

The Story of the Dead Sea Scrolls

Back in the mid-1950s, while attending the Seminary, the present writer heard one of our leading evangelists tell how the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Two small boys were out tending their sheep, but they had one sheep which would not obey them. So one of the youths threw a stone to get it to go in the right direction—and the stone went into a hole, and he heard something shatter. Peering into the hole, they found the scrolls.

What was found that day was later hailed by scholars throughout the world as the greatest Bible manuscript discovery in history.

Gradually, as a result of many interviews with everyone named in this account, the full—and correct—story emerged. The finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls is a fascinating story.

(Throughout this story, a name of a person is placed in bold print, when it is first used.)

About 800 years before Christ's birth, Jehoshaphat or Uzziah had established a military outpost (called *'Ir Hammelach*; "City of Salt") on a tableland overlooking the Dead Sea. It included a large, round cistern. Two hundred years later, the outpost was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's army (587 B.C.).

About 125 B.C., a religious community was founded on the site by what is generally believed to be, Essene Jews. It was called Qumran. About 25 years later, Qumran was greatly enlarged, as more members moved in.

Although an earthquake destroyed much of Qumran about 35 B.C., it was rebuilt about the year that Jesus was born (4 B.C.). Many manuscript scrolls were prepared and stored in the buildings. But, when the Jewish War (A.D. 66-70) began, a number of the scrolls were cached in caves throughout the area for safekeeping.

After the destruction of Qumran by the Romans in A.D. 68, the Jews never returned to recover the rolled-up manuscripts from those caves.

Slowly, the centuries passed.

But, at this point, we need to consider the layout of the land. In the mid-1940s, a resort opened at Kallia, about six miles southwest of Jericho. Many tourists went there to bathe in the mineral waters of the Dead Sea.

From Kallia a broad, barren plain stretches for two-and-a-half miles westward to sheer cliffs which mark the eastern edge of the rugged Judean wilderness. Six miles to the south, the rapidly narrowing plain comes to a sharp point where the cliffs drop down at Ras Feshkha. The broad expanse of the Dead Sea is to the east of this entire area.

Less than a mile north of Ras Feshkha, is 'Ain Feshkha (Feshkha Spring). This is a copious spring of warm water. Around it grows an abundance of reeds and grasses. Shepherds come here to water their sheep.

From 'Ain Feshkha, a well-worn path winds up the steep slopes on the broad Buqei'a plateau of the eastern Judean wilderness. This area is thought to be the ancient Valley of Achor (Joshua 7:24-26).

From here the path continues to rise, as it winds westward through dry creeks (*wadis*) and finally crosses the "Shepherds' field" where, centuries earlier, shepherds heard the angels singing. The path ends at Bethlehem.

When Naomi journeyed to Moab and returned with Ruth, she took that path. David later sent his parents to Moab along the same route. Amos lived in Tekoa, not far from that path.

For almost three centuries, this wilderness area, eastward of Bethlehem, has been the home of the Ta'amireh, a tribe of Bedouin Arabs. They have roamed that area, and have watered their sheep and goats at 'Ain Feshkha.

In November or December of 1946, three Ta'amireh Bedouins descended with their flocks of sheep and goats toward 'Ain Feshkha. They were searching for forage for their animals; but one of the Arabs was also watching for something else.

The two older herdsmen were **Khalil Musa** and his younger cousin, **Jum'a**

Muhammed Khalil. They were in their mid-twenties. The youngest of the three was their teenage cousin, Muhammed Ahmed el-Hamed. His nickname was **Edh-Dhib** ("Son of the Wolf"), because of the fierce nature of his father.

Jum'a liked to explore caves, and believed that someday he might find gold stashed in one of them from ancient times. Often, while tending the flocks, he would explore the rocky crags nearby.

On this day, looking up at the rocks, Jum'a noticed two holes in the cliff. The lower hole, according to Jum'a, was barely big enough "for a cat to enter." But the upper one had an entrance that a small man could crawl into.

Throwing a rock into the lower hole, he heard something shatter! What could that be? Gold, he hoped. Quickly, he called the other two herdsmen and showed them the holes. But, by now, it was almost dark; and tomorrow they must spend the day watering their flock at 'Ain Feshkha. It was agreed that they would return to the hole two days later.

