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The Legacy of the Scrolls

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Sixty years after their discovery, the Dead Sea Scrolls still spark controversy and debate. What, if anything, have they established so far, and how will they be remembered?

Proclaimed as the greatest discovery of the century, the [Dead Sea Scrolls](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D6820) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D6820>) (DSS) quickly became the preserve of a limited academic circle. That meant that any hope they would increase our collective understanding of the Bible became rather remote. In July 2008, leading DSS scholars gathered at an international conference to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the scrolls' discovery. The event, titled *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Contemporary Culture*, took place at the Israel Museum's Shrine of the Book, designed and built specifically to house seven of the celebrated scrolls, and now home to all of them that are in Israel's possession. The declared focus of the conference was "to reflect on the progress made in the last ten years and to articulate our hopes for the future of Qumran studies."

With respect to the scrolls, the program notes raised the question, "How can we dispel myths and inaccuracies?" Answering that question may have been an impossible goal, however, as myths and inaccuracies will always abound with a trove of documents as old as these. But the conference did reveal something of even greater importance: the diversity of

opinions that surround the body of related evidence from the pre-Christian settlement at Khirbet Qumran, near the caves where the scrolls were discovered. The ongoing debate strikes at the foundation of some dearly held views regarding the scrolls' significance.

QUMRAN CONNECTION

To lend context to the current discussion, let's take a brief historical tour of DSS scholarship.

Eleazar Sukenik and Roland de Vaux were two of the earliest scholars to work with the first scrolls discovered in 1947. Sukenik almost immediately linked them to the settlement at Qumran, above the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, and specifically to a Jewish sect known as Essenes. In 1951 de Vaux excavated the area and discovered pottery in the ruins of Qumran that was identical to pottery found in nearby Cave 1 (the scrolls were taken from a series of 11 caves, each of which was numbered by archaeologists in order of discovery). This solidified Sukenik's connection between the caves and their contents and the nearby archaeological ruins of the Qumran settlement. The Qumran-Essene hypothesis established by these two titans of archaeology became, in the words of Edna Ullmann-Margalit of Hebrew University, the "mainstream theory" that would be popularized in books on the subject and accepted in reference works.

While a coterie of specialists began work on translating the scrolls in the 1950s, the rest of the academic world waited for almost 40 years to view them. During these decades, scholars speculated and rumors of conspiracy proliferated. Was important evidence being withheld? Eventually impatience led to a short-circuiting of established procedures by a pair of researchers who took matters into their own hands. With the aid of sophisticated computer software and a concordance of all the words found in the already-published scrolls (as compiled by the DSS scholars), they reconstructed the remaining scroll fragments and released their own volume ahead of the "authorized" version. Though the official team wasn't happy about this circumventing of their work, it did serve to dissipate the conspiracy theories and to confound the critics. No startling evidence had been withheld after all.

The eventual release of the complete transcripts and official translations in a 39-volume series, titled *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert*, led to much scholarly activity relating to the scrolls and their origins. But as thoughtful debate and examination continued, scholars began to take issue with the "mainstream theory," challenging Sukenik's and De Vaux's belief that the scrolls belonged to the Essenes.

One of the first challengers was professor Norman Golb of the University of Chicago. He sought to remove the link between the scrolls and the archaeological evidence at Qumran by asserting that the scrolls had all been brought from Jerusalem for safekeeping prior to the Roman siege that began in 68 C.E.

Since Golb published his hypothesis, many differing ideas have been put forward about Qumran's use and purpose. While many held to the view that it was the home of the Essene sect, others suggested that it was a country estate, a hostelry for traders crossing the Dead Sea, a fortress of the Hasmoneans, or a pottery factory. Still others noted that Qumran may have performed all or some of these functions at various times in its history. Nevertheless, despite beliefs to the contrary, certain features consistently tied the ruins to the Essenes.

One interesting but controversial fact is that the site has apparently yielded more inkwells than any other recorded archaeological site in the area. Some of them clearly had been used and were therefore not necessarily part of the manufactured products of a pottery factory, as some suggested. Although de Vaux's idea of a major scriptorium—a place for copying the scrolls—is largely rejected today, the inkwells are an indication that some scribal activity (a highly professional undertaking) took place at Qumran.

