It was a dry, horribly hot day when my companions, five women and two men, and I journeyed in a van years ago from Jerusalem to the wilderness of Judea and its Dead Sea.

As we strolled beside the salty sea, the sands that sprayed our sandals stung like embers of fire. We shaded our faces from the boiling sun as we stared at the listless water and nearby rocky caves, whose giant holes peered at us like the blackest of eyes.

Those caves are famous because fragments of ancient scrolls, stuffed in large jars, were hidden 2,000 years ago inside their dark interiors. The huge pots contained manuscripts of the Book of Isaiah, older by a thousand years than any previously known Hebrew copy of the Old Testament.

Since the last scroll find in 1956, it was believed that only 11 caves contained the ancient scrolls. However, on Feb. 9, 2017, it was announced by CNN News that Qumran Cave 12 had been discovered by an international team of archaeologists from Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel and Liberty University in Virginia.

A number of jars, lids, flint blades, arrowheads, and a stamp seal made of carnelian, a semi-precious stone from the Second Temple period, were found hidden in niches along the walls of Cave 12 and inside a long tunnel at its rear.

“Although no scroll was found, and instead we only found a piece of parchment rolled up in a jug that was being processed for writing, the findings indicate beyond any doubt that the cave contained scrolls that were stolen,” Dr. Oren Gutfeld said.

That recent finding included the storage jars in which the scrolls and their covering had been hidden, a leather strap for binding scrolls, a cloth that wrapped the scrolls, and a piece of worked leather that was part of a scroll.

“The important discovery of another scroll cave attests to the fact that a lot of work remains to be done in the Judean Desert, and finds of huge importance still are waiting to be discovered,” said Israel Hasson, Director-General of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

The first Dead Sea Scroll Cave was found 73 years ago during the summer of 1947, when a young Bedouin shepherd boy, Muhammad Adh-Dhib, climbed up the steep crags to bring down his goat that had wandered away. The goat took shelter inside one of the caves, and the boy threw a stone into the opening to startle the animal out. The stone made a “plunk” sound as it pitched into one of the pots.

“Curious about the sound and eager to retrieve his goat, the boy struggled up the giant rocks to the cave. Once inside he noticed seven or eight jars, some with lids, standing in a row on each side of the dark cave. The scrolls inside the jars—discovered by a humble shepherd boy—turned out to be priceless, dating back 2,000 years.

And so it all began.

Below the scroll cave, located on a plateau near the Northwest shore of the Dead Sea, my companions and I explored the remains of the Qumran monastic community of Jewish men, who many historians and archeologists believe were the Essenes.

Some people believe instead that they were the Zealots known as the Sicarii, political assassins who killed
persons sympathetic to Rome. But the Jews who lived severe lives of penance and prayer near both the Dead Sea and the high mountain caves were deeply religious. It’s difficult to believe that men living in the monastic community could be murderers.

These Jews at Qumran may have fled Jerusalem to escape persecution when the Maccabean Revolt of 168 B.C. arose. The cruel Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes had attempted to force a Hellenistic civilization on the Jews.

Or, perhaps the Jews arrived in the desert during the reign of John Hyranus (135-104 B.C.), ending shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem by Romans in A.D. 70 (as foretold by Jesus).

Many archeologists believe the Essenes wrote the first scrolls discovered by the shepherd boy, as well as the hundreds of scrolls found later in other nearby caves. The Essenes may have hid the scrolls in the caves because they feared for their lives and wanted to protect what they had written for future generations of righteous believers in the One God.

After decades of persecution, thousands of Jews fled Roman controlled Jerusalem, which at one time had a population of 600,000 Jews, according to Roman senator and historian Tacitus. The Essenes may have fled into the wilderness, as “The burden of Roman rule grew intolerable,” Potok wrote.

The Qumran sect whose members lived by the Dead Sea was led by a man called the Teacher of Righteousness. His followers referred to themselves as the Children of Light (considering their enemies the Children of Darkness). Members of the sect lived a strict, disciplined life and turned away many men whom they thought would be unable or unworthy to live such a harsh life of fasting and prayer.

The monks spent years patiently writing portions of scripture onto parchment or papyrus, and engraved onto one copper scroll. The Dead Sea scrolls include more than 800 documents, including Biblical texts, hymns, and even recipes from the Second Temple period 530 B.C. to 70 A.D. It is believed that these monks hid their manuscripts in the nearby Quimran caves.

