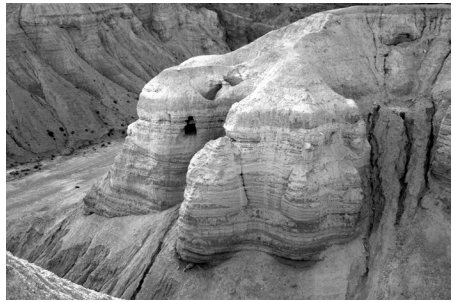


THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AND THE SILVER SCROLLS

Shortly after the conclusion of World War II, the Middle East reemerged as the center of political and religious attention when two significant discoveries that would revolutionize biblical studies were revealed to the world. The first was the Dead Sea Scrolls found in Israel, and the second was the Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi, Egypt. The Gnostic literature greatly informed New Testament scholars of the mysterious sect's theology and apocryphal account of the life of Christ and His disciples.

However, nothing could compare with the accidental discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) in the limestone caves of Qumran. These finds consist of hundreds of the oldest biblical texts in existence: manuscripts and fragments of every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther. The remarkable discovery of these Old Testament manuscripts led famed archaeologist William F. Albright to view them as the “greatest archaeological discovery of modern times.”¹ Most would agree with Albright—however, this agreement would only come after one has grasped and appreciated the scrolls’ theological and apologetic value to the church.

The scrolls proved to be an important link in an unbroken chain of texts that contribute to establishing the textual reliability of the Old Testament Scriptures—a chain whose links date from 600 BC (the Ketef Hinnom Silver Scrolls) to AD 1008 (*Codex Leningradensis*). During this time period, however, the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) emerge

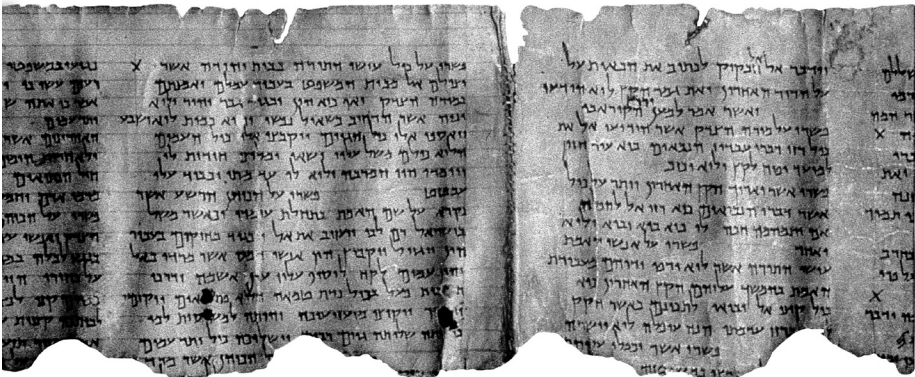


The entrance to cave 4 is visible from the ruins of Qumran. This particular cave contained thousands of manuscript fragments that were discovered during excavations from 1951 to 1956.

as the most remarkable of ancient biblical texts. The Dead Sea manuscripts give scholars biblical texts that date over 1000 years earlier than any previously known Hebrew manuscripts. It is important to note that these texts come from a time where no authoritative standard text existed from which to transmit the Hebrew Bible, and therefore, greatly informed scholars of the process of transmission and the care with which the Hebrew Scriptures were copied through the centuries.

Discovery of the Scrolls

In 1947, during Israel's struggle to be reborn as a nation after nearly 2000 years of dispersion, Muhammad edh-Dhib, a Bedouin goat herder from the Ta'amirah Bedouin tribe, discovered the first of several manuscript caches in a limestone cave at Qumran overlooking the northwest shores of the Dead Sea. Eventually, edh-Dhib delivered seven scrolls to Khalil Sahin, a Christian antiquities dealer in Bethlehem, who in turn sold three of them to E.L. Sukenik of Hebrew University. In 1949, the remaining four scrolls were sold to Mar Athanasius Samuel of the Syrian Jacobite Monastery of St. Mark in Jerusalem, who shortly after traveled to America. On June 1, 1954, Samuel ran an advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal* offering the four Dead Sea Scrolls for sale. The ad was quickly brought to the attention of former Israeli military commander Yigael

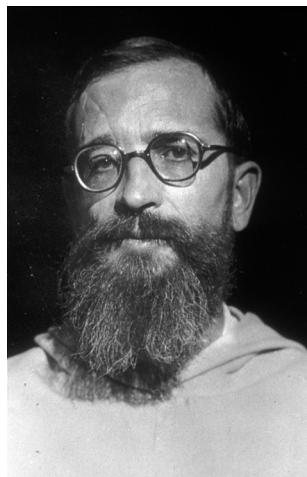


The Habakkuk Commentary was among the first of seven scrolls discovered in cave 1 at Qumran. The manuscript contains multiple columns of Hebrew writing on leather that is sewn together between columns 7 and 8 (see stitching above). It was one of the scrolls purchased by the State of Israel in 1955 through an advertisement placed in the *Wall Street Journal*. It is currently on display alongside the other six scrolls at the Shrine of the Book Museum in Jerusalem. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

