

The “Holy” Stones Found Near Newark, Ohio

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Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
levine@stevens.edu

Introduction

Scripture tells us that “Tiglath-pileser (II Kings xv. 29) or Shalmaneser (*ib.* xvii. 6, xviii. 11), after the defeat of Israel, transported the majority of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria, and placed them in Halah and Habor, on the stream of Gozan, and in the towns of Media. In their stead a mixed multitude was transported to the plains and mountains of Israel.”

Much mystery surrounds what happened to these Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Many groups have, over the years, claimed to be descended from these tribes. These include the Bnei Ephraim of southern India who claim they are descended from *Shevet* Ephraim; the Nasranis of Kerala, India (ancient Malabar); the Bnai Israel from the Indian cities of Mumbai, Pune, Ahmadabad, and the Pakistani cities of Karachi, Peshawer and Multan; the Bnai Menashe of northeast India who claim to be descended from *Shevet* Menashe; the Beta Israel (Falashas) of Ethiopia; the Bukharian Jews who claim ancestry from the *Shevet* Naphtali and *Shevet* Yissachar; some Persian Jews who claim descent from *Shevet* Ephraim; as well as a number of other groups.

Perhaps the most bizarre claim regarding the Lost Tribes was the belief held during the 17th, 18th and part of the 19th centuries that the aboriginal peoples found here when the New World was discovered were descended from Jews. While this claim may sound ridiculous today, many people believed it to be true, particularly Protestant Evangelicals, and much “evidence” was advanced to substantiate it.

I. Mound Builders

Mound Builders is the name given to the Native American Peoples who built mounds in an area that stretched from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Mississippi River to the Appalachian Mountains. Most of these mounds are found in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. Those who constructed these mounds were referred to as “Mound Builders,” since at one time the origin of these mounds was shrouded in mystery. Until the late nineteenth century most Americans of European extraction felt that the American Indians were not civilized enough to erect such structures. However, it is now known that these mounds were indeed built by Native Americans.

Some of these mounds were built nearly 1000 years before the Egyptian Pyramids; the last mounds were built in the 16th century. Many were burial mounds, but others were temple mounds, serving as platforms for religious structures. Hernando De Soto, a Spanish conquistador who from 1540 to 1542 traversed most of what became the southeast United States, reported encountering many different mound-builder peoples. Given the nature of these mounds, digging in them often leads to unearthing objects that give insight into the lives of the people who constructed them. However, one would not expect a dig in one of these mounds to unearth objects associated with Jews, yet this is what supposedly happened at a burial mound located south of Newark, Ohio.

II. The Finds of David Wyrickⁱ

David Wyrick (1806 – 1864) He married Nancy Huff on July 4, 1833 in Perry County, and they had 7 children.

Nancy died in 1843 shortly after giving birth to their last child, a daughter also named Nancy. The child died just two months later, and mother and daughter are buried next to each other at Somerset Methodist Cemetery, Somerset, Ohio.

He married Caroline Dodd in Perry County on July 14, 1844, and had at least two more children. He relocated to Newark, Licking County, Ohio, in the late 1840's, where he became the County Surveyor in 1850.

David suffered from severe rheumatoid arthritis, and took a drug called laudanum for his condition. He was described by his good friend, supporter, and prominent local figure Charles Whittlesey, in this way: “He was physically disabled by rheumatism by which he suffered intensely: his fingers were swollen and distorted, and his feet so much enlarged as to render them almost useless....and that his appendages were so disfigured as scarcely to retain their human aspect, he was everywhere regarded with commiseration.” He goes on to say: “Wyrick was wholly a self-taught man, in many respects possessed of genius....” After continually battling with his ailment, he retired as county surveyor in about 1859.

It was at this time, in a state of retirement, that he began his quest for excavating artifacts in the ancient burial grounds of The Mound builders at the Newark Earthworks, in Newark, Ohio.

David Wyrick took his own life in April, 1864, by taking an overdose of laudanum. He is buried at Cedar Hill Cemetery, Newark, Ohio.

