



# DISCOVERY IN THE DESERT

There are few people who would ever expect to find adventure and romance associated with the fields of archaeology and paleography, the study of ancient manuscripts. For these sciences appear to be as dry and dusty as the objects they consider. Yet the discovery of the *Dead Sea Scrolls* is one story which is so full of mystery and intrigue that it surpasses the wildest scheme of any detective novel. The telling of this account will, besides serving an informative purpose, manifest the manner in which modern biblical scholars proceed, for the study of Scripture and associated fields is not at a standstill. Scholarly investigation continues to cast light upon the shadowy areas of Revelation and broadens the horizons of previous knowledge. And among the many scholars involved in this dramatic discovery were the very successors of Père LaGrange—the men of the École Biblique.

## The First Discoveries

One day in the spring of 1947 a young Bedouin of the Taamirah tribe was grazing a flock of goats in the hills a mile from the Dead Sea, some eight miles from Jericho. By chance, one of the goats strayed away and climbed the craggy wall of rock that runs along the Dead Sea. As the shepherd pursued the lost goat up the limestone cliffs, his eyes fell upon a small hole in the rock which appeared to be the entrance to a cave. Muhammad ed-Di'b or "the wolf," as he was known, picked up a stone and threw it into the opening. To his amazement the stone crashed among potsherds whose ring puzzled the young man. He returned the next day and upon entering was faced with a natural cave some eight yards long and six feet at its widest point, along whose sides stood seven or eight jars with fragments of other pottery lying about. In one of these jars he found complete leather scrolls with writing on them. Other pieces of leather of various sizes were scattered around the floor of the cave. The larger scrolls had been wrapped in linen which, having disintegrated from age, had formed a tarry substance with the leather. Although the Bedouin's desire for hidden gold had been frustrated, he had unwittingly discovered what would soon be known as the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, a group of ancient documents whose value would soon soar into legendary figures.

After consulting with the older members of the tribe, Muhammad

adh-Dhib and his friends brought the scrolls to a Muslim sheikh at their market town of Bethlehem.<sup>1</sup> Seeing that the inscription on the scrolls was not Arabic and thinking that it might be Syriac, the sheikh sent them to a Syrian merchant named Kando. The writing was insignificant to him also, but being a shrewd Oriental he realized that the manuscripts could have a high monetary value. Kando and another merchant belonging to the Jacobite branch of the Syrians went to visit the Metropolitan-Archbishop of their church, Mar Athanasius Yeshue Samuel,<sup>2</sup> who resided in Jerusalem at St. Mark's Monastery. The merchants showed the bishop one of the rolls of leather whose text he realized was Hebrew. Desiring to purchase the entire discovery, Mar Athanasius sent Kando to acquire the rest of the scrolls which were still in the possession of the Bedouins.

It is quite difficult to establish the entire factual account of subsequent transactions because of various pressures which were affecting the participants in this drama. Nevertheless there apparently occurred at least two secret expeditions to the cave, one under Kando and his henchmen who succeeded in collecting most of the remaining fragments, and another organized by the bishop. The Syrians from St. Mark's Monastery also found more fragments but other important items such as pottery and the linen wrappings were discarded to a rubbish pile outside.<sup>3</sup> The carelessness of these amateurs in searching the cave proved to be a heartbreak to the archaeologists who would follow in their path. Secrecy and fear enveloped these happenings because any such excavation was illegal according to the laws of the country.

Meanwhile, several weeks passed before Kando telephoned the bishop to tell him that three Bedouins had shown up with the other scrolls. Unfortunately, when the Bedouins arrived at the monastery dressed in rags and presenting a rather unkempt appearance, the monk who met them at the door refused them admission, feeling that the dirty manuscripts that these nomads had brought were worthless. The monk happened to mention this even to his bishop at the midday meal and immediately Mar Athanasius realized the blunder that had taken place. He quickly called Kando only to discover that two of the Arabs had left their scrolls at his shop while the third had taken his share to the Muslim elder of Bethlehem. Although a certain obscurity shrouds this area of our account we do

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<sup>1</sup> Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p.5.

