



# Writings of Jewish antiquity

Specialising in the Hebrew Bible and Dead Sea Scrolls, **Associate Professor Sarianna Metso** describes the complexity involved in deciphering the historical and cultural factors behind them, and outlines how ancient texts are shaping contemporary understanding of ancient literary works

## Can you begin by describing what sparked your fascination for writings of Jewish antiquity and, more specifically, the Dead Sea Scrolls?

Very seldom does a scholar interested in the ancient world get the opportunity to work on material that is newly discovered or unresearched. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls unearthed ancient Jewish literature, much of which was previously unknown. Fortuitously, at the time I started my doctoral work, the Scrolls archives in Jerusalem were opened to a broader community of scholars. The opportunity to venture into unmapped territory was fascinating to me. The Scrolls that had lain buried in the desert caves for 2,000 years provide authentic material contemporary with the emergence of rabbinic Judaism and the beginnings of Christianity. They offer a far more multifaceted and deeper perspective into the religious, cultural and societal currents of that period than was available before.

## Why is understanding the historical and cultural factors that contributed to the emergence of religions such as rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity such a complex endeavour?

Much of the complexity is created by the character of the material. Most of the ancient writings are multi-layered documents and compilations of materials stemming from a variety of sources written at different times, anonymously modified and transmitted further by creative scribes. Rather than simply copyists, ancient scribes were active participants



Khirbet Qumran, the site of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovery.  
© Metso

in the processes of authoring, collating, interpreting and revising textual traditions of the communities that had created them; originally, often in communal and oral settings. To what extent a document created in this way reflects actual historical circumstances of any particular community at any given time is often a difficult question to answer, although obviously these documents reflect history in a broader sense.

## How has knowledge that these ancient texts were commonly written by more than one person and augmented by successive scribes affected understanding of the development of new versions?

Our increasing knowledge of how ancient scribes worked is now changing – in quite fundamental ways – how we approach the concept of a literary work. For example, it has been quite typical for textual scholars to focus on uncovering the ‘pristine original,’ the presumed intended wording of the original author, and consider textual differences in manuscripts as ‘errors’ or ‘recensions’ – following rather modern notions stemming primarily from the Western print culture of a copyrighted work of a single author. While

there is no need to abandon the notion of a textual archetype, it is important to recognise that modern conceptions of a ‘work’ do not necessarily coincide with those of ancient scribes.

## Much of your work involves creating new editions of ancient Jewish texts. In what ways has your research been able to contribute thus far?

As a member of the official Dead Sea Scrolls publication team, I co-edited two fragmentary Hebrew manuscripts of the Book of Job. The manuscripts show some minor variation in comparison with the Masoretic text, which lies behind the translations of most standard Bibles. In addition to the manuscripts of the book of Leviticus that one of my current editing projects focuses on, another set of manuscripts that interests me belongs to a work called The Community Rule, a non-biblical work. When I first encountered the material, all that was available were black and white photographs of the preserved fragments, which I compared with the original fragments in the Scrolls archives in Jerusalem. There are still many unanswered questions regarding this material.

# The complex development of ancient texts

A researcher working in the Departments of Historical Studies and Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the **University of Toronto** is currently involved in two projects that seek to create new editions of ancient Jewish texts. Her work contributes towards presenting the preserved fragmentary materials in a way that advances their scholarly analysis

**THE DEAD SEA** Scrolls were discovered between 1946/7 and 1956 in 11 caves at Khirbet Qumran in the West Bank. The manuscripts are dated, using accelerator mass spectrometry and palaeography, to circa 250 BCE to 70 CE. The approximately 900 texts were written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek on animal skin and papyrus (though one was written on copper).

They are fascinating historical, religious and literary documents that are both biblical and non-biblical in nature. Every book of the Hebrew Bible is represented in the discovery of the Scrolls except one – the Book of Esther – which, curiously, is the only book in the Bible that does not mention God. Naturally, the Scrolls have proven to be of extreme importance to textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and have revolutionised understanding of the work of scribes in antiquity.

## THE COMMUNITY RULE

Associate Professor Sarianna Metso from the University of Toronto is fascinated with – and an expert in – Jewish antiquity. Her interest in ancient Jewish texts and, in particular, the Dead Sea Scrolls has led to several publications on the subject. She is currently involved in two different, yet related, projects that seek to create new editions of ancient Jewish texts. The first involves preparing a new edition of The Community Rule – one of the first Scrolls to be discovered.

