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Revisiting the Dead Sea Scrolls

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Ancient writings found in the Judean desert have been at the center of conflict for more than 50 years. What have we learned from these much-debated texts?

As the United Nations deliberated on the formation of a Jewish state in May 1947, a young bedouin shepherd made a remarkable discovery. Muhammad ed-Dhib stumbled upon a collection of earthenware jars while searching for a lost goat in caves above Khirbet Qumran near the Dead Sea. Inside the jars he found a collection of ancient leather scrolls known to us today as the [Dead Sea Scrolls](#) ([/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D6816](#)).

The scrolls are generally thought to have been hidden away for safety in the arid wilderness of Judea in the late 60s C.E., as Roman legions converged on Jerusalem to eliminate the Jewish polity. It is ironic, therefore, that their recovery coincided with the birth of the new Jewish state (See [Déjà Vu](#) ([/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-deja-vu-dead-sea-scrolls/1014.aspx](#))).

A further irony is that while the identity of who hid the scrolls is lost to history, so almost were the scrolls themselves. The nomadic Muslim shepherds quickly put the pottery containers and their contents to use. It is said that they tried burning some of the ancient leather scrolls in their campfires to generate a little extra heat on a cold night. The scrolls might all have gone up in smoke except for the acrid smell they gave off as they burned.

Muhammad and his family took some of the remaining scrolls to a cobbler in Bethlehem, perhaps hoping they would produce better sandals than campfire fuel. The cobbler, known to history as Kando, considered himself a dealer in antiquities. Recognizing the potential value of the scrolls, he paid the bedouin family a few coins for the find.

He then arranged for the bedouins to take four scrolls to Mar Samuel, the metropolitan of the Syrian Orthodox church in Jerusalem to which Kando belonged, to find out their value and detail. The metropolitan's staff initially turned the visitors away as beggars, but the bedouins eventually managed to establish the purpose of their visit. Mar Samuel paid £24 for the four scrolls (about US\$97 at that time), which Kando had previously agreed to share with the bedouins.

THE SCROLLS CHANGE HANDS

At this point no one even knew in what language the scrolls were written, so in the hope of determining their value, the metropolitan contacted a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Eliezer Sukenik.

The professor had by this time become aware that Kando the cobbler owned some similar scrolls, though he didn't realize that they had come from the same place. Sukenik wanted to buy them from him, but the situation was delicate to say the least. The turmoil engulfing the area was at its height. Still, on November 29, 1947, the very day on which the United Nations voted to establish the State of Israel, Sukenik risked his life to go to Arab-controlled Bethlehem to purchase Kando's three remaining scrolls.

Mar Samuel subsequently lent the four scrolls in his possession to the Hebrew University professor for examination. So at one point, Sukenik and the university had all the scrolls in one place, still unaware that they had come from the same cave in Qumran. But when asked, Mar Samuel refused to sell his scrolls to Sukenik, and the professor reluctantly returned them.

After further examination of the three scrolls he had bought from Kando, Sukenik deduced that they had been the property of an Essene community known from historical sources to have been located in the area. (Subsequent archaeology has confirmed that Khirbet Qumran was indeed the likely site of Essene activity.)

Up to that time, Palestine had been governed under a 1919 League of Nations mandate granted to Britain after the First World War. But within two years of the shepherd's discovery at Qumran, Palestine was partitioned as spelled out in the 1947 UN resolution and in the cease-fire of the ensuing 1948–49 war. As a result, the Judean Wilderness fell under the control of Jordan and remained so until 1967. Continued tensions between Arabs and Israelis greatly complicated efforts to shed light on the curious scrolls.

At about the time of the partition, Mar Samuel secretly took his collection to the United States to be stored in a bank vault. In 1954 he advertised them for sale in the *Wall Street Journal*—an illegal act according to the Jordanians, because the scrolls had been found in territory that now belonged to Jordan. Notwithstanding, a leading Israeli archaeologist, Yigal Yadin, responded through intermediaries and purchased the scrolls for the State of Israel for \$250,000. Neither Mar Samuel nor the bedouins profited much from the sale, however. The tax man confiscated the majority of the proceeds.

For Yadin, the purchase of the scrolls was a personal triumph. His father was none other than Eliezer Sukenik, who had first identified the scrolls and established their date and provenance. Sadly, Sukenik had died the year before and therefore never saw the seven scrolls reunited. They are now displayed in West Jerusalem's Shrine of the Book, a purpose-built museum that draws its shape from the earthenware jars in which the scrolls were found.

QUEST FOR MORE

When the discovery of the scrolls was made public and a value placed upon them, it produced a race to find more. Competing with the bedouins, who still saw the scrolls as a potential source of income, was an archaeological team under the guidance of Roland de Vaux of the École Biblique in Jordanian-controlled East Jerusalem.

Scrolls were eventually found in 11 caves in the Qumran area. The Rockefeller Museum, also in East Jerusalem, became the repository for all of the subsequent material recovered from the caves. In all, more than 800 scrolls were found, though only 16 were intact or largely

intact. The rest were represented by more than 15,000 fragments of varying sizes. For the vast majority of the scrolls, the ravages of two thousand years had taken their toll. Not even the favorable desert climate had preserved them.

