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“Gabriel’s Vision” and the Resurrection of Jesus

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The original stone measures three feet high by one foot wide, and it contains 87 lines of Hebrew text. However, the verses are written on the stone rather than being engraved, and it is presently being dated to the end of the first century B.C. or a little later. The origin of the stone is unknown, but it is thought to have come from the Transjordan region. The inscription is an apocalyptic message that is rather typical of Jewish writings, such as those found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is written in first person and the author claims to be Gabriel (line 77). Much of the message is missing and many parts of it are extremely difficult to decipher. Unfortunately, this is especially the case at a few key junctures of the reading.

A major translation by Jewish scholars Ada Yardeni and Binyamin Elizur proposes that in line 80, Gabriel is saying something about three days, but that the remainder of the words there are too obscure to decipher. The immediate context involves bloodshed, and one called "the Prince of Princes." The background for the discussion seems to be taken from several Old Testament books, relying chiefly on the book of Daniel (Yardini, *BAR*, Jan/Feb, 2008).

Another Jewish scholar, Israel Knohl, contends that the words in line 80 that Yardeni and Elizur considered to be indecipherable should be translated as Gabriel saying something like, "In three days you shall live" (Knohl, "By Three Days, Live," *Journal of Religion* [Vol. 88, April, 2008, pp. 150-152]). Knohl thinks that this indicates the hope that the Prince of Princes, listed in the next line (81), would die and then be raised from the dead. Further, Knohl takes this individual to be a man named Simon, who led a Jewish revolt against Rome in the first century B.C. and was slain by Gratus, a commander in King Herod's army, as recounted by Josephus. Thus, the last few lines of "Gabriel's Vision" express the hope that Simon would be raised from the dead, perhaps by winging his way to heaven in a chariot, like Elijah (line 67), and that justice would defeat evil (as per lines 19-21). (See Knohl, pp. 155-158.)

The Significance for Studies of Jesus’ Resurrection

To date, the chief point been made by scholars such as Israel Knohl is that perhaps shortly before the time of Jesus there was more than one competing notion of the coming Messiah in Judaism. Instead of only a Davidic Messiah who would conquer the nation's enemies, there is also a concept of a suffering Messiah. If Knohl’s translation of line 80 of "Gabriel's Vision" is upheld by scholars, then it may also have been believed by some that the suffering Messiah would rise from the dead in three days.

This interpretation would probably bother very few Christians. After all, believers have long argued that a dying and rising Messiah can be found in various Old Testament texts,

so why couldn't some pre-Christian Jews have talked like this just a few years before Jesus?

But some evangelical apologists have espoused the common Jewish scholarly view which emphasizes that Judaism at the time of Jesus had no concept of a rising Messiah. Rather, the New Testament notion is that Jesus was the only one to have risen from the dead in a resurrection body before the end of time. Thus, these apologists have asked how we would account for Jesus' unique resurrection that occurred out of the normal time sequence.

Actually, it does not appear that much is at stake here, at least so far. If Knohl's translation is upheld, perhaps evangelicals will have to revise or somehow add a caveat to their previous notion that Jews had no place for the resurrection of an individual before the end of time. Perhaps they would simply add that there may be a seemingly minority Jewish view that disputes this.

Personally, I think that the original point sometimes made by Christian apologists here is a relatively minor argument. In my dozens of publications on the resurrection, I rarely mention it at all, and do not emphasize it as a strong argument for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus.

But actually, when all things are considered, something more positive may be going on here. I would argue that "Gabriel's Vision" provides far more positive than negative features for a study of Jesus' resurrection. I will divide my responses into three categories:

Points for Clarification:

1. Before solid conclusions can be drawn, the precise wording of the inscription must be hashed out by scholars, especially with regard to the most important lines, such as 80-81. Knohl is a good scholar and I want to be clear that his translation may actually turn out to be the best one, and that's absolutely fine. Nothing turns on this point. But the fact remains that the best discussion can only proceed when we know the text with which we are dealing as exactly as possible. After all, as another Jewish scholar, Moshe Bar-Asher, states, "in crucial places of the text there is a lack of text. . . . in two to three crucial lines of text there are a lot of missing words" (as quoted in Ethan Bronner, "Ancient Tablet Ignites Debate on Messiah and Resurrection," *New York Times*, July 6, 2008). And the chief issue here among the words that must be determined are nothing less than the portion about rising from the dead. What exactly was Gabriel saying about the three days?
2. As Knohl states, his view of "Gabriel's Vision" confirms the thesis of his earlier book, *The Messiah before Jesus* (University of California Press, 2000). Again, his opinion is that besides a concept of a Davidic Messiah, some Jews also believed in a slain Messiah, who was the son of Joseph (Ephraim). Although he may well be right, other scholars need to weigh in on the issue, in order to confirm whether or

not this particular inscription supports Knohl's thesis. After all, this is not a common view in studies of Judaism.

Potential Negative Points:

1. As we just explained above, the thesis that Jews had absolutely no place for a resurrected Messiah, especially before the day of resurrection, might have to be amended.
2. Some popular commentators have barely raised the question of whether Christians may actually have copied from pre-Christian Judaism the idea of a resurrection after three days. On this interpretation, Christians more or less invented the notion from previous Jewish expectations. To my knowledge, no critical scholars have so far taken this approach. Even James Tabor comments that the "Suffering Messiah" ideas "were not creations of the Christian communities after Jesus' death. . . ." (Tabor blog, July 5, 2008). Rather, Tabor's comments support the concept that a popular view in early Christianity continued the tradition of some pre-Christian Jews, who did envision a suffering Messiah (Tabor blog, July 7, 2008).

Potential Positive Points:

1. Even if a suffering and dying Messiah is a minority view in the Jewish thought of the first century B.C., the idea that there were two kinds of messianic figures is a very nice complement to current evangelical thought. Some might postulate that even losing the absolute uniqueness of the timing aspect of Jesus—that Jews never thought of anyone being raised from the dead before the end of the world—is a fair trade for restoring the concept of a double messianic hope, which plays into so much of evangelical scholarship, most notably in the two comings of Jesus.
2. The close connection between "Gabriel's Vision" and Old Testament writings, especially the book of Daniel, further strengthens the propensity of some evangelicals for finding messianic prophecies or types in pre-Christian, Jewish thought. For if the notion of a suffering, dying, and resurrected Messiah is established from Old Testament times, this will simply feed the connection between the Testaments, including pointers to Jesus as the Christ. So it must be noted carefully that "Gabriel's Vision" presents very little disruption to current evangelical thought.
3. One of the strongest corollaries proceeding quite naturally from "Gabriel's Vision" is that Jesus' predictions of his death and resurrection (such as those found in Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; 14:27-28) would probably seem quite natural to his listeners who were familiar with this or similar Jewish traditions. Therefore it may be no surprise to see that critical scholars such as Knohl (cited in Bronner) and Tabor (*The Jesus Dynasty* [Simon and Schuster, 2006], p. 181; Tabor blogs, July 5 and 7, 2008) allow that Jesus and the early church favored the suffering Messiah view. If Jesus did predict and have knowledge of these events, that must be explained, as

well.

4. As critical scholars also acknowledge readily, early Christians did not invent the resurrection of Jesus for any reason, but least of all because of teachings like those in "Gabriel's Vision." Rather, the earliest testimony is clear: the chief impetus for the Christian proclamation was the appearances of the risen Jesus after his death, as taught in a text that almost assuredly comes from the 30s A.D. (1 Cor. 15:ff.). Most scholars also think that Jesus' tomb was empty, and this requires a physical explanation. In other words, the Christian teaching is based on what were perceived to be real events; Jewish expectations alone would not have done the job. That Jesus' early disciples truly believed that they had seen the risen Jesus is virtually never disputed in the scholarly community.

Conclusion

In my opinion, the recent translation of "Gabriel's Vision" is actually more positive than not. I think there is a very minimal amount of challenge to Christian beliefs. On the other hand, what is given back is greater still. Beyond the area of apologetics, the new information on the diversity within Jewish messianism is itself exciting. At any rate, there should be very little here to disturb Christians, or probably anybody else, for that matter.