

Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea scrolls consist of roughly 900 documents, including texts from the Hebrew Bible, discovered between 1947 and 1956 in eleven caves in and around the Wadi Qumran near the ruins of the ancient settlement of Khirbet Qumran, on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea.¹

The texts are of great religious and historical significance, as they include some of the only known surviving copies of Biblical documents made before 100 CE, and preserve evidence of considerable diversity of belief and practice within late Second Temple Judaism. They are written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, mostly on parchment, but with some written on papyrus. These manuscripts generally date between 150 BCE to 70 CE. The scrolls are most commonly identified with the ancient Jewish sect called the Essenes, but recent scholarship has challenged their association with the scrolls.¹

In 1947, young Bedouin shepherds entered a long-untouched limestone cave and found jars filled with ancient scrolls. That initial discovery by the Bedouins yielded seven scrolls and began a search that lasted nearly a decade and eventually produced thousands of scroll fragments from eleven caves. During those same years, archaeologists excavated the Qumran ruin, a complex of structures located on a barren terrace between the cliffs where the caves are found and the Dead Sea. Historical, paleographic, and linguistic evidence, as well as carbon-14 dating, established that the scrolls and the Qumran ruin dated from the third century BCE to 68 CE – during the late Second Temple Period – the scrolls are older than any other surviving biblical manuscripts by almost one thousand years.

The Dead Sea Scrolls texts are identified by a number and letter combination, indicating the cave from which they were recovered. This initial code is followed by either a second number (the catalog file number assigned to each fragment as it was archived) or by a few letters that abbreviate an alternative name given to a fragment by researchers, usually the supposed title of the text.

Generally speaking the manuscripts fall into one or more of the following genres: Biblical texts, Pentateuch stories and commentaries; legal and ritual texts; prophets stories and commentaries; psalms and poetry; wisdom literature; prophecy and visions; sectarian literature; and “miscellaneous things that don’t fit anywhere else”. Some texts can be assigned to several categories depending on the subjective reading of the interpreter.

Scrolls Discovered in the Caves

Cave 1: Manual of Discipline, War of Sons of Light, Thanksgiving Scroll, Isaiah, Genesis Apocryphon and Habakkuk Peshet.²

Cave 2: 300 fragments of other scrolls, including Jubilees and the Wisdom of Ben-Sirach¹

Cave 3: Copper Scroll²

Cave 4: 122 biblical scrolls (or fragments)²

Caves 5-6: Modest finds¹

Cave 7: Fragments written in Greek¹

Caves 8-9: Fragments¹

Cave 10: Psalms, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Genesis, and various fragments²

Cave 11: Thirty scrolls were found including Leviticus and the Temple Scroll²

Significance

The significance of the scrolls relates in a large part to the field of textual criticism. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible were Masoretic texts dating to 9th century. The biblical manuscripts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls push that date back to the 2nd century BCE. Before this discovery, the earliest extant manuscripts of the Old Testament were in Greek in manuscripts such as Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus.¹

Access and Publication

Prior to 1967, the Scrolls were housed in the Rockefeller Museum (formerly known as the Palestine Archaeological Museum) in Jerusalem. After the Six Day War, the Scrolls were moved to the Shrine of the Book, at the Israel Museum.¹

Some of the documents were published early. All the writings in Cave 1 appeared in print between 1950 and 1956, those from eight other caves were released in 1963, and 1965 saw the publication of the *Psalms Scroll* from Cave 11. Their translations into English soon followed.¹

An exception was the contents of Cave 4, representing 40% of the total. Their publication had been entrusted to “The International Team” led by Father Roland de Vaux, a member of the Dominican Order in Jerusalem. This group published the first volume of the material entrusted to them in 1968, but spent much of their energies defending their theories regarding the materials, instead of publishing them. Geza Vermes, who had been involved from the start in the project, blamed the delay—and eventual failure—on de Vaux’s selection of a team poorly suited to the work, as well as de Vaux’s vain reliance on “his personal, quasi-patriarchal authority” to ensure its prompt completion.¹

Thus a large portion of the finds in Cave 4 were not released for years. Access to the scrolls was governed by a “secrecy rule” which allowed only the original International Team or their designates to view the original materials. After de Vaux’s death in 1971, his successors repeatedly refused to allow the publication even of photographs of these materials, preventing other scholars from making their own judgments. This rule was eventually broken, first by Ben Zion Wacholder’s publication in the fall of 1991 of 17 documents reconstructed from a concordance that had been made in 1988 and had come into the hands of scholars outside of the International Team; next, in the same month, by the discovery and publication of a complete set of facsimiles of the Cave 4 materials at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, which were not covered by the “secrecy rule”. After further delays, these photographs were published by Robert Eisenman and James Robinson as *A Facsimile Edition of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. As a result, the “secrecy rule” was lifted.¹

Publication accelerated with the appointment of the respected Dutch-Israeli textual scholar Emanuel Tov as editor-in-chief in 1990. Publication of the Cave 4 documents soon commenced, with five volumes in print by 1995. As of March 2009 volume XXXII remains to be completed, with the whole series, *Discoveries in the Judean Desert*, running to thirty nine volumes in total.¹

¹“[Dead Sea Scrolls](#).” *wikipedia.org*. Wikipedia, n.d.

²Bolen, Todd. [Qumran Caves](#). Bible Places, n.d.

©Rachel-Esther bat-Avraham, 5772/2012
becomingjewish.org