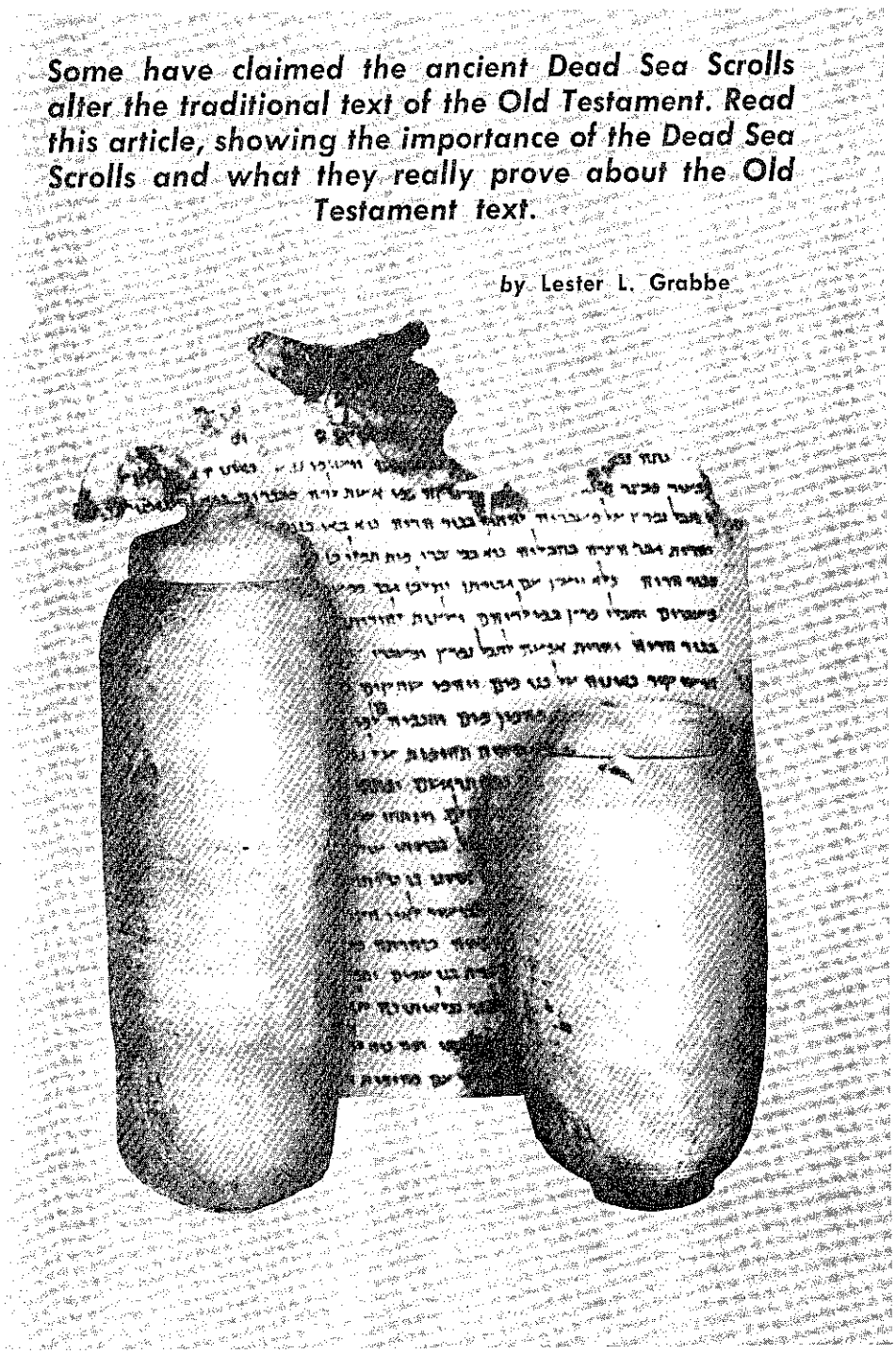
Significance of The

DEAD SEA SCROLLS

Some have claimed the ancient Dead Sea Scrolls alter the traditional text of the Old Testament. Read this article, showing the importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls and what they really prove about the Old Testament text.

by Lester L. Grabbe



IT ALL BEGAN in the spring of 1947.

