



OCTOBER 2017: VOL. V, No. 10

***The Ancient  
Near East Today***

A PUBLICATION OF FRIENDS OF ASOR

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## Chapter One

# Making Amulets Christian: Artefact, Scribes, and Contexts

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# Making Amulets Christian: Artefact, Scribes, and Contexts

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**By: Theodore de Bruyn**

Much religious activity is customary. People do what they do because others have done it before them. But at the same time people adapt customary activities so that they continue to be meaningful. Indeed, it is the combination of the customary and the personal in religious activity that makes it powerful and relevant to people. What happens, then, to customary religious practices when there is a major social and cultural shift in religious regimes? This question underlies a new book, [Making Amulets Christian: Artefacts, Scribes, and Contexts](#). The book examines how textual amulets—incantations written on papyrus, parchment, metal, or other materials—changed as the Christian church became the dominant religious institution in the later Roman empire.

In the Greco-Roman world, as in other cultures, people sought protection from adversity, healing from illness, a competitive advantage in love affairs or athletic contests, and revenge on an adversary through incantations. These incantations often followed set patterns. They would call upon a powerful figure—a deity, for example, or a lesser power, or the spirit of a dead person—and command that figure, in fairly standard phrases, to do what was desired. The incantations could be written on



P.Oslo I 1, col. 1-2 (University of Oslo Library Papyrus Collection inv. 402)

The first two columns of a papyrus roll containing a collection of incantations for various purposes (4th c. CE). Used with permission of the University of Oslo Library.

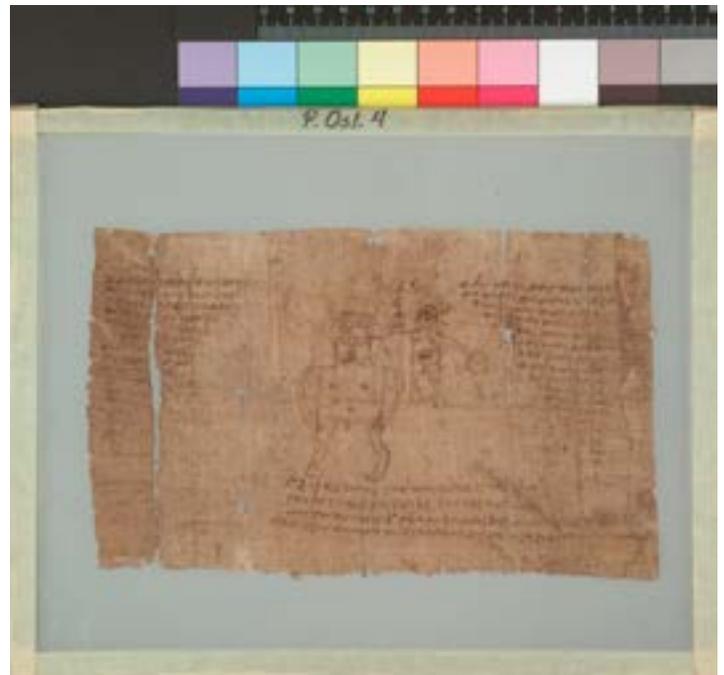
some material which was then worn by or deposited near the person to be affected. Many such incantations from the time of the Roman empire have survived in Egypt, along with manuals giving instructions on how to prepare and activate them. By the time Christian groups began to emerge in Egypt, the formulation of incantations was thoroughly syncretistic, drawing on Egyptian, Hellenistic, and Jewish traditions.

Church authorities discouraged Christians from using incantations and amulets.

According to the authorities, the purveyors of such remedies were at best frauds or, even worse, agents of the Devil. Erotic or aggressive incantations were, of course, condemned outright, but protective and healing incantations were also suspect. When Christians feared illness or became sick, they were urged to make the sign of the cross or obtain oil or water blessed by a holy man or woman rather than resort to the amulets their non-Christian neighbors used.

