



Sermons: On some Items in the Wren

The Bible in the Library

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Deuteronomy 11: 26–end

John 4: 1–14

The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water
springing up into everlasting life.

I have the privilege of spending most of my working life in one of the great libraries of the world. Being invited to choose one book from the quarter of a million or more which fill the Wren Library and its adjacent overflows ought therefore to be an easy task. Some of the stars in its galaxy burn so bright that they take their names from their location – the Trinity Apocalypse, the Trinity Gospels, the Trinity Carol Roll, or the Trinity Milton Manuscript. But let me leave them for future preachers in this series of sermons on books in the Wren. Instead let us first consider the building itself. In 1675 Sir Christopher Wren sent his detailed plans for the library to the Master, Sir Isaac Barrow, with an apology for the pedantry with which he attended to every detail of its construction. We are immensely fortunate that he was so attentive, and in fact there is very little in the building today which did not form part of those initial plans – the statue of Lord Byron is the most obvious interloper. But although the building itself is substantially exactly the same as it was on its completion in 1695, there is an important difference in the way in which it is seen.

When Wren conceived the library, as a grand public monument of knowledge, there was a path through the middle of Nevile's Court, a remnant of a medieval road down to the river, which since the fourteenth century had been known as King's Childers Lane, the road which the Children of the Chapel Royal could use to alight from barges and return to the King's Hall which stood on the site of this chapel. The road marked a parish boundary, and to this day the Wren Library transects two parishes. But more importantly, the path down the centre of Nevile's Court lawn generated a focal point at the central arch of the Wren Library, directly beneath the four statutes which so proudly look down on the efforts of the mere mortals who labour in the rooms of Nevile's Court. Anyone approaching the library along this path would have their eyes drawn to the relief sculpture which occupies the central arch of the Wren's cloisters. This relief depicts the translators of the Septuagint – the seventy (or maybe seventy-two) men who prepared the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures and thereby established the canonical ordering of the Old Testament – presenting their work to King Ptolemy II as an addition to the legendary library of Alexandria. (I would encourage you to take a closer look at this remarkable sculpture, by the Danish sculptor Caius Gabriel Cibber,

but alas the central path has now been replaced by lawn. This in turn means that the opportunity to stand near it is now sadly restricted to those few in the back stalls who have the authority to walk on the grass...)

The creation of the Septuagint, in the second century before Christ, was a vital moment in the history of the Bible. The legend that the translation was commissioned by Ptolemy for the library of Alexandria is based on very slender evidence, and in fact was being questioned for the first time at exactly the time the Wren Library was being built, but it serves as a very fitting centrepiece to the façade of the building: it was at this moment, so the story tells us, that the Jewish scriptures were brought to sit alongside the great writings of ancient Greece. For the first time, the Hebrew scriptures entered the canon of historical, scientific and literary endeavour which the library of Alexandria sought to preserve for eternity. The Wren could similarly present itself as having the ambition to contain all knowledge, while giving special precedence to the study of Holy Scripture and the texts of classical antiquity, which together account for a majority of the books on its shelves to this day. In his published memoirs, Christopher Wren wrote of 'publick buildings being the ornament of a country', and that 'architecture aims at eternity'.¹ In this stated aim for eternity it is surely fitting that the first ever Bible should be represented on the keystone at the centre of Wren's great library.

Throughout its history, Trinity has been in a central position in the study of the Bible in this country. Two of our Elizabethan Masters, Thomas Nevile and John Whitgift, between them assembled what is probably the largest collection of Bible commentaries to survive from medieval England, and there have been many notable luminaries in every succeeding century, both as biblical scholars and as collectors of books now in the College's care. I do not propose to lecture you on the thousands of Bibles and commentaries in the Wren, but instead have brought just one small example to talk about this evening. It is a small, decrepit, messy, incomplete collection of fragments, gnawed by rodents and affected by damp, and written in a script and a language which I do not read or understand. As far as I have been able to deduce, nobody has asked to see this book in the last hundred years, until recently an enquiry from Wittenberg led me to take it off the shelf. It is on display today in the antechapel, between the statues of Bacon and Barrow, and digital images of the complete manuscript are available on the Library's website.² The book consists of thirty leaves from a Samaritan Targum of the Pentateuch – that is to say, a translation of the first five books of the Bible from Hebrew into Aramaic for use by the Samaritan people, probably in the fourteenth century (AD).

The Samaritans held the first lesson tonight in particular regard, and it would later lead to their schism from the Jewish people. On first crossing the Jordan and entering the Promised Land after the Exodus, the Israelites saw two mountains in Canaan, Gerizim and Ebal, and were instructed by Moses to perform blessings on mount Gerizim and curses on mount Ebal. The Samaritans took this holy pronouncement to signify that it was mount Gerizim that God had intended as the place for his holy temple, and the mountain to which Abraham took Isaac for sacrifice. The rival claims of Gerizim and Jerusalem as the holy place led to the division between the Samaritans and the Jews. The Samaritans continued to celebrate the Passover by sacrificing lambs on mount Gerizim, a custom which is continued to this day by the small community of less than a thousand which now lives at the foot of the mountain. But their Torah, their sacred scripture, consists only of the five books of Moses, the portion of the Hebrew scripture leading up to the separation from the Jews.

¹ Wren, *Parentalia* (1750), p. 351.

² MS R.15.56, available at <https://mss-cat.trin.cam.ac.uk/Manuscript/R.15.56>.

