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Journal Title: **Archaeology of Jordan and beyond : essays in honor of James A. Sauer / edited by Lawrence E. Stager, Joseph A. Greene, and Michael D. Coogan.**

Volume:

Issue:

Month/Year: 2000.

Pages: **t.p, 490-497**

Article Title: **Archaeology of the Bible and Judaism in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages**

Article Author: Tigay, Jeffrey

Jeffrey Tigay

Deliver to: 847 Williams Hall

Department: SAS - Near Eastern Languages and Culture

Date Printed: 1/13/2009 09:52:05 AM

“Archaeology” of the Bible and Judaism in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

Jeffrey H. Tigay

[S]ome books were found ten years ago in a rock-dwelling near Jericho. The story was that a dog belonging to an Arab out hunting, while following game, went into a cave and did not come out again; its owner went in after it and found a chamber in the rock containing many books. (Driver 1965:8)

The report just quoted resembles the story of Muhammad edh-Dhib's discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 so closely that an unsuspecting reader might take it for just that. But, as most readers of this volume will recall, this report was written more than 1,100 years earlier and describes a discovery made in the late eighth century CE (see below).

It may come as a surprise that “archaeological” finds were made so long ago, without the benefit of modern archaeological techniques. But many of the most important modern archaeological discoveries have also been the result of accidental strokes of good fortune, and in this commodity we moderns have nothing over the ancients. In fact, discoveries since the turn of the era have included counterparts to several of the most important types of texts and artifacts found in the Dead Sea region since 1947: biblical and apocryphal manuscripts, sectarian codes, and *tefillin* (phylacteries). Several of these earlier discoveries have been compared to the modern ones, while others have never been mentioned. A volume honoring Jim Sauer, who is a connoisseur of virtually every period of Near Eastern archaeology, is an appropriate place to gather together the known episodes in order to gain

a preliminary picture of premodern discoveries that bear upon the Bible and postbiblical Judaism.

It is natural that such finds have been taking place since ancient times in the land of Israel. The history of the Near East made such discoveries inevitable all over the region. The practice of rebuilding temples, palaces, and entire cities on previously occupied sites required the razing and excavating of those sites in preparation for the new construction, and this often led to the discovery of manuscripts, inscriptions, and other ancient artifacts. Certain Mesopotamian kings of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE evinced a lively interest in archaeology. The great bibliophile Ashurbanipal, the Assyrian king (668–627 BCE) who gathered in Nineveh the greatest library of the pre-Hellenistic Orient, claimed to have “examined the stone inscriptions from before the Flood.”¹

Rabbinic sources indicate that coming upon certain types of ancient remains was a normal occurrence. The Mishnah prescribes a blessing for one who sees a place formerly used for idolatrous worship (M. Ber. IX, 1). The Tosefta mentions that an object found in a heap of stones or an old wall could be from the days of the Amorites (Tosefta Bava Mezia II, 12; Babylonian Talmud, Bava Mezia II, 3). Another passage in the Tosefta discusses whether the Second Tithe

¹ See Streck 1916:256:18; Cogan and Tadmor 1988:294, n. 11; cf. Weinfeld 1991:18–19.

may be replaced with coins that are no longer valid and gives as examples the coins of Bar Kochba, ancient "Jerusalem" coins, and coins of prior kings (Tosefta Maaser Sheni I, 6). A passage in the Mishnah mentions the practice of using invalidated coins for necklaces and weights (Mishna Kelim XII, 7; the numismatist Y. Meshorer [1967:98–99] argues that the many perforated Bar Kochba coins that have been discovered must have been used for necklaces such as those to which the Mishnah refers). Objects such as these were so common that they would not have been regarded as archaeological discoveries in Tannaitic times, but for us they illustrate how full the country was of such objects and why antiquities were unearthed in the land throughout the Middle Ages with little apparent effort.

Biblical Manuscripts

1. For completeness, we should begin with the discovery of the "book of the law" (*sēfer hattôrāh*)—presumably a large part of Deuteronomy—by the high priest Hilkiah in the Temple of Jerusalem during the course of repairs toward the end of the seventh century BCE (2 Kings 22:8; 2 Chron. 34:14). The practice of burying documents in the wall or foundations of a temple, which seems to underlie this discovery, was followed elsewhere in the ancient world (see n. 1), and was still alive generations later when Rabban Gamaliel ordered a builder to bury an Aramaic translation of Job under a wall on the Temple Mount (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 115a).

