish communities at Qumran considered themselves to be the true remnant of Israel who were faithful to God's covenant. They preserved many of the Scriptures of the Tanakh, or what Christians call the Old Testament, and they also followed the authoritative priestly leaders that they had selected who rejected the priesthood in Jerusalem.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Those at Qumran appear to have been of a particularly strict sect of Essenes. Instead of living in a city or village, like the ones described by Josephus, the Qumran

community withdrew into the desert near the Dead Sea. Some leading scholars think an intense struggle over the legitimacy of the temple priesthood may have prompted this move. From their writings, we can conclude that they were an offshoot of Judaism who emphasized faithfulness to the Jewish Law but believed the priesthood in Jerusalem had become corrupt. So, instead of participating in the sacrificial system at the temple, they withdrew and waited for God to re-establish righteousness in Israel and rectify the temple service and priesthood.

We can infer from their documents — especially “The Damascus Document” — that the community initially coalesced around a leader referred to as the “Teacher of Righteousness.” This teacher established what the community believed regarding the proper method of interpreting the Scriptures, and particularly regarding the right way of living and worshipping together according to the Law of Moses.

**One priestly figure whom they called the “Teacher of Righteousness” insisted on strictly regulated ritual purity in preparation for a final cataclysmic battle between the forces of darkness and the forces of light, and that this battle would bring about the spread of the kingdom of God throughout the entire earth.**

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Some of the extra-biblical texts, like the “Commentary on Habakkuk,” extol the Teacher as:

**[one] to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of His servants the prophets**

But not every governing document found at Qumran mentions the Teacher of Righteousness. For instance, “The Rule of the Community” says nothing about this leader. Some scholars believe that “The Rule of the Community” and “The Damascus Document” must have been produced by different groups. But their similarities outweigh their differences. Both documents list rules for initiation, ritual washings, meals, and sabbath worship that were distinctive of the Qumran community. Both documents also express intense hopes for an apocalyptic reckoning when God will intervene in history to vindicate his people and punish the wicked. And both voice expectations about a messiah or messiahs who will restore the true people of God.

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## MESSIANIC HOPES

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The community at Qumran had a number of specific beliefs, but we’ll look at one in particular: their hopes for the Messiah. In “The Rule of the Community,” column 9, line 11, The author wrote:

**There shall come ... the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel.**

We find similar language in The Damascus Document. Although scholars debate the precise meaning of this phrase “Messiahs of Aaron and Israel,” it seems that the community at Qumran expected both a *priestly* messiah and a *royal* messiah.

Whether this priestly, royal messiah was one or two people, the community hoped that he, or they, would vindicate the true priesthood, purify the people, and deliver them from false leaders who had corrupted wider Jewish society. This same concern is also present in several other biblical, sectarian, and extra-biblical texts found at Qumran.

**There was definitely messianic expectation at Qumran. In one of the key documents, the Manual of Discipline, that shaped how the community lived, they make reference, in fact, to two Messiahs, one priestly and one Davidic, with the priestly being the more prominent of the two. So, in one of their key documents, they definitely had the idea of Messiah. The other document that shapes that is a later discovery known as 4Q521, a document that explicitly mentions a Messiah who will raise the dead when Messiah comes. And this one adds a whole other layer to the messianic expectation of the Qumran community. What we can't be sure of just how widespread this belief was within the community, but we do have it documented in the key document that shaped the community plus this one description of Messiah's coming, that they had a definite expectation of a Messiah who would raise the dead.**

— Dr. Michael William Holmes

Some of the extra-biblical documents found at Qumran associate their messianic expectations with known biblical figures. For example, the Melchizedek document refers to Melchizedek, the King of Salem, an enigmatic figure mentioned in Genesis 14. In a fragment from Cave 11, we read these words:

**Melchizedek... will judge the holy ones of God ... This is the Day of Salvation, concerning which God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news ... who says to Zion, ‘Your Elohim reigns!’” Zion is ... those who uphold the covenant, who turn from walking in the ways of the people. And your Elohim is Melchizedek, who will save them.**

“Elohim” is one of God’s names, but it also can be used to refer to divine or supernatural beings in general. So, this fragment describes Melchizedek as a quasi-divine or angelic figure who will bring the “Day of Salvation” promised in Isaiah 52:7.

The full text of the Melchizedek document quotes many parts of Scripture. And this interweaving of biblical texts and the focus on the final “Day of Salvation” were important features of biblical interpretation at Qumran. Interestingly, these same features existed in contemporaneous Christian communities, but Christian communities believed



that all the messianic hints and hopes that are described in the Hebrew Bible were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. For example, a Qumran document that modern scholars call “A Messianic Apocalypse,” affirms Isaiah’s prophecy that the Lord will send his Messiah to liberate the captives, restore sight to the blind, revive the dead, and bring good news to the poor. And in Luke 4, Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of this prophecy.

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## IMPACT

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The Dead Sea Scrolls have taught us a lot about the messianic hopes at Qumran. Now, let’s consider the impact these documents have had on the world from their discovery until today.

Scholars often use the biblical texts found at Qumran to understand how the text of the Hebrew Bible has been preserved throughout history. These texts are the earliest known manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible by roughly 1000 years. By comparing them with the Masoretic Text — the dominant tradition of the Hebrew text from the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century — we get a good idea of how stable the text of the Hebrew Bible was in the intervening period.

Some pastors and apologists mistakenly state that the text of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text are identical or nearly identical. But when we look more closely at the documents, we see that this is not true. Many Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts are *remarkably similar* to the Masoretic Text and bear witness to its earlier form. But others have variants that align more with the Samaritan tradition or with the Septuagint — the Old Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. And some manuscripts, while being largely similar to the Masoretic Text, have variants that don’t seem to align with any known tradition.

