

# The Scroll



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THE  
SCROLL

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## *Foreword and Acknowledgments*

**T**he Jewish divorce decree that spurred the idea for this book was in fact discovered in a cave in Wadi Murabba'at in the Judean Desert.<sup>1</sup> The document is dated to the equivalent of what many scholars believe to be 71–72 CE. That means it was composed toward the end of the Sicarii community at Masada, shortly before the fortress was captured by the Romans. The document records the husband's name as Joseph and the wife's – like mine – Miriam. Both are among the most common names in the Second Temple period. Out of respect for Joseph and Miriam of Masada, I have kept their true names, although I concede, this book emerged partly out of the desire to explore how a present-day Miriam might have responded to the devastating choices an ancient Miriam faced. How they came to be divorced, and how the scroll recording their divorce reached the Judean desert cave where it was found by archaeologists some 2,000 years later, I drew from my imagination.

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1. R. de Vaux, J. T. Milik, and P. Benoit, *Les Grottes de Muraba'at*, Discoveries in the Judean Desert II (Oxford, 1961); H. M. Cotton and A. Yardeni, *The Aramaic and Greek Documents from Nahal Hever and Other Sites* (Oxford, 1997).

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## Prologue

JAN. 21, 1951, BETHLEHEM

**T**wo battered Fords, their Jordanian police markings barely visible under a layer of couscous-colored mud from the last rainstorm, maneuvered slowly out a narrow alleyway and emerged on the edge of town. In the lead car were Hannan Farhan and Hassan 'Id of the Ta'amirah Bedouin tribe. Following close behind, in the second car, were Father Roland de Vaux, head of Jerusalem's École Biblique, and Gerald Lankester Harding, director of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities.

"Does he *aim* for the potholes, I wonder?" Harding mused aloud, grabbing on to the door handle in an attempt to stabilize his angular frame. In response, De Vaux raised his palms in mock surrender to the bone-jarring bumps that were by now so familiar he thought he might give them names. Names whose origins would one day be forgotten, like those the Arabs gave the biblical mountains around them.

The little convoy made its way eastward, past the last of the greening wheat and barley fields, toward the prearranged meeting place at Jabal Muntar, the "mountain of the guards" where, thousands of years ago, the Temple priests in Jerusalem would dispatch the doomed ritual scapegoat that bore the sins of Israel.

Two more mounted *shurta* were waiting to take over the task of escorting and protecting the foreign scholars. The mode of transportation changed at this point too. The motorcars were left behind, and the

Dominican priest and the British scholar mounted donkeys for the next leg of the journey. Three hours into the trip the donkeys, too, became useless. From that point on, the trail that wound treacherously through Wadi Murabba'at could be navigated only on foot.

Since the Ta'amira Bedouin had stumbled across the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran four years before, the number of brittle fragments in the Scrollerly in the basement of the Rockefeller Museum had increased from a few dozen to several hundred. The international team of scholars, Abbeys Starchy, Milik and Barthelemy, Professor Allegro and the others were hard at work on the laborious task of piecing them together in order to properly transcribe and finally, translate them without access to those who, in some other world, would be the most natural of de Vaux's colleagues, among them the Hebrew University's Professor Sukenik, two miles and a universe away on the other side of the barbed wire and minefields that divided Jerusalem between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the newborn State of Israel.

But two months ago, the Parisian-born De Vaux had received a visitor. It was Khalil Iskander Sharir, better known as Kando, the Bethlehem antiquities dealer who had, some three years before, mediated between the ivory towers of Jerusalem and the tents of the Judean Desert Bedouin for the purchase of the original batch of Dead Sea Scrolls. The houseman showed Kando directly to De Vaux's study.

After the requisite Middle Eastern amenities had been disposed of, and the houseman had set two tiny cups of steaming aromatic coffee before them, Kando finally announced the reason for his visit.

"I have some more fragments from Qumran."

The gaunt merchant proceeded to unwrap a layer of newspaper, damp with the vapors of a Jerusalem winter morning, from around a cardboard box. Wordlessly, he pushed it across the table at De Vaux. He waited while the priest took in the contents: a few blackened fragments of leather and several shreds of darkened papyrus. De Vaux raised one aristocratic eyebrow. The game had begun, or rather, it continued.

