

Messiah Stone Scrutinized

Clinton Wahlen

Media attention has recently spotlighted a sensational interpretation of what has been dubbed “Gabriel’s Vision” and “a Dead Sea Scroll on stone.”¹ Israel Knohl, Professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, claims that the 87-line Hebrew inscription, which has been dated by Ada Yardeni and Binyamin Elitzur to the late first century B.C.,² reflects a pre-Christian, Jewish belief in a messiah who would die, rise again after three days, and be exalted to heaven.³



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Knohl’s reading of this tablet raises a number of questions, not the least of which is why a similar messianic conception by Jesus would be so unintelligible to the twelve disciples. It could be argued that if the idea of a dying messiah was current the disciples were unwilling to accept it in reference to Jesus,⁴ or that such a notion was not widespread. The impression given by the four Gospels is that Jesus’ death was seen by onlookers as proof positive against any messianic claim.⁵ Knohl, while not directly addressing such questions, understands Jesus’ reference to Ps 110 (Mark 12:35-37) as a rejection of the triumphant messiah model in favor of one that “involves suffering and death.”⁶

Unfortunately, like several other sensational “discoveries” in recent years, the messiah stone is unprovenanced. That is, instead of being excavated by archaeologists, who would then be able to confirm where it came from, verify its authenticity, date the inscription, and locate other clues that could shed light on the group that produced it, the stone was uncovered by traders and sold through the antiquities market to David Jeselsohn, a Swiss-Israeli collector. Further, the Hebrew text on which Knohl’s reconstruction is based is fragmentary at critical junctures and there is no agreement on what it actually means. As with the Dead Sea Scrolls themselves, the widely divergent readings and resultant translations show just how problematic the work of reconstructing such a text can be. Even when there is agreement on what words are to be reconstructed, differing opinions on their relation can lead to opposite conclusions as to what the text actually means.⁷

The main points at issue are portions of lines 16 (“My servant, David, asked from before Ephraim [?]”), 19 (“in three days you shall know...”), 21 (“this bad plant”), and 80-81 (“In three days ..., I, Gabri’el ...[?], / the Prince of Princes,..., narrow holes (?) ...[...].”).⁸ It should not be overlooked that lines 80-81 on which Knohl’s suggestion depends the most, are particularly difficult to decipher as the verbs are illegible. His translation of these lines is: “by three days live....”⁹ Then, by an ingenious connection of the first reference to three days with Ephraim as a suffering and dying messiah (mostly based on ideas in later Jewish traditions)¹⁰ and “this bad plant” (line 21) with a “wicked” and “false” messiah, Knohl argues that the person to whom Gabriel speaks “live/be resurrected!” is also a messianic figure (151).

While Knohl’s hypothesis is carefully-argued, each of his major points is speculative. First, the reconstructions of “Ephraim” and “live” are questionable.¹¹ Another serious problem is his reading of the text in the light of Jewish traditions clearly documented only hundreds of years after the time of Jesus (ca. AD 400-650).¹² Finally, Knohl’s linkage of widely separated and partial lines of text into one coherent idea rests on

many unproved (and largely unprovable) assumptions about the identification, meaning and connections of words in this inscription.

It is much easier to make headlines with sensational claims than to convincingly demonstrate the truth of those claims. Upon closer scrutiny, the stone nowhere makes reference to a messiah of any kind, good or bad. Nor is the reference to three days clearly a reference to resurrection. In fact, the number three is mentioned a total of at least twelve times in this short inscription, including references to three prophets (lines 15, 70), three saints (line 65), three shepherds (line 75), and (probably) three signs (line 79). Too much weight is placed on the reference to “three days,” a stereotypical period of time mentioned no less than 42 times in the Hebrew Bible (more than twice as often as references to “forty days”). There are just too many gaps in the text and too many points at which Knohl’s hypothesis rests on gratuitous assumptions about what the text reads and what the text means. While Jesus seems to have referred to OT prophecies of a suffering messianic figure (Mark 10:45; Luke 24:25-27), the messiah stone provides no compelling evidence for a pre-Christian, Jewish tradition of a dying messiah resurrecting in three days.

¹ See, for example, “Ancient Tablet Ignites Debate on Messiah and Resurrection,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2008; online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/06/world/middleeast/06stone.html?th=&emc=th&pagewanted=all>

² Ada Yardeni and Binyamin Elitzur, “Document: A First-Century BCE Prophetic Text Written on a Stone; First Publication,” *Cathedra* 123 (2007): 155–66 (in Hebrew).

³ Israel Knohl, “By Three Days, Live’: Messiahs, Resurrection, and Ascent to Heaven in Hazon Gabriel” *JR* 88 (2008): 147-58. He claims that the stone confirms his hypothesis that “the character of the Messiah son of Joseph and the tradition of his killing were created in the late first century BCE or the early first century CE” (149); see idem, “On ‘the Son of God,’ Armilus, and Messiah Son of Joseph,” *Tarbiz* 68 (1998): 13–38 (in Hebrew with an English abstract); idem, *The Messiah before Jesus: The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000.

⁴ So William Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM, 1998), 33.

⁵ Cf. Markus Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 55.

⁶ Israel Knohl, “The Messiah Son of Joseph: ‘Gabriel’s Revelation’ and the Birth of a New Messianic Model,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 34, no. 5 (September/October 2008): 58-62, 78 here 62.

⁷ For an example of this in connection with 1QS IV.21-22, see Clinton Wahlen, *Jesus and the Impurity of Spirits in the Synoptic Gospels* (WUNT 2/185; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 46.

⁸ Yardeni’s Hebrew transcription and English translation of the text used here may be found online at <http://www.bib-arch.org/images/DSS-stone-hebrew.jpg> and http://www.bib-arch.org/news/dssinstone_english.pdf respectively (brackets hers). Her drawing of the inscription may be found at: <http://www.nfc.co.il/uploadFiles/848324000835419.pdf>.

⁹ Ada Yardeni has recently agreed with Knohl’s reconstruction of this word (online: <http://www.daylife.com/photo/0fnO1pW05I2yC>).

¹⁰ Esp. *b. Sukkah* 52a; *Pesiq. Rab.* 36; *Sefer Zerubbabel*.

¹¹ “Ephraim” does not appear to be the only possible reading, according to Yardeni. With regard to “live,” Knohl reconstructs the Hebrew verb as *kh’yh*, arguing its equivalency to *khyh* on the basis that *aleph* appears in 1QIs^a as a vowel, though this form of *khyh* is not established in any extant Hebrew text outside of this postulated use in the messiah stone.

¹² Knohl also refers to *T. Benj.* 3.8 but to what extent this and other portions of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* derives from Jewish, Jewish-Christian or Gentile-Christian origin continues to be debated as the “testaments” found at Qumran (e.g. 4Q215, 4Q541) do not show a clear connection to these traditions.