A Rare Torah

in the Library of Congress

Gary A. Rendsburg

In January 2018, the Library of Congress announced that it had obtained a c. 1,000-year-old Torah scroll sheet. What makes this Torah scroll sheet so important? Where is it from? And how did it reach the halls of the *de facto* national library of the United States? Here is the story, though first some background.

As readers of **BAR** know, in ancient Israel and during the Greco-Roman period, biblical books were written on scrolls, made either from papyrus (in the earlier period) or from parchment (in the later period). Our most important testimony, of course, stems from the more than 200 biblical manuscripts found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, dated from the third through first centuries B.C.E. In the scroll format, the text was written on only one side of the available writing surface, what we may call the inside surface.

With the rise of Christianity, the written text took a new form, the codex, the forerunner of the modern book. In this format, the text was written on both sides of the parchment sheet, and then the sheets were piled one on top of the other and sewn together—again, consider the modern book. The most famous exemplar is probably Codex Sinaiticus,* a complete (or nearly so) manuscript of the Greek Bible (including both

*See "Who Owns the Codex Sinaiticus?" **BAR**, November/December 2007.

ONE OF ITS KIND, this Hebrew manuscript, purchased recently by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., is the oldest complete Torah scroll sheet totally legible by the naked eye. Penned around 1000 C.E., it contains the text of Exodus 10:10–16:15.

COURTESY OF THE SYNDICS OF CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

ANCIENT BUT INCOMPLETE. This fragmentary manuscript page was recovered from the ocean of Jewish documents in the Cairo Genizah, a repository of sacred Jewish writings that had accumulated over centuries in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo, Egypt. Containing sections of Genesis 4–6, it is kept today in the Cambridge University Library (as T-S NS 4.3). This fairly legible sheet predates the Library of Congress's new manuscript by about 200 years, but it survives incomplete.

Old and New Testaments), written in the fourth century C.E., most likely in Caesarea.[1]

For centuries, however, the Jews resisted the new technology of the codex, perhaps or even most likely because it came to be associated with the Christian Bible.* Eventually, however, the Jews realized the benefit of the codex, and this new form was adopted for the writing of the Hebrew Bible. The two great exemplars are the Aleppo Codex (c. 920 C.E.) and the St. Petersburg (or Leningrad) Codex (1009 C.E.).**

At the same time, another development took hold in the Jewish tradition. Originally, the biblical text (indeed, any text) was written solely with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, each one representing a consonant (or in some cases, two consonantal sounds). Vowels, punctuation, and so on were not represented in the written text; rather, expert readers knew how to intone the text via oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation. Eventually, however, Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes (from the Hebrew word *masora*, "tradition") developed a full repertoire of signs and symbols to mark every possible minor item in the reading tradition: vowels, accents, punctuation, and more. Thus, our earliest codices, such as Aleppo and St. Petersburg mentioned above, are written with the full Masoretic apparatus in place.

But these two developments—the adoption of the codex and of the Masoretic notations—were implemented for nonliturgical purposes only. These complex productions were to be used for study, reference, and consultation. For liturgical purposes, the Jews retained the older technology of the scroll and the original manner of writing (without the vowel points, accent marks, and punctuation symbols). The Torah scroll remained the central object in the synagogue, housed in the Ark and brought forth on the prescribed occasions (especially on Sabbath and festivals) for the public reading of the biblical text.[2]