The Samaritan text of these five books holds a particular fascination to any student of the Old Testament. There are several thousand differences in meaning from the standard Masoretic text of the Hebrew Pentateuch. The first time these came to be studied in modern times was in the 1620s, after a complete Samaritan text was brought to Paris and edited as part of the Paris Polyglot Bible printed in 1631 by Jean Morin. Closer study of these differences revealed many cases where the Greek translators of the Septuagint had used phrases closer in meaning to the Samaritan (Aramaic) text than to the standard (Jewish) Hebrew text. In other words, there seemed to be an implication that the newly discovered Samaritan text bore vestiges of a more ancient textual tradition, familiar to the Greek translators of the third century BC, than was found in any surviving Hebrew manuscripts. Such a discovery caused a fundamental problem to any translator hoping to establish a particular reading – should one follow the reading found in a large number of Hebrew manuscripts surviving from over several centuries, or use the evidence of this single known Samaritan witness when it concurred with the different reading of the Greek Septuagint? The King James Version was printed, ‘newly translated out of the original tongues’, only a few years before the Samaritan manuscript first came to light, but its fidelity to the earliest texts was already being called into question through these new discoveries. One of the main purposes of the Authorized Version had been to replace the Septuagint, but now there seemed to be a new reason for considering some readings in the Septuagint in a new light. It is tempting to wonder whether the Wren carving can be seen as a nod to this revised opinion of the old translation for Ptolemy of Alexandria.

In the seventeenth century such problems were raised but never resolved, and it has since transpired that the Samaritan manuscript used for these analyses was a late and corrupted text, so it is probably just as well that not too many conclusions were drawn from it. Scholarship could not proceed without further surviving evidence, and it took a while for any further manuscripts to become known in the West. The Samaritan people had been living in exile for many years, but by the seventeenth century the Ottoman rulers had allowed a small community to return to Nablus, in the West Bank, where the Samaritan men were allowed to hold substantive clerical roles in the local administration, and to worship under their High Priest. However, it was not until 1832 that they were permitted to resume their Passover sacrifice on mount Gerizim.

The story of our manuscript takes us to the mid-nineteenth century. In succeeding years the Ottomans removed the right of these clerical positions, and the Samaritan community was placed in peril once again. The son of the High Priest, Jacob esh-Shelaby, sought other sources of income, perhaps in a fit of desperation but there was also a clear entrepreneurial streak in his methods. In the 1850s he travelled to London to give a series of lectures, spreading news of the plight of his people and raising financial and political support. This was the time at which tours of the Holy Land were first being developed, and several travel memoirs of the mid-Victorian period record visits to Nablus where esh-Shelaby would show some of the ancient Scriptures of his people, in return for pieces of silver, and sometimes would sell fragments of old manuscripts from the Genizah – in fact, we have some other collections of Samaritan fragments in the Wren Library which were tourist souvenirs from exactly such trips. As with the Jews, the Samaritans were not allowed to destroy any sacred texts, but there was no scriptural mandate to prevent them from selling their older manuscripts once they had ceased to be usable in worship. esh-Shelaby recognised the market for these, and in the 1860s he sold a large quantity of Samaritan manuscripts to Abraham Firkovich, a Ukrainian rabbi whose massive library of Hebrew texts is now in St Petersburg. Around the same time it seems that he brought further manuscripts on one of his later trips to London,

and sold our thirty pages to Joseph Barber Lightfoot, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity and Fellow of Trinity. Other pages dismembered from the same manuscript ended up in other hands, and this book is now spread between London, Cambridge, St Petersburg, Turin, and perhaps elsewhere too.

Professor Lightfoot was one of the great triumvirate of Victorian theologians at Trinity: Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort are sometimes credited with the intellectual salvation of the Church, and Lightfoot in particular was widely seen as the greatest English-language commentator of all time on New Testament texts. A volume of tributes published by his disciples after his death portrays an almost saintly man of great learning but also great compassion, who took his duties as a College Tutor at least as seriously as his biblical studies. Lightfoot never wrote directly about this particular Samaritan manuscript, instead passing it to my learned predecessor as Librarian, William Aldis Wright, who published some preliminary findings on it in 1870. But it remains intriguing to wonder whether the particular readings of passages of Leviticus which we find in it can shed light on our interpretation of their Hebrew counterparts. The quest for the original text of the Old Testament is a somewhat more nuanced campaign today than it was in Victorian England, and we have the advantage (or new complexity) of the Dead Sea Scrolls to re-set the questions we might pose, but the place of these Samaritan fragments in a house of knowledge remains thankfully secured.

The Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, who featured in today's second reading, may allow us some concluding thoughts on this complicated nexus of textual criticism and historical scholarship. 'The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans', we hear her tell Christ – and it was a natural assumption of the editors of the Old Testament that they could rely solely on the Jewish scriptures when establishing the best readings for new editions of Scripture, without having recourse to the Samaritans. But in his simple request to the Samaritan woman, 'Give me to drink', Jesus breaks down that presumed division. The Wren Library is a fitting monument to the thirst for knowledge. 'Architecture aims at eternity', Wren told us; but monuments rise and fall, and it is only if a library retains its function of allowing and encouraging new approaches and new questions to be asked of its holdings that it can remain refreshed and useful. Our little Samaritan fragment poses many more questions. It tells stories of displacement, neglect and desperation in its journey from Palestine to Cambridge, and it arrived here with a plan, never fulfilled, of clarifying possible understandings of the very earliest state of the earliest books of the Bible. It was extensively corrected and amended sometime after the words were first committed to parchment, but the reasons for this have yet to be explored. Many of its secrets have yet to reveal themselves: the cup of knowledge may in due course provide water to quench any thirst. May that water be in the Father's hands a well of water springing up into everlasting life.