

FIRST WORDS OF THE OLDEST STORY

On display at the public museum, the Dead Sea Scrolls were one of the century's most important theological discoveries

BY *Liz Rhodebeck*

*History comes alive at the Milwaukee Public Museum's new exhibition **Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible: Ancient Artifacts, Timeless Treasures**, which runs through early June. With more than 200 artifacts, including eleven portions of the famed Dead Sea Scrolls, the show is causing much anticipation among people of faith and students of the past.*



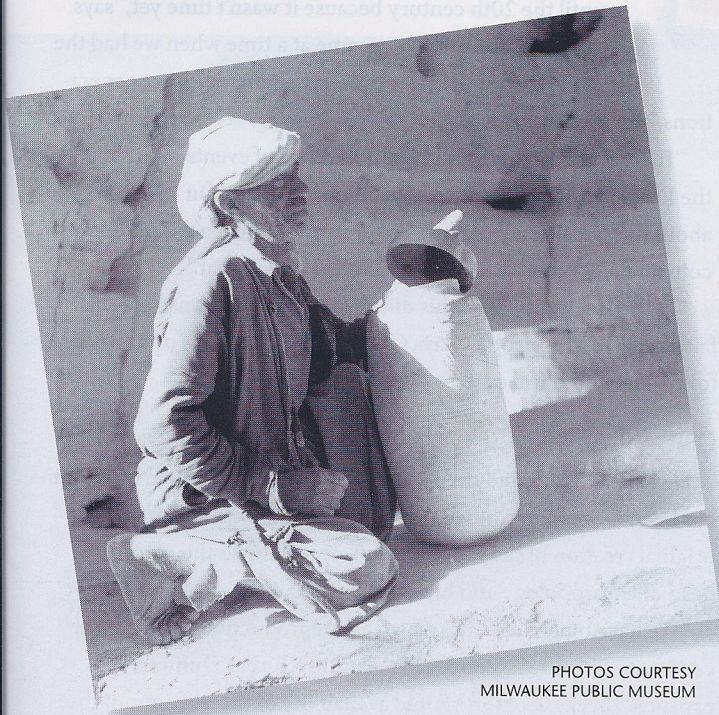
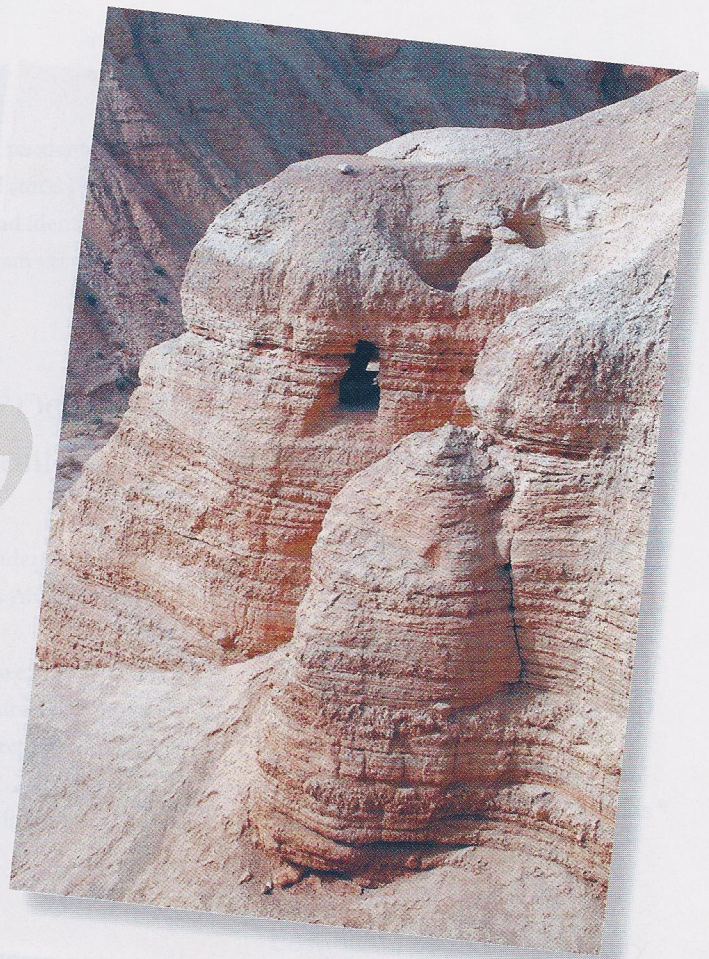
Discovered by a young Bedouin shepherd in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls, which date from 300 B.C. to 70 A.D., are the oldest known manuscripts of the Bible. More than 100,000 fragments were found preserved in 11 caves near Khirbet Qumran, Israel, on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. The scrolls are parchment, papyrus and copper plates and include portions of all but two books of the Hebrew Torah (the biblical Old Testament), along with hymns, prayers and other religious writings.

