



Mysterious Hebrew stone depicts archangel Gabriel, called a 'Dead Sea Scroll in stone'

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JERUSALEM – An ancient limestone tablet covered with a mysterious Hebrew text that features the archangel Gabriel is at the center of a new exhibit in Jerusalem, even as scholars continue to argue about what it means.

The so-called Gabriel Stone, a meter (three-foot)-tall tablet said to have been found 13 years ago on the banks of the Dead Sea, features 87 lines of an unknown prophetic text dated as early as the first century BC, at the time of the Second Jewish Temple.

Scholars see it as a portal into the religious ideas circulating in the Holy Land in the era when Jesus was born. Its form is also unique -- it is ink written on stone, not carved -- and no other such religious text has been found in the region.

Curators at the Israel Museum, where the first exhibit dedicated to the stone is opening Wednesday, say it is the most important document found in the area since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

"The Gabriel Stone is in a way a Dead Sea Scroll written on stone," said James Snyder, director of the Israel Museum. The writing dates to the same period, and uses the same tidy calligraphic Hebrew script, as some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of documents that include the earliest known surviving manuscripts of Hebrew Bible texts.

The Gabriel Stone made a splash in 2008 when Israeli Bible scholar Israel Knohl offered a daring theory that the stone's faded writing would revolutionize the understanding of early Christianity, claiming it included a concept of messianic resurrection that predated Jesus. He based his theory on one hazy line, translating it as "in three days you shall live."

His interpretation caused a storm in the world of Bible studies, with scholars convening at an international conference the following year to debate readings of the text, and a National Geographic documentary crew featuring his theory. An American team of experts using high resolution scanning technologies tried -- but failed -- to detect more of the faded writing.

Knohl, a professor of Bible at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, eventually scaled back from his original bombshell theory but the fierce scholarly debate he sparked continued to reverberate across the academic world, bringing international attention to the stone. Over the last few years it went on display alongside other Bible-era antiquities in Rome, Houston and Dallas.

Bible experts are still debating the writing's meaning, largely because much of the ink has eroded in crucial spots in the passage and the tablet has two diagonal cracks the slice the text into three pieces. Museum curators say only 40 percent of the 87 lines are legible, many of those only barely. The interpretation of the text featured in the Israel Museum's exhibit is just one of five readings put forth by scholars.

All agree that the passage describes an apocalyptic vision of an attack on Jerusalem in which God appears with angels on chariots to save the city. The central angelic character is Gabriel, the first angel to appear in the Hebrew Bible. "I am Gabriel," the writing declares.

The stone inscription is one of the oldest passages featuring the archangel, and represents an "explosion of angels in Second Temple Judaism," at a time of great spiritual angst for Jews in Jerusalem looking for divine connection, said Adolfo Roitman, a curator of the exhibit.

The exhibit traces the development of the archangel Gabriel in the three monotheistic religions, displaying a Dead Sea Scroll fragment which mentions the angel's name; the 13th century Damascus Codex, one of the oldest illustrated manuscripts of the complete Hebrew Bible; a 10th century New Testament manuscript from Brittany, in which Gabriel predicts the birth of John the Baptist and appears to the Virgin Mary; and an Iranian Quran manuscript dated to the 15th or 16th century, in which the angel, called Jibril in Arabic, reveals the word of God to the prophet Mohammad.

"Gabriel is not archaeology. He is still relevant for millions of people on earth who believe that angels are heavenly beings on earth," said Roitman. The Gabriel Stone, he said, is "the starting point of an ongoing tradition that still is relevant today."

The story of how the stone was discovered is just as murky as its meaning. A Bedouin man is said to have found it in Jordan on the eastern banks of the Dead Sea around the year 2000, Knohl said. An Israeli university professor later examined a piece of earth stuck to the stone and found a composition of minerals only found in that region of the Dead Sea.

The stone eventually made it into the hands of Ghassan Rihani, a Jordanian antiquities dealer based in Jordan and London, who in turn sold the stone to Swiss-Israeli collector David Jeselsohn in Zurich for an unspecified amount. Rihani has since died. The Bible scholar traveled to Jordan multiple times to look for more potential stones, but was unable to find the stone's original location.

Israel Museum curators said Jeselsohn lent the stone to the museum for temporary display.

Lenny Wolfe, an antiquities dealer in Jerusalem, said that before the Jordanian dealer bought it, another middleman faxed him an image of the stone and offered it for sale.

"The fax didn't come out clearly. I had no idea what it was," said Wolfe, who passed on the offer. It was "one of my biggest misses," Wolfe said.

What function the stone had, where it was displayed, and why it was written are unknown, said curators of the Israel Museum exhibit.

"There is still so much that is unclear," said Michal Dayagi-Mendels, a curator of the exhibit. Scholars, she said, "will still argue about this for years."

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