**Codex Sassoon – Frequently Asked Questions**

1. **What is Codex Sassoon?**

Codex Sassoon contains all 24 books of the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*), written on parchment by a single scribe, and bound together as a codex – that is, like a modern book. Unlike in a traditional Torah scroll, Codex Sassoon contains vocalization, punctuation, and cantillation marks. Additionally, in the margins and between the columns of text are notes on the tradition of how to write and read the text, known as **Masoretic notes**. Codex Sassoon was used for study and for ensuring precision of the text and tradition, not for ritual reading.

1. **What is in Codex Sassoon?**

Codex Sassoon consists of 792 pages. Over the years, the manuscript underwent several alterations that left their mark. Some of its pages were lost, others were damaged, and it was repeatedly repaired and restored. Today the codex contains about 92% of the text of the *Tanakh*.It is bound in a modern leather binding (from 1929) and weighs about 12 kilograms (26 pounds). The page numbers were added in the 20th century.

Codex Sassoon begins with chapter 11 of Genesis and concludes with Ezra and Nehemiah, as the order of books in *Ketuvim* (“Writings”; the third section of *Tanakh*) differs from that of the printed *Tanakh*. The manuscript is missing the first ten pages, containing the first ten chapters of Genesis, as well as verses that appear in the outer margins of pages at the beginning and end of the manuscript (from the books of Genesis, Psalms, Proverbs, the Five Scrolls, Ezra, and Nehemiah), as these wore out over time. These margins were restored in the 20th century using modern paper, which differs in appearance from the original parchment.

1. **Who wrote the codex? (Where? How many people? How do we know?)**

We do not know who produced Codex Sassoon, as no personal texts survive in the manuscript. We do know that the codex, in its present state, was produced by several people: a **scribe** who copied the entire *Tanakh* text (the handwriting is uniform throughout the codex); someone who provided the **vocalization and cantillation marks** on the text (perhaps the scribe, and perhaps the earlier Masorete); **an earlier Masorete**, who wrote Masoretic notes between the columns of the Biblical text and on the lower margins of the page (and who may have also added the vocalization marks); **the later Masorete**, who deleted the earlier Masorete’s notes to extensive sections of the codex and replaced them with his own notes between the columns of Biblical text and in the upper and lower margins. It is known that this later Masorete saw the Aleppo Codex. The two Masoretes can be distinguished by ink color, handwriting, and even by the nature of their notes.

1. **The dating of the codex**

The codex is dated to the **beginning of the 10th century CE** based on material examination of the parchment (carbon-14 testing) and analyzing features of the script (paleography). It emerges from the examination of the Masoretic notes, dedicatory inscriptions in the codex, and various repairs made to the parchment by the end of the 14th century (according to the carbon-14 dating of the parchment added to the lower margins) that the codex was produced in the area of Eretz Yisrael/Syria and kept there for several centuries after its completion.

Codex Sassoon then disappeared without a trace for several centuries. Over the past century, it was privately owned and was therefore known mainly to Bible scholars and lovers of arcane knowledge. In 2023, it returned to Eretz Yisrael and was entrusted to ANU – The Museum of the Jewish People to safeguard it for the public.

1. **Ownership of the codex**

Just as we do not know who produced Codex Sassoon, we also do not know who commissioned its writing. We know of other manuscripts – containing the entire *Tanakh* or part of it – that existed in Syria, Egypt, and Eretz Yisrael.

**Nevertheless, we know about various owners of the manuscript in different eras.**

**In the Middle Ages:** The codex accrued dedications and ownership inscriptions, allowing us to trace two main chains of ownership. One inscription documents the purchase of the codex by Yitzhak ben Yehezkel al-Attar, who later added another inscription in which he entrusts the codex to his sons, Yehezkel and Maimon. He declares that the book is ‘sacred unto God’ – that is, a public trust – forbids its sale, and curses whoever dares sell or steal the book.

