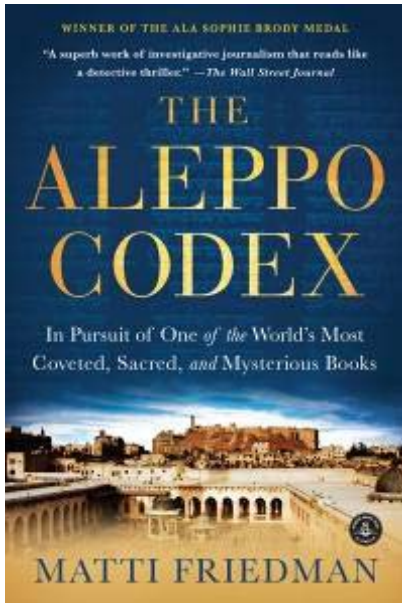


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Matti Friedman

The Aleppo Codex: In Pursuit of One of the World's Most Coveted, Sacred, and Mysterious Books

Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin, 2012. Pp. xx + 312.
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The Jewish Book Council awarded the 2014 Sami Rohr Prize to this surprising nonfiction book. It is beyond doubt that Matti Friedman, a Canadian-Israeli journalist, deserves it. Reviewers observe that the book reads like a detective novel. However, it is not only well-written but also based on diligent research into the vicissitudes of the precious Aleppo Codex after it was damaged in 1947, during anti-Jewish riots in the Syrian city after which it is named. The research spanned four years: from 2008, when Friedman discovered that there was something odd in the widely accepted story about the rescue of part of the codex, until the publication of the hardcover version of the book in 2012 (*The Aleppo Codex: A True Story of Obsession, Faith, and the Pursuit of an Ancient Bible*).

The Aleppo Codex, also known as the “Crown,” was Judaism’s most authoritative version of the Bible right from the moment it was produced, around 930 CE. Also, it was probably the first single volume comprising all the books of the Hebrew Bible. The skilled scribe Shlomo ben Buya’a copied the consonantal text from the best available manuscripts. Aharon ben Asher, the most outstanding of the Masorettes of Tiberias, added the vocalization, the accentuation, and the Masoretic notes. After its transfer to Jerusalem, the codex was brought to Egypt, where the renowned Jewish scholar Maimonides (1135–1204) decided to base his instructions for the correct writing of Torah

scrolls on this specific manuscript. In the late Middle Ages, the Jewish community of Aleppo came to possess the codex. The book was stored in a grotto beneath Aleppo's Great Synagogue. During the last decades before 1947, even rabbis or scholars with a good reputation were hardly ever allowed to consult it, because the holders feared that it might be stolen or damaged.

When at the beginning of 1958 the volume was brought to Israel, nearly two hundred folios (around 40 percent), including extensive parts of the beginning and end, appeared to be missing. Fortunately, most of the sheets between Deut 28:17 and Cant 3:11 had been preserved. The surviving part was entrusted to the Ben-Zvi Institute, which had been founded by Israel's president Yitzhaq Ben-Zvi.

Friedman noticed that even in publications authorized by the Ben-Zvi Institute crucial evidence concerning the history of the book's rescue was suppressed. Already before Friedman started his research, the disappearance of sections of the codex was believed to be surrounded by greed and deceit. In their book *Crown of Aleppo: The Mystery of the Oldest Hebrew Bible Codex* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2010), Hayim Tawil and Bernard Schneider tell that during a conversation about the missing sheets Mossad agent Shlomo Gal said to Tawil: "Leave the subject alone. You don't want to know. It's a very dirty story" (130). According to Friedman, the wish to cover up scandals may also explain why no Israeli government publicly showed interest in the sad loss.

Dissatisfied with the dubious accounts, Friedman dug through archives and interviewed Jews from Aleppo and others who might know more about the damaging of the codex. He comes closer to solving the mystery in this work, but many riddles remain.