The scrolls were written with ink on parchment or leather. One scroll was composed on copper, and this scroll has been popular through the years because it is a “treasure map,” listing areas in Israel where buried treasure from the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was hidden. Several expeditions to these sites have failed to turn up any treasure.

The longest of all the scrolls, more than 26 feet, was from Cave 11. But fragments from one scroll of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible are estimated to have originated from a 98-foot scroll.
The ‘Talking Scrolls’ of yesteryear

In the long ago world—more than 2,000 years before computers, I-phones, printed books, TV, and radio—the scholars Judah the Prince created a legal canon for the Jews.

People did not read this canon, they heard it.

As author Chaim Potok points out in his book Wanderings, History of the Jews, “In the very ancient world, you published a work by reading it aloud in public or by inscribing it on a stone which you placed in a public area.”

The good Rabbi Judah collected the traditions and beliefs of the past, and added to them the rules of his and his father’s generations. He divided this accumulation of rules and beliefs into six categories that became the talks of the rule and beliefs into six categories that became the “talking scrolls.”

1. Seeds, having to do with agricultural matters.
2. Festival, regarding laws pertaining to the Sabbath and holidays.
3. Women, concerning marriage, family life, and divorce.
4. Damages, explaining buying, selling, injuries, real estate, courts, witnesses, idolatry, and the effects of erroneous legal decisions.
5. Sacred matters, dealing with sacrifices, dietary laws, and the temple service.
6. Purifications, consisting of laws regarding ritual uncleanness.

So, if you were Jewish, and you wanted to learn more about these topics, all you had to do was listen to a voice in your town reciting the talking scrolls for all to hear or go searching for a large stone on which were inscribed the cherished rules and beliefs of the pious Jews.

Later, scribes and rabbis would submit the contents of these “spoken scrolls” to publishers, who employed many copyists. Thus hundreds or thousands of scrolls could be produced and the talking scrolls became a thing of the past, putting the “talkers” out of business.

There were different factions of the Jews: the Sadducees, composed of the wealthy priestly class who claimed descent from the high priest of King David; the Pharisees, a group of religious teachers, whose followers came from the lower classes of the city and countryside, and the Essenes, a pious sect of Second Temple Judaism who fled from Jerusalem into the wilderness near the Dead Sea to worship God while living strict lives of fasting, prayer, and ritual uncleanness.

It is not known exactly when the Essenes headed into the hot sands and dry air of the Judean desert. They may have fled Jerusalem when the Jews revolted against the Romans in A.D. 66, or after the burning in 70 A.D. of their beloved Second Temple in Jerusalem, where they and their ancestors had worshipped for more than 500 years.

It has been speculated that John the Baptist was at one time an Essene, although he lived after most of the scrolls were written. Jesus also has been labeled an Essene by some, but most of the scrolls probably were composed 100 years before his birth.

Another fact that debunks these speculations is that the Essene monks shunned outsiders and uncleanness, while both Jesus and John welcomed strangers and even lepers who sought to be baptized and live more righteous lives worshiping the One, True God.

After they fled Jerusalem, the Essenes established a community at Qumran near the Dead Sea. (The Jordan River, in which Jesus was baptized, flows through Israel and the Sea of Galilee, and empties into the Dead Sea.) The Qumran sect of Essenes lived in strict poverty in their ancient settlement close to the rocky caves where more than 900 caves someday would be found.

The Essenes are credited by most archeologists as the authors of the manuscripts. Even Historia Naturalis, written by historian Pliny in A.D. 77, describes a community of men living on the western shores of the Dead Sea, north of the oasis of En-gedi.

After being hidden and forgotten for 2,000 years, the first scroll and several fragile fragments were discovered in 1947 by a 15-year-old Bedouin shepherd whose goat had wandered away and scrambled up into one of the caves. The teenager, Muhammad Ad-Dhib, belonged to the Ta’amireh tribe, which roamed the wilderness of the Judean desert between the Dead Sea and nearby Bethlehem.

The boy threw a rock into the cave where his goat was hiding, and heard a “plunk” as the stone hit something that sounded like pottery. It was a large jar, and inside of it the boy found several handwritten fragments of parchment.

