The Care and Keeping of Scrolls

James C. Vanderkam
University of Notre Dame

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol28/iss28/8
FORUM

THE CARE AND KEEPING OF SCROLLS

James C. VanderKam

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a collection of texts that were found from 1947 to 1956 in eleven caves located at the Northwest corner of the Dead Sea. They number about 800 documents, almost all of which have survived in very fragmentary form. There is one complete scroll—the Great Isaiah scroll discovered in the first cave—a series of fairly well preserved works, and a multitude of frustratingly broken texts. The documents include between 100 and 200 copies of books in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, commentaries on some biblical books, copies of extra-biblical works which had previously been known only through later translations, and a host of texts which regulated the life of the community that wrote and copied the scrolls and expressed their views on law, theology, the future, and worship.

The most widely accepted theory about the scrolls still today is that they were written and copied by a group of people whose communal life was centered on a set of building located near the caves. These impressive ruins and their famous waterworks, which were excavated after the first caves were found, seem less appropriate for lodging than for larger gatherings for eating and business. Study of the scrolls and of other pertinent texts convinced most scholars that these people belonged to the larger Essene party which a number of ancient writers described. The beliefs and practices reflected in the scrolls correspond to a remarkable degree with those attributed to the Essenes by authors such as the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. Also, the first-century Roman geographer Pliny or the source from which he quoted mentioned that a group of Essenes lived next to the Dead Sea above Engedi—a location which matched that of the caves and ruins.

The texts and artifacts found in their vicinity were subjected to the normal methods of dating. Three types should be noted. First, paleography or the study of script evolution has played an important
if controversial role in the process. Practitioners of this art or science claim, on the basis of their analysis of dated scripts and their development and comparison of these with undated ones, that they can place a document within a 50-year period. On this basis, the oldest documents among the scrolls were dated to the third century BCE, more to the second century, and most to the first centuries BCE and CE. This technique has come under heavy criticism recently, but it should be pointed out that the radio-carbon tests conducted on a selection of the manuscripts in 1991 indicate that if anything the conclusions of the paleographers are too conservative. In general, however, they confirm the accuracy of this kind of dating technique.

The pottery found in the ruins and the series of coins unearthed there have also contributed to the dating debate. They, too, point to the last centuries BCE and the first CE as the time of the buildings and occupation of the caves. Hence, the dominant theory about the scrolls is that a group of Essenes, under the leadership of a man who is called the Teacher of Righteousness, decided to leave the centers of Jewish habitation in Palestine and to exile themselves to the wilderness of Judea, there to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3). They found themselves a genuine wilderness and there prepared the way for God's coming in judgment by studying his law (so they understood the words "way of the Lord" in the Isaiah passage). This exodus of Essenes occurred, it appears, because of their dissatisfaction with the Jewish leadership--a dispute which involved several issues among which was the nature of the religious calendar that was to be followed in the temple. The various kinds of dating evidence cited above suggest that the departure occurred in the mid-second century BCE or a little later; the data indicate that occupation continues well into the first century CE (with perhaps one gap). It is often surmised that the scrolls were hidden in the caves just before Roman troops, who were defeating Jewish rebels between 66 and 70 CE, arrived and destroyed the communal center.

These texts from the Judea wilderness aroused great public and scholarly interest when they first became public knowledge in the late 1940s and early 1950s. They were the first texts from this
period to be discovered in Palestine; also, they exhibited, as many pointed out immediately, numerous points of agreement or similarity with what the New Testament divulged about the early Christians. Naturally, it was important that these fascinating Hebrew and Aramaic texts (with a few Greek ones) not only be made available for study and reflection but also be preserved for future consultation and admiration. Here an intriguing and little known story begins.

The scrolls would have to be worked on by experts, but they came to the hands of the scholars through different and at times unfortunate means. Of the major texts found in the first cave in 1947, three were purchased by Eleazar Sukenik of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1949 and the other four were bought by his son Yigael Yadin after he learned they had been advertised for sale in the Wall Street Journal on June 1, 1954. The advertisement, placed by Mar Athanasius Yeshue Samuel, a metropolitan of the Syrian Orthodox Church who had first obtained the scrolls through a complicated and confusing series of events, read as follows:

"THE FOUR DEAD SEA SCROLLS

Biblical manuscripts dating back to a least 200 BC are for sale. This would be an ideal gift to an educational or religious institution by an individual or group. Box F 206."