<sup>2</sup> "Mar" is the Syrian title for a bishop.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1959), pp. 16-17.

know that this portion of the scrolls was eventually purchased by Professor Sukenik of Hebrew University. Eventually the two Bedouins who had left their share with Kando returned to his shop and he accompanied them to St. Mark's. This time there were no blunders and the bishop purchased the entire lot of four scrolls for the price of twenty-four Palestine pounds.

The bishop now decided to call upon experts who could evaluate the age and significance of his manuscripts. The first person consulted was S. H. Stephan, a well known Orientalist of the Department of Antiquities, but he judged the scrolls to be worthless. Later on this same expert after looking at the manuscripts lying on a table said: "If that table were a box, and you filled it full of pound notes, you could not even then measure the value of these scrolls if they are two thousand years old, as you say."<sup>4</sup> The next scholar contacted was Father Marmadji, O.P., who taught Arabic at the Dominican Fathers Biblical School in Jerusalem. He was asked to bring with him Father J. P. M. Van Der Ploeg, O.P., an eminent Dutch biblical scholar who was in Jerusalem at that time. The bishop had the scrolls and jars brought in on a tray and explained that they had been found somewhere in the country and were two thousand years old.<sup>5</sup> The two skeptical Dominicans unrolled the largest of the manuscripts and saw before them a Hebrew text that was somewhat strange and difficult to read. Fr. Van Der Ploeg recognized it as a complete copy of *Isaiah* but expressed his doubt as to its antiquity, for if the bishop's claim were true, it would be the oldest version of an *Old Testament* book in existence. The second scroll turned out to be a combination of biblical and non-biblical texts. After a short examination it was identified as a commentary on the first two chapters of *Habbakuk*. Two other rolls were found to be separate parts of a single manuscript which constituted a community rule for a Jewish sect and this is the now famous *Manual of Discipline*. Mar Athanasius had a fifth scroll which he did not show at this time, quite possibly because it was in very poor condition. Fr. Van Der Ploeg was absolutely bewildered. He realized that these were not forgeries and were truly ancient, yet no proof was offered to substantiate the claim of two thousand years. To verify the age of the manuscripts the Dominican asked the bishop if he would let them have one of the jars in which the scrolls were discovered. The experts at the Dominican School would be able to judge from the shape and material of such an object the era in which it

<sup>4</sup> Burrows, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> J. Van der Ploeg, O.P., *The Excavations at Qumran*, (London: Longmans Green & Co., 1958), p. 10.

was made. The bishop agreed but unfortunately never fulfilled his promise. This only confirmed the doubt raised in Fr. Van Der Ploeg's mind.

More experts were consulted and each time the verdict was negative. In the meantime Professor Sukenik of Hebrew University had heard of the bishop's collection of scrolls and through a member of the Syrian Orthodox Church arranged to examine them. It will be remembered that at this time the United Nations had approved the partition of Palestine and bitter feelings arose between the Arabs and Jews. Because of these hostilities there was no easy travelling from one quarter to the next and so a meeting took place on the neutral grounds of the Y.M.C.A. When Sukenik saw the scrolls he immediately realized that they and the ones he had acquired came from the same collection.<sup>6</sup> He was told that they had been discovered in a cave near the Dead Sea and was permitted to keep the manuscripts for three days. During this time Sukenik copied several columns from the *Isaiah* text which he later published. The professor was the only other person outside of Mar Athanasius who was convinced of the manuscripts' antiquity and rightly so, for he had carefully studied the writing methods in Palestine at the turn of the Christian age. Acting on behalf of the Hebrew University, he attempted to purchase the bishop's share of the scrolls but negotiations failed.

