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PIECING TOGETHER THE PAST THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

By: Eugene Ulrich, James Vanderkam, Catherine M. Murphy

Nearly fifty years ago, some Bedouin shepherds stumbled upon a cache of ancient texts in caves near the Dead Sea, thirteen miles east of Jerusalem.

It soon became clear that this was the largest and most significant collection of manuscripts ever discovered in Palestine.

Finds included the oldest witnesses to the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts of Jewish scripture—the Christian Old Testament—along with nonbiblical manuscripts certain to illuminate the tumultuous period of the destruction of the Second Temple and the time of Christ. The singularity of these texts has brought about one of the most protracted and painstaking endeavors of contemporary scholarship on religious history and Scripture.

One afternoon 1947, three Bedouin shepherds were herding their flocks in the vicinity of Wadi Qumran above the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. They casually tossed a rock in a cave opening and heard something break. Returning later, they discovered ten large pottery jars, one of which contained three scrolls wrapped in protective linen coverings. Four additional scrolls were soon discovered in the cave. Neither the Bedouin nor the antiquities dealer whom they contacted had any idea what the documents contained. Thinking the script to be some form of Syriac, the antiquities dealer sold four of the scrolls to the Syrian Orthodox metropolitan at St. Mark's Monastery in Jerusalem. For approximately one hundred dollars, the metropolitan unwittingly purchased the oldest extant Hebrew text of the Book of Isaiah, an ancient Hebrew commentary on Habakkuk, and two unknown texts. The antiquities dealer sold the other three manuscripts to Eleazar Sukenik, a professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The scrolls were in such fine condition that they were all published almost immediately.

The magnitude and antiquity of these finds soon became apparent, and the caves around Wadi Qumran were aggressively explored for additional scrolls. Of the many caves quarried, eleven near the Wadi yielded written material. Cave 11, the last to be discovered (1956), supplied several extensively

preserved scrolls of Leviticus, Psalms, and other works whose state of preservation rivaled that of the original Cave 1 finds.

Unfortunately, there were only about a dozen of these beautifully preserved scrolls. Most of the approximately eight hundred texts discovered in the Qumran caves were not scrolls but scraps from disintegrated scrolls. Cave 4 yielded its rich cache of more than 575 manuscripts in tens of thousands of pieces. The condition of the written material in the other caves was no better: Caves 2 and 3 and Caves 5 through 10 yielded only fragments of more than one hundred other texts. Lacking the protection of pottery jars and linen shrouds, these manuscripts had fallen prey to a host of aggressors over the centuries, from the moisture in the caves to the appetite of worms to the swords and sandals of the caves' human visitors. The scrolls simply disintegrated over the centuries, with the result that rarely 5 percent of any individual manuscript survived. The few surviving pieces of discrete scrolls were separated from one another and jumbled indiscriminately in layers of dirt on the cave floors.

The muddle of fragments was made all the more incomprehensible by the manner of their retrieval. The Bedouin had gathered and sold most of the initial fragments without any record of where they came from. Fortunately, subsequent scientific excavations of Cave 4 unearthed fragments that were manifestly part of the same scrolls represented by the Bedouin finds. This established that the Bedouin scraps had been removed from the floor of Cave 4 and thereby guaranteed the authenticity of the initial fragments.

EARLY SCHOLARSHIP

It fell to a group of scholars to undo the damage wrought by natural forces and human enthusiasm. Their commission was to publish critical editions of the ancient texts, a manageable task for the relatively small number of complete manuscripts and fragmentary remnants from Caves 1 and 11. These scrolls and the manuscripts from the smaller caves were published expeditiously under the general direction of Roland de Vaux. The team of scholars included Dominique Barthelemy (Switzerland), Jozef T. Milik (Poland/France), Eleazar L. Sukenik (Israel), Pierre Benoit and Maurice Baillet (France), James A. Sanders (United States), and J. van der Ploeg (the Netherlands).

