

# The Great Isaiah Scroll

A Voice from the Desert

Edited by Marcello Fidanzio





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A Voice From the Desert

# The Great Isaiah Scroll

Edited by Marcello Fidanzio



The first sheet of the Great Isaiah Scroll, with the beginning of the Book of Isaiah (Revised Standard Version):

*The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*

*Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the LORD has spoken [...].*



Handwritten Hebrew text on a fragment of the Great Isaiah Scroll, showing several lines of script in a cursive style. The text is written on aged, yellowish-brown parchment that is heavily damaged, with significant tearing and discoloration. The script is dense and fills most of the visible area of the fragment.

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## Preface

*One of religion's key roles is to be the custodian and propagator of universal values, such as freedom and equality, according to which we wish to conduct our lives as individuals and societies. At the same time, religion is also a part of our particular identity, of the unique history of our communities. It is what makes us distinct and special.*

*An inherent tension exists between the desire to apply universal values and the desire to accept, preserve, and encourage particularity and uniqueness. So, are religions particular or universal? This question stood at the heart of the Jewish-Christian controversy for many centuries. Yet in the last decades, both communities have come to see the challenge as being rooted in the need to successfully accommodate both.*

*Nowhere has that challenge been dealt with more prudently than in the following words from Isaiah 56:7: "My house shall be the house of prayer to all the nations," in which God declares through the prophet that his temple is meant to be a place of worship for all peoples.*

*The full text in the original Hebrew language reads:*

והביאותים אל הר קדשי ושמחתים בבית תפילתי עולותיהם וזבחייהם לרצון על  
מזבחי כי ביתי בית תפילה יקרא לכל העמים

*NIV: "These I will bring to my holy mountain, and give them joy in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations."*

*In these two short verses, Isaiah makes it clear that there is a place for both particularism in the form of various nations, and universalism in the form of a single house of prayer for all. He also makes it clear that the Jewish worship of which the prophet speaks is not closed and exclusivist, but, rather, seeks to implement its universal values for the benefit of humankind. Not only do the two not conflict, they actually complement one another.*

*That such a complex and profound message—so relevant today—was enshrined in the Hebrew Bible some two thousand years ago, is nothing short of inspiring.*

*It inspired the founding fathers of Israel who, when drafting its Declaration of Independence, included in it a commitment that "the State of Israel will be based on freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel...".*

*Israel's Declaration of Independence is written in the particular Hebrew language of the Bible, using the same letters with which the Isaiah scroll was inscribed over two thousand years ago. The miraculous revival of the language of the Bible in the land of the Bible by the people of the Bible is an incredible testimony to the persistence of a particular tradition across generations. Yet it also affirms our commitment to our tradition's core universal values, to the dignity of all peoples, and to the thriving of humankind.*

*The connection of the Jewish people to the Bible continues to bind us today in a collective commitment to reinstate ourselves in the land of Israel, where, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, "Their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped... they first attained statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books".*

*As these words clearly imply, the national and universal are not to be separated from each other or set against one another. Rather, it is precisely their coexistence and cross-pollination that Israel's Declaration of Independence, inspired by the prophet Isaiah, calls us to cultivate.*

*The relevance of Isaiah's message today cannot be overstated. In a world riddled with division and animosity fueled by blind hate, we are in dire need of the healing remedy of Isaiah, of peoples and nations coming together under God's roof to engage in prayer and dialogue. Only then will we be able to remove barriers and prejudices that set us apart, and learn to accept and appreciate one another.*

*I wish to conclude with another quote from Isaiah 1:17: "Learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow." In other words: do all that you can in order to help others and mend the world. To me, this constitutes the next step to accepting God's invitation to pray and work together for a just and safe world. It also reflects the prophetic particular-universal values that define Israel's raison d'être from its foundation until today.*

*Only when we learn to engage and pray together while accepting and admiring our differences will we be able to love and seek to help one another, making the world a better place for all.*

