

## DEAD SEA SCROLLS

R. LAIRD HARRIS, Ph.D.

Professor of Old Testament

Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.

The amazing story of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is too well known to be repeated except in outline. In 1947 a shepherd boy was wandering with his sheep and goats near the northwest end of the Dead Sea. He idly threw a stone in one of the many caves of the limestone cliffs which rise to the mountains of Judah on the west. He heard something breaking and on investigation found he had broken a pottery jar containing old leather scrolls. He and some companions took seven scrolls from this cave and sold them on the black market in Bethlehem. They found their way to Jerusalem just as the Jewish-Arab war was breaking out. Jewish scholars purchased three and Arab Christians bought the other four. At length the Israeli government purchased all seven and they have been adequately published.

Meanwhile more fragments turned up for sale and in 1952 archaeologists organized an expedition to investigate the whole area for similar caves and more fragments. About eleven caves were found in this area having significant pieces of manuscripts and more have been found further south. These fragments have been intensively studied and many have been fitted together in work on the biggest jigsaw puzzle in history.

Of crucial importance is the date of these manuscripts. Handwriting experts dated them as from the two centuries before Christ. The ones from the caves further south in the area called Murabbaat come from the second century A.D. Some are even dated manuscripts. The question of dating is allied to the question of who wrote these scrolls. It was soon noted that near the northern caves was a ruined town or group of buildings called Qumran. This ruin was excavated in 1951-56 and was clearly shown to be the place where the scrolls were written. Even their benches and tables and ink wells were found! Qumran was apparently not an ordinary town but a sort of Jewish monastery and it was occupied, as was shown by coins and pottery, from about 125 B.C. to 70 A.D. when the Romans invaded and destroyed Jerusalem. Interestingly, the Jewish "monks" had left the city a short time during the days of Herod the Great. We are reminded of Herod's slaughter of the innocents of Bethlehem and the flight of Mary and Joseph and Jesus. Herod was one to be feared by those who loved the Scripture.

The inhabitants of Qumran have been identified with fair certainty as Essenes (pronounced Essenzen) who were a sect of Jews living side by side with the Pharisees and Sadducees. Their chief characteristic in which we are interested is their regard for the O. T. and their opposition to the sinfulness of

the Jerusalem priesthood. They themselves state that they had withdrawn into the wilderness to "prepare the way of the Lord."

The Dead Sea Scrolls consist of two main types of documents — Biblical Scrolls and scrolls related to Essene belief or practice. There are no purely secular compositions. These writings teach us many things about the O. T.; about the backgrounds of Christianity and about Essene belief. The writer's conviction is that their greatest usefulness is in study of the text and canon of the Old Testament.

### THE SCROLLS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT TEXT

To help us appreciate the witness of the Scrolls for the O. T. text let us consider our previous O. T. copies and then the Biblical Manuscripts from the caves. It was the practice of the Jews through the middle ages to copy their Hebrew manuscripts with great care, then decently to dispose of the worn out copies. Because of these practices we only had late (9th century A. D.) O. T. manuscripts though we had reason to believe that these were in quite close agreement with the text of about the 2nd century A.D. But we had no early manuscripts. Just in 1947 a prominent textual scholar wrote that we never would have any early manuscripts! We did have some old translations from the Hebrew — the Latin Vulgate of about 400 A. D.; some portions of Greek translations made about 200 A. D.; the Syrian translations and the Aramaic Targums of uncertain dates; and the Greek Septuagint, which was dated at about 200 B.C. by orthodox scholars and somewhat later by critics. Most of these translations were post Christian. The Septuagint departed more widely than the others did from the Hebrew. In short we could trace our present Hebrew text pretty well back to about 100 A.D. but before that our evidence was uncertain. Did the origin of Christianity cause much change in the O. T.? How about the glorious but bitter wars of independence waged by the Maccabees around 165 B.C. ? Were the copies before those days of the same type as after those days?

These and other questions can now be answered very satisfactorily. The Dead Sea caves have yielded Biblical manuscripts and fragments of every O.T. book except Esther. One complete copy of Isaiah from 150 B.C. and another partial copy and a dozen fragmentary copies are found. A commentary bearing nearly the complete text of Habakkuk 1 and 2 come from perhaps the 1st century B.C. Another manuscript preserves in fragmentary form most of the chapters of the Books of Samuel. A more recently purchased piece has about a third of the book of Psalms. Some books have left very

small fragments, like the six lines of Chronicles. Others have left respectable pieces like several portions of Daniel from around 110 B. C., parts of Ecclesiastes from 150 B.C. There is a very old portion of Jeremiah and another of Job from 200 B.C. The oldest scraps seem to be part of Samuel from 225 B.C. though some have dated fragments of Exodus and Leviticus even earlier. We thus have numerous specimens of various O.T. books copied before the Christian era and even before the persecution of the Maccabean days. What are they like?

