

THE DISCOVERY AND PUBLICATION OF THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

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The story of the journey of the ancient Scrolls from the caves of Qumran to publicly available translations reads like a modern detective thriller. Here, scholars and participants in this saga retell these events.

Discovery and Publication

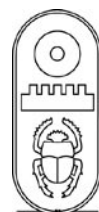
Archaeology is the study of *archaia*, “old things,” but for a long time nobody knew that old things were interesting. The past, they thought, was pretty much the same as the present, and so in illuminated medieval Bibles King David is pictured in a medieval suit of armor. But people began to gain a sense of historical perspective during the Renaissance, and some things began to be valued because they were old. The wealthy began to collect antiquities: *archaia*. When Napoleon and his legions entered Egypt in the early nineteenth century, they opened up not only a new arena of cultural interchange, but a rich new source of *archaia*. The antiquities trade began in earnest at that time, along with colonialism, its sponsor, and a new science—archaeology.

Private collectors and professional archaeologists have always vied for the same antiquities. “That belongs in a museum!” is the cry of Indiana Jones and his professional colleagues as they struggle against mere collectors. Both parties, of course, are willing to pay for their antiquities under the right circumstances. An awareness of that fact led certain Bedouin of the Taamireh tribe to preserve some old scrolls that they had found in the Judean desert in 1946 or 1947. They happened to enter a narrow cave, they said, and there they were, rolled up in stone jars. Could not someone be found to buy the manuscripts—old, dirty, and tattered as they were?

The original seven scrolls were early divided into two lots. One lot of four was purchased by the Syrian Orthodox archbishop of Jerusalem, Athanasius Samuel, the other lot of three by a scholar at the Hebrew University, E. Y. Sukenik. Samuel, wishing to authenticate the antiquity of his purchase through experts, eventually showed his texts to specialists at the American Schools of Oriental Research. They realized that Samuel’s scrolls had been written at least two thousand years earlier, not the oldest *archaia* ever, but centuries older than the oldest manuscript ever discovered in the Holy Land. These excited scholars announced the discovery of the oldest known biblical manuscripts to the press on April 11, 1948, and Sukenik followed suit days later. The original seven scrolls are the *Charter of a Jewish Sectarian Association* (then called the *Manual of Discipline*, text 5 in the present collection), *Tales of the Patriarchs* (text 2), *Thanksgiving Psalms* (text 3), *A Commentary on Habakkuk* (text 4), *The War Scroll* (text 8), and two copies of the book of Isaiah.

Samuel took the scrolls to the United States and continued to try to sell them for years, without success. Potential buyers were aware that some scholars doubted the scrolls’ authenticity and that questions lingered about the propriety of Samuel’s removing the scrolls from their country of origin. Finally, in 1955, an agent of the young state of Israel paid Samuel \$250,000 for his four scrolls, and the texts were reunited with Sukenik’s three scrolls. Today they are the prize displays of the Shrine of the Book museum in Jerusalem.

But by 1955, no one really cared anymore whether Israel or the archbishop had the scrolls, because by then the industrious Bedouin had discovered nine more caves containing scrolls



equally ancient. Another cave would turn up in 1956, for a total of eleven. The first astonishing discovery was succeeded by a steady stream, as the caves of Judea seemed eager to disgorge everything that had silently lain in their depths for millennia. These eleven caves, it should be noted, were all in the general vicinity of the Wadi Qumran, near the northwest end of the Dead Sea, and their treasures do not exhaust the total number of discoveries. Ancient writings were also found in caves near the Wadi Murabba'at and the Wadi Daliyeh and in the ruins of Masada. Except for the Masada texts, the other discoveries came from times and milieus different from those of the Qumran texts. When people use the phrase "Dead Sea Scrolls," they sometimes mean all of these treasure troves, but more usually only the Qumran scrolls are meant. That will be our own usage in the pages that follow.

The total number of scrolls, when the books were intact, may have been as high as 1,000. Some have vanished without a trace, but scholars have identified the remains of about 870 separate scrolls. Their long centuries in the earth have reduced the vast majority of them to bits and pieces, mere scraps, some no larger than a fingernail. The fourth cave alone, where the biggest cache of manuscripts was unearthed, contained an estimated 15,000 fragments.