*That, to me, in a nutshell, is Isaiah's message.*

*Let us heed his call.*

Yaron Sideman

*Ambassador of Israel to the Holy See*

*Among many other things, the Book of Isaiah is a book of dreams. The dreamer is God himself. He imagines that the wolf will dwell with the lamb (Isa 11:6), that the names of enemies will be part of the prayer of blessing (Isa 19:24–25), that the afflicted will be comforted like children (Isa 66:10–16), and that all peoples will joyfully participate in a sumptuous banquet served in Jerusalem (Isa 25:6–10).*

*The story of the Great Isaiah Scroll, both ancient and new, is the pledge of those dreams of peace. In fact, the document, both impressive and formidable in its singularity, is the result of the collaboration of who knows how many hands, minds, and hearts. It is the product not only of the calligraphers who wrote it, but also of the carpenters who prepared the support on which the sheet was laid at the time of writing. The scribes themselves, the protagonists of the text, were in fact the heirs of those who taught them the sacred art of writing, passed down from generation to generation. The Great Scroll would not have existed without the sheep and goat farmers who provided the skin, the tanners who transformed it into parchment and put it on the market. Those who procured the components of the ink also contributed by cutting and burning wood, or digging an anthracite deposit. It would not have reached us without those who collected the clay, molded it, sold it, and bought the jar that held it. The Great Scroll would not exist without the cooperation of thousands of lives and without the harmony of all these things, which in turn are the result of the concord between things, people, generations, and worlds.*

*The Great Isaiah Scroll has thus come down to us with the breathtaking weight of a supernova just before the tremendous explosion that scatters its inestimable wealth throughout the entire universe. In fact, since its discovery, the Isaiah Scroll has initiated a new history of unimaginable alliances. Friendships between different fields of knowledge ranging from biblical exegesis to physics, from paleography to the history of religions, from chemistry to archaeology. Alliances between scholars belonging to different schools, cultures, nations, and religions.*

*By bringing together the contributions of leading experts on the Great Scroll, this volume realizes and expresses that network of alliances, as if it were a choreography of studies. Thus, this book honors the Great Isaiah Scroll's desire for peace. In this way, it contributes to setting the table for that banquet promised to all peoples.*

+ Giovanni Cesare Pagazzi  
*Archivist and Librarian of the Holy Roman Church*







Fragment of a scroll with several lines of handwritten text in a cursive script. The text is written in dark ink on aged, yellowish parchment. The fragment is narrow and has a jagged, torn right edge. The focus is sharp on the central lines, while the edges are blurred. The background is dark and out of focus.

*George J. Brooke*

*University of Manchester*

## The Dead Sea Scrolls as Archaeological Artifacts

Each Dead Sea Scroll has a story in three parts. The acts of discovery since 1947 are the opening scenes of the third part, and it is those moments of discovery that have fascinated the general public and which have triggered the questions and research methods associated especially with the first two parts of each scroll's story.

The first part of the story belongs to antiquity. Here the description of any scroll should begin with treating it like any other archaeological artifact as a product of the past. Too often scholars and other interested readers have jumped directly to the text that any scroll might contain and forgotten to consider the other significant details behind both the production of the manuscript and also the writing of the text. It might even be said that the ready availability of the Dead Sea Scrolls as texts—in their original languages and in translation, both in printed form and online—have encouraged a focus on text almost as an abstract entity to be analysed all by itself, without comprehensive reference to its physical context.

Therefore, looking at the Dead Sea Scrolls or any ancient manuscript, requires first some thought about who commissioned the scroll. Who would be paying for it both in terms of the cost of its material, but also in terms of the cost of the writing of the text? Once commissioned, who was responsible for going to the workshop and requesting a particular set of skins or papyrus sheets? How were such materials themselves produced, either as animal or plant artifacts? What is known about processes of flaying, depilation, stretching, liming, and storing? Who was responsible for cutting and preparing sheets of skin or of papyrus for them to be written on?