But, on that third day, just as the sun was rising and his friends were still sleeping, Edh-Dhib, the teenager, quietly arose and went to that hole. Carefully, he climbed up and eased himself down into the larger hole. As his eyes became accustomed to the dimness, he saw about ten tall jars standing by the walls of the cave. Several had covers. It seems that rocks had fallen from the ceiling at some earlier time (probably caused by earthquakes), which probably had produced the broken pottery on the floor.

The Bedouins later claimed that all but two of the jars were empty. (Some of their reports were conflicting; so it is difficult to have certainty in this situation.) One pot had reddish dirt in it; and the other, with a cover, contained three scrolls. Two were wrapped in nearly rotted cloth; and the third, much larger, had no outer wrapping.

When Edh-Dhib took the three scrolls from the cave that morning, and showed them to his friends, they were angry and feared he might be hiding gold which he had also found. From

2 that time on, the two men distrusted Edh-Dhib, and no longer does he appear to have played a part in the scrolls.

When, several days later, one of Jum'a's five sons arrived to help with the flock, Jum'a left and took the scrolls to his home at the Ta'amireh community, southeast of Bethlehem. For several weeks, the manuscripts hung in a bag on a tent pole. Two jars were also brought back and set beside the tent. Along about this time, the cover of the jar which had held the scrolls was destroyed. It is also likely that one of the three scrolls was broken in two parts at the same time.

Well, that is how the scrolls were found, and we should stop here. But you probably want to know what happened next.

It is one thing to make the most important Bible manuscript discovery of history (the largest of the three scrolls was the now-famous Isaiah scroll), but it is quite another thing to find anyone interested in purchasing it.

During March 1947, Jum'a and Khalil Musa took the three manuscripts and two jars, and showed them to a carpenter in Bethlehem, by the name of **Ibrahim 'Ijha**. He told them he would see if they could be sold. So, when not busy making ax and hoe handles from walnut branches, he showed the scrolls to **Faidi Salahi**. Upon seeing them, he told 'Ijha they had probably been stolen from a Jewish synagogue, and he had better have nothing to do with the Bedouins. The manuscripts were in such excellent condition, Salahi could not believe they were ancient.

The next time Jum'a stopped by, 'Ijha pushed the priceless scrolls into his arms and told him to take them back; he wanted nothing to do with them. But he was willing to keep the jars and see if he could find a buyer.

Carrying the scrolls to the marketplace in Bethlehem, Jum'a found another man who had earlier helped the Arabs sell ancient objects they found in the desert. For a living, **George Isha'ya Shamoun** sold *abayahs* (cloak-like outer garments) to the Bedouins. As they talked together about the scrolls, a third man walked up and suggested they take them to Khalil Eskander Shahin (nicknamed **Kando**). Kando was a shoemaker who

worked near Manger Square in Bethlehem.

It was agreed that, if the scrolls could be sold, Kando and Isha'ya would get one-third and the Bedouins would receive two-thirds of any money received. So the scrolls were left with Kando.

During the week of April 7-13, 1947, Isha'ya contacted St. Mark's Syrian Orthodox Monastery in Jerusalem and told them he had some old manuscript scrolls. The **Metropolitan Athanasius Y. Samuel**, head of the monastery, told them to bring the scrolls over. When he saw them, he decided to buy them, but Isha'ya and Kando continued looking for buyers who would offer more, but found none.

During that time, Isha'ya persuaded the Bedouins, Jum'a and Khalil Musa, to take him to the cave, which they did. Several weeks later, Jum'a met Isha'ya and Khalil Musa in the Bethlehem marketplace—and they were carrying two more scrolls, which they told him they had found in the dirt of the floor of that same cave. (They later told investigators that they had found four scrolls, not two. Kando agreed that they brought four more scrolls to him to sell.)

While trying to find a buyer for the latest scroll find, a scroll dealer in Jaffa said he would stop by and look at them—but he never appeared. Finally, three of the four scrolls were sold to Faidi Salahi (who earlier said he was afraid of them) for \$28.35. He also bought the two jars for 80 cents each. About five months later, after many disappointments, those scrolls were sold to **Dr. E.L. Sukenik** of the Hebrew University, on November 29, 1947.

But what had happened to the first three scrolls, which included the large Isaiah scroll?

