

# The Leningrad Codex

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Even though the city has changed its name back to St. Petersburg, the book is still called the Leningrad Codex. It's the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible in the world.

Since *glasnost*—remember that?—we have been able to photograph it using the latest equipment and photographic techniques and to prepare a new replica edition, which will soon be available. Scholars all over the world will be able to examine every “jot and tittle” (see *Matthew 5:18*)—or, more precisely, every *yod* (the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet) and *tagin* (the elegant crowns that grace some Hebrew letters in Torah scrolls). More than that, with the new photographs all the vowel pointings (*nequdot*) and tiny marginal notes (*masorot*) are visible and readable.

These photographs are already being used by the current revisers of the famous *Biblia Hebraica*, the scholarly edition of the Hebrew Bible that provides the standard text from which most translations are made and that also contains multiple variances found in different ancient manuscripts.





The Leningrad Codex, or L for short, can be dated to about 1010 C.E. As its name implies, it is a book with pages, or leaves, and not a scroll. As early as the first century C.E., Christian scholars began transmitting their holy works in codices rather than scrolls, and by the third century the codex was standard. In the Jewish world, however, the codex was not adopted until about the seventh century.

The traditional scroll, or roll book (Latin *uolumen*, from which our word “volume” comes), continues to be used today for reading the sacred text in synagogues. These scrolls for reading the sacred text, however, contain only the five books of Moses. No scroll is big enough to contain the entire Hebrew Bible.

Besides its importance as a text, the Leningrad Codex is a work of exceptional medieval art. It contains 16 illuminated “carpet pages,” so called because their geometric patterning and fine detail resemble ancient carpets from the Near East. The carpet pages also include blessings and texts from Deuteronomy and Psalms.

In addition, L has two colophons. From a Greek word meaning a finishing, or crowning, touch, a colophon is an inscription containing the title, the scribe’s or printer’s name, and the date and place of composition. L has one colophon at the beginning of the codex and another at the end (folio [or leaf] 1a and folio 491b).

L is also the earliest complete Hebrew Bible with pointings indicating vowels. Hebrew is usually written with only consonants and a few vowels. Unfortunately, this frequently leaves room for ambiguity and uncertainty; often several different vowels, and therefore several alternative readings, are possible. To remedy this situation, various systems of vowel subscripts and superscripts, or pointings, were devised by different schools in Palestine by the tenth century. The best known system, and the one that prevailed, was devised in Tiberias by Masoretes, or scribes, associated with the Ben Asher family. These scribes also annotated their texts with marginal notes—on the top, bottom and sides of the page. L’s notes are almost as important as its text.

The text prepared by these Masoretes is known as the Masoretic text. It remains to this day the standard text of the Hebrew Bible.

The scribe who penned the Leningrad Codex identified himself in the two colophons and in the center of a star on one of the manuscript's exquisite carpet pages (folio 474a). He is Shemu'el ben Ya'aqov, or Samuel son of Jacob. In the first colophon, the scribe tells us that the manuscript was written in Cairo (*medinat misrayim*, meaning capital of Egypt). The man who commissioned the manuscript is also identified—four times, in fact—as Mevorak ha-Kohen ben-Netan'el. Mevorak means the Blessed One. He is a priest (or a descendant of one—the Jewish name “Kohen” denotes a priestly family), the son of Nathaniel.

The date of the manuscript is given in five different ways: 4,770 years from the creation of the world, 1,444 years from King Jehoiachin's exile (586 B.C.E.), 1,319 years from the “Greek dominion” (the Seleucid era, beginning in 309 B.C.E.), 940 years from the Roman destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.) and 399 years from the Hegira (the flight of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina to escape persecution in 622 C.E.). When we convert these dates into those of the Common Era, slightly differing dates emerge: 1008 to 1010.

A note at the end of the first colophon tells us that the manuscript was purchased in 1489 by the head of a yeshiva, or rabbinical academy (we know nothing about the manuscript between 1010 and 1489). Both the purchaser's name and the yeshiva's name are given. Three months after this purchase, it was donated to the Karaite synagogue of Damascus, as we learn from another note in the first colophon. Since the purchaser's name is the same as that of the donor—it is rendered both in Judeo-Arabic (Ishaq ibn Musa) and in Hebrew (Yishaq ben-Moshe ben-Eliyahu ben-Alula)—the codex had probably reached Damascus by the time it was bought in 1489.

Just as we know nothing of the peregrinations of the manuscript from 1010 to 1489, we know nothing about it thereafter until it was acquired in the mid-19th century by one of the great hero-rogues of manuscript history: Abraham Firkovich.