The scrolls’ discovery nearly 2,000 years after they were hidden was called the “archaeological find of the century.” Since then, 11 more scroll
Above is a view of the Jordan River in Israel at the spot where Jesus was thought to have been baptized.
The Jordan River feeds into the Dead Sea.

“In the very ancient world, you published a work by reading it aloud in public or by inscribing it on a stone which you placed in a public area.”

Above is a view of the Jordan River in Israel at the spot where Jesus was thought to have been baptized.
The Jordan River feeds into the Dead Sea.

Caves containing thousands of fragments have been found, the small and larger pieces sorted by archeologists and placed together like puzzles to form whole or partial scrolls.

Written in both Hebrew and Aramaic around 135 B.C., the scrolls are among the oldest manuscripts ever discovered. They include versions of 23 of the 24 books of the Old Testament, some predating other surviving Hebrew texts by 1,000 years. Some scroll Biblical texts are more than 1,000 years older than any previously found. The only book not included was the Book of Esther.

A Biblical scholar from Holland, Father J.P.M. van der Ploeg, was the first to identify the largest scroll as the Book of Isaiah, the most famous intact scroll, found hidden in the first cave. This Catholic priest studied the scrolls for many years.

A Bethlehem antiques dealer sold four scrolls for $100 in 1947, but he received $105,000 for the Temple Scroll from Cave Eleven from the Israeli government in 1967 after the Six Day War. The Temple Scroll is the longest of all the scrolls, measuring 26 feet long, according to “The Dead Sea Scrolls, Unlocking the Secrets of the Scriptures.”

But it has been estimated from fragments that a 98-foot scroll of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible once existed!

The Copper Scroll is unique because its words were engraved instead of written with ink. This scroll was found in Cave Three in 1953 near Qumran, and contains a list of locations where gold and silver are hidden, possibly so that the monks might retrieve them at a later date.

“The Copper Scroll is not Biblical; it may be a temple inventory,” wrote Millar Burrows in his book “The Dead Sea Scrolls.” The Copper Scroll had to be cut into pieces in order to read and preserve it.

Perhaps the monks removed the treasure from the Jerusalem temple before they fled to the Dead Sea prior to an expected attack. The monks may have chosen copper for this special scroll as it would have been less likely to disintegrate than parchment. And in 2,000 years it did not fall apart as the parchment scrolls did.

After the 1948 war between the young state of Israel and the Arabs, an international team of archaeologists led by Father Roland de Vaux, a Jesuit priest from France, was formed to study the scrolls in East Jerusalem.

The authors of the Dead Sea scrolls were unidentified, referring to themselves as “The Sons of Light” and “the Community.” Father de Vaux was convinced, however, that the monks living near the Dead Sea caves were the obvious authors of the library of scrolls discovered.

“The most exciting discovery occurred when scroll Cave Three was discovered north of the first cave,” John Allegro, secretary of the Dead Sea Scrolls fund, noted in his book “The Dead Sea Scrolls.”

“The roof had fallen in, but the remains of 40 jars and 26 lids testified to the possibility of there having once been a large library stored in the cave.”
Y
ears ago, I visited Ma-
sada—golden in the
morning sun—in south-
ern Israel’s Judean Desert, not
far from the Dead Sea and the
dark caverns where the first
Dead Sea Scrolls were found.

One of the hottest places on
earth, Masada is the address
of a fascinating ancient high
rise: a gigantic mesa with a
palace brilliantly designed and
built on its rocky three tiers by
King Herod the Great.

It was Jonathan the high
priest who first built a fortress
on the plateau and named it
Masada, but Herod also
designed the beautiful harbor
and town of Caesarea, visited
by Jesus.

Several ancient scrolls were
discovered at Masada, not too
surprising due to the mesa’s
close proximity to the Dead
Sea and its caves that housed
thousands of hidden remnants
of scrolls for 2,000 years.

Herod, although of Jewish
heritage, was not popular
with the Jews. They hated
him, and he knew it, so he
chose Masada as his refuge in
case the Jews rose up against
him. The paranoid Herod
took even more drastic steps
against his family, ordering
his three sons murdered, his
once beloved wife Mariamne
poisoned to death, and her
brother drowned at Jericho.

It was dangerous to be re-
lated to Herod. There was
a saying in Rome that it was
“safer to be a pig than a rela-
tive of Herod.”

