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Source: *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Jan., 1949), pp. 235-247

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1452974>

Accessed: 15-11-2015 09:24 UTC

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“A COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK” IMPORTANT DISCOVERY OR HOAX?

By SOLOMON ZEITLIN, Dropsie College

A GREAT sensation has been created recently in scholarly circles by the discovery of ancient scrolls comprising the book of Isaiah and other Hebrew writings which are supposed to date back to the pre-Christian era. If true, this discovery could well be rated as one of the greatest discoveries in modern times. Unfortunately, despite the enthusiastic support hastily offered by distinguished scholars, these claims to antiquity are not only open to doubt but it is difficult to defend their validity once the documents are subjected to critical analysis.

The story of the sensational find is related by Doctor John C. Trever in the *Biblical Archaeologist* (Sept. 1948) in an article entitled “The Discovery of the Scrolls.” It appears that wandering Bedouin strayed in the vicinity of a cave near the northern end of the Dead Sea. To repeat the story as told by Doctor Trever, “The cave had partially collapsed. This had closed up the main entrance, leaving only a small hole through which to enter. At the time, apparently, some jars containing the scrolls were crushed, so that their contents became visible. Seeing the scrolls protruding from the fallen debris, the Bedouin pulled them out and tore off the cloth wrappings, thereby revealing the ancient contents. They took them to the Moslem Sheikh in Bethlehem, hoping that he would buy them. The Sheikh, however, thinking that the script was Estrangelo Syriac, suggested that they take the scrolls to the Syrians in Bethlehem. When the Syrians saw them they called their

Metropolitan, Athanasius Yeshue Samuel, in Jerusalem. He offered to purchase them from the Bedouin and thus they came into the library of St. Mark's Orthodox Convent in Jerusalem."

The sympathetic reader cannot help sharing the tremor of excitement when it appeared to the scholars in the American School that they were handling the most ancient copy of Isaiah, dating back fully one or more centuries before the common era, and other equally ancient writings in Hebrew, viz., a hitherto unknown commentary on Habakkuk and a Document belonging to a Jewish pre-Christian sect, of which no other trace has been left.

As the Isaiah scroll has not yet been published, I am unable to pass judgment except that it is safe to assume that its claim to antiquity will stand or fall with the claims of its companions, the *Commentary on Habakkuk* and the *Sectarian Document*. A facsimile page of the former and the description of the contents of the latter make it possible to submit them to examination and analysis. It is these documents that Professor Millar Burrows describes in the *Biblical Archaeologist* (September 1948) entitled "The Contents and Significance of the Manuscripts" and claims that they are authentic writings from a period antedating the destruction of the Temple. We shall now examine these documents.

As to the *Commentary on the Book of Habakkuk*, I had already expressed doubt about its authenticity in the previous number of the *JQR* (October 1948, p. 180). In the meantime a one page facsimile of the Commentary appeared in the issue of the *Biblical Archaeologist*, referred to above. I have no doubt now that it is indeed a commentary on the Book of Habakkuk but, far from being an ancient book, it clearly belongs to the Middle Ages.

It is axiomatic that the Jews did not write commentaries

on the prophetic book during the period of the Second Commonwealth. The very need for commentaries did not arise until a much later period. What then are the "proofs" for ascribing the Commentary to the period of the Second Commonwealth? Professor Burrows finds that there is striking similarity between the *Commentary on Habakkuk* and the *Damascus Document* found in the Cairo Genizah, for which an early date was assumed. Dr. Burrows has overlooked the fact that many scholars rightly doubt the premature theory of the origin of the *Damascus Document*, which actually belongs to the medieval period. Assuming with Doctor Burrows the kinship of the *Commentary on Habakkuk* with the *Damascus Document*, we may say the Commentary too would belong to the same period.

Professor Burrows bases his argument on the striking usage of the phrase מורה הצדק in the same sense in which it appears in the *Damascus Document*. Thus commenting on Chapter 1, v. 4 "For the wicked doth deceive the righteous" כי רשע מכחיר את הצדיק, the Commentary reads הוא מורה הצדק. The usage of this phrase "righteous teacher," (or the teacher of righteousness) according to Doctor Burrows, indicates a very early period prior to the destruction of the Temple.

Quite the contrary is the fact. The term "righteous teacher" was unknown in the period of the Second Commonwealth. It does not occur in tannaitic, apocryphal nor apocalyptic literature.

