

THE HEBREW SCROLLS AND HISTORICAL “TRUTH”

Norman Golb

The freeing of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1991 for study by all scholars has greatly advanced the search for the meaning and origin of these manuscripts, but that does not mean that we can by now distinguish with certainty between the false and the true of Qumranology. Many of the newly released texts have still to be published, while many of those now before the public in printed form have been the subject of varying and disparate interpretations. While writing my recent book (*Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?*; Scribner, 1995) I learned anew, with every twist and turn of the investigation underlying it, how wrong it would be for me, or any other scholar involved in the subject, to claim that we now “know the truth” about the scrolls and their surrounding history. At the most, on the basis of the analysis of those scrolls discovered and analyzed to date, scholarship has only created certain hypotheses concerning them; and as logicians and historians of science have eloquently shown, hypotheses can never be proved with finality—they can, with finality, only be dis-

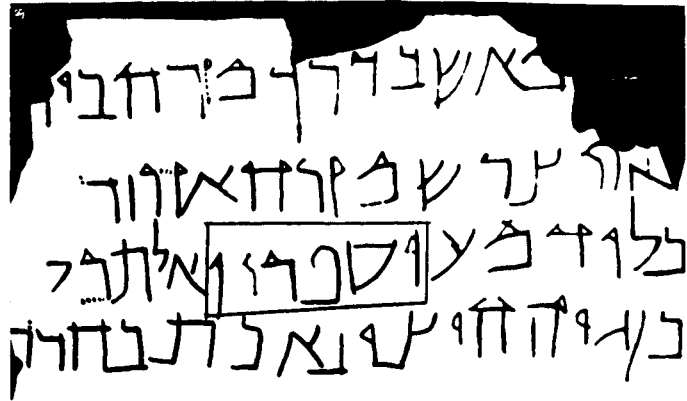
proved. We can only *seek* the truth, hoping that the inductive weighing and assimilation of evidence will lead to a theory—i.e., an explanation of the evidence—characterized by a high degree of verisimilitude. In scholarship as in civil law, this quality should be determined by the criterion of preponderance of evidence—the *sine qua non* of probative inductive reasoning without which the study of history would be nothing more than an intellectual farce, unworthy of the slightest acceptance as a university discipline.

Such, at all events, were the few basic criteria that I adopted and tried to keep in mind as my book on the scrolls took shape. Early on in this process, I was buoyed by the success of the 1992 conference on the scrolls that had been organized jointly by the New York Academy of Sciences and the Oriental Institute (see M. Wise, N. Golb, J. Collins, and D. Pardee, eds., *Methods of Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Khirbet Qumran Site: Present Realities and Future Prospects*; Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, Volume 722; New York, 1994). The conflicting views on scroll origins that emerged from these meetings and, what is more, the ability, demonstrated by them, of Qumran scholars of mutually opposing theories actually to debate the issues with one another in open forum (see especially J. N. Wilford, “Science Times” section, *New York Times*, December 22, 1992), encouraged me to hope that they as well as the larger community of scholars, scientists, and the intelligent reading public would be able to tolerate a work on the scrolls free of the cherished axioms of traditional Qumranology. I could not (and cannot today) expect that a step-by-step examination of the continuously mounting evidence, carried out without recourse to the scholastic method of harmonization of opinions of venerated authorities, might produce a sudden and fundamental change of heart among those many who are their disciples. Rather, my main concern was to show that, regardless of past opinions, the preponderance of evidence, when carefully considered detail by detail, no longer favored the theory of scroll origins in



Room (near tower), at Khirbet Qumran, that once supported a second story claimed by traditional Qumranologists to have served in antiquity as a “scriptorium”

vogue since 1948. The new theory that I offered in place of the old was built on the very pieces of evidence that had been overlooked or discarded as irrelevant by earlier generations of scholars, and my main purpose in presenting it to colleagues and the public has been to encourage the further search for what are at best certain elusive



Some lines from the Copper Scroll describing hiding of manuscripts (sefarim) in the Judean Wilderness

truths of history that lie hidden behind the words of the manuscripts themselves. Cicero once said that “the first law for the historian is that he shall never dare to utter an untruth. The second is that he shall suppress nothing that is true. Moreover, there shall be no suspicion of partiality in his writing, or of malice.” These are ponderous rules to attempt to follow, particularly when we cannot always distinguish what is true in history from what is false. But we try to follow them nonetheless, and *if* my recent volume on the scrolls will eventually succeed in encouraging further debate on the subject, more intensive research on the texts and the Khirbet Qumran site, and, in time, a higher level of discourse on the historical meaning of these ancient manuscripts, I will have more than fulfilled my expectations in setting out to write it.

Meanwhile, our research on the scrolls continues. The superb facilities of the Research Archives here at the Oriental Institute, and of the University of Chicago’s Regenstein Library, assure access to all investigations at other centers of research currently being published. Yet our own main concern remains the analysis of the texts themselves—virtually all of which are now accessible in photographic reproduction. I have suggested in my book that, as a field of manuscript investigation, the study of the scrolls must be subject to the same rules, methods, and criteria as govern all other areas of Hebrew manuscript study (e.g., research on the medieval Cairo Genizah manuscripts). The practical consequence of this observation is to cast doubt on a number of basic assumptions underlying traditional Qumranology: One cannot, for example, avoid acknowledging that the scrolls are not—with the exception of the Copper Scroll—historical autographs, but rather are copies by scribes of mostly imaginative literature; and, as another example, that dating these undated manuscripts, whose copying spanned a period of approximately three centuries (circa 200 B.C.—circa A.D. 60), to a precise twenty-five- or fifty-year time span within that period is, by virtue of the much more extensive practical experience of Cairo Genizah researchers attempting to assign dates to their own manuscripts, largely unjustified. Contrary to advance claims heralded in newspapers, the recent radiocarbon tests of the scrolls fully support this observation. To ensure the scientific quality of their findings, students of the Dead Sea Scrolls must scrupulously follow the basic ground rules of the manuscript game. The recent archaeological demonstration that the so-called “scriptorium” of Khirbet Qumran could hardly have been one (*Methods of*

Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Khirbet Qumran Site: Present Realities and Future Prospects, pp. 1–38), together with the present knowledge that not a single scrap of parchment or papyrus has ever been found at that site itself, makes the observance of those rules all the more important.