The 80,000 fragments of nearly 600 manuscripts from Cave 4 required a different strategy. The national archaeological schools in Jerusalem nominated the international team for the project: Jean Starcky (France), J. T. Milik (Poland/France), John Strugnell and John Allegro (England), Claus-Hunno Hunzinger (Germany), and Frank Moore Cross and Patrick Skehan (United States). The task facing these scholars was uncommonly complex. In addition to the work of imposing order on the fragments' chaos, they had to undertake pioneering work in the subdisciplines of palaeography, orthography, and archaeology.

Palaeography, the study of ancient scripts, was a field severely limited by the shortage of ancient Hebrew inscriptions before the discovery of the scrolls. With the wealth of material from the caves, however, Cross was able to devise a developmental schema of the Hebrew script, which became the foundation for dating and understanding the scrolls. Although some have challenged Cross's system, Carbon-14 tests have confirmed his results to a remarkable degree. Another discipline requiring exploratory analysis was orthography, the study of spelling practices. At Qumran, as in Elizabethan England, spelling was more a creative art than a linguistic science, and John Strugnell helped elucidate this field. Meanwhile, the members of the original team produced preliminary editions of the more significant scrolls, and individually or together with Israeli scholars such as Shemaryahu Talmon, generated comprehensive introductions to the world of Qumran and preliminary assessments of the scrolls' impact on text criticism of the Hebrew Bible. Another Jewish scholar, E. Y. Kutscher, produced an exhaustive study of the language and linguistic background of the Isaiah scroll.

While textual scholars labored over the scraps in East Jerusalem's Rockefeller Museum, archaeologists toiled on the marl terrace the Qumran caves to see what the physical site would reveal. The excavations, supervised by Roland de Vaux (France) and Gerald Lankester Harding (England) established that the site had been inhabited from about 140 B.C.E. to 68 C.E. and was a community center of what may have been an ascetic group--an assessment corroborated by the contents of the texts.

As the general import of the scrolls was disseminated to a wider audience, the original team of scholars continued the particular task of piecing together the myriad scroll fragments and identifying their contents. The process had been set up well and produced good results for the first decade, while funding was available and full-time commitment possible. By the early 1960s, funding had dried up and most of the scholars were engaged in full-time teaching. Work proceeded fitfully over the next decades, at the mercy of funding problems, wars and political strife, and competing demands on the scholars' time.

MATCHING THE TEXTS

Progress on the identification of the fragments was necessarily slow due to the sheer magnitude of the task. The scholars first had to separate the thousands of loose fragments and group them on glass plates according to general categories: leather or papyrus, Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek, the ancient "Palaeo-Hebrew" script or contemporary "square" script. These characteristics could be determined at a glance for all but the most illegible fragments. Then the more arduous aspect of identification began, as the editors worked through each fragment word by word to discern whether the text matched a known biblical or apocryphal work. While there were many representatives of such books, the scholars also discovered numerous previously unknown compositions that had been lost for 2,000 years.

The second step was to differentiate the manuscripts of various books. This determination is made by assessing the characteristics of the script, leather, measurements, and patterns of deterioration. As the original scholars grew increasingly familiar with the fragments, they would often recall a shape or a biblical passage which would allow them to place a new fragment in its correct location. The tremendous accretion of such detail in the memory of early team members permitted a level of accuracy in the designation of manuscripts that rarely requires revision even in this age of computerized word searches and digitally enhanced photographs.

The third step involves attempting to identify the text on each fragment more precisely and to arrange the assorted fragments from a single manuscript into their original positions in the scroll. This painstaking task requires weeks or months of careful scrutiny of damaged letters and broken words around the edges of the fragments. The editor must reconstruct the measurements of the original scroll: the number of letters per line, lines per column, and amount of text missing from the beginning of the book to the first extant fragment. Patterns of deterioration on each fragment are then examined and extrapolated to estimate the length of the original scroll and the location of each column and fragment of text within it.

