DISCOVERING SECOND TEMPLE LITERATURE

THE SCRIPTURES AND STORIES THAT SHAPED EARLY JUDAISM

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Set in Merope by Mikala R. Kolander.
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Note about the cover: The image on the cover is part of a mosaic floor discovered in Sepphoris, a town in the Galilee that flourished in the Rabbinic period, which followed the Second Temple period. While this mosaic is dated to the third or fourth century CE and includes scenes from the life of Dionysus, a Greek god associated with wine, theater, and celebration, it was discovered in a home that may have been inhabited by Jews. The arresting images on this mosaic, and the Roman-style villa that houses it, may testify to the ways in which some Jews admired aspects of Greek and Roman culture to such an extent that they welcomed these features into their own homes. Even some synagogue floors that archaeologists have dated to the Rabbinic period incorporate images from Greek mythology. Jewish literature of the Second Temple period paved the way for this kind of integrative thinking, which extended well past 70 CE.

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PART 1

THE MODERN RECOVERY OF SECOND TEMPLE LITERATURE

CHAPTER 1

The Cairo Genizah

In the year 1896, Scottish twin sisters embarked on a trip to Egypt from their home in Cambridge, England. It was not uncommon at the time for members of England's upper class to take luxury trips to places they regarded as exotic regions of the world, in the hopes of acquiring artifacts, ancient manuscripts, and other treasures. But these women were not ordinary explorers. After their marriages to James Young Gibson and Samuel Savage Lewis ended in their husbands' untimely deaths, the sisters, Agnes Smith Lewis (1843–1926) and Margaret Dunlop Gibson (1843–1920), found themselves widowed at the prime of their lives. Lewis and Gibson had inherited a fortune from their Scottish father, John Smith, who had encouraged them to study the Bible, world history, and ancient and modern languages. The sisters also had a passion for traveling, and so they coupled their interests in travel and academic study by journeying to Palestine, Egypt, Greece, and other regions of the Mediterranean world, hoping to find ancient manuscripts and artifacts related to the period of nascent Christianity. During their stay in the ancient city of Cairo in 1896, the sisters purchased a small fragment of a Hebrew manuscript from a local antiquities dealer.

By this time, Lewis was well regarded in Cambridge as a scholar of Early Christianity. She was especially well known for her recovery of a fourth-century CE Bible codex written in an Aramaic dialect called Syriac. A codex, a kind of book consisting of sheets of leather or papyri sewn or bound together, had replaced scrolls and papyri in about the second century CE. When Lewis had discovered this codex (which would

become known as the Syriac Sinaiticus) in the library of St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai desert, she notified other Bible scholars, who later photographed and published it.

Lewis knew enough to sense that the Hebrew manuscript fragment in her possession was very ancient, and perhaps a significant find in the field of biblical scholarship. She could read Hebrew, Syriac, and Greek, but believed the fragment needed to be examined by an expert in ancient Jewish texts. For this task, the two sisters brought the fragment to a man named Solomon Schechter.

Early Stages of Genizah Research: Solomon Schechter (1896–1915)

In selecting Solomon Schechter (1847–1915) as the person to examine their prized fragment, the sisters were making an informed decision. Raised in Romania in a family affiliated with the Chabad branch of Hasidic Judaism, Schechter was an expert in classical Rabbinic texts. He had received a formal yeshiva education in Romania that focused on the study of Talmud and other Rabbinic literature, underwent rabbinical training in Vienna, and, at age thirty-two, completed his education in Jewish studies at the University of Berlin. Three years later, in 1882, he moved to England to teach Rabbinic literature to the Jewish scholar and philanthropist Claude Montefiore. In 1890, Schechter was appointed Reader in Talmudic and Rabbinic literature at the University of Cambridge.[1] In the six years Schechter was at Cambridge before the sisters approached him with their fragment, he had made a name for himself as a learned and passionate scholar.

Upon seeing the manuscript, Schechter immediately suspected that he was looking at part of an ancient Hebrew version of the apocryphal book known as the Wisdom of Ben Sira. In Schechter's time, scholars were only aware of this text in its Greek translation. It was preserved in the Catholic Bible as part of the Apocrypha, a collection of books written by Jews in the Second Temple period that was included in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint. Schechter had long suspected that the Greek version of Ben Sira was a translation of a Hebrew original, but he had no manuscript evidence to prove his case.

