

Sisters of Semitics: A Fresh Appreciation  
of the Scholarship of Agnes Smith Lewis and  
Margaret Dunlop Gibson  
Rebecca J. W. Jefferson

“There is nothing that does not leave its mark” —M. D. Gibson

**A**GNES SMITH LEWIS and Margaret Dunlop Gibson were twin sisters who excelled in Semitic studies, particularly Syriac and Arabic, producing more than forty published works (articles and monographs), of which nineteen were critical editions of important Christian texts based on early medieval manuscript witnesses. The manuscripts, including one of the earliest known versions of the Gospels (dated to the late fourth or early fifth century CE),<sup>1</sup> were mostly discovered by the twins themselves and many were in the difficult-to-read palimpsest form.<sup>2</sup> Their scholarly work, first conducted when they were in their fifties and at a time when women were not admitted to British universities, was greatly acclaimed. In addition to being among the first women to receive honorary doctorates (including Doctors of Divinity from Heidelberg, Doctors of Law from St. Andrews, a PhD from Halle and a Doctor of Letters from Dublin), the twins were finally awarded the prestigious Triennial Gold Medal for their “special eminence in Oriental research” by the Royal Asiatic Society.<sup>3</sup>

The recent publication of a new biography of the twins, together with the re-release of eight of their critical works by Gorgias Press, indicates that the time is ripe for a re-assessment and appreciation of the twins’ scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Although they are often mentioned in academic writings where their work is relevant, their scholarly work has been somewhat neglected. After their deaths in the 1920s, their contribution to scholarship was recalled by just a handful of Semitic scholars, and only recently has there been an academic article dealing solely with some of their

scholarly work.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, a number of inaccurate statements have been made with regard to them in biographical accounts and other recollections. For example, student members of Westminster College (the theological college which they founded in Cambridge) only knew them as the “Giblews” and as a good source of “simply wizard” stories.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the entertaining life-story provided by the twins’ daring travels was sometimes repeated to the detriment of their scholarship. The first biography of the sisters tended to treat the twins as though they were characters in a novel. Whigham Price wrote the book after many years of research, which he termed his “love affair” with the two women.<sup>7</sup> His book is full of warm affection and admiration for his subjects, and brings the details of their lives and activities to a wider audience. Yet, Whigham Price also managed through a number of errors and omissions to do his subjects a disservice. Worse still, the book’s preface by Eric Newby gives a negative impression of them that (even if true) has unfortunately become common currency. Newby presents a picture of these two highly intelligent women as both “lucky” and “odd”: “women eccentric even by Victorian standards,” “totally unglamorous, frumpish to a degree,” whose father’s “death gave them independence and a very considerable fortune,” and who might even have engaged in nefarious activities (“two husbands later, both of them [...] dying within four years of marrying the sisters [I call this jolly sinister[...]]).”<sup>8</sup> Even the recent entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* by a well-respected scholar cannot seem to resist including a description of the sisters as expensively dressed frumps.<sup>9</sup>

Eric Newby ends his preface: “to discover what the twins themselves discovered[...] being used as dishes for great chunks of butter[...] you will have to read the book.”<sup>10</sup> Here he repeats a major error in Whigham Price’s book, and does a great injustice to a brilliant woman (Agnes Smith Lewis) by suggesting that her momentous manuscript find of an early copy of the Syriac Gospels was “served up” to her on a plate by ignorant monks.<sup>11</sup> This downplays her crucial ability to communicate with the monks in Greek (thus gaining access to manuscripts unseen by previous visitors) and her capability of spotting the hidden Syriac script that the manuscripts contained; it also insults the monks and the protection they had afforded to priceless manuscripts over hundreds

of years. Whigham Price devoted a whole chapter to “The Case of the Remarkable Butterdish,” even though he admitted in a later chapter that this part of the story had been reconstructed through hearsay.<sup>12</sup> The legend would have been particularly galling to Agnes who not only fought hard to establish the true facts of the discovery, but also repeatedly defended the monks against accusations of wanton neglect.<sup>13</sup>

Regrettably, until recently, the butter-dish story was accepted as fact. Even the introduction to the 1999 re-issue of the twins’ travelogues *How the Codex was Found* and *In the Shadow of Sinai* refers the reader back to Whigham Price’s “true story” of the discovery.<sup>14</sup> This same introduction also repeats the fallacy (first made by the twins’ contemporaries) that the sisters made the discovery of the copy of the Gospels together. In spite of the close collaboration of the sisters on all of their projects and despite Margaret’s own prodigious talents, it was Agnes alone who discovered the manuscript. The sisters strove to correct this error, but it has now become commonplace.<sup>15</sup> Another injustice reflected in the 1999 introduction is the tendency to regard this famous copy of the Syriac Gospels as the only discovery of note made by the sisters. Yet both catalogued and published many important previously-lost texts from the early days of Christianity, as well as assembled a valuable collection of medieval Hebrew manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah.

Happily, Soskice’s new biography of the twins establishes beyond doubt the many great talents of these extraordinary women by finally restoring full credit to each sister for her own work and discoveries.<sup>16</sup> The present article will focus on several additional aspects of their scholarly output and its reception, as well as provide (for the first time) a comprehensive bibliography of their publications. The intellectual development of each sister will be considered separately; even though they collaborated on every publication (usually through proofreading and constructive criticism), they have for too long been considered as one entity instead of as closely related individuals. It is hoped that this summary article will provide a stimulus to a scholar of Semitics to address their work in greater depth.