Herod should have stuck
with architecture. He was not
a nice man.

My husband, Dave, and I
viewed a video about Ma-
sada, which claimed that the
Qumran monks who wrote
the Dead Sea Scrolls were Si-
carri, known to attack persons
friendly with the Romans in
Jerusalem. More voices claim
that the Qumran monks were
non-violent, holy men, how-
ever.

The 960 zealot Jews who fled
to the fortifications at Masada
also have been described as
Sicarii, however they were not
violent until forced to defend
themselves. After the Roman
siege and fall of Jerusalem in
70 AD (which had been fore-
told by Jesus: “Not one stone
will be left on another….”), the
Jewish zealots at Masada were
the last of the Jews whom the
Romans sought to conquer in
73 AD. These Jews also were
devout religious men and
women. The Qumran monks
and the Jewish zealots all had
fled the beauty of Jerusalem to
save their lives and souls in the
stark and steaming desert.

The Jews inhabited Ma-
sada for only four years after
the Romans laid siege to the
desert outpost. During those
long years, the defenders of
Masada could look down into
the valley below and watch
Jewish slaves laboring in the
sweltering sun to construct
enormous camps for the Ro-
mans warriors, as well as a huge
ramp up to Masada. We saw
the outlines of one camp from
Masada 2,000 years later, and
travelers still trek up the ramp
to Masada today.

You can read about Masada in
“The Works of Josephus,” a 930-
page book that weighs almost
as much as I do! The Jewish
historian Flavius Josephus was
born in 37 A.D. of a priestly
family of the Hasmonaens. He
was attached to the Roman army
during the siege of Jerusalem,
and chose the name “Flavius”
to ingratiate himself with rul-
ers of the Flavian dynasty of
Romans in Israel. Josephus
wrote the history of the Jews,
but he later became a Christian
and a bishop.

The video about Masada
claimed it was unbelievable
that Josephus knew so much
about the 900 Jews’ painful
discussions prior to their deci-
sion to commit suicide in order
to escape the Romans, who
had built a high wall surround-
ing Masada.

But in his book Josephus
himself addressed that issue,
reminding his readers that two
women and five children had
hidden in a cistern at Masada
after they heard the Jewish
leaders debate and decide to
kill their wives and children-
-and then kill themselves—to
escape capture by the cruel
and vicious Romans.

Now we learn from Jose-
phus himself what he wrote
about that:

“It seems as if that philo-
sophic lady who survived
remembered the substances
of these discourses, as spoken
by Eleazar [leader of the Jews
at Masada], and so Josephus
clad them in his own words
that he wrote.”

Josephus believed this
woman who heard the tragic
discussions of whether the
Jews should allow themselves
to be captured by the Romans,
who would attack their wives,
murder their children, and
enslave the survivors for life.
The Jews agreed that their
only means of escape was to
take the lives of their families
and end their own lives, rather
than submit to slavery. Both
options were tragic.

The Romans were unable
to navigate the narrow and
dangerous Snake Path up
Masada carrying their heavy
weapons. And there was no
room for their mammoth bat-
tering rams and huge siege
tower that opened into a plank
on which the Romans could
climb. The Jews made it even
more dangerous by sending
massive stones plummeting
down upon the Romans to
part their wavy black hair.

Under the frustrated com-
mend of General Silva, the Ro-
mans finally conceived a plan
to erect an enormous siege
ramp fashioned of stones and
dried mud. This ramp al-
lowed their soldiers to reach
the top of Masada with their
swords and massive machines
of death that hurled fire and
stones larger than grapefruit
down upon the Jews.

It took the Romans four
years to finish the massive
ramp, which was built with the
sweat and pain of thousands
of Jewish slaves who had been
captured in towns attacked by
the Romans.

The Jews at Masada were
able to survive due to the
massive amount of preserved
food stored in vessels in two
enormous storehouses built
on Masada by King Herod’s
workers. On the jars were
inscriptions such as “crushed
pressed figs,” “pressed figs,”
and “dried figs.” (They ate a
lot of figs!)

In 1909, archeologists stud-
ed, mapped and excavated
Masada. A century later, the
Jewish Youth Movement of
Israel and hundreds of other
volunteers from around the
world helped with additional
excavation. One young man
found several scrolls written
2,000 years ago by the Jewish
zealots.
“From an historical viewpoint, the most significant of our discoveries in the rooms of the casemate wall were undoubtedly the scrolls,” wrote Yigael Yadin, the distinguished Jewish military leader and archaeologist, in his book “Masada.”