The answer to this question is that they are exceedingly close to the Hebrew manuscripts that we have always possessed. They serve to substantiate our present Bibles and carry back the evidence for our text to around 200 B.C. This is within two hundred years of the close of the Old Testament period. For instance in the four lines of I Samuel 23:9-12 preserved in a fragment from 225 B. C., every letter (of the fifty-plus preserved) is equal to those in our Hebrew Bibles. To be precise, one vowel letter differs, being replaced by an equivalent vowel letter. The complete scroll of Isaiah likewise is quite close to our Bibles. An accurate description of it would involve some knowledge of Hebrew. It is perhaps enough to say that this manuscript uses more extra vowel letters than our Hebrew Bibles do, but these make no difference at all in the meaning. It is only a matter of spelling. A comparison of the great 53rd chapter might be of value. After we make appropriate allowances for these differences in spelling we find that the scroll adds two words to the present Hebrew text and uses more freely the single letter *Waw* as a conjunction between the clauses. The two added words are no improvement in our text but in any case do not change the sense. Actually we may fairly conclude that the new scrolls only confirm what we had. It is interesting to note that the Isaiah scroll, though valuable because of its early date, is clearly not as carefully written a copy nor as pure a text as our later manuscripts. Thus the scrolls confirm, but hardly improve upon our existing texts.

The scrolls do allow us to re-examine certain old problems and suggest some answers. In three or four cases, the scrolls confirm the Septuagint text in places where it was quoted in the New Testament and in doing so justify the New Testament's use of that verse. Thus in Hebrews 1:6 there is a quotation from the Septuagint of Dt. 32:43 which is not found in the King James translation. The Hebrew does not have this line. But a Dead Sea fragment shows that in early times that line was in the Hebrew text as well as in the Septuagint.

#### THE SCROLLS AND THE CANON

We are often asked, "Do the scrolls say anything in favor of or against the Higher criticism?" The answer is that the scrolls are not early enough to

speak directly on this subject, but they have some implications that question such views. Critics have not only said that Moses did not write the Pentateuch and Isaiah has two or three parts and the Psalms were late, etc. Critics also dated some books extremely late and had developed a special theory of the growth of the canon of the Old Testament.

Job was dated as late as 200 B.C. Now we have fragments of a 200 B.C. copy! Ecclesiastes was placed by some extremists as late as the days of Herod the Great. Now we have a copy from 150 B.C. Several Psalms were called Maccabean. That view is now impossible. Chronicles was placed at about 200 B.C. The argument is now given that it was nearer 400 B.C. Daniel is still placed at 165 B.C. in spite of the fact that it was used as Scripture and copied in several copies in Qumran at about 110 B.C. It strains credulity to think that Daniel was written as a pious fraud and was as quickly and completely and widely accepted as Scripture. No other case is parallel. It is true that in the New Testament we have a portion of John written within 30 years of the author's death — but that was not a hoax, as abundant testimony shows. So some of the positions of criticism are seriously challenged.

Furthermore, critics have held an elaborate theory that the Pentateuch was not held to be sacred and canonical until 400 B. C., the Prophets not until 200 B.C. and the Writings (the 3rd division of our Hebrew Bible) not until 90 A.D. Surely this view is contradicted by the scrolls. Note that of the most popular books in Qumran, one is from the Pentateuch — Deuteronomy; one is from the Prophets — Isaiah; and one is from the Writing — Psalms. A copy of a book of the writings, Job, is practically as early as any of the copies of the prophets — 200 B.C. Ecclesiastes in 150 was clearly canonical. Proverbs is quoted as Scripture. The Psalms were supplied with commentaries like the other portions of the Bible. There is considerable evidence that all the Writings (Esther only is not found) were considered as canonical at least by the first century B.C. and some were clearly considered canonical as early as evidence exists for the prophets. The elaborate critical theories simply break down in the face of these facts.

