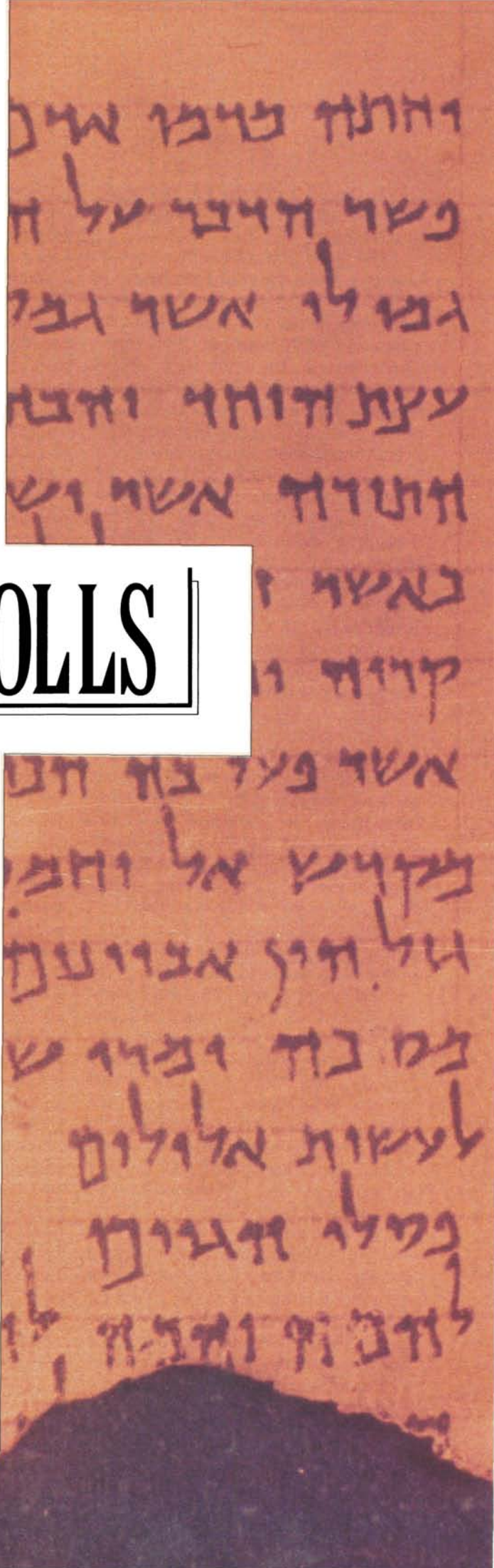


FOR FORTY-FIVE YEARS, A SELECT GROUP OF SCHOLARS HAS GUARDED THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS MORE CLOSELY THAN A STATE SECRET. CORNELL'S MAN ON THE BEAT EXPLAINS WHAT ALL THE FUSS IS ABOUT.

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

BY GARY A. RENDSBURG

From the moment forty-five years ago when a young Bedouin boy chasing down a stray goat accidentally discovered the first manuscripts, to the most recent high-tech applications of infrared photography and computer-generated texts, the Dead Sea Scrolls have captivated the imagination of the general public and the attention of scholars worldwide. In the last year and a half, there have been several new developments based on various controversial aspects of Dead Sea Scrolls research. One result of these developments may be easier access to the Scrolls,



which should make the life and work of many scholars—including me—much easier.

The story of the Dead Sea Scrolls begins in 1947 when Muhammad ed-Dhib, a young herder from the Taamire tribe of the Judean Desert, followed a stray member of his flock into a cave in the cliffs high above the Dead Sea. He not only found his lost goat, but he also discovered large pottery vessels holding seven parchment manuscripts. Muhammad, who like most of the tribesmen was illiterate, could not read the material but recognized its value. On the Taamires' next trip to Bethlehem to buy supplies, they sold the scrolls to a man named Kando, a cobbler who also dabbled in antiquities. Kando, a Syrian Orthodox Christian, also could not read the material, but took the scrolls to Jerusalem where the Metropolitan Mar Samuel, head of St. Mark's Monastery of the Syrian Orthodox Church, recognized them as ancient Hebrew documents.

