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## GABRIEL'S REVELATION

A Challenge to Our View of the Resurrection?

by Craig J. Hazen

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### Synopsis

In July of 2008 a flurry of academic journals and news sources reported a new archaeological artifact that might "shake our basic view of Christianity"—especially about first-century messianic expectations and the resurrection accounts. The new find was a large stone tablet on which was written eighty-seven lines of Hebrew text in ink, but much of the text was missing. The message of the text, thought to be composed just before the time of Jesus, is being called Gabriel's Revelation. A scholar named Israel Knohl created headlines about this artifact by filling in some of the missing text with words that line up with his idea that the notion of a suffering and dying messiah who rises on the third day was part of the consciousness of Judaism before Christianity emerged and is therefore the source of the stories about Jesus. Evangelical scholars have concluded that even if Knohl's recreation of the text of the tablet is correct, there is no threat to the New Testament picture of Jesus. Indeed, Knohl's views, if proven true, could actually bolster the Christian case.

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Almost every year now as we approach the traditional Easter holiday, we brace ourselves for news that will "shock the faithful worldwide." In the Spring of 2007, it was this:

*An incredible archaeological discovery in Israel changes history and shocks the world. Tombs with the names Maria, Jesus son of Joseph, Mariamne e Mara, and Judah, their son, are found and an investigation begins. The Jesus Family Tomb [movie] is a riveting archaeological adventure, a real-life detective story, co-produced by filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici and Titanic director James Cameron. In 1980, in East Talpiot, Jerusalem, a bulldozer accidentally uncovered what may be the most explosive archaeological discovery of all time....What they find is the discovery of a lifetime, and raises questions about the historical Jesus.<sup>1</sup>*

Of course, after the dust settled with regard to the purported family tomb of Jesus, the only thing "remarkable" and "shocking" was the speed and cleverness of a group of pseudoscholars to grab some headlines, sell a book and a DVD, and hightail it out of town before people with real knowledge about such matters were able to weigh in.<sup>2</sup> I believe Jacobovici and Cameron set a whole new standard with regard to profitable hit-and-run Jesus exposés.

We have seen a number of these kinds of issues exploited both for financial gain and for the purpose of undermining the picture of Jesus that emerges from the New Testament documents. The DaVinci Code, the various Gnostic Gospels, the lost years of Jesus, the Passover Plot, and so on. Of course, the “shocking conclusion” of each new conjecture never seems to be that we have compelling and reliable evidence to know that an extraordinary, innocent man died at the hands of a Roman crucifixion squad and returned from the dead several days later in first-century Jerusalem just as He and the Scriptures predicted!

## A DEAD SEA SCROLL ON STONE

The latest archaeological find that is being used by some to call into question the New Testament witness to Jesus is being called “Gabriel’s Revelation” (also called the Vision of Gabriel, or *Hazon Gabriel* in Hebrew). The filmmakers and exploiters have not yet arrived on the scene of this relic—but the day is young.

Gabriel’s Revelation is a Hebrew apocalyptic text written on the face of a thick stone tablet measuring three feet by one foot.<sup>3</sup> One would expect the inscription to be engraved into the stone, but the message here was painted onto a smooth surface of the tablet using ink. The text is arranged in two columns with a total of eighty-seven lines. The arrangement of the text is very much like that on a scroll; hence some scholars have been calling it a “scroll on stone.”

The tablet was cracked into three pieces in its journey through the centuries, but all the pieces are accounted for. The Hebrew lettering on the tablet, however, did not fare so well. It is a very poorly preserved artifact and a good deal of the text is either gone or indecipherable—but this is, of course, a key reason for the mystery and the current controversy surrounding it. Paleographic analysis (that is, a study of the script and materials of writing) place the date of composition from the late first-century BC to the early first century AD—the same general time frame that has been assigned to the Dead Sea Scrolls. In both appearance and apocalyptic tenor, the Gabriel Tablet appears to have more than a little in common with these other ancient Hebrew texts from the Qumran community.<sup>4</sup>

Although scholars are comfortable with the date range of the writing on the tablet, they really have no idea who wrote it or anything about its provenance. The tablet surfaced about a decade ago in the possession of a Jordanian antiquities dealer. It was then purchased by David Jeselsohn, an Israeli collector living in Zurich, who kept the artifact at his home. Although a knowledgeable antiquities patron himself, Jeselsohn did not know the importance of the coffee-table-sized stone occupying three square feet of his living room.