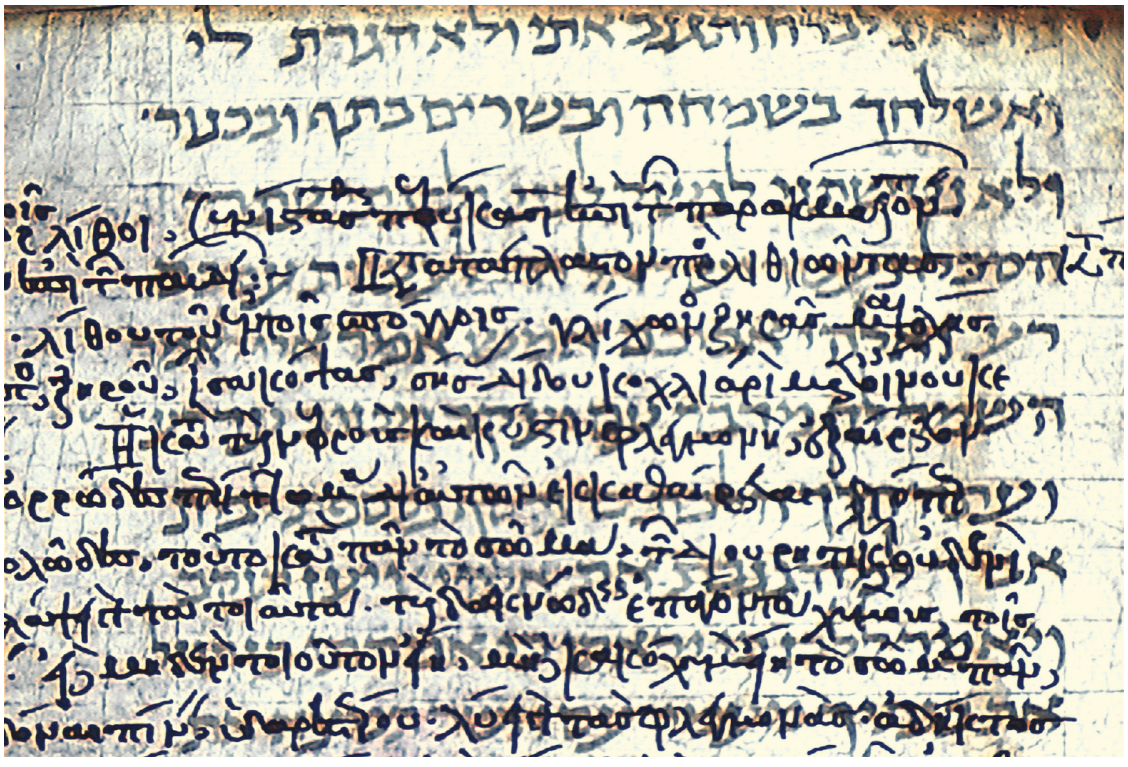
To our good fortune, and against all expectations, we possess a number of Torah scroll sheets from c. 500–1100 C.E. that attest to their ongoing use in synagogue ritual, even as the codex

COURTESY OF DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY, DUKE UNIVERSITY

SONG OF THE SEA is preserved in this incomplete and hard-to-read sheet of Exodus 13:19–16:1. Housed today in a special library collection at Duke University, it is known after its donors as Ashkar-Gilson no. 2. This fragment may date before 800 C.E., but it cannot be read without the help of modern imaging and viewing technologies.

*See Larry W. Hurtado, Archaeological Views: "Early Christian Dilemma: Codex or Scroll?" **BAR**, November/December 2018.

On these two major codices, see Harvey Minkoff, "The Aleppo Codex," *Bible Review*, August 1991; Yosef Ofer, "The Shattered Crown," **BAR, September/October 2008; Yosef Ofer, "The Mystery of the Missing Pages of the Aleppo Codex," **BAR**, July/August 2015; and James A. Sanders and Astrid Beck, "The Leningrad Codex," *Bible Review*, August 1997.



FIRENZE, BIBLIOTHECA MEDICEA LAURENZIANA, MS. PLUT 74.17, C. 75R; BY PERMISSION OF MIBAC

OVERWRITING GENESIS. A medieval codex book (Plut. 74.17) includes numerous pages made of even older Torah scrolls. Reused to write down medical and pharmaceutical treatises in Greek, those Hebrew scroll sheets originally contained sections of the books of Genesis and Exodus, a portion of the former still vaguely visible on this photo. Such rewritten manuscripts are called palimpsests, and they were made by erasing or scraping the older text and overwriting it with a new one. Thanks to advances in digital imaging, these "undertexts" can still be read.

took hold elsewhere in Jewish life and society. But here's the catch: Either these documents are fragmentary, or they can be read only through photographic enhancement. Accordingly, the Torah scroll sheet recently obtained by the Library of Congress is (drum roll): *the oldest complete Torah scroll sheet in our possession totally legible by the naked eye.*

Examples of older documents include two representative items from the Cairo Genizah, both housed in the Taylor-Schechter Collection of the Cambridge University Library: T-S NS 3.21, containing portions of Genesis 13–17, and T-S NS 4.3, containing sections of Genesis 4–6. The two fragments derive from the same original scroll, dated to c. 800 C.E.

