

# Episode 152 The Dead Sea Scrolls, Part 1

*This episode has been edited for clarity and time.*

## **Tim Lim**

Hello, I'm Timothy Lim. I'm Professor of Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism at the University of Edinburgh.

## **David Capes**

Dr. Timothy Lim, Timothy, good to see you. Welcome to the podcast.

## **Tim Lim**

Nice to see you, David. Thank you for having me.

## **David Capes**

Well, we're here in your home. And you've been a gracious host to me the last few days. Thank you very much. For those who don't know who is Timothy Lim?

## **Tim Lim**

Well, I'm a British and Canadian scholar from a Christian and Chinese background. And I've been living in the UK for over 30 years. And apart from biblical studies, I'm interested in all kinds of things that people don't know about. And that is that I'm interested in playing the guitar.

## **David Capes**

You are a good guitar player. I've heard it!

## **David Capes**

Oh, thank you. And I also like to go to the gym. And I go approximately five times a week to the gym, and I play tennis.

## **David Capes**

And this summer, where will you be going?

## **Tim Lim**

In a couple of days, I'm going to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, to teach a summer course on Bible in Archaeology in the Department of Religion.

## **David Capes**

And your wife will be going with you?

## **Tim Lim**

She will join me once she completes her academic year. She's a teacher.

**David Capes**

You're well known around the world as an expert in the Dead Sea Scrolls. And we want to talk today about the Dead Sea Scrolls, which have fascinated me for a long time, I don't have the linguistic skills you have in it. I can work in it but it's slow for me. Let's just start off with something very basic. What are the Dead Sea Scrolls?

**Tim Lim**

The Dead Sea Scrolls are ancient manuscripts that were discovered in caves by the Dead Sea. And they are manuscripts that belong to a Jewish community, the Essenes who lived in the Second Temple period, which is the period around the turn of the era, or the time of Jesus, if you like.

**David Capes**

And the scrolls themselves are books, right? What we would call a book. They used rolls for their books. We use codices or codexes, for books today. But how many books in all were there? You probably can't be exactly precise, but approximately how many.

**Tim Lim**

That's right. The count is not precise. The estimate is between 800 to 1000 scrolls. And if you think about it, it's not because we're innumerate. But rather because of the data and evidence that we have. A number of the scrolls, maybe about 20 to 25 of them are well preserved scrolls. But the rest of them are really fragments. And if you think about the problems of piecing together fragments, it's akin to the task, the enviable task of trying to put together a puzzle where you don't have the cover on the box. And you're missing all kinds of pieces in the box. And somebody else has put in other pieces from another puzzle into the same box and mixed it all together. And so that's the kind of challenges that we have in Dead Sea Scrolls studies. And it makes it more difficult to be certain about how many scrolls we actually have.

**David Capes**

And there's always a chance, in putting together the puzzle that you put together a puzzle that never existed. And computers are being used today.

**Tim Lim**

Yes, absolutely. They are using computers for digitization in order to clean up the image so they can read it better. But also trying, in some cases to find joins. That is if you find one piece that has a particular shape on its edge, and it fits the mirror image of the side of another piece. It fits into that image. So that's a join or a possible join.

**David Capes**

So these were discovered about 70 years ago.

**Tim Lim**

That's right. Just over 70 years ago they were discovered in 11 caves by an archaeological site called Khirbet Qumran. Khirbet means ruins of a place called Qumran, by the northwest shores of the Dead Sea. However, in recent years there's been further discovery of a cave, which has been identified by some as cave 12. Now, this is somewhat controversial because it comes late. But there's good evidence that it belongs to the same collection of caves 1 to 11, because it has the same kind of pottery as you find with the other Dead Sea Scrolls. The broken pieces of pottery from the jars that are found in that particular cave as well as in the archaeological site as well as in other caves.

**David Capes**

Are there any intact scrolls? Are they all fragmentary?

**Tim Lim**

Ah, so here's the other problem. And that is that we do have a tiny little piece of scroll with no writing, but that has been prepared. It's been lined. Unfortunately, there's nothing written so there's no substantial or maybe contextual link to other scrolls that we have. The link is through proximity to the Khirbet Qumran and also because of the discovery of the pottery that's the same.

**David Capes**

What do we know about the people who wrote, preserved, treasured and valued these books?

**Tim Lim**

The scholarly consensus is that the community that owned these scrolls were a Jewish group known as the Essenes and the Essenes are a small community. I think both Philo and Josephus talk about them as having 4000 members. At the very beginning of Qumran scholarship, that is at the beginning of when they were discovered in 1947 and forward, the reigning hypothesis was that these Essenes basically lived at Khirbet Qumran. Nowadays, there's a change in the understanding of where they live, and that Qumran is only one place. And there are lots of other places and in fact, Josephus talks about them living in all places in Judea.

**David Capes**

And that's the southern part of what we today call Israel.

**Tim Lim**

That's right. We even have evidence that the Essenes also lived in Jerusalem.

**David Capes**

And the Essenes had a particular way of looking at the world that was distinct from other Jews. They were assumed to be apocalyptic, I guess you could say. And the way they treasured their Bibles, the way they read their Bibles were very unique.

**Tim Lim**

Yes, that's right. So I think that the Essenes had an understanding of the world as dualistic. It's often described as being ethical dualism. That is the world is clearly divided between the wicked and the righteous. And, obviously, they are the righteous, and they're the ones who will be saved. And they will

be saved because of their belief in God, as interpreted by their leaders, including the teacher of righteousness.

**David Capes**

And he lived when? Do we know exactly or approximately, when the teacher of righteousness lived?

**Tim Lim**

We don't know. In fact there's some debate as to whether that's actually just a title, that the teacher of righteousness was a title for various individuals.