Yadin, who was the son of Sukenik. Yadin, with the help of philanthropist D.S. Gotsman, purchased the four scrolls for approximately \$250,000 and eventually returned them to Israel to be placed alongside the other three scrolls purchased earlier by Sukenik. Today, the seven scrolls are displayed on a rotating basis in the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum. These include two copies of Isaiah, Habakkuk Commentary, Thanksgiving Scroll, Community Rule, War Rule, and the Genesis Apocryphon.

Exploration and Excavation

After the initial discovery, Israel's war for independence (1948) prevented the exploration of the Dead Sea area until 1949. G.L. Harding and French Dominican Father Roland de Vaux (see photo) led the initial investigation, which eventually brought the discovery of some 30 more caves, 10 of which contained more manuscripts, many of which were of extensive length. The 11 limestone caves are in close proximity to the ancient settlement of the Khirbet Qumran. Further excavations from 1951 to 1956 by Roland de Vaux revealed that the Qumran community was founded in Maccabean times, under either John Hyrcanus (135–104 BC), or Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BC). The small Qumran community served as an administrative center, assembly place, and burial site until its destruction in AD 68 by Roman troops during the First Jewish War (AD 66–70). It appears that Qumran later served as a Roman military post, and soon after as a stronghold for Jewish rebels during the Second Jewish War (AD 132–135).



The initial excavation at Qumran (1951 to 1956) was led by French Dominican monk and archaeologist, Father Roland de Vaux. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

The caves with manuscripts are numbered from 1 to 11 in order of their discovery. Hundreds of leather scrolls as well as a few papyrus fragments were discovered in their desolate and arid environments. Of the nearly 1,000 documents recovered, about 20 percent were of biblical books, while others were nonbiblical sectarian texts and commentaries. Of the 11 caves, cave 4 proved to be the most productive, providing fragments of more than 380 manuscripts (both biblical and extrabiblical). Caves 1 and 11 added to this cache by yielding the most well-preserved texts of all the caves.

During the excavations more than 190 fragments of biblical scrolls were located. These fragments were small in size, representing no more than 10 percent of an entire biblical book. However, one of the most heralded finds among the Dead Sea Scrolls is two scrolls of the book of Isaiah found in cave 1: the complete St. Mark's Monastery Isaiah scroll (Isaiah A, or 1QIs^a), and the second scroll of the book of Isaiah, the Hebrew University Isaiah (Isaiah B, or 1QIs^b).^{*} Isaiah A is a popular copy that contains multiple corrections in the texts and also serves as the earliest known copy of any complete book of the Bible. The Isaiah B text, although incomplete, agrees more closely with the Masoretic Text than does Isaiah A.

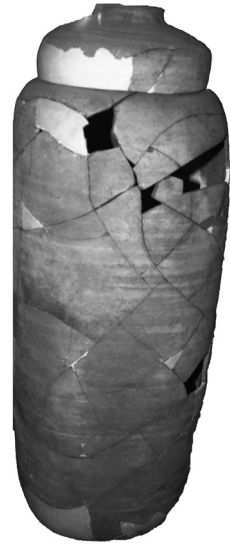
^{*} The Dead Sea documents are identified by a number specifying the cave from which the particular text was discovered. After the cave number is identified, the letter "Q" is used to describe the location of discovery as "Qumran." The letter "Q" then is usually followed by an abbreviation of the name of the biblical book itself. In some cases, an additional superscript letter is added which denotes the order in which the particular manuscript was discovered when more than one copy of the same book exists. For example, the famous Isaiah Scroll is referred to technically as 1QIs^a, meaning that it was the first Isaiah scroll discovered in Cave 1 at Qumran, while the Hebrew University Scroll of Isaiah is identified as 1QIs^b.

Not only did the archaeologists search the Qumran hills, but the Bedouin went on to pursue their own searches in other areas and found caves to the southeast of Bethlehem. These caves produced self-dated manuscripts and documents from the Second Jewish War (AD 132–135), which helped to establish the antiquity of the Dead Sea Scrolls. There was also found in these caves an additional scroll of the Minor Prophets, the last half of Joel through Haggai, which closely supports the Masoretic Texts. Also found was the oldest known Semitic papyrus, which had been scraped clean and inscribed for the second time (known as a *palimpsest*) in the ancient Hebrew script that is dated from the seventh to eighth centuries BC. Additional manuscript materials were found at another site known as Khirbet Mird. These items included a parchment fragment from the first century AD of Psalm 15. Furthermore, a portion of Psalm 16 was discovered at Wadi Murabba'at in 1960.