Of approximately the same age, though perhaps a bit older, are the London and Ashkar-Gilson sheets, now known to derive originally from the same scroll.[3] The former, which contains Exodus 9:18–13:2, is a complete sheet composed of seven columns of text. To some extent the text can be read by the naked eye, but the brown (and in some places dark brown) parchment makes this task quite difficult. The London sheet gains its name from its former location at Jews' College, London, though today it resides in the private collection of Stephan Loewentheil (more about him anon).

The latter contains Exodus 13:19–16:1 (including the Song of the Sea), but the sheet is incomplete and is difficult to read in the extreme, that is, without technical assistance. The Ashkar-Gilson sheet (technically, Ashkar-Gilson no. 2) is named for the two collectors who donated this document (along with others) to Duke University, where it remains in the collection of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library.* I had the opportunity to inspect this fragmentary Torah scroll sheet in 2012, and I can personally attest to the great difficulty in reading the text.

In a remarkable piece of detective work, Mordechai Veintrob (Hebrew University) recently identified 13 additional fragments—most of them in Cambridge—that belong with the London and Ashkar-Gilson fragments to the same scroll.[4]

Among the most fascinating of old Torah scroll fragments are those preserved in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, as the undertext

*Paul Sanders, "Missing Link in Hebrew Bible Formation," **BAR**, November/December 2015.

Oldest Torah Scrolls

In this survey of Torah scroll sheets, the emphasis is on the word *sheets*. But what about the oldest extant complete Torah *scrolls*? Note that Torah scrolls were (and still are) formed from individual sheets sewn together, one after the other, so that the final product contains the entire Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) in a single artifact.

The oldest extant complete Torah scroll is the Bologna scroll, housed in the Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna, dated via radiocarbon to c. 1190 C.E. In a library catalog from 1889, this scroll was mistakenly dated to the 17th century. Mauro Perani (Bologna) "rediscovered" the scroll in 2013, realized that the document was much older, and arranged for the radiocarbon testing. The complete scroll reaches 120 feet and is written on sheepskin.

The oldest complete Torah scroll still in use is in Biella, Italy, and dates via radiocarbon to c. 1250 C.E. Credit for the recognition of the age and importance of this Torah scroll goes to Rabbi Amedeo Spagnoletto, recently appointed rabbi in Florence.

THE OLDEST COMPLETE TORAH is this parchment scroll, kept in Bologna. First believed to come from the 17th century, it actually dates to c. 1190.

of the palimpsest designated as MS Pluteo 74,17.* A palimpsest (meaning "scraped again") refers to a document whose original text has been erased or scraped, so that the writing surface (especially vellum or parchment) could be reused for a new text. The old writing is called the "undertext," while the new writing is called the "overtext." The overtext of the Florence palimpsest is a Greek manuscript, dated to the 13th century C.E., while much of the undertext in the second half of the manuscript is composed of sections of six old Torah scroll sheets, dated to the 10th century C.E., cut up and reused for the production of the overtext.[5]

We also should mention the Ein Gedi scroll, which is too brittle to unroll, but which recently was "unrolled" digitally, via micro-CT scanning, to reveal the first two chapters of the Book of Leviticus.** The date of this document is debated, but in general it fits into the period of c. 200–600 C.E.

This survey hopefully provides the reader with a general idea of the evidence for Torah scroll sheets from before the year 1000 C.E. There is not much, but we are grateful for what we have. Into this picture we now may interweave the complete Torah scroll sheet recently obtained by the Library of Congress. To our good fortune, and most unusually, on the back of the sheet there is a bilingual inscription in Hebrew and Russian. The information conveyed there notifies us that the scroll sheet was presented by Shelomo Beim (1817–1867), Karaite hazzan in Chufut-Kale, Crimea, to Grand Duke Konstantin, brother of Czar Alexander II, in the year 1863. Based on considerations of text, handwriting, section divisions, and layout of the Song of the Sea, one may assume that the scroll sheet emanates from the Near East.

