

The Joy of Studying *cont.*

Seleucus 1 Nicator, at the battle of Gaza in 312 B.C.E. Seleucus had been a general under Alexander the Great. A minor dilemma was that later writers did not agree exactly when Year 1 of the Seleucid Era began. Some started Year 1 immediately after the battle, and others deferred that Year 1 started one year later, in 311. Next, a new Jewish dating system began with the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem, and is called the Destruction Era (DE) chronology. Again, there have been different calculations for this. Did the first year start in 68 C.E. or in 70 C.E.? Finally, there is the Era of Creation or Anno Mundi (AM) chronology dating back fifteen hundred years. The Era of Creation chronology was calculated from the day scholars thought the world was created. The current Jewish calendar uses this dating system, and the current year is 5764. This number “5764” is important for dating the “Firkovitch II.B.34” manuscript on the microfilm.

A particularly challenging task was reading the notes scribbled by four different hands on the colophon at the front of the book. A friend who examined this colophon commented, “It looks as if the scribe was tired and just wanted to be done with the whole thing.” These notes were important because they contained several references to the Karaite Jews and the need for this manuscript to go to a Karaite community in Egypt. The reference to the Karaites was another clue for dating the manuscript. Who were these Karaite Jews, and when might they have had a large enough community in Egypt that someone would be sending them a biblical manuscript? The Karaite Jews appeared at the middle of the eighth century as a reaction to rabbinic Judaism. Their reputed founder, Anan ben David, was active about 765 C.E. in Baghdad. He vehemently denied

the validity of the Talmudic-rabbinic teachings and traditions, and he attracted a large Jewish following.

There are two more unexplored paths for this investigation. Radio carbon dating of the manuscript would be helpful, as well as a close examination of the way in which the manuscript was prepared, given that manuscripts were prepared and sewn together in various ways over the centuries. Further, different methods were used to help scribes write their letters in an even line and also to begin and end exactly within the margins. Such preparation for writing the letters could include making an even row with tiny pin marks or actually drawing straight lines directly on the animal skin. Sometimes these lines or pin marks are still visible. If the original “Firkovitch II.B.34” manuscript could be studied in St. Petersburg, many more questions about its date could be answered. In addition to the way the manuscript was prepared, a comparison could be made in St. Petersburg of the vowel notations in the two texts, “Firkovitch II.B.34” and the “Leningrad Codex.” At present, such a comparison is not possible because the tiny vowels are not clear enough or sometimes are not visible on the microfilm or in photographic reproductions.

Based on the research I was able to do, my conclusion at this point is that the date in Hebrew is 1141 in the Seleucid Era chronology, which would be 1141 minus 311, or 830 C.E., one of the two western numbers on the colophon. If the other number “4590” were written in 830 C.E. and if it referred to 4590 of the Creation Era chronology, then today would be 1174 years later, or 4590 plus 1174, which is 5764, the current Jewish year! Thus, the one Hebrew and two western numbers correlate perfectly, and the book of Esther in the “Firkovitch II.B.34” manuscript is the oldest copy in the world. ^(f)

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The Joy of Studying at the School of Religion: Dating an Ancient Manuscript

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One of the most exciting academic experiences of my life has been studying in the CGU Ph.D. program in Hebrew Bible. In particular, I have had many opportunities to do research under the guidance of caring and dedicated professors. One example was my effort to date an old Hebrew manuscript to see if it was, in fact, the world’s oldest copy of the Bible’s book of Esther.

The project started in Professor Kristin De Troyer’s class on textual criticism, which involved an examination of ancient manuscripts. We looked at a microfilm of an old manuscript known as “Firkovitch II.B.34” from the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, formerly Leningrad. In this manuscript Professor De Troyer had found a copy of the book of Esther. The manuscript’s colophon, which was the second page with scribbled notes of explanation, included a date in Hebrew, “...in the year 1141.” Just below that scribbling, someone had written “830” and “4590” in western numbers. So, were these two numbers also dates? The first question, though, concerned the Hebrew date. To which Jewish chronology, or dating system, did “...in the year 1141” belong, and was it somehow related to “830” and “4590”? There was also the question of the content of this book of Esther. Was it exactly like our oldest copy of Esther, in the so-called “Leningrad Codex,” or was this mystery Esther on microfilm a totally different version? The “Leningrad Codex” dates to 1008 or 1009 C.E., and no remains of the book of Esther were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran.

