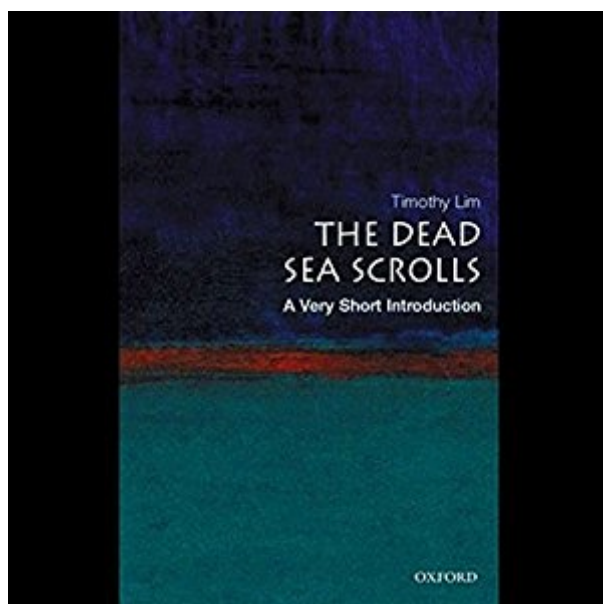


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The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Everyone has heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but amidst the conspiracies, the politics, and the sensational claims, it can be difficult to separate myth from reality. Here, Timothy Lim explores the cultural and historical background of the scrolls, and examines their significance for our understanding of the Old Testament and the origins of Christianity and Judaism. Lim tells the fascinating story of the scrolls since their discovery; their cultural context through the archaeology and history of the Dead Sea region. He explains the science behind their deciphering and dating, and does not omit the cast of characters, scandals, and controversies that have hastened the scrolls' rise to the status of cultural icon. Beginning with their discovery in the 1940s, through the political, legal, and scholarly controversies that still persist today, public interest in the Dead Sea Scrolls has remained exceptionally high. This is an accessible and well-written mini-history that will appeal to anyone interested in the true history of these fascinating documents. --This text refers to the Digital edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I am a fan of the VSI - Very Short Introduction - Series done by the Oxford University Press. On literally hundreds of subjects, they provide a survey with enough depth and detail to be worthwhile to the non-specialist, a wide enough range to be useful for students looking for authoritative information, and good as a general outline of the fields or subjects as preparation for further study. This particular volume on the Dead Sea Scrolls touches on one of my areas of interest that I have been following for over a quarter of a century (and it pains me to realise that I am indeed old

enough to have areas of study that reach back that far). When I first encountered information about the scrolls, one controversy about them was over ownership rights and publication rights - there were conspiracy theories about why the scrolls were being withheld, and no such thing as a complete volume of the scrolls. These issues are included in Timothy Lim's text, as that story has become part of the history of the scrolls. Lim also addresses the role of the Dead Sea Scrolls as a cultural icon: 'Many people have heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but few know what they are or the significance they have for our understanding of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, ancient Judaism, and the origins of Christianity.' The scrolls have been a media sensation for what they are more so than for what they contain; the location where they were found (a mysterious place, the Dead Sea, the site of ancient battles and settlements, and a place that is still in turmoil today) also played a part in the mystery of the scrolls, as did the Catholic-dominated scholarly team that worked on the translations and reconstruction for so long (conspiracy theories still resonate in works such as the Da Vinci Code).

For as long as I can remember, it seems, new books keep appearing on the Dead Sea Scrolls (which were discovered in 1947, two years before I was born). At some point I became interested in the subject, but in looking to learn something about it I had a hard time distinguishing between objective books and those that had a particular religious or academic axe to grind. For someone in my shoes, this volume from the Oxford "Very Short Introduction" Series is made to order. The author Timothy H. Lim is a Professor at the University of Edinburgh; he is the author or editor of several academic books dealing with the Dead Sea Scrolls and he is a member of an international team of editors that is producing consensus editions of the texts. Nothing in the book's principal 120-page text made me question my initial assumption that what the work presents is a balanced summary of the weight of current scholarship concerning the Dead Sea Scrolls. Thus, it serves, I think, as a good introduction to the subject. Among the matters addressed are the scrolls themselves, the archaeology of Khirbet Qumran, the prevailing hypothesis that associates the scrolls with a community of Essenes that lived at Qumran, a description of that Essene community, and the reasons for concluding that the scrolls relate to the Jewish faith rather than the early Christian faith. A fair portion of the book, and the most interesting to me, has to do with how the scrolls contribute to the current assessment of the "reliability" (for want of a better word) of the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament.

Given all the recent fictionalized scandals (not to mention the very unfortunate non-fictionalized

ones) about impropriety and conspiracies surrounding religious institutions, it comes as no surprise that a recent hype has risen around a significant archeological find: the Dead Sea Scrolls. Controversy has followed the discovery of these some 25,000 fragments (depending on how one counts) of ancient documents. Some have claimed that academics and religious authorities have intentionally kept the scrolls from view because they overturn today's conception of "religious truth." These scandals held water before the whole lot of the scrolls were released for research in the early 1990s. Critics held that "compromising documents" could already be destroyed, but no proof of that accusation has apparently surfaced. Timothy Lim, a Dead Sea Scrolls expert and author of the very tiny but very readable "The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Very Short Introduction" debunks the myths that continue to vaporize around what he calls the greatest manuscript find of the 20th century. Not only that, this little book provides a sobering and enlightening view of the Scrolls from the Dead Sea. The true importance of the scrolls lies in historical research and that they now stand as the earliest known copies of Biblical texts. Lim gives a very high level view of the Scrolls' history and importance. No longer under lock and key, the scrolls emerge as decisive documents for understanding Second Temple Judaism. Extremely few documents from that period have surfaced, so the unexpected boon from the caves near Qumran has proved beyond fruitful. Lim points out that, given some of the scrolls' textual variations, there was far more doctrinal tolerance in early Judaism than previously thought.

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