

“Dead Sea Scroll” on Stone?

Does Ancient Stone Predict a Risen Messiah?

Indiana Jones, move aside. An ancient Hebrew stone dated a few decades prior to Jesus' birth has suddenly become the hottest topic among archaeologists. On the three-foot tall stone are 87 lines of Hebrew words, some of which may refer to a messiah who would die and rise again three days later. The stone labeled “Gabriel's Revelation,” has been coined by one expert as a “Dead Sea Scroll on stone.”

Scholars have begun the tedious process of verifying the dating and authenticity of the stone. In the past, some scholars and conspiracy theorists have jumped to conclusions that finds such as the “James Ossuary” and the “Jesus Family Tomb” were authentic, only to discover later that they were forgeries or of dubious historical value (See, [“The Jesus Family Tomb”](#))

Thus far no scholar is arguing that the stone is a forgery. Yuval Goren, a professor of archaeology at Tel Aviv University, who has submitted his chemical investigation of the stone to a peer-review journal, presumes the stone is authentic.¹ If proven to be authentic, the stone may actually shed light on the historical setting for Jesus' resurrection.

Was there during Jesus' time the belief among Jews that the Messiah would die and rise from the dead three days later? If so, how would this prophetic detail be different from the hundreds of other Hebrew prophecies regarding the Messiah? Christians point to Jesus' fulfillment of these ancient prophecies as evidence of his messiahship (See, [“Was Jesus the Messiah?”](#))

But skeptics argue that Jewish expectations of a messiah who would die and rise again may have provided a motive for Jesus and his disciples to invent the story of his death and resurrection. In fact, some non-Christian scholars hope the stone will actually expose Jesus' resurrection as a hoax.

Israel Knohl, a professor of Bible studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is leading the charge to prove that Jesus was a fraudulent messiah. Knohl interprets line 80 of the text as prophetic about a “suffering Messiah who would rise from the dead.”² Thus, according to Knohl, the concept of a risen Messiah would not be unique to Christian thinking.

“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 -³ while others will be comforted by the idea of it being a traditional part of Judaism,’ he said.”⁴

But before we evaluate whether or not the stone sheds any light on the Christian claim that Jesus rose from the dead, let's look at the facts regarding this ancient find.

Checking the Facts

1. The stone was discovered ten years ago in Jordan.
2. An Israeli-Swiss collector who kept it in his Zurich home bought it from a Jordanian antiquities dealer.
3. It has two neat columns of Hebrew letters written in ink on 87 lines.
4. Experts date the stone first century BC, decades before Christ.
5. Two Israeli scholars published an analysis of the stone a year ago.
6. The stone is broken and some of the ink is faded, making it difficult to read.
7. The message has been dubbed, “Gabriel's Revelation,” and draws on the Old Testament writings of Hebrew prophets Daniel, Zechariah, and Haggai.
8. Line 80 begins with, “in three days,” but the next crucial word is hard to read.

A Stony Problem

Although Knohl believes the message has significant historical value, what the message actually says is dubious. Knohl contends that the message on line 80 should be read, “In three days you shall live, I Gabriel, command you.” He believes the message may refer to a rebel-rouser named “Simon,” who was slain by Herodian forces.

However, Hebrew language scholar, Moshe Bar-Asher, states:

“There is one problem: 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.”⁵

In other words, the interpretation of the Hebrew words is extremely difficult, and somewhat subjective. And subjectivity is the fodder of conspiracy theorists. Historian Paul Johnson writes:

“Unfortunately, historians are rarely as objective as they wish to appear. Biblical history, which for Christians, Jews and atheists alike involves beliefs or prejudices which go to the very root of our being, is an area where objectivity is peculiarly difficult, if not quite impossible to achieve.”⁶

Nevertheless, if the stone proves to be authentic, and Knohl’s interpretation of the message is correct, it would be historically significant. But would the stone’s message in any way validate his conjecture that the story of Jesus’ resurrection was a fabrication?

That would certainly be a stretch. In fact, there are some major difficulties with that theory:

1. The details regarding Jesus’ lineage, life, death, burial, and resurrection were contained in hundreds of Old Testament prophecies. How could they or their fulfillment have been conspired?
(See [“Was Jesus an Impostor?”](#))
2. How could Jesus have plotted his own death and resurrection in the face of his Roman and Jewish enemies? Regarding evidence against Jesus’ resurrection they are strangely silent. Why?
(See [“Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?”](#))
3. Why didn’t Jesus’ enemies in the first century cite this message of a Messiah who would die and rise again as evidence against his resurrection?
4. If the first century Jews were expecting a Messiah who would die and rise again, why wouldn’t Jewish historians such as Josephus have included this important historical fact in their writings?
5. Why would the disciples of Jesus willingly give their lives to perpetuate a hoax, if Jesus hadn’t really risen from the dead? What did they have to gain by lying?

These and other questions will be the subject of numerous debates as the message on the stone is analyzed and deciphered by experts. It may take years for all the evidence to be weighed before the historical value of the “Gabriel’s Revelation” is truly known.

In any event, the case for Jesus Christ’s resurrection remains an elusive target for those who would try to disprove its authenticity. One skeptic who began his own investigation into the resurrection of Christ, set out to disprove it by writing a book detailing his findings. His conclusion was surprising. To see what he discovered see [“Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?”](#)

Endnotes

1. Ethan Bronner, *New York Times*, July 6, 2008, 1.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (London: Harper & Row, 1988), 6.

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