From the myriad of manuscripts found in the Qumran caves one can see the different manuscript families represented in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The proto-Masoretic tradition, from which the consonantal Masoretic Text is derived, is recognized from the Qumran documents. In addition to these, the proto-Septuagintal family and the pre-Samaritan textual tradition is found here, forming the foundation that eventually became the *Samaritan Pentateuch*. The discovery of these early textual traditions does not, however, necessarily mean that the Masoretic texts that the present Hebrew Bible is based upon are inferior to these early traditions. Nothing from the Dead Sea Scroll discoveries calls into question the reliability and authority of the Masoretic Text used today as the foundation of the Old Testament Hebrew Bible.

Deciphering the Qumran Literature

Over the past 60 years, scholars have identified over 800 separate biblical and non-biblical texts that possess content unique to themselves in complete, partial, or fragment form. Among them is represented every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther,



Several of the Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts were rolled up and placed in unique jars like this one found in cave 1.



The interior of Qumran cave 4, where thousands of intact manuscripts and fragments have been discovered, including portions of the book of Isaiah. The man-made niches used for storing various scrolls can still be seen in the walls. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

and in the case of Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Isaiah multiple copies have been identified. Also included are portions of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) and even some apocryphal texts such as the *Book of Tobit* (Aramaic and Hebrew), *Letter of Jeremiah* (Greek), and the *Book of Ben Sira/Ecclesiasticus* (Hebrew). Of the complete biblical collection, however, only the Isaiah scroll has been preserved in its entirety, and it remains the oldest complete manuscript of any book of the Bible, being dated as early as the second century BC.

A Survey of the Caves' Content

According to Qumran specialist Farah Mebarki, a summary of the entire biblical and nonbiblical collection can be organized by type, language, and category. Included among the types of literature are the scrolls, decomposed volumes, phylacteries, and *mezuzot*, consisting of tiny rolls of parchment with passages from the Torah, which are usually placed on the doorpost of a Jewish home or business. By arranging the texts according to language and writing, one can expect to see Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin in the form of a seal, cryptic writing that contains encoded Hebrew messages, and possibly Nabatean, a language indigenous to the area of Petra (southern Jordan). Among the categories are texts from the Hebrew Bible, apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings of the Protestant Old Testament, and Essene or Qumranite literature. Among these fascinating scrolls are distinguishing characteristics that make each text unique and worthy of our consideration. The following list is a description of the more significant biblical and extrabiblical documents discovered at the 11 Qumran caves.²

- *Cave 1*: Of the two Isaiah scrolls (A and B) discovered, Isaiah A is the most well-preserved complete copy of any text, containing distinctive scribal notations above the line of text or in the margin. It is currently the oldest complete book of the Bible. The Isaiah B scroll is an incomplete copy of the latter half of the book that more closely resembles the medieval Masoretic Hebrew text than does Isaiah A. In addition to these major finds, fragments of Genesis, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Psalms, and a unique section of Daniel 2:4, where the language changes from Hebrew to Aramaic, were collected.

Among the nonbiblical literature discovered was a commentary on the book of Habakkuk containing the first two chapters of the book and a corresponding interpretation; the Manual of Discipline, articulating the rules and regulations of the sect; the War Scroll, which gives an account of preparation for the end-time war between the Essenes and their enemies; the Thanksgiving Hymns, which contain 30 hymns resembling the Old Testament Psalms; and the Genesis Apocryphon, which preserves the accounts of the Genesis patriarchs in Aramaic.

What is more, fragments of books such as Enoch, Sayings of Moses, Book of Jubilee, Book of Noah, Testament of Levi, Tobit, and the Wisdom

of Solomon were discovered, as well as fragmentary commentaries on Psalms, Micah, and Zephaniah.

- *Cave 2:* Though the second cave was not nearly as productive, by 1952 archaeologists uncovered hundreds of fragments including two of Exodus, one of Leviticus, four of Numbers, two of Deuteronomy, one of Jeremiah, Job, and Psalms, and two of Ruth.
- *Cave 3:* The same year that excavations were occurring in cave 2, researchers discovered a unique text divided into two halves known as the Copper Scroll. According to the pioneering work of de Vaux, the fragile scroll is the only one of its kind discovered at Qumran. It is written on metal and contains unique Mishnaic Hebrew text. Due to its fragile composition, X-ray examinations were done; they revealed that the unique text describes at least 60 locations of various treasures hidden throughout Jericho, Qumran, and Jerusalem areas, none of which have been discovered. Shortly after the X-ray examinations, researchers found it difficult to unroll the crumbling scrolls, opting to cut them from top to bottom into several long strips and display them at the Jordan Archaeological Museum in Amman.
- *Cave 4:* This location is seen by many to be the most productive of the 11 caves since it produced nearly 100 copies of Bible books and at least 15,000 fragments. Included among these discoveries is one of the oldest known texts of biblical Hebrew, a fragment of the book of Samuel that dates to the third century BC. Other texts include commentaries on the Psalms, Isaiah, and Nahum. Interestingly, a fragment of Daniel



The Copper Scrolls as they were originally discovered in Cave 3. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)



The Copper Scroll discovered in cave 3 contains directions to hidden treasure. To date, no treasure described on the scroll has been found. Portions of the scroll are housed at the Citadel Museum in Amman, Jordan. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

7:28 and 8:1 was discovered showing the transition of the Aramaic language back to the Hebrew.