Firkovich was a Karaite, and that is important to our story. The Karaites apparently originated in Babylonia and broke off from rabbinic Judaism in about 760 C.E. The chief doctrinal difference between the Rabbanites and the Karaites was that the latter rejected the so-called Oral Law embodied in the Talmud, maintaining that the Bible alone must be their guide. As so often happens with brothers, hostility between the Karaites and the Rabbanites was often intense. Nevertheless, until the very late 18th century, both considered each other as Jews and regarded even their most intemperate polemics as internal Jewish matters. In 1795, however, Russia conquered the Crimea, which was home to a large Karaite community. The Russians soon relieved the Karaites of the double tax that was levied on Jews. The Karaites were also permitted to acquire land, unlike non-Karaite Jews. In 1827 the Karaites were exempted from the dreaded military conscription, again unlike the Jews. To improve their political circumstances still further, the Karaites began impressing the government with their fundamental differences from the Jews, that is, the Rabbanites.

Finally, in 1840 the Karaites were put on an equal legal footing with Muslims, a significant step up. By this time the Karaites were wealthy landowners; their lower-class cousins, the Rabbanite Jews, were largely peddlers and artisans.

It is in this historical context that we must understand Abraham Firkovich. He was born in 1786 in Lutsk (Luck), Poland, the center of the Karaite communities in Lithuania. Although he wrote an autobiography, we know very little of his early years—chiefly that he was the *hazzan*, or cantor, in a Karaite synagogue in Lutsk. He traveled for several years throughout the southwestern regions of Russia, zealous in his effort to discover the origins of the Karaites. He was determined to prove that they descended from an early group of Judahites who had immigrated to the Crimea after the Babylonian Exile (sixth century B.C.E.)—and thus long before the Common Era and long before the advent of Rabbinic Judaism. If this were true, it would have provided the basis for still more improvement in the status of the Karaites.

In February 1839 Firkovich wrote a letter to his patron, Simhah Bobowich, the chief *hakham* (wise man) of the Russian Karaites, in which he recognized that the Karaites separated from the Rabbanites in about 640 C.E. (this date is a little early). “Thus,” he wrote, “we would have been participants in the murder of Jesus, which is not good for us.”<sup>1</sup> Firkovich hoped to prove his case that the Karaites were in the Crimea long before the Jews, even before the time of Jesus, by drawing evidence from ancient manuscripts, which he began collecting early in his life. (Ironically, recent archaeological discoveries indicate that Jews may have lived in the Crimea at least as early as the first century C.E.)<sup>a</sup>

In 1822 he made his first trip to Jerusalem to collect manuscripts. In 1830 he made a second trip to Palestine, this time accompanied by Bobowich. From 1831 to 1832 Firkovich lived in Istanbul, but he soon returned to the Crimea to serve the Karaite community in Eupatoria, which was the largest Karaite community in Russia during the 19th century and the seat of the chief Karaite *hakham* of Russia.<sup>2</sup>

Then in 1839 Firkovich traveled in search of further acquisitions, this time commissioned by the governor general of the Crimea. He even undertook some archaeological excavations in the Caucasus Mountains, as well as the Crimea, in search of early Karaites. He found some Karaite tombstones but evidently falsified dates in order to prove his case. In the letter to Bobowich quoted earlier, he mentioned what a boon such a find would be: “If, however, we could find a [grave] stone from the year 4300 [after creation], then the Christians would accord us much honor and praise.”

There is no question that Firkovich was an expert at recognizing and evaluating old manuscripts and that he had a vast collection. In 1859 he offered to sell what has become known as the First Firkovich Manuscript Collection to the St. Petersburg Imperial Library for 25,000 silver rubles. This offer was ultimately accepted, with the provision that the collection was to be augmented by some manuscripts that Firkovich had previously given to the Odessa Society of History and Antiquities. In 1862 this stipulation was agreed to.<sup>3</sup> Apparently, the Leningrad Codex was part of the collection from the Odessa Society.

Firkovich made another, more extensive trip to the Near East from 1863 to 1865, where he gathered a still larger collection of manuscripts. He spent the last years of his life in Chufut-Kale in the Crimea and died there at the age of 87 on June 7, 1874. During these years, Firkovich lived in a magnificent home and was renowned as a Karaite leader and a successful businessman. He even had his portrait made: A prosperous, patriarchal man, draped in a costly cloak and sporting a flowing white beard, sits sternly erect; the staff he carries may recall the biblical Abraham, Firkovich’s namesake, the shepherd-guardian of his flock.

