

EDITORIAL: MYSTERIOUS BOOKS FROM JORDAN

The explosion, in the popular media, of stories about lead codices apparently discovered in Jordan has been followed by a burst of ‘revelations’ on the internet about them and about some of the persons involved. The confident claims, on the one hand, that these are genuine early Christian (or Jewish) products have been met with equally confident assertions that these are a transparent forgery. There remain a few, including myself, who find some of the reactions on both sides premature and unscholarly. Faced with certainties on both sides, it is becoming harder and harder to insist that we do not know the full truth yet and possibly never will, and that in the meantime there are clues but no certainty.

The outline of the story of these lead books has already been well publicized. About five years ago — in all probability — parts of a cave somewhere in northern Jordan were accidentally exposed and a Jordanian Bedouin discovered inside several metal ‘books’ — the number reported varies from 30 to 70. These ‘books’, and a few other items, are currently in the possession of an Israeli Bedouin (named as Hassan Sa‘ceda) who claims that they have been in his family’s possession for 100 years. (If this is true, his identification of the place of discovery is probably untrue). In September 2007 a David Elkington and his wife Jennifer were contacted by a third party and later shown one of the objects that had been brought to England on behalf of the ‘owner’. There is, however, some evidence that parts of this ‘find’ had already been shown to, among others, staff at the British Museum, who regarded them as of no historical value. In June 2009 a metallurgical expert was consulted by the Elkingtons. I have seen his report, which comments that:

‘The crystallization implies a rejection of impurities from the metal matrix over a very long period of time. The lead is not ductile and feels very hard, totally different from modern sheet lead. There are no obvious corrosion or oxide deposits because the item has been well handled and polished in contemporary times’. He concluded: ‘I find it astonishing to think of how many hours of work it would take to manufacture each and struggle to conceive of a method of faking the corrosion build up and hardening of the lead, never mind the content and meanings.’

A later test conducted in the Oxford Materials Characterisation Services (the report is confidential, but I have seen it) concluded that the lead was not of recent production and the pattern of corrosion suggested storage in a dry place for a long period, but further tests on another codex are being conducted at present. I should add that neither report is foolproof, but neither can they be simply dismissed either. They remain part of the wider puzzle.

Elkington approached a number of scholars, including myself. He told me his theory but asked me to try and check on the likely antiquity of the symbols and lettering. I consulted a number of colleagues around the world, and not one of them suggested that these were an obvious forgery: many agreed that a first century date could not be ruled out on the evidence of the images. Most adopted the same position as I did, and do (a position erroneously represented in much of the press as being an endorsement of the Elkington theory): that these are intriguing artifacts, but needing physical examination before any conclusions can be drawn. It seemed a further oddity of this affair that Elkington was anxious to consult as widely as he could from among scholarly experts, while insisting on confidentiality. This pattern did not seem to fit a publicity-seeking fraudster. Indeed, it was not he and his wife who leaked the story to the press, though they have since made the most of that leak to promote their own theory that the codices emanate from first-century Christians who fled to Jordan when Jerusalem was besieged by the Romans.

These speculations apart, the really interesting features of these ‘books’ are that, despite the apparent care taken in making them (and, if fraudulent, elaborately creating the impression of age), they are really quite uninformative. The vast majority of the sheets are covered in a limited repertoire of standard Jewish images — menorahs, date-palms, stars, cups, grape clusters, together with fragments of wall and palaeo-Hebrew letters (Fig. 1 shows a fairly typical example). Some of the lettering is quite formal, closely resembling Jewish and Samaritan writing in use two millennia ago. Other scripts are less formal, while some of the letters are unrecognisable and the *yod* is often written backwards. The letters are mostly purely decorative, sometimes in repeated sequences (and sometimes



Fig. 1. Selected pages from the enigmatic codices from Jordan; photographs courtesy of David Elkington.



Fig. 2. Selected pages from the enigmatic codices from Jordan; photographs courtesy of David Elkington.

in exactly the same relative position). Many of these features can be seen in Fig. 2, showing a sheet that is in some ways untypical, being only the size of a credit card, instead of about 20cm x 12cm, and not bound into a codex. On some sheets (relatively few), there is extended and non-repetitive writing that gives the impression of a text, but it has not yet proved possible to make sense of this. One respected academic colleague has identified the words *'lk btm'* ('I will walk uprightly'). Though I personally have been unable to verify this reading, that may yet be confirmed by others. Whether the remainder of the writing is in a code remains to be seen. But overall, these 'books' do not make any claims to be from a certain time or place or to point to particular events. Deception, where it exists, can only be in the appearance of antiquity; that may, of course, be enough, but it is nevertheless a poor and disappointing effort!

