

Programs that feature the Dead Sea Scrolls usually draw good audiences, maybe because their title suggests a mystery story. The scrolls were discovered by accident in the 1940's when a shepherd boy chased a goat that ran into a cave near the Dead Sea. The boy threw a rock into the cave, hoping to scare the goat out, but instead heard the sound of pottery breaking. Entering the cave, he discovered the pottery concealed parchment manuscripts of the Bible hidden (it turns out) for nearly two thousand years. We have no original Bible books--the actual letter that Paul sent to the Romans, or the first draft of the twenty-third psalm. The best you can find is a copy older than any other. The Dead Sea Scrolls predated every other manuscript we have by at least six or eight hundred years. They got us closer to the Old Testament authors than we'd ever gotten before.

The cave where that goat ran is at Qumran, former home to a sect called Essenes. John the Baptist probably knew that community; some speculate he was a member. John surely baptized Jesus near Qumran and just a few decades before a persecution forced the Essenes to hide their treasures, their sacred scrolls, and flee.

In the last few decades, people have fought over who owns the scrolls, and they've split up. Scholars have access to most of them, but others are hidden again. Hidden first for safety, now they're hidden because--well, quite frankly--they're worth a lot of money. You'll hear speculation that they reveal new information about Jesus, John, and their lifestyles. It's not likely. But they will help us understand some parts of the Bible better.

When Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized by John, that event became a kind of living scroll, helping us to understand the Bible better. Mark, for example--the main question that drives all of Mark's Gospel is "Who is Jesus?" and Mark puts this scene first in his gospel to begin answering it for us. A voice says, "You are my beloved son, my chosen one." The voice comes from heaven, so it carries some heavy authority. And the voice addresses Jesus, not yet John or the crowd. For Jesus it confirms who he is as he begins his public ministry.

The question "Who is Jesus?" will always haunt us. People will interpret the Bible in different ways; some make wild speculations. Or life's crises will cause us to ask again and again just who is this Jesus we believe in? The baptism lets us in on the great secret, so long hidden, which God revealed like an ancient scroll: Jesus is the chosen one, the beloved son of God.