



From Atheist to Theist (Part 12)

Evidence?

By

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Ancient Archaeological Discoveries

For those of you who have studied Biblical archaeology, you'll recognize that I am not mentioning the great discoveries of the last 50+ years in this series. That's because I'm limiting my comments to those discoveries available for me to consider during the early part of 1971. These findings, and others too many to mention in a limited series, were part of my journey from atheist to theist.

The combination of atheist, investigative journalist, and radio talk show host was certainly not conducive to any quick sell about the existence of God. I did not believe in God, I did not like people who believed in God, and I enjoyed making fun of them until they either hung up, yelled, or cried on my talk show. It didn't matter what they did, as long as it gave me the opportunity to ridicule them and their belief in God.

Ridicule, intimidation and bullying (RIB) were stock and trade for most atheists I knew in the 1960s and 70s. Those are the same tactics many atheists still use today. They will say something like this — “There is absolutely NO evidence to support the Bible as being anything other than myth and legend.” NO evidence? Not true. That’s where archaeology comes in – as evidence.

Keep in mind that I’m using the term ‘evidence,’ rather than ‘proof.’ Atheists and other people who don’t believe in the existence of God want ‘proof’ of His existence. I used to say the same thing. I demanded that Christians ‘prove’ God’s existence by having God show up in my radio studio so I could interview Him. God did not do that. Instead, He sent Christians to me who brought ‘evidence’ of His existence. Archaeology was part of the chain of ‘historical evidence.’ It was an early building block for me as an inquiring atheist that would eventually lead to my becoming a theist.

The Discovery of Ancient Scrolls

I, like so many baby-boomers, was born within a year after my father left military service at the end of World War II. One of the greatest archaeological discoveries supporting the accuracy of the ancient Hebrew Bible was made during that same period of time – in the late 1940s.

Interestingly, archaeologists did not make one of the most important discoveries. Bedouin shepherds found the caves about a mile from the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. A Jewish settlement was established in the late part of the 2nd century BC and was occupied until the Roman Army destroyed it about 68 AD.

The Bedouins initially found seven ancient scrolls in clay jars in one of the caves. They eventually came to the attention of Dr. John Trever of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR). He compared the scrolls to the oldest biblical manuscript known at the time and saw similarities. The ASOR made the announcement of the discovery in 1948. The first seven scrolls included the Great Isaiah Scroll, the Community

Rule Scroll, the Peshar on Habakkuk, the War Scroll, the Thanksgiving Hymns and the Genesis Apocryphon.

Continuing the search for more scrolls in the caves became more difficult because of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, but the original cave was found in the early part of 1949. During the next several years, more caves were discovered containing thousands of biblical and other Jewish documents. About 90% of the scrolls and fragments were found in Cave #4 (see photo above), including all or portions of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Daniel, Ezekiel, Song of Songs and various ancient commentaries on the Writings in the Hebrew Bible.

Other scrolls found in the 11 Qumran caves included portions of 1 and 2 Kings, Psalms, Jeremiah, a scroll of Jubilees, the Wisdom of Sirach, the Targum of Job, the Book of Enoch. Many other Jewish documents were also found, including the Temple Scroll, Angelic Liturgy, Hymn to King Jonathan, Testament of Joseph, the Copper Scroll and the Damascus Document. Along with the scrolls and fragments, searchers

found tefillin cases (phylacteries), mezuzah, jars, lamps, linens and leather objects.

Carbon dating tests done on a piece of linen in 1950 showed it was from the early 1st century AD, plus or minus 200 years. Carbon dating done on the scrolls showed them to belong to the last two centuries BC and 1st century AD. Paleographic dating (handwriting analysis) done on the Dead Sea Scrolls showed them to be from the same period of time as the carbon dating tests. Other tests done on the scrolls included parchment and ink which also supported the dating.

So what? What do old scrolls and stuff have to do with proving the existence of God? This is where we enter into textual evidence for the Bible. I knew little about Bible texts as an atheist, so Dr. Edward Hindson guided me through the process of understanding what the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls meant as 'evidence' for the credibility of the biblical documents.

The Hebrew Bible of the mid-20th century AD was made up of 22 Books. The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible from the late 2nd century BC (Septuagint) contained 39 Books (same writings as the Hebrew Bible, but divided differently for Greek readers), plus several Apocryphal books. After the advent of Christianity, which included a majority of Gentiles by the end of the 1st century AD, some Jews turned away from using the Septuagint and supported using only the Hebrew Bible. However, prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, the oldest complete or almost complete copies of the Hebrew Bible were the Aleppo Codex (10th century AD) and Leningrad Codex (11th century AD).

Again, we ask, so what? The ‘what’ is that the scrolls of the Hebrew Bible found among the Dead Sea Scrolls were almost identical to the copies made more than a thousand years later in more recent translations. It demonstrated in a powerful and evidential way that the Jewish Masoretes who made the 10th and 11th century copies were not inventing or re-inventing text, but carefully preserving text that had been written centuries earlier.

This was exciting news for both Jews and Christians. Jews now had access to texts of their Hebrew Bible that were more than a thousand years older than the oldest texts they had at the time. Christians who depended on the Hebrew text for their Old Testament (instead of the Greek Septuagint) had more evidence that their translation was based on accurate accounts of original texts.

Dr. Hindson explained that every Book of the traditional Hebrew Bible is represented to some degree by the scrolls found at Qumran, except for the Book of Esther. That provided textual critics the opportunity to compare somewhat recent texts (10th century AD) with much older manuscripts (2nd century BC) to check for accuracy in transmission. Dr. Hindson also pointed out that the Dead Sea Scrolls were within just hundreds of years of the original writings instead of more than a millenium-and-a-half for the Masoretic texts. The fact that the Masoretic texts compared so well to the Qumran texts was more evidence in support of the accurate transmission of the original writings of Old Testament prophets to the translations in use during my investigation.

As an atheist I had often asked Christians how anyone could trust the text of the Hebrew Bible (Christianity's Old Testament) if the oldest manuscripts were thousands of years distant from the original writings? Dr. Hindson introduced me to the archaeological discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and it demonstrated why we can trust the authenticity of those documents. The ancient scribes who copied the Hebrew texts carried along a special tradition that protected and preserved the copied texts from error — proven by the discovery of The Dead Sea Scrolls.

* Here are some of the Dead Sea Scroll research websites where you can see the ancient documents.

[Israel Antiquities Authority - The Dead Sea Scrolls Exhibition](#)

[The Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library](#)

[Digital Dead Sea Scrolls at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem](#)

** Here are some of the research resources available to me during my investigation in 1971.

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