



The Mystery and Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls

By Hershel Shanks

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"Illuminating . . . absolutely fascinating." --*The New York Times*

"First-rate. . . . An important addition to the Dead Sea Scrolls literature. . . . Shanks' compelling narrative of their discovery and contents . . . truly does justice to the material." --*Archaeology*

Fifty years ago, in a cave near Qumran on the Dead Sea, a Bedouin shepherd made a remarkable discovery--a cache of scrolls, in Hebrew and Aramaic, dating roughly from the time of Jesus. Here, in hundreds of literary fragments, was a window into an unknown world--the world where Christianity and modern Judaism were born.

Everyone has heard about the scrolls, but what, exactly, are their contents? Who wrote them? What do they reveal? Do they undermine the authority of the Hebrew Bible? Do they shed new light on Jesus, his sayings and his sacraments? Until recently, only a handful of experts could answer these questions, for only they had access to the scrolls. Now, thanks to the liberating efforts of scholars such as Hershel Shanks, the scrolls are the property of us all, their mystery at long last yielding to meaning. Here, in arresting detail, is the most complete assessment of the scrolls to date. It is a history of their discovery and dissemination, a summary of their scholarly interpretation, and a thoughtful meditation on their ultimate significance. Above all, it is an act of generosity--a great scholar's gift to the common understanding of the most important ancient texts found in modern times.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Since 1947, scholars from all over the world have hotly debated the meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The 200 biblical manuscripts found hidden in the caves of Qumran contain esoteric biblical commentaries, calendrical texts, and apocalyptic manuscripts similar to what can be found in the last pages of the bible. Translation of the scrolls was not an easy task. Much of the language was in ancient Hebrew or Aramaic, written by a sect of Judaism that had broken off from the Hellenistic ways of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The remarkable findings reveal a community of Jews who rejected the archaic teachings of the Temple, set up their own calendar, pondered the meaning of time, and wrote down their views of life after death.

Author Hershel Shanks reviews a great number of translations and histories of the period, ranging from ancient historians such as Josephus to contemporary scholars such as Emanuel Tov. He does this to get a better feel for the period of Judaism from the rulership of Herod the Great to the destruction of the First Temple by the Roman Empire, and in order to understand the philosophy that influenced the movement of the Essenes--who are generally recognized as the authors of the scrolls from Qumran. Shanks argues that the key to understanding the scrolls lies within the pages of the period of Judaism that was "remarkably variegated," because it will explain the cultural fragmentation that led to the evolution of thought that manifested itself into the scrolls. This accessible account is highly readable and a great introduction to an area of study that is contentious to this day. Even Shanks recognizes his limitations by humbly concluding, "Gradually, step by step there will be enough for a more convincing synthesis than can be presented today. In the meantime, much work remains to be done." --*Jeremy Storey*

From Publishers Weekly

Fifty years ago, a shepherd rummaging through caves surrounding the Dead Sea discovered a number of scrolls and scroll fragments that provided a glimpse into Judaism in the years between the takeover of Jerusalem by Pompeii in 64 B.C. and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by Rome in A.D. 70. In his engaging new book, Shanks, founder and editor of Biblical Archaeology Review, examines the history and significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Part detective story and part historical narrative, his book reveals the behind-the-scenes race to discover more scrolls that preoccupied both biblical archeologists and Bedouin, as well as the political intrigues between Israeli and American scholars that kept the scrolls from being translated and available to a larger public for more than 40 years. Most important, however, is Shanks's overview of the question of the authorship of the scrolls. The popular scholarly view on this topic is that the Essenes, a Jewish ascetic community, wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. Using archeological evidence as well as literary and historical criticism, Shanks conducts a survey of the major opinions on the matter to conclude that "if it weren't for the proximity of the scrolls to Qumran we would never think of Qumran as the site of an isolated religious community." Finally, Shanks contends that the scrolls are far less important for our understanding of Christianity and than for the glimpse they offer into Judaism between 250 B.C. and A.D. 70. Lively prose and lucid critical insights into one of the most fascinating chapters of modern history make Shanks's book a must read for armchair biblical historians and archeologists.

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From Library Journal

Though he is not a professional biblical scholar, Shanks has been deeply involved in the ongoing saga of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the pages of Biblical Archaeology Review (of which he is founder and editor), he championed the efforts of scholars to gain access to all the scrolls that have been found. Additionally, he

published, under the auspices of the Biblical Archaeology Society, a two-volume set of photographs of the unpublished scrolls. Shanks doesn't break new ground in this work but provides a survey of the history of Scrolls research and an analysis of their significance. His treatment is on the whole fair and balanced. Where there is a difference of scholarly opinion (such as the connection between the Scrolls and Qumran and the provenance of the scrolls), he presents the options, though he usually states whichAif anyAhe finds the most compelling. The writing is clear and nontechnical, and there is a brief bibliography of important works on the scrolls. All this makes for a good introduction for general readers and perhaps lower-level undergraduate students.

A Craig W. Beard, Univ. of Alabama at Birmingham Lib.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Deanna Stewart:

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