Margaret and Agnes, the twin daughters of John and Margaret (*née* Dunlop) Smith, were born into the devout Presbyterian community of Irvine, Ayrshire in 1843. Their mother died three weeks after their

birth, leaving them to be raised by their father. Thanks to a fortune inherited from a distant relative whose affairs he managed, their father was able to send the sisters to exclusive boarding schools. The twins also accompanied him on numerous trips abroad, as special vacations promised to them on the condition that they learned the language of their country of destination. As a result, the twins became fluent in French, German, Spanish, and Italian at a young age.<sup>17</sup> Their father died when they were twenty-three, leaving them a large inheritance. Being strong characters the twins were not inclined to indulge in a long bout of unproductive mourning; instead they hatched a plan to tour Europe and the Middle East, a fitting tribute to a parent who had inspired them with a love of travel. Their competency in speaking foreign languages ensured that the twins were able to see and do things not normally the preserve of unmarried British women. Agnes fictionalized their unusual adventures in her first book (*Eastern Pilgrims*). Upon their return they were at a crossroads: in spite of being well-educated and competent in many languages, they were (at twenty-eight) too old for the British universities that were only beginning to open their doors to women.<sup>18</sup> Agnes therefore produced three more novels, in the last of which she began to show her true inclinations by including a detailed history of a twelfth-century Irish church with an appendix of Latin sources.<sup>19</sup> The twins also spent their time learning Greek, visiting Greece in 1878.

In 1880, after thirteen years of courtship, Margaret finally married James Young Gibson, a translator of Spanish literature; she would later edit and publish posthumously some of his translations.<sup>20</sup> Agnes moved in with the newlyweds and continued writing.<sup>21</sup> Four years later, Gibson died unexpectedly of tuberculosis. In order to raise her grief-stricken sister's spirits, Agnes suggested a tour of Cambridge.<sup>22</sup> That same day, they made the acquaintance of the man who would become Agnes's future husband: the Librarian of Corpus Christi College, antiquarian and collector, the Reverend Samuel Savage Lewis. A close friendship, based on a true meeting of minds, quickly deepened, and they were married in 1888. Agnes would later write a book about the life of her "dear husband" in order to "retain and reproduce [...] some of the impressions made on a very wide circle by a character which is by no means a common one."<sup>23</sup> Margaret joined the couple in Cambridge, and the

three lived together in a close-knit, academic area. Two years later, the workaholic Lewis collapsed and died from heart failure.

Lewis's unexpected death affected Agnes badly for she had lost both her husband and the access to the academic world that she had enjoyed through him.<sup>24</sup> This time it was Margaret's turn to coax Agnes out of her sorrow by planning another cathartic trip. The twins decided to visit St. Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai, a destination that had long called to Agnes given its identification as the location where Moses saw the burning bush (a symbol of the Presbyterian Church). Margaret's late husband had also visited Sinai before their marriage; his descriptions of the desert scenery, wrote Agnes, were "for ever haunting my memory."<sup>25</sup>

During their first few years in Cambridge, the twins had begun to study Hebrew and Arabic. Agnes was so interested in a recently published edition of the lost *Apology of Aristides* (a manuscript discovered in St. Catherine's monastery in 1889 by the biblical scholar and palaeographer James Rendel Harris), that she became determined to learn its language, a dialect of Aramaic known as Syriac. A young scholar, the Reverend Robert Kennett (later the Regius Professor of Hebrew), gave her private lessons in this early Christian language after his morning classes, and another young scholar, Francis Crawford Burkitt (later to become the world's leading Syriac scholar) taught her how to write the Estrangelo script.<sup>26</sup> After a chance meeting with his wife, Agnes was also introduced to James Rendel Harris, who encouraged the sisters to believe that important manuscripts still remained to be found at Sinai and confided to them the secret of a dark closet in the monastery with chests of Syriac manuscripts that he had not had time to examine.<sup>27</sup> In the hope that the twins would get the chance to see the manuscripts, he taught them how to use a camera.

The twins' incredible journey to Mount Sinai at the age of 49 in January 1892 is described in detail in *How the Codex was Found*, a narrative compiled by Margaret based on Agnes's journals.<sup>28</sup> Friends in Cambridge had advised the twins that women would not be welcome at St. Catherine's monastery.<sup>29</sup> As for the opportunity to view manuscripts, it was well-known that the monks were less forthcoming after their unfortunate experience with the German scholar Constantin von

Tischendorf, who had taken the monastery's most famous manuscript, the oldest known version of the Gospels (the Codex Sinaiticus), on loan to Russia, where it was kept and later sold to the British government.<sup>30</sup> Luckily, after travelling for nine days in the desert, the sisters received a warm welcome. The monks were bound to treat two women travellers courteously, and these particular women happened to be fluent in Modern Greek, which made communication easy. The twins were also armed with letters of recommendation from the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University and from Rendel Harris. The sisters were greeted by the Prior of the monastery and by the librarian, Father Galaktéon, both of whom, according to Agnes, were "delighted at being able to converse with us in their own tongue, and to read descriptions of their own birthplaces in the Greek edition of my book *Glimpses of Greek Life and Scenery*."<sup>31</sup>

In 1898, Agnes wrote a second narrative account of their trip to the monastery (*In the Shadow of Sinai*), partly as a response to false reports circulating about her manuscript discoveries. According to this account, when asked what they wished to see, Agnes boldly replied: "All your oldest Syriac manuscripts, particularly those which Dr. Harris had not time to examine, for I want to take a report of them to him." Galaktéon, who was predisposed towards friends of Rendel Harris, immediately took her to explore the "dark closet" that she had "so often dreamt about."<sup>32</sup> The second manuscript that she examined in the closet was a 358-page codex (MS no. 30) upon which she spied some faint Syriac script underneath the main text. Agnes was clearly the first person to examine this manuscript in a long time, for it was in a poor state and a steam kettle was needed to separate its leaves. The main text (upper script) was a Greek martyrology of female saints written in the eighth century by John the Recluse of Beth-Mari. However, Agnes's knowledge of Syriac enabled her to spot that every word of the lower script was from the Gospels. Furthermore, she noticed a date in the colophon of the upper text and realized that the lower, hidden script had to be at least several centuries older.<sup>33</sup>

