Qumran and the Caves

The Archaeological Site of Qumran (a.k.a. Khirbet Qumran)

Khirbet Qumran in Arabic means ‘the ruins of Qumran’ (khirbeh means ‘ruin’). Archaeological evidence for people living at the Qumran site comes mostly from 100 BCE up to 70 CE, the year that the Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem. For many years, archaeologists and scholars have debated the original purpose of the Qumran site during this period.

The least problematic and most popular theory is that it was home to a sectarian community. The sectarian community theory is the only theory without major problems for both the nature of the Scrolls and the archaeology of the site. The buildings which have been found at Qumran indicate that it was home to a Jewish community which placed high value on ritual purity because there are numerous large mikva'ot or ritual baths on the site. Some alternative theories have been proposed: a country villa, commercial centre, pottery-making site, or a fortress, but these create more problems than they solve.

Furthermore, Qumran is located on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, about 60m above sea level, quite high above the Dead Sea (425m below sea level). This site is most likely the same one described by Roman writer Pliny the Elder in his Natural History and two first-century Jewish writers: Josephus Flavius and Philo of Alexandria. Josephus and Philo wrote that an Essene community of ‘thousands’ of men lived there and strictly followed Jewish law. Finally, both Josephus and Philo wrote that they did not marry and had no children. Scholars still debate on this point; arguing that the sectarian texts do not reject marriage outright and that many of the texts are idealized visions of a messianic future, not a guidebook for the present. However, one factor in favour of the male-only Qumran community is the evidence of Qumran’s cemetery. The only women and children buried at Qumran are outside the ‘main’ cemetery and date to early Islam.

Another intense debate is about whether Qumran was the place where all the scrolls were created. Early archaeologists like Roland de Vaux imagined that a large room at Qumran in which three inkwells were found and traces of tables was their ‘scriptorium’: today this building is still popularly called the scriptorium. However, there are major problems with this theory: ancient scribes did not use tables for writing or reading, tables were not used by scribes to write or read until the medieval period. If the tables were used for anything, they might be for the production of parchment, which did involve tables, or for dining, which is more likely. If scrolls were written at Qumran, they would have been outside or under shade using laps and wooden boards as surfaces, in a chair/stool or on the floor, as was done universally in the Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Besides this, scholars cite that we do not know when or how the three inkwells were deposited on the site.

The Discovery of the Caves and Association with Qumran

The first seven scrolls of the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in early 1947 by a Bedouin shepherd Mohammed edh-Dhib (‘the Wolf’) searching for a lost goat. He heard pottery breaking when tossing stones into what is now Cave 1. He brought the scrolls, still in their pottery vases, to an antiquities dealer in Bethlehem called Kando. The seven scrolls were
bought and sold on the antiquities market without knowledge of the value, until a second antiquities dealer, Salahi, offered to sell them to Eleazar Sukenik, a leading archaeologist and founder of Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s Institute of Archaeology. It was Sukenik who realized the scrolls might date back to the Second Temple period. In 1948, archaeologists came to investigate the area where the scrolls had been found.

Archaeologists could not dig straight away after 1948 because the State of Israel was formed and there was a War of Independence; Jordanian forces occupied the West Bank including the area where Qumran was (Qumran and the West Bank would remain part of Jordan until the Six-Day War in 1967). Roland de Vaux of the École Biblique in Jerusalem worked with the Jordanian Antiquities Department to excavate Cave 1 in 1949. De Vaux then made the connection between the caves and Qumran and began excavations there in 1952. Meanwhile, Bedouins found Caves 4 and 6. Cave 4, found in 1952, contains vastly more scrolls than any of the other caves (over 550).

Over three decades, a small scholarly team was formed to identify and piece together the Scrolls, as well as other finds in the Judean Desert such as more scrolls and objects found at Masada. A lot of criticism of these years concerned why it was taking so long to publish all of the Dead Sea Scrolls finds (only half the finds were published by 1991). In fact, the original team of scholars were overwhelmed by the data but lacked sufficient funding and did not want to expand their team or allow other scholars to take over. By this time, several theories about the origins of the Dead Sea Scrolls had become very well-known: the original team believed that the creators of the Scrolls were Essenes, and that these Essenes lived a monastic life without private property. This theory made the Essenes resemble the Christian Apostles and early Christianity, and some people began to claim that John the Baptist was an Essene and familiar with Qumran. Christians who wanted to argue how Jesus and John the Baptist were not to be identified with the Judaism of their time at all wanted to stress how Jewish the Dead Sea Scrolls were; while other Christians wanted to incorporate the Dead Sea Scrolls into early Christianity so much that their Jewish origins were lost or ignored. The majority of the Scrolls date to the first century BCE, very few date to the first century CE, the century in which early Christianity began. 95% of the scrolls are in Hebrew and the rest in Greek and Aramaic.