In February of 1948 Mar Athanasius contacted the American School of Oriental Research and sent one of his monks there with the scrolls. He was received by a young American scholar, Dr. John Trever, and with typical Oriental cunning explained that these scrolls had been found in the monastery library during an inventory and would like some information on them.<sup>7</sup> Trever copied a few lines from one of the manuscripts but was disturbed by the form of the inscribed Hebrew. He compared it with the writing from other manuscripts and found to his amazement that it most resembled the *Nash Papyrus*, a fragment of *Deuteronomy* considered to be from the first century before Christ. Trever along with another American, William Brownlee, began to photograph the collection of scrolls and sent some of the first prints to Professor William F. Albright of Johns Hopkins University, one of the greatest experts in Palestinian archaeology. On the fifteenth of March an answer came from Albright reading: "My heartiest congratulations on the greatest manuscript discovery of modern times. There is no doubt in my mind that the script is more archaic than that of the

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<sup>6</sup> Millar Burrows, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Van der Ploeg, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

*Nash Papyrus*. . . I should prefer a date around 100 B.C." The judgment of Professor Albright dispelled the skepticism that had previously flourished and a new phase in the *Dead Sea Scrolls* had begun. Shortly thereafter, Millar Burrows, the Director of the American School of Oriental Research, made the first press announcement regarding the scrolls of Mar Athanasius and similarly Professor Sukenik released the news of the Hebrew University's collection.

There was now great excitement throughout the scholarly world and G. L. Harding, the Director of the Jordan Department of Antiquities, was determined to purchase any other fragments that might be in circulation. After many efforts Kando, who had kept his identity hidden, was finally reached by Joseph Saad, an associate of Harding. He spent several days at Kando's shop trying to gain his confidence assuring him that he was not a government agent. The Syrian merchant was finally won over and sold a number of fragments from the original cave for one thousand pounds. Thus a standard price of one pound per square centimetre was established and Kando became the semi-official middleman for all future transactions. The metropolitan eventually smuggled his collection of scrolls to America and after they were published by the American School of Oriental Research the Hebrew University, through Professor Sukenik, purchased them in 1954 for \$250,000.

### Excursions and Further Discoveries

The scholars attached to the various biblical and archaeological institutes around Jerusalem realized that the original cave had to be found since its contents could verify the age of the manuscripts and might possibly shed some light on their origin. In January, 1949 Arab legionnaires who knew the area were dispatched to comb the cliffs along the Dead Sea.<sup>8</sup> The cave was located by one of the Legion officers who spotted a mound of fresh earth and potsherds which the illegal excavators had tossed out the previous November. The experts were now in a position to reconstruct the history of the manuscript discovery through their scientific methods.

In February G. L. Harding of the Department of Antiquities and Père Roland de Vaux, O.P., Director of the École Biblique, set out on an official expedition to Qumran. Archaeologists normally make measurements and photographs of each stage of their operations; they remove each layer

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<sup>8</sup> Frank M. Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), p. 8.



of terrain examining it for age and filter the earth for its hidden contents.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately these careful procedures were thwarted since the illegal excavations of Kando and other profit-seekers had left Cave I in a state of chaos. Nevertheless, Harding and de Vaux uncovered about a thousand fragments, more remains of linen wrappings and an enormous quantity of potsherds. Several of the jars were reconstructed and it was evident that at one point there were at least fifty of them. Using the "ceramic index," i.e. the shape, size and material of pottery, de Vaux assigned a date of 100 B.C. to the jars. Although he later changed his opinion to the first century A.D.,<sup>10</sup> it did offer substantiation to the purported antiquity of the manuscripts. Remnants of the original scrolls were found along with several bits of *Old Testament* books and various unknown works. The script on these fragments were all quite similar to the 1947 collection except for some lines from *Leviticus* which resembled the old Hebrew-Phoenician type, dating back at least to 600 B.C.

While excavating the cave de Vaux and Harding decided to examine a nearby ruin called Khirbet Qumran. It had always been considered a Roman fortress and although the archaeologists had uncovered two graves, there still appeared to be no connection between the scrolls and the Khirbet. Thus it seemed that the last chapter in this episode had been written. During the next two years the Bedouins were patiently scouring the desert caves and in the Fall of 1951 some new documents were offered for sale at Jerusalem, but nothing more developed. Because they were dissatisfied with their first, superficial examination, de Vaux and Harding returned to Khirbet Qumran to initiate a series of five campaigns which lasted until 1956. Gradually the excavator's skill revealed that the ruins were not Roman but had been the buildings of a Jewish sect leading a communal life. An assembly hall, refectory, scriptorium, water supply system and a community cemetery gave evidence to a rather self-sufficient "monastery" that had flourished in the Judean desert. The presence of pottery and coins indicated a period of occupation from about 100 B.C. to 70 A.D.<sup>11</sup> The pottery from the ruins was of the same type as that found in the caves and so it became apparent that the scribes of the manuscripts had lived in the desert, perhaps hiding their sacred texts in the Judean

