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Discovery of a New Manuscript of the Pentateuch,

MOST of our readers are aware that the originals of the Books of Scripture are not now in existence. Copies in manuscript, technically termed *codices*, are all that we have now to depend on. The earliest codices of the Old Testament extant are the Spanish. They may be attributed to the ninth or tenth centuries, and are held in high esteem by the Jews, as it is asserted that they were corrected by the Codex Hillel, a manuscript supposed to have been of hoar antiquity. Nevertheless, the Hebrew scholar has often wished from the bottom of his heart that a copy of the ancient Scriptures might be found which belonged to the halcyon days of the sacred tongue, when every king was commanded "to write him a copy of the law in a book." Perhaps this wish may be gratified at an early day, so far as regards the Books of Moses.

Hebrew was originally written in a different character from the one now in use, though cognate to it. When or why the change was made, is an undecided question. Most likely, during the Babylonian captivity, the children of Israel learned to write their language, which was like the Chaldaic, Shemitic, in the Chaldaic character; and continued to use that character after their return to their own country. But scholars are not altogether agreed about the matter.

The Samaritans- a mongrel people who inhabited Samaria after the *ten* tribes had been carried away, with very little Israelitish blood in their veins, but who mixed up Judaism and idolatry, worshipped in a temple on Mount Gerizim, which they built in opposition to the one on Mount Zion—received, it is said, through a Levitical priest, sent to them from Babylon, a copy of the Pentateuch written in the old Hebrew character. This manner of writing they over preserved. It appears now on coins, medals, some minor writings, and in the Samaritan Pentateuch in Walton's celebrated Polyglot. The latter, however, is not considered pure. There are also, in the British Museum, several volumes of Samaritan, that include the Pentateuch, and some liturgies and ceremonials. Of their age we cannot speak; but they are all in the ancient character, which, Havernick says, is "identical with the old Hebrew."

Owing to the exclusiveness of the Samaritans, and the jealous spirit with which they have always secluded their writings, until within the last twenty years, it has been a difficult matter to obtain any of their manuscripts. Within the period referred to, however, a change has come over the spirit of the Samaritans; and the volumes, now in the British Museum, have been obtained. Germany, likewise, has procured some manuscripts through Prof. Petterman, of Berlin. Among them is a Pentateuch. But, a few years since, a discovery of great importance was made. Dr. Basilius Levishon, a distinguished member of the Russian establishment in Jerusalem, "got hold," we are informed, "of a large-sized vellum Samaritan Pentateuch, defective in a few leaves at the beginning and end, and which he believes to have been written during the days of the first Temple, which was destroyed B. C. 588." The London *Athenoeum* gave the following as the reasons which induced Dr. Levishon to assign so remote a date to this valuable codex:

1. "The extreme reserve with which the priestly family in Nablous have guarded it from the knowledge even of their own sect, and the assertion of the priest from whom it was obtained.
2. "The fact of its not being divided into chapters or sections of any kind, except as books, such as Genesis, Exodus, etc.
3. "The names of several priests found in marginal scraps about (p. 182) the volume, recording occurrences connected with its preservation—the names coinciding with the priestly genealogy in his possession.
4. "The express statement, in a marginal observation, that the volume had escaped a peril of fire during the time of Zerubbabel, B. C. 630."

Dr. Levishon, who, though a member of the Russo-Greek Church, is of Hebrew origin, and familiar with the Samaritan, as well as with the Masoretic Hebrew, aided by a learned assistant, devoted much time to his highly-prized manuscript and we believe proposed to reproduce it in fac-simile for the benefit of the leading European libraries.

This work of Dr. Levishon, which should be far advanced now, is of great importance, and cannot fail to awaken the liveliest interest among those who search the Scriptures in the original. The learned professor avers that he has "noted down ten thousand variations" from the received Hebrew text. He does not inform us in regard to their importance. Will the new readings shed a new light upon the record of creation? Will they render a new translation of the original imperative?

The age of the manuscripts from which the Samaritan Pentateuch, in the Walton Polyglot, was derived, is (quite uncertain. Some scholars have attributed them to the Macedonian period. The one in possession of Dr. Levishon, thus far, seems to be a veritable antique, and may be expected to shed some light upon those which have preceded it. Indeed, a copy of the Books of Moses written when the first House was in her glory, is no small addition to literature, and must be regarded with emotion. We trust that if it is reproduced in fac-simile, that some of our libraries will obtain copies, as they have of the Codex Sinaiticus. Students of the sacred language will certainly view them with great interest.

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

This reference is not listed in ***A Bibliography of the Samaritans, Third Edition, Revised, Expanded, and Annotated***, by **Alan David Crown** and **Reinhard Pummer**, ATLA Bibliography, No. 51, **The Scarecrow Press, Inc.** Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Oxford. 2005