

# THE CURRENT EXHIBIT (2012–2013) AT THE CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER TOUCHING ON THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

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There can be no doubt that a beautiful exhibit on Ancient Israel has opened recently in Cincinnati — one that without question should be seen by all people of good will interested in the ancient origins of our humanistic culture. This is especially true of the many stunning displays of artifacts, stonework, amulets, ossuaries, stamp-seals, bathing-pools, pottery figurines and still other realia drawn from the daily life of the people of Ancient Israel, and now to be seen on a scale never before contemplated for overseas presentation. It must certainly be Dr. Israel Dahari of the Israel Antiquities Authority who has brought together the multiple strands of this exhibit and fashioned them into a coherent and esthetic whole. A variation of the exhibit was previously presented at Discover Times Square in New York City and the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup>

All the more is this to be wondered given the fact that, while the above-mentioned displays occupy the major part of the exhibition, it is another element, i.e. presentation of a goodly number of Dead Sea Scrolls, that takes primary billing in the publicity expended for the exhibition. It is this one feature that casts the only a regrettable shadow over the exhibition, and which as a matter of common sense and fairness cries out for correction.

The blatant errors that crop up in this portion of the exhibition are not difficult to fathom, and with good will and reasonable perception can readily be corrected. I quote some of them here, sporadically, from the text of the exhibit.

1. In an early section of the exhibit, the following statement is made: “Could the Temple Priests have written some of the Dead Sea Scrolls? While most of the people were barely literate, Temple priests almost certainly copied and wrote texts.”

**Comment:** Although universal literacy was obviously not characteristic of ancient societies, there is no empirical proof whatever that the majority of the Jews of Palestine at that time or thereafter were “barely literate.” This claim is the product of a branch of traditional Qumranology whose adherents assert that the manuscripts found in the

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<sup>1</sup> See my article “Recent Scroll Exhibits and the Decline of Qumranology” at:  
[http://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/decline\\_of\\_qumranology.pdf](http://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/decline_of_qumranology.pdf)

11 caves near Qumran all belonged to a radical Jewish sect ostensibly living at Khirbet Qumran, and that since manuscripts of no other such Jewish groups, according to their claim, have been discovered in similar abundance, these putative “Essenes,” or else Yahad brotherhood members, were the only Jews who were truly literate, except for some Temple priests. The bizarre reasoning underlying this opinion is vitiated by the de facto survival of numerous Hebraic writings in antiquity both before and after the First Revolt as well as the continuity of Palestinian Hebrew literary production directly into the period of the Tannaitic Masters (First through Third Centuries C.E.) and their multiple successors. The exhibit, however, allows a highly dubious claim to run rampant in its midst without as much as whispering a contrary word to the public — precisely in disdain of the balanced policy that any museum catering to the public should observe. The unfortunate result is that all of the Cincinnati exhibits relating to the Scrolls follow an arbitrarily one-sided scheme of presentation, resulting in a scientifically worthless power-play of an exhibit. (Cf. items below.)

2. A subsequent heading reads “Jerusalem and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls were intimately familiar with Jerusalem”

**Comment:** Yes, but the curators refuse to state or even hint that those authors, either in part or in whole, may have actually lived in Jerusalem and produced Hebrew scrolls there which made their way, in the hands of refugees fleeing the Romans, to the Qumran caves during the First Jewish Revolt. A well-known stricture of some of the most diehard Qumranologists is to describe the Revolt, and the Jerusalem community as a whole, as seldom as possible — while focusing their main attention on the Khirbet Qumran desert stronghold which they claim — without an iota of probative evidence — to have been the home of a radical Jewish sect that ostensibly wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. Once again, a one-sided presentation unfair to the viewing public.

3. “Of the sixteen cisterns found at Qumran, ten appear to be ritual mikvaoth” (ritual baths.)

**Comment:** The decade-long archaeological investigation of Khirbet Qumran under the official aegis of the Israel Antiquities Authority and led by Dr. Yitshak Magen with the scientific cooperation of Yuval Peleg ((1996–2004) 20–) drew the conclusion, based entirely on empirical evidence, that no more than **two** of the cisterns could have been used for bathing purposes — indicating no more than a normal activity of Palestinian Jews at that time, and not the esoteric ritualisms of a radical religious sect. Why is the less likely possibility featured in this exhibit to the complete exclusion of the Magen-Peleg findings and the similar but yet earlier results achieved by the late Prof. Yizhar Hirschfeld in his 2004 “Qumran in Context”?