The effort to date this microfilm copy of “Firkovitch II.B.34” took me down many amazing and unexpected paths. The first was determining just what the text said. To do this was the easiest task. Using the microfilm, and wearing gloves in order not to risk touching it, I copied the pages of Esther on a special microfilm-copy machine at CGU’s Honnold Library. I then compared the writing, literally consonant by consonant, with a control copy. As the control copy I chose the book of Esther in the 1008/1009 C.E. “Leningrad Codex” because it has few smudges or places where the letters were rubbed away, the text is complete, and the document has been dated with some certainty. Amazingly, the two copies of Esther were almost identical; only about eleven words or consonants differed. This discovery was surprising because all manuscripts were hand-copied before the invention of the printing press, and there were always discrepancies. Scribes either purposely made changes by editing the material, or accidentally added or omitted letters or entire words.

Once I knew the texts were so much alike, the next challenge was determining the chronology for the date of the Hebrew letters. In Hebrew, numbers are made using letters of the alphabet—the first letter, aleph, is number 1; the second letter, bet, is number 2; and so forth. A tiny dot above the consonant indicates that it is used as a number and not as a letter. The number in the colophon was 1141, but to which dating system did it refer? This examination required a study of Jewish chronologies of which at least four major ones were in use in the last three thousand years.

The first chronology was based on a system in the Bible where the reign of one king was dated in reference to the reign of another king, (e.g. JPS 2 Kings 13:1 — “In the twenty-third year of King Joash...of Judah, Jehoahaz...became king over Israel.”) During the Hellenistic period, both Jews and non-Jews began using the Seleucid Era (SE) chronology, which in our own western dating system began about 312 B.C.E. The starting point of this chronology was based upon the military victory of Ptolemy of Egypt, with the help of



continued on page 8

The Folio

The Newsletter of
The Ancient Biblical
Manuscript Center

shedding light

Table of Contents

The Joy of Studying at the School of Religion:
Dating an Ancient Manuscript
Emily Champagne 1

Reflections on the Advisory Meeting
John Dickason 3

Honor Roll of Donors 4-5

Publications and Upcoming Events 6

Welcome Andrea! 7

Staff News 7

documentary
history of

Judaism and
Christianity

James A. Sanders

Publications

“Review of Jerusalem Crown: The Bible of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem,” in Nahum Ben Zvi (ed.) Jerusalem: Ben Zvi, 2000.
With the 2002 “Companion Volume,” in Mordechai Glazter (ed.) *Review of Biblical Literature*,



Contributed epilogue in *From Prophecy to Testament* by Craig Evans, Hendrickson Press, 2004.

“Canon as Dialogue,” in Jan Assmann (ed.) *Heresien: a symposium volume on “Abweichung in der Kirche,”* Heidelberg University, 1995.

Lectures

One day seminar on “True and False Prophecy.” Sheppard University, Los Angeles, CA, March 4, 2004.

Bible study for the plenary sessions of the annual conference of the National Conference of Congregational Churches, Providence, RI, June 27-29, 2004.

ABMC Welcomes

Andrea Zimmerman

The Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center welcomes Andrea Zimmerman as the new Research Associate for Publication and Scholarly Services. She replaces Arik Greenberg, who left to teach at Loyola Marymount University and, Meg Ferris, who has taken a leave of absence to complete her graduate studies.

Andrea has just completed her M.A. in Hebrew Bible at the Claremont School of Theology, and looks forward to beginning a Ph.D. program in 2005. Her thesis, a study of the conceptualization of covenant in the book of Hosea, raises important questions concerning the relationship between G-d and the people of Israel presented in Hosea. Most importantly, she examines the question of evil in the book and the silence of Hosea’s wife, who metaphorically represents Israel as the bride of G-d.

Andrea comes from Salem, Ohio, and graduated from Hiram College with a B.A. in Religious Studies, Writing, and Political Science. She knew from her undergraduate days that she wanted to do graduate work in Hebrew Bible, but it was a college trip to Israel and Jordan that made her realize her passion for such work. A morning hike to the top of Masada, where some 900 Zealots died rather than surrender to Rome



book of Ezekiel. “Without a doubt,” she says, “Ezekiel is one of the most vivid and beautiful writers of the prophets.”