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<sup>9</sup> Van der Ploeg, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> R. de Vaux, O.P., *La Cachette des Anciens Manuscrits Hébreux*, Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, April-June, 1949.

<sup>11</sup> R. de Vaux, O.P., "Fouilles au Khirbet Qumran," *Revue Biblique*, April, 1956, pp. 533-77.

hillside for safekeeping shortly before the advance of the Roman legions.

Toward the end of 1951 the Bedouins came to Fr. de Vaux with a collection of documents for sale, which they claimed to have recovered from Cave I. Applying his deep understanding of Bedouin ways, Fr. de Vaux forced them to admit that the fragments originated from a new source. He also cajoled the tribesmen into taking him to the new site and, ironically enough, under the protection of their usual enemies, the police. In January, 1952 de Vaux and Harding led an expedition to Wadi Murabba'at, some ten miles south of Qumran. Here a new group of caves was found and the evidence showed that they had served as military outposts during the Second Jewish Revolt under the famed leader Simon bar Kokhba. The documents discovered here included a palimpsest papyrus dating back to the eighth century B.C., several fragments of biblical books including a scroll of the minor prophets extending from *Joel* to *Zacharias* and two letters signed by bar Kokhba. The most unusual feature of the Wadi Murabba'at finds was that they did not appear to have any connection with that of Qumran.

While the archaeologists were busying themselves with the most recent discovery, the Bedouins took advantage of their absence and began searching the original areas around Qumran. Their determination proved successful and remains of manuscripts were found in a cave about one hundred yards from Cave I. Although Cave II did not yield anything impressive, its very existence prompted scientists to make a thorough search of Qumran. Fr. de Vaux with members of the Dominican School, along with a party from the American School of Oriental Research, examined the entire area around the Khirbet within a radius of five miles. They made soundings of more than two hundred caves and from twenty-five of them recovered pottery of a nature homogeneous with the previously discovered pots, thus indicating a common place of manufacture. Evidence was also detected for tents and lean-tos around the caves, manifesting an occupation that radiated from the main buildings of the ruin.<sup>12</sup> In spite of the systematic combing of the cliffside only one other cave was found to contain manuscript material. Besides various biblical fragments Cave III produced the most unusual, although not the most significant, find of all the excavations—the now famous *Copper Scrolls*. This unique discovery was composed of three sheets of copper, riveted end to end and measuring approximately eight feet long. Unfortunately the material had

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<sup>12</sup> Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 15.



oxidized and therefore had become so brittle as to prevent their unrolling.<sup>13</sup> It was not until 1956 that a process was devised whereby the scrolls could be opened and deciphered. The text was inscribed so heavily that some characters could be read on the reverse side of the scrolls. They were of the square Hebrew alphabet employed in the other manuscripts but not enough was visible to manifest its contents.

In the summer of 1952 the Bedouins once more succeeded in discovering a cache of manuscripts, this time only two hundred yards from the site of the ruins. This was Cave IV which, in the opinion of Fr. Vaux, surpasses the importance of the 1947 manuscripts. The archaeologists rushed to the scene and replaced the clandestine diggings of the Bedouin with more controlled procedures. Thousands of fragments were recovered by de Vaux and Harding while the tribesmen continued to add to the collection. The documents from Cave IV represented all of the Hebrew canon except *Esther*, a large portion of apocryphal and pseudoepigraphical works and various manuscripts related to the community which inhabited the ruins. Since 1953 an interconfessional team of scholars has occupied itself with the almost impossible task of sorting and identifying the fragments from this cave. Many hours are expended fitting pieces into this vast and complicated jigsaw.

