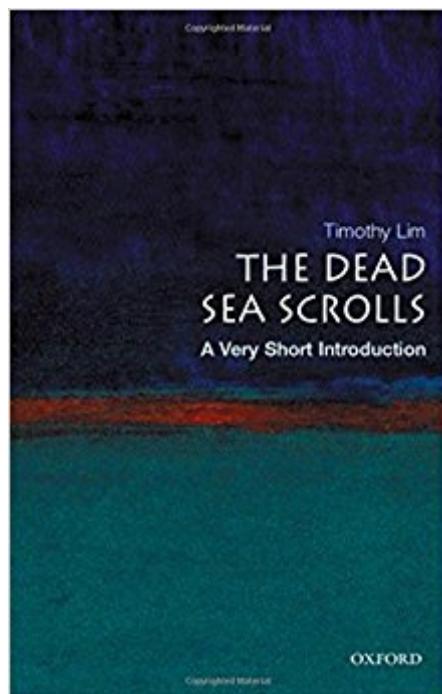


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# The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Very Short Introduction



## Synopsis

Everyone has heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but amidst the conspiracies, the politics, and the sensational claims, it can be difficult to separate myth from reality. Here, Timothy Lim explores the cultural and historical background of the scrolls, and examines their significance for our understanding of the Old Testament and the origins of Christianity and Judaism. Lim tells the fascinating story of the scrolls since their discovery; their cultural context through the archaeology and history of the Dead Sea region. He explains the science behind their deciphering and dating, and does not omit the cast of characters, scandals, and controversies that have hastened the scrolls' rise to the status of cultural icon. Beginning with their discovery in the 1940s, through the political, legal, and scholarly controversies that still persist today, public interest in the Dead Sea Scrolls has remained exceptionally high. This is an accessible and well-written mini-history that will appeal to anyone interested in the true history of these fascinating documents.

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## Customer Reviews

...an excellent, brief, but thorough introduction... Lim provides an authoritative guide to the contents and significance of the scrolls as ancient documents of major religious importance. That would be enough to ask, but he also provides a fascinating account of how these documents have played a role in modern copyright law and have become a focus for polemically tinged religious conspiracy theories. What a story!" - Carol A. Newsom, C. H. Candler Professor of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, Emory University ...an excellent, brief, but thorough introduction... Lim provides an

authoritative guide to the contents and significance of the scrolls as ancient documents of major religious importance. That would be enough to ask, but he also provides a fascinating account of how these documents have played a role in modern copyright law and have become a focus for polemically tinged religious conspiracy theories. What a story! - Carol A. Newsom, C. H. Candler Professor of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, Emory University

Timothy Lim is Reader in Hebrew and Old Testament Studies at the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, and is a widely recognized expert in the field. His research has ranged from aspects of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, to sectarianism, the history of the calendar, and ancient science. He is the author of *Holy Scripture in the Qumran Commentaries and Pauline Letters* (OUP, 1997), and is Principal Editor of Volume 1 of the official digitised edition of the scrolls entitled *The Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Reference Library* (1997, OUP and Brill Academic Publishers). He has made numerous media appearances to promote the public understanding of religion.

This "Very Short Introduction" does just what you want it to do: Acquaint you with the history of the scrolls and their 20th century discovery, their general content, their condition, the reasons why they are important, some of the controversies over their translation and access, an outline of the community believed to have created them, even such things as how they are numbered for cataloging and the work involved in distinguishing between scrolls and identifying the work when all that remains are tiny fragments. It's everything a generally educated person ought to know -- not in a "how to cheat at small talk" way but at a level of real comprehension by a layman -- and it's all presented in an interesting tone and well organized order. I now understand why the Dead Sea Scrolls are such a big deal.

I am a fan of the VSI - Very Short Introduction - Series done by the Oxford University Press. On literally hundreds of subjects, they provide a survey with enough depth and detail to be worthwhile to the non-specialist, a wide enough range to be useful for students looking for authoritative information, and good as a general outline of the fields or subjects as preparation for further study. This particular volume on the Dead Sea Scrolls touches on one of my areas of interest that I have been following for over a quarter of a century (and it pains me to realise that I am indeed old enough to have areas of study that reach back that far). When I first encountered information about the scrolls, one controversy about them was over ownership rights and publication rights - there were conspiracy theories about why the scrolls were being withheld, and no such thing as a