A minority of scholars began to question whether or not the site of Qumran had anything to do with the Dead Sea Scrolls; rather they might possibly be from Jerusalem. This hypothesis, the Golb Hypothesis, is named after scholar Norman Golb. Because one-third of the Scrolls are sectarian, though, the leading theory is that the Qumran community created or owned most if not all of the Scrolls.

Today, most scholars question whether the Qumran community would have called themselves Essenes since they do not use this word in their own sectarian writings. This is why these resources refer to ‘Qumran community’ instead. The community does refer to itself as the Yachad (also spelled Yahad or Yahad, the ‘unity’ or ‘community’ in Hebrew). Other disagreements about the Qumran community are whether they regarded themselves as separate from the rest of Judaism; one alternative theory is that the community was not a permanent living situation but temporary: Jews might have lived there for a short time but not their entire lives. Another disagreement is when exactly they were formed: some sectarian

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2 For example, Hartmut Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran: On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
texts such as the *Community Rule* refer to a Wicked Priest and a Teacher of Righteousness. Scholars disagree over the identity of the Wicked Priest, but it might refer to Jason or Menelaus, or the Hasmonaeans who ruled Judea as both priests and rulers from 140-63 BCE. The Teacher of Righteousness is thought to refer to the founder and leader of the Qumran community.

**Why Some Scrolls Were Buried**

In some of the caves, like Cave 1, 4, and 11, scrolls were found ‘buried’ wrapped in linen and placed in tall covered jars, while in other caves, they were not. This follows a practice known in Judaism as a Genizah, or a burial place for retired and damaged texts. In Nag Hammadi, another important discovery of ancient manuscripts, but of early Christian and Gnostic texts, some texts were also buried. Joan E. Taylor has argued that the Scrolls being buried indicates that perhaps the community at Qumran were involved in scroll burial for the caves in which scrolls were buried.\(^3\) In most of the caves, scrolls were piled in no particular order and without pottery or linen. This could indicate a change in practice, or how events became dangerous with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE: the majority of the scrolls therefore may have ended up in the caves to quickly hide them from the Romans. Similarly, Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra argues that there are old caves (Caves 1 and 4) and young caves (2, 3, 5, 6, 11): two stages of putting scrolls into the caves and two stages of the community living at Qumran.\(^4\) Stökl Ben Ezra argues the two stages are due to a fire around 4 BCE, determined by archaeologist Jodi Magness.

**Online Resources**

View six of the largest and most significant scrolls: [http://dss.collections.imj.org.il/](http://dss.collections.imj.org.il/)

Virtual Tour of Cave 1: [http://orion.mscc.huji.ac.il/cave/cave1.shtml](http://orion.mscc.huji.ac.il/cave/cave1.shtml)

Virtual Tour of Qumran: [http://virtualqumran.huji.ac.il/](http://virtualqumran.huji.ac.il/)


**Questions:**

1. Create a case (three or four points) for or against Qumran being related to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Then take the opposite side of the argument and make a case of three

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or four points against your original argument. Which side do you most agree with, and why?

2. Discuss how the scrolls came to be 1) created and 2) put inside the caves. Did it happen all at once, in multiple stages, and by one or more groups of people—and for what reasons?

3. Many scholars and other people today believe in open-access for the Scrolls: they should be viewable by the public and as much information about the Scrolls made available. However, the internet is full of unsupported claims and conspiracy theories about the origins of the Dead Sea Scrolls, especially in relation to Jesus. Discuss why you think there are still conspiracy theories and unsupported claims made about the Dead Sea Scrolls. Then discuss what you think scholars and museums should do (or do more of) in order to make more information about the Scrolls accessible.

4. Discuss – as an archaeologist might – whether the Qumran site is the site of a religious community, a villa, a fortress, or a commercial (trade) centre.