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Polemics & Ironics

Canaanites in America: A New Scripture in Stone?

Did the biblical world of the Canaanites extend to America? Do mysterious tablets from the Western Hemisphere represent a scripture in stone more important than the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls? The great controversy is with us again, and a review of the evidence explains why experts conclude that every alleged Canaanite-Phoenician inscription in the New World is either misidentified or a fraud.

A startling title appeared in the September 1978 issue of *Biblical Archeologist*: "How Wide the Biblical World? A Challenge for Recognition and Preservation." The writer of the letter, Dr. N. Rosenstein, a New Jersey physician, summarized some recent books about Canaanites in America and asked:

How long will the "Establishment" remain skeptical and silent? Let their voices be heard so that we laymen can learn the truth. For in the wooded lands of Vermont, New Hampshire, and elsewhere, we have our own American-biblical heritage that is much in need of preservation. Artifacts and inscriptions predate Columbus by hundreds, if not thousands of years. . . . Can we accept the challenge?

The Editor acted most properly in bringing the issue into the open and following it with a rebuttal by Ives Goddard and William Fitzhugh of the Department of Anthropology, The Smithsonian Institution. Theirs is an interesting and informative reply; as a scholar who has done research on the subject, I found their statement correct in every detail. There is neither archeological nor linguistic evidence to support any Canaanite discovery of America. What more can be added to the discussion?

The Canaanites were termed Phoenicians by the early Greeks, and most of the speculations refer to them by that name. Because the Phoenicians were renowned seafarers in antiquity, a commonly expressed opinion over the years holds that some ship or expedition once left the Mediterranean and ventured to the New World for the purpose of trade and exploration. Having arrived safely, these representatives of the relatively sophisticated Phoenician civilization supposedly left a lasting impression upon the less-developed aboriginal societies still living in stone-age America. If one accepts the possibility that such pre-Columbian voyages occurred, it is reasonable to search for evidence demonstrating that ancient Old World civilization stimulated the rise of civilization in the Americas. If the

Phoenicians were responsible for the origin of native civilization, we should be able to find very specific and well-defined evidence. Proof of Phoenician influence should include the presence of the following items of a shared cultural inventory: Phoenician loan words in Indian languages and, of course, some Indian words in Phoenician; alphabetic writing; parallels in architecture, sculpture, and art; surviving oral traditions and mythological accounts of the bringing of civilization; farming technology; the use of iron; Phoenician artifacts and pottery; ship construction and navigation; Mediterranean food plants and animals; and derivations of Canaanite religious ritual and cosmology. This is a long list, and part of the dispute between amateurs and professionals stems from differences of opinion in establishing rules of evidence.

Proponents of the spread of Phoenician influence into America define the evidence with great latitude. An aboriginal reed float is transformed into a lineal descendant of a Nile River barge; Mayan hieroglyphics become an offshoot of Egyptian; an Olmec statue of a bearded god is a Phoenician merchant prince from Carthage. All sorts of similar proofs are said to link the Old World with the New. If such proof exists, why do scholars reject it?

Here we come to the nub of an amazing conflict. In the good old days of scholarship it was enough to say, "The authorities in the field agree that the arguments are wrong"; regardless of the merit of the position, no one would hazard a further opinion against the weight of august professors. But in this modern day everyone wishes to be his own authority, and the personal search for cultural alternatives seems to make every idea or theory equal in value. This search creates a stimulating environment if basic rules of evidence hold firm, but ad hoc rules invented to support new theories wreak havoc in archeology and other fields of inquiry. The pro-Phoenician group of writers go beyond changing the rules of evidence; they blithely reject the work of professionals. Not infrequently the writers claim that their research is ignored totally or misunderstood because "Establishment" scholars are obtuse, opinionated, self-serving, and engaged in a sinister plot to conceal the evidence of Canaanite-Phoenicians in America. These charges against the professionals are widely believed. Some evidence of this can be seen in Rosenstein's letter complaining about the hostile "Establishment."

