In 1975 an extraordinary discovery was made in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. In a recess in the wall of the Monastery, the very existence of which was unknown to the present-day community, a vast quantity of manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts was discovered, full details of which are now being published. ¹ The roof of the cavity had collapsed, showering its contents with dust, earth and stones, so that clearing the area and retrieving the manuscripts proved very arduous, and it was only after 44 days of very hard labour that the Sacrist of the Monastery, the late Archimandrite Sophronios, who worked almost single-handed, completed the task. The volume describing the material in Greek has now appeared, and forms the basis of the present note.

The Report states (p. 20) that it would be unwise to speculate on the origins of this collection of material pending the discovery of written records, but in the meantime it may be useful to put together such evidence as is at present available and to see what conclusions can be drawn from it.

In May 1844 the Biblical scholar Constantine Tischendorf visited the Monastery, where he remained for eight days. He was to make further visits in 1853 and 1859. According to his account, ² it was one day in 1844, while he was working in the Library of the Monastery, that he noticed on the floor a large basket filled with manuscript fragments. He asked if he might examine them, and the Librarian, Cyril, gave his permission, saying that they were rubbish which was to be destroyed by burning it in the ovens of the Monastery, adding that two similar basketfuls had already been so disposed of. Among these

¹ Tὰ Νέα Εὐρήματα τοῦ Σινᾶ (Athens, 1998).
² C. von Tischendorf, Die Sinaibibel (Leipzig, 1871), pp. 3-4.
fragments Tischendorf found 129 leaves in Greek which he identified as coming from a manuscript of the Old Testament and which, to judge from the appearance of the script, could not be later than the fourth century, and thus the earliest Biblical manuscript he had ever seen. As the leaves were destined for destruction, he asked if he might keep them, but at this point the attitude of the Librarian changed, evidently because he realised that they might be of value, and eventually Tischendorf was permitted to take only one-third of the whole—43 leaves. These he took back to Germany and later published.

Tischendorf must have realised at the time that somewhere in the Monastery there was presumably a large collection of such, to the monks, useless material, which was being transported, basketful by basketful, to the ovens for destruction. Whether he asked to see this collection, and was refused, or whether he decided, diplomatically, to be contented with the prize he had so unexpectedly secured, we do not know, for he tells us no more. What he did do, however, was to prove of the utmost importance, for he strongly advised the monks to search for more leaves of the manuscript and preserve them carefully. Of course, at this time all the leaves he had seen were from various historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament, and he could have had no idea that any part of the New Testament was included in the manuscript.

We now know that the monks did indeed follow Tischendorf’s advice, with spectacular results, recovering not only much more of the Old Testament but the New Testament absolutely complete, together with the Epistle of Barnabas and the early part of the “Shepherd” of Hermas. All this the monks then attempted to bind up, and this is the “second binding” described by Cockerell. The monks got as far as sewing the leaves into quires, and then sewing the quires together. They then attached to the back two broad bands which were evidently intended to be attached to the binding boards. By this stage, however, the volume had become very out of shape. As Cockerell describes it, “While the fore-edge is roughly square, the spine is badly out of shape. When the spine is straightened up, as in the new binding, the fore-edge naturally becomes irregular. It is quite possible that this later binding was never actually completed. The sewing threads were deliberately cut from the bands, perhaps with a view to a fresh start.”

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