

The Dead Sea Scrolls At 70

Exciting new developments point toward future progress

By **LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN**

The field of Dead Sea Scrolls is never without important new developments. At the recent conference, “The Dead Sea Scrolls at Seventy: Clear a Path in

PERSPECTIVE

the Wilderness,” there was exciting news about the ongoing development of technological tools for reading and identifying the remaining small scraps or wads (several layers of fragments stuck together) that did not find their place in the amazing jigsaw puzzle that had to be assembled to decipher the scrolls.

The announcement was made by Pnina Shor, curator of the Dead Sea Scrolls for the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), at a public session conducted in Hebrew at which I had the honor of being a speaker. The conference was organized by the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Hebrew University, the IAA, the Israel Museum, New York University, and the University of Vienna — all major players in scrolls research.

The session was chaired by Professor Esther Chazon, director of the Orion Center, and opened with greetings from Martin Weiss, Austria’s ambassador to Israel. He delivered a stirring speech expressing his and Austria’s deep friendship for Israel and the Jewish people.

prestigious Israel Prize for his Dead Sea Scrolls research and other scholarship.

The new decipherment by Oren Ableman, scrolls researcher at the IAA and a Hebrew University doctoral student, was made possible by the use of multispectral imaging technology. This new technology

the Hasmoneans (the Maccabean dynasty) that ruled from c. 153 BCE.

Most scholars identify this sect with the Essenes described by Josephus, the first century CE Jewish historian. Readers will be interested to know that they fol-

the Talmudic rabbis.

With the help of the new images, Ableman succeeded in reading eleven small fragments that had never been legible before. They were taken from a box labelled “Cave 11,” so he rightly assumed that they should most likely be part of the manuscripts that came from

Among these are a Scroll of Psalms, a Targum (Aramaic translation) of Job, and two or probably three manuscripts of the Temple Scroll, a 66-column text that calls for a reshaping of the political and religious order in the period of the Hasmoneans.

In investigating the newly read fragments, Ableman was able to read letters on eleven of these and to identify several. One was part of Leviticus 13 and another a fragment was of Psalm 37, a text for which a sectarian commentary exists as well. Also found was a fragment of Psalm 147.

But for me, the most exciting part of his decipherment was the reading and identification of a small fragment as belonging to a very fragmentary manuscript of the Temple Scroll.

In fact, the decipherment was not the only thing that was said about the Temple Scroll that evening at the Israel Museum, where this session was held. I had spoken about the relationship of the Scroll’s proposed new temple plan to the Tabernacle and desert camp of the Jews in the wilderness. I argued that the author sought to make his proposed temple in the image of the way in which the people of Israel

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Oren Ableman, researcher at the Dead Sea Scrolls unit of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), examines the ink traces that have been discovered.

has been applied to the Dead Sea Scrolls as part of the IAA’s Leon Levy Digital Library project, which has provided scholars and the public with phenomenal images of the ancient manuscripts from Qumran and other sites in the Judean Desert.

The Dead Sea Scrolls collection

lowed a very strict halachic system generally in agreement with the super-strict Sadducees described by

Cave 11 at Qumran, the find site of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This cave had yielded parts of 29 manuscripts.

The Dead Sea Scrolls collection consists of about 900 manuscripts and fragments dating from the late third century BCE through the early first century CE.

ple and commitment to Israel’s long-term security.

The conference itself had opened the night before with its first academic session. Among the most significant words that night were said by Professor Armin Lange, Director of the Institute for Judaic Studies at the University of Vienna, who used this opportunity to speak out against anti-Semitism.

A highlight of the opening Evening was the chance to recognize our colleague Professor Elisha Qimron of Ben Gurion University, who had received the

consists of about 900 manuscripts and fragments dating from the late third century BCE through the early first century CE. Most are in Hebrew, about a fifth are in Aramaic, and a few are Greek fragments.

The texts are about evenly divided into three groups: (1) parts of every biblical book except Esther; (2) apocryphal books that are like the books of Bible or about them, but later — what Chazal called “external books” — apocrypha; and (3) sectarian works of a Jewish sect that retired to the desert sometime after the onset of the rule of

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camped around the Tabernacle in the desert.

When I finished, Dr. Adolfo Roitman, Curator of the Shrine of the Book of the Israel Museum, played a short video clip of an interview with retired General Shmuel Goren, who led the effort of the IDF during the 1967 Six Day War to recover an almost complete manu-

script of this scroll from the Bethlehem Arab dealer who held it. The existence of the scroll had been known already since 1960 by the leading Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin, and he was able to mobilize the Israeli army to recover it. The audience was thrilled to learn that Goren was in the auditorium and would make a few remarks.

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The identification by Ableman meant that this newly identified fragment would appear in the new edition of the Temple Scroll that I have been working on for years

with Professor Andrew Gross of Catholic University of America and others. The new fragment is helping us in our efforts to publish an edition that reflects as much as possible the ancient text of this extensive but still damaged document. This is the slow but steady progress of scholarship through which we are always learning new details about Jewish history and literature.

Many remember the public struggle over the lack of progress in the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls that took place from the late '80s through 1991. A team of Catholic and Protestant scholars appointed to publish the manuscripts had failed to publish almost all of what they held and refused access to other scholars.

After 1967, the unpublished scrolls in East Jerusalem came under Israeli control. In 1991, after the appearance of various bootleg copies, the IAA was able to fully release photographic images of the scrolls to scholars and the public.

Professor Emanuel Tov of the Hebrew University had been earlier charged with reorganizing the publication process, and the new team, of which I was honored to be part, quickly published editions of the entire corpus.

If anything, the 70th anniversary conference showed how

those days of strife are long over. The team that organized it, the scholars invited, and the many participants came together to celebrate the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls and learn about the latest advances in research. As one who participated in the 40th and helped to plan the 50th, 60th, and 70th anniversary con-

ferences, I am already awaiting the first meeting to plan the 80th.

Lawrence H. Schiffman is the Judge Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and Director of the Global Network for Advanced Research in Jewish Studies at New York University.

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