Once the objects are in public possession it should be possible to discover the full truth about them. But that may not happen. The effect of the recent publicity is unpredictable. Elkington has (and I have no reason to doubt this) been attempting to persuade the owner with the aid of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, which believes they belong to the Kingdom of Jordan. But Mr Sa'eeda is apparently under the impression that they are worth millions of dollars and would like to sell them. They may, then, either come into Jordanian possession, or go into private possession, or simply disappear. Whether or not Mr Sa'eeda knows where these came from, whether they are indeed of modern origin, may become a factor in their fate. Dr. Ziad al-Saad of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities is reported as believing that they are valuable, although he has clearly written (I have seen the email) that he is aware of the possibility that they are not, and therefore wishes to have them tested 'with involvement of an international team of experts'. But of course he is very hopeful of something valuable.

In the meantime, a few useful things can be learned from careful inspection of the images. The method of manufacture seems to have been by casting from a mould (according to the scientific test, a clay mould). This is a laborious way to create a single object, but ideal for mass production. Perhaps one reason, therefore, why lead was used for the majority of the plates is its low melting point. I have not yet tried to work out whether there are any identical sheets among these codices, but it would not surprise me if there were. Certainly many are very similar, but many are also illegible. The sheets have been bound into codices, many of them fastened by metal loops or wires on two, three or four sides. The reason for this is unclear, as is the reason for making them into codices in the first place, unless this procedure was inspired by the example of the lead books of Sacromonte, which were found between 1595 and 1606, and comprise 22 volumes of lead books, each containing inscribed circular lead leaves and folded lead covers, bound with lead wire.¹

Just one of the sheets (apparently of copper) whose image I have seen looks to contain an explicitly Christian image, but unfortunately it is one of those images with a rather low resolution, making it impossible to be reproduced here. The image appears to me to include a cross in the foreground, in the shape of a 'T' (but topped by a circle — reminiscent of the Ankh symbol). The cross stands in front of what looks like a city wall and behind it, inside the wall, is a small isolated stone building that, if we are dealing with a cross, probably depicts the Holy Sepulchre. Behind both at the top is a wall, rather like the fragments of wall that appear on other sheets, and so representing the Temple.² To the right of the cross, running vertically across most of the plate is something resembling a ladder, making one think of the ladder of Jacob. This, the only composite image I have seen makes sense theologically, though the placing of the cross outside the wall is suspicious. I am also surprised that David Elkington did not single out this image until I drew his attention to it. It may be, therefore, that this was sent to him later than the previous images (giving rise to a suspicion that it might have been concocted by its manufacturer in order to support the 'Christian' theory).

Another image (again apparently on a copper sheet) shows Alexander the Great (the horns are clearly visible) as well as an animal that might be a crocodile or possibly a serpent. Also to be seen are draught-animals pulling a cart in which sits a driver, and a wreathed head. At the top are Greek letters (Fig. 3). In 2010 David Elkington sent Peter Thonemann of Oxford the image of this sheet, and Thonemann identified the Greek as a quotation (with the letters *alpha* and *lambda* confused) of a stone tombstone from Madaba in Jordan, precisely dated to 108/9 CE, on display in the Archaeological Museum in Amman for the last fifty years.³ Hence it is almost certainly a very modern product.⁴ Another codex contains sheets with portraits of a round smiling clean-shaven face surrounded by either unkempt hair, or possibly flames, in a cartouche. This is thought by Elkington to be Jesus, with a



Fig. 3. Selected pages from the enigmatic codices from Jordan; photographs courtesy of David Elkington.

crown of thorns. A recent blogger, James Deltrick, has suggested that it is a replica of a photograph of the ‘Mona Lisa of the Galilee’ — a mosaic from Sepphoris that was uncovered by excavation in 1987. This is again likely, though not certain. In fact, there is another face, a rather modern-looking bearded one (Fig. 4), and to me reminiscent of 20th-century depictions of an Aryan Jesus. But whoever it is supposed to be, the style is hardly ancient.

So we should accept that there are *some* modern items here. The variety of images (Jewish, Christian, Greek, Egyptian) might suggest that not all the images come from the same source and that the cave may have been a repository for more than one hoard. But only testing of the sheets themselves can determine this. Thonemann, for one, is in no doubt that the entire collection is a modern forgery and that scholars should not be wasting their time on them. I disagree: they may well turn out all to be quite modern or fairly modern. I think the balance of evidence is falling in this direction. But it is not wise for anyone to draw such definitive conclusions about things one has not seen. Moreover, in any case much about the artifacts themselves is intrinsically curious, as is the story of their ‘finding’ and of the subsequent publicity. If this all turns out to be a ‘story about a story’ (in my view quite likely), it will nevertheless be a story worth unravelling. Meanwhile, the wave of scepticism now sweeping the internet is washing over David and Jennifer Elkington and their personal histories. Some fairly serious charges are being laid against them, including by those claiming to be family members. Paul/David Elkington and his wife are themselves accused of being ‘forgeries’.

