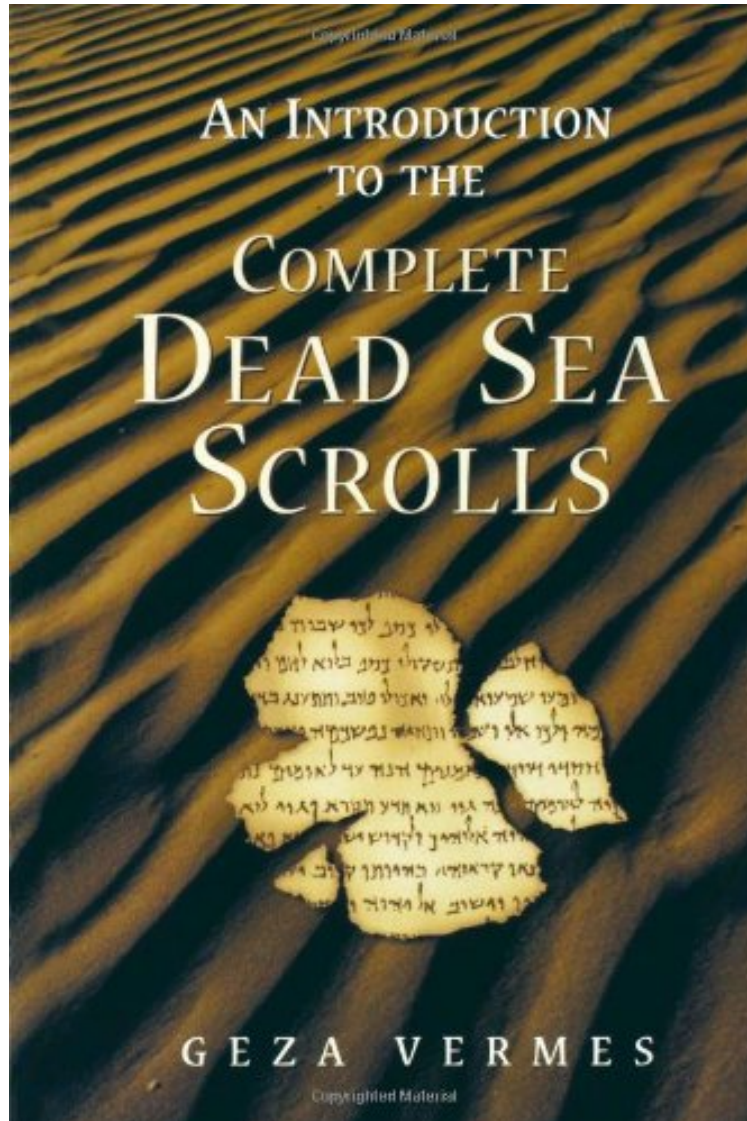


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An Introduction to the Complete Dead Sea Scrolls

