

*The Mystery and Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, by Hershel Shanks

reviewed by [Jane McDonald](#) in the [September 9, 1998](#) issue

By Hershel Shanks, *The Mystery and Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. (Random House, 246 pp.)

Hershel Shanks presents a comprehensive, intriguing and indeed mystery-filled account of the activities surrounding the Dead Sea Scrolls and of the scrolls' nature and significance. He takes us into the "scrollery" where Cave 4 scroll fragments were assembled and studied, and gives us insight into the competitive world of the scholars who controlled access to the unpublished scrolls and whose careers were enhanced by their scroll research. In 1991 Shanks, editor of the *Biblical Archeological Review*, became the first to publish excerpts of the Dead Sea Scroll fragments, thus "freeing the scrolls" for others to study.

Shanks addresses such issues as the effect of the scrolls on the Christian faith and on our understanding of the Hebrew Bible and Judaism. He explores the archaeological evidence and the questions of ownership raised by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. And he describes the debate surrounding the Copper Scroll and discusses whether Qumran was an Essene settlement. Shanks's engaging storytelling and vividly detailed accounts of the discovery, acquisition, reconstruction and interpretation of the documents make this a lively book.

Shanks provides a brief history of the now three "quests" for the historical Jesus. If today's third quest attempts to understand Jesus within the context of Judaism, then these scrolls, "by far the most important archive of contemporaneous Jewish documents," are essential to this understanding. For those who have been helped to see and value the continuity between the concepts and images of the Hebrew faith and Christianity, the scroll texts deepen and enhance understanding of such terms as "Messiah" and "Son of God."

Shanks includes several examples of translations from these texts which parallel familiar passages from the Gospels. Excellent photographs illumine texts, people and places. The book raises vital questions not only about how we view the life and time of Jesus and how the Hebrew Bible developed, but also about how we use the

Bible today.

The biblical texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls include the oldest copies ever discovered. A fragment from Daniel dates to the late second century b.c.e. Far from undermining the Hebrew Bible, they show the modern texts to be quite accurate. In one case the scroll manuscript clarifies the existing translation so that a new paragraph has been included in the NRSV Bible (1 Sam. 10). The numerous copies of the Psalms, Deuteronomy and Isaiah recovered from the Qumran caves reflect their authority within the community.

Spanning about three centuries, the scrolls represent a variety of Judaisms, a variety of texts and no fixed canon. Qumran literature also reflects the continuing central influence of apocalypticism and an unusual concern for ritual purity.

Although Shanks draws some conclusions, he does not seek to resolve all mysteries surrounding the scrolls. Instead we are left with much to ponder and to anticipate as new scholars gain access to the manuscripts. And Shanks reminds us that other scrolls may be found in the Qumran caves, scrolls which would continue to shed light on the period from which both Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism emerged.