After examining the sisters' fragment, Schechter became determined to discover the rest of the manuscript. He was certain that the discovery of an ancient Hebrew manuscript of Ben Sira would make a profound impact on the academic community. On May 15, 1896, shortly after viewing the fragment, Schechter wrote a letter to his friend Judge Mayer Sulzberger, a Jewish intellectual who lived just outside of Philadelphia, saying:

> I met yesterday with a piece of good fortune of which many a Biblical scholar will be jealous. I have namely discovered among the Fragments which Mrs. Lewis (the discoverer of the Syriac Gospel) brought from her last journey in the Orient a leaf from the Hebrew Sirach (Eccliasticus). As you know [that] was the original of the Apokryph in the Hebrew and the Geonim even cite passages from it. But it is now for the first time that we have a Fragment coming from the body of the book. I am now transcribing the MS [manuscript] and shall אי"ה [God willing] write a monograph on the subject which I hope you will receive soon.[2]

In his letter, Schechter divulged to Sulzberger his recent discovery of a Hebrew fragment of Ben Sira—but he did not reveal where the Ben Sira fragment had come from. Schechter only disclosed that the fragment had come into the possession of Mrs. Lewis at some point during her trip to "the Orient."

Soon thereafter, Schechter's article "A Fragment of the Original Text of Ecclesiasticus," publicizing the discovery of the Ben Sira fragment, was published in the journal *The Expositor.* He included a translation of the fragment and argued that it was not composed as a translation of an older Greek Ben Sira manuscript, but that it represented an original version of the book that was later translated into Greek.

Here, too, Schechter appeared elusive about the origin of the sisters' incredible find. He indicated that the fragment had come from Palestine, and not from Egypt:

> For this Fragment we are indebted to [Agnes Smith Lewis's and Margaret Dunlop Gibson's] last journey in Palestine and Egypt, in which countries

> they have acquired various Hebrew MSS., mostly in fragments. Our Fragment was found in the Palestine bundle, among other leaves of Hebrew MSS., extending over various branches of Jewish literature, as Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, Liturgy, Grammar, etc.[3]

A few months after the article's publication, Schechter was ready to find out more. He embarked on his first trip to Cairo on December 16, 1896, to seek out additional leaves of the Ben Sira manuscript. Later that month, Schechter's wife, Mathilde, disclosed in a letter to Judge Sulzberger that her husband had traveled to Cairo specifically because he believed he would find more fragments there.

Mathilde also knew that Cairo was home to a large genizah (a Hebrew word that means "hidden," or "buried"), a site designated by the Jewish community for storing sacred texts. *Genizot* (plural of genizah) are storage areas for biblical texts, or pages that have God's name written on them. They are usually situated in synagogue basements or attics, or in Jewish cemeteries. Understanding that her husband believed that the Cairo Genizah might house more Hebrew fragments of Ben Sira, Mathilde wrote:

> Mr. Schechter left England on the 16 December for the East, Egypt, and Palestine where he was sent to by our University for purposes of research (Hebrew Mss). As it is a secret mission, the fact will be announced in the University Reporter only after the commencement of next Term about the end of January, when he will already have secured permission to work in the old Genizah, as otherwise his plans might have been defeated, caused by his discovery of the Ecclesiasticus fragment.[4]

What accounts for the discrepancy between Schechter's published article, in which he implied that the Ben Sira fragment could have come from Palestine, and Mathilde Schechter's private communication to their close friend Judge Sulzberger, in which she indicated that the fragment might have come from a genizah in Cairo? And why did Schechter choose to go to Cairo in the first place, rather than Palestine?

One possibility is that Schechter was not ready to reveal the true origin of the fragment to the public.[5] His decision would not simply have been due to a petty desire to be the first scholar to receive credit and acclaim for rediscovering a stash of ancient Hebrew documents. For Schechter, there was a great deal more at stake. He believed it was imperative that the remainder of the Ben Sira fragment, if it had indeed survived, end up in the right hands.

Schechter made the stakes clear in the opening paragraph of his article on the discovery of the fragment:

> If it could be proved that Sirach, who flourished about 200 BC, composed his work, as some believe, in the Rabbinic idiom, with which we are acquainted from the Talmudic literature, then between Ecclesiasticus and the books of the Old Testament there must lie centuries, nay, there must lie, in most cases, the deep waters of the Captivity, the grave of the Old-Hebrew and the old Israel, and the womb of the New-Hebrew and the new Israel. The assumption of Maccabæan Psalms, and many another hypothesis [*sic*] of Bible-Criticism would fall to the ground.[6]

This is why the Ben Sira fragment was so important to Schechter. In his opinion, the question of how to date Ben Sira's writing was part of a much greater conflict. In the 1880s and 1890s, some biblical scholars were dating parts of the Hebrew Bible to the late Second Temple period, and at the same time were characterizing Second Temple Judaism as obsessively legalistic. For these scholars, most of whom were affiliated with German Protestant schools influenced by the towering intellects of Professors Julius Wellhausen and Bernhard Duhm, the emergence of Christianity and its emphasis on universal love was a revolutionary improvement over the particularist legalism of Second Temple Judaism.