But this grand old man was also a bit of a scoundrel. A number of scholars have questioned the authenticity of some items in his collection. Some manuscripts in it are forgeries, and others contain forged emendations and interpolations—part of Firkovich’s effort to establish the early settlement of the Karaites in the Crimea. Fortunately, the forgeries constitute a small and identifiable part of the gigantic collection. Apparently, he also changed the dates on some of the tombstones that supposedly proved the antiquity of the Karaites in the Crimea; unfortunately, no one knows where these tombstones are today. Still, despite his efforts to establish an early date for the records—or as one eminent scholar has put it, to “Karaize” them<sup>4</sup>—there is no caviling with the fact that he managed to acquire the greatest collection of Hebrew manuscripts ever assembled to that point.

Since *glasnost*, in 1988, Western scholars have had continual and cooperative access to the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, formerly the Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library and before that known simply as the Imperial Library. A team from Israel, headed by Professor Malachi Beit-Arie, professor of codicology and paleography at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is microfilming virtually the entire collection, apparently the largest in the world.<sup>5</sup> There are over 15,000 Hebrew manuscripts in the Firkovich collections alone, which are estimated to comprise nearly 600,000 folios (1,200,000 pages). Beit-Arie anticipates that it will take generations for such a collection to be comprehensively evaluated.

“In my estimation,” Beit-Arie writes, “the Firkovich collections contain many hundreds of manuscripts or considerable remains of codices (mostly biblical) produced in the tenth and the eleventh centuries. To fully grasp the extraordinary significance of this quantity one has to compare it to the probably not more than 30 Hebrew manuscripts of that period kept in all libraries throughout the world!”<sup>6</sup>

Firkovich called the Leningrad Codex the crown of his acquisitions, no small accolade considering the extent and quality of his collections. Yet neither in his autobiography, *Book of Memorial Stones* (*Sefer Avnei Zikkaron*), nor in his extant letters does he tell us where, when or under what circumstances he acquired the Leningrad Codex; he does not even discuss this codex.

He did bring it to the Odessa Society of History and Antiquities, however. Perhaps this was why the Imperial Library of St. Petersburg insisted that Firkovich’s gifts to the Odessa Society be included in its purchase of Firkovich’s First Collection.

An intriguing question remains: How did the Leningrad Codex come to be written in Cairo? Although this part of the codex’s history is as uncertain as its whereabouts after it was copied in 1010, and then again after it was bought and donated to the Damascus synagogue in 1489, there are intriguing hints. If we are right, we may even learn something about the Dead Sea Scrolls.

In about 800 C.E. some Hebrew manuscripts were discovered near Jericho. According to a letter written by Timotheus I (726–819 C.E.), the Nestorian patriarch of Seleucia, to the archbishop of Elam, an Arab hunter’s dog had pursued an animal into a cave near the Dead Sea. When the hunter went to look for his dog, he found “a cave in the rock and many books therein.”<sup>7</sup> The hunter then took his loot to Jerusalem, where at least some of the manuscript were identified as books of the Bible written in Hebrew. In all probability, these manuscripts came from the same set of caves in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were found under similar circumstances in 1947 and during the decade thereafter.

By the ninth century, Jerusalem had become the spiritual center of the Karaites, and a number of Karaite scholars had settled there. Indeed, the Karaites at that time were far more influential in spiritual matters than Jerusalem's Rabbanites. Karaite scholars were interested in looking beyond the oral teachings of the rabbinic authorities codified in the Mishnah and developed in the Talmud; they hoped to find the original biblical text itself. Thus they eagerly studied old biblical manuscripts and must have been intensely excited by the texts mentioned by Timotheus I.

As Karaism spread, its adherents were to be found not only in Jerusalem and Constantinople but also, in large numbers, in Egypt. There they traced their ancestors to the remnant of Jews who fled to Egypt with the prophet Jeremiah after the Babylonian destruction of Judah in 586 B.C.E. (*Jeremiah 43:4–7*). Most of the Karaite manuscripts in the Paris and St. Petersburg libraries come from Egypt.<sup>8</sup> In Cairo the Karaites resided near the Nile, close to *Fostat* (Old Cairo).

Having established a link between biblical Hebrew manuscripts found in caves near Jericho in about 800 C.E. and the Karaites in Egypt (through Jerusalem Karaites who would have examined the ancient texts), let's see if we can tighten the bond.

