

The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls by Jodi Magness.
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Reviewed by Johan D.Tangelder.

The ruins of the settlement of Qumran, where the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were found by Bedouin shepherds in 1947, are on a hill overlooking the north-west shore of the Dead Sea. In these Scrolls, we have copies of the Hebrew Bible a thousand years older than anything else we'd had. The increased awareness of their importance for Biblical scholarship made Qumran a popular site for archaeologists, whose work consists very largely in digging, observation, recording and interpretation. Since the discovery of the Scrolls, many have attempted to learn Qumran's secrets. Who lived there? What kind of community was it? Are there more scrolls hidden? Excavations have yielded invaluable information about the Qumran community, Judaism and the Jewish world in the last centuries B.C. Data was uncovered about the nature, size, and date of the community, which has been identified with the Essenes, a sect of Judaism described by 1st century historian Josephus. For example, the ruins reveal a communal centre used for meals, meetings, scripture study and scroll copying.

In her book veteran archaeologist Jodi Magness, an American Jewish scholar, who has participated in twenty different excavations in Israel and Greece, provides an overview of the archaeology of Qumran and presents a new interpretation of this ancient community. However, she does not claim it to be the definitive work on the subject. Most of the interpretations and conclusions are tentative. Magness combines all the available (published) archaeological evidence and the information provided by the scrolls and our ancient historical sources. For example, she re-examines the archaeological evidence for the presence of women and children in the settlement and the purpose of some of its rooms. Numerous photos and diagrams give readers a firsthand look at the site. Each chapter of the book has extensive biographical notes. All in all, it is a learned and readable account of Qumran archaeology by a recognized expert, which offers valuable insights into the background of the Gospels.