

The Jordan Lead Books

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The oldest text in the New Testament is the Book of Revelation and it tells how a small sealed book was opened by a king from the house of David ‘the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.’ (Revelation 5.5). The Book of Revelation is a stylised collection of prophetic visions and their interpretations that was compiled by St John. The book itself, however, says that the prophetic visions recorded in it were those of Jesus himself, interpreted by St John. This is how the book begins:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John (Revelation 1.1).

Since Jesus was believed to be the LORD who had come in human form, the angel who revealed the meanings to St John was the figure who appeared in the Old Testament as the Angel of the LORD. In his gospel, St John had Jesus describe the angel of the LORD as the Paraclete, the one who would replace him as the presence of the LORD. He would teach the disciples all things and bring to their remembrance all Jesus had taught them; he would take what had come from Jesus and explain it to them (John 14.26; 16.14). Thus St John received from the Angel of the LORD the meaning of what Jesus had seen in his visions.

The main section of the Book of Revelation describes how Jesus was considered worthy to open a sealed book [*not a scroll*] and reveal its secrets. Jesus has died and ascended to heaven. There he approaches the heavenly throne, and he hears a voice:

And I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a book written without and within [that is, on both sides of the page]. And I saw a mighty angel calling out with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the book and break its seals?’ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the book or to look into it. And I wept much because no one had been found worthy to open the book or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me: ‘Do not weep. Lo the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so that he can open the book and its seven seals’ (Revelation 5.1-5, my translation).

Whatever this book was or represented, it was at the centre of the vision that described the role of Jesus. He had to open the sealed book.

So many sentences beginning with ‘and’ are a sign that this is a very literal translation of Hebrew. ‘And’ is a normal way to begin a sentence in Hebrew but not in Greek, and so we can be fairly certain that the Book of Revelation was originally written in Hebrew. The Greek text in the New Testament is a translation into a rough Greek, but the underlying Hebrew style and wordplay are obvious.¹

As the Davidic king opens the sealed book, so the events of the seven seals are revealed (Revelation 6—7). Before the seventh seal is opened, seven angels blow seven trumpets, and

¹ I have argued all this in detail in my book *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000

with each of these there is another vision unfolding. After the seventh seal has been opened, the seven angels pour seven bowls of wrath upon Jerusalem, and these are prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. But before the seventh angel blows his trumpet, there is another vision. St John sees the mighty angel coming from heaven carrying a little book [Greek *biblaridion*] that had already been opened. St John is told to eat the little book, which means that he has to learn and keep secret what he reads in the little book (Revelation 10). There was, then, something in the history of the Christians just before the fall of Jerusalem that involved a small sealed book.

Sealed books are mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures. When the prophet Isaiah warned the people of Jerusalem that they would be punished for their evil ways (Isaiah 2—3), and they refused to listen to him, he said in despair: ‘Bind up the testimony, seal up the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the LORD who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob...’ (Isaiah 8.16-17). The face of the LORD will prove to be significant in the investigation of the lead codices. The prophet Daniel received visions about the future of Jerusalem, first from Gabriel (Daniel 9.21) and then from the LORD himself (Daniel 10.5). He was told: ‘Shut up the words and seal the book until the time of the end’ (Daniel 12.4). The sealed books concerned the future of Jerusalem, and it is a sealed book that Jesus in heaven begins to open. As he opens the seven seals, so the judgement and destruction of Jerusalem begins.

Some early Christian texts associate Jesus with sealed books. One of these has been called by modern scholars *The Secret Book of James* although the ancient original has no title. It was found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, among a small collection of Christian books that had been left in a cave. The James in question was the leader of the Jerusalem church, sometimes called James the Righteous, and he was one of the brothers of Jesus (Mark 6.3) usually understood to mean one of the children of Joseph’s first marriage. He wrote to an unknown enquirer and began thus:

Since you asked that I send you a secret book which was revealed to me and Peter by the LORD, I could not turn you away... but I have written it in the Hebrew alphabet and sent it to you... I also sent you, ten months ago, another secret book which the Saviour revealed to me...’