Another inscription, split across two pages, records the dedication of the codex to the synagogue in Makisin, identified with the modern-day Markada, in northeast Syria. It forbids the sale of the codex and threatens anyone who does so with a curse. An inscription on the last page attests to the tragic fate of the community and the destruction of its synagogue. The codex, states the inscription, was entrusted to Salama ibn Abi al-Fakhr on condition that he returns it to the synagogue after it is rebuilt. This inscription was evidently added in the late 14th century, perhaps later. The owners and whereabouts of Codex Sassoon from then until the early 20th century remain unknown.

**In the 20th century:** David Sassoon, a London-based scion of a Baghdadi family of merchants and bankers that spanned the globe, and a scholar and collector of Hebrew manuscripts, received an offer in 1929 to acquire a *Tanakh* manuscript that was touted as one of the oldest in existence. It was the manuscript before you, which was ultimately called by Sassoon’s name. It was purchased for 350 pounds sterling, rebound, and given the shelf mark 1053, which remains imprinted on its spine.

During the 1970s, Sassoon’s descendants sold part of his collection, and in 1978, the British Rail Pension Fund bought Codex Sassoon as part of its strategy of investment in artistic and cultural assets. The codex was deposited at the British Library in London, where, in late 1982, it was publicly displayed for the first and last time.

In 1989, Codex Sassoon was sold once again, achieving what was then the highest price ever for a Hebrew manuscript and the second highest price for any manuscript. It became part of the collection of Ya’akov (Jacqui) Safra of Geneva, Switzerland, a businessman from a banking family that originated in Aleppo, Syria.

In 2023, the codex was acquired byAlfred H. Moses and donated to the collection of ANU – The Museum of the Jewish People, to safeguard it for the entire Jewish people.

1. **Who is the donor?**

Ambassador Alfred Moses is an old and trusted friend of ANU – The Museum of the Jewish People, a member of its board of directors, and the chairman of its international honorary board. Moses is also a major donor to ANU; the Foundations Level and the synagogue gallery are named for him and his family. He recently purchased Codex Sassoon for $38.1 million to donate it to the museum’s collection.

1. **Why was Codex Sassoon donated to ANU – The Museum of the Jewish People?**

For over a thousand years, Codex Sassoon drifted from community to community, place to place. Its fate was tied to the fates of those who produced it, shaped it, and possessed it. It tells a story of tradition and creativity; of migration and displacement; of disappearance and rediscovery – like the story of the Jewish people itself. ANU, the largest and most comprehensive Jewish museum in the world, tells the whole story of the Jewish people, from its formation until today. Nowhere is better suited to safeguard this unique manuscript.

On a technical level, the codex was displayed at ANU in March 2023, as part of Sotheby’s public relations campaign leading up to its public auction. For the past century, Codex Sassoon has been in private hands, and it was publicly exhibited only once, for a few months in 1982. Consequently, it was unfamiliar to the broader public. After its display at ANU, efforts were made to keep the codex in Israel and enable its return to the museum. To our delight, these efforts succeeded: the codex was purchased at auction and donated to the museum’s collection.

1. **Why is it open to this specific page?**

To preserve the codex, we cannot permanently display it open to the same pages. Its pages must be turned every three months, so every three months different pages will be displayed to the public. The first pages that will be displayed to visitors will include broadly familiar texts, like the Ten Commandments, *Shema Yisrael* (“Hear, O Israel”), and famous songs (the Song of the Sea, the Song of Deborah). Later, other *Tanakh* texts will be displayed.

1. **The inscriptions in the codex state, “not for sale” – so why was it sold?**

The expression “not for sale” – along with admonitions against selling it or profiting from it – appears in the dedicatory inscriptions written in the codex, alongside declarations that the codex is ‘sacred unto God,’ meaning that it is not private property. The codex’s chain of ownership over the past centuries is unknown, and evidently the last owners did not consider this admonition binding. Now that Codex Sassoon has been donated to the museum, it is once again considered public property, and it is forbidden by law to resell it.

For special requests, contact the curator, Irit Shapira-Mayer – irit@anumuseum.org.il