This information, in turn, directs our attention to Abraham Firkovich (1786–1874), the great Karaite collector of Hebrew manuscripts, who lived in Chufut-Kale, Crimea, during this time period. (The Karaites are a sect of Jews who reject rabbinic tradition and

*Advances in photographic technology now make it possible to read the undertexts of palimpsests, in a way previously not possible. For a prize example, in the Schøyen Collection in Oslo, see Hershel Shanks, "Scrolls, Scripts and Stelae," **BAR**, September/October 2002.

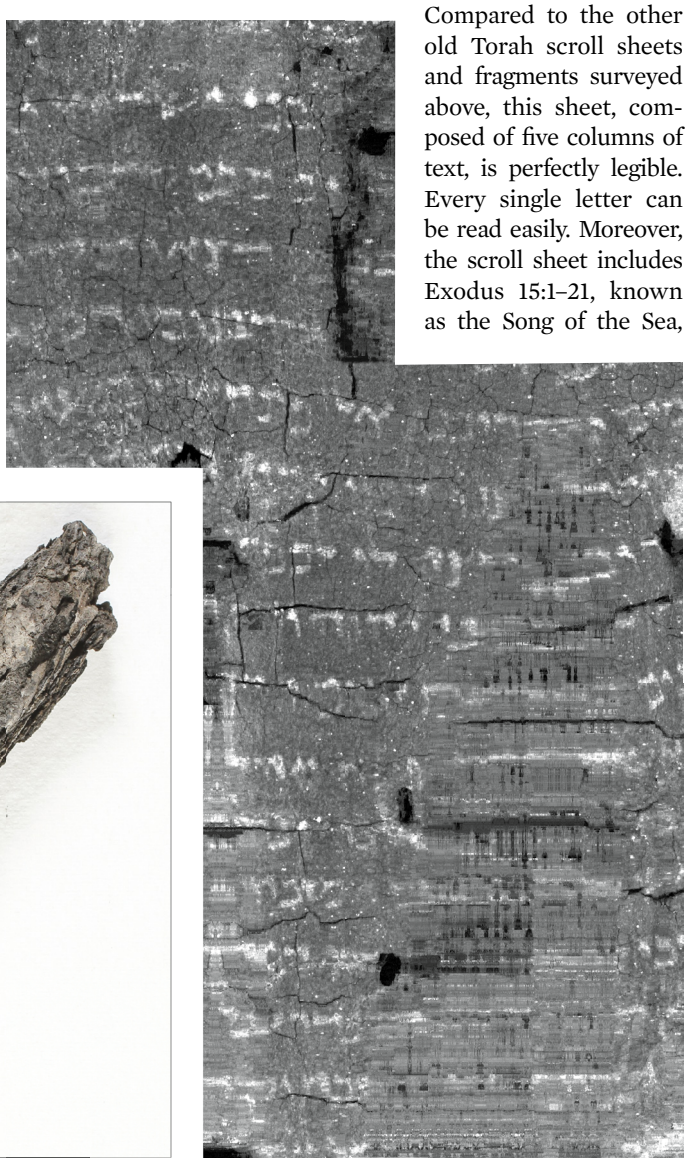
**See Robin Ngo, "Book of Leviticus Verses Recovered from Burnt Hebrew Bible Scroll," *Bible History Daily* (blog), April 9, 2018 (www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/hebrew-bible/book-of-leviticus-verses-recovered-from-burnt-hebrew-bible-scroll/).

derive their beliefs and practices more directly from the Bible.) Indeed, the aforementioned St. Petersburg (Leningrad) Codex was brought to Russia from the Near East (we do not know exactly where) by Firkovich in 1838, and then entered the Imperial Library in 1863. Although we cannot know for sure whether Firkovich played a role in the Library of Congress Torah scroll sheet's arrival in the Crimea, one suspects his involvement, in one way or another.