Agnes was convinced that this palimpsest was an important discovery but she would need to have experts in Syriac verify her suspicions and identify the work, and thus she determined to photograph the entire

piece. Yet she met with some resistance from Margaret, who was worried about wasting precious film on a manuscript that might not turn out to be significant, and from Galaktéon who wanted the sisters to focus on a twelfth-century Palestinian Syriac lectionary that he considered a treasure. After a great deal of effort Agnes finally convinced both that the Sinai Palimpsest should get their full attention. The twins returned to Cambridge with a thousand photographic negatives of the manuscripts that would form the basis of their future scholarship, including (among other works) images of the Sinai Palimpsest (MS No. 30), a codex of Arabic Gospels, a codex of Arabic Epistles, a copy of the Fathers of the Desert, a Greek Liturgy of St. Mark, a Syriac Liturgy, and specimen pages of the Palestinian Syriac Lectionary.<sup>34</sup>

Back home, Agnes had a further battle to get the Sinai Palimpsest noticed by the experts. It took the sisters six weeks to develop their negatives and to index them. The first photographs that they developed were not sufficiently clear to reveal to others what Agnes had seen with her eyes. Furthermore, some were probably not convinced that a lady traveller lacking in formal academic qualifications would have the skill to find an important manuscript. Repeated invitations to view the photographs were ignored until, in desperation, Agnes resorted to a ruse: she arranged a dinner party to which she invited Burkitt and his wife. At the end of the party, Agnes casually invited Burkitt to look at the photographs that had been left conveniently out on the table.<sup>35</sup> Now, after his initial reluctance, he showed some interest.

Two days later, a note from his wife revealed that Burkitt was “in a state of the highest excitement”<sup>36</sup> for he believed the Sinai Palimpsest to be a complete copy of the Cureton Codex, a manuscript discovered in 1838 by the Archdeacon Tattam in the Monastery of St. Mary Deipara and later deciphered by the Reverend William Cureton. Dated to the fifth century, the Cureton Codex challenged the primacy of the *Peshitta* [simple, common], the standard version of the New Testament in Syriac. Before the discovery of the Cureton Codex, the only other known Syriac version of the Gospels was Tatian’s *Diatessaron* [through the four], a combined narrative of the four Gospels written in the second century CE which itself is only known through quotations and from a medieval Arabic translation discovered in 1888. The *Diatessaron* was eliminated

from the Eastern Church in the fifth century and the separate Gospels made standard. The Cureton Codex was a fifth-century manuscript that preserved a copy of the four separate Gospels which, from its language and contents, appeared to be a version that pre-dated the *Diatessaron*. The version of the Gospels preserved in the Cureton Codex was thus termed “Old Syriac” (analogous to the situation between Old Latin and the Vulgate).

Burkitt had taken some photographs of the Sinai Palimpsest to show Robert Lubbock Bensly (Lord Almoner’s Professor of Arabic at Cambridge), who was producing a critical edition of the Cureton codex. Bensly quickly realized that the palimpsest discovered by Agnes might provide a fuller version of the Old Syriac Gospels and therefore rival the one preserved in the Cureton Codex.<sup>37</sup> Bensly felt that an expedition to St. Catherine’s was vital in order to study the actual manuscript and include a transcription as an appendix to his forthcoming work. Yet Agnes thought that the manuscript deserved to be published in its own right and wrote to Bensly to suggest that he, Rendel Harris, and Burkitt should transcribe it; that Bensly should edit the work; and that she should supply an introduction. Bensly did not reply, but his silence appeared to acknowledge his tacit agreement.<sup>38</sup> Whatever the outcome for the manuscript, the twins were certainly necessary to any planned expedition as their now well-established friendship with the monks would open doors and facilitate access to the manuscript.

The sisters together with Bensly, Burkitt, their wives, and Rendel Harris formed a party which returned to Sinai to read and transcribe the palimpsest. Agnes recounted the trip in her narrative *In the Shadow of Sinai*. The experience was not all positive: disagreements abounded and scholarly resentment was sometimes high. But the transcriptions were completed, not least with the help of Agnes’s recently acquired reagent, hydrosulphide of ammonia (a chemical which temporarily “lifted” the lower text by restoring its color), and her success in gaining the monks’ permission to take the manuscripts outdoors into the light. The party was sworn to secrecy about the find until they could return to Cambridge to announce it together. But a letter from Rendel Harris to a correspondent in Germany went astray, and news of this



major discovery broke without any reference to Bensly and Burkitt.<sup>39</sup> The already rocky friendship now turned sour, and with Bensly's death just a few months after they returned, the project to jointly publish the work was on hold. These circumstances, however, propelled the twins into the world of scholarship.

Even though she still did not know a great deal about its contents, Agnes would not allow the Sinai Palimpsest to become a footnote to the Cureton Codex. To this end, she constantly pushed the reluctant Rendel Harris to produce his transcriptions in an effort to force the issue with Burkitt.<sup>40</sup> In the meantime, she also began to prepare to edit the text herself if necessary by taking further lessons in Syriac and encouraging Margaret to do the same. It is remarkable that, during this same period, the sisters managed to transcribe other works and compile catalogues too. Indeed, Agnes reveals that her edition of the upper text of the palimpsest was transcribed at night making "use of our slender stock of tallow candles" after Bensly, Burkitt, and Harris had finished their daily work on the manuscript.<sup>41</sup> Harris's transcriptions of the Sinai Palimpsest were eventually completed and—after some diplomacy from William Robertson Smith (Adams Professor of Arabic at Cambridge and a good friend of the twins)—Burkitt agreed to cooperate. The published palimpsest was supplied with a weighty introduction by Agnes, some twenty-four pages in length, even though the collaborators had originally agreed to let her write the introduction only if it were brief.<sup>42</sup>

