

Jews? What Jews?

DEAD SEA SCROLLS EXHIBIT CANCELED IN FRANKFURT OUT OF CONCERN THAT THEY MIGHT BELONG TO THE PALESTINIANS

Imagine the ridiculousness of this: The Palestinians claim that the Jews have no historical connection to Eretz Yisrael, Yerushalayim or the *Har Habayis*. Nevertheless, they still wish to claim that they are the rightful owners of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In other words, there were never any Jews there—but we want their scrolls anyway! It is this claim, already made during the negotiations leading up to the Oslo Accords in 1993, which caused the recent cancellation of a long-planned exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls at the Frankfurt Bible Museum. Like the almost two dozen other Dead Sea Scrolls exhibits that have been held throughout the world, this latest one was to take place in close cooperation with the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA).

The IAA is a government agency responsible for all matters of archaeology in Israel, including excavations, research, and exhibitions of archaeological material in Israel and abroad. It is the custodian of nearly two million archaeological objects. The task of the IAA is to preserve the heritage of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. Prominent among their work is conservation, research and exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

What happened is that the Frankfurt museum had been working with the IAA since 2015 to mount an exhibit in 2018, but like all such agencies, the IAA requires a document from the government of the exhibiting country indemnifying the lender of the antiquities against any attempt at seizure via legal action. Unlike all the other countries that had hosted Dead Sea Scrolls exhibitions, the German government refused to provide the document, which meant that the IAA had no choice but to cancel the exhibit. As a result, untold numbers of Germans and other tourists will miss seeing and learning about the most sensational archaeological discovery of the last century, including the earliest existing texts of the *Tanach* and numerous fascinating texts from the *Bayis Sheini* period.

Why did they refuse to sign? Because they questioned Israel's ownership of the Scrolls. The initial discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was made by the famous Bedouin boy who recovered the seven original complete scrolls from the cave at Qumran at the shore of the Dead Sea. That was in 1947, when the area was



part of the British Mandate for Palestine. All of those scrolls were purchased by Israel by 1954, and are held and exhibited at the Shrine of the Book of the Israel Museum. After the 1948 War of Independence, Jordan occupied the West Bank, including the site of Qumran and the caves. Over the next few years, Bedouin and archaeologists continued to recover scroll fragments, and these were held in the Palestine Archaeological Museum (PAM). This museum was acquired by Israel when it was victorious in the 1967 Six-Day War, and it was soon renamed the Rockefeller Museum. In this way, Israel came into possession of the manuscript fragments held in the PAM.

When Israel took control, only 25% of what was in the PAM collection had been published. The museum housed the fragments of what had been almost 600 manuscripts from Cave 4 of Qumran as well as material from other caves. It took until 1991 for Israel to recognize that the Christian scholars who had been appointed by Jordan's Department of Antiquities to publish the scrolls would never complete the task. After an international



uproar and the release of bootleg copies of the still-unpublished material, the IAA stepped in and began a full-scale program of conservation and preservation, as well as the reorganization and expansion of the editorial team. I was privileged to be appointed to this expanded team. By 2010 the entire corpus had been published, and the IAA soon set up an advanced website to make the texts available to the scholarly and general public.

So what is the claim of the Palestinians? In July 1988, Jordan renounced its claims to the West Bank and recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as “the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.” The Palestinian Authority (PA) claims to be the successor to the PLO, and therefore, to be the legal owner of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Their argument is that they inherited them from the Jordanians, who we know mishandled the Scrolls and failed to publish them. The State of Israel, which has spent millions of dollars on maintaining and researching the Scrolls, has not made any formal legal claim. Rather, it has consistently dealt with these manuscripts as the heritage of the entire Western world and published all of them, applying the most sophisticated techniques of preservation and scholarship and seeing it as an obligation to allow all of humanity to share in learning about them.

What Israel asked of the Germans was that they guarantee that the manuscripts would return to their climate-controlled storage facility, where they would continue to be available online and for scholarly research. The German government balked, arguing that they might really be the property of the Palestinians. And so, the IAA had to stand its ground and cancel the exhibit in Frankfurt. Hopefully, the German government will reverse its decision and the exhibit will be rescheduled.

Can you conceive of the Israeli government handing over 2,000-year-old Jewish manuscripts, many of them parts of *Tanach*, to Palestinians who claim that there weren't any Jews in Eretz Yisrael? Take it from me: The Scrolls are where they belong, and where they will stay. Yes, they are the heritage of the whole world, but Israel is uniquely able to treasure and care for them. Too bad for the people who will miss the exhibit because of the shortsightedness of the German government ●

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