



The Great Isaiah Scroll, best preserved of the Biblical documents found in caves near the Dead Sea, contains the full 66 chapters of the Book of Isaiah.

Secrecy on Dead Sea Scrolls Hit

Official Scholars Stalling on Making Their Findings Public, Magazine Charges

By Nicolas B. Tatro
Associated Press

JERUSALEM—More than 40 years after being found in the Qumran caves, many of the Dead Sea Scrolls remain a mystery, largely because a small circle of scholars with exclusive access have failed to make their findings public, a Washington archaeology journal has charged.

Other scholars are clamoring to have a look, and Israeli authorities have laid down a deadline of 1996 to see all the documents in print.

"It's true that scholars have been dragging their feet for the past 40 years. It's an absolute scandal," said Magen Broshi, curator of the Shrine of the Book where about eight of the 800 scrolls are on permanent display.

The bimonthly Biblical Archaeology Review, published in Washington, has carried two articles questioning the delays and saying scholars were unfairly blocked from access to the original manuscripts and photographs.

Editor Hershel Shanks wrote that the team of scholars originally given exclusive rights to research by King Hussein of Jordan and later by the government of Israel "has now become more an obstacle to publication than a source of information."

Shanks called for opening the materials to research by "any scholar who so wishes."

One angry scholar is Robert Eisenman, professor of religion at California State University in Long Beach.

He said he was denied permission to conduct carbon-14 dating tests on the scrolls and was barred from looking for a Bible passage in Isaiah that he needed to support a theory.

"Manuscripts of crucial importance are jealously guarded by a small group of scholars," Eisenman said in a telephone interview. "We have research to do . . . and we are tired of waiting and want to know what's in the scrolls in our lifetime."

John Strugnell, a professor at Harvard University's Divinity School and the now editor-in-chief of the scroll project that involves

about 20 scholars, said he tries to accommodate as many outside requests as possible.

"My general inclination is to facilitate requests. But my problem is to get the scrolls published, not satisfy the vanities of particular scholars," said Strugnell, who is based in a chamber in a church at the French-run Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem.

Strugnell, who predicted the scroll project would be completed by the end of the century,

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noted a series of Greek papyri found in Egypt 100 years ago was still not fully published.

He demonstrated the difficulty of the work by displaying a photograph of a still-undeciphered manuscript in which tiny fragments of Hebrew letters dotted the plate.

"Maybe the one big mistake was deciding in the beginning to publish every detail," he said. Shanks said the 1996 target date set by Israel's Department of Antiquities was a "hoax and a fraud" because it did not say what would happen if scholars failed to meet deadlines.

But Amir Drori, the antiquities chief and a former army general, said he set up a program to require annual progress reports and got the scholars to agree on publishing all their finds in seven years.

To speed the process, he said scholars had been urged to share the workload with students and other researchers, and a special study program has been set up by Hebrew University for leading Bible scholars next fall.

A \$350,000 grant from an offshoot of the Wolfson Foundation also has been obtained.

"For the first time, we have a plan, and if someone does not complete his work on time we have the right to deliver the scrolls to someone else," said Drori, the former commander of troops in Lebanon during Israel's 1982-85 invasion.

Drori defended the decision to close the doors to some scholars, saying free access was unfair to those "who have devoted their life" to the research.

Drori was interviewed at his office in the Rockefeller Museum, where the leather parchment manuscripts are kept in air-conditioned aluminum boxes in the cellar.

The Review said some scroll fragments "are deteriorating so rapidly that if the outside world cannot see them soon, it may never be able to see them."

Broshi, who oversees conservation, dismissed the allegation as "absolute rubbish," adding that only about 1 percent of the manuscript collection had deteriorated beyond repair.

Other scholars with access to the scrolls put the figure as high as 5 percent but said the care is good.

Discovered by Bedouin nomads in the caves overlooking the Dead Sea in 1947, excavations uncovered the documents from 11 caves in a 10-year span.

The scrolls include some of the earliest copies of the books of the Bible as well as poetry and legal texts. Scholars say they provide an insight into the life of the ancient Essene sect of Jews as well as the roots of Christianity.

"The Dead Sea scrolls provide a missing link between Christianity and Judaism. They help us understand how Jesus arrived at some of the teachings he preached. Certainly there is a similarity between his teachings and this sect," said Rudolph Cohen, deputy director of the Rockefeller Museum.