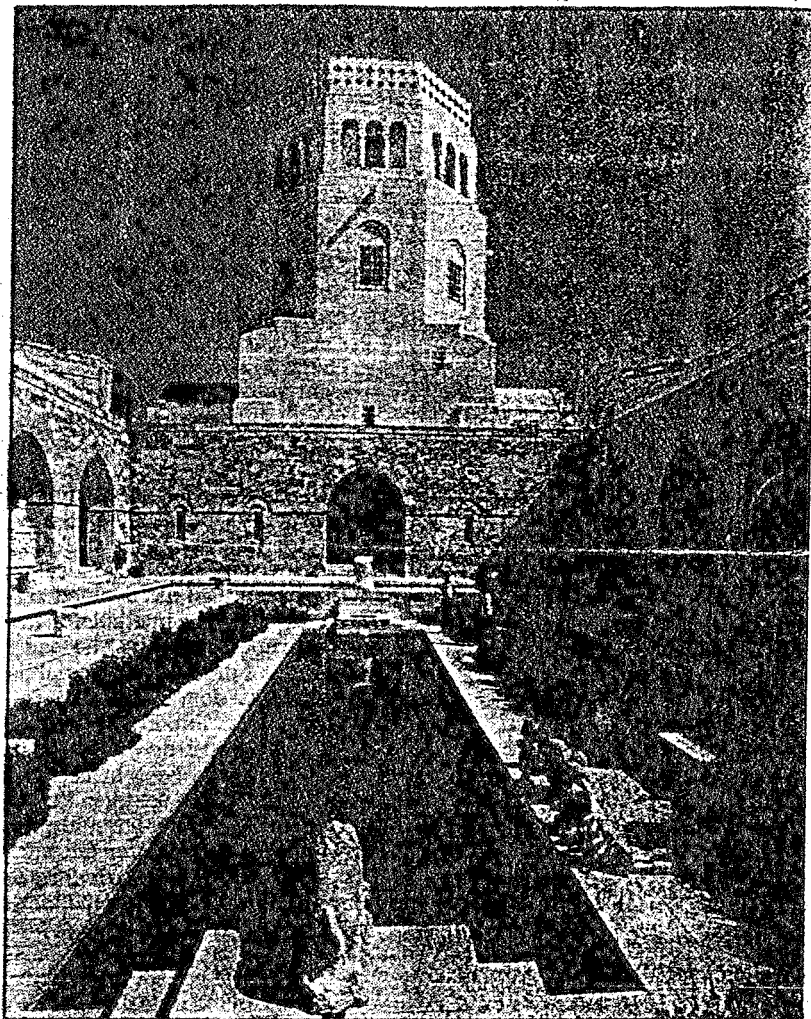


A rare example of parchment used for the Dead Sea Scrolls.



Scroll fragments are kept locked in Jerusalem's Rockefeller Museum. Photos courtesy of John Trever and Richard Nowitz

Dead Sea Scrolls: A scholarly duel unfurls

By Larry Witham
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A group of biblical scholars, unable for 30 years to see major parts of the Dead Sea Scrolls collection, is demanding that a select group of scholars and Israeli officials open it to wider scientific study.

A leading archaeology magazine has fired the most recent salvo in a drama that includes politics, academic rivalry and rumors of conspiracy to suppress some of the controversial documents.

The appeal is being made to Israel's Department of Antiquities, keeper of some 400 undisclosed documents, and a small circle of scholars who have controlled translation and publication of them since Jordan governed East Jerusalem before 1967.

"Biblical and related scholarship of the period is being impeded," says Herschel Shanks, editor of the Washington-based *Biblical Archaeology Review*, in an interview.

"While these scholars are working, they won't let anyone else see

the texts," he says. "That's the insidious thing."

Mr. Shanks, whose magazine has a circulation of 145,000, published a critical article Monday that, said, "the team of editors has now become more an obstacle to publication than a source of information."

Discovered in 1947 by Bedouins in caves near the Dead Sea, the scrolls are one of the most significant biblical finds of the century.