In addition to all the processes involved in the production of skin and papyrus, the scribe then had to have a manuscript on hand that would fit the requirements of the patron or scribal master. What tools would be used and what ink might be suitable for the task at hand? What size manuscript would it be for the purpose required? Would the scroll be used in public performance, or was it for private use, perhaps as something portable from place to place? What size of writing might be needed: micro-writing for tefillin, cryptic alphabetical signs of a particular shape, or a particular style of square or formal script or paleo-Hebrew? Or might the writing be less formal, perhaps as a scribal exercise? Did the scribe work sheet by sheet with the sheets subsequently sewn together? Or did he work on a nearly completed set of parchment skins? And then the manuscript with its completed text would need finishing in some manner, perhaps with an opening fold and tie or even a cloth wrapping for its better protection.



The Bedouin who discovered the first scrolls, in front of Cave 1Q.

The second part of the story runs from antiquity to the moment of discovery. At some point the scroll was placed where it managed to survive until its discovery sometime after the Second World War. For the Qumran finds, this was in a cave, at Masada several scrolls were buried under the floor, and at other places scroll fragments were found in various locations. For Qumran it does not seem that all the scrolls were hidden at the same time or in the same manner, so it is important to try to discern when and why and how each scroll was deposited where it was later discovered. Each cave has its own history and profile.

A scroll might have been damaged for some reason in antiquity, causing it to go out of use and resulting in its burial in a cave. However, most of the damage that we see belongs to the period during which the scroll has lain hidden. Damage can be caused by several factors: by the physical processes of the aging of the material, by the way the scroll was placed in the cave, or by various external factors such as occasional exposure to moisture, or to animals such as rodents or bats, or to the movement of the environment, perhaps through an earthquake resulting in roof or wall collapse in the cave. For example, a quick look at the Great Isaiah Scroll shows a similar pattern of damage at the bottom of the beginning of the scroll which was almost certainly caused by the way it was stored for nineteen centuries or more: placed in a jar nearly vertically but at a slight angle, the weight of the scroll gradually caused the leather at the bottom of the scroll to decay.

The third part of the story runs from the moment of the modern discovery of the scroll up to the present and into the future. The first matter of concern is provenance: when, where, and how was the scroll discovered and by whom? In some instances, as with the famous Copper Scroll, the discovery was made by trained archaeologists who recorded all the details precisely, including by photographic image. In many more instances, however, discoveries were made by others, and claims about provenance were made orally or through antiquities dealers; although it is not always possible, in a good proportion of cases such claims can be verified. So, for a few of the finds from Cave 1Q in the foothills above Qumran archaeologists who worked in the cave after the initial discoveries found pieces of the same manuscripts that had come to light through other means. However, it remains the case that several of the manuscript finds linked to the caves at and near Qumran have an uncertain provenance. This applies particularly to the manuscripts containing documentary texts, since the collection from the Qumran caves is overwhelmingly literary and perhaps was exclusively so.

After the determination of provenance there are two lines of approach in the treatment of the remains of a scroll. The first concerns a full range of physical matters. Most of the scrolls that survive from antiquity are in pieces, so, once fragments have been suitably assigned, there is a jigsaw puzzle to be attempted—and often that puzzle has many pieces missing. Scholars have developed various techniques, now assisted greatly through digitization, to assemble fragments that are associated with any particular scroll.

The physical remains need to be assessed in terms of their preparation and here many of the research questions are like those that belong to the best understanding of the scroll in the first part of its story. Questions emerge too concerning the age of the material. Three techniques have been applied which complement and correct each other: there is the C<sup>14</sup> analysis of the leather, the relative dating of the handwriting style (paleography), and the general confirmation of both through observations concerning the deterioration of the collagen

chains in the skin. The physical remains then need to be conserved in the most appropriate ways. Conservation methods have changed very considerably over the last three generations.