There is a synagogue in Old Cairo, known as the Ben Ezra Synagogue, that is famous for its celebrated *genizah*, a storage room for worn-out sacred documents. For some reason, in the Ben Ezra Synagogue, all kinds of documents, not just sacred documents, were thrown into what has become known as the Cairo Genizah; these documents remained there for centuries, until their discovery in the late 19th century. Indeed, some of Firkovich's early purchases probably came from the Cairo Genizah. In 1897 a Cambridge University scholar named Solomon Schechter found two strange documents in the Cairo Genizah that he published in 1910 under the title "Fragments of a Zadokite Work." They had affinities with Karaite documents, and many suggested that Schechter's fragments were indeed Karaite. Schechter, however, believed them to be copies of a much older work composed before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.<sup>b</sup> He observed, for instance, that the fragments' Hebrew, unlike the Hebrew used by the rabbis after 70 C.E., closely resembles the Hebrew of the later books of the Bible.

Schechter's conjecture proved stunningly correct when several copies of the very same work surfaced among the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>c</sup> But how did this work, now known as the Damascus Document, get from Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were hidden, to the Cairo Genizah? Probably it was among the documents found in about 800 C.E. and taken to Jerusalem. There it would have been studied by Karaite scholars, who would surely have admired the Zadokite priesthood, especially its rejection of the Jerusalem priesthood, and the Damascus Document's strict regulations concerning the community of the New Covenant, which seemed so like the Karaite rejection of rabbinic Judaism. The document was doubtless copied over and over again by the Karaites, and two copies eventually made their way to the Cairo Genizah, there to be discovered in 1897.

This supposition is buttressed by another strange manuscript connection. Schechter's interest in the Cairo Genizah was triggered by some leaves from a Hebrew copy of the Wisdom of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) that had come from the Cairo Genizah. Before that time only Greek copies of Ben Sira had been found, and it was uncertain whether the original was written in Hebrew or Greek (answer:

Hebrew). Hebrew fragments of Ben Sira were subsequently also found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Apparently, a Hebrew copy of Ben Sira was among the finds of about 800 C.E., copies of which ultimately made their way to the Cairo Genizah.

So a Karaite trail from Palestine to Cairo is not so difficult to imagine. In fact, it appears to have been well traveled.

How does this help us explain why the Leningrad Codex was commissioned and written in Cairo? As the Damascus Document and the Hebrew Ben Sira found their way from Jerusalem to Egypt as a result of Karaite scholarly interest, so, very likely, did copies of the rabbinic recension of the Hebrew Bible created in the tenth century in Tiberias, on the southwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. As we noted already, in the tenth century scribes known as Masoretes added vowels and accents to the consonantal Hebrew text, standardizing it and commenting on their work in marginal notes. Obviously this was of great importance to the Karaites. Copies of this new text no doubt circulated quickly, and some were taken to Cairo to serve the needs of the local Karaite community. There Shemu'el ben Ya'aqov probably made a copy from one of the authoritative manuscripts prepared by Aaron ben-Moshe ben-Asher himself in Tiberias.

Eventually, as we have seen, this copy made its way to Damascus. Firkovich acquired it on one of his far-flung trips, perhaps even in Damascus.<sup>d</sup>

There is only one other manuscript to which the Leningrad Codex can be compared: the Aleppo Codex.<sup>e</sup> Both the Aleppo Codex and the Leningrad Codex preserve the text of the Ben Asher school of Masoretes. The Aleppo Codex, however, is even older, dating to about 935 C.E. From 1478 until 1947 it was housed in the Mustaribah Synagogue in Aleppo—hence its name. There is a tradition that Maimonides, the great 12th-century Jewish philosopher and Bible scholar, saw the Aleppo Codex, for he refers to it as the authoritative codex for textual study.<sup>9</sup>

On December 2, 1947, four days after the United Nations passed a resolution to partition Palestine, thereby effectively creating a Jewish state for the first time in nearly 2,000 years, Arab mobs in Aleppo (and elsewhere in Syria) went on a rampage against Syrian Jews and their property, looting, burning, raping and murdering. Among the targets was the Mustaribah Synagogue, a landmark since the fourth century. Miraculously, however, 294 of the Aleppo Codex's 380 leaves were recovered. Eventually, they were smuggled to Israel and are now owned by the Yitzchak Ben-Zvi Foundation in Jerusalem. (Rumor has it that several more leaves have been recovered and may be on their way to Jerusalem.)

