

Dead Sea Scrolls

70 Years ago- in the winter of 1947 in the midst of the turmoil around Israel's Independence, the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls was found in a cave near Qumran. These fragments were sold to an antiquities dealer in Bethlehem. They included a section of the book of Isaiah and caused an immediate splash. Through the war and in the years immediately afterwards, more material was found. In the mid 1950's another large trove was discovered, and even this winter more fragments were brought to market – but in this case were not authenticated.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, was for the Jewish world ,archeology's greatest discovery, certainly since the Cairo Genizah 50 years earlier, and possibly of all time—though at first there was a great deal of debate as to what had been discovered and what it's importance was for the study of Judaism and Christianity.

The scrolls have subsequently been authenticated to the Inter-Testamental Period – a period for which previously scholars had been almost entirely dependent on later material – like the Gospels and Rabbinic literature – material which was not historical in nature.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have shed light on the process by which the Bible became the Bible and given us a new way of looking at the Jewish world in the late Second Temple period.

Because the Dead Sea Scrolls is such a huge topic, I am going to focus this morning on our own Reform movement's involvement and interest in the scrolls. I'm going to divide this into four chapters from the time of the discovery of the scrolls until today.

Initially, the Hebrew Union College had a close relationship to the Dead Sea Scrolls through Nelson Glueck, who was President of the college at the time.

Glueck was a prominent archeologist whose work had focused on Southern Israel and Jordan, giving him a deeper understanding than most of the context of this discovery from an archeological point of view.

In addition before coming to Hebrew Union College, he had been the head of the American School of Oriental Research (ASOR) in Jerusalem, the place where the discoveries were first brought. Glueck was part of the original authentication of the scrolls, he wrote about them publically in the New York Times, and in 1954 authorized Hebrew Union College Bible scholar Harry Orlinsky, my teacher at the

New York campus in 1980-1981, to participate in a clandestine scroll purchasing operation.

The scrolls were part of H.U.C.'s curriculum beginning in the 1950's, especially in comparing the Dead Sea Scrolls with the Masoretic text.

Now begins the second chapter – which I will call the eclipse of the scrolls.

Through the 1970's there remained active debate about the dating of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Today the academic consensus is that the scrolls date from the 3rd - 2nd century BCE through the 1st century CE. But in 1949, the very prominent American scholar Solomon Zeitlin attacked the scrolls as Medieval Karaite documents.

This argument influenced two prominent scholars at H.U.C. – Ellis Rivkin (for full disclosure, Michael's uncle) and Samuel Sandmel (for whom I house sat). From their arrival at H.U.C. in late 40's/early 50's and until the late 1980's very little was taught about the Dead Sea Scrolls at H.U.C. and thus two generations of American rabbis barely learned about them.

This brings us to the third and most exciting chapter of the relationship of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Reform movement. To understand its importance, you have to understand that until 1991, most scholars did not have access to the Dead

Sea Scrolls. A few institutions tightly controlled the scrolls and access was not routinely granted, even to well established scholars working in directly related fields. That this changed in 1991 is directly related to the work of one scholar, Ben Zion Wacholder, (for the sake of full disclosure, father of my friends from Habonim), and his wife, Toby Wacholder, (my mother's friend, who gave me my first tallit). Ben Zion Wacholder had been an illui, a brilliant young Talmud student, in the years before World War II. During the war he survived by pretending to be a Polish peasant. Since his speech would give him away, he pretended to be a deaf mute and succeeded in not responding to sound, by focusing in his mind on the texts he knew so well. He ended up at H.U.C. in Los Angeles in a menial job in the library, until his background and brilliance was recognized. He was my teacher and original thesis advisor.

In 1987, through a taxi ride he took with a Harvard professor at a conference, Dr. Wacholder gained access to a concordance of the Dead Sea Scrolls. I can just imagine the conversation. He was so unassuming and would seem stumbling – I'm sure the professor thought, "Sure I'll give him the concordance note cards. What harm could that do?"

Using a rudimentary understanding of computer capabilities at the time, Wacholder and a team of graduate assistants reverse engineered the creation of the complete text – a Silicon Valley type achievement. What they published in 1991 turned out to be 97% accurate and it forced other institutions to loosen their hold on the documents, such that later that year a full set of photocopies were released.

Finally, the last chapter in our little history – the impact of the Dead Sea Scrolls on Reform Judaism today. Most importantly, the Dead Sea Scrolls have led scholars to speak about Judaisms, rather than Judaism. That process had already begun as the documents found in the Cairo Genizah were studied and published, but the Dead Sea Scrolls also contributed in a major way to breaking down the old vision of a monolithic Judaism in ancient times. The non-Biblical texts that were part of the Dead Sea Scrolls and especially the Pesharim books of commentaries and midrashim, as well as use of non-Biblical books like Jubilees and Ben Sira as authoritative texts, opened up for us a very different vision of 2nd Temple Judaism.

The varieties of Jewish religious thought and practice in ancient times also strengthened the Reform movement's sense of its own authenticity. For

Interfaith relations, the Dead Sea Scrolls pointed to a greater debt of Christianity to Judaism than had previously been recognized and this played a role in opening up Jewish Christian relations.

The “new compositions” of the Qumran community – like their Psalms around the themes of the 23rd Psalm, also played a role in contemporary Reform thinking about liturgy. It was argued that our own “riff’s” as it were on classical material, equally had a place in the ongoing story of Judaism. Working on models from the Dead Sea Scrolls, and sometimes even quoting from the scrolls themselves, has become part of contemporary Reform culture as evidenced in Mishkan Tefillah and Mishkan HaNefesh.

On that note I will close with one of the most often cited pieces of Dead Sea Scroll literature – a version of the Priestly Blessing.

May God bless you with all that is good and protect you from all that is evil.

May God illumine your heart with the life-giving wisdom and grant you knowledge of those things that are eternal.

May God’s love and kindness extend to you so that you always have peace.

May it be so.

For a fuller exposition of some of this material see “How the Dead Sea Scrolls Influenced Reform Judaism” by Richard Freund in the American Jewish Archives Journal