This could have been oral tradition from the early church or it could have been a fabrication, but, as Cardinal Daniélou observed, the claim to secret teachings, even if those particular teachings were false, indicates that they were imitating something known to be authentic. Thus they are evidence that secret teaching of some sort did exist: ‘Ils attestent du même coup l’existence de celles-ci.’² *The Secret Book of James* shows that at a very early date, the leader of the church in Jerusalem was believed to have in his possession secret books written in Hebrew. *The Secret Book of James* does not say how those books were made or what they looked like, but the Book of Revelation suggests that they would have been small and sealed.

Another early text, also found at Nag Hammadi, gives some indication of what those secret books contained or what they represented. *The Gospel of Truth*, so called from words in its opening line, is thought to be a work of Valentinus, who was influential in the mid second

² J Daniélou, ‘Les traditions secrètes des apôtres’, *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 31 (1962), pp.199-217, p.203.

century CE and whose teaching was accepted within the church at Rome in his own lifetime. It describes the revelation of Jesus as the book which he was able to open only after he had died - the book opened by the Davidic king in the Book of Revelation - and then:

For he revealed it as a knowledge... of the living book, which he revealed to the aeons [heavenly powers] to the last of its letters, revealing to them that they are not merely vowels or consonants, so that one might read them and think of something without meaning; but they are letters that convey the truth. They are pronounced only when they are known. Each letter is like a complete truth, like a complete book, since they are letters written by the Unity, the Father having written them for the aeons in order that by means of his letters, they should know the Father...

This suggests that Valentinus knew of that some of Jesus' secret teaching had been recorded in a code, such that only initiates knew what each letter stood for. *The Secret Book of James* suggests that this writing was Hebrew, and Valentinus' distinguishing the consonants from the vowels could imply this.

Two more early Christian texts are relevant here. First, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a record of the visions received by Hermas, a Christian prophet in Rome about 100 CE. On two occasions, he had a vision of a woman clothed in shining garments: on the first occasion, she read to Hermas from her little book; on the second occasion, she gave her little book to Hermas so that he could make a copy: 'I copied it all, letter by letter, but I could not work out the letters of the alphabet, *sullaba*.' (*Shepherd of Hermas*, Vision 2.1). One wonders what this little book was, and what the letters were if a man in Rome who could write could not read them.

Second, there is the story of Ezra, a thinly veiled account of how the Hebrew Scriptures were preserved after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Towards the end of the second-temple period, and so in the early years of the Christians, there was a literary style in which a writer adopted the name of a figure from a similar period of history. Jeremiah's scribe Baruch, who lived when Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BCE, was adopted as a pseudonym for people writing about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Ezra helped to restore Jerusalem and the holy books when the exiles returned from Babylon in the fifth century BCE. The Persian king Artaxerxes sent him with 'the law of his God in his hand' (Ezra 7.14) to restore the religious writings and practices of his people. There is a tradition that he also introduced the 'new' Hebrew alphabet along with the restored scriptures. Someone who adopted the name Ezra [in Greek this became Esdras], writing in about 100 CE, described how the holy books were restored again after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

This is described in the book that is sometimes called 2 Esdras and sometimes called 4 Ezra. Ezra/Esdras was told to take five scribes and then to dictate what was revealed to him.

And the Most High gave understanding to the five men, and by turns they wrote what was dictated, *in letters which they did not know*. They sat forty days, and wrote during the day time and ate their bread at night... So during the forty days, ninety four books were written. And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me saying: 'Make public the twenty four books that you wrote first, and let the worthy and the unworthy read them. But keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people. For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom and the river of knowledge.' And I did so. (2 Esdras 14.42-48).

'Letters which they did not know' is reconstructed from the Syriac text as the Latin text is damaged at this point. Only the Christians preserved this book, so it must have had some special importance for them. It claims that thirty years after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Jews decided what books should be preserved as their Scriptures. They kept 24 [these are what is now called the Hebrew Bible] but 70 others, *thought to be more important*, were kept only for the wise. One wonders what these 70 books were. They were important enough for the Christians to preserve this story, and yet were rejected by the Jews. The Mishnah, the deposit of late second temple Jewish practice, has a ruling about these rejected books; 'He who reads the "outside books" has no share in the world to come' (Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 10.1). Accepting or rejecting these 70 books was one of the distinctions between Jews and Christians.

Little sealed books written in Hebrew but also in 'codes' seem to have been an important element in early Christian teaching. Some such book or books existed before the time of Jesus since he received a vision of himself opening a sealed book and thus inaugurating the judgement on Jerusalem. This could have been the sealed book of Daniel's vision, or even the sealed book from the time of Isaiah. Isaiah mentions a Book of the LORD (Isaiah 34.16) which describes the terrible judgement that the LORD brings on his enemies. Such a book would fit the pattern of the visions in the Book of Revelation.