If the term "righteous teacher" had been in vogue, the author of the books *Enoch*, the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Apocalypse (Second Baruch)*, and the *Assumption of Moses* would have used it where they speak of wicked and righteous men. Neither is the term found in the New Testament nor in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. In the Gospels Jesus is sometimes called teacher,¹

¹ Comp. Mark, 12.14, 32; Luke, 20.21, 39; Matt. 22.36.

but the phrase "righteous teacher" never occurs. Again if the term had been in vogue it would have found its way to the Epistles and the writings of the early Church Fathers. The use of the term "righteous teacher" became prevalent in the gaonic literature, i. e. in the time of the Karaites, who, I believe, actually coined this term.

Professor Louis Ginzberg, in his book *Eine Unbekannte Jüdische Sekte*^{1a} collected many passages where the expression מורה הצדק is found. All of them are of a later period.² In the Talmud Bek. 24, the expression עד כי יבוא ויורה צדק לכם "until he will come and decide what is right for you" Rashi interprets to mean that Elijah will come and decide what is permitted and what is prohibited.³ The words מורה צדק are not found even in this passage of the Talmud which is of a late period.

That the Damascus Document, upon which Doctor Burrows relies greatly in fixing the date of the *Habakkuk Commentary*, is a relatively late document was argued by the late Doctor Büchler as early as 1913.⁴ Professor Ginzberg, through his great erudition, has demonstrated that the halakot in this document are actually parallel to those of the later Talmud and gaonic literature.⁵

I venture to add additional proof based on the following passage in the Document. "And at the end of the wrath, three hundred and ninety years after He had delivered them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, He remembered them and made bud from Israel and Aaron a root of a plant to inherit."⁶ The number three hundred and ninety years caused considerable speculation. Dr. Schechter

^{1a} Pp. 303-314.

² Ibid.

³ עד שיבא אליהו ויורה אם מותר או אסור.

⁴ *JQR*, pp. 429-85.

⁵ Op. Cit.

⁶ ובקץ חרון שנים שלוש מאות ותשעים לחיתו אותם ביד נבוכדנאצר מלך בבל פקדם ויצמח מישראל ומאהרן שורש מטעת לירוש.

emended the text to read four hundred and ninety years, which according to him, corresponded to the seventy weeks of years of Dan. 9.2, 24.⁷ I am of the opinion that this chronological date, three hundred and ninety, throws light on the question of the genuineness of this document. The “period of wrath” which, according to the author, will come at the end of three hundred and ninety years after He delivered them into the hands of the King of Babylon refers to Hillel.⁸ According to a late talmudic tradition the Second Temple stood four hundred and twenty years⁹ which added to seventy years of Babylonian exile gives four hundred and ninety years. A Baraita tells us that Hillel became Nasi a hundred years before the destruction of the Temple;¹⁰ — four hundred ninety minus one hundred years will give us three hundred and ninety years, and it was three hundred and ninety years since Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Jerusalem. Thus the author of this Document knew a late talmudic tradition, namely that the Temple had stood four hundred and twenty years.

It has been suggested that the scroll is not actually a commentary on the Book of Habakkuk but a kind of midrash. It is, however, clearly a commentary, not a midrash, and is of a late period. Midrash is of two types: — one consists of narratives based on biblical topics but not on the Bible itself, like the midrash found in Josephus, about Joseph and the wife of Potiphar,¹¹ or about Moses

⁷ S. Schechter, *Documents of Jewish Sectaries* V. 1. *Fragments of a Zadokite Work*, p. xxxii.

⁸ The great enmity towards the rabbis exhibited by the Karaites, especially toward Hillel is well known. According to Yefet ibn Ali Shammai was a Karaite. Comp. Pinsker, לקוטי קדמוניות, p. 186. ושמעה ואבטליון מסרוה לעמאי הצדיק והחסיד ע"ה ושמאי מסרה לבעלי מקרא ישמרם איום ונורא.

⁹ See Ar. 12b. בית שני כמה קם ארבע מאה ועשרין.

¹⁰ Shab. 15a. הלל . . . נהגו נשיאתן לפני הבית מאה שנה.