Muhammed adh-Dhib, a fifteen-year-old Bedouin boy, stumbled onto the first scrolls on the northwest shores of the Dead Sea. According to one story, he threw a stone at a runaway goat. The stone landed in a cave, and the boy heard the tinkle of breaking pottery. This led him to the manuscripts.

When scholars examined the manuscripts they were astonished.

Wrong Assumption Made

But what caused Biblical archaeologists to leap for joy when news of the Dead Sea Scrolls spread? The reason was clear. Valuable new information was now available in the field of Jewish studies. More important, here was background material for the study of the Old Testament Biblical text itself.

Previous to the Dead Sea Scrolls discovery, the earliest dated Hebrew text of what is commonly called the Old Testament came from the early 10th century of the present era. Now scholars possessed manuscript material about 1000 years older — even though some of the books of the Hebrew Bible were represented only by fragments.

The Revised Standard Version, published in 1951, made use of some of the earlier finds in the Dead Sea Scrolls. A number of textual "emendations" were put into the RSV on the basis of the variant readings in some of the Scrolls.

Leading textual critics had for years proclaimed the late origin of the traditional Hebrew text — also referred to as the *Masoretic* — sometimes spelled Massoretic. (Most older English translations, including the King James "Old Testament," are based on the Masoretic.) These critics had concluded that this "received text" needed to be corrected — that many inaccuracies had crept in over the centuries. Some had begun to rely for their emendations on

the Greek Septuagint, the Samaritan, and other variant texts.

"Now, with the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls," they asserted, "we are one thousand years closer to the original rendition." They were sure the Dead Sea Scrolls would show up many "inaccuracies" in any version which relied on the Masoretic.

Now that more than two decades of study has cleared the air, what is the outcome? Should the *traditional Masoretic text* be thrown out the window and replaced by "more accurate" readings? On this crucial point the real significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls becomes evident.

Second Thoughts on Early Conclusions

A majority have now come to realize the Scrolls show, not weaknesses, but the *superiority* of the Masoretic text. One example of this recent shift in scholarly opinion can be found in the field of textual criticism. Notice what one scholar on the revision committee which produced the RSV has since written:

"Thirteen readings [in Isaiah] in which the manuscript departs from the traditional text were eventually adopted. In these places a marginal note cites 'One ancient Ms,' meaning the St. Mark's Isaiah scroll. . . . For myself I must confess that in some cases where I probably voted for the emendation I am now convinced that our decision was a mistake, and the *Masoretic reading should have been retained*" (M. Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls,* p. 305, emphasis ours throughout).

Another scholar, F. F. Bruce of the University of Manchester, echoed the conclusions of many that "in general the new discoveries have increased our respect for the Massoretic Hebrew text" (*Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls,* p. 69).

The Dead Sea Scrolls actually confirm the superiority of our present-day Masoretic text:

"The St. Mark's manuscript of Isaiah is the only one of the scrolls that contains a whole book of the Bible. . . . The age of the manuscript, of course, does not establish its importance. An old manuscript is not necessarily a good manuscript. A copy made in the ninth or tenth century A.D. may more accurately reproduce the original text than one made in the first or second century B.C. *As a matter of plain fact the St. Mark's Isaiah manuscript is obviously inferior at a great many points to the best medieval manuscripts*" (M. Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls,* p. 303).

Scholars have had to realize *age* is not necessarily the best criterion for determining the accuracy of a text. The official Masoretic text, preserved by the Masoretes, official copyists, is superior even though the earliest dated manuscript of any part of it we possess was copied about *one thousand years later than* the Qumran (Dead Sea) scrolls.

Shocking Similarities

While realizing the differences between the Scrolls and the Masoretic text, more striking are the *similarities.* Notice what one scholar stated:

"Lest one exaggerate the differences between the great Isaiah Scroll and the traditional text, it must be pointed out that more often than not, except for the free use of vowel letters, even this document *supports* Masoretic readings. Its disagreements, moreover, are *so often inferior* that indirectly they attest the *superior character of the familiar text*" (W. H. Brownlee, *The Meaning of the Qumran Scrolls for the Bible,* p. 216).

But the superiority of the Hebrew Masoretic text should not surprise us in the least. One merely needs to understand *the history* of the preservation of this traditional text.

How Official Text Was Preserved

Jewish tradition tells us the Old Testament was put in its final form by Ezra and the "Great Synagogue" (a body which provided the religious leadership of the community). Jewish scholars were entrusted with preserving the text faithfully.