2. A report from the third century CE may help us understand a number of enigmatic references. In his *Hexapla*, Origen (185–254) included, in addition to the Septuagint and the translations of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, three other, anonymous, translations. In his translation of Psalms he explained where he found two of these:

the fifth edition . . . I found in Nicopolis near Actium [on the west coast of Greece]. . . . The sixth edition which was found together with other Hebrew and Greek books in a jar near Jericho in the time of the reign of Antonius [read "Antoninus"] the son of Severus [i.e., the Emperor Caracalla, 211–17]. (Yadin 1957:75, citing Kahle 1947:161)²

Swete (1902:55) writes that "since Origen was in Palestine in 217 and in Greece in 231 it is natural to connect his discoveries with those years," though Origen does not state that the find near Jericho was made by him personally. Since Origen conducted his intensive work on the *Hexapla* during the years 240–45 (Roberts 1951:129–30), it is evident that he was preparing for it years earlier. The discovery of Greek biblical manuscripts constitutes a counterpart to the modern discovery of Greek biblical manuscripts in the Dead Sea region. Origen's reference to "other Hebrew and Greek books" implies non-biblical manuscripts as well, but the nature of their contents is anybody's guess.

3. This account of Origen's manuscript finds in connection with his textual criticism indicates the context in which we may view two events reported in Talmudic-Midrashic literature. One is the much-discussed account of "three scrolls [of the Torah that] were found in the Temple Court." The three scrolls were distinguished from each other by a small number of variant readings, a conflict which the sages resolved in each case by adopting whichever reading had the support of two of the three manuscripts (Lieberman 1962:21–22; Talmon 1962:14–27).³ It is nowhere stated when this event took place, but it is clearly described as a singular event rather than an example of an ongoing procedure.

² Other accounts, from Eusebius and Epiphanius, are cited by Kahle and by Swete 1902:54; see Swete for speculation on when these texts were buried.

³ Talmon (1962) analyzes the variants and shows that they belong to types found in the Samaritan Pentateuch and Qumran Bible manuscripts.

Other sources indicate that there was a single authoritative copy of the Torah deposited in the Temple Court, against which other copies could be checked, but the present passage indicates that all three of these scrolls were of equal status, and that a single recension was produced on the basis of them. Conceivably this episode may represent the origin of the single text which was thenceforth regarded as the norm. M. H. Segal (1960:4, 865–67) connects it with the report in 2 Maccabees 2:14 that “Judah Maccabee made a complete collection of the books dispersed in the recent war.” While a search for manuscripts and such recensional activity would be plausible in a period of reconsolidation following a devastating war, the most that can be said with confidence is that the event must have taken place before the destruction of the Temple in 70 (unless the “find” was made by excavation of the Temple Court!).

4. A second report introduces a variant reading with the following statement:

This is one of the words written in the Torah scroll that left Jerusalem in the captivity and was brought to Rome and was stored away [a variant adds: “and sealed”] in the synagogue of Severus [a variant adds: “containing different letters and words”]. (Albek 1940:209; see also Ginsburg 1966:410–21)

This passage, followed by a list of thirty-two variant readings found in the scroll, appears in the late midrash *Bereshit Rabbati*, which was compiled by R. Moshe Hadarshan (first half of the eleventh century) but employed much earlier sources. Josephus actually mentions a Torah scroll that was carried in Vespasian’s triumphal procession in Rome as the last of the spoils from Jerusalem and subsequently deposited in his palace (*War* 7.150, 162). Some scholars have reasoned that a scroll that merited such treatment may well have been the official copy from the Temple. Others have connected Vespasian’s copy with that deposited in the Severus synagogue, assuming that one of the Severi, with whom the Jews