Agnes used the introduction to prove her worth as a serious scholar, providing a detailed description of the manuscript itself, a careful explanation of the complex arrangement of the quires, and a confident discussion about the contents of the upper script. Agnes concluded her introduction by suggesting that the Sinai Palimpsest provided important evidence as to the development of the Gospel texts: "we have now two authorities for a considerable part of the Gospels, and thus for the first time possess evidence as to the nature and range of the variations which existed between different copies of this version."<sup>43</sup> She also produced an English translation of the palimpsest.<sup>44</sup> The question of the palimpsest's significance sparked much debate.<sup>45</sup> Burkitt continued to

regard the Sinai Codex as a copy of the Cureton Codex, while Agnes came to believe that the Sinai Palimpsest reflected an older translation than the Cureton and was a copy of the very first attempt to render the Gospels into Syriac.<sup>46</sup>

Agnes's great passion for defending the significance of the Sinai Palimpsest was to last for the rest of her life, and she would visit the monastery six times to examine the manuscript. On a visit in 1895 she studied the palimpsest again and the next year published new transcriptions, distinguishing them from previous readings by printing them in blue ink.<sup>47</sup> Agnes returned to Sinai to make more transcriptions in 1897 and again in 1902. In 1905, Burkitt published an edition of the Cureton Codex which used the Sinai Palimpsest only as a source of alternative readings. By this time, having received a number of honorary degrees for her work, Agnes felt confident enough to review Burkitt's work and disagree with his conclusions as to the primacy of the Cureton Codex.<sup>48</sup> She repeated Rendel Harris's observation that the Sinai Palimpsest was "rich in omissions" (for example, the famous verse "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" [Luke 23:34] is missing) as an argument in favor of its antiquity, for a text missing certain key verses could not be the descendant of an older text that contained them.<sup>49</sup>

Agnes made the arduous journey to Sinai for the last time in 1906 at the age of 63. The result was her magnum opus, *The Old Syriac Gospels*: a new transcription of the text using variants from the Cureton Codex with corroborations from other manuscripts and a list of quotations by the Syriac Fathers, plus a lengthy introduction, a bibliography of every publication dealing with the Sinai Palimpsest, critical notes, and facsimiles of the manuscripts.<sup>50</sup> Agnes took great satisfaction in correcting Burkitt's earlier work on the palimpsest and, by adding a substantial amount of new material, establishing the Sinai Palimpsest as the superior source to the Cureton Codex. A contemporary review stated: "the text which she is now able to print surpasses in accuracy and fullness by no small margin the text printed by Mr. Burkitt[...]. In fact, her text comes as near as is possible with so difficult an exemplar to the scholar's ideal of purely objective accuracy for such work[...]. Mrs. Lewis has given added proof of her right to a place in the foremost rank of scholarship," and described her labor of love as "carried on with such devotion,

unswerving constancy of purpose, and, withal, such feminine delicacy of painstaking precision.”<sup>51</sup> Agnes’s long held belief in the importance of the Sinai Palimpsest was also articulated in a bold thesis entitled *Light on the Four Gospels* in which she challenged the rule of textual criticism which prefers the *lectio difficilior* (more difficult reading); for her, the Sinai Palimpsest was authentic in its antiquity precisely because it preserved simple readings that made better sense and were more appropriate to the context of early Christianity.<sup>52</sup> As part of her argument Agnes, clearly aware of the growing debate between modern science and religion (particularly with regard to the age and nature of the universe), concluded her treatise with a discussion of how the ideas contained in the Bible might support the evidence provided by the natural sciences, thereby constructing the sort of argument that would later be echoed by proponents of the theory of intelligent design.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to her many years of devotion to the Sinai Palimpsest, Agnes produced other textual editions that received great acclaim, including two that shed light on the dialect now known as Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA).<sup>54</sup> In one case, Agnes rescued the relevant manuscript from a dealer who had separated it into parts in order to maximize his sales.<sup>55</sup> In another notable work, Agnes produced an edition of an Arabic manuscript discovered by the sisters in the same convent where the Cureton Codex was found; the manuscript was an important textual witness of early Arabic translations from a time when Arabic was beginning to replace Coptic (in the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE).<sup>56</sup> Although Agnes was probably the more scholarly and certainly the more forceful of the two sisters, Margaret was more talented as an Arabist.<sup>57</sup> She produced a catalogue of the Arabic manuscripts in St. Catherine’s monastery (628 items) as part of a new academic series, *Studia Sinaitica* (*Sinai Studies*), instituted by the sisters themselves, and an edition of an Arabic version of the Pauline Epistles based on a ninth-century manuscript discovered by Agnes.<sup>58</sup> No less committed to accuracy than her sister, Margaret had taken the opportunity during repeated trips to St. Catherine’s monastery to re-examine the manuscript and fill the gaps in her transcription. Meanwhile, her translations of Syriac and Arabic works were described as “as entrancing as a good story to all those who love the literature of romance and folklore.”<sup>59</sup>

Margaret published a number of other significant texts. One medieval manuscript which she had catalogued at St. Catherine's monastery had stood out from the other Arabic manuscripts in the library as it seemed to be written in an old specimen of Arabic calligraphy similar to Kufic (the type of script found in the earliest copies of the Qu'ran) and was also of considerable interest as it contained an example of early polemics between Christianity and Islam.<sup>60</sup> Her *Apocrypha Arabica* (*Arabic Apocrypha*) made available five medieval texts on subjects important to the development of religious legend, including the story of Cyprian which, according to Margaret, took "a powerful hold of the popular imagination" and was later transformed by Goethe into the "immortal Faust."<sup>61</sup> Elements of her translations were criticized in review, but above all the work was regarded as another important addition to the range of curious and original texts being brought to light by the two sisters.<sup>62</sup> Margaret's first critical edition of a Syriac text inaugurated the new series, *Horae Semiticae* (*Semitic Hours*), founded by the sisters to publish works other than those discovered at Sinai. Her transcription and (first-ever) English translation of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (*Teachings of the Apostles*) was based on a copy of an ancient Syriac manuscript found by Rendel Harris in Mesopotamia which contained a long addition to the previously published version of the text.<sup>63</sup> The *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a third-century Greek text concerning early Church regulations whose original version is now lost, is of great importance for the history of the Church and the history of Jewish-Christian relations, for it may have been composed for Jewish converts.<sup>64</sup>