Academics over the years have grouped other scrolls and written materials together with the Dead Sea Scrolls, primarily because of proximity in time and/or place. These materials include texts from the first-century Jewish wilderness stronghold of Masada and the second-century Bar Kochba revolt, materials from the Samaritan site at Wadi ed-Daliyeh, and documents from the Cairo Genizah, a ninth-century synagogue storeroom for worn-out copies of the Torah and other manuscripts.

MULTIPLE MISPERCEPTIONS

For the first 20 years of their public life in the 20th century, the Dead Sea Scrolls remained in the possession of two neighboring academic institutions with an impenetrable wall separating them. The political impasse between Arabs and Israelis meant that the bulk of the translation work (other than on the initial seven scrolls) had to be entrusted to Christian rather than Jewish academics. This led to a perception that the scrolls related to Christianity rather than to Judaism. The basis for that perception ended in 1967 with the Six Day War and Israel's capture of East Jerusalem. At last the École Biblique and the Hebrew University could pool their efforts.

Even after the major scrolls had been translated and made available to the public, they remained the subject of acrimonious disputes. In the 1980s the Vatican found itself accused of religious intrigue. Charges that it was delaying publication of the scrolls' translations ultimately proved unfounded, however. More than anything, the conspiracy charges simply highlighted the lethargy that had come to surround the project. The accusation centered specifically on material found in Cave Four, which had not as yet been officially published in toto, though much of the material had appeared piecemeal in academic journals. The difficulty was the sheer number of scroll fragments. No intact scroll had been found in the cave. Putting the jigsaw puzzle together by connecting scraps of parchment or papyrus was very time consuming. And assembling the fragmented translations was almost as much a challenge as working with the ancient scraps themselves. But eventually an official, complete translation did become a reality.

Expectations of what would be discovered within the scrolls had run high. But the ancient writings did not provide the insights that so many had hoped for. They have been of interest principally to the academic world rather than to Judaism or Christianity.

Some scholars, for example, put considerable effort into trying to identify early Christian figures within the text of the scrolls. Both John the Baptist and [James the Righteous—the brother of Jesus \(/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-apostles-of-jesus-james-brother-of-jesus/6812.aspx\)](#)—have been proposed as the “teacher of righteousness” referred to in the scrolls. But such claims have never been substantiated.

In a similar vein, José O’Callaghan, a Spanish priest, claimed that certain Greek-language fragments were from the book of Acts and the Gospel of Mark. However, he had to manipulate the fragmentary text so much in order to make his case that his ideas have few supporters today.

As for the leaders of Judaism, they at first saw the scrolls simply as a remnant of another form of their religion that had failed to survive the Roman era. The texts added little to the understanding of modern-day Pharisaic or rabbinic Judaism. On the other hand, the scrolls did take away from Judaism in one way. Their discovery established without doubt the pluralism that existed within the Jewish religion in the centuries prior to the 70 C.E. fall of Jerusalem. This fact alone has transformed understanding of the religious and social environment of the first century, and especially of early Christianity: it has come to be seen as yet another form of Judaism—an understanding that both highlights and begs a question as to the distance between the two religions today.

GLEANNING FROM THE PAST

The benefits arising from the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls are numerous. Among the scrolls were biblical texts and related commentaries, as well as sectarian documents expressing the theological outlook of a distinct group among the Jews—likely the Essenes. Other texts were pseudepigraphical; that is, quasi-biblical writings such as Jubilees and Enoch, which had a wide audience among the people of that time. The material also included correspondence and legal documents relating, for example, to marriage agreements.

Because they comprised material in various languages, the scrolls added immeasurably to the understanding of the languages of the time, whether Aramaic, Greek or Hebrew. (The Essenes appear to have elevated the latter to a religious language.) The recovery of the Hebrew documents greatly increased modern knowledge of that language, as it had previously been understood primarily from the biblical texts alone.

The discovery of so many scrolls and fragments relating to the Scriptures has also highlighted how the people of that day understood the sacred writings. Only one Old Testament book, the book of Esther, has not been found at Qumran. Among the sectarian scrolls, quotes from certain scriptural books (e.g., Deuteronomy, Isaiah and Psalms) were dominant. The prophecies of Daniel were also given special status. Significantly, the Gospels and Apostolic Writings rely heavily on those same books, quoting them often.

The sectarian parts of the Dead Sea Scrolls have testified to the intensity of religious feelings that existed in earlier Jewish times. Thus the scrolls have added a new dimension to our growing understanding of the society into which the [early Church \(/visionmedia/series-index-the-apostles-of-jesus-4043\)](/visionmedia/series-index-the-apostles-of-jesus-4043) was born. They have shown the religious community of that period to be highly polarized on many subjects, including the temple and even the calendar. Religious behavior was apparently a divisive force in society.

Despite failing to disclose sensational new material as many had hoped, the Dead Sea Scrolls have informed many areas of biblical studies over the past half century, and in fact continue to do so.