

A Story of Remarkable Recovery  
by Nicholas Van Cleve<sup>1</sup>

*“[The act of preserving damaged] books ... means much the same thing as burial means in the case of men. When the spirit is gone, we put the corpse out of sight to protect it from abuse. In like manner, when the writing is worn out, we hide the book to preserve it from profanation.”*

- Solomon Schechter, 1908<sup>2</sup>

The russet-colored parchment of the Exodus Scroll dating from the Medieval Ages represents part of a trove of valuable and enlightening Middle Eastern manuscripts discovered in the Cairo Genizah—the attic of ancient Ben Ezra Synagogue.<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew term *genizah* refers to a burial place for Hebrew manuscripts. It is used in the books of Esther and Ezra to denote a “storehouse” or “treasury.”<sup>4</sup> Discovered among a fascinating collection of “nearly three hundred thousand documents,”<sup>5</sup> the scroll of Exodus characterizes the precise work typical of most Torah scrolls. This paper will examine the significance and contents of the Cairo Genizah as well as the unique practices of Jewish copyists of sacred texts like the Exodus Scroll.

### The Genizah Itself

Jewish inhabitants of Egypt bought the land on which they built the Ben Ezra Synagogue from Coptic Christians. It was built by at least 882 A.D., only to be destroyed along with other Jewish and Christian places of worship by command of caliph Al-Hakim around 1012. Rebuilt

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Van Cleve was a freshman Honors College student majoring in Biblical Languages when this essay won first place in the Dunham Bible Museum category in HBU’s “Piece of the Past” essay contest.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Mark Glickman, *Sacred Treasure—The Cairo Geniza* (Woodstock, Virginia: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Glickman, xi, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Glickman, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Glickman, xi.

by 1025, the second version of the synagogue included a two-story genizah.<sup>6</sup> In a tiny space of only 12 by 14 feet, generations of Jewish people stored away their worn-out writings for “eight hundred years.”<sup>7</sup>

The Cairo Genizah provided a fitting resting place for scrolls which the Jewish people considered sacred because they were written in the Hebrew language (Hebrew *lashon hakodesh*, “the sacred tongue”).<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Mark Glickman, a long-time student of the Cairo Genizah, writes in *Sacred Treasure* that “Words, in Judaism, carry sacred power: Especially Hebrew words. And even more especially, the words of Torah” (like those of the Exodus Scroll).<sup>9</sup> Though texts containing God’s name—the Tetragrammaton, or YHWH<sup>10</sup>—were considered particularly holy, the Jewish people eventually regarded all things Hebrew as sacred, holding it to be the language of God.<sup>11</sup> In accordance with this belief, the Jewish people held that Hebrew texts were not to be destroyed. When they deteriorated or otherwise became unusable, the Jews either buried them or placed them in a genizah.<sup>12</sup> Medieval Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides) wrote, “It is forbidden to destroy any sacred writing or its commentary or its interpretation.”<sup>13</sup> Broadening their ideas of which items should be preserved, Jewish culture eventually retained “any paper even remotely related to their Jewish lives,” even those written in “Arabic, Persian, [or] Yiddish.”

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<sup>6</sup> Glickman, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Glickman, xi.

<sup>8</sup> Glickman, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Glickman, xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Glickman, 8.

<sup>11</sup> S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society, the Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*. Vol. 1, *Economic Foundations*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1967), 1-2. Rabbi Mark Glickman also notes the sacredness idea in *Sacred Treasure*, xiv. Documents containing the holy names of God were denoted by the Hebrew term *shemot*, meaning “names” (xv).

<sup>12</sup> Glickman, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Glickman, xiv.

Thus, all sorts of documents are found in the Cairo Genizah, as S.D. Goitein notes in *A Mediterranean Society*: “Alongside carefully worded and magnificently executed deeds, one finds hastily written notes, accounts or letters, jotted down in nearly illegible script and in sloppy or faulty language.... It is a true mirror of life, often cracked and blotchy, but very wide in scope and reflecting each and every aspect of the society that originated it.”<sup>14</sup> The Jews even stowed away in the Genizah “hidden books” (Gk. *apocrypha*) that were non-canonical and illegal under Jewish law.<sup>15</sup>

Though the Jewish people built many genizot in history, few survived.<sup>16</sup> The Cairo Genizah did not lie hidden for centuries, but instead people merely disregarded its riches until a “trickle” of Genizah texts found their way abroad and into the hands of the intellectually astute scholar and paleographer Rabbi Solomon Schechter.<sup>17</sup>

