



# THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

## WINDOW TO THE MODERN BIBLE

By Donald W. Parry

Professor of Hebrew Bible at Brigham Young University

In early 1947, three shepherds belonging to the Ta'amireh Bedouin were searching for a stray animal. One of them threw a rock into a cave and heard an earthen jar break. When they entered the cave, they saw it contained several large clay jars, some of which held scrolls.\* In the ensuing years, Bedouin and archaeologists found several hundred scrolls in 11 caves on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea.

Many scholars believe that the Dead Sea Scrolls are the greatest archaeological discovery of the 20th century. The scrolls provide an ancient library of more than 900 texts, most of them written in the original Hebrew of the Old Testament. About 225 of the scrolls contain the oldest copy of the Old Testament (except for the book of Esther), which is more than 1,000 years older than the copies used during the Middle Ages. Most of the scrolls date between 150 B.C. and A.D. 68, although some texts date as far back as the third century B.C.

In addition to traditional biblical texts, the Dead Sea Scrolls also include the Temple Scroll (describing a temple to be built in Jerusalem and the ideal covenant society), the War Scroll (describing the end-of-days conflict), and texts parallel to the Bible (such as the books of Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek,

and the testaments of Jacob, Judah, and Levi). Little is known about Enoch in the Bible, but in the scrolls, Enoch is a major character—a mighty prophet with special gifts.

Most of the scrolls are severely fragmented because of age and exposure to the elements, but scholars have been able to glean a wealth of information about the scribal practices. The scribes' careful and meticulous work indicates a high level of professionalism and competence as they copied and transmitted sacred texts from one generation to the next. Those of us who love and appreciate the holy scriptures owe a great debt to these scribes for their careful work.

When we consider the ancient methods of transmitting texts by hand, we realize that the Bible went through a remarkable process to make it into this century. The Dead Sea Scrolls stand as a witness that the Old Testament has been passed down through the centuries with a respectable degree of accuracy. For this, we must be grateful to prophets, scribes, copyists, and everyone who was responsible for the Bible's transmission from generation to generation. ■

\*Accounts of how the scrolls were discovered vary because the shepherds relied on their memories to recount the story years later.