Eusebius says that the Christians fled from Jerusalem before the final assault by the Romans in 70 CE. They went and settled in Pella, a town east of the Jordan:

Members of the Jerusalem church [by means of an oracle] were ordered to leave the city before the war began, and to settle in a town in Peraea called Pella. (Eusebius, *History of the Church* 3.5).

The oracle in question is found in the Book of Revelation:

Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,
'Come out of her, my people,
Lest you take part in her sins,
Lest you share in her plagues,
For her sins are heaped high as heaven,
And God has remembered her iniquities'. (Revelation 18.4-5).

The Jerusalem Christians were told to flee but not where to go. They chose to go east across the Jordan, rather than south to Egypt, and the reason for this may be that there were already Christian centres in the region east of the Jordan..

In the gospel of St John, for example, the incidents that he records show Jesus visiting Jerusalem and Galilee from a place to the east of the Jordan. He first appeared where John the Baptist was baptising east of the Jordan and then he went into Galilee (John 1.43). Jesus fed the 5 000 on a mountain east of the sea of Galilee, where the crowd wanted to proclaim him King, but 'he withdrew again to the mountain by himself' (John 6.1-15). The synoptic gospels describe how Jesus healed a disturbed man in this area, and how a herd of pigs stampeded into the sea of Galilee (Mark 5.1-20 and parallels). Jesus had several hostile encounters with 'the Jews' in Jerusalem, and when his life was in danger, he returned to that place east of the Jordan where John the Baptist had been baptising and he stayed there (John

10.40). After raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus had to go even further away to escape from the authorities in Jerusalem and so went 'to the country near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples (John 11.54). St John does not reveal the location, and no town named Ephraim is known.

Second, there is *The Ascension of Isaiah*, an early Christian text that purports to describe the visions of Isaiah but is in fact a thinly veiled account of the early Christian community. Scholars cannot agree on how it was compiled; it includes earlier Jewish legendary material about Isaiah, but the final form is obviously Christian. 'Isaiah' is the leader of a group of prophets who came from Galilee to Jerusalem, but in the reign of the wicked king Manasseh the city became so evil that Isaiah and the prophets left Jerusalem and went to live 'on a mountain in a desert place', clothed in sackcloth and eating only what they could gather locally (*Ascension of Isaiah* 2.7-11). It is curious that this 'Isaiah' comes from Galilee to Jerusalem, when Galilee plays no part in the stories of the original Isaiah.

The defining characteristic of this group of prophets was that they believed it was possible to see the LORD, and that Isaiah had indeed seen the face of the LORD, contrary to the teaching of Moses, who said that the LORD could not be seen. A man who discovered where Isaiah and his community were living betrayed them to King Manasseh:

They prophesy lies against Israel and Judah. And Isaiah himself has said, 'I see more than Moses the prophet.' Moses said, 'There is no man who can see the LORD and live.' But Isaiah has said, 'I have seen the LORD, and behold I am alive.' Know, therefore, O king, that they are false prophets. He has called Jerusalem Sodom, and the princes of Judah he has declared to be the people of Gomorrah.' (*Ascension of Isaiah* 3.7-10).

This community lived on the mountain for two years, and then their leader was killed (*The Ascension of Isaiah* 2.11). St John describes the ministry of Jesus in the same way: it lasted for two years. Jesus called his first disciples just before a Passover (John 2.13); he fed the 5000 on a mountain east of the Jordan at the next Passover (John 6.4) and on the eve of the third Passover, he was crucified in Jerusalem (John 19.31). The community of prophets described in *The Ascension of Isaiah* had much in common with Jesus and his disciples, and the early Christians did describe Jerusalem as Sodom: 'The great city which is allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, where their LORD was crucified' (Revelation 11.8). It was the original Isaiah who had known the Book of the LORD and the teaching sealed up among his disciples, and *The Ascension of Isaiah* has one of the early leaders [perhaps St James] adopting the persona of Isaiah.