The "scribes," mentioned often in the Gospels, were the group with the responsibility of preserving the official canonized text. They viewed this responsibility with reverence, regarding it as a sacred duty.

In order to insure textual purity, various devices of counting were used to cross-check the accuracy of each newly written manuscript. Careful records were kept of the number of words and even *letters* in each book. The scribes kept copious notes on which was the middle word and middle letter of each book, how many times a letter was used in each book and in the whole Old Testament, and other statistics which minimized the possibility of mistakes creeping in.

The system was so elaborate and carefully adhered to that the original Hebrew name for the scribes was *Sopherim* which means "counters." Any mistakes in copying were carefully corrected.

As manuscripts became old and worn through use, they were culled from the library. That is why we have no official copies before the 10th century — those responsible discharged their office very well by removing all old, worn-out manuscripts! When a suit of clothes wears out, you throw it away and buy a new one. The same was true for old manuscripts. They were destroyed. The *same words,* however, were carefully copied and preserved.

And this is why the New Testament says of the Biblical text: "Till heaven and earth pass, *one jot* or *one tittle* shall in no wise pass from the law" (Matthew 5:18). *The Twentieth Century New Testament* renders the middle phrase more understandably as "not even the smallest letter, nor the stroke of a letter"!

Solid Evidence for Bible Faith

In certain instances differences between the Qumran (Dead Sea) scrolls and the Masoretic text are extensive. But the reasons for the differences now become obvious — the Qumran community was *not* the official preserver of the text of the Hebrew Bible. It did not exercise the same diligent care as the Sopherim and later Masoretes.

The unofficial scrolls abound in mistakes of carelessness and scribal ignorance. Spelling variations or errors are quite common. Once an error was made, it tended to be perpetuated — in contrast to the official text which was elaborately cross-checked for error. Because of the "separatist" policy of the Qumran group, it did not have regular refer-

ence to the official Old Testament text. The many deviations are exactly what one would have expected.

Professor Bruce puts into words the consensus of scholars dealing with the Qumran material:

"The new evidence confirms what we had already good reason to believe — that the Jewish scribes of the early Christian centuries copied and recopied the text of the Hebrew Bible with the *utmost fidelity*. . . . Isaiah A [the scroll containing almost the complete book of Isaiah] bears all the marks of a popular, *unofficial* copy of the sacred text. It was probably the work of AMATEUR SCRIBES, or at least of scribes who did not belong to the higher grades of their profession" (pp. 61-63).

Masoretic Meticulously Maintained

The Masoretic text of today is far superior to the unofficial scrolls of the Essene community living in the desolate wilderness.

"Most of the deviations in Isaiah A which do make a difference to the meaning of the text — additions, omissions, and alterations of words and groups of words — simply show, when subjected to critical scrutiny, that the text of this manuscript, ancient as it is, *is not so accurate as the traditional text* which was received and handed on by Massoretes" (Bruce, p. 64).