enjoyed good relations, may have subsequently presented the scroll to the Jews of Rome. It is usually assumed that this was Alexander Severus, emperor from 222 to 235. Whether or not the Severus scroll was that displayed by Vespasian, it seems unlikely that it could have been the official Temple Court copy, for it is hard to believe that a scroll which deviates from the MT as much as the Severus scroll does could ever have been the official text. Saul Lieberman (1962:24) regards it as representing a vulgar text.⁴ The question that interests us here is the origin of this list of variants. Possibly the scroll was known for its unique readings even before its capture, with Palestinian Jewry preserving the list since that time and following the fate of the scroll until its ultimate deposit in the Severus synagogue. While this is conceivable, it does require us to assume that Palestinian Jewry managed to keep informed of the fate of this scroll, despite its probable lack of official status, for something like 150 years. It is perhaps more likely that the scroll was unexpectedly rediscovered in the Severus synagogue (perhaps in its genizah?) and upon examination was found to have a number of irregular readings which were then recorded. Eventually this list of variants made its way into Masoretic text-critical notes and was taken seriously enough for one Masorete to conclude his list with the hope that “the righteous teacher [Elijah] may come speedily in our day and tell us”—presumably, which readings are correct (Ginsburg 1966:410–11, 421).

5. Other Masoretic notes refer a number of times to a “Jericho Pentateuch” (*hwmš yryhw*) (see Ginsburg 1966:433), which some scholars speculate may also have been discovered in the Middle Ages in the same manner as Origen’s manuscripts. If so, it could be connected with the next item.

⁴ For a sampling of readings and comparison to the types of variants found in 1QIs^a, see Tov 1992:119–21, and earlier studies cited by him.

6. A manuscript find made toward the year 800, as described in a letter written in Syriac by Timotheus I, Nestorian Patriarch of Seleucia (ca. 726–819) to Sergius, the Metropolitan of Elam (died ca. 805). This fascinating letter, often cited by modern scholars, is worth quoting at length:

We have learnt from trustworthy Jews, then being instructed as catechumens in the Christian religion, that some books were found ten years ago in a rock-dwelling near Jericho. The story was that a dog belonging to an Arab out hunting, while following game, went into a cave and did not come out again; its owner went in after it and found a chamber in the rock containing many books. The hunter went off to Jerusalem and told his story to the Jews, who came out in great numbers and found books of the Old Testament and others in the Hebrew script; and, since there was a scholar well read in literature among them, I asked him about many passages quoted in our New Testament (as coming) from the Old Testament but found nowhere in it, neither in copies amongst the Jews nor in those amongst Christians. He said: they are there and can be found in the books discovered there.⁵

Later in the letter Timotheus adds that his informant told him that "we have found more than two hundred psalms of David among our books."

This account not only parallels almost exactly the role of the stray goat in the 1947 discovery of scrolls at Qumran, but more importantly indicates the presence of non-canonical "Davidic" psalms in this collection (reminiscent of the Qumran Psalms scroll), along with Hebrew books other than the Bible (recalling the discovery of books of the Apocrypha in the Cairo Genizah and at Qumran and Masada).⁶

⁵ The letter was first published by Braun 1901:299–313; English translation by Driver 1965:8.

⁶ A polemical letter by Pirkoi ben Baboi, a Talmudic scholar of the eighth–ninth century, mentions the discovery of copies of the Mishnah and the Talmud that had been stored away. Spiegel 1965 considers the possibility that this was part of the same discovery as that reported by Timotheus, but he ultimately concludes that it was not.

Sectarian Works

1. The late-eighth-century CE date of the latter find brings us to the same period when the Karaite ("Scripturalist," i.e., literalist or fundamentalist) movement arose among the Jews. The Karaites distinguished themselves primarily by their denial of the postbiblical traditions and interpretations of the Talmudic rabbis and their followers, the "Rabbanites." According to a charge reported by Rabbi Moses Taku in the thirteenth century in the name of earlier teachers, the eighth-century founders of Karaism "used to write down heresies and lies and hide them in the ground. Then they would take them out and say: 'This is what we found in ancient books'" (Lieberman 1951:402–3). This charge presupposes that the Karaites actually did claim to have unearthed the books containing their teachings. This would explain the intriguing fact that copies of the sectarian code known to scholars as the Damascus Document, which bears great similarity to the Karaites' laws, have been found both at Qumran (1QS, 4QD, etc.) and in the Cairo Genizah (CD). The document's presence in the latter, medieval, collection is best explained on the grounds that it was rediscovered around the eighth century and gained recognition by the Karaites. Though it is not demonstrable that this discovery was part of that reported by the Patriarch Timotheus, it is noteworthy that Timotheus does mention nonbiblical books in the cache, and he also mentions that "great numbers of Jews" came out from Jerusalem to the find-site (see Kahle 1951:44–48).