Three volumes in the *Horae Semiticae* series were dedicated to Margaret's important edition of the *Commentaries* of Isho'dad of Merv.<sup>65</sup> These can be regarded as Margaret's magnum opus for here she displayed the same devotion to accuracy and attention to detail as her sister did in the *Old Syriac Gospels*. Margaret's work on Isho'dad was heralded as a monumental contribution in the field of Patristic studies that brought new attention to an early father of the Eastern Church. Little is known about Isho'dad, but his great importance to the history of Christianity lies in his *Commentaries* which contain quotes from the *Diatessaron*, from the Old Syriac versions of the Gospels, and from the writings of many early Christian authorities. Of Margaret's work, a

contemporary reviewer observed: “by the issue of these three handsome volumes Mrs Gibson has proved that she belongs to the very select band of women who are great scholars. Dr Rendel Harris confesses that he himself shrank from even a small part of the undertaking which she has accomplished.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, in his introduction to the work, Rendel Harris expressed himself “surprised at the courage (I had almost said daring) which she has displayed in attacking a work so extended, and beset by so many internal difficulties.”<sup>67</sup>

In addition to the insufficient notice that has been taken of the twins’ prodigious scholarly legacy (described in the preceding paragraphs), the sisters’ joint role in the discovery and recovery of the Cairo Genizah has been underappreciated. In the spring of 1896, the sisters heard rumors that good manuscript finds were to be made that season in Cairo. In spite of having made plans to spend the winter in England working on the Palestinian Syriac texts, they could not resist the possibility of recovering more important manuscript witnesses to the Bible. So ardent were they to know the truth about the development of the Bible that they considered it a duty to collect such manuscripts and save them from being broken up or destroyed. It was in this spirit that they embarked on another journey eastwards. This time they purchased a number of sacks of Hebrew fragments from dealers in Cairo and in the “Plain of Sharon” (probably Jaffa), among which were to be found some unexpected treasures.

The treasures were soon identified by another scholar in Cambridge, the Reader in Rabbinics, Solomon Schechter. The Schechters were famously hospitable and had a wide circle of friends, often those whose religion or gender placed them outside of main university circles (including the twins who fell into both categories).<sup>68</sup> When Agnes and Margaret began sorting through their sacks of manuscripts, they found pieces written in a form of Hebrew unfamiliar to them and thus resolved to show them to Schechter. No doubt aware of the twins’ reputation for making remarkable finds, Schechter did not waste any time in responding to the invitation and within a short time he had found an early version of the Palestinian Talmud (which he described as “very rare”) and another “interesting” fragment which he asked to take away for further examination. An hour later Schechter had drafted a letter to the sisters

to inform them that: “[...] the fragment I took with me represents a piece of the original Hebrew of Ecclesiasticus. It is the first time that such a thing was discovered.” He swore them to secrecy and requested that they meet the following day to discuss “how to make the matter known.” He quickly followed the letter with a telegram: “Fragment is very important, come to me this afternoon.”<sup>69</sup>

The find was particularly meaningful for Schechter, who had been embroiled in a bitter academic debate about the original version of Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sira). The work (similar to the Book of Proverbs) was composed by Simeon ben Jeshua ben Eleazar (known as Ben Sira) in the second century BCE and afterwards translated into Greek by his grandson. The original work was lost and only the Greek version survived. Schechter had collated and published Hebrew quotations from Ben Sira that were scattered throughout Rabbinic literature to prove his argument that it had been continually transmitted in Hebrew.<sup>70</sup> Other scholars, most famously David G. Margoliouth, dismissed the rabbinic evidence out of hand, arguing that the Greek version was the most authoritative source.<sup>71</sup> Schechter was in no doubt that the medieval Hebrew fragment found by Agnes and Margaret was a copy of the original that had been transmitted through to the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, it was not until the discovery of an ancient version at Masada in 1964 that Schechter was fully vindicated in his claim.<sup>72</sup>

The unique Hebrew manuscript recovered by the twins was to prove even more important, for it led Schechter to embark on an expedition to Egypt to find the rest of the book and, in so doing, to recover a hoard of Hebrew manuscripts (over 200,000) hidden in the Genizah chamber of a synagogue in Old Cairo.<sup>73</sup> These Cairo Genizah manuscripts would help scholars reconstruct the entire history of the Jewish people in the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages and beyond; indeed, the vast significance of the find is still being gradually realized today. Evidence has recently come to light showing that the Bodleian Library in Oxford had purchased large amounts of Genizah material prior to Schechter’s journey to Cairo and then sold to private collectors any of the material the curators regarded as “rubbish.”<sup>74</sup> Further piecemeal dissemination of the collection (and possibly the loss of much of it to scholarship) was prevented by Schechter’s dramatic removal of most of the contents

of the Genizah chamber to Cambridge where it was retained for future scholarship and its full potential finally realized.

Sadly, historians have assigned a passive role to the twins for their part in this momentous find. Whigham Price's biography recalls that the expedition to find manuscripts was made purely at the insistence of a friend (Rendel Harris) and that manuscript hunting itself was of secondary importance to the sisters: "It seemed foolish to go so far merely to haggle with a few dealers, so they used the opportunity to revisit Jerusalem."<sup>75</sup> In fact, Agnes clearly relates that collecting manuscripts was their primary goal: "If we were to go to Egypt, we thought it would be well for us to see the manuscripts at Jerusalem also."<sup>76</sup> Accounts of the discovery often relegate the twins to the role of mere "purchasers" of manuscripts,<sup>77</sup> rather than presenting them as dedicated scholar-collectors who would themselves publish many barely legible palimpsest fragments recovered from the Genizah, and who would do so before ultraviolet light and digital imaging became available.<sup>78</sup> Today, the twins' pioneering work on these difficult manuscripts is being incorporated into a new, online catalogue of Genizah palimpsests by the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit at Cambridge University Library (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: A palimpsest from the Cairo Genizah (Cambridge University Library, T-S 20.158). The upper script is a portion of a Midrash (hitherto unknown) and the lower script is in Syriac from 2 Timothy 22–26 and from Titus 3: 8–12. The palimpsest was published for the first time in Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *Palestinian Syriac Texts from Palimpsest Fragments in the Taylor-Schechter Collection* (London: C. J. Clay, 1900), pp. 62–69. (Image courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.)