The scrolls predate our best biblical manuscripts by 1,000 years.

“There’s no question that the Dead Sea Scrolls are the greatest archeological find of the 20th century,” says the Rev. Tim Johnson, associate professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Nashotah House Seminary in Nashotah. “The scrolls predate our best biblical manuscripts by 1,000 years.”

BONDS ACROSS THE AGES

Prior to the scrolls’ discovery, the oldest-known copy of the Bible in Hebrew was the Masoretic text, dating from the tenth century A.D. Edited by Jewish scholars of the era, the Masoretic text has



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MILWAUKEE PUBLIC MUSEUM

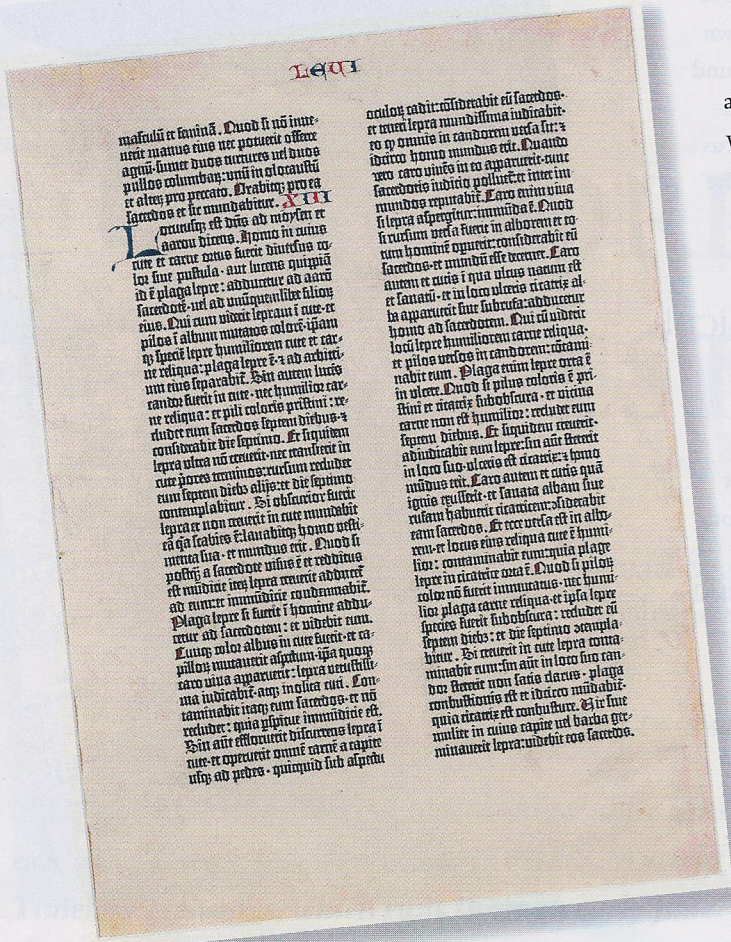
ANCIENT HISTORY Preserved in clay jars hidden in caves, the Dead Sea Scrolls were first uncovered in 1947 by Bedouins. The museum exhibit contains a replica of the caves.

been the standard for all translations of the Old Testament since then. The Dead Sea Scrolls, written in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, shed light on the accuracy of those later scriptural documents, as well as give a historical sense of the times.

“The Dead Sea Scrolls are fascinating from both a historical and theological perspective,” says the Rev. Robert Drutowski of Queen of Apostles Catholic Church in Pewaukee. “They enhance our knowledge of the history of the Jewish people.”

The Dead Sea Scrolls represent a link to faith for both Jews and Christians. Scholars have studied the scrolls for over fifty years, comparing them to other biblical texts that have been passed down through the centuries. What they’ve found is that more recent copies of biblical texts have been, by and large, accurate—remarkable since the texts were copied by hand for more than a thousand years.

“Seeing the ancient Dead Sea Scrolls shows that the biblical text used today is the same text we thought it was—that’s powerful,” comments Rabbi Steve Adams of Congregation Emanu-El in Waukesha. “Also, seeing that the scrolls [of the Bible] we use now in Shabbat services are written the same way they were thousands of years ago—that is, handwritten on parchment—adds legitimacy to what we are doing every week.”



IN PRINT *The Gutenberg Bible was the one of the first books printed, in the 15th century. The exhibit explores the transmission of biblical text over 2,000 years.*

Johnson concurs: “The Dead Sea Scrolls confirm that the [Jewish] scribes were faithful in their copying throughout the centuries, especially the Great Isaiah Scroll. It gives confidence to both Jews and Christians in the accuracy of the Scriptures today.”