The initial assumption that the lost part of the Aleppo Codex went up in flames had previously been proven unfounded. During the anti-Jewish riots that began on November 30, 1947, one day after the U.N. vote in favor of partitioning Palestine, Aleppo's Great Synagogue was put on fire. However, the surviving parts of the volume do not show any burn marks. The origin of the rumor that the codex had been burned lay with Aleppo's Jewish elders, who tried to conceal that it had been rescued, fearing that Arabs might want to destroy or sell the sacred book. In reality, the codex was kept in the storeroom of the Aleppo Jew Ibrahim Effendi Cohen. Despite the evidence, the assumption that the codex was damaged by fire can still be found in recent scholarly literature.

Friedman discovered also that the authorized account of the book's arrival in Jerusalem contains several half-truths. In the fall of 1957, Rabbis Moshe Tawil and Salim Zaafrani of Aleppo decided to let Murad Faham, a Jew who had permission to emigrate from Syria, smuggle the codex to Israel. It arrived first in Iskenderun (Turkey), then around three

months later, on December 16, in Haifa. On January 24, 1958, President Ben-Zvi, who had worked tirelessly to bring the codex to Israel, received the codex and entrusted it to the Ben-Zvi Institute. The Israeli government and the president's institute spread the story that it had been the intention of the Aleppo rabbis that courier Faham hand the codex to the Israeli president. Friedman, however, uncovered evidence concerning a hushed-up trial that lasted four years. Soon after Ben-Zvi received the manuscript, leaders of the Aleppo Jews who had come to Israel took legal action against the Israeli government, hoping to regain control of their community's priceless artefact. During the process, Rabbis Tawil and Zaafrani, who in the meantime had also reached Israel, emphatically stated that they had given Faham the order to bring the codex to Rabbi Yitzhaq Dayan, an Aleppo rabbi who by then already lived in Israel. Faham denied the accusations but made the impression of having been intimidated by government officials. In 1962, the court decided that the codex would stay in the Ben-Zvi Institute, but it declared also that the account of the Aleppo rabbis was trustworthy. Despite this verdict, the initial, government-supported version of the events remained widespread. Although Friedman understands why the Israeli government regarded the codex as a sacred heritage to all Jews, not only to those from Aleppo, he labels the government's conduct as "theft." Also, he points out that, once in the Ben-Zvi Institute, the volume was neglected for more than a decade and that its condition deteriorated there.

Soon after President Ben-Zvi received the codex in January 1958, he listed the missing sections in an article and ascribed the loss of the missing folios to the 1947 pogrom.¹ Ben-Zvi's explanation for the loss became commonplace, but Friedman rejects it on the basis of witnesses neglected by Ben-Zvi and other government officials. One of the Aleppo Jews claiming to have seen a virtually complete codex after the 1947 riots was Shahoud Baghdadi, the son of the sexton of Aleppo's Great Synagogue, Asher Baghdadi. According to his report, his father found the codex torn apart on the floor of the synagogue immediately after the riots. Together with Shahoud he collected the scattered parts and noticed that only sections of Deuteronomy and Isaiah had been lost. In 1961, Ya'akov Hazan, once the treasurer of Aleppo's Jewish community, informed Ben-Zvi that he had seen the codex several weeks after it was damaged and that only a few sheets were missing. In 1989, Rabbi Isaac Shchebar, who had fled Aleppo in 1952, stated that he had seen the codex just before he left and that the codex was almost complete. An account of the well-known Israeli antiquities collector Shlomo Moussaieff suggests also that part of the missing sections of the codex was not destroyed in 1947. In 1993, he told a former Israeli police detective that in the mid-1980s two men dressed in ultra-Orthodox garb offered him for sale seventy to one hundred sheets of an ancient codex. Moussaieff

1. Y. Ben-Zvi, "בתר התורה" של בן-אשר שנכתב בארץ-ישראל," *Sinai* 21/7-8 (April-May 1958), 5-13.

claimed that he did not purchase them because of the high price but later regretted his decision, realizing that these were sheets of the Aleppo Codex. During one of his confusing conversations with Friedman, Moussaieff confirmed the account and added that on the top of the pile was the book of Genesis. Although Friedman was suspicious about Moussaieff's stories, he was able to verify part of them. His research yielded that one of the two manuscript dealers was the ultra-Orthodox Haim Schneebalg, who died under suspicious circumstances in 1989.

