Two Windows on the Ancient World

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The unlikely arrival in Provo, Utah, this year of nine original Dead Sea Scrolls, along with several high-quality replicas and other ancient artifacts from Qumran and Masada, is the result of efforts that began three years ago.

Alan Ashton, a prominent Utah businessman, and I were in Jerusalem in 1994 when the Masada Exhibition was on display at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. We were fascinated with the exhibit, and toward the end of our visit I commented to Alan that it would be wonderful if the exhibit could someday come to BYU. He wholeheartedly agreed. We made arrangements to meet with the curator of the exhibit, Gila Hurvitz, who immediately and enthusiastically embraced the idea. Because of Hebrew University’s proximity to the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies on Mount Scopus, she responded, “We are neighbors in Jerusalem; we should be partners in Provo.”

Because the Masada Exhibition did not contain much in the way of scroll material, we made a special request of Hurvitz that more of the scroll fragments found at Masada be added to the exhibit when it was sent to BYU. We were interested, for example, in a fragment that contains the biblical prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1–14). As it turned out, this scroll fragment and three others found at Masada were eventually prepared for display and were included in the Masada exhibit at BYU. The Ezekiel fragment, technically known as Mas1d Ezekiel, was on display in Provo for the first time anywhere in the world.

As long as some of the Masada scroll fragments were coming to BYU, I began investigating the possibility of securing additional scrolls and scroll fragments from other sources to enhance the exhibit.

In May 1996 I corresponded with Hurvitz about our adding one of the famous Bar Kokhba documents, owned by the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, to the exhibit. I requested the deed 5/6Hev 44, which contains the Book of Mormon name Alma. I also urged her to inquire about the possibility of our obtaining some of the scrolls held in the Rockefeller Museum. We both recognized that publicity of the Masada exhibit would increase if additional original scrolls were included, because many people in Utah have a great interest in this ancient material. Unfortunately, as late as October 1996, in spite of several inquiries by Hurvitz and others, it seemed we would not be able to add any additional scrolls to the exhibit.

But Hurvitz persisted, and in late November she received word from the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) that they had agreed to include the Bar Kokhba deed we requested in the Masada exhibit during its six-month stay in Provo. However, at least two months would be required for conservation of the material, and a special courier would be required to deliver the document by hand.

News of this development was enthusiastically received at BYU, and details about this added cooperation reached us in time to be included in our initial publicity and in an article about the upcoming Masada exhibit that appeared in the March 1997 issue of the Ensign magazine, a Latter-day Saint publication.

Also in November, while I was in New Orleans for the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, I met with Dr. Weston Fields, executive director of the Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation, which is based in Jerusalem. He was familiar with our plans for the Masada exhibit and was eager to thank people in Utah for supporting the work of the foundation. Consequently, he wanted to do whatever he could to secure some of the Qumran scrolls to complement the Masada scrolls in the exhibit.
Fields reported that on his way to New Orleans he was approached by an antiquities dealer in New York who had a set of three Qumran scroll replicas for sale. One was a copy of 1QIsa\(^a\) *The Great Isaiah Scroll*. The set also included a copy of IQS *Rule of the Community* and a copy of the *Habakkuk Pesher*. The replicas were all of high-quality leather and comparable to the scroll replicas on display in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem.

I authorized Fields to purchase the replicas on behalf of FARMS, and the set was shipped to Provo the first week in December. At the same time, I began to explore with others at FARMS the idea of our sponsoring a second exhibit at BYU in which we could display the replicas and the Bar Kokhba document. This exhibit, conceived as a companion to the Masada exhibit, would be called *Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

Meanwhile, during the first week of January 1997, Fields, who was then back in Jerusalem, traveled to neighboring Amman, Jordan, and met with Dr. Ghazi Bisheh, director general of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. They discussed the possibility of Jordan's loaning some of the Qumran scrolls to BYU for display in the Qumran exhibit. Fields initially asked about obtaining on loan part of the famous 3Q15 *Copper Scroll* but learned that it was in Paris and would not be available. Nevertheless, Bisheh was confident that the Jordanians wanted to cooperate.

At this time we selected six scrolls that we thought would be of particular interest to the BYU community and asked Fields to begin the process of formally requesting this material. In his correspondence to Bisheh, Fields pointed out an interesting coincidence. Dr. Marti Lu Allen, associate director of BYU's Museum of Peoples and Cultures and my codirector of the Masada exhibit during its stay at BYU, was a classmate of Dr. Bisheh during their graduate studies at the University of Michigan.

After confirmation from university administrators that FARMS and BYU Studies could proceed to negotiate with the Jordanians without further university clearance, news was received on 20 January 1997 that “in principle the Department of Antiquities of Jordan will have no objection to the display of the requested items.” However, one major political hurdle stood in the way: the shipment of a registered archaeological object to another country required the approval of the Jordanian cabinet. We therefore reduced our request to three or four scroll fragments to facilitate rapid approval. Finally, on 27 February, Fields and his wife, Diane, received a certificate authorizing them to act as couriers on behalf of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan in transporting four original Dead Sea Scrolls from Jordan to Provo. The Fieldses arrived with the scrolls at the FARMS offices the next day, and the material was deposited in the vault of the BYU Museum of Art. Only two weeks later the exhibit opened to the public.

Also in February, further arrangements needed to be made regarding the display of the Bar Kokhba document. A separate loan agreement was negotiated to cover the expenses for this single document, and during the first week of March that contract was finalized and executed by the IAA and BYU. Couriers carrying both the Bar Kokhba document and the Masada scroll fragments arrived in Provo late in the evening of Thursday, 6 March, only a few days before the press conference and opening gala for the exhibit on 12 March.

The arrival of this material, however, was not without incident as well as disappointment. The cases that had been prepared for transporting the Masada fragments and the Bar Kokhba document from Tel Aviv to New York proved to be too large for normal storage on the domestic aircraft Delta Airlines used between New York City and Salt Lake City. After several phone calls to Delta officials at Salt Lake International Airport, and with the cooperation of the director of protocol at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City, the two oversize scroll cases were allowed to ride beside the pilot in the cockpit. Delayed five hours, the material finally arrived at the museum.
The excitement of receiving these items was momentarily subdued when it was discovered that the Shrine of the Book had prepared and sent the wrong Bar Kokhba document, one that did not contain the name of one “Alma son of Judah.” The document we received, 5/6Hev 46, was nevertheless placed on display and is similar to the one we requested. Eventually, the IAA dispatched a high-quality color photograph of the so-called Alma deed; so instead of seeing only one of the famous Bar Kokhba documents, visitors to the exhibits saw two rare items, one original and an enlarged facsimile.

At the Qumran and Masada exhibits at BYU—two windows on the ancient world—people were thus able to see nine original Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts; three full-size, high-quality scroll replicas; several photographic reproductions of other documents; and related material. It is a great honor and privilege for FARMS and BYU to have been able to host these priceless artifacts. Under one roof we had treasures of Israel from Masada and the Judean desert and treasures of Jordan from Qumran.