Hidden Books from the Biblical World

Osher Lecture 2 (Oct. 13, 2015)

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1. The Dead Sea Scrolls

Manuscripts that have been discovered since 1946 from the region of the Dead Sea consist of official documents from the city of Samaria, religious literature from an Essene community at Qumran, some manuscripts from the fortress of Masada, archives of a rich woman named Babata, and signed letters of Bar Kokba, the leader of a revolt against Rome in the second century CE.

2. Discovery

The chance discovery in 1946 or '47 of seven manuscripts in wine jars hidden in a cave near the Dead Sea led to careful excavation of that cave as well as nearby Khirbet Qumran, the initial publication of a few texts, dispute over ownership, seizure of some texts after the war in 1967, and the building of the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, where the discoveries are housed. Eleven caves have yielded manuscripts dating from the late second century BCE to the second century CE. Publication of the texts has been slow due to the sorry state of preservation of some and disputes over proprietary rights. A translation of all the Dead Sea Scrolls in English is now available (Florentina-Garcia Martinez, **The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated** 2ed. Brill/Eerdmans, 1996).

3. The Origin of the Manuscripts

Beginning in the years of John Hyrcanus' rule (145-104), a sectarian group of Essenes broke away from mainstream Judaism over the calendar and priestly representation, if one can actually speak of “mainstream Judaism.” Their leader, called The Teacher of Righteousness, or Right Teacher, sought to fulfill Isaiah's proclamation, “Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness.” He and his followers settled near the Dead Sea, and apparently John Hyrcanus tracked him down and killed him. The community survived and thrived during the reign of Alexander Janaeus (103-76) and Herod (37 BCE-4 CE). It was sectarian, exclusive, hierarchical, and scribal. Caught up in the revolt against Rome in 68 CE, and convinced that they lived in the End Time, the members hid their treasures (that is, written documents) in local caves. The treasures survived; the community did not, except for a small remnant who fled to Damascus.

4. The Rule of the Community

Naturally, the sectarian community needed a set of rules governing life in close quarters. The guidebook survived in two versions, with considerable overlap. In addition, many copies of the two texts have been found, mostly fragmentary. From these manuscripts, we learn that only men belonged to the community, that people who were thought to be less than perfect physically and mentally were excluded from membership, and that rigid discipline was enforced by elders and priests.

Today's lecture will be devoted to the history of the community and discovery of its main texts, only one of which will be examined at this time.