SCRIPTURE ANALYSIS · BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Ancient Stones, Part 6

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Translations, images and commentary for the artifacts on the Ancient Stones page

Contents

64. The Dead Sea Scrolls

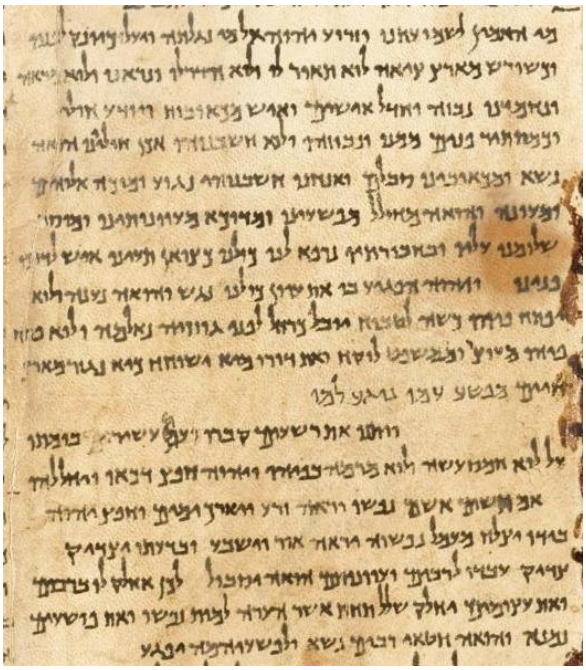
About this study

This final part covers the Dead Sea Scrolls, the last item on the Ancient Stones page. Unlike the other entries, the Scrolls are not a single object but a library of some 930 manuscripts. The entry therefore gives an overview of the discovery and contents, then focuses on what the biblical scrolls mean for the text of the Old Testament, comparing selected readings with the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX).

About the translations. No complete public-domain English translation of the Scrolls exists, and the biblical readings discussed here are given as literal glosses of the Hebrew and Greek prepared by the author of this study, so that each witness can be compared directly. Readers are referred to the critical editions and the free online images listed under Further Reading.

About the images. The photograph is from Wikimedia Commons and is in the public domain. Keep the credit line with the image when publishing.

64. The Dead Sea Scrolls



Columns of the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa[a]) showing Isaiah 52–53, Shrine of the Book, Israel Museum, Jerusalem.
Image: Ardon Bar-Hama (photograph). Public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	About 930 manuscripts (some 25,000 fragments) from eleven caves near Khirbet Qumran, plus finds from other Judean Desert sites
Museum	Israel Museum (Shrine of the Book) and Israel Antiquities Authority, Jerusalem; Jordan Museum, Amman (Copper Scroll and others)
Date	c. 250 BC – AD 68 (palaeography and radiocarbon); the Qumran settlement was destroyed by Rome in AD 68
Provenance	Qumran Caves 1–11, northwest shore of the Dead Sea; found 1947–1956 by Bedouin and by excavators led by R. de Vaux and G. L. Harding
Language / script	Hebrew (about 80 per cent), Aramaic and Greek; square (Jewish) script, with some Paleo-Hebrew and cryptic scripts
Principal editions	*Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* (DJD), 40 vols. (1955–2011); Ulrich, *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls* (2010); Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (3rd ed., 2012)

What it is

Technical summary. The Scrolls fall into three broad groups.

- **Biblical manuscripts.** About 230 manuscripts cover every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther. They are about a thousand years older than the earliest complete Masoretic codices (Aleppo, c. 925; Leningrad, 1008/9).
- **Parabiblical and apocryphal works.** These include *Jubilees*, *1 Enoch*, the *Genesis Apocryphon*, Tobit, Sirach and the *Temple Scroll*.

- **Sectarian compositions.** These include the *Community Rule* (1QS), the *Damascus Document*, the *War Scroll*, the *Thanksgiving Hymns* (*Hodayot*), and the *pesharim*, commentaries applying the prophets to the sect's own history.

Most scholars still associate the sectarian texts with the Essenes described by Josephus, Philo and Pliny. Alternative views (a Sadducean, priestly or Jerusalem-library origin) continue to be debated.

In plain terms. Between 1947 and 1956, shepherds and archaeologists found jars and fragments of nearly a thousand ancient Jewish scrolls in caves by the Dead Sea. A quarter of them are copies of Old Testament books, a thousand years older than any Hebrew Bible known before. The rest are the religious writings of a Jewish community of Jesus' era.