But even before the disaster of 1947, the Aleppo Codex was largely inaccessible to scholars. In the 1920s the great German textual critic Paul Kahle (a Christian minister who was later driven from Nazi Germany because his writings were too favorable to the Jews; he fled to the United States in 1938) wanted to use the Aleppo Codex as the base text for the third edition of the *Biblia Hebraica* (BH). BH is the critical edition of the Hebrew Bible used by scholars throughout the world since the first edition was published in 1905. It is also the textual base from which most translations, for whatever religious persuasion, have been made. The first two editions used the traditional text of the rabbinic Bible, which was printed in Italy in the early 16th century. Since then it has become clear that both the Aleppo Codex and the Leningrad Codex are superior witnesses. Kahle knew that the Aleppo Codex was older and

probably even more authentic than the Leningrad Codex. Unfortunately, however, he was unable to persuade the synagogue officials in Aleppo even to allow him to study it at the synagogue, let alone borrow or photograph it. By contrast, in 1926, during a window of opportunity, Kahle was allowed to take the Leningrad Codex to Leipzig. There his student, Gottfried Quell, prepared copious notes for Rudolf Kittel—the distinguished editor of the first two editions of BH—who was then preparing a third edition.

Thus, the Leningrad Codex became the base text for the third edition of BH (1937), called by scholars BHK (for Kittel and Kahle). The Leningrad Codex is also the base text for the fourth edition of BH (1976/7), known as BHS, the S for Stuttgartensia. That is the text now used throughout the world for scholarly study and translation.

The fifth edition of BH, to be referred to as BHQ (for the Latin *quinta*, or fifth), is currently being prepared by an international team of scholars appointed by the United Bible Societies' Hebrew Old Testament Text Project, of which James Sanders [one of the authors of this article] has been a member since its inception in 1969. It is expected to begin publication of fascicles of biblical books in 1998.

Although the Leningrad Codex has been photographed and microfilmed, most of the original photographs and film have disappeared, and the remaining copies are less than satisfactory.<sup>10</sup> Even some of the Hebrew consonants are unclear in these copies, and the tiny marginal notes are mostly illegible.

Clearly a new set of photographs was called for. With the advent of *glasnost* in the late 1980s, the United Bible Societies approached the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center (ABMC) in Claremont, California, about the possibility of refilming the Leningrad Codex in the library in Leningrad. A photographic expedition was organized under the direction of Bruce Zuckerman of West Semitic Research, then acting director of the ABMC; the team also included his brother, Kenneth Zuckerman, and ABMC staffers Marilyn Lundberg and Garth Moller. (Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center) (Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center) (Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center)

After careful and politically sensitive negotiations, the ABMC team was given permission to travel in May/June 1990 to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg again) to do the tedious job of filming all 982 pages of the Leningrad Codex, including endnotes and carpet pages, in color and black-and-white film.<sup>11</sup> For an account of the photography team's travails, see the first sidebar to this article. Copies of the new photographs have already been supplied to the scholars preparing the fifth edition of *Biblia Hebraica*. A facsimile edition of the Leningrad Codex will be published by Erdmans in 1997. (Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center)

With the new photographs of the Leningrad Codex, BHQ will, for the first time, include all the marginal notes (*masorot*) of the oldest complete Hebrew Bible in the world.

Understanding the value of these masorot requires a little understanding of some scholarly history. The Masoretic notes preserve the earliest oral traditions concerning how the written text is to be read. Until recently, these notes were regarded as secondary to the consonantal text itself. This principle goes back at least as far as Martin Luther. In the early 16th century, Luther was confronted with discrepancies in the various texts of the Hebrew Bible that were available to him. He was extremely skeptical of what he thought of as Masoretic innovations added to the consonants of the Hebrew text. Modern Old Testament scholarship has followed that view ever since—until the post-modern period beginning in the middle of



this century. Now the text-critical paradigm has shifted, as will clearly be seen in BHQ, when it is published. We now see the reading tradition—that is, the contribution of the Masoretes—as just as authentic as the letters (consonants). In the introduction to the third volume of *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament*, Dominique Barthelemy argues, on the basis of 25 years experience with the United Bible Societies' Hebrew Old Testament Text Project, that in some passages the contributions of the Masoretes who added the vowels are more valuable than the work of the scribe who copied the consonants.<sup>12</sup> That is why the new BHQ will include all the Masoretic notes from the Leningrad Codex.

Thus the new photographs of the Leningrad Codex as published in the facsimile edition, and as incorporated in the fifth edition of *Biblia Hebraica*, will, for the first time, make all the riches of tradition embedded in this famous manuscript available to everyone in biblical studies.