2. Books discovered in a cave are also referred to by the Karaite historian Jacob Al-Kirkisani (first half of the tenth century CE). In his essay on Jewish sects, Kirkisani refers to a sect, founded before Jesus and extinct in Kirkisani's time, which he says was called Al-Maghariya, "cave people," "because their books were found in a cave" (see Nemyo 1930:326–27,

363–64, 391).⁷ Although Kirkisani does not say when these books were found (whether in antiquity by the Maghariya or closer to his own time), he notes that these cave people differed from other Jewish sects in having a separate calendar, and that their books included biblical exegesis. Both of these features are known among the Qumran sect as well (though biblical exegesis is common among all Jews), and some have concluded that the cave people were in fact the Qumran sect and that the discovery of their books mentioned by Kirkisani was the same find mentioned by Timotheus. Assuming, however, that the Karaites did discover and use books of the Qumran sect, it would be strange, if Kirkisani's cave people were the Qumranites, that Kirkisani, himself a Karaite, fails to recognize them as the source of his own sect's books and goes so far as to dismiss several of the cave people's books as valueless and mere fables.⁸

Tefillin

If the discovery of biblical manuscripts served the practical purposes of text criticism and recension, medieval discoveries of *tefillin* played a role in resolving controversies of ritual law. According to rabbinic law the *tefillin* contain copies of the four biblical passages that mention the injunction to bind God's teachings "as a sign on your hand and as frontlets on your forehead" (Exod. 13:1–10, 11–16; Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21). The major controversy regarding them was whether the four scriptural passages are to be placed in the capsules in the order in which they appear in the Bible or in some other order. The former view is associated with Rashi (1040–1105), the great Franco-Jewish Talmudist and biblical scholar. The best-known

version of the latter view—reversing the order of the Deuteronomy passages—is usually associated with Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Jacob Tam (Rabbenu Tam, ca. 1100–71), although he was actually representing the view of earlier geonim (heads of Babylonian Talmudic academies).

One method of resolving the controversy was to examine older sets of *tefillin* in order to see which order they displayed. After Maimonides (1135–1204) endorsed Rashi's view in his Code, he received an inquiry from the Sages of Lunel in southern France pointing out that they had been taught by many rabbis and geonim, including R. Hai Gaon (939–1038), to follow the order reversing the Deuteronomy passages. In his reply (see Blau 1957–61:2, 543, no. 289), Maimonides mentioned that he, too, had formerly followed their view, but that he had been convinced otherwise by, among other things, a report that R. Hai's *tefillin* had been opened and found to follow the biblical order. Since Hai's view had to be ascertained by opening his *tefillin* rather than simply asking him, it is evident that this examination took place after Hai's death, but there is nothing to indicate when in the century between Hai's death and Maimonides' lifetime this took place. The fact that Hai's *tefillin* were recognized as belonging to him presumably indicates that they had been known all along rather than discovered archaeologically.

Maimonides' responsum did not settle the question, and in subsequent discussion at least two discoveries of *tefillin* were mentioned. Rabbi Moses ben Jacob of Coucy, an itinerant French preacher, began preaching in Spain in 1236 in an effort to stir a spiritual revival among the Jewish masses by encouraging a return to neglected ceremonial observances, especially the use of *tefillin*, *mezuzah*, and *šišit* (Ta-Shma 1972:418). Moses also authored an important compendium of Jewish law known as the *Sefer Mišvot Gadol*, "The Great Book of Precepts." In his discussion of the precept of *tefillin* Moses reports:

⁷ The first passage is also translated in Nemoy 1952:50; cf. 333, 336. Note also the story from Hasdai ibn Shaprut (tenth century) cited by Driver 1965:12.

⁸ See Nemoy 1972:762. On the Maghariya, see also Mansoor 1972:1088.

An epistle was sent from the Land of Israel (reporting) that a platform over the tomb of Ezekiel collapsed, and very old *tefillin* were found there, (arranged) according to the order of our teacher Moses (Maimonides) and Rashi. (*Sefer Mišvot Gadol*, Positive Command No. 22)⁹

No date is mentioned either for this discovery or for the epistle reporting it. Ezekiel's tomb is mentioned in a number of medieval Jewish sources as being located at a village twenty miles south of Hilla in central Iraq (Ben-Yaacob 1972:1096).