There is an additional significant point. The Scrolls do not use a three-fold division of books as does the later Talmud and medieval copies of the Hebrew Bible. The Scrolls speak only of the Law and the Prophets. In this they agree with the New Testament which also uses a two-fold division. Now in view of the evidence that all the Old Testament was canonized, we cannot say that the third division was not yet formed. Rather we must say that at this early time, just as later in the New Testament, all the books were recognized and classified under two categories — the Law of Moses and the Prophets. With this evidence, the old critical three-fold development theory of the critics is seen

to be contrary to the facts. The way is open now to appreciate the testimony of Old Testament books themselves that they were written by the prophets of old and accepted promptly by the faithful in Israel.

#### THE SCROLLS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Although the Qumran community existed until about 68 A. D., the bulk of our writings came in the pre-Christian period and therefore there was little chance of direct reference in them to Christianity. At least no such reference is found. There are, however, numerous parallels to the New Testament in ideas, in expressions, and in organization of the Qumran community. What can we learn from these parallels?

A variety of answers has been given. Some have said that the Scrolls show us a pre-Christian Christianity and a Messiah before Jesus. Some say John the Baptist was an Essene and Christianity can now be explained away. More positively and cautiously other scholars say we now can fill in the history of early thoughts and properly place Christianity against its background.

We can dismiss at once the headlines. The Scrolls present no rival to Christ or challenge to Christianity. The Qumran Essenes had a leader whom they called the "Teacher of Righteousness" or "Right Teacher." He did not claim inspiration or miracles or superhuman prerogatives. His death is not recorded and his resurrection was not expected or claimed. Some feel that the office was perpetual and there were several such teachers.

A sober estimate of these things is given in a book by T. H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956). Dr. Gaster, himself Jewish, argues that even an extreme estimate of the right-teacher "would be poles apart from the Christian belief that the crucified Master was God incarnate Who by His passion removed a sinfulness inherent in man through a pristine fall from grace. Of this basic doctrine of Christianity there is not a shred or trace in the Dead Sea Scrolls," (p.19). Gaster's book translates all the Dead Sea literature in helpful compact form with capable annotations.

The Dead Sea Scrolls do, however, illuminate the background of the New Testament. They show, as we have seen, how immersed in the Scriptures were the Jews of that day. They illustrate also the Messianic expectation of Israel, although the Essenes looked apparently for two Messiahs, a kingly and priestly one. Certain parallels as the contrast of light and darkness, the concept of sons of light, the idea of saints as the temple of God, these show a background of Christian expression in contemporary Judaism.

This is as it should be. We do not seek for the origin of the New Testament. It came by revelation from God. And it came to Jews who knew their Old Testament and used the expressions common to contemporary Judaism. This is all that the parallels with the Dead Sea Scrolls imply.

Here again, however, the Scrolls have confounded critical thought. It has been said by some that parts of the New Testament were late and dependent on the heresy called Gnosticism which claimed a special secret knowledge of heavenly things and mixed Christian ideas with Greek philosophy in curious ways. The Scrolls and also certain discoveries of Gnostic books in Egypt now show us that critics had the cart and horse reversed. Instead of the New Testament being late and dependent on Gnosticism, Gnosticism is late and dependent on the New Testament. The parallels of John's Gospel, for instance are closer with the pre-Christian Scrolls than with second century Gnosticism. It is this development that has led some scholars to say that John could have been written as early as in the 40's. This is a far cry from the date of 170 A.D. assigned by German Scholarship of a century ago! With this early dating of John there falls away the idea that the fourth Gospel is untrustworthy. And thus is established the view that the New Testament picture of the supernatural and risen Christ was the view of the earliest Church.

In many details surely the Scrolls can help in New Testament study. They do not overturn a single point of orthodox belief concerning the New Testament. They rather confirm what orthodox students have said and have made impossible some of the older critical views. The main value of the Scrolls it appears to the writer is in the field of Old Testament studies. But their illumination of the history of the earliest church is a welcome contribution as well. The Scrolls deserve widespread attention and should have our closest study.

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Of the thousands of books written on the scrolls just a few may be mentioned of practical usefulness.
- T. H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, New York: Doubleday Anchor paperback, 1956. (A translation of all the non Biblical material then available, a rather free translation, but well annotated. )
- Charles F. Pfeiffer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957 (Good popular discussion emphasizing the value of the Scrolls for the Old Testament. )
- J. T. Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judea*, London: SCM Press, 1959. (Best introduction to serious study. )
- Articles from 1948 on in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* and *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*.