In 1955 another series of finds was announced and eventually the total number of caves reached eleven. Cave XI was the only other hiding place that yielded scrolls that were relatively intact, and it was felt that the contents of the latter would rival those of Caves I and IV. A third group of documents completely distinct from the others was recovered from the ruins of a Byzantine monastery near Khirbet Mird. The more important texts include fragments from the *Book of Wisdom*, *Joshua*, the four *Gospels*, the *Acts of the Apostles*, and the *Epistle to the Colossians*. These were written either in Greek or Syro-Palestinian<sup>14</sup> and range from the fifth to the eighth centuries A.D., thereby representing an entirely different period from Qumran. We cannot say that the final discovery in the Judean desert has been made. The Bedouin continue to bring in fragments; the spade of the archaeologist still reconstructs the background to this strange drama.

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<sup>13</sup> Burrows, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Géza Vermès, *Discovery in the Judean Desert*, (New York: Desclee, 1956), p. 24.

## The Scrolls and Their Significance

The religious community that once flourished at Qumran must have possessed a rather extensive library of both biblical and non-biblical works. It would be impossible to appraise the significance of each text in this limited consideration. Therefore, after a few remarks on the biblical manuscripts, we will briefly examine the contents of those documents pertaining to the Jewish sect itself.

The standardization of the Hebrew *Bible* began in the sixth century A.D. and was accomplished by Jewish scholars called Masoretes, deriving their name from the Hebrew word for tradition. The Qumran finds now permit us to see the Hebrew text at a much earlier period than ever before, revealing a certain fluidity in the language that scholars had always suspected.<sup>15</sup> We also have verification that no substantial corruption has taken place in the transmission of the *Old Testament*. This is most manifest in the *Isaiah* scrolls from Cave I. Although they are a thousand years older than any previous copy very few differentiations appear. The *Bible* is a literary collection that grew, undergoing occasional revisions and the Qumran manuscripts have shed some light on the early editing of the Hebrew books. From the evidence of paleography experts can also ascertain the date of the texts, thereby setting up limits as to when various works originated. These attempts at textual criticism of the *Bible* are in no way intended to undermine the Divine message. Rather they seek to purify the errors that have crept in from human frailty during the course of centuries.

The *Manual of Discipline*, one of the scrolls originally acquired by the Syrian Metropolitan, measures seven feet in length and one foot in width. As its name indicates, it was the community's rule and at its beginning we read the holy purpose of these people:

. . . to do what is good and right before Him according as He commanded through Moses and through all His servants the prophets, and to love all that He chose and to hate all that He rejected, to remain aloof from all evil and to devote oneself to all good actions. . . . (IQS, I, 1-6)<sup>16</sup>

The *Manual* goes on to explain the conditions for entrance into the community and requires that they be instructed in the knowledge of the two

<sup>15</sup> Roland Murphy, O. Carm., *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible*, (Westminster: Newman Press, 1956), p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Translations in this article are taken from Edmund Sutcliffe, S.J., *The Monks of Qumran*, (Westminster: Newman Press, 1960).

spirits, light and dark, whose influence permeates the hearts of men.

In the hand of the Prince of Lights is the dominion of all the sons of righteousness. In the ways of light they walk. And in the hand of the Angel of Darkness is all the dominion of the sons of wickedness and in the ways of darkness they walk. And it is through the Angel of Darkness that any of the sons of righteousness go astray. (IQS, III, 20ff.)

Thus all men were either children of light or darkness and we can visualize the Qumranites following the Prince of Lights in order to depart from the perverse ways of other men. The rest of this document is devoted to the formation period or novitiate, ceremonies as well as juridical legislation.

The next manuscript that tells us something of Qumran is the *Damascus Document*. Only fragments of it were recovered from Cave VI but complete copies of it were found in 1896 in the *genizah*, or storeroom, of an old synagogue in Cairo. Until the Dead Sea discoveries its origin was unknown, but scholars have now established its relation to the Essenes. The first part of this text is an exhortation to a group of pious men who have come forth from Israel and from Aaron. The second half is a body of regulations for these people, but it is here that we find differences from the *Manual of Discipline*. It includes provisions for women and property, two facets alien to the celibate group at Qumran who held all in common. One solution to this difficulty is that the *Manual* applies to the celibate group while the *Damascus Document* lays down provisions for a group of camp dwellers who were associated with the Essene movement. However, the vagueness of this text impedes an absolute resolution.

