

Professor Józef Tadeusz Milik

Scholar of Qumrân Scrolls

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Though rightfully acclaimed in the world as the devoted researcher of a sensational archeological find – the oldest biblical manuscripts from the Dead Sea, dating back more than 2,000 years – Professor Józef Tadeusz Milik remains relatively little known in Poland. His life and work comprise an extraordinary story, illustrating the kind of contributions Polish researchers have made to world science

Józef T. Milik was born in Poland's Podlasie region in 1922. Upon graduating from high school in 1939 he joined the Theological Seminary in Płock, but after WWII broke out he started studying in Warsaw in 1940. In October 1944 he began studying theological and philological sciences at Catholic University in Lublin, graduating in 1946 with a double master's, plus a bachelor's degree in theology.



Józef Tadeusz Milik (left) together with Roland de Vaux, director of the *Ecole Biblique*, the French Biblical School in Jerusalem

Source: J.T. Milik's personal files

Milik already showed extraordinary linguistic skills as an undergraduate, publishing articles about Polish dialectical expressions. His superb knowledge of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Old Church Slavonic propelled him onward in philology studies. In 1946 Milik was ordained into the priesthood, and in 1946–1950 continued his studies in biblical philology at the Pontifical Bible Institute in Rome, where he mastered a further seven ancient languages, Akkadian, Sumerian, Egyptian, Arabic, Ugaritic, Hittite, and Georgian, plus 6 modern European languages.

The caves of Qumrân

In the late 1940s, Bedouin shepherds had discovered a cave at Qumrân in the Judean Desert near the Dead Sea, where they found clay pots containing 2000-year-old manuscripts. That marked the start of one of the world's greatest archeological discoveries, in which Prof. Milik would take part as a researcher, philologist, and archeologist.

Already during his studies in Rome, the young philologist and Bible specialist had become fascinated with the scrolls discovered in Qumrân, and his first excellent translations into Latin and commentaries (including of the Book of Community Rule) attracted the attention of the Dominican priest Roland de Vaux, then director of the French Biblical School in Jerusalem. In 1951 he invited Milik to join an elite international group of researchers known as the Scrollery Team, conducting excavations in Qumrân in 1951–56, and to publish the oldest biblical manuscripts of the Old Testament found there (from the 3rd–1st centuries BC) and the so-called Essene biblical scrolls.

Initially Milik's publications dealt with vestigial scraps of the so-called Essene scrolls discovered by de Vaux and Harding, director of Jordan's Antiquities Department. They included numerous biblical commentaries, apocrypha, legal and liturgical texts, and hymns. During this time Milik developed a universal system for designating the Qumrân manuscripts, which nowadays remains in use in all publications. With his extraordinary philological talents, Milik became known for his pace of work and for the accuracy of his translations of the most difficult Essene manuscripts. He also authored the greatest number of translations from the scrolls discovered in 1950's, handling more than 160 scrolls of the 800 identified in 11 scrolls caves at Qumrân.

Excavations

Milik took active part in the excavation work at Khirbet Qumrân and Ain Feshkha, where among other tasks he



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A fragment of one of the scrolls found in Qumrân (Israel) on the Dead Sea, containing the oldest known biblical manuscripts – their discovery marked one of the greatest sensations in the history of archeology

worked together with M. du Buit on drawings and architectural documentation, and oversaw a research sector where vessels were sorted and reconstructed and where objects found were inventoried. In 1952 he became head of a team performing a surface study of the Qumrân cliff, from Hedjar el-Asba to Ras Feshkha. It was then that he discovered what is called the Timotheus cave, which has been linked to a medieval letter written by the patriarch Timotheus about “Old Testament books” discovered in a cave near Jericho around the year 785.

Together with a team from the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, Milik moreover did archeological reconnaissance work in the Judean Desert. In October 1952 he purchased from an antiquities dealer in Jerusalem two vessels bearing Hebrew inscriptions and five plates from the Qumrân vicinity. Recognizing the inscription on one of the vessels, Milik managed to identify the biblical measure of one *seah* (16.6 liters), known from the New Testament.

Copper scrolls

Prof. Milik’s achievements in philological research cannot be overestimated. In publications on the Qumrân scrolls, he was coauthor of a concordance (a set of text correspondences) and the discoverer of an as-yet unknown Aramaic cursive from the cave 4Q scrolls plus two encoded cursive hands of proto-Hebraic. In his book *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea*, first published in Paris in 1957, he presented a magnificent synthesis of the current state of research on the Qumrân scrolls, becoming one of the originators of what is called the “Essene theory” of the origins of the Qumrân settlement and scrolls.

In 1961 Milik published his most mysterious document, the “Copper Scroll” discovered in cave 3Q by the

French archeologist H. de Contensson in March 1952. The two copper plates of the scroll were cut at Manchester Institute of Technology into 23 segments in 1955–56, enabling Milik to produce a translation. The interpretation of the texts from these scrolls continues to spark much debate. In the 1960s, after completing research in Jerusalem, Milik returned to Paris and became director of the CNRS research center, where he worked until his retirement in the mid-80s. Despite his poor health, Prof. Milik systematically continued his research on publishing difficult and fragmentary manuscripts from Qumrân, in addition to research on numismatics, Nabataean chronology, and Phoenician epigraphic texts.

In recognition of Milik’s vast achievements in furthering biblical and Qumrân scroll studies, two institutions of learning nearly simultaneously honored the outstanding Polish researcher. In March 1991, Universidad Complutense de Madrid organized an international Qumrân convention, where Prof. Milik was granted an Honorary Medal, and in October of the same year the PAN Committee on Oriental Studies honored the Professor by organizing an international colloquium and by publishing a collection of *Intertestamental Essays in Honour of J.T. Milik*. In July 1998, the Polish authorities commemorated the Professor’s 75th year by granting him the Officer’s Cross of the Order of Merit for Polish Science, while the PAN Scientific Center in Paris organized an international colloquium of Qumrânologists in 1999.

In January 2006, Prof. Józef T. Milik was bid a final farewell at Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris by an international group of his students and colleagues, who paid homage to this extraordinary Polish researcher, one of the most outstanding scholars of biblical and Qumrân archeology in the world. ■