Friedman gives various possibilities of how the missing sections may have disappeared. It is beyond doubt that some sheets went missing during the riots in 1947. At least two sheets were picked up by Aleppo Jews. They resurfaced in the 1980s with relatives who had settled in New York. However, Friedman suggests that most of the missing sections were embezzled around the time Faham smuggled the volume to Turkey. He assumes that the following persons may have known more about the disappearance: (1) Edmond Cohen, the adult nephew of Ibrahim Effendi Cohen, who took care of the codex when it was in the hiding place of his uncle and handed it to Murad Faham; once in Israel, however, he declared not to know which parts of the original volume were missing when he was in charge; (2) Murad Faham, who spread contradictory accounts about his role in the rescuing of the codex; (3) an Israeli immigration agent known as Isaac Silo, who worked in Iskenderun and according to witnesses used to rob Jewish refugees; Faham accused him of having stolen 11,000 Turkish pounds from him; (4) Shlomo Zalman Shragai, the head of the Jewish Agency, who got his hands on the codex immediately after it was smuggled out of Syria; in 1964 he secretly wrote to Israel's president that Faham caused trouble and that the matter of the codex might turn into a worldwide scandal if the truth would become public; and (5) Meir Benayahu, director of the Ben-Zvi Institute in 1958, who had an extensive private collection of manuscripts and may have been responsible for the mysterious disappearance of several valuable manuscripts that were entrusted to the institute.

Friedman cleverly demonstrates that some of these men seemed to be trying to conceal the truth and that a number of them may even be suspected of having grabbed parts of the codex themselves. The stolen parts were possibly sold to dealers such as Haim Schneebalg. In the end, Friedman can only speculate about who the culprit was, but he concludes with confidence that Jews bore more responsibility for the partial loss of the codex than the Arab rioters who damaged it in 1947.

Scholars and journalists as well as professional and amateur detectives have devoted parts of their lives to the quest for the missing parts of the codex. Friedman shows that fresh research can still yield new evidence, even though the main characters of the tragic story died long ago. It is clear that Friedman was right in taking the voices that deviate from the

predominant narrative so seriously. He regards also his own sources with suspicion, for instance, the dubious accounts of Moussaieff. In some cases, however, Friedman could have been more critical of the witnesses who support his own reconstruction. For instance, Shahoud Baghdadi's statement that he and his father recovered virtually the complete codex except for some sheets of Deuteronomy and Isaiah is problematic, since in the surviving volume all sheets with the text of Isaiah are still present.

How relevant is the quest for the missing sections of the Aleppo Codex for biblical exegetes? Thanks to the Masorah, faithful Yemenite copies, and the notes of medieval and later scholars who consulted the authoritative codex, it is possible to reconstruct most of the text and part of the sectional division of the Torah.² Unfortunately, much less is known of the rest of the missing sections. As the vocalization and Masoretic notes are of a high quality and predate those of the Leningrad Codex (1008/1009 CE), on which most modern editions of the Hebrew Bible are based, it would be marvelous to retrieve the missing parts and to be able to base future editions on them.

On the other hand, it is all too often forgotten that other ancient Hebrew Bible codices also deserve attention. Among them are Firkovitch II.17 and Firkovitch II.10, Torah codices from the early tenth century that are kept in the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg. Shlomo ben Buya'a, who wrote the consonantal text of the Aleppo Codex, also wrote the consonantal text of Firkovitch II.17.³ Unfortunately, only very few photos of these codices have been published.

Supposing that certain missing sections of the Aleppo Codex still exist, we can do nothing but await action on the part of the holders, detectives, and other key actors. This is different in the case of Firkovitch II.17 and Firkovitch II.10. I recommend that attempts be made to publish facsimile editions or online photos (see www.aleppocodex.org) of these neglected codices.

2. See J. S. Penkower, עדות חדשה – נוסח התורה בכתר ארם־צובה: – *New Evidence for the Pentateuch Text in the Aleppo Codex* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1992).

3. See M. Beit-Arié, C. Sirat, and M. Glatzer, *Codices Hebraicis litteris exarati quo tempore scripti fuerint exhibentes*, vol. 1, *Jusqu'à 1020*, Monumenta Palaeographica Medii Aevi, Series Hebraica (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 53–64 (Firkovitch II.17), 65–72 (Aleppo Codex).