

Rare Biblical Manuscripts from the Russian National Library to Be Exhibited alongside the Dead Sea Scrolls at the San Diego Natural History Museum

By Dr. Risa Levitt Kohn

San Diego is gearing up for one of the most comprehensive museum exhibitions in its history. On June 29, 2007, the San Diego Natural History Museum will open *Dead Sea Scrolls* for a six-month run. The biblical scrolls may be the oldest manuscripts we have of the Hebrew Bible, but they will not be the only texts on display in the Museum's exhibition.

In a significant coup for the Museum, they have been able to secure a number of the next-oldest historical biblical manuscripts to have ever been discovered. Incredibly, these texts have not been sitting in caves near the Dead Sea, but were purchased from their Middle-Eastern owners and brought to Russia, where they have been held by the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg.

The riveting tale of these texts involves a prescient Russian-Jewish collector who, on a mission to help his community, traveled far and wide to acquire a vast and priceless collection of some of the oldest-known bibles.

Of these prized and rare manuscripts, the Russian National Library and government have graciously allowed a portion of one leather Torah (the five books of Moses) and ten codex pages from hand-written and hand-bound ancient books, dated between 929 and 1018 CE, to make the trip from Russia to San Diego for the duration of the six-month-long *Dead Sea Scrolls* exhibition.

The curator of the exhibition, Dr. Risa Levitt Kohn of San Diego State University's Religious Studies Department, is particularly excited. "These fascinating texts are rarely put on public display, but they are an ideal fit for our exhibition. They will help the Museum tell the story of how the Bible has been transmitted over time among Jewish Communities dating as far back as Qumran and proceeding through the centuries to the present. To these communities, these texts and words were and are holy and their transmission is of vital importance. These are extraordinary manuscripts and we are thrilled to be able to exhibit them with the scrolls," she explained.

The biblical texts sent from Russia are part of some 15,000 pieces from the Russian Library's collection of Hebrew manuscripts. They represent the culmination of years of extensive travels and discreet trading and acquisitions by an enigmatic Karaite Jew named Abraham Firkovich. Karaism is a Jewish denomination whose adherents rely solely on the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible as their scripture. They reject the Talmud as a source of Jewish law, instead relying upon a literal reading of the books of the Tanakh. The term "Karaite" comes from the Hebrew "to read," and was chosen as a means of distinguishing the group from the predominant Jewish streams that follow the traditions of Rabbinic Judaism.

Born in 1787 in the Ukraine, Firkovich was a Karaite teacher and *hazzan* turned avid book collector and archaeologist. As a result of his group's deep interest in biblical texts as the sole

source of Jewish teaching, he took it upon himself to collect as many manuscripts as he could to help establish the Karaites' claim that their practices pre-dated the Talmud, which is a primary source within Rabbinic Judaism. Firkovich was already in his early 70s when he set out on two expeditions to the ancient Near East to sites that included Egypt, Jerusalem, Istanbul, Beirut, Aleppo, Nablus, as well as the Crimea and the Caucasus, collecting biblical texts from the *genizot* of ancient Jewish communities.

Hebrew for "hiding place," a *genizah* (plural *genizot*) is a depository for sacred Hebrew books that are no longer usable. Firkovich was among the first Europeans to visit the Cairo Genizah in 1863, and having the prescience to identify and take the most complete manuscripts at the site, was able to build the heart of an unmatched collection of ancient Jewish texts. His collection was purchased by the Russian government upon his death.

Perhaps the best-known of Firkovich's finds is the so-called St. Petersburg Codex (Leningrad Codex), the oldest-known complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. It is dated to 1010 CE. However, the collection contains many other important codices that have rarely been on public display. Some of the pages in this collection contain the names of the scribes who copied the texts and the names of the members of the community who commissioned its production.

On exhibition through September

1. Pentateuch, Fragment of Deuteronomy

B II 10

Two parchment folios (one double folio): f. 229–230. Each folio is 43 x 37 cm. This text dates to 1018 CE.

2. Pentateuch Fragments

B II 17

This colophon, or "carpet page," lists names of possessors. This text is from Cairo and is dated to 929 CE. Three parchment folios: f. 234 (40 x 37 cm), f. II (42 x 38 cm), f. III (28 x 29 cm).

3. Prophet, Fragment of Massorah

B II 39

This fragment is dated to 988–989 CE; it is from Jerusalem. One parchment folio: f. 152 (36 x 34 cm).

4. Hagiography, Fragment of Nehemiah and colophon

B II 115

Dated to 994 CE. One parchment folio: f. 36 (38 x 34.5 cm)

5. Pentateuch, Fragment of Deuteronomy and colophon

B II 159

Dated to 942 CE. Two parchment folios (one double folio): f. one and four (32 x 30 cm each folio).

6. Torah Scroll, Fragment of Exodus and Deuteronomy

IA 1/a

This scroll is from the 9th century and is comprised of five stitched skins (65 x 280cm).

On exhibit through December

1. Pentateuch, Fragment of Deuteronomy

B II 10

This Deuteronomy fragment is dated to 1018 CE. Two parchment folios (one double folio): f. 228 and 231 (43 x 37 cm each folio).

2. Pentateuch, Fragments of Genesis and Exodus

B II 17

Dated to 929 CE; from Cairo. Two parchment folios.

3. Prophets Fragment of Massorah

B II 39

Dated to 988–989 CE; from Jerusalem. One parchment folio: f. 154 (36 x 35.5 cm).

4. Hagiography, Fragment of Psalms

Parchment folio: f. 20 (38 x 36.5 cm).

5. Pentateuch, Fragment of Deuteronomy

Dated to 942 CE. Two parchment folios (one double folio): f. 2–3 (32 x 30 cm each folio).