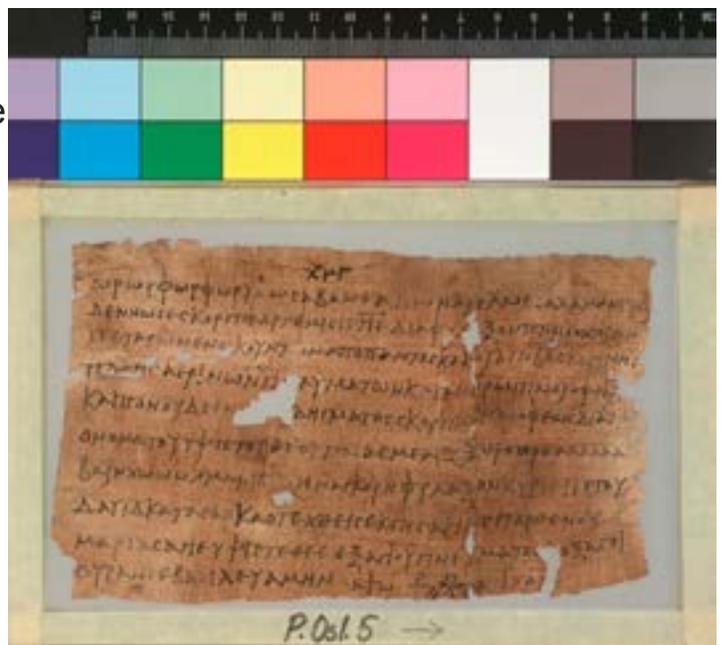
Yet we know from both the exhortations of church authorities and from amulets that have survived that Christians in fact produced and used amulets, including amulets written with an incantation.

There are different ways in which amulets began to incorporate Christian elements at this time. Sometimes a short commonplace incantation, like those designed to protect against scorpions and snakes, is simply 'framed' with Christian markers, such as the sign of the cross. In one remarkable example of this type, the incantation ends with an



Above: P.Oslo I 4 (University of Oslo Library Papyrus Collection inv. 434) An incantation (or 'love spell') to attract Herakles to Allous (4th c. CE). The Egyptian dwarf-god Bes is pictured on the left.

Below: P.Oslo I 5 (University of Oslo Library Papyrus Collection inv. 303) An amulet to protect a house (4th c. CE). The customary incantation is framed by Christian symbols and a Christian doxology.



elaborate Christian doxology or liturgical formula.

In other amulets, text phrased in Christian terms is paired with text phrased in customary terms. For instance, one amulet begins with a trinitarian invocation and a powerful name (the common palindrome Ablanathanalba), and then calls upon 'holy signs' (often used in incantations) to heal Tiron from fever. Similarly, another amulet against fever appeals to both Jesus Christ and the white wolf (the sun god Horos-Apollo) for healing.

In yet other amulets, the phrasing of the commands may be customary, but the substance of the incantation is entirely Christian. The request is addressed to Christian figures, the stories told are from the gospels, and the closing words echo liturgical prayers. This last type of amulet tends not to use 'secret' words and signs, devices commonly used in non-Christian incantations to achieve the desired effect.

Interestingly, the ways in which writers of individual amulets compose or copy all these elements tell us something about their familiarity with Christian rituals or their proximity to Christian institutions. An amulet with a fully developed doxology addressed to Christ or a description of Christ's career derived from a Christian creed was probably written by someone closer to the institutional church than, for example, an amulet with a somewhat jumbled excerpt from the Lord's Prayer or the eucharistic liturgy. Often, though not always, writers



Above: P.Köln VI 257 (Kölner Papyrussammlung inv. 10266v) An amulet that appeals to 'holy signs' to heal Tiron from fever (late 4th-early 5th c. CE). It begins with an acclamation addressed to the Trinity.

(Institut für Altertumskunde, University of Köln.)

Below: P.Köln IV 171 (Kölner Papyrussammlung inv. 3302r) A fragment of an amulet with the Lord's Prayer (5th c. CE). The final petition is followed by a doxology similar to one found in an early Christian prayer-book from Egypt. (Institut für Altertumskunde, University of Köln.)

who are more familiar with ‘standard’ Christian material are also more consistent in their use of Christian scribal techniques, such as abbreviations for ‘God’, ‘Lord’, ‘Jesus’, ‘Christ’, and certain other names (termed *nomina sacra*) that were commonly used by Christians when copying, for instance, books of the Bible.

What also emerges in this period are amulets—or objects that may have been amulets—written with only or mostly a portion of the Christian scriptures. Some passages, such as the Lord’s Prayer or Psalm 90 (cited in the Greek version of the Septuagint), were especially popular. But other texts were also used, accompanied by a short petition or command: the opening words or a verse from a gospel, or a portion of the legendary correspondence between Jesus and Abgar, king of Edessa.