“In June, 1860, David Wyrick, of Newark, Ohio, a printer by trade who dabbled in ancient languages and was much interested in the remains of the mound builders, found about one mile southwest of Newark, Ohio, in one of the circular artificial depressions common among the ancient earthworks preserved in Licking County, a wedge-shaped stone not quite six inches long and measuring three inches in its widest part. It tapered at the small end, which end itself was a flattened surface about half an inch in diameter. A handle rested on the head of the wedge at the other end. On each of the four sides was a Hebrew inscription; these inscriptions were readily deciphered as being the phrases: *Melech Eretz* - King of the earth; *Toras Hashem* - the Law of the Lord; *D’var Hashem* - the Word of the Lord, and *Kodesh Kodashim* - Holy of Holies. The letters were all very clear but, as students were not slow in discerning, they were not at all of an archaeological character, nor did the stone itself have the appearance of antiquity.”

Because of its shape this stone was given the name “Keystone.”

The following November Wyrick made an even more striking “find.” He discovered what has come to be known as the Decalogue Stone.

“Wyrick took a number of workmen and excavated in the great stone mound [located near Newark, Ohio]. Presently there was unearthed a stone casket eighteen inches long and twelve inches wide. This casket upon being opened was found to contain a slab six and seven-eighth inches long, one and five-eighth inches thick, and two and seven-eighth inches wide. On one side of the stone was a carved human figure, very fierce and pugnacious looking, in turban and priestly robes. This figure stood out in relief from the surface of the stone. Above the figure the word *Moshe* [in Hebrew], the name of the great Jewish lawgiver was inscribed; so evidently this was intended to be a presentment of Moses. Above this name was an arching circular border which ran down both sides of the image to its feet. At the bottom of the stone was a round handle attached to the stone at both ends while in the middle was an empty space through which, as was suggested, a strap was intended to be passed wherewith the stone was to be carried. Every available bit of space with the exception of the handle was carved with Hebrew characters, which were found to be the reproduction of the Ten Commandments although not altogether complete.”

“The inscription is carved into a fine-grained black stone that only appears to be brown in the accompanying overexposed color photographs [Shown below.]. It has been identified by geologists Ken Bork and Dave Hawkins of Denison University as limestone; a fossil crinoid stem is visible on the surface, and the stone reacts strongly to HCl.”ⁱⁱ

One of the people accompanying Wyrick when he found the Decalogue Stone found a stone bowl. It is made of the same material as the box and has the capacity of a teacup. “The bowl was long neglected, but was found recently in the storage rooms of the Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum by Dr. Bradley Lepper of the Ohio Historical Society.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“The discovery created intense excitement far and near and the ‘Holy Stones of Newark,’ as they were called, aroused unusual attention in the archeological and the religious world. Dr. Nicol, the Episcopalian minister of Newark, declared them to be genuine.”

“In 1867, David M. Johnson, a banker who co-founded the Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum, in conjunction with Dr. N. Roe Bradner, M.D.,

of Pennsylvania, found a fifth stone, in the same mound group south of Newark in which Wyrick had located the Decalogue. The original of this small stone is now lost, but a lithograph, published in France, survives.

III. Was This a Hoax?^{iv}

Initially many scholars believed that the Newark Holy Stones were authentic Jewish relics. However, as time passed many archaeologists doubted their authenticity and declared them a hoax concocted by Wyrick himself. However, there is evidence that seems to indicate that Wyrick did not create these stones.

In 1861 Wyrick published a pamphlet giving his account of the discoveries in which he included woodcuts he made that supposedly depicted, to the best of his ability, the inscriptions on the stones. “A careful comparison of Wyrick’s woodcuts of the Decalogue to the actual inscription shows that out of 256 letters, Wyrick made no less than 38 significant errors, in which he either made a legible letter illegible, turned a legible letter into a different letter, or omitted the letter altogether. Whoever carved the Decalogue stone had only imperfect knowledge of Hebrew, and introduced a few errors of his own. Wyrick, however, piled his own errors on top of these. He clearly did not even understand the inscription’s peculiar, yet consistently applied, alphabet, and therefore could not have been its author.

