For forty-five years, a select group of scholars has guarded the Dead Sea Scrolls more closely than a state secret. Cornell's man on the beat explains what all the fuss is about.

The Dead Sea Scrolls
by Gary A. Rendsburg

From the moment forty-five years ago when a young Bedouin boy chasing down a stray goat accidentally discovered the first manuscripts, to the most recent high-tech applications of infrared photography and computer-generated texts, the Dead Sea Scrolls have captivated the imagination of the general public and the attention of scholars worldwide. In the last year and a half, there have been several new developments based on various controversial aspects of Dead Sea Scrolls research. One result of these developments may be easier access to the Scrolls,
which should make the life and work of many scholars—including me—much easier.

The story of the Dead Sea Scrolls begins in 1947 when Muhammad ed-Dhib, a young herder from the Taamire tribe of the Judean Desert, followed a stray member of his flock into a cave in the cliffs high above the Dead Sea. He not only found his lost goat, but he also discovered large pottery vessels holding seven parch- ment manuscripts. Muhammad, who like most of the tribesmen was illiterate, could not read the material but recognized its value. On the Taamires’ next trip to Bethlehem to buy supplies, they sold the scrolls to a man named Kando, a cobblor who also dabbled in antiquities. Kando, a Syrian Orthodox Christian, also could not read the material, but took the scrolls to Jerusalem where the Metropolitan Mar Samuel, head of St. Mark’s Monastery of the Syrian Orthodox Church, recognized them as ancient Hebrew documents.

Word soon reached scholars in Jerusalem that a major discovery had been made. On November 27, 1947, the same day the United Nations voted to partition Palestine and thus create the State of Israel, Prof. Eliezer Sukenik of the Hebrew University dressed him- self in Arab garb and made the dan- gerous trip to Bethlehem. There he visited Kando, saw the scrolls for the first time, confirmed their au- thenticity and immediately purchased three of the documents. Mar Samuel had the other four documents and several years later, through a me- diator, sold them to Prof. Vgael Yadin of the Hebrew University. All seven of the documents found their way to Jerusalem, where they are now displayed in the Shrine of the Book Pavilion of the Israel Museum.

But where exactly had these scrolls come from? Were there more of them? Could their authenticity be proven beyond doubt? How old were they? The answers to all these ques- tions began to unfold in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Although the Bedouins had attempted to conceal the exact location of the cave in which the documents were found (for they wished to explore further and sell more items), eventually schol-
did not participate in the sacrificial services in Jerusalem; likewise the Qumran texts do not refer to sacrifices and in fact allude to their current locale as a voluntary withdrawal to the desert to remove themselves from what they perceived as the sins of Jerusalem and its Temple. Many of the Essenes were celibate, and while there is no proof of celibacy among the people of Qumran, there are some hints in the texts. In the various laws laid out in the Community Rule document and in other legal texts, there are no references to women. Furthermore, only a few of the skeletons found in the cemetery at Qumran are female. The Essenes believed that all matters of human life were predestined, and this is strongly reflected in all the Qumran texts. Finally, there was a clear apocalyptic bent among the Essenes, and this, too, is seen in the Qumran material, especially in a text called the War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. Based on this evidence, then, I think it is clear that the Dead Sea Scrolls present us with firsthand material composed by ancient Jewish sectarian Essenes.

Another reason such importance has been attached to the Dead Sea Scrolls is that among the texts are the oldest copies of the books of the Bible ever found. In some cases, we have only small fragments, but in the celebrated case of the Book of
Isaiah we have a complete copy of all sixty-six chapters. When one realizes that prior to 1947 the oldest copies of the Hebrew Bible were from the early Middle Ages, one quickly sees how the scrolls represent a tremendous boon to those scholars interested in how the biblical books were copied and passed from one generation to the next. The book of Daniel was written in 165 B.C.E., so the fragmentary copies of Daniel found at Qumran are very close to the original date of composition. Some of the copies in use at Qumran diverge greatly from the traditional text used in Judaism (the Masoretic Text); at the same time much of the material is very close to the traditional text, differing sometimes only in small matters of spelling.

The Scrolls have been of great interest to scholars of both Judaism and Christianity. Simply stated, the Dead Sea Scrolls have revolutionized every aspect of the study of ancient Judaism, and by implication, modern Judaism. And scholars of Christianity have also followed the developments outlined above with keen interest, for not only do the Qumran documents represent Jewish texts from the period in which Jesus lived, but there are many points of commonality between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament. Even before 1947 some scholars had suspected that Christianity developed out of a particular type of Essene Judaism. The Dead Sea Scrolls seem to prove this hypothesis; in the very least they provide an important bridge between the Essenes and the early Christians.

