

Rocking the Oldies: A Cautionary Tale

by Daniel Passamaneck

It began long before our time, so I can't take total credit for how it turned out. Regardless, I think anyone would admit I did well with the resources available to me.

The U had been a major player in the archaeology craze of the Victorian era. They had expeditions out all over the world, desecrating ruins and liberating artifacts, and they did a good job of it too so far as such things went at the time. A sizable collection was duly amassed, and a suitable edifice was required in which to display it. The University Museum was commissioned for the purpose, with its first wings coming open in 1899, a serene and elegant institution more than equal to the priceless treasures it was to preserve and the academic enterprises to be undertaken within its halls. It's a stunning building that houses an amazing archaeological collection and a cubic passel of the world's top archaeologists. It is sited just across the street from the massive old football field with its crenelated fieldhouse and massive brick arches, and the U hospital, a fortress of medical education since the 18th century. The U Museum is a complete space in and of itself; it imbues everything around it and within it with reverence. Every visit I paid there as an undergraduate was an uplifting experience. Except for this once.

This museum was of high enough caliber to get some important touring exhibitions. Stuff from the Near East, Latin America, ancient China, the Pacific NW - a good collection was always rolling through. One, for example, that I didn't want to miss at the time, was a visit from the Dead Sea Scrolls. My buddy Glen and I were both down with seeing the scrolls at the stately old U Museum. And thus the stage was set.

I don't recall the costumes, but I could make an overeducated guess: denim, hard-worn and 80s-skinny, below a t-shirt likely to be either ironic, hallucinogenic, or (if possible) both. Shoes were sandals or sneakers so thoroughly used as to resemble organic extensions of our feet. I may have had a painter's cap on, backwards; Glen's girl-hair hung lankly down his back. We were unshaven and probably hollow of cheek and eye. We'd certainly set ourselves up to appear ridiculous.

On the other hand, we were thoughtful and attentive, and were motivated by a deep respect for both institution and artifact. We had the osmotic glibness with Judaic history of reform kids who hung out with conservatives. And we never did lose sight of the fact that, bedraggled though we were, it was our museum, a feature of our school. Regardless whose exhibit might be gallivanting through at any given time, the place itself belonged to us.

Memory is imperfect here, perhaps even suspect. I didn't remember any of it at all, actually, until nearly 25 years later. But I ran into Glen and, after so many long years apart, this story very quickly came back to him to share with me again. At the time I had repressed it, but since then I've dragged the riverbeds of my memory, encouraging true recollections to unsink back to the surface. I now have recovered something I believe to be authentic. Anyway, I know that something happened, and I'm pretty sure this was it.

It was a brisk, sunny day. We began as usual with a general review of the collections: the dramatic 12-ton pink sphinx, the unearthly clarity of the crystal globe under the massive rotunda, the good old golden ram of Ur, and all the other masterworks that we, as matriculants of the university, owned. The art moved us into a mindset of contemplative calmness and analytical attentiveness. Our eyes and hearts were open and focused. We arrived at the scrolls ready to make the most out of the experience. In what way, we were at the time unaware.

The DSSs are fragments of holy books surviving from around the year 70. The Essenes of Qmram (see how I toss this stuff around like

funnelcakes) secreted hundreds of documents in caves that perforate the walls of the deepest unsubmerged canyon on the planet, the valley of the Dead Sea, a land so hot and dry that something lost there can wait two thousand years to be found. The scrolls of Qmram included every biblical book except Esther and hundreds of other documents, more than 800 of which survived to be discovered in the 1940s by a Bedouin teenager who is doubtless now sitting pretty on the royalties and syndication rights, you know what I'm talking about. At any rate, the scrolls themselves are the second-oldest and by far most substantial trove of ancient biblical materials. Though badly deteriorated, the remnants that have been successfully analyzed have been invaluable to scientists as well as historians. They are materials of enormous importance. They are to be taken seriously and to the extent we were able to do so, we intended to. Honestly.

When we came to the exhibit of the DSSs we'd had a chance to read the exhibit notes and knew, so far as was necessary, what we were looking at. We waded in. The displays contained just a few fragments each, each one consisting of just a few parts of a few short lines. These scraps were presented for our review under the most rigorous atmospheric and security controls, so we were seeing at best only bits at a time. Still, there was no minimizing what it was that was before us. These were religious scrolls from the time of Jesus, from the era of the Second Temple. These were the real thing. And the weird part was, they basically looked like the torah portion from my bar mitzvah.

I could see the patterns the brush had made on the parchment two thousand years prior, and it was basically the same pattern from every torah and mishnah I'd seen as a child, which as it turns out was a not-insignificant number. The scrolls might be two millennia old, but - Glen and I exchanged a sophomoric glance - that didn't mean a couple of dilettante hebrew school dropouts couldn't sound them out.

We therefore began to work on articulating the text of the DSSs by the dim light of the display cases. The lettering was blocky and

businesslike, less decorative and cantillated than I'd seen in later writings, and of course utterly lacking in vowels. It wasn't easy-peasy hebrew, either - it was hard-core old school aramaic. Plus, neither Glen nor I had any of the vocabulary that would have helped us recognize words from contextual clues. Every letter was a struggle, every sound required negotiated confirmation. We didn't know what we were doing. And let's face it, we were just a couple of freaked-out hippy types, o-d'ing on archaeology. We were not engaged in any formal academic efforts, we were just trying to get closer to the text through the engagement of trying to read it. We didn't know what what we were reading meant. We didn't even know if we were reading it right. In fact, we suspected we probably were not.

We were immersed in our efforts when the first nudnick wandered over to partake of our erudition. By the time we looked up there were three or four of them. More? Here's where I start to falter, I'm not exactly sure how it went, but I'm pretty damn sure of the parts I'm reasonably sure about, so I can't let this one area of lapse sow undifferentiated doubt about what I've reconstructed of my memories. I don't know how many of them there were, but there they were for good and sure, gathered respectfully a few feet away so as not to interrupt our examination of the relics. We were being given academic deference by a handful of tourists, agog at the authenticity with which their visit to the ancient holy texts was being played out as, before their eyes, two sons of Israel, as rough-girt and hairy as any Elijah, interpreted the ancient scrolls through modern, world-reddened eyes. As I recall, one young woman was actually holding her breath. But that might not be precisely accurate.

What I do recall, with a clarity that puts all questions of authenticity to bed, is the mortification, the shame, the plain humiliation of having to confess our actual ignorance to those rubes. I remember the look that dawned in their eyes, the growing concern that these assumed so-called experts were abjectly unqualified. Their gazes were shifting from us to each other as Glen and I

bickered about letter sounds and missing diacriticals. We both knew it: though they had been initially fooled, we had already lost their confidence; already the charade, short as it had been, was over. They were starting to look insulted. I think it was Glen who stammered something about how this wasn't our area of specialization or something, as I gave my best "Trust me, I've thought this through" look in tacit endorsement. The tourists moved on, clucking. Glen and I couldn't really get back into the experience anymore and left shortly thereafter. Outside it was still a brisk, sunny day.

MORAL: Anyone can look foolish in public but it takes an artist to perfect it.