The twins were with Schechter in Cairo in January 1897, when they accompanied him to see the Genizah chamber and climbed a ladder to look inside. Prior to their visit, there had only been two accounts of the chamber and its history is therefore something of an enigma. Thus the descriptions offered by Agnes serve as important historical accounts of the Genizah, providing details of its location, height, and the appearance of its contents.<sup>79</sup> Schechter, in his zeal to recover every leaf of the Hebrew Ecclesiasticus, also spent time chasing after leaves sold to dealers in Cairo. Agnes and Margaret helped him in this endeavor too and at the same time purchased “a considerable quantity” for themselves.<sup>80</sup> These manuscripts, combined with their earlier purchases, would later form the Genizah Collection held today at Westminster College, Cambridge. The sisters cleaned the fragments, placed them in subject order, assigned classmarks, and bound them up in books. Regretfully, this collection of 2565 manuscript leaves has not received proper attention, and is in great need of costly preservation work, which Westminster College is unable to undertake. Schechter realized the value of the collection in containing many important biblical and talmudic fragments and so began describing them, but his work was not continued.<sup>81</sup> The collection was not even catalogued until recently, and the circulation of the 2006 catalogue appears to be extremely limited.<sup>82</sup>

Sadly, at the age of 76, Agnes began to lose her mind. Margaret, perhaps weakened by the stress of her sister’s illness, died suddenly at the age of 77 in 1920. Agnes lived on for another six years with moments of lucidity, but she never published again. Yet the twin sisters have more than made their mark on Semitic and Oriental studies, leaving behind them a wealth of publications dealing with texts important to the history of early Christianity and its relations with Islam. They have also bequeathed to the student of medieval Jewish history an important collection of Hebrew and Arabic manuscripts, not the least of which was their medieval copy of the Hebrew Ecclesiasticus (Or. 1102) which now forms one of the priceless treasures of the Genizah Research Unit as well as the Cambridge University Library.<sup>83</sup>

*Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit  
Cambridge University Library*



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*Forty-One Facsimiles of Dated Christian Arabic Manuscripts, with Text and English Translation.* Studia Sinaitica XII. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907.

The twins also composed a great number of letters, notices, short articles, reviews, and responses to reviews, which were published in a wide range of newspapers, magazines, and journals, including *The Athenaeum*, *The Academy*, *The Cambridge Review*, *The Century Magazine*, *The Church Quarterly Review*, *The Expository Times*, *The Presbyterian Churchman*, *The Scotsman*, and *The Times*.<sup>84</sup>

## END NOTES

1. The Syriac Gospels found at Sinai contained one of the earliest translations of the Greek Gospel text, probably from around the early third century CE (although Agnes Smith Lewis always believed that the translation was older than this, possibly as old as the first or second century CE).

2. A colorful definition of a palimpsest is provided by Margaret: “Occasionally, especially in out-of-the-way places like Mount Sinai, vellum also became scarce, but the literary ardour of the brethren was not to be restrained by such a contemptible difficulty, so the existing writing on the already-used vellum was carefully erased and scraped with a knife or pumice-stone; and when this had been done to the scribe’s satisfaction, he proceeded to use it again for his immediate purpose, and to write on it something wholly different, with no regard, or less than no regard, to the probably far more valuable script that lay beneath his pen. There is nothing that does not leave its mark, however, in this serious world of ours, and it is happily possible often to see the traces of the earlier or under-writing on the margins and between the lines of the later or upper-writing. Such a manuscript is called a palimpsest” (Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *In the Shadow of Sinai: Stories of Travel and Biblical Research* [Brighton/Portland, Oregon: Alpha P, 1999], p. 34).

3. *The Times*, Wednesday, June 9, 1915, p. 11.

4. Janet Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai: How Two Lady Adventurers Found the Hidden Gospels* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2009). The reissued works from Gorgias Press are noted on the bibliography above.

5. J. C. O’Neill, “Agnes Smith Lewis as a Textual Critic,” in *From Cambridge to Sinai: The Worlds of Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop*

Gibson, ed. D. Cornick and C. Binfield (London: URC History Society and The United Reformed Church, 2006), pp. 39–64.

6. A. Whigham Price, *The Ladies of Castlebrae* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1985), p. 4.

7. Whigham Price, *The Ladies of Castlebrae* (the quote is taken from Whigham Price's dedication to his wife in the book's front matter). One reviewer called the book "a merry romp" (Paidagogos, "The Giblews," *The Expository Times* 97 [1996]: 256).

8. Eric Newby, "Preface," in Whigham Price, *Ladies of Castlebrae*, pp. v–vii.

9. Christa Müller-Kessler, "Lewis, Agnes Smith (1843–1926)" and "Gibson, Margaret Dunlop (1843–1920)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004; online edition: 2006). Nonetheless, Müller-Kessler also notes that it was their forcefulness that led them to be considered as eccentrics.

10. Newby, "Preface," *Ladies of Castlebrae*, p. vii.

11. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, pp. 293–96.

12. Whigham Price, *Ladies of Castlebrae*, p. 185.

13. For example, in one interview with an English newspaper, Agnes related the story of the discovery and, when asked if the monks appreciated her find, replied: "Yes, indeed. They are most intelligent—not ignorant authorities, as most travellers suppose" (*Birmingham Daily Post*, Birmingham, England, Saturday, April 22, 1893; No. 10870, p. 11).

