THE CODEX OF BEN ASHER*

IZHAK BEN-ZVI

I

The United Nations resolution in favour of the establishment of a Jewish State was immediately followed by a wave of anti-Jewish riots in the neighbouring countries. In attacks by mobs on ancient Jewish places of worship, the Old Synagogue at Aleppo, traditionally identified with the Biblical Aram-Zobah, suffered especially severe damage.

Great, therefore, was the apprehension felt for the safety of the historic Bible Codex (Keter Torah) which, collated and pointed in Palestine more than a thousand years ago by the Massorete Ben Asher, had since been preserved in this synagogue in Aleppo. After numerous investigations and enquiries, it transpired that, though desecrated and pillaged, this venerable MS had been rescued from complete destruction and was hidden in a secret place.

It is my privilege and pleasure to inform the Jewish public and the world of Biblical scholarship that the precious MS has been found and is now in safe keeping.

This Codex has held the interest of students of the Bible for the past hundred years. Jewish and non-Jewish scholars have travelled great distances in order to see and use it, though for the most part without success. What then is its special importance? First of all, it is one of the oldest complete texts of the Hebrew Old Testament now extant. But even its antiquity is less important than its having been pointed, collated, and provided with a Massorah by one of the most outstanding Massoretes, Aaron Ben Asher, who made a detailed study of all contemporary MSS of the Old Testament and devoted his whole life to establishing the correct text.

Many such Great Codices are known to us. In former generations, the most important and most ancient of them were found mainly in the Oriental Jewish communities in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, but not many have survived to the present day. Written on parchment, these Codices usually contained only the Old Testament without Targum and Commentaries, though in a few the Targum appears after each verse of the Biblical text. The text itself is framed by the Massorah, and is written on both sides of the parchment and bound in

book form, not in scrolls like a Sefer Torah. In the more ancient Codices there are three columns to a page, while the later ones have only two. The Books of Job, Proverbs, Psalms and other poetical passages are written in two columns in the older as well as the later MSS.

Unfortunately we possess no exact description of the Aleppo MS under discussion, since the scholars who endeavoured to examine it were not permitted to photograph it, but only to look at it. Hence, up till now, our information has been of a very general nature. Now at last, for the first time, we can give a complete description of the MS from what remains of it.

The Codex of Aleppo contained all the books of the Old Testament. On each page there are three columns, except for the Books of Job, Proverbs and Psalms and other poetical passages, which are written on pages of two columns. Every column contains 28 lines. The size of the leaf is 33 by 26.5 cm. As a result of the violence done to the MS during the pogroms, about one quarter of it is missing, so that today it contains only 294 folios out of the presumable original number of about 380.

A. Pentateuch:
   Missing: Gen. i, 1 — Deut. xxvii, 16.
   The Codex thus begins with Deut. xxvii, 17.

B. Former Prophets:
   Joshua — complete
   Judges — complete
   Samuel — complete
   Kings — missing: 2 Kings xiv, 21 — xviii, 13.

C. Latter Prophets:
   Isaiah — complete
   Jeremiah — missing: xxix, 9 — xxxi, 35 (torn page also xxxii, 2-4, 9-11, 21-24).
   Ezekiel — complete
   Minor Prophets — missing: Amos viii, 12, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah v, 1;
   Zephaniah is extant except for the last verse;
   Haggai i, 1 to Zech. ix, 17.

D. Hagiographa:
   Chronicles — missing: 2 Chron. xxxv, 7 — xxvi, 19
   Psalms — missing xv, 1 — xxv, 2
   Job — complete
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Proverbs — complete
Ruth — complete
Song of Songs — up to iii,11; Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel
Ezra are all missing.

From this list it is evident that, in our MS, the books of the O.T. were arranged
in a different order from that laid down by the Sages (B.T. Baba Batra 14b). What
is still more significant is that this order is the same as in the Leningrad
MS B. 19, written in 1008, i.e. nearly at the same time as the Aleppo Codex and
also pointed according to Ben Asher.

