

THE JOHN HENRY BIRKS COLLECTION OF ANCIENT PALESTINIAN MANUSCRIPTS

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PRINCIPAL F. Cyril James has announced the acquisition for the Faculty of Divinity, McGill University, through the munificence of the John Henry Birks Foundation, of a collection of manuscript fragments of the Old Testament and related works dating from the beginning of the Christian era and earlier. These will be of the utmost importance for the study of Judaism in the time of Christ, and for the study of the Old Testament text. They are part of a find made in a cave known as "Qumran Cave Four" in the Judaeen Desert near the Dead Sea in September 1952. Most of the remainder is in the hands of the Jordan Government and the Palestine Museum. The Faculty of Divinity collection will be the largest outside of Palestine. It was obtained for McGill by purchase from the Bedouin who made the find, as a result of prolonged negotiations conducted by the author with the Department of Antiquities of the Jordan Government. The Director of the Dept. of Antiquities, G. Lankester Harding, F.S.A., has declared that the genuineness of the documents is beyond question, and has written to "congratulate the University on having acquired what is certainly the finest collection of these unique manuscript fragments outside the original Government collection".

Since the accidental discovery in 1947 of the famous "Dead Sea Scrolls", including a complete copy of the Book of Isaiah, five other caves containing parts of the library of a Jewish sect, apparently the Essenes, have been found in the same vicinity about ten miles south of Jericho. The ruins of the sect's community centre at Khirbet Qumran have been excavated by British, French and American archaeologists. The most extensive and important finds were made in what is now known as "Cave Four", and of these about one quarter have been obtained for McGill. Smaller collections have been purchased by Manchester University and the Vatican Library. They will remain at the Palestine Museum in Jerusalem (Jordan) for about two years for classification and study.

The excavation of the community centre at Khirbet Qumran by Father R. de Vaux of the École Biblique in Jerusalem has demonstrated conclusively that it was occupied by the sect from the second century B.C. to the First Jewish Revolt, as a result of which Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70. Evidently on the approach of Roman armies the "Essenes" were dispersed, after concealing their library in surrounding caves so well hidden that some were not discovered until the twentieth

century. Ancient authors record similar discoveries in the same vicinity in the third and in the eighth centuries A.D. In the community centre have been found the remains of a "scriptorium", with a table, inkpots and a basin apparently for ritual washings; here evidently some at least of the newly found manuscripts were copied by the scribes from older examples.

The fragments of the John Henry Birks Collection are still in process of being cleaned and identified, so that it is not yet known what it comprises, except that there are included both Biblical and non-Biblical manuscripts in Hebrew and Aramaic. The material previously acquired by the Jordan Government from the same cave includes parts of every book of the Old Testament except Chronicles, and also commentaries, paraphrases, apocryphal works (some previously unknown), together with ritual documents of the Qumran sect.

These finds, of which McGill has been so fortunate as to acquire a significant portion, will throw a flood of light on the history of Judaism in the post-Maccabean period, and on the crucial epoch of the rise of primitive Christianity. In addition, they give glimpses of the form of the Old Testament text a thousand years before the copying of the Hebrew scrolls from which our English Bibles and other translations have been made.