¹¹ Comp. Josephus, *Ant.* 2.4.

being a general of the Egyptian army, who fought the Ethiopians and later married an Ethiopian princess.¹² This type of midrash is very old. The second type is not narrative but legal in character. It is based on the verses of the Bible deducing laws from the biblical text either for the purpose of substantiating old halakot or introducing new laws under biblical sanction. This type is also old and had its origin during the Second Commonwealth.

Midrash like that on Genesis or on Lamentations is of a later period after the destruction of the Temple. It is a combination of legend, theological and halakic interpretations and sometimes etymological explanations of words. But this *Document on the Book of Habakkuk* has none of the above characteristics and plainly belongs to the class of commentaries prevalent during the early and later Middle Ages.

As to the companion text, Doctor Burrows writes: "The text which I have called the *Sectarian Document* may be described as the manual of discipline of some group within Judaism. The fact that the manuscripts were found not far from the Dead Sea suggests at once that this group may have been the sect of the Essenes, but the little that we know about this sect does not confirm this conjecture, though it by no means excludes the possibility that the Essenes were the community from which our text came. A few facts point rather to a group more or less closely related to the one which produced the work commonly known as the Damascus Document."

Professor Burrows is right when he says that the conjecture that these *Sectarian Documents* originated among the Essenes cannot be confirmed. Of course, other Jews besides the Essenes lived near the Dead Sea, not only in ancient times but during the Middle Ages.

¹² Ibid. 2.10.

As to the documents belonging to a group "closely related to the one which produced the work commonly known as the Damascus Document," this may well be, but as indicated above that Document belonged to the Middle Ages.¹³

It was announced that among the discoveries a book of Apocrypha was found. The term Apocrypha was ill chosen. The word Apocrypha means hidden, i.e., outside of the canon, that is, such books as the rabbis excluded from the Hebrew Bible, and as the Church excluded from the New Testament. There was no complete Hebrew canon as yet during the period of the Second Commonwealth and thus we cannot speak of an Apocrypha during that period.

The announcements of this discovery was later modified. Now it is claimed that documents were found "resembling some books of the Apocrypha. One of them is so much like the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament." If such works existed I should think that some references to them would be found in the vast literature of the Church Fathers. Such apocalypticism as the Book of Daniel would have been of great interest to them. The entire apocalyptic literature that we have was preserved by the Church. When, for example, the Italian scholar Ceriani, discovered *The Assumption of Moses*,¹⁴ he identified it by a passage quoted in the *Acts of the Second Nicene Council*.¹⁵ Hence before identifying a work as Apocrypha or Apocalyptic we must make a search in the literature of the Church Fathers to see if there is any passage quoted from it there. Above all the documents must be examined by a student of rabbinic literature in order to ascertain whether the terms and ideas as well are not of a late period.

¹³ A detailed study of the halakot given in this document will be given in the near future.

¹⁴ Ceriani, *Monumenta sacra et profana*, V. 1. 1861.

¹⁵ Origen in his book *De Principiis* also mentioned an apocryphal book entitled *Assumption of Moses*.

Scholars must be exceedingly cautious with new findings. Every student of Judaism and Christianity knows what confusion is produced by so called new discoveries — in our own time, to mention only two — the fragments of a *Zadokite work* and the *Slavonic Josephus*. The first mentioned document, before it had been carefully examined from every angle, was proclaimed to have belonged to a sect existing during the Second Commonwealth. Scholars of great erudition and renown accepted it but differed as to the exact date.¹⁶ Thus the history of the Jews during the Second Commonwealth was distorted. In the case of the *Slavonic Josephus*, H. St. J. Thackeray, one of the greatest scholars of Josephus in our age, accepted it as genuine and even published extracts from it in his edition of *Jewish Wars*, in the Loeb Classical Library. Only shortly before his death did he see his error and retract. Solomon Reinach was not even willing to retract when its authenticity was rejected by almost all reputable scholars. Credit must be given to the few reviewers who had the courage to denounce it as not a genuine work of Josephus. They did this in spite of the great publicity given it and its acceptance by almost all the scholars as an authentic work by Josephus.

There is a talmudic axiom *שבשחא כיון דעל על* which I shall paraphrase. It is very hard to erase an erroneous statement once it has been widely accepted.

ADDENDUM

After this article was ready for the press I received the October issue (1948) of the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, wherein appeared an article by Dr.

¹⁶ Comp. J. Lagrange, *Le Judaïsme Avant Jésus-Christ*. 1931, pp. 331–37. E. Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums*, V. 2. p. 47, n. 2.; G. F. Moore, The Covenanters of Damascus, a hitherto unknown Jewish Sect, *Harvard Theological Review*, 1911.

