2,000-year-old Dead Sea Scrolls go online

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A tourist is silhouetted standing near a replica of the Dead Sea Scrolls on display, inside the Shrine of the Book building at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, Monday, Sept. 26, 2011. Two thousand years after they were written and decades after they were found in desert caves, some of the world-famous Dead Sea Scrolls are available online. Israel's national museum and the international web giant Google are behind the project, which saw five scrolls go online Monday. (AP Photo/Sebastian Scheiner)

Two thousand years after they were written and decades after they were found in desert caves, some of the world-famous Dead Sea Scrolls went online for the first time on Monday in a project launched by Israel's national museum and the web giant Google.

The appearance of five of the most important Dead Sea scrolls on the Internet is part of a broader attempt by the custodians of the celebrated manuscripts — who were once criticized for allowing them to be monopolized by small circles of scholars — to make them available to

anyone with a computer.

The scrolls include the biblical Book of Isaiah, the manuscript known as the Temple Scroll, and three others. Surfers can search high-resolution images of the scrolls for specific passages, zoom in and out, and translate verses into English.

The originals are kept in a secured vault in a Jerusalem building constructed specifically to house the scrolls. Access requires at least three different keys, a magnetic card and a secret code.

The five scrolls are among those purchased by Israeli researchers between 1947 and 1967 from antiquities dealers, having first been found by Bedouin shepherds in the Judean Desert.

The scrolls, considered by many to be the most significant archaeological find of the 20th century, are thought to have been written or collected by an ascetic Jewish sect that fled Jerusalem for the desert 2,000 years ago and settled at Qumran, on the banks of the Dead Sea. The hundreds of manuscripts that survived, partially or in full, in caves near the site, have shed light on the development of the Hebrew Bible and the origins of Christianity.

The most complete scrolls are held by the Israel Museum, with more pieces and smaller fragments found in other institutions and private collections. Tens of thousands of fragments from 900 Dead Sea manuscripts are held by the Israel Antiquities Authority, which has separately begun its own project to put them online in conjunction with Google.

Photography work on the project began earlier this month in conjunction with a former NASA scientist. An advanced $250,000 camera developed in Santa Barbara, California allows researchers to discern words and

other details not visible to the naked eye.

The latest photography effort by two technicians is centered on a fragment of a manuscript known as the Thanksgiving Scroll. On a computer screen was a piece of the Apocryphon of Daniel, an Aramaic text that includes a verse referring to a figure who "will be called the son of God." The first fragments of that will be online by the end of the year.

The Antiquities Authority project, aimed chiefly at scholars, is tentatively set to be complete by 2016, at which point nearly all of the scrolls will be available on the Internet.

More information: dss.collections.imj.org.il/

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