

Codex (Crown of) Aleppo and Codex Leningradensis: Silent Witnesses of Asher Family and of the History of the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract:

The fascinating world of the text of the Old Testament requires not only a philological knowledge, but also the knowledge of the tradition of manuscripts. The present study tries to present briefly historical and philological aspects of two of the most important Hebrew manuscripts, written and annotated with the help of Masora by the members of the famous family Asher: codex or the Crown of Aleppo and codex Leningradensis.

Keywords: *Old Testament, Bible, codex, Aleppo, Leningradensis*

The Holy Scripture of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and only later the Greek version appeared (LXX), by translating the Hebrew one. In ancient times, in order for the text to be preserved and transmitted to future generation, it was written by scribes or copyists on various materials such as papyrus or parchment. Many of these manuscripts deteriorated along the years, others were lost, and a significant number was preserved. They are nothing but the silent witnesses of a millenary history.

What we now call the text of the Old Testament is in fact the text offered through the analysis, comparison and interpretation of the numerous manuscripts that were preserved. For example, the edition *Vetus Testamentum Hebraicum* (Kennicott 1776-1780) by Benjamin Kennicott from 1776-1780 was based on no fewer than 615 manuscripts and 52 printed editions of some fragments of the Hebrew Bible (Burnett 2008: 798; Vladimirescu 2006: 137). The edition published under the patronage of Giovanni Bernardo de Rossi, *Varia electiones Veteris*

Testamenti (DeRossi 1784-1788), was no second to the previous one I mentioned, because it was based on 731 manuscripts and 300 editions published of several parts of the Hebrew Bible (Vladimirescu 2006: 137). On the other hand, various European libraries, renowned all over the world, as well as several private individuals, possessed manuscripts of the sacred, inspired text. Although the Christian Church speaks about the “divine inspiration”, there are differences between these manuscripts that the researchers underlined on numerous occasions. Moreover, to which Bible should we relate if there are so many versions and differences? Obviously, we should relate to the Hebrew Bible. The manuscripts of the Old Testament are nothing but the manuscripts of the Hebrew text, hence of the Hebrew Bible, that is why their importance is today acknowledged both by theologians and by philologists and Orientalists.

The present study analyzes two of the manuscripts that belonged to the family Aharon Ben-Asher, the son of Moses Ben-Asher: the Codex or the Crown of *Aleppo* and Codex *Leningradensis*. These two, together with Codex *Cairensis* and manuscript MS. Or. 4445 preserved in the British Museum (London), indicate most significantly the work of generations of masoretes belonging to Asher family.

1. Codex *Aleppo* or the *Crown of Aleppo* (קְטָר אֶרְמֵא צוֹנָא)

The history of the Codex or Crown of Aleppo (marked by the specialists with א or A); (Tov ³2011: 44; Friedman 2012; Fant, Reddish 2008: 412-515; Attias 2015: 28-30) is linked to the name of the famous masoret and grammarian of the Masoretic School from Tiberias, Aharon Ben-Asher, the son of Moses Ben-Asher. In fact, the profound relation between the finite act and the one that elaborated it (Aharon Ben-Asher) led to the identification of the Codex Aleppo as belonging to the “family” of manuscripts Ben-Asher (Waldman 1989: 139; Vladimirescu 2006: 138; Holden, Geisler 2013: 26). The credible testimony is precisely the dedication from the end of this codex:

This is the complete codex of the twenty-four books [of the Bible], written by the master and teacher Shlomo ben Buya'a the ready [deft] scribe, may God's spirit give him rest, and punctuated and given Masora'h notes by the great teacher and wise sage, master of scribes and father of wise men, head of the teachers, quick of deed and understanding in action, and unique in his generation, the master, Rabbi