John C. Trever entitled "Preliminary Observation on Jerusalem Scrolls," in which is given a description of the *Sectarian Document* and a facsimile of one page. After examining the facsimile I am even more convinced that we cannot accept the date given as of the period of the Second Commonwealth. I was struck by further points of similarity to the Fragments of the Zadokite Work. Thus, in this photostat the word *El* (*Aleph Lamed*) appears several times as the Divine name. The names *Jehovah* and *Adonai* are not found. Similarly in the Zadokite Work the word *El* is found thirty-eight times while the names *Jehovah* and *Adonai* are not found even once. Even where it seems that the author of the Zadokite Work quotes a biblical verse where the word *Jehovah* is used he substitutes *El* as on page 3 where the text reads, וירגנו באהליהם ויחר אף אל בעדתם.¹⁷

Now during the period of the Second Commonwealth the words *Jehovah* and *Adonai* were used for the name of God. This is true of the post-exilic books Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah. It is also true of the apocryphal literature. For while the latter has come down to us chiefly in Greek, there is ample evidence that either *Jehovah* or *Adonai* was used in the original Hebrew judging by the Greek rendering of *κύριος*, Lord, in the Apocrypha as well as in the Septuagint.^{17a}

In the later period of the Second Commonwealth the word *Jehovah* was pronounced only in the Temple while outside the Temple *Adonai* was used.¹⁸ Even when the name God was written *Jehovah* it was pronounced *Adonai*.¹⁹ After the destruction of the Second Temple the word

¹⁷ See Ps. 106. 25, 40, וירגנו באהליהם . . . ויחר אף יהוה בעמו.

^{17a} On the usage of the name Heaven in 1 Maccabees, see my forthcoming edition of 1 Maccabees. (Jewish Apocryphal Literature)

¹⁸ M. Sota 7.6 במקדש אומר השם ככתבו ובמדינה בכניו.

¹⁹ Sec Pes. 50a לא כשאני נכתב אני נקרא נכתב אני בירד ה'א ונקרא באל'ף ה'א ונקרא באל'ף רל'ח; Yer. San. 10, נכתב בירד ה'א ונקרא באל'ף רל'ח.

Adonai also became sacred. Hence the Jews in their writings avoided mentioning the word *Adonai* and substituted the words Heaven, Power, Place and other equivalents. On the other hand, the names *Elohim* and *El* even in the Bible were not always considered sacred. Thus the Targum Onkelos and the Targum according to Jonathan always substituted two *yods* " for the name *Jehovah* or *Adonai* but they had no apprehension in using the words *Elohim* or *El* when so written in the Bible.²⁰ Had the Sectarian Document belonged to the period of the Second Commonwealth the author would have used either the name *Jehovah* or *Adonai* both which were in vogue among the Jews. The use of the word *El* by the author clearly indicates that it was written during the Middle Ages. The similarity of the Sectarian Document and the Fragments of a Zadokite work in this and other respects is indeed so remarkable as to indicate that they were composed during the same period. Is there not a possibility that they came from the same place?

In conclusion let me point out that scholars did not discover these Scrolls. They were received from the Metropolitan, Athanasius Yeshue Samuel of the St. Marks Orthodox Convent in Jerusalem, who purchased them from the Bedouin who said they had found them in jars in a cave near the Dead Sea. It is indeed extremely regrettable that the Bedouin were not thoroughly interrogated by scholars.

²⁰ Doctor Trever says, "Each case where the Divine name is so written is in a quotation from the text of Habakkuk. In his commentary the scribe always uses לַ for the Divine name." This method was employed by all medieval commentators of the Bible. When they quote the scriptures they use the Divine name as written. In the commentaries they designated Him by His attributes, but never referred to Him by the name *Jehovah* or *Adonai*.

See also Doctor W. F. Albright's "Editorial Note on the Jerusalem Scrolls": "The Habakkuk roll offers a different problem.—Is it Herodian or pre-Herodian? In my opinion it is not yet safe to date it more precisely than about the second half of the first century B. C." p. 3.