14. Anthony Grahame, "Introduction," in Lewis and Gibson, *In the Shadow of Sinai*, pp. vi–x.

15. For example, Agnes's obituary ("Mrs Agnes Lewis," *The Times* [29 March, 1926], p. 9) credited both with the find. Margaret had included a note denying having had anything to do with the discovery, not least because she did not know the Syriac language at the time, in Agnes Smith Lewis, "The Evangelion Da-Mepharreshe," *The Expository Times* 16/6 (1905): 249–53.

16. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*.

17. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, p. 10.

18. David Cornick, "Cambridge and Sinai" in *From Cambridge to Sinai*, ed. Cornick and Binfield, pp. 3–24; pp. 3–4.

19. Agnes Smith Lewis, *Effie Maxwell* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1876); Agnes Smith Lewis, *Glenmavis* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1879); Agnes Smith Lewis, *The Brides of Ardmore* (London: Elliot Stock, 1880); Cornick, "Cambridge and Sinai," p. 4.

20. James Young Gibson, *The Cid Ballads, and Other Poems and Translations from Spanish and German*, ed. Margaret Dunlop Gibson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1887).
21. Agnes Smith Lewis, *Glimpses of Greek Life and Scenery* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1884); she also translated a tourist guide into English: Panagiotos G. Kastromenos, *The Monuments of Athens. An Historical and Archaeological Description* (London: E. Stanford, 1884).
22. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, p. 85.
23. Agnes Smith Lewis, *Life of the Rev. Samuel Savage Lewis* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Bowes, 1892), p. 1.
24. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, p. 108.
25. Lewis and Gibson, *In the Shadow of Sinai*, p. 71.
26. Cornick, "Cambridge and Sinai," p. 11.
27. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, p. 111.
28. Margaret Dunlop Gibson, ed., *How the Codex was Found: A Narrative of Two Visits to Sinai from Mrs. Lewis's Journals 1892-1893* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Bowes, 1893).
29. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, pp. 117-18.
30. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, chapters 11-13, pp. 108-23.
31. Lewis and Gibson, *In the Shadow of Sinai*, p. 73.
32. Lewis and Gibson, *In the Shadow of Sinai*, p. 74.
33. Lewis and Gibson, *In the Shadow of Sinai*, pp. 74-75.
34. Lewis and Gibson, *In the Shadow of Sinai*, p. 75.
35. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, p. 149.
36. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, p. 150.
37. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, p. 150.
38. Cornick, "Cambridge and Sinai," pp. 14-15.
39. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, pp. 192-93.
40. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, p. 204.
41. Agnes Smith Lewis, *Select Narratives of Holy Women: From the Syro-Antiochene or Sinai Palimpsest as Written Above the Old Syriac Gospels by John Stylite, of Beth-Mari-Qanūn in A.D. 778*, *Studia Sinaitica IX-X* (London: C. J. Clay, 1900), p. v.
42. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, p. 191.
43. Agnes Smith Lewis, "Introduction," in *The Four Gospels in Syriac Transcribed from the Sinaitic Palimpsest*, ed. R. Bensly, J. Rendel Harris, and F. Crawford Burkitt (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1894), pp. v-xxiv; p. xxiii.
44. Agnes Smith Lewis, *A Translation of the Four Gospels from the Syriac of the Sinaitic Palimpsest* (London: Macmillan, 1894).

45. Agnes Smith Lewis, *The Old Syriac Gospels, or, Evangelion da-Mepharreshê: Being the Text of the Sinai or Syro-Antiochene Palimpsest, Including the Latest Additions and Emendations, with the Variants of the Curetonian Text, Corroborations from many Other MSS, and a List of Quotations from Ancient Authors* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1910), pp. xxxvii–xlvi.

46. Lewis, *The Old Syriac Gospels*, pp. iv–vi.

47. Agnes Smith Lewis, *Some Pages of the Four Gospels, Re-transcribed from the Sinaitic Palimpsest, with a Translation of the Whole Text* (London: C. J. Clay for the Cambridge UP, 1896).

48. Agnes Smith Lewis, “The Evangelion Da-Mepharreshe,” *The Expository Times* 16/6 (1905): 249–53 and 17/8 (1906): 382–83.

49. O’Neill, “Agnes Smith Lewis as a Textual Critic,” p. 43.

50. Agnes Smith Lewis, *The Old Syriac Gospels*.

51. M. Sprengling, “Review of *The Old Syriac Gospels, or Evangelion Da-Mepharreshe* by Agnes Smith Lewis,” *Biblical World* 36/5 (1910): 356–8.

52. Agnes Smith Lewis, *Light on the Four Gospels from the Sinai Palimpsest* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913); O’Neill, “Agnes Smith Lewis as a Textual Critic,” pp. 39–65.

53. For example, she proposed that the astronomer Sir Robert Ball’s view of the earth’s beginnings (the Great Nebular Theory) agreed with 2 Peter 3:10 (Lewis, *Light on the Four Gospels*, p. 225).

54. Agnes Smith Lewis, ed., with critical notes by Eberhard Nestle and a glossary by Margaret D. Gibson, *A Palestinian Syriac Lectionary Studia Sinaitica VI* (London: C. J. Clay for the Cambridge UP, 1897), and Agnes Smith Lewis, ed., *The Forty Martyrs of the Sinai Desert: and the Story of Eulogios; from a Palestinian Syriac and Arabic Palimpsest*, *Horae Semiticae IX* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1912), now revised and updated as Christa Müller-Kessler and Michael Sokoloff, eds., *A Corpus of Christian Palestinian Aramaic, vol. III: The Forty Martyrs of the Sinai Desert, Eulogios, the Stone-Cutter, and Anastasia* (Groningen: Styx, 1996). For the linguistic significance of the text, see W. Taylor Smith, “Review of *Studia Sinaitica, No. VI: A Palestinian Syriac Lectionary* [...] by Agnes Smith Lewis,” *The American Journal of Theology* 2/3 (1898): 661–63.

