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Chapter One

The Pharaoh’s Magic: Imagery and Diplomacy in the Late Bronze Age
Today we imagine Egyptian magic through the lenses of the Bible and films. But what was the ‘actual’ role of ancient Egyptian magic in the royal palace when the king received foreign delegations?

Imagine you are an upper class Hittite. In your own country you serve your king and live a comfortable life in a spacious estate surrounded by many exotic luxury goods. You have the respect of your peers and command the service of the rest of the population. As a friend of the king of Hatti you are also well-versed in foreign politics, and so you are assigned to visit the king of Egypt and deliver gifts.

So you gather your horses and servants to load your caravan for the trip south. After traveling for a few days and nights, you are met by the embassy of the king of Egypt who welcomes you and showers you with kindness and compliments. The new travel mates provide extra protection for the precious goods you are bringing. As your
caravan reaches the Nile, there is a ship waiting and you sail in comfort to meet the pharaoh.

An Egyptian envoy has told you that their king is god on earth with no equal, who will expand the borders of Egypt both north and south. Such veiled threats weigh heavily; there is pressure not to strain diplomatic relations between your king and the king of Egypt. In fact, the safety of your friends and family potentially rides on your proper behavior in the presence of the pharaoh. You know to follow the rules of the court in his presence; bow low in obedience, and reiterate your country’s loyalty.

The next morning your delegation presents the gifts to the pharaoh. When you are brought before the king you prostrate low to the ground, with your head on the stone floor. You lie as if dead. The king orders you be lifted to speak and it is that moment you are brought to your feet and take witness of your surroundings.

And this is where the magic happens, literally. In the audience hall the king is surrounded by palatial decorations, many of which depict foreigners, that is to say, you. The most common of these depict a Nubian and a Levantine as captives with their arms bound behind their backs. These images of captive foreigners mostly adorn areas where they are stepped on by the pharaoh. In Egyptian ideology, the objects evoke the Egyptian idea written on one of king Tutankhamun’s footstools, “every foreign land is under your (the king’s) sandals.”

These images were tools of political intimidation when seen by foreign emissaries but they also functioned on a supernatural level. Many images of captive foreigners being crushed by the king were placed where they were not visible to palace visitors, for example the gilded arm of Thutmose III’s throne and Tutankhamun’s sandals and footstool. This imagery of destroying foreigners was not
for the sake of foreign relations but because through Egyptian magic, images affect reality. The crushing of images has real life consequences. In the king’s act of walking, or sitting on his throne, he is, through sympathetic magic, dominating all the people in the world. Foreigners were also the paramount symbol for the concept of “chaos” since the beginning of Egyptian history. Through captive foreigner imagery the king is performing one of his primary roles of destroying chaos and keeping cosmic order.

To the Egyptians, the king is shaping the invisible world and the tangible world as he sits on his throne. He is performing a supernatural action of crushing the foreigners while he greets real-life foreigners in the audience hall. Adding to this, the king is aware of his pivotal role in the universe even though he is corresponding with “brother kings” as if they were equals.

Let’s again put ourselves in the sandals of the guest from Hatti to see how international relations were affected by imagery in the royal hall. While prostrating, you would surely have a good look at the dais, a platform elevating the king above all others in the room, which was sometimes decorated with bands of captive bound foreigners. Captive Levantines and Nubians could also be rendered on the throne base, throne arm, footstool and cane of the king. Emissaries at the palace of Ramesses II at Qantir would have even seen versions of themselves with their heads being gnawed off by a lion at eye level when bowing to the king. The stairs leading up to the throne could also be inlaid with images of dead foreigners that the king would trample en route to his throne.

Without saying a word the captive foreigner imagery conveys a royal threat - if you do not obey the king, you will be crushed. Such depictions elevated the king in discussions with foreign emissaries at the palace.
But the story does not end here. Upon returning home the foreign delegates would relay their experience to their king. In letters corresponding with the pharaoh (written in Akkadian, not Egyptian) brother kings expressed concerns that the parity established through friendly letters and gifts was not being properly expressed to the people of Egypt. In one letter a Babylonian king inquires why his gifts were being displayed with those of a vassal state’s tribute. In another, a Hittite king is upset with the fact that Ramesses II represents a military victory on Egyptian temples when the battle actually resulted in a draw.