How much was paid to the Bedouin for the Scrolls is not revealed. Dr. Trever in his article in the *Biblical Archaeologist*, p. 50, relates that when he suggested photographing the Scrolls to the authorities of the Syrian convent they informed him that, "only very rarely was anyone allowed to photograph anything in their library." Dr. Trever continues, "My heart sank but I tried a new attack. Did they realize that by photographing them and getting them widely distributed, their monetary value would be greatly increased — witness the Codex Sinaiticus? This argument seemed to appeal to them for we began to consider how it was to be done."

Dr. Trever says in the same number, p. 49, "Late in August (1947) they (Bedouin) guided one of their priests, Father Bulos, from the Syrian convent to the site of the discovery. The intense heat, however, made it impossible for him to remain longer than a few minutes; for he had no water and only two melons with him. He recounted how he had seen not only the pieces of the cloth wrappings scattered over the floor of the cave but also numerous fragments of the manuscripts, broken pieces of jars in which they had been sealed, and evidence of ancient graves nearby." This is not sufficient evidence to establish that the Scrolls came from the cave. For proof, a more thorough investigation must be made on the site. More regrettable is the fact that we do not have the jars in which the Bedouin stated the Scrolls were found. Regarding the jars, Dr. Trevor says, "The Bedouin claimed that they had taken some of the jars that had not been broken and were using them for water jars." Dr. Trever continues: "I suggested to the Metropolitan that he try to purchase them from the Bedouin, but all his attempts failed."

To establish the antiquity of the Scrolls other overwhelming proofs must be advanced, and the jars produced

to determine the date. It is also of importance to contact the Bedouin in order to crossexamine them very carefully.

Judging from the Photostats which were reproduced in the above mentioned periodicals, the *Commentary of Habakkuk* and the *Sectarian Document*, we may classify them as belonging to the Genizah documents; thus they have no connection with the history of Judaism during the Second Commonwealth nor with the history of inter-testamental studies.

POST SCRIPTUM

Professor Sukenik's book entitled גניזה מתוך גניזה מגילות גנוזות מתוך גניזה קדומה שנמצאה במדבר יהודה wherein he deals with the manuscripts discovered in Palestine, has just reached me. He identifies one scroll as belonging to a sect which existed in the pre-Hasmonean period, which he calls מלחמת בני אור בבני חושך. Although I intend to deal with this at length in the near future, I must, however, say a word as to the *terminus ante quem* of this scroll. According to Professor Sukenik this scroll is not later than the Hasmonean period because he argues that the term כוהן הרואש is found instead of הכהן הגדול. He holds that the term כהן ראש was not in use after the Hasmonean period. הוה אומר, שמגילה זו חוברת לאחר חלוקתה של ממלכת אלכסנדר בין הדיאדוכים, כנגד זה הכיניי „כוהן הרואש" החוזר כמה פעמים במגילה משמש *terminus ante quem* שכן הוא מעיד שאין היא מאוחרת לתקופת החשמונאים, לפי שבמטבעות הנשיאים מבית החשמונאים כבר באה התואר „הכהן הגדול". Doctor Sukenik should have the *terminus ante quem* before the Hellenistic period since after the Restoration the term כהן הראש was not used but כהן הגדול.²¹ He refers to Ezra 7.5, where the words בן אהרן הכהן הראש are found. But

²¹ Comp. Hag. 2.2; Zec. 3.1, יהושע הכהן הגדול, Neh. 3.1, אלישיב הכהן, הגדול; 13.28.

these words do not mean that Aaron was High Priest but the *first priest*.²² הכהן הראש, ראשון להכהנים. As a matter of fact the term כהן הראש was used in the literature of the Middle Ages. Comp. also J. Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine Under the Fatimid Caliphs*, V. II, p. 275. This indicates that this scroll, which Doctor Sukenik's ascribes to the pre-Hasmonean period,²³ indeed belongs to the medieval period.

Again there is as Dr. Sukenik himself points out a definite similarity between this Scroll and the Damascus Document, מיר ראיתי את הדמיון הרב שיש בכמה דיבורים ושימושי-לשון השכיחים בשני הספרים. This is a clear indication that both were composed in the Middle Ages. It seems that the entire find is not an important discovery but possibly a hoax.

²² Comp. also LXX *ad. loc.* 'Ααρὼν τοῦ ἱερέως τοῦ πρώτου.

²³ הנני נוטה לייחסה. לחקופה שלפני החשמונאים, מבלי לציין לפי-שעה כל האריך. מריויק יותר.