At some point, the scroll sheet was taken to England, though when and under what circumstances, we do not know. The first time the scholarly world heard about this document was in 2001, when it was offered for sale by Christie's Auction House. Fortunately, before the sale was concluded, Jordan Penkower of Bar-Ilan University was able to study the document closely and then publish a detailed description.[6]

In 2017, the sheet was offered for sale again, this time by the presumed 2001 buyer, the noted rare book dealer Stephan Loewentheil. The Library of Congress purchased the sheet, and the Hebraic Section of the African and Middle Eastern Division now serves as the custodian of this exceedingly important document. I had the opportunity to inspect the scroll sheet at the Library of Congress in October 2017, courtesy of Dr. Ann Brener, head of the Hebraic Section, in advance of the Library's public announcement in January 2018. And I saw the document again at the Library of Congress during a second visit in May 2018.

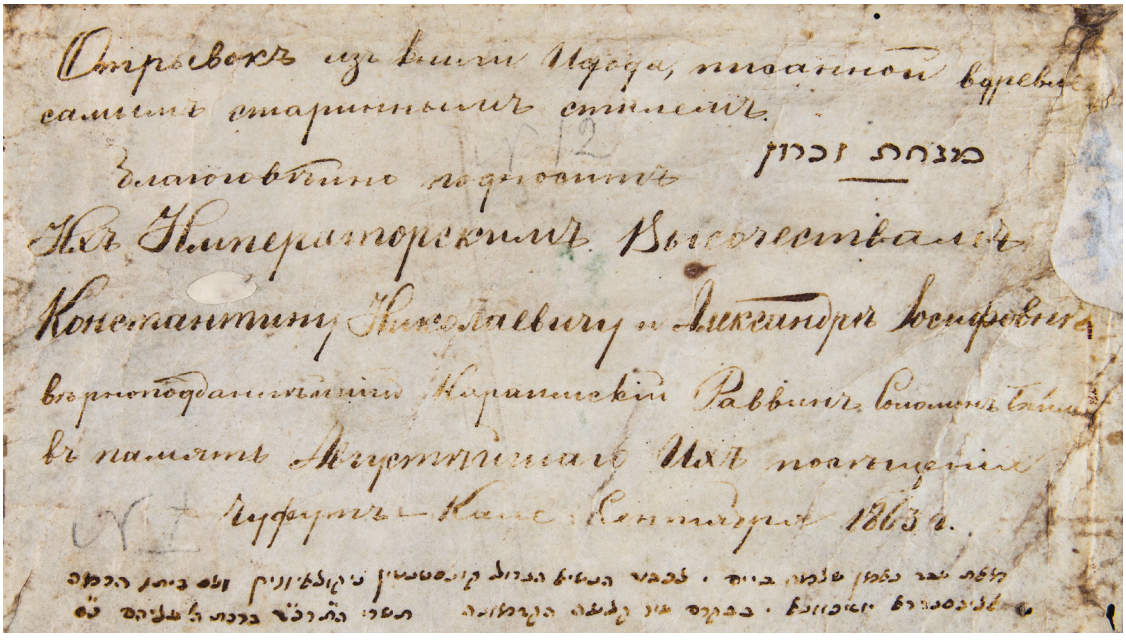
The document is nothing short of outstanding! Compared to the other old Torah scroll sheets and fragments surveyed above, this sheet, composed of five columns of text, is perfectly legible. Every single letter can be read easily. Moreover, the scroll sheet includes Exodus 15:1–21, known as the Song of the Sea,