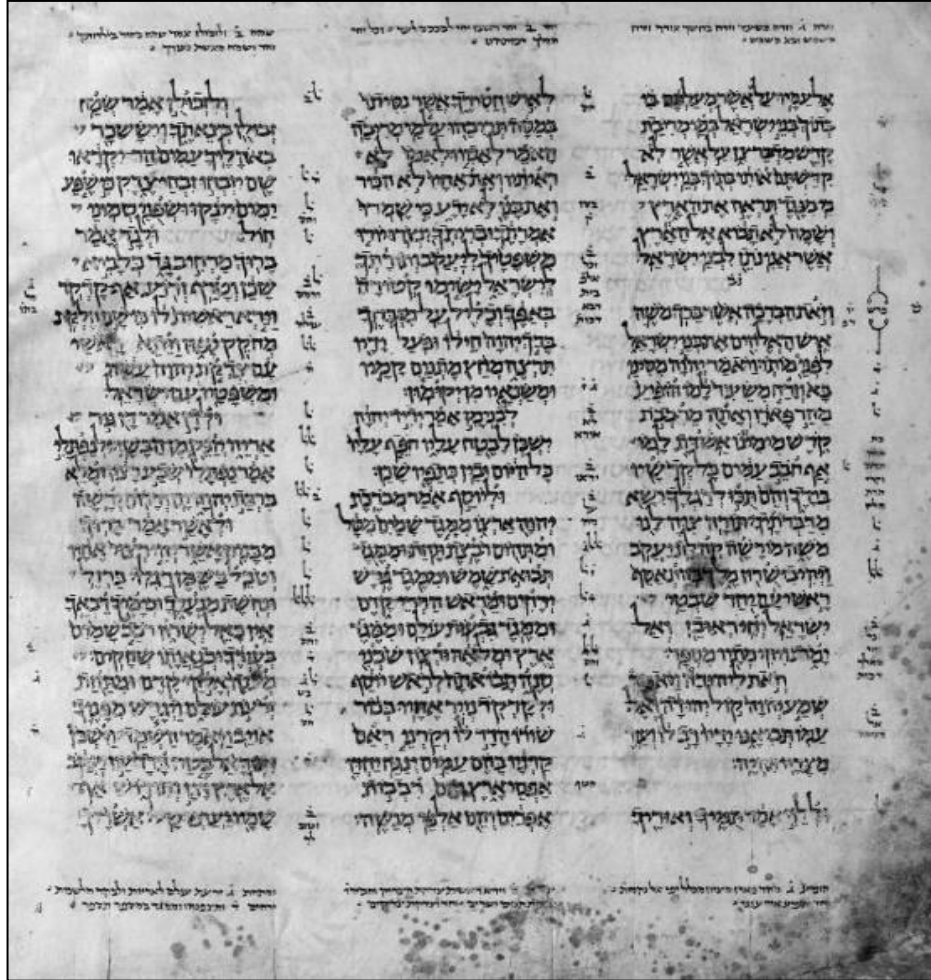
Aharon son of the master Rabbi Asher” (Ofer 2000: 36; Tawil, Schneider 2010: 25; Breshears 2014: 241-242).

The importance of this codex is inherent, all the more so as Codex Aleppo is the most important manuscript of the Bible preserved until today, the oldest codex of the Bible which contains the Masora’h (מסורה/מסורה; *Masora’h* represents the collection of critical and grammatical notes of the Old Testament, with the main purpose to protect the sacred text of corruption or degeneration, as well as to transmit faithfully this text from one generation to another, for eternity; Iatan 2005: 150-153) and it is superior to all the other Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible (Iatan 2005: 152). The interesting fact is that this codex is also named *crown* (קִרְיָן), because it was the most famous manuscript written under the coordination of Aharon Ben-Asher (Ofer 2000: 36; Korpel, Oesch 2003: 237). The fame of this codex is also given by the fact that it represents a reference point for the other codices that followed.

