

"THE SAGA OF THE YONAN CODEX"

Bruce M. Metzger, Princeton Theological Seminary

Reprinted from Chapter Nine of *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian* by Bruce M. Metzger, copyright 1997 by Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, Massachusetts. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

THE SAGA OF THE YONAN CODEx

THE afternoon of April 5, 1955, marked the opening of an exhibition in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress that was to have extraordinary consequences. Put on temporary display that day was a parchment manuscript of the Syriac New Testament called the Yonan Codex. Its owner was a Washington-based businessman from Iran, Mr. Norman Malek Yonan. Presiding at the ceremony,



The Yonan Codex, opened to Matthew 5:1ff. (the Beatitudes begin at the middle of the last line on the right-hand page and continue at the top of the left-hand page; see p. 115)

which opened with an invocation pronounced by the chaplain of the Senate, the Reverend Frederick Brown Harris, was the librarian of Congress, Dr. L. Quincy Mumford. Among the several governmental and ecclesiastical dignitaries who participated in the “unveiling” of the manuscript was the Honorable John Foster Dulles, secretary of state, who was the principal speaker¹ and who unveiled the booth where the codex was enclosed.

Two weeks earlier Yonan gained preliminary publicity for his manuscript when Washington newspapers announced that it had been insured for half an hour at an evaluation of one and a half million dollars during the time it was being taken by a procession of motorized police and armed guards from a bank vault of the National Savings and Trust Company of Washington to the White House. Here newspaper reporters and television cameras were focussed on President Eisenhower and Mr. Yonan bending over the manuscript, examining its pages. After leaving the White House the entourage went on to the Library of Congress, where the manuscript was temporarily deposited, awaiting the ceremony of opening its formal exhibition.

The next stage in the orchestration of publicity took place later that year when arrangements were made to take the manuscript, under armed guard, throughout the so-called Bible Belt of the South in order to exhibit it at various places and to solicit contributions in an attempt to raise three million dollars. Half of this amount was to be used to purchase the manuscript from Yonan in order to give it over permanently to the Library of Congress. The

¹The remarks of Dulles (taken down stenographically) about “this wonderful old manuscript” were “informal and brief,” as he stated, and were focussed chiefly on a verse from the Epistle to the Hebrews, “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with patience the race that is set before us” (12:1). A copy is on deposit among the Dulles papers in the Seeley Mudd Manuscript Library at Princeton University. For a photograph of Dulles opening the exhibition of the Yonan Codex, see *Bible Review* 12 (December 1996) 28.

other half was to be used to make facsimile copies of the codex available to institutions of higher learning; to publish a translation of its text in order to stimulate the study of the language of the manuscript; and “to promote other projects relevant to the dissemination of the faith and knowledge of Christianity.”

The tour began on November 28, 1955, with what was doubtless an impressive ceremony at the Capitol plaza in Washington. There was newspaper, radio, and television coverage of the ceremony, which featured an address by Vice President Richard M. Nixon. Nixon declared, “This book of the Holy Scriptures will be taken to every city and hamlet in America in order that the American people may participate [i.e., by their contributions] in the ownership of this ancient manuscript.”

A specially built glass-domed bus, equipped with a depository for the safe-keeping of the manuscript, was to take it under armed guard from place to place. Written on the sides of the bus, in large gold letters, was a sign that read, “Christendom’s Most Precious Possession.” Mrs. Cynthia Wadell, president of the National Council of Church Women, christened the bus, “The Spirit of Galilee,” and expressed the belief that “all Americans will want to see it [the codex] and know its history.” The well-known New York minister, the Reverend Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, wished for the tour Godspeed and success.

It was not surprising that such publicity attracted and impressed newspaper reporters, photographers, and radio and television crews. It was also not surprising that their accounts of the significance of the manuscript did not always correspond with the facts.

Before continuing with an account of the tour of “The Spirit of Galilee” and the subsequent fortunes of the Yonan Codex, it is necessary to provide a brief description of the manuscript and to relate how I became involved in the debate over the importance of the codex.