Another feature of the site is the ancient cemetery, which contains predominantly male remains. Though this seems to reinforce claims made by Philo of Alexandria and Pliny the Elder that the Essene community was celibate, German DSS scholar Hartmut Stegemann suggested that this was an unfortunate exaggeration. Stegemann held that conditions in Qumran were simply too harsh for women and that as a result, few men brought their families to the site. He adamantly opposed what he called the "idealistic" view that the Essenes practiced a principled celibacy, nevertheless conceding in 1998 that "the old reports of the Essenes' celibacy on principle continue to shape opinion."

To bolster his own theory, Stegemann pointed to the discovery of a Qumran cemetery containing women's and children's graves. But some scholars now identify those remains as Bedouin. The question of whether the Essene community was indeed celibate therefore continues to be problematic.

Adding to the difficulty of analyzing and interpreting the various archaeological claims, de Vaux died in 1971 without ever publishing his findings. Much of our knowledge about Qumran archaeology is gleaned from his public lectures or from interpretations of the notes he took on site as excavation progressed.

THE SCROLLS DEBATE

If interpretation of the remains of Khirbet Qumran have been subject to debate, the same is true for the scrolls themselves. Now that they have been fully translated and published, another generation of scholars is looking carefully at the evidence, and they too have taken differing approaches to analyzing them.

First, the ideas found in the scrolls have been studied to see whether they convey a unified view of Scripture, religion or theology. If they do not convey a cohesive, systematic view, can they have come from a single group? And if they do not represent the ideas of a single group, did one group collect documents of other groups in the manner in which we would establish a library today, assembling works that cover a variety of approaches to a subject?

One consideration is that no known scrolls can be clearly identified as originating with major Jewish sects such as the Pharisees or the Sadducees. This strengthens the Essene connection, as they were very conservative and derided the views of the priesthood who controlled the temple in Jerusalem. On the other hand, because some of the scrolls were written in the Greek language (which indicates a more Hellenistic approach toward the Scriptures than the Hebrew or Aramaic of the majority), it would be reasonable to posit that the scrolls *are* from more than one group.

A further complicating factor is that attempts to date the scrolls have proven difficult: most of them are leather, and establishing how long the leather existed before being made into scrolls is currently beyond the ability of experts. However, carbon-14 dating of the linen cloths in which many of the scrolls were wrapped has led to a claim that the entire collection could have been in the caves by the time of the Roman general Pompey's entry into Judea in 63 B.C.E. This claim, though not widely accepted, has led to other attempts to date the scrolls. One scholar has used paleography, or the study of the handwriting styles found in the scrolls, to establish their age. On that basis Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra holds that some caves contained older material than other caves, meaning that the scrolls must have been placed in the various caves at substantially different times.

Others have sought to categorize the caves by material or type. For example, because Cave 7 contained only scrolls written in Greek, it would appear that some form of categorization occurred in the placement of the scrolls.

Professor Stephen J. Pfann of the University of the Holy Land in Jerusalem analyzed the caves by usage and contents. He concluded that each cave served one of four purposes: a library, an archive, a repository for scrolls that had to be hidden in some emergency, or a genizah (a place where old, worn scrolls were stored). The latter use is particularly interesting. Jewish communities avoided destroying old sacred texts, instead collecting them in places where they would be left untouched unless and until ceremonially buried elsewhere. Other genizahs from this time include one at Masada and another in Cairo, which was discovered at the end of the 19th century and contains materials dating to the 10th.

Pfann concluded that the specific use of a given cave could be established from the types of scrolls it contained and the way in which those scrolls were placed in the cave. Having determined each cave's use, he then analyzed the texts it contained. He posited that Cave 4, in which were found largely fragmentary remains of scrolls that appear to have been neither wrapped in linen nor placed in pottery jars, served as a genizah. On the other hand, Cave 1—with its treasure trove of almost complete scrolls that were wrapped and placed in jars (such as the famous Isaiah scroll)—could have served as a library.

THE QUESTION OF OWNERSHIP

Pfann's position portrays how far the study of the scrolls has come.

At the outset of DSS research, Sukenik concluded that based on the findings from Cave 1, the scrolls belonged in their entirety to the Essenes, a group of Jews who espoused a different interpretation of the Scriptures than the dominant groups of the day, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. But modern scholars wonder: If Cave 7 or Cave 11 had been discovered first, would Sukenik's conclusions have been the same?