Such sentiments may be only the tip of the iceberg. If this were a technical article, I could cite at this point

the names of 15 authors who have written about exotic conquests and imaginary migrations to America. This growth of scientific fantasy in the past decade has been of great concern to American anthropologists and archeologists. Until recently the feeling seemed to be that if these strange theories were ignored they eventually would disappear.

More recently there has risen a clearer recognition of the great damage being done and a growing awareness of the extent of misinformation reaching the reading public. Much of the professional response has occurred in the past year. The evaluation of *America B.C.* by Goddard and Fitzhugh (1978: 85-88) is just one of a number of responses which indicate that some of the profession are beginning to mobilize to set the record straight. Other examples have appeared in the public journal of the Archaeological Institute of America, *Archaeology*, in two recent editorials. Rathje's article (1978: 4-7) points out the errors of Von Däniken's pseudoarcheological myth-making concerning ancient astronauts. Riley's article (1978: 59-61) addresses itself rather to the controversial migrations to the New World propounded by professors Fell, Van Sertima, and Gordon.

The November 1978 issue of the *American Anthropologist* illustrates the extent of professional concern. That journal of the American Anthropological Association now reviews books written for the general public about archeology. Four such volumes are evaluated shrewdly therein by Philip Weigand. Additionally, a new journal, *The Zetetic*, devotes itself to the scientific examination of astrology, pyramid power, chariots of the gods, Atlantis, and other paranormal explanations of reality; it is making a useful contribution to clearing up their mysteries. These professional efforts are coming none too soon, as the reading public already has been misled badly by the fantasists. Finally, I have recently written a book about alleged Atlantic voyages, and I have heard that another book on the same subject is being prepared for the Oxford Press.

From this discussion the reader may be able to put the Canaanite-Phoenician speculations into clearer perspective, for they are just part of the outpouring of the archeologically refutable argument which is flooding the literary marketplace. The Smithsonian reply to Rosenstein is, indeed, an excellent contribution to the controversy, but the problem is of such scope that no single article, rejoinder, or reply will give much satisfaction to either side. Even a book is too short to discuss every author and every question. Where does this leave the Canaanite-Phoenicians and their proponents?

The clearest line of argument centers on the presence of Phoenician writing on stone tablets in the Americas. If genuine, these tablets provide final and unassailable proof that the influence of the biblical world reached the Western Hemisphere at an early date.

If false, they do not disprove the Phoenicians' arrival on these shores, but they knock away a major prop of its linguistic evidence. The Smithsonian rebuttal touched on this question, but too lightly to convey a clear impression of the extent of inaccurate reporting. Six major inscriptions have been attributed to Phoenician explorers; I shall discuss each briefly.

(1) *Ogam messages from New England prove that Celts and Phoenicians lived in the eastern United States.* In the summer of 1978 two British archeologists, Ross and Reynolds, published in the British journal *Antiquity* a report titled "Antique Vermont," summarizing their field studies and examinations of alleged sites, inscriptions, and artifacts reported by Fell (1976) and by Trento (1978). Fell claims in *America B.C.* that the New World holds many Phoenician inscriptions written in Ogam, an alphabetic script which uses combinations of bars and dots, representing consonants and vowels, respectively. Ogam, developed in southwest Ireland no later than the 4th century A.D., had no known precursors in Ireland or the Mediterranean; it is manifestly absurd to decipher casual scratches on rocks as ancient Phoenician, Libyan, or Iron Age Celtic languages written in 4th-century-A.D. script. Ross and Reynolds (1978: 100-7) found that the Vermont "inscriptions" usually have some obvious explanation. For example, the examination of a grooved boulder at the Crow site, an early, abandoned Yankee farm in Vermont, showed that the striations were not Ogam letters; in fact, they readily were identifiable as abrasions left by a horse-drawn plow of the single share, Gloucestershire type. The two British archeologists found no evidence of any prehistoric Celtic or Phoenician settlements in, or visits to, Vermont, and they concluded that the evidence from other states was equally insubstantial.

