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).”
The purpose of this paper is to examine the process of decontextualizing, tracing the transition from scholarly analysis to popular enigma, and to speculate on why scrolls popularizers might generate such transformations.

Scholarly and Popular: Distinguishing Discursive Realms

Since the first manuscript discoveries in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls have been objects of public fascination. An initial wave of coverage in major newspapers and magazines gave way in the 1950s to a number of commercial volumes on the content of the scrolls and their significance for modern (and especially Christian) readers. The more recent controversy over the delayed publication of the fragmentary Cave 4 material was accompanied by a similar wave of media attention. Popular interpretations of the scrolls vary widely, but they share a common distance from the academic presentations offered by philosophers, literary critics, archaeologists, and historians. It is therefore worth pausing to consider the “discursive realms” in which the scrolls are read, to identify some of the assumptions, categories, and specific vocabulary of these distinct realms, and to ask how they might intersect with one another.


3 Much of this discussion was driven by editorials and articles in Biblical Archaeology Review, many written by BAR editor H. Shanks. The controversy was further fueled by the publication of M. Baigent and R. Leigh, The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception (New York: Summit Books, 1991) and R.H. Eisenman and M.O. Wise, The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered (New York: Penguin Books, 1992). An overview of the publication controversy (influenced by the theories of Eisenman) can be found in N.A. Silberman, The Hidden Scrolls: Christianity, Judaism, and the War for the Dead Sea Scrolls (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1994).