4. “The limestone vessels on display in the exhibition “may have been used for water rituals.”

**Comment:** Such an idea would be rationally conceivable only if one were to come into possession of *a priori* evidence that a religious sect occupied Kh. Qumran in antiquity — a claim that to this day has still not been validated by empirical investigation either

of texts or archaeological findings. The discovery of Hebrew manuscripts in caves **near** Khirbet Qumran does not in any sense prove that a radical Jewish religious sect lived **at** Kh. Qumran. Given the events of the First Revolt that were taking place at that time, and which the contemporary historian Josephus Flavius describes at length, it is far more likely that the scrolls were taken **from Jerusalem to be hidden in the caves**. The refugees from the capital then fled — as Josephus emphatically indicates — **both to Masada and Machaerus** — the latter in **Transjordania**, then still controlled by Jewish forces. Why is there not the slightest mention of Josephus anywhere in the exhibition? — or, more tellingly, why no mention of his description of the refugees' efforts to escape to those **two fortified** locations? Where in this exhibit is there even a map depicting the directions of flight during the harrowing final months of the war, or any statement at all pertaining to the First Revolt?

5. “Many scrolls mention both the contemporary city [of Jerusalem] and messianic visions of a future age. For these *writers, the city was polluted and profane* — a place from which they had physically withdrawn.”

**Comment:** Some of the Qumran texts are replete with descriptions of messianic visions and apocalyptic fantasies regarding a future age — but not a single text originally excavated either in the 11 caves near Khirbet Qumran or discovered in the ruins of Masada describes Jerusalem itself as a place of pollution or profanity. However, the disdain of several of the scrolls' ancient authors — and by no means the imaginary multitudes of writers conceived of by the current exhibitors — is to the effect that the city has fallen into the hands of wicked priests who no longer faithfully carry out the Lord's decrees. A few of these latter texts describe a migration of faithful followers to the region of Damascus; a few others describe the exile of a charismatic leader to an undetermined location most likely in Palestine. No text, however, actually places this latter charismatic personality at Khirbet Qumran. That site itself was, according to its architecture and geographic position, a Jewish military base during the Hasmonaean period and in stages of the First Revolt circa 71/73 A.D., when according to Josephus the Roman incursion into the Judean wilderness, and the flight of the Jews of Jerusalem to Masada and Machaerus, began. As though historical evidence concerning the period of the scrolls does not matter, the current Cincinnati exhibit is entirely silent about these latter events.

6. “The authors of the scrolls viewed their community as the sole rightful inheritors of Israel's legacy.”

**Comment:** This exhibition claim notably exaggerates the evidence. The exhibitors are here alluding to the Yahad brotherhood group, some of whose writings — approximately twelve or thirteen in number — were discovered among the manuscripts hidden in the caves near Kh. Qumran, but in the company of various writings of **other groups** that reflect no such heterodox views as do the writings of the Yahad group, and still other writings indicative of disparate heterodox leanings of various additional writers. Serious readers need only follow the totality of the published cave writings now available in translation through (e.g.) Oxford University Press in order to perceive the remarkable

mix of the ideas and views represented in the manuscripts. As for the claim regarding the Yahad brotherhood itself, while their writings do reflect an effort to give new and sometimes radical meanings to various scriptural passages, not a single text attributable to them proves that they actually “viewed their community as the sole rightful inheritors of Israel’s legacy.” By allowing such a claim to be championed during the exhibit without alternate comment of any kind, its sponsors naively mislead their thousands of viewers.

7. “Phylacteries.”

**Comment:** In this case the fault is one of omission rather than of commission. The exhibitors refrain from acknowledging that the ritual phylacteries (Hebrew *tefillin*) found in several of the caves near Qumran (and worn by pious Jews in antiquity as even in modern times) **are not uniform in their liturgical content.** The lack of uniformity is, in turn, indicative of the presence of various groups and parties, rather than a single sect or brotherhood, among the individuals whose manuscript holdings were discovered in the caves near Kh. Qumran. A panel actually describing this intriguing matter, rather than omitting it, would obviously have been a matter of considerable interest to many of the thousands of visitors to the exhibit, but no effort seems to have been made to describe it to the viewing public despite the heterogeneity of the scrolls texts at which it hints.

8. “Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?”

**Comments:** (a) After appropriating the title of my book on the Scrolls for their own purpose, the exhibitors here assert that “Qumran is a fascinating and complicated puzzle,” — and yet this assertion is expressed only in this one panel, all the other numerous presentations relative to the Scrolls in this exhibit making one pitch or another for the empirically dubious theory that a religious sect occupied the Khirbet Qumran fortified site.