The great glut of material—a bonanza that far exceeded the wildest dreams of scholars—was not without its problems. The biggest was simply finding scholars equipped with enough knowledge and time to sort through the material. The government of Jordan in whose territory, after 1948, the Qumran caves lay—allowed foreign scholars to form a team in the early 1950s to deal with all the incoming texts. These eight young men were to have the responsibility—and the privilege—of publishing everything.

The scroll team began well, publishing its first volume of texts in 1955, *Discoveries in the Judean Desert, Vol. 1: Qumran Cave 1* (abbreviated as *DJD 1*). This book contained

additional fragments from the first cave the Bedouin had entered, pieces of documents that had turned up after the first seven scrolls were removed. "Work of this nature is of necessity slow," wrote G. L. Harding, director of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, in the foreword. "It may well be a few years before the series can be completed." Harding could not have foreseen that forty years later the work would still not be complete. What explains the achingly slow pace of publication?

For one thing, the work required considerably more time than originally estimated. The first seven scrolls were all more or less intact (although some were in better repair than the others). The publishing program consisted of simply publishing photographs of the texts, which were (and still are) legible to anyone who can read ancient Hebrew. But undamaged scrolls like these turned out to be the exception. Most were fragmentary, and it required considerable painstaking work to even figure out which fragments originally belonged to the same scroll. That work necessarily had to be done before even preliminary translations and interpretations could be issued. (This work, by the way, still continues, and new "joins"—ways of connecting the fragments—are discovered from time to time. We propose a few ourselves in the pages that follow.)

The work of collecting and joining fragments, then, required much painstaking work and not a little ingenuity. The original team did this phase of its work well, but in hindsight it is clear that the task was too large and the team too small. The second volume of *DJD* came out in 1961, with texts from Murabba'at, and *DJD 3* followed in 1962, containing all the texts from Caves 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 10, the so-called Minor Caves (for comparatively few scrolls were found in these caves). *DJD 4* (1965) contained a single manuscript of the book of Psalms from Cave 11. Only with *DJD 5* (1968) were several manuscripts from the "mother lode," Cave 4, issued.

At this point the already slowing pace of publication ground to a complete halt. As a

result of the Six-Day War of June 1967, the Palestine Archaeological Museum, where the scroll fragments were stored, had become the property of the state of Israel. The members of the scrolls publication team—most of whom held decidedly pro-Arab convictions—were reluctant to continue under Israeli auspices, even after the authorities assured them they could continue their work without interference.

Eventually the Israelis and the team worked out an agreement, and the team published *DJD* 6, containing a number of minor texts, in 1977. By this time, however, the scholarly community was growing increasingly unhappy with the official scrolls team. The scrolls that had already been published had revolutionized study of the Bible, early Judaism, and early Christianity. The thought that hundreds of texts—more than half of what had been found—had never been seen outside a small circle of privileged editors was maddening, “the academic scandal of the century” in the words of Britain’s Geza Vermes.

In fact, after a *modus operandi* had been reached with Israel, there was no good reason why the rest of the texts could not be published rapidly. The team had finished most of the initial work of reconstruction by 1960. But they had come to feel that a simple publication was no longer enough. The scrolls had become an entire subdiscipline of ancient history, and a “proper” publication now had to include vast analyses, large syntheses, and detailed assessments placing every fragment in its place in the history of Judaism, Christianity, and humankind. This was a daunting task for a large team; for a small team it was simply impossible. And, although the team had slowly begun to increase its size—taking on a few Israeli members and select graduate students (those who studied with team members) in the 1980s—it still refused to allow other scholars access to the texts. In academia, of course, knowledge is power, and the scrolls editors enjoyed theirs immensely.

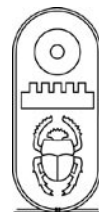
Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, complaints about the slow pace of publication snowballed. Team members continued to publish individual texts from time to time, but

control of the process always remained in their hands. Even when a text was published it seemed like *noblesse oblige* and the perceived arrogance behind the slow pace of publication acted as a catalyst, goading “outsiders” to work toward achieving unfettered access. New obstacles to publication had arisen as well: several members of the original team had died and others were battling poor health.