Eventually he showed it to Ada Yardeni, an expert in ancient Hebrew scripts, paleography, and epigraphy from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Dr. Yardeni, in collaboration with Binyamin Elitzur, recognized the text as the work of a professional scribe and clearly from the first-centuries time frame already mentioned based on “the shape and the form of the letters.”<sup>5</sup> According to a New York Times report, chemical analysis of the artifact done by a renowned expert in archaeological dating, Yuval Goren of Tel Aviv University, confirmed the proposed date range from paleography.<sup>6</sup> The question of the basic time-frame of composition seems for the most part closed, but where it was and who had it for 2,000 years is still wide open.

After spending some quality time with the Gabriel Tablet, Yardeni and Elitzur published an article in 2007 in the Hebrew language periodical *Cathedra*.<sup>7</sup> In that article they offered their best attempt at a transcription of the lines of ancient Hebrew.<sup>8</sup> Their own English translation was published on the Web site of the *Biblical Archaeology Review* and shows all of the missing and illegible parts according to their expert analysis.<sup>9</sup> This is important because these two textual scholars were most concerned with reconstructing and reading the actual text and less concerned with broader interpretation or how it might “shake the very foundation of Christian history.”

Upon reading Yardeni’s and Elitzur’s English translation of Gabriel’s Revelation and the English-language summary of their article from *Cathedra*’s Web site, one wonders what the controversy could possibly be?<sup>10</sup> No doubt this is a fascinating find. We have here a very unusual artifact emerging from the Second Temple period that gives us a new but very small window into the variety of Jewish prophetic literature of the period. As Yardeni herself wrote,

*The text has not been identified, but it is clearly a literary composition, similar to Biblical prophecies. It is written in the first person, perhaps by someone named Gabriel....It is apparently a collection of short prophecies addressed to someone in the second person....*

*It is difficult to say more. Perhaps this intriguing text only emphasizes the variety of Jewish movements at the turn of the era—and how much about them we don’t know.*<sup>11</sup>

Yardeni displayed great scholarly restraint in her analysis by sticking to the legible text on the tablet without making grand extrapolations to determine what the text was “really” all about.

Enter Israel Knohl.

## **GABRIEL’S REVELATION AS TEXTUAL MISSING LINK?**

New York Times reporter Ethan Bronner referred to Knohl as an “iconoclastic” scholar because Bronner picked up on the fact that Knohl was interested in nothing less than to “shake the world of Christology.”<sup>12</sup> In the preface to a book he published in 2000 (in which he believed he was the first ever to find the elusive connection between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament), Knohl was upfront with his deep desire to overturn long cherished beliefs: “In the present work I challenge the point of view dominant in New Testament scholarship for over a hundred years....I have a strong compulsion to reveal the truth as I see it.”<sup>13</sup> Over the years, Knohl’s work is known to be competent, creative, and bold—necessary attributes for notable work in ancient texts and history. However, no one would ever accuse him of “under reaching” in his attempts to draw conclusions from limited evidence.<sup>14</sup>

Professor Knohl first read about the tablet and Gabriel’s Revelation in the Yardeni and Elitzur article in *Cathedra*. His interest in seeing the stone was immediate. The New York Times article captured the reason for this. “Mr. Knohl posited in a book in [the year] 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.”<sup>15</sup>

For Knohl, Gabriel’s Revelation was the missing link he needed.