“I think the Dead Sea Scrolls attest to the historicity of Bible,” says the Rev. Scott Grabendike of Westbrook Church in Hartland. “They give objective credibility as to the accuracy of the Bible, and demonstrate we are connected to something larger than ourselves.”

COMMUNAL LIFE

Along with the biblical texts, which include an almost-complete, 24-foot-long scroll of the book of Isaiah, referred to as the “Great Isaiah Scroll,” the Dead Sea Scrolls include documents that delineate the beliefs and rules of a communal group believed to be the Essenes, a pietistic, separatist group of Jews.

Excavation in the Khirbet Qumran region near the caves where the scrolls were discovered has revealed a structure that many

archeologists think could have been the communal complex where the Essenes lived. It is theorized that they were the ones who preserved the scrolls in the caves.

“There was a lot of turmoil going on at the time of this Essene community, with the Roman Empire’s destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.,” explains Adams. “The Essene group who escaped was trying to preserve their past and their faith; it helps us as Jews understand who we are today.”

“The Qumran community was very disciplined and prepared for the battle of good and evil,” says Drutowski. “They are an encouragement of our own renewal as spiritual people. I think the information helps us understand the cultural world Jesus lived in, and how people may have interpreted the ministry of John the Baptist, who also was an ascetic.”

DIALOG OF DISCOVERY

The unlikely way in which the scrolls were discovered, along with their incredible preservation for 2,000 years, has suggested divine intervention to some.

“I think the Dead Sea Scrolls weren’t discovered until the 20th century because it wasn’t time yet,” says Adams. “The discovery came at a time when we had the technology to properly preserve them for future genera-

tions,” he adds.

“There was an extraordinary convergence of events of finding the Dead Sea Scrolls and Israel becoming a nation [in 1948] at about the same time,” comments Johnson. “It doesn’t seem like a coincidence—it’s not hard to see God’s hand in that.”

“I feel God was behind this discovery, and it demonstrates his faithfulness to his people,” says Grabendike. “It creates opportunity for dialog on biblical criticism and within the culture.”

ONE-OF-A-KIND SHOW

Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible at the Milwaukee Public Museum has been more than two years in the planning, with much of it the original creation of the museum staff, according to the museum’s head of anthropology and history, Carter Lupton.

“We have built elements—such as a reproduction of one of the caves—to give a real sense of the place in Khirbet Qumran,” he explains. “Because of the limited availability of the portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls, every ‘show’ of them is different, even if you’ve seen the Dead Sea Scrolls somewhere else. For example, our exhibit does not include any of the scrolls from the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, where most of the documents are housed.”

That's fine with Riva Merkow, who saw the scrolls in Israel in 1961. A resident of Beaver Lake in Chenequa, Riva has been a member of Congregation Emanu-El since 1964.

"Visiting Israel and seeing the Dead Sea Scrolls confirmed my faith and identity as a Jew," she recalls. "I am very excited to see this exhibit again; at 86 years old, I am very particular about when and where I go out, but I will definitely see this."

In addition to the Dead Sea Scrolls themselves, the exhibit also includes a display of historical Bibles, many of them from local sources.

"We have the whole Torah from the Masoretic text of the 10th century on loan from the British Library, as well as a page from the 1450 Gutenberg Bible," says Lupton. The exhibit concludes with a portion of Saint John's Bible, a modern handwritten, illuminated Bible being created by Benedictine monks from Saint John's Abbey in Minnesota and Donald Jackson, a world-renowned calligrapher from Wales.

As an enrichment to their faith, many churches are planning to see the exhibit as a group.

"It's my hope that people view the Dead Sea Scrolls not only as a cultural experience, but have eyes to appreciate the history of the texts, and the kind of faith expressed and the impact this has on the development of faith," says Drutowski.

"Judaism and Christianity have had a profound influence on world culture; both Christians and Jews would benefit from seeing this exhibit," says Johnson. **W**

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KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

What: Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible: Ancient Artifacts, Timeless Treasures

When: Jan. 22-June 3, 2010

Cost: \$22-\$26/adult; timed-entry tickets to the exhibit include museum admission

Where: Milwaukee Public Museum, 800 W. Wells St., Milwaukee.

Contact: (414) 223-4676 or www.mpm.edu

Did you know? This is the largest temporary exhibit ever produced by the Milwaukee Public Museum.

Don't miss: A series of eleven lectures related to the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit covering archaeology, theology and history. Cost for each lecture is \$20/museum members, \$25/nonmember. Call (414) 223-4676 to purchase tickets; Advance registration is strongly recommended.



DAVID SHANKBONE

GOOD HIDING SPOT *The caves' remote location in the cliffs along the Dead Sea made it less likely that later settlements would disturb their hiding places.*