The second strand of questions involves the reading of the text on the scroll and its interpretation. The digitization of the fragmentary remains and the production of multiple images from different angles and with a range of lighting have greatly improved the ability of scholars to produce good transcriptions of the texts. Sometimes the text is already known from other manuscript sources, such as with the scriptural compositions, but for very many of the texts found among the scrolls there is no other information about them. Scholars also take note of all the information that can be derived from seeing how the text was written on the scroll: layout, paragraphing, handwriting style and size, scribal marks in the margins, corrections, etc. Much of this information is not discernible in a printed or online edition, but it should not be overlooked.

Then there is the analysis of the language of the text—its grammar and syntax—so that a suitable translation can be produced. In all that, it has to be



remembered that language itself develops and changes over time for a variety of reasons. With a suitable translation to hand, the debate can begin about how best to understand the composition presented on the manuscript: its possible structure, form, genre, setting, and purpose, both as originally produced and as subsequently used. The production of good editions of these fragmentary manuscripts is an ongoing task. Improvements in the modern understanding of these works are taking place all the time, such as with the increasing certainty that only a minority of the scrolls found in the caves and near Qumran were actually produced there—most were brought from elsewhere. And these manuscripts have ongoing significance for the modern appreciation of textual transmission and for their religious and cultural importance.

Each scroll needs to be considered from the outset as an archaeological artifact with three phases in its existence as outlined here. This volume of studies shows that the Great Isaiah Scroll is no exception.





*Emanuel Tov*

*Hebrew University*

## What Are the Dead Sea Scrolls?

What are the Dead Sea Scrolls? Everyone talks about them, but the public often doesn't know what they are. They must be important because everyone wants to see them, but also after the eyesight most people don't know what they have seen. I will illustrate this with an anecdote. Years ago, when we turned to a large museum in Sydney, Australia with the suggestion that they undertake an exhibit of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the director said: "Yes, with pleasure, but what are these scrolls?"

The Dead Sea Scrolls are ancient manuscripts that were found near the Dead Sea between the years 1947 and 1956 that tell the story of the intellectual life in Israel of 2,000 years ago. They were discovered in caves, far away from modern places of habitation, in an arid climate that helped these scrolls to survive for many centuries, covered by layers of dust, dirt, and animal dung. These ancient fragments were remains of scrolls similar to the Torah scrolls used until today in Jewish worship in synagogues. The main find place was Wadi Qumran, half-an-hour by car from Jerusalem, near kibbutz Kaliyah. Here, literally thousands of scroll fragments of all sizes were found, written mainly on skin (leather) and some on papyrus. Other scrolls were discovered to the south of Qumran in various sites, of which the most famous is on top of the Masada mountain, where they were found barely under the surface. In the central find place, Qumran, fragments of close to one thousand literary documents were found, predominantly in the so-called Caves 1Q, 4Q, and 11Q, near the ruins of community buildings. As to the nature of that community, according to the most widely accepted theory, a select

Fragments of 11Q20, Temple Scroll<sup>b</sup>.

group of Essenes, one of the Jewish groups living in ancient Israel, sometimes described as a sect, lived at the spot from about 100 BCE until 68 CE. When moving out to the desert from other places in ancient Israel, the settlers took with them scrolls originating at various places. At the same time, they also copied scrolls at Qumran itself.

The texts deposited in the caves probably had been collected by the members of the Qumran community who previously housed them within one of the community buildings. The community members consulted some or all the texts, some privately and some in community gatherings; however, we possess no information regarding the exact role of these texts in their daily life over a period of almost two hundred years, probably around 100 BCE, until the demise of the site in 68 CE.

The fragments belonged to what were once some 950 complete Qumran documents in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, while the complete collection, before its destruction by the elements of nature, would have included more than 1,000 documents.

