Tablet Ignites Debate on Messiah and Resurrection

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When David Jeselsohn bought an ancient tablet, above, he was unaware of its significance.
Photo by Dominic Buettner for The New York Times.

A three-foot-tall tablet with 87 lines of Hebrew that scholars believe dates from the decades just before the birth of Jesus is causing a quiet stir in biblical and archaeological circles, especially because it may speak of a messiah who will rise from the dead after three days.

If such a messianic description really is there, it will contribute to a developing re-evaluation of both popular and scholarly views of Jesus, since it suggests that the story of his death and resurrection was not unique but part of a recognized Jewish tradition at the time.

The tablet, probably found near the Dead Sea in Jordan according to some scholars who have studied it, is a rare

example of a stone with ink writings from that era — in essence, a Dead Sea Scroll on stone.

It is written, not engraved, across two neat columns, similar to columns in a Torah. But the stone is broken, and some of the text is faded, meaning that much of what it says is open to debate.

Still, its authenticity has so far faced no challenge, so its role in helping to understand the roots of Christianity in the devastating political crisis faced by the Jews of the time seems likely to increase.

Daniel Boyarin, a professor of Talmudic culture at the University of California at Berkeley, said that the stone was part of a growing body of evidence suggesting that Jesus could be best understood through a close reading of the Jewish history of his day.

“Some Christians will find it shocking — a challenge to the uniqueness of their theology — while others will be comforted by the idea of it being a traditional part of Judaism,” Mr. Boyarin said.

Given the highly charged atmosphere surrounding all Jesus-era artifacts and writings, both in the general public and in the fractured and fiercely competitive scholarly community, as well as the concern over forgery and charlatanism, it will probably be some time before the tablet’s contribution is fully assessed. It has been around 60 years since the Dead Sea Scrolls were uncovered, and they continue to generate enormous controversy regarding their authors and meaning.

The scrolls, documents found in the Qumran caves of the West Bank, contain some of the only known surviving copies of biblical writings from before the first century A.D. In addition to quoting from key books of the Bible, the scrolls

describe a variety of practices and beliefs of a Jewish sect at the time of Jesus.

How representative the descriptions are and what they tell us about the era are still strongly debated. For example, a question that arises is whether the authors of the scrolls were members of a monastic sect or in fact mainstream. A conference marking 60 years since the discovery of the scrolls will begin on Sunday at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, where the stone, and the debate over whether it speaks of a resurrected messiah, as one iconoclastic scholar believes, also will be discussed.

Oddly, the stone is not really a new discovery. It was found about a decade ago and bought from a Jordanian antiquities dealer by an Israeli-Swiss collector who kept it in his Zurich home. When an Israeli scholar examined it closely a few years ago and wrote a paper on it last year, interest began to rise. There is now a spate of scholarly articles on the stone, with several due to be published in the coming months.

"I couldn't make much out of it when I got it," said David Jeselsohn, the owner, who is himself an expert in antiquities. "I didn't realize how significant it was until I showed it to Ada Yardeni, who specializes in Hebrew writing, a few years ago. She was overwhelmed. 'You have got a Dead Sea Scroll on stone,' she told me."

Much of the text, a vision of the apocalypse transmitted by the angel Gabriel, draws on the Old Testament, especially the prophets Daniel, Zechariah and Haggai.

Ms. Yardeni, who analyzed the stone along with Binyamin Elitzur, is an expert on Hebrew script, especially of the era of King Herod, who died in 4 B.C. The two of them published a long analysis of the stone more than a year ago in Cathedra,

a Hebrew-language quarterly devoted to the history and archaeology of Israel, and said that, based on the shape of the script and the language, the text dated from the late first century B.C.

A chemical examination by Yuval Goren, a professor of archaeology at Tel Aviv University who specializes in the verification of ancient artifacts, has been submitted to a peer-review journal. He declined to give details of his analysis until publication, but he said that he knew of no reason to doubt the stone's authenticity.

It was in Cathedra that Israel Knohl, an iconoclastic professor of Bible studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, first heard of the stone, which Ms. Yardeni and Mr. Elitzur dubbed "Gabriel's Revelation," also the title of their article. Mr. Knohl posited in a book published in 2000 the idea of a suffering messiah before Jesus, using a variety of rabbinic and early apocalyptic literature as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls. But his theory did not shake the world of Christology as he had hoped, partly because he had no textual evidence from before Jesus.