Geza Vermes

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yet...By Valhaven't finished reading it yet...24 of 24 people found the following review helpful. A good introduction for beginning scroll scholarsBy FrKurt MessickGeza Vermes is one of the foremost scroll scholars. His work includes complete translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls, countless articles and monographs, and several books dealing with the Dead Sea Scrolls both in terms of history, translation, and interpretation. An emeritus professor of Oxford University, he wrote this recent book after half a century had passed since the first scrolls were discovered.In the first chapter, Vermes traces the history of discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, starting with the caves near Qumran and expanding from there to incorporate a few other finds and sites. In all, eleven caves were discovered in the first decades of scroll exploration. There were major scrolls and minor fragments found in these caves, particularly cave 4; there are over 800 titled scrolls and scroll fragments, over 550 of which come from cave 4 alone.The scrolls themselves have been dated to as early as 200 BCE and as late as 70 CE, with a very few fragments going even further back, or going forward into the next century. The dating and authentication of the scrolls has created a new discipline, according to Vermes - codicology. The texts have added significantly to knowledge about the Bible and the Pseudepigrapha, those works not contained in the official canon but which relate to scripture or scriptural stories. Vermes contends that the actual contribution of the scrolls to Jewish history is negligible, a sense not always shared by other scholars. That the scrolls are historic is not at issue, however.Vermes traces the patterns of different interpretations of the scrolls, including the `official' line of Qumrani origins, the Groningen hypothesis that discusses a theorised series of Wicked Priests, the Zealot theory, theories that link the scrolls to earliest Christian sects (including Barbara Thiering's hypothesis about the contentions between Jesus and John the Baptist, or Eisenman's idea of tensions between James and Paul, variously identifying them as Wicked Priests or Teachers of Righteousness). He includes Norman Golb's latest theories also - in all of this, it shows the wide diversity of views about the scrolls from start to finish.Vermes does a literature survey of the scrolls, highlighting the primary categories of finds in the scrolls. The first is called `Rules of Community' - a good portion of the scrolls seem to deal with a monastic or communal rule, possibly for the community that lived at Qumran. There are poetic and liturgical texts, possible hymn texts and prayers that were recited at the monastic community. There are `Wisdom' texts, most akin to proverbs and sayings. There are Biblical texts (every book of the Hebrew canon save Esther) and interpretations, as well as texts of apocryphal works. Finally, there are documents that resist easy classification, which includes the famous and enigmatic Copper Scroll. Vermes addresses the issue of the Damascus Document here (not found in Damascus, but rather in a Cairo genizah, an attic for documents, that was found much earlier, but later linked to the same scrolls).Vermes devotes several chapters to looking at the dominant theories about the community that lived at Qumran. He addresses the issues of identity in terms of who the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots and the Essenes were, and their likely relationship, if any, to the community at Qumran. He does a brief survey of Jewish history often termed inter-testamental (the time between the completion of the Hebrew canonical texts and early Christian era), focusing mostly in the end on the history of the Essenes, perhaps the least known of Jewish groupings at the time. Expanding upon this survey of the historical identity, Vermes also gives a development of the Religious identity of the Essene community, taken from a distillation of the information from the Rules, the interpretations, and the liturgical works primarily.For many lay persons, the Dead Sea Scrolls are important for the light they shed on the canonical scriptures of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and, possibly, the New Testament. In the final chapter to this text, Vermes looks at the connection of the scrolls and scholarship about the scrolls with the wider field of biblical study and interpretation. In developing the influence on Hebrew scripture study, Vermes discusses the situation prior to the advent of the scrolls in addition to the issues now arising because of the availability of the scrolls - what authority is given to textual variations that are found in the scrolls versus modern texts of the Bible?With regard to the Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament, the situation is different. For much of the extra books in the Pseudipigrapha, not only were there no ancient Hebrew texts remaining, but it was sometimes speculated that some (such as Jubilees) were not even originally Hebrew, but rather in Greek. Issues like this have now been settled, but other issues have arisen, including the authority given these texts prior to Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.With regard to the New Testament, despite a great volume of scholarship, the connections are far more tenuous. Given that there are no direct evidence pieces of scrolls with the New Testament, speculation and conjecture rules the day. The ideas of early Christian life and community often parallels the development of some scholars' ideas of community life among the Essenes, and this causes excitement. However, Vermes prefers to see this less as an identification, and more of a confirmation of the type of Jewish world in which Jesus and early Christianity arose.Vermes includes a catalogue of the scrolls, by title and point of origin, a general index and an index of modern authors. There is a bibliography, divided by major topics, near the front of the book. This is the third edition of the book; originally published in 1977, it went through two revisions as scroll scholarship and lore proceeded at an ever-quickenning pace. It is a very good introduction to this fascinating and complex topic, accessible in language and subject.

This thoroughly revised and updated version of *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Qumran in Perspective* is useful as a textbook for courses in Dead Sea Scrolls, the Hebrew Bible, or the New Testament. It has been a standard work in the field for the past thirty years.

About the Author Geza Vermes is Emeritus Fellow of the British Academy, and Emeritus Professor of Jewish Studies and Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford University. His other Fortress Press books are *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (1993) and *Jesus the Jew* (1981). He has been an international leader in the field of Dead Sea Scrolls research for more than forty years, as recounted in his *Providential Accidents: An Autobiography* (1998).