In a sense, it is a misnomer to refer to these materials as ‘scriptural’, since the way the texts are selected, phrased, and written reveal that they issue from the devotional habits of the writers and their communities. For example, the wording of the Lord’s Prayer in amulets corresponds to the form recited by the priest in the liturgy of the church. Psalms regularly recited in daily prayer services also appear with some frequency in what may have been amulets.

The devotional nature of these materials, particularly the Lord’s Prayer and verses from the Psalms, is also reflected in their mode of transmission: they are written down from memory, and the memory is more oral than visual, as the frequent phonetic spellings show. Moreover, because the Lord’s Prayer and the Psalms were widely known, the range of writers who would have been able to write them down is relatively broad. This is reflected in the range of hands and the relative ‘accuracy’ of the text in amulets comprising the Lord’s Prayer and/or Psalm 90.



MPER N.S. XVII 10 (Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek Papyrussammlung inv. G 29831, ii verso and i recto) A protective amulet in the form of a small codex (6th-7th c. CE). The opening invocation is followed by verses from the Gospel of John (John 1:5-6). Copyright Austrian National Library, Papyrus Collection, inv. G. 29831.



When amulets incorporate chants or other portions of the liturgy of the Egyptian church that were regularly recited by the people or the clergy (such as the Sanctus or the Lord's Prayer), they demonstrate the importance and efficacy of those rituals in generating resources for writers of amulets. At the same time, variations in how those elements are incorporated into amulets reveal that, consciously or not, writers drew on these resources with some freedom. Moreover, the traditions on which writers drew were more diverse than those preserved in the authorized liturgies of the church, as is evident from incantations that incorporate Valentinian or Sethian elements, that is, reflecting early Gnosticism.

In short, as *Making Amulets Christian* concludes, the writers of incantations were both receivers and creators of tradition. In perpetuating a customary practice, they also reshaped it, leaving us tell-tale traces of their individuality.

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*Chapter Two*

**Revolutionary Biblical  
Discoveries  
and the Need for  
Historical Amnesia**

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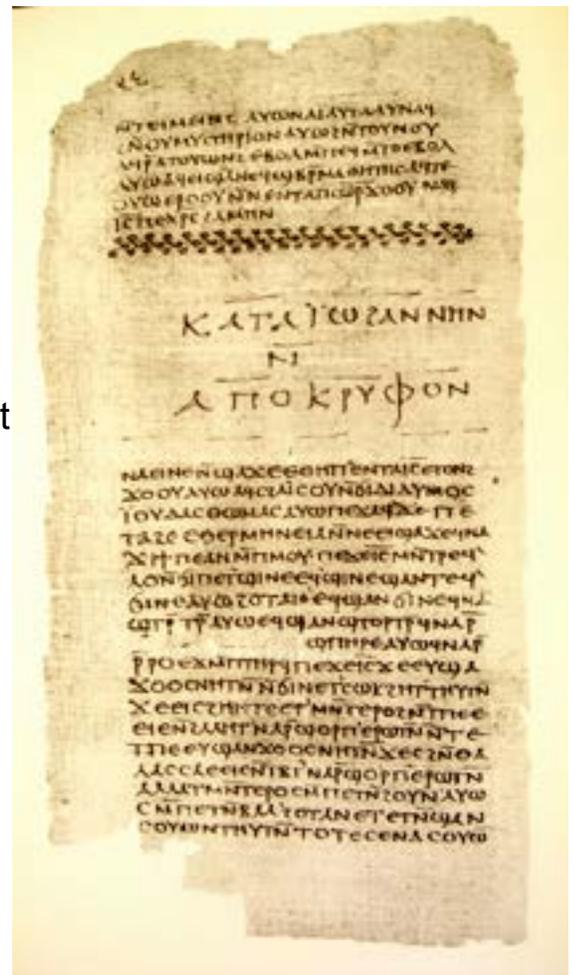
## Revolutionary Biblical Discoveries and the Need for Historical Amnesia

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By Philip Jenkins

The Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Jesus's Wife ... every few years, the media report new finds of ancient texts that supposedly throw revolutionary new light on the Biblical world, and (commonly) on Christian origins. In reality, such finds rarely tell us much that is new or unexplored, and are mainly of use to hardcore specialists. In most cases, the claims that are made are actually quite familiar, and have been made on many previous occasions. Any kind of historic perspective shows that even what initially look like the most radical ideas in this field have a long prehistory. Successive claim about new and explosive discoveries rely on a process of recurrent public amnesia.