## ISRAEL KNOHL AND THE “PREQUEL” TO JESUS’ RESURRECTION

After studying the tablet himself, Knohl published three articles—one scholarly and two popular—from April 2007 to April 2008.<sup>16</sup> A subsequent New York Times report on his conclusions regarding Gabriel’s Revelation became the top blogged and e-mailed story on the newspaper’s Web site for a period of time.<sup>17</sup> Knohl’s conclusions—or at least the way he was packaging them—were magnetic for the media and garnered broad and immediate popular interest.

Of the eighty-seven lines of text on the tablet, Knohl knew just where to focus his gaze in order to find the controversy—the now infamous line 80. According to Yardeni’s original study of the tablet, lines 80 and 81 read as follows (of course, ellipses, brackets, and question marks indicate missing and unreadable text):

*80. In three days li[ve], I, Gabri’el ...[?],*

*81. the Prince of Princes, ..., narrow holes(?) ...[...].<sup>18</sup>*

Israel Knohl rendered the same two lines this way:

80. *In three days, live, I Gabriel com[mand] yo[u]*

81. *prince of the princes, the dung of the rocky crevices [...]...*<sup>19</sup>

In comparing Yardeni's original version to Knohl's, it is easy to see that Knohl filled in some key blank spots in the tablet's text. The insertions he made, though, make the message very sympathetic to his long-held position that the picture of a dying and rising messiah was part of the Jewish consciousness in the years before Jesus arrived on the scene. When Knohl rendered line 80 as "In three days, live, I Gabriel command you," he was massaging the text to express the idea that a powerful angel (Gabriel) was ordering a messianic figure (prince of the princes) to rise from the dead after three days.

Knohl, of course, does not believe in the supernatural resurrection of Jesus on the third day as the Gospels attest, so in his mind the tablet helps provide a naturalistic explanation as to how this central Christian idea took hold among the earliest believers. In Knohl's own words, "This should shake our basic view of Christianity....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."<sup>20</sup>

In all fairness, Knohl's reflections on Gabriel's Revelation go far beyond his provocative thoughts about line 80. He draws other conclusions from the prophetic lines of the tablet and weaves them together with other texts and trends from the time to form some interesting ideas about the variety of messianic expectations during the Second Temple period. However, with limited space here, those cannot be addressed.

## **POST HOC, ERGO PROPTER HOC**

Scholarly reactions to Knohl's work on the Gabriel Tablet can be placed in two categories. There are reactions to his interpolations of the text itself and reactions to his overall interpretation—especially the cause-and-effect relationship he sees between the tablet and the early ideas about Jesus. Although Ada Yardeni has come out in support of one of the key illegible words ("live" in line 80) proposed by Knohl,<sup>21</sup> others such as Prof. Moshe Bar-Asher, President of the Israeli Academy of Hebrew Language, concluded (with a tip of the hat to the obvious) that "in crucial places of the text there is a lack of text. I understand Knohl's tendency to find there keys to the pre-Christian period, but in two or three crucial lines of text there are a lot of words missing."<sup>22</sup>

Like many in the decades before him who overreached on their interpretation of the Dead Sea Scrolls to reveal the "real" origins of Christianity and make headlines, Knohl appears a little too

desperate to find the foundation-shaking evidence for which he longs. In doing so he seems to have welded himself to the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy (“after this, therefore because of this”). It is not the case that just because the messianic movement featuring Jesus of Nazareth *followed* the composing of Gabriel’s Revelation that Gabriel’s Revelation was necessarily the cause or source of the central ideas of the movement. Positing this, even with a bevy of scholarly qualifiers, is mostly wish fulfillment and goes well beyond what the hard evidence warrants.