Metropolitan Samuel wanted those scrolls badly, but tried to hide his interest so he would not have to pay very much. He told the Arabs to come to the monastery on Saturday, July 5, 1947. But, when the three Arabs (Isha'ya, Jum'a, and Khalil) arrived at the monastery door, a priest named **Blos Gilf** refused to let them in. Surely, he thought, the metropolitan did not want to see these Arabs with their dirty bag and foul-smelling scrolls inside! The Arabs pleaded with him, but he

refused to let them in.

The Metropolitan Samuel did not hear about it for hours; and, when he did, he immediately telephoned Kando in Bethlehem. Kando told him that, while the three Arabs were leaving Jerusalem, they met a Jewish antiquities dealer who, when he saw the scrolls, offered to buy them if they would follow him to their shop.

But Isha'ya warned the two Bedouins that they should not go with the man, since it was probably a trick to turn them over to government authorities, who would arrest and jail them. So they all fled to Bethlehem.

Immediately, on the phone, Samuel told Kando to pay them "a good price" for the scrolls; which he did the next time they stopped by (on July 19, 1947). The three scrolls were sold to the Metropolitan Samuel for \$97.20, of which \$64.80 was paid to the two Bedouins. (All amounts were paid in Palestinian pounds, but are here quoted in what that amounted to in American dollars at the time.)

So Jum'a, who had been searching for gold for years and was responsible for finding the first scrolls, received \$32.40 for his trouble. Those scrolls are today worth millions.

Well, that is the story of how the manuscripts, found in that Dead Sea's cave, were sold. But what happened next?

The rest of the story is just as interesting. Very briefly, here is what happened:

As soon as he owned them, Metropolitan Samuel, the head of the Syrian community in Jerusalem, wanted to get as much money for himself as possible out of the sale of those manuscripts. He felt certain they must be very ancient.

Samuel contacted one of his church members, an Arabist who could not read Hebrew, who looked over the scrolls and told the metropolitan they were "not worth a shilling."

Samuel then contacted an Arabic teacher at the Dominican Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem, who also did not read Hebrew. Glancing over the scrolls, he said they were only a few centuries old and worth little.

Samuel then showed them to a well-known Old Testament scholar, **J. van der Ploeg**, who said the largest

one contained the book of Isaiah but laughed at the suggestion that they might be ancient. That same evening, van der Ploeg told another famed Bible scholar, **L.H. Vincent**, about them; and he launched into a lecture on the dangers of forgeries, which left van der Ploeg shaken and determined to have nothing more to do with Samuel's scrolls.

Among the buildings, which the monastery owned, was a clinic rented by a Jewish physician, Dr. Brown. So Samuel showed the scrolls to him. He said he would have to consult an expert. But Brown waited two weeks; and, by that time, Samuel was away on a trip. Brown also contacted a Jewish antiquities dealer (a **Mr. Sassun**) who later told Samuel to cut off some pieces from the scrolls and send them to the universities in America to examine; then he would find what they were worth. But Samuel would not do that.

The wealthiest man in Metropolitan Samuel's Jerusalem congregation, **Anton Kiraz**, was a close friend. Kiraz owned a used car lot and a fleet of taxis. Kiraz had consistently been a faithful friend to Samuel, when other members of his congregation had forsaken the metropolitan because of certain financial dealings he had been involved in.

Late in August, Samuel confided in Kiraz about some of his personal financial problems. When Kiraz mentioned that he was about to leave for a vacation trip to Lebanon and Syria, Samuel asked him to wait until after the Feast of St. Mary on August 28, so he could accompany him on the trip. Samuel hoped that, up north, he might learn more about the value of his scrolls or find a wealthy buyer.

Taking the scrolls with him, the two headed north. In Homs, Syria, Samuel counseled with several friends, including **Aphram I.**, who was Patriarch of Antioch. But, not thinking they were more than three hundred years old, Aphram counseled Samuel to talk to the professor of Hebrew at the American University in Beirut. On September 22, he went there; but he found that the professor was on vacation. So Samuel returned to Jerusalem on the 26th.

About October 1, Samuel phoned Kiraz and said he needed to see him urgently. On arrival, Kiraz learned that

Samuel's finances were at a crisis point, so Kiraz offered to give him some money and become "partners" with him in the ownership of the scrolls. Samuel accepted the money. It was agreed they would split the profits, when the scrolls were eventually sold. The next day, the metropolitan called him in again and begged for more money, which he gave him. He assured Samuel he would solve the metropolitan's problem, even if he had to mortgage his home to do it. Gradually, in the coming months, he poured more money into Samuel's pocket.

