Preface

What is the Copper Scroll? Do the Dead Sea Scrolls contain lost books of the Bible? Did John the Baptist study with the people of Qumran? What is the Temple Scroll? What about DNA research and the scrolls?

We have responded to scores of such questions on many occasions—while teaching graduate seminars and Hebrew courses at Brigham Young University, presenting papers at professional symposia, and speaking to various lay audiences. These settings are always positive experiences for us, particularly because they reveal that the general membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a deep interest in the scrolls and other writings from the ancient world.

The nonbiblical Dead Sea Scrolls are of great import because they shed much light on the cultural, religious, and political position of some of the Jews who lived shortly before and during the time of Jesus Christ. The biblical scrolls and the scrolls that have biblical themes are of even greater significance because they present valuable information regarding the ancient world and the way that the Old Testament was preserved, copied, and transmitted through the ages.

Latter-day Saints will recognize many truths in the scrolls. Even so, the scrolls should be approached with the same caution that the Lord revealed concerning those who read the Apocrypha: “There are many things contained therein that are true . . . ; there are many things contained therein that are not true . . . Therefore, whoso readeth it, let him understand, for the Spirit manifesteth truth; . . . and whoso receiveth not by the Spirit, cannot be benefited” (Doctrine and Covenants 91:1—2, 4, 6).

This small volume, inspired by Joseph A. Fitzmyer’s book Responses to 101 Questions on the Dead Sea Scrolls, gathers information on seventy such questions into a single work. While many of the questions we respond to are ones that Latter-day Saints have asked us, we also selected questions that will be of further interest to them. We added still more questions in order to balance our goal of addressing Latter-day Saints with the need for adequate coverage of the scrolls in general. In any case, because we wrote this book with an LDS audience foremost in mind, many of our responses treat themes of particular interest to Latter-day Saints (e.g., baptism, prophecy, premortal life, and the plan of salvation), include LDS terminology, and refer to LDS scripture.

Our brief volume does not attempt to touch upon all aspects of the Dead Sea Scrolls, nor does it attempt to be comprehensive in its treatment of selected topics. Rather, we have prepared this book with the needs of the general reader foremost in mind. We have included various illustrations so that the reader can visualize the scrolls, the caves where they were discovered, and the ruins of Qumran, among other points of interest. Because we have kept endnote citations to a minimum, readers desiring additional information on the scrolls are encouraged to consult the select bibliography found in the final response of this book.

Our preparation of this volume does not imply a historical or theological connection between the beliefs of the people of Qumran and Latter-day Saints. Numerous similarities exist between any two religious groups, but there are also differences—and the differences often are more consequential than the similarities. While we may see several similarities between Latter-day Saints and the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we also see equally interesting similarities between the latter group and religious groups of other historical periods and locales. There are actually far more differences between the Qumranites and the Latter-day Saints than there are similarities.
We have tried to avoid subjects of scholarly controversy. For instance, we do not attempt to settle the issue of who—Essenes, Sadducees, another Jewish group?—owned or possessed the scrolls and later hid them in the caves near Qumran. We have also tried to avoid the sensationalism and gratuitous comparisons between Latter-day Saints and the Qumran people that have marred many publications and public presentations on the scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls are sensational enough without such embellishments; they stand on their own as being the greatest manuscript discovery of the twentieth century.

With few exceptions, we have used the translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls by Geza Vermes, The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English (New York: Penguin, 1997), which is responsibly prepared, accepted by the scholarly community, and readily available in libraries and bookstores. Scroll translations included in our book were drawn from Vermes's work unless otherwise noted.

We would like to thank the many people who have so ably assisted us in preparing this volume. Jeanette Miller helped us with research and work on early drafts of some of the responses. Gaye Strathearn and Dana M. Pike of the Department of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University and Alison V. P. Coutts of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at BYU reviewed the early manuscript and offered helpful comments. We also thank Don L. Brugger of FARMS for his careful and sensitive editing and for his very considerable insight in guiding the book through to completion. Other FARMS associates competently performed additional tasks: Whitney Fox and K. Laura Sommer checked the sources; Stephanie Christensen, Alison V. P. Coutts, Paula W. Hicken, and Sandra A. Thorne proofread the edited manuscript; and Mary Mahan designed and typeset the book. The cover concept and design are the commendable work of J. Scott Knudsen. To all of these we express our heartfelt thanks.

Note