Another discovery of *tefillin*—actually a pair of discoveries—is mentioned in a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century digest of legal decisions known as the *Piskei Tosafot*. One of the decisions relative to the Talmudic tractate *Menaḥot*, which contains a lengthy deliberation on the *tefillin*, relates that "In Nehardea and in Jerusalem two pairs (of *tefillin*) were found, one (with the passages arranged) in accordance with Rashi and one in accordance with Rabbenu Tam" (*Piskei Tosafot* to B. *Menaḥot*, No. 92 [to Men. 34b], cited by Rabinowitz 1972:904). Again, no date is given for the discovery. What is meant by Nehardea in this medieval source is debatable. Nehardea, situated on the Euphrates in central Iraq, was the site of a leading Talmudic academy that was destroyed in 259. Conceivably the *tefillin* were found in the ruins of the academy. In medieval sources, however, Nehardea is sometimes used as an epithet for two other academies, that of Sura, Nehardea's erstwhile rival, and Pumbeditha, Nehardea's successor (Gilat and Bashan 1972:935). It is even possible that Nehardea is simply a rough approximation of the location of Ezekiel's tomb, and that the discovery reported at Nehardea is the same mentioned by R. Moses of Coucy.

At any rate, these discoveries of *tefillin* proved that both systems for arranging the biblical portions within the *tefillin* capsules could invoke

⁹ The *tefillin* were found under Ezekiel's head according to *Migdal Oz*, a commentary on Maimonides' Code by R. Shem Tob ibn Gaon (1283–1330) at Hil. *Tefillin* III, 5.

the support of ancient *tefillin*. This is exactly what has been shown by the *tefillin* discovered near the Dead Sea in modern times: the systems of both Rashi and Rabbenu Tam, as well as other systems, were all in use in antiquity (Goren 1964:496–510; Yadin 1969:14–15; Rabinowitz 1972:904).

Conclusion

These medieval discoveries seem often, if not always, to have been accidental. Modern archaeology, we like to think, is not only methodologically superior, but also systematic and intentional. But some of the most sensational discoveries of modern archaeology came about by sheer accident. Muhammad edh-Dhib's discovery of the first Qumran scrolls has already been mentioned. The Amarna letters were discovered in 1887 by an Egyptian peasant woman "who was digging out dust from among the ruins to lay upon her land for 'top-dressing'" (Budge, cited by Knudtzon 1915:1, 4). Ancient Ugarit was discovered in the spring of 1928 when "a peasant's plow struck what proved to be one of the stone slabs of the convex roof of a sepulcher" (Ginsberg 1945:42). The underground Jewish cemetery at Beth Shearim was discovered in the spring of 1936 when two youths followed yet another animal, a fox, down a hole in the ground and emerged into a catacomb (Kaplan 1977:169). As noted above, in the realm of accidents, modern scholars have no advantages over their medieval predecessors, which explains why the latter, too, were no strangers to the discovery of antiquities. Undoubtedly, medieval literature contains many more reports of such discoveries.

Additional Note

Apropos the discovery of ancient coins (above, pp. 490–91): When Moses Nachmanides (1194–1274) settled in Israel toward the end of his life, he found a silver shekel coin

in the possession of the Jewish elders in Acco (Chavel 1962:2.507–8). His description of the coin matches the Jewish coins of the second to the fifth year of the Jewish revolt against Rome (67–70 CE).¹⁰ Its inscriptions were deciphered for the Jewish elders by Samaritans who were able to read the script because of its similarity to their own. After having it weighed, Nachmanides concluded that its weight supported the weight of the shekel stated by Rashi (in the latter's commentary to Exod. 21:32) with which Nachmanides had previously disagreed (in his commentary to Exod. 30.13).

¹⁰ See Cohen 1987:36–37. The wording that Nachmanides reports for one side of the coin, *šql hšqlym*, is questionable, since Jewish shekels read *šql yšrʾl*. The text of Nachmanides here may be corrupt (there is considerable corruption in many of the manuscripts and early printings of his report about this coin). My thanks to Prof. Cohen for a helpful correspondence on this subject.

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