



New Dead Sea Scrolls?

UNDERSTANDING AN EXCITING
NEW FIND OF ANCIENT BOOKS
OF TANACH IN A CAVE IN THE
JUDEAN DESERT

By Lawrence H. Schiffman



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Since the very first Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, there has been a constant race between Bedouin antiquities hunters and archaeologists. This time the archaeologists won, and the prize was well worth the effort. In about 2002, numerous Dead Sea Scrolls fragments started to appear on the antiquities market. Although we now know that these were all forged, at the time it was believed that some of them were being pillaged by Bedouins from caves in the Judean Desert. There had been a thorough search, conducted by Israeli archaeologists, soldiers and (yes!) Bedouins, of much of the Judean Desert and the area around Jericho when the Oslo Accords went into effect in 1995. That search had turned up some documents brought to caves on the shore of the Dead Sea by refugees during the Bar Kochba Revolt against Rome in 132-5 CE. But in 2017, in order to prevent the pillaging of antiquities, another operation was launched by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) to survey all the caves in the Judean Desert and to excavate those that held promise for the recovery of antiquities.

This week, the IAA provided the first public report of the results of this effort. In

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summary, the most significant finds were the most ancient basket ever found in Eretz Yisrael, the body of a child that had been buried wrapped in a cloth thousands of years ago, numerous ancient coins, a lice comb, a sandal, and cloth. But most importantly, they recovered fragments of a Greek manuscript of *Trei Asar* containing parts of *Nachum* and *Zechariah*.

WHAT IS A "DEAD SEA SCROLL"?

To understand these new discoveries, readers need to know that when we use the term "Dead Sea Scrolls," we are almost always talking about the remnants of some 900 manuscripts that were discovered in caves

near what had been a sectarian Jewish settlement at Qumran. But actually, a number of other collections of ancient manuscripts have been recovered in the region of the Judean Desert, most notably, the Masada Scrolls and those that we generally term Judean Desert documents. This last group includes the legal documents of Jews who fled to caves along the shore of the Dead Sea during the Bar Kochba Revolt, as

well as military dispatches sent by Bar Kochba himself to his officials at Ein Gedi and other nearby sites. The numerous legal documents, covering marriage and divorce, land sales, rentals, deeds of gift, and other matters have greatly illuminated the lives of a community of Jews living around the southern half of the Dead Sea and in parts of Judea, as well as the everyday life realities behind much of what we learn in the Mishnah.

At the same time, we see how those very same people, living in the Roman provinces of Judea and Arabia, also interacted with the legal system imposed by the Romans.

I must admit that all of these latest finds made me jealous! The manuscripts were found in a cave known as the Cave of the Horror (*Me'arat haEimah*), because when it was excavated in 1961 by Israeli archaeologist Yochanan Aharoni, skeletons of over 40 men, women and children were found there. They had been starved to death by the Romans, who blocked their escape from the cave. That excavation itself was part of a project organized at the inspiration of David





Ben-Gurion, Israel's then prime minister, after it became very clear that manuscripts discovered in the caves of Nachal Chever, in what was then pre-1967 Israel, were being smuggled by Bedouins into Jordan, where they were being sold to the Palestine Archaeological Museum (now the Rockefeller Museum in East Jerusalem) under the false claim that they had come from what would then have been a Jordanian site. In essence, then, the new fragments were recovered at an already excavated cave.

CAVES AND TEXTS

These fragments are the third set of texts from one manuscript, all found in this cave, which fit together in a sort of ancient jigsaw when researchers placed them together.

Bedouins entered this cave in 1952 and sold to archaeologists in Jordan the remnants of a scroll that constituted a Greek manuscript of most of *Trei Asar*. A full scholarly edition of that manuscript was published by Professor Emanuel Tov of the Hebrew University in 1998. Tov is credited as being the editor who reorganized the publication plan for the Dead Sea Scrolls and brought about the full publication of these important texts.

It wasn't definitely established that the Greek *Trei Asar* had come from Nachal Chever until Aharoni's excavation of 1961. In his excavation, some additional small fragments of this manuscript, overlooked by the Bedouins when they robbed the cave, were discovered, proving the scroll's provenance—its place of origin. And now there is this third section.

This is not the only *Trei Asar* that emerged from what we loosely term the Bar Kochba caves. At about the same time that the Bedouins were looting the caves in Israel, on the Jordanian side of the then border, Bedouins located a cave along Wadi Murabba'at, known in Hebrew as Nachal Deragot. Among the scroll fragments they recovered there were the remnants of a Hebrew *Trei Asar*. They were brought to the antiquities dealer Kando in Bethlehem and then sold by him to the museum. This text contained the *nusach hamesorah*, the traditional text of the *Tanach*. Although this manuscript was also not complete, it contains sufficient text to prove that the *Trei Asar* were indeed

written on one scroll that was approximately the same size as the scrolls that were required for writing each of the larger *Nevi'im Acharonim* (Latter Prophets), *Yeshayahu*, *Yirmeyahu* and *Yechezkel*. The *Gemara* (*Bava Basra* 14b) tells us that the 12 were written as one manuscript, because otherwise they might be lost because of their small size.

