The Great Isaiah Scroll

Donald W. Parry

The Great Isaiah Scroll, perhaps the most well-known biblical scroll found at Qumran, was one of the initial seven scrolls found in Qumran Cave 1 in 1947. It was wrapped in a linen cloth and stored within a sealed clay jar. The scroll itself measures twenty-four and a half feet in length and ten and a half inches in height. It consists of seventeen pieces of sheepskin that have been sewn together into a single scroll and shows signs of being well-worn before it was stored away.

Through paleographic analysis of the Hebrew script, scholars date the scroll to between 125 and 100 B.C. Radiocarbon dating of the leather of the scroll indicates a date between 202 and 107 B.C. The scroll is currently housed at the Shrine of the Book, part of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. A replica of this scroll was on display in the Qumran exhibit.

The scroll comprises fifty-four columns of text written in Hebrew script that vary in width and average about twenty-nine lines of text per column. The scribe who copied the scroll was quite careless and erred in numerous places, even misspelling Isaiah's name in the first line of the scroll (see Isaiah 1:1). The scribe frequently fixed his errors by squeezing the corrections between the lines or writing them in the margins. Other scribal markings throughout the scroll indicate divisions within the text (perhaps similar to our modern-day paragraphs), places where corrections needed to be made, or passages of special importance to the Qumran community.

This scroll is an extremely significant find because it predates any other previously known Hebrew copy of Isaiah by approximately one thousand years. The existence of this manuscript allows scholars to better understand how the text has survived from the second or first century B.C. to the present. The scroll contains all sixty-six chapters of the book of Isaiah, with most of the content being very similar to the Isaiah material preserved in the Masoretic text (the traditional Hebrew text of the Old Testament). However, some important variants have been found in the Isaiah scroll, some of which have been included in modern translations of Isaiah in current use. For example, the text of Isaiah 33:8 in the Masoretic text, as translated in the King James Version, reads as follows:

The highways lie waste, the wayfaring man ceaseth: he hath broken the covenant, he hath despised the cities, he regardeth no man.

Instead of cities in the last line, the Isaiah scroll renders it witnesses —"he hath despised the witnesses."¹

This summary has been adapted from Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks, Questions and Answers on the Dead Sea Scrolls for Latter-day Saints (forthcoming).

Note

1. For further reading, see Donald W. Parry and Elisa Qimron, The Great Isaiah Scroll: Transcriptions and Photographs (forthcoming).