

Jerusalem Paper



Jewish Connection

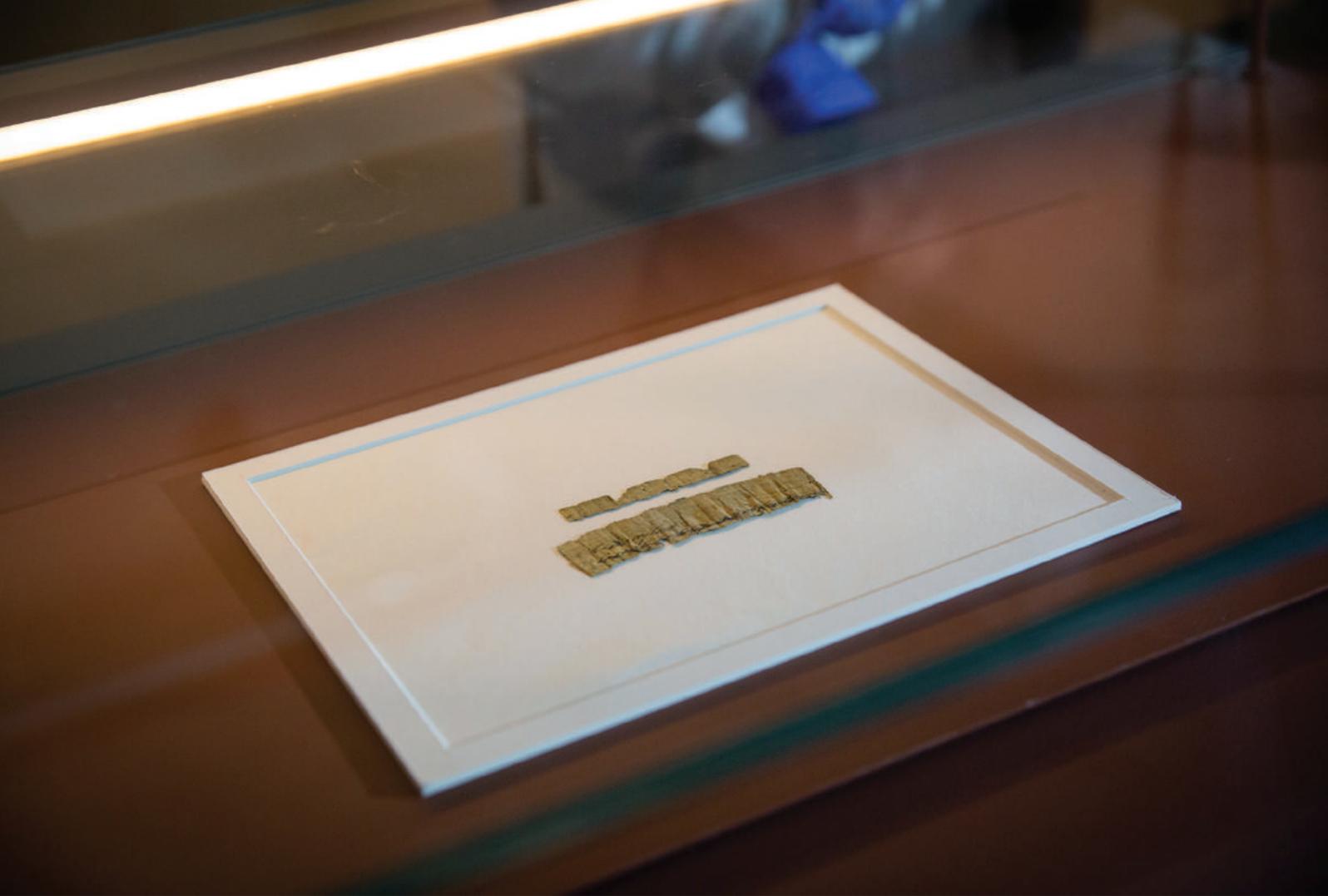
By Lawrence H. Schiffman

Dyrus “Proves”



n to Har Habayis

But is it a forgery?



We

There was much excitement a few weeks ago when the report that an ancient Hebrew papyrus mentioning Yerushalayim, dating to the seventh century BCE and certainly proving the Jewish presence there, had been recovered. Papyrus, a writing material made of reeds crisscrossed and pressed together, was commonly used in the ancient Near East for all kinds of documents and appears to have been used in ancient Israel as well.

The document, only an inch high and a bit more than four inches wide, preserved a short Hebrew text, a record of the delivery of wine: “From the female servant of the king, from Naharata [a place near Jericho], two wineskins to Jerusalem.” The papyrus was reportedly confiscated by Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) investigators from Bedouin who had plundered it from a cave in the Judean Desert some years earlier.