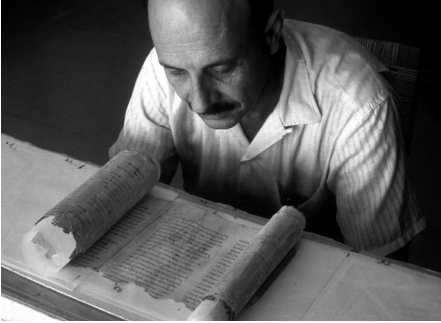
- *Cave 5*: Though not as productive for archaeologists, this site contained fragments of the apocryphal book Tobit and an assortment of decayed biblical books.
- *Cave 6*: Unlike most of the other locations, cave 6 yielded papyrus fragments of Daniel and 1 and 2 Kings.
- *Caves 7-10*: In 1955, while nearing the end of excavations, archaeologists found a very few items, such as 18 Greek fragments and one ostracon (clay shard with writing), along with materials used for the storing and bundling of scrolls.
- *Cave 11*: Despite being the last excavated, in 1956, this cave produced a partial copy of the Psalms, including the apocryphal Psalm 151. As a result, scholars now possess 36 canonical texts ranging from Psalm 90 through 150, many of which are attributed to King David. Also found was a partial copy of Leviticus, Apocalypse of the New Jerusalem, and an Aramaic paraphrase (known as a *targum*) of Job. Furthermore, two or three nonbiblical Temple Scrolls were discovered, which describe various themes relating to the Temple in Jerusalem and the book of Deuteronomy, such as laws addressing the construction of the Temple, purity rules, and regulations regarding judges, idolatry, slaves taken in war, curses, false prophets, incest, and betrayal. One of these scrolls has also been recognized as the longest of all the Dead Sea Scrolls, measuring almost 28 feet in length.



Scroll of Psalms discovered in cave 11 at Qumran. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

It is particularly important for Christians to understand and appreciate the enormous testimony of Scripture the Lord has providentially preserved for our benefit, especially as it pertains to the reliability of the Old Testament.

Dating of the Manuscripts



In 1955, Professor Yigael Yadin purchased four of the Dead Sea Scrolls found in cave 1 for approximately \$250,000 by answering an ad in the *Wall Street Journal*. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)



Ruins of Khirbet Qumran. The settlement itself housed approximately 200 inhabitants. Numerous inkwells, stone benches, pottery, coins, ritual baths, cisterns, and kilns, as well as a refectory, a scriptorium, and a well-developed irrigation system have been discovered. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

The Dead Sea Scrolls have been dated in a variety of ways. Radiocarbon (carbon-14) dating of the manuscripts has determined that the fragments are approximately 2000 years old. The paleographical method dated the texts to between 125 and 100 BC. More recent dating by Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) between 1991 and 1998 placed the date for the Isaiah Scroll between 202 and 93 BC (combining results from Zurich and Tucson laboratories).

The paleographical method operates on the basis of comparison of the structures and shapes of the particular characters of the text with that of the structures and shapes of external sources that have already been dated, such as coins and inscriptions. This method has been improving over the years and has been proven to be a relatively reliable technique of dating the manuscripts.

Dating the texts on the basis of archaeological data is another method of dating, and is often the least valuable of the three mentioned. This method researches only within the confines of the time period of the Qumran community, looking to the upper and lower limits of the period of residence in Khirbet-Qumran, from approximately the middle of the second century BC to about AD 68. The problem with this method is that many

of the texts that were discovered in the caves precede the time period of the residence in Qumran. Some scholars believe that the texts were not copied in Qumran, but were brought into the Qumran community from outside areas.

The oldest Qumran texts are fragments from Exodus and Samuel: 4QEx^f is dated c. 250 BC and 4QSam^b comes from c. 225 BC.

