

FALL 2004

Religion and Spirituality (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality.aspx)

Déjà Vu

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It seems that 1947 was not the first time the Dead Sea Scrolls had been disturbed since the first century. Though a bedouin shepherd is credited with discovering them in 1947, there appears to have been knowledge of a cache of scrolls in the area near Jericho among the rabbis of the early third century.

This knowledge enabled the third-century Catholic church father Origen to locate a Greek-language manuscript of the Psalms near Jericho in similar circumstances to those of the 20th-century discovery. Scholars have hotly debated whether Origen accessed the scrolls we know today as the Dead Sea Scrolls or another hoard of materials.

Five hundred years after Origen, a Karaite Jew named Daniel al-Qumusi found scrolls in the same area and brought them to Jerusalem. The Karaites were a sect who looked to the Scriptures for instruction in terms of life and action, rather than to the Talmud as rabbinic Judaism did. (The Karaites have often been seen as descendants of the Sadducees, whereas rabbinic Judaism traces itself to the Pharisaic tradition). The rabbis in Jerusalem showed no interest in al-Qumusi's scrolls. As a result, knowledge of their origin and content disappeared from Jerusalem with the Karaite community. Some scholars have suggested that al-Qumusi's discovery was the means by which a uniquely sectarian document, now known as the "Damascus Document," was found at Qumran as well as in the Cairo Genizah of a Karaite synagogue in the late 19th century.

