



October 28, 2011

# The Scrolls as a Start, Not an End

By **EDWARD ROTHSTEIN**

Don't expect to see the glittering marvels of King Tut's tomb. Few artifacts at the provocative new exhibition at Discovery Times Square — "The Dead Sea Scrolls: Life and Faith in Biblical Times" — will inspire aesthetic wonder. Pottery, silver coins, iron arrowheads, limestone pitchers, scraps of parchment — such are the seemingly mundane yields of many archaeological excavations, and they are prevalent here as well.

The understated result is almost jarring. Other exhibitions created by Running Subway Productions in this space are typically more extroverted, whether they are large commercial ventures (a [second show here](#) is based on the television franchise "CSI") or substantial historical examinations of [Leonardo da Vinci's inventions](#) or [Pompeii's ruins](#).

And while there is some attempt at spectacle — when an actor welcomes you into a gallery showing stunning scenes of the Dead Sea, or when you descend a staircase and see 10 fragments of the scrolls dramatically arranged in a rotunda — this exhibition's real enticements lie elsewhere. They come not from appearance, but from explanation; not from objects, but from connections among them; not from stunning displays, but from intellectual vistas.

The artifacts are drawn from archaeological explorations by the [Israel Antiquities Authority](#). Some have been recently found; some are being shown for the first time; and this is, we are told, one of the largest such exhibitions ever organized. But the main interest of the show, designed by Ralph Appelbaum Associates, is in the historical arc shaped by the two curators, [Risa Levitt Kohn](#), a professor of the Hebrew Bible and Judaism at San Diego State University, and Debora Ben Ami, the Israel authority's curator of Iron Age artifacts.

The narrative treats the scrolls not as the beginning of a history, but as its culmination. This is almost the reverse of [their usual treatment](#). Since the first scrolls were found by Bedouins in 1947 in caves near the Dead Sea, they have inspired extraordinary drama and debate.

Before their discovery, the earliest known texts of the Hebrew Bible were from about 1,000

years after these scrolls were written. In the caves were over 800 scrolls and fragments, including Hebrew biblical texts before they were canonized, all written during a 200-year period of ferment in which the Israelite religion was about to be shattered by exile in A.D. 70, as Christianity was emerging. They showed how consistent transmission of these texts was, how many possibilities there were for interpretation and how fundamental the texts had already become.

The Bible's first five books, for example, possessed a special status: a fragment of Leviticus shown here is written using an ancient paleo-Hebrew script, affirming the text's antiquity. Other scrolls on display (which will be rotated to minimize light damage) include minor prophets in Greek translation, apocalyptic prophecies and the regulations of an unidentified **religious community**. Excavations of a site near the caves — **Qumran** — have suggested that such a community lived there during the period when the scrolls were written, perhaps in the first century B.C.

One hypothesis about Qumran was that its inhabitants were Essenes or proto-Christians, and that the scrolls describe the first stirrings of that new religion, evident in their messianism and references to the "Son of God." This view became orthodoxy as a small group of scholars retained almost ruthless control over many scrolls for almost 40 years.

During the last two decades, though, **the debate has become more diverse**, as the scrolls have been made available. (This discussion may now become more widespread, since, as the exhibition notes, Google is digitizing the scrolls and putting them on the Internet at [dss.collections.imj.org.il/](http://dss.collections.imj.org.il/).) Meanwhile, hypotheses proliferate. What was Qumran? A fortress? Pottery factory? Repository for the Jerusalem temple's library? Were the scrolls written by Qumran scribes?

The exhibition avoids conclusions. Instead it ends with a kind of ecumenism, referring to how modern Judaism and Christianity evolved out of the texts of ancient Israel and how Islam, too, grew out of these narratives.

But the show as a whole is more interested in the scrolls' past. We see the scrolls only after we have walked through a chronicle of the region's milestones, illustrated by archaeological finds in the collection of **Israel National Treasures**. And they position the scrolls not just as a part of religious history but also as a part of national history.

This is a reason that the exhibition establishes a parallel between the devotional fervor of the Qumran community (destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 68) and the zealotry of rebel

holdouts at Masada, a cliff settlement overlooking the Dead Sea (destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 73). Displays about both communities include potsherds, seeds and dried fruit. There are ropes from Qumran and wool textiles from Masada. Masada has long been an Israeli national symbol, and Qumran is surely a religious one, but their connections are made clear.

The flaw is that we never really comprehend how such a religious culture and its scrolls evolved out of this history. But we do see a history exceptional in its traumas and influences. In this sliver of land, the curators explain, “the beliefs and material culture of locals, nomads and invaders have intermingled for millennia.”

An animated map shows the area being swept into the expanding blobs of surrounding empires. The Egyptian New Kingdom gives way to the Hittite; the United Kingdom of Israel thrives, beginning around 1000 B.C., and then splits in two. The Assyrian Empire overruns them both; then comes a parade of conquerors, from the Babylonians to the Byzantines, an immense chain of domination.

The opposite wall offers a reverse timeline, beginning in the present and displaying excavated objects. The Ottoman Period (1516-1917) is represented by pottery tobacco pipes; the Mamluk Period (1250-1517) is commemorated in an 18th-century coin. The Crusader Kingdom, a series of Islamic empires and their ancient predecessors are represented by pottery, coins and jewelry.

The onslaught moves forward and backward in time. But we learn that in the 12th century B.C., there were signs of a culture in the Canaanite hills that scholars have associated with the Israelites; evidence includes the ruins of distinctive four-room homes incorporating a central courtyard.

We are also shown artifacts that testify to the evolution of Israelite monarchies and to the building of royal cities with trappings of wealth; large vessels have survived bearing the Hebrew inscription “LMLK”: “belonging to the king.”

We see the signs of warfare as well, including iron arrowheads and sling stones used in the Assyrian attack on the town of Lachish in the eighth century B.C., a siege mentioned in [the Bible](#) and shown in reliefs at [the Assyrian king’s palace excavated in Iraq](#).

And we see, too, from the eighth century, an array of “household goddesses” a few inches tall, evidence of folk religions thriving alongside the Israelite monotheistic cult.

When the surface of this history is simply looked at, everything seems at best ordinary, at worst disastrous. This is not just a region of conquest; it is a region of unrelenting conquest. As a national history, it is a sequence of catastrophes.

The Israelites' own foundational texts chronicle them as other nations have recorded triumphs. Is there any national literature that so relentlessly exposes the flaws and pettiness of its rulers or so fervently condemns the failings of its people as the accounts in the books of Kings or the speeches of the prophets? There is little glory to be found in the nation's own canon.

Perhaps there was something in this unrelenting self-scrutiny that laid the foundation for the evolving religious culture, some understanding offering coherence amid chaos, conviction amid cataclysm. Perhaps it was a belief that history's disasters and human failings were inextricably connected. Or that human action, not miracle or magic, is what led to these consequences. But at the very least we begin to see that the Dead Sea Scrolls are not just astounding because of what they led to, but because of what led to them.

*"The Dead Sea Scrolls" is on view through April 15 at Discovery Times Square, 226 West 44th Street; [discoverytsx.com](http://discoverytsx.com).*