Of course, some people have exaggerated the *differences* as well. While it’s true that some variants change the meaning or flow of passages, many of the differences tend to be incredibly minor, such as spelling or word choice. So, on the whole, the Dead Sea Scrolls confirm that the Masoretic text faithfully represents a text that existed several centuries before Christ.

**In 1947, when the Dead Sea Scrolls were first found, the big question on everybody’s mind was, “What do these tell us about the Bible? What do they tell us about the reliability of the Canon?” And the Qumran texts give us a lot of confidence in the Bibles we hold today. But they do show some fluidity. In general, the biblical texts at Qumran are very similar to the later, what we call, Masoretic text. But we had some texts at Qumran in Hebrew that look more similar to the Septuagint. We had other texts that look more similar to what became the Masoretic text. So, it does show some dynamic realities between the texts, but in general, the Dead Sea Scrolls give us great confidence in the Bibles we hold today.**

— Dr. Robert Duke

The Dead Sea Scrolls also illuminate the historical context of the New Testament. Through the sectarian texts and the non-biblical religious writings found at Qumran, scholars have gained a better understanding of the theological debates that formed the backdrop for the New Testament.

The Qumran community was frustrated at Israel's unfaithfulness. They strongly denounced the temple priests and the way the sacrifices were conducted. They viewed the present age as an age in which sin and evil triumphed on every side. They longed for the age to come when God would destroy the forces of darkness in a climactic victory, establishing his people in his land. They looked forward to a Messiah — or possibly two — who would lead God's people in the end times. And they awaited the reward of those who were faithful and righteous.

Although the Qumran community was a somewhat fringe movement in the Judean wilderness, its concerns paralleled many of those that occupied the earliest Christians: Israel's need for redemption; the corruption of the priests and temple services; the prevalence of evil in this age; hope for the kingdom of God and the age to come; Jesus the Messiah; and the reward of the faithful and righteous. In these and many other ways, the scrolls and fragments found at Qumran help us understand the New Testament's historical context.

**Prior to the Dead Sea Scrolls, we didn't have much direct information about different ideas and teachings in Judaism that were directly from that time. So, they give us a lot of background information on what were the topics of conversation. What were some of the controversies? What were people thinking about different ideas? How were they interpreting the Hebrew Bible? So, for example, in the Gospels, of course, there's a lot of discussion with Jesus and the Pharisees about Sabbath laws. What can you do and not do on the Sabbath? And sure enough, in the Qumran documents we see a lot of discussion about Sabbath laws. What can you do? What can you not do? How do you fulfill them? What's appropriate? What's not? So, it helps us to see that these were not just idiosyncratic questions, but they come from a context, and they're answered within that context. Another example is, of course, the messianic expectations, but also, and even more specifically, which passages from the Hebrew Bible tended to be more prominent in those discussions. So, you actually see some similarity between the passages used in the Gospels and the passages used at Qumran. For example, Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has anointed me." Same passage quoted in a messianic context in the Dead Sea Scrolls. So, it gives us sometimes very specific links to help us see how people were thinking about these topics in the Gospels.**

— Dr. Jeffrey Kloha

Based on similarities between the Qumran community and the early church, it might be tempting to think that there was a relationship between the two groups. But the

Qumran community was not a Christian community. The Dead Sea Scrolls make no reference to Christianity, and none of the scrolls contain any portions of the New Testament. Similarly, the scrolls never mention Jesus or John the Baptist, or any other New Testament figure. As a result, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has not fundamentally altered most scholars' understanding of the New Testament or the early Christian movement. Still, these documents have added valuable context to the New Testament and have helped explain the appeal of its messianic message.

## CONCLUSION

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The Dead Sea Scrolls are a fascinating discovery. They provide ancient proof of the reliability and stability of the text of all portions of the Hebrew Bible across millennia. They confirm the social and religious context that's described in the New Testament. And they provide substantial insight into the Second Temple period. Even today, scholars and archaeologists continue to study and learn from them. And for many people of faith, they provide strong evidence of the historicity of the Bible, making them the most encouraging archaeological find of the past century.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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## GLOSSARY

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**apocalypse** – Term from a Greek word (*apokalupsis*) meaning "uncovering" or "disclosure"; sometimes used interchangeably with "revelation"

**Damascus Document** – A fragmentary ancient text found among the Dead Sea Scrolls which contains a collection of religious and moral teachings and community regulations; considered to be one of the most important documents of the community at Qumran

**Elohim** – Hebrew term (sometimes shortened to “El”) meaning “God”

**Essenes** – Jewish sect from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. that had a reputation for being strict observers of the Mosaic Law and often lived in closely connected, insular communities; sect believed to comprise the community at Qumran

**extra-biblical** – Relating to literature or other writing that is not included in the canon of Scripture

**Josephus** – (A.D. 37-ca. 100) Jewish historian from the 1st century A.D. who wrote *Antiquities*

**Law of Moses** – Also called the Mosaic Law; can refer to the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah or Pentateuch, or the statutes, ordinances, caselaw and judgments revealed by God to the ancient Israelites through Moses

**Masoretes** – Jewish scribe-scholars in the 6th through 10th centuries who developed a system of textual markings and notes that helped to stabilize, codify and preserve the text of the Hebrew Bible

**Melchizedek** – King of Salem and high priest who blessed Abraham and received tithes from him

**Messiah** – Hebrew word meaning "anointed one"; the great King from David's royal line who would bring about the transition from this age to the age to come; translated "*Christos*" in Greek

**Qumran** – Archaeological site near the Dead Sea where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in caves during the last half of the 20th century

**Sadducees** – Jewish sect at the time of Christ that only adhered to the five books written by Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy) and did not believe in angels, spirits, or the resurrection of the dead