

“The Dead Sea Scrolls and Living Faith”

Genesis 12: 10-20
The Genesis Apocryphon
Dead Sea Scrolls document

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In 1947 in a cave near the old archeological site of Qumran 930 Biblical-era documents were discovered. The story almost reads like the beginning of an Indiana Jones movie. A goat had wandered into one of the caves and the young boy who was charged with his care was searching for him. He threw a rock into a cave and instead of hearing it fall silent as it hit dirt or rock, it made a ping. The rock had landed on some ancient pottery that contained hundreds of documents of sacred scripture 2000 years old. These documents were given the name “The Dead Sea Scrolls.” Up to this point our oldest documents of the Bible were translations from the Middle Ages one thousand years later. One might say that this was a find of Biblical proportions!

On Wednesdays for the past nine weeks our adult study class has been wading into the Dead Sea Scrolls scholarship. Quite honestly, there is so much information in this lecture style video that we can’t really understand how all the pieces fit together. Nonetheless, the ten or so attendees will probably know more about the Dead Sea scrolls than everyone else in Portland with the exception of a handful of Bible professors.

Even though there is no way for us to digest all the information in this 24-lecture series the implications of the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls is beginning to settle in. And quite honestly, I am excited about what we are discovering. I have been a serious student of the Bible now for 30 years and in recent years I have watched as my own understanding of Scripture has shifted. Very simply that shift can be captured in the way I introduce Scripture when I am reading it. I used to say, “Listen TO the Word of God.” These days I say, “Listen FOR the Word of God.” It’s a very simple shift, but one that reveals how I understand Scripture.

Let me see if I can unpack that. Today, we read two different accounts of the story of Abram and Sarah. The first reading was from Genesis 12 in what we know today as the Christian Bible. The second reading is from what is called the Genesis Apocryphon which was one of the Dead Sea Scroll discoveries. The basic story captures the time when a great famine struck the land of Haran, Abram and Sarah’s homeland. So they journeyed to the richer Egypt. You might say that they went looking for greener pastures. There Sarah was kidnapped by the Pharaoh and taken as one of his wives. Because Abram and Sarah knew this would happen they devised a plan where Abram’s life would be spared. Rather than fight for his wife and thereby being killed himself they decided that they would claim that Abram was Sarah’s brother. Everyone knows that if you want someone else’s wife it’s the husband you have to kill, not the brother. And there plan worked perfectly.

I am less concerned with exactly what takes place in this scripture today than I am by the existence of two different versions of this story. The second version is an expanded description of the earlier Biblical version. In the Genesis Apocryphon Abram has a dream warning of Sarah’s impending kidnapping by the Pharaoh. In the Biblical version no such dream is mentioned. In the Biblical version Sarah is just called “very beautiful.” In the second version there is a whole poetic description of her beauty very much in the tradition of the Song of Solomon that we also have in our Bibles. And, although I didn’t read that far, in the Genesis

Apocryphon, there is a more detailed version of the plagues that afflicted the Pharaoh and a description of Abram laying his hands on the Pharaoh and healing him from the afflictions. None of that is in the Biblical version.

We have these two versions of the same story—one that survived and was included in the Bible as the Word of God and a second expanded version that was only discovered 2000 years later and is not considered the Word of God. So it brings up the question, “*What exactly is the Word of God?*” What makes one the Word of God and the other just an archeological discovery? We could make it easy on ourselves and just say that the Word of God is anything included in the Bible as we know it today. We could trust that the Holy Spirit somehow knew that the first version belonged in our Holy Bible and the second version belonged in a hidden cave never to be discovered. We could say that the earlier and more original is the Word of God and that the later one is just someone letting their imagination run away from them.

There is a problem with this theory, however. Scholars will tell you that even the version we do have in the Bible is an adapted version of two different stories. Scholars tell us that Genesis is actually the weaving together of two different Jewish traditions, both of which had stories about Abraham and Sarah. Long before Genesis was actually written there were both written and oral stories floating among the earliest Hebrew people. What we have in the Bible is a blend of many stories and many traditions put together over hundreds of years by Hebrew and Christian scribes.

So what exactly is the Word of God? Where do we find the Word of God? Is it in the earliest unwritten oral stories that were told around the campfire? Was it the first recorded versions of those stories? Is the Word of God the blended, adapted versions of these stories that we have in the Bible today? Or is the Word of God in some of our recent discoveries as found in the hundreds of Dead Sea scrolls?