Word soon reached scholars in Jerusalem that a major discovery had been made. On November 27, 1947, the same day the United Nations voted to partition Palestine and thus create the State of Israel, Prof. Eliezer Sukenik of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem dressed himself in Arab garb and made the dangerous trip to Bethlehem. There he visited Kando, saw the scrolls for the first time, confirmed their authenticity and immediately purchased three of the documents. Mar Samuel had the other four documents and several years later, through a mediator, sold them to Prof. Yigael Yadin of the Hebrew University. All seven of the documents found their way to Jerusalem, where they are now displayed in the Shrine of the Book Pavilion of the Israel Museum.

But where exactly had these scrolls come from? Were there more of them? Could their authenticity be proven beyond doubt? How old were they? The answers to all these questions began to unfold in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Although the Bedouins had attempted to conceal the exact location of the cave in which the documents were found (for they wished to explore further and sell more items), eventually schol-

ars were taken to the site and systematic exploration of the cave and neighboring caves was begun. The Taamire tribesmen were of great assistance in this project, because they alone know the desert and its various features. The accidental discovery by Muhammad ed-Dhib turned out to be just the tip of the iceberg (perhaps an inappropriate metaphor in reference to the arid wasteland of the Judean Desert, but an apt one nonetheless). Manuscripts were found in eleven caves in the region. By the time the exploration was finished, dozens of complete or virtually complete manuscripts, along with hundreds of fragments, had been found.



he caves were located in an escarpment above an ancient archaeological site known as Qumran, only a few hundred meters from the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. While the Bedouins and scholars cooperated in the exploration of the caves, archaeologists began a systematic excavation of Qumran. There they found an ancient settlement, with a complex system of water courses and cisterns to collect the meager amounts of rainfall that the area receives. Of great importance was the discovery of about 250 coins, all dated, which thus enabled scholars to fix the period of settlement at Qumran between 120 B.C.E. and 70 C.E. (Like many scholars of antiquity, I prefer to use the theologically neutral terms B.C.E.—before the common era—and C.E. in place of the terms B.C. and A.D.) At the same time, carbon-14 dating tests were done on the linen wrappers in which some of the scrolls had been found. The tests dated the linen to 33 C.E. (with an accuracy of plus or minus 200 years).

A study of the handwriting of the scrolls by paleography experts led to the conclusion that the manuscripts were written in the same period. In short, the various lines of evidence converged to indicate that the scrolls were about 2,000 years old. Any doubts that scholars had about the scrolls' antiquity or