“Our great excitement may be imagined when, only a few weeks after we started digging, we found our first scroll,” Yadin said. “It was discovered in one of the rooms in the casemate wall.

“After clearing more than six feet of debris, we got down close to the floor. The room had not been burned [as were several rooms on Masada by the Romans], and it contained a large collection of vessels, cloth, mats, baskets, and leather articles…. Then came the first serious find, important not only in itself, but also in relation to the other finds.”

Strewn over a small area of the floor in the southern corner of the room were 17 silver shekels. “They were in excellent condition,” Yadin reported. “The inscriptions in Hebrew, ‘Shekel Israel’ and ‘Jerusalem the Holy,’ were completely clear.” So were several Hebrew words and letters representing numbers such as one to ten.

“At Masada, silver shekels were found for the first time in a systematic archaeological excavation, and in an archaeological stratum clearly belonging to the period of the revolt,” Yadin explained.

The first scroll discovered at Masada was three feet away from the shekels. It was a fragment from the Book of Psalms, and the parchment was black and creased. But the archeologist was able to identify the chapters: the scroll section ran from Psalm 81 to Psalm 85. And with the help of infra-red photography, the text of this scroll was identified as identical with the traditional Hebrew version, both in wording and division of the Psalms.

It was the first time that a parchment scroll was not discovered in a cave. This scroll was dated as not later than the year 73 A.D., the year Masada fell. Yadin described this scroll as “almost identical to the text of the Biblical books which we [the Jews] use today.”

A young man from a kibbutz in Israel, one of the many volunteer workers at the excavation, found a scroll from the Book of Leviticus at Masada. The text on another fragment was exactly the same as the text of a scroll discovered at Qumran’s Cave Four!

One fragment appeared to have been cut and torn, perhaps intentionally by the Roman garrison. Josephus wrote that “Roman soldiers persecuted Jews by tearing books of the Bible before their eyes.”

Another fragment was from the “Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifices,” identical with the scroll from Cave Four of Qumran. Also discovered was a piece of white leather on which was written the last chapter of the Book of Psalms, Psalm 150: “Praise Ye the Lord… Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet!”

The story of the Jews at Masada ended tragically when the men decided to kill their families and themselves, rather than succumb to Roman slavery.

It was heartbreaking for each father to bestow hugs and farewell kisses on his beloved wife and children, and then to slay them in order to save them from the pain and degradation of a lifetime of slavery.

This tale of Masada, its history and its ancient scrolls, would echo down the centuries and never be forgotten.
I have written several stories about the Dead Sea scrolls since I floated years ago in the sea’s thickly salt-clogged waters, looking up at the cliff caves where the scrolls were found in Israel.

But never did I think I actually would see the scrolls with my own eyes, which happened recently when my husband Dave and I visited an exhibit of 10 of 20 scrolls displayed at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science in downtown Denver. (The other 10 scrolls were displayed at a different time.)

The scrolls had never before been on public display, and span nearly 185 years, with copies made as early as 125 BCE. The Isaiah scroll is one of the latest copies discovered.

The building was clogged with the curious public, but a kindly man from the museum gave us a private tour, explaining the history of each scroll on display as we strolled past these remains of antiquity.

The scrolls had been written and stuffed into large jars by religious men—Essene monks—a sect of Second Temple Judaism who fled the attacks of Jews and others in Jerusalem and lived in a desert community they named Qumran that was destroyed in 68 CE (Christian Era). More than 900 remarkably preserved scrolls were recovered.

During my visit to Israel, some of my companions and I climbed the huge rocks leading up to one of the caves and peered into the darkest darkness I’ve ever seen. Of course, there were no pots or parchment of any sort left inside the cave.

Discovered by a young Bedouin boy in 1947 when his goat scampered up the rocks and into one of the caves, the huge pots we saw at the museum contained manuscripts of the Book of Isaiah, older by a thousand years than any previously known Hebrew copy of the Old Testament! The Book of Isaiah is one of the more common Dead Sea scroll texts.