Such correspondence reminds us of one of the basic problems in interpreting the historical record. If there is a state sponsored version of reality, another version of reality corresponding with the archaeological record likely exists as well. If written down, we may even come across a third or a fourth version, as understood by separate ancient kingdoms. These different realities can exist at the same time within the minds of the people who are actively creating history.

By imagining circumstances that existed in the past the modern reader is reminded to be alert to narratives propagated through state sponsored ideologies. By identifying historical precedents, including ‘magical’ ones, perhaps scholars can help limit the damage when political realities collide today.

*Flora Brooke Anthony holds a PhD from Emory University and is the author of *Foreigners in Ancient Egypt: Theban tomb paintings from the early Eighteenth Dynasty* (1550-1372 BC).*
Chapter Two

The Exodus in Archaeology and Text
By Richard Elliott Friedman

For too long Biblical studies was made up of Bible scholars who weren’t trained in archaeology or historical method. And then for too long we leaned on archaeologists who weren’t trained in biblical texts, their history, language, and authorship. Father of Biblical Archaeology William F. Albright’s ideal was that eventually the two would work together. They separated for a while, but their inevitable reunion has begun.

We can read a story closely, excavate the earth carefully, and figure out what happened that led to that story. And one of the first fruits of this high-yield merger of literary study, historical study, and archaeology is a grasp of what happened in Egypt all those years ago, the story behind the story.

I mean real textual evidence, not just reading the Bible and taking its word for it that sticks became snakes and seas split. And how does this connect with the archaeological evidence? And I mean real archaeological evidence — findings, artifacts, material culture, stuff — not just surveys that didn’t turn up anything.

The starting-point, widely recognized, is that there were Western Asiatic people in Egypt. Call them: Asiatics, Semites, Canaanites, Levantine peoples. These aliens were there, for centuries, and they were coming and going all along, just not in millions at a time.

The second step was to identify a group among these as the Levites. They are the ones in Israel with Egyptian names, the ones who foster circumcision, a known practice in Egypt, the
ones with connections to Egyptian material culture: a Tabernacle that has parallels with the battle tent of Rameses II, an ark that has parallels with Egyptian barks.

It is their stories (the E, P, and D sources in the Biblical text, but not J) that have a series of known items of Egyptian lore: the hidden divine name, turning an inanimate object into a reptile, the conversion of water to blood, a spell of three days of darkness, death of the firstborn, parting of waters, death by drowning, and stories of quotas for brickmaking and the use of straw in mudbrick — also Egyptian practices.

It is only those three Levite sources that tell the story of the plagues and exodus itself, and only those three give laws about treatment of slaves. Only those Levite sources command that one must never mistreat an alien. They say the alien is to be treated the same as an Israelite, 52 times, “because you were aliens in Egypt.” But this never occurs in the non-Levite J source, or anywhere else in ancient Near Eastern law.

And genetically, the so-called “Cohen gene” isolated by analyzing Jewish genomes reflects an apparent commonality among the Aaronid priestly group that separated from the rest of the Levites; but there is no clear Levite-specific genetic signature. Cohanim, starting from a small group, perhaps a family or clan, should be related genetically. Levites, starting from a large, diverse group of immigrants from Egypt, should be diverse genetically. And that is just what the genetic research showed.

This evidence takes some chapters to tell in The Exodus, a work of detective non-fiction, with details, sources, and acknowledgement of the many Bible scholars and archaeologists who contributed the pieces. I’ve rattled off that evidence in a paragraph here. But even this little précis should convey that we are at last dealing with tangible, mutually supportive, data that reflect both text and archaeology.

If it was just the Levites, other classic arguments, too, are transformed. One of the
turning-points in many arguments about the exodus has been the Merneptah stele. Pharaoh Merneptah’s inscribed stone contains the earliest known occurrence of the name Israel. Scholars date it to circa 1205 BCE or a little earlier. So, scholars said, if Israel was a settled people by 1205, then the exodus had to be before that. But this still presumes that all of Israel made the exodus and then arrived in Canaan. If it was just the Levites who made the exodus, while the rest of Israel was back in their land, then this whole argument disappears. The Levites’ exodus could have been before or after Merneptah. As Biblical scholar Abraham Malamat said, “This stele has little or nothing to do with the Exodus.”