Third, there is the story in *The Clementine Recognitions*. Traditionally, this text has been attributed to Clement, the bishop of Rome at the end of the first century, but recent scholarship assigns the work to a later date. The actual date is not important; what matters is how the early years of Christianity were remembered. *The Recognitions* describe how Saul of Tarsus, later St Paul, was at first a leading persecutor of the Christians. On one occasion, he found St James, the leader of the Jerusalem Christians, teaching in the temple and he began to attack him:

Then ensued a tumult, on either side of the beating and the beaten. Much blood was shed; there was a confused flight, in the midst of which that enemy attacked James and threw him headlong

from the top of the steps; and supposing him to be dead, he cared not to inflict further violence upon him. Our friends lifted him up... When the evening came, the priests shut up the temple and we returned to the house of James and spent the night there in prayer. Then before daylight we went down to Jericho, about 5 000 men. (*Clementine Recognitions* 1.70-71).

There was a road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and at Jericho there was a ford across the Jordan. Why did this group of persecuted Christians decide to go to Jericho? They could have gone to Egypt, as did Mary and Joseph when they had escaped from King Herod in Jerusalem when Jesus was baby. One possibility is that there was already a community of Christians near, or perhaps just beyond, Jericho. Saul set out in that direction when he was authorised by the high priest in Jerusalem to arrest the followers of Jesus (Acts 9.1-2).

Since the first Christians are known to have given a prominent place to sealed books in both their visions and their teachings, I was very interested to hear that a number of small sealed books [known now as the Jordan Codices] had been found in a cave near the area to which some early Christians had fled from Jerusalem.

The cave location was significant. Caves are, of course, an obvious place to deposit books, but Al Qirqisani, a 10th century Karaite scholar, noted that there had been a group of people who deposited their books in a cave. In his account of the various Jewish sects, he mentioned a group who lived just before the time of Jesus, and he called them Magharians, meaning 'cave people'.³ He may have meant the Qumran community whose scrolls were found in caves, but he may have had another group in mind. What he says about the beliefs of the Magharians, namely that the theophanies described in the Hebrew scriptures refer to appearances of the Great Angel and not to God Most High, are similar to the way the Christians read the Hebrew scriptures, but not to anything so far found in the Qumran texts. The Magharians, then, could have been the group whence Christianity emerged.

In addition, there is the ancient underground church at Rihab in north-east Jordan, announced in June 2008 to be the oldest known Christian church, although, as with all discoveries, this is disputed. And there is also evidence of a Christian monastery said to be of the late first or early second century not far from the cave where the sealed books are said to have been found. The Deir, as it is known, is a series of caves high up a sheer cliff at the end of the valley.

No art from the original Hebrew Christians is known, but there are plenty of vivid descriptions of what it might have depicted. The Book of Revelation is full of temple imagery: the throne and the seven torches of fire before the throne (Revelation 4.4-6); the restored Davidic king and his kingdom (Revelation 5.5; 11.15-18); the crowd with palm branches (Revelation 7.9-12); the mark of the Name of the LORD, X, on the forehead (Revelation 7.3-4); the birth of the Messiah (Revelation 12.1-6); the shining presence/ face [in Hebrew this is the same word] (Revelation 1.16); the great vine of the land - there was golden vine on the front of the temple - that would be crushed on the day of judgement (Revelation 14.17-20); and there are angel priests throughout.

³ There is an English translation of Al Qirqisani's text by A Nemoj in Hebrew Union College Annual, 7 (1930).

The images on the Jordan Codices were therefore of considerable interest as they corresponded with what is known of the earliest Christian imagery.

The images on the codices.

There are several symbols and patterns that appear many times on the codices:

- fruiting palm trees which are a well known nationalist symbol of Judea and appear on coins.
- menorahs, seven-branched lamps, which became a symbol of Judaism but were also important for the Christians.
- palm branches and *etrogim* [citrus fruits] which were symbols of the feast of Tabernacles.
- willow branches like those carried by the priests at Tabernacles.
- diagonal crosses that were the ancient sign of the Name of the LORD, and used by Christians as the mark of baptism.

These suggest that the overall theme of this decoration was the feast of Tabernacles, especially the priestly aspects of Tabernacles..

