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Mystery or History: The Dead Sea Scrolls as Pop Phenomenon



Author: [Maxine L. Grossman](#)

Source: [Dead Sea Discoveries](#), Volume 12, Issue 1, pages 68 – 86

Publication Year : 2005

DOI: [10.1163/1568517053272332](#)

ISSN: 0929-0761 **E-ISSN:** 1568-5179

Document Type: Research Article

Subjects: [Biblical Studies](#)



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MYSTERY OR HISTORY:
THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AS POP PHENOMENON

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Consumers with an interest in the Dead Sea Scrolls will find a variety of videotapes on the subject on sale at a popular retail website. "Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls," "Ancient Mysteries: Enigma of the Dead Sea Scrolls," and "Mysteries of the Dead Sea Scrolls Exposed" (the last in three volumes) all promise to provide audiences with insights into the true significance of the scrolls. As these titles suggest, that significance is grounded in the revelation of ancient mysteries and the uncovering of hidden secrets.¹

For Dead Sea Scrolls scholars, in contrast, the relevant "secrets" of the scrolls are connected with issues of scriptural development and ancient Jewish sectarianism, and it is therefore tempting to dismiss such popular mystery-claims with an incredulous shake of the head. However, a close look at some popular-culture presentations of the scrolls reveals an unexpected link to academic discourse. While popular presentations may appear at first glance merely to oversimplify the picture or to invent falsehoods outright, closer investigation demonstrates that such presentations often are grounded in actual scholarly claims, however rewritten, redirected, and taken out of their original contexts.

¹ Commercial website Amazon.com advertises ten Dead Sea Scrolls videos and several hundred books on the subject. It is not always easy to distinguish academic scrolls projects from those oriented toward conspiracy theories, since both types tend to have exotic or dramatic titles. "Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls," for example, is produced by University of Georgia Anthropology (2000), while "Mysteries of the Dead Sea Scrolls Exposed" is a product of UFO Video, Inc. (1999). Even major production companies vary in the content or agenda of their videos. The Discovery Home Video production "Dead Sea Scrolls: Unraveling the Mystery" (2000) focuses on the use of scientific tools for the study of the scrolls by Brigham Young University students. In contrast, Discovery's "Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls" (1998) centers on the theories of B. Thiering (on whose work, see below). The "Ancient Mysteries" series is a product of A&E Home Video (1999). For further discussion of video productions, see G.J. Brooke's contribution to this issue, "The Scrolls in the British Media (1987–2002)."



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