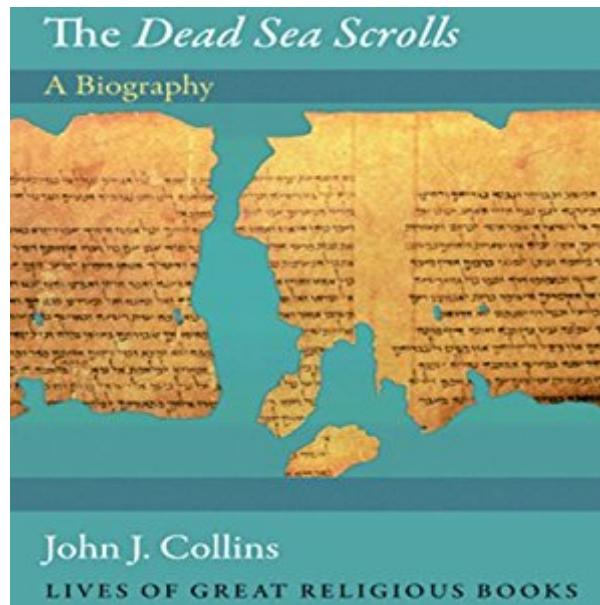


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# The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Biography: Lives Of The Great Religious Books



## Synopsis

Since they were first discovered in the caves at Qumran, in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls have aroused more fascination - and more controversy - than perhaps any other archaeological find. They appear to have been hidden in the Judean desert by the Essenes, a Jewish sect that existed around the time of Jesus, and they continue to inspire veneration and conspiracy theories to this day. John Collins tells the story of the bitter conflicts that have swirled around the scrolls since their startling discovery, and sheds light on their true significance for Jewish and Christian history. Collins vividly recounts how a Bedouin shepherd went searching for a lost goat and found the scrolls instead. He offers insight into debates over whether the Essenes were an authentic Jewish sect and explains why such questions are critical to our understanding of ancient Judaism and to Jewish identity. Collins explores whether the scrolls were indeed the property of an isolated, quasi-monastic community living at Qumran, or whether they more broadly reflect the Judaism of their time. And he unravels the impassioned disputes surrounding the scrolls and Christianity. Do they anticipate the early church? Do they undermine the credibility of the Christian faith? Collins also looks at attempts to "reclaim" the scrolls for Judaism after the full corpus became available in the 1990s, and at how the decades-long delay in publishing the scrolls gave rise to sensational claims and conspiracy theories.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Collins does a particularly good job of handling with remarkable objectivity the many controversial issues related to the scrolls and their interpretation. Where he has an opinion, he is clear in stating that it is his opinion. I was particularly struck by the way in which he addressed John Strugnell's situation. This is the best overview of current scholarship on the DSS that is available to the general public in my opinion.

This "Lives of Great Religious Books" series contribution by one of the Scrolls editors offers a somewhat breezy, journalistic overview, including a few more personal observations than is typical of academic writing. Those observations were, to me, some of the most interesting passages in this book. It's readable and mostly reliable. It rightly notes (p. 33) that, early on, after the first discoveries in the late 1940s, several (including I. Sowy) independently raised the possible Essene connection, but (p. 34) writes that "it is not clear exactly when Sukenik reached this conclusion." Actually, his son Y. Yadin published excerpts from his diary in the *Eretz Israel* 8 Sukenik volume (1967), with dates. Coverage of the relevant history of scholarship before 1948 is somewhat hit-or-miss: mentioning Scaliger on Philo but not Conybeare; mentioning some mistaken etymologies of Essene--there are dozens published--but not the likeliest ones, for which, see now J. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible* (2012) 100-104 (from 'osey hatorah, observers of Torah, a self-designation found in Qumran scrolls, pesharim, recognized as Essene on other grounds; it's also an etymology in effect predicted by several scholars before the Qumran discoveries). Collins recounts several, but surely not all, of the Scrolls controversies. For example, omitted is Yadin's claim that B-Z Wacholder in *Dawn of Qumran* plagiarized him. There are some misspellings, including Rafael for Raphael Golb. (And the latter was not the first scrolls sockpuppet.) An OK read. (Some pages fell out; the binding--maybe only in this particular copy, and not Collins' responsibility--was substandard.)

This is an excellent short summary of Dead Sea Scroll research (and politics). The author avoids name-calling, but is straightforward about some of the pitfalls that scholarship has had to overcome in this area. I doubt if an expert would learn much from this review, but those (like myself) for whom this is a very interesting sideline will enjoy the book and learn a few things, too.

In retirement, I have become an amateur theologian--trying to educate myself on the bible and religious scholarship. Collins has become one of my favorite authors. He is scholarly, a very good writer, and a clear thinker. He has many fields of expertise, and one is the Dead Sea Scrolls. I found

this book very educational on the history of the discovery of these important manuscripts and the tangled history of their availability to scholars. It is a short and very readable book. I would have preferred a little more of the contents of the various manuscripts, but that is much too broad a topic for Collins and his expertise for such a short book. If you know little of the discovery and availability of these important biblical manuscripts, as I did, this is a great place to start.

Collins' book covers two stories. There is the story as portrayed in the scrolls themselves, the history and secrets contained within the fragmented manuscripts. For example within its texts are some of the earliest Jewish writings, stating laws about diets, the clean, and the unclean. Prophecies written 2000 years before Stephen King's "The Stand" chronicle the wars between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. While these texts have been translated in other books, Collins' work also offers a history of the discovery of the scrolls themselves. While most of the general populace believes the texts exist as one large document discovered in one cave at a single moment in time, Collins reveals that many texts resided in many different areas apart from the cave where the first was unearthed. Some ancient manuscripts believed to be related to the texts found in the first cave were in fact hiding in other areas several miles away in some instances. Collins goes on to relate the first scholars who studied the texts, and in particular how Jewish scholars were excluded from examining the manuscripts because of political reasons. These original scholars published their findings and theories about the texts in the late 1950's and early 1960's, some of which have been debunked by contemporary and later scholars. New realizations have been revealed even as late as the 1980's and 1990's. Overall a very enjoyable and insightful look at one of the greatest archeological finds concerning religious literary tradition.

The Dead Sea Scroll exhibit is currently in town and so I wanted to read a few sources to brush up on my previous understanding of the scrolls. (I visit Israel every year and have had a chance to hike up to Cave 1 the past three years.) Collins does a good job laying out the information and nuances of the scrolls. As one previous reviewer noted, the short book is a bit tedious/dry in some places, especially for a resource that I believe is more meant for beginners. But I found no fault with the information, based on my previous knowledge, and think this would be fine for the average person who's looking to understand more.

I bought this book for my mother to read and share with her book club. However, I must admit that before I give it to her I am carefully sneaking and reading it myself. I heard about this interesting

history book on my public broadcasting station. And I couldn't wait to purchase it. It's a good book for those interested in religious history. Fascinating. In addition, this is an attractive, nicely sized hardback book that I think my mother's aged hands will enjoy holding.

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