Appendix 2

# Ashkar Manuscript 2: Introducing a Phenomenal New Witness to the Bible

James H. Charlesworth,
Princeton Theological Seminary

When I was a professor at Duke University (1969–1984), Mrs. Terry Ashkar called my office while I was lecturing in Miami, Florida. Having learned about my work on the importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls for understanding the Bible, which had just been featured on television and in the *Miami Herald*, she left a message with my research assistant who, when I returned to Duke, informed me that Terry Ashkar and her husband owned valuable Hebrew manuscripts. Dr. Fuad Ashkar eventually gave me 23 Hebrew manuscripts, all leather Torah scrolls, which he had acquired in Lebanon in 1972. I recognized their importance and placed them in Duke University's Rare Book Room.

One of the manuscripts – MS Ashkar 2 (above MS Ashkar) – immediately caught my eye. On first glance, it looked like a pre-70 CE copy of a book of the Bible. Within a year, some scholars in Jerusalem who had seen a picture of the manuscript informed me that the scroll was copied in the first century CE. Indeed, many of the letters looked ancient, but there were some forms that looked much later. What, then, was the date of the handwriting?

## Paleography

When I first examined the letters in Ashkar MS 2, I was impressed that some of them were almost identical to those in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Other forms of the letters, however, seemed to be much later than the first century CE. In 1980, I published a provisional announcement, indicating that the handwriting could date "probably as early as the seventh century and may be centuries earlier."[1] I had no doubt that this manuscript antedated both the Aleppo Codex and the St. Petersburg Codex (then called the Leningrad Codex). In the early 1980s, I studied the pictures of the earliest medieval copies of

our Bible. Eventually, I recognized that the handwriting of Ashkar MS 2 was somewhat unique. Its elegant hand is far more precise and professional than the early medieval manuscripts I had seen, and various aspects of its calligraphy are impressively distinct from that of any other known Hebrew manuscript.

The paleography of Ashkar MS 2 seems to resemble two manuscripts that can be dated only roughly. One of these manuscripts preserves portions of 1 Kings 22 and dates to the fifth century CE. The other – a *piyyut* (liturgical poem) – was written in the eighth century. Both were discussed by Salomo A. Birnbaum in *The Hebrew Scripts*,[2] who numbered the manuscripts 183 and 184 and reported that both are examples of the Egyptian square script

I concluded that the Hebrew script of Ashkar MS 2 should be dated somewhere between the sixth and eighth centuries CE. Moreover, since these early medieval copies of 1 Kings and a *piyyut* are examples of the Egyptian square script, it is conceivable that Ashkar MS 2 originated in Egypt and was eventually placed in the Cairo Genizah. If so, it would be one of the earliest Hebrew manuscripts from this archive. It is possible that Dr. Ashkar's early correspondence with me contains precious insights into the Egyptian origin of Ashkar MS 2. He wrote on December 19, 1977: "I also have a collection of ancient Hebrew Scrolls on animal skins, they were in Zareb Pasha's estate and were sold off after the downfall of King Farouk, and their origin is thought to be the Cairo Genizah whose contents were dispersed in the 19th century."

## AMS Carbon-14 Dating of the Manuscript

I knew that the paleographic dating of Ashkar MS 2 needed to be confirmed by a scientific dating of the leather. This method would indicate the approximate year of the death of the animal whose hide became the leather used to prepare this manuscript. Four samples were taken from the manuscript. When one looks at Ashkar MS 2 from right to left, the weight of the samples was 63.0 milligrams, 91.3 milligrams, 67.5 milligrams, and 42.0 milligrams respectively. Two of the cut pieces were mailed to Oxford for Carbon-14 dating, and on June 1, 1989, Dr. Rupert A. Housley, Senior Archaeologist of the Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit at Oxford University, Oxford, reported that the AMS (Accelerator Mass Spectrometer) date of the leather scroll indicated that the animal whose hide constituted the leather died about 1200 years ago (±70 years). This date is uncalibrated; however, using the calibration curve devised by Minze Stuiver and Gordon W. Pearson,[3] Dr. Housley concluded: "The following age ranges are to be assigned to Ashkar MS 2: one sigma (68% confidence level) c. AD 710–895; two sigma (95% confidence level) c. AD 650–980." He continued with the following assessment: "As you can see the animal skin with which the scroll was made came from an animal which died sometime between the mid 7th and the late 10th century AD. Whilst it is possible the scroll need not have been written between these dates, the date does rule out that the scroll was inscribed earlier than the 7th century. It does confirm your suspicion that the document is at least 1000 years old."

From the beginning of my research, I wanted to conduct a double-blind study to confirm the precision needed to date Ashkar MS 2. Therefore, I sent two more samples from the manuscript to Professor Douglas J. Donahue of the NSF-Arizona AMS Facility at the University of Arizona. On August 11, 1989, he reported

his findings: "The four measurements yielded internally consistent results, and we quote the weighted mean of the four measurements.

| Sample | Radiocarbon Age | Calibrated Age |
|---|---|---|
| | Weighted Average | Range (1) |
| AA3991, AA3992 | 1355 ±60 years | 1σ: AD 640–685 |
| | before the present | 2σ: AD 600–780 |

Professor Donahue also used the calibration curve developed by Stuiver and Pearson, adding: "We generally prefer to quote the two sigma interval, which has the significance that if we repeated the measurement twenty times, nineteen of the results would fall within that interval. It is called the 95 percent confidence interval."

