

Sailing the Dead Sea
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Reading

Slightly adapted from the introduction to [The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation](#) (1996) by Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook (pgs. 8 & 43):

What exactly are the Dead Sea Scrolls? The objects themselves are documents written with a carbon-based ink usually on animal skins, although some are inscribed on papyrus. The scrolls were written right to left using no punctuation except for an occasional paragraph indentation—no periods, commas, quotation marks, or any of the other reader helps to which we are so accustomed. Indeed, in some cases there are not even spaces between words: the letters simply run together in a continuous stream. The codex, the early form of the books with pages bound on one side, had not yet been invented, so the “pages,” or columns, were written consecutively on the scroll. To read them one slowly unrolled the scroll, and then, to be polite, rewrapped it. [Be Kind: Rewind!] Not a few of the scrolls testify that the ancients sometimes failed to “be kind.” The scrolls are written in several languages and half a dozen scripts, and though all are religious texts, within that category their contents are amazingly varied.

Translation is the last step in an intricate and frequently uncertain process of reconstruction ... Translators betray both what they translate and readers of the translations. By their very effort they violate the original. Yet we are not unduly concerned, nor in the least repentant. Any damage is for a worthy cause and is not irreparable. Much of the beauty, the concision, the power of the Hebrew and Aramaic in which the scrolls are couched will continue to reside, untranslatable, where nature has decreed it must. And we are not really traitors to you, the reader, for we have drawn your attention to our betrayal from the very first... If we have perhaps transported at least most of the meaning of the words across time, space, and linguistic distance, we shall have succeeded in a principal aim...

Sermon

What is in the Dead Sea Scrolls? What do they say? What do they reveal? Something important, right? Something huge. Something that makes the Dead Sea Scrolls “the greatest manuscript discovery of modern times,” as proclaimed by Professor William Foxwell Albright, professor at The Johns Hopkins University, who was among the first people told about their discovery. Something that has turned “Dead Sea Scrolls” into a phrase that is used like “Xerox,” “Kleenex,” or “Velcro,” to mean not only what it specifically means but to stand in for a whole category of things, leading to such interesting headlines in major newspapers such as: “Buddhist ‘Dead Sea Scrolls’ uncovered by British Library,” and [“Afghanistan wants its ‘Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism’ back from UK.”](#)

Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism? Were these Buddhist manuscripts found near the Dead Sea? No. Do they have some connection to Judaism? No. These *were* scrolls from the 1st Century B.C.E. that give clues to the early history of Buddhism just as the Dead Sea Scrolls--composed between 250 B.C.E. and 70 C.E.--offer previously undiscovered clues to the early history of Judaism. So rather than saying “Ancient Manuscripts of Great Importance to Piecing Together the History of Buddhism,” these journalists used what they figured would be culturally recognizable shorthand: “The Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism.”

In the introduction to the new translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the reading, the authors write:

Like Shangri-la, the term “Dead Sea Scrolls” has the power to evoke images and emotions even in those who have only a vague idea of what they are. The term is redolent of enigma, of intrigue, perhaps even of sacred mysteries; hovering in the background are images of caves, scrolls, barren deserts, and intense scholars hunched over tiny scraps of leather...

From their discovery in 1947 by a Bedouin goatherd who, searching for a lost goat, threw a stone into a cave and heard it shatter a clay jar inside to the introduction of ever-advancing computer technology in the study and analysis of the text right up to the present day, enigma and intrigue runs throughout the story of the scrolls.

There is something captivating about the image of many Bedouin goatherds scouring the caves in the area after they hear of the discovery and sale of the first scrolls, taking their fragments to market, oblivious of their real worth.

There is something ominous about these documents, so important to the understanding of early Judaism, finding their way to a Jewish scholar in Jerusalem just as Israel is recognized as a state by the United Nations.

There is something mysterious and frustrating about the secrecy of the first team of scholars that worked on the scrolls. Far too small a group to ever finish the laborious task of putting the puzzle of fragments together within their lifetimes, they were notoriously close-mouthed about their work and refused to allow other scholars access. There were charges of deliberate exclusion of non-Christian (and specifically non-Catholic) scholars, as though they were poised to hush the release of any revelations that could be considered damaging to the doctrines of the Church. As this kind of secrecy lasted for over 30 years, one Oxford professor called the closely held scroll material the “academic scandal of the century.”

