

ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՀԱՄԱՐ**THEFT AND RETURN OF 23 PARCHMENT MANUSCRIPTS
OF JERUSALEM
(1966-1967)****Deplorable News**

On the seventh year of Archbishop Yeghishe Derderian's patriarchate of Jerusalem, 55 years ago in March 1967, news spread all over that 23 Armenian manuscripts were stolen from the vaults of the monastery of St. James Armenian Patriarchate and were taken to London for sale by the Sotheby Auctioning Center. Those parchment manuscripts were stolen and taken to London to be auctioned and sold on March 14, 1967.

The shameful and notorious action was truly a great scandal and disgrace for the Armenian nation and Church, revealed from the detailed catalogue of the 23 precious manuscripts, all Gospel Books, dated from the 13th to the 18th centuries including the most famous **Gospel of King Hetoum of Cilicia**, with illustrations by the famous artist Toros Rosslin. The “*Catalogue of twenty-three important Armenian illuminated manuscripts*” was published by Sotheby for the use of those interested. The catalogue announced the possible sale, and scholars who knew about the manuscripts raised their prompt condemnation and claimed their return to Jerusalem at once.

Theft an Internal Case

The first and foremost responsible persons for the theft would be naturally those high-ranking clergymen in office, namely, the Patriarch, the Grand Sacristan, and the Chancellor. Besides, the Grand Sacristan headed a standing Committee of three elected by the Brotherhood to oversee closely and protect the ancient artifacts of the Patriarchate, all three together and not individually. Intolerably, the Committee did not exist in those days, and with the expression of the Patriarch during an interview, “it was not significant, being an obsolete body.” This open confession indeed prompted the hidden theft. The 23 manuscripts were in London as hostage for five months from November 1966 until they returned to Jerusalem on March 11, 1967. Under all circumstances the theft reflected the indifference and the negligence of those three responsible clergy who were reprimanded by the public as inapt and indolent guardians of national and religious treasures.

Both Armenian and international media blamed those responsible for the treacherous action to sell those ancient manuscripts estimated at the time 500,000 Eng. Pounds. Scholars from Armenia and Paris, who frequently visited Jerusalem for reading those manuscripts as they did their research, recognized the ancient books and witnessed the original place they had been kept for centuries.

Reprimand and Interference of Holy Etchmiadzin

His Holiness Vasken I Catholicos of All Armenians was deeply concerned hearing about the unwarranted sale, and sent strong reprimand to Patriarch Yeghishe Derderian of Jerusalem to take immediate steps to stop the sale without any delay, saying “they should immediately return to the Jerusalem Armenian Patriarchate at any cost in the name of the Armenian people.” The Patriarch as if moved and concerned, responded to the Catholicos of All Armenians, lamenting, “we are in deep trouble and we will do the best we can to rescue the manuscripts.”

With no further delay the Pontiff assigned a commission of five scholars, headed by the President of the AGBU and philanthropist Alex Manoogian to travel to London and meet with the chancellor Bishop Shahe Ajamian, the real responsible for the theft and the deal, to cancel any deal for the sale with the Sotheby. Ransom was needed and Mr. Manoogian was willing to meet with the payment with one condition, requiring the letter of the person who had given the valuable Gospel manuscripts for sale. Sotheby was unwilling and rejected to provide any document, but only to receive the 50,000 Pounds ransom, revealing another proof of the identities of the persons who made the infamous deal. Mr. Manoogian out of his unlimited kindness and concern gave the ransom and the manuscripts returned to Jerusalem on March 11, 1967.

Interference of the Jordanian Court

Had the notorious deal ended right there, the Armenian Church and nation would be satisfied with the return of the treasures and turn the page to end the scandal. This was not the case however. Out of the blue sky the same Patriarch Derderian and his cohort Bishop Ajamian committed yet a most stupid and condemnable treachery. They appealed to the Jordanian court to blame fraudulently two respected high-ranking clerics, the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople Archbishop Shnork Kaloustian and the elderly Archbishop Souren Kemhajian for commissioning, as if, the manuscripts for sale a decade earlier when holding offices in the Patriarchate. This lie spoke for itself in simple words that the books were comfortably resting in London for a decade... and now were ready for auction.

The government of Jordan based the false accusation on a fraudulent letter signed by the elderly Archbishop Kemhajian, fabricated by the treacherous chancellor Bishop Ajamian, who made him sign a false letter due to the near blind Archbishop who could not read the false letter as he answered the questions of the media the next day. He told the public that “on February 18, 1967 Bishop Ajamian entered my room and made me sign a false letter, and because of my poor eyesight I could never read what the letter said, and I am suspicious my signature will be abused.” Archbishop Kemhajian had learned about the theft of the manuscripts only the day before.

Patriarch Shnork Kaloustian of Constantinople

Patriarch Shnork Kaloustian ignored the Jordanian verdict which had canceled itself and turned into pardon due to an amendment to the court rules of 1965, if anyone believes. The Patriarch took his valuable time to compile and publish in Istanbul a large volume called “The Scandal of the Theft of Manuscripts” with ample evidences and witnesses to officially condemn those three archbishops, Yeghishe, Hairig, and Shahe of Jerusalem “as guilty in the act of the

theft.” Likewise, he refuted the shameful accusation based on the following facts:

1. The allegations of the Jordanian government were an outright lie, a “clumsy lie indeed.”
2. A decade had passed since Archbishop Kaloustian’s office as the Grand Sacristan of the Jerusalem Patriarchate, and one should imagine the present chief officers didn’t realize that so many manuscripts were missing for so many years.
3. Archbishop Kaloustian was never summoned by the government as the guilty one.
4. The verdict said “it was guilt committed collectively” that canceled itself “according to an amendment to the rules of 1965 granting blanket pardon.” Based on this ridiculous verdict Patriarch Kaloustian said it was all fabrication of lies, and that he would return such pardon back to the government since he did not need falsehood and mockery.

Years later in 1985, when a major dispute broke between Patriarch Derderian and his cohort Ajamian, the latter was expelled from the brotherhood of the Patriarchate, and the Patriarch confessed that the allegations against Patriarch Shnork Kaloustian were formulated by Bishop Ajamian, saying: “The accusation against Patriarch Shnork was prepared by him.” In revenge, Ajamian made public those two letters related to the sale of the manuscripts between the Patriarchate and Sotheby, stating the Patriarch as the sole responsible person of the whole scenario.

In Closing

Here I conclude the dark page of our recent history happened 55 years ago that shadowed the credit of the Armenian Church, at least for a short time. The tragedy was that clergy were responsible for it. For sure the safe return of the manuscripts was of prime importance for which our nation is grateful to His Holiness Vasken I Catholicos of All Armenians, to Patriarch Shnork Kaloustian, and to our Great Benefactor Alex Manoogian. The rest is unwarranted history.

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