II

The Jews of Aleppo believed that this Codex was written by Ezra the Scribe
himself. This tradition is an expression of the special awe felt by the community
for this book, which no mere mortal dared to look upon. At the beginning and
the end of the book were recorded the date when it was written and its subse-
quently fortunes. These sections have, unfortunately, been lost, and all that has
come down to us are copies of them made at various times, most of which are
inaccurate. An exception is the copy of R. Meir Nehmad of Aleppo, who in
1933 published at Aleppo a small booklet called "משה הבר נבון". Although he does not touch on the bibliographical and
scientific problems involved in any historical study of the Codex, Nehmad
was nevertheless the only one who approached the MS critically. His copying
was done with accuracy and great care, and some of his comments are worth
reading.

The colophon, which was written at least one hundred years after the MS, makes it clear that this Codex was copied out by the scribe Solomon Ben
Buyā'ā, a member of a well-known family of copyists. Where this scribe lived and when he worked at copying out the Codex is uncertain. What is known
is that in the town of Čufut-Kale ("Jews' Rock") in the Crimea, there was a
copy of the Pentateuch written by the same R. Solomon Ben Buyā'ā. The
colophon to that MS bears no date, but it does contain further biographical
details about the copyist. A section of it is worth quoting here:

אָּלַיְנוּ שְׁלֹחַנָּה יְהוּדִי בָּר בַּיָּעַא
תָּלִימֵינוּ מְצוּדָּה בַּר מְצוּדָּה הַמַּכְוָת
בְּלַעְקַק מִכְּהַתָּה הַסֵּפַּר הַדָּוִדְת
מַשְׁה בֶּר יְהוּדִי מַכְוָת עִילֵּרָב

"I], Solomon Halevi the son of Buya'a,
the disciple of Sa'id the son of Pargoi, called
Balgūq, have written this Book of the Law of
Moses, according to the good hand of my God upon me, for our Rabbi
Barhūn and for our Rabbi Šāliḥ, the sons of our Rabbi
Maimūn, may it be a good omen for them . . . ."

In another colophon of the same MS, there are data which can provide us
with information about R. Solomon ben Buya'a. The MS was pointed and
provided with a Massorah by another member of the same family, R. Ephraim
ben Buya'a, who has left us some interesting details about his work:

"I, Ephraim the son of Rabbi Buya'a
have pointed and provided with a Massorah and perfected
this Torah and examined it
according to the good hand of my God upon me; and if
there be any unintentional error in it, let it not be accounted
to me a sin by the Lord. I completed (the work) on Friday
the eighth day of Kislev in the year one thousand
two hundred and forty one
according to the counting of the documents for our Rabbi Abraham and for our Rabbi
Šāliḥ the sons of our Rabbi Maimūn . . . ."
From this several important conclusions may be drawn concerning the problems which we are discussing: a) The copyist of the Cufut-Kale MS used to copy out the Hebrew text, leaving the pointing, accents and Massorah to be added by a specialist in those matters. b) The vocalizer finished his work in the year 1241 of the Seleucid Era, i.e. 930 C.E., no doubt a few years after the scribe had copied the text. Hence it can confidently be assumed that the writing of this Codex was begun in the twenties of the 10th century. c) It would appear that the Aleppo Codex was copied before that of Cufut-Kale, since the vocalizer of the Aleppo Codex was Ben Asher — who had perhaps died in the meantime —, while in the Cufut-Kale Codex it was a relative of the scribe. From this we may draw the important inference that the Aleppo Codex was written at the end of the ninth century, at any rate not later than the year 910.

These colophons can also provide a solution to an important question which has greatly exercised the minds of scholars — namely, whether the Aleppo Codex is of Karaite or Rabbanite origin. The colophons leave no room for further doubt that the family of Buya‘a were all Rabbanites. As a general rule the Rabbanites, being the majority, did not go out of their way to proclaim their identity, and therefore any text of the O.T. which contains no specific indication of its being Karaite may be presumed to be Rabbanite, unless proved otherwise. Now, in the colophons under discussion there is no reference to בְּנֵי אֲרָא or other distinctively Karaite features, such as would certainly be found in a Karaite MS, since the Karaites never missed an opportunity to proclaim their sectarian allegiance.