complete volume of the scrolls. These issues are included in Timothy Lim's text, as that story has become part of the history of the scrolls. Lim also addresses the role of the Dead Sea Scrolls as a cultural icon: 'Many people have heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but few know what they are or the significance they have for our understanding of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, ancient Judaism, and the origins of Christianity.' The scrolls have been a media sensation for what they are more so than for what they contain; the location where they were found (a mysterious place, the Dead Sea, the site of ancient battles and settlements, and a place that is still in turmoil today) also played a part of in the mystery of the scrolls, as did the Catholic-dominated scholarly team that worked on the translations and reconstruction for so long (conspiracy theories still resonate in works such as the Da Vinci Code). Lim also highlights the role of the Biblical Archaeology Society in 'freeing' the scrolls from the captivity of the scholarship team. Lim discusses the history of the scrolls as an archaeological find, and puts forward several of the theories of their origins. The primary theory that Lim develops in good detail is the Qumran-Essene origin, which is the dominant theory among scroll scholars today. The archaeological sites are largely situated near the ancient settlement of Qumran, at the north end of the Dead Sea (an hour's drive from Jerusalem today, but a day's journey or more from Jerusalem in ancient Judea). Lim's discussion of de Vaux's archeological work on Qumran is one of the best brief overviews that I have read across several dozen books on the scrolls. Lim discusses the scrolls themselves, discussing many of the difficulties of working with them. He mentions that there are 800 to 900 scrolls (and why we don't know for certain just how many of them there are in the collections), consisting of 25,000 fragments or more. Piecing them together is just one part of the problem; not having all the pieces complicates matters, and not having an accurate guide to follow in reconstruction is another. Biblical and ancient texts can be difficult enough to translate and reconstruct even when they are well known, so how does one account for differences in texts? Are they scribal errors (frequent in ancient manuscripts, given that they are hand written)? Are they reconstruction errors? Are they legitimate textual variants? A large number of the scrolls are biblical texts - the Hebrew Bible has every book save Esther represented in the scrolls. This is important, as it backs up the antiquity of the writings we have by nearly a millennium - the oldest texts of the Hebrew Bible prior to the discovery of the scrolls were texts like the Leningrad Codex, which dates closer to 1000 c.e.; the scrolls date back in some instances as long as 250 years before the time of Herod, Hillel and Jesus. Lim highlights some of the intriguing finds, such as the discrepancy of Goliath's height, recorded in modern texts following the Masoretic text (that in the Leningrad Codex) as approximately 9 feet 9 inches, and the scrolls which record a more realistic 6 feet 9 inches - a giant in a world where 5 feet 4 inches would be

closer to the norm, but hardly a super-human height. This book is an excellent resource for study groups and individuals who want a quick introduction; in today's school environment, students are confronted with an increasing volume of information, but the means to organise and use that information hasn't increased at the same rate. The presentation of material in the typical VSI is good at addressing this need for organisation and utility, and Lim's text on the Dead Sea Scrolls is one of the best of this series that I have read thus far. In addition to the well-written text, it includes maps, graphics and pictures of the scrolls and associated places (the Shrine of the Book, Qumran, etc.), a good index, and a very good list of references keyed to each chapter.

For it was very good and informational. It was not as boring as my other books I have read for school. He seemed to not think high of conservative views but that did not appear to affect the basic information he was sharing.

For as long as I can remember, it seems, new books keep appearing on the Dead Sea Scrolls (which were discovered in 1947, two years before I was born). At some point I became interested in the subject, but in looking to learn something about it I had a hard time distinguishing between objective books and those that had a particular religious or academic axe to grind. For someone in my shoes, this volume from the Oxford "Very Short Introduction" Series is made to order. The author Timothy H. Lim is a Professor at the University of Edinburgh; he is the author or editor of several academic books dealing with the Dead Sea Scrolls and he is a member of an international team of editors that is producing consensus editions of the texts. Nothing in the book's principal 120-page text made me question my initial assumption that what the work presents is a balanced summary of the weight of current scholarship concerning the Dead Sea Scrolls. Thus, it serves, I think, as a good introduction to the subject. Among the matters addressed are the scrolls themselves, the archaeology of Khirbet Qumran, the prevailing hypothesis that associates the scrolls with a community of Essenes that lived at Qumran, a description of that Essene community, and the reasons for concluding that the scrolls relate to the Jewish faith rather than the early Christian faith. A fair portion of the book, and the most interesting to me, has to do with how the scrolls contribute to the current assessment of the "reliability" (for want of a better word) of the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament. (The book also raises a few examples where the Masoretic Text appears to be flawed, one of which is its presentation of Goliath as an improbable giant of 9 feet 9 inches in height, in contrast to two other texts, one from the Dead Sea Scrolls, that present him as being a much more plausible 6 feet 9 inches tall.) Lim identifies, and debunks, some of the

more sensational works that purport to interpret or base historical conclusions on the Dead Sea Scrolls. One of the more infamous such works, which Lim calmly addresses and dismisses, is "Jesus the Man" by Barbara Thiering, which purported to show that Jesus did not die on the Cross, but survived, married Mary Magdalene, and fathered several children. Lim's writing style is a little dry and academic, but by and large it is plain enough that I could understand it without undue effort. The only part of the book that became tedious and made demands on my concentration similar to those from my college days was the chapter on the Qumran community. By no means is **THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS** the be-all and end-all for the interested layperson, but it does provide a reliable orientation for further, more in-depth reading. And if I never get around to such reading, I at least now know something rather than next-to-nothing about the subject.

This book is fact filled. A bit laborious from the numerous historical references. Well balanced perspectives. Worth reading and a good resource.

A very good introduction for those who have no familiarity with the scrolls. Not so good if you are in search of detail.

I read this as a review before seeing the exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls. I have read a great deal about them throughout the years but didn't want to go back and re-read whole books. This is also a good book for those who know nothing about the Scrolls and want to start somewhere.

It summarizes different theories about the Scrolls and is informative. There is too much about the hierarchy of the community, which appears to be conjecture anyway.

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