The dawn of civilization arose in the region of Israel more than a million years ago and became the birthplace of some of the world’s leading religions. There are more than 30,000 known archaeological sites throughout Israel, a tiny sliver of land that can be crossed by car from top to bottom in only four hours!

The Denver museum featured 2,000-year-old parchments and scraps of parchments found in Israel’s caves above the Dead Sea between 1947 and 1956. Following their discovery, historians in the 1950s pieced the scraps back together using cellophane tape.

The majority of the scrolls are non-Biblical, representing religious legal writings, prayer texts and predictions of a future apocalypse. Even recipes are included among the scrolls!

Some 1,200 silver shekels (coins) were unearthed at Qumran, and many copies of the Book of Isaiah were discovered in the caves. A few were on display at the exhibit, as were a pair of leather sandals worn by one of the
Date: 100–1 BC;  
Language: Hebrew

Among the oldest known copies of Genesis, the fragment of the Scroll shown here contains the description of the first three days of the creation of the world. It reads:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep; And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”
— Genesis 1:1–2

The Denver museum featured 2,000-year-old parchments and scraps of parchments found in Israel’s caves above the Dead Sea between 1947 and 1956. Following their discovery, historians in the 1950s pieced the scraps back together using cellophane tape. Today, they are housed in environmentally controlled cases through which they can be viewed. An ancient pot is at the center.

Jewish rebels who fought in vain against Roman forces and chose to kill their families and themselves rather than surrender at the nearby desert fortress of Masada in 73 CE.

The Jewish religious men at Qumran believed the last days were coming at any time, and readied themselves by prayer, study and cleanliness, bathing twice a day in small pools of water. Qumran was destroyed in 68 CE (Christian Era), but when we visited the area, we walked among the rooms of its stony remains as we did at the better preserved mountain fortress of Masada.

Among the ancient pieces of pottery from Israel displayed at the Denver museum were huge collared-rim storage jars called “Pithos,” dating from the Iron Age I (11th century BCE). These enormous pots were found in the remains of four-room houses in Canaan’s central hill country.

As for the scrolls on exhibit at the museum, 27 percent were written in Greek, although 10 scrolls were copies of the Hebrew community’s writings. NASA has a digital library where a digitized process allows viewers to “see writings we never could see before.”

A discovery made in Cave 4 in 1952 produced a “War Rule,” a six-line fragment, known as the Sefer ha-Milhamah, commonly referred to as the “Pierced Messiah” text, which refers to a Messiah from the Branch of David (whom we know as our Savior Jesus Christ), and also to a judgment and a killing, both of which He experienced.

One Hebrew scroll on parchment includes as many as 51 psalms, but their order does not correspond to the present version of the Hebrew Bible, and the scroll contains psalms not found in the present version.

The text names King David as author of the psalms, reinforcing his reputation as the greatest of poets!

One scroll contains a lease agreement belonging to Eliezer ben Shmuel, a farmer who lived in Ein Gedi. (I visited this small part of Israel that looks like Paradise, and we have named a picnic area in our backyard “Ein Gedil!). The land changing hands in Israel was owned by the government of Simeon Bar Kokhba, leader of the Second Jewish Revolt against the Romans (132-135 CE). The document refers to Bar Kokhba as the “Prince of Israel.”

One parchment, the book of Enoch, was written in Aramaic and found in Cave 4, dating back to between 100 and 50 BCE. Enoch is mentioned in the book of Genesis, where he is reported to “Walk with God,” as we all would like to walk.
One text of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are 1,000 years older than any other extant manuscripts, specifically is a prophecy of the days to come of Jesus and His teachings.

Text number 4Q246 reads:

“He shall be called the Son of the Great [God], and by his name shall he be hailed as the Son of God, and they shall call him Son of the Most High.”

-- Text 4Q246, Dead Sea Scrolls
The texts were discovered in caves in the canyons above the Dead Sea, rolled up and placed in clay jars such as these that were on display at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science.

Photo by Dave Myers

discovery among the Dead Sea caves was a complete scroll of the book of Isaiah in Hebrew that measured 24 feet long,” he added. “The text of this Old Testament book (about 100 B.C.) was very much like the Ben Asher Text of A.D. 926. “This fact gave scholars confidence that the translation of the book of Isaiah, which appears in our modern English translations and is based on the Ben Asher text, is a reliable one.”

