

JUDAISM

The Dead Sea Scrolls... made in St John's Wood

Korea wanted the Dead Sea Scrolls for an exhibition, but Jerusalem would not oblige. So curators asked a London couple to make some

BY SIMON ROCKER

THE THRILL of recognition is instant. You need not be a Hebrew scholar to make out a few familiar words among the clear black letters first formed by a scribe more than 2,000 years ago.

Unwound before me is a 23ft-long scroll of the Book of Isaiah. It could be the one that was found 60 years ago in a cave in Qumran by the Dead Sea.

But this scroll is different: it originates in St John's Wood, North-West London, is bound for Korea and was conceived by a man who runs a salmon-fishing business in Alaska.

Enter Weston Fields, executive director of the Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation. His organisation funds publication of the 900 or so documents and fragments that comprise the Dead Sea Scrolls and also helps with preservation and exhibitions.

A couple of years ago, he was approached by a Korean group that wanted to put on an exhibition. "There are between 25 to 35 per cent Christians in Korea, so they have a built-in interest in the Bible," Dr Fields explained during a brief visit to London earlier this month. "There are lots of Korean students in Israel at the Hebrew University or Jerusalem University

scrolls that were originally found — they are the best preserved," he said. "The Koreans were willing to underwrite the cost — it's terribly expensive."

To help, he turned to some old friends, Linda and Michael Falter of St John's Wood. As Facsimile Editions, the couple have a worldwide reputation for producing high-class replicas of illustrated religious manuscripts, so meticulously executed that they are hard to tell from the original. "When Weston rang and said could you advise me how to make a copy of the Dead Sea Scrolls," Michael Falter said, "I replied, 'I'd rather not advise you, I'd rather do it.'"

The scrolls were from a period more a thousand years earlier than anything the couple had previously attempted. "We wanted to get as close as possible to the original scroll," he said. "Fortunately, Weston knew that in a vault somewhere in America there was a complete set of transparencies that were taken in 1948 in war-torn Jerusalem by an American archaeologist who was also a good photographer."

After negotiations with the heirs to the collection, the negatives were flown from California to the Falters' printer in Milan by courier, who stood by for three-and-a-half days until scanning was complete before whisking them straight back to the States.

The production has taken about a year and the results are extraordinary. The facsimiles have been printed on conditioned paper that looks, feels and

sounds like parchment. Every stain, crack, tear in the original scrolls appears exactly in its place — an effect achieved by the use of advanced laser-cutting techniques. "All the tiny holes in the manuscript have been reproduced — some of them are hairline, including pinpricks," said Linda.

The sections have been attached by linen thread, following the stitchmarks revealed by the photographs. "We've been able to reproduce the sewing, thread by thread," she said.

Three copies each have been created of the original three scrolls: Isaiah, a commentary on the Book of Habakkuk, and the Manual of Discipline. "We wanted to produce them exactly as they are, we didn't want to enhance or prettify them," Michael said. "When we showed them to Weston,

he said they were as legible as the original. The only thing we haven't got is the clay pots in which they were found."

The Seoul exhibition on the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Christianity is scheduled to open next month and expected to attract two million visitors over six months. For Fields, such facsimiles will allow more people a chance to see what these priceless ancient manuscripts look like. "The original Isaiah scroll is no longer on display," he said. "You only see a copy in the Shrine of the Book [in Jerusalem] — and it is inferior to this."

AS FOR THE ORIGINALS...

► **THE first three Dead Sea Scrolls were found accidentally by Bedouin shepherds in a clay pot in a cave at Qumran by the Dead Sea in 1947.**

Since then, around 900 documents have been unearthed, comprising biblical books such as Isaiah and Deuteronomy, works from the Apocrypha and religious writings attributed to the

ascetic Essene sect.

The scrolls are invaluable in shedding light on the development of Judaism 2,000 years ago and of early Christianity.

While some of the manuscripts are well-preserved, others are a jigsaw of tiny pieces. New X-ray techniques are enabling scholars to decipher previously illegible fragments.



Masters of the scrolls: Michael Falter, Weston Fields and Linda Falter — and the Book of Isaiah

College. There are also Christian churches in Israel.

"Koreans account for a fairly sizeable percentage of tourists in Israel — they don't seem to be as afraid of terrorism as people in the USA or Europe. You can go to Qumran and find guidebooks in Korean."

In fact, the curator of the Seoul exhibition has a PhD from Israel's religious university, Bar-Ilan, and, while a student, worked at the Israel Museum.

Now, ancient manuscripts are precious and fragile objects, and since the Israelis had had no previous dealings with the prospective exhibitors, it was going to be hard to persuade them to lend some of the original Dead Sea Scrolls, especially to a destination so far away. But Weston Fields had a plan.

His own interest in the scrolls dates back to his childhood in the 50s, from a book on the subject in his parents' library. They were a religious family: "My parents moved from California to Alaska to run a Baptist orphanage for Indian and Eskimo children."

Later, with a doctorate in Bible studies, he taught Hebrew and Greek before moving in the mid-80s to Jerusalem to take a second doctorate at the Hebrew University. His professors would send him down to undertake projects at the scrollery where the Dead Sea documents were kept locked away.

In 1991, the then editor-in-chief of the scrolls, Professor Emanuel Tov, asked him to set up the foundation. And since then, he has divided his year — spending the summer in Alaska helping his brothers with the family salmon-fishing business and the rest of the year travelling extensively to promote one of the world's greatest manuscript discoveries.

"I had the idea of making facsimiles of the three

PHOTO: BEN TURNER