



**Commentary** Lawrence H. Schiffman

# A reflection on the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls

**WHAT BETTER** time to reflect on the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls than now, soon after celebrating their 70th anniversary? This corpus of ancient manuscripts has awakened immense interest, spawned an entire new field of scholarship, and reshaped our understanding of biblical studies, the history of Judaism and the background of Christianity. The scrolls have been at the center of their share of intrigue, legal action and even humor. Exhibits such as that taking place right now in Denver, under the auspices of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), are more than ample evidence of the tremendous interest in the scrolls. But how many people can actually explain what the scrolls are and what they should mean to us?

The discovery of the first Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, and the continuing discoveries in the 50's in territory held by Jordan after the 1948 War of Independence, created a tremendous amount of excitement. Yet after the initial publication of some important texts, most of the material was left to languish in what was then the Palestine Archaeological Museum (now the Rockefeller Museum) in East Jerusalem. The seeds of change took place during the 1967 Six Day War when Israel gained control of Qumran, the area of the Judean Desert where the archaeological find sites were located, and of the Palestine Archaeological Museum where the still unpublished scroll fragments were housed. Further, during the war Israeli military and intelligence forces acquired the Temple Scroll that was in the possession of a Bethlehem antiquities dealer. Because this text concerned almost entirely issues pertaining to the Temple and Jewish law, it reenergized discussion of the significance of the scrolls for the history of ancient Judaism. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the war, the Israel Department of Antiquities, predecessor to the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), left the Jordanian-appointed, judenrein international team in place and did not interfere in their work. Progress was

virtually nil and the team continued to refuse outside scholars access to the sequestered texts. Nonetheless, international pressure began to build for the full release of the material. By 1991 the ensuing controversy led to a reshuffling by the newly organized IAA and the appointment of Emanuel Tov of the Hebrew University as editor-in-chief. An expanded international and truly inter-confessional team that was led by him completed the publication of the scrolls in their entirety. (I was honored to be a member of that expanded team.)

The series of events that led to the "liberation" of the scrolls certainly contributed to the reawakening of interest in the Dead Sea Scrolls among the wider public throughout the Western World. Indeed, the tremendous public interest that was ignited has supported a series of exhibitions, television documentaries and conferences that have been of genuine advantage to the field. The study of the Dead Sea Scrolls has matured into a full-fledged academic field, with major publications in the form of monographs, collected volumes, and periodicals. A wide-ranging popular literature pertaining to the scrolls has also come into being.

In the past seventy years, scholars have come to a consensus regarding many issues in Dead Sea Scrolls research, although some issues are, as is natural in any field, still subject to disagreement. Such is the case with the identification of the authors of the sectarian scrolls who, according to virtually all scholars, gathered the wider library that besides their particular sectarian texts, also included biblical texts and a large number of post-biblical, Second Temple period texts that must have been read widely by Jews in the Land of Israel. The majority view regarding the identity of the sect is that they are the Essenes counted by Josephus along with the Pharisees and Sadducees as the major Jewish sects of the Greco-Roman period. I have argued for the importance of recognizing that their system of Jewish law

is Sadducean. Their historical origins lie in a group of pious Sadducees who protested the Maccabean takeover of the Temple when the Hasmonean dynasty was established circa 152 B.C.E. As can be expected, despite the most informed speculation, some issues will never be resolved because there is just not enough evidence on the tiny scraps of parchment that once were full scrolls to answer all our questions.

The most exciting part of this story is the unbelievable scholarly progress that we have seen. So what have we learned now that we have the entire corpus that we could not have known when we worked with only the few scrolls that had been published before 1990? In biblical studies, we have come to understand much better the process of evolution of the authoritative Masoretic Hebrew text and its relation to the other biblical textual traditions that existed in Second Temple times. The lines between text and interpretation were nowhere near as clear as we would have thought beforehand. Furthermore, at least in the case of the Dead Sea Scrolls community, differing biblical text types or textual families could coexist and serve the needs of the community. We have uncovered an enormous amount about the scribal practices, modes of transmission, and assertion of authority that allowed the biblical text to be passed down from antiquity into the Middle Ages. We have also learned an enormous amount about the many apocryphal texts Jews were reading in ancient times. Indeed, an entirely new library of such texts has come to light in the scrolls.