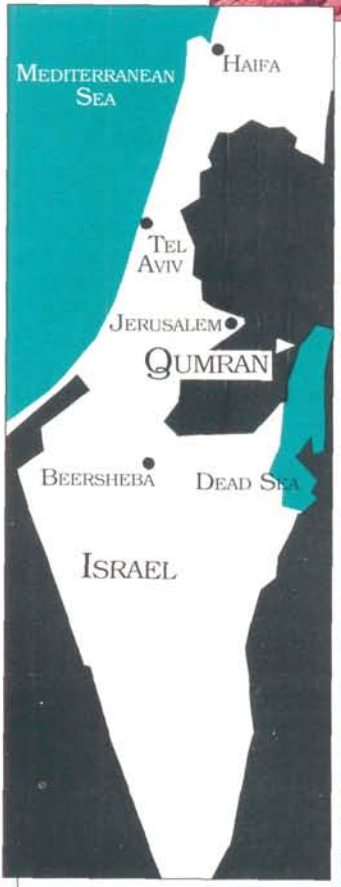
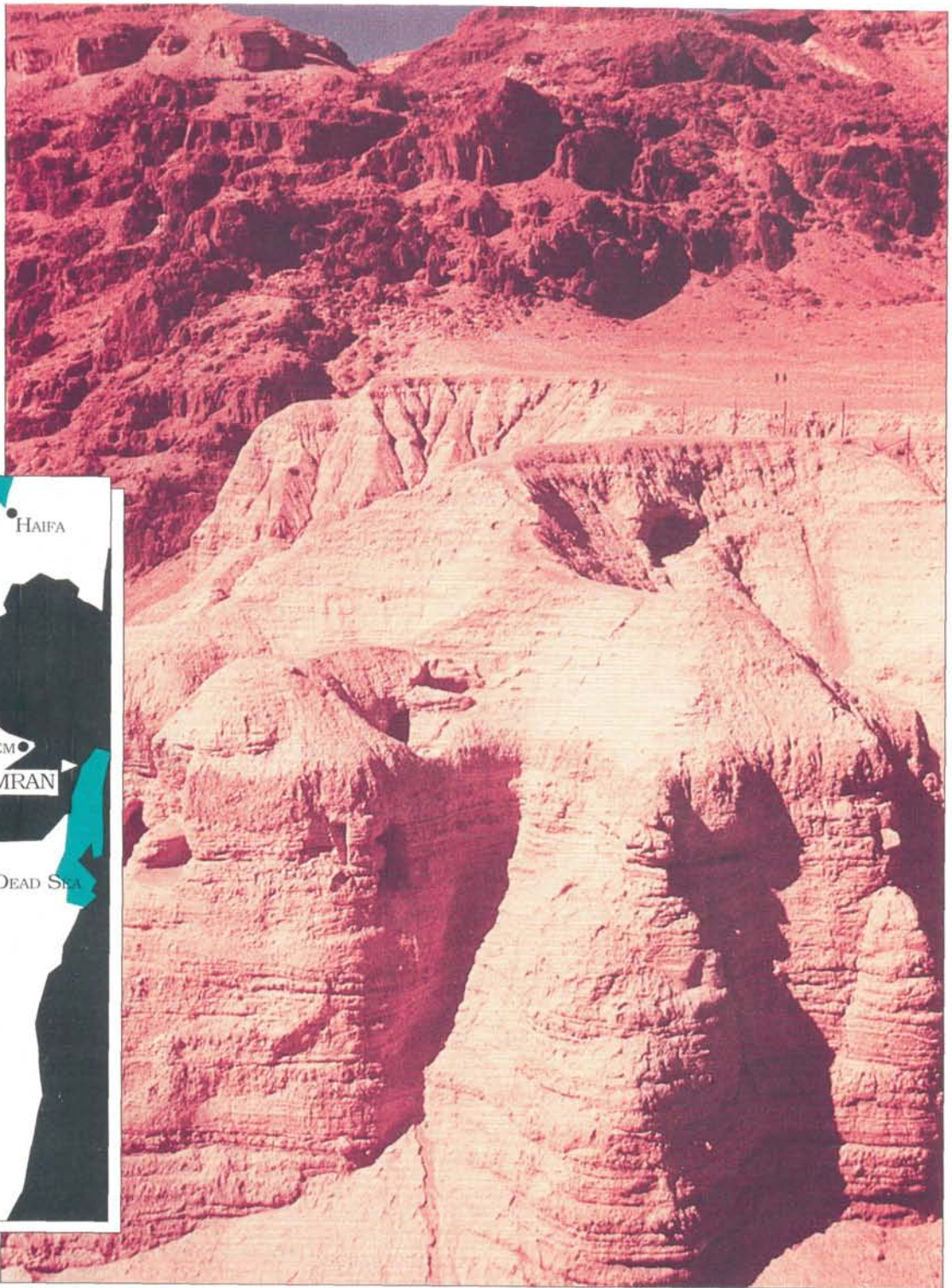
authenticity (and there were some who considered the scrolls to be medieval) were proved to be unwarranted. Scholars had before them what Prof. W. F. Albright of Johns Hopkins University called "the greatest manuscript find of modern times," and what were henceforth called the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Qumran Scrolls.

Starting with Prof. Sukenik's earliest studies, it became clear that the scrolls were written by members of an ancient Jewish sect. But which Jewish sect? We know that many varieties of Judaism existed during the 1st Century B.C.E. and the 1st Century C.E. Most prominent were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. After 70 C.E., when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple (as well as Qumran), the only Jewish sect that survived was the Pharisees; this sect developed into the normative rabbinic Judaism which has dominated the religion for the last nineteen centuries.

To further complicate the picture, Christianity was in its infancy at this time: Jesus and Paul were active, and the first of the Gospels, Mark's, was written shortly before 70 C.E. The task of biblical scholars then, from 1947 to the present day, has been to determine who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, and how the scrolls relate to the different brands of Judaism and to incipient Christianity during the period of the Roman occupation of Israel.

The majority view, to which I subscribe, is that the scrolls were written by the Essenes. Unfortunately, we do not know a lot about this group, but from the ancient Jewish writers Philo and Josephus and from the Roman writer Pliny the Elder we learn some important facts that dovetail nicely with the evidence from Qumran. Pliny tells us that the Essenes lived along the western shore of the Dead Sea, between Jericho and Ein Gedi; this description matches Qumran exactly.