(2) *The Davenport slate tablet from Iowa is an American Rosetta stone proving that an ancient expedition of Libyans, Egyptians, and Spanish Phoenicians colonized the Upper Midwest in 800 B.C.* This theory, also proposed by Fell (1976), has received wide publicity in the *Reader's Digest* and elsewhere. In fact, however, the supposed tablet is a 19th-century building slate taken from what is alleged to have been a Davenport house of prostitution, the Old Slate House. Members of the Davenport Academy of Natural Science carved this tablet among others and put them into Indian mounds, hoping to embarrass a local Swiss clergyman who had antagonized them. The source of the inscription was letters copied from Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (1872 edition), or from an almanac. This hoax was released to the press in the 1870s as a genuine discovery, and the whole affair later became a source of great embarrassment to the Academy (McKusick 1970).

(3) *The Grave Creek tablet from West Virginia proves that Phoenicians, Erse, and others built the Adena Hopewell mounds.* This story was exposed in the 19th century by Cyrus Thomas (1894) and others, but it

refuses to give up the ghost. The Grave Creek tablet bore a mixture of alphabetic signs, including Runic, Phoenician, Greek, Roman, and Erse, apparently all taken from some dictionary current in the 1840s. They do not, of course, spell out any message. Those who inscribed the tablet hoped to create interest in artifacts taken from the Grave Creek Mounds and exhibited to the public in the 1840s for profit.

(4) *The Bat Creek tablet is a Canaanite inscription of the period of the Jewish revolts (A.D. 66-71 or 132-135) and proves that an expedition reached Appalachia in eastern Tennessee.* Cyrus Gordon (1971) provides several decipherments of this tablet, including, "For Judea, the end of days." Smithsonian excavations in the 1880s found the tablet in an Indian mound. Thomas (1894: 391-94) identified the burial of the tablet as dating from the period of historic European contact because there remained fragments of bark and polished wood which had not decayed in the moist environment. No artifacts except the tablet turned up in the Bat Creek mound, but other nearby mounds contained the remains of historic Cherokee burials with European trade goods; the region was the center of the Cherokee nation. The "Canaanite" characters on the tablet closely resemble those used in the system of writing which Sequoyah developed around 1821, a syllabic system using derivatives of English letters to spell the 86 most common syllables. The Cherokee used Sequoyah's system widely in the 1820s, even printing a newspaper with it. The Bat Creek tablet has only nine characters, too short a string to translate, especially because of variations in denotation of signs before the stabilization of the writing system by printing. Despite some difficulties, Cherokee script is a closer match to that on the tablet than the late-Canaanite proposed by Gordon.

(5) *The Metcalf stone from Fort Benning, Georgia, proves that either Cretans or Phoenicians discovered America.* The stone came from a recent barn foundation and has no archeological history, though Gordon (1971) attempts to show that the few marks on the stone may be either Linear A and B, or else Phoenician. He makes no attempt at decipherment, and his tentative identification is astonishing in light of the fact that Phoenician letters and Minoan scripts do not resemble each other. An illustration of the stone shows that the marks thereon are vague and imprecise delineations that do not resemble any Mediterranean-patterned writing. If the Metcalf stone has prehistoric markings, the specimen may be an aboriginal charm-stone, but the designs are too few to suggest any exotic voyages, or that any galleys from the Mediterranean rowed up North American rivers to Georgia.

(6) *The Paraiba tablet proves that Canaanites voyaged to Brazil in 600 B.C.* Long known to be a hoax, the Paraiba inscription regained attention when Gordon restudied the question using a slightly different text copy. The extremely long inscription related that a Phoenician galley was lost in a storm during the

circumnavigation of Africa. This event can be dated approximately 600 B.C. if it refers to the only known attempt to round Africa from the east, an attempt described briefly by Herodotus. The Brazilian inscription reported that twelve men and three women arrived on a "new shore," where they sacrificed a youth to obtain good luck. Gordon (1968, 1971, 1974) argues that the story is authentic and the Paraiba stone genuine, but he has never successfully countered the arguments raised by Frank Moore Cross (1968) of Harvard.

