

QUMRAN AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

In late 1946 or early 1947, Bedouin shepherds, while chasing a wandering goat, chanced upon what later came to be known as Cave 1 near the Dead Sea. In it, they found a number of clay jars containing manuscripts, mostly copied on skins but some also on papyrus. Shortly, the newly discovered scrolls began appearing on the antiquities market. A lengthy story of exploration, intrigue, war, the independence of the State of Israel, antiquities dealers, scholars, and soldiers punctuate the full discovery and collection of the scrolls, several hundred in all, recovered from multiple caves.

The location and character of Qumran seemed to correspond to statements made by Pliny the Elder about a group of sectarian Jews called the Essenes.¹ The members made their own copies of the Scriptures as well as other documents, and just before they were attacked by the Roman legions, who were responding to the 1st Jewish Revolt, they hid their precious scrolls in the surrounding caves, doubtless hoping to survive the conflict so as to retrieve them later. Unfortunately, Qumran itself was destroyed by the Romans in the aftermath of the 1st Jewish Revolt.

CATEGORIES OF THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS (DSS)

Canonical Scriptures

Hebrew copies of biblical books, including portions from all the books in the Hebrew Bible except Esther (dating to the late 2nd Temple Period, ca. 250 BC – AD 68)

Apocrypha

the Deutero-Canonical books

Extra-canonical Works

the Pseudepigrapha

Sectarian Documents

produced by the community itself and relating to the community's beliefs and community life



Qumran (upper left) looking eastward toward the Dead Sea

The Sectarrians at Qumran

The Dead Sea scrolls yielded a considerable amount of information concerning a sectarian branch of Judaism about the time of John the Baptist and Jesus and earlier. Its members considered

¹ Pliny (1st Century) comments as follows: *On the west side of the Dead Sea, but out of range of the noxious exhalations of the coast, is the solitary tribe of the Essenes, which is remarkable beyond all the other tribes in the whole world, as it has no women and has renounced all sexual desire, has no money, and has only palm-trees for company. Day by day the throng of refugees is recruited to an equal number by numerous accessions of persons tired of life and driven thither by the waves of fortune to adopt their manners, Natural History, V.xv.73.*

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themselves to be the rightful heir to a pure Judaism, the fulfillment of prophecy, and the means by which God's will would be accomplished in the last days. Their communal meetings for meals and festivals, their ascetic lifestyle following their own religious calendar and purity laws, and the preservation of their most precious commodity--the scrolls themselves--testify to the fact that all life was deeply religious. Their community and faith were described in the various sectarian scrolls recovered from the caves.

Clearly, the community had broken with the Judaism of Jerusalem and retreated into the desert to "prepare the way of the Lord." The text of Isaiah 40:3, which is used in all four Gospels to explain why the ministry of John the Baptist was in the desert (Mt. 3:3//Mk. 1:3//Lk. 3:3-6; Jn. 1:23), was also used by the Qumran community to describe why it was in the desert (1QS 8:12-16). Its members believed that God had specially chosen them, a choice that required their virtuous withdrawal from others Jews, who, along with the rest of the world, were considered to be the "sons of darkness," while members of the community were the "sons of light." They believed that they had entered the New Covenant described in Jeremiah 31 (CD 6:19; 8:21; 19:34; 20:12).

The Community's Origin

The exact details of the community's origin are obscure. It may have begun during the time of the Maccabean leader John Hyrcanus (134-104 BC), when references to other Jewish sects, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees, begin to surface. The community's origin is closely connected with a person called the Teacher of Righteousness, a priest of the Zadokite family (1QpHab 2:8), who guided the community in its earliest period (CD 1:11). Though he is not directly described as the founder of the sect, he certainly was a seminal figure near the time of its origin. He was believed to



The longest scroll describes an ideal temple for the future.

have special insight into the prophetic scriptures (1QpHab 7:5). Though not named (and as yet unidentified with any historical figure), he is described in detail (1QpHab 1:13; 2:2; 5:10; 7:4; 8:3; 9:9-10). No Qumran text identifies him as a messianic figure, though he was said to have been persecuted by a "wicked priest" (1QpHab 8:8-11, 16; 9:9; 11:5-8, 12; 12:2, 8; 4QpPsa^a), whom many scholars believe may have been Judas' Maccabeus' brother, Jonathan, who accepted the office of High Priest after the death of his

brother (ca. 162-142 BC).² This disapproval of the Jerusalem priesthood was almost certainly the primary reason the dissidents withdrew into the desert. They sought to prepare the way of the Lord by studying the Torah and maintaining ritual purity so that they could be a "trustworthy house in Israel" (CD 3:19) and a "house of holiness" (1QS 8:5).

² When Alkimus, considered a true priest from Aaron's family, died in about 160 BC, Jerusalem had no High Priest for about seven years until Jonathan was appointed. The High Priesthood later was made hereditary in the Maccabean family, and this was perceived to be a usurpation.