Schechter felt a personal responsibility to challenge the late dating of biblical books and their mischaracterization as negative contrasts to early Christian literature. He believed that if he could show that Ben Sira was originally written in Hebrew in the early second century BCE, he would also be able to establish that the book was stylistically different than the

Hebrew books of the Bible that Wellhausen and Duhm believed to have been written at that time. Schechter aimed to show the richness and antiquity of Jewish Scripture, in part by proving that ethical wisdom texts such as Ben Sira were integral parts of Jewish tradition.[7]

What Schechter discovered on his 1896 trip to Cairo far exceeded his greatest expectations. He had hoped to find a small cache of ancient documents, but he ended up recovering one of the world's largest and most ancient *genizot*.

Genizot were formally instituted as places to store sacred documents, but Schechter soon realized that the genizah at Cairo's Ben Ezra Synagogue contained thousands of nonreligious documents, including personal letters of correspondence and legal contracts. This genizah had been operating more broadly than its technical function, perhaps because the Jewish community in Cairo regarded the Hebrew language as so sacred that anything written in Hebrew, regardless of whether it contained God's name or religious content, could not be thrown out.[8]

When Schechter first entered the genizah in the Ben Ezra Synagogue attic, he was overwhelmed. There were hundreds of thousands of fragments, dated to different time periods, uncataloged, and lying in piles on top of one another. Some had lain untouched for centuries. Sifting through them would be an almost insurmountable job, even for an accomplished scholar like himself. In his 1908 article, "A Hoard of Hebrew Manuscripts," Schechter described the experience:

> After showing me over the place and the neighboring buildings, or rather ruins, the Rabbi [Grand Rabbi of Cairo Aaron Bensimon] introduced me to the beadles of the synagogue, who are at the same time the keepers of the Genizah, and authorized me to take from it what, and as much as, I liked. Now, as a matter of fact, I liked all. Still, some discretion was necessary. I have already indicated the mixed nature of the Genizah. But one can hardly realise the confusion in a genuine, old Genizah until one has seen it. It is a battlefield of books, and the literary production of many centuries had their share in the battle, and their *disjecta membra* are now

> strewn over its area. Some of the belligerents have perished outright, and are literally ground to dust in the terrible struggle for space, whilst others, as if overtaken by a general crush, are squeezed into big, unshapely lumps, which even with the aid of chemical appliances can no longer be separated without serious damage to their constituents. In their present condition these lumps sometimes afford curiously suggestive combinations; as, for instance, when you find a piece of some rationalistic work, in which the very existence of either angels or devils is denied, clinging for its very life to an amulet in which these same beings (mostly the latter) are bound over to be on their good behavior and not interfere with Miss Jair's love for somebody. The development of the romance is obscured by the fact that the last lines of the amulet are mounted on some I. O. U., or lease, and this in turn is squeezed between the sheets of an old moralist, who treats all attention to money affairs with scorn and indignation. Again, all these contradictory matters cleave tightly to some sheets from a very old Bible.[9]

Schechter clearly recognized the formidable challenge before him. How was he to organize, catalog, and study the contents of this chaotic genizah? In his opinion, the only way to complete this massive task was to ship as many manuscripts as possible to the University of Cambridge, where he conducted his research. Indeed, one of the greatest accomplishments of Schechter's career was his success in convincing Rabbi Bensimon, the Grand Rabbi of Cairo, and the administrators of the Ben Ezra Synagogue to allow him to ship the entire contents of the genizah to Cambridge. No outsider had ever been given carte blanche to assume control of the genizah by overseeing the emptying of all its contents. At the same time, however, Schechter was not the true "discoverer" of the genizah. Many individuals had been aware of the treasures it held decades before Schechter knew of its existence, and some collectors and scholars had purchased bundles of Genizah fragments prior to Schechter's arrival.

One such individual was Rabbi Jacob Saphir (1822–1886). Authorities in Palestine had hired him to travel to Jewish communities around the

world and collect money for poor Jews living in Jerusalem. In the course of his travels, between 1859 and 1864, Saphir made a number of visits to the Ben Ezra Synagogue. In his 1866 book, *Even Sapir*, Saphir wrote that during one of his trips to Cairo he was permitted to enter the Ben Ezra Synagogue Genizah but found nothing of immediate interest to him.