In modern times, two finds in particular have rightly caused much excitement for what they might suggest about the Second Temple era and early Christian times, namely the Dead Sea Scrolls and the books in the Nag Hammadi library, specifically the Gospel of Thomas. Both those discoveries date from the mid-1940s but many of the main insights long predated that time. In the 1890s, manuscript finds at Oxyrhynchus, in Egypt, already produced major portions of the Gospel of Thomas, and these created a sensation in popular newspapers and magazines. Before the First World War, any reasonably literate person would be expected to know and quote those "Sayings of Jesus," not to mention a wide range of alternative Jesus sayings and logia that were widely



Nag Hammadi Codex II, folio 32, the beginning of the Gospel of Thomas Nag Hammadi Codex II, folio 32, the beginning of the Gospel of Thomas. (wikimedia.org)

available in popular books. In 1917, a religious education text intended for schools gave the Thomas passages the homely description of “a bit of Bible long lost.”

Think of a radical new version of the “Jesus Quest” from the past few decades, and it was thoroughly established in the popular mainstream by 1914. Jesus as feminist prophet, as Buddhist sage, as New Age mystic, as the husband of Mary Magdalene – all these images were familiar and readily available, and grounded in ancient writings and alternative scriptures.

Particularly familiar was the idea of “Jesus the Essene.” While the Dead Sea Scrolls discovery did revolutionize scholarship, the Qumran community itself was not quite as unexpected a revelation in the 1940s as we might think. Scholars had long known the writings of Josephus and other ancient writers on the Essenes, and integrated those ideas into their speculations. Already by the 1870s, English Biblical scholar J.B. Lightfoot denounced the habit of “a certain class of writers” who claimed Essene precedents for many aspects of early Christianity. The idea of mystical Jewish settlements in the Judean wilderness was so familiar in the nineteenth century that it was almost old hat.



Above: Caves at Qumran (wikimedia.org)

Below: Solomon Schechter at work on Cairo Geniza material in Cambridge (longreadsblog.com)



The study of Jewish sectarianism was revolutionized by a truly important discovery in

the 1890s, namely the documents in the Genizah (manuscript storage facility) of an ancient Cairo synagogue. Although this vast collection continues to be explored and published, one document created a particular sensation at the time. This was a text from a then-unknown sectarian movement, which we now know to be fragments of the Community Rule of the Qumran group. It was published as the [Fragment of a Zadokite Work](#) (1910) by rabbi Solomon Schechter, with a brilliant and perceptive commentary. Among other things, Schechter gave a wonderful idea of the nature of the sect, its legal outlook and scriptural universe. Widely quoted and anthologized, Schechter's translation popularized many of the distinctive ideas, terminology, and emphases of the Qumran sect.

The Fragment detonated a public controversy of a kind that would be instantly recognizable from the modern media. Biblical scholar George Margoliouth made far-reaching claims about the nature of the mysterious Zadokites or Sadduceans, whom he saw as early Jewish-Christians, which would make the Fragment a very primitive lost gospel describing Jesus and his first followers. For Margoliouth, Jesus himself was the sect's Teacher of Righteousness, with Paul as one of his enemies and betrayers. So sensational were these ideas that they dominated the Christmas Day front page of the *New York Times* in 1910, and the controversy echoed through US newspapers and periodicals for months afterwards.



Rev. George Margoliouth (fearon.me.uk)

Between them, the Sayings of Jesus and the Zadokite Fragment ignited immense popular interest in alternative scriptures and religious texts, and fired demand for accessible translations. One of the most successful was R. H. Charles's two volume collection of [The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English](#) (Clarendon Press, 1913). Meanwhile, mystical and proto-New Age groups ran a whole publishing industry producing alternative and heretical early Christian texts and Gnostic writings. These already contained virtually all the fundamental ideas about Gnosticism that have attracted so much attention in recent years.