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Community Scrolls

Some scrolls relate to the community itself and its vision for the future. The Temple Scroll (11QT^a), the longest single scroll (a whopping 27' long), envisioned a new temple, and almost half of it is occupied with this concern. Precise architectural details are noted. The law of the Temple Scroll was to guide the community until God would usher in a future "day of creation."

In addition to the Temple Scroll, the Manual of Discipline (1QS) outlines the rules for communal life. A code of punishment for infractions of community rules is also included.³

Community Life

Khirbet Qumran from an aerial view

The daily life at Qumran was spartan. At the common meals, a priest would extend his hand to bless the first-fruits of the bread and the new wine prior to eating (1QS 6:4-5). The community observed the Jewish holy days and *Yom Kippur* (1QpHab 11:7), though its calendar was different than that of Jerusalem.⁴ The Sabbath was tightly regulated, and Sabbath restrictions on such things

as picking up a clod of dirt, opening a sealed vessel, or walking beyond a thousand cubits outside the commune were typical (CD 10:14--11:18).

Community Beliefs

The community considered itself to be the final generation living at the very end of the age (1QSa. 1:1f; CD 1:10-13). The War Scroll (1QM) describes the last great conflict between the "sons of light" and the "sons of darkness." An eschatological battle would soon begin (1QS 10:19; 1QH 15:17; 1QpHab 13:2ff.). Total victory, of course, was anticipated for the sons of light. Following a final judgment, the new covenant community would live a thousand generations (CD 7:6) and form an eternal house (4QFlor 1:2-7).⁵

Considerable attention has been given to the Qumran concept of the messiah. One Qumran text is made up of four messianic quotations (Ex. 20:21; Nu. 24:15-17; Dt. 33:8-11 and Jos. 6:26). Together,

³ If a member lied about his wealth, for instance, he would forfeit a quarter of his food ration. If he spoke aloud the sacred name of God, he would be summarily expelled from the community with no chance of return. Various other punishments are specified for fraud, gossip, grudges, indecent speech, misconduct in public assembly, inappropriate laughter, and so forth.

⁴ Using an ancient solar calendar of 364 days per year and months with varying days of 30 and 31, the annual festivals at Qumran fell on exactly the same day of the week each year. Passover, for instance, always fell on Wednesday. *Yom Kippur* always fell on Friday. What we do not know is how the community accounted for the missing 29 hours, 48 minutes and 48 seconds of each year.

⁵ Immediately, one is tempted to wonder if the thousand generations in the Damascus Document has any bearing upon the thousand years in the Apocalypse of John (Rev. 20:4-6). For the Qumran community, however, the number "thousand" is derived from Dt. 7:9, where God is said to keep his covenant of love unto a thousand generations.

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they refer to a prophet like Moses, a star identified as a priest, the scepter of David as a royal messiah, and a blessing of Levi (4QTestimonia).

Importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls for Translating the Hebrew Bible

Today, translators of the Hebrew Bible use the Masoretic Text as their primary source, the standard edition being the Leningrad Codex written in AD 1008. With the oldest copies of the Hebrew Text only dating back about a thousand years, a question has always lurked in the background: just how accurate was the transmission of this text through the prior centuries? There had been no way to adequately answer that question other than on the basis of Jewish tradition.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls changed this picture substantially. The biblical fragments from Qumran were a millennium earlier than the oldest copies of the Masoretic Text. Now, our medieval Jewish text of the 11th century could be compared to Jewish texts of the 1st century or earlier. To be sure, the Dead Sea Scrolls were not complete texts of the Hebrew Bible. While they contained portions of every book in the Old Testament except Esther, most of these scrolls had suffered deterioration through the centuries. Some, like 1QIsa^a, were complete.⁶ Others were fragmented. Still, the roughly 170 manuscripts of biblical texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls made possible new avenues of textual analysis.



The Isaiah Scroll contains all 66 chapters of Isaiah

The agreement between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text was extensive. To a large degree, the Dead Sea Scrolls have confirmed the medieval Masoretic Text. There are some spelling differences, but these differences are largely insignificant for the meaning of the texts. Also, the Qumran scrolls demonstrate that the Septuagint was not a careless translation (some had so accused it), and Hebrew precedents were found for a number of variants between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint.⁷

Today, scholars still use the Masoretic Text as the foundation for biblical translation, and rightfully so, since it is a complete text including all the books of the Hebrew Bible. However, translators sometimes depart from the Masoretic Text by following Dead Sea Scrolls texts, especially if the Dead Sea Scrolls agree with other ancient versions over against the Masoretic Text.

⁶ 1QIsa^a contained all 66 chapters of Isaiah, and barring a few lines broken off from the bottoms of a few columns, the complete text survived.

⁷ A case in point is the Book of Jeremiah. The form of Jeremiah is about one eighth shorter in the Septuagint than in the Masoretic Text. However, 4QJer^b attests to a shorter recension of Jeremiah in Hebrew as well.