Finally, in the early 1990s, the monopoly of the official team was broken, both from within and from without. In 1990, John Strugnell, head of the scrolls team since 1987, was forced to resign by the Israel Antiquities Authority for derogatory comments he made about Judaism. The Authority put Israeli scholars in charge of the project, and they began to invite more scholars to join the team, intending to speed up the pace of publication.

But outside forces played the decisive role. The official team had compiled a concordance—a comprehensive word list that also provides the context in which each word listed occurs—of all the words in the unreleased texts. The team had always limited use of the concordance to themselves, but before Strugnell’s departure he allowed certain academic libraries to receive copies of the concordance. Since the concordance listed each word along with one or two on either side of it, theoretically one might reconstruct not only entire lines, but entire scrolls.

A graduate student at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Martin Abegg, with his adviser, Ben Zion Wacholder, put the theory into practice. He carried out the reconstruction with the aid of a desktop computer, and the first volume of hitherto unreleased scrolls was published in September 1991. The publication was a bombshell, and it triggered another. Later that same month, the director of the Huntington Library in southern California, William Moffett, announced that the library had in its possession photographs of all of the unreleased Dead Sea Scrolls and that scholars would be allowed full access to them. These twin attacks on the monopoly of the scrolls



team proved decisive. After initially threatening legal action, in November 1991 the new editor-in-chief of the official team, Emanuel Tov, announced that all scholars would have free and unconditional access to all the photographs of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This victory over scholarly secrecy and possessiveness made the book you hold in your hand possible.

How the Dead Sea Scrolls Were Written

What, exactly, are the Dead Sea Scrolls? The objects themselves are documents written with a carbon-based ink usually on animal skins, although some are inscribed on papyrus. The scrolls were written right to left using no punctuation except for an occasional paragraph indentation—no periods, commas, quotation marks, or any of the other reader helps to which we are so accustomed. Indeed, in some cases there are not even spaces between words: the letters simply run together in a continuous stream. The codex, the early form of the book with pages bound on one side, had not yet been invented, so the “pages,” or columns, were written consecutively on the scroll. To read them one slowly un-rolled the scroll, and then, to be polite, rewrapped it, like rewinding a modern videotape. Not a few of the scrolls testify that the ancients failed to rewind as often as we do. The scrolls are written in several languages and half a dozen scripts, and though all are religious texts, within that category their contents are amazingly varied.

The Languages Used in the Scrolls

Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the dominant view of the Semitic languages of Palestine in this period was essentially as follows: Hebrew had died; it was no longer learned at mother’s knee. It was known only by the educated classes through study, just as educated medieval Europeans knew Latin. Rabbinic Hebrew, the written language of the Mishnah, Tosephta, and other rabbinic literature of 200 C.E. and later, was considered a sort of scholarly invention—artificial, not the language of life put to the page. The spoken language of the Jews had in fact

become Aramaic. Even in this tongue, literary production was thought to be meager. Accordingly, prominent scholars writing in the mid-1940s (on the eve of the scrolls’ discovery) expressed doubts that the composition of a Semitic Gospel was even possible. Edgar Goodspeed, for example, argued: “The Gospel is Christianity’s contribution to literature. It is the most potent type of religious literature ever devised. To credit such a creation to the most barren age of a never very productive tongue like Aramaic would seem the height of improbability. For in the days of Jesus the Jews of Palestine were not engaged in writing books. It is not too much to say that a Galilean or Jerusalem Jew of the time of Christ would regard writing a book in his native tongue with positive horror.”¹

The discovery of the scrolls swept these linguistic notions into the trash bin. Here were hundreds and hundreds of texts, tangible evidence of substantial literary productivity. Apart from copies of biblical books, about one out of six of the Dead Sea Scrolls is inscribed in Aramaic. Clearly the writing of an Aramaic Gospel was eminently possible. Yet the vast majority of the scrolls were Hebrew texts. Hebrew was manifestly the principal literary language for the Jews of this period. The new discoveries underlined the still living, breathing, even supple character of that language. A few texts pointed to the use of Hebrew for speech as well as writing. These works (for example, *A Sectarian Manifesto*, text 84) displayed a missing-link type of Hebrew, intermediate between the form of Hebrew used in the Bible and that used by the rabbis. Rabbinic Hebrew was shown to be no invention, but simply a development from the ordinary spoken Hebrew of biblical times.

