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Looking for Scrolls

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Notes and Comment

Looking for Scrolls

In a fascinating talk to a group of Catholic biblical students at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, on May 6, 1960, Mr. Yigael Yadin, head of the university's Department of Archeology, described what was at the time the most recent of the Dead-Sea-Scroll explorations. This renewal of the search for manuscript treasures was occasioned by references, in the reports of the Murabba'at discoveries, to fragments deriving from a "source inconnue". Suspecting that the "unknown source" lay within the borders of Israel, Mr. Yadin and his colleagues decided to make a thorough investigation of the Dead Sea region south of the Wadi Murabba't, between Ein Gedi and Masada.

The territory was divided into four strips, each of which was assigned to a professional archeologist with a crew of assistants who were to explore the area thoroughly. Mr. Yadin was one of the archeologists and the story he told was naturally that of his own explorations, which in the end proved to be the most productive. There were several caves in the area which might possibly have held buried scrolls. Some of them were not only inaccessible, but were so hidden in the folds of the vertical cliffs that they could not even be seen by searchers working along the foot or the top of the cliffs.

The archeologists therefore asked the help of the Israeli army and received a prompt, magnanimous response. To locate the caves, the army brought in helicopters, which were flown up the course of the wadis hovering perilously poised between sheer cliffs on either side, while the forbidding face of the rock was scanned and photographed for detailed study. By these means two promising caves were spotted. One was in the side of a cliff that rose to a height of 500 meters above the wadi bed, about 100 meters from the cliff's top. At the mouth of the cave, clearly visible from the helicopter, and in the

photograph as well, was the nest of some huge bird. The principal problem that confronted the would-be explorers was how to get into the cave.

The first attempt proved a frustrating failure. A good stout rope, an inch and a half in diameter, was fastened to a jeep parked at the top of the cliff above the cave. A volunteer from among the army men, having donned a parachutist's belt, attached the rope to it, and was then lowered over the edge of the cliff. He dropped slowly and smoothly in the direction of the cave for about eighty feet, but then found his way blocked by a projecting ledge which prevented his being lowered any further. He was therefore hauled up, a bit unceremoniously perhaps, to the top, and the project was abandoned for the day.

The following morning a second volunteer was called for, and lowered over the cliff in the same way. This time, however, an observer had been stationed in the wadi below, armed with field glasses and a walkie-talkie with which to direct the lowering operations. The soldier was let down at the end of the rope and, guided by the observer below, succeeded in getting past the projection which had put an end to the preceding day's attempts. But then a new problem presented itself. Below the projection the soldier found himself dangling in free air at the rope's end several feet out from the side of the cliff. The mouth of the cave yawned wide and deep and dark in front of him, but quite out of reach. There was only one way to get into it, and despite the risk the soldier took it. Daringly he set himself swinging back and forth until he was able to jump into the cave and hold on.

Once safe inside, in accordance with instructions he had received, he began to dig into the floor of the cave. It proved hot, grimy and fruitless toil. The cave floor yielded no treasures, either in the form of scrolls or anything else. As he was about to be hauled up again, orders from above directed him to bring the abandoned bird's nest with him. Birds have known to use even precious manuscripts for their building material. Tucking the nest securely into his pack, therefore, the soldier swung out of the the cave and began the ascent.

The drama was not yet over.

As he was being hauled up by those on top of the cliff, the rope got caught in a crevice of the rock and refused to budge. Nothing could shake it loose. There the cave-digger dangled, between earth and sky, quite helpless to go up or down, with the bottom of the wadi, a stretch of arid sand and gravel, four hundred meters below. Army training and a good physique came to the rescue. Hand over hand the soldier by sheer physical strength hauled himself up the jammed rope. But the exertion, after the labor in the cave, proved too much;

he weakened, slipped and fell back with a sickening jerk. Undaunted, he tried again, after a brief rest, and this time succeeded in reaching the projecting ledge in which the rope had stuck. He freed it and from there was hauled in happy speed to safety.

And the results of this perilous venture?

The nest contained, woven into its structure, bits of cloth and what looked like an old sock inscribed with Hebrew characters. It turned out on further examination actually to be an old sock, and the Hebrew characters spelled out the recognizable name of one of the residents of the Ein Gedi settlement nearby.

Thus ended the story of Cave One.

The second cave explored by Mr. Yadin's party was not a new discovery. It had been known and investigated before. Extending some 150 meters into the heart of the mountain, it was one of the vastest caverns in the whole region and consisted in reality of a series of three caves, each connected with the others by a low, narrow corridor. The floor of these caves was to the trained archeologist's eye "foreign" rock, that is, material brought in from outside. It was neither the original floor of the cave nor rock that had fallen from its walls or ceiling.