One feature that relates the two texts already mentioned is the person of the "teacher of righteousness," a mysterious figure who pervades the milieu of Qumran. He was possibly the founder or at least a great leader in this religious movement.

. . . He raised them up a true teacher to guide them in the way of His heart and to make known to the last generations what He is to do in the last generation against the congregation of the faithless. (DD, I, 11)

His followers held him in high esteem and regarded his teaching as "coming from the mouth of God."

The *Habbakuk Commentary* also reveals more information about the

Teacher. This rather complete scroll is a verse by verse interpretation which sees Habbakuk's words as a prophecy of future events at Qumran. Here we read that the Teacher was the one "whom God gave to know all the secrets and sayings of His servants the prophets." But the Qumran leader has an enemy, the Wicked Priest and the commentary describes him in the following manner:

... when he ruled in Israel his heart grew proud and he abandoned God, and was faithless to the precepts for the sake of wealth . . . and acted in abominable ways in all impurity of uncleanness. (IQpHab, VIII, 10)

Here we have a picture of a warrior priest who turned away from the Law and pursued a life of greed, oppression and immorality. The same commentary also states that the Wicked Priest "defiled the sanctuary of God," "persecuted the Teacher of Righteousness" and finally, "God gave [him] into the power of his enemies . . . because he treated His elect wickedly." It is quite obvious from these selections that all was not peaceful at the monastery of Qumran. Sometime during the course of events the Wicked Priest entered the scene and attempted to disrupt the community's progress. However the ambiguity of persons and events is so great that an exact reconstruction of the community's history as well as an identification of the people involved has yet to be established. Although scholars have arrived at tenable theories, others with fertile imaginations have seen Christ in the Teacher of Righteousness and the persecution as signifying the crucifixion, but such a position collapses from the view of standards other than mere verbal similarity and is not supported by unpublished documents.

*The War Between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* is the title given by Professor Sukenik to one of the scrolls he first purchased. The text lays down minute regulations for a holy war between the "sons of light" and the "sons of darkness." Although the details for battle are very precise it is quite doubtful that this work was intended as a field manual for an actual war. Rather, it seems more plausible that it is an expression of an eschatological war in which the two spirits battle one another until the "sons of light" triumph for the glory of God. Another part of Prof. Sukenik's collection included the *Thanksgiving Psalms*. There are about thirty-five of these and, as their name indicates, they are hymns of thanksgiving. Although they utilize the *Old Testament* to a great extent, they still preserve a flavor of their own for the Qumranites frequently interpreted the scriptures allegorically. Our final consideration, the unique

*Copper Scroll*, turned out to be a disappointment for scholars. It is a list of buried gold, silver and other precious objects, giving specifications of hiding places. Unfortunately the vast amounts listed and the vagueness of their burial places only emphasized the legendary character of the work. While some would maintain that this is a factual account, no one has yet become a millionaire.

For two thousand years a vast library of biblical and non-biblical manuscripts lay hidden in the Judaeen desert and it was only the chance curiosity of an Arab boy that revealed this secret of the caves. The realization that an Essene community had flourished at Qumran during Christ's lifetime evoked a scholarly furor that has barely subsided. Was Christ the Teacher of Righteousness? Did the early Church originate from a Jewish sect living alongside the Dead Sea? In short, was Christianity truly unique? These were the problems that plagued the experts and in spite of some early sensationalism a more sober view of the Judaeo-Christian era has been attained. Because of the scrolls and our knowledge of the men who wrote them, we can better appreciate the historic setting of Christianity's birth. Most archaeological discoveries are soon forgotten but the *Dead Sea Scrolls* generated an extensive popular interest that has continued to develop. The only explanation for such universal concern is the profound significance that these documents have for religion, both Jewish and Christian, and their inestimable value in understanding the word of God—the Bible.

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