Thirty years and 10 caves later, University of Chicago's Golb rejected Sukenik's idea and concluded that the collection of scrolls represented the remains of the temple library, smuggled out of Jerusalem at the time of the Roman siege in 68–70 C.E.

But time has a way of undercutting absolutist readings of history. Based on current findings, it now appears that the scrolls probably belonged to not one but several groups.

And if, as Pfann and others believe, some of the caves were also used as genizahs, then some of the scrolls may have been in the caves for a long time even before Pompey's Judean incursions in 63 B.C.E. and the siege of Jerusalem a century later.

But what of the idea that some caves were used as an emergency repository? Here Pfann provides perhaps the greatest challenge to the link between the scrolls and the Qumran community. Caves 7, 8 and 9 are closest to Qumran and are accessed through the walled remains of the settlement. Hence scholars most often connect them with the people who last inhabited the settlement, commonly believed to be the Essenes. Yet Cave 7 contained only Greek-language material, a very strange collection for the conservative Essene Jews. Food remains and lamps also discovered in Cave 7 could provide a clue; they suggest that it may have been used as a refuge during the siege. Accordingly, Pfann relates those scrolls to the refugees who escaped Jerusalem at that momentous time. This leads to the conclusion that the contents of Cave 7 likely had no relation to the Essenes or to their settlement a few meters above the cave.

If Cave 7 can be demonstrated to have no connection with the settlement at Qumran, could that also be true of the other caves?

BIBLICAL STUDIES

At the time of their discovery, scholars and theologians heralded the scrolls as keys to increased understanding of the Bible. And despite areas of intense controversy, it must be conceded that some aspects of biblical history have been illuminated. Whereas previous commentators and historians, including Jewish scholars, portrayed Judaism in the first century as monolithic, the Dead Sea Scrolls demanded that its true diversity be appreciated. This had a profound effect on the study of the New Testament and brought Jewish scholars into a field in which previously they'd had no major interest.

Although no scroll appears to directly address individuals named or referred to in the New Testament, they do represent an additional source by which to study the milieu of the characters and events written about. Now both the people and the events of early Church history can be viewed in a different light. Two notable results are the so-called new perspective on Paul and the recasting of John's Gospel as a profoundly Jewish text, whereas previously it had been considered Hellenistic or Greek in its influences. (See "[Before Christianity: A First-Century Perspective \(/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality/church-history-before-christianity-4198\)](#)," a collection of articles and video presentations about the apostles and the early Church.)

After an initial burst of energy in this area, however, progress on the application and relevance of the scrolls to the study of the New Testament subsided to the point that a moderator at the November 2007 Society of Biblical Literature meeting in San Diego lamented the loss of interaction and called for a renewal of interest and study. Perhaps her plea was answered by the recent notoriety surrounding the stone known as “Gabriel’s Revelation” (see *The Dead Sea Stone* (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D6820>)).

Academic benefits from DSS studies are not limited to a better understanding of the New Testament, however. Ideas about the validity of the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament, known to us principally through Origen and the Codex Sinaiticus, have been challenged after the discovery of older Greek translations among the DSS. Documents from Qumran showed that multiple Greek translations of Scripture existed at that time in addition to the one that supposedly became the basis of what is called the Septuagint today. The multiplicity of Hebrew manuscripts has also given rise to questions about the timing and creation of the Hebrew canon of Scripture.

At the end of the day, the goals of the conference to mark the 60th anniversary of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovery may have been laudable, yet it would appear that continued study of the scrolls will lead to the deconstruction of many more theories associated with their times. This in itself may not be a bad thing. Nevertheless, the diversity of views and opinions developed through the study of the DSS provides a dilemma for both Jewish and Christian scholarship, as the evidence shows that modern rabbinic Judaism and Christianity are clearly the products of other centuries and milieus, with little connection to the materials from Qumran.

Orthodox Jewish scholarship focuses on rabbinic issues that arose in centuries subsequent to the DSS. The scrolls do not address rabbinic issues and in fact validate other ideas within Judaism that the rabbis sought to bury. For the Christian community, study of the DSS creates an uncomfortable realization of how far Christianity has wandered from the paths of its founder, as Christian theology bears little resemblance to the Hebraic underpinnings of Jesus Christ’s teachings. And that has a direct influence on what His would-be followers believe and do.