Beginnings

This survey covers the contributions by Israeli scholars to the scholarly investigation of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek biblical fragments found at Qumran and other sites in the Judean Desert. For this purpose, the term “Bible” includes the traditional books of Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek Scriptures, excluding the so-called Apocrypha.

The first scrolls, biblical and nonbiblical, were found in 1947, at a decisive moment in history, the time of the birth of the State of Israel. As Sukenik would assert, they were part of the “Jewish heritage,” “which at this moment could hardly be compartmentalized from an awareness of contemporary events.” Indeed, the scrolls inspired Israelis to delve more deeply into the period they covered. The interests were scholarly and probably also somewhat nationalistic for some, but this did not distort their scholarly objectivity. On the other hand, Christian terminology and views colored the first two decades of scrolls research on the nonbiblical texts in non-Jewish circles.

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2 Sukenik’s words are reported by J.C. Trever, The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Personal Account (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 125.
4 In the preface to his book The Message of the Scrolls (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 14, Yigael Yadin states: “I cannot avoid the feeling that there is something symbolic in the discovery of the scrolls and their acquisition at the moment of the creation of the State of Israel … These facts may have influenced my approach to the scrolls.”
The first three scrolls to reach the hands of scholars were bought by Sukenik on behalf of the Hebrew University in 1947–1948. Four additional scrolls were purchased in 1954 on behalf of the State of Israel, and were exhibited between 1957 and 1965 at the Hebrew University and thereafter in the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum. Feelings of pride in these scrolls in Israel were mixed for two reasons: (1) from an Israeli and Jewish standpoint the Jewish scrolls had been “hijacked” by gentiles: from the beginning of the research until the mid-1980s Jews (including Israelis) were banned from the official publication team that operated in and from east Jerusalem (part of Jordan until 1967) working on the scrolls’ fragments in the Palestine Archaeological (“Rockefeller”) Museum; (2) in its reflections on the text of Hebrew Scripture, organized religious Judaism, as opposed to individual religious scholars, did not see beyond the manuscripts of MT penned in the Middle Ages. Ancient scrolls of the Bible were disregarded, certainly when they differed from MT, but even when they were identical to its consonantal framework. In a way, the texts of the scrolls from sites other than Qumran (such as Masada) from the first centuries CE could have been used to “prove” the early origin of MT, but organized religious circles have never pursued this, as far as I know. The traditionally transmitted text was assumed to reflect the original text of Hebrew Scripture even before the period of the Judean Desert scrolls, although it included the vowels and accents attached to it only in the 9th–10th centuries CE. Jewish tradition perceived these later layers of exegesis as having divine origin, just like the consonantal text.

The young Jewish state was proud to possess some samples of ancient Hebrew scrolls. This was so despite Israeli scholars’ frustration at not being able to participate in the publishing efforts of the bulk of the scrolls as part of the international team, and despite religious Judaism turning its back on them.

Generalizing, I would say that Israeli scrolls scholarship is sober, objective, and text-based, as opposed to tending to theologize. Israeli scholars have written important studies on individual scrolls, on philological, linguistic and exegetical aspects, and on textual theory in general. It remains an open question whether the ability of Israelis, or Jews in general, to read the script of the Scrolls has facilitated or encouraged more scholarly involvement than by gentiles. However, not all the scrolls can be read with the same ease as the great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsaa), and while at the student level skills vary, at the scholarly level Jewish and non-Jewish specialists hardly differ.

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6 I am grateful to Adolfo Roitman, Director of the Shrine of the Book, for providing me with the exact dates.