

FALL 2004

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

What the Dead Sea Scrolls Have Shown

Peter Nathan

1. With regard to the canonization of Scripture, the collection we know as the Old Testament is now understood to be the product of Jewish efforts rather than something that the Christian church imposed on Judaism. In creating a canon of the Gospels and the Apostolic Writings, the Church was simply adding to what was already authoritative.

In fact, while it is largely accepted that the scrolls were written before the Christian Era, a movement now exists among scholars to date their concealment to about 100 years before the 70 C.E. destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. Verification of this theory would add further depth to our understanding of the preservation and transmission of the Scriptures.

2. [New Testament](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-new-testament/18198.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-new-testament/18198.aspx>) practices such as baptism, first associated with John the Baptist, likely had antecedents in the Essene community. Their Manual of Discipline describes the use of ritual baths for the purpose of “entering the covenanted life of a community,” an act paralleled in the early Church.

3. The New Testament includes expressions and phraseology that are also common to the sectarian scrolls. The New Testament books are closer in nature to the Dead Sea Scrolls than to the later rabbinic writings, which are several hundred years removed.

4. Several terms used by the apostle Paul have been found only in the New Testament and have posed problems to translators and exegetes of Scripture over many centuries. Now several of the more obtuse terms, which have great impact on understanding Paul's teaching correctly, have been found in the sectarian writings of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

One such phrase, used by Paul in his epistles to both the Galatians and the church at Rome, is translated from the Greek as "the works of the law" (Galatians 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; Romans 3: 20, 28). These words are hugely important in grasping Paul's argument to the Galatians, in part because they have been used to say that Judaism was based on earning salvation through performance of physical works.

In one of the scrolls, an equivalent Hebrew phrase is used to signify what is needed to stay within the community. This has an application to Paul's usage, in that it demonstrates that his admonition to the churches was not about attempting to "earn salvation" through works, as has been commonly assumed and taught.

The conclusion is that Paul's writings can be established within a Judean Hebraic context rather than a Hellenistic one. Paul dealt with issues that concerned the Jews of Jerusalem, Judea and the Diaspora, as well as those gentiles who became part of the community of spiritual Israel. He was not creating a new religion (see *"Is Christianity Off Base?"* (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/interviews/john-garr-apostle-paul/437.aspx>)).

5. The writings of the New Testament have been placed in a more correct cultural context and social setting. Scholars have generated new forms of cultural and sociological studies of the Apostolic Writings as they seek to better comprehend the social milieu in which those books were written.