An effort was made to remove it, in the hope that the original floor might contain buried scroll treasure. But the material proved so extremely hard and so firmly imbedded that it yielded but grudgingly even to the powerful compressor and drill provided by the army. Work proceeded so slowly that the plan of removing all the "foreign" rock had to be abandoned.

Instead, a careful search was made between the stones; and this proved rewarding. In the dark recesses of the innermost cave, inhabited by myriads of bats whose dung, a foot deep in places, carpeted the floor, the first find was made. One of the searching party had at considerable risk edged himself through a crevice in the wall of the cave that was barely wide enough for him to squeeze through. There in a small, narrow chamber the light of his lamp fell upon a basket full of what proved to be skulls, human skulls, some of them evidently of children, and others bearing clear signs of mutilation, as if they had been done to death by violence. Upon the floor, on mats placed one on top of the other like a macabre layer cake, were several skeletons.

It was not exactly what the archeologists were looking for; but the finds were significant and fanned into bright flame hopes that had visibly begun to flicker and fade. The burials were all secondary, and Mr. Yadin hazarded the conjecture that they might prove to be

the bodies of Jews who had been slain by Roman soldiery during the second Jewish revolt. Fellow Jews may have gathered the remains together and placed them in concealment in the cave to prevent their suffering further desecration or defilement.

The search therefore proceeded but again quite fruitlessly. Days went by uneventfully. Nothing new was found except for one coin dating from the time of Ben Koseba, on the terrace at the entrance to the cave.

Some of the army men then suggested making use of a mine-detector. One was secured, and army technicians, followed by two archeology students to investigate the tell-tale registerings of the machine, made a careful search of the cave. At one spot the machine began to act up in great fashion. When the needle was pulled aside and released, it jerked back strongly and categorically, pointing always to one particular spot. Shovels were soon digging into the earth, and after going down a half meter or so struck a solid object; it proved to be another basket, bottom up, its handles tied together. When it had been unearthed and opened it was seen to contain: several copper vessels, jugs with images of deities engraved upon them with the engravings deliberately defaced, three incense shovels, a key, and a kind of paten. They were all clearly cult objects. Mr. Yadin believes it probable that they belonged to Roman troops who are known to have carried such things around with them in a locked box. Perhaps they had fallen into the hands of Jews, who before using them for their own purposes, removed or defaced the images of the pagan deities. All of the objects were in a remarkably good state of preservation.

There followed another period of fruitless search and toil.

Three individuals from one of the nearby Jewish settlements, who had asked to be allowed to join the party but once in had shown little inclination for physical exertion, then approached Mr. Yadin and requested permission to make another search between the rocks of the innermost cave. Reluctant at first to grant the request lest it have an adverse effect on the morale of those engaged in the more laborious type of work, Yadin finally consented and off the three went. They were missing for the rest of the morning. But at lunch time two of them came back white-faced with excitement. In Cave Three they had discovered a kind of pit under the floor of the cave, and one of their number had gone down into it and made a discovery.

At the bottom of the pit was a water-skin made from the hide of a sheep or goat. It had been used by its last owner, not for water but as a kind of satchel. In it were all sorts of things which evidently had belonged to a woman: batches of dyed, raw wool, not

yet combed; wool already combed and worked into skeins; a mirror in a wooden case with a highly polished parchment cover; a necklace; and several little amulets for protection against the Evil Eye. And down at the very bottom of all this feminine gear was a bundle of papyri written upon and folded over so as to make it fit into the skin bag.

That was the final discovery of the archeological explorations. At the time Mr. Yadin delivered his talk, the finds were still under study and no definite conclusions had been reached as to their nature or date. The papyri were still in the process of being unfolded and deciphered.

JOSEPH J. KAVANAGH

The Philippine-American Cultural Center

Lincoln Square in New York City reminds every visitor to that metropolis of what money, used properly, can do to encourage art and culture. Most big cities abroad have similar centers or places where the best and the finest in the people's cultural heritage can be treasured, developed and transmitted from one generation to another.

Manila has long been pointed out as one of the most backward cities when it comes to the presentation of art and the preservation of our cultural accomplishments. A city of almost two million people, Manila should, if it were the capital of a more progressive country, be able to boast of several museums, art galleries, public libraries, theatres (not just cinemas), parks, and the like. The small city of Copenhagen, with about half a million inhabitants, has over twenty different museums and galleries, two big theatres and two big public libraries, not to mention the 7-hectare recreation park in the heart of the city.

This story of our prospective cultural center can very well begin with the exchange of diplomatic notes begun during the administration of President Quirino and concluded during that of President Magsaysay. President Garcia was the Secretary of Foreign Affairs when the agreement was signed. The subject of the agreement was informational media of U.S. manufacture, that is, periodicals, books, textbooks and other articles which may be used to convey information. It enabled U.S. producers of such media materials to continue sending their products to the Philippines. The U.S. Government guaranteed