The scrolls have therefore proven that late Second-Temple Jews used various dialects of Hebrew along with Aramaic. (These two languages are closely related—Aramaic is to Hebrew as French is to Italian.) For writing, however, they generally tried to imitate biblical Hebrew, an older form of the language. The situation would be analogous to our trying today to write in the style of Elizabethan

English. Not all the scrolls writers could perform this feat equally well, so the “correctness” of the Hebrew varies considerably. Modern scholars actually appreciate the mistakes more than the deft performances, because the mistakes arise out of the writer’s own language usage. The written form teaches us about the spoken.

A small minority of the scrolls were written in Greek. Their discovery has vouchsafed us a further glimpse into the linguistic complexity of first-century Jewish society. Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek: each was being used in particular situations of speech and writing. We are only just beginning to discover some of the rules for those uses, to bring to bear the more sophisticated perspectives of sociolinguistics. Since, as noted above, many of the Dead Sea Scrolls have but recently become known to a wide range of scholars, we are presently at an early stage of linguistic understanding.

Scripts Used for Writing the Scrolls

The script most commonly used to write these texts, whether Hebrew or Aramaic, has come to be called the *Jewish script*. Before the discovery of the scrolls, we knew relatively little about it. The Jewish script proves to be a development of an earlier script of the fourth and third centuries B.C.E., one that has been known to scholars since the nineteenth century. Perhaps surprisingly, that script had originally been used only for Aramaic, not for Hebrew. In the time of the scrolls it came to be used for Hebrew as well. Whereas Hebrew won the battle of the languages, when it came to script Aramaic was the victor. The scrolls reveal various forms of the Jewish script: beautiful, careful chancellery hands decorated with serifs, informal varieties, cursive and extremely cursive (i.e., illegible and extremely illegible!) types. From this script later developed the medieval scripts used to write Hebrew, and one descendant became that most often used in modern printed Hebrew Bibles and books.

Also surviving among a small group of the scrolls, however, is a developed form of the ancient Hebrew script that the Aramaic form

had supplanted among the Jews. This script had been the standard in the days of David and Solomon and on down to the time of Jeremiah. In our period this form of writing, known as *Paleo-Hebrew*, was especially used for copies of the books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and of Job. Presumably the scribes who chose it regarded those books as the oldest of the Hebrew Scriptures; Paleo-Hebrew was therefore most appropriate. The scrolls have shown, then, that the Jews of Jesus’ day used scripts descended from both earlier Aramaic and earlier Hebrew scripts.

In addition, three different *cryptic*, or secret, *scripts* have emerged. Before the discovery of the scrolls, we had never seen these forms of writing. While cryptic writing as a concept goes back as far as the third millennium B.C.E. in ancient Mesopotamia, these are the oldest forms associated with Hebrew ever discovered. The most important of these secret scripts has come to be called Cryptic Script A. Perhaps fifteen scrolls use Cryptic Script A either entirely or for marginal notes (see especially *The Sage to the “Children of Dawn,”* text 55, and *The Phases of the Moon*, text 57).

As Edgar Allan Poe once noted in an essay; *A Few Words on Secret Writing*, “Few persons can be made to believe that it is not quite an easy thing to invent a method of secret writing which shall baffle investigation. Yet it may be roundly asserted that human ingenuity cannot concoct a cipher which human ingenuity cannot resolve.” Cryptic Script A, likewise, has yielded up its secrets to modern scholars, who have discovered that it is a simple substitution cipher—that is, each symbol of the cryptic alphabet corresponds to one symbol of the regular Hebrew alphabet.²

Endnotes:

¹ Edgar Goodspeed, “The Original Language of the Gospels,” in *Contemporary Thinking About Jesus: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas S. Kepler (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1944), 59.

² Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 4-11.

