

Ancient Scrolls



Adapted from Mark Link, SJ *Path Through Scripture*, Tabor Publishing, 1998 pp. 4-5

Most people think of the Bible as being just one single book. Actually, it is a *library* of scores of books that divide into two sections.

- The Old Testament, which was written before the coming of Jesus and

- The New Testament, which was written after the coming of Jesus.

Surprisingly, the oldest copies of biblical books were found in 1947 at **Qumran**, on the northwest corner of the Dead Sea. They were written on leather scrolls no known as the "Dead Sea Scrolls." Their discovery reads like a novel.

A young man was tending his goats. When one of them turned up missing, he went up a hillside in search of it.

Coming upon a large hole in the hillside, the young man threw a stone into the hole. When he

heard something break inside, he panicked and ran away. The next day he returned with his cousin.

Climbing through the hole and dropping to the floor of the cave, they first groped in darkness; but as their eyes grew accustomed they made out some jars with lids...

They opened one; it was empty... They opened still another and from this one they took some hides that were rolled up and inscribed and wrapped in linen. (Roland de Vaux "the Qumran Story")

The boys' amazing discovery touched off a treasure hunt for more scrolls that might be hidden in other hillside caves of the Dead Sea area. The subsequent hunt produced these remarkable results:

- Between the years 1947 and 1956, eleven caves yielded 800 documents (mostly in

fragmentary form).

-Some 200 were biblical writings that represented almost every book of the Hebrew Bible and were a thousand years older than our oldest copies of it.

Scholars think the scrolls belonged to Essenes (Jewish "monks") living in the desert at Qumran around 70 C.E. Common Era. The Essenes stashed the scrolls in the caves to keep them from being destroyed by invading Roman armies.

Popular Science magazine says that when the atom bomb mushroomed its message of death into the sky, many people speculated on the future uses of "atomic energy." Few, if any, put Bible study on the list. Ironically, this is one of the first uses to which it was put.

A Chicago scientist used a Geiger counter to measure radioactivity from a scroll of the Book of Isaiah and dated it. It turned out to be about a hundred years older than Jesus himself.

....

1 Concerning the dating of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Popular Science reported:

It was strangely fitting that

nuclear scientists, turning from war to peacetime research, should undertake the task of determining the age of an ancient transcript of the Book of Isaiah.

Read Isaiah 2:4-5

What did Popular Science have in mind?

2. Imagine you are a TV reporter preparing to interview a biblical expert upon the (sixtieth) anniversary of the finding of the

Dead Sea Scrolls.

List three questions that your viewers might be interested in having the expert answer.

3. In his book *What the Jews Believe*, Philip Bernstein says that during a fire in a synagogue, an Irish policeman rescued the Torah scroll from the ark. He gave it to the rabbi, saying proudly, "I saved your crucifix." Bernstein says, "Well, the Jews have no crucifix, but the policeman had the right idea."

a) What did Bernstein have in mind?

b) Research and share the meaning of **synagogue**, **scroll**, **ark**, **Torah**, and **rabbi**: give their approximate Christian equivalent.

4. Sometimes hanging by ropes, work crews explored over 200 caves in the Dead Sea area. Cave

4 housed the biggest find: over 400 manuscripts.

Why didn't the scrolls rot or deteriorate in the caves?

6. List the two sections into which the "library" of the Bible divides.

7. When, where and by whom were the oldest copies of the Bible found?

8. When, by whom, and from whom were the scrolls probably hidden in caves?

9. How many caves yielded how many biblical documents? How much older were these copies than those we had?