The place where this codex was preserved and deposited since the Middle Ages until 1948 is the city of Aleppo, in Syria. Aleppo – which also gave the name of the codex – has been the “cradle” of the manuscript until 1947, when the revolts against the Jewish started again (Hoffman 2004: 78). The year when the manuscript was written seems to be 925-930 AD (Würthwein 1995: 36; Vander Kam, Peter Flint 2004: 87; Vriezen, Van der Woude 2005: 72; Roberts 2014: 55), and its history is complex (on the history of the Codex of Aleppo see useful information on its dedicated site: <http://www.aleppocodex.org>).

It seems that the main purpose of this manuscript was liturgical, that is to be used on the occasion of the great Jewish feasts (Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot; Würthwein 1995: 36). Regarding the trail of this codex, we know that it was moved from Tiberias (the place where it was written) to Jerusalem, after the death of Aharon Ben Asher. From here, it fell into the hands of the leaders of the Karaite sect from Jerusalem and it was consulted only in terms of textual critique of the sacred text, and not to be analyzed. From Jerusalem it was stolen either by the Seleucid Turks (1071 AD), or by the crusaders (1099 AD; <http://www.aleppocodex.org>) and sold in Egypt. Here it ends up in the synagogue from Cairo. It is

interesting its mentioning in the works of Moses ben Maimon († 1204), *Mishnah*.



Referring to the Jewish mentality to copy the sacred texts and to transmit them from one generation to the next, Maimonides brings to the front the use of a book that was very famous in Egypt, which contained the 24 books and which had been in Jerusalem for several years (Berlin, Zvi Brettler, Fishbane 2004: 2081; Sáenz-Badillos 1993: 107; Ofer 2000: 37). From Cairo, the manuscript is transported in the 13th-14th centuries

AD to Aleppo (אֲדִיפּוֹ in Hebrew), where it was kept for over 600 years in a wooden box and covered in red leather (Ofer 2000: 28), in the main synagogue of the city, in one of the seven “altars”

[In the south-east altar there is a niche which contains four Crowns of the Law, some of them are texts of the whole Bible, others are only texts of the Pentateuch, and in one of them it is written what was found in the trophy taken from Jerusalem (or repaired and reconstructed); there is no data mentioned, but they all seem to be very old. There is also a cave there where it is said that prophet Elijah appeared; there is a custom to light candles here in times of trouble (the testimony of Rabbi Abraham, son of Rabbi Isaiah Dayan); Vladimirescu 2006: 141].

Nobody had access to it except for the members of the synagogue and Maimonide’s relatives. Not even the audacious attempt of Paul Khale from 1920 to see the codex and to photograph it in order to use it for the Hebrew Bible remained unsuccessful. But Umberto Moshe David Cassuto was luckier and succeeded to consult the codex in 1943, four years before it was deteriorated for good (On the impossibility to photograph this codex by Paul Khale and Umberto Moshe David Cassuto because of the superstitions of the leaders of the Jewish community from Aleppo, who considered the photography of the manuscript as a “sacrilege”, see the testimony of the first researcher:

The difficulty in dealing with this codex is the fact that we have no photo of it... Umberto Cassuto who is preparing a new edition of the Ben Asher text in Jerusalem, was in Aleppo a few years ago, in order to study the codex. He also was unable to obtain permission to take a photo of the codex. The chiefs of the community are very superstitious and were convinced that all the curses written in the book would fall upon them if they agreed to allow such a profanation as to photograph the codex. But Casutto was able to study the codex thoroughly for a long time... (Kahle 1951: 163).