The list of *dramatis personae* is not complete, either: Robert Feather, a metallurgist who has written on the Qumran Copper Scroll, and seems first to have broken the story, has been in contact with Mr Sa’eeda and has himself a theory that in some places the Hebrew letters on the sheets appear to



Fig. 4. Selected pages from the enigmatic codices from Jordan; photographs courtesy of David Elkington.

stand for Bar Kochba, leader of the second-century Judean revolt against the Romans, and for the Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who according to legend hid from the Romans in a cave for 13 years and also instituted the Kabbalah. There are indeed some features of these codices that might indicate a mystical or magical character, and perhaps these sealed books have some such character; not intended to be read at all. Feather states that he has had a piece of leather submitted for scientific analysis, the results indicating that it is nearly 2,000 years old. (I am also in possession of a piece of leather, courtesy of David Elkington, which I may try to have analysed, but without demonstrable proof of provenance the results will mean little, and in any case modern forgeries often use ancient materials.)

The Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) has commented that they are a 'mixture of incompatible periods and styles — without any connection or logic. Such forged motifs can be found in their thousands in the antiquities markets of Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East'. There are many reasons why the IAA might not be interested in dealing with articles that are both claimed by Jordan and possibly being offered for private sale (and export). Whatever the number of such motifs, lead books are not that usual. But at any rate, it seems that Israel will raise no objection to Jordanian efforts to reclaim these and may, if approached, be willing to assist in such a bid.

All that can safely be said at present is that between the writing of this report and its publication a good deal more information will have been discovered about the entire affair, and some of it made public. It seems to me worthwhile trying to secure them for scholarly and scientific examination, not least because if they are evidence of a dubious Jordanian industry it is worth knowing as much as one can about its methods (much useful research has been done on Israeli forging techniques). I do not at

present rule out the possibility of some historical value in some of these objects, but that is something that will have to be proved. Meanwhile, readers of the *PEF* are invited to recall the words of Daniel 12:4 and 8:

But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end. Many shall be running back and forth, and evil shall increase.

... I heard but could not understand; so I said, 'My lord, what shall be the outcome of these things?'

NOTES

¹ See further M. J. Hagerty, *Los libros plúmbeos del Sacromonte*. Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1980 (repr. Granada: Editorial Comares, 1998); A. K. Harris, 'Forging History: the *Plomos* of Granada in Francisco Bermúdez de Pedraza's *Historia eclesiástica*', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 (1999), 945-966.

² In fact, part of this wall is strangely reminiscent of the Herodian masonry of the 'Western Wall'!

³ Subsequent to the news of the find, and of Elkington's claims, Thonemann has publicized his

evidence: see 'The Messiah Codex Decoded', *TLS* April 6th, 2011.

⁴ The possibility that this phrase itself exists only on this tombstone, and that it could have been copied from elsewhere from the second century CE onwards cannot actually be ruled out: hence 'almost certainly' and not 'certainly'. But having sought Thonemann's opinion, and got it, Elkington did not share the news with anyone, nor modify his opinion. I first heard of this discovery from the internet along with everyone else.

PHILIP DAVIES

NOTES AND NEWS

ANSON RAINEY: The death has been reported of Anson Rainey, a leading expert of ancient Semitic languages and much else on 19 January 2011. He was born in Dallas, Texas, in January 1930 and had a multifaceted education in the USA, encompassing studies at military academies, a Baptist seminary and secular universities, leading to the award of a PhD for a thesis on *The Social Structure of Ugarit* from Brandeis University (1962). He then undertook research at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, specialising in ancient Egyptian and Semitic Languages. In 1963 Anson obtained a position at Tel Aviv University as Instructor teaching Ugaritic and Akkadian, and rose to the rank of Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Cultures and Semitic Linguistics at the same institution (1981). He gained experience of field archaeology at various sites in Israel over the years.

His research activities at universities in Israel and the USA, largely through the successful award of grants, led to a grammar of the West Semitic language reflected in the el-'Amârna letters. Anson collated all the el-'Amârna Tablets in the Cairo Museum together with other related textual material bearing Canaanite and North Syrian names from sites including Karnak, Luxor and Medinet Habu. In 1996, he published a four volume monograph on *Canaanite in the Amarna Tablets*. Although he made significant contributions to knowledge of other aspects of the ancient Levant including historical geography, through his numerous publications, the el-'Amârna Tablets formed the main focus of his research. Over the years, he examined the collections of el-'Amârna tablets in London (British Museum), Oxford (Ashmolean), Berlin (Vorderasiatische Museum), Moscow (Pushkin Museum), New York (Metropolitan Museum) and Chicago (Oriental Institute). In fact, he is probably the only scholar who has personally read all the extant 'Amârna letters. In the last years of his life, Anson was busy formatting and proofing all 350 'Amârna Tablets for publication, to include an introduction, glossary and collation notes.

Anson enjoyed an excellent reputation among his students. He was as conscientious about his teaching as he was about his research and, although a demanding taskmaster, he was generous in his encouragement of younger scholars.

His position on the Bible was somewhat traditionalist. Thus, Anson endorsed Lemaire's reading of *bytdwd*, 'House of David', on the Mesha stele, believing that both the Mesha and the Dan inscriptions related to the events recorded in the Bible with events in 853-851 BC, which included the battle in which Ahab, king of Israel, died fighting the army of the king of Damascus while his ally,