

**Modern technology and the  
scholarly expertise of  
OU alumnus P. Kyle McCarter Jr.  
are unlocking the secrets of a  
2,000-year-old treasure map.**

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Israel Antiquities Authority

*The Copper Scroll is shown here as it was discovered in a cave in a remote Judean desert canyon. Originally a single scroll broken in half before being placed in the cave nearly 2,000 years ago, the Copper Scroll lists the locations of the temple treasure hidden in the wilderness to escape confiscation by the invading Roman army.*

*Photos on cover and pages 7 and 8  
by Bruce & Kenneth Zuckerman,  
West Semitic Research | Photo Edit,  
courtesy of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities.*

# THE MYSTERY OF THE COPPER SCROLL

by Ben Fenwick



The story of the Dead Sea Scrolls began simply. According to one account, two young Bedouin, probably looking for treasure, were exploring the small caves in a remote canyon of the Judean desert, south of the ancient holy city of Jerusalem. The boys searched by casting stones into each cave to see if anything was inside. Suddenly one of their stones broke something in a cave high on the cliff.

Darkness was approaching, and the cave was a long, scary climb away. The boys ran home to gather courage for another day. One of the boys, Muhammad 'ed-Din,' returned to find the cave filled with clay jars. The jars contained the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls, considered the greatest archaeological find of the late 20th Century.

Collectively the Dead Sea Scrolls are hundreds of handwritten religious texts in Hebrew and Aramaic, all approximately 2,000 years old. Included are the oldest known manuscripts of books from the Bible.

But there is more to the story. This monumental scholarly find has a glittering footnote in the discovery of the Copper Scroll. Telling a story only recently being accepted as

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*Back at his desk in Johns Hopkins' department of Near East studies, Kyle McCarter examines prints of Copper Scroll photographs taken by Bruce and Kenneth Zuckerman at the Museum of Antiquities in Amman, Jordan.*

factual, the Copper Scroll is nothing less than a map to the ancient treasure of Jerusalem's temple. Scroll scholar and OU graduate P. Kyle McCarter Jr. says no one is more surprised at the contents than the Dead Sea Scroll scholars themselves.

"The Copper Scroll contains 64 locations of caches, hidden treasure," McCarter says, "most of it large amounts of silver and gold—not the sort of thing we're supposed to find in ancient documents. It sounds like someone's imagination. It sounds like Indiana Jones."

In fact, scroll scholars are fortunate to have anything at all to study. By all the odds, the Dead Sea Scrolls, including the Copper

Scroll, should have perished at some point over the 2,000 years of their existence. Initially they lay inside limestone caves, sometimes enclosed in ceramic jars, often open to the elements. When discovered by Bedouin tribesmen, they sometimes were cut into strips and sold to scholars a piece at a time for exorbitant amounts.

Particularly extraordinary is the survival of the Copper Scroll. Hammered onto a roll of copper, it lay in the only cave discovered by archaeologists.

*Continued*

"The cave was constructed with a large anteroom in the front, and in the back, a much smaller room," McCarter says. "So much was found there—jars with scrolls in them, scrolls without jars, articles of clothing—that the archaeologists felt the cave once was filled from the floor to the ceiling with material before it was sealed." Hidden far inside the cave, separated from the other scrolls for added security, the Copper Scroll nearly was overlooked.

"After excavating the caves they decided to take one last look in the small back room," McCarter explains. "In a dark corner, they saw what appeared to be two rolls of leather. A slightly closer glance showed they

was nothing compared to the challenge presented to modern scholars attempting to study it. The copper had crystallized over the centuries in the cave, making the artifact brittle and very difficult to handle. It could not even be unrolled for reading because the substance that had once been copper would crumble when touched.

Eventually, after much discussion, the scroll scholars made the unfortunate decision to cut the scroll into strips to be dismantled and read. The work was performed by an engineer in an English laboratory. Although the process damaged the scroll severely, the surface now could be photographed. These grainy, black-and-

treasure was hidden shortly after the time of Christ, during the Roman invasion. The scholarly community was skeptical.