As regards the question of where the MS was written, we apparently have to fall back on conjecture. Here two facts may provide us with a clue. In the colophons frequent mention is made of Jerusalem and its rebuilding; and shortly after it had been written, the Codex was, as we shall see below, in Jerusalem.

Hence, we may assume that the family of Buya‘a lived in Palestine, either in Jerusalem itself or in Tiberias.

Some scholars maintain that the Codex is Karaite on the ground that some of the plene and defective spellings in it do not accord with the traditional readings of the Sages as recorded in the Talmud.

To refute this argument it is sufficient to remark that even in those Codices which are indisputably non-Karaite we find variants from the traditional readings of the Sages. Moreover, if it can be proved, as in our case, that the scribe who wrote the MS was a Rabbanite, then the whole argument falls to the ground.

Scholarly opinion is also divided as regards the denomination of the author of the Massorah and the pointing of our Codex — “Master ( cargar) Rab Aaron
the son of Master Rab Asher". We are not here concerned with the details of the discussion of this question, on which an exhaustive article has recently been published by Aaron Dotan. Suffice it to say that I accept his conclusion — that Ben Asher was not a Karaite. It is confirmed by what I have already said above and the further evidence that will come to light below.

It should be remarked here that the name "Rab Aaron the son of Rab Asher" does not mean that R. Asher was his father. The name of R. Aaron's father was R. Moses ben Asher, who lived in Tiberias. We know his approximate date from a Codex which was in the possession of the Karaites in Egypt, where the date "827 after the Destruction" (i.e. 895–897 C.E.) appears. It follows from this that R. Aaron lived in the first part of the tenth century.

III

Since the original colophons of the copyist and vocalizer are not extant, we do not know for whom the Codex was written. The first piece of information we have is that, many years after it had been written, it was purchased by the "prince" (sar) Israel ben Simha, a Karaite from Basra, who presented it to the Karaite synagogue in Jerusalem, entrusting it to the keeping of the two great "nesi'im" Josiah and Hezekiah. Since we know that Hezekiah was alive in the year 1064, it follows that the Codex came into the hands of the Karaites only in the eleventh century. It was a common occurrence for non-Karaite scribes to sell texts of the Bible to the Karaites. Even the ה' in the Karaite synagogue in Jerusalem was undoubtedly of Rabbanite origin. Altogether the relations between Rabbanites and Karaites were, at that time, far less strained than in later generations.

The Codex did not remain in Jerusalem long. In 1071, after the sack of Jerusalem by the Seljuks, it was carried off to Egypt as part of the booty. It was ransomed by the Jewish community and placed in the Synagogue of the

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11. Kahle, however, adopts a later date. He holds that the Codex was carried off to Egypt by the Crusaders in 1099 and returned to Jerusalem in 1105. Cf. Masoretten des Westens, I, Stuttgart 1927, pp. 9–11.
Jerusalemites in Cairo, which was a Rabbanite synagogue. Shortly afterwards Maimonides saw the Codex in Egypt and used it as his authority for the correct Hebrew text for the Scroll of the Law copied out by himself, since he found that it was the most accurate version. This is what he writes in the Code, Hilkhot Sefir Torah, viii:

"Since I found great confusion in these matters in all the manuscripts that I saw, and since I found that the Masoretes who write and compose works to show which paragraphs are to be 'open' and which 'closed' differ no less in their opinions in these matters than do the manuscripts on which they rely — I decided to write down here all the sections of the Law, both the open and the closed ones as well as the correct way of writing the poems, for the purpose of revising existing books by them and collating new ones. My authority in these matters was the well-known codex in Cairo which contains the twenty-four books and which was in Jerusalem several years ago. This book was referred to by all as an authority for the correct text, since it was collated by Ben Asher, who worked on it for many years and collated it many times. It has been my own authority in the correct Torah scroll which I have written".

