

The Dead Sea Scrolls

by Dr. Norman Geisler

Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (hereafter DSS) at Qumran, beginning in 1949, had significant apologetic implications. These ancient texts, hidden in pots in cliff-top caves by a monastic religious community, confirm the reliability of the Old Testament text. They provide significant portions of Old Testament books—even entire books—that were copied and studied by the Essenes. These manuscripts date from as early as the third century B.C. and so give the earliest window so far found into the texts of the Old Testament books and their predictive prophecies. The Qumran texts have become an important witness for the divine origin of the Bible. They provide further evidence against the negative biblical criticism of such crucial books as Daniel and Isaiah.

The DSS manuscripts date from the third century B.C. to the first century A.D. They include one complete Old Testament book, Isaiah, and thousands of fragments, which together represent every Old Testament book except Esther. William R. Albright called this “the greatest manuscript discovery of modern times.”¹

Dating the Dead Sea Scrolls

Important, though not crucial, to the apologetic value of the DSS are their dates. Dating used several lines of evidence.

Carbon 14 Dating

Carbon 14 dating is a reliable form of scientific dating when applied to uncontaminated material several thousand years old. Since it destroys a portion of the material tested, this process is used sparingly. Half of a two-ounce piece of linen wrapping from a scroll in cave 1 was tested by Dr. W. E. Libby of the University of Chicago in 1950 to give a general idea of the age of the collection. Results indicated an age of 1917 years with a 200-year (10 percent) variant, which left the date somewhere between 168 B.C. and A.D. 233.

Paleographical and Orthographical Dating

Paleography (ancient writing forms) and orthography (spelling) were more helpful, indicating that some manuscripts were inscribed before 100 B.C. Albright studied photographs of the complete Isaiah scroll and set its date at around 100 B.C. “What an absolutely incredible find!” he wrote. “And there can happily not be the slightest doubt in the world about the genuineness of the manuscript.”²

Archaeological Dating

Collaborative evidence for an early date came from archaeology. Pottery accompanying the manuscripts was Late Hellenistic (ca. 150-63 B.C.) and Early Roman (ca. 63 B.C. to A.D. 100). Coins found in the monastery ruins proved by their inscriptions to have been minted between 135 B.C. and A.D. 135. The weave and pattern of the cloth supported an early date. Evidence also came from the Murabba'at Discoveries south of Bethlehem, where self-dated manuscripts were discovered in 1952. Bearing dates from A.D. 132-35, these proved to be paleographically younger than the DSS.³ In the end there was no reasonable doubt that the Qumran manuscripts came from the century before Christ and the first century A.D. Thus, they are 1000 years older than the Masoretic manuscripts of the tenth century. Before 1947, the Hebrew text was based on three partial and one complete manuscript dating from about A.D. 1000. Now, thousands of fragments are available, as well as complete books, containing large sections of the Old Testament from one millennium before the time of the Masoretic manuscripts.

Support for the Masoretic Text

The nature and number of these finds are of critical value for establishing the true text. With innumerable fragments of the entire Old Testament, there are abundant samples with which to compare the Masoretic Text. The evidence points to the following general conclusions.

Confirmation of the Hebrew Text

The scrolls give an overwhelming confirmation of the faithfulness with which the Hebrew text was copied through the centuries. By the tenth-century Masoretic copies, few errors had crept in. Millar Burrows, in *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, writes, "It is a matter of wonder that through something like a thousand years the text underwent so little alteration. As I said in my first article on the scroll, 'Herein lies its chief importance, supporting the fidelity of the Masoretic tradition.'"⁴ R. Laird Harris points out that "evidently the difference between the standard text of A.D. 900 and the text of 100 B.C. is not nearly so great as that between the Neutral and Western text in the New Testament study."⁵ Gleason Archer observes that the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1 "proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling."⁶ To return to the original and "all important question" framed by Old Testament scholar Frederic Kenyon (1863-1952) a generation ago, it may now be more confidently asserted than ever before that the modern Hebrew text faithfully represents the Hebrew text as originally written by the authors of the Old Testament. Dead Sea discoveries have enabled us to answer this question with much greater assurance than was possible before 1948.⁷

Support for the Septuagint

Since the New Testament most often cites the Greek Septuagint (hereafter LXX) translation of the Old Testament, the reliability of this text is important, particularly where it is quoted in the New Testament. The DSS provide early support for the LXX

and answers questions about variations between the Hebrew and LXX Greek:

1. A fragment containing Deuteronomy 32:8 reads, “according to the number of the sons of God,” which is translated “angels of God” by the LXX, as in Genesis 6:4 (margin); Job 1:6; 2:1; and 38:7. The Masoretic Text reads, “according to the number of the children of Israel.”