What recent scholarship is unfolding for us is that what we have in the Bible today is really a snapshot of our faith tradition in a certain time and place. We tend to think of the Bible as a closed and complete book of the Word of God. It begins with Genesis and ends with the Revelation of John. It’s exactly 66 books—39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament. The Bible came to us gift-wrapped just as we have it today and our job is to protect it from any wrong interpretations, translations, or adaptations. That’s how we often think about it.

But, there is a serious problem with thinking that the Bible as we have it today is the complete, once-for-all, final revelation of God. There is a problem with thinking that what we have in our pews today is the Word of God and that other writings are not the Word of God. Consider these facts:

1. If you walk down the street just ten blocks to the Catholic Church you will discover that they don’t read the same Bible that we read. Did you know that? In addition to our 66 books they also consider as sacred scripture an additional 15 books called the Apocrypha which includes such works as Tobit, Judith, The Wisdom of Solomon and Bel and the Dragon.
2. If you visit one of the growing Eastern Orthodox churches, also part of our Christian tradition, you will discover that in addition to the Roman Catholic Apocrypha they add three more books—3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, and Psalm 151.
3. Speaking of Psalms it is believed that King David is actually credited with having written over 3000 psalms, yet only 150 of them are in our Bible and thus considered

to be the “Word of God.” Does this mean his other 2,850 psalms were missing God’s spirit?

4. Also consider the fact that there has been much disagreement about what got into the Bible and what didn’t. There were actually hundreds of scriptures in circulation in the first 400 years after Jesus. When they began to decide what was official Christian literature and what wasn’t they had to narrow it down to what they believed best fit this emerging Christian tradition. Writings that made Jesus sound too human and not divine enough were discarded as heresy. And writings that were considered too Gnostic—that is, where Jesus was portrayed as too divine and not human enough were also discarded as heresy. You should know that the gospel of John almost didn’t get in the Bible for this reason. John was dangerously close to portraying Jesus as more divine than human.

As I said earlier, in recent years I have gone to introducing Scripture by saying, “Listen FOR the Word of God” as opposed to “Listen TO the Word of God.” Why do I say this? Because now into my fourth decade of study on scripture I am convinced that the Word of God is not in the particular words found on the page. The Word of God is found in the living community. The Word of God is found in our ever-changing, ever-evolving, living faith. The Word of God is found the stories, in the lives, and in the experiences of faithful people. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that the Bible is the “words of God,” but that the actual experience of God takes place off the page and in the lives of faithful people and faithful communities.

I have been in most of your homes by now and one of things that your homes have in common is that you have snapshots of your families on your walls and in picture frames. There are pictures of your parents when they got married. I have seen old photographs of grandparents dressed properly and with formal expressions on their faces. I have seen your own family pictures with 50’s hairdos and that old classic Thunderbird car.

We all know that these pictures are just snapshots of your lives at a certain time and place. The picture itself is only a snapshot of what is really going on. The experience that is behind the picture is what matters. And that experience changes, grows, and evolves over time. A wedding picture can capture a certain special moment, but it can’t capture the entirety of the relationship. A posed soccer photograph is a reminder of a certain time, a particular year, and a unique experience. But, that posed picture doesn’t come close to capturing how that soccer experience contributed to your friendships and your choices in life and how you feel about yourself. That’s somewhere behind the picture.

In recent years the world of the Bible has expanded greatly. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls new questions about how the Bible came to be are being raised. With good church history we are recognizing that the Bible didn’t just drop from the sky, but was fought over long and hard over many centuries. We now have many of the other Christian writings that didn’t get in the Bible and we are studying why they were rejected and others were accepted.

In recent years I have begun to introduce scripture by saying, “Listen FOR the Word of God” rather than “Listen to the Word of God.” I say that because with all of these new discoveries I am convinced that the Bible is just a snapshot of the early Jewish and Christian community as they practiced their living faith. But, the thing about photographs is this—once you take the picture that moment is lost and life continues and faith evolves. The picture doesn’t capture once and for all everything you are and everything you will be. It only serves as a reminder of who you were and what you were about then.

This week I visited Anna Maria and she repeatedly reminded me that 27 years ago she made a commitment to the Lord and then she would quote Isaiah 6: 8 which reads, ‘Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”’ Anna Maria took the words of Isaiah and made them her own.

My friends, the Word of God is not in the letters on the page. It’s in the lives of faithful people who have that Word of God written on their heart. The Word of God is not found in a Dead Sea Scroll but in the experiences of a living vital faith!