The fourth step toward the editio princeps (or first critical edition of the text) is the decipherment and transcription of fragments. This work used to be done by hand until the second generation of scrolls scholars began producing electronic versions of the manuscripts in the mid-1980s. In order to do this, they relied on newly invented Macintosh personal computers and their own ingenuity; there were no Hebrew and Greek fonts in those years and so Eugene Ulrich created his own. Using electronic versions, the editors could analyze the texts that the scrolls preserve, assessing their relationship to other texts and ancient translations. Questions, comments, variants, and corrections could be logged more easily and corrected much more quickly. Significant documents such as the eighty-page edition of

4QpaleoExod^m may go through as many as fifty drafts before they are ready for publication in the editio princeps.

The final stage of production is reached when the editio princeps is published by Oxford University Press. Advances in computer technology and printing capabilities enable the current editors to produce these volumes in camera-ready format. So far, seven volumes have been published by the second generation of editors. The first volume, by Emanuel Tov in 1990, blazed the trail for computerized production; four subsequent volumes were completely typeset by Ulrich, VanderKam, and their graduate assistants at the University of Notre Dame, and two more by Tov and his team at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Financial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities since 1986 made possible the research time necessary for publication of the four volumes from Notre Dame as well as the technology to produce them in camera-ready form.

As certain developments in technology have facilitated the publication of critical editions, other advances have helped to reveal previously unknown features of the ancient fragments. One of the techniques used from the beginning was infrared photography. Since many of the fragments were blackened by the effects of age and the elements, the ink was indistinguishable from the leather. Photography in the infrared spectrum brought out the contrast between the carbon ink and the leather background, rendering the texts legible. Carbon-14 testing, discovered in the same year that the scrolls were found (1947), was used to confirm the palaeographic dates assigned to the scrolls.

More recent technological advances such as digitization and DNA analysis offer hope for future breakthroughs. A text indecipherable in visible light can be "imaged" in the infrared spectrum and transmitted in digital format directly into the computer. Advanced computer software can then be used to manipulate the contrasts between carbon and leather on any layer of the photographed fragment. This represents an important advance, because sometimes the surface of the leather has flaked away, and the only way to retrieve the lost letters is through their reverse impression on the back side of the next revolution of the scroll. Early hopes for the application of DNA analysis are that it can help distinguish three levels of differentiated information about the animal skin from which a fragment derived: the species of animal, the particular herd from which the animal came, and whether two fragments derived from the same skin and therefore from nearby "pages."

As strange as it may sound to the layperson's ear, the many critical labors culminating in the editio princeps are themselves but a foundational stage in the larger academic enterprise of understanding the significance of the scrolls. Transcriptions of the scrolls are the basis on which historians and theologians will rebuild our working framework for understanding the late Second Temple period (200 B.C.E.-70 C.E.). This helps to explain the clamor in recent years for hastened progress on the publication of the scrolls: Scholars are hesitant to propose new theories when evidence lies near at hand that they would like to incorporate.

The frustration of scholars stimulated a national debate in the early 1990s, when the general public became aware that a few members of the original team had yet to publish their findings. The media oversimplified matters, depicting a black-and-white battle between the sluggish editors and the majority of thirsting academics. What they could not, or would not, incorporate was a third group that had already begun to solve the problem in a responsible way. By that time a younger generation of trained editors had already revamped the publication process, with the result that seven volumes of critical editions that had been in the works have appeared in the past five years--the first shortly before the controversy broke. The exemplary speed of these recent editions is the fruit of the deliberate pace which two generations of editors have set for themselves, a pace necessitated by the condition of the scroll fragments and the requirements of sound scholarship.