The Yonan Codex is a Syriac manuscript of the New Testament comprising 227 leaves of parchment, each

measuring seven inches (27.5 cm) by eight and three-fourths inches (32.3 cm). The writing is in black ink, still quite legible, in single columns of twenty-nine or thirty lines per page. The text of the parchment folios begins with Matthew 9:35 and closes with Hebrews 12:9. Its present binding of boards includes at the beginning sixteen folios of paper of a much later date and four folios at the end, each page containing twenty-one or twenty-two lines of larger script; these provide in a totally different hand the portions of the text of Matthew and Hebrews lacking in the original parchment codex.

My examination of the Yonan Codex was made the previous year in response to an invitation from Mr. Yonan. It turned out that he had been trying to interest the Library of Congress in acquiring the manuscript, and Dr. Verner Clapp, assistant chief librarian of Congress, had suggested my name along with the names of several others² who would be qualified to give an estimate of the age and general importance of the document.

Having arrived at Washington, I was taken by Mr. Yonan to his lawyer's office where I waited until he brought from the vault a box containing the manuscript. He explained that it was a precious heirloom, for it had been in his family since about the fourth century. I examined the manuscript with care, comparing various passages with a copy of the Bible Society's printed Syriac New Testament that I had brought with me. In the passages that I collated, the text was identical with that of the standard Peshitta Syriac version. This version, made near the beginning of the fifth century, comprises twenty-two books of the New Testament (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation are absent).

In order to determine the approximate date of the manuscript I compared the style of its handwriting with

²I learned later that two other scholars from Princeton had also examined the manuscript, Philip K. Hitti, professor of Arabic at the University, and Henry S. Gehman, professor of Old Testament at the Seminary.

specimens of dated facsimiles in William H. P. Hatch's *Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts*³ and came to the conclusion that the codex dated to about the seventh century at the earliest, and was perhaps slightly later. After returning home, I drafted a letter (dated July 2, 1954) to the librarian of Congress in which, without mentioning any specific date or monetary value of the manuscript, I recommended that the library take steps to acquire it. As chair of the American Committee on Versions of the International Greek New Testament Project I was—and still am—interested in having the Library of Congress increase its very modest collection of biblical manuscripts.

A few months later an organization known as the Aramaic Bible Foundation was incorporated with three trustees: the Reverend William G. Adams, pastor of the Temple Hills Baptist Church, Bethesda, Maryland; J. W. Rixley Smith of Alexandria, Virginia, former assistant to the late Senator Carter Glass; and Professor John Shapley, a member of the art and archaeology department of the Catholic University of America. With an office located in Washington, D.C., the foundation produced a small brochure that was to be distributed during the tour of the codex. The brochure began: "The Aramaic Bible Foundation presents the Yonan Codex, one of Christendom's most precious documents, written in the language spoken by Jesus and His disciples." More precisely, however, the language that Jesus spoke was Palestinian Aramaic, whereas the language of the codex is Syriac, a related but somewhat different Aramaic dialect.

In the light of this background information we may now pick up the narrative of the subsequent fortunes of the Yonan Codex during its progress through the Bible Belt. The first stop made by the bus was at the chapel of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Here Professor Shapley delivered a lecture on the importance of the manuscript. Extravagant and misleading

³Boston: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1946.

claims were made as to its date and the nature of its text. According to information sent to me by W. D. Chamberlain, professor of New Testament at the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Shapley claimed that the Yonan Codex was one of the oldest, if not the oldest manuscript of the New Testament. He also referred to it as a copy of the *original* New Testament in Aramaic.

After the lecture questions were invited, and Chamberlain began a series of inquiries that made it necessary for Shapley to admit that the codex was a copy of the Syriac Peshitta and that its text was, in fact, subsequent to the Old Syriac text.

That night Mr. Yonan flew to Louisville and the next morning he called at Chamberlain's office. He threatened Chamberlain with a lawsuit for defamation of character by having implied that Yonan was deliberately misleading the public. When Chamberlain showed that he was not easily intimidated, Yonan changed his tune and declared that just as Wycliffe and Tyndale were persecuted for bringing the Bible to the people, so too the clergy were still making things difficult for the Aramaic Bible Foundation in bringing the Yonan Codex to the attention of the public. He, of course, did not mention that a great difference was the attempt to raise three million dollars!

Chamberlain's letter to me included a most disquieting note. "I am writing you," he concluded, "because they are using your name as one who supports their claims and endorses them. I have seen a letter from you to the Librarian of Congress, dated July 2, 1954, which they are using. I do not see that you endorse what they claim. However, the letter itself is not publically shown but your name is used." Chamberlain added a final sentence: "I do not wish to involve you in any unpleasantness, but I did want you to know what was going on."