"From the first cave at Qumran? Really?" De Vaux responded dryly, making no attempt to disguise the doubt in his voice.

"That is an unexpected windfall indeed," the scholar continued. The Qumran fragments had become De Vaux's oldest and most intimate

friends; one glance at Kando's offering was enough to tell him: these were not from Qumran. His expression still bland, he removed a handkerchief from the pocket of his white cassock, peeled off his horned-rim glasses, polishing imaginary smudges away with slow, deliberate motions. He peered into the box again, showing just the right, slight amount of interest. Finally, he spoke.

"I am not sure that the Department of Antiquities can afford another purchase at this stage."

Kando's own inscrutable visage did justice to his skill as a merchant, developed over years of negotiating under just such circumstances. He folded his arms, leaned one elbow on the table, and cupped his chin in one hand. A long index finger came to rest on his small mustache, groomed to a careful square covering the space beneath his nostrils. He made no move to rise or take the box back.

"Of course," said De Vaux, "if it should turn out that these finds originated in another location, and if we could be shown that location, I imagine that would put a different light on things."

More cups of coffee, more roundabout discussion. Finally Kando was persuaded to reveal the true source of his latest find. It was Wadi Murabba'at, eleven miles south of the first cave of Qumran. Negotiations had moved toward to a quick and favorable conclusion from that point on, and so here they were at Wadi Murabba'at, one of the most inaccessible places in Jordan's Judean Desert. And yet, on this January morning as the sun rose higher on the little party rounding the last curve in the trail, they saw they were not alone. Harding rubbed his eyes in disbelief, but insisted on counting as thirty-four Bedouin burst out of a cave on the north flank of the wadi like a flock of startled starlings, scattering in every direction. Harding came across the last of the diggers still energetically going at it, in the depths of the cave, abandoned by his fellow raiders and too busy earning his living to be aware of the arrival of the dignitaries from Jerusalem.

From January 21 until March 1, a narrow rock ledge fronting the caves that became known as Murabba'at 1, 2, 3, and 4 was home to De Vaux and Harding, together with eight laborers from Bethlehem and two foremen from the Rockefeller Museum. The winter of 1951 was a wet one. The clouds that had formed over the Mediterranean floated heavily



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eastward, crossing the watershed in Jerusalem still potent with rain. The rainfall turned the desert into an intricately designed and riotously colored oriental carpet of wildflowers and grasses. But it also washed out the trail by which the men had reached Wadi Murabba'at, turning the three-hour trip back to civilization into a perilous daylong trek. It loosened rocks from the cliff above them and brought them crashing down on their two-man tents, set precariously on the rocky porch. Sometimes, a gray Judean sky left them an offering – crystal ponds of drinking water. More than once it turned the streambed below them into a raging river. Food came by truck via Jerusalem twice a week as far as it could go, with donkeys at the ready to bear the burden until the point when only two-legged porters would do.

Just west of Cave I was the grotto where Kando had told them the fragments in the cardboard box had been found. The cave's main chamber was a muscle-cramping four feet high, lower in places where the ceiling had collapsed in a long-ago earthquake. Sure enough, even before their eyes had become used to the dark, they saw fragments of papyrus lying everywhere, on the rocks, or just under them. Many were chewed to pieces by the coneys that had turned them into nests. Their immediate task was to carefully scour the entrance chamber, hoping to find a corner or a boulder neglected by the energetic "excavators" that had preceded them.

The gloom of what soon proved to be a labyrinth beckoned. A narrow rock chimney was one of two that the Bedouin had transformed into a busy route of passage between the main vault of the cave and what turned out to be its lower level. The archaeologists took the better part of an hour to inch their way through it. As they regained their bearings, the dim light of their kerosene lamp revealed a level of black soil, above which was a layer of ash. De Vaux knelt down and probed the ash gently. "More Chalcolithic fragments here," he said, opening his hand to reveal a few potsherds to Harding. Harding, close behind, muttered in agreement.

"Wait a minute," said De Vaux, his practiced eye falling on another item. The tip of his thumb and forefinger once again disappeared into the ancient layer. When they withdrew, they were holding an Egyptian scarab. De Vaux and Harding looked at one another in amazement.

