



The Dead Sea Scrolls Unravelled

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The Cheat Sheet is designed to give readers a quick overview of sophisticated topics – making you look smart without all that annoying, studious effort. Use it as a conversation starter- all you gotta do is keep a straight face. “Go get ‘em, Einstein!”

Talk about stumbling onto buried treasure: the Dead Sea scrolls were found in a bunch of caves near Jerusalem by some kids looking for a stray goat in the 1940’s. Written about 2,000 years ago, the scrolls contain most of the Old Testament, a treasure map and some really good recipes for plum wine.

Namedropping:

Essenes: (pron: eh?-scenes): A religious community of Jews living around the time of Jesus who supposedly penned a majority of the scrolls.

Jesus (pron. Gee-zus): You know the guy.

The Basics: The Dead Sea Scrolls are often referred to as the greatest manuscript discovery of modern times (rivaled only by Donald Trump’s autobiography). Surprisingly, the Scrolls weren’t all buried together. In fact, the texts hail from eleven separate caves along the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, where they were discovered between 1947 and 1956. (If you’re driving there from Jerusalem, head 13 miles east and take a left at the town of Jerico. It’s 1300 feet below sea level.) Coveted for the info they have about the Bible and Judaism from the period, the Scrolls illuminate early Christian beliefs and our understanding of the Old Testament. They also give a first-hand look at early Jewish schmoozing, detailing the “Festival of the New Wine” – tiros. The Scrolls contain some 200 copies of books of the Bible, as well as prophecies by Ezekeil and Jeremiah. In fact, they show how Christianity is rooted in Judaism and are often referred to as the evolutionary link between the two.

EXTRA CREDIT:

So, who wrote them? Most scholars agree that the Dead Sea Scrolls are the remains of a library belonging to an ancient Jewish sect, the Essenes, a strict, Torah observant Jewish group. They were led by a priest called the "Teacher of Righteousness." Modesty, apparently, was not one of their virtues. It’s believed the scrolls were hidden in the caves in an attempt to protect them during an outbreak of the First Jewish

Revolt (A.D. 66-70) as the Roman army advanced against the rebel Jews. Mostly scribed in Hebrew, there are also passages in Greek and Aramaic, the common language of Palestinian Jews for the last two centuries B.C. and of the first two centuries A.D.

Conversation Starters:

- Scholars had to piece over 100,000 fragments together like a jigsaw puzzle – with most the bits missing. Better hope they got it right!
- Carbon dating indicates the Scrolls were written from the third century BCE though 68 CE.
- There are between 825-875 manuscripts, the longest of which is the Temple Scroll, stretching out at 28 feet. (Cliffs Notes not available.)
- 1883: Jerusalem antiquities dealer, M. H. Shapira, attempts to sell pieces of a manuscript of Deuteronomy. Heartbroken when scholars determine that his ‘treasure’ is a clever forgery, Shapira commits suicide the next year. Recently, however, scholars have rethought the authenticity of his fragments.
- The Scrolls first catch the American public’s attention in a series of articles written by Edmund Wilson for the New Yorker magazine in 1947.
- The scrolls contain previously unknown stories about biblical figures such as Abraham and Noah, including an explanation of why God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. (He wouldn’t do his homework.)
- Also included in the mix are some Thanksgiving psalms, a couple upbeat hymns, and a divinely dictated battle plan, just in case of war.
- Editor’s nightmare: Other than paragraph indentation, the scrolls have no punctuation None *While the scrolls make no mention of Jesus (or Tammy Faye for that matter) they do have psalms attributed to King David and the dying last words of Amram -- Moses’ dad.
- Scroll you’d most like to unroll: The Copper Scroll is a veritable treasure map of secret tombs containing silver, gold and spices.
- The original scrolls were written on parchment (dried animal skin), papyrus and copper. The Paperback versions should be out early next year.