The Residents of Qumran

While scholars are reasonably certain of the number of inhabitants (between 150 and 200) who functioned as a monastic community at Qumran (also known as Sokoka), they are not absolutely convinced of their identity. Many believe they were *Essenes*, originally an Aramaic word (*hasayya*) meaning “the pious ones.” According to Roman historian Pliny the Elder, the Essenes lived west of the Dead Sea and north of Ein Gedi,³ which is consistent with the view that identifies the Essenes as the inhabitants of Qumran. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus fixes their population in Israel at approximately 4,000⁴ and adds that the sect was flourishing in the second century BC during the time of the Maccabees and Pharisees and continued until the destruction of the Jewish temple by the Romans in AD 70.⁵

Others reject this traditional view and see the Qumranites originating either as a reaction to the moral laxity of the priesthood during the Babylonian exile (sixth century BC) or during the second century BC as a group separated from a yet earlier (third-century BC) apocalyptic Essene community. Some speculate this schism was due to doctrinal, moral, interpretive, ritual, and calendrical differences, which may explain the apparent variations of doctrine and practice among those within the movement. Although none of their own texts describe the group as “Essenes,” but only as “pious” and “saints,” Pliny the Elder, Philo of Alexandria, and Josephus identify them as either “pious,” “Essenes,” or “Essenians.”

Functionally, unlike the Sadducees who held political power and officiated daily in the Jerusalem temple, and the Pharisees who delighted in demonstrating personal virtue through pomp, the Essenes rejected the temple sacrifices and rituals. Instead, as a reaction to the priestly corruption in Jerusalem, they appear to have been preoccupied with ritual cleansing and “separating themselves from the dwellings of the men of iniquity.”⁶ Their remote location in the arid desert and the presence of at least ten ritual cleansing pools excavated at the site attest to these practices. Theologically, while adopting holy behavior consistent with a mystical interpretation of the Law of Moses, the Essenes viewed life as a moral and spiritual struggle between the “Sons of Light” and the “Sons of Darkness.” This struggle would eventually climax in a messianic-led war between good and evil, followed by divine judgment and the new creation. Therefore, in preparation for that great apocalyptic day, prayers, meditation, reflection, praises, work, ritual purification, and the reading or development of new literature were daily activities.

The extent to which the Essenes were involved in the copying of biblical manuscripts and the production of new literature remains a mystery and has been the center of debate for the last 60 years. However, support for Essene participation comes from the discovery of three inkwells found in the scriptorium, where most of their scrolls were



Some believe these ruins at Qumran housed a scriptorium, where scribes could read and copy the Scriptures.

stored. In close proximity to the inkwells, large rectangular stone library tables were unearthed, which were most likely used for reading, unfolding, and copying. Furthermore, the discovery of hundreds of small, flat, saucer-bowl-shaped receptacles made of clay lends support. These may have been used for eating, or perhaps used as ink receptacles, which would point to a manuscript-producing environment. Scholars have suggested a range of theories in attempting to explain the origin of the scrolls. Among these are suggestions that the scrolls were part of the Jerusalem temple library or authored by the various sects of Judaism.

In contrast to the Essene theory, there is a growing minority opinion among some archaeologists. According to Yizhak Magen and Yuval Peleg, who excavated the site from 1993 to 2003, Qumran was used as a pottery factory and was inhabited by only a few dozen workers. Magen sees no connection between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Essenes or any other inhabitants of Qumran. Rather, the manuscripts were hidden in nearby caves by refugees who fled Jerusalem to escape the Roman invaders during the Jewish revolt in AD 66–70. He supports his theory by describing the evidence discovered at Qumran as being consistent with a pottery-manufacturing environment.

For example, up to seven tons of clay deposits were discovered in many of the community's reservoirs and ritual baths (*mikva'ot*). Also discovered were unusually high amounts of industrial waste, tens of thousands of clay fragments, many pottery kilns along with fully formed vessels, and nearly 1,400 coins, all of which is consistent with a commercial atmosphere.

But why store the scrolls at Qumran? For Magen, it was the logical place since it lies directly on the route refugees would have taken from Jerusalem in order to arrive at the hilltop fortress of Masada. In fact, the clay jars used to store many of the scrolls were probably provided by the pottery factory, since refugees would not have wanted to carry heavy clay storage containers during their hasty and long flight south to safety. According to this theory, it appears unlikely that the Essenes would have hidden the scrolls since many of the documents were haphazardly deposited in caves, without customary reverence. In addition, many of the scrolls were discovered at various locations along the refugee escape route adjacent to the northwest end of the Dead Sea, including Masada.⁷

The Scrolls and Scribal Practice

It is from the Dead Sea Scrolls that scribal practices have been discovered and researched. Manuscripts from the Judean Desert reflect a variety of scribal practices,



This stone bench and table were unearthed in the ruins of Qumran. Some believe these may have been used to read and possibly copy some of the biblical scrolls.

since many of the documents were copied at other locations in Israel. So the documents as well as the scribal practices found in this territory reflect not only the scribal tradition of those who lived and wrote in that community, but also the tradition and practices of the scribes of Israel as a whole. Scribal practice may be supported by research of the content of the document as well as the physical components that make up the scrolls, such as the parchments, ink, and so on.