This announcement came on the heels of the two utterly dishonest and morally bankrupt UNESCO resolutions greatly minimizing the Jewish connection to Yerushalayim and the *Har Habayis*. Here, many of us thought, was the “smoking gun” that proved it. The fact that not only Christian sources but even a plethora of authoritative Muslim sources testified to the Jewish presence on *Har Habayis* was seemingly

insufficient to make the case. Not even the discovery of a ninth- or tenth-century CE Arabic inscription from a village near Yerushalayim referring to the Dome of the Rock as “the rock of the *Bayt al-Maqdis*”—literally, “the Holy Temple,” equivalent to the Hebrew *Beis Hamikdash*—was persuasive enough for the rest of the world.

Here, finally, was an ancient papyrus that we hoped would demonstrate to the world that this was the place of the Jewish Temple from the times of David and Shlomo Hamelech in the tenth century BCE.

But on the very day that the IAA announced the discovery at a conference sponsored by Hebrew University, challenges were already being mounted against its authenticity. This was despite the fact that three leading experts—Professor Shmuel Ahituv of the Hebrew University, and Dr. Amir Klein and Amir Ganor of the IAA—had already examined it in detail and were convinced. Furthermore, the papyrus was carbon-14-dated to the seventh century BCE, the time of the great prophets Yeshayahu, Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel.

Nonetheless, Professor Aren Maeir of Bar-Ilan University raised objections, and shortly afterward he was followed by Professor Christopher Rollston of George Washington University on his blog. Both

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argued that there was a strong possibility that the text was a forgery and that more testing should have been done before the discovery was announced.

In view of the carbon-14 dating, their attack amounted to claiming that someone in the modern era had taken a seventh-century BCE piece of blank papyrus and forged the record of the wine delivery. Moreover, Rollston said that he had actually seen the document on the antiquities market a few years earlier. Maier supported his arguments against the authenticity of the document by referencing a controversy swirling around some Dead Sea Scrolls fragments that came to light after 2002.

Hearing these accusations reminded me of an experience I had last summer when I was in Yerushalayim. I had gotten an email from a woman who was an investigative reporter for a Canadian French-language news program; she had attached scans of a supposedly antique Jewish magical amulet. The reporter asked me to call her in Beirut. Sitting in my hotel room in Israel, I was soon speaking with her.

She had already been told by another scholar, an expert in Jewish magical texts, that what she had scanned was a forgery. Strangely, the amulet was a mixture of our standard Hebrew script, *ksav Ashuri*—Assyrian or square script—and *ksav Ivri*—the old Hebrew script (paleo-Hebrew), which went out of general

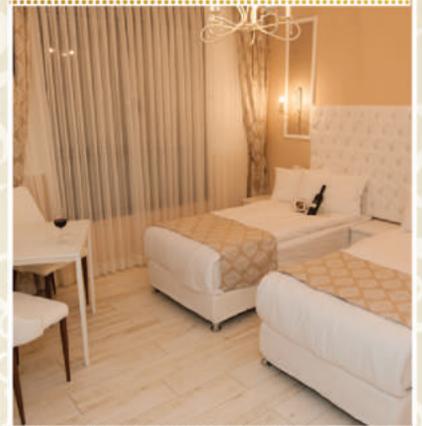
use in the time of Ezra and Nechemiah, around 450 BCE. *Ksav Ivri* was only used later for nationalistic reasons on Jewish coins and in the writing of some Biblical manuscripts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The *Kusim* (Samaritans) continue to use the old script for their Torah scrolls and *mezuzos* today.

The combination of the scripts in one sloppily written, nonsensical text showed clearly that it was forged. The reporter explained that she was actually investigating an influx of forged Judaica currently being marketed as having been smuggled into Beirut from Syria and Iraq, where antiquities thieves have been having a field day. So I was in no way surprised when questions about the authenticity of the Jerusalem papyrus were raised.

In casting these doubts, Professor Maier had referenced the Dead Sea Scrolls. Because of my own close involvement in research on and publication of the scrolls, I immediately felt at home with his arguments. Indeed, as you are reading this, a controversy is simmering over the authenticity of some Dead Sea Scrolls fragments that came on the market after 2002. The first seven scrolls, discovered in 1947 and currently housed in the Shrine of the Book of the Israel Museum, are large texts. They were found in caves close to the shore of the Yam Hamelach, the Dead Sea, near the ruins of an ancient community referred to by the Arabs as Khirbet



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(the ruin of) Qumran. Qumran is probably the place called Sechachah in *Yehoshua* (15:61).