The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa[a])

The best-preserved biblical scroll is 7.34 m long, with 54 columns containing all 66 chapters of Isaiah. It is dated palaeographically to about 125 BC, and radiocarbon dating supports a 2nd-century BC date. It agrees with the consonantal Masoretic Text in the great majority of its readings. Most differences are orthographic (fuller spelling with *matres lectionis*) or minor grammatical variants. This general agreement over a thousand years is the scroll's most important lesson for textual criticism. Its genuine variants, a few of them significant, show that the text of Isaiah was not yet absolutely fixed.

Selected readings compared with the MT and the LXX

The glosses below are literal renderings of each witness.

Passage	Masoretic Text (MT)	Qumran	Septuagint (LXX)	Comment
Isa 53:11	"From the anguish of his soul he will see; he will be satisfied"	1QIsa[a], 1QIsa[b], 4QIsa[d]: "he will see **light** (*ʾwr*)"	ὄψεται **φῶς**, "he will see **light**"	Three Qumran copies and the LXX agree against the MT. Several modern translations adopt "light."
Deut 32:8	"according to the number of the **sons of Israel**"	4QDeut[j]: "the **sons of God** (*bny ʾlwhym*)"	ἀγγέλων θεοῦ / υἱῶν θεοῦ, "angels / sons of God"	Qumran supports the LXX tradition. The reading underlies the "divine council" interpretation of the verse.
1 Sam 10:27–11:1	Nahash besieges Jabesh-gilead without introduction	4QSam[a]: an additional paragraph on Nahash's oppression of Gad and Reuben, gouging out right eyes	Lacks the paragraph (like the MT)	Josephus (*Ant.* 6.68–71) knew it. Some modern translations print it. Whether the MT lost it or 4QSam[a] added it is debated.
1 Sam 17:4	Goliath's height "**six** cubits and a span" (c. 2.9 m)	4QSam[a]: "**four** cubits and a span" (c. 2 m)	τεσσάρων πηχῶν, "**four** cubits"	Qumran and the LXX agree against the MT.

Passage	Masoretic Text (MT)	Qumran	Septuagint (LXX)	Comment
Jeremiah (whole book)	Long edition	4QJer[a],[c]: long (MT-like); 4QJer[b],[d]: short edition, ordered as in the LXX	Short edition, about one-seventh shorter	Both literary editions circulated in Hebrew. The LXX was translated from a different Hebrew text, not freely abridged.
Ps 145:13	No verse for the letter *nun* in the acrostic	11QPs[a]: includes a *nun* line ("Faithful is God in his words …")	Includes the line	Qumran and the LXX supply the missing acrostic line, which is adopted in several modern translations.

Assessment. E. Tov groups the Qumran biblical texts into proto-Masoretic texts (the largest group, especially for the Torah), texts close to the Hebrew source of the LXX, pre-Samaritan texts, texts written in "Qumran scribal practice," and non-aligned texts. The overall result is to confirm the antiquity and careful transmission of the proto-Masoretic tradition. At the same time the Scrolls rehabilitate the LXX as a witness to genuine Hebrew variants, and they show that in the Second Temple period several editions of some books (Jeremiah, Samuel, Exodus, Psalms) circulated side by side.

Points of contact with the New Testament

- **Messianic expectation.** The Scrolls attest expectations of two messiahs, "of Aaron and of Israel" (1QS IX 11). They also show a messianic reading of Isa 61:1 in the *Messianic Apocalypse* (4Q521), which lists healing the wounded, raising the dead and bringing good news to the poor. Compare Jesus' answer to John the Baptist (Matt 11:4–5; Luke 7:22).
- **"Son of God."** The Aramaic *Son of God* text (4Q246) speaks of a figure who will be called "son of God" and "son of the Most High." Compare Luke 1:32, 35.
- **Language of light and darkness.** The dualism of the "sons of light" and the "sons of darkness" (1QS III–IV; 1QM) has often been compared with John's Gospel and Paul (e.g., John 12:36; 2 Cor 6:14–15; 1 Thess 5:5).

Further reading

- Tov, Emanuel. *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*. 3rd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.
- Ulrich, Eugene, ed. *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls: Transcriptions and Textual Variants*. VTSup 134. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- VanderKam, James C. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.
- Abegg, Martin, Jr., Peter Flint and Eugene Ulrich. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999.
- Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library (Israel Antiquities Authority), free high-resolution images of all fragments. deadseascrolls.org.il

- The Digital Dead Sea Scrolls (Israel Museum), including the complete Great Isaiah Scroll. dss.collections.imj.org.il