



△ The interior of Cave 4 yielded the largest group of Essene manuscripts.

◁ Two types of jars containing manuscripts found at Qumran.

In Search of the Qumran Library

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Autumn 1947. Seven large leather scrolls covered with ancient Hebrew writing appeared on the antiquities market in Jerusalem. They were soon joined by two terracotta jars that, it was said, had held them. Bedouin from the Judaeian desert, of the Tāʿamireh tribe, had brought them to a merchant in Bethlehem, their customary marketplace. Thus began a lengthy game of “hide and seek” involving large sums of money and scientific concerns, all against the background of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

The riches of the Qumran Library are still not entirely known to this day—far from it. But the “Manuscripts of the Dead Sea” have already revolutionized our conceptions of the history of Judaism and Christianity.

According to legend, it was while searching for a lost goat that a Bedouin by the name of Ed-Dhib, “the jackal,” discovered the first eleven caves with manuscripts near Qumran in August 1947. On the shores of the Dead Sea it is too hot in the summer for the goatherds, especially at some 400 meters above sea level. More likely is the story that Ed-Dhib was looking for places to hide his smuggled goods. The entrance of Cave 1 was nothing more than a hole in the mountainside. The rocks he threw in happened to hit pottery. He slid into the cave and, among the sherds, he noticed some closed jars. How many? Ten or forty-nine, according to different versions of the story. Nine contained nothing but “reddish grains.” But the tenth one, smaller and carefully sealed, contained three leather scrolls surrounded by smelly cloth. He ripped the cloths off to see what they held: nothing but leather “with scribbling on it.” The scribbles were Hebrew, and the leather was the *Isaiah Scroll*, the *Commentary of Habakkuk*, and the *Manual of Discipline*. Fortunately, his cousin’s sandals needed new straps, so Ed-Dhib decided to take everything with him and return later with reinforcements. The pillaging continued over the next few days. The spoils were divided. Ed-Dhib hung his share of the leather in a skin bag on his tent pole. One of his cousins used one of the jars for water. And the months passed.

Spoils, Bargaining, and the First Intuitions

Kando, a cobbler in Bethlehem, was also an antiquities dealer. He bought the scrolls for five dollars. He had understood that the texts could have some value once the writing was identified. No one in Bethlehem could help him. But if this were Syrian writing, then the Metropolitan Samuel, a Syrian Christian like himself, would know. So he went to the Monastery of St. Mark in Jerusalem with one of the scrolls, the *Isaiah Scroll*. Mar Samuel recognized the Hebrew writing and showed interest. He even burned a piece of the leather to be sure of its antiquity. Satisfied, he then bought four of the scrolls from Kando for less than \$100—but only after lengthy negotiations.

While the pillaging of the cave continued with a vengeance, Mar Samuel consulted the specialists in Jerusalem. These were delicate negotiations because they were swimming in illegal waters. They needed to know the value of the scrolls but without awakening the suspicions of the authorities. The chaos that reigned at the end of the British Mandate, and the war between Jews and Arabs that was about to break out, favored these discreet contacts. As to the antiquity of the texts, very contradictory opinions were offered. Some suspected a hoax. Others thought the texts were new. Others, like Professor



Workers excavate a cave in the limestone cliff.

Sukenik at Hebrew University, understood immediately that these were indeed the most ancient Hebrew manuscripts ever found. Against the backdrop of the U.N. decision to partition Palestine in the fall of 1947, Sukenik bought three additional scrolls from an antiquities dealer in Bethlehem. The Americans (ASOR) were content to buy the photographic rights with a view to their publication.

Under Cannon Fire

Why did it take two years for the archaeologists to find the cave where these treasures came from? First of all, the Bedouin and their Syrian intermediaries were in no hurry to see anyone else arrive on the spot, as the pillaging was prosperous. Then, too, ever since the vote on the resolution to divide Palestine, the country expected war. On the very day the new country was born, May 15, 1948, six Arab armies invaded Israel.

