



## Evidence for the Defence

### ***The Dead Sea Scrolls are a good friend to historic Christianity***

In 1947, a young Bedouin shepherd, Muhammed ed Dhib, was playing near the top of some cliffs that surrounded the Dead Sea. He picked up a stone and threw it into a small hole in the cliff face. There was a sharp crack: the sound of broken pottery. Little did he realise that he had stumbled upon a treasure trove of ancient documents that had lain undisturbed for nearly 2000 years. He had found the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Dead Sea Scrolls originally belonged to a religious community called the Essenes, who lived at Qumran. They were a Jewish ascetic group who lived primarily in three locations: Qumran at the Dead Sea, the Essene Quarter of Jerusalem (Mt Zion), and an area near Damascus.

Archaeologists have established a number of important points about the Essene community. Through the discovery of coins on the sites, it appears that the community began in the reign of John Hyrcanus (134-104BC) and carried on until about AD 70 when it was destroyed by the Roman army.

Archaeologists believe that when the Roman legions advanced towards Qumran, the inhabitants hid their precious documents in the caves nearby, hoping to retrieve them later. But they never did. The community was slaughtered. There is evidence that some people returned to the site later, around 130-135, but the details are sketchy.

Since 1947, further discoveries of documents have been made in the Dead Sea region. William F Albright, the famous leader of the American School of Oriental Research, wrote shortly afterwards: *"What an absolutely incredible find! ... this is the greatest manuscript discovery of modern times."*

The significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls stems from their age. Dr W F Libby of the University of Chicago, conducted Carbon 14 dating tests on the scrolls in 1950. This is a reliable form of scientific dating when applied to uncontaminated material several thousand years old.

Dr Libby's results indicated an age of 1917 years for a scroll in Cave 1 with a 200 year (10%) variant, which left the date somewhere between 167BC and AD233.

Until 1947, the oldest complete Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament was the text of Codex Leningradensis, dated to 1008. This text was made 1400 years after the last book of the Old Testament had been written. This was the text used by the King James translators — the Textus Receptus. It was regarded as the authoritative Masoretic Hebrew text.

Obviously that manuscript was a copy of a copy of a copy etc. This raised a pressing question: Could scholars be sure that the text in Codex Leningradensis was identical to the original text, as given by God, to the Bible writers? What assurance could they have that the Bible text today is pure?

After carefully comparing the Biblical texts, the scholars were amazed to discover that, apart from a tiny number of spelling variations, there were no significant differences between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text. Albright, himself a former liberal scholar, declared: *"The Dead Sea Scrolls prove conclusively that we must treat the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible with the utmost respect and that the free emending of difficult passages in which moderns critical scholars have indulged cannot be tolerated any longer."*

What does all this show? It demonstrates that the Jews throughout their history have been faithful in copying the Biblical manuscripts with remarkably few errors. The text we have today faithfully represents the original autographs. As the Jewish historian, Josephus said: *“For, although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable”*.

Further, the Dead Sea Scrolls also contribute to our knowledge of the canon of the Old Testament. The canon represents the collection of books which believers recognise as inspired by God, and given to them as Scripture. Jews and Protestants accept the 39 books of the Old Testament as inspired. However, Roman Catholics also accept the collection of books known as the Apocrypha as part of the Bible.

Interestingly, every book in the Old Testament, with the exception of Esther, has been found at Qumran. While many apocryphal books have been found too, it is important to note that the only commentaries that have been found at Qumran are of canonical books. This suggests that the Essenes distinguished in their minds between canonical and non-canonical texts. Only the canonical texts seem to have warranted commentaries. This lends support for the Protestant view of the canon.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, the Dead Sea Scrolls show that the apostolic proclamation of Jesus as the divine Messiah was consistent with some of the messianic expectation of the period.

Several Qumran documents, 4Q252, 4Q246, and 4Q521 speak of the Messiah being of the line of David, having the titles *“Son of God”* and *“Son of the Most High”* (as in Luke 1:32-35), as well as having enormous powers such as raising the dead.

According to Albright, the Qumran evidence supports the view that the concepts, terminology and mindset of the Gospels are consistent with a Palestinian setting in the early first century. In other words, the historical data of the New Testament are accurate and the documents are not an invention of the church of the second century as was formerly believed by radical Bible critics.

As Millar Burrows, a liberal biblical scholar, admits: *“If one will go through any of the historic statements of the Christian faith he will find nothing that has been or can be disproved by the Dead Sea Scrolls”*.

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