Some of the scroll fragments are sizable, and in rare cases large, even constituting complete scrolls, while most are medium-sized to minute. Two large scrolls measure over 7 meters, namely the the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa<sup>a</sup>), and the nonbiblical Temple Scroll (11QT<sup>a</sup>, a rewritten Torah scroll), both today exhibited in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Scrolls of intermediate size measure anywhere between 40 centimeters and 1 to 2 meters, while tiny fragments of scrolls measure only a few square centimeters. The ongoing process of identification of the fragments is based on content, handwriting, color of the skin, and shape of the fragments. These identifications were not without problems especially since reliance upon handwriting is not without problems.

The corpus contains more than 240 fragmentary manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, which is a large percentage of the scrolls found at Qumran. The group of Scripture scrolls includes the minute texts incorporated in the twenty-four *tefillin* (“phylacteries”) that religious Jews place on their head and arms during daily morning prayers.

Until the scrolls were found, the Hebrew Bible was known only from medieval manuscripts, strange as it may sound. Before 1947, the oldest Hebrew evidence for the Bible were the Cairo Genizah manuscripts, dated to anywhere between the fifth and tenth century CE, and a few additional manuscripts such as the Manuscript London + Ashkar-Gilson, dated to the seventh or eighth century CE. Then came the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating to 500 to 1,000 years earlier.

Thousands of readings in the Dead Sea Scrolls (that is, “variants” differing from the traditional, Masoretic Text) not previously known help us to better understand the complexities of the biblical text, often pertaining to matters of substance.

It is often thought that the Qumran Scrolls include only Scripture manuscripts but that is not true. In addition to biblical fragments, the Qumran Scrolls contain compositions in diverse literary genres such as wisdom literature, psalms, biblical interpretation, apocalyptic compositions, calendrical documents, prayers, rewritten biblical books, eschatological writings, and magical documents, some composed by the Qumran community, and some by others.

By way of these scrolls, we now have a clear picture of the Jewish literature of this period. The corpus of compositions found at Qumran probably reflects the literary taste of the community that lived there: almost every text expands our understanding of the literary genre to which it belonged. Some sectarian scrolls are written in a cryptic script. Many texts have been found in multiple copies,

enabling an examination of the relationship between these copies. The texts that are the most typical of the Qumran sectarian literature are the Pesharim (contemporizing biblical commentaries), the Thanksgiving Hymns (Hodayot), the Community Rule, and the War Scroll.

Ever since their discovery, the scrolls have been named the “Dead Sea Scrolls” or “Scrolls from the Judean Desert.” However, these manuscripts did not derive only from the Dead Sea area. It has become increasingly clear that only a certain percentage of the scrolls were copied at their respective find sites in the Judean Desert. For Qumran, probably only one third of the scrolls were copied on the spot, while the remainder were taken there by members of the Qumran community from other places in Israel. This view is based on considerations of content and on a theory about a school of Qumran scribes who copied many scrolls that shared certain scribal characteristics as opposed to other scrolls taken to Qumran.

As a result, the term “Dead Sea Scrolls” is misleading, as it implies a limited milieu for the scrolls. However, the Qumran Scrolls represent a broad spectrum of biblical and nonbiblical writings created and copied in ancient Israel, and they should therefore be considered “the scrolls of ancient Israel.” Likewise, the biblical scrolls found at the other sites in the Judean Desert were not copied there, neither at Masada, nor in the caves used to stow scrolls from the time of the Second Jewish (Bar Kokhba) revolt (132–135 CE). Therefore, most aspects of the description of the Dead Sea Scrolls pertain to the entire land of Israel, and not only to the Essenes, Qumran, or the Judean Desert sites.

These scrolls have been published mainly in the *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* series, the official publication series of the fragments found in the Judean Desert, as well as in several digital text editions: Accordance, Logos, DSSEL. Most images of the fragments are now also accessible on the internet in advanced analysis programs (especially, the Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library, Israel Antiquities Authority).



אֵלֶּיךָ  
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
וְעָשִׂיתָ  
לָנוּ  
וְעָשִׂיתָ

Ostrakon bearing an abecedary, an exercise by an apprentice scribe, from Khirbet Qumran.