In the end, the attitude of maximum security given by the Jewish community of Aleppo also had a positive effect: all the 480/487 pages of the codex (the number of pages differs from one author to another; see: Ofer 2000: 28; Iatan 2005: 155) were kept intact. The fatality came over the codex in 1947 (on the events from 1947 see the first chapter of the work of Tawil, Schneider 2010: 3-13; Segal 2005: 24, on the entire Codex, 21-27), when on the 1st of December 1947, the Arabs from Aleppo descended in a powerful opposition against the Jewish, destroying the synagogue of the city (for more information on the pogrom from 1947

from Aleppo see Tawil, Schneider 2010: 3-14). After the disaster of the fire only 294 pages were saved, a third of them burnt. The situation of the tragic event of the destruction of the synagogue from Aleppo was described in a very bleak manner by Rabbi Moshe Tawil:

They took forty scrolls of Torah and burned them outside with gasoline and oil. The Jewish were afraid to leave their homes because they were sure they would be killed. The government worn the population not to commit any murders, although they were allowed to destroy and despoil... At that time all the synagogues burned, especially the big synagogue... After forty days I was able to enter into the big synagogue and I saw the ashes of the books and other small fragments... "The Crown" was discovered laying in ashes, with its wooden box broken into several pieces (Ofer 2000: 29; Tawil, Schneider 2010: 25; Iatan 2005: 155).

The codex was saved from the ashes of the fire and hidden. However, some researchers showed that the pages of the codex were not completely burnt and it all seemed to be a setup (Würthwein 1995: 36, "but fortunately this proved false"), although the Jews from Aleppo stated the contrary. Maybe the falsification of the truth was possible with the help of the mass-media that announced the tragedy of the definitive disappearance of this codex:

The renowned Bible that was the splendor of the Jewish community of Aleppo, Bible which was used by Maimonides himself, according to the tradition, was destroyed in the fire of the pogrom against the Jews a couple of weeks ago. *Keter Aram Tsova (The Crown of Aram Tsova)*, as it was usually called, is lost forever (Tawil, Schneider 2010: 13).

The closest to reality hypothesis is that the Jews from Aleppo tore up the pages from the Codex and they either hid them or used them for their personal interest. Maybe some of the Jewish families divided the Codex, in order to maintain it intact (Fischbach 2008: 194). Thus, one of the missing pages of the Codex – although declared burnt – was discovered in the home of a Jew who emigrated to the United States, in Brooklyn, right after the fire set by the Arabs to the central synagogue from Aleppo, where the Codex was preserved. It is interesting that this page was preserved at home as an amulet (!); (see: Ofer 2000: 30; Iatan 2005: 156). The page, which contained fragments from *Crown*, was immediately repatriated to Israel.

In 1957, Rabbi Moshe Tawil gives the codex to Mordecai ben Ezra in order to offer it to the Israeli president Isaac Ben-Zvi. A year later, in 1958, the manuscript was deposited in the library of the Ben-Zvi Institute, and then transported and preserved until today in the basement of the Book Sanctuary from the Israeli Museum in Jerusalem (Ofer 2000: 30; Segal 2005: 24; Iatan 2005: 156). The manuscript went through a process of cleaning, analyzing and removal of the deteriorated parts which lasted for ten years, a process that started in 1986 at the Israeli Museum from Jerusalem (Ofer 2000: 30).

Of the Codex Aleppo only 244 pages remained, starting from Deut 28: 17 (אֲנִי־אֶשְׁׁרֶיךָ) to the word אֶל־ (given אֶל־) from Song 3: 11. The missing fragments are from *Song* (end of the book), *Eccl*, *Lamentations*, *Esther*, *Daniel*, *Ezra*. There is also a problem regarding the sequence of the books of the Old Testament, where *Chronicles* is placed before *Psalms*, *Job*, *Proverbs*, *Ruth*, *Song*, *Eccl*, *Lamentations*, *Esther*, *Daniel* and *Ezra* and *Nem* (<http://www.aleppocodex.org/links/9.html>). After a serious research, after 1958, a part of the missing fragments of the codex were rediscovered: the fragment from Deut 4: 38-6: 3 was discovered in a photographic reproduction in the book of J. Segall, *Travels through Northern Syria* (1910), and another folium that contained the text from 2 *Chron* 35: 7-36: 19 was discovered in the Library of the Hebrew University from Jerusalem (Würthwein 1995: 36, footnote 78).

