



Follow-Up of the History of an Outstanding Hebrew Seal

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Abstract

This article explains how a group of 16 highest level scholars, specialized in ancient history of the Middle East, joined their efforts to save an exceptional Hebrew seal of the 7th century B.C., related to the discovery of the Biblical Deuteronomy in the temple of Jerusalem, published in BAR 13 (1987). In contrast, the concerned responsible of UNESCO escaped her responsibilities.

Keywords: Hebrew seal, Hilqiyahu, High priest, Deuteronomy, Hanan, temple of Jerusalem, Memory of the World Register

Introduction

In 1987, almost 40 years ago, BAR published an outstanding article which has had a lot of echo, entitled "Name of Deuteronomy's Author Found on Seal Ring" (Elayi [1]). This article revealed to BAR's readers the discovery of an exceptional Hebrew seal of the end of the seventh century B.C., a Biblical relic that had more than 2600 years of existence. It was related to the discovery of the Biblical Deuteronomy in the temple of Jerusalem. What is now the destiny of this Hebrew seal? This article is a testimony of its incredible tumultuous story. As it is in danger of disappearing, an operation to save it was undertaken by a group of 16 highest level scholars, through an application to UNESCO. The details of this operation and its result are presented in this article.

The seal

Having discovered an exceptional Hebrew seal in a private collection, I studied it and published it in three articles (Elayi [1-3]). Several other publications refer to this seal (for example Day [4]; http://www.interbible.org/interBible/decouverte/archeologie/2006/arc_060317.htm). The importance of this seal was

immediately recognized by Naaman Avigad, the main specialist of Hebrew seals (personal letter 1986).

The seal is set in a very beautiful silver ring, with two triangular areas, on each side, decorated with five small pellets, themselves embedded in small twists. The stone is a magnificent dark blue agate, veined with light blue. The name of the owner is written in Hebrew on three lines separated by double lines: '(Belonging to) Hanan, son of Hilqiyahu, the priest'.

Hilqiyahu was the high priest of the temple of Jerusalem, well known from Biblical sources. At the beginning of his reign (around 620 BC), the young king Josiah had removed from the temple of Jerusalem all the pagan cultural objects that his predecessors had introduced there, and commissioned the high priest to direct the restoration works which were required. It was during these works that the 'Book of the Law' was discovered in the temple and read to King Josiah. In fact, the law of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 12-25) became the basis of the great religious reform that Josiah entrusted to the care of Hilqiyahu (2 Kings 22,4-20). Hilqiyahu had two sons: Hanan who was a priest and Azaryahu who succeeded his father as

a high priest in the temple of Jerusalem. A bulla of Azaryahu, that is a clay print of his seal, was discovered in Jerusalem's excavations (Shiloh [5]). It was written by the same engraver who engraved the seal of his brother Hanan (Elayi [3]). I did not mention this bulla in my first article because its presentation was not available to me when I was preparing my study of the seal.

Application to UNESCO:

It was obvious for me that such an exceptional seal should not be in a private collection and in the risky environment of the Middle East. However, the collector had the satisfaction of owning such an important biblical document, related to the origin of the Deuteronomy, and was not ready to lose it without compensation. He said: "If it is to go into a private collection, I prefer to keep it in mine; if it is to go into a public collection, I am willing to discuss this possibility". In the trial of saving the seal, one of the persons concerned argued that it will be easier to buy it from the children of the collector after his death. The collector answered: "My children will never have the seal because they will not find it after my death". I thought that UNESCO could help to place this seal in the public collection of a museum because it has a program to preserve such exceptional historical documents. A meeting with Joe Springer, Senior program specialist of UNESCO, confirmed that this historical document was eligible to be presented to this program (letter 6 November 2012).

The application was presented to UNESCO in 2014 by Josette Elayi, Honorary researcher, CNRS, Paris, and Jesus Garcia Recio, Director of the Instituto Biblico y Oriental, Leon, Spain. Our application was supported by an impressive scientific committee of 14 other members:

- i. Bauks Michaela, Professor of Biblical Studies, University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany
- ii. Becking Bob, Senior research Professor for Bible, Religion and Identity, Utrecht University, Netherlands
- iii. Davies Graham, Professor at the Fitzwilliam College, University of Cambridge, UK
- iv. Elayi Alain Gérard, Maître de Conférences honoraire, University of Paris XIII, France
- v. Froehlich Ida, Professor at the Pazmany Péter Catholic University, Piliscsaba, Hungaria
- vi. Garcia Martinez Florentino, Emeritus Professor of the University of Groningen, Netherlands; Research Professor of the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium; Member of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences
- vii. Gordon Robert P, Emeritus Professor of Hebrew, University of Cambridge, UK
- viii. Halpern Baruch, Covenant Professor of Jewish Studies, Professor of Religion and Linguistics, Center for Archaeological Science, Director of Jewish Studies, University of Georgia, USA
- ix. Millard Alan, Emeritus Rankin Professor of Hebrew and Ancient Semitic Languages, University of Liverpool, UK
- x. Perez Fernandez Miguel, Professor (catedrático) of Bible and

Rabbinic Literature, Granada University, Spain

- xi. Piovanelli Pierluigi, Professor of Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity at the University of Ottawa, Canada
- xii. Treballe Julio, Professor de Estudios hebreos y Arameos, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain
- xiii. Vanderhooft David, Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Boston College, Chestnut Hill, USA
- xiv. Vervenne Marc, Président de la Commission flamande pour l'UNESCO en Belgique, Recteur honorifique de l'Université de Leuven, Professeur en linguistique et littérature hébraïques, Belgique.

Unfortunately, our application has been rejected by the sub-committee of 'Memory of the World Register' (letter of Iskra Panevska, specialist of the program, 1 December 2015). The arguments justifying this refusal are as follows: the proposal does not meet the criteria of 'authenticity, global significance and accessibility'.

Regarding the criterium of 'authenticity', of course it is unthinkable to make the publication of the seal and to present the application to UNESCO without in-depth inquiries and secure expertise.

Regarding the 'global significance', this historical document belongs to the Bible, which is known in the whole world, certainly much more than other documents accepted in the 'Memory of the World Register'. This seal is a major historical document for historians and an exceptional relic for believers of the Jewish and Christian religions. The international experts of our committee are also specialized in the diffusion of the Bible across the world.

As for 'accessibility' to this Hebrew seal, the aim of our application was precisely to make it accessible.

Conclusion

Let me first highlight the fantastic positive reaction of the scientific international community to save this seal. In contrast, UNESCO failed in its mission by hiding behind formal dubious arguments, whereas the aim of the program 'Memory of the World Register' is to preserve such exceptional documents. Prof. Robert P. Gordon sent me a letter proposing to fight against this decision: 'Should there not be an account of this debacle written up for wider dissemination, ... I do not think we should let them brush the application aside with impunity' (letter 24 November 2015). However, I considered that we and the scholars of the committee had spent enough time, effort, and money while the people who should have supported it the most have been absent.

If the possibility of saving this outstanding historical document still exists, it is continuously decreasing more and more every single day. However, the positive element is that if it disappears, at least its publications will remain.

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

References

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