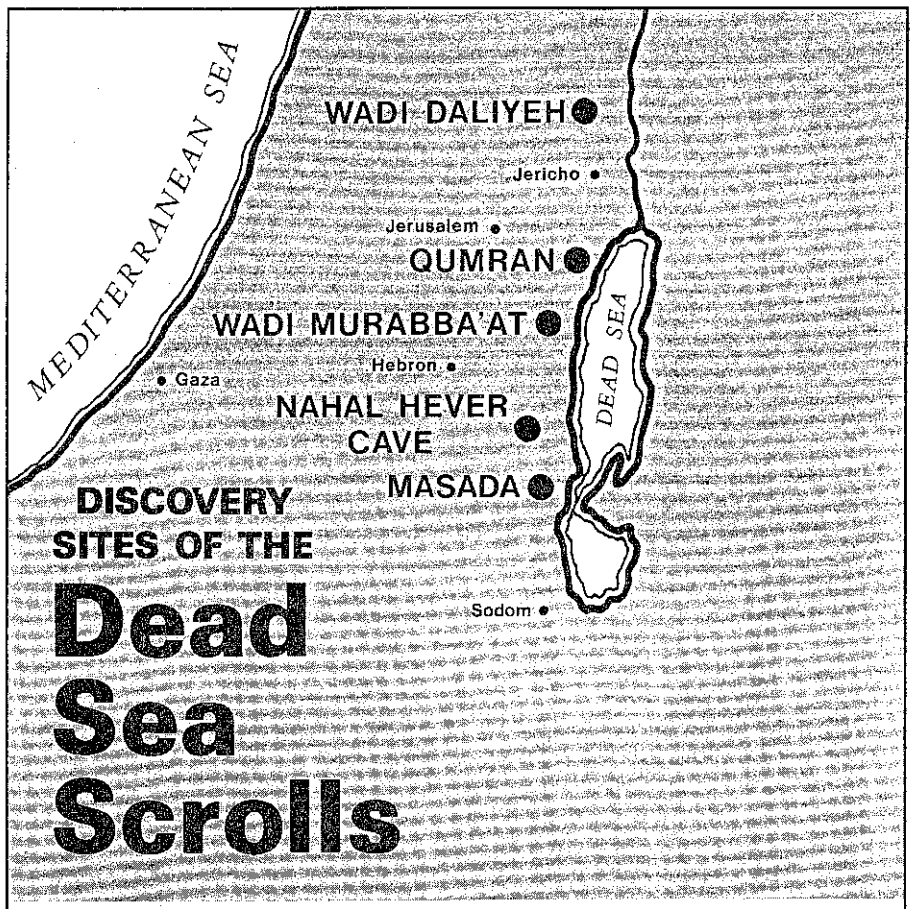
The Dead Sea Scrolls do not consistently agree even among themselves! Yet, the more carefully copied material tends to be *more like* the *traditional* Masoretic text.

"As for Isaiah B [a partial text of Isaiah], the differences between its text and that of the Massoretes are fewer and less significant . . . [the scribe] produced a *much neater* and *more accurate piece* of work than Isaiah A, which is rather slovenly by comparison" (p. 64).

Yet some few critics would still use such slipshod, careless pieces of work in an attempt to "correct" the officially preserved text!

Other Finds Confirm Textual Accuracy

But other Biblical scroll finds from Murabba'at in the Judean wilderness, especially those from the "Bar Kokhba"



THE DEAD SEA SCROLL finds in 1947 were the first such discoveries to be made in the area. Since that time, many important documents have been unearthed. For example, the "Temple Scroll," the largest scroll found to date, did not come into Israeli hands until 1967.

The consensus of scholarly research puts the dates of the scrolls at the time preceding the destruction of the Qumran religious community (which preserved the scrolls) in about 68.

All the finds have centered around five major areas:

Khirbet Qumran. This is the area on the northwestern shores of the Dead Sea where the original Dead Sea manuscripts were found. Its name comes from the ruins of the ancient Essene Qumran community which copied the material found in the area.

This was a "monastic" group whose religious beliefs caused it to *withdraw* from the mainstream of Jewish civilization. Members of the ascetic Qumran community even refused to worship at the Temple.

They were completely outside the official body of Jewish scholarship. So, in addition to fragments of every book of the Bible but Esther, archaeologists have found remains of mystical Essene literature, and Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings. (These latter are made up of historical and theological writings which vary greatly in scholarly value.)

Wadi Murabba'at and the Caves of Nahal Hever and Nahal Se'elim. Both these finds are in the desolate Judean Wilderness west of the Dead Sea. Besides fragments of the Bible, finds in these areas include evidence from the Jewish revolt of 132-135. This includes letters from "Bar Kokhba" (Simon ben Kosiba), the leader of the revolt himself.

Wadi Daliyeh. In this area north of Jericho were found documents left by refugees from Alexander the Great. This material, written during the time 375-334 before this era, is the earliest extensive collection of papyri yet found in the Palestine area.

Masada. The excavation of this ancient Jewish fortress by the famous soldier-archaeologist Yigael Yadin turned up, among other things, material from both the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha.

era (132-135) and from Masada (ancient Jewish fortress which fell in 73), *confirm* the accuracy of the present text to an *even greater degree.* Bruce points out that "the Biblical Hebrew texts at Murabba'at conform *exactly* to the consonantal text preserved by the later Massoretes" (p. 57).

Biblical fragments from Masada "contain a text which, like those of Murabba'at, bear the stamp of the traditional recension, and push back the date of this *stabilized Hebrew text* to a time *no later than the first Jewish revolt*" ("Dead Sea Scrolls," *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 1970 edition).