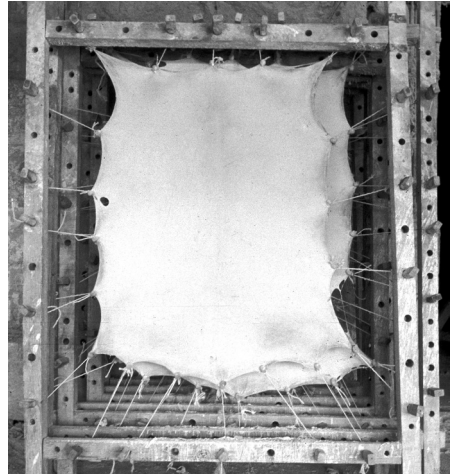
Though the majority of Dead Sea Scroll documents from the Judean Desert were written on leather or papyrus (a form of ancient paper created from the flattened, dried papyrus plant found in Egypt), scholars have found that the materials used at the different locations were related to the content of the documents. It seems that leather was used for writing more formal literary content, while papyrus was for more personal usage, such as letters and documentary texts. Papyrus may have also been used for personal copies of formal documents as well.

What can be gathered from the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is the myriad of scribal practices that were widely used throughout Israel from the third century BC to the second century AD. Insight is given into the procedures of transmission and copying of the Hebrew and Aramaic texts, such as the materials used and the techniques implemented.

The Scrolls and Reliable Transmission

Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, our earliest complete manuscript of the Old Testament was dated to the eleventh century AD (see chapter 1). The more ancient Qumran manuscripts had a great impact on the scholarly world, verifying the validity and reliability of the Masoretic transmission tradition and the Masoretic Text, on which we base our English Old Testament text. Some of the Qumran biblical texts are dated hundreds of years before Christ and closely parallel the corresponding portions of the Masoretic Text, which dates from AD 800 to 1000. The differences found are only minuscule and do not alter the meaning of the text in any way. The Qumran manuscripts give much earlier evidence of the Old Testament text than anything previously known.

The differences that do exist between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text are largely those of word order and spelling errors, being confined only to individual words and even letters. Overall agreement between the two texts is remarkable. It is amazing



Preparing parchment to be used for writing the Scriptures. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

to note that though the text underwent hundreds of years of transmission, so little alteration was made to it.

The Example of the Isaiah Scroll

The Isaiah Scroll shows how insignificant the above-mentioned discrepancies really are. Isaiah 40:12 of the Masoretic Text uses the Hebrew word *mayim*, translated “waters,” while the Dead Sea text uses the Hebrew word *me yam*, which translates “waters of the sea.” When comparing the Isaiah B Scroll, which dates to the first century BC, to the *Codex Leningradensis* (AD 1008), the two texts are almost word-for-word identical to one another. There are a few differences, but they are only very minor deviations that are merely orthographic and linguistic.

The book of Isaiah was one of the more popular books at Qumran, with twenty-one manuscripts being recovered throughout the excavation of the caves. The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa^a) was the only virtually complete scroll found and thought by some to be placed at Qumran for safe preservation but somewhat earlier by more recent AMS scientific dating. This scroll’s copy date was determined to be around 125 BC using the paleographical dating method. All sixty-six chapters are preserved within its fifty-four columns, suffering only minor damages in the leather that resulted in small gaps in the scroll. This scroll, although containing many variant readings, is for the most part in agreement with the Masoretic Text. Scholars have taken much interest in these variant readings found in the Great Isaiah Scroll. It appears the Qumranites believed that Isaiah foretold of God’s plan of the time period in which the community lived, thus they quoted the book as authoritative Scripture and wrote commentaries on it.

Many of the other manuscripts of the book of Isaiah, such as 1QIsa^b, 4QIsa^a, 4QIsa^b, 4QIsa^d, 4QIsa^e, 4QIsa^f, and 4QIsa^g, follow closely with the Masoretic Text. On the other hand, 1QIsa^a and 4QIsa^c contain many variants from the Hebrew text, providing insight on the book’s composition in its later stages and what many consider improved readings of the text.

There are four categories of these variant readings within the Isaiah Scroll, the first of which deals with particular verses that are present in some texts but absent from others. One example comes from the second chapter of Isaiah, where the latter half of verse 9 and all of verse 10 are completely absent from 1QIsa^a.



Portions of the book of Isaiah were found in caves 1 and 4, including a complete copy known as the Isaiah A, pictured here. It is over 25 feet in length and dates to the second century BC. The scroll, opened to Isaiah 40:3, was stitched together at several points, which are visible on each end of the scroll as well as on the left side of the text above. Scholars have estimated that approximately 95-plus percent of the Isaiah text is identical to the later Masoretic Text, from which the English Old Testament is translated. The remaining 5 percent disagreement is attributed to minor scribal mistakes and differences that affect no major doctrine. (© John C. Trever, PhD; digital image by James E. Trever.)