Treasure maps just are not found very often, despite the Hollywood image of archaeology, and no treasure of the magnitude described in the Copper Scroll ever has been found. Even the tomb of King Tutankhamen did not yield anything to compare with the 600 metric tons of gold and silver catalogued in the Copper Scroll. The account was dismissed by scholars as mere fantasy. The scroll, newly mounted in a special display case, was returned to the country of Jordan and sat in the museum of antiquities, vir-

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**The initial translator believed the Copper Scroll gave the exact locations of the treasure of the great temple of Jerusalem, constructed by Herod the Great.**

*During his first trip to Jordan to examine the Copper Scroll, Kyle McCarter, right, visited the ruins at Jerash, north of Amman, the site of the Decapolis city of Gerasa. The Decapolis was a confederation of Greco-Roman cities sponsored by the successors of Alexander the Great to promote Greek culture. With McCarter are fellow scholars Eric Myers, left, and Walter Rast.*

I. Jones, Hollywood, CA

were not leather but metal. The rolls were removed from the cave, and it was announced to the world that not only were other manuscripts found but also two Copper Scrolls."

Actually this latter find was a single scroll that had broken in half sometime before being hidden in the cave. But the problem the ancients may have encountered in crafting the scroll

white photos, made in the late 1950s, were for years the only text available to scholars for translation.

Those translations of the ancient Hebrew text stirred immediate controversy. The initial translator, a German scholar, believed the Copper Scroll gave the exact locations of the treasure of the great temple of Jerusalem, constructed by Herod the Great. The

tually ignored for years.

Then McCarter entered the picture.

McCarter is the son of Pete Kyle McCarter, for whom the McCarter Hall of Advanced Studies in the Oklahoma Center for Continuing Education complex is named. The elder McCarter was OU's academic vice president under President George L. Cross and the institution's first provost under Presi-

dent J. Herbert Hollomon. Kyle McCarter graduated from OU in 1967 with a bachelor's degree in English. He then pursued a master's in divinity at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, intending to enter the ministry. But Providence had other plans.

While earning a 1974 doctorate from Harvard University's department of Near Eastern languages, McCarter became known in academic circles for his study of ancient stone inscriptions in Hebrew, Aramaic and other ancient languages. He now chairs the department of Near Eastern studies at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he holds the title of William Foxwell Albright professor of biblical

"To me originally, the Dead Sea Scrolls were too late historically, too modern to be of interest," McCarter says. "My interests were older things. To me, modern history began roughly with Alexander the Great."

But a specialist in inscriptions was needed, since the Copper Scroll's text was incised using a mallet and chisels, much like a stone engraving.

Initially McCarter studied the Copper Scroll from the old 1950s photographs. Although what he read was tantalizing, McCarter needed a clearer picture of the text to make a definitive translation. So, in 1988, he traveled to Jordan to examine the condition of the scroll.

"The project would not have been possible without the cooperation of the Jordanian authorities," says McCarter. "The museum director put only one restriction on us, that if we photographed the Copper Scroll, we also take steps to conserve it. That's exactly what he should have done. We worked on that, I'm happy to say, with success."



He had not anticipated his trip being very fruitful, since time often destroys museum pieces, even if left undisturbed in a locked case. Metal artifacts, especially, deteriorate rapidly. However, McCarter was amazed when he inspected the relic that he had expected to be completely deteriorated.

"I discovered, to my delight, that the Copper Scroll is still there. It has not disintegrated," McCarter says. "The principal reason is that it's more than 99 percent pure copper. It has a tiny bit of tin in it as a natural alloy. Therefore, it's not as subject to the ravages of such things as bronze disease. It's certainly weathered since its discovery, but it's in substantially good shape."

As a result, the Scroll still could be



*Bruce and Kenneth Zuckerman had to transport hundreds of pounds of photographic equipment across the tense Middle East to Amman, Jordan, to rephotograph the Copper Scroll with high-resolution techniques that allow enlargements many times over with no loss or distortion of the image.*



and ancient Near Eastern studies. (At the time of their discovery, Albright was the recognized world authority on the scrolls.)

Because all but one of the Dead Sea Scrolls are written, not engraved, McCarter at first was surprised to be asked for his translation expertise. The scrolls also are quite recent for McCarter's background.

