

Today - 2,000 Years Later

About two thousand years elapsed between the time the scrolls were deposited in the caves of the barren hills surrounding the Dead Sea and their discovery in 1947. The fact that they survived for twenty centuries, that they were found accidentally by Bedouin shepherds, that they are the largest and oldest body of manuscripts relating to the Bible and to the time of Jesus of Nazareth make them a truly remarkable archaeological find.

Since their discovery, the Dead Sea Scrolls have been the subject of great scholarly and public interest. For scholars they represent an invaluable source for exploring the nature of post-biblical times and probing the sources of two of the world's great religions. For the public, they are artifacts of great significance, mystery, and drama.

Interest in the scrolls has, if anything, intensified in recent years. Media coverage has given prominence to scholarly debates over the meaning of the scrolls, the Qumran ruin, as well as particular scroll fragments, raising questions destined to increase attention and heighten the Dead Sea Scrolls mystery. Did the scrolls come from the library of the Second Temple or other libraries and were they hidden to prevent their destruction by the Romans? Was the Qumran site a winter villa for a wealthy Jerusalem family or was it a Roman fortress? Was it a monastery not for Essenes but for a Sadducean sect? Does this mean we need to revise our view of Jewish religious beliefs during the last centuries of the Second Temple? Do the Dead Sea Scrolls provide clues to hidden treasures? Does the "War Rule Scroll" (object no. 12) refer to a pierced or piercing messiah?

Since the late 1980s, no controversy has been more heated than that surrounding access to the scrolls and the movement to accelerate their publication. The push by scholars to gain what the "Biblical Archaeology Review" characterized as "intellectual freedom and the right to scholarly access" has had significant results. In 1988, the administration for scroll research, the Israel Antiquities Authority, began to expand the number of scroll assignments. By 1992, they included more than fifty scholars. In 1991, a computer-generated version as well as a two-volume edition of the scroll photographs were published by the Biblical Archaeology Society. Late in the same year, the Huntington Library of California made available to all scholars the photographic security copies of the scrolls on deposit in its vault. Closing the circle, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced that it too would be issuing an authorized microfiche edition, complete with detailed indices.

Judaism and Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls include a range of contemporary documents that serve as a window on a turbulent and critical period in the history of Judaism. In addition to the three groups identified by Josephus (Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes), Judaism was further divided into numerous religious sects and political parties. With the destruction of the Temple and the commonwealth in 70 C.E., all that came to an end. Only the Judaism of the Pharisees--Rabbinic Judaism--survived. Reflected in Qumran literature is a Judaism in

transition: moving from the religion of Israel as described in the Bible to the Judaism of the rabbis as expounded in the Mishnah (a third-century compilation of Jewish laws and customs which forms the basis of modern Jewish practice).

The Dead Sea Scrolls, which date back to the events described in the New Testament, have added to our understanding of the Jewish background of Christianity. Scholars have pointed to similarities between beliefs and practices outlined in the Qumran literature and those of early Christians. These parallels include comparable rituals of baptism, communal meals, and property. Most interesting is the parallel organizational structures: the sectarians divided themselves into twelve tribes led by twelve chiefs, similar to the structure of the early Church, with twelve apostles who, according to Jesus, would sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Many scholars believe that both the literature of Qumran and the early Christian teachings stem from a common stream within Judaism and do not reflect a direct link between the Qumran community and the early Christians.

[Library of Congress Materials Relating to the Dead Sea Scrolls Today](#)

- Final thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls can be found in the [Conclusion](#).
- [Outline](#)