The second category of variant readings involves scribal errors made in the transmission process. These errors are somewhat more difficult to identify because what scholars may deem an error may, in fact, be an alternative reading or different textual tradition. However, there are many variants in certain texts that cannot be explained in any way besides human error during copying. An example of this kind of error can be found in Isaiah 16:8-9. In this passage, the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint contain a more extended version of the passage than does the IQIsa^a.

The third has to do mainly with grammatical variations. These are merely variations in spelling, forms of names, word order, and the like. There are many of these variants throughout the different texts, but they do not have any effect on the meaning of the texts and, for the purposes of interpretation, are considered meaningless. These variants do, however, give us insight into and evidence of the use of the Hebrew language, the use of spelling systems, and the use of other conventions by the scribes at the time of the late Second Temple period.

The fourth category involves the wider spectrum of variant readings. These include sections of verses whose readings slightly differ in their syntax and sentence structure. An example of this kind of variant can be found in Isaiah 53:11, where the NIV translation is somewhat altered by the addition of the word *light* from the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint. Other translations rely on the Masoretic Text, which does not contain the word *light*.

The current textual evidence from the scrolls and the Masoretic Text, however, points to a single main edition of the book of Isaiah that was circulated in Judaism during the late Second Temple period. The textual variants (described above) in the text appear to be classifiable as individual variants, meaning that each instance of a variant seems to be



This tattered Dead Sea Scroll manuscript is known as the Messianic Testimony (4Q175) and was discovered in cave 4 during excavations at Qumran in 1952. The first-century BC document written in Hebrew contains an accurately copied listing of Old Testament passages relating to the coming Messiah. These include describing the Messiah as a prophet from Deuteronomy 5:28-29; 18:18-19; as a priest from Deuteronomy 33:8-11; and as a king from Numbers 24:15-17. Joshua 6:26 is also quoted in connection to a coming disaster brought on by wicked persons. It is interesting to note that document appears to recognize the three-fold office of the coming Messiah as prophet, priest, and king. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

isolated. The variants are not ones that reflect a general, systematic tendency to purposefully alter or revise the original meaning of the text.

The Scrolls and Their Contribution

In sum, the Dead Sea Scrolls have made an immense contribution to the Masoretic Text in the field of textual criticism. Upon careful study of these manuscripts we can see they have helped confirm that the Hebrew text that we have today is extremely accurate and has maintained essentially the same voice over time. It should be noted that scholars still hold the Masoretic Text as authoritative over the older manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls. According to Ernst Würthwein, in evaluating the significance of any particular surviving manuscript, the age of the manuscript should neither be the sole nor primary criterion of its worth. The Dead Sea Scrolls attest to the reliability and the faithfulness of the Masoretic tradition of the Old Testament. We can rest assured that the current Old Testament is a faithful copy of the original words penned by the original author, handed down for generations.⁸

The Ketef Hinnom Silver Scrolls

Although the Dead Sea Scrolls have offered us a key ancient witness to the integrity of the Hebrew Scriptures, another of the most important biblical discoveries of all time was unearthed in 1979 by a team of archaeologists led by Gabriel Barkay of Bar-Ilan University and his assistant, Gordon Franz. As excavators were concluding their investigations of pre-exilic (seventh-century BC) tombs in southern Jerusalem overlooking the Valley of Hinnom, they unearthed two tiny objects now known as the “Ketef Hinnom Silver Scrolls” or the “Ketef Hinnom Amulets.” The Silver Scrolls give us an earlier confirmation of a portion of the book of Numbers. They contain the priestly benediction of Numbers 6:24-26 and phrases from other biblical books, including Exodus 20:6 and Deuteronomy 5:10 and 20:6. Although Judith Hadley is credited with the find, several other student-volunteer excavators assisted in locating the fascinating object.

Setting and Background

The Ketef Hinnom tombs were originally hewn from the living rock prior to Israel’s exile into Babylon during the sixth century BC. Most of these family tombs contained stone slabs with carved-out headrests (pillows) for the deceased. Located directly underneath the slab was a repository (pictured here) where the bones of those previously deceased were transferred in order to make room for new burials upon the slabs.

The process of placing the bones of the deceased into the repository led to the development of the familiar biblical



The Ketef Hinnom tombs were a pre-exilic master-planned tomb complex that once contained stone roofs that have been since quarried away. The area inside the open receptacle pictured here is where the two silver scrolls were discovered.

phrase of being “gathered together with/to your fathers.” Ancient pre-exilic tombs such as these are rarely found intact, and are usually targeted for the quarrying of stone (as these tombs were) for ancient building projects.

