

Dead Sea Scroll fragments at Museum of the Bible found to be forged

Close to 70 items that have come on the market since 2002 as Dead Sea Scroll fragments appear to be suspect, one scholar said.

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [November 21, 2018](#) issue



Conservators examine a portion of the Dead Sea Scrolls containing the Ten Commandments. AP Photo/Seth Wenig.

Since its grand opening a year ago, the Museum of the Bible has exhibited five fragments from the storied Dead Sea Scrolls, the ancient parchment fragments discovered 70 years ago in a desert cave.

In late October, the museum acknowledged that the five fragments it had on display were forgeries. They were taken down several weeks ago and replaced with three other fragments that do not have the same anomalies.

The museum had long suspected the fragments might be forged, and a sign accompanying the exhibit says scholars had raised questions about their authenticity. The scroll fragments underwent three rounds of investigation to verify their provenance, handwriting style, and the relationship between the parchment and ink. After the third round, considered the best determinant of authenticity, the museum received the results of digital and X-ray testing of the ink, sediment layers, and chemical composition, which proved conclusively that the fragments were forged.

“This is part of our ongoing commitment to making sure we’re adhering to all legal and museum standards, that our displays are accurate, that when we have information, we make it available,” said Jeff Kloha, chief curatorial officer. “Where we had uncertainty about the documentation, we put that up on the museum website and updated labels on the displays.”

Many of the items in the Washington, D.C., museum, including the purported Dead Sea Scroll fragments, were purchased by the billionaire Green family, owners of the Hobby Lobby craft store chain.

Among the 20th century’s greatest archaeological finds, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered by Bedouin shepherds in 1947 in caves near the sea. They are about 1,100 years older than any other existing texts of the Hebrew Bible. Among the fragments are portions of the Ten Commandments and the Book of Genesis.

The Israel Antiquities Authority owns most of them and displays them in Jerusalem’s Shrine of the Book. [Many can now be viewed online, too.](#)

“For the Greens and many collectors like them from the evangelical community, there’s something about the tangibility of the text, something about being able to touch a part of the Bible that predates Jesus,” said [Joel Baden](#), a professor of Hebrew Bible at Yale Divinity School. “There’s some deeply seated appeal in ‘the oldest’ and these are absolutely the oldest texts we have.”

The Green family bought 16 scroll fragments between 2009 and 2014, Kloha said. He did not say how much Hobby Lobby paid for the items before they were donated

to the museum.

This is not the first time the museum has faced questions about the origins of some of its antiquities. Last year, Hobby Lobby agreed to return nearly 4,000 artifacts to Iraq after they were found to have been looted from Iraqi archaeological sites. As part of the settlement with the Justice Department, the company was also required to pay \$3 million to the U.S. government.

Lawrence Schiffman, professor of Hebrew and Judaic studies at New York University and an adviser to the Museum of the Bible, disputed a commonly held narrative that the Greens erred by buying too many artifacts too quickly, without guidance from professionals who could properly vet their origin and authenticity.

He noted that close to 70 items that have come on the market since 2002 as Dead Sea Scroll fragments appear to be suspect. Some fragments were sold to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, others to Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California.

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