

Sacred Treasure The Cairo Genizah – The Amazing Discoveries of Forgotten Jewish History in an Egyptian Synagogue Attic. By Rabbi Mark Glickman. Jewish Lights Publishing 2011.

There can be little doubt that the two most momentous discoveries of Jewish manuscripts during the twentieth century were the Scrolls found in the caves of Qumran and the manuscripts uncovered in the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat, Cairo.

Of the two it is the Dead Sea Scrolls that have hitherto achieved primacy in the public consciousness, and have a shrine dedicated to them at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem; yet it might well be argued that the documents from the Cairo Genizah, hundreds of thousands in number and covering a period of many centuries' duration, have even greater importance.

Rabbi Solomon Schechter, the Romanian born Cambridge academic whose name will forever be associated with the Cairo Genizah, owed his discovery of this trove of treasure to two remarkable lay scholars, the independently wealthy sisters Margaret Gibson and Agnes Lewis. The two women, about whom a fascinating book has been written by the academic Janet Soskice, came upon some scraps of text in the Cairo market and brought them back to show to Schechter, with whom they were close friends.

The first piece of text that they showed him turned out to be from the hitherto unknown Hebrew text of the apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus, and this text led Schechter to travel to Egypt in 1896 to see what else might be found. It was a journey well worth making, for he brought back to Cambridge a lifetime's worth of texts which was to become after his death the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit housed at the University Library.

The story of the Cairo Genizah and its manuscript treasures has fascinated many generations of scholars, and its hold on the imagination of Rabbi Mark Glickman is part of that tradition.

For Sacred Treasure, Mark Glickman was able to trace the journey of Schechter to the Ben Ezra Synagogue as well going to the Genizah Research unit, taking his son Jacob along for what turned out to be an exhilarating ride. Glickman writes with passion in an engaging style, and he draws in the reader whether aware or ignorant of the Genizah and its importance.

Sacred Treasure is divided into 11 chapters with an introduction and conclusion, telling the story of Schechter himself, the discovery of the Genizah by him and by other scholars both before and after him, and then of the work that has taken place on the texts since Schechter moved to America in 1902, and the later scholars who have studied and written about them – such as Jacob Mann, Shlomo Dov Gotein and Stefan Reif.

Glickman also details the other places where manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah may be found, and although the largest quantity of them are at Cambridge, sizable numbers may be found at the British Library in London, the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the John Rylands Library in Manchester and the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, with varying small quantities of texts spread across the world from Tel Aviv to Los Angeles and Vienna to Toronto.

Sacred Treasure is a determinedly populist book in style, which will doubtless bring the existence of the Genizah to the attention of many readers who would eschew a more serious academic work; the author's passion about the subject shines through, as well as his wonder at some of the Genizah's contents, particularly material bearing the handwriting of Moses Maimonides himself, and the texts that have no parallel in Jewish literature such as a piece of sheet music by Ovadiah ha-Ger.

Rabbi Mark Glickman has created a fine, highly readable and entertaining monument to Solomon Schechter's greatest discovery and his most significant contribution to Jewish scholarship and to the Jewish literary tradition.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh