

Dr. Anthony Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus, Session 11, The Dead Sea Scrolls

Abstract:

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino provides a comprehensive overview of the **Dead Sea Scrolls**, characterizing them as a revolutionary archeological discovery that offers a unique window into **early Judaism** and the world surrounding the life of **Jesus**. The sources detail the accidental discovery of the manuscripts in 1947 and the subsequent recovery of nearly **900 texts** from eleven different caves, including biblical books, apocrypha, and specific sectarian documents. These findings are significant because they contain Hebrew scriptures **one thousand years older** than previously known versions, confirming the remarkable accuracy of the **Masoretic text** over centuries of transmission. Tomasino also explores the identity of the **Qumran community**, examining various theories that link the scrolls to the **Essenes**, Sadducees, or early Christian movements based on shared themes of **eschatology** and community discipline. Ultimately, the materials demonstrate that while the scrolls were not written by Christians, they share a similar **apocalyptic mindset** and interpretive style, providing essential context for the development of religious thought during the **intertestamental period**.

Briefing Document:

The Dead Sea Scrolls: Discovery, Significance, and Impact on Early Judaism

Executive Summary

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, beginning in 1947, represents one of the most significant archaeological events of the 20th century. Comprising approximately 900 texts across 30,000 fragments found in 11 caves, these manuscripts provide an unprecedented "window" into Judaism during the intertestamental period and the era immediately preceding Jesus.

The scrolls have revolutionized biblical studies by providing Hebrew manuscripts over 1,000 years older than the previously oldest available texts (the Masoretic Text, c. 900–1000 AD). Analysis of these documents has largely validated the meticulous accuracy of scribal transmission over a millennium, with 95% of the content remaining identical. Furthermore, the scrolls offer critical insights into sectarian Jewish life, specifically the *Yahad* community, revealing deep internal conflicts regarding the solar vs. lunar calendar, the legitimacy of the Hasmonean priesthood, and the interpretation of prophecy. While popular theories occasionally attempt to link the scrolls directly to the early Christian movement, internal evidence and chronology suggest they represent an "Essene-like" millennial sect that shared a similar eschatological mindset but predated the New Testament era by at least 150 years.

I. Discovery and Acquisition History

Initial Discovery (1947)

The first scrolls were discovered in 1947 near the Dead Sea. While a popular legend attributes the find to a Bedouin shepherd throwing a rock at a stray sheep and hitting a jar, the likely reality is that Bedouin groups were actively scouring caves for antiquities to sell on the black market.

The initial find in Cave 1 included:

- **The Great Isaiah Scroll:** A remarkably well-preserved copy of the book of Isaiah.
- **The Community Rule (Manual of Discipline):** A foundational document for sectarian life.
- **The Habakkuk Commentary:** A prophetic interpretation of the biblical book.
- **The War Scroll:** An account of a future battle between the "Children of Light" and "Children of Darkness."
- **The Genesis Apocryphon:** A legendary retelling of Genesis in the first person.
- **The Thanksgiving Scroll:** A collection of religious poetry.
- **The Job Targum:** An Aramaic translation of Job.

Acquisition and Controversy

The scrolls were initially sold for a mere \$100 to Mar Samuel, an Orthodox prelate in Jerusalem. Their authenticity was initially debated until confirmed by American archaeologist W.F. Albright. Due to the political instability of the region and the scrolls' status as "smuggled property," they were difficult to sell openly. Eventually, Eliezer Sukenik purchased them through a middleman for \$250,000. Subsequent discoveries between 1952 and 1956—including the "motherload" in Cave 4—led to more scientific excavations.

II. The Textual Corpus

The 11 caves yielded approximately 900 different texts. These are categorized into three primary types:

1. Biblical Manuscripts

The scrolls include fragments from every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther. The absence of Esther is attributed to the sect's strict opposition to intermarriage with Gentiles (a central theme of Esther) and the fact that the holiday of Purim was not part of their calendar.