The finds lend confirmation to what other evidence had *told us all along.* Ancient and medieval historians have maintained down through the ages that our Hebrew Bible has been accurately handed down from the edition made by Ezra.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, a priest of the scholarly ranks, tells how carefully the Holy Scriptures were preserved. After pointing out how the Hebrew Bible was finally completed in the days of King Artaxerxes of Persia, he states:

"It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time; and how firmly we have given credit to those books of our own nation, is evident by what we do, for during so many ages as have already passed, *no one* has been so bold as *either to add* any thing to them, *to take any thing* from them, *or to make any change* in them" (*Contra Apion, I,* 8).

No wonder the official Jewish community preserved it so faithfully. They venerated the text as divine — and would have considered any alteration a sin in the extreme!

Sectarians and heretics treated the text quite differently.

Qumran Texts Corrupted

The Essene group at Qumran accepted and preserved more than one form of the Bible text. In discussing these variants, one scholar points out "there is one thing which is quite certain: *these pages did not have the approval of the Palestinian rabbinic authorities*" (H. E. Del Medico, *The Riddle of the Scrolls,* translated by H. Garner, p. 194).

Another authority tells us: "Moshe Greenberg reminds us that the sect which left us this treasure of manuscripts had rejected the authority of the Jerusalem priesthood and withdrawn from the mainstream of Jewish history. Forms of the text which it was willing to use and copy may have been already rejected by the more orthodox leaders of Judaism" (Burrows, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls,* p. 161).

This is how the Jewish authorities viewed the situation. Since these inaccurate Qumran texts were refused approval by the official authorities to whom had been committed the preservation of the text, they therefore would not have the approval of Israel's God! (Romans 3:1-2.)

We do not have to go to the Qumran scrolls to try to find the Word of Israel's God. That Word has been carefully preserved over the centuries, in the officially approved version. And the great importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls is this: they *confirm* the authority and correctness of the traditional text.

The Positive Contribution

Another valuable contribution made by all the manuscripts is in the matter of language. The scarcity of ancient Hebrew manuscripts makes each additional one, even though fragmentary, potentially of great value. The notable contribution toward Semitic philology, palaeography, and epigraphy of the manuscripts is beyond dispute.

The Scrolls contribute to the total sum of this knowledge, including geographical, historical, and biographical details of the times.

A significant point, which some of the more conservative theologians tend to minimize, is the additional light some of these variant texts throw on Bible understanding itself. Even when realizing the faithful conservation of the Masoretic text, there are some passages which are still not clear.

Some Bible translations will insert footnotes with the statement, "Hebrew obscure" or "passage obscure." The text is not at fault, but the knowledge of how to translate this particular Hebrew idiom is lacking! It is inevitable that the present-day knowledge of ancient Hebrew would be imperfect.

But sometimes in such cases, a variant text, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Septuagint, will give a *paraphrase* which elucidates the real meaning of the obscure passage. These unofficial paraphrases give us the possible meaning of the official text in some few cases where our knowledge is otherwise deficient.

M. H. Goshen-Gottstein of the Hebrew University explains this important point quite clearly: "The Scrolls help us thus to solve a number of *cruces* [difficult problems] in the Masoretic text and to gain a deeper insight into it. But we must remember that they *only present to us in a clearer light certain facts which are found also in the MT* [Masoretic Text]" (*Text and Language in Bible and Qumran,* p. 87).

Above all, these finds confirm the authenticity of the Bible. Writing specifically of the Qumran Isaiah Scrolls, Yigael Yadin, famed soldier-archaeologist, gave this summary:

"There is no question that the *overwhelming significance* of the texts lies in the fact that these scrolls, which are about a thousand years OLDER than any Hebrew text hitherto discovered, vary only slightly from the text as it is known to us and used today. *It thus proves the antiquity and authenticity of the Masoretic text*" (*The Message of the Scrolls,* p. 89).

Of this there is no question!

The Masoretic text has been very accurately preserved. But you may say, "That's *interesting,* but of what real IMPORTANCE is it?"

Why has such painstaking care been taken to maintain the text — and WHO was really responsible?

You need to understand the answers — the reasons. They're made plain in our FREE reprint article "Do We Have the Complete Bible?" and our booklet *Proof of the Bible.* Sent upon personal request. □