Although the 13 fragmentary manuscripts of The Community Rule have been published individually, there is no single critical edition, as exists for many other classical works. For Metso and her team, this presents a problem, as without such an edition, scholarly analysis

Although the 13 fragmentary manuscripts of The Community Rule have been published individually, there is no single critical edition of the work

tends to centre on the quantitatively most-preserved manuscript, irrespective of whether it is the oldest or most representative. Without inclusion of the full body of preserved material, any analysis is necessarily incomplete.

Thus, Metso – with support from her graduate students – has set about presenting the totality of the preserved material in a meaningful way that recognises the complexity of its textual development and transmission through history. “My technologically savvy students are very good at utilising digital technologies, and the Israel Antiquities Authority recently made high-resolution images of the Scrolls available,” explains Metso. “The images have been created in multiple spectra and have taken our work to a new level; some previously unreadable text in the fragments is now visible with near-infrared wavelengths.” Ultimately, the project has enabled Metso and her team to create a comprehensive, unified treatment of the material with the latest revised readings.

## THE HEBREW BIBLE

The second project is a large collaborative effort involving senior biblical scholars from around the world. Her contribution concerns the development of the Leviticus volume in the Hebrew Bible. Entitled *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Edition* (HBCE), the full series will include all books of the Hebrew Bible, and make use of the Scrolls that are around 1,000 years older than the Hebrew manuscripts previously available. Where earlier editions made use of a single manuscript as a base text against which textual variants in other manuscripts were compared, HBCE presents a compilation of the best readings from all available manuscripts. “These manuscripts can be from the Scrolls or other important manuscripts – Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Latin and Syriac,” says Metso. “Previous editions were the best scholars could do because of the paucity of Hebrew manuscripts, but with the new evidence provided by the Scrolls, we can produce new and improved editions of each biblical book.”

## DEAD SEA SCROLLS

### OBJECTIVES

- To reconstruct literary, social or cultural history from ancient sources
- To create new editions of ancient Jewish texts entitled: *Serekh ha-Yahad (The Community Rule): A Critical Edition of the Foundational Text of the Dead Sea Scrolls Community* and the *Leviticus* volume in the series *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Edition*

### KEY COLLABORATORS

For *Serekh ha-Yahad (The Community Rule)*, former and current students of the University of Toronto:

**Dr Chad Stauber; James Tucker**, University of Toronto, Canada

**Dr John Screnock**, University of Oxford, UK

For *Leviticus*:

**Professor Ronald Hendel**, University of California, USA

### FUNDING

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada (past)

### CONTACT

**Associate Professor Sarianna Metso**

Room 307, 4 Bancroft Avenue  
Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations  
University of Toronto  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5S 1C1  
Canada

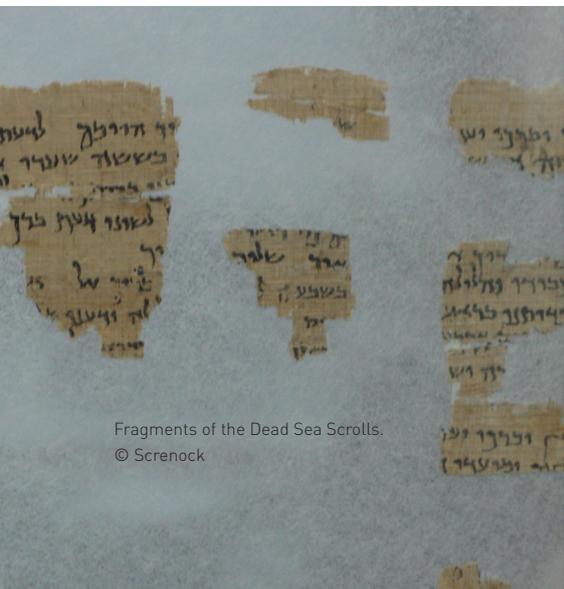
T +1 416 946 3243

E s.metso@utoronto.ca

<http://hbceonline.org>



**SARIANNA METSO** is Associate Professor in the Departments of Historical Studies and Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto, and Associate Member of the University of Toronto Centre for Jewish Studies. She specialises in the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls, particularly on issues of ancient Jewish legislation, community identity development and methodology of historical reconstruction.



Fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls.  
© Screnock