It is worth quoting the comment of R. Shem-Tob Gaon (1283–1330), one of the greatest Masoretic authorities, on these words of Maimonides in his הידראוט; 12: "(Maimonides) took the text of Moses Ben Asher as his authority and, in my opinion, was quite right in his choice". R. Shem-Tob thus identifies Maimonides "Ben Asher" (wrongly) as Moses Ben Asher.

Prof. M.D. Cassuto13 has expressed doubt as to whether the book referred to by Maimonides really was the Codex of Aleppo, but has not given reasons for his skepticism. In any case, whether we believe that Ben Asher actually pointed and collated this MS or not, there is no disputing the fact that in the colophon attached to the "Crown" when it was in Cairo it was recorded that this book was so pointed and collated by Ben Asher, and Maimonides considered the information of the colophon authentic. Moreover, all the rest of the data is in keeping with the statement of the colophon. It may be objected that, according to Maimonides, Deut. xxxii should contain seventy verses, whereas in the Aleppo MS it has only sixty-seven. However, a careful examination of the earliest MSS and editions of the Code has revealed that Maimonides also wrote the poem in sixty-seven verses, in accordance with Ben Asher, and that his text was subsequently altered by the printers and copyists.14 This is a further confirmation of what has been surmised above.

12. First published Constantinopel 1509.
14. This problem and its solution will be discussed by Dr. M. Goshen-Gottstein in his article appearing in this volume.
When was the Codex removed from Egypt to Aleppo? For an answer to this question the scholars of Aleppo refer us to R. David b. Zimra (1479–1574) who in his *Responsa* stated that the Codex used by Maimonides as his authority in writing his Scroll of the Law was brought to Aleppo in his own lifetime. Scholars have searched in vain for this particular responsum. It has recently been proved by N. Ben-Menachem\(^{15}\) that David b. Zimra was not referring to a Bible Codex, but to a copy of the *Code*, which was copied by a professional scribe and revised by Maimonides himself, and that the scholars of Aleppo confused the two books.

The most likely time for the transference of this Codex to Aleppo would seem to be the end of the 14th century. It is known that in the year 1375, Rabbi David the son of R. Joshua, the son of R. Abraham, the son of R. David, the son of R. Abraham the son of Maimonides, left Egypt and, travelling to Syria by way of Palestine, settled first in Damascus and then in Aleppo, where he lived, apparently, till his death (c. 1410). R. David the younger took with him many MSS, including the commentary of Maimonides to the Mishnah in the author’s own hand\(^{16}\), and it is quite possible that amongst them was the Codex of Ben Asher which his ancestor had used as his authority. Or else the MS may have been brought by one of two other scholars who moved to Aleppo in the same period. To-day we have clear proof that a hundred years before the time of R. David b. Zimra, even before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the Codex was already in Aleppo.

Saadia ben David of Aden, who visited Aleppo, no doubt in the course of his pilgrimage to Safed, before the year 1478–9, mentions the Codex in his commentary to *Seder Ahabah* of Maimonides’ *Code*, a MS of which is in the Bodleian Library\(^{17}\):

> הפסוק שמפי עליה התוסף דר שירין היא何必 במדינת ויבא והיה תליב בראשה ומלמד
> המכתבים עליך כלuin erhalten משותף וראיהollider לברית נא אחז קרבר וראיהشتה מבר.

“The book which the Gaon of Blessed Memory used as his authority is still today in the town of Zobah, i.e. Aleppo, and is called ‘the Crown’. It is written on parchment with three columns of writing to every page. At the end is written: ‘I, Aaron ben Asher collated it, etc.’”.\(^{18}\)

Thus there is a gap in our knowledge of only about one hundred years from

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17. Dated 28 Tebeth 5239 (Jan. 1479); Neubauer’s Cat. No. 619.
the year 1375 when R. David ha-Nagidh left Egypt to the time of R. Saadia of Aden who was in Aleppo before the year 1478. Less than a hundred years later one of the most famous scholars of Safed, R. Joseph Ashkenazi “the Tannaite”, declares that he, too, consulted the Codex of Ben Asher in Aleppo on the subject of the open and closed paragraphs of the Law, in connection with the above ruling of Maimonides. He writes as follows:

“..."I found the actual manuscript of Ben Asher from which he (Maimonides) copied the open and closed sections, as he wrote in his book. I found there that many times he wrote no more than a single word (at the beginning of a line) and then began the following section on the line below. If his (Ben Asher’s) opinion had been like that of Maimonides who read it as a closed section, he could easily have written it as such19, since there was plenty of space left. . . . Moreover, the scribe wrote at the end of the book: ‘Whoever wishes to see from it which words have the full and which the defective spelling, which sections are open and which closed, where a new sedher begins and where the text goes on’ . . . According to his (Maimonides’) system I did not know what the opinion of the scribe was in all these matters that we have mentioned.”20 This is exactly the version found in the colophon of our Aleppo Codex.

IV

For two hundred years after this we have no further information about the Codex in Aleppo. Then the Rabbi of the community, R. Raphael Solomon Laniado (died in 1783–4) mentions it in one of his responsa:

19. If a 'closed' section ends before the middle of a line, the first word of the following section is written at the end of the same line, otherwise the same blank space is distributed between this and the following line. An 'open' section requires in any case restarting on another line, and if the section ends after the middle of the line, the following line is left blank (Maimonides, Code, H. Sefer-Torah viii, 1–2).

20. Oxford MS Neubauer 1664, p. 123b. I have reproduced the text as printed by G. Scholem, “Fresh Information about R. Joseph Ashkenazi, the Tanna from Safed”, Tarbiz (Hebrew), 28 (1959) p. 75. After the publication of my Hebrew article, Scholem, too, stated that Rabbai Joseph’s remarks referred to the Aleppo Codex discussed here.
“It is a custom in our city that he who says so²¹ must swear by the ‘Crown of the Law’ how much he has and then he pays according to his oath. . . . . and this is an ancient custom”.²²

About this time, before 1753, an English traveller, Alexander Russell, who visited Aleppo, was allowed to see the Codex. In the record of his travels, The Natural History of Aleppo (second edition, London 1794) Russell devoted a whole chapter to the Jews and their customs. At the end (Vol. II, pp. 59, 399) he refers to this ancient MS which was kept in the Old Synagogue in Aleppo and which the Jews of Aleppo believed to be from the time of the Second Temple²³:

“They have one synagogue, situated in what is called the Jews’ Street, where a manuscript of the Old Testament is preserved, which, as they pretend, is of very high antiquity.

“(Note) The Jews assign two reasons for ascribing such high antiquity to the M.S. Bible preserved in the synagogue at Aleppo. The one, the concurrent tradition of their Rabbis, and their submission to its authority in the various readings of disputed passages: they produce instances of deputations sent from Europe on purpose to consult it.

The other that at the end of the M.S. there is a prayer for the preservation of the Temple: whence they conclude it must have been written before the expedition of Titus; because after that period, their prayers were offered up for the restauration, not preservation of the Temple of Jerusalem. A specimen of this M.S. was transmitted to Dr. Kennicott, who did not find reason to ascribe such high antiquity to it as the Jews do.”

The tradition of swearing by this Codex has persisted in Aleppo down to the present day. There can thus be no doubt that Laniado’s words refer to the famous Codex copied by R. Solomon ben Buyâla, as will be corroborated by further evidence to be brought below. Such being the case, this MS must have been in Aleppo many years before the lifetime of R. Solomon Laniado.

The Codex was kept in one of the seven “shrines”²⁴ of the Old Synagogue. There is extant a description of this repository written in the year 1847–8 by one of the scholars of Aleppo, R. Abraham the son of R. Issiah Dayan. He writes as follows: “In the shrine on the south-eastern side there is a niche containing four Crowns of the Law, some being texts of the whole Bible, some only of the Pentateuch, and on one of them it is written that it was found among the booty

