The Dead Sea Scrolls have been described as the “the greatest MS (manuscript) discovery of modern times!”¹ For Bible scholars and those interested in seeking truth regarding God’s name, this statement is especially true. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, the oldest known text of the Hebrew Old Testament was the Masoretic Text (MT). The oldest extant version of MT is dated to about 1000 AD – over 500 years after the oldest surviving Greek texts. For centuries, the versions in Greek and Latin were older than any existing Hebrew text. Moreover, in these Greek and Latin texts, the name of God did not exist; rather, the name of God had been replaced with the word for “Lord” (Kurios in Greek and Dominus Domino in Latin). Although the Hebrew MT contained the name of God, Yahweh, the Greek and Latin texts were in reality, much older. How could scholars be certain of the accuracy of this text, codified, compiled, and written by the Masorites between 600AD-1000AD?

Sometime in 1947, three Bedouins were shepherding their herds near the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. One of the young men threw a stone into a nearby cave, and he heard something break. The men entered the caves to find out what
had made the noise. There they found several clay jars and when they looked inside, found many manuscripts in an ancient language they didn’t understand. Upon bringing samples of these documents to an antiquities dealer in Bethlehem, these shepherds learned they had discovered the oldest copies of Scripture. Over the next decade, almost a 1,000 manuscripts were discovered from several caves scattered along the Dead Sea. Most scrolls are in the Hebrew language, while a few Aramaic and Greek texts were also discovered. While the majority of manuscripts are copies of the Hebrew Scripture, non-Biblical writings were also discovered. The majority of the manuscripts date between 100BC and 70AD, while a few manuscripts are thought to be even older. Now, for the first time, scholars had copies of the Bible dated to the time of Jesus and the first century disciples. Also, the name of God, YHWH, is present in all of the Hebrew copies of Scripture.

Adjacent to the caves where the scrolls were found, people made another archeological discovery – the ruins of an ancient Jewish settlement known as Qumran. The popular theory is that this was a community of Jewish separatists known as Essenes, which was one of three major Jewish sects existing in the first century. The three distinct groups, as described by the historian Josephus, were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. Unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees
that remained within common society, the Essenes withdrew from worldly influence. This community at the Dead Sea were said to “devote themselves to turn away from all evil, and to hold fast to all that he has commanded as his will, to separate themselves from the congregation of men of iniquity to be a commune in Torah and property.”

The common belief about the destruction of Qumran is that the community met its end around 68AD. Historians think that when the Roman Army came upon this settlement in their war against the Jewish people, they killed the people of this city. It is believed that before this fateful event, members of the community hid their writings in the surrounding caves.

A majority of the texts found were in Hebrew containing versions, or at least fragments, from every Old Testament book except Esther. The name of God, YHWH, is found in all of these Hebrew copies of Scriptures. Even a few Greek fragments of the Old Testament were discovered in which the name of God is also present. In the Greek manuscripts, the main text is in Greek, but the name is written in Hebrew – in an ancient Paleo Hebrew script. One Greek manuscript has a rendering of God’s name with Greek letters IAO. The Greek word kurios (English translation “Lord”) is not used as a surrogate for God’s name in any of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This truth, that the name of God is in these ancient manuscripts, is a witness to
the fact that YHWH was still being used at this time in the land of Israel. Besides the vast amount of manuscripts containing Scripture, the collection of texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls also include other religious writings known as Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. There is also a collection of “secular” writings that may have been composed or revised by the Qumran community. These manuscripts provide an interesting insight into a study of God’s name.

If the name of God were only found in Scripture, one might conclude that the name had no contemporary use at the time, only that it was being copied from antiquity in the sacred documents. A study of three manuscripts, believed to be part of the secular writings of the community, is very intriguing. Three of these documents are known as The Community Rule, The War Scroll, and The Temple Scroll. To understand the history of these documents, it is helpful to understand how a paleographer dates a text. Besides the modern technique of carbon dating and using historical references in texts to determine the date, paleographers also look at the “style” of the writing. There are at least three distinct styles of Hebrew found among the manuscripts from the Dead Sea Scrolls: Paleo Hebrew style (which predates the Babylonian captivity), Hasmonean type characters (from the Hasmonean dynasty between 160BC and 63BC), and Herodian style
script (from the time of Roman rule, about 63BC to 68AD). These “secular” writings are written in either Hasmonean or Herodian style Hebrew script.

These three secular manuscripts from the Essene community can now be viewed by anyone as they are freely available online from the Digital Dead Sea Scrolls at http://dss.collections.imj.org.il/. The Community Rule is written in Hasmonean text and is thought to have been written in the early first century BC. It contains statutes and liturgical ceremonies for the sect. God’s name, YHWH, is not used in this manuscript, nor is God ever referred to by the title of “Lord.” There is, however, a mention in the rules about restrictions when uttering “the Most Venerable Name” in the court of Inquiry. The War Scroll is written in Herodian Hebrew script and dates to the late first century BC or early first century AD. It is an apocalyptic view of the forces of the righteousness, called the sons of light, versus the forces of evil, called the sons of darkness. As with the Community Rule, this text also does not use the name YHWH, nor does it use the title “Lord.” However, the manuscript has references such as “to Thy great Name,” “praise Thy Name,” and “bless Thy Name.”

The Temple Scroll was the longest of any of these secular writings. This document is written in Herodian Hebrew script and dates to the first half of the first century AD. The Temple Scroll gives
legislation for sacrificial worship as described in the Torah and also provides some non-biblical regulations. Also in this manuscript, written around the same time that Jesus declared, “Hallowed be Your name” (Matthew 6:9), the four letter name of God, the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, is used over 60 times. It was at this time in history that Jesus himself stated, “I have manifested Your name” (John 17:6). The name was being penned in the Essene community at Qumran during this same time period. The Temple Scroll declares “The children of Israel shall rejoice before YHWH, an eternal rule for their generations wherever they dwell.”

The Dead Sea Scrolls provide undeniable proof that the name of God, pronounced “Yahweh”, was still being used in the first century. Jacob Neusner (a Professor at Brown University and noted specialist in Judaic studies) writes the following about this unique sect known as the Essenes. “Men and women came to Qumran with their property, which they contributed to the common fund. There they prepared for a fateful day, not too long to be postponed, scarcely looking backward at those remaining in the corruption of this world. These Jews would be the last, smallest, “saving remnant” of all. Yet through them all humankind would come to know the truth.”
The prophet Ezekiel spoke of a time when God’s holy name would be made known.

My holy name I will make known in the midst of My people Israel; and I will not let my holy name be profaned anymore. And the nations will know that I am the LORD [YHWH], the Holy One in Israel.

Ezekiel 39:7

May God continue to reveal Himself to the nations of the world, and may we boldly proclaim the name of Yahweh.


4 Neusner, op.cit P.26