At this time, a Russian Crimean manuscript collector named Abraham Firkovich (1786–1874) also visited the genizah. A Karaite (a Jew who rejected the authority of Jewish traditions recorded outside of the Hebrew Bible), Firkovich had been purchasing ancient Jewish manuscripts for his private collection as early as 1864 in order to verify their Karaite origin and, by extension, the authenticity of the Karaite tradition. He would later become famous for acquiring the Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete copy of the Hebrew Bible, dated to the early eleventh century CE, under mysterious circumstances.[10]

It is very possible that Firkovich collected documents from the genizah long before Schechter first arrived in Cairo, but we cannot be certain since Firkovich did not reveal the origins of the manuscripts that he collected. We must note, however, that some fragments found in Firkovich's collection come from the same codices as fragments that are now in the genizah collection of Cambridge. One example is the Rabbinic midrashic collection called the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon*. While Firkovich may have obtained his fragments of this codex from elsewhere in Cairo, it seems likely that at some point he obtained access to the contents of the Ben Ezra Synagogue's Genizah.[11]

Another visitor to the genizah around the same time was a Russian Orthodox Archimandrite, a high-ranking abbot, named Antonin Kapustin (1817–1894). A scholar of Byzantine history who had extensive interest in historical sites and their treasures (and who would become best known for purchasing the Oak of Mamre, the site where Abraham resided following his circumcision in Genesis 17), he bought more than a thousand manuscripts from the genizah.[12] Per Kapustin's will, the genizah documents were donated to the Russian Imperial Public Library after his death, where they are housed today in the Archimandrite Antonin Kapustin Collection.

By the 1880s, word had spread among elite intellectual circles in Europe regarding the existence of this special genizah. Academics in these circles worked independently from one another to gain access to the genizah and to export some of its contents to their university libraries. Reverend Greville John Chester (1830–1892), for example, purchased and exported 991 genizah manuscript fragments to the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, many of them ancient treasures, such as the oldest dated manuscript of the Babylonian Talmud.[13]

Elkan Adler (1861–1946), a lawyer, avid manuscript collector, and passionate Jewish intellectual—his father and brother both served as Chief Rabbis of Britain—also visited the genizah before Schechter. Over the course of multiple visits, beginning in 1888, Adler collected thousands of genizah fragments, which are housed today at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Among these are Hebrew fragments of an ancient book of Ben Sira, which Adler said he acquired in January 1896—four months or so before Schechter identified the Ben Sira fragment that had come from the genizah. An article written by Adler in 1900 opens with the following statement:

> Among the numerous fragments from the Cairo Genizah which I brought away with me in January, 1896, and which I have since acquired, I have discovered a portion of the famous Hebrew Text of Eccliasticus, and hasten to publish the text and translation with fascimiles . . . the case containing the fragment was only opened on March 7 last, and the precious fragment itself identified two days later.[14]

Adler's declaration that he acquired Hebrew fragments of Ben Sira in January 1896 may reflect his desire to be recognized as the very first discoverer of the Ben Sira fragment in the Cairo Genizah. Yet Adler also admits that he did not open the box containing the precious fragment until about four years after he acquired it.

Other efforts to obtain genizah fragments have not been well documented. An Egyptologist known as Count Riamo D'Hulst (c. 1850–1916), for example, is known to have collected thousands of genizah manuscripts

for the University of Oxford's Bodleian Library. In 1889, as an officer of the Egypt Exploration Fund (EEF), he was sent to Cairo, apparently to obtain ancient pottery. In its *Annual Report of the Curators of the Bodleian Library* of 1890, the EEF announced that the fund acquired numerous ancient manuscripts from Egypt that year. Years later, in 1915, d'Hulst sent a postcard to Falconer Madan, the Bodleian Library's head librarian, in which he mentioned having purchased a box of manuscripts in Egypt and sending them to "the authorities of the EEF."[15]

The opening of the genizah's doors to outside collectors marked a conscious effort on the part of Ben Ezra's leadership to raise funds for the synagogue, which was undergoing renovations during this time.[16] By discreetly opening the genizah to individual collectors who were willing to pay for fragments, these leaders were able to ensure the synagogue's financial security.

And so, by the time Schechter came on the scene in 1896, more than a few scholars were working to transport fragments in the Cairo Genizah to public and private libraries. Yet the lack of public disclosure regarding these operations suggests that these individuals wanted to secure fragments for their employers or their private collections before making the genizah's treasures known to others.

After Schechter secured the remainder of the collection, he spent years organizing, cataloging, and translating the genizah documents. Their contents, it turned out, spanned from as early as the tenth century through the nineteenth century. The overwhelming—and revealing—gleaning process would extend far beyond Schechter's own academic career, as we will see at the end of this chapter.

Cataloging the Genizah in the Mid-Twentieth Century: The Work of Shlomo Dov Goitein

Perhaps the person who contributed the most to genizah studies after Solomon Schechter was Dr. Shlomo Dov Goitein (1900–1985). Born in Burgkunstadt, Germany, and educated in Islamic studies at the University of Frankfurt, Goitein moved to Israel, where he spent the bulk of