REVISING THE BIBLE

Before the discovery of the Qumran scrolls, the oldest complete extant texts of the Hebrew Bible dated to the ninth and tenth centuries. Comparison of these medieval texts copied by scribal traditors (Masorettes) reveals that they are substantially similar to the biblical scrolls from Qumran, thus attesting to the fidelity of scribal copying during the intervening millennium. 1QIsaa, for example, is quite close to the received Hebrew text of Isaiah.

Despite the evidence of congruity, there are many minor variations between the earlier Qumran scrolls and the "traditional" (that is, medieval) text of the Hebrew Bible. Differences range from variant spelling and grammatical forms to alternate words and minor additions or omissions. Sometimes these are simply alternate forms, sometimes they are mistakes in the scroll, and other times the scroll preserves correct readings where the traditional text has erred. In every case, scholars must judge the import of the new evidence for the text's history and for contemporary Bible translations.

One of the most important biblical manuscripts found at Qumran is a scroll of Exodus designated 4QpaleoExod^m. Its text is much fuller than our traditional text of Exodus, expanded with related material which either echoes other passages in Exodus or is imported from Deuteronomy. It shares these features with the Samaritan version of Exodus, whose "deviations" from the received Masoretic text formerly had been attributed to the religious-political motivations of the Samaritans in their long-standing rivalry with the Jerusalem Jewish establishment. But 4QpaleoExod^m and similar texts prove that various editions were in use by a wide spectrum of Jews, including early Christians. So, if Jewish groups besides the Samaritans used this "deviant" text alongside other versions of Exodus, Samaritan practice is less unusual and the concept of a single authoritative version from which the Samaritans supposedly deviated becomes untenable.

As 4QpaleoExod^{[sup[m]} has influenced our understanding of the formation of the Bible, a manuscript of the Books of Samuel, 4QSama, has influenced the Bible itself. One fragment from 4QSama gives text from the beginning of 1 Samuel 11 that the received Hebrew text lacks. In light of that discovery the Catholic New American Bible of 1970 incorporated a note on 1 Samuel 11:1, indicating that more text was preserved in a Qumran scroll. Subsequent studies confirmed the reliability and antiquity of this "additional" reading, so that by 1991 the editors of the Protestant New Revised Standard Version decided to incorporate the longer version as a part of the text after 1 Samuel 10. The NRSV text stands out on its page because it lacks the sixteenth-century verse numbers that characterize the traditional text.

Not only do the Qumran biblical texts diverge from what had been considered the "traditional text"; they also vary from one another. That is, we often find a single biblical book like Deuteronomy attested by several manuscripts, each representing a variant textual tradition. This suggests that there was no single, authoritative version of each book yet established in the late Second Temple Period. Still less do we see an established canon or list of authoritative texts at Qumran. While the Qumran library certainly contained those books which would later be ruled part of the Hebrew Bible (with the exception of Esther and Nehemiah), and while some of these books, notably Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Psalms, are frequently quoted as authoritative texts, we find alongside them many books whose status as sacred scripture was later debated by rabbis and Christians, and consequently during the Reformation. These texts include some of the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical Books (Tobit, Sirach, Baruch) and Pseudepigrapha (1 Enoch, Jubilees, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs).

Should the discovery of these texts at Qumran influence the contemporary canon of scripture? What should be the relative weight of a textual tradition's chronological priority when balanced against the

traditional usage of later, more familiar versions in faith communities? These are just some of the many questions that the Dead Sea Scrolls raise.

RE-IMAGINING JEWISH SOCIETY

As the scrolls have begun to alter our understanding of the Bible, so too have they begun to illuminate our view of Jewish society in the late Second Temple period. Before the discovery of the scrolls, scholars relied on third-party descriptions of social groups within Jewish society, such as the descriptions of the Essenes by ancient authors. Now we have more reliable access to the apocalyptic perspectives and purificatory practices of that group through the texts they themselves collected and composed. Some of these practices were shared by nascent rabbinic Judaism (legal interpretation and purity concerns) and early Christianity (communal sacred meals, purifying/initiatory bathings, interpretation of prophecy, communal property [cf. Acts 2:45-46; 4:32-5:11]). Others reveal an apocalyptic mentality and degree of asceticism that eventually became marginal in the surviving religious traditions.

