

Gabriel's Vision: An Angelic Threat to the Resurrection?

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A July 7, 2008 *TIME* magazine article titled, “*Was Jesus Resurrection a Sequel?*” opened with the statement, “A 3-ft-high tablet romantically dubbed ‘Gabriel’s Vision’ could challenge the uniqueness of the idea of the Christian Resurrection.”¹ What exactly is this tablet, and does it have any significant impact on the teaching of the resurrection of Christ?

About a decade ago a stone tablet owned by a Swiss-Israeli antiques collector received the attention of historians. This tablet contained eighty-seven lines in Hebrew text written, not engraved, on the stone, several parts of which are missing or difficult to decipher. Experts date the tablet to the late first century B.C. or slightly thereafter. The origin of the tablet is unknown. Some surmise that it came from the Transjordan region, and other scholars think this may have been a part of the Dead Sea Scrolls collection.

The tablet contains an apocalyptic prediction of the end of the world spoken by a person named Gabriel. Some scholars believe the name refers to the angel Gabriel.

Knohl’s Interpretation

The connection to the resurrection of Christ is found in line 80. Jewish scholar Israel Knohl, expert in Talmudic and biblical languages at Jerusalem’s Hebrew University, believes the line begins with the words, “In three days” and includes some form of the verb “to live.”² He believes that this text refers to a first century Jewish rebel named Simon who was killed by the Romans in 4 B.C. Knohl believes the translation reads, “In three days, you shall live. I Gabriel command you.”³

Knohl’s Argument

According to Knohl, this translation challenges the literary argument for the resurrection. The basic premise of the literary argument is that the idea of a resurrection was without precedent for both Jews and Christians; therefore, it could not have been fabricated. Van Biema states that one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection was that it was a unique concept introduced by Christianity. The defense Christians gave for the resurrection is that the idea of resurrection was neither believed by the Jews nor found in prior literature, and, thus, could not have been made up by the Christians. Since it could not have been made up, it must have been true.

TIME magazine writer David Van Biema states that if Knohl’s translation is correct, it would somehow undermine the historicity of resurrection:

¹ David Van Biema, “Was Jesus’ Resurrection a Sequel?” *Time Magazine*, 7 July 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1820685,00.html?xid=newsletter-weekly>

² *Ibid.*, 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

This, in turn, undermines one of the strongest literary arguments employed by Christians over centuries to support the historicity of the Resurrection (in which they believe on faith): the specificity and novelty of the idea that the Messiah would die on a Friday and rise on a Sunday. Who could make such stuff up? But, as Knohl told TIME, maybe the Christians had a model to work from. The idea of a "dying and rising messiah appears in some Jewish texts, but until now, everyone thought that was the impact of Christianity on Judaism," he says. "But for the first time, we have proof that it was the other way around. The concept was there before Jesus." If so, he goes on, "this should shake our basic view of Christianity. ... What happens in the New Testament [could have been] adopted by Jesus and his followers based on an earlier messiah story."⁴

Critique of Knohl's Argument

There are reasons that Knohl's argument is not a threat to the resurrection. First of all, the physical evidence on the stone tablet is not clear. In particular, the exact words of line 80 are not known. Hebrew scholars remain uncertain regarding line 80 because in crucial places there are a number of missing words. The translation of the text done by Ada Yardeni, the Israeli scholar who first worked on the tablet, shows there are indeed key words missing. In fact, Yardeni considers the words in line 80 to be indecipherable.⁵ The English translation reads:

(line 79) "...from before You, the three si[gn]s(?), three ...[....];
(line 80) In three days ..., I, Gabri'el ...[?].⁶

This has naturally led to differing translations of the text. Knohl contends that the words should be translated saying, "In three days you shall live." In contrast, church history scholar Ben Witherington states that the verb Knohl translates as "*rise*" could also mean, "*there arose*." Thus, instead of a resurrected messiah, the text refers to the appearing of a Messiah.⁷ Since the words of line 80 are not clear, we cannot state conclusively the text speaks of a messiah who dies and resurrects in three days.