Some of the points discussed above have close ties with early Christianity. The notion of communal life, opposition to the sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple, the role of celibacy, and an emphasis on apocalypticism all resonate in the New Testament. Specific passages from the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) are cited both at Qumran and in the New Testament to prove the same point. For example, both groups of texts use the verse “Male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27) as the basis for their distinctive marriage laws. Another example, “A voice crying in the wilderness” (Isaiah 40:3) is used at Qumran to refer to the community itself, while in the New Testament it refers to John the Baptist.

The organizational structure of the community at Qumran and those described in the New Testament is strikingly similar. At Qumran a group of twelve elders presides over all activities, a practice paralleled in the Book of Acts with the work of the twelve Apostles. The leader of the Qumran community is called the “overseer,” which is the same term used by Paul in Acts for a leader of a Christian community.

Yet despite all these close links between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament, most scholars do not think there is a direct relationship between the two. The most important reason: at Qumran the law of Moses was upheld and followed in the most scrupulous fashion. In the New Testament, of course, there is a strong move away from adherence to Jewish law. So the Qumran people are not early Christians, but they give us a picture of what an ancient Jewish sect that evolved into Christianity would have looked like. Probably, the early Christians were a different group of Essenes, one that was less rigorous in its observance of Jewish law but which adhered to many other Essene principles. If there is any direct connection, the aforementioned John the Baptist is the most likely bridge. The New Testament tells us that he lived in the desert for some time. There were so few settlements in the wilderness that if he came in contact with any Jewish communities in the region Qumran likely would have been one.

In the past few years new controversies have arisen, not so much over questions of interpretation but over questions of access to the material. The first scrolls discovered in 1947 were published quickly. Sukenik published the three manuscripts that he had purchased; Millar Burrows of Yale University published three of the books held by Mar Samuel, and Yadin eventually published the seventh text. (Burrows was a teacher of the late Isaac Rabinowitz, professor emeritus of Semitic studies at Cornell, who in turn wrote several important articles devoted to the Qumran texts.) Thus the scholarly public had early and easy access to the initial discovery.

As exploration of the eleven caves progressed and additional documents were found, the texts were entrusted to scholars comprising an international committee devoted to the publication of the material. Some of these researchers did their job well; within several years their texts were published for all the
A big break came in 1991 when a pair of researchers at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati used a sophisticated computer program designed to read and create texts from concordances to produce a corpus of the unpublished Qumran documents. The privately circulated concordance developed in the 1950s served as their database, and the computer did the rest of the work. Scholars in possession of the actual texts claimed that their work had been stolen from them, and that the computer-generated texts are not fully accurate. Still, this use of the most modern research tool in the humanities forced the issue of access to some of the most ancient Hebrew texts extant.

A few weeks later it was revealed that the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, had in its collection photographs and microfilms of all the Dead Sea Scrolls materials. Apparently, they had been deposited there in case something happened to the originals in Jerusalem. The Huntington Library announced that it was “going public” with this material, and that any competent scholar who requested access to the documents would be granted permission to view them and publish them.

The Cincinnati and Huntington projects will result in a dramatic change in the way Dead Sea Scrolls research will be conducted. Already, scholars not connected to the international committee are publishing the results of their initial studies. For some scholars this means the ability to test long-held theories. In one case, Prof. Lawrence Schiffman of New York University will be able to test his hypothesis concerning the Sadducean identification of the Qumran community (notwithstanding the Essene connections described above, there are also some doctrines of the Sadducees reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls). In another case, Prof. Robert Eisenman of California State University at Long Beach will be able to test his theory that the Qumran manuscripts are more directly connected to early Christianity.

My own work will be affected by easier access to the unpublished materials. My main area of interest lies not in the identification of the sect (as noted above, I hold to the majority Essene view), but in various philological aspects of the documents. Thus, for example, several years ago I published an article on a key word in one of the laws of the Community Rule. This word is unique in the published Dead Sea Scrolls, and it is very rare in other ancient Hebrew works such as the Bible. The law states that members of the sect are to be punished with ten days of confinement for a certain public action. Most scholars translate the word in question either as “gesticulate” (with the argument that it was impolite to gesticulate while speaking) or “lean, recline” (with the argument that this, too, was impolite in the presence of others). I proposed that the word means “urinate, defecate,” a meaning I defended on philological grounds. To solidify my argument, I wanted to know if the word occurs elsewhere in the Dead Sea Scrolls, specifically in the unpublished texts. I was stymied. There simply was no way for a researcher not connected to the international team to find answers to such questions. In the end my article was published in a respectable scholarly journal, but still one wonders if somewhere in the vast reserve of unpublished Dead Sea Scrolls this key word is lurking.

And so the saga still is not complete. From the moment forty-five years ago when an illiterate Bedouin goatherd first found the scrolls, until just recently when a literate computer program recreated the scrolls from a concordance database, the discoveries have been revealing and startling. Who knows what discoveries lie ahead as more scholars pore over more texts as they become available? As they say on television: stay tuned!

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