There is something shocking about the seemingly cavalier way that this first team went about the delicate and painstaking business of piecing together fragments and preserving ancient manuscripts, as people who worked on the team revealed that windows were left open in the room with the scrolls, allowing dirt and sunlight to damage the scrolls, and further that some of the men were smoking cigarettes as they carried out their tasks. Sounds more like 1950’s ad men (mad men) than scholars. (It was a different time.)

There is something intellectually satisfying about the genius of scholars who, once the original team released a concordance of the material they had analyzed thus far (this concordance being a list of words they had found, with the words on either side of it and the document that it came from), devised a computer program in 1991 that used that information to reconstruct the full original texts and publish it for the world to see.

There is something that continues to draw us in, as the latest DNA technology is put to use in identifying the leather of some of the scrolls (from cows? there were no cows around there!) and possibly challenging some of the work that scholars have already done (those words, alas, did *not* come from the same scroll).

There is something almost magical about the very preservation of the scrolls across that vast expanse of time in such harsh conditions. David Noel Freedman, endowed Chair in Hebrew Biblical Studies at the

University of California notes that “the Essenes’ method of storing documents also contributed to the Scrolls’ extraordinary preservation. Many of the Scrolls were planed in clay jars that weren’t sealed, but were loosely covered. As the manuscripts deteriorated, they formed a kind of glue that sealed the jars. No one could have predicted this, and it certainly wasn’t intentional” ([What Are the Dead Sea Scrolls and Why Do They Matter?](#) pg. 35). No, not intentional...but maybe almost magical.

This air of mystery and intrigue extends over into speculation about the community that preserved these scrolls. In the quotation I just read, David Noel Freedman called them “the Essenes.” It is a popular notion that the community at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, were the Essenes that were previously known only through the work of three first century C.E. historians: Pliny, who was Roman, and Josephus and Philo, Jews who became Roman citizens.

Pliny wrote that the Essenes lived in the wilderness near the shore of the Dead Sea, near the town of “En Gedi” and with “only the palm trees for company.” This almost exactly describes the location at Qumran. Josephus and Philo described the Essenes as a group of extremely pious Jews, all men, who believed that they alone were worthy to uphold the Law of Moses ([The Dead Sea Scrolls](#) by Ilene Cooper, pgs. 26 & 28).

There was initially agreement that the people at Qumran were separatists, voluntarily extracting themselves from the society to create their own community, purified of what was seen as the corrupting influences of the established religion. They did not reject Judaism; rather, they sought to practice it with what they felt was the proper, rigorous observance. They were intentionally “holier than thou,” one might say.

In keeping with that attitude--though they of course hated the Roman occupying force and imagined an apocalyptic battle against the Romans in which they would be victorious--their greatest enemies seemed to be fellow Jews who were seen to be perverting the true religion. They appear to have separated the world into two camps: “The Children of Light” (their own community) and “The Children of Darkness” (those who didn’t follow the one, true way.) They would have had no trouble talking, as President Bush did, about “evildoers,” with the one exception that they were not an imperial power but rather subjects of an imperial power. They expected the end of the world to come soon, and indeed it came for them in 70 C.E. when the Romans invaded and apparently wiped them out completely. There is the additional historical irony that if this community had not been wiped out, we would most likely not have the evidence of the scrolls today. It is guessed that the scrolls were hidden in anticipation of the Roman invasion and that if the residents of Qumran would have survived the battle they would have returned to retrieve the precious scrolls from their hiding place.

