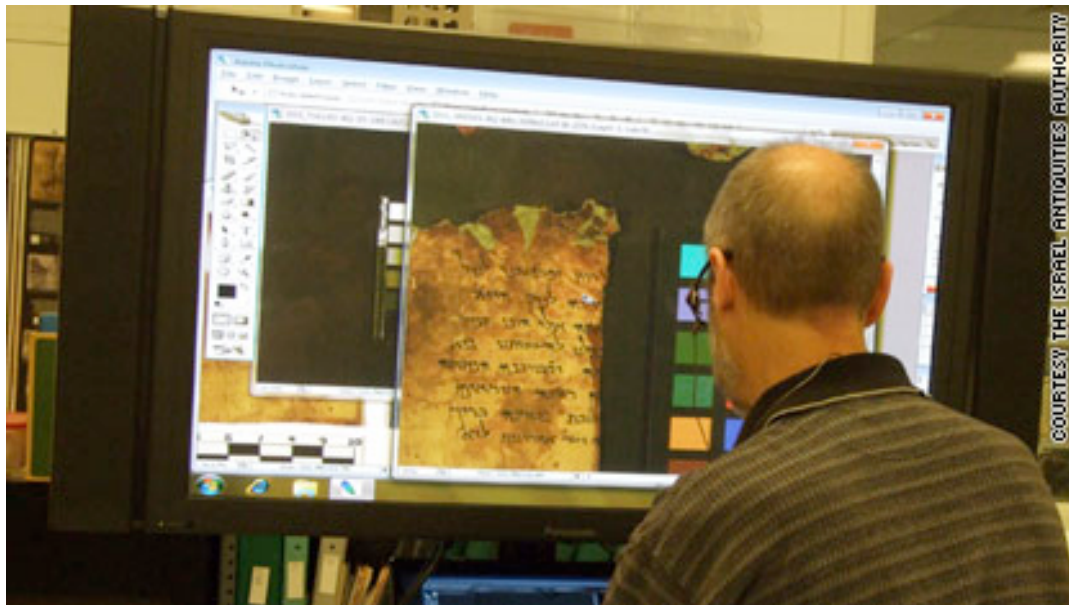




Dead Sea Scrolls to be made available online

By Kevin Flower, CNN

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Israeli Antiquities Authority and Google announce plan digitize Dead Sea Scrolls
- Online scrolls will be available to the public
- 900 manuscripts thought by many as one of most important archeological finds ever
- Google says "the idea is an open platform and an open approach"

Jerusalem (CNN) -- In an ambitious application of 21st century technology brought to bear on a first century wonder, the Israel Antiquities Authority and internet search giant Google Tuesday announced a plan to digitize the Dead Sea Scrolls and make the entire collection available to the public online.

Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) General Director Shuka Dorfman called the project a milestone that would enhance the field of biblical studies and people's understanding of Judaism and early Christianity.

"We have succeeded in recruiting the best minds and technological means to preserve this unrivalled cultural heritage treasure, which belongs to all of us, so that the public, with a click of the mouse, will be able to access history in its fullest glamour," Dorfman said.

Made up of 30,000 fragments from 900 manuscripts, the Dead Sea Scrolls are considered by many historians to be one of the most important archaeological finds ever made.

The idea is an open platform and an open approach.

--Yossi Matias, Google Israel

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The ancient manuscripts, made of leather, papyrus, and copper, were first discovered in 1947 by a nomadic shepherd in a cave near the Dead Sea. In the years following, more scroll fragments were located.

Dating back more than 2,000 years, the scrolls reveal details about the development of Judaism during the Hellenistic period and shed light on the relationship between early Christian and Jewish religious traditions.

The project will employ the latest in spectral and infrared imaging technology to scan the thousands of scroll fragments into one large database.

"This is the ultimate image of the scroll you can get get," explained IAA project manager Pnina Shor, as she showed reporters an example of the imaging. "It presents an authentic copy of the scroll, that once online, there is no need to expose the scrolls anymore."

Conservation of the ancient manuscripts is a major concern for the IAA which recently began limiting photography of the scrolls. Flawed preservation and display practices in decades past had in some cases had "catastrophic" consequences Shor said, and the IAA decided it needed to create a new active image record that would spare the manuscripts from further degradation. The entire collection of Dead Sea Scrolls was photographed in 1950s, but access to the photos and the documents themselves has been limited. Only four conservationists are allowed to actually handle the scroll fragments and scholars are limited in how much time they can spend studying them in person.

Google with its high-powered search and translation services will help catalogue the mass of material, but the internet heavyweight says the project is not for profit and not exclusive.

"I can envision scholars or other companies contributing their own technologies so as to get some additional value over the data," said Yossi Matias, Google's head of research and development in Israel.

The IAA has raised \$3.5 million in funding for the project and project managers say that the first images could be online within months.

Matias said it was too early to detail how the scrolls would be displayed online, but assured "the idea is an open platform and an open approach"