The only record of the inscription is an 1872 letter to the museum, containing a hand-drawn representation of the inscription. Brazilian authorities quickly learned that the signature on the letters was fictitious and that the plantation where the mysterious letter writer said the stone had been found was nonexistent. When the director of the Brazilian National Museum learned that the story of the discovery was false, he began to wonder who was responsible. Knowing only five men in Brazil capable of concocting a Phoenician text, he wrote each of them on some minor matter and checked the handwriting of their replies. The mystery was solved when the handwriting of one of the men matched that of the fictitious plantation owner who reported finding the inscription. The hoax seems to have been intended to beguile the Emperor of Brazil, Don Pedro II, a Semitic scholar. Linguistic analysis of the inscription also proves its 19th-century composition. The forger substituted biblical Hebrew when he could not find the right Canaanite expression, made a few inspired guesses, used alphabetic letter forms from various time periods rather than consistent 6th-century-B.C. script, and followed 19th-century handbooks which contained Punic examples of later periods. It was, plainly, a Brazilian fraud.

These six inscriptions are poor substitutes for reality, and yet, many examples from North and South America are even more conspicuous frauds or misidentifications. Obviously, no Canaanite scripture in stone has been found in the New World. The Canaanites and closely related Hebrew peoples left a remarkable heritage in the Mediterranean area; nothing requires elaboration upon that heritage by the invocation of prehistoric fantasies in the Western Hemisphere.

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Where is the Third Wall of Agrippa I?

The recent publications of Benoit (1976) and Hamrick (1977) have contributed to narrowing the gap among various scholarly views concerning the nature and date of the wall unearthed in Jerusalem in the 1927-28 excavations of Sukenik and Mayer, 400 m northwest of the present wall of the Old City. Both Benoit and Hamrick are of the opinion that these are the remains of a wall which defended the city in the 1st century C.E., prior to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. The questions of the precise date of construction and the identity of the builder remain open to discussion.

Excavations carried out by the authors intermittently between 1972 and 1974 along the line of the Third Wall have thrown additional light on various aspects of the problem. The discovery of two additional towers enabled the excavators to observe a pattern of evenly spaced (42-43 m), northward-facing towers (see plan), thus proving that the wall faced north. Among other problems, the methods used in the construction of the wall were studied in detail.

The remains of the 4.5-m-thick wall are part of an engineering enterprise which, in one section, follows a straight line for 750 m(!). The courses of masonry uncovered comprised the foundations of the wall which had been adapted to the natural surface of the bedrock. These foundations were constructed of small and medium-size field stones and of ashlar of varying sizes. Fine workmanship is evident, mainly in the well-fitted ashlar and in the high quality mortar binding the field stones.

The foundations match perfectly the measurements of the Third Wall as described by Josephus: 10 cubits for the width of the wall and 20 cubits for the width of the towers. He may have exaggerated somewhat in describing the size of the stones employed in the construction, although several huge stones (5 m long) were found incorporated in the foundation. Similarly, Josephus exaggerated in describing the size of the stones used in the construction of the three towers of Herod's western palace (Phasael, Hippicus, and Miriamne). He was accurate, however, in the overall measurements he gave for the towers, as evident in the so-called "Tower of David."

The remains of the excavated foundations are impressive enough to have been part of the ambitious plans of Agrippa I. They are not the desperate and hasty work of the Jewish insurgents. The scanty remains of their building activities at Masada and Herodium are of considerably inferior quality.

Recent archeological finds have enhanced Josephus' reliability as a source for the history of this period. This is a weighty obstacle to the acceptance of

The grid follows the final plans of Sukenik and Mayer.

