

Ancient Metal Books and Tablets in History and Lore

In 1973 in Ahwaz the Iranian Mandaean Sheikh Abdullah Khaffagi showed Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley a lead codex of the Book of John:

We helped him pull out a large cloth bag, like the others, but this one was heavy as a rock. It was an archetypal book, *The Book of John*, made entirely of lead, inscribed with stylus on lead pages bound together like a regular book. No wonder it was heavy. Its edges were frayed and worn. We leafed through it reverently. C. G. Jung might have fantasized about a tome like this. There is probably not its like in the world. Sheikh Abdullah told us that the book was 2,053 years old and written by John the Baptist himself. There and then, it seemed a likely view.¹

As the eminent Semiticist Dr Charles Häberl of Rutgers University informed one of the Centre's Evaluation Panel scholars, the Mandaeans still produce lead copies of *Sidra d-Nishmatha* as part of their baptismal rites.

There is also a Gnostic-themed lead book (late antique or later) in the Epigraphic Museum of the Baths of Diocletian in Rome dated tentatively by the museum to the 4th-5th centuries CE; one or two other such lead books appear to have existed in the vicinity up until recent centuries.²

Qur'ān *sūra* 18:9 speaks of "the writings," *al-raqīm*, traditionally understood as a metal plate inscribed with the names of the companions of the cave after which the *sūra* is named. The Qur'ānic narrative is based on the Christian story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, Syriac versions of which refer to a lead tablet, *lū ḥâ d'abārâ*, or even to several lead tablets.³ According to Qummī, the tablet of Qur'ān *sūra* 18:9 was copper.⁴ Gabriel Said Reynolds writes:

Ṭabarī relates a tradition similar to that of *Tafsīr Muqātil*, that two believers in the king's palace, named Bīdrūs and Rūnās (*Tafsīr Muqātil* has Mātūs and Astūs), recorded the story and the names of the Companions on lead tablets, placed these tablets in a copper container and put the container at the entrance to the cave.⁵

¹ Jacobsen Buckley, Jorunn. *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (Oxford/NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. ix.

² See https://ryanfb.github.io/etc/2015/02/10/a_curious_metal_codex_in_the_baths_of_diocletian.html

³ See Sidney Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān: The 'Companions of the Cave' in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian tradition," in Gabriel Said Reynolds, ed., *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (London/NY: Routledge, 2008), pp. 123, 135.

⁴ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (Oxon/NY: Routledge, 2010), p. 172.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

In an article published in *Revue de Qumran* Hugh Nibley writes that “we should not overlook the suggestion that the Companions were originally wandering artisans (*sayāqala*) [Damiri, II, p. 340; Qurṭubī, X, p. 367]. Tha‘labī reports that when writings inscribed on metal plates (and we shall presently see that the ‘inscriptions’ of the Cave were such documents) were found in a cave in Yemen no one could decipher them until one of these traveling smiths or artisans was consulted” [Tha‘labī, pp. 102-3. Ṭabarī (cited by Huber, pp. 254-55) tells of a shepherd who found an inscribed tablet in a cave, which no one could read but an old holy man of the desert.]”⁶ Nibley continues on the Qur’ānic *al-raqīm*:

Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, XV, p. 131, says it was a stone tablet], or else it is two lead tablets in a sealed copper box—with silver seals [Tha‘labī, p. 298; Bayḍāwī, IV, p. 83 (lead or stone). The box was sealed with a silver seal. *Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ* (Leyden: 1868), III, p. 276, says there was just one lead plate], or it is simply a book, or even a golden tablet [Ṭabarī, suggests a book; Qurṭubī, X, p. 357, a golden tablet], or perhaps it is an inscription over the cave door. . . . On the other hand, it may refer to coins [Qurṭubī]. . . .

The general consensus is that *al-Raqīm* refers to secret buried writings containing the history and even the teachings of the Companions but “whose meaning God has kept from us, and whose history we do not know” [Qurṭubī. Most commentators . . . note that the tablets contained the names and history of the Sleepers, and Qurṭubī would even include in the writings “the rule which they embraced from the religion of Jesus” (*al-shar‘ tamassakūhu bi-hi min dini ‘Isa*)]. These were deliberately hidden away to come forth in a later age when “perhaps God will raise up a believing people” [Tha‘labī, p. 295; Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, XV, p. 135; Bayḍāwī, IV, pp. 86-87; Damiri, II, p. 344, according to whom the book itself is to come forth as a new revelation.] When the Patriarch Timotheus was informed, about the year 800, of the discoveries of documents in caves near Jericho, he assumed that it was those buried by Jeremiah, (J. Hering, in *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse* 41 [1961]:160.]), as Peter had done near Jerusalem (according to Bayḍāwī it was Peter who discovered the documents of (*al-Raqīm*) [E. A. W. Budge, *The Contendings of the Apostles* (Oxford: 1935), pp. 394-96; Bayḍāwī, IV, pp. 87, 90. . .], and the theme of buried holy books has a special appeal to Tha‘labī, who carries the custom back to the remotest times.⁷

Hugh Nibley notes that the variant name of the Companions’ dog, *Khumran*, is uncannily similar to *Qumran*, not to mention the congruity between the famous Qumran copper scroll and the traditions that *al-raqīm* refers to writings on metal plates.⁸

The story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus is ultimately based on Jewish traditions relating to Jeremiah and the Babylonian exile as preserved, for example, in works such as *4 Baruch*.⁹ The flight of the Seven Youths perhaps corresponds to the exile of

⁶ <<http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1101&index=14>>. Originally published in Hugh Nibley, “Qumran and “The Companions of the Cave,”” *Revue de Qumran* vol. 17, no. 5 (October 1964): pp. 177-198.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Hugh Nibley, “Qumran and “The Companions of the Cave,”” pp. 177-198.

⁹ On this pseudepigraphon, see Jens Herzer, *4 Baruch (Paraleipomena Jeremiou)*. (Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005). Herzer presents evidence

Jeremiah and the Israelites to Babylon. The sleep of the Seven Youths is based on that of Abimelech in Jerusalem and Baruch (or Jeremiah) in a sepulchre for most of the seventy years of the exile. The trope of a lead tablet or tablets that contain/s the names and the story of the Seven Youths could be inspired by the story of Baruch's letter that an eagle carried to Jeremiah at the conclusion of the exile. The conception of the Seven Youth's awakening as a miraculous resurrection may be related in part to *4 Baruch's* account of the eagle who arrives with Baruch's letter at a funeral being conducted by Jeremiah. The eagle lands on the corpse and it is resurrected, arguably a symbol of the exile's end, as Jens Herzer suggests.

indicating that the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus story is derived from the story found *4 Baruch*; see *ibid.*, pp. 89-90.