



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

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The Dead Sea Scrolls – Robin Hamon *(edited from his notes)*

The Dead Sea Scrolls are fascinating! Furthermore, I think there's a lot of misunderstanding in the church about what the Dead Sea Scrolls are and what they mean for the Bible in terms of its accuracy and reliability.

History and Geography. The Dead Sea Scrolls have been found in a number of places down the west side of the Dead Sea (east of Jerusalem), and over a number of years - they were not all found together and at the same time.

The first cache of scrolls was found in 1947 wrapped in linen cloth, sealed in pots, inside a cave in the limestone cliffs just to the north west of the Dead Sea in a region known as Qumran by a Bedouin shepherd. They were blackened with age.

The scrolls were sold to an antique dealer in Bethlehem who, although unaware of their full importance, asked if more could be found. A period of trading these scrolls began, but by 1955 they were returned to Israel. Further discoveries were made up to 1956 (with some additional fragments found in to the early 1960s), academic study began (initially by just 12 scholars), and in 1965 the 'Shrine of the Book' was built to house and exhibit these artefacts.

What are the Dead Sea Scrolls? All in all, the Dead Sea Scrolls are a collection of some 50,000 artefacts of writings. They make up between 800-900 documents. Some are near complete, such as the Isaiah scroll, which is a copy of the entire book of Isaiah with only small fragments missing, right through to single fragments of scrolls with partial words on.

Approximately one quarter of all the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered are books in the Bible; in fact, fragments of Dead Sea Scrolls correspond with every single book in the Bible, excepting only the books of Esther and Nehemiah.

Approximately another quarter are religious writings not found in the 'standard' Protestant Bible; these intertestamental writings, often referred to as the Apocrypha, include the books of Enoch and Jubilees.

The remainder of these writings include other religious texts and a range of secular writings including lists of rules and laws, advice on warfare, and a catalogue of places where treasure was buried! The Dead Sea Scrolls are not a particular group of texts with a common theme or purpose, but rather the name given to this large body of writings found in the Qumran region around the Dead Sea.

Why are the numbers unclear? There is a degree of interpretation involved with assessing the Dead Sea Scrolls. Something like the near-complete Isaiah scroll is clearly identifiable and no one would dispute this.

But, in many cases, one fragment of a Dead Sea Scroll might contain just one single word. How do you know where it comes from? In a sense, the process of determining this is a little like completing a jigsaw, though not necessarily because fragments will fit together perfectly, but rather that clues from fragments found together can help reveal where they should fit.

Scholars, recognising phrases and sentences in fragments that correspond with existing texts, then make judgements about how other fragments relate to these.

So for example, if you had a fragment that says 'In the beginning God created the Earth and the Heavens' and then you have a fragment with 'night and day', you may then make a guess that this fragment belongs with the phrase and then start to reconstruct the whole chapter based on what you have. Not all scholars will agree on how these fragments are rearranged, hence the approximations.

The scrolls are written in dialects of classical (also known as) biblical Hebrew (different from modern Hebrew), Koine (Common) Greek and Aramaic. That is to say the same languages that make up the Bible that we know.

When were the Dead Sea Scrolls written? A sensible range of dates for these writings seems to be between 300 BCE to 100 CE. That is to say that they seem to be authored during the period after which the Old Testament Writings had reached their near-final form and the time in which most of the New Testament writings were authored.

Who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls? No consensus has been reached, but the scrolls seem to have been written by a sectarian religious community, the Essenes, whose beliefs drew upon the existing Hebrew scriptures as well as scripture from the emerging group of followers of Jesus.

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest Hebrew-language manuscripts of the Bible were Masoretic texts dating to the 10th century CE. The Aleppo Codex is the most well-known of these. The biblical manuscripts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls push that date back over one thousand years, to the second or third century BCE. This was a significant discovery for biblical scholars who anticipated that the Dead Sea Scrolls would either confirm or dispute the reliability of scribal copyists.

Accuracy. The remarkable thing about the biblical content of the Dead Sea Scrolls is that, for the most part, it faithfully matches other historical versions of biblical texts. Even though the Dead Sea Scrolls were written by a community far outside the established scribal community in Jerusalem, scribes copying biblical text, both in Jerusalem and Qumran, did so with incredible degrees of accuracy.

However, there are some minor discrepancies: some manuscripts of the books of Exodus and Samuel found in 'cave four' show differences in content with the biblical versions we know. Eg in Exodus 1:1-6 Jacob had 70 people with him according to the Masoretic text, but this number is 75 according to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Another interesting discrepancy is found in 1 Samuel. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, a paragraph between 1 Samuel 10 and 11 appears introducing a character: *[Na]hash king of the [A]mmonites oppressed the Gadites and the Reubenites viciously. He put out the right [ey]e of a[ll] of them and brought fe[ar and trembling] on [Is]rael. Not one of the Israelites in the region be[yond the Jordan] remained [whose] right eye Naha[sh king of] the Ammonites did n[ot pu]t out, except seven thousand men [who escaped from] the Ammonites and went to [Ja]besh-gilead.* (Note – the items in [] are missing fragments from the text and completed by scholars). It seems that Nahash was edited out of the text at some point, though very modern Bible translations such as the NRSV which take into account Dead Sea Scroll findings, will include these supplements with explanatory comments in the footnotes. On the whole, the differences are rather small.

There are far greater variations in some of the Apocryphal texts: for example, in this body of writings are alternative gospels (eg Thomas) and an alternative Genesis 2-3 story.

Possible questions to ask

- How do the Dead Sea Scrolls affect your understanding of the reliability of the Bible?
- What, if anything, do the content of the Dead Sea Scrolls suggest to you about how the books of the Bible were chosen?
- Might Esther (Persian connection) and Nehemiah (freedom from exile) have been excluded from the Dead Sea Scrolls to downplay foreign links?