From then on, Kiraz worked earnestly to interest others in the scrolls; and he would mention that he had to consult his "partner" before he could sell them.

But Samuel later said that no such partnership arrangement had ever existed.

At about the same time, Sassun offered him \$405 for the scrolls, but Samuel turned him down. He wanted much more money than that for them.

Samuel then borrowed some Hebrew grammar books from **Hanna Stephen** at the Palestine Archeological Museum, so he could try to figure out how much the scrolls were worth. Not knowing anything about Hebrew, he accomplished little. But this aroused Mr. Stephen's interest; and, several days later, he brought over an expert in Jewish antiquities, **Tovia Wechsler**. After examining them, he decided they appeared in too good a condition to be ancient. When Samuel said he was sure they were very ancient, Wechsler, who had some acquaintance with ancient manuscripts, laughingly said something which made a very deep impression on Samuel:

"If that table were a box and you filled it full of pound notes, you couldn't even then measure the value of these scrolls if they were two thousand years old, as you say."

At about the same time (November 1947), Dr. E.L. Sukenik, Professor of Archaeology at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, was able to purchase several other scrolls from Kando. They were invaluable; but none were the equal of Samuel's large Isaiah scroll.

Sukenik was the first of the many "experts" who had examined those ancient scrolls to recognize something very special about them: *They were all written in a style of Hebrew which*

was very strange.

Quite by accident one day in early December, Sukenik mentioned the scrolls to one of his librarians. That librarian had earlier stopped in at the Syrian monastery and had been shown Samuel's scrolls. So he mentioned it to Sukenik, who immediately tried to make contact with Samuel. But, by December, it was becoming increasingly difficult for Jews to contact Arabs or Syrian Christians.

You see, all of Palestine was on the verge of civil war! The British mandate (governorship) of Palestine was to end on May 15, 1947; and both the Arabs and the Jews were getting ready for a fierce battle for the control of Jerusalem and the surrounding territory.

In January 1948, it was suggested that Kiraz try to get Dr. Sukenik, of the Hebrew University, to evaluate their importance. Taking the scrolls home, he wrote a letter to Sukenik, which took three days to reach his office, a mile to the west.

Upon receiving it, Sukenik immediately responded; and it was agreed they would meet at the YMCA, in neutral territory in Jerusalem, on February 4, 1948.

Fearful of his safety, Sukenik was relieved to arrive there safely. Upon looking at them, he quickly recognized that these scrolls had the same ancient script pattern as the few he had already purchased at a low price from Kando. Sukenik was consistently the first to recognize the antiquity of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

After a two-day delay, to give Kiraz time to discuss Sukenik's offers with his "partner," the two met again on the 6th and Sukenik offered him \$2,025 (500 Palestinian pounds) for the three scrolls. He also confidentially offered Kiraz another 500 pounds, if he, Kiraz, would talk his partner into accepting it. (If Kiraz could have foreseen the future, he would have gotten Samuel to sell them.)

Returning, Kiraz told Samuel all that happened. He then counseled with his leading adviser, **Butrus Sowmy**, a monk at the monastery. Sowmy, who had just returned from a trip, was deeply upset and told Samuel the Jews were not to be trusted. So Samuel had no more dealings with Sukenik and refused to return his phone calls, made throughout March and April.

At this point, Sowmy phoned the

4 bishop of St. George's Christian Cathedral, and was told about the **ASOR** (American Schools of Oriental Research) office just north of Jerusalem.

On February 18, Sowmy phoned the ASOR, inquiring if someone there might be able to help them learn the value of their scrolls.

Dr. John C. Trever, a young scholar studying at the ASOR that year, answered the phone; and events began to change in two ways.

First, Trever was an expert photographer who had used that hobby to help pay his way through school.

He was quick to ask Samuel to let him photograph the scrolls, so the scholarly world would learn about them. He said that would increase their value. Samuel liked that idea!

Immediately, he set to work to photograph the scrolls with color film. This was a difficult task, as well as all his contacts with the monastery; since, throughout the area, sniper fire and bombing kept increasing.