However, most of what was discovered after the 1948 War of Independence, when Qumran was under Jordanian occupation, was made up of approximately 80,000 small fragments that constituted some 5 to 15 percent of what in ancient times had been almost 900 manuscripts. These scrolls are the remains of an ancient library that belonged to a Jewish sectarian group, perhaps the Essenes described by Josephus, whose practices are closely linked to that of the *Tzedukkim* (Sadducees).

Everything found between the 1950s and the beginning of the Six Day War in 1967 was placed by the Jordanians in what is now the Rockefeller Museum in East Jerusalem. Israel took control of these scroll fragments after the war, and in the 1990s assumed responsibility for the process of conservation and publication as well. That is when I was privileged to join the reorganized international team publishing the scrolls. Attempts by the Palestinians to claim ownership of these Jewish scrolls is, of course, ridiculous. Although ancient manuscripts were discovered after the 1950s, those were from sites other than Qumran.

Beginning in 2002, small fragments looking like the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran began to appear on the antiquities market, and several collections of fragments were bought by collectors and Christian academic institutions. We were fortunate that the collectors who acquired this material understood their responsibility and made it available for scholarly study and publication. There have been several lots of such fragments, and

initially nobody suspected that they could be inauthentic. Indeed, they look just like the real thing, and like the Jerusalem papyrus, they were carbon-14-dated—in this instance to the years between the Maccabean revolt (168-164 BCE) and the Jewish revolt against Rome (66-73 CE). This period corresponds to the occupation of Qumran by the sectarians who compiled the ancient library and authored the sectarian scrolls.

Recently, however, questions have been raised about the authenticity of these post-2002 fragments, and it was to this that Professor Maeir was referring when he questioned the Jerusalem papyrus. Essentially, he argued that just as old pieces of leather writing materials had been used for the creation of forged Dead Sea Scrolls fragments, an ancient piece of papyrus had been used to forge this one. Basically, despite political reasons to hope for the authenticity of the Jerusalem papyrus, he and Professor Rollston simply could not accept its validity.

But what led to the suspicion that the post-2002 Dead Sea Scroll fragments were forged?

There are several reasons. First, for almost all ancient scrolls of which fragments are preserved, there are several fragments representing what was once a complete manuscript. For many of these suspect manuscripts, only one fragment survives. This anomaly attracted attention and raised the question of authenticity.

Second, most of these questionable texts are Biblical, representing a much greater proportion of material than in the scrolls as a whole. This is best explained as a result of buyers' greater interest in Biblical material.

We need no such reassurances that despite all the propaganda to the contrary, it is without question that Jews lived in Yerushalayim and Eretz Yisrael.

Third, these texts, by and large, are written in a much more irregular and sloppy manner than the real fragments of the much more skilled scribes. In addition, these fragments seem to be written in lines that aren't parallel, as opposed to the authentic manuscripts. The skin on which they are written is also much rougher, unlike the carefully prepared skins of the ancient scrolls.

Finally, some letters appear to have been shaped to fit the existing contours of torn pieces of writing material, giving the impression not of ancient texts that were damaged but of modern counterfeits. (We should add here that it is not yet possible to use technology to determine if the ink and writing are ancient.)

The recent publication of small "Dead Sea Scrolls" fragments in two eminently scholarly publications—one the collection of Martin Schøyen, a Norwegian collector, and a second belonging to the Museum of the Bible (MOTB), set to open next year in Washington, DC—is what raised this question. Ironically, it was their publication that provided the necessary data for scholars to argue that these texts were forged. (I would like to disclose here that I serve as a consultant to MOTB.) Here, however, no one can complain about cover-ups or deception. The editors lay out all the information, and it seems to be emerging that a large number

of these fragments are forged. The job of scholars will now be to determine which, if any, are real.

We may never know for sure whether the Jerusalem papyrus is genuine. Technology may be developed in the future to analyze and date ink; research in this field is progressing. Such techniques will have to be able to determine the chemical composition of the ink, as well as when the writing was done, even if the writing surface is ancient.

Until then, however, we have to admit that the origin of this fantastically significant inscription cannot be determined. In any case, we need no such reassurances that despite all the propaganda to the contrary, it is without question that Jews lived in Yerushalayim and Eretz Yisrael for over 1,000 years before the Common Era.

We have a rich history and tradition, and there is an extensive archaeological record to allow us to deepen our understanding of the past. Let us not make the mistake of arguing for the validity of our entire history based upon a delivery receipt the authenticity of which cannot be proven. ●

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