A Treasure Quest in the Copper Scroll from Qumran

By Jesper Høgenhaven

The Copper Scroll from Qumran sends its reader on a quest to uncover hidden treasures. Is this treasure hunt for real or a symbolic journey? Is this dichotomy even fruitful? Maybe the most important thing is that the text sends the reader's mind on a quest.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are some 900 ancient Jewish manuscripts, which were found 1947-1952 in 11 caves near the shores of the Dead Sea. Among these, scrolls, the Copper Scroll is extraordinary with regard to both its material and its contents: It is the only manuscript made of metal. All the other manuscripts are made of leather or papyrus. The contents are equally unique: The text is a catalogue of treasures, pointing to hiding-places of large amounts of valuable objects scattered around Palestine.

Archaeologists searching Cave 3 in 1952 came across two metal scrolls deep inside the cave. They turned out to be parts of the same manuscript. Originally, the Copper Scroll consisted of three thin metal sheets (copper with 1% tin) that were riveted together to form a long strip. One of the sheets had accidentally broken off in ancient times, and the two parts of the scroll were then rolled up separately.
At first, the oxidized state of the copper made it almost impossible to unroll the scrolls and read the engraving. Ultimately, in 1956, the scrolls were sent to the Manchester College of Science and Technology, and cut into smaller pieces. The 23 cylindrical segments resulting from this process are available at the Jordan Museum in Amman. The location of discovery, Qumran, was at the time (1952) a part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.
The Copper Scroll comprises twelve columns written in Hebrew. In a catalogue-like style the text enumerates locations in Palestine and describes hidden treasures. The opening lines of the text set the stage for this treasure quest:

In the small ruin in the Valley of Achor under the steps which go eastward, forty cubits: a box of silver, in total a weight of seventeen talents. KEN

In the tomb in the third layer of stones, 100 gold bars.

In the great cistern which is in the courtyard of the peristyle at the side of its floor, sealed in the wall opposite the upper opening, 900 talents (1 1-8).

Copper Scroll, strip 11. Photo by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin.
The text consists of short sections, each pointing to a location and listing hidden valuable objects. In the first four columns, a strange “code” occurs at the end of some sections (e.g., the letters KEN in the above example). While the text is in Hebrew, the “codes” marking the endings are in Greek letters. So far, no one has been able to give a satisfactory explanation for these “codes”. Some interpret them as abbreviations for personal names (e.g. “Kendaios”). However, we have no clue as to who these people might have been, or how they were related to these locations and treasures.
A close reading reveals that the Copper Scroll is more than a catalogue or a list. The text addresses a “you”, and frequently instructs this “you” to measure certain distances between locations, or dig a certain amount of cubits at a specific place (e.g., “dig three cubits!”). The instructing voice in the Copper Scroll is anonymous throughout the text. The text describes a situation where the addressee is sent on a quest to reclaim and retrieve the hidden treasures.

In terms of geography, most of the locations are in or near Jerusalem, and around Qumran and Jericho. However, the text also refers to places in Northern Palestine (e.g., Garizim). Most of these places are familiar from the Hebrew Bible, with the exception of the often mentioned place Kohlit. A number of hiding-places are described as ruins or deserted buildings, tombs, cisterns, water installations, or underground caves. These descriptions portray a desolated and mysterious landscape.

The handwriting of the Copper Scroll is dated to the 1st century CE. The many errors and corrections witness to a difficult process of engraving the Hebrew text on the costly material. Some questions remain unanswered since the Copper Scroll was opened: Why was this mysterious artefact fabricated, obviously with great cost and effort? And by whom? Were all the treasures real at some point in history?

Some hold that the Jewish community that settled in Qumran in antiquity – possibly the “Essenes” mentioned by Philo and Josephus – could have amassed considerable wealth over time. It seems that members were required to hand over all their property to the community when entering. The community members or some of their trusted people could have hidden their possessions during the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans (66-74 CE). Other scholars have maintained that the great amount of valuables in the Copper Scroll refers to treasures of the Jerusalem Temple, which might have been rescued before the final Roman assault in 70 CE.

Alternatively, the Copper Scroll treasures are regarded as a literary fiction. Ancient Jewish sources contain various legends of what happened to the treasures from Solomon’s Temple when it was destroyed by the Babylonians (587 BCE). One story tells of the prophet Jeremiah hiding the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle in a cave before the Babylonian attack (Second Maccabees). In another legend, the earth swallows up the sacred vessels before the Temple is destroyed, to give them back at the end of days (Syriac Baruch). The Copper Scroll does not mention the most famous sacred objects from the Temple, but the text does refer to valuables associated with the Temple: consecrated objects, tithe offerings, and priestly garments. The image of a devastated land, where the sacred objects are no longer in the Jerusalem Temple, where they belong, but hidden in various obscure places, points to a background similar to those legendary texts.
Perhaps the dichotomy of real versus fictional treasures is too simplistic. The Copper Scroll could reflect both legends and traditions of actual hiding of valuables during troubled times, and the distinction between them would have been foreign to the ancient authors. If we pay attention to the instructing voice of the Copper Scroll, the text sends the addressee on a quest through the landscape of Palestine. There might well be a symbolic as well as a concrete meaning to this journey. The final section of the scroll states the last object to be retrieved:

In the pit which is situated to the north of Kohlit, its opening to the north with tombs at its opening – a duplicate of this document, with its explanation and their measurements and the inventory of everything, item by item (XII 10-13).

This reference to a “duplicate” of the document is intriguing. On the one hand, it seems to reinforce the credibility of the treasure catalogue, yet on the other hand, it undermines any attempt to connect the contents of the Copper Scroll firmly to external realities by pointing to a more accurate version existing somewhere else. The document mentioned here is the final goal of the addressee’s quest finding and retrieving the hidden treasures and it could be understood as a symbol of wisdom or insight as the most important treasure of them all.

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