

## **The Dead Sea Scrolls - Archaeological Treasure**

The Dead Sea Scrolls have been called the greatest archaeological discovery of modern times. They have dramatically enhanced our understanding of the world of the New Testament, the teachings of John the Baptist and our Lord Jesus, and the early church.

They have also confirmed the truth of the Bible. Certainly their discovery was not by chance. The same God who had inspired some of the books contained in the scrolls also preserved them for the future of the people who carry his name.

### **The Discovery**

In 1947, near an old ruin that was later identified as Qumran, Bedouin shepherds rounded up stray goats at the foot of barren cliffs. One shepherd noticed a small cave opening, threw a rock inside, and heard the sound of pottery breaking. After an excited discussion of possible treasure, the shepherds decided to return later, as it was getting late and the goats had to be taken home.

The next day, Mohammed edh Dhib squeezed into the cave, which was littered with broken pottery. Ten jars were still intact, some with their bowl-shaped lids still in place. Two of the jars contained a large scroll and two smaller ones, which the disappointed Mohammed showed to the other shepherds. Little did they know they had just discovered incredible treasures-the book of Isaiah, the Manual of Discipline (describing Qumran community rules), and a commentary on the book of Habakkuk.

### **The World Learns**

Mohammed hung the scrolls from his tent pole for several months, then sold them to an antiquities dealer in Bethlehem named Kando. Kando found the cave and located additional scrolls. After showing them to church officials in Jerusalem, he sold the three original scrolls to a Jerusalem antiquities dealer named Samuel for less than \$100.

As church officials consulted scholars about the ancient Hebrew texts, word of the discovery spread. Professor E. L. Sukenik of the Hebrew University purchased Kando's additional scrolls, recognizing their antiquity and their immense value for understanding the period during which they were written.

Meanwhile, Samuel placed an ad in the Wall Street Journal on June 1, 1954, to sell the original three scrolls. Dr. Sukenik's son, Yigael Yadin, happened to see the ad, and, through a middleman, purchased the original find for \$250,000 and presented them to the State of Israel. Today they are in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

## **More Discoveries**

The Bedouin from Mohammed edh Dhib's tribe soon located more caves near Qumran containing additional scrolls and scroll fragments. Soon an official archaeological investigation was launched, and the caves and nearby ruins were carefully examined.

The archaeologists found evidence convincing them that there was a definite relationship between the nearby ruins and the scrolls found in the caves. Especially convincing was the discovery of pottery within the ruins similar to the jars found in the caves themselves.

Many of the scrolls were small fragments that had to be carefully pieced together. In many cases, only a few fragments exist from an entire scroll. For this reason, the process of deciphering the scrolls has been painstakingly slow. Most scrolls were unavailable to the public until over 40 years after their discovery by the Bedouin shepherds in 1947.

## **The Scrolls**

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain three types of literature: (1) copies of all the Old Testament books except Esther; (2) Jewish writings such as the apocryphal book of Jubilees; and (3) specific writings from the Qumran community such as commentaries interpreting the Old Testament, liturgical writings and hymns, and rules for community conduct. More than 800 separate scrolls are represented, though many only by fragments.

The most common material of the scrolls was parchment, a "paper" made from animal skins. Since parchment is more durable than papyrus (made from the leaves of the papyrus reed), these scrolls are in much better condition than the few surviving papyrus fragments. The extremely dry climate of Israel's wilderness aided in their preservation.

## **Scroll Writings**

The most well known scrolls include: (1) the Isaiah Scroll, which is nearly intact; (2) the Copper Scroll, which describes 64 locations where Temple treasures were hidden (3) the Habakkuk Commentary, which applies prophecies of God's judgment to the Romans and those who resisted Essene beliefs; and (4) the Manual of Discipline, an important description of Essene community rules.

Many books of the Bible were included in multiple scrolls, indicating that these writings were most widely used by the community:

- the Psalms (on 36 scrolls)
- Deuteronomy (on 29 scrolls)
- Isaiah (on 21 scrolls)
- Exodus (on 17 scrolls)
- Leviticus (on 13 scrolls)
- Numbers (on 8 scrolls).

## **Significance**

The Dead Sea Scrolls represent the most spectacular archaeological discovery of modern times, and the impact of these writings on the Jewish and Christian communities continues to be significant.

Until the Dead Sea discoveries, the oldest copies of the Hebrew Bible dated to around A.D. 1000. The scrolls take us back beyond 100 B.C. But amazingly, scholars have found few differences between the old and new texts-most involve spelling changes. Truly, "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16) and God has preserved the integrity of his Word.

The scrolls also give striking insight into the theological and cultural setting of Jesus' life, the early church, and the history of Judaism. While the perspective contained in the writings belongs to one small community, there are remarkable similarities to the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and the early Christians.

Understanding the theological context of Jesus' life and the early church helps us to better understand their teachings. It also affirms God's careful planning to ensure that the theological context of the New Testament was perfect for Jesus' ministry and the spread of the gospel.