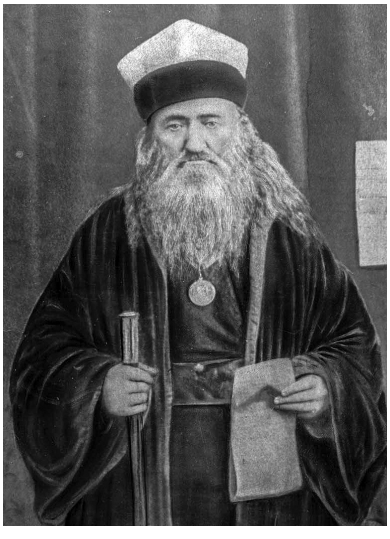
TOO FRAGILE TO UNROLL, this charred scroll was unwrapped digitally, using advanced digital technology, thereby revealing the first two chapters of the Book of Leviticus. It was discovered in an archaeological excavation of a village synagogue in Ein Gedi, an oasis on the western shore of the Dead Sea. The Jewish settlement is believed to have been destroyed c. 600 C.E. The handwriting and a Carbon-14 test suggest that the document dates to c. 300 C.E., which means that the scroll was in use for about three centuries. The image below shows the actual artifact; a portion of the read segment (at right) is composed of two images merged after the digital "unrolling."

COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY/PHOTO BY BRENT SEALES

COURTESY OF THE LEON LEVY DEAD SEA SCROLLS DIGITAL LIBRARY, IAA/PHOTO BY SHAI HALEVI



COURTESY OF THE HEBRAIC SECTION, AFRICAN AND MIDDLE EAST DIVISION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



INSCRIBED ON THE BACK of the Library of Congress Torah scroll sheet, this bilingual Russian-Hebrew notice reveals that, in 1863, the manuscript was presented to Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich of Russia, younger brother of the Russian Emperor (Czar) Alexander II. Other circumstances make it conceivable that it was brought to Crimea by the Karaite scholar, leader, and manuscript collector Abraham ben Samuel Firkovich (left), just like one of the most important manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, the St. Petersburg Codex. Firkovich (1786–1874) acquired many Hebrew, Arabic, and Samaritan manuscripts during his travels in the Middle East.

with its distinctive poetic layout (see the image on p. 46, upper left corner).

Several features attest to the antiquity of this document. First, note that there is no attempt at left-justification. The lines are right-justified (recall that Hebrew reads from right-to-left), but the scribe did not adjust the letters or the spacing to create a left-justified text. Later Torah scrolls, from the Middle Ages down to the present day, create nice neat blocks of paragraphs, with both edges aligned, but not so with the Library of Congress Torah scroll sheet.

Second, later Jewish scribal tradition includes the custom of placing small crowns (called *tagin*, in Hebrew) over certain letters. The Library of Congress Torah scroll sheet, by contrast, does not follow this practice—another testimony to its hoary age.[7]

In every which way, the Library of Congress Torah scroll sheet is a truly remarkable document. Dated to c. 1000 C.E., it is *the oldest complete Torah scroll sheet totally legible by the naked eye* (notwithstanding the qualification above regarding the London scroll sheet). Anyone who can read Hebrew can walk right up to this precious document and read aloud, with no difficulty whatsoever. Finally, and not insignificantly, this medieval treasure is now the patrimony of the people of the United States.[8]

[1] The vast majority of Codex Sinaiticus is on display at the British Library. Additional leaves are in Leipzig and St. Petersburg and at St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai.
[2] On the physical properties of Jewish biblical manuscripts throughout the ages, see David Stern, *The Jewish Bible: A Material History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).
[3] See the detailed study by Edna Engel and Mordechay Mishor, "An Ancient Scroll of the Book of Exodus: The Reunion of Two Separate Fragments," *Israel Museum Studies in Archaeology* 7 (2015), pp. 24–61.
[4] Mordechai Veintrob, "More Fragments of Early Torah Scroll Come to Light," *Genizah Fragments* 77 (April 2019), pp. 1–2.
[5] Colette Sirat et al., "Rouleaux de la Tora antérieurs à l'an mille," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 138.4 (1994), pp. 861–887.
[6] Jordan Penkower, "A Sheet of Parchment from a 10th or 11th Century Torah Scroll," *Textus* 21 (2002), pp. 235–264.
[7] To be sure, the practice of *tagin* is alluded to in the Babylonian Talmud, but the custom appears not to have taken hold until later.
[8] This article is an expanded version of my online essay "The World's Oldest Torah Scrolls," *The Ancient Near East Today*, March 2018 (www.asor.org/anetoday/2018/03/Worlds-Oldest-Torah-Scrolls).