Through the agency of others, they were purchased for $250,000. Note that this did not happen until 1954. In the seven years since their discovery, little had been done to secure the scrolls and preserve them from deterioration. They had also been moved several times and changed hands often.

But these were only the largest, best preserved texts and they were published--sometimes simply as photographs with transcription--in short order. As noted earlier, most of the materials unearthed in the caves were badly fragmented and decayed. As the Ta’amireh tribesmen continued to find such bits and pieces of text, they were sold, through an antiquities dealer named Kando, to the Department of Antiquities for Transjordan and Arab Palestine whose director was G. Lankester Harding. Funds came from the Jordanian government and other institutions. The going price was set about $2.80 per square centimeter of written surface (F.M.
Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies*, 36). The texts were then deposited in the Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem—an institution which opened in 1938 and in which the Department of Antiquities had its offices. The museum operated under the directorship of an international board of trustees whose members came from people who represented the different archeological schools which were then in Jerusalem—British, American, French, and German. The fragments were removed from the museum to Amman during the Suez crisis in 1956 and not returned until the next year. In Amman they were kept in a bank vault. The museum was taken over by Israel in 1967 in connection with the Six Day War and renamed the Rockefeller Museum.

Most of the fragments which came to the museum were from the fabulously rich fourth cave discovered in 1952 only a short distance from the building ruins. These battered but important texts clearly could not be handled as easily and quickly as the larger, better preserved texts from cave 1. The solution adopted by the board of trustees in 1953 was to appoint a team of scholars who would work on the thousands of scraps with a view to publishing them in the reasonable future. This was an important move and one which led to some of the controversy which has surrounded the scrolls in recent years. The PAM board of trustees asked the foreign schools of archeology in Jerusalem to make nominations of scholars who would be qualified to do the work; those schools were also invited to support the cause. Eventually the team included eight scholars and was led by Father Roland de Vaux of the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem who happened to be the elected president of the board and the director of the Ecole. That is, just eight men were assigned what may be nearly 100,000 fragments, all of which had to be cleaned, arranged into documents on the basis of similar scripts and writing materials, photographed, deciphered, translated and published. One of the team members—F.M. Cross, who has just retired from Harvard but who was then on the faculty at the McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago—has left a description of the varied and painful labors these scholars faced:
Unlike the several scrolls of Caves I and XI which are preserved in good condition, with only minor lacunae, the manuscripts of Cave IV are in an advanced state of decay. Many fragments are so brittle or friable that they can scarcely be touched with a camel's-hair brush. Most are warped, crinkled, or shrunken, crusted with soil chemicals, blackened by moisture and age. The problems of cleaning, flattening, identifying, and piecing them together are formidable.

The fragments when they are purchased from tribesmen generally come in boxes; cigarette boxes, film boxes, or shoe boxes, depending on the size of the fragments. The precious leather and papyrus is delicately handled by rough Bedouin hands, for the value of the material is all too keenly appreciated. Often cotton wool or tissue paper has been used by Bedouin to separate and protect the scraps of scrolls; and on occasion they have applied bits of gummed paper to pieces which threatened to crack apart or disintegrate. Not since the clandestine digs of Cave I have owners broken up large sheets or columns to sell them piecemeal. (35)

The team of scholarly editors was supported by Rockefeller funds and was able to spend substantial amounts of time at the museum in the 1950s. During those years they made remarkable progress in their work. The extent of their progress on the fragments of Cave 4 (and on some other texts) can be gauged from the concordance which was prepared in the late 1950s. It includes all the words of the Cave 4 documents in their contexts. However, by other measures, their progress has appeared slow, even when allowance is made for the well night hopeless task which confronted them. There were some preliminary publications of individual Cave 4 texts during the 1950's, but in the official series Discoveries in the Golden Desert (Oxford University Press) the first volume of Cave 4 texts was not to appear until 1968, the second in 1977, and the only other one yet available in 1982 (each was completed, of course, some time before publication date). Why has it taken this long?