But even the temporarily settled questions, like the identification of the Qumran community with the Essenes, are increasingly being challenged as further study and speculation proceed. Nowhere do the scrolls speak of *Essenes*, critics of the theory point out, nor do the scrolls anywhere command celibacy, though that is noted as a trait of the Essenes by all three historians mentioned earlier. Philo says the Essenes pursued only peaceful occupations, but the “War Scroll” “gives detailed prescriptions for the conduct of a very real, though future, armed conflict against the powers of darkness”. Philo and Josephus say the Essenes rejected slavery, but “The Damascus Document” has rules governing the treatment of slaves” (pg. 25). Overall, the urge to move toward convenient and tidy identification does not match up with responsible historical research nor with present day reality. Imagine, say the editors and translators of [The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation](#), trying to understand every shade of

religious opinion in the contemporary United States using only the categories of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew. (Unitarian Universalism would be left out, for one thing...we wouldn't want that!)

And if we just take the term "Protestant," a category that could include Jesse Jackson, Pat Robertson, and David Koresh, how much can we expect it to tell us about the individuals who fall into that description?

And so it is with most every assertion made about the Scrolls and the community from which they came: Were the scrolls written and transcribed at Qumran? There was some evidence of tables possibly used for scribal activity, but further evidence showed that hundreds of differing scribal hands were at work. If the scrolls were actually produced at Qumran, one would expect much fewer unique signatures, and many scrolls with the same scribal signature.

Was the Qumran community truly separatist? Further study and speculation suggests that they may have been much more politically astute and involved than previously thought.

Every assertion, in other words, leads to further mystery...and the great mystery for us who are not Dead Sea Scrolls scholars: if the Dead Sea Scrolls are so all-fired important, how come we don't know what's in them? They seem to hold the promise of explosive revelation...but have achieved that promise only in fiction.

As I searched out Netflix for Dead Sea Scrolls movies and Amazon for Dead Sea Scrolls books, the common refrain in the comments was: "This had a lot of interesting stuff about how the Scrolls were found, but didn't tell me much about what was actually written in them."

Let me put it this way: if the story *about* the scrolls reads like a thriller, the scrolls themselves decidedly do not. Reading the scrolls is more akin to trying to tune in a distant radio station--pre-satellite radio, folks--trying to tune in a distant radio station playing the news in your old car on a lonely desert road in the middle of the night. In the midst of the static, you catch about every third or fourth or fifth word, and you have to imagine the rest of the sentence. Or you listen a little further, hoping something you hear will put what you just heard in context. Reading the translation of the scrolls is reading through many sentences that are interrupted by brackets and periods and parentheses with the words that scholars think might have been there...it's slow-going.

The arduous work of not only piecing together this unbelievably complicated jigsaw puzzle (like a jigsaw puzzle that's been left out in the monsoons and chewed on by coyotes), but imagining the pieces that are missing and then having to translate the result, is mind-boggling. It is no wonder to me that revised interpretations are still forthcoming. Whatever we come up with, though valuable, can only be tentative.

So where does that leave us? As was said in the reading, many scholars believe that "[i]f we have perhaps transported at least most of the meaning of the words across time, space, and linguistic distance, we shall have succeeded in a principal aim." And what meaning do we find?

Well, I shouldn't go without saying that the Dead Sea Scrolls give the earliest versions of every book in the Hebrew Scriptures (except the Book of Esther) that have yet been discovered--earliest by approximately 1000 years. If you have a study Bible, you will probably run across footnotes that refer

to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Scholars suggest that finding all of these texts points to an established canon of Scripture that predates what some may have imagined.

On the other hand, the Dead Sea Scrolls, in giving a deeper sense of the diversity of practice and interpretation in the Jewish religion of the time, also point to a more general truth about the study of history: the more we learn about any time period, the more diversity we discover. Though it is tempting to categorize in neat and tidy boxes; though we often wish to go in search of the one true source; though it would be nice to simplify our understanding and interpretation with some clear once-and-for-all answers, diversity always awaits us. I am reminded of Albert Einstein's advice to make things as simple as possible, but not simpler.

And, appropriately enough, the Dead Sea Scrolls leave us with a question: what will people make of what we leave behind? What will they imagine mattered to us? How will they characterize our place in time? And what kind of legacy would we wish to linger if we could somehow pass a message, preserve a Unitarian Universalist scroll for the future?

For today, in memory of those who gave their lives in our Knoxville congregation one year ago, I think I would put the words of Frances David on my scroll: We need not think alike to love alike.

So may it be...