Also, the transposition into columns differs from one book to the other (Deut and the text of the prophets is written on three columns, except for Deut 32 – on two columns where *Moses' Song* is inserted; the text of *Psalms*, *Job* and *Proverbs* is arranged on two columns, and starting with *Ruth*, the text is arranged on three columns). Each column has 28 rows, and its dimensions are 33x26.5 cm (Iatan 2005: 155; Vladimirescu 2006: 138). It has an extremely beautiful writing, calligraphic. As a linguistic peculiarity, Codex Aleppo uses excessively the orthographic sign *rafé* (-), which has the purpose to soften pronunciation, on the one hand, and on the other hand to show that the consonant on which it is placed is not double, it is either fricative or it isn't even pronounced (when placed above א; Cornițescu, Abrudan 2002: 33; Iatan 2005: 155). Also on the *remarks* chapter we mention that the

writing is cursive, without being divided into chapters or verses, but having the open and closed sections, characteristic to the Masoretic texts.

2. *Codex Leningradensis*

Also noted by the specialists as **Ms. B19^A**, **Codex Leningrad B 19^A** or simply **L**, the present manuscript, dated in 1008 (or 1009 AD), is part of the Ben Asher tradition and it is considered to be the oldest and the most important complete manuscript of the Old Testament (Würthwein 1995: 36; Korpel, Oesch 2003: 236; Wegner 2006: 102; Vladimirescu 2006: 144; Holmes 2012: 102; Holden, Geisler 2013: 25. There are specialists, such as M.H. Goshen-Gottstein, who, during their entire career have considered *Codex Leningradensis* to be inferior to the one from Aleppo [see: Holden, Geisler 2013: 43, footnote 13]).



It is considered today that the text was copied in Cairo by Samuel ben Jacob, after a manuscript (unfortunately lost today) written by Aaron ben Moses ben Asher, eight years earlier (around 1000). There are some contemporary signals which consider that this manuscript was copied precisely after codex Aleppo (Holden, Geisler 2013: 25), but this opinion is rather singular. The manuscript was examined in the autumn of 1926 by Paul Kahle and – to his request – it was brought to Germany, to Leipzig, for a period of two years, in order to photograph it (Kahle 1951: 164). In the third edition of the Hebrew Bible (BKS) this Codex was used by the editor Rudolf Kittel as the main manuscript (Holden, Geisler 2013: 25; Unger 1966: 1551; Breshears 2014: 242-243).

A remarkable sign in this Codex is related to the presence of the *Psalms* which are numbered, most probably by a “second hand”. There are only 149 Psalms, which proves once more that the tradition of 150 is not present in the Masoretic manuscripts. The most obvious difference in the matter of the numbering of *Psalms* may be observed in the case of Psalms 114 and 115, which are united into a single poem. Also, all five occurrences of לְהַלְלֵהוּ are written in opposition to the right margin of the column, and four of these occurrences (except for that in the beginning of *Psalms* 13) have as accents *silluq* (◌) and *sophpasuq* (:), which reflects the traditional demarcation (Korpel, Oesch 2003: 236; also, for an analysis regarding the textual critique of this codex, see: Engmann 2013).

Today, codex *Leningradensis* is preserved in the public library from Leningrad (Russia).

Short conclusions

The two manuscripts presented here in a brief form offer a testimony regarding the contribution of the “family” Aharon Ben-asher and implicitly of the Masoretic School from Tiberias. Of course, indirectly, the whole editorial effort of this School led to a more profound knowledge of the Judaic Bible and of the Masoretic text, as well as to the various linguistic nuances characteristic to this School.

Through their content, even though nowadays they are severely reduced in comparison with their *editio princeps*, these manuscripts remind us of the long journey of the biblical text and of the manner in which various rabbinic Schools produced the vocalization of the sacred

text in their sincere wish to be a *common good* and accessible to everybody.

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