55. Lewis, *A Palestinian Syriac Lectionary*, pp. v–vi (for the full story of the MS rescue, see Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, pp. 225–26).

56. Agnes Smith Lewis, *Acta Mythologica Apostolorum: Transcribed from an Arabic MS in the Convent of Deyr-es-Suriani, Egypt, and from MSS in the*



*Convent of St. Catherine, on Mount Sinai, with Two Legends from a Vatican MS by Ignazio Guidi, and an Appendix of Syriac Palimpsest Fragments of the Acts of Judas Thomas from Cod. Sin. Syr. 30, Horae Semiticae III* (London: C. J. Clay, 1904).

57. Müller-Kessler, "Gibson, Margaret Dunlop."

58. Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Convent of S. Catherine on Mount Sinai*, *Studia Sinaitica III* (London: C. J. Clay for the Cambridge UP, 1894); Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *An Arabic Version of the Epistles of St. Paul to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians with part of the Epistle to the Ephesians from a Ninth Century MS in the Convent of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai*, *Studia Sinaitica II* (London: C. J. Clay, 1894).

59. R. D. Wilson, "Review of *Studia Sinaitica*, No. V: *Apocrypha Sinaitica*," *American Journal of Theology* 1.2 (1897): 531, concerning Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *Apocrypha Sinaitica*, *Studia Sinaitica V* (London: C. J. Clay, 1896).

60. Gibson, *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles*, p. vii; Richard Gottheil, "Review of *Studia Sinaitica*. No. VII by Margaret Dunlop Gibson," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 18/1 (1901): 53-4; Leila Avrin, *Scribes, Script and Books: The Book Arts from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago/London: American Library Association and The British Library, 1991), pp. 261-82.

61. Margaret Dunlop Gibson, ed. and trans., *Apocrypha Arabica*, *Studia Sinaitica VIII* (London: C. J. Clay, 1901), p. xiv.

62. Duncan B. Macdonald, "Review of *Studia Sinaitica*. No. VIII by Margaret Dunlop Gibson," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 18/1 (October, 1901), pp. 54-55.

63. Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac, Edited from a Mesopotamium Manuscript, with Various Readings and Collations of Other MSS*, *Horae Semiticae I* (London: C. J. Clay, 1903); Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in English, Translated from the Syriac*, *Horae Semiticae II* (London: C. J. Clay, 1903).

64. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "The Didascalia Apostolorum: A Mishnah for the Disciples of Jesus," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9/4 (2001): 483-509.

65. Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *The Commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv, in Syriac and English ... with an introduction by J. Rendel Harris*, 3 vols., *Horae Semiticae V-VII* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1911).

66. Albert Bonus, "Review of *The Commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv* by Margaret Dunlop Gibson," *The Expository Times* 23 (1911): 26.

67. J. Rendel Harris, "Introduction," in Gibson, *The Commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv*, vol. 1, p. xi.
68. Stefan C. Reif, "Giblews, Jews and Genizah views," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 55/2 (2004): 332–46.
69. Lewis and Gibson, *In the Shadow of Sinai*, pp. 155–56.
70. Solomon Schechter, "The Quotations from Ecclesiasticus in Rabbinic Literature," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 3/4 (July 1891): 682–706.
71. Stefan C. Reif, "The Discovery of the Cambridge Genizah Fragments of Ben-Sira: Scholars and Texts," in *The Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research. Proceedings of the First International Ben Sira Conference 28–31 July 1996, Soesterberg, Netherlands*, ed. P. C. Beentjes (Berlin/NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), pp. 1–22.
72. Yigael Yadin, "The Ben Sira Scroll from Masada," *Eretz Israel* 8 (1967): 1–45 [in Hebrew].
73. Rebecca J. W. Jefferson, "A Genizah Secret: The Count d'Hulst and the Letters Revealing the Race to Recover the Lost Leaves of Ecclesiasticus," *Journal of the History of Collections* 21/1 (2009): 125–42.
74. Rebecca J. W. Jefferson, "The Cairo Genizah Unearthed: the Excavations Conducted by the Count d'Hulst on Behalf of the Bodleian Library and their Significance for Genizah History," in *Cambridge Genizah Studies I: Proceedings of the First International Conference on Genizah Studies, Westminster College, Cambridge 2007*, ed. S. Bhayro and B. Outhwaite, *Études sur le Judaïsme médiéval* (Leiden: Brill [forthcoming]).
75. Whigham Price, *The Ladies of Castlebrae*, p. 196.
76. Lewis and Gibson, *In the Shadow of Sinai*, p. 142.
77. Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, p. 232.
78. Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *Palestinian Syriac Texts: from Palimpsest Fragments in the Taylor-Schechter Collection* (London: C. J. Clay, 1900). Facsimiles at the back of the book allow one to see the degree of difficulty involved in deciphering the texts.
79. Lewis and Gibson, *In the Shadow of Sinai*, pp. 160–1; Lewis and Gibson, *Palestinian Syriac Texts*, p. viii.
80. Lewis and Gibson, *In the Shadow of Sinai*, p. 161
81. Solomon Schechter, "The Lewis-Gibson Hebrew Collection," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 9/1 (1896): 115–21.
82. Elazar Hurvitz, *Catalogue of the Cairo Geniza Fragments in the Westminster College Library, Cambridge* (New York: Cairo Genizah Institute, Yeshiva U, 2006) 2 vols. [in Hebrew]. Searches for this publication in

libraries and other institutions, including the Yeshiva University, do not retrieve any results. I am presently aware of only one copy, the complimentary copy sent by the author himself to Westminster College.

83. Stefan C. Reif, "The Genizah Fragments: A Unique Archive" in *Cambridge University Library: The Great Collections*, ed. P. Fox (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), pp. 54–64.

84. Many of these are listed in Lewis, *The Old Syriac Gospels*, pp. xxxvii–xlvi.