**David Capes**

It would be like Dean of the school.

**Tim Lim**

Exactly. But at the very beginning of Dead Sea Scrolls studies, that teacher of righteousness was considered to be somebody who was a teacher and operated in the second century BCE, that is in the middle of the second century. And during the time of the Maccabees is when he operated, and his opponent was somebody who was called by another epitaph, the Wicked Priest. And the wicked priest, was identified as Jonathan Maccabee.

Qumran scholarship has really changed. And the emerging consensus is that the origins of the Qumran community is not in the middle of second century, but actually in the first century, at the time when the Romans entered into Judea and took it over. So, when Pompey conquered Judea and entered Jerusalem in 63 BCE.

**David Capes**

That would be the origins of the community. And that community lasted until when?

**Tim Lim**

The evidence that we have archaeologically is that Qumran was destroyed by the Romans in the conflagration that was the first Jewish revolt. So that would be between 66 and 70. When the Romans burnt down the temple. They went around [the Levant] and also sacked Galilee before that.

**David Capes**

And then went city after city, right?

**Tim Lim**

Absolutely. And Qumran was one of the fortresses. In fact, the following archaeological period showed that they made Qumran into a Roman lookout.

**David Capes**

Because of its high point. You can see up and down [the Dead Sea] and see anybody that might be coming, any troublemakers, from their point of view.

**Tim Lim**

Yes, that's right. The Romans didn't need a number of things in the Qumran site, like the ritual bathing pools any longer so that those became obsolete, and they only use certain parts of it.

**David Capes**

So were the scrolls left there on purpose, or was it an accident? Why do you think they were left?

**Tim Lim**

Again, there are many theories about how the scrolls were left in the caves. One theory is that they were sequestered. They were taken from libraries in Jerusalem and sequestered or taken away for safety in the Judean Desert. And they were hidden there during the war between the Jews and the Romans in the first century. So that's one theory. Another one is that this place, Khirbet Qumran with its caves was a kind of genizah. Genizah in Hebrew means that it's like a storeroom. You have that quite often in synagogues, where used manuscripts, or scrolls that have been used, are not destroyed, but placed in the storeroom to dissipate on their own. Because you're not allowed to destroy something that has the name of God in it. In fact, Orthodox Judaism, has two ways of disposing of such scrolls. One is to put in a genizah to let it decompose on its own, or the other one is to dig a hole and bury it.

**David Capes**

They get a proper burial then I suppose. So, what did the Dead Sea Scrolls tell us about Jews and Judaism that we didn't know?

**Tim Lim**

Okay. So, the scrolls have told us quite a lot of things about Judaism, or what we call early Judaism. And one of the most fascinating things that we've learned from this is the connection. What I would call a sectarian matrix, that is this subset of the wider society of Second Temple Judaism. And sectarians by the way, should not be thought of in a negative way. But rather the sectarians are more like schools of philosophy. They have specific teachings that make them distinctive, but they're not odd or strange. So there is a sectarian matrix. They include the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Therapeuti, and followers of Jesus as well. That's the kind of matrix that emerges very clearly.

**David Capes**

Could you include in there the followers of John the Baptist?

**Timothy Lim**

Yes. In fact, John the Baptist was seen by some in Qumran scholarship as the link between the Essenes and the earliest followers of Jesus. Because in Mark, John the Baptist is introduced by a passage in Isaiah 40, verse three about a voice calling in the wilderness. And that same biblical passage is also found in the rule of community as proof text that justify the Qumran community living in the desert.

**David Capes**

Let's talk about the Hebrew Bible now. There are 800 to 1000 scrolls. One of the things discovered there had been books that we today find in the Hebrew Bible but are also now in the Christian

scriptures. Part One of the scriptures called the Old Testament. Have they told us anything new about those biblical books?

**Tim Lim**

Yes, indeed. And there are two things that I would outline. The first concerns the biblical texts if we just take it as Genesis, Exodus, et cetera. We have in the Qumran collection, all the books that became canonical, except for the Book of Esther. So that's one thing to note. The second thing is that we discovered that the scrolls, that is the writings of the Hebrew Bible had a variety and a fluidity about them. That is not evident later on. If we think about the Hebrew Bible, we think about the Hebrew Bible that was created by the Masoretes. That Masoretic text is one version of the Hebrew Bible, or one for each book of the Hebrew Bible. And that became either fixed or selected as the authoritative texts by 100 CE. After 100 CE every single text that we find in the Judean Desert is a proto-Masoretic text. Before that, there's a great deal more fluidity as to what kind of version that you have.

**David Capes**

So why Esther? Why is Esther not one of those books? Any thoughts about that?

**Tim Lim**

I was going to say that's the \$60,000 question, or maybe by now probably one-million-dollar question.

**David Capes**

That's inflation!

**Tim Lim**

So, there's several theories about that. And one theory is that it's because the book of Esther doesn't include the name of God, it doesn't refer to God. So that's one possibility to say, it's secular.

**David Capes**

The name of God is not found in Ester. Not even a reference to God in general, like Elohim.

**Tim Lim**

Yes, that's right. But there's an issue there. Of course, the Septuagint in its expansion of the book of Esther includes all kinds of references to God. So that's one possible reason and it's been speculated that that is it, but we just don't know. We really don't know why the book of Esther is not there. And it's interesting, too, because it's not so much the nature of the book of Esther, because the book of Esther is about court tales in the Persian court. And we have court tails in the Persian court in Qumran that is not the book of Esther. So that's not the reason.

**David Capes**

That is part one of my discussion with Dr. Timothy Lim from the University of Edinburgh. We're going to continue this conversation of the Dead Sea scrolls on the next episode of The Stone Chapel Podcast.