

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS PROJECT

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The Dead Sea Scrolls Project was established by the Oriental Institute during the months that followed the freeing of the scrolls (autumn 1991). Staffed by the writer and Dr. Michael Wise, Assistant Professor of Aramaic in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, as well as by our graduate research assistant, Anthony Tomasino, the project from the beginning developed in several directions. First and foremost, there was the challenging task of deciphering and translating, from photographs, the manuscripts from Qumran Cave Four that had previously remained unpublished. This fundamental responsibility was undertaken by Dr. Wise with Mr. Tomasino's assistance and, in the earlier stages, that of several other graduate students (these included Deborah Friedrich, Michael Douglas, and David Clemens). These initial efforts have already led to valuable results; see, for instance, R. Eisenman and M. Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (Dorset, 1992).

Dr. Wise has recently had accepted for publication by Sheffield Academic Press a volume of essays entitled *Thunder in Gemini: Essays on Second Temple Judaism*. The volume includes discussions of various Dead Sea Scrolls (both Hebrew and Aramaic texts), Aramaic materials from Masada, and Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote in Greek. He has also had accepted two articles on topics about the Dead Sea Scrolls, one on the Aramaic texts of the apocryphal writing Tobit from Cave Four, and one on an Aramaic magical incantation to be used as protection against disease-causing demons. These articles will appear in the journals *Vetus Testamentum* and *Journal of Biblical Literature*, respectively. He has begun research on another book dealing with scrolls that promote physiognomy—the “science” of determining a person's fate or character on the basis of



The escarpment to the west of Khirbet Qumran, where many of the manuscript-bearing caves are located

an appraisal of his or her physical characteristics. The scrolls themselves are written in both Hebrew and Aramaic; the comparative materials that promise to shed light on their contents come from various regions and periods and are written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and other languages. In addition, since one of the Dead Sea Scrolls on physiognomy is inscribed in a code, this volume will deal with the cryptic texts among the scrolls in general. Three different cryptic codes are known, two of which have never been broken. Having already deciphered the first cryptic script, Dr. Wise hopes to do the same with the two holdouts in the course of the next year.

The present writer's undertaking has, on the other hand, been to explore the overall problem of identification of the authors of the scrolls and, increasingly, to examine the specifics of the Khirbet Qumran site and the theory that the manuscripts found in the nearby caves were composed by a sect ostensibly living there. The investigation to date has resulted in a book, *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?*, to be published by Macmillan in the winter of 1994. The main conclusion of this study with regard to the archaeology of Khirbet Qumran is that the site itself, given its many telling features, could have been nothing except a fortress strategically guarding the eastern approaches to Jerusalem. Among the features of the site showing military characteristics are its well-buttressed watchtower, the reservoirs capable of supplying water to a troop of eight hundred men over the entire eight months of the dry season, the signs of a battle between the inhabitants and Roman besiegers ca. 70/72 A.D., and the adjacent 1,200 graves having characteristics of a post-battle cemetery. Qumran and Machaerus—the Herodian fortress east of the Dead Sea—are in direct line of sight of each other, and both served as bastions designed to ward off invasions of Judaea from Nabataea and other trans-Jordanian territories.



Detail of the Khirbet Qumran tower; note the buttressing ramp of boulders and the fine stonework of the original vertical structure

There are no substantial proofs that Essenes or other Jewish sectarians lived at this site, and the many new cave manuscripts now being transcribed and translated add to the total historical picture of events on the eve of the Roman siege of Jerusalem (70 A.D.). The texts, of great diversity in their ideas, literary styles,



Aerial view of Khirbet Qumran (view to south); note its commanding position and the impressive complex of building-remnants, walls, and cisterns. The tower is in the foreground

and idioms—and written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—could only have come from important libraries in Jerusalem, which the Jews desperately sought to hide away, along with treasures and other important possessions, prior to the tightening of the Roman stranglehold on the capitol. The Copper Scroll, found in Cave Three, describes many of these acts of hiding in detail. Future research will hopefully reveal further details of these efforts and of the complexity of social and religious thinking among the Palestinian Jews of that period who wrote the texts deposited in the caves.

Growing out of our work on the project came the idea of an International Conference on the Scrolls, which was held in December 1992 under the aegis of the New York Academy of Sciences and the Oriental Institute. Thirty papers were read at this conference, and it was reported on in detail in the *New York Times* (see particularly “Science Times” of December 22, 1992) and elsewhere. The conference contributed significantly to a changing public perception of the nature and importance of the scrolls, showing particularly that many of the old ideas about the texts and the Khirbet Qumran site are now being challenged and, in many cases, replaced by new interpretations. The *Proceedings* of the conference will be published in full by the Academy in 1994. The conference itself, it should be noted, could not have been held without the strong support of the Oriental Institute and its Director, William Sumner, from the very beginning of our efforts to organize it. In the end, what was accomplished was an endorsement of the principle of free and open debate among scholars holding mutually opposing theories and beliefs—a goal vigorously championed not only by the Oriental Institute but by the University of Chicago as a whole from the time of its founding.