People who challenge the historicity of the exodus frequently point to the absence of any references to it in ancient Egyptian sources. This too is dependent on an assumption of a big exodus of a mass of Israelites. There is no reason to be surprised that there’s no mention of Israelites in Egypt when, after all, there’s no mention of Israelites in the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15 either!

A group of Levites, of unknown size, leaving at an unknown time, under unknown circumstances, didn’t require a headline in the Egyptian Daily News. People are looking for a reference to a specific nation, Israel. But no entity named Israel was there. And the group that was there would not necessarily be called “levites” in Egyptian sources either because that might not have been the name by which they were known there. levi was a Hebrew word for an attached person, so a levite group in Egypt probably was not known to Egyptians by that term. We have no idea what they’d be called there.

Some ask: why aren’t the pharaohs’ names in the Torah given? They argue that this is evidence that the stories were invented by writers who had no idea of the names of ancient pharaohs. But on the hypothesis that the oppression and exodus of the Levites are historical, we must consider whether there could be other reasons why the
pharaohs are unnamed. Perhaps the names of the pharaohs were simply no longer preserved in memory or written tradition by the time the stories were written.

The authors had no sources that recorded (or cared about) the pharaohs’ names. They cared about names that mattered much more to them: Levi, Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Zipporah, even the midwives Shiprah and Puah. These are names of the story’s heroes. But did the authors care whether it was Pharaoh Rameses II or III? Or Merneptah? Apparently not. An absence of pharaohs’ names doesn’t mean an absence of an exodus. Indeed, there may not have been any single pharaoh’s name to remember. On the hypothesis that there were Levites, “attached” outsiders, in Egypt through centuries, who then left, we don’t know if any one pharaoh stood out as their prime oppressor.

The principal points that people raise in doubting the exodus are mostly about numbers: We’ve found no remnant of the two million people in the Sinai region, no widespread material culture of Egypt in early Israel, no records in Egypt of a huge mass of Israelite slaves or a huge exodus.

True. But none of this is evidence about whether the exodus happened or not. It is evidence only of whether it was big or not.

The likelihood that just the Levites were the ones who experienced the exodus forces us to reexamine many of the classic arguments. Either these arguments involve a mass exodus of all Israel, or they don’t come to terms with connecting the archaeology with the texts and their authors.

In the age of cyber-archaeology, sophisticated literary study, and advanced linguistic knowledge of biblical Hebrew, we can get at the story behind the story. And here’s the pot of gold at the end of this particular historical rainbow: we don’t have to choose
between recapturing the history and caring about the values we might derive from the exodus. Once we exhume the history, we'll find, more intensely, more vividly, more really than before, the fruits that those events bequeathed for all the centuries that followed since then.

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Chapter Three

Rebuilding Eden in the Land of Eridu
The site of Eridu had a special place in the Mesopotamian tradition. In Babylonian literature the relevance of Eridu was always more religious than political. For example, in the Sumerian King List the gods first handed kingship down to Eridu. In Babylonian mythology Eridu was founded by the god Enki/Ea, who warned Zuisudra, the Sumerian Noah, about the flood. Moreover, the central core of the site of Eridu, whose name became later interchangeable with Babylon, was Enki/Ea’s temple, called the House of the Aquifer. But what about the archaeology of Eridu?

Eridu is situated about 12 kilometres south-southwest of Ur (Tell Muqayyar) and comprises seven mounds. Across more than 8,000 years settlement at Eridu shifted over more than 25 square kilometres. Though today it is located in the desert, in antiquity Eridu’s principal ecological asset was the southern Iraqi marshland, an ecology that has been dramatically altered since the 1970s.

The archaeological significance of Eridu is also related to the deep stratigraphy of its principal mound.
(Abu Shahrein), explored in the 1940s by pioneering archaeologists Fuad Safar and Seton Lloyd, which revealed the oldest southern Mesopotamian temple. It is also related to the fundamental pottery study by Joan Oates of the Eridu assemblages that created a guideline to understand the passage between the prehistory and history of the ancient Near East, including the Sumerians entry onto the historical stage.