Moreover, in this same panel, almost as if to make amends for all those other portions of the exhibit having to do with the scrolls themselves, the exhibitors continue by first stating that early archaeologists were certain that the scrolls’ authors “lived here [at Qumran], studying, copying, and composing religious writings,” but then asserting in contrast with this view that “*today some doubt Essenes wrote the Scrolls.*”

**The next sentence, however,** is to the effect that “Essenes” never appears in the scrolls, where the group is the “Yahad” ... or community.”

This, however, by simple logic can only mean that, according to the newly inserted idea, it was not the Essenes who wrote the scrolls but rather only members of another group, the “Yahad” community, who were ostensibly living at Qumran and writing the scrolls there. This is in puzzling contradiction with the earlier curatorial statement just above it, describing the original belief that “**THE SCROLLS’ AUTHORS**” lived at Kh. Qumran — not that it was another claimed group of authors, the Yahad Brotherhood, that was ostensibly living at Qumran and writing or copying scrolls there.

This last sentence as it now stands is thus a glaring non-sequitur. The original assertion was clearly to the effect that some individual researchers were — in contrast to the earlier mentioned ones who believed that the scrolls were written at Qumran — no longer necessarily of the view that the Scrolls were actually written there.

Evidently to counter or ameliorate this admission, one or another of the curators appears to have slightly changed the wording of the text at this point in order to protect the standard (if unproven) belief that a radical religious sect inhabited Kh. Qumran and wrote the scrolls there. Thus we have the assertion that “The term Essenes never appears in the scrolls, where the group is the “Yahad” ... or community.” Writings of the Yahad brotherhood are, as indicated above, certainly to be found among the scrolls and scroll fragments discovered in the caves, but these writings, according to their content, are but a small fraction of the scrolls found in those hiding places.

Those who apparently handled the text at this point would appear to have been one of a dwindling number of traditional Qumranologists and their followers who are still pushing the belief, however undemonstrated to this day and however unlikely, that a singular group of sectarian Jews occupied the Khirbet Qumran fortress during the First Jewish Revolt and spent their hours writing scrolls there.

The change in wording could only have had the effect of misleading many of the visitors to the Cincinnati Museum Center who had obviously come there expecting a fair and objective exhibit. Even this one panel concerning the scrolls failed in the end to candidly inform the viewing public of the controversial and ongoing history surrounding these precious manuscripts, instead opting for a lopsided indoctrination that was and still remains an egregiously unfair action towards the unsuspecting people of Cincinnati and its environs.

(That the scrolls were hidden and buried in eleven caves, stretching northward from an area near Khirbet Qumran towards Jericho, offers an obvious key, on the other hand, to the direction of flight of many of the Jewish refugees fleeing from the Roman forces. Their destination was quite obviously Machaerus, where, as Josephus writes, they held out for some time against the Roman siege to which they eventually succumbed.)

**POSTSCRIPT:** One of the most popular displays in the exhibition is the portrayal of various Dead Sea Scrolls appearing in the museum’s large and elegant rotunda. Viewers taking a careful look at the individual items will notice that the accompanying descriptions often attempt an effort, now somewhat subdued in contrast to earlier exhibits of the Scrolls, to encourage interest in and sympathy with the of traditional beliefs of the early Qumranologists — but without guiding the public to any possible alternative interpretations. This can hardly be termed museology at its best.

In addition, the statements of the exhibitors that “**Today**, some doubt Essenes wrote the scrolls” and that “scholars **have also begun to question** the Essene connection of the scrolls” represent an apologetic faux pas, if not worse. My first published discussion to the effect that Jerusalem, not

Qumran, was the home of the scrolls took place in a Jerusalem Post interview with me on June 9, 1970 – not “today” or in any recent year; and it has been followed since then, and not only today or recently, by the findings of bona fide research archaeologists who have emphatically acknowledged the Jerusalem origin of the Dead Sea Scrolls. (See particularly Haaretz of 21 August 2001.) The present exhibition leaves the actual sequence of events in the dark. **Moreover, it clearly behooves the Cincinnati exhibitors of the current Scrolls exhibition to rectify the misleading and untruthful statements in the exhibit, if only out of respect to the good people who reside in this city and its environs.**

*N. G./ 20 December, 2012*

**Nota Bene:** The above article includes some passages first delivered at a lecture by the writer on Nov. 19, 2012 at the University of Cincinnati.

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