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Dunham Bible Museum

Freshman

Dead Sea Scrolls

1017 Words

A Bedouin Shepherd's Discovery

## A Bedouin Shepherd's Discovery

The year is 1947. Swarming clouds of sand cover the landscape. Violent rays from the sun bear down, with the sound of hard hooves galloping down a cliffside. Then, amidst the harmonious sounds, the alluring whistle of the wind plays through the dark corners of a nearby cave. Inside, clay pots cover the ground with worn and torn papers scattered across. These are the Dead Seas Scrolls, the most important archeological finding of the 20th century.

This was the recollection of a young Bedouin Shepherd in search of lost cattle on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea in the desert of Khirbet Qumran, where the first of 11 caves of the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. Hidden away in these caves, lie over 900 separate documents written on papyrus, leather, and copper. These ancient scrolls are worthy of the title most important archeological finding. The Dead Sea Scrolls are excerpts from the Hebrew Bible, otherwise known as the Old Testament, and can be dated back to the 3rd century B.C., far before any full bible was ever composed together. One of the most shocking facts about the Dead Sea Scrolls is their ability to survive the harsh environment of the Khirbet Qumran Desert. (Fitzmyer 3) Their importance stems from the authenticity of the information they have etched into them and what they help support.

The oldest most complete version of the Hebrew Bible is the Codex Sassoon. Written between 880 and 960 A.D., the Codex Sassoon contains 24 books of the Hebrew Bible. The Dead Sea Scrolls were written in the 3rd century, 200 - 101 B.C., over a millennium before the Codex Sassoon was created. The Dead Sea Scrolls have much of the same books and wording as the Hebrew Bible, confirming that the text of the Hebrew Bible has fewer editorial changes and

errors than scholars originally thought (Freedman 4). Not only do the Dead Sea Scrolls bring authenticity to current Hebrew Bibles but they also reveal information about religion at the time of their writing. “Above all else, the contents of the scrolls show the remarkable flexibility and variety of Jewish thought and practice and demolish any notion of a uniform “Judaism” at that time.” (Davies). Philip R. Davies continues by listing examples of the significant differences between traditional Judaism and the Judaism mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls:

They show that the notion of cultic holiness and sacrifice could be contemplated without the Temple, that different liturgical calendars existed at the same time, that the distinction between Israel and the Gentiles could be displaced by a notion of two predestined groups of saved and damned individuals, that the worship of the celestial Temple could be witnessed and described (Davies).

The Dead Sea Scrolls changed the history and understanding of Judaism, revealing a new and more separated version of the religion.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have been reproduced in the Dunham Bible Museum, at Houston Christian University. These scrolls give us insight into the life of their authors, The Essene, a religious sect or brotherhood that flourished in Palestine from about the 2nd century B.C. to the end of the 1st century A.D.. At Qumrān this group not only preserved their beliefs but developed a worldview that rejected the rest of the Jewish people, espoused a highly dualistic view of the world, and looked for an imminent divine judgment of the wicked. (Davies)

The Essene was not a large group of people, they only numbered about 4,000 subjects. The Essene used the 11 caves as libraries and homes for themselves and the Dead Sea Scrolls,

writing then storing them in jars to protect and preserve them (Isbouts). It is assumed that the Essence spoke Aramaic because that was the common language in Judea, however, the scrolls were written in Hebrew because it was “considered holy and therefore appropriate for religious subjects” (Freedman 6). Fun fact, The Essecene, although important, is neither mentioned, nor their existence implied in the Hebrew bible.

After their discovery, the Dead Sea Scrolls did not stay locked away in clay jars in dark murky caves. The major scrolls of the first cave are located in the Shrine of the Book, in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and The copper plaque from the third cave is in the Museum of the Department of Antiquities, in Amman Jordan (Fitzmyer 6). This is their current location, but they were not immediately sent to museums:

Three of the scrolls were immediately purchased by archaeologist E. L. Sukenik on behalf of the Hebrew University; the others were bought by the Metropolitan of the Syrian Orthodox Church in East Jerusalem, Mar Athanasius Samuel. In 1948 Samuel smuggled the four scrolls in his possession to the United States; it was only in 1954 that Sukenik’s son, Yigael Yadin, also an archaeologist, was able to bring them back to this country. (Ruppin).

Many scholars wanted to get their hands on the Dead Sea Scrolls, showing the significance of their discovery. Every scholar wanted to be the one to unravel the mysteries behind the scrolls; some went to the length of smuggling them to other countries, begging museums to extend their use, and even attempting to find another cave.

Upon first glance, the Dead Sea Scrolls appear to be worthless pieces of torn paper and shattered clay, but, like most artifacts found in museums, their importance stems from the story

they carry. Looking deeper into the stories you can find that after surviving over two thousand years of harsh desert weather, the Dead Sea Scrolls fill in a gap in history for Judaism and Christianity alike, giving insight into lost communities, revealing past religions, and protecting the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible. Connecting the lives of many people, under the protection of the Israeli government, the Dead Sea Scrolls can be seen by hundreds of visitors and appreciated for their contribution to the religious communities. Protecting the truths of the Bible and healing the heart of doubt, the Dead Sea Scrolls prove their worth as the most important archeological finding of the 20th century.

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