2. The Masoretic Text of Exodus 1:5 reads “seventy souls,” whereas the LXX and its quotation in Acts 7:14 read “seventy-five souls.” A DSS fragment of Exodus 1:5 reads “seventy-five souls,” in agreement with the LXX.

3. Hebrews 1:6b, “Let all God’s angels worship him” is a quote from the LXX of Deuteronomy 32:43. This quotation does not agree with the Masoretic Text, but DSS fragments containing this section tend to confirm the LXX.

4. Isaiah 9:6 reads, “she shall call his name” in the Masoretic Text, but the LXX and now the great Isaiah scroll read, “His name shall be called,” a matter of one less consonant of the Hebrew alphabet.

5. The Greek version of Jeremiah is sixty verses (one-eighth) shorter than the Hebrew text of Jeremiah. The fragment of Jeremiah supports these omissions.

6. In Cave 11 a copy of Psalm 151 was found, which was previously unknown in the Hebrew text, although it appeared in the Septuagint. Some apocryphal books were also found among the Hebrew manuscripts in the Qumran caves that had previously been known only in the LXX.⁸

This should by no means be construed as a uniform picture, since there are not many deviants in the DSS from the Masoretic Text to begin with. In some cases the variants do not consistently agree with the LXX; in a few cases they do not agree at all. However, even Orlinsky, who is one of the foremost defenders of the Masoretic Text against proposed emendations based on the DSS, admits, “The LXX translation, no less than the Masoretic Text itself, will have gained considerable respect as a result of the Qumran discoveries in those circles where it has long—overlong—been necessary.”⁹

Light on the New Testament

Some DSS fragments have been identified as the earliest known pieces of the New Testament. Further, the messianic expectations reveal that the New Testament view of a personal messiah-God who would rise from the dead is in line with first-century Jewish thought.

The New Testament fragments?

Jose O’Callahan, a Spanish Jesuit paleographer, made headlines around the world in 1972 when he announced that he had translated a piece of the Gospel of Mark on a DSS fragment. This was the earliest known piece of Mark. Fragments from cave 7 had previously been dated between 50 B.C. and A.D. 50 and listed under “not identified” and classified as “Biblical Texts.” O’Callahan eventually identified nine fragments. The center column in the following chart uses the numbering system established for manuscripts. For example, “7Q5” means fragment 5 from Qumran cave 7.

Mark 4:28	7Q6?	A.D. 50
Mark 6:48	7Q15	A.D. ?
Mark 6:52, 53	7Q5	A.D. 50
Mark 12:17	7Q7	A.D. 50
Acts 27:38	7Q6?	A.D. 60
Romans 5:11, 12	7Q9	A.D. 70+
1 Timothy 3:16; 4:1-3	7Q4	A.D. 70+
2 Peter 1:15	7Q10	A.D. 70+
James 1:23, 24	7Q8	A.D. 70+

Both friend and critic acknowledged from the beginning that, if valid, O’Callahan’s conclusions would revolutionize current New Testament theories. The *New York Times* reported: “If Father O’Callahan’s theory is accepted, it would prove that at least one of the gospels—that of St. Mark—was written only a few years after the death of Jesus.” United Press International (UPI) noted that his conclusions meant that “the people

closest to the events—Jesus’ original followers—found Mark’s report accurate and trustworthy, not myth but true history.”¹⁰ *Time* magazine quoted one scholar who claimed that, if correct, “they can make a bonfire of 70 tons of indigestible German scholarship.”¹¹

Of course, O’Callahan’s critics object to his identification and have tried to find other possibilities. The fragmentary nature of the manuscripts makes it difficult to be dogmatic about identifications. Nonetheless, O’Callahan offers a plausible, albeit revolutionary, possibility. If the identification of even one of these fragments as New Testament is valid, then the implications for Christian apologetics are enormous. It would be shown that the Gospel of Mark was written within the life time of the apostles and contemporaries of the events.