²¹ i.e. who does not accept the assessment made of his means for the purpose of the congregational tax.
²² In his responsa collection הבקע ראה, Jerusalem n.d., Par. 2, fol. 9a.
²³ This source was brought to my notice by Mr. Ben-Zion Luria. Dr. Michael Davis was kind enough to lend me his copy of the book. I hereby express my thanks to both of them.
²⁴ For a description of this synagogue and its shrines, see the article of Alexander Dothan, סמרות Sport 1 (1957) pp. 25–61.
taken from Jerusalem (may it be rebuilt and restored). There is no date on them, but they appear to be ancient. He who incurs an oath by the Law swears there upon the Codices. The administration of the oath is the sole prerogative of the Dayan family. There is also a cave there in which tradition relates that Elijah the prophet appeared. It is customary to light lamps there in time of trouble, and also women do so when they start their ninth month of pregnancy. Also on the eve of the Day of Atonement, at the time of the Mirkhah prayer, the women leave their ovens and cooking fires, change their garments and join the throng to place oil (lamps) in that cave."

Subsequently, the Codex was removed from this shrine. Rabbi Isaac Shheby-bar, one of the scholars of Aleppo (now living in Buenos Aires), has given me the following information about it by letter:

"It stood in a wooden case in a corner of the oil store of the Great Synagogue, and no Jew had the presumption to go near it. Thus its great sanctity in the eyes of the masses preserved it intact all the time. Eventually, however, there was a fire in the oil store and it was saved from destruction only by a miracle. In addition some suspicious-looking people in the guise of tourists and scholars came from various countries to look at the book, and the members of the community feared that they would steal or photograph it. For these reasons they decided in recent years to make a special iron box for it, and they put it in this box with the other manuscripts of the Bible that were kept in the synagogue. There were two keys to this box. Both of them were not given even to the most trusted gabbai, but one key was given to each of two wealthy and important members of the community, so that the box could only be opened in the presence of both of them together and under the supervision of the council of the congregation. The box was placed on a large stone slab in the cave of Elijah the Prophet in the Great Synagogue and all the congregation regard the place where it stands with awe and reverence."

I have quoted the evidence of the scholars of Aleppo at length, because of the most interesting light that it throws upon the development of a tradition. The special sanctity attaching to the Codex goes back no further than to the time when it was placed in the Cave of Elijah. Shortly afterwards, the Jewish masses had forgotten the source of the cave's sanctity and attributed it to the Codex. But it is clear from the words of R. Abraham Dayan that a hundred years ago the Jews of Aleppo used still to prostrate themselves in worship and light candles not to the Codex, which was then in another place, but to the Prophet Elijah. R. Solomon Laniado, too, does not regard the Codex as particularly holy, nor does he attribute it to Ezra the Scribe: he simply writes that his contemporaries used to swear upon it. Thus it is clear that these later legendary embellishments grew up around the Codex only after it had been transferred to the Cave of Elijah.

The tradition described by Rabbi Sh'heybar appears to be inaccurate in certain particulars. The codices were certainly not kept in the oil store, but in the south-eastern "shrine". It is possible that the oil for replenishing the lamps was also placed there, as is done in several Oriental congregations and was the case in the "Istambulis" synagogue in Jerusalem. Our Codex was transferred to the Cave of Elijah after 1850 and before 1899, since in the latter year the collector Elhanan Nathan Adler from London, on a visit to Aleppo, already found it in the cave.26

V

The high esteem in which this Codex was held by scribes may be gauged from the fact that, in many Codices, the later scribes also copied out the colophon attached to it, as proof of having taken their text of the Bible from this accurate source. In the synagogue of the Rema (Rabbi Moses Isserlis) at Cracow there was a Codex sent to him in 1558–9 by R. Joseph Caro of Safed (author of the Shulḥan 'Arukh) which had been bought for one hundred ducats. Isserlis copied the text of his own Scroll of the Law from this MS because it contained the colophon of the Codex of Aleppo.27 At the end of the nopser which was in the Karaite synagogue in Jerusalem, this same colophon was added in a modern Karaite script which was no part of the original MS; this was apparently the work of the notorious Karaite scholar Firkovich who introduced various

27. The colophon has been reproduced in the Hebrew periodical Ha-Maggid, 1 (1856–7) No. 47. The copyist was unable to read all the letters. The fate of this Codex after the European holocaust and its present whereabouts are unknown to me. Any one who possesses such information is requested to communicate with me. B-Z.
changes and distortions into the original version in order to prove its Karaites origin. At the head of this colophon he states:

אברר יתועניך רשם היקר החוכם חנוך יהודה עקיבא מקדש כה הזרע והיו。

I set myself to copy the precious note from the end of the precious Bible known as the לָמוֹשׁ, which was copied into it from a Codex called מִדְקֵרֵשׁ that was dedicated to the Jerusalemite Synagogue in Cairo” 28. There is no point in commenting here on all the errors in this copy, but the differences which prove his tendentious distortions should be mentioned. Instead of giving the name of the scribe as “Solomon known as Ben Buyā’a”, the Karaites write “Our Master and Teacher Solomon the son of Jeruham the deft scribe”, thus hoping to mislead the reader into thinking that the MS was copied by the Karaitic Solomon ben Jeruham (b. ca. 910). At the same time it is interesting to note that the name of Ben Asher appears in Firkovich’s copy in its correct form (and not as it is wrongly written in our MS): “Our Master Aaron the son of our Master Moses the son of Rab Asher”. In the genealogy of the “Princes” (כנבירא) he adds the name of the Prince Solomon, son of the Prince David.29

We shall now quote in full the lost colophon at the end of the Codex, as copied by R. Meir Nehmad:30

29. Since the copy of the colophon in the Cracow Codex contains the additional name Solomon, it may be presumed that the name was inadvertently omitted from the copy of R. Meir Nehmad.
30. Yehuda el-aleppo, 1933. I found R. Meir Nehmad, whom I met on visits to Cairo and Aleppo, to be a scholar of vast knowledge and scientific acuity. The translation has been set out in paragraphs so as to guide the reader through the labyrinth of names and eulogies.
"This complete copy of the Twenty-four Books, which was written by our Master and Teacher Solomon known as Ben Buyâ’a, the deft scribe, (may the spirit of the Lord rest him), and pointed and given a full Massorah by the great scholar and wise sage, lord of the scribes and father of the sages, and chief of the scholars, who was deaf in his deeds, knowledgeable in his undertakings and unique in his generation — Master Rab Aaron the son of Master Rab Asher (may his soul be bound up in the bundle of life with the prophets, the righteous and the pious ones)

"was dedicated by the great, exalted, mighty prince, our Master and Teacher Israel, the glory of all Israel, the sage and wise, the pious, upright and noble one (may the Lord raise high his standard and cause his crown to flourish and his strength to increase) from Basra, the son of Master Rab Simha, the son of Master Saadia, the son of Master Rab Ephraim (may the spirit of the Lord rest them)

"to Jerusalem the Holy City, into the keeping of the seed of Israel, the congregation of Jacob, the community of Jeshurun, the possessors of knowledge and the chosen ones of the wise ones who dwell upon Mount Zion, may God preserve them forever, Selah,

"as a thing holy unto the Lord: it shall not be sold or redeemed, that it may not pass out of the hands of the two great Princes, their honoured and glorious highnesses and holinesses the Prince Josiah and the Prince Hezekiah, the sons of his honoured highness the Prince David, the son of the Prince

31. Cf. Ps. cxxxii, 18.
32. R. Meir Nehmad remarks that this word is written in place of a previously erased word which, in his opinion, was "the Karaites", העריאים.
34. I.e. made available for profane use by paying a sum of money to the synagogue's treasurer.
Boaz (may their souls be bound up in the bundle of life in the Garden of Eden beneath the tree of life).

"so that they may bring it out to the study-houses (מבואות)35 and the congregations in the Holy City on the three pilgrim-festivals, on the Feast of Passover and the Feast of Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles, (for the people) to read therein and to study and to learn therefrom all that they wish and choose.

"If these two great Princes, Master Rab Josiah and Hezekiah (may their Rock grant them happy lives) so desire and entrust it to two righteous and wise men, known to be God-fearing and true and haters of ill-gotten gain, they shall act in their wisdom and according to their prerogative.