The Essenes lived a communal life, without money, with a period of probation before complete acceptance in the community; all of this is reflected in the document called the Community Rule. The Essenes



The caves at Qumran in which the scrolls were found.

did not participate in the sacrificial services in Jerusalem; likewise the Qumran texts do not refer to sacrifices and in fact allude to their current locale as a voluntary withdrawal to the desert to remove themselves from what they perceived as the sins of Jerusalem and its Temple. Many of the Essenes were celibate, and while there is no proof of celibacy among the people of Qumran, there are some hints in the texts. In the various laws laid out in the Com-

munity Rule document and in other legal texts, there are no references to women. Furthermore, only a few of the skeletons found in the cemetery at Qumran are female. The Essenes believed that all matters of human life were predestined, and this is strongly reflected in all the Qumran texts. Finally, there was a clear apocalyptic bent among the Essenes, and this, too, is seen in the Qumran material, especially in a text called the War of the Sons of

Light and the Sons of Darkness. Based on this evidence, then, I think it is clear that the Dead Sea Scrolls present us with firsthand material composed by ancient Jewish sectarian Essenes.

Another reason such importance has been attached to the Dead Sea Scrolls is that among the texts are the oldest copies of the books of the Bible ever found. In some cases, we have only small fragments, but in the celebrated case of the Book of

Isaiah we have a complete copy of all sixty-six chapters. When one realizes that prior to 1947 the oldest copies of the Hebrew Bible were from the early Middle Ages, one quickly sees how the scrolls represent a tremendous boon to those scholars interested in how the biblical books were copied and passed from one generation to the next. The book of Daniel was written in 165 B.C.E., so the fragmentary copies of Daniel found at Qumran are very close to the original date of composition. Some of the copies in use at Qumran diverge greatly from the traditional text used in Judaism (the Masoretic Text); at the same time much of the material is very close to the traditional text, differing sometimes only in small matters of spelling.

The Scrolls have been of great interest to scholars of both Judaism and Christianity. Simply stated, the Dead Sea Scrolls have revolutionized every aspect of the study of ancient Judaism, and by implication, modern Judaism. And scholars of Christianity have also followed the developments outlined above with keen interest, for not only do the Qumran documents represent Jewish texts from the period in which Jesus lived, but there are many points of commonality between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament. Even before 1947 some scholars had suspected that Christianity developed out of a particular type of Essene Judaism. The Dead Sea Scrolls seem to prove this hypothesis; in the very least they provide an important bridge between the Essenes and the early Christians.

Some of the points discussed above have close ties with early Christianity. The notion of communal life, opposition to the sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple, the role of celibacy, and an emphasis on apocalypticism all resonate in the New Testament. Specific pas-

sages from the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) are cited both at Qumran and in the New Testament to prove the same point. For example, both groups of texts use the verse "Male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27) as the basis for their distinctive marriage laws. Another example, "A voice crying in the wilderness" (Isaiah 40:3) is used at Qumran to refer to the community itself, while in the New Testament it refers to John the Baptist.

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the community at Qumran and those described in the New Testament is strikingly similar. At Qumran a group of twelve elders presides over all activities, a practice paralleled in the Book of Acts with the work of the twelve Apostles. The leader of the Qumran community is called the "overseer," which is the same term used by Paul in Acts for a leader of a Christian community.

Yet despite all these close links between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament, most scholars

do not think there is a direct relationship between the two. The most important reason: at Qumran the law of Moses was upheld and followed in the most scrupulous fashion. In the New Testament, of course, there is a strong move away from adherence to Jewish law. So the Qumran people are not early Christians, but they give us a picture of what an ancient Jewish sect that evolved into Christianity would have looked like. Probably, the early Christians were a different group of Essenes, one that

was less rigorous in its observance of Jewish law but which adhered to many other Essene principles. If there is any direct connection, the aforementioned John the Baptist is the most likely bridge. The New Testament tells us that he lived in the desert for some time. There were so few settlements in the wilderness that if he came in contact with any Jewish communities in the region Qumran likely would have been one.

In the past few years new controversies have arisen, not so much over questions of interpretation but over questions of access to the material. The first scrolls discovered in 1947 were published quickly. Sukenik published the three manuscripts that he had purchased; Millar Burrows of Yale University published three of the books held by Mar Samuel, and Yadin eventually published the seventh text. (Burrows was a teacher of the late Isaac Rabinowitz, professor emeritus of Semitic studies at

Cornell, who in turn wrote several important articles devoted to the Qumran texts.) Thus the scholarly public had early and easy access to the initial discovery.