“Moses on the stone has a mild expression and fine features. He is wearing a turban and flowing robe, and is either holding a tablet or wearing a breastplate. Wyrick’s Moses, on the other hand, glares over a projecting nose. He is wearing a beret, Mrs. Wyrick’s 19th century dress, and a minister’s ecclesiastical shawl. Wyrick was evidently a fine draftsman, but not much at life drawing. Beverley H. Moseley, Jr., former art director of the Ohio Historical Society, has compared the carving of Moses on the stone to Wyrick’s woodcut copy. It is his opinion as a professional artist that the same person could not have made these two images.

“Archaeologist Stephen Williams claims that Wyrick was very committed to the Lost Tribes of Israel as the origin of the Mound builders prior to his discovery of the Keystone, with the implication that

Wyrick may therefore have fabricated the Keystone and Decalogue in order to support his pet theory.

“However, Wyrick somehow neglected to mention this alleged obsession in any of his surviving correspondence or even in his very pamphlet on the stones. He was described at the time of the Keystone discovery as merely an ‘enthusiast for natural science.’ Wyrick’s documented interests, besides mound exploration and surveying, included geomagnetism, anomalous boulders, river terraces, beaver dams and sorghum processing.

“In any event, the ‘Lost Tribes of Israel’ would have used the pre-Exilic ‘Old Hebrew’ alphabet, rather than the post-Exilic or ‘Square Hebrew’ alphabet adopted in the time of Ezra by the Jews and which appears, in two versions, on both these stones. There is therefore no question of a ‘Lost Tribes’ connection here, Williams’ misconception to the contrary notwithstanding.”

In 1999 Archaeologist Bradley T. Lepper claimed that Rev. John W. McCarty and stonecutter Elijah Sutton made the Keystone and Decalogue Stone and planted them where Wyrick would innocently find them.

“Lepper’s view is based on the presupposition that the stones must somehow be frauds, in conjunction with the entirely circumstantial evidence that a) McCarty knew how to read Hebrew and quickly translated the inscription despite its peculiar alphabet, b) Elijah Sutton was the stone cutter who carved Wyrick’s tombstone, along with many other Newark tombstones of the period, and c) the Decalogue stone and Keystone are of approximately the same thickness as a typical Newark tombstone of the period.

“Although McCarty did publish an article in a Cincinnati newspaper with a translation of the Decalogue stone within just a couple of days of its discovery, this feat would be no more difficult for a well-trained nineteenth century minister than it would be for any student of American history to decipher a copy of the Gettysburg Address that had been semi-encrypted by consistently replacing half the letters of the alphabet with distorted versions of themselves or even entirely arbitrary

symbols. Once a few unencrypted words are recognized, the other letters fall into place quickly.

“A few days later, McCarty published a second article, correcting some errors he had made [in] his initial interpretation. In his first attempt, for example, he read the letters over the head of the carved figure as Mem-Shin-Heth, or Meshiach (Messiah), and concluded, as a good Episcopalian minister, that the figure was intended to represent Jesus Christ. In his second version, he read these letters correctly as Mem-Shin-He, or Moshe, and conceded that the figure in fact represented Moses. If he had composed the text himself, he would surely have gotten the translation right on his first try, particularly on such an important (and, in retrospect, obvious) point.

“It seems rather hasty to convict McCarty of composing the two Wyrick stones, simply on the grounds that he happened to be the first Hebrew scholar to come along. This is particularly true given that there is not yet so much as a *corpus delicti* to indicate that a fraud has occurred in the first place.”

IV. The Newark Holy Stones Are Genuine^v

Dr. Rochelle Altman, a specialist in ancient phonetic-based writing systems, maintains that the Newark Holy Stones are indeed genuine. In her discussion of this topic she notes that “Dr. Arnold Fischel, lecturer at the Sephardic synagogue in New York (founded in 1654, thus with a Sephardic-Dutch connection), a noted scholar and authority, had written a paper, ‘The Hebrew Inscribed Stones Found in Ohio,’ delivered in June of 1861 to The American Ethnological Society. In this paper, he stated he was convinced of the authenticity of the artifact and ascribed it to ‘medieval and European origins’.”