"And if, on any day of the year, anyone of the seed of Israel from amongst the possessors of understanding from36 the Rabbanites desire to check in it words with plene or defective spelling, or whether a passage runs on without break or is open or closed, or any accents, they shall produce it for him to see and study and to explain to them, to read and interpret, and afterwards they shall restore it to its place and keep watch over it; and no untrustworthy person must be left alone with it.

"The Lord, the God of Israel, will set it as a good sign, a sign of blessing, for him and for his seed and for all Israel, and there will come to pass for him the words of the prophet: ‘For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon thy descendants and my blessing on thine offspring. They shall spring up like grass amid waters, like willows by flowing streams. This one will say, I am the Lord’s, another will call himself by the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, The Lord’s, and surname himself by the name of Israel’.37 And all the blessings written in this volume shall be fulfilled and come to pass and be said concerning him and his seed and everyone who shall hear and listen and give ear and do according to these words and shall not change and alter them for all eternity. Blessed be the Lord for evermore. Amen. Amen."

At the end of the first page the following words are written:

אנתקל בחכמה אלמלארכאות ממזבח ירושלים עד הקדיש בניו הכהנים ללקול פוריס
לבנש ירושלים בניו הכהנים בחתי ישראל ברוך שם מרור เมנו וויואר ממון לא ממיר
ולא יאכלי לנד לשולם עולם.

35. Ibn Sapr reads מיספנ. The Karaite seems to have been something like a מיספנ. Cf. Ben-Yehuda, Thesaurus p. 2866b, s.v. מיספנ, פארות ע. נ.
36. This word, too, is written over an erasure where, in the opinion of Neḥmad, the reading had been “from amongst the Karaites (מיספנ) and from the Rabbanites”.
37. Isa. xlv, 3-5.
“Transferred by force of ransom (al-iftikāk) from the booty of Jerusalem the Holy City (may it be rebuilt and restored) to the congregation of Cairo to the Synagogue of Jerusalem (may it be rebuilt and restored in the lifetime of Israel). Blessed be he who keeps it and cursed be he who steals it, and cursed be he who gives it in pledge. It shall not be sold or redeemed for all eternity.”

VI

One further point remains to be discussed. As stated by Rabbis Abraham Dayan, Adler, Nehmad and Sh’heybar, there were four codices in the Great Synagogue in Aleppo. One of them, containing only the Pentateuch, was rescued together with the Codex of Ben Asher. This MS was completely undamaged, apart from the last page on which the colophon was written. Thanks, however, to the particulars noted down by Adler, we know that it was completed on the 15th of Tammuz in the year 5111 A.M. (1341 C.E.) apparently in Italy. The other two Codices were an illuminated double-column Pentateuch with the Haphtaroth and the Five Scrolls, which Adler describes as being even then in bad condition; and another Pentateuch with a colophon stating the name of the dedicator: קֵדֶשׁ מְנִיחַ אֲבָרְכָהּ רְדֵּרְשַׁ חָי בְּכָרָדָא תְּרוּחַ מָן. "Dedication of his honour, Rabbi Abraham, dedicated by a Kohen, son of his honour Rabbi Isaac the Kohen." 39

We fervently hope that these two copies of the Pentateuch may also come to light again in due course.

The last in time, but by no means the least in importance, who was privileged to see the Codex of Ben Asher in its entirety and to note down particulars about its contents, was the late Prof. M.D. Cassuto. Following the decision of the Hebrew University to publish a scientific edition of the Hebrew Bible, Prof. Cassuto travelled to Aleppo for the specific purpose of examining the Codex of Ben Asher. Unfortunately, the Aleppo congregation did not permit him to spend there more than a few days. He thought of basing his Hebrew text on this MS, and later, when he heard of the fire in the Aleppo Great Synagogue, he lamented the destruction (as he thought) of the Codex in a special article.40 It is our hope that what was denied this scholar will be granted to his pupils and disciples who will have the advantage of being able to refer to this ancient MS when restoring the exact Hebrew text of the Bible.

40. הַאָרֶץ 18.XII.1947.
The Aleppo Codex
Dt. xxviii, 17 — 45

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