Upon arrival McCarter was awestruck by the enormity of the history that lay before him. The museum of antiquities where the scroll resided was atop the site of the citadel of Rabat Ammon, besieged by the army of King David in biblical times. McCarter immediately sought the cooperation of the Jordanian government.

rephotographed with much more modern equipment. McCarter enlisted the help of photographers Bruce and Kenneth Zuckerman, who are internationally known for their work photographing the leather scrolls in Jerusalem and other inscriptions all over the world. Transporting hundreds of pounds of photographic equipment across the tense Middle East

was not easy, but several months after McCarter had returned home, the Zuckermans finally arrived in Amman and began the photographic project.

The scroll sections were moved individually from the display and carefully mounted, with consideration for lighting, then photographed from a variety of angles. Several different lenses were used, including a special high-resolution lens that allowed the photographs to be enlarged many times without loss or distortion of the image. The process took weeks.

McCarter calls the Zuckermans' work "the best in the world."

"I can stick one of these photos under a microscope or blow it up as big as I want," he says. "These are extremely fine photographs."



he fine photography, however, revealed some further deterioration of the scroll. When McCarter first saw some of the new photos, he noticed additional crumbling along the edges where the saw had touched the scroll as it was being cut into strips in the English laboratory.

"The place the saw touched it in Manchester had insulted the metal in a way the ancient cuts didn't," McCarter explains. "The metal has begun to recede. Up to an entire centimeter of material has disappeared along the cut. Some of the old letters are gone, and we have to rely on the old photos for those."

With the Zuckermans' project complete, McCarter began work on the new photographs. Following the lead of Bruce Zuckerman, who is a scholar as well as a photographer, McCarter also became involved in plans for the conservation of the Copper Scroll. Among the plans discussed was a special climate-controlled case to house the Copper Scroll.

In the ongoing conservation effort, the Copper Scroll subsequently was sent to a laboratory in Paris, where a number of new technological advances are being tried to stop the deterioration. The scroll also has been scanned with a special X-ray so sensitive that it can bring out markings that have been completely obscured by the oxidation of the copper. This development is extremely valuable to

McCarter's preparation of what he hopes will be the final, definitive translation of the Copper Scroll.

In his reassessment and retranslation of the Copper Scroll text, McCarter is exercising extreme caution, mindful that the scholarly community has issued its share of false alarms and shaggy-dog stories. Even with the Dead Sea Scrolls, many stories appearing to be factual have proved to be allegorical tales, such as a letter released several years ago, purportedly from Samson to Delilah. Although the scroll was authentic, the letter was a common tale being told at the time, not an actual letter written by the biblical hero, Samson.

try, "which is in the Valley of Achor, beneath the steps that go to the east, forty lath-cubits: a chest of silver. The totality of its weight is seventeen talents."

Talents are a measurement of weight used in biblical times. The exact value of a talent is unknown, as more than one standard was in use, often at the same time. The modern-day equivalent of a silver talent could be approximately 50 to 100 pounds, or up to \$2,000 per talent. The measurement for gold is slightly higher, with its value equaling nearly \$30,000 per talent.

This gives special significance to entries like this one: "In the big pit



Nevertheless, McCarter is convinced that the Copper Scroll document was an actual account, not a fairy tale.

"I don't think it's possible—and almost everyone who has worked on the Copper Scroll now agrees with this—that it is imaginary. It's too business-like a document. It's too dull, frankly, to be a fantastic document."

"In *Harubah*," begins the first en-

try, "that is within the enclosure of the peristylion (a small, colonnaded building) in the recesses at the bottom in the collapsed stone opposite the upper door, 900 talents."

A few of the document's 64 entries speak of hundreds of talents of silver, but McCarter states that the accumulated sum of all the entries is enormous. "Truckloads of gold and silver. This is why most scholars thought

(the account) must be a fantasy.”

But the amount of treasure is even greater than the face value spoken of in the scroll, for there are also entries that mention other tributes, including incense. When the scrolls were written, the term had ceased being literal and had come to refer generally to tithes of precious metals offered to support the temple and priesthood. Thus, this entry has much more meaning than originally thought: “*On the mound of Khoklit, vessels of incense.*”

So, why are not hundreds of scroll scholars and archaeologists swarming to the Middle East to find this treasure? McCarter says more than a few have considered it.

“My children always thought their father worked with the most esoteric and hard-to-understand subject there was,” he jokes. “They finally said, ‘Ah, Dad is doing something worthwhile.’ They assume that once this translation is complete, the next thing to do is get the jeep and the gun and the whip and go into the West Bank and shovel the gold into the truck and bring it back. Not exactly what I had in mind.”