## SO WHAT?

Evangelical scholars have been less concerned about how Knohl has reconstructed the missing lines and illegible characters of the text and have instead focused on the simple but important question, “So what?”<sup>23</sup> That is, what would it mean for our traditional views of Jesus as the resurrected Christ if Knohl’s textual rendering of Gabriel’s Revelation (not his broader interpretation) turned out to be correct? The early consensus of noteworthy evangelical scholars who have weighed in (mostly informally on Internet sites) is that, ironically, if Knohl’s reading is right, it would be more helpful than harmful to our traditional views in several ways.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the most important positive would be that Knohl’s view would do significant harm to the pervasive idea promoted for years by radical Jesus scholars that the predictions made by Jesus about His own passion and resurrection<sup>25</sup> were not authentic sayings, but rather were words put into His mouth by later followers. Leaders among the modern messianic Jewish movement picked up on this helpful attribute right away. Here is some “evidence that Jesus was the kind of messiah Israel was waiting for, even if the rabbis now teach that Jesus failed to meet the biblical messianic criteria.”<sup>26</sup>

In addition, if correct, Knohl’s broader ideas correlate in modest ways with [Daniel 9:26](#) and the Anointed One being “cut off.” It corresponds well with the suffering messiah of [Isaiah 53:5](#). It brings to life the idea of the Sign of the Prophet Jonah mentioned by Jesus in [Matthew 12:39–41](#). It also can help us understand why Paul would claim that Christ was raised on the third day “according to the Scriptures” ([1 Cor. 15:4](#)). Of course, these are all things that evangelicals have promoted vigorously.

The only downside noticed by Resurrection experts such as Gary R. Habermas, if Knohl is correct, has been that apologists who make much of the fact that the death and resurrection of Christ caught His followers completely off guard need to dial down that point.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps there was a stronger expectation in the air about a suffering and rising messiah than previously thought.

With all of this said, it is important to remember two things. First, Knohl's broader interpretation is based on text that he is reading into the blank spots on the tablet. Second, even if he is right, the original belief and early proclamation of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus derive from eyewitness accounts of an empty tomb and a risen Christ. Early Jewish messianic expectations alone would simply not have been enough to propel this early movement forward.

As Prof. John J. Collins of Yale Divinity School concluded,

*But even if Knohl's interpretation were right, it would hardly warrant the ensuing fuss. Everyone who has taken an introductory New Testament course knows that the early Christians understood Jesus in light of Jewish prophecies and expectations. The motif of resurrection after three days is based on a passage from the prophet Hosea about restoration of the people: "on the third day he will raise us up that we may live before him." If Knohl's interpretation should prove to be right, it would be an interesting contribution to the history of religion. But its supposed threat to Christian theology is no more than a marketing strategy. In that respect, the Vision of Gabriel is only the latest of many discoveries that have been sensationalized for the sake of publicity.<sup>28</sup>*

At this point, the fast-buck filmmakers and executives from cable channels desperate for provocative programming have not descended on the Gabriel Revelation as a new way to boost ratings and revenue. But just wait. Another Easter season will come soon enough.

**Craig J. Hazen, Ph.D.**, is the founder and director of the M.A. program in Christian Apologetics at Biola University and the editor of the scholarly journal, *Philosophia Christi*. His latest book is the breakout new apologetics novel *Five Sacred Crossings* (Harvest House, 2008).

#### notes

1 <http://www.jesusfamilytomb.com> (accessed January 9, 2009), and [http://www.jesusfamilytomb.com/movie\\_overview/about.html](http://www.jesusfamilytomb.com/movie_overview/about.html) (accessed January 9, 2009).

2 For detailed and thorough responses to the claims about the "Jesus Family Tomb" in Talpiot, see Gary R. Habermas, *The Secret of the Talpiot Tomb* (Nashville: B and H Publishing Group, 2007) and Charles L. Quarles, ed., *Buried Hope and Risen Savior* (Nashville: B and H Publishing Group, 2008).

3 An "apocalyptic text" is a written record of a special revelation about the future (but sometimes the past and present) in deeply symbolic language. These apocalyptic revelations usually come in the form of dreams or visions and often involve angels as messengers or interpreters. They usually have as their purpose the bringing of hope and encouragement to people of faith undergoing difficult times and tribulations.

4 The "Qumran community" is the name of the settlement near the Dead Sea where it is thought that a group of Jewish separatists called the Essenes had a kind of wilderness retreat or monastic outpost. It is believed that the Essenes in the Qumran community were responsible for writing and then hiding in caves the famous Dead Sea Scrolls.