The basic picture of the Qumran community and the cross-section of Judaism that it reveals were presented to the general public within a decade of the scrolls' discovery. The research of fifty years has contributed richer detail, nuance, and texture to our understanding of the Bible and of the religious environment from which rabbinic Judaism and Christianity emerged. With the ongoing production of critical editions and the application of new technologies, our understanding will continue to increase, and this will have far-reaching implications for historians, theologians, and communities of faith. While some will raise defenses against this new knowledge, others will respond to the exciting challenge from Qumran, to recover the scattered fragments of the past and to render them intelligible to the modern world.

The University of Notre Dame has received \$681,702 from the Editions program of the Division of Research Programs to support the publication of four volumes of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Previous page: Aerial view of the Qumran settlement where the scrolls were found. Qumran was contemporaneous with the fort of Khirbet Mazin, about two miles to the south, and may be the place called Secacah included on Judah's list of cities in Joshua 15:61.

MAP: Dead Sea

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Two of the three Bedouin shepherds who discovered the first Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): This group of rooms in the Qumran buildings complex was most likely the center of community activities. The long room in the center was the "scriptorium," where new copies of sacred writings were made by scribes.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Qumran pottery vessels in which some of the scrolls were found.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The interior of cave 4. Materials were buried under more than six feet of bat guano and wind-blown dust that had accumulated over the centuries. Researchers believe that caves 4 and 5 may have been vandalized after the destruction of the settlement in 68 C.E.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Two caves excavated by Vendyl Jones, an American archaeological adventurer. Caves in this vicinity are still being explored in the hopes of finding more scrolls.

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BY EUGENE ULRICH, JAMES VANDERKAM, AND CATHERINE MURPHY

Eugene Ulrich and James VanderKam are co-editors of the Dead Sea Scrolls project at the University of Notre Dame and Catherine Murphy is a graduate assistant on the project.

### **DIGITIZING THE IMAGES**

In 1947 the Dead Sea Scrolls were recovered from caves in the Judean desert in bits and pieces, ragged, warped, blackened with age, wormeaten, and encrusted with bat guano.

Exposed to the air, the scrolls began deteriorating, despite advanced efforts at conservation. In the years since their discovery the scrolls have further discolored and deteriorated; scholars must use photographs of the texts for their studies. Even when photographed with the most exacting care, many of the scroll texts remained illegible.

Scholars and photographic experts at the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center in Claremont, California, have devised a method of reading the texts through the application of digital imaging technology. The photographs are digitized and the digital images are enhanced so that words-obscured by dirt or flaws in the skins on which the texts were written--become visible.

With two NEH-funded grants, the center's staff prepared a database inventory of the fragments, then developed and tested procedures and standards for digitizing the photographs of the texts. The Center's findings will be disseminated to repositories of ancient materials throughout the world.

The digitizing project aims to transfer the center's collection of images into the highest-resolution electronic form for preservation and produce a Master Library of the high-resolution images, which will be stored on compact discs.

Improving the photographic record includes clarifying the early photographs, which contain information no longer recoverable from the scrolls, and taking new photographs to obtain information still recoverable with today's technology, but not recovered by photographs of the 1940s and 1950s.

In addition, the staff will prepare for distribution on the Internet and for CD-ROM a complete set of the digitized images of the scrolls, enabling scholars to work with these texts on their own desktop computers. The digitization of the texts is expected to produce extraordinary growth in knowledge of the place of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Western civilization.

The ancient Biblical Manuscript Center in Claremont, California, has received a total of \$58,240 from the Division of Research Programs and the Division of Preservation and Access to prepare a database inventory and produce digitized images of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

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