At the ABMC, a whole new world has opened for her now that she reads “some really unbelievable materials,” like the Dead Sea Scrolls. She has recently helped to select materials for a History Channel documentary, and she has been involved in selecting photos for a new Hermeneia commentary on Qohelet. “It’s so incredible; it’s not even real! It’s really great to be hands on with that kind of material!” Andrea, welcome to the ABMC!

Staff News

Dana Newlove

We regret to report that Dana Newlove, a PhD student in Hebrew Bible at the Claremont Graduate University, will be leaving the ABMC. Dana has been working as a Research Associate. She leaves to begin a new chapter in her life. The ABMC wishes her much luck. Thank You Dana!

Michael Schufer

The ABMC congratulates Michael and Jennifer Schufer on the birth of their second son, Jacob Schufer. Jacob was born January 31, 2004. Michael is currently writing his dissertation in New Testament at Claremont Graduate University, as well as teaching.

Michael Phelps

Michael Phelps will be teaching Dead Sea Scrolls for an Elder Hostel at the University of Judaism, Los Angeles, CA. For more information, call: 310-476-9777.

and a visit to Yad vaShem, the Israeli Holocaust museum, left her feeling that she would never be the same again. For Andrea, these were not just visits to ancient sites and museums; they were experiences of remembrance and sanctity that she will never forget.

Because her trip was designed to enable students to meet Israelis and Arabs, getting to know the people as well as the places prompted her desire to study. “I knew, I said, ‘this is it.’”

Why Claremont? Her college advisor studied for an M.Div. at Claremont, and felt that this would be the right place for her. A CST recruiting visit to Hiram College, and Andrea’s own visit to the CST campus sealed the deal. She is especially interested in prophetic literature, and plans to work on the

Publications and Upcoming Events

Marvin A. Sweeney

Publications

The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century. eds. Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003).

“Zechariah’s Debate with Isaiah,” in Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi (eds.) *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 335-350.

The Review of Biblical Literature, 5 (2003), editor; annual journal published by the Society for Biblical Literature, Atlanta, GA.

Lectures

“Zephaniah in History and Manuscript.” Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, CA, February 12, 2003.

“The Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel” Academy for Jewish Religion, Los Angeles, CA, January—March, 2004.

“The Writings.” Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, CA, January—March 2004.

“Ezekiel: Temple Priest and Visionary Prophet of the Exile.” California State University, Long Beach, CA, Jewish Studies Program Speakers Series, April 22, 2004.

“Jeremiah’s Reflection on the Isaian Promise: Jeremiah 23 in Context.” International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, Leiden, Netherlands, August 1-6, 2004.

“The Dystopianization of Utopian Prophetic Literature.” Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, San Antonio, TX, November 21-23, 2004.

Events

Dr. Sweeney was invited to deliver the homily at the Claremont School of Theology Graduation Service, Claremont, CA, May 14, 2004.

Dr. Sweeney was selected to participate in the Summer Institute for Modern Israel Studies, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, June 20-

July 2. Summer Institute Fellows will engage in two weeks of intensive study of modern Israel in order to develop courses to be taught at their home campuses.

Kristin De Troyer

Reports

Report on the Cambridge IM of the SBL, in SBL Forum, Religious Studies News of SBL: www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=197.

Publications

“Esther in Text and Literary Critical Paradise,” in L. Greenspoon & S. White Crawford (eds.) *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (JSOT SS, 380). Sheffield: SAP, pp. 31-49.

Lectures

“The Contribution of Old Greek Texts to the Study of the Development of the Hebrew Bible.” BAS Meeting, Atlanta, GA, November 2003.

“The Contribution of Old Greek Texts to the Study of the Development of the Hebrew Bible.” Temple Beth-El, San Pedro, CA, October 2003.

William M. Schniedewind

Publications

How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

“The Evolution of Name Theology,” in M. Graham, S. McKenzie, and G. Knoppers (eds.) *The Chronicler as Theologian: Essays in Honor of Ralph Klein* (London/New York: Continuum, 2003), 228-39.

“Jerusalem, the Late Judahite Monarchy, and the Composition of the Biblical Texts,” in Andrew G. Vaughn and Ann E. Killebrew (eds.) *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology: The First Temple Period* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2003), 375-93.

“Explaining God’s Name in Exodus 3,” in M. Augustin and H. Niemann (eds.) *Basel and Bible: Collected Communications to the XVIIth Congress of the IOSOT Meeting, Basel 2001* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2004) 13-18.