The silver scrolls were found in the repository of chamber 25 of tomb 24, which fortunately had a collapsed roof that sheltered the contents from intruders and preserved the precious artifacts for nearly 2,600 years. Nearing the last day of the excavation, Barkay and his associates unearthed a cache of finds including oil lamps, fine pottery, storage jars, jewelry, ornaments, and more importantly, the incised biblical silver scrolls. When the two scrolls were originally discovered, they were tightly rolled and in the latter stages of disintegration. For the next three years specialists in Germany and England were offered the opportunity to unroll the tiny amulets, but because of their fragility, there were very few who would risk destroying the brittle objects. Ultimately, the Israel Museum carefully unrolled the brittle scrolls with the aid of a special liquid solution that helped maintain the integrity of the fragile metallic documents. After the scrolls were finally unrolled, the first scroll measured 1.0 inches wide and 3.75 inches long. Epigraphers deciphered the inscriptions on the scroll as containing paleo-Hebrew script (rounded Hebrew characters written prior to the Babylonian captivity) and phrases reflected in several passages of the Old Testament.

The 18 lines preserved on the first scroll read as follows:

YHW...the grea...the covenant and...
 raciousness towards those who love...and
 those who keep...the eternal?...blessing more
 than any...re and more than Evil. For redemp-
 tion is in him. For YHWH is our restorer...
 rock. May YHWH bles...you and...keep
 you...YHWH make...shine....⁹

The second scroll contains 12 lines of paleo-Hebrew script and measures 0.5 inches wide by 1.5 inches long. It reads,

May be blessed...by YHW...the warrior (or
 helper) and the rebuker of...vil: May bless you, YHWH, keep you.
 Make shine, YH-H, His face...you and g-rant you p-ce....¹⁰



The Hebrew-inscribed silver scrolls are the oldest copy of biblical passages in the world, dating 400 years prior to the Dead Sea Scrolls. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

Today, the scrolls can be seen on display at the Israel Museum; the tombs, located behind the Menachem Begin Heritage Center (directly below the Scottish Presbyterian Church) in Jerusalem, can also be seen.

The Biblical Significance of the Silver Scrolls

Since the scrolls (dated to the early sixth century BC) predate the famous Dead Sea Scrolls (dated to the 200s BC) by about 400 years, they are currently the oldest copies of biblical passages in the world.* From these scrolls emerge several important details concerning biblical transmission and history.

First, if Numbers and Deuteronomy had already been written by this time, the incisions offer early confirmation of the accuracy and great care of the scribal transmission process when copying the Hebrew Scriptures. Previous to this discovery, the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumran had confirmed that 95 percent of the scrolls were virtually word-for-word identical to the later Masoretic Text, which was used to construct our English Old Testament. The 5 percent consisted of minor errors of spelling or the like that did not affect the meaning or doctrine of the text. Likewise, the passages written on the silver scrolls are substantially the same as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text. This provides an unbroken chain of early textual transmission stemming from c. 600 BC to AD 1000.

In addition, some minimalist scholars had argued that the Hebrew Scriptures were written late in the Hellenistic age (fourth to third century BC). However, this position has become harder to sustain in light of the Silver Scrolls, not to mention the previously discovered Dead Sea Scrolls. Though the Silver Scrolls themselves do not conclusively prove the book of Numbers and Deuteronomy had been written prior to 600 BC, they certainly are consistent with arguments supporting the much earlier dates of authorship for both books. Moreover, since the tiny scrolls were used as amulets for protection from evil, it was recognized that the words inscribed held authority and power.† This is consistent with the assertion that those who wore the amulets understood the passages as being the very words of God.

Second, the Silver Scrolls contain the oldest extant biblical passages using the Lord's name (YHWH), demonstrating that YHWH was not a later development as some critical scholars previously believed. Third, the scrolls also reveal that the priestly benediction was in early use, showing that the Hebrew priestly order and ritual was most likely developed not after the Babylonian captivity in the late sixth and fifth century BC, but as a much earlier phenomenon—which is consistent with scriptural descriptions of a thriving priestly order dating to the time of Moses.

* In 2004, the Western Semitic Project at the University of Southern California, led by Dr. Bruce Zuckerman, confirmed an early sixth-century BC date through computer-enhanced analysis. See Gabriel Barkay, Marilyn J. Lundberg, Andrew G. Vaughn, Bruce Zuckerman, "The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation," *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research* 334 (May 2004), 41-70.

† It is interesting to note that the Ekron inscription discovered in 1996 contains a similar phraseology as the Silver Scrolls, which read, "May Yahweh bless you and keep you." The Ekron inscription calls upon a goddess to bless King Achish: "May she bless him and keep him." The similar phrases may be indicative of the special power believed to be inherent in the priestly benediction of Numbers 6:24-26 and the reason for its use as an amulet to ward off evil.