BYU Entrusted with Jordanian Scrolls

Weston Fields
For the first time ever the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan allowed four of the original Dead Sea Scrolls in its possession to leave the country. These scrolls—4Q22 Paleo Exodus, 1Q28a Rule of the Congregation, 4Q175 Testimonia, and 1Q22 Words of Moses—were on display at BYU’s Museum of Art.

In 1967, during the Six-Day War, most of the scrolls owned by Jordan were captured by Israel and placed in the Rockefeller Museum. However, several scrolls remained in Amman, Jordan, and since then have not been out of the country. Three of these scrolls have never been on display in a museum, but have been kept in a vault in Jordan for years. Consequently, very few people have had a chance to see them since they were first published. Only one fragment, 4Q175 Testimonia, had been on display before.

It is a great honor that of all the universities and museums in the United States, BYU was the first to be permitted to display these scrolls. Original scrolls seldom leave Jordan or Israel, so their coming to BYU was a rare opportunity. Even in Israel, where there are many more scrolls, few people get to see something like this firsthand.

The impetus for bringing the Jordanian scrolls to BYU was a desire for exhibit visitors to see as many original Dead Sea Scrolls as possible. I think the reason the Jordanian government allowed these national treasures to come to BYU and Utah was because of the reputation of the LDS Church, the university, and FARMS—a reputation of honesty. In the end, it was this reputation that made it possible for me, even though I am not a member of the LDS Church, to negotiate with the Jordanian Department of Antiquities and for them to convince the Jordanian cabinet and the prime minister to let the scrolls out of their country. Many requests have been made for this material but have always been turned down. However, when the request came from BYU and FARMS, the Jordanian government was willing to loan them because they trusted the LDS people, BYU, and FARMS. That trust made all the difference.

During the negotiations, I tried to maintain a nonpolitical, neutral stance, as does the Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation, which I head. Our neutrality made it easier for the director of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, Dr. Ghazi Bisheh, who is himself nonpolitical, to overlook my Israeli connections and trust that when I left his office I would get on a plane to Amsterdam and not to Tel Aviv.

It is my view, and I think that Dr. Bisheh agrees with me, that the Dead Sea Scrolls belong to the world. They do not belong just to the Israelis or to the Jordanians, but to everyone. It so happens that at this point in history the Jordanians are the custodians for some of the scrolls, the Israelis are the custodians of others, and the Dutch and the French own a few; but all these scrolls really belong to the world.

It was exciting for my wife and me to bring these scrolls to Utah—to travel halfway around the world with them in a box and to watch out for them constantly for the forty hours it took us to travel from Amman to Provo. It is not every day that one gets to travel with ancient original scrolls in his hands. Lika Tov, wife of Professor Emanuel Tov, director of the international team of scholars who are working on the scrolls, said, “I’m glad they asked you to do it, because I wouldn’t have the nerve.”

After the officials left us in the Amman airport, we were asked to open the box before being checked in through the X-ray machine. I was nervous, but because the Arab guards did not speak English very well, and because the people
who packed the box fortunately placed on it a fragile sign with a picture of a glass, the guards decided that we did not have to unwrap the material.

Only a few people in Israel were really aware of what was taking place: Professor Tov and his wife, Professor Shemaryahu Talmon of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, my secretary, maybe one or two others, and, of course, my wife and I. But nobody officially knew about it. For security reasons, we wanted to keep the number of people who knew what we were doing to a minimum. Also, we did not want to take a chance that somebody would object to what we wanted to do.

Will what we have done help the political climate between Jordan and Israel? I think it will. This was the first cooperative venture in archaeology in decades (even if it was done indirectly) involving Jordan and Israel. It is important that scholars cooperate in such matters strictly on a scholarly basis, being as nonpolitical as possible. The fact that the scrolls came to BYU and were on display demonstrates such cooperation. There will be other opportunities for Israel and Jordan to join together in similar ventures. I think that what has happened at BYU will be viewed in the long run as a positive step forward in dealings between these two countries and the United States.