As exploration of the eleven caves progressed and additional documents were found, the texts were entrusted to scholars comprising an international committee devoted to the publication of the material. Some of these researchers did their job well; within several years their texts were published for all the

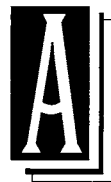
world to read. But for numerous reasons, other scholars never published the documents they were entrusted with. It is true that in some cases the texts are extremely fragmentary; there are hundreds of fragments, many of them barely legible. Better readings sometimes can be gained from photographs of the material. Often the text needs to be pieced together in jigsaw-puzzle fashion before the whole can be read and interpreted. But some scholars were accused of simply "holding on" to material, so that they could have power over colleagues who needed access to the texts.

To facilitate cooperation among the members of the international committee—who were dispersed over three continents—a concordance of the texts, including the unpublished ones, was produced in the 1950s and privately circulated among the researchers. This concordance listed every occurrence of every word in the entire collection of the Dead Sea Scrolls. A committee member studying a text in the United States could use the concordance to see if a particular word or phrase occurred in another text, perhaps one being studied by a colleague in Europe or Jerusalem.

Several events in the last year and a half have changed matters drastically. First, in 1990, the head of the international committee, Harvard Prof. John Strugnell, made several scathing anti-Semitic remarks in an interview with an Israeli newspaper. Prof. Strugnell was among the most guilty of the non-publishing committee members so there was little sympathy for him among scholars in the field of Dead Sea Scrolls research. Strugnell was stripped of his committee chairmanship by the Israeli Antiquities Authority, the official arm of the State of Israel charged with oversight of all archaeological research. He was replaced by Prof. Emanuel Tov of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who is working towards swifter publication of the texts.

Still there was pressure to allow more open access to the texts. A big break came in 1991 when a pair of researchers at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati used a sophis-

ticated computer program designed to read and create texts from concordances to produce a corpus of the unpublished Qumran documents. The privately circulated concordance developed in the 1950s served as their database, and the computer did the rest of the work. Scholars in possession of the actual texts claimed that their work had been stolen from them, and that the computer-generated texts are not fully accurate. Still, this use of the most modern research tool in the humanities forced the issue of access to some of the most ancient Hebrew texts extant.



A few weeks later it was revealed that the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, had in its collection photographs and microfilms of all the Dead Sea Scrolls materials. Apparently, they had been deposited there in case something happened to the originals in Jerusalem. The Huntington Library announced that it was "going public" with this material, and that any competent scholar who requested access to the documents would be granted permission to view them and publish them.

The Cincinnati and Huntington projects will result in a dramatic change in the way Dead Sea Scrolls research will be conducted. Already, scholars not connected to the international committee are publishing the results of their initial studies. For some scholars this means the ability to test long-held theories. In one case, Prof. Lawrence Schiffman of New York University will be able to test his hypothesis concerning the Sadducean identification of the Qumran community (notwithstanding the Essene connections described above, there are also some doctrines of the Sadducees reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls). In another case, Prof. Robert Eisenman '58 of California State University at Long Beach will be able to test his theory that the Qumran manuscripts are more directly connected to early Christianity.

My own work will be affected

by easier access to the unpublished materials. My main area of interest lies not in the identification of the sect (as noted above, I hold to the majority Essene view), but in various philological aspects of the documents. Thus, for example, several years ago I published an article on a key word in one of the laws of the Community Rule. This word is unique in the published Dead Sea Scrolls, and it is very rare in other ancient Hebrew works such as the Bible. The law states that members of the sect are to be punished with ten days of confinement for a certain public action. Most scholars translate the word in question either as "gesticulate" (with the argument that it was impolite to gesticulate while speaking) or "lean, recline" (with the argument that this, too, was impolite in the presence of others). I proposed that the word means "urinate, defecate," a meaning I defended on philological grounds. To solidify my argument, I wanted to know if the word occurs elsewhere in the Dead Sea Scrolls, specifically in the unpublished texts. I was stymied. There simply was no way for a researcher not connected to the international team to find answers to such questions. In the end my article was published in a respectable scholarly journal, but still one wonders if somewhere in the vast reserve of unpublished Dead Sea Scrolls this key word is lurking.

And so the saga still is not complete. From the moment forty-five years ago when an illiterate Bedouin goatherd first found the scrolls, until just recently when a literate computer program recreated the scrolls from a concordance database, the discoveries have been revealing and startling. Who knows what discoveries lie ahead as more scholars pore over more texts as they become available? As they say on television: stay tuned! ■

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