There are many explanations and excuses. Everyone admits that the task was immense and painstaking, and Jerusalem, since 1947, has not often qualified as an isolated, quite locale in which to pursue scholarship. During those decades the site where the scrolls
were found has witnessed three changes of government; the museum in which the fragments are housed has been transformed from a private to a Jordanian and then to an Israeli institution; war hit the region in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973; and tensions have often been high. Another factor which impeded progress is that Rockefeller money was not renewed after John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s death in 1960 with the result that most members of the editorial team were not able to spend as much time at the project in Jerusalem as they may have wished. They became involved in many other duties and projects which were a drain on their research time. I have also wondered whether the magnitude of the editorial work assigned to each of the eight did not soon become one of those proverbial albatrosses. In at least one case fire destroyed the files of a team member.

Judging from my memory of work on the scrolls, by the late 1960's the excitement had worn off, the public paid no more attention to them, and the scholarly world seemed to be patiently waiting for full publication of the remaining texts, many of which had already been described in survey articles and books written by members of the team. Scholars were accepting of the old academic practice which permitted the scholar assigned texts to be the first to publish an edition of them. I have been told by members of the team that the policy of the group was to provide information about the texts and even the texts themselves to qualified scholars who made application. And there are documented cases that this is precisely what happened. Thus, for example, biblical material was made available to groups who were producing new translations of the Bible (such as the NRSV); and I have located one incident in which J. T. Milik, who has been accused of failing to communicate at all about his material, conveyed information to another scholar who requested it.

More importantly, however, there were exceptions to such provision of access by the members of the team. The perception grew that this small group was tightly controlling the texts and not allowing them to see or use them until they finished their editions of them. These editions were slow in coming in part because they kept growing in size with the passage of years. Milik himself published a set of cave 4 texts in 1976 in a separate volume outside
the official series. The photographs of all the fragments published in it occupied 32 not very full page-sized plates, but his edition of them filled 439 pages. Production of such grand and comprehensive editions marked a major departure from the earlier practice of producing photos, transcriptions, translations, and a few notes.

All of this has changed in the last few years. Some scholars whose requests for access to unpublished texts were refused or ignored protested such treatment, and the popular Biblical Archaeology Review began to publicize to its huge readership the situation that had developed with the scrolls. Much of what happened subsequently you may have read on the front pages of your newspapers. A book entitled The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception (first published in Great Britain in 1991) charged that it was actually the Vatican which, through the historical continuation of what used to be called the Inquisition, controlled the Catholic-dominated editorial team and suppressed the unpublished texts because they supposedly contain information frightfully damaging to Christianity. This explains why the team did not publish its texts; it was not just academic slothfulness. As you might expect from the thesis, the book is a combination of fact and free flight of the imagination. In recent times, the Israeli authorities, under international pressure, have asserted greater control over the texts; the editorial team has been expanded from the original eight (and their immediate successors) to about 55 today--a total that includes for the first time many Israeli and other Jewish scholars; and photographs of almost all unpublished texts are now available to all, either through the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA, or through the two-volume facsimile edition published by the Biblical Archaeological society ($195). We are still witnessing occasional flurries of publicity about individual texts which people have spotted among the photographs and publicized. They usually involve a messiah or are assumed to involve one; they are then packaged in the media as great discoveries hitherto withheld from us. From the ones that I have see, one can learn either that the scholar in question has difficulty reading such texts or that they tell us pretty much what we already knew.

The obvious benefit of all the recent controversy--both its serious and silly sides--is that the texts are now available to anyone who wishes to use them. This is to be applauded, even if we continue
to experience cases in which scholars run to the media with poorly read or understood texts. Having more people work on the documents should yield an overall positive result, even if there are embarrassments from time to time. But good is also coming about in another way. As the controversy raged, two of the leading learned societies that are interested in research on the scrolls and other texts and artifacts from the Ancient Near East have named committees which have been commissioned to prepare statements about access to discovered materials so that, insofar as these societies are able to influence the policy of the owners of the materials in questions, the mistakes made with the Dead Sea Scrolls will not be repeated. One organization--the Society of Biblical Literature--has already adopted a statement, and the other--the American Schools of Oriental Research--is still studying the formulation of its policy. The SBL statement, whose wording suffers somewhat from the process of passing through several revisions and amendments, reads as follows:

The Society of Biblical Literature wishes to encourage prompt publication of ancient written materials and ready access to unpublished textual materials. In order to achieve these ends, the Society adopts the following guidelines.

