

Here in the School of Religion exciting new research in the study of religion, peace studies, theology, and ethics is always emerging. At the moment, we're celebrating the launch of Assistant Professor Benjamin Wold's new book *4QInstruction: Divisions & Hierarchies* (Brill, 2018). A Fellow of Trinity College, Dr. Wold teaches and researches in Ancient Judaism and Christianity, and is current Director of the Trinity Centre for Biblical Studies. We sat down with Dr. Wold to ask him about his research, the importance of the study of religion, and his new book:



**1) So, you lecture in Ancient Judaism and Christianity. What drew you to the academic study of these fields?**

From a young age I was interested in the Near East, both ancient and modern. I probably watched *Lawrence of Arabia* a hundred times as a teenager. When I had the chance to study in Jerusalem in my early 20s, I developed a fascination with the historical Jesus and the Jewish context of Christian origins. At that time, I also had opportunities to volunteer at excavations at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, which drew me into this incredible discovery. I was fortunate to have opportunities for further education that allowed me to follow both a professional and personal passion.

**2) Why is the study of these fields important for a modern research university like Trinity College Dublin?**

In general, it is important to articulate just how important the study of religion within an arts and humanities context is for our societies today. Critical and analytical study of the world's religions entails careful and sustained attention to their respective histories and evolution. The late David Flusser, a famous scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, once said: 'Judaism and Christianity are not mother and daughter, but they are in reality sisters, because the mother of both is ancient Judaism.' If we are to take seriously the study of the history of Christianity in Ireland, then this beginning point is foundational.

**3) What is 4QInstruction and what led you to write this book?**

4QInstruction is one of the more important Dead Sea Scrolls. We know that at least eight copies were hidden in two caves alongside the Dead Sea. It would have been one of the longest Scrolls from this discovery, about 30 columns in length. It was composed in the second century BCE, in Hebrew, and it is especially concerned to teach about understanding something termed the 'mystery of existence'. This Scroll is an address

from a wise sage to a group of students; what is amazing is that this teacher communicates an inclusive and universalist outlook. My book is interested in how this composition constructs notions of 'authority', how the author views divisions and hierarchies within his own community, and also how humanity as a whole was understood.

4QInstruction was published in a critical edition for the first time in 1999 and in the intervening years a great deal has been written about it. Early in the 2000s I began to notice that problematic reconstructions and translations of key fragments were leading to misguided views of this composition. This book was intended from the outset to challenge an emerging consensus, one that did not match my material reconstructions and translations of crucial fragments. My book offers new critical editions of these fragments done in consultation with the original manuscripts at the Israel National Museum with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (2012-13).

**4) What's one thing that surprised you in the process of writing this book?**

The Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library makes available high-resolution photographs of many of the Scrolls. In the course of writing, I would always return to the original photographs to check the transcription of the Hebrew original; I was surprised several times when the Hebrew found in critical editions was not accurate. One of the questions I am concerned with is what 4QInstruction has to say about the Mosaic Torah; critical editions represented the phrase 'God commanded by the hand of Moses' twice in 4QInstruction. Returning to the fragments this is mistaken, this phrase is not to be found, and consequently this has a profound influence on the interpretation of this Scroll.

**5) If you wanted a general audience to take away one idea from your research in this book, what would it be?**

There is a great deal that is 'new' in the study of ancient Judaism and Christianity. Even though biblical texts have been the subject of study for thousands of years, new discoveries of texts and artefacts are providing the opportunity for truly innovative research. In the case of the Dead Sea Scrolls, nearly two-thirds were only published since the late 1990s and early 2000s. We have a new cache of ancient literature that was previously unknown, and we are only accounting for it now. This is an exciting time to study the beginning point of two world religions that shape our societies.

**6) What's next?**

4QInstruction is important for our assessment of ancient Judaism and so too of ancient Christianity. This Scroll helps us to understand the development of 'wisdom' in the period. As we better understand this ancient composition there is the opportunity to discuss 'wisdom' as found in New Testament literature. I am currently completing a book on wisdom in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the New Testament, with special attention to

the gospel of Matthew, the letter of James, and the Didache. I plan to publish this with Cambridge University Press in 2020.

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