

The Recent Finds in Palestine

F.F. Bruce

[p.43]

It is well known that manuscript discoveries in the New Testament field during the last twenty years have steadily reduced the gap of years between the date of the original autographs and the date of the earliest extant copies. This is particularly so with the Gospel of John, for the Rylands Library in Manchester houses a fragment of a papyrus codex of this Gospel which was written not more than forty years after the first appearance of the Gospel itself.

The position with regard to the Old Testament is far different. Here, until the other day, a gap of over two thousand years separated the earliest known Hebrew copies of the oldest books of the Old Testament from the date at which these were actually penned. The Revisers' Preface to the Old Testament (1884) states that "the earliest MS, of which the age is certainly known bears date A.D. 916." This is a copy of the prophetic books at Leningrad. Older than this are a ninth-century Hebrew copy of the Pentateuch in the British Museum and a Cairo codex of the prophetic books completed in A.D. 895.

There are special reasons for the comparatively late date of the earliest extant copies of the Hebrew Bible which we need not go into here. But the text was not in such an uncertain condition as might have been inferred from the gap of one or two thousand years separating the copies from their prototypes. The known conditions in which the text was transmitted were such as to inspire confidence. The Hebrew text could be checked by the Samaritan Pentateuch, by quotations in the Rabbinical writings, by the Aramaic paraphrases called Targums, and (more especially) by the early versions—Greek, Latin, and Syriac—which bore witness to a Hebrew text many centuries older than the earliest accessible Hebrew copies. The Greek Septuagint, in particular, which is extant in manuscripts of the third and fourth centuries A.D., bears witness to the state of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament in the last three centuries B.C.

Of recent years it has been possible to push our knowledge of Hebrew manuscripts back beyond the end of the ninth century A.D. The *geniza* or storehouse of a synagogue in Old Cairo was discovered towards the end of last century, and its contents, which scholars have been studying for the last fifty years and more,

[p.44]

have proved to include many portions of Hebrew Scripture older than the earliest manuscripts hitherto known. An account of this discovery was a few years ago by Dr. Paul Kahle in *The Cairo Geniza*, a volume which contains the Schweich Lectures for 1941.¹ This is an indispensable work for students of the textual history of the Old Testament.

Even so, however, the gap was not reduced by more than a century or two as a result of the exploration of the Cairo *geniza*. Far otherwise is it with a more recent discovery in Palestine.

¹ A *geniza* was a store-room where worn or damaged copies of the Scriptures were stored until such time as they could be reverently buried. It is this reverent disposal of old copies which accounts for their disappearance. Fortunately the contents of the *geniza* in Cairo were forgotten and left undisturbed for centuries.

In 1947 a Bedouin found in a cave at Ain Fashka, to the north of the Dead Sea, a number of jars sealed with pitch, which proved to contain a number of ancient scrolls. How many scrolls were in the cave at the time when the discovery was made cannot be known, but in the troubled times in Palestine in 1948 four of them made their way to the Syrian Orthodox Convent in Jerusalem, while the Hebrew University secured another three. Those belonging to the Syrians were entrusted for study to the American Schools of Oriental Research, while those in the Hebrew University could be studied by experts on the spot, especially by Prof. Eleazar Sukenik.

Great excitement and not a little scepticism broke out in the world of Biblical learning when it was announced that one of the Syrian scrolls was a complete copy of the Book of Isaiah in Hebrew, belonging to the first or second century B.C., with a script as Prof. W. F. Albright put it. "easily a thousand years older than that of the oldest Hebrew Biblical roll hitherto known." The scepticism was natural and wise: scholars like Sir Frederick Kenyon had expressed the view that there was no hope of finding Hebrew manuscripts materially older than the earliest now extant. Memories of famous hoaxes in the past were immediately recalled. But the scholars who examined the scrolls, both in America and in Palestine, had no doubt about their genuineness, and every fresh piece of evidence that has come to light has gone to confirm their verdict.

