

Arab Narratives of The Dead Sea Scrolls: Between Abrahamic Tolerance and Conspiracy

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

In early 1947, a [Bedouin shepherd \(https://www.history.com/news/6-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-dead-sea-scrolls\)](#) named Muhammad Ta'amirah threw a rock into an opening on the side of a [cliff near Qumran \(https://middle-east-online.com/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%87%D9%88%D9%84\)](#) on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea and heard a clay pot shatter. The next day, the shepherd returned with some of his friends and climbed into the cave, where they found numerous clay jars containing 70 wrapped up scrolls, including [seven complete papyrus scrolls \(https://www.afhu.org/2017/01/09/bringing-life-to-the-dead-sea-scrolls/?gclid=Cj0KCQIAL5zwbRCTARIsAlrukdm1F8IK0-JgA4BDuKx3y9eTwIosSPU4-gunTJrGzdFA-Pxn8qy4FfMaAv01EALw_wcB\)](#) and some scraps. Local residents and Jordanian archaeological authorities began discovering other caves, eventually leading to the discovery of 800 to 900 scrolls dating back to 150 BC to 70 AD.

These documents, which became known as [the Dead Sea Scrolls \(https://www.josh.org/resources/apologetics/answering-skeptics-detail/?id=869&mwm_id=241871637728&mot=J79GNF&gclid=Cj0KCQIAL5zwbRCTARIsAlrukdm1F8IK0-JgA4BDuKx3y9eTwIosSPU4-gunTJrGzdFA-Pxn8qy4FfMaAv01EALw_wcB\)](#), contain every Old Testament book except the Book of Esther, with minimal differences from the earliest Hebrew manuscripts. Particularly notable is the preservation of the entire book of Isaiah, which highlights how Old Testament scribes managed to accurately preserve their holy scriptures for a thousand years. However, the scrolls also contained traditional religious stories not found in the Bible and biblical exegesis, providing a window into the gradual redaction process of holy texts.

While these texts have been invaluable for archeologists and religious scholars, they also play a role in a much more contemporary issue playing out in the modern Middle East. On their face, [the Dead Sea Scrolls \(https://arabicpost.net/%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A9/2018/09/27/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A9/\)](#) emphasize the commonalities of the three Abrahamic faiths that originated in the Middle East—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Yet Arab nationalist figures and Islamists alike have found such a message of shared values too much to take, and have provided an alternative narrative, couched in conspiracy theories, to repudiate this message of tolerance.

The Contents of the Scrolls: A Shared Beginning

The scrolls were written by a Jewish sect known as the Essenes, who appeared between the 2nd century BC and 1st century AD after breaking away from the two main Jewish sects of that era, the elite Sadducees and more conservative, populist Pharisees. 80 percent of the [Dead Sea Scrolls \(https://www.marefa.org/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A9/\)](#) were written in Hebrew with another 17 percent written in Aramaic and a small portion written in Greek. The Qumran sect that compiled these scrolls was only a small part of a larger Jewish society whose focal point and holy city was Jerusalem.

The [credibility and precision \(https://www.history.com/news/6-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-dead-sea-scrolls\)](#) with which the Jewish tradition has been transmitted since the time of the Essenes has culturally stabilized the understanding of the region's history and events, as evidenced by the fact that the three Abrahamic faiths share vast portions of these scrolls as part of their holy texts and understanding of sacred history. The Dead Sea scrolls also underscore how the ongoing conflicts between these three religions are thus unjustifiable because their differences are extremely minor—as the writer and intellectual [Youssef Zeidan has argued \(https://egyptindependent.com/youssef-zeidan-misrepresentations-intellectual/\)](#), these three religious strains are one religion.

Within the scrolls we can see strains of religious thought that would develop in both Christianity and Islam. In fact, the community of Qumran, with its focus on imminent messianism, contains many similarities with Christianity; some have even argued that the Essenes are the sect that preceded, prophesied, or prepared for the arrival of the messiah.

These pious Jews believed that the world had gone astray during the time between the Old and New Testaments, necessitating the arrival of a savior or messiah whom they awaited in the guise of a persecuted "Teacher of Righteousness" opposed by wicked and false priests.

The sect referred to themselves as the ["New Covenant" and the "Sons of Light," \(https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1028&context=jlbt\)](#) and lived a lifestyle similar to that of the monastic orders that would quickly develop in early Christianity. Even more notably, John the Baptist lived in and around the Judean Desert by the Dead Sea, and the Qumran sect would have been located near the Baptism Site.

Similarities with Islamic theology are also evident. Both faiths reject idolatry and share rituals, rites, and moral commandments; furthermore, most of the Old Testament prophets – and the details of their lives – that are mentioned in the scrolls are also prophets in the Quran and Islamic culture. In particular, these scrolls included the story of Enoch's ascension to heaven—which shares many similar aspects of the Mi'raj (ascension to heaven) of the Prophet Muhammad. The Essenes also shared the requirement of ablution before praying and touching or reading the holy book.

Hidden Messages? The Conspiracy Theories of the Dead Sea Scrolls

However, the shared traditions emphasized by the Dead Sea Scrolls have not been emphasized by Arab nationalist rhetoric on the scrolls, which refuses to accept the notion of the historical presence of Jewish societies and kingdoms in the region. This rhetoric has vacillated between doubting the veracity of the historical Jewish presence to lying about its vestiges and calling it the product of a joint biblical-orientalist-Zionist conspiracy.

