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The Aleppo Codex Issue of Israel

by Bruce L. Johnson

In 2000 the Israel Postal Authority issued a postage stamp in honor of the Aleppo Codex [Sc1420], which is pictured here, with tab. In Hebrew the Aleppo Codex is called Keter Aram Zobah (or Tsova), and is reputed to be the most authoritative, accurate, and, to Jews, the most sacred source document for the Hebrew Bible in existence. The Aleppo Codex has greater religious and scholarly import than any other manuscript of the Bible.



Israel, 5 December 2000. Stamp featuring the Aleppo Codex [Sc1420].

The textual accuracy of biblical books is important, especially among Orthodox Jews, who traditionally believe that every letter, jot, and tittle of the Torah that we read today must be identical to those that were transmitted to Moses at Mount Sinai. If the Torah text is inaccurate for whatever reason, or a single letter is missing, the entire scroll is not kosher and may not be read aloud in a synagogue. For anyone interested in the history of the book, textual transmission is an ancillary topic of some significance, and the story of the Aleppo Codex offers us a fascinating glimpse into just how intricate such a study can be.

Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, the Aleppo Codex was the earliest known manuscript in Hebrew containing the entire text of the Old Testament—all 24 books

of the Hebrew Bible. To the casual observer it may seem surprising that, even though eleven centuries separate the Dead Sea Scrolls from the Aleppo Codex, the texts of the Aleppo Codex and the Dead Sea Scrolls are virtually identical. Only thirteen minor variations between the Book of Isaiah found in a cave at Qumran and the Aleppo Codex, for example, have been identified.

Under the direct supervision of the famous scholar, Aaron ben Moses Ben-Asher, the Aleppo Codex was copied by the scribe Shlomo Ben-Buy'a and illustrated by Avraham Shemi in Tiberius about 900 C.E. (Common Era), and is one of many extant biblical manuscripts that comprised or supported the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible.

The text was then verified and vocalized (by the addition of musical cantillations) by Aaron ben Moses Ben-Asher himself, who came from a long line of scholarly Masoretic scribes, world-renowned for their diligence in counting and cross-checking every letter of the scriptures to ensure accuracy. The Masoretes developed elaborate systems for maintaining the accuracy of the written, consonantal text of the Bible,

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The Aleppo Codex: now on display in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem.

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A page from the Aleppo Codex.



A page from the *Crown of Jerusalem*, a new edition of the Hebrew Bible inspired in design by the Aleppo Codex (Jerusalem, 2001).

as well as recording the vowels and accents, which had previously been handed down through oral memorization.

Scribes who subsequently wanted to produce a copy of the Torah scroll used the Ben-Asher text because of its presumed accuracy, and tradition has it that Maimonides later used the Aleppo Codex in Cairo, when he set down the exact rules for writing Torah scrolls. In Maimonides' magnum opus of Jewish legal writings, he attests that the Aleppo Codex is the most authentically accurate manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament.

Sometime in the 13th century, the great great grandson of Maimonides brought the book to the Aleppo community in Syria, one of three distinct Jewish communities in the country, each with its own traditions. There, for more than 600 years, the Aleppo Codex, a talisman of the community, was kept in a guarded vault in the Cave of Elijah, under the Joab Ben Zeruah Synagogue of Aleppo, also known as the Yellow Synagogue.

Following Syrian independence from France in 1946, attacks against Jews and their property increased throughout Syria, culminating in the pogroms of 1947, during which the synagogue was torched and its interior severely damaged; the Aleppo Codex, however, was saved from total destruction and was hidden away for a decade.

In 1957, an incomplete Aleppo Codex was entrusted to Mordechai Faham, who smuggled the manuscript out of Syria into Turkey, then into Israel. In January the next year, the Aleppo Codex was brought to Jerusalem, presented to Israeli President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, and is today housed at the Shrine of the Book.

Of the original 487 leaves that comprised the Aleppo Codex, only 295 remain. When the Aleppo Codex reached Israel, the first four and a half books of the Pentateuch (until Deuteronomy 28:17), as well as a few books of Writings (the third section of the Hebrew Bible) were missing, but no one knows for certain what happened to

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them. It's possible that, to save the Aleppo Codex from destruction during the pogroms of 1947, pages were removed and entrusted to members of the synagogue. Indeed, in 1981, an Aleppo-born Jew living in Brooklyn died; among her possessions was a page from the Aleppo Codex!

Professor Menachem Cohen heads the Aleppo Codex restoration project at Bar-Ilan University. Thus far, 7 out of the 24 books have been published using several restoration and verification techniques. For example, the missing text from the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the Bible, also known as the Five Books of Moses) has been reconstructed in part

by compiling and organizing biblical verses that are quoted in the margins of later books that still survive. When the Aleppo Codex was written in the 10th century, Bible chapter divisions had not yet been created, so to refer to another verse, one had to quote the verse itself. Professor Cohen's team of researchers compiled and organized these quotes, much like a jigsaw puzzle, to reconstruct the earlier and missing text.

Considering the role that the Hebrew Bible continues to play in the lives of the world's Jews, a postage stamp issued in Israel and honoring the Aleppo Codex is a welcome addition to Israeli philately.