“This is going to take some explaining,” Harding finally said. De Vaux placed the scarab carefully in the rucksack slung over one shoulder. But the familiar flutter of anticipation he had felt when he dropped from the chimney to the lower chamber had been replaced by resignation. The impossible mix of artifacts, which 4,000 years of history should have separated by several feet of soil and debris, told him what he needed to know.

“No it won’t. They’ve gotten to everything,” De Vaux stated flatly.

The Frenchman’s eyes roamed restlessly over the chamber, frustrated by the poor light. But Harding urged him back to the mound of soil and ash.

“*Ta’alu*,” Harding shouted up the chimney, ordering the waiting laborers to come down. Two more hours of work brought them to another layer of black soil. Then, a foot-thick layer of Roman-era antiquities: the gift of an unmistakably undisturbed stratum. Fragments of pottery, pieces of leather and cloth and wood, as well as the rarest treasure of all. No, neither precious metal nor stones, but a find of infinitely greater value – a document. They were to discover that it had been inscribed, by an ancient and forgotten hand, with the dry details of the divorce agreement between one Joseph and his wife Miriam – issued at Masada in 71 CE, two years before the fall of the doomed fortress and the death of its inhabitants. From that document, the story you are about to read was born, bringing the ill-fated Joseph and the bold and determined Miriam, and her descendants, back to life.

# Chapter 1

OCTOBER 71 CE

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he flame of the single clay lamp in its niche was tiny, but it cast a monstrous shadow against the plastered stone wall, mimicking Joseph's every move as he placed the scroll into the shaking hands of his wife. His own hands, warm in spite of the chill of the ebbing night, remained cupped tightly around hers. Miriam locked his eyes with her own, willing him to let her go so she could unroll the parchment for one last time.

She knew its terms. Her dowry was to be returned to her, together with fourfold compensation for lost or damaged property. She had declared no such property, but the scribe they had engaged insisted on writing out this additional clause with all the self-importance he could muster.

"And at any time that you say to me, I shall replace for you the document, as long as I am alive." Joseph had been adamant about the inclusion of this sentence. Miriam remembered the scribe, bent low over the document as he took down Joseph's dictation, glancing up with surprise when he heard these words. Now, as the words danced in the flicker of the lamplight, the finality of their meaning coiled itself around Miriam's heart like a viper poised to strike. In spite of her promise to herself, her green-gold eyes glittered with tears.

Joseph saw her falter, and he seized her firmly by the shoulders, just as he had done when he first suggested the idea to her.

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“But why, why must you do it this way?” Miriam had cried out in anguish then, when he revealed his plan.

“Because,” he had answered quietly, “when I leave the fortress, I will never return. I do not know if there is anyone left in Jerusalem to help me fulfill the mission Elazar has entrusted to me. If our enemies among our own people are the only ones to have survived, I will not last out the day I am discovered, and no one will care whether our community ever finds out what happened to me. You would become *aguna*.”

Such a woman, her husband’s whereabouts unknown, was doomed to disgrace, robbed of her future. She could remarry only if her husband reappeared to divorce her, or if his death could be proven beyond all doubt. Though a widow for all intents and purposes, she would remain chained – *aguna* – to her husband for the rest of her life.

Joseph released her as suddenly as he had grabbed hold of her, breaking abruptly into her thoughts of the past.

“It is time.”

He bent to fasten the final knot on his woven cord carry-basket, hoisting it onto his shoulder. He turned to face his wife and slipped his arms through hers. Lacing his fingers together at the small of her back, he pulled her toward him in the embrace she knew so well. But this time it was she who broke away, lowering her head to hide the tears.

“Away now, or first light will be upon you before you reach the bottom of the path,” she choked out. Daylight was a familiar, pitiless adversary, and Joseph instinctively placed his hand against the folds of his broad belt, feeling beneath his woolen cloak for the *sica*, the dagger that all the warriors carried. He turned, thrust aside the door curtain, and stepped over the threshold of the two-room dwelling the couple shared with Miriam’s mother.

Joseph’s back was tall as he crossed the courtyard, stepped through the outer door and disappeared from view.