McCarter says one scholar who studied the scroll did try to find a site described as being on the east slope of

Harubah might have been, let alone the steps. The problem faced by would-be Indiana Joneses, McCarter points out, would be similar to someone who, 2,000 years from now, might hear about a fabulous treasure located next to a dumpster, next to the maintenance plant, in a location called the University of Oklahoma in a land called Cleveland County. In such a case, the treasure hunters might know where Cleveland County once was, but the rest would be guesswork.

“OU might still be there,” McCarter says optimistically. “You might find the foundation of what was once the maintenance plant. But in any case, that dumpster will be long gone.”

However, the Copper Scroll is intriguing far beyond its role as a treasure map. McCarter believes the scroll was hammered out by a craftsman who could not read, who carefully copied what he saw from a written model. He bases this conclusion on the fact that some characters have a few mistakes that a literate person would not make. McCarter theorizes that the work was ordered by a priest, one of the few who knew of the existence of the Copper Scroll. An illiterate craftsman would not be able to tell of the treasures or their hiding places.

Also, the scroll is in the “common Hebrew” of the time, not in the ritual flourishes of “priestly Hebrew.” This is yet another clue to McCarter that the document is an actual account from shortly after the time of Christ, not a fantasy.

“No one doubts it’s an authentic scroll,” McCarter says. “No one doubts the dates, roughly the middle of the first century of this era. The Copper Scroll probably was deposited in the cave at about the same time as the other Dead Sea Scrolls.”

The informational value of the Copper Scroll is its true treasure, McCarter contends. This window into the heritage of Judeo-Christian civilization, at a time of upheaval, is an unwitting confirmation of times so terrible that the Hebrews’ most prized treasures had to be hidden in the desert.

Even as businesslike as the document is, the scroll still confirms some ancient aspects of the Bible, for instance, the reference to the Hakkoz family.

“Of all places, turn to the Bible, and you find who the Hakkoz were. They

were one of the priestly families in the time of Nehemiah,” McCarter explains.

The family of Hakkoz returned from exile but was unable to establish its credentials through its family lineage. As a result, the Hakkoz were not allowed to participate in the sacrificial rites of the Temple of Jerusalem but were assigned the secondary office of keeping the temple treasury.

“So you have a priestly family in charge of the temple treasury as the only people mentioned in the scroll,” McCarter concludes. “There is no question that here is the list of the temple treasury—probably not the *whole* treasure but the accumulated religious tithes collected during the war with Rome. Instead of being taken to the temple, as in safer times, it was hidden in the wilderness of the Judean Desert.”

But what happened to the treasure after that? McCarter suggests that the treasure may have been reclaimed when the Romans left Jerusalem. Perhaps in the intervening years, various parts—or maybe all of it—have been looted. But then, maybe not.

Perhaps the treasure is still there, waiting to be discovered. During his study of the document, McCarter found some other exasperating clues. One is that at the end of several of the entries, one to three Greek characters appear that seem to have no meaning or relation to the entry—a code, McCarter suggests.

Then there is the last entry itself, which basically tells the reader that the riddle of the treasure can be solved if one finds the *other* Copper Scroll. Where? No one knows. The 64 locations mentioned in the scroll lie in a roughly triangular area bounded by Jerusalem, Jericho and Qumran, the site where most of the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. The treasure locations are all in dry riverbeds, cisterns, aqueducts and tombs that existed throughout the region. The treasure seems to have been destined one day to return to Herod’s temple, the ruins of which now lie beneath the modern-day Moslem shrine of the Dome of the Rock.

“But the exact explanation for the scroll and the treasure is still unknown,” McCarter concludes. “The solution to the problem is one that we continue to work on. And that’s the mystery of the Copper Scroll.”

**Although no one doubted the authenticity of the Copper Scroll, the story it told was too fantastic to believe. From the late '50s until McCarter's trip to Amman in 1988, the scroll lay virtually ignored in a display case in Jordan's Museum of Antiquities, shown at left.**

the temple in Jerusalem. He went to the location and began digging, but he had not gotten very far when he was arrested by Jordanian officers and deported.

A number of other conditions work against that kind of venture. McCarter says the Valley of Achor is one of the few references in the text that can be positively identified. But no one knows where in that valley the village of