In May of 1896, two Scottish Presbyterian sisters returned from a trip to Egypt bearing several parchments.<sup>18</sup> These they offered to the examination of Schechter, a friend of theirs. After an excited examination, Schechter discovered one of the “fragments” to contain the words of an ancient Jewish book of wisdom, the book of Ben Sirah. Noting that the pages the sisters brought back came from Egypt, and having heard of a genizah in Cairo, Schechter quickly scheduled a journey to that place himself.<sup>19</sup> Upon arrival, seeing the “mountain of texts” in it inspired Schechter to write,

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<sup>14</sup> Goitein, 9. The author goes on to speak of court depositions, marriage contracts, “deathbed declarations,” “[d]eeds of sale,” and more, all included in the vast body of documents kept safe within the Cairo Geniza (10-11). Rabbi Glickman notes that it even contained the oldest piece “of Jewish sheet music—a Hebrew poem set to Gregorian chant during the twelfth century” (xii). The extremely dry conditions of the Middle East enabled the genizah to be a prime location for the preservation of valuable, historical material.

<sup>15</sup> Glickman, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Glickman, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Glickman, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Glickman, 42-43, 53.

<sup>19</sup> Glickman, 57, 64.

It is a battlefield of books, and the literary production of many centuries had their share in the battle, and their *dissecta 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 from their contents.<sup>20</sup>

After a brief examination of the vast array of literary elocution, romantic aspiration, theological ponderings, and bureaucratic scratches in the crumpled folios that lay before him, Schechter pronounced that he “liked it all” and proceeded to purchase the remaining contents of the entire genizah for three hundred pounds.<sup>21</sup>

### Disciplined Copyists

Painstakingly handwritten, every Jewish scribe followed stringent practices regarding the copying of Torah scrolls. Scribes typically immersed themselves in a *mikvah* (water bath) before beginning their work, indicating the holy nature of their task.<sup>22</sup> As author Larry Stone notes in *The Story of the Bible*: “Each day a scribe would make sure his reed pen was writing well by dipping it in ink and writing the name *Amalek* and then crossing it out.”<sup>23</sup> Before writing the name, YHWH, the scribe would wipe clean his pen and say “I am writing the name of God for the holiness of His name.” The scribe would pronounce aloud every word before copying it. If any letters seemed too close together or otherwise misleading, the scroll would be disqualified. If a mistake was not fixed within thirty days, a scroll had to be buried or placed in a genizah.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Glickman, 73-74.

<sup>21</sup> Glickman, 75-76. £300 in 1900 would equal about £30,000 today, according to <http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/bills/article-1633409/Historic-inflation-calculator-value-money-changed-1900.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Torah Online, “The Scribe” *Chabad.org*; available from [http://www.chabad.org/library/howto/wizard\\_cdo/aid/339595/jewish/The-Scribe.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/howto/wizard_cdo/aid/339595/jewish/The-Scribe.htm); Internet; accessed 19 December 2011.

<sup>23</sup> See Exodus 17:14 and Deuteronomy 25:19.

<sup>24</sup> Larry Stone, *The Story of the Bible: The Fascinating History of its Writing, Translation, & Effect on Civilization*, (Nashville/Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 21.

Presumably, the Exodus Scroll was sequestered in the Cairo Genizah based on its condition and not the error of a scribe.<sup>25</sup>

The painstaking accuracy with which the Jewish scribes kept the sacred words of the Torah preserved enabled modern Jews and Christians to have surprisingly accurate copies of what we believe are the inspired, revelatory words of God.<sup>26</sup> *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* quotes Gleason Archer on the subject, stating,

even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran...were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known (A.D. 980), they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling. They do not affect the message of revelation in the slightest.<sup>27</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As demonstrated by the background and “discovery” of the Cairo Genizah, the Exodus Scroll certainly possesses a unique history. The Genizah itself reveals myriad stories from the lives of remarkable and ordinary Jewish people. Just as they preserved God’s word to the benefit of the nations, the Cairo Genizah preserved much of the identity and culture of the Jewish people during the Medieval Ages for our study today. Six years after entering the Cairo Genizah, Rabbi Schechter wrote, “Every discovery of an ancient document giving evidence of a bygone world is, if undertaken in the right spirit...an act of resurrection in miniature.”<sup>28</sup> Through displays like that

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<sup>25</sup> This conclusion is based primarily on the caption for the scroll in Dunham Bible Museum and the fact that the scroll seems complete. Had the scribe erred, I would assume the scroll would have been fixed or destroyed before it was finished and reached full length.

<sup>26</sup> This accuracy is reflected by the lack of any serious differences between later Old Testament book copies available before the discovery of Scriptural books among the Dead Sea Scrolls which date from circa “200-100 B.C.” Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 1999), 28.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict, Evidence I & II Fully Updated in One Volume to Answer Questions Challenging Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 70.

<sup>28</sup> Glickman, xi.

within Houston Baptist University's Dunham Bible Museum, ordinary people have the opportunity to partake in a remarkable story of preservation and discovery.

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[cited 2011 19 December].