The feast of Tabernacles, *Sukkot*, was the third of the temple festivals that had originally marked the autumn new year, the first being new year itself, and the second being the day of atonement. Tabernacles marked the turning of the year and the grape harvest. It was associated with judgement, and so the grape harvest became an image for divine judgement. Since the work of Sigmund Mowinckel⁴, more and more scholars have recognised his insight that Tabernacles also celebrated the enthronement of the king as the LORD. The importance of the theme in the New Testament was set out by Harald Riesenfeld⁵, when he showed the link between Tabernacles and the disciples seeing Jesus as a radiant heavenly figure at the Transfiguration. The synoptic gospels say that Jesus linked his shining appearance to the coming of the Kingdom of God (Mark 9.1 and the parallels in Matthew 16.27 and Luke 9.27). Jesus' disciples expected that he would restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1.6). This would explain the fruiting palm trees on the codices.

In the time of Jesus, Tabernacles was celebrated in the temple with an almost carnival atmosphere:

- there were processions into the temple with pilgrims carrying bundles of palm, myrtle and willow branches, and *etrogim*, citrons;
- the priests walked round the great altar in the courtyard carrying willow branches;
- huge lampstands each with four golden bowls of oil lit up the temple courts all through the night;
- there was a procession to bring water from Siloam that was poured out on the great altar (Mishnah *Sukkah* 3—5).

The themes of Tabernacles were central to the teaching of Jesus: in his great temple discourse (John 7—9) he said that he was the true light and that people could drink rivers of living

⁴ *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, English translation 1962.

⁵ *Jésus Transfiguré*, 1947.

water from him; and his farewell discourse at the last supper centred on the great vine and its fruits (John 15), another symbol of Tabernacles and the temple.

Tabernacles' symbolism from the late second temple period would explain the menorahs, the willow branches, the palm branches and the *etrogim* on the codices.

But those who eventually became the Christians remembered the older associations with the enthronement and the king who was the anointed one, the Messiah. In the temple of Solomon, Tabernacles had been the time when the Davidic king was enthroned and became the presence of the LORD with his people. He became divine when he was anointed (Psalm 110); then he gave them his law and sat in judgement. One of the ancient Hebrew poems linked to this ritual became a key text for Christian claims about Jesus: 'When [God] brings the firstborn into the world, he says "Let all God's angels worship him"' (Hebrews 1.6, quoting the original form of Deuteronomy 32.43 found at Qumran, which goes on to describe the LORD bringing judgement). The Christians claimed that Jesus was the divine Son whom God had anointed and sent into the world as Son and judge (John 10.36).

The ancient sign for the Name of the LORD was X. The prophet Ezekiel saw an angel marking the faithful on their foreheads with this sign to protect them when Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BCE. (Ezekiel 9.4). They were marked with the letter *tau*, which in the older Hebrew alphabet used at that time was an X. The Christians were also marked on their foreheads with this X when they were baptised, and this X appears many times on the codices. It was the sign of the Christians. In the Book of Revelation, an angel appeared to mark the chosen ones on their foreheads with the seal of the living God, X, and 144,000 received the mark (Revelation 7.1-8). Later this great crowd of 144,000 people was seen in heaven, all wearing the Name on their foreheads (Revelation 14.1). They were the Christians, whose sign [which was originally X not +] appears all over the codices.

The early Christians in Rome had a ceremony involving willow branches, clearly based on the ritual of Tabernacles. In a vision, the prophet Hermas saw the angel of the LORD cutting branches from a great willow tree and giving them to his people (*The Shepherd of Hermas* Similitude 8.2). The meaning of the temple ritual is not known, but for the Christians, the condition of their branches - green and flourishing or withered and dry - was an indication of their spiritual state. Willow branches appear many times on the codices.

There have been confident claims that all the symbols on the codices are known elsewhere and so are no more than crude copies made by forgers. I question this assertion, because the most complex pattern that appears several times and seems to have been the main symbol of whatever the codices represent, has not been found elsewhere. This is the wide, seven-branched menorah, beneath which are two willow branches forming a shallow arc, and between the branches and the lamp six Palaeo-Hebrew letters which are forms of מֵטבֿ כִּלְי although the first letter may be א, meaning 'he [or I] shall walk in uprightness', *ylk/ 'lk btm*. The 'in uprightness' is clear, and gives the context. To the left of the menorah is a fruiting almond branch, the sign of the true priesthood. Aaron and his sons were high priests because Aaron's rod had produced first almond blossoms and then fruit when it was left in the holy of

holies. This was a sign from the LORD that he and his house had been chosen as the high priests (Numbers 17.1-12).