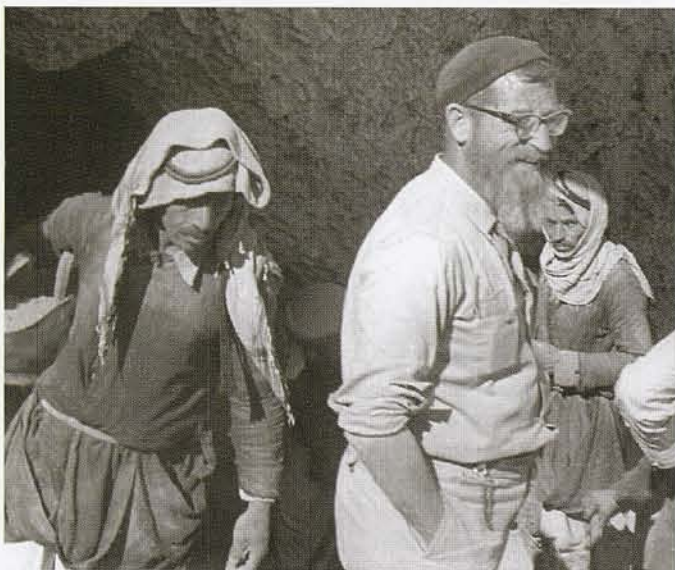
Jerusalem was under siege for several months. Hand to hand combat, attempted coups, and gunfire multiplied in the city, where the Arab Legion occupied the Mount of Olives. Mar Samuel’s confidence man—his intermediary with the Bedouin as well as the buyers—was killed in St. Mark’s Monastery on May 16, 1948. There was no water, electricity, or food. Civilians suffered.

The front line that divided Jerusalem passed very close to the French School. Father Roland de Vaux, who was about to begin the excavations at Qumran, officially protested the



△ The opening that the Bedouin used to enter Cave 1 in 1974 (center of the photograph).

▽ Father de Vaux, Director of the French Biblical and Archaeological School in Jerusalem, co-directed the excavations at Qumran with G. L. Harding, Director of Antiquities in Jordan.



fact that the Jordanian army had established an observation post in the tower of the (Dominican) priory. The various chancelleries evacuated their nationals, including the residents of the archaeological schools. Only the Dominicans remained. It was impossible to leave the city; a military passport was required, and people went about at their own risk. The winter weather made the situation even worse. Under these conditions, who would have imagined an archaeological expedition in the area of the Dead Sea, the combat zone? Nevertheless, the scientific world was moved by the discovery of the scrolls. The American Schools of Oriental Research, whose Institute in Jerusalem was involved in photographing the scrolls, released a statement on April 11, 1948 that was carried on the following day in the *London Times*.

Looking after his own interests, Mar Samuel was in the United States trying to sell his scrolls for a million dollars. But the photos published by the Americans had devalued his treasures. The contents were already known. Embittered,

the Metropolitan finally resorted to classified ads in newspapers. One of them appeared in the "Miscellaneous" section of the *Wall Street Journal* on June 1, 1954. The irony of the matter is that Yigael Yadin, head of the Haganah, the Jewish underground military organization, and son of Professor Sukenik, who had died in the meantime, was immediately informed. He took over the transaction through intermediaries, who bought the four scrolls that his father had not been able to acquire six years earlier. In all, Mar Samuel made more than \$250,000 on the four scrolls that he had purchased for \$97.20 in 1947. Today, the scrolls are in the Israel Museum.

Once calm was restored, the Department of Antiquities began to look for the cave that the Syrians had finally told them existed. A Belgian observer for the UN had the idea of exerting pressure on the Ta'amireh Bedouin of the Arab Legion since Ed-Dhib was a member of their tribe. The deal was made in three days, and six weeks later, on February 15, 1949, excavations began. Successive pillaging had left irreparable damage. The archaeological strata had been destroyed. About fifty covered jars and some fragments were removed, and the cloth coverings of the scrolls were salvaged.

Finally, an insignificant but colorful detail confirmed beyond the shadow of a doubt that the scrolls did indeed come from the cave. While a Bedouin was being interrogated to see if he recognized any of the objects coming from the cave, he naively came upon a cigarette case that he had lost during the clandestine searches. The link between the scrolls and the cave was thus confirmed. It was the beginning of a long story.