

# Book of Leviticus Verses Recovered from Burnt Hebrew Bible Scroll

Oldest Hebrew Bible scroll since the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Ein Gedi

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*This Bible History Daily feature was originally published in 2015. It has been updated.—Ed.*

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A charred Hebrew Bible scroll was discovered in the Torah ark in a Byzantine synagogue at Ein Gedi, Israel. *Photo: Shai Halevi, Israel Antiquities Authority.*

A burnt ancient scroll found in 1970 [has finally been deciphered](#) thanks to advanced digital technology. Four and a half decades after its discovery, the scroll was recently revealed to contain a passage from the Book of Leviticus. Excavated from the Torah ark of a Byzantine-period synagogue at Ein Gedi in Israel, the scroll had been victim to a fire that raged through the entire village. The scroll is considered to be the oldest Hebrew Bible scroll discovered since the Dead Sea Scrolls. Furthermore, the discovery represents the first time a Torah scroll has been excavated from an ancient synagogue.

When Merkel Technologies Company, Ltd. Israel performed high-resolution 3D scanning on [Dead Sea Scroll fragments](#) and [phylactery cases \(tefillin\)](#) in 2014, the burnt scroll from Ein Gedi was added to the batch. Afterward, the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) sent the scans to be analyzed by Dr. Brent Seales, Professor and Chair of Computer Science at the University of Kentucky, who had developed digital imaging software to read the scrolls. The researchers initially discovered that the scroll contained the first eight verses of the [Book of Leviticus](#):\*  
*The Lord summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the Lord, you shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock.*

*If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you shall offer a male without blemish; you shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, for acceptance in your behalf before the Lord. You shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you. The bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord; and Aaron's sons the priests shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. The burnt offering shall be flayed and cut up into its parts. The sons of the priest Aaron shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the parts, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar.*

Leviticus 1:1-8 (NRSV)

The **free eBook Life in the Ancient World** guides you through craft centers in ancient Jerusalem, family structure across Israel and ancient practices—from dining to makeup—throughout the Mediterranean world.



Using advanced digital technology, the burnt Hebrew Bible scroll from Ein Gedi was virtually unrolled and deciphered. *Photo: Seth Parker, University of Kentucky, and Ehud Shor, Jerusalem.*

**Ein Gedi** is an oasis nestled on the western shore of the Dead Sea. Excavations conducted at the site in the 1960s and 1970s were focused on the prominent summit, Tel Goren. The site was inhabited beginning in the Chalcolithic period, but most of the remains at Ein Gedi date from the Iron Age through the Byzantine period. In the Byzantine period, Ein Gedi had a **synagogue** with a colorful mosaic pavement and a Torah ark.<sup>1</sup>

In an IAA press release, Yosef Porath, one of the directors of the Ein Gedi excavations in the 1970s, described what happened to the Jewish village in the sixth century:

“The settlement was completely burnt to the ground, and none of its inhabitants ever returned to reside there again, or to pick through the ruins in order to salvage valuable property. In the archaeological excavations of the burnt synagogue, we found in addition to the charred scroll

fragments a bronze [seven-branched candelabrum \(menorah\)](#), the community's money box containing about 3,500 coins, glass and ceramic oil lamps, and vessels that held perfume. We have no information regarding the cause of the fire, but speculation about the destruction ranges from Bedouin raiders from the region east of the Dead Sea to conflicts with the Byzantine government." "The deciphering of the scroll, which was a puzzle for us for 45 years," Porath added, "is very exciting."

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\* **Update, September 23, 2016:** Research on this scroll has been published in "[An Early Leviticus Scroll from En-Gedi: Preliminary Publication](#)" by Michael Segal, Emanuel Tov, William Brent Seales, Clifford Seth Parker, Pnina Shor and Yosef Porath with an Appendix by Ada Yardeni in *Textus* 26 (2016). The researchers now state that verses from the first two chapters of the Book Leviticus have been deciphered on the scroll.