But there is something very important about this latest manuscript, numbered in our academic catalogs as 8HevXIIgr ("eighth cave at Nachal Chever, Twelve Prophets, Greek," to translate the abbreviation). First of all, it is interesting to note that in this Greek manuscript, the *Shem Hameforash* (the four-letter Divine name) is written in the ancient Hebrew script, similar to that of the Canaanites, not in the *ksav Ashuri*—the square script that became the norm after the return from *Galus Bavel* (the Babylonian Exile). A similar practice is found in some of the Hebrew scrolls among the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran. Whereas according to *halachah* (Rambam, *Hilchos Tefillin* 1:19) writing biblical texts, let alone Divine names, in this script renders them unsanctified, it seems that some sectarian Jews at this time thought the opposite, seeing the use of this kind of lettering for the Divine name, even in the Greek text, as indicating sanctity. Use of Hebrew Divine names in Greek biblical texts is also known from later manuscripts.

But that is not all that this manuscript has to tell us. The *Gemara* (*Megillah* 9a) recounts how under Ptolemy, ruler of Egypt, after the division of the empire of Alexander the Great, arranged for 72 scholars to translate the *Tanach* into Greek. This translation is known as the *Septuagint*, a term deriving



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138 AMI MAGAZINE // MARCH 24, 2021 // 11 NISAN 5781

from the number 70 in Latin. The third or second-century BCE Greek text entitled "Letter of Aristeas," contains a parallel to this account that identifies the king as Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-47 BCE) and allows us to date the translation to the third century BCE. However, that account refers only to the Torah. The rest of the books were translated in the second and first centuries BCE. A small number of fragments of Greek biblical texts were also found at Qumran, indicating that some of the sectarians, identified by most scholars as the Essenes described by Josephus, needed to use Greek translations to understand *Tanach*. Apparently, this was the case with some of the refugees who came to the caves during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. We should not be surprised at this in light of the fact that some of the legal documents they brought had been written in Greek.

However, the translations found in this manuscript, when compared to the Greek text of the *Septuagint* as it has been passed down by the Christian monks who copied its manuscripts in the Middle Ages, show a very interesting tendency. The manuscript from Nachal Chever has a variety of translations that are clearly corrections of the Greek text in order to bring the previously existing Greek translation into harmony with the established Hebrew text. What this shows is that somebody was using the translation to study along with the Hebrew text, and whoever created this version sought to provide such a reader with a helpful guide to understanding the Hebrew.

A TRIP TO A CAVE

So why did I say above that I was jealous? The group of archaeologists who entered the Cave of the Horror to re-excavate it were doing something that I myself had the opportunity to do in another important Nachal Chever cave, the Cave of the Letters (*Me'arat haIgrot*). This cave had been entered by Bedouins and robbed of all kinds of important materials in 1953. It was then excavated by Yigal Yadin in 1960-61 as part of Ben-Gurion's attempt to stop the smuggling of



Workers inside a Judean cave

They found fragments of Nachum and Zechariah.

Israeli antiquities into Jordan. The excavators found unbelievable treasures there, including a cache of all the legal documents of a woman named Babata, including her *kesubah*. In 2003 I participated in a return to this cave with a group of scholars and archaeologists headed by Professor Richard Freund, then of the University of Hartford. We traveled into what was then a military shooting range on desert transports that went up and down the dunes at angles that no one would believe were safe. We climbed a 30-foot ladder with mountain climbing equipment and helmets to enter the cave and explored for days finding only a few coins. For me it was especially moving, nonetheless, to be in this important historic site.

One especially moving aspect of this experience was that our colleague Professor Hanan Eshel, ז"ל, of Bar-Ilan University, who himself had found Bar Kochba contracts during Operation Scroll, undertaken in connection with the Oslo Accords, walked around the cave for close



to an hour before pointing to an opening and saying, "That's it!" What was it? It was where the archaeologists who had excavated the site left the bodies of those Jews who some 2,000 years ago had died trying to escape the Romans during the revolt. One could see some of the clothes that they had been wearing when they died.

Of course, when we returned to the Cave of the Letters it was our hope that we would find documents, perhaps even biblical scrolls. But that was not to be. Happily, such disappointment did not await our colleagues at the Cave of the Horror. They unearthed some 80 fragments of parchment, 40 of which bear written material. Specifically, they found fragments of *Nachum* and *Zechariah*. Indeed, the text from *Zechariah* comes to us at a time when its message is sorely needed. The manuscript preserves *Zechariah* 8:16-17: "These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to one another, render true and perfect justice in your gates. And do not contrive evil against one another, and do not love perjury, because all those are things that I hate, declares Hashem."

● 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.