The image of Eridu as an isolated religious cathedral in the desert was also dramatically revised by the Oriental Institute of Chicago surveys in central-southern Mesopotamia, particularly the Ur and Eridu regional survey directed by Henry Wright. This undisputed guide to land use on the Central Floodplain of the Euphrates was changed again during the 1990s by different experimental studies on complex systems, and specifically those focusing on simulation of Mesopotamian settlement patterns using advanced computational methods.

Our project on the Eridu Hinterland focuses on both the cultural and symbolic functions of the Holy Sanctuary of Enki in the Abu Shahrein landscape through more than eight millennia. We assume that Eridu was not an urban center with a redistributive economy, as Uruk and Ur later were, but was instead the center of the Sumerian economic, religious and political identity.
Previous settlement research on the Eridu Hinterland showed that isolated settlements atop ‘turtlebacks’ or rock outcroppings were characteristic of the Ubaid period (ca. 5500-4000 BCE). By the Early Uruk period (ca. 4000-3500 BCE) settlements were dispersed throughout the alluvium, and could be mapped in linear patterns along what were presumed to be relict branches of the Tigris and Euphrates.

More and larger sites were visible as surface scatters, some approaching genuinely urban scale (20 hectares and above). Notable among these was Eridu, at 40 hectares but in the succeeding Late Uruk period (ca. 3500-3000 BCE), while Ur continued as a small town of 10 hectares, Eridu seems to be gradually abandoned, probably in connection with rapid desiccation of the surrounding plain. Only in the Early Dynastic II Period (ca. 2900-2350 BCE), when a Royal Palace was built on the top of Mound 2, Eridu becomes an important urban center.

During the Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2112-2004 BCE), Abu Shahrein reached its greatest size, as attested by the eroded platform of the impressive, still-preserved ziggurat. Though it now only rises to a height of about 9 meters, it is clear that the base supported a much higher superstructure. Eridu was abandoned for long periods, until it was finally deserted and allowed to fall into ruins in the 6th century BCE. The encroachment of neighbouring sand dunes and the rise of a

Below: The Early Dynastic palace on the top of the Mound 2 at Eridu.
saline water table set early limits to its agricultural base so, in its later Neo-Babylonian development, Eridu was probably rebuilt only as a temple site, in honor of its earliest history.

We propose that the landscape transformations of the Eridu Hinterland were the result of a confluence of political, social and economic factors. The first human adaption to a land between the desert, the alluvial plain, the marshlands, and the sea was not the result of an economically driven settlement process, but something more complex and adaptive. Our goal is to integrate classical and natural computing models, and models inspired by biological systems.

The Eridu Landscape Project’s agreement with the State Board of Antiquities & Heritage (SBAH) was signed in August 2014 and the first preliminary survey undertaken by the Iraqi-Italian archaeological mission in October 2014. Our plans for the next season, if adequately financed, will start with an intensive archaeological, geological, and ethnographical survey of the entire settled area (25 km2) and surrounding landscape. The survey will continue for three years, when a detailed analysis of the natural and cultural assessment will be published. This will define the boundaries of a new protected natural and historical park: an Eden artificially rebuilt as the origin spot of the Mesopotamian past.

* I am grateful to La Sapienza University of Rome who made my research on southern
Mesopotamian urbanism possible, to Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation who sustained our preliminary field activities on the Land of Eridu and to the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities & Heritage (SBAH) for the permission for excavate at Eridu.

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**For Further Reading**


Chapter Four

The Grammar of Messianism
Messianism is one of those classic topics in Jewish studies that suffers not for lack of attention but rather for confusion surrounding the concept itself. My new book *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* picks up where the classic studies of ancient Jewish messianism leave off. My project is not simply to do what the classic surveys (such as those by Joseph Klausner, Sigmund Mowinckel, Gershom Scholem, and, more recently, John Collins and Joseph Fitzmyer) have done, only a bit more critically or more up-to-date, but rather to ask a different set of questions altogether. I take it that the two questions that have dominated modern research on the subject—first, where is the phenomenon of messianism attested in antiquity? and second, what are the major types of messiah figures represented in the sources?—are more or less settled.

One might get the impression from the secondary literature that these are the only questions worth asking about the primary sources. In fact, however, they represent only the beginning, not the end, of a historical study of early Jewish and Christian messiah texts. Granted that we can sketch a rough timeline of the production of ancient messiah texts and identify a taxonomy of types of messiahs, we are now in a position to ask a whole range of potentially enlightening interpretive questions, especially questions about the inner logic of each text, why it makes the particular choices it does—questions, that is, about the grammar of messianism.

Viewed from this angle, ancient messiah texts constitute one example—an excellent
example, in fact—of the vast, sprawling ancient Jewish and Christian project of scriptural interpretation. As the last generation of scholarship, especially, has shown, in antiquity, virtually all Jewish discourse—and, equally, Christian discourse—consisted of scriptural interpretation of one kind or another. As Michael Fishbane has put it, to speak about anything significant was to speak in the language of scripture.

This is the historical context within which ancient messiah texts become intelligible. They represent so many creative reappropriations of an archaic scriptural idiom to talk about matters of contemporary concern to their latter-day authors and audiences. As Martin Karrer has pointed out, in Judaism of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the actual performance of ritual anointing was associated primarily not with persons (and, in any case, certainly not with kings) but with sacred artifacts, especially the altar and related cultic paraphernalia in the Jerusalem temple. Despite this fact, however, almost without exception Hellenistic- and Roman-period Jewish texts use the language of anointing in a manner that reflects the archaic Israelite practice, not the contemporary one. It is deliberately antiquarian usage; that is precisely the point. Ancient messiah texts interpret, order, and legitimate the present by using the language of the past, which is to say, the scriptures.

My title, The Grammar of Messianism, is not a promise of a survey of terrain, but rather a thesis statement with a suppressed verb. That is to say, my goal in this book is not to map exhaustively the rules of ancient messiah discourse (to do so would be
painfully tedious, even if it were possible), but to show that the relevant primary texts do amount to such a discourse, that messianism is effectively a grammar. To this end, each chapter of the book takes up a classic problem in the modern study of ancient messianism—for example, the messianic vacuum hypothesis (i.e., that there are certain conspicuous gaps in the history of messianism), the quest for the first messiah, and the Jewish messiah–Christian messiah distinction, among others—and shows how the problem dissolves when viewed from the revisionist angle advocated here. The book thus takes the form of a proof, by means of a series of related studies, that in antiquity the messiah was not an article of faith but a manner of speaking.

One key finding of the book is the remarkable resilience of literary features of messiah texts from one epoch to subsequent ones. Granted, a certain feature (for example, a gentile messiah or a suffering messiah) may only come about in the first place because of a certain historical development (in these cases, the decree of Cyrus or the crucifixion of Jesus), but ever after that feature remains part of the trove of discursive resources on which the exegetical project draws. But—this is the main point—the whole thing is an exegetical project, a centuries-long discussion within and between the two religious communities about their common scriptures, their overlapping polities, and what the former has to do with the latter.

When Shakespeare had Richard II say, in the passage comprising the epigraph to the book, “Not all the water in the rough rude sea/Can wash the balm off from an anointed
“king” (Richard II, act 3, scene 2), he summarized unwittingly the situation of messiah language in antiquity. The use of the lexicon of unction to talk about affairs of state—king and priest, dynasty and coup d’état, past and future, real and ideal—persisted for centuries after the lapse of the Israelite institution whence it originated, becoming a fixture in the literature of ancient Jews and Christians. The future of the study of messianism lies not in vain attempts to measure the vigor of the phenomenon, nor in pedantic quarrels over the definition of “messiah,” nor in lightly revised taxonomies of redeemer figures, but rather in fresh expeditions into the primary sources to trace the way the words run, in the exploration, that is, of the grammar of messianism.


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Chapter Five

The Christian Monks Who Saved Jewish History
The Christian Monks Who Saved Jewish History

By: Malka Simkovich

Many Jews view the Second Temple period as a “filler” period that bridges the biblical period and the rabbinic period. Some figures who appear in the latest strata of the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah are viewed by many of these Jews as proto-rabbis who forged the way into the rabbinic period. Yet it was during the late Second Temple period—the second century BCE through 70 CE—that Jews became especially prolific, writing a vast body of diverse literature that includes the entire body of the Dead Sea Scroll library, the voluminous treatises written by Philo of Alexandria, and the writings of Josephus, not to mention the many other Jewish texts written in Greek. And this only comprises the material that survives to the present day. One can barely imagine how many thousands of other documents were composed and did not survive the two millennia.

One of the most remarkable anomalies of Jewish history is that its most popular literature, its documents that were translated from Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic into languages such as Latin, Slavonic, and Ethiopic, were preserved mainly by Orthodox Christians instead of Jews. For centuries, Christian monks carefully copied these Jewish texts in scriptoriums, rooms where scribes copied books, usually books that would be placed in their monastery’s own library, where they sat for centuries.

Some of the most popular Jewish documents that were highly circulated among Jews in the ancient world were preserved in monasteries that thrive to this day: St. Catherine’s monastery in the Sinai Desert, and the twenty monasteries on the Greek peninsula of Mount Athos. Both St. Catherine’s and Mount Athos were settled by Orthodox Christians in the early medieval period, and both are geographically isolated: St. Catherine’s is surrounded by desert, and Mount Athos’s rugged mountainous terrain, with its sharp cliffs that give way to the sea, is difficult to access.

Tradition has it that since the medieval period, no females have been admitted to the peninsula. The ban on females visitors to Mount Athos extends even to animals,
although this ban is not enforced.

**St. Catherine’s Monastery**

Two of the oldest surviving copies of the Bible were discovered at St. Catherine’s monastery in the 1800s. One is the Codex Sinaiticus, a fourth century CE codex comprising the books of the Old Testament, the books of the Apocrypha, the New Testament, and some other Christian documents called the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas, all written in Greek. This codex was first discovered in 1844 by the German scholar Constantin Tischendorf, but it was only in 1859, upon one of his return visits to St. Catherine’s, that Tischendorf discovered the bulk of the manuscripts. Tischendorf would later claim that he discovered the codex as it was about to be consigned to be burned for fuel, but this claim is dubious.

The second ancient Bible preserved at St. Catherine’s is the Syriac Sinaiticus, a late fourth century copy of the four Gospels that are now preserved in the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The text’s language, Syriac, is a dialect of Aramaic that was spoken by Christians living in the region north of the land of Israel, specifically in the grand city of Antioch, as well as in eastern regions of the Roman Empire. This document was of particular fascination to scholars because it was a palimpsest, a document whose original
original text was scratched out by a later scribe, who rewrote a second text over it. In
the case of the Syriac Sinaiticus, a scribe working in the eighth century rewrote stories
about Christian female saints and martyrs over the Gospels.

The Codex Sinaiticus and the Syriac Sinaiticus were incredibly important for Christians
seeking to determine the most authentic version of their scriptures. The discoveries of
these codices have eclipsed the preservation of other ancient texts in St. Catherine’s,
which are of Jewish origin. Before discussing some examples of these texts, let’s
discuss a second ancient depository of manuscripts, the collections of documents on
the Greek peninsula known as Mount Athos.

Mount Athos

Mount Athos region encompasses
a thirty-one mile stretch of land that
extends in a southeasterly direction into
the Aegean Sea, but the Mountain itself
lies at the very bottom of the peninsula.
The name Mount Athos alludes to the
historical figure of Saint Athanasios, who
founded a monastery there in the tenth
century. Most monks on the mountain
live in monasteries, but others live in
tiny communities called sketes, which
are under the jurisdiction of a nearby
monastery. Other smaller dwellings
house three or four monks who are
associated with a particular monastery.
Yet other monks live solitary, or eremitic,
lifestyles.

Today there are twenty functioning
monasteries on the peninsula, most
of them centuries old, and boasting
a library with precious manuscripts

Above: Map showing location of Mount Athos.
Below: Bible from Vatopedi Monastery, Mount Athos.
Photo by Christian Manhart.
that include manuscripts which derive from non-Christian traditions. Many of the manuscripts in these libraries date to the medieval period, and of these, many texts were originally composed well before the medieval period. In addition to ancient documents, the monasteries also boast incredibly valuable and ancient artifacts of gold and other precious metals that have religious value for the monks. Broadly speaking, scholars interested in perusing the treasures of Mount Athos have not had easy access to them. But in recent years, the lack of access has begun to change. The government of Greece even initiated a project three years ago to begin digitizing the precious manuscripts preserved on Mount Athos.

The Precious Manuscripts Housed at Mount Athos and St. Catherine’s

Besides ancient Bibles, Greek monasteries have been home to medieval manuscripts based on texts originally written by Jews in the Second Temple period. These fall under the category of what some scholars call Rewritten Bible, a term first introduced by the Hungarian scholar Geza Vermes. Vermes used this term to refer to an array of texts written in the Second Temple period that expand on biblical stories in different ways. But many scholars now recognize that the term poses some difficulties. In the first place, the term presumes that by the time certain texts were written in the middle of the Second Temple period, there was some sort of “closed” Bible. In fact, however, there may have been a high degree of fluidity in the Second Temple period as to what was regarded as scriptural, and what was not. Jewish communities probably differed on the scriptural status of certain books. We know, for example, that the community who lived
near the Dead Sea had at least fifteen copies of the book of Jubilees in their library—and no copies of Esther. Debates about what books were regarded as authoritative extended into the early rabbinic period, and are recorded in the Mishnah.

The second problem with the term Rewritten Bible is that it presumes that authors who wrote books relating to scriptural stories shared the same motive: to rewrite, or perhaps replace, early scriptural texts. In all likelihood, however, this was not the case. The texts that share some relationship with biblical material were written in different genres, from brief adventure tales to wisdom texts to apocalyptic documents in which a biblical hero is given a vision about the end-time. The authors of these documents had varying beliefs about Judaism and its place in the world, and varying motives for writing their texts. Some authors wanted to critique contemporary Jews who interpreted biblical texts and traditions differently than the author, and others wanted to entertain their readers with pious but entertaining stories. Among this vast corpus of documents were what some would refer to today as “fan fiction:” texts that paid homage to the scriptural stories by using them as springboards for other stories.

The libraries of Mount Athos and St. Catherine’s include ancient Jewish documents that participate in all of these genres. Some of their documents are canonized in the Hebrew Bible, others are included in the books of the Apocrypha, which is included in the Catholic Bible, and yet others are not canonized in the Hebrew Bible, Catholic Bible, or Protestant Bible, but are preserved in other canon lists, such as the Ethiopic canon. There are many books in these libraries that are not preserved in any Bible today, and scholars do not know whether they were considered scriptural at all in the ancient world. Nevertheless, Greek Orthodox readers saw enough value in these documents to preserve them.

Today, these documents are preserved in the Pseudepigrapha, which is a collection of documents that were not regarded as a single collection in ancient times, but is a term
that came into use in the eighteenth century to refer to texts that were written by Jews in the Greco-Roman period and not canonized in most major religious traditions. I will briefly turn to two examples of pseudepigraphic texts.

**Joseph and Aseneth**

The manuscripts preserved in the library of St. Catherine’s include three copies of the ancient Jewish novel Joseph and Aseneth in manuscripts dated to the tenth, fifteenth, or sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A monastery on Mount Athos called the monastery of Konstamonitou is also home to a fifteenth century manuscript of the Jewish novel Joseph and Aseneth. This manuscript is part of a group of manuscripts that can possibly be traced to an original version of the text. The compositional origins of Joseph and Aseneth is under dispute; some scholars date its writing to as early as the second century BCE, while others date it to as late as the fourth century CE. But most historians agree that the text was written by a Jew sometime in the Greco-Roman period.

Joseph and Aseneth comprises two novellas, which may have each been written at different stages and later combined to make a single story. In the first half, the lovely Egyptian maiden Aseneth, a daughter of the priest Pentephres, falls in love with Joseph. This section builds off of the obscure reference to the marriage of Joseph and Aseneth in Genesis 41:50–52. Joseph and Aseneth opens with a description of Aseneth’s devotion to idol worship. When Pentephres mentions to Aseneth that he is considering giving her to Joseph as a wife, Aseneth, who has not yet met Joseph, reacts with disgust that she would have to marry a lowly Israelite.

But when Joseph comes to visit Pentephres’ household and Aseneth meets Joseph for the first time, she is immediately smitten and renounces her idols. The question of whether Aseneth “converts” to Judaism in this story (which would depend largely on whether there was any kind of systematic conversion to Judaism at the time that the author wrote his story), or whether she simply commits herself to worshipping the Israelite God among other gods in her pantheon, is up for debate. But the love that Aseneth bears for Joseph is far from ambiguous.

In the second half of the book, some of Joseph’s older brothers, Dan, Napthali, Gad and Asher (Bilhah and Zilpah’s sons) ally with Pharaoh’s son to kill Joseph, and wrest
Aseneth away and marry her. When Joseph’s other brothers—the sons of Leah—get wind of the plan, they fight the other brothers and save Joseph and Aseneth.

Joseph and Aseneth touches on a number of themes that readers in the late Second Temple period would have found pertinent to their own lives. Besides Daniel, Joseph was the consummate diasporan Jew. He lived in Egypt (like hundreds of thousands of Jews who lived there in the late Second Temple period), was widely respected among Gentiles, and never renounced his ancestral faith. Readers of this story would have appreciated Joseph’s effective balancing of his tradition with being a modern man of his times. They also would have appreciated the typically Hellenistic features of the story: an unlikely romantic pairing, threats against the hero’s life by a wicked antagonist, and a story that climaxes in a battle between good and evil forces.

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs is a collection of twelve texts that recall the wise words that Jacob’s twelve sons imparted to their wives and children as they lay on their deathbeds. Each of these speeches is called a “Testament.” The Testament form of writing was a genre unto itself in the Greco-Roman world. Besides this collection, other testaments have been preserved that were written by Jews at this time, including The Testament of Solomon, The Testament of Adam, and The Testament of Job.

Perhaps the three most pivotal figures in this collections of texts is Judah, Levi, and Joseph. Judah and Levi are portrayed as being imbued with monarchic and priestly leadership in these documents, and their roles as communal leaders will be restored in the end-time. Joseph is portrayed as the quintessential man of piety, a person who exhibits complete mastery over his desires and who refrains from integrating into his gentile surroundings.

A Greek medieval manuscript of The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs is preserved in Mount Athos at the library of Koutloumos, as well as at St. Catherine’s monastery. This manuscript contains Aramaic material from The Testament of Levi that was also found in the Cairo Genizah and in the Dead Sea Caves near Qumran. It is therefore an important witness to a manuscript tradition that goes back to at least the first century CE.
Conclusion

What is it about these texts, and others that fall under the category of “Rewritten Bible,” that made them appealing and worth the painstaking cost of preservation to those living in monastic communities? There is likely more than one answer. The most basic is that today, many members of the Greek Orthodox Church consider these texts to be Christian. As these documents were copied, scribes interpolated references to Jesus’s birth, crucifixion, and resurrection into these texts, as well as references to the Trinity. Still, this explanation does not clarify why the earliest Christian copyists of these texts preserved and copied them—before they were subject to interpolations.

One important feature of documents such as The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and Joseph and Aseneth is that while they are of Jewish origin, they almost never make reference to distinctively Jewish practices. The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs does make passing reference to Jewish mourning laws and levirate marriage, but neither of these documents talk about the main identifying markers of Judaism in the ancient world: circumcision, Sabbath and holidays, and dietary law. Nor do they make reference to Jewish purity practices, which were also a distinguishing feature of Jewish practice at this time.

This is not to say, however, that the authors of these texts viewed themselves as assimilated Jews. On the contrary, the authors of these texts extolled the patriarchs for their devotion to the Israelite God, which conveyed to their readers that they, too, should cling to their ancestral tradition. Yet in order to present Judaism as a sophisticated religion of integrity, they emphasized the ethical aspects of the religion rather than the ritual ones.

Christian copyists saw in these documents “proto-Christian” elements that underscored ethical concern and universalist messages. They may not have understood, of course, how central these values were to Judaism. Jews, likewise, have viewed these texts as marginal to their tradition, but in fact they represent a vast body of pious Jewish texts that do not mention the distinguishing aspects of Judaism. I hope that one day these documents will be seen as reflective of what life of was like for pious Jews living in the Greco-Roman world who were devoted to their scriptures and to their ancestral traditions. In this way, these texts will become regarded as central to Jewish tradition, and to what would become rabbinic Judaism, rather than marginal to it. If that happens, we have Greek Orthodox monks to thank.
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