‘Uprightness’ is the Hebrew *tm*, from the root *tāmam / tam*, which is the verb ‘to be complete, to be finished’ whence *tom*, which is the noun ‘completeness, integrity’. It was the ideal of the ancient Wisdom teachers, who spoke of ‘walking in completeness/integrity’, e.g. Proverbs 10.9: ‘he who walks in *completeness/integrity* will walk securely’. The words in italics are the words on the codices. But in the context of the menorah, the willow branches and the almond rod with fruit, Psalm 101 is a better explanation of why these words are part of the symbol.

Psalm 101 is the Davidic king’s declaration that he will rule with completeness/integrity. He sings to the LORD of loving kindness and justice, which are also the themes of Jesus’ teaching in St John’s Gospel. ‘I will act prudently in the way of *completeness/integrity*, I will walk with *completeness/integrity* of heart in the midst of my house’, says the king. ‘He who walks in the way of *completeness/integrity* shall be my servant’ (Psalm 101.2, 6). The Greek equivalent of these words is the verb *teleioō*, usually translated ‘complete’, and *teleiōtēs*, ‘perfection’. St Paul taught the Christians to put on ‘loving kindness, the bond of perfection’ (Colossians 3.14) a reference to the same ideas, and according to St John, Jesus’s last words when he was dying were ‘I have completed/ made perfect’, the same word (John 19.30). St John gives as Jesus’ final words what could have been the Greek equivalent of the letters around the menorah on the codices.

Much of the script on the codices has not yet been deciphered, and this may be because the letters themselves are symbolic and not intended as words. Such a practice is implied by *The Gospel of Truth*, and it may be that some of the letters will never be understood.

The Faces.

The most startling feature of the codices is the faces. There are several images of the same face - a shining face without a body and sometimes with rays like the sun – with Palaeo-Hebrew writing. A human face with ancient sacred letters is unlikely to have been made by observant Jews, even though there are images of palm trees and other objects on coins of the period, together with the Palaeo-Hebrew script. The images of the face have been explained [and thus dismissed] as being made by pressing a coin into the mould from which they were cast. The faces are too large to have been impressed from a coin, and the moulding is too deep. But *how* they were made is not so important as *why* they were made. Who needed to represent a human face in this way, sometimes surrounded by rays like the sun, and accompanied by Palaeo-Hebrew letters?

In Hebrew, the same word is used for ‘face’ and ‘presence’: *pānîm*. One of the issues that distinguished the group of prophets who left Jerusalem with ‘Isaiah’ to live on a mountain in the desert was their belief that it was possible to see the LORD. The authorities in Jerusalem followed the later ruling of Moses, that it was not possible to see the face of the LORD, but seeing the face/ presence had a been a part of the older faith of the first temple in Jerusalem, Solomon’s temple. The prophet Isaiah said ‘My eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts’

(Isaiah 6.5). The prophet Ezekiel said that he had seen ‘the likeness of the glory of the LORD’ (Ezekiel 1.26). He had seen a shining human form on a throne. Whatever they actually saw is not known, but this way of speaking was later discouraged, and so the writer of Deuteronomy had Moses emphasise that the form of the LORD was not seen. His voice was heard, but nothing was seen (Deuteronomy 4.12). According to *The Ascension of Isaiah*, this was the basis of the dispute between the ‘Isaiah’ prophets who went to live on a mountain in the desert, and those who followed the ways of Moses.

So sensitive was this matter of ‘seeing the face of the LORD’ that it became the custom to read some parts of the Hebrew Scriptures differently. Three times a year, according to the ancient temple calendars - at the feast of Unleavened Bread in the spring, at the feast of Weeks in the summer, and at the feast of Tabernacles in the autumn – the men of Israel had to make a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem ‘to appear before the LORD’ (e.g. Exodus 23.17; Deuteronomy 16.16). This is the customary translation. What the Hebrew actually says is: ‘Three times a year shall all your men see the face of the LORD’. No letter of the Hebrew text has to be changed; the two meanings depend on what vowels are read with the text. There are many other examples of this change of meaning, but there are also many examples where two meanings are not possible: the Hebrew of Exodus 34.23 *must* mean ‘Each man shall see the face of the LORD’; Psalm 42.2 *must* mean ‘When shall I come and see the face of God?’; Isaiah 1.12 *must* mean ‘When you come to see my face’ not ‘when you come to appear before me’. The changes were made to avoid saying ‘see the face of the LORD’.

