

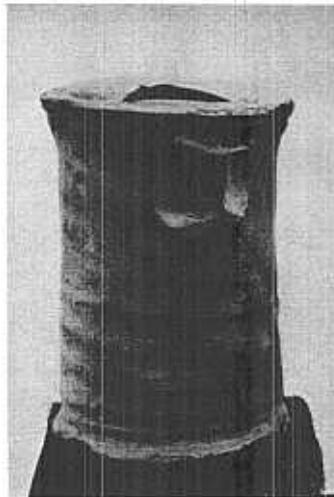
The Holy Scriptures in Jesus' Time

In 1947 the first fragments of over 600 manuscripts were found in the Qumran region of the Wilderness of Judea. These are the Dead Sea Scrolls—a priceless collection of ancient texts offering new insights into the Old Testament, Judaism and the origins of Christianity.



The scrolls were transcriptions made by the Essenes in their scriptorium at Qumran (see page 303). Here one of the sect's 12 priests reads from one scroll while a scribe, seated at a plaster table, copies his words with a reed pen. Both wear white tunics, symbolic of the spiritual purity that was central to Essene belief.

While herding sheep among these caves near the Dead Sea, south of Jericho, a young Arab threw a stone into a hole on the cliff face, and heard a jar shatter. Investigating, he found several more sealed jars containing ancient Hebrew writings on long leather scrolls: The Dead Sea Scrolls. Written mostly during the three centuries before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, they had been hidden in these caves by the Essenes just before the Romans destroyed their community at nearby Qumran. At right is a terra-cotta inkpot—still bearing traces of dried ink—actually used by the Essene transcribers.



The contents of the scrolls include fragments of all books of the Old Testament except Esther; two relatively complete scrolls of Isaiah; apocryphal and apocalyptic works in Hebrew and Aramaic; and original material on the tenets of Essene doctrine. As in the sample above, the careful transcriptions were done on animal skins marked with horizontal lines for writing and verticals for margins. The Biblical texts—the earliest known—predate the next oldest Hebrew manuscripts by 1000 years; yet the two versions show remarkably few discrepancies. The Scrolls are now under study by Biblical scholars in Israel, Europe and America.