THE DEBT OF BIBLICAL RESEARCH TO IZHAK BEN-ZVI

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The late President of Israel, I. Ben-Zvi, was well-known for his interest in the history and intellectual life of the Oriental Jewish, Karaite, and Samaritan communities. Among the many aspects of this culture, he held in special esteem the “Crowns of the Law” (ךנמיי תואר), those venerable model codices of the Bible found in many communities. On various occasions, when his travels led him to Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo, or Constantinople, as well as smaller towns, he spent much of his time there visiting synagogues in the Jewish quarters, inquiring after manuscripts in general and “Crowns of the Law” in particular, and studying those he was shown. When during the Israel War of Independence the Karaite synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem was destroyed by Arab rioters, Ben-Zvi instituted a search for the ancient תָּרֶח kept there; and after discovering it in private hands in Europe, he made arrangements for it to be redeemed and placed in the National and University Library in Jerusalem. He also devoted to this codex a scholarly study, in which he established that it was written in the 13th century C.E., by a Spanish scribe, and brought to the East by the Spanish exiles after 1492, as was also the אַבָּב מַיְרָי codex preserved by the Karaites in Egypt and the עַר כָּנֶס kept at Damascus.

More than by any other, however, his attention was attracted by the famous “Crown of the Law” which had for many generations been kept at the Old Synagogue of Aleppo, perhaps the most ancient of all the synagogues which existed until a few years ago in the Middle East. Tradition attributed the pointing and Massorah of this codex to Aaron Ben-Asher in the ninth century, and identified it as the manuscript which Maimonides had used. It thus rightly attracted the notice of biblical scholars and gave rise to a long-drawn-out controversy concerning its character and the truth of the tradition attached

1 Cf., for instance, his article on the “Crown of the Law” at Jobar, Hadashoth ha-Ares 1918–19, no. 83; or his article on a Samaritan Pentateuch in קובץ התוברים לחקירת אִדָּם וַצְוָאֵי תְרוֹפָה, מְסֶכֶת לוֹךְ אֶלֶף מִלּוֹת 1927–8, p. 191 sq.
to it. These problems were all the more difficult to solve, as no scholar had ever been allowed to examine the manuscript or to photograph it. The late Prof. M.D. Cassuto, the last scholar to see the undamaged manuscript at its place in the Aleppo synagogue, was only permitted a cursory examination.

During the War of Independence the synagogue at Aleppo was raided and burned down by a local mob. It was generally assumed that the Aleppo Codex was also destroyed on that occasion. President Ben-Zvi, however, refused steadfastly to give credence to the reports and surmises regarding the fate of the codex, and moved by his deep concern for this most important of all biblical manuscripts, continued to make inquiries, and kept alive the hope that the manuscript would one day be found and serve as a source for biblical research. I remember his many efforts to discover the place where in his opinion the codex was hidden. More than once I was present when he discussed with the late Sephardic Chief Rabbi Uzziel and other personalities the ways and means by which the “discovery” of the venerable manuscript could be brought about, and its transfer to safety in Jerusalem assured.

And indeed his incessant labours bore the hoped-for result. Great was his joy when at last the Aleppo Codex was lying before him. His happiness was not perfect, since the codex had suffered at the hands of the rioters, and many pages were missing, perhaps as much as one quarter of the manuscript as it had been before 1948.

Shortly after the rediscovery of the codex, Ben-Zvi published his important study on it, accompanied by some photographs. In it he stated: “It is my privilege and pleasure to inform the Jewish public and the world of biblical scholarship that the precious manuscript has been found and is now in safe keeping.” The article concludes with the words: “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... It is our hope that what was denied this scholar will be granted to his pupils, who will have the advantage of being able to refer to this ancient manuscript when restoring the exact Hebrew text of the Bible.” This task now faces the scholars of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I am convinced that the Hebrew University’s Bible Project will carry out Ben-Zvi’s last will enjoining the publication of the codex to the full and within a short time.

3 Only two pages had been photographed and published without the knowledge of the Aleppo community.