In the Psalms, however, the worshippers were seeking the face of the God of Jacob (Psalm 24.5-6). They prayed: ‘May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make his face to shine upon us’ (Psalm 67.1); ‘Restore us O God; let thy face shine that we may be saved’ (Psalm 80.1, 3, 7, 19). And they declared with confidence: ‘I shall behold thy face in righteousness, when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form’ (Psalm 17.15).

The great blessing of the high priests was that the people would see the face of the LORD and bear his Name:

May the LORD bless you and keep you.

May the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you

May the LORD lift up his face on you and give you peace.

And you shall put my Name [the X] on the people of Israel and I will bless them.

(Numbers 6.24-27).

This blessing is represented in the vision of the angel from the sunrise who marks the faithful of the twelve tribes with the seal of God, the X, to protect them on the imminent day of judgement (Revelation 7. 1-8). By the time of the first Christians, it was forbidden to interpret the blessing of the high priests; nobody was allowed to teach what it meant. Some versions of the text say that it was forbidden even to read out the ancient blessing of the high priests: ‘It is neither read out nor interpreted.’ (Mishnah *Megillah* 4.10). The oldest known translation of this text into Aramaic [the Neofiti Targum] did not translate these verses but left them in Hebrew. Seeing the face of the LORD was a very sensitive issue, but faces are a prominent feature of the codices, including a face from which spring rays of light. This has

been identified [and thus dismissed] as a *helios* image, but in context, it is an image of the radiant Man, the LORD with rays of light as described in the Book of Revelation. When a mighty angel brought the little book from heaven, 'his face was like the sun' (Revelation 10.1). This was St John's vision of the return of the LORD, and the little book he carried was opened.⁶

The Christians, on the other hand, celebrated the fact that they had seen the face of the LORD, and it may have been their claims that led to the Jews' reluctance to use the term 'the face of the LORD'. When Jesus took Peter, James and John to a mountain top near Caesarea Philippi, [which was east of the Jordan and in the foothills of Mount Hermon, so we assume the mountain was Hermon] the disciples saw him transformed into a radiant figure. 'His face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light' (Matthew 17.2). In the opening vision of the Book of Revelation, St John had a vision of the resurrected Jesus in heaven and recognised him as the LORD. He was dressed as a high priest in the long robe made of white linen, although the white linen is not mentioned in the description, just that it was the long robe that was worn with the golden sash of the high priest. He was standing in the midst of the sevenfold lamp, presumably forming its central stem. 'His eyes were like fire... and his face was like the sun shining in full strength' (Revelation 1.1.12-16). Later St John saw the Lamb, which was a title for the King, not literally an animal. He was resurrected after being killed ['standing even though he had been slain'] and from his head came seven beams of light. The Greek has over-literally translated the Hebrew here, because the Hebrew *qeren* means both 'horn' and 'beam of light'. Anyone taking the Lamb title literally would assume that this animal had horns, but it was in fact the enthroned King who shone with seven beams of light. So bright was this light that it eventually replaced the light of the menorah: 'They shall need no light of lamp or sun, for the LORD God will be their light, and they shall reign with him for ever' (Revelation 22.5). This verse describes the heavenly kingdom, where the radiant face/presence of the LORD has replaced the need for the lamp.

St John emphasised seeing the presence of the LORD in his other writings. He began his gospel: 'We have beheld his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father' (John 1.14); he recorded that Jesus taught: 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14.9): and he began his first letter with the exuberant declaration: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands... we proclaim to you' (1 John 1.1).

With the lead books were found small figurines, which could not be identified by the experts who had seen them. From the photos that appeared briefly on-line, two things are clear:

- The face is the face on the codices
- The figure is dressed as the high priest.

The figurines are most likely to be Jesus the high priest. This was the Christians' first acclamation of Jesus: 'We have a great high priest...' (Hebrews 4.14), and this is how he appeared to St John at the beginning of the Book of Revelation.

⁶ See my book *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000, pp.180-182.

This is a very brief preliminary survey, a Christian response to the lead books, and the basis for the case that some of the items that prove to be ancient are likely to be early Hebrew Christian artefacts. No other known group - both its tradition and its known location - fits so well with the evidence from the codices.