Dr. Isa bin Daifallah Haddad's thesis ["Secrets of the Cave \(http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=645503&r=0\)](#): The Missing Link of the Hebrew Bible, from the Cocoon to the Web" writes the narrative of the scrolls discovery in a way that implicitly questions the veracity of its discovery. He writes: "In a scene out of a romantic plot amid the uproar of 1947, the twists of fate led a stray goat and its shepherd to usher in together the greatest archaeological event of the 20th century by finding scrolls that sat in caves for over 2,000 years? ... [this was] followed by a bunch of police activity that culminated with major international institutions – including the Vatican and the official religious organizations of American and international Zionists – engaging in academic and religious disputes ... These discoveries were accompanied by elaborations, conflicts, accusations, firings, and secret scrolls that received great attention; the value of this investment surpassed the New York Stock Exchange." Haddad concludes that this narrative is more befitting of a police novel or cinematic film, hinting at a conspiratorial beginning for the scrolls.

However, some Islamists have gone even further in the need to invalidate the scrolls, fabricating strange stories and tales to deny their authenticity. The Arab nationalists' cynical questions about the veracity and importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls pale in comparison to these positions, which suggest that these scrolls actually negate other religions outside of Islam.

Dr. Zainab Abdelaziz, professor of French culture at Al-Azhar University, reinterprets an Essene text not incorporated into any later holy work into "resembling Islam's depiction of Jesus." In order to mask this apparently Muslim reality of the works, Abdelaziz claims that "The Vatican and the Zionist movement reached a grand bargain to conceal this reality whereby the Vatican absolved the Jews of responsibility for Christ's death in exchange for some scrolls being hidden because the correct interpretation of this fact about the scrolls—that the 'Man of Justice' [referenced in the work] is a regular human and not the son and incarnation of God – could undermine the Church's foundations."

Similarly, the scholar Tariq Abdu Ismail (<http://www.eltwhed.com/vb/showthread.php?62373-%DE%D3%C7%E6%D3%C9-%DD%ED-%E1%CD%D9%C9-%D5%CF%DE-%E4%C7%CF%D1%C9/page3>), in a study titled *The Bible of Qumran: The First Christian Bible*, claimed that the Essene sect could be a group of Jesus' followers and that the publication of the scrolls was suppressed because people were fearful of depicting Jesus as a pious man in rapprochement with Islam.

Others have pushed conspiracy theories that have gone even further. Sheikh Abdul Majeed al-Zindani (<http://www.eltwhed.com/vb/showthread.php?62373-%DE%D3%C7%E6%D3%C9-%DD%ED-%E1%CD%D9%C9-%D5%CF%DE-%E4%C7%CF%D1%C9/page3>), one of the senior founders of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood party, suggests that "the Dead Sea Scrolls may have caused the death of Pope John XXIII in 1963 when he tried to acknowledge that these scrolls showed that the true messiah is the one professed by Muslims, that Islam is the true religion, and that only Muslims achieve salvation. The Israeli ambassador to the Vatican objected; the pope was soon found dead in his bed and the Vatican went back to opposing the truth and Islam while concealing the scrolls' facts!" ISIS even joined in on this campaign and declared "the Qumran Scrolls (the Dead Sea Bible) destroy the Christian faith."

In the book *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Real Faith of Tribes of Israel* (<https://resalapost.com/2019/07/14/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%91%D9%90%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7/>), Dr. Mohamed Abdel-Mohsen claimed "there are some who said that the Essene sect learned about herbal healing and healing stones from the angels that fell on Mount Hermon. These angels are clearly the Israelites' version of Harut and Marut and these healing practices are a type of ritualized Shamanic sorcery and séance!" The same author cited the works of fiction-thriller novelist and *The Da Vinci Code* author Dan Brown as if they were authentic sources that can be used to corroborate historical events.

The "God's True Religion is Islam" (<https://mycommandments.wordpress.com/2009/07/20/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%82%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86/>) website wrote that the Book of Isaiah discovered in Qumran is inconsistent with the current version of the book. The site claimed that religious scholars were prevented from viewing the Qumran scriptures for 40 years and not allowed to reconcile the different versions until the Qumran discoveries were changed. Continuing in the same fictional vein, it declared that "the Israelis have concealed 500 books that were discovered in Qumran, just like the Vatican hid some of the scrolls obtained by the Jordanian Army before 1967! ... Incredibly, the scholars that Christians cited to confirm the veracity of the scrolls are just evangelicals, so do not rely upon their testimony because they are biased." The website also states that faith cannot be discussed when quoting scriptures.

These strange reimagining of the Dead Sea scrolls demonstrate how many Islamists have sought to repudiate their contents by dabbling in fantasy. Unfortunately, these Islamists have a wide audience; the more ignorant and intolerant segments of society want to believe Islamists' credulous stories about the scrolls.

Though it is not easy to stop the spread of misinformation on these sites as they are backed by political movements and states, the only solution is to produce genuine information and make it available to the widest possible segment of people. Just as the advocates of a culture of intolerance and hatred make every effort to spread their culture, advocates of tolerance should give the issue the attention it deserves and help spread their ideas. Moreover, it is better to work with moderate countries in the Middle East so that their media and educational curricula can enjoy an acceptable degree of credibility and impartiality. This definitely means a movement in a new direction that is very different from the traditional one, which has been dominant on the political, cultural, social and religious levels. This definitely requires a wise approach in order for it to succeed.

As a society, we need to reexamine our treatment of these valuable archeological documents. If we are open to them, they may provide a valuable starting point for a reemphasis of the commonalities in Abrahamic faiths, from shared theological concepts to a common ritual tradition. However, this is only possible if the false narratives are rejected. Otherwise, we may miss out on the gift of shared knowledge that these scrolls can provide.

Adapted from two pieces published on al-Hurra. ❖

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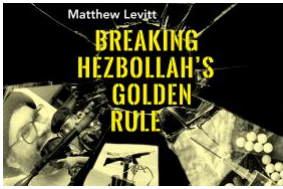
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