Five years of further discoveries

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The Washington Times, June 28, 1989.

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produced about 800 partial documents and a few full manuscripts. Dating roughly from the end of the second century B.C. to the first century A.D., the scrolls throw light on the time of Jesus, the context of early Christianity and Jewish life in Jerusalem before the city was destroyed by the Romans.

Most of the unpublished material, some 1,200 plates of scroll fragments, is locked in Jerusalem's Rockefeller Museum under government auspices.

Mr. Shanks writes that the government and a group of scholars have "joined the conspiracy of silence and obstruction." He says that a recent "Suggested Timetable" for the unseen works to be published by late 1997 is "a facade for further delay."

John Strugnell, a Harvard professor who is the project's chief editor, says in a telephone interview from Jerusalem that there is nothing unusual about the arrangements.

"We on our team have tried to give fairly wide access to the material," he says, noting that 15 to 30 years on a project is "quick" compared to those that have taken a century or more.

For Robert Eisenman, chairman of the Department of Religious Studies at California State University, Long Beach, it has not been fast enough. He and a British colleague filed a formal request with Israel's Department of Antiquities to gain access to the documents.

Access has been given only through a "back-room buddy system," he says, making a formal inquiry the first of its kind. If there is no response, "we might consider further legal avenues," he adds.

Scholars who seek access to the original Dead Sea Scroll material, or photographs of it, state various concerns:

■ Carbon dating has not been allowed to determine dates and chronology.

■ The scrolls are deteriorating.
■ Scholars who have not "discovered" ancient materials should not have lifetime control over them.

■ Documents published reflect biases of the translating scholar and are less reliable for research than originals.

■ Controversial "sectarian documents" among the scrolls continue to be the most closely guarded.

An example is the case of J.T. Milik, a former Roman Catholic priest in Paris, who for 30 years has controlled most of the so-called "Damasus Document" set. He has published little and refuses access.

"What we want to see is the Damasus Document," Mr. Eisenman says. The material traces historical roots of the Essene religious sect that produced material found in the caves.

The Dead Sea Scrolls include texts copied from the Hebrew Bible, commentaries, founding documents of the Essene sect and its "Rule of the Community" and revelatory and liturgical texts.

The Essenes lived in caves at a site now called Qumran, where they fled to retain a pure practice of Judaic law after they believed the ruling priests in Jerusalem had become corrupted.

The sect's copies of Genesis and Exodus showed it believed it was the last remnant to which God had revealed the true interpretation of the Mosaic law. The sect viewed the

world as separated between "the children of light and the children of darkness."

There has been scholarly speculation on the relationship of Jesus and early Christianity to the Essenes.

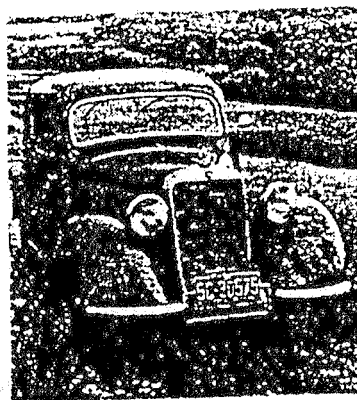
An appendix to the "Rule of the Community" mentions a sacred meal of bread and wine at which the Messiah of Israel, a royal figure, yields to the Messiah of Aaron, a priestly figure.

Mr. Strugnell says that when the remainder of the material is published it will yield more information. "New details will certainly modify our opinions" regarding the life and times of Jesus and the rabbinic period, he says. "I don't think it will overturn our basic opinions."

Meanwhile, the closed-door policy has prompted undocumented rumors. One holds that the Vatican cut a deal with the Israelis to suppress the documents as evidenced by the many Roman Catholic scholars who were given original control.

Another rumor asserts that the documents are being suppressed by the Israeli establishment because of their scathing criticism of the Pharisaic Judaism that governed Israel at that time.

"The secreting of the Dead Sea Scrolls for 35 years contrasts sharply with the treatment accorded other major inscriptional finds," Mr. Shanks concludes in his editorial.



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