We have come to understand the varying modes of biblical interpretation that would later influence the authoritative texts of Judaism and Christianity. In the scrolls we find halakhic midrash, some of it as complicated as what we find in later rabbinic literature. The genre of rewritten Bible points towards the aggadic midrash of the rabbis. Peshet, contemporizing biblical interpretation, to

some extent resembles the fulfillment passages of the Gospels in which the claim is made that biblical prophecies are being realized in the present. Biblical texts were being used for the production of mezuzot and tefillin (phylacteries), indicating the continuity of Jewish traditional understandings of Scripture. Perhaps most important of all, we come to understand the plurality and variety of interpretations of the Bible and the manner in which they would shape the later development of Jewish tradition.

Many new details have emerged about the phenomenon of sectarianism, the various approaches to Judaism that competed for the allegiance of the Jewish community of the Land of Israel in late Second Temple times. Eventually, after the destruction of the Temple, a consensus developed around Pharisaic-rabbinic Judaism that became the basis for the subsequent history of Judaism. Through the scrolls corpus, one can trace so many details of agreement and disagreement between groups, clear examples of both common Judaism and intergroup tension, that there is simply no comparison between what we know now and what was known before the scrolls were made available to us. Indeed, the notion of common Judaism has become increasingly significant, and can be seen by studying Dead Sea Scrolls Sabbath codes and other legal tractates that often have numerous parallels to those found in the later rabbinic corpus. Even while this allows us to observe continuities in Jewish practice, such as in the mikvaot (ritual baths) found at the sectarian site at Qumran, we must not forget that disagreements about Jewish law were the main factor that separated Jewish groups and movements in Second Temple times. Yes, many theological differences existed. However, these were manifested most clearly in the differing opinions about Jewish practice and ritual. One cannot overstate the impact of the scrolls on our understanding of the early history of halakhah, Jewish law. With the help of the scrolls we have been able to reconstruct the Sadducee/Zadokite system of Jewish law that competed in Second Temple times with the Pharisaic-rabbinic system that is the basis for later Judaism.

The focus of research has shifted so that the important question is not “Who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?” This issue is far

RONEN ZVULUN / REUTERS



A restorer works on a fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls in a laboratory at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem

less important than what the scrolls tell us about the inner ferment and debate that took place in the Jewish community in the second and first centuries B.C.E. and the early first century C.E. After all, the apocalyptic messianism that we see in the scrolls would propel the Jewish community towards two revolts against Rome, both of which had at least some messianic overtones. Further, the expectation of a soon-to-come redeemer and numerous other motifs found in Dead Sea Scrolls apocalyptic tradition have left their mark on the rise of Christianity and its eventual separation from the Jewish community.

One of the most significant developments of the last ten years or so has been the successful digitization and online distribution of images of the scrolls themselves, the primary source for ongoing research. The Israel Antiquities Authority has taken the lead in these efforts and has made extensive use of multispectral imaging. This technology has enabled the reading of fragments that otherwise could not be read and that now can be placed in the massive jigsaw puzzle that results from the fragmentary nature of most of the manuscripts. The IAA and its partners in this research are seeking to develop algorithms to place broken fragments into their proper place in the corpus. Advanced technology has also enabled the reading and virtual unrolling of a fourth century Leviticus found in the Torah ark of the Ein Gedi

synagogue and will certainly be applied to other partially destroyed texts. The Israel Museum has also provided digitized the scrolls held at the Shrine of the Book and made these available online. The possibility that some fragments that became available on the antiquities market after 2002 might be forgeries has led to scientific research on the nature of the writing material and the ink, and it can be expected that these projects will yield prodigious results.

We have arrived at a point when we truly have a right to celebrate seventy years of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The amazing accomplishments of research in this field show that we can expect many more years of significant progress in the study of the scrolls. At the same time, the scrolls continue to spark considerable public interest. As we look forward to the next seventy years of Dead Sea Scrolls research we should hope to see discussion of the scrolls become an integral part of the way we understand the history of Judaism and the background of Christianity. If the past seventy years are any indication, we should see the fulfillment of that hope. ■

*Lawrence H. Schiffman is 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. He is author of numerous scholarly and popular articles on the Dead Sea Scrolls*