

Newly Discovered Scrolls Exhibited at Israel Museum

JERUSALEM — Two silver scrolls with the oldest Biblical inscriptions ever found, more than 400 years older than the Dead Sea Scrolls, went on exhibition at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, on July 1.

The scrolls, from the Seventh Century B. C. E., during the First Temple Period when the kings of the House of David still ruled Judah, were discovered in a burial cave overlooking Jerusalem's Valley of Hinnom, the "Valley of Hell," by Dr. Gabriel Barkay of Tel Aviv University, in a dig extending from 1975 through 1980. They were deciphered in the Israel Museum.

Nearly 1,000 archaeological objects were discovered on the site, from the First Temple Period through the Roman Period, most of them in a single below-the-surface repository of a burial cave which managed to escape the eyes of ancient grave robbers who had looted the nearby caverns.

As important as the objects found was the factual evidence that Jews continued to inhabit Jerusalem between the Exile by the Babylonians in 586 B. C. E. through the Return under the Persians in 538 B. C. E., many more than information from historical sources would indicate.

The inscribed silver scrolls predate the Dead Sea Scrolls by more than 400 years. Until this new find, the Dead Sea Scrolls were the oldest known example of Hebrew Biblical verses. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1947 they, in turn, were 1,000 years older than the then oldest known Hebrew Biblical inscription, the Aleppo Codex.

Parts of the Aleppo Codex were destroyed in Damascus in December 1947, so the next oldest known extant Hebrew Biblical document after the Dead Sea Scrolls is now the Leningrad Codex, written in

Egypt in 929 C. E., and on display in a Leningrad museum.

Over a two-month period, the two small silver cylindrical objects were laboriously unrolled in the Israel Museum Laboratories by Joseph Shenhav, director of the laboratories, and David Bigleisen, who specializes in archaeological restoration.

They had been silver plaques, rolled into tight scrolls, leaving a tiny space in the center where a string could be threaded, so they could be worn on the body.

After the scrolls were unrolled, one to a height of 97 mm. and the other to 39 mm. (3.8 and 1.5 inches), ancient Hebrew script was apparent, especially the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable name of the Deity.

On further examination, 17 lines of writing were discerned on the larger scroll, only a small portion of it visible to the naked eye. Further study made it probable that both scrolls originally contained 19 inches each.

The material was entrusted to Ada Yardeni, an expert in drawing First Century Period script. She succeeded in deciphering part of the inscriptions on both pieces as fragments of the Priestly Benediction, which appears in the Bible in Numbers 6:24-26. It is translated customarily as:

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you;

The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and grant you peace.

A modern translation is found in the 1962 Bible published by the Jewish Publication Society:

The Lord bless you and keep you!

The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you!

The Lord bestow His favor

up to you and grant you His friendship!

In the Hebrew, the Tetragrammaton, the four letters that signify the Deity, YHWH, is the second word in each line. The three lines are composed of three, five, and seven words, respectively. In the Temple, the Tetragrammaton was uttered by the high priest; in the synagogue it is pronounced "Adonai."

The type of letters used clearly indicates the time period as late Seventh Century or early Sixth Century, B. C. E. After the return from Exile, in 538 B. C. E., the Jews adopted the Aramaic letters as their own.

The excavation of the nine burial caves in the "Shoulder of Hinnom" showed they had been in use continuously, with brief lapses, for the entombment of the dead from the First Temple Period through the Roman Period.

"Of special interest are the burials from the end of the First Temple and from the time after its destruction (the Babylonian Period, Sixth Century, B. C. E.)," according to Michal Dayagi-Mendels, curator of the exhibition.

"Here," she said, "assemblages have been discovered for the first time which afford us a glimpse of a period previously unrecorded in Jerusalem...."

"These tombs, in which several generations of the same family were buried, contained numerous funerary offerings placed on the burial benches next to the deceased. When the burial benches were full, the bones of the deceased were collected and placed together with the offerings in a deep repository hewn in the floor.

"Fortunately, one of these repositories escaped the greedy hands of tomb robbers and was found intact by the

excavators. It contained hundreds of offerings, including personal possessions of the deceased, pottery and glass vessels, weapons, fascinating epigraphic material and a rich variety of gold and silver jewelry, reflecting the lifestyle of a wealthy Jerusalem family.

"The finds, which attest to a continuous use of the cave for burial in Babylonian and Persian periods, throw new light on life in Jerusalem after the destruction of the city and the exile of most of its population to Babylonia," she concluded.

The exhibition, in the Museum's Library Entrance Hall, will be open to the public until November.

The exhibition and poster are sponsored by the Associates Division of the American Friends of the Israel Museum. The catalogue is by courtesy of Julia Forchheimer.

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