Secondly, even if Knohl's translation is correct, it does not affect the evidence for and the teaching on the resurrection. Instead it references the already known Jewish debate regarding messianic expectations. Knohl's translation, if true, simply highlights two conflicting Jewish expectations of a conquering vs. suffering Messiah. On one side, the popular notion taught that a Davidic Messiah would overthrow the nation's enemies and establish the Davidic Kingdom. On the other side, a minority of Jewish schools held to a belief in a suffering Messiah. If Knohl's translation is correct, this tablet would further support that a particular sect believed this suffering Messiah would rise from the dead in three days.

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ Gary Habermas, "'Gabriel's Vision' and the Resurrection of Jesus" July 2008, <http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/gabrielsvision1/gabrielsvision.htm>

⁶ Ada Yardeni's translation, http://www.bib-arch.org/news/dssinstone_english.pdf

⁷ Van Biema, 2.

A possible reference to the resurrection of a suffering Messiah does not pose a major threat to Christianity. Some Christians have taught that the idea of a resurrected Messiah was never taught in Judaism. However, many other Christians have long taught that the Old Testament prophecies, such as Isaiah 53 and Daniel 9, teach of a dying and resurrected Messiah. In fact, a few resurrections are recorded in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17, 2 Kings 13). Therefore, it is not surprising if a pre-Christian Jewish belief in a resurrected Messiah was held by a minority of Jews.

Inaccurate Assumptions

A final reason this interpretation of “Gabriel’s Vision” is not a threat to the resurrection is because it is based upon two inaccurate assumptions. The first inaccurate assumption is overstatement of the strength of the literary argument as evidence for the resurrection. Van Biema asserts that the “novelty” of the resurrection is one of the strongest literary arguments for the historicity of the resurrection. I do not believe the literary uniqueness of the resurrection to be one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection. I rarely, if ever, have used it in an apologetic presentation.

The second inaccurate assumption is that the Christian belief in the resurrection is based on “faith.” I would disagree with Van Biema’s assertion which implies that there is no measure of evidence undergirding that faith. The historicity of the resurrection is not based on “faith” or belief void of credible reasons. Rather, belief in the resurrection is based on compelling historical evidence. In fact, I believe the strongest arguments come from the historical evidence.

Historical Evidence as Strongest Evidence for Resurrection

There is accurate historical evidence recorded in lifetime of eyewitnesses. First, the Gospels represent an accurate historical account of the life of Christ written within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. The internal evidence, archaeology, manuscript evidence, quotes from the early Church Fathers, and ancient non-Christian historical works affirm the first century date and historical accuracy of the gospels (See my article, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, at www.probe.org).

In studying the resurrection, there are several facts upon which historians of various persuasions agree. Any explanation of the resurrection must account for these facts. All other attempts have failed as alternative explanations, leaving only the resurrection as the most reasonable explanation (Read my article, “*Resurrection: Fact or Fiction*” at www.evidenceandanswers.org and www.probe.org). These facts are as follows: First, the tomb of Christ was known and was found empty. Second, there was a transformation of the Apostles from cowards to men who boldly proclaimed the resurrection of Christ in the face of their enemies, some to the point of death. Third, the preaching of the resurrection originated in Jerusalem, the most hostile place to preach such a message. Fourth, there was a massive Jewish societal transformation. Thousands of Jews abandoned key tenets of Jewish faith and accepted the teachings of Christ. Fifth, the origin of the church was built on the proclamation of the resurrection. From the beginning (Acts 2) the church preached the resurrection of Christ in the face of eyewitnesses who could verify the facts of their message. It is hard to believe the church would have survived if it they were presenting a false message.

Summary

These historical facts and evidence, not the novelty of a resurrected Messiah, remain the strongest arguments for the resurrection. Even if Knohl's translation is proven to be correct, it does not affect any of these historical facts. There is still compelling evidence for the resurrection of Christ apart from the relatively weak argument of literary uniqueness. If accurate, Knohl's translation would highlight the controversy among pre-Christian Jews regarding the two concepts of the coming Messiah. It would also reinforce the idea that within the minority Jewish view of a suffering Messiah there was the belief by some that a Messiah would die and resurrect three days later. However, Knohl's interpretation of "Gabriel's Vision" falls short of its threat to "shake our basic view of Christianity"⁸ by discrediting the resurrection.

⁸ Van Biema, 2.