

Ten Commandments scroll goes on display in New York

by [David Gibson](#)

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NEW YORK (RNS) It is an irony of history that the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai on two stone tablets are found in their purest form on a strip of ancient parchment so delicate that it is hardly ever seen by the public.

A rare exception is being made this holiday season as the 2,000-year-old "Ten Commandments Scroll" goes on display through Jan. 2 in a New York City exhibit dedicated to the Dead Sea Scrolls.

For once, at least, this display of the Ten Commandments is unlikely to become the focus of legal squabbles or impassioned religious rhetoric.

Instead, the exhibit at Discovery Times Square in Manhattan could serve to underscore the remarkable power of faith to shape a culture -- and the ability of that culture to transmit its bedrock teachings across the centuries, and around the world.

"When it comes to the Ten Commandments, it's something that crosses all religious lines and even moves into the secular world," said Risa Levitt Kohn, a professor of Judaism and biblical history at San Diego State University and the curator of the show, which features 20 of the more than 900 Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as other artifacts of the era.

"For one reason or another these laws have influenced not just Judaism and Christianity for centuries, but also have made their way into civil and criminal codes, and have really had a lasting effect on Western secular culture."

The scroll is part of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a trove of biblical and religious writings that were only discovered by accident in the 1940s in a desert cave east of Jerusalem.

The Ten Commandments provided the foundation of modern moral and legal codes -- including principles such as equality before the law, parental rights over children, swearing oaths on a holy book and a weekly Sabbath.

Indeed, versions of the Ten Commandments were written into the constitutions of 12 of the original 13 American colonies. "Pretty amazing when you think about it," Kohn said.

Yet as an increasingly diverse America tries to untangle the commandments' secular and religious elements, they have become a flash point in modern-day culture wars. Some hold up the stone tablets as an indispensable mark of American identity, while others see them as sectarian icons that have no place in the public square.

The Discovery exhibit defuses much of that heated rhetoric by placing the Ten Commandments in the context of biblical history, and in a time and place that is remote enough to allow viewers to consider them without the baggage of modern biases.

The reverence for the scrolls on display is more universal, based more on a fascination over their origin and remarkable survival than on any preconceived beliefs, religious or otherwise.

The Ten Commandments Scroll, for example, is just 18 inches long and 3 inches wide and was written in the decades before the birth of Jesus. It was hidden in the caves at Qumran near the Dead Sea (along with hundreds of other religious writings) for reasons that are still unclear. Whether a library or a hideaway, the dark, dry cave preserved the scrolls until their discovery in the 1940s and '50s.

The only other ancient copy of the commandments is the Nash Papyrus, which was discovered a century ago in Egypt, and dates to about 150 B.C. The Nash Papyrus is at the Cambridge University Library in England, and its paperlike material is even more fragile than the scroll's animal skin parchment.

After those two versions, the next oldest recording of the Ten Commandments is from a Hebrew biblical manuscript a full thousand years later -- a gaping chasm of time that makes the almost exact replication of the Ten Commandments in both the ancient and later versions all the more stunning.

"The amazing thing is that these are texts that were passed down by copying," said Kohn. "And that's a pretty difficult thing to accomplish because human copyists are prone to human error."

When the Dead Sea scrolls came to light, she said, "what they helped us understand was just how faithfully the text was copied over the years."

"You can actually look at this piece of parchment and see someone's handwriting on it that is 2,000 years old, and someone 2,000 years ago was penning the Ten Commandments pretty much the way you'd read them if you opened up the Bible today."

The Ten Commandments actually appear twice in the Bible, in Exodus and in Deuteronomy, and are slightly different. The Deuteronomy version commands the Israelites to keep the Sabbath to recall their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, while in Exodus the commandments enjoin them to keep the Sabbath because God also rested on the seventh day. The Dead Sea version, which is from Deuteronomy, includes both reasons.

The parchment was last on display two years ago in Toronto, and it will be returned to the Israel Antiquities Authority after its two-week display in New York. In April, the rest of the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit moves on to the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

This particular scroll is so sensitive to light and humidity that it is not even on display in Israel. But if the Ten Commandments Scroll is hidden away again, the teachings it conveyed through the ages -- and the passionate debates they continue to spark -- are surely not going anywhere.