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978-1-108-04336-6 - How the Codex was Found: A Narrative of Two Visits to Sinai, from Mrs. Lewis's Journals 1892-1893

Edited by Margaret Dunlop Gibson

Excerpt

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HOW THE CODEX WAS FOUND

FIRST VISIT TO SINAI

THE narrative of these two journeys is of special interest, because the first one, that made by my twin sister, Mrs. Lewis, and myself, in 1892, led to the discovery of an early and important codex of ancient Syriac gospels, as well as of three other valuable codices of later date ; while that made by us this year in company with the late Professor Bensly and his wife, Mr. J. Rendel Harris, and Mr. and Mrs. F. C. Burkitt was undertaken for the purpose of deciphering the precious manuscript to which we have alluded.

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Abler pens than mine will write about these Syriac gospels. It is impossible to predict what may be their future influence on theological thought; yet on me devolves the task of telling how the codex was found, having been, to use a scriptural expression, an eye-witness of these things from the beginning. Many inaccurate statements have been made by too hasty writers in our public prints, and it has occurred to me that the best means of removing misconceptions on the subject is to reprint my sister's journal of our trips to Sinai in 1892 and 1893, from the columns of the *Presbyterian Churchman*, which has welcomed the narratives of all her journeys for the last twelve years. A contemporary account written from day to day by the chief actor in any event, however artless and unrestrained in style, is of the first quality in historical value. I will therefore confine myself to filling up the gap

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between the two journals, and giving a short account of the convent of St. Catherine. Suffice it to say here that only three persons were present when the codex was found in February 1892, viz. Father Galaktéon, the monk-librarian of the convent, Mrs. Lewis, and myself. Two of this trio being completely innocent of Syriac, my sister was practically alone in discovering the codex, though she will never cease to feel grateful to the distinguished scholar who had put her on the track of it.

For many years my sister had been desirous of going to Mount Sinai, simply on account of its hallowed associations, and because my dear husband had visited it before our marriage on his way to Petra. I cannot say that the library or its MSS. were chiefly in her thoughts, but the publication by Mr. J. Rendel Harris in the winter of 1891 of the Apology of Aristides, which

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he had found there two years previously, renewed her eagerness, and Mr. Harris himself did more than encourage her by vigorously expressing the opinion that something more might be got out of the early Estrangelo MSS. in the convent library, and by his suggestion that she should allow him to teach her the art of photographing such MSS. He even designed a MS. stand for us, in order to avoid the difficulties he had himself experienced; but while we went to Sinai, he went to Jerusalem and Athos. We had a secret consciousness before starting that we were otherwise not badly equipped for the task of finding something valuable, if there were anything valuable to be found.

We had many years previously studied ancient Greek with the modern pronunciation (for which idea, it need hardly be said, we were indebted to our genial friend, Professor John Stuart Blackie), and whilst

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travelling through Greece we had found our pronunciation invaluable, and had acquired some fluency in the modern idiom. We had been lodged on several occasions in Greek monasteries, and found intercourse with their inmates both pleasant and amusing; we had also occasionally had instructive interviews with dignitaries of the Greek Church, so that we anticipated no difficulty in making friends with the custodians of the library. My sister's book, too, "Glimpses of Greek Life and Scenery," published by Messrs. Hurst and Blackett in 1883, and translated into Greek by Dr. I. Perbanoglos, had won for her the reputation of being a Philhellene among a people who, whatever may be their faults, can never be accused of want of gratitude, as they have shown to my sister in many unexpected ways.

After having studied Arabic and then Hebrew for some years, Mrs. Lewis had not

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found Syriac at all difficult, and had been instructed in it by the Rev. R. H. Kennett of Queens' College. Mr. Kennett has not yet visited the Highlands, so can hardly be credited with the gift of second sight, yet it is a fact that he said to her one day shortly before she left for Sinai, "Mrs. Lewis, you will be editing a Syriac book one of these days." Little did either of them think what book it was to be.

Without further preface, I will now proceed to introduce Mrs. Lewis's diary for 1892.

I

Towards the end of 1891 my sister, Mrs. James Y. Gibson, and I resolved to carry out our long-cherished plan of visiting the scene of one of the most astonishing miracles recorded in Bible history—a miracle which has hitherto baffled the most determined opponents of the supernatural in history to

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explain away ; the passage of the Israelites through the desert of Arabia, and the spot where a still more impressive event occurred, the secluded mountain-top where the Deity first revealed Himself to mankind as a whole, not simply to the few chosen ones whom He had, from time to time, consecrated to be the exponents of His will to their fellow-men.

Our intentions soon became known to a few of our Cambridge friends, and we were almost overwhelmed by offers of kindly help and suggestions as to how our visit might be made useful. Mr. Rendel Harris, who visited the Convent of St. Catherine in 1889, and there made the happy discovery of the Apology of Aristides, not only insisted on teaching us photography, but lent us his own camera, and accepted with Christian resignation all the little injuries we did to it. As he reported the existence in the convent of some hitherto unpublished Syriac MSS., I

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began to study the grammar with the help of the accomplished young Syriac Lecturer of Queens' College, whilst another equally enthusiastic scholar, Mr. F. C. Burkitt, was kind enough to teach me how to copy the ancient Estrangelo alphabet.

The Regius Professor of Divinity asked us to collate two tenth-century MSS. of the Septuagint, and the Professor of Geology to bring him a specimen of what is called "granite graphites," a variety where the hornblende has so disintegrated itself from the rest of the stone as, when polished, to present a surface suggestive of being written over in Arabic characters. Sceptics pretend that Moses deceived the children of Israel by showing them a bit of this as the Tables of the Law, but of course this is pure nonsense, for a rock that is common to the whole district of Horeb must have been quite familiar to the Hebrews. So our journey

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promised to be none the less interesting because we expected to make some scientific profit out of it, and we could afford to laugh at the prediction that, being women, we might possibly be refused admission into a Greek convent. Our only fear was that, being such utter novices in photography, and having got our own camera only two days before we started, we might be quite incapable of doing justice to a unique opportunity.

II

The most impressive sight we saw in Cairo were the royal mummies, which are exhibited in their gorgeously painted coffins, under glass, in the museum. Whatever may be said in the way of discrediting the histories narrated in the Old Testament, it must henceforth be impossible for the most hardened sceptic to deny that the Pharaohs, at least, have existed. The features of Rameses the

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Great* are somewhat shrunk in the six years since his body was unswathed, but there are others who look almost like life, notably, Sethi I., his equally great father. It is no exaggeration to say that for days after we looked on that tranquil, good-natured, dark face, we have seen at least a dozen negroes in the street who are exceedingly like him. The very flesh, and the very expression of a man who lived 3000 years ago are thus vividly before us. We spent much time in the American schools, listening to the children's lessons, both English and Arabic. But as our object in coming to Egypt was to prepare for a trip to Sinai, we first engaged a dragoman named Hanna, under Dr. Watson's kind advice, and then sought, through other friends, an introduction to the chief dignitaries of the Greek Church, who have the pastoral

* The Pharaoh whose daughter, it is supposed, found Moses.