I had, in fact, previously learned from the librarian at Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, that my name was being used in promotion designed to secure official sanction from the governor of Virginia and from the

mayor of Richmond, in developing a campaign in the city and the state with the object of raising three million dollars for the Aramaic Bible Foundation. Consequently, on November 26, 1955, I had written to the Reverend William G. Adams, the president of the foundation, concluding my letter with the paragraph:

I do not know the full details of the methods by which you are soliciting contributions in behalf of this Codex. I do not wish, however, to have my name used in the solicitation of funds, by mail or otherwise, because I should not wish to be charged with using the mails for purposes of defrauding, for which there are, you must know, very severe penalties.

Ten days later I received a curt response from Mr. Adams; it read as follows:

Dear Dr. Metzger:

This will acknowledge receipt of your recent letter. In the name of our Loving Lord—Whose we are and Whom we serve—I want to express my regret that you did not confer with us on a Christian basis.

The contents of your letter have been noted, and in view of the statements and implications contained in your letter we have referred it to our counsel for such action as he may advise.

In deference to your wishes, we shall not use your name in connection with the accomplishment of the objectives of the Aramaic Bible Foundation, which has received the plaudits, approval, and encouragement of many national leaders in the political, religious, theological and scholastic fields.

Another angle to the affair emerged when J. Philip Hyatt, professor of Old Testament at the School of Religion at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, wrote me on December 10, 1955:

Dear Metzger:

I have just had a conference with two men, one of whom introduced himself as a Rev. Mr. Adams, a Baptist minister from Washington, D.C., and the other a Mr. Hendrickson.

They have talked with me about the Yonan (spelling?) manuscript, and seemed a bit surprised when I did not agree with their enthusiasm for it. They are apparently promoting an appearance of it in Nashville early in January, at which time it will be “blessed” (or something of the sort!) by the governor of Tennessee, etc. etc.

I understand that you have actually seen this manuscript, and have an opinion as to its commercial value—which is considerably less than the owners are trying to get out of the government for it. I am writing to you with two purposes in mind: (1) would you write and tell me briefly your opinion of the MS. and its value (*vis à vis* other Syriac MSS. of course); and (2) if, as it appears, an attempt is being made to build up this MS. to some very high figure, is there anything that SBL [The Society of Biblical Literature], or some group from SBL (such as the Textual Criticism Seminar), might do to give the public a true picture of the nature of this MS? I am vice-president of SBL now, and slated (I assume) to be elected president later this month. The publicity I have seen appears to be attempting to make people believe this is the oldest Biblical MS. in existence, in the original language spoken by Jesus. Of course it is no such thing; even Mr. Adams did not claim that, but did not seem to care that Syriac, as a form of eastern Aramaic, is not the same as the Western Aramaic of Palestine.

A brief note from you would be appreciated, and I look forward at least to seeing you at the SBL meetings in New York.

Acting on Hyatt’s suggestion, I drafted a proposed memorandum about the Yonan Codex, and at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held later that month in New York at Union Theological Seminary, I showed copies of it to Professor William H. P. Hatch and Professor William F. Albright. The latter, who made one or two suggested changes in the wording, agreed to join Hatch and me in presenting the memorandum to the society. That night I returned to Princeton to type the final copy and to make several hundred mimeographed copies for distribution at the business meeting of the society the next day. At

that time, without much discussion, the society adopted the following statement, with no negative vote being cast.

The Society of Biblical Literature at its annual meeting in New York City on December 28–30, 1955, wishes to go on record as opposing some of the publicity attending the efforts currently being made to raise by popular subscription \$1,500,000 for the purchase of the so-called Yonan Codex. This codex is a manuscript of the Syriac New Testament which is reported to be “the oldest surviving complete New Testament written in Syriac-Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus” (Washington *Evening Star*, March 25, 1955).

