

Documents and Historical Evidence

Following is an excerpt from the Encyclopedia Britannica on the Dead Sea Scrolls:

The Dead Sea Scrolls are ancient, mostly Hebrew, manuscripts (of leather, papyrus, and copper) first found in 1947 on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is among the more important finds in the history of modern archaeology.

Study of the scrolls has enabled scholars to push back the date of a stabilized Hebrew Bible to no later than AD 70, to help reconstruct the history of Palestine from the 4th century BC to AD 135, and to cast new light on the emergence of Christianity and of rabbinic Judaism and on the relationship between early Christian and Jewish religious traditions.

The Dead Sea Scrolls come from various sites and date from the **3rd century BC to the 2nd century AD**. The term usually refers more specifically to manuscripts found in 11 caves near the ruins of Qumran, which most scholars think was the home of the community that owned the scrolls. The relevant period of occupation of this site runs from c. 100 BC to c. AD 68, and the scrolls themselves nearly all date from the 3rd to the 1st century BC.

The **15,000 fragments** (most of which are tiny) represent the remains of 800 to 900 original manuscripts. They are conventionally **labeled** by cave number and the first letter (or letters) of the Hebrew title—e.g., 1QM = Cave 1, Qumran, Milhamah (the Hebrew word for “war”); or 4QTest = Cave 4, Qumran, Testimonia (i.e., a collection of proof-texts). Each manuscript has also been given an individual number.

The discoveries at the various sites include a wide variety of texts, but the greatest interest remains with the **sectarian writings**, which can be classified as follows: (1) rules, or manuals, like the Rule of the Community, describing the dualistic doctrine, constitution, and regulations of the “Union,” as the community owning the scrolls at Qumran called itself; and the War Scroll, which tells how the “children of light” finally conquer the “children of darkness”; (2) interpretations of biblical texts, such as commentaries on Isaiah, Habakkuk, Nahum, or Psalms; or groupings of texts by topic, such as the Florilegium or the Melchizedek Fragments—all of these typically relate scriptural passages to the sect and its times; (3) liturgical texts, including the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, which focus on angelic worship in the heavenly Temple (anticipating later Jewish mystical traditions), and the Thanksgiving Hymns, which express a powerful anthropology of human depravity redeemed through divine grace; (4) collections of laws, frequently dealing with cultic purity, such as the Halakhic Letter, the Damascus Document, and the Temple Scroll; and (5) ethical tracts (e.g., several sapient works, and the Song of the Sage).

The group at Qumran has been identified with many Jewish sects of the time. Even though some scholars believe the community to have been a branch of the Sadducees or Zealots, most believe that they were **Essenes**. The group is believed to have fled, or been driven out, to the Judean wilderness as a result of a dispute with the priestly leaders in Jerusalem over the sacred calendar and matters of legal interpretation. At Qumran 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 (i.e., a world sharply divided between good and evil, light and darkness), and looked for an **imminent divine judgment** of the wicked. They also cultivated a communal life of extreme **ritual purity**, necessitated by their rejection of the Temple cult.