

From: Israeli Institute of Antiquities
Sent: Monday, February 9, 2009
To: Biblical Archaeologists & Textual Critics
Subject: Recent Manuscript finds in Tell at Yavneh

Biblical Archaeologists & Textual Critics-

Recent digs at restricted locations at the site of the ancient city of Yavneh have uncovered a collection of papyrus manuscript scrolls bound and sealed in clay jars. Yavneh, as you are no doubt aware, was the ancient site of a Jewish academy that may have played an integral role in the development of the canon of Jewish scriptures after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD. Yavneh also became the center of Pharisaic leadership in the Post Second Temple Period and as such, may have been the place where Judaism sought to redefine itself after the loss of the temple and during the formative years of Christianity.

The scrolls can be divided into two categories: (1) scrolls that correspond to books in the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament, and (2) scrolls that appear to be community rules and records. Among the Biblical books are Greek copies of Daniel and First Maccabees. Among the non-Biblical works are several collections of sayings that appear to fall into the category of Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature.

Attached to this document you will find facsimiles of two scrolls found at the site. One scroll appears to be completely intact, the other has been damaged due to a crack found in the side of the jar in which it was contained; air was allowed into the jar thus causing the papyrus to become brittle. Both scrolls appear to be copies of essentially the same text, with minor differences. Carbon dating places both scrolls in the same time period- the late first/early second century AD, probably close to 100 AD. The scrolls appear to be some sort of manual for scribes- similar to those found in synagogues at other locations throughout Palestine.

We are asking for your assistance in answering two questions: (1) Which of the two scrolls is probably more "accurate" (i.e. closer to a hypothetical original)? and, (2) What can we know about the community or communities that produced these scrolls? The following background information on the Yavneh dig may be helpful.

We have known for some time from non-Biblical references and inscriptions found at Yavneh that at least one Jewish synagogue existed there in the late first century. For the last decade, archaeologists at the site have been evenly divided over the location of this synagogue, between two sites that seem to fit the known criteria for synagogue architecture of the time. More recently, a minority of scholars has proposed that both sites may in fact be synagogues, and that both existed at the same time. Such a situation is almost unknown during the assumed time period, except in cases where the synagogues were 'rivals'- offering competing interpretations of the Torah.

To complicate matters, neither of the scrolls in question was found at either of the proposed synagogue sites, so at present neither appears to offer any insight into the synagogue debate. Rather, both were found at a third location, which appears to have been a library of some sort. We do not know if the scrolls "belong" to either (or both) of the proposed synagogues because we have no information about synagogue practices in the city, save for the safe assumption that such practices were probably in line with those of the Pharisees who controlled the city after the Second Temple was destroyed. It is hoped that translating the scrolls will help to fill out this picture.

We need from you the following:

1. A complete transliteration of each scroll.
2. A catalogue of differences between the two.
3. An explanation for the differences that explains and establishes with reasonable confidence which is closest to the original, and that offers a logical picture of the community/ies that produced them, along with a hypothesis that relates these scrolls to the question of the two synagogues.

*The facsimiles of the two scrolls are on the back of this page.
Use Worksheet #1 to answer the above questions.*