Surprisingly, Davis revealed something that I never have read previously in my studies of the Dead Sea Scrolls. “As noteworthy as the Dead Sea finds were in 1947 and following, there is historical evidence that similar scrolls and manuscripts had been discovered in the region much earlier,” Davis wrote. Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis, fourth century A.D. refers to Old Testament manuscripts in Hebrew and Greek found concealed in clay jars near Jericho in A.D. 217.

Eusebius lived from the third to the fourth century A.D. and referred to the discovery of the manuscripts found in the large jars. Then in the eighth century A.D., Timothy I, who was the patriarch of the Nestorian Church, recorded the fact that “more than 200 psalms of David” were found near Jericho.

Here are some more facts that you can file away for future use: three-fourths of the Dead Sea manuscripts include the Apocrypha (14 books in the Greek Septuagint, but not in the Hebrew Canon), the Pseudepiographa (books that were falsely ascribed to Old Testament writers), and commentaries on books of the Old Testament such as Habakkuk, which dates to 25 B.C. – and sadly for readers has had the bottoms of many of its columns eaten away!

The Dead Sea Scroll monks also wrote a rather severe piece of literature called the “Manual of Discipline,” dating back to 100 B.C. They didn’t seem to care much for women.

The historian Josephus, whom I have quoted many times in other articles, did write about the Essenes, whom he hardly could ignore since at one time there were 4,000 of them living along the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, where I went for a float among the chunks of salt.

Recently it came to light that the head of a Jewish sect had written a letter to a king or priest in 160 B.C. The letter cited 22 matters on which the sect disagreed with mainstream Judaic thought.

So, some scholars now believe the people at Qumran may have been Sadducees rather than Essenes.

When they learned the great monetary value of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Bedouins, archaeologists, scholars, and just plain thieves began to ravage the caves along the northwest shores of the Dead Sea, surely dunking themselves into the murky and sticky sea in the horrible heat, and later selling the scraps (which most of them could neither read nor decipher).
An expedition to search the first cave where Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in Israel by a shepherd boy in the summer of 1947 began a fortnight after the rediscovery of the cave.

Joining in the exciting venture to explore the biggest archaeological discovery ever found in Palestine was a Catholic priest, Father Roland De Vaux, O.P. of the French School of Archaeology in Jerusalem.

Part of the discovered cache came immediately into the hands of a museum, and Father De Vaux was one of the trustees.

“The trustees, only one of whom, Father Roland De Vaux, O.P., can claim any competence in reading or appreciating the significance of these most important and controversial documents—apparently began offering the publication and exhibition rights to the highest bidders,” wrote John Allegro in his book “The Dead Sea Scrolls, a Reappraisal.”

The priest joined Lancaster Harding of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities in official excavations of the scrolls on Feb. 15, 1949. The excavations continued until March 5. The two men’s work yielded shards and linen scroll wrappings “and a few pieces of inscribed leather.” (Scrolls were written on parchment, papyrus, leather and one was even scratched onto copper.)

Father De Vaux and Harding also found the first fragment recovered from Qumran (where the scroll caves were located by the Dead Sea), written in the old proto-Hebraic or “Phoenician” characters. This fragment represented part of the text of Leviticus.

The Essene monks who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls hid them in large jars in the nearby caves because they feared an invasion of Romans who would destroy the scrolls, as they had destroyed Jerusalem. The practice of storing scrolls in jars for safekeeping was common in antiquity.

“In his report on the archaeology of the First Cave, Father De Vaux recalls instances from the time of Rameses III down to an Arab letter of the eighth or ninth century of our era where the practice is referred to,” explained Allegro.

While excavating the first cave in the spring of 1949, Father De Vaux and Harding searched for any evidence that humans had lived nearby when the scrolls were written. About 1,000 yards southeast of the cave, they discovered the ruins of Qumran, the monastery of the monks who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The ruins remained untouched until Father De Vaux and Harding made a trial sounding in 1949, digging up two of the tombs in an adjacent cemetery of a thousand graves, which were presumed to date from pre-Islamic days.

The monastery area included a complex water system, which author Allegro said “has probably accounted for a reduction of at least a centimeter in Father De Vaux’s patriarchal beard, which he is apt to chew in moments of mental stress.”

Allegro praised both Father De Vaux and Harding.

“Now, thanks to the skillful work of Harding and De Vaux and their teams, the visitor can walk again through rooms and passages of the monastery.”