1. **Recommendation to those who own or control ancient written materials:** Those who own or control ancient written materials should allow all scholars to have access to them. If the condition of the written materials requires that access to them be restricted, arrangements should be made for a facsimile reproduction that will be accessible to all scholars. Although the owners of those in control may choose to authorize one scholar or preferably a team of scholars to prepare an official edition of any given ancient written materials, such authorization should neither preclude access to the written materials by other scholars nor hinder other scholars from publishing their own studies, translations, or editions of the written materials.

2. **Obligations entailed by specially authorized editions:** Scholars who are given special authorization to work on official editions of ancient written materials should cooperate with the owners or those in control of the written materials to ensure publication of the edition in an expeditious manner, and they should facilitate access to the written materials by all
scholars. If the owners or those in control grant to specially authorized editors any privileges that are unavailable to other scholars, these privileges should by no means include exclusive access to the written materials or facsimile reproductions of them. Furthermore, the owners or those in control should set a reasonable deadline for completion of the envisioned editions (not more than five years after the special authorization is granted).

The Society mandated that this statement for its members and more widely to other learned groups.

Our learned organizations are not in a position to order any government or institution by their policy. But they do stand as a moral force composed of those people who are interested in preserving, studying, and maintaining access to texts of whatever age or value. Here they do have some strength. If enough societies took steps to establish policy and informed the relevant authorities, it might make a difference and encourage decision makers to pursue a line different from the one taken with the scrolls. Everyone recognizes that there were flaws in the way the process of their publication was arranged; but it now stands as a mistake from which all interested parties can learn an important lesson. Terrible mistakes were also made in the matter of properly securing the finds. Some attention was paid to this, and all the texts were photographed at an early date. But they have suffered since their discovery to a far greater degree than was necessary. At a time when the number of experts in the various fields has grown rather large, it is difficult to fathom how one could defend a policy of limiting access to unpublished texts to a small group of people for any length of time.

The policy adopted by SBL may not adequately address some difficulties that arise, especially financial problems. Will open access and freedom of publication make it more difficult to raise the funds necessary for research and preservation today? Why should one person go through the bother of raising funds and digging when her work is likely to be scooped by someone who happens to visit the right museum. Will owners agree to this? Or are these selfish concerns? Is anything essential lost if all are allowed such access? These are important queries and will no doubt continue to be
debated, but in general it seems greater good will come from openness and access than from denial of either.

—University of Notre Dame

ETHICS AND ACCESS: THE CASE OF THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

Michael O. Wise

As I am neither an archivist nor an ethicist, I am uneasy about addressing myself to a question that requires me to combine my ignorance of two disciplines. Furthermore, I am sensitive to both sides of the problem of access in the case of the Dead Sea Scrolls. To varying degrees I can sympathize with both of them. As I have been asked to address myself to the question of access from the perspective of those who formerly lacked it, however, I will endeavor to represent that case the best I can.

What have been the problems of access and its lack with respect to the Dead Sea Scrolls? I think these problems have been numerous and profound. Fundamentally, good scholarship in the field has suffered, perhaps irreparably—and good scholarship ought to be the foremost concern of all involved. How has it suffered? I could offer many answers to that question, but a few considerations must suffice. For one thing, scholarship on the scrolls has been deprived of the insights of two generations of great scholars who, given access to the scrolls, might well have advanced our knowledge far beyond where it now stands. Other scholars who might have become specialists in Qumran studies have instead turned to other fields where they might more reasonably hope to be on the cutting edge. The loss of these scholars to our field and related fields can never be made up. Scholars whose competence exceeds or compliments that of the original team members have been denied access, with the result that certain ideas have either become regnant when they ought not have, or have died abirthing when they should have attained a healthy maturity. Take a recent example: an Israeli specialist in ancient cursive scripts has