Distribution of Selected Biblical Books: | Book | Number of Manuscripts | | :--- | :--
 -: | | Deuteronomy | 30 | | Psalms | 36 | | Isaiah | 21 | | Genesis | 19 | | Exodus | 17 | |
 Jubilees (Pseudepigrapha) | 16 | | 1 Enoch (Pseudepigrapha) | 20 |

2. Previously Known Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

The scrolls provided the original Hebrew and Aramaic versions of texts previously known only through later translations (Greek, Ethiopic, or Latin). This includes **Tobit**, the **Wisdom of Ben Sirach**, and significantly, large numbers of **1 Enoch** and **Jubilees**.

3. Previously Unknown Sectarian Texts

These documents detail the specific beliefs and rules of the community (*Yahad*):

- **4QMMT (Some of the Acts of the Law):** A foundational letter detailing why the sect separated from the mainstream Jewish establishment.

- **The Copper Scroll:** A unique text inscribed on copper listing hidden treasures, likely temple objects hidden during the Great Revolt.
 - **Peshirim:** Interpretive commentaries that apply biblical prophecy to the sect's own history and leaders.
 - **The Damascus Document:** A list of rules and history for a group that claimed to have moved to "Damascus" (possibly a symbolic name for Qumran).
-

III. Significance for Textual Criticism

Validation of the Masoretic Text

Before 1947, scholars relied on the Masoretic Text (MT) from the Middle Ages. The Dead Sea Scrolls proved that scribes had been incredibly meticulous:

- **Isaiah 53:** In the 166 words of this chapter, only 17 letters differ between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the MT. Ten are spelling differences, four are stylistic, and only three involve a substantial word addition ("light" in verse 11), which is also supported by the Septuagint.
- **Isaiah 14:4:** The scrolls corrected a "hapax legomena" (a word appearing only once). The MT used *Madhava* (translated as "Golden City"), but the scrolls used *Mahava* ("arrogant one"), clarifying a longstanding linguistic mystery.

Support for Other Traditions

The scrolls occasionally align with the **Septuagint** (Greek translation) or the **New Testament** against the Masoretic Text. For example, in Psalm 22:16, where the MT reads "like a lion are my hands and feet," the scrolls support the New Testament reading: "they have pierced my hands and feet."

IV. The Sectarian Community: The Yahad

The community that produced and collected these scrolls is widely identified as an **Essene or Essene-like sect**. They referred to themselves as the *Yahad* ("unity" or "community").

Core Beliefs and Conflicts

- **The Calendar:** A primary point of contention was the use of a **solar calendar** (364 days) versus the mainstream **lunar calendar**. The *Yahad* believed that using a lunar calendar invalidated holy festivals because they were performed on the wrong days.
- **The Priesthood:** They viewed the Hasmonean high priests as "Wicked Priests" and "sons of darkness." They criticized the Jerusalem establishment for corruption, including allowing dogs into the temple and improper ritual washing.
- **Eschatology:** The sect lived in "the Age of Wrath" and expected an imminent final battle. They believed the "Teacher of Righteousness" had been raised by God to lead them in truth.
- **Legal Strictness:** Their documents (like the Manual of Discipline) outline strict communal living, shared meals, and specific rules regarding behavior, such as when one was allowed to speak or spit.

Mysticism and Science

The scrolls reveal that the sect practiced forms of **physiognomy** (judging character by physical features) and **astrology**. They produced horoscopes that divided a person's spirit into nine parts, balancing "light" and "darkness."

V. Origins and Theories

While the **Essene Hypothesis** remains the "orthodox" theory, several alternatives exist:

- **The Zealot Theory:** Proposed by Cecil Roth, suggesting the scrolls' militant language reflects the Zealots of Jerusalem.
- **The Sadducean Theory:** Based on legal similarities in orthopraxy, though the *Yahad's* belief in angels and the afterlife contradicts known Sadducean theology.
- **The Christian Theory:** Some scholars (e.g., Robert Eisenman) argue the scrolls represent the early Christian movement. This is largely rejected by mainstream scholarship because the scrolls date 100–150 years before

Jesus, never mention Jesus or his specific teachings (like loving enemies), and reflect a much higher degree of militancy.

VI. Conclusion: Impact on Biblical History

The Dead Sea Scrolls have silenced critics who argued the Bible was a late, Greco-Roman invention. They demonstrate that the core themes of the New Testament—such as the "Kingdom of God," the "New Covenant," and the "Children of Light"—were already deeply embedded in Jewish thought.