It is now clear that the AMS Carbon-14 date of the leather is probably the seventh or eighth century CE. Most likely, the scribe put ink to leather at that time, producing what we call "Ashkar MS 2."

The cumulative result of this study, the first clear paralleling of paleographical dating with AMS Carbon-14 dating,[4] is an indication, despite the claims of some professors of Bible (such as G. R. Driver), that paleography is not only an art but a science. Paleography and Carbon-14 dating combined indicate that Ashkar MS 2 dates sometime between the seventh and eighth centuries CE.[5]

## Layout of the Poetry

Most interesting and deserving of further research is the poetic layout of the Song of Moses in Ashkar MS 2. One can clearly see the stichometric separation of words on each line, and the spacing is almost identical to that in the St. Petersburg (Leningrad) Codex (MS **L**; see below). We cannot compare the poetic layout of Ashkar MS 2 with the text of the Aleppo Codex because this section of Exodus has been lost. Modern readers of the Hebrew Bible may not be familiar with this poetic layout, which is represented in the *JPS Hebrew-English TANAKH* but is absent from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*

Ashkar MS 2 is probably not the earliest evidence of this practice of writing Hebrew poetry. It may be reflected in some Qumran fragments. In particular, a copy of 4Q365 frg. 6b (*DJD* XIII, pl. 23), from the group of manuscripts called "the Reworked Pentateuch," preserves Exodus 15 with words presented stichometrically; i. e., the text is arranged so that clusters of two to four words are separated by spaces (similar to the stichometric layout in the *Prayer of King Jonathan*). It is now certain that the traditional rabbinic rules for separating groups of words in biblical poetry clearly antedate Aaron ben Asher (see next section) and the Aleppo Codex.[6]

## A Voice from the Period of Great Silence

No Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible are preserved from the late fifth to mid-ninth century CE, and the ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible antedate this period. From paleographical analyses and Carbon-14 dating, it is relatively certain that Ashkar MS 2 was copied during this "period of great silence." We now have a definitively dated witness to the transmission of our Bible that helps bridge the gap between the Dead Sea Scroll biblical texts and the Aleppo Codex. Moreover, the "fragment" is large compared to the Qumran fragments of biblical text.

Ashkar MS 2 serves as an invaluable witness to the transmission of the Hebrew Masoretic Bible before the Masorah notations and antedates the work of Aaron ben Asher who established and mastered the Masorah. It is also a major witness to the Hebrew text that preceded the creation of the Tiberian Masoretic Text. The text is identical to the modern printings of the Hebrew Bible, which derive from the *textus receptus*, namely, the

Venice *Biblia Rabbinica* of 1525 (Gutenberg invented the printing press around 1449). Thus, Ashkar MS 2 is an early witness to the Masoretic Text and helps illustrate the importance of this standard text type, which appears also in many pre-70 CE Hebrew biblical manuscripts from the Qumran caves. The handwriting of Ashkar MS 2 is elegant and refined, providing yet another indication of the love and devotion with which early scribes copied the Bible.

Many questions have yet to be resolved and will be left for future investigation: Might Ashkar MS 2 be related to one of the biblical manuscripts found near Jericho and mentioned ca. 800 CE by Timotheus I, the Nestorian patriarch of Seleucia? Was Ashkar MS 2 copied from manuscripts mentioned by Timotheus I? Would such a hypothesis help explain why some scholars thought Ashkar MS 2, based on paleographical grounds, was one of the Qumran scrolls? What is the relationship between the Qumran scrolls and the manuscripts that Timotheus I reported were discovered near the Dead Sea about the same time Ashkar MS 2 was copied? Did those manuscripts, and perhaps Ashkar MS 2, help stimulate the work of Masoretic scribes and the eventual production of the Aleppo Codex? Is Ashkar MS 2 one of the many manuscripts that Aaron ben Moshe ben Asher studied? Such questions are intriguing and encourage us to probe deeper into the discovery of ancient biblical scrolls from the Jordan Valley and the transmission of Scriptures.

[1] Charlesworth 1980.

[2] Birnbaum 1954–71.

[3] Stuiver and Pearson 1986, 805.

[4] Decades later, the paleographical dating of the Qumran scrolls was supported by Carbon-14 dating.

[5] Professor Malachi Beit-Arié is a far better paleographer of medieval Hebrew manuscripts than I am. When I showed him pictures of Ashkar MS 2 and we studied the handwriting, he confided in me that it antedated the Aleppo Codex.

[6] See Talmud Bavli Shabbat 103b; Tractate *Soferim* 1:15; *Sifre* 36 on Deut. 6:9. See esp. Tractate *Soferim* 1:11, which warns that if the Song of Moses is not arranged correctly it cannot be used in the synagogue. The Song of Moses in 4QDeut$^{q}$ was neither written nor arranged according to these rabbinic rules. Furthermore, this is not a "proto-Masoretic" text but has independent elements and belongs to the LXX tradition.

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