5 Ada Yardeni, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 34 (January/February 2008), 60.

- 6 Ethan Bronner, "Ancient Tablet Ignites Debate on Messiah and Resurrection," New York Times, World Section, July 6, 2008. Also according to the article, Goren's results have been submitted to a peer-reviewed academic journal. Hence details of the analysis will be coming forth in the near future.
- 7 Ada Yardeni and Binyamin Elitzur, "Document: A First-Century BCE Prophetic Text Written on a Stone; First Publication," *Cathedra* 123 (2007): 155–66.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 9 See [http://www.bib-arch.org/news/dssinstone\\_english.pdf](http://www.bib-arch.org/news/dssinstone_english.pdf) (accessed January 9, 2009).
- 10 See *Cathedra* abstracts at the Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Web site at <http://ybz.org.il/?ArticleID=1712> (accessed January 9, 2009).
- 11 Yardeni, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 60, 61. Emphasis added.
- 12 Bronner.
- 13 Israel Knohl, *The Messiah before Jesus: The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, trans. David Maisel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), xi.
- 14 See, e.g., the review of Knohl's *The Messiah before Jesus* by Eileen M. Schuller in *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 21 (2002): 153–56.
- 15 Bronner.
- 16 Israel Knohl, "In Three Days, You Shall Live" *Haaretz*, April 19, 2007; "'By Three Days Live': Messiahs, Resurrection, and Ascent to Heaven in Hazon Gabriel," *Journal of Religion* 88 (April 2008): 147–58; and "The Messiah Son of Joseph: 'Gabriel's Revelation' and the Birth of a New Messianic Model," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 34 (September/October 2008): 58–62.
- 17 According to Alan Abbey of the Shalom Hartman Institute Blog, July 7, 2008. <http://hartmaninstitute.wordpress.com/2008/07/07/hartmans-israel-knohl-in-the-newsfor-pre-jesus-jewish-tablet/> (accessed January 9, 2009).
- 18 From [http://www.bib-arch.org/news/dssinstone\\_english.pdf](http://www.bib-arch.org/news/dssinstone_english.pdf) (accessed January 9, 2009).
- 19 Found in Knohl, "The Messiah Son of Joseph," 62.
- 20 Bronner.
- 21 See the letter to the *Biblical Archaeology Review* editor, Hershel Shanks, from Ada Yardeni at the BAR Web site. <http://www.bib-arch.org/bar/extra.asp?ArticleID=11&ParentArticleID=14> (accessed January 9, 2009).
- 22 Bronner.
- 23 See Ben Witherington's blog post "The Death and Resurrection of Messiah—Written in Stone," July 5, 2008, at <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/07/death-and-resurrection-of-messiah.html> (accessed January 9, 2009).
- 24 See, e.g., Gary R. Habermas, "'Gabriel's Vision' and the Resurrection of Jesus," July 2008 at <http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/gabrielsvision1/gabrielsvision.htm> (accessed January 9, 2009); Witherington, "The Death and Resurrection of Messiah;" and Craig Blomberg, "No Threat Here!" July 7, 2008. Blog post at <http://blog.bible.org/primetimejesus/content/and-raised-3d-day%3F> (accessed January 9, 2009).
- 25 Such as in [Mark 8:31](#); [9:31](#); [10:33–34](#); and [14:27–28](#).
- 26 Quote from Israeli historian Gershon Nirel as reported by Ryan Jones on the *Israel Today Magazine* Web site on July 11, 2008, <http://www.israeltoday.co.il/default.aspx?tabid=178&nid=16576> (accessed January 9, 2009).
- 27 Habermas, "'Gabriel's Vision' and the Resurrection of Jesus."



28 John J. Collins, "The Vision of Gabriel," Yale Alumni Magazine (September/October 2008) at [http://www.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/2008\\_09/forum.html](http://www.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/2008_09/forum.html) (accessed January 9, 2009).