According to members of our Society who have examined the manuscript, the Yonan Codex is a copy of the Syriac Peshitta, a version which was made from the Greek New Testament at about the beginning of the fifth century and which contains twenty-two of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Edessene Syriac, the language of this version, differs considerably⁴ from the Palestine Aramaic used by Jesus more than four centuries earlier. About three hundred manuscripts of the Peshitta version are known to exist in the libraries of this country and Europe. Several of these are older than the Yonan Codex, which some of our members who are expert in Syriac palaeography date to the seventh or eighth century. According to certain members of the Society who have frequently arranged for the purchase of biblical manuscripts, a fair estimate of the value of a manuscript like the Yonan Codex is about \$5,000.

Now the fat was in the fire. It was not surprising that the media picked up the story and ran with it. Hyatt, as the newly elected president of the society, and other members were interviewed by the press, and the Aramaic Bible Foundation issued “clarifying” statements. The following week the lawyer of the foundation wrote to Hyatt, threatening a lawsuit against the society for libel if it did not retract the statement voted at the business session.

⁴My initial draft had the word “somewhat”; at Albright’s suggestion this was changed to “considerably.”

Meanwhile, I prepared an article for the *Christian Century* magazine entitled "Is the Yonan Codex Unique?" Two lawyers (my father and the magazine's lawyer) reviewed what I had written; after several changes were made in the wording, it was published in the issue of February 22, 1956. Here, among other points, I tried to put the Yonan manuscript in the context of other similar copies of the Peshitta Syriac version. I pointed out that, far from being unique, several hundred other manuscript copies of the Peshitta New Testament have been catalogued in libraries and museums of the United States and Europe, and some of them are earlier in date than the Yonan copy.

After further negotiations with the foundation's lawyer, and with understandable anxiety lest a lawsuit deplete the society's modest financial resources, Hyatt consulted the other officers of the society and the twenty associates-in-council, as they were called (the function of the latter group was roughly similar to that of trustees of the society). Sixteen of the twenty despaired of being successful in a court of law defending the society's action, fearing that neither the court nor the public would understand the technical linguistic arguments. Consequently, as the least unsatisfactory resolution of the affair, it was decided that Hyatt should send the following letter, dated March 5, 1956, to the Aramaic Bible Foundation.

Dear Sirs:

The Council of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis regret the misunderstanding which has arisen between the Society and the Aramaic Bible Foundation. The resolution which was adopted by the Society on December 29, 1955, was not intended to discredit the Aramaic Bible Foundation or the owner of the Yonan Codex. The resolution did not intend to give the impression that Syriac, the language of the Codex, was an entirely different language from that spoken by Jesus. Qualified scholars know that Syriac is an Aramaic dialect and is related to that dialect of Aramaic spoken by Jesus. The monetary appraisal of the Codex expressed the opinion of some members of the Society; the great majority of members are not in position

to make such an appraisal. As to the date of the Codex we recognize the possibility of honest difference of scholarly opinion; we have been informed that at least two qualified scholars, who are members of the Society, had subscribed to a fifth-century date.

We have been informed by Mr. Norman Yonan and the Aramaic Bible Foundation that it is not the intention of Mr. Yonan to profit from the transfer of the Codex to the Foundation, which will in turn place it in the Library of Congress. The Foundation further informs us that the funds which it is seeking to raise will, after the payment of the necessary expenses, be devoted to the establishment of professorships for the teaching of Aramaic in theological seminaries, the offering of scholarships especially for the study of Aramaic, and the publishing of facsimiles, translations and studies of the Yonan Codex. Such a program is consistent with the interests of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, and we hope that these objectives will be accomplished.

Yours truly,
J. Philip Hyatt
President (1956)

In a later communication to me Hyatt commented, "There seems to be no 'right' way to deal with these people [i.e., the Aramaic Bible Foundation]. I would make no claim that our way was entirely right. I do hope that some people who see our latest statement will take the trouble to read it carefully, and thus see what it actually says and what it does not say. . . . I interpret it as a clarification of our position and a gesture of conciliation. Our resolution still stands, and individual opinions are not silenced." Ironically enough, while the clarification removed the threat of a lawsuit against the society, in its continuing publicity the foundation used the statement as the society's approval of the extravagant claims being made for the Yonan Codex!