When he read "Gabriel's Revelation," he said, he believed he saw what he needed to solidify his thesis, and he has published his argument in the latest issue of The Journal of Religion.

Mr. Knohl is part of a larger scholarly movement that focuses on the political atmosphere in Jesus' day as an important explanation of that era's messianic spirit. As he notes, after the death of Herod, Jewish rebels sought to throw off the yoke of the Rome-supported monarchy, so the rise of a major Jewish independence fighter could take on messianic overtones.

In Mr. Knohl's interpretation, the specific messianic figure embodied on the stone could be a man named Simon who was slain by a commander in the Herodian army, according to the first-century historian Josephus. The writers of the stone's passages were probably Simon's followers, Mr. Knohl contends.

The slaying of Simon, or any case of the suffering messiah, is seen as a necessary step toward national salvation, he says, pointing to lines 19 through 21 of the tablet — "In three days you will know that evil will be defeated by justice" — and other lines that speak of blood and slaughter as pathways to justice.

To make his case about the importance of the stone, Mr. Knohl focuses especially on line 80, which begins clearly with the words "L'shloshet yamin," meaning "in three days." The next word of the line was deemed partially illegible by Ms. Yardeni and Mr. Elitzur, but Mr. Knohl, who is an expert on the language of the Bible and Talmud, says the word is "hayeh," or "live" in the imperative. It has an unusual spelling, but it is one in keeping with the era.

Two more hard-to-read words come later, and Mr. Knohl said he believed that he had deciphered them as well, so that the line reads, "In three days you shall live, I, Gabriel, command you."

To whom is the archangel speaking? The next line says "Sar hasarin," or prince of princes. Since the Book of Daniel, one of the primary sources for the Gabriel text, speaks of Gabriel and of "a prince of princes," Mr. Knohl contends that the stone's writings are about the death of a leader of the Jews who will be resurrected in three days.

He says further that such a suffering messiah is very different

from the traditional Jewish image of the messiah as a triumphal, powerful descendant of King David.

"This should shake our basic view of Christianity," he said as he sat in his office of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem where he is a senior fellow in addition to being the Yehezkel Kaufman Professor of Biblical Studies at Hebrew University. "Resurrection after three days becomes a motif developed before Jesus, which runs contrary to nearly all scholarship. What happens in the New Testament was adopted by Jesus and his followers based on an earlier messiah story."

Ms. Yardeni said she was impressed with the reading and considered it indeed likely that the key illegible word was "hayeh," or "live." Whether that means Simon is the messiah under discussion, she is less sure.

Moshe Bar-Asher, president of the Israeli Academy of Hebrew Language and emeritus professor of Hebrew and Aramaic at the Hebrew University, said he spent a long time studying the text and considered it authentic, dating from no later than the first century B.C. His 25-page paper on the stone will be published in the coming months.

Regarding Mr. Knohl's thesis, Mr. Bar-Asher is also respectful but cautious. "There is one problem," he said. "In crucial places of the text there is lack of text. I understand Knohl's tendency to find there keys to the pre-Christian period, but in two to three crucial lines of text there are a lot of missing words."

Moshe Idel, a professor of Jewish thought at Hebrew University, said that given the way every tiny fragment from that era yielded scores of articles and books, "Gabriel's Revelation" and Mr. Knohl's analysis deserved serious

attention. “Here we have a real stone with a real text,” he said. “This is truly significant.”

Mr. Knohl said that it was less important whether Simon was the messiah of the stone than the fact that it strongly suggested that a savior who died and rose after three days was an established concept at the time of Jesus. He notes that in the Gospels, Jesus makes numerous predictions of his suffering and New Testament scholars say such predictions must have been written in by later followers because there was no such idea present in his day.

But there was, he said, and “Gabriel’s Revelation” shows it.

“His mission is that he has to be put to death by the Romans to suffer so his blood will be the sign for redemption to come,” Mr. Knohl said. “This is the sign of the son of Joseph. This is the conscious view of Jesus himself. This gives the Last Supper an absolutely different meaning. To shed blood is not for the sins of people but to bring redemption to Israel.”