

The full release in 1991 of the Dead Sea Scrolls from the cabal of Christian scholars who held onto their rights of access and publication set off an amazing series of academic achievements: the full publication of the Scrolls by an expanded international team, of which I had the privilege of being a member, and the availability of the entire photographic archive on the websites of the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Israel Museum. These important achievements sparked an enormous amount of new research on Judaism in the *Bayis Sheini* period. This research extended to all areas: Biblical studies, literature, history and archaeology.

But the renewed interest in the ancient scrolls discovered at Qumran (probably Biblical Sechachah; *Yehoshua* 15:61) on the western shore of the Dead Sea brought with it a dark side as well.

Collectors, most of whom were Evangelical Christians seeking to connect tangibly with the Bible, began to attempt to purchase fragments of Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts. Several individuals and institutions bought such fragments, believing that they were buying the real thing. Millions of dollars were paid by these collectors and institutions. Today, some 70 fragments have been identified as having surfaced on the antiquities market from 2002 on. But as we recently heard in a press release issued on October 22 by the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, regarding five of their own fragments, many if not all of these 70 fragments are almost certainly modern forgeries.

It's not as if the news from the Museum of the Bible was a shocker to scholars in

Buyer Beware!

HOW FORGED DEAD SEA SCROLLS WERE EXPOSED BY HIGH-TECH TESTS



the field. As a consultant to the museum, I had made sure that there was a sign next to these fragments indicating that there was a question about their authenticity and that research was ongoing. Frankly, by the time the museum opened in November of 2017, I was convinced that some if not all of their fragments were forgeries. Last week the museum announced the results of studies performed by the Bundesanstalt für Materialforschung und -prüfung (Federal Institute for Materials Research and Testing) in Berlin. They performed an array of complex tests, including 3D digital microscopy, scanning X-ray fluorescence and energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy material analysis of the ink, sediment layers and chemical makeup. Much of the work was to determine whether or not dirt

and stains on the processed leather writing material were on top of the ink, as they should be in an ancient text, or below it, indicating that old and damaged material had been written on at a later period. I'm sure you're wondering they just couldn't carbon-14 date the writing material. The problem here is that the forgers had obtained ancient leather, dating to over 2,000 years ago. They had then processed the surface to look authentic and inscribed it. Therefore, only sophisticated tests could yield definitive results.

This is actually the second batch of such tests. When fragments belonging to Martin Schøyen in Norway were published in 2016, some in this collection were omitted from the volume. These fragments had been tested by the very same laboratory in



Berlin and found to be most likely forged.

In fact, the forged fragments have some very specific characteristics: (1) They are almost all Biblical, which appears to be a response to the Christian market in which collectors want to “own a piece” of Scripture. (2) These fragments are usually the single extant fragment of the manuscript and do not belong to existing manuscripts recovered in the late 1940s and early 1950s. (3) These materials sometimes share layout with existing printed editions of the *Tanach*. One even has a footnote sign where one had appeared

in the printed book from which it was copied. (4) The writing material is rough and the ink seems to bleed into the processed leather in ways that authentic Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts, like *sifrei Torah*, do not. (5) In some cases, the letters on these fragments don't line up or may be slightly altered to make them fit on the irregularly shaped fragments of leather on which they were being inscribed.

I personally had a close call with two of the post-2002 fragments. I am currently working with colleagues on a new edition of the Temple Scroll, one of the best preserved of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is 66 columns long and constitutes an adaptation of the text of the Torah from the end of *Shemos* through the middle of *Devarim*,

intended to convey the author's apparently *Tzeduki* (Sadduceean)-like interpretations on many different topics, especially *tumah v'taharah* and *korbanos*. But most importantly, the text puts forth a plan for a gargantuan Temple with an additional third courtyard that would have covered most of the city of Yerushalayim as it then existed. At some point during our many years of work on this project, a friend and colleague made available to us two images of previously unknown fragments of this text that we were expecting to use in our edition, along with the known manuscripts. When the discussion of the forgeries began, we realized that these two fragments fit almost entirely into the catalog of characteristics mentioned above. As time went on, we concluded that these fragments were most probably forged, so we mention them in our text but give them absolutely no credibility.