Lectures

“How the Bible Became a Book.” Los Angeles Biblical Archaeology Society, Monrovia, CA, May 7, 2004.

Reflections on the Advisory Meeting

John Dickason

Director of Library and Information Technology
Claremont School of Theology

In the previous issue of *The Folio*, Mike Phelps discussed the Mt. Athos Project Advisory Meeting, held in Thessaloniki, Greece, on June 12 and 13, 2003, within the context of the launching of the Mt. Athos Photographic Expedition. Here, I wish to reflect upon some of the rich discussions of these meetings.

At first glance, this Advisory Meeting might be viewed merely as a perfunctory requirement of the Getty Grant. However, it was much more than this. For the first time, the Mt Athos Project was described in detail to a community of scholars and technical experts. If there were any major weaknesses or deficiencies in the project’s design, this was the opportunity to make these discoveries. Several important themes emerged from these meetings.

A new cataloging project is necessary. Efthimios Litsas, the lead cataloger, demonstrated that at least 50% of the previous cataloging of Mt. Athos manuscripts is brief and inaccurate. Efthimios directs a team of catalogers with uncommon expertise. Katarina Katsarou is a recognized expert in manuscript illumination, and Venetia Chatzopoulou is a doctoral student in paleography.

The project should preserve manuscript art, as well as text. Katarina Katsarou, an expert on manuscript miniatures, speculated that manuscript illuminations might be a “subconscious protest against the invention of printing.”

The cataloging database should be shared with scholars world-wide, and must maintain flexibility and “portability” so that the data will be usable as future technologies are developed. Stephen Psarras and Panagiotis Tokatlidis, programmers and database designers for the project, provided a technical view of the Mt Athos Catalog. One of the main goals of this database project is to share records with other projects, such as the *Digital Scriptorium*, to encourage the study of monastic collections.


The documents must be scanned with the best available technologies. Mike Phelps led a discussion of the missions, goals, and strategies of the Mt. Athos Project, emphasizing that the primary goal is access. This access will be achieved by scanning images of microfilms and color trans-

parencies, as well as by onsite, digital scans of Mt. Athos manuscripts not preserved on microfilm, as well as new digital scans of some of the most significant manuscripts that have already been filmed. The urgency of this task is underlined by the fact that many of the microfilms held by the Patriarchal Institute are in poor condition, and are at risk of deteriorating. Phelps outlined the technical specifications of the project’s new digital camera system, and experts gave detailed advice on how images should be stored, compressed, and distributed to scholars.

The project is informed by the experience and insights of related projects. Consuelo Dutschke, Curator of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts at Columbia University, and Project Manager of the Digital Scriptorium, delivered a presentation on the state of electronic cataloging projects in the United States. Father Justin, of St. Catherine’s Monastery at Sinai, Egypt, presented a paper on the Monastery’s project to digitally photograph its manuscripts.

At the conclusion of the conference, Nicholas Zarkantzaz (Project Director) moderated a rich discussion on the current issues and next steps of the Mount Athos Manuscripts Digital Library. The Advisory Meeting participants raised a number of questions that will need to be addressed in the days ahead. For example, who decides which manuscripts (on film) will be digitally photographed as well? What are the criteria used in this selective digitization (will the decision be based on the manuscript’s condition, it’s importance, or whether it is signed and dated?) How can we insure that the cataloging forms of names of authors and scribes will be consistent and searchable?

One of the most fruitful benefits of the Advisory meeting is the ongoing dialogue and collaboration among many of the participants. For example, Nicholas Pickwood, formerly Conservator at the Harvard University Library, has recently provided the project with a hierarchy of categories that can be used in the cataloging of bindings.

In sum, the most gratifying aspect of this conference was that the experts were unanimous in their affirmation of the Mt Athos Project. Since each of them approaches manuscripts from radically different perspectives (for example, some are interested in the content of the texts, others are interested in the physical properties of the manuscript bindings and watermarks), one might expect some disagreement. The recurring refrain was “We like what we see, and we want you to do more.” The project is launched, with the blessings and good wishes of all in attendance. 



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The ABMC is pleased to recognize the individuals and organizations who generously supported the work of ABMC in the year 2003. Each of you, through your generosity, makes possible the preservation of precious Jewish and Christian manuscripts which are our sole sources for knowledge of the text of the Bible today.

We also thank our donors who gave to the Mount Athos Digital Library and Preservation Project. Your gift makes possible a ground breaking endeavor.

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