A date before A.D. 50 leaves no time for mythological embellishment of the records. They would have to be accepted as historical. It would also show Mark to be one of the earlier Gospels. Further, since these manuscripts are not originals but copies, it would reveal that the New Testament was “published”—copied and disseminated—during the life time of the writers. It would also reveal the existence of the New Testament canon during this early period, with pieces representing every major section of the New Testament: Gospels, Acts, and both Pauline and General Epistles.

The fragment of 2 Peter would argue for the authenticity of this often disputed epistle. The absence of fragments of John’s writings might indicate that they were written later (A.D. 80-90) in accordance with the traditional dates. With all these revolutionary conclusions it is little wonder that their authenticity is being challenged.

First-Century Jewish Messianic Expectations

The DSS have also yielded text that, while not referring to the Christ of the New Testament, have some interesting parallels, as well as some significant differences. The similarities that confirm the New Testament picture accurately describes Jewish expectation of a personal, individual Messiah who would die and rise from the dead. A fragment called “*A Genesis Florilegium*” (4Q252) reflects belief in an individual Messiah who would be a descendant of David. “Column 5 (1) (the) Government

shall not pass from the tribe of Judah. During Israel's dominion, (2) a Davidic descendant on the throne shall [not cease] ... until the Messiah of Righteousness, the Branch of (4) David comes."¹²

Even the deity of the Messiah is affirmed in the fragment known as "The Son of God" (4Q246), Plate 4, columns one and two: "Oppression will be upon the earth... [until] the King of the people of God arises,... and he shall become [great] upon the earth. [... All will make [peace,] and all will serve [him.] He will be called [son of the Great [God;] by His name he shall be designated.... He will be called the son of God; they will call him son of the Most High."¹³

"The Messiah of Heaven and Earth" fragment (4Q521) even speaks of the Messiah raising the dead: "(12) then He will heal the sick, resurrect the dead, and to the Meek announce glad tidings."¹⁴

The Dead Sea Scrolls also confirm that Qumran was not the source of early Christianity. There are significant differences between their concept of the "Teacher of Righteousness," apparently an Essene messianic hope, and the Jesus revealed in Scripture and early Christianity. The differences are enough to show that early Christianity was not just an offshoot of the Essenes, as has been theorized.¹⁵ The Essenes emphasized hating one's enemies; Jesus stressed love. The Essenes were exclusivistic regarding women, sinners, and outsiders; Jesus was inclusive. The Essenes were legalistic Sabbatarians; Jesus was not. The Essenes stressed Jewish purification laws; Jesus attacked them. The Essenes believed two messiahs would come; Christians held that Jesus was the only one.¹⁶

Conclusion

The DSS provide an important apologetic contribution toward establishing the general reliability of the Old Testament Hebrew text, as well as the earliest copies of parts of Old Testament books and even whole books. This is important in showing that the predictive prophecies of the Old Testament were indeed made centuries before they were literally fulfilled. Furthermore, the DSS provide possible support for the New Testament. They may contain the earliest known fragments of the New Testament, and they definitely contain references to messianic beliefs similar to those taught in the New Testament.

Notes

1 See J. C. Trever, "The Discovery of the Scrolls," *Biblical Archaeologist* 11 (September 1948), p. 55.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

3 Solomon Zeitlin, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Modern Scholarship* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1956)

4 Millar Burrows, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Viking, 1958), p. 304.

5 R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), p. 99.

6 Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1974), p. 19.

7 F. F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), pp. 61-69.

8 Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 296.

- 9 Cited in G. E. Wright, ed., *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), p. 121.
- 10 Ibid, p. 137.
- 11 David Estrada and William White, Jr., *The First New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1978), p. 136.
- 12 See Robert H. Eisenman and Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (New York: Barnes & Nobel, 1992), p. 89.
- 13 Ibid., p. 70.
- 14 Ibid., p. 23; cf. pp. 63, 95).
- 15 See C. Billington, "The Dead Sea Scrolls in Early Christianity," IBA, January-March 1996, pp. 8-10.
- 16 See James Charlesworth, et. al., *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

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