

Sample translation of

*The Bible Hunter*

by

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## The Last Byzantines

*The life of desert monks has hardly changed in 1,500 years*

The alarm clock rings at five a.m. and it's still pitch-dark outside. Having made out little of the monastery the evening before, my orientation is fairly poor. In the old days the monastery was completely unlit at nighttime; now, for the past few years, a few lamps faintly illuminate the yard. It's not hard to make out the church, but harder to find your way across winding stairs and lanes to the entrance of the house of worship. I was actually expecting that quite a few monks would stream into the church around six o'clock, when the early mass was scheduled to begin, and was planning to join them rather inconspicuously. Far from it. It's almost six and I'm the only one straying across the yard. The church as well makes a totally deserted impression. Neither the colorful stained glass of the entranceway, which takes you to the narthex – that is to say, the vestibule of the nave – nor the clerestory windows emit any light. Guess I didn't really need to attend the six o'clock mass, I think, and am kind of surprised that, instead of being locked, the entrance opens effortlessly.

I had been to a Greek Orthodox church before, a couple of times in Istanbul, but only on festive occasions like Christmas and Easter. So what I'm seeing now is rather strange to me. Apart from two monks, the church seems utterly empty. The monks are standing at a pair of lecterns, a few meters from the iconostasis. The lecterns, facing each other about five meters apart at the end of the central aisle, both have low-hanging spotlights directly above their rotatable tops. These spotlights, illuminating nothing but the books on the lecterns, are the only electric lights in the church. The remaining light comes from candles stuck in large candelabra or small, colorful hanging lamps suspended from the high ceiling on long cords and which block the view of the iconostasis and the sanctuary behind it. The two monks at their lecterns are the only thing that can be made out clearly. They chant in continuous

alternation, the melody faintly inflected, rippling along, punctuated only by an occasional *Kyrie, eleison* (Lord, have mercy) which marks the boundary between chant and prayer.

This recitative is like a carpet of sound and serves as a backdrop for the entire mass. Everything seems a little unworldly. The diffuse candlelight only intensifies this feeling of unreality. The liturgy follows the Byzantine rite and for the last 1,500 years has virtually remained unchanged. The Sinai monks are Basilians, meaning they follow the rite of Saint Basil, who lived from 329 to 379. The recitative is sung in Ancient Greek, or Koine, and is probably unintelligible for most of those attending the mass. Koine is the common Greek vernacular which developed from various Greek dialects 300 years before Christ, following the Alexandrian conquests, and became the predominant language in the eastern Mediterranean. The New Testament was written in Koine, as was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. With the division of the Roman Empire into East and West, Koine became the official language of the Byzantine Empire. Though we may indeed be critical of Tischendorf's arrogant Western attitude toward the Eastern Church and the monks he encountered there, considering ourselves more open-minded, the fact remains that for someone brought up in the Protestant Church a religious service like this is probably about as foreign as a Lamaist ritual in a Tibetan monastery.

[...]

### **The kafenion**

The most agreeable part of the day begins once the early mass is over. Monks and visitors meet in the café – a room bathed in light, located not far from the church, and modeled after a Greek kafenion. Cushioned benches lining the walls offer a place to sit; little tables are scattered throughout the room, the walls are adorned with pictures of Greek and Russian

monarchs as well as former abbots. Before I know it, they've nudged me into the kafenion and press a hot cup of tea into my hand. Cakes and cookies are served – breakfast is always sweet – along with tea, coffee and water. A relaxed, conversational tone prevails, of which I understood almost nothing, because people are mostly speaking Greek. In the bright light of a desert winter day I can now get a closer look at the majority of the residents of the Sinai monastery. The monks are dressed in black robes and black caps which they only seldom remove. They wear layers of scarves and roughly knit jackets under their robes on account of the cold winter nights. Almost all the monks wear bushy full beards, usually hanging down to their chests. There are currently 22 monks in the monastery, I soon learn. Fourteen of them are gathered in the kafenion this morning, most of them immersed in lively discussions. At first they amiably ignore me. Though eager to offer me tea, coffee and cakes, no one even bothers to ask me who I am and what I want.

I finally muster up the courage to ask a young monk sitting next to me if perhaps the librarian, Father Justin, is present. The man points to a large figure sitting across from me: “That’s Father Justin,” he says in English. I had noticed in the church this tall, lean man with the longest beard in the monastery. He was one of the two antiphonal singers who accompanied the mass for hours from their lecterns. Father Justin is more or less the way you’d imagine a monk in the desert: an earnest, pale face with ascetic, almost ethereal features. His habit, I presume, conceals little more than skin and bones. Overjoyed at finding the man I had come here to see in the first place and for whose sake I made this spur-of-the-moment trip to Sinai, I approach him and introduce myself, thanking him for the invitation. The monk is friendly but keeps his distance.

The monk sitting next to him, one of the few who eyed me curiously before, joins in the conversation when he hears we’re talking about Tischendorf and that I’m interested in the monks’ opinions of German travelers in the Orient. “Tischendorf was one of those smug Westerners who think we don’t understand our own Holy Scriptures,” he says, but before he

can really get going, Justin cuts him off. The Bishop, he says rather disapprovingly, has reserved the right to explain to me in person the monastery's attitude toward Tischendorf, so the others, for the time being, should keep their opinions to themselves. The comment suffices for a kind of invisible wall to go up around me once again, a wall which would seldom be breached in the coming days. A German journalist in the footsteps of Constantin Tischendorf is obviously a thorny issue. At ten o'clock, Father Justin suggests, we should meet at the Bishop's to discuss the rest. He points out the window at a building two houses down. That's where the Bishop resides. For now I'm dismissed. Father Justin retires, and the other monks too leave the kafenion one by one. I have some time until ten, which finally gives me the opportunity to have a look around the monastery.

[...]

## The Find

### *The secret from the raffia basket*

In May 1844, Constantin Tischendorf was a guest for eight days at St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai. The prior of the monastery had placed a young man at his side as a companion who, apart from Greek, spoke Italian and French and spared Tischendorf the embarrassment of communicating with the monks in his broken Greek. The young man made a good impression at first but turned out to be somewhat mentally deranged, which explains why the monks treated him like a gofer. He led Tischendorf through every corner of the desert fortress and zealously showed him the ancient chapels – 22 little chapels alone can be found in the narrow confines of the cloister – as well as the famed basilica. Relations to the monks themselves would remain tense throughout his stay. True, the brothers were friendly enough to offer him a glass of wine when Tischendorf, on his way back down from Mount Moses one day, ran into almost the entire congregation at a Pentecost celebration in a grotto. But they never really warmed up to him. He felt their watchful eyes upon him up until the very end, and was convinced that, rather than initiating him into their secrets, the monks were trying to hide their treasures from him. A veritable scandal ensued regarding a supposedly precious Gospel book. Tischendorf had learned of its existence but repeatedly encountered ever new excuses that effectively kept him from seeing it. One day it couldn't be located, on another the Father Superior was using it, then finally, all of a sudden, it was allegedly no longer there, but in Cairo. Tischendorf was livid, if not to say downright abusive. Lies, all of it, he accused the Superior, certain of the latter's craftiness ever since their first encounter. The man, he learned, was a native of Crete, and Tischendorf gloatingly noted in his memoirs that even St. Paul on his missionary travels had come to the conclusion that "*All Cretans are liars.*"

The big exception for Tischendorf was the librarian Kyrillos. This 40 to 50-year-old monk originally came from the great monastic community of Holy Mount Athos in northern

Greece and had been, so Tischendorf believed, banished to Sinai. Kyrillos was the only monk who could read Ancient Greek. An endearing intellectual, he endeavored to acquaint Tischendorf with the treasures of the monastery library, and even allowed him to take interesting manuscripts back to this room with him, where he could study them at his leisure. Kyrillos was in the process of cataloging the library when Tischendorf arrived at the monastery. Apart from printed works, there were several hundred hand-written manuscripts in Ancient Greek, Arab and Russian, of which *“some of the Syrian and Arab ones are quite old and deserve to be examined more closely,”* Tischendorf noted. *“Besides which, however,”* he reported to his brother, *“it is painful to see how ancient and precious uncial manuscripts are sometimes lying about in loose sheets, sometimes being used as bindings, and thereby given up to destruction through the ignorance and carelessness of the cloister dwellers.”*<sup>1</sup>

It was just before departing that Tischendorf, amidst the very chaos he found so deplorable, made a discovery that would change his life forever and turn this manuscript expert, whom only a few specialists in his field had ever heard of, into a celebrity just as revered as the archeological excavator of Troy, Heinrich Schliemann, or the early twentieth-century discoverer of the tomb of Tutankhamun, Howard Carter. By Tischendorf’s own account, he was hanging around the library talking to Kyrillos when he started rummaging through a basket containing old sheets of parchment which Kyrillos, not knowing which manuscripts they belonged to, had discarded. Searching through the basket, Tischendorf was struck by the capital letters on a large parchment sheet. He immediately recognized the four neatly written columns of ancient uncial script as passages from the Old Testament. Feverishly he continued burrowing, and ever more of these fabulous pages came to light. The ecstatic philologist found 43 sheets lying directly on top of each other, and by the time he had reached the bottom of the basket and sorted through the last remaining shreds had amassed a total of 129 sheets, each with four columns of uncial handwriting and all of them belonging to a Greek manuscript of the Old Testament. Tischendorf had spent the previous years scouring

European libraries for old Bible manuscripts and could tell with one glance what was old and what just seemed to be. And these parchments, he determined with growing excitement, were really old. The writing alone indicated that it had to be a manuscript from the fourth century. Only once before had Tischendorf seen another manuscript from this early era of the book, and that was the Codex Vaticanus, which was guarded like gold by the Pope in Rome.

Naturally Tischendorf was inclined to make off with all of it, but his excitement gave him away. Apparently even good-natured Kyrillos was becoming suspicious. He only allowed the jittery German to take the first stack of 43 pages back to his room. More careful inspection revealed with certainty that he had truly stumbled upon an archeological gold mine. These parchments were some of the oldest Bible manuscripts he had ever laid eyes on. To his mind, there was only one option: he had to have these parchments.

The discovery of these 129 pages marks the beginning of the as yet unsettled dispute over the legitimate ownership of the Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest surviving Bible manuscript in the world. Tischendorf was extremely secretive at first about his colossal find. He succeeded in taking back to Europe the 43 pages he had extracted from the basket and was able to study more closely. He copied the pages, had letters cast and, together with a commentary, had it printed in 1846 on behalf of the King of Saxony, Frederick Augustus II. He called it the Codex Friderico Augustanus, and carefully avoided any reference to where his sensational find came from. Tischendorf hoped for more, and feared tipping off potential rivals to the place of his discovery.

Not until 1871, three years before his untimely death, did he describe in his book *The Sinai Bible – Its Discovery, Publication and Acquisition* his version of having found it:

*In the room referred to as the library, printed and handwritten books were set up on shelves all along the walls. I looked through each of them. In the middle of the library, however, was a large basket with the remnants of damaged manuscripts. When I began*

*to inspect these things as well, Kyrillos, the librarian, said the contents of the basket had twice been tossed into the flames. This was the third batch, so to say, and seemed destined to share the same fate. How surprised I was, then, when I pulled out a number of large-sized parchment leaves written in Greek and whose paleographic features seemed to indicate they were ancient. I had not only seen the oldest Greek manuscripts in the possession of European libraries, I had studied them as well for the purpose of a new Greek paleography, and in some cases, including the Vatican Bible, had facsimiled them with my own hand. [Tischendorf is mistaken here. At the time he made his first discovery he had only briefly seen the Codex Vaticanus, J. G.] No eye was therefore more familiar with old Greek forms of writing. But I had never seen anything that could be taken for older than the Sinaitic sheets. Their contents turned out to be Old Testament, historical and prophetic books; the number of leaves 129. Having identified the contents of the basket, they let me have, upon my request, the smaller part of the sheets, 43 sheets loosely stacked together. When I later tried to gain possession of the rest, difficulties arose on the part of the Superior, though he betrayed no knowledge of the matter. I recorded the exact contents of the remaining 86 sheets; they comprised the books of Tobit and Judith, the first and fourth books of the Maccabees, the prophet Isaiah with six sheets of Jeremiah, as well as nine minor prophets. I also made a verbatim copy of an entire page with the three last columns of Isaiah and the first of Jeremiah. Kyrill the librarian, however, who had overwhelmed me with his kind gestures during the course of my stay, I most urgently enjoined to take religious care of these precious sheets. To which I added: and anything of the like they might happen to chance upon. For the remnants of an old binding on the sheets that stayed there revealed quite clearly that there had once been an extensive Bible manuscript here. At the same time I openly expressed to Kyrill my intention of making another trip to Sinai.*

*I likewise indicated that I would endeavor to interest the imperial Russian government in my plans.*<sup>2</sup>

There are two key scenes in this description. First of all, Tischendorf claims that the contents of the basket from which he fished out the oldest known pages of the Bible were actually supposed to land on the fire. This would mean he saved this irreplaceable treasure from destruction. From this we reach a second conclusion: by identifying the contents of the basket, they let him have the smaller part of the find upon his request. Both of these points have been vigorously contested by the monks of the Sinai monastery for decades. When Father Justin shows me his library 165 years later, in January 2009, he demonstrates to me how they used to store parchment manuscripts in the monastery. It was entirely common to keep parchment leaves in baskets like the one Tischendorf ran across, not only in the Orient but in Europe as well. “There’s a picture in the Vatican where you can see the Pope being handed an old manuscript from a basket,” Father Justin explains. For centuries, parchment leaves were stored in such baskets. This would mean that the basket Tischendorf found was by no means a wastepaper basket, but the normal storage place for old parchment manuscripts. According to Father Justin’s investigations, the last original parchment basket from the Sinai monastery was taken back to London by a female visitor in the late nineteenth century. More importantly, it is ridiculous to claim that the parchments would have been burned. Parchment, it is well known, is thinly scraped leather, and leather burns poorly. Parchment, moreover, was a very valuable material. Unlike papyrus, which was used for writing before parchment, parchment is extremely durable, and for that reason, as Tischendorf himself knew from experience, was not destroyed but reused. If an old text was unusable, it was scraped off and the parchment reinscribed. This is called a palimpsest, and Tischendorf was renowned for deciphering one of these. Even after parchment was replaced by paper, it was still used – namely, as book bindings. No expert nowadays, says Father Justin, finds it

credible that Tischendorf arrived just in time to save the Bible pages of Sinai from their imminent destruction by fire.

[...]

### **I go in the name of the Lord**

Tischendorf once again boarded a ship in Trieste, setting out for Alexandria. He was already enjoying the privileges of traveling on behalf of the Tsar.

On January 10, 1859, he jotted down one last letter to his wife from Trieste before embarking on the ship the following day. He wrote: *“Up to this point of my trip, no one has even so much as considered searching my belongings; the mere mention of the fact that I’m traveling on behalf of His Imperial Russian Majesty has been all-powerful.”* The directors of Lloyd’s, he reported enthusiastically to his wife, *“insisted on putting the state barge at my disposal which will take me to the ship tomorrow.”*<sup>12</sup>

Thus equipped with gold and protection, the quasi-diplomat Tischendorf set out for Egypt, where on January 16 he went ashore in Alexandria for the third time in sixteen years. A railroad connection had meanwhile been established between Alexandria and Cairo, and on January 18, 1859, his 44th birthday, he rolled into Cairo after a mere six-hour train ride, a radiant blue sky above and feeling in the best of spirits. After a brief round of visits to his acquaintances there, Tischendorf was eager to continue his journey and set off just a few days a later. There was now a rail line to Suez as well, which he took on January 23 for his final trip to the monastery. Only when he got to Suez did he have to switch to a camel. The ride through the desert, though shorter than on his previous expeditions, was no longer a thrilling adventure for the 44-year-old professor, but quite a physical ordeal. The heat and the enormous fluctuations in temperature between day and night were extremely taxing. *“And yet*

*nothing could steal the joy from my heart over this, my third Sinai trip in sixteen years,*” he later told Angelika.<sup>13</sup>

As in Trieste, Alexandria and Cairo, things kept going splendidly for the Tsar’s envoy in the Sinai monastery. The monks had been informed that he was traveling on behalf of the Tsar this time and prepared a proper reception for him. His letter of reference from Russia, hoisted up in a basket and passed through the wall, was all he needed; he was received in person at the gates by the steward of the monastery, the *oikonomos*, and was escorted through a secret passageway – from the garden into the yard, passing under the fortifications – to the ailing prior Dionysos. To his wife he wrote: *“The Father Superior and the other monks treated me like a good genius sent from heaven. They spoke of my good works for the church as if they were well acquainted with them. They only wish that the Lord may again help me find what I am looking for, for the salvation of the Church. I was quite surprised at such a reception, believe me; but I was happy to comply.”*<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, Tischendorf did everything he could to live up to his status. He announced to the monks “quite openly,” as he put it, that he had come to make “acquisitions” in the name of the Emperor and with his gold – that is to say, to buy up in the name of the Tsar the parts of the fourth-century manuscript he had seen once sixteen years ago and any other fragments of the ancient Bible that might still be found in the monastery. In the letter to his wife he said: *“I behaved more like a Russian prince than a Saxon professor. I handed out gifts at every opportunity. They even sought my favor and advocacy in Petersburg on many occasions.”* And yet Tischendorf realized: *“The direct, official path, however, did not carry me to the goal; private agreements had to be reached.”*<sup>15</sup>

This vague reference in a letter to his wife which he wrote on February 15, 1859, immediately upon returning to Cairo from the monastery, suggests that the sensation that followed was not quite as coincidental as he portrayed it in his later years, in the book he published shortly before his death – the official version, so to speak.

According to the latter, he supposedly “*did not ask again about the Bible fragments I had once saved from destruction; I had come to have no doubt since my visit in 1853 that nothing remained of them at St. Catherine’s Monastery.*”<sup>16</sup> This can’t be the case, though, because Tischendorf, having alluded to the existence of the fragments in an article that elicited no response from potential rivals, had – despite his failures in 1853 – come to St. Catherine’s in the hope of finding the parchments still hidden away somewhere in the monastery, and was intent, with the support and gold of the Tsar, on bringing the fragments to light this time.

His reference to “private agreements” is probably an indication of how Tischendorf achieved his aims. The key figure is the young *oikonomos* who received him at the gates of the monastery. The man came from Athens – no name is ever mentioned – and, according to Tischendorf, was the spiritual foster child of Kyrillos, the monastery’s librarian and Tischendorf’s friend.

Allegedly things happened as follows. Tischendorf had already ordered the Bedouins and their camels for his return trip the following Monday (it was Thursday) and was taking another long walk with the *oikonomos* to the other side of Mount Moses. They were having an open and lively discussion. Tischendorf had brought to the monastery his seventh and last edition of the Old and New Testament in Greek as a present and the *oikonomos* had been studying it. On the way back, just before arriving at the monastery, he supposedly divulged to Tischendorf that he too was in possession of a Greek Bible. If Tischendorf wanted to see it, so the story goes, he could show it to him.

*Returning at dusk to the cloister, the steward begged me to take some refreshment with him in his cell. Serving me, he remarked: I, too, have a Greek Old Testament here. And so saying, he went to the corner of his room and brought a manuscript of bulky proportions, wrapped up in a red cloth, and laid it before me on the table. I opened the*

*buttoned-up cloth and saw before me, to my great surprise, the magnificent uncial script of the Codex Friederico Augustanus divided as it was into four columns. The number of sheets before me furnished immediate proof that it was not limited to the Old Testament fragments I had taken out of the fateful basket and left behind. A few fleeting glances allowed me to recognize the beginning and end of the New Testament with the Epistle of Barnabas, and my astonishment was complete.<sup>17</sup>*

In Tischendorf's account, there were suddenly quite a few monks in the cell, among them Kyrillos, who stood there and observed him, the radiant professor, suddenly holding the long-sought treasure in his hands, like the Three Wise Men from the East in the stable of Bethlehem holding Baby Jesus.

*"I asked for permission to take the cloth with all of its contents – the sheets did not have a binding – back to my room for closer inspection; the kindly steward agreed."*

Shortly thereafter he reported to his wife:

*I was in a transport of joy as I hurried back to my cell with the manuscript. Once there I saw, to begin with, that it contained the entire New Testament – the only manuscript of its kind in the world! Neither the Codex Vaticanus nor the London Alexandrinus contains the whole New Testament, and the Sinai Codex is undoubtedly older than both. And now, new surprises. At the end of the book [the New Testament, J. G.] is the entire Epistle of Barnabus, a disciple, of which a considerable part has been considered lost until now, in the Greek original. I had tears in my eyes and my heart was stirred like never before. Once I had recovered, I thought how easy it would be for the Pastor of Hermas to be here as well. I took a sheet into my hand – some of the sheets are loose – and what do I read? The Pastor. At that I lost all self-control. Yet I felt in the deepest recess of my heart that that which gave me no peace at home, however much it smacked*

*of human striving and yearning, was really the call of the Lord. Though I had always told myself: I go in the name of the Lord, in search of treasures for the benefit of His Church – now I knew it, and was truly in awe of the truth itself. This find is a real sensation. The entire manuscript, as it stands, is an incomparable jewel for scholarship and the Church.*<sup>18</sup>

– Translated from the German by David Burnett