Subsequent fortunes of the Yonan Codex can be more briefly recounted. After it had been displayed at a political function involving Governor A. B. ("Happy") Chandler of Kentucky, the entourage went on to Little Rock, Arkansas,

and from there to Dallas, Texas. Here the manuscript was placed, under suitable armed guard, on display in the Nieman Marcus Department Store. Shortly thereafter the Dallas representative of the American Bible Society got in touch with the society's headquarters in New York for suggestions on how to respond to a barrage of queries that the exhibition had generated. I have no doubt that Dr. Eric M. North, general secretary of the Bible Society, would have responded in much the same vein as he did in his letter to me of January 4, 1956, when he wrote:

May I express my satisfaction at your efforts in the Society of Biblical Literature to put an end to the extravagant claims about the so-called Yonan Codex.

There are a lot of people trying to trade on religion in a dishonest manner and I am glad to see some of them caught up with.

During the following months the tour of the glass-domed bus with its "treasure" came to an end. How much money had been collected was not revealed.

A few years later the manuscript surfaced once again, this time in Georgia. In a letter dated May 31, 1960, Edwin D. Johnston, professor of Bible at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, informed me that the Yonan Codex had been given to the university by Mr. Yonan, then a resident of Lawrenceville, Georgia. Dr. Harry Smith, a Mercer alumnus and executive secretary of the Baptist Foundation, had been, Johnston said, "greatly responsible for interesting Mr. Yonan in giving the Codex to Mercer."

Johnston's letter requested that I send him suggestions concerning the proper way of preserving and protecting such manuscripts. He also requested my judgment on the advisability of having the manuscript microfilmed. Of course, I recommended that it be microfilmed and that a copy be sent to the archives of the International Greek New Testament Project at Claremont, California.

More than a decade later, during the summer of 1973, having decided to make inquiry of the librarian at Mercer

concerning the Yonan Codex, I received the following reply from Daniel Lamar Metts, Jr.

The manuscript was given to us in May 1960 and was returned to Mr. Yonan in 1962. This happened before I came here. Apparently there was continuing disagreement between Mr. Yonan and the University concerning copying the manuscript for study or publication and financial benefits from copies. I am not clear on details. I have no idea at all what happened to the document since. I am sorry not to be of more help, but that is all I know.

Curiously enough, several year later while I was attending sessions of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Dr. Paul L. Garber, professor of Bible at Agnes Scott College, Decatur, Georgia, casually inquired of me whether I had ever heard of the Yonan Codex. This led to a most astonishing disclosure. The manuscript, Garber told me, was in the possession of the Emotional Maturity Instruction Center, Decatur, Georgia.⁵ The center had transliterated the Syriac text of the Beatitudes in Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12) and was making a copy of this available for four dollars with the assurance that, by concentrating each day on these sentences in Aramaic, one's personality would become adjusted and more mature. In fact, according to Garber the center had even persuaded magistrates in Atlanta to buy copies of the transliteration for use in attempting to quell obstreperous prisoners!

For several years thereafter I heard nothing more concerning the Yonan Codex. Then in the autumn of 1994,

⁵In response to my writing for further information the center sent several typescript booklets: "Rationale and Guidelines for Emotional Maturity Instruction," three levels of "Keys to Human Relations," and "A Promising New Approach to Rehabilitation," the last by Dr. C. D. Warren, former medical director, Georgia Department of Corrections. These, as well as copies of several testimonial letters, are now on deposit in the archives of Princeton Theological Seminary library.

it surfaced once again, this time in Michigan. During a visit to Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, where I had been invited to give several lectures, I was taken to visit a newly established museum containing early printed Bibles and other treasures near Grand Haven, bordering on Lake Michigan. This museum, established by Mr. Robert Van Kampen, is named The Scriptorium: Center for Christian Antiquities. During my visit the director, Dr. Scott T. Carroll, showed me some of the center's treasures, including several manuscripts in Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Hebrew. Then he took from a shelf a parchment codex about seven by nine inches. When he identified it as the Yonan Codex, one can imagine my surprise—not to say amazement.

Of course I asked how it had come into the possession of the Scriptorium, and learned that it had been acquired for about \$25,000 at an auction at Sotheby's. Holding now in my hands the same manuscript that I had examined forty years earlier released a flood of memories. I realized that at last the saga of "The Yonan Codex Affair" had come to a conclusion; the manuscript was now ensconced in a suitable environment and available for scholarly examination and research. Certainly the ancient comment made by Terentianus Maurus is altogether applicable:

Habent sua fata libelli.
(Books have their fates.)