The scrolls show that by 150 BC, the Hebrew Bible was largely fixed in its current form, though groups like the *Yahad* debated the edges of the canon (e.g., rejecting Esther but treating Jubilees as authoritative). Ultimately, the scrolls provide a vital analogy to the early church: both were millennial sects grappling with the delay of an anticipated end-time, redefining their faith as they waited for a "Day of Vengeance" or an eschaton that remained inscrutable in its timing.

Study Guide:

The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide provides a detailed analysis of the discovery, contents, and historical significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls based on the research and teachings of Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. **What was the primary archaeological significance of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls?** The discovery provided a "window into the world" of Judaism shortly before the time of Jesus, offering intact ancient texts for study. It revolutionized biblical studies by providing manuscripts, such as the

Great Isaiah Scroll, that are over a thousand years older than those previously available.

2. **How did the Dead Sea Scrolls silence critics regarding the antiquity of the Bible?** Critics once claimed the prophets were written late in the intertestamental period or that New Testament religion was more Greco-Roman than Jewish. The scrolls proved that these biblical texts existed in their current form much earlier than critics argued, validating the historical Jewish roots of the scriptures.
3. **What is the "Manual of Discipline," and what does it reveal about the Qumran community?** Also known as the Community Rule, this text outlines the strict regulations for a sectarian community living in a shared compound. It includes specific rules on shared meals, speaking order, and even social conduct like spitting, indicating a highly disciplined and secluded lifestyle.
4. **Why is the book of Esther notably absent from the Dead Sea Scrolls collection?** The sect was vehemently opposed to the intermarriage of Jews with Gentiles, a central theme of the book of Esther. Furthermore, the holiday of Purim, which originates from the book of Esther, is absent from the sect's list of religious holidays.
5. **What is a "Targum," and which example was found among the scrolls?** A Targum is a translation of a Hebrew biblical text into Aramaic. One of the original findings among the Dead Sea Scrolls was a Targum of the book of Job.
6. **How do the scrolls validate the accuracy of the Masoretic Text?** The scrolls, dating to approximately 200 B.C., are 95% identical to the Masoretic manuscripts from 900 A.D. This demonstrates the meticulous care scribes took over 1,100 years to transmit the text with only minor variations in spelling or style.
7. **What are "Peshirim," and how did the sect use them?** Peshirim are a unique form of biblical commentary where a scripture verse is quoted, followed by the phrase "its interpretation" (*peshet*). The sect used this method to apply prophetic texts, like Habakkuk or the Psalms, to events occurring within their own community's history.

8. **What is the significance of the "Copper Scroll" compared to other manuscripts?** Unlike the leather or papyrus used for other scrolls, the Copper Scroll was inscribed on metal to ensure its preservation. It contains a list of treasures, believed to be objects removed from the Jerusalem Temple and hidden at the start of the Great Revolt.
9. **Why was the calendar a major point of contention between the Dead Sea sect and other Jewish groups?** The sect insisted on a solar calendar as divinely intended, whereas mainstream Judaism used a lunar or lunisolar calendar. This was a critical issue because if festivals like the Day of Atonement were celebrated on the "wrong" day, the sect believed the rituals were meaningless and failed to atone for sins.
10. **How does the sect's view of the "Teacher of Righteousness" differ from the Christian view of Jesus?** While some suggest parallels, the Teacher of Righteousness is never described as atoning for the sins of others. Additionally, the sect's foundational documents command a "perfect hatred" for enemies, which stands in direct contrast to Jesus's command to love one's enemies.

Part II: Answer Key

1. The discovery provided ancient, intact texts that offered a window into the world before Jesus lived. It provided manuscripts 1,000 years older than previous versions, revolutionizing the study of early Judaism and the Bible.
2. The scrolls provided physical evidence that prophetic books were written long before the end of the intertestamental period. This silenced theories that the Bible was a recent invention or that the New Testament was primarily Greco-Roman rather than Jewish.
3. The Manual of Discipline (Community Rule) is a set of regulations for a sectarian group living in a compound. It covers everything from shared meals and speaking rules to hygiene and social conduct, showing the community was highly structured.

4. The sect likely excluded Esther because they were strictly against Jews marrying foreigners. Additionally, they did not observe Purim, the holiday established in that book.
5. A Targum is an Aramaic translation of a Hebrew text. A notable example found in the caves is the Job Targum.
6. Comparing the Great Isaiah Scroll to the Masoretic Text reveals a 95% word-for-word match despite an 1,100-year gap. Most differences are merely spelling variations or minor stylistic changes, proving the incredible accuracy of the scribes.
7. Peshirim are prophetic commentaries that interpret biblical verses as referring to the sect's own life. They believed books like the Psalms and Habakkuk were actually foretelling the history and struggles of their specific community.
8. The Copper Scroll is unique because it is made of metal and functions as a treasure map rather than a religious or literary text. It lists hidden riches, likely from the Jerusalem Temple, intended to be found later.
9. The sect used a solar calendar and argued that the lunar calendar used by others was incorrect. They believed that using the wrong calendar rendered holy days and sacrifices invalid, meaning the nation remained in sin.
10. The Teacher of Righteousness was a leader who led in truth but did not serve as a substitutionary atonement for sin. Unlike Jesus, the Teacher's followers were encouraged to hate their enemies (the "sons of darkness") rather than love them.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the Source Context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Evolution of Biblical Manuscripts:** Discuss how the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls changed the scholarly understanding of the Hebrew Bible's transmission. Compare the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the Scrolls,

highlighting specific examples where the Scrolls provided clarity or correction.

2. **Sectarian Identity and the Essene Theory:** Analyze the various theories regarding the identity of the group that produced the scrolls (Essenes, Zealots, Sadducees, etc.). Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the "Essene" hypothesis in light of the fact that the word "Essene" never appears in the texts.
3. **The Solar vs. Lunar Calendar Conflict:** Explain the technical differences between the solar and lunar calendars as described in the text. Discuss why this seemingly astronomical debate was considered a matter of spiritual life and death for the Dead Sea Scroll community.
4. **Apocalypticism and the "Day of Vengeance":** Describe the sect's expectations for the end of the world (*Eschaton*). How did they interpret the Book of Daniel, and how did they handle the "disappointment" when their predicted timelines for the final battle did not come to pass?
5. **Comparative Analysis: The Dead Sea Sect and Early Christianity:** Examine the "lines of analogy" between the Qumran community and the early Christian movement. Focus on shared terminology (New Covenant, Sons of Light) while clearly articulating the fundamental theological and ethical differences between the two groups.

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
4QMMT	A fragmentary letter (Some of the Acts of the Law) detailing the sect's reasons for separating from the priesthood, focusing on calendar and purity issues.
Apocrypha	Books written during the intertestamental period, often preserved in Greek, that the Jews did not eventually consider part of the official canon.

Copper Scroll	A unique metal manuscript listing hidden treasures, believed to be relocated from the Temple in Jerusalem.
Eschaton	The end of the world or the end of the current age, characterized by an imminent battle between light and darkness.
Genesis Apocryphon	A retelling of Genesis stories (Noah to Abraham) in the first person, featuring legends and expansions on the biblical text.
Hapax Legomena	A term for a word that appears only once in the entire Old Testament, making its definition difficult to determine without comparative texts.
Intercalation	The process of adding an extra month to a lunar calendar to realign it with the solar year.
Masoretic Text	The traditional Hebrew text of the Old Testament, codified by scholars called Masoretes around 900 A.D., serving as the basis for modern translations.
Peshet	A style of commentary (plural: <i>Peshetim</i>) that interprets biblical prophecy as being fulfilled in the contemporary events of the sect.
Pseudepigrapha	Ancient Jewish writings, such as 1 Enoch and Jubilees, often attributed to biblical figures and preserved by specific church traditions.
Septuagint	The Greek translation of the Old Testament, which sometimes reflects a different Hebrew manuscript tradition than the Masoretic Text.
Teacher of Righteousness	The leader of the Dead Sea sect whom they believed was raised up by God to lead them in truth during the "Age of Wrath."

Wicked Priest	The antagonist of the Teacher of Righteousness, usually identified as a high priest in Jerusalem who persecuted the sect.
Yahad	The Hebrew term meaning "community" or "unity," which the Dead Sea Scroll sect used to refer to themselves.