The Isaiah manuscript, while showing deviations from the standard Hebrew text in details of spelling and inflection, in general exhibits a text in remarkable agreement with the Masoretic text of the later manuscripts. It contains additional notes in

[p.45]

Hebrew on the margins and between the lines, some of which are said to draw attention to variant readings hitherto known only from the Greek form in the Septuagint version. If the date assigned to the scroll is right, then it puts out of court the late dating assigned by some scholars to certain portions of Isaiah, such as the apocalypse of chapters 24 to 27, which has sometimes been dated as late as about 100 B.C.

Another of the scrolls owned by the Syrians is a commentary on Habakkuk, interpreting the prophecy of conditions obtaining under the Macedonian dynasties of Egypt and Syria. This gives a clue to the date of the commentary, and indicates that at this time the Book of Habakkuk itself was acknowledged as Holy Scripture. Yet another scroll in this collection to which the name of the "sectarian document" has been given seems to be a manual of discipline of some Jewish sect—possibly the sect which was responsible in the first place for storing these documents in the cave at Ain Fashka. The fourth, which was particularly brittle and took much longer to unroll and study, turns out to be an Aramaic work—either the Aramaic original of the Book of Enoch or a work very like it, and in any case of extraordinary importance for our knowledge of the development of apocalyptic thought and literature in the period between the Testaments.

The three works which belong to the Hebrew University are (1) a work which Prof. Sukenik has entitled "The War of the Children of Light against the Children of Darkness"; (2) a

collection of hymns at praise:² another copy of part of the Book of Isaiah, containing about eleven chapters from chapter 48 on.

Whatever variations there may be in the dating of the various scrolls making up these two collections it appears that they all belong to the period preceding the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

[p.46]

Since the truce in Palestine it has been possible for an official archaeological inspection to be made of the cave where the manuscripts were found. Not much was left, as there had been previous unofficial inspections. But there was some ancient pottery which confirmed the dates assigned to the scrolls; there were also fragments belonging to the scrolls themselves, which had been torn off when they were removed from the jars. Other fragments were found indicating that there had been other scrolls in the cave. These fragments included portions of Genesis, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Judges and the Book of Jubilees, and some of them were written in a script more archaic than the Isaiah scrolls, approximating to that used for the Lachish Letters of the 6th century B.C. Among some other fragments from, the cave, which were acquired by the Syrian Convent early this year, are three portions of the Book of Daniel from two separate scrolls. In view of current opinions about the date of this book, it will be interesting to know what the experts think about the date of these fragments.

Accounts of the discoveries, with some facsimiles, have been published by the American scholars in various numbers of *The Biblical Archaeologist* since Sept. 1948. and of the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* since Oct. 1948. As for the Jerusalem scholars, Prof. Sukenik has given the first instalment of his findings in a volume entitled *Megilloth Genuzoth* (Jerusalem, 1948). We expect to see complete facsimiles soon; a facsimile of the Isaiah scroll is promised for autumn of this year. We must also hope for reports by experts of another kind on the condition and age of the writing material and ink, for the issues at stake are so far-reaching that the genuineness of these documents must be established as thoroughly as possible-. But already sufficient evidence has been offered to confirm Prof. Albright's view that this is "the greatest manuscript discovery of modern time."—[We are indebted to *The Harvester*, London, for this excellent summary.—Ed.]

© 1950 F.F. Bruce. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in March 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

² Regarding these "Hymns of Praise," it is of great interest to read the following statement by, Mr D. J. Wiseman, B.A., assist. Keeper in the Dept. of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities in the British Museum.

"Another critical idea about the Bible that is forever silenced by this great find is the view that some of the Psalms were written as late as the 'Maccabean period,' i.e. 130 B.C. Among the other scrolls were some containing 'Thanksgiving Hymns,' dateable to about the same time as the Isaiah scroll. They quote from our Psalms in such a way as to indicate that by this time they were already very old. Professor Albright, addressing a learned Society in London last July, gave it as his opinion, based on all the evidence available to scholars now, that the Psalms certainly date back to the time stated in the Bible, i.e. David, etc."—Ed. "B.S."