Dr. Altman notes that the 1863 report of a committee set up by the Ethnological Society agreed with Dr. Fischel’s conclusions; nonetheless, this report has been ignored by the archaeological world. She writes, “Why was the identification ignored? Because neither the committee’s report nor Fischel’s identification fit the two models erected with regard to these artifacts. On one side, we had a group who maintained that the artifacts were evidence of the presence of the ten lost tribes of Israel in

‘Ancient America.’ On the other side, we had a school who declared the artifacts were ‘modern forgeries.’”

Dr. Altman then presents a new and novel explanation of what the five Newark Holy Stones really are.

“There are five pieces, four of which compose a set of ritual artifacts of two types. The fifth item is a case, made-to-order, to house one of the ritual artifacts. The two types are intended for different purposes.

“Type one consists of head (‘rosh’) [which Dr. Altman identifies as the Johnson-Bradner Stone] and hand (‘yad’) phylacteries (tefillin), made of black limestone (black is required for phylacteries). The hand phylactery is 6-7/8” in length by 2-7/8” in width by 1-3/4” in thickness.

“The artifact [the Decalogue Stone] is inscribed in the incantation format and displays a variant of a known condensed version of the ‘decatalogue,’ with abbreviations and composite graphs that dates to before the second century BCE. The head phylactery, inscribed with two of the four excerpts of Exodus required by halacha (Laws), is also written in the spirals of an incantation format and is also made of black limestone. Now only a lithograph of the head piece remains. The phylactery was approximately 3” long by 1-3/4” in thickness and tapered from approximately 1” at the top to a rounded “point” at the bottom.

“Type two, made of novaculite, a very hard fine-grained rock, consists of a flow detector [the Keystone], for determining whether water is stagnant or flowing (thus pure), and a bowl for containing the water for ritual purification prior to donning the phylacteries. The flow detector is four-sided and approximately 6” in length by 1-5/8” in thickness and bears a resemblance to a rounded ‘plumb bob.’”

Dr. Altman analyzes each of the Holy Stones and the writings on them. In part she writes, “The two phylacteries are made of black material, which is in accord with the rabbinical law that phylacteries must be black in color. Although contrary to Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic rulings in the second century CE, the use of a condensed ‘decatalogue’ is in accord with a known prior tradition. That other

traditions continued to exist alongside the Palestinian and Babylonian tradition is known from the Dead Sea Scrolls, papyri from Egypt.”

Based on her analysis she comes to the following conclusions:

“The artifacts could not possibly have been created in the nineteenth century; nobody had the knowledge necessary to do so. Indeed, nobody who previously examined these artifacts has recognized that two of the artifacts are inscribed in the ancient incantation format. Nor has anyone previously realized that the ‘peculiar’ font is a consolidated design or that it is a grid font typical of scripts and fonts used with incantation formats. It is rather clear that no one until today has recognized the Late-Medieval Hebrew script that is the base-script of this consolidated grid font. The ‘Newark’ Ritual artifacts are neither forgeries nor relics of ‘Ancient America.’ They are, however, very important concrete evidence of Ancient and Medieval Israelite practices.”

There are obvious difficulties with Dr. Altman’s theory, the most important of which is why the person who created the “*tefillin*” would have made them out of stone, which, while certainly retaining purity as she suggests, would not be viable as *tefillin* altogether.

The mystery is, therefore, unresolved.

ⁱ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes in this section are from **Are There Traces of the Ten Lost Tribes in Ohio?** by David Philipson, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961)*; 1905; 13, AJHS Journal. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm>

ⁱⁱ The Newark, Ohio Decalogue Stone and Keystone <http://www.econ.ohio-state.edu/jhm/arch/decalog.html>

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^{iv} All quotes in this section are from The Newark, Ohio Decalogue Stone and Keystone <http://www.econ.ohio-state.edu/jhm/arch/decalog.html>

^v All quotes in this section are from ‘**First, ... recognize that it's a penny**’: Report on the ‘Newark’ Ritual Artifacts by Rochelle I. Altman, *The Bible and Interpretation* (an online journal), Jan. 2004, http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Altman_Newark.htm