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The "Other" Bible from Qumran

by Sidnie White Crawford

Where did the Bible come from? The Hebrew Bible, or Christian Old Testament, did not exist in the canonical form we know prior to the early second century C.E. Before that, certain books had become authoritative in the Jewish community, but the status of other books, which eventually did become part of the Hebrew Bible, was questionable. All Jews everywhere, since at least the fourth century B.C.E., accepted the authority of the Torah of Moses, the first five books of the Bible (also called the Pentateuch): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Most Jews also accepted the books of the Prophets, including the Former Prophets or historical books (Joshua through Kings), as authoritative. The Samaritan community only accepted the Pentateuch as authoritative, and the Pentateuch remains their Bible today. Some parts of the Jewish community accepted the books found in the Writings as authoritative, but not all Jews accepted all of those books. The Jewish community that lived at Qumran and stored their manuscripts in the nearby caves, for example, do not seem to have accepted Esther as authoritative. We know this because no trace of Esther has been found in the Qumran caves, and the Qumran community did not celebrate the festival of Purim.

However, the Qumran community did accept other Jewish religious texts as authoritative scripture. The books of *Enoch*, Aramaic documents that date from around 300 B.C.E. to 70 C.E., were found in multiple copies in the Qumran caves, although the *Parables of Enoch* have not been found there. These books, which give more detail about the story of the patriarch Enoch mentioned in Gen 5:21-24, advocate a calendar based on the 365-day rotation of the sun, a calendar the Qumranites may also have embraced (as opposed to the lunar calendar used in the Jerusalem temple). Other works found at Qumran, such as the *Genesis Apocryphon*, also mention Enoch or the story of the Watchers found in his books, so it is likely that the Qumran community thought of the books of *Enoch* as authoritative scripture. Interestingly, *Enoch* is quoted as scripture in the New Testament, in Jude 1:14-15.

The book of *Jubilees*, a second-century B.C.E. work, was also found in multiple copies in the Qumran caves. *Jubilees* is an example of rewritten Scripture retelling the story found in Genesis 1-Exodus 15. It claims Mosaic authority, since it presents itself as a revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai by an angel of the Presence. *Jubilees*, like *Enoch*, advocates a solar calendar. *Jubilees* is quoted by name in the Qumran sectarian *Damascus Document*, indicating the same degree of authority as the Torah. It too was probably part of the “Bible” of the Qumran community.

Other Jewish books may have obtained scriptural status in different Jewish communities. The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira (Hebrew; second century B.C.E.) was translated into Greek and became part of the Septuagint, the scripture of the Jewish community in Alexandria. It was found in Hebrew at Qumran and Masada, and also in the Cairo Genizah, which belonged to the Karaites, a medieval Jewish sect. Although ben Sira was eventually rejected from the Jewish (rabbinic) canon because of its late date, it probably was part of the “Bible” of certain Jewish groups.

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Although we now think of the Bible as something fixed and unchanging, before the second century C.E. different Jewish groups had different sets of books in their “Bibles.”

The Genesis Apocryphon

Genesis Apocryphon (1QapGen), circa third century B.C.E.–first century C.E. Ink on parchment, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel.

The *Genesis Apocryphon* is from the cache of ancient writings known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1946 by Bedouin shepherds in a cave near Qumran, in what is now the West. Eventually over nine hundred texts were discovered around Qumran between 1946 and 1956, including the oldest existing copies of books of the Hebrew Bible. The *Genesis Apocryphon*, one of the many nonbiblical texts found among the scrolls, records a conversation between Lamech, son of Methuselah, and his son, Noah. Paleography (the study of ancient scripts) and carbon-14 dating techniques were used to identify the age of the documents. The scroll is written in Aramaic, the language of Jesus, on parchment—a material made from calf, sheep, or goatskin.



Qumran Cave 4

Qumran Cave 4, viewed from the northeast. Photograph by Todd Bolen.

Qumran is located in the West Bank, near the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. The site has a long history of settlement but is best known as the location of the parchment scrolls and fragments called the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered in a series of caves between 1947 and 1956. The scrolls include parts of almost all of the books of the Hebrew Bible, along with many other ancient writings. Some scholars propose that the site was a settlement of a Jewish sect called the Essenes, mentioned by some ancient historians. Cave 4 contained the most significant finds, numbering several hundred scrolls.

An archaeological site on the western shore of the Dead Sea, in modern Israel, where a small group of Jews lived in the last centuries B.C.E. The site was destroyed by the Romans around 70 C.E. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in caves near the site and are believed by most scholars to have belonged to the people living at Qumran.

Qumran is a site that was inhabited by members of a Jewish sect—apparently Essenes—who deposited the Dead Sea Scrolls in the nearby caves.