The good news is that we now have a list of the approximately 70 fragments that are likely to be forged and we know where virtually all of them are. This means that scholars can make sure that these very questionable manuscripts do not contaminate academic discussion of the original Dead Sea Scrolls corpus.

Where do the questionable fragments allegedly come from? After the initial discovery in what is called Qumran Cave 1 in 1947 by a Bedouin boy, Israel's 1948 War of Independence intervened. When the armistice was reached, the Jordanians occupied the area of the Judean Desert where the Scrolls had been discovered, and with the help of Christian archaeologists who resided in East Jerusalem, they undertook excavations of the site of Qumran that was located close to the caves. During the excavations, while the archaeologists were in East Jerusalem on the weekends, the



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The Dead Sea Scrolls caves

Bedouin workers discovered additional manuscripts in the surrounding caves. The largest of these collections emerged from Cave 4, yielding some 80,000 fragments that when assembled in the fashion of a jigsaw puzzle, were reduced to 20,000. These fragments, in turn, belonged to some 900 manuscripts. Approximately one third were fragments of the *Tanach*; the only book not represented was *Megillas Esther*. A second third was made up of books from the *Bayis Sheini* period that would have been of interest to many elements of the Jewish population, as evidenced by the presence of some of these books in small fragments at Masada. The final third consisted of the writings of the particular sectarian group that had gathered the library and inhabited the site of Qumran from about 100 BCE until its destruction in 68 CE during the Great Revolt against Rome (66-73 CE). This revolt led to the destruction of the second *Beis Hamikdash* by the Romans in 70 CE. Most scholars identify the sectarians of the Dead Sea Scrolls as the Essenes, described by the first-century CE Jewish historian Josephus (Yosef ben Matisyahu).

Virtually all the material found after the initial 1947 discovery was sold by the Bedouins to a dealer in Bethlehem, Khalil Iskandar Shahin, nicknamed Kando. Kando, in turn, sold these fragments to the Palestine Archaeological Museum in East Jerusalem, now known as the Rockefeller Museum. The authenticity of the fragments was confirmed, as the archaeologists were able to find some remains of the same manuscripts in fragments left in the caves when they excavated them. Nonetheless, there has been a persistent claim ever since that Kando kept some fragments, or that the museum didn't buy some fragments, and that these were

sent by him through Lebanon to a bank vault in Switzerland before the Jordanian adoption of antiquities laws prohibiting the exportation of such items. When the materials began to surface in 2002, they were said to come either directly from this vault through Kando's son William, or from fragments that had been sold earlier to collectors that were now available again

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on consignment. A few American dealers seem to have represented William Kando, the second generation in this business, in selling these fragments to collectors. I myself served as an advisor to Azusa Pacific University, an Evangelical school in California, and we received what appeared to be completely appropriate documents of authenticity as well as confirmation from a leading scholar who had investigated and transcribed the fragments. None of us suspected the possibility of forgery.

In 2016 the Museum of the Bible published its first scholarly volume, *Dead Sea Scrolls Fragments in the Museum Collection*. This volume should have been the new standard-setter, since it employed

very sophisticated technology and a level of exacting analysis that had never been brought to the study and publication of Qumran fragments. Yet one of

its editors, Kipp Davis, hinted in a brief note at the irregularity of the lettering on one fragment published in the volume. But by the time the volume was actually published, Davis and another scholar from Norway, Årstein Justnes, began to circulate articles on the Internet arguing that some or all of these fragments were forgeries. At a session sponsored and organized by the Museum of the Bible at the Society for Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in 2017, a number of presentations on this topic attracted large audiences, and by the end of the meeting, and after the publication of the results of the Schøyen tests, the majority of Dead Sea Scrolls scholars took very seriously the claim that the 70 or so fragments that came on the market after 2002 were indeed forgeries.

When the Museum of the Bible received the results of the tests of its own fragments it did the only responsible thing, removing them from the exhibit cases and replacing them with others that have not yet been invalidated, those in their collection that are most likely to be authentic. Of course, the signs will stay, warning viewers that these fragments may also be forged. Don't be surprised, however, if these fragments also turn out to be problematical. The lesson of all this is: if someone offers you a Dead Sea Scrolls fragment for the bargain price of \$500,000-\$1 million, don't buy it! ●

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