Father De Vaux joined Harding again in January 1952 on an official excavation of the Murabba’at caves of the Wady Murabba’at, a great gorge of water east of Bethlehem until it enters the Dead Sea.

A priest by the name of Father J. T. Milik discovered what has been called “the most amazing documentary find from the pre-Roman period,” a papyrus which Father Milik identified as sixth century. On it are written Jewish names like Josephus, Jesus, Saulus, and Simon.
Most of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 12 caves at Wadi Qumran near the Dead Sea in Israel 72 years ago between 1946 and 1956 were written in Hebrew, but a few were found inscribed in Aramaic, a popular language during the lifetime of Jesus.

Hebrew was the language of Israeli scripture and culture, but Aramaic was the official language of the ancient Near East, as Andrew B. Perrin described it in the September/October issue of Biblical Archaeology Review magazine.

According to Perrin, Aramaic “took hold in much of the ancient New East as both the official and common tongue, starting in eighth century B.C.E.”

Aramaic eventually took the place of the Akkadian language in the region, but much of ancient Judaism’s Aramaic scribal heritage was lost or forgotten. Exceptions were imperial messages in Ezra (4:8-6:18; 7:12-26) and also the apocalyptic dreams, visions, and court stories from the first half of Daniel (2:4b-6:18; 7:12-26).

Hebrew was the official language of the Jews, but Aramaic words and phrases were to be found scattered within the Hebrew Bible. Aramaic could be read, for example, in Genesis 31:47 and in Jeremiah 10:11.

Half of the Babylonian Talmud and most of the Jerusalem Talmud were written in some dialect of Aramaic, as was the collection of translations in Targumim, which were spoken paraphrases and explanations of the Jewish scriptures that a rabbi would give in the language of his listeners, usually the Aramaic language.

The Aramaic Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran Cave 1 was among the first discoveries in the Judean Desert near the Dead Sea. This text was published in 1955, but the greater number of Aramaic texts “had long remained among the most understudied materials in the collection [of Dead Sea Scrolls],” Perrin pointed out.

Fragments of 972 separate documents, named the Dead Sea Scrolls, were found some 40 years ago near the Dead Sea in cliff caves of the ancient settlement of monks at Qumran.

Aramaic texts represent between 10 and 13 percent of the Qumran finds, “depending on how you collect, count, and configure the epic jigsaw puzzle that is the Dead Sea Scrolls,” Perrin explained.

But it was not until 2009 that the last of the Aramaic texts received full, critical publication, he reported.

Aramaic texts of up to 30 literary works were found in the caves at Qumran, where the monks who wrote the scrolls resided near the Dead Sea. The community of holy men seemed to have preferred to write the majority of their scrolls in their ancestral language of Hebrew, however.

“These Aramaic fragments include previously known works (e.g., Daniel 2-7 and Tobit), texts that served as sources for other Jewish or Christian compositions in antiquity (e.g., the Aramaic Levi Document and the Book of Giants), and completely new materials (e.g. Visions of Amram and Prayer of Nabonidus (king of Babylon),” Perrin wrote.

Like Perrin, I wonder “Why would faithful Jewish scribes reflecting on their ancestral past and expecting the dramatic arrival of divine rule pen their works in Aramaic, their adoptive language, rather than Hebrew, the traditional language of their sacred scriptures?”

Perrin thinks he has the answer.

“Since Aramaic was the lingua franca of the age, perhaps the choice was pragmatic: writing in Aramaic meant that the texts were accessible to communities beyond Judea, including Jewish communities in the Diaspora.”

Until the accidental discovery of the scrolls by a Bedouin shepherd boy in 1946, only a few of the 300 or so texts they contain were preserved through Christian traditions, including the Book of Enoch, which was preserved not in the Hebrew Bible, but by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Ge’ez.

Until 200 BCE, the Dead Sea Scrolls were written in Aramaic and Greek, which predate the Ethiopian version.

Perrin stated it best: “In sum, the scribes of the Aramaic texts exhibit an exceptional command of ancestral traditions, as well as creativity in re-imagining them.”

Most people have never read the Book of Giants or heard of Nabonidus or read any text in Aramaic. I am among those people, but we just keep on learning more about Biblical history, and for me, that’s one of the greatest excitements of this life!