Second, Trever and his co-worker, **Dr. W.H. Brownlee**, immediately set to work to figure out the dating of the scrolls *by the style of their lettering* (paleography). This was what should have been done all along. They were startled to discover that the Isaiah scroll matched the Hebrew letters in the Nash papyrus, a fragment which dated from 200 B.C.! Only containing the Ten Commandments and Deuteronomy 6:4, it appeared to be the oldest Hebrew manuscript in existence. On February 26, Trever wrote a note to **William Albright**, the world's leading Old Testament scholar, and included photographs of several pages of the Isaiah Scroll.

On March 15, they received his reply that it was, indeed, the greatest manuscript discovery in history.

But, fearful that Samuel would not let them complete their photography of the scrolls, Trever did not disclose this fact to the metropolitan until March 18, 1948. At that time, because the war was intensifying, Trever warned Samuel to hide the scrolls in a safe place. On March 25, Sowmy took them to Beirut.

Events occurred quickly after that. On April 5, Trever flew out of Pales-

tine, just before the war began in earnest. On April 11, the first news release about the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls appeared in the world's press. On May 15, the British mandate ended. England wanted the city internationalized, but the Jews fought fiercely for control. In the ensuing battles, the Syrian monastery was seriously damaged and Sowmy was killed. Only two days before, Kiraz drove to Syria. He had lost all his possessions, except the one car he drove.

During the brief truce in August, the Bedouins went back to the cave and recovered more manuscripts. Still more were found in November.

On January 29, 1949, the Metropolitan Samuel arrived in New York City and placed the scrolls in a bank vault. He immediately began searching for a buyer with deep pockets.

On February 18 through March 5, Cave 1 (that first cave) was excavated by Westerners. Fragments of about 70 scrolls were found in it, along with pieces of 50 different pottery jars and covers.

From November 24 to December 12, 1951, the first season of excavation at Khirbet Qumran began. Located close to Cave 1, it was the Essene center, where the scrolls had been made.

Soon the Bedouins were finding more caves; and, in the dark of the night, they emptied them of most of their scrolls. Then Westerners located the pilfered caves. Eventually, eleven caves were found.

In Cave 3, the "Copper Scroll" was found; but no one knew how to unroll it. In Cave 4, 40,000 fragments of about 100 manuscripts were recovered, including parts of 400 different manuscripts. Over 100 of these manuscripts were Biblical.

Back in the United States, Metropolitan Samuel was a hard man to deal with. He refused permission to copy more of his scrolls, and wanted top prices for them all. But everyone was hesitant to purchase them; since the State of Israel was attempting to block their sale, stating that it was their property. Finally on July 1, 1954, through a third person (**Yigael Yadin**, son of the late Sukenik), the State of Israel bought his scrolls—including the

Isaiah Scroll—for \$250,000. They are now housed in a special building in Jerusalem.

But Kiraz received none of the quarter of a million dollars. Although, impoverished by the Palestinian War and forsaken by Samuel, he lay sick in Beirut.

On June 1, 1956, the contents of the Copper Scroll were announced: They consisted of a list of locations where fabulous gold and silver treasures were located throughout Palestine! But no one was ever able to find them. (You will find the list, and John Allegro's attempt to locate the treasure, in his book, *The Treasure of the Copper Scroll*.)

So that, in brief, is the story of the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The reason they are so important is that, before they were found, nearly all the oldest Old Testament manuscripts we had dated were from about A.D. 700. But the Dead Sea Scrolls take us back to about 150-200 B.C. In addition, none had ever been found in Palestine before the tenth century A.D. Critics scornfully suggested that no one could really know what the Old Testament books were like because they were written so long ago, before our oldest manuscripts. But the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls put all that to rest. It was discovered that the same information in your, and my, Old Testament is what is to be found in the Dead Sea copies of those books.

Among the total Dead Sea Scrolls and fragments, there were more than 125 Old Testament manuscripts, including parts of every book, except Esther, have been found. They range in date from about 250 B.C. to about A.D. 68. Some are, therefore, more than a thousand years older than previously known documents in Biblical Hebrew. Non-Biblical materials spanned from 375 B.C. to A.D. 135. More than 500 different script types have been identified.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have provided a powerful vindication of the truth of the Old Testament Scriptures.

This great flood of manuscript discoveries constitutes yet another indication that we live in the last days.

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