In 1916, George Moore produced an international best-seller in his novel [The Brook](#)



[Kerith](#), which went through many editions. In this daring retelling of the gospel narrative, Jesus begins and ends his career in an Essene monastery on the Dead Sea. Surviving the crucifixion, he ends his days by joining a band of Buddhist monks evangelizing the Judean countryside.

Just how mainstream was the idea of these lost “other” portions of the Bible? In 1915, the *Kansas City Star* published a short religion column on the theme of “How the Idea of Immortality Developed” (January 17, 1915). The story was clearly aimed at a general audience, and made no pretensions to academic depth, yet the author’s main point was that “The whole doctrine of the future life as it is worked out in the New Testament is based on the religious teachings and insights of the writers of the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament.”

That assertion is undeniably correct, but we must be struck by the assumption that ordinary non-expert readers would be expected to know or care about those “Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament” – including the Zadokite work. In the 1930s, the four million paid subscribers of the *Women’s Home Companion* could have read a major essay on “The Books That Jesus Loved.” This listed an impressive range of pseudepigraphic texts that Jesus almost certainly knew, including “The Book of Zadok” – or as we would call it, the Community Rule from Qumran.

So commonplace were these various ideas and theories that it is perhaps surprising that they have proved so sensational in very modern times. Although the text is authentic, the Gospel of Judas (for instance) really adds next to nothing to what we knew about Gnosticism a century ago. Why, then, do we so often hear that such a new find is astonishing, revolutionary, that it challenges the long-held beliefs of dyed-in-the-wool academic orthodoxy... and so on?

But to ask the question is to answer it. If an author or publisher produces a hitherto unknown text, just what are they meant to say? Well no, this text really doesn’t change our basic knowledge about early Christianity, and it obviously contributes nothing to what we can say about Jesus’s time, but it’s really exciting for scholars in early Coptic grammar and narrative! Of course not. In order to seize attention, the text has to be portrayed as ground-breaking, explosive, and wholly new in its implications, even if that means ignoring a long history of previous research and scholarship. Any and every “revolutionary discovery” has to be founded on painting and exaggerating the



ignorance that had prevailed in previous years.

Historical amnesia is a fundamental and necessary component of the process of claiming, and over-claiming.

***Philip Jenkins is Distinguished Professor of History at Baylor University.***



Chapter Three

**The Antikythera  
Device:  
A Working Model of  
the Cosmos**

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# The Antikythera Device: A Working Model of the Cosmos

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**By: Alexander Jones**

All cultures create models of the cosmos in words and images; the ancient Greeks were the first to make a mechanical working model of the cosmos.

In the spring of 1900, a group of Greek sponge divers en route to their usual diving grounds off North Africa chanced upon the site of a shipwreck dating from about 60 BCE off the small island of Antikythera, between Crete and the Greek mainland. For nearly a year, the divers labored with assistance from the Greek navy and archeological service to recover objects from the wreck, including bronze and marble statues, fine quality glassware, and other high-end items; in other words, a commercial cargo of luxury goods from cities of the

Above: Antikythera, Greece, and the Aegean.  
(nature.com)

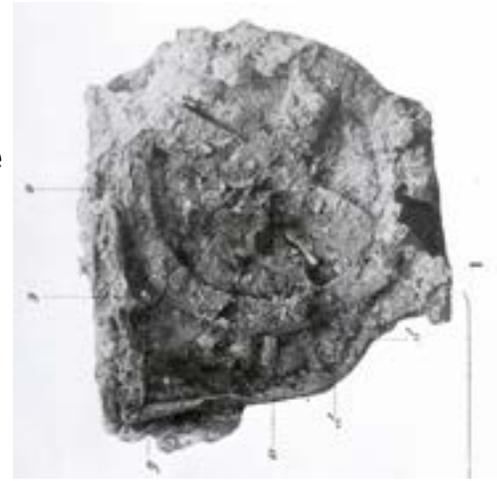
Below: Sponge divers, archeologists and ministry officials, and the officers and crew of the naval transport ship Mykali at Antikythera in 1901.

(Photo: Alexander Jones.)



Aegean and eastern Mediterranean, heading for markets in Italy or elsewhere in the western part of the Greco-Roman world.

Among the recovered objects deposited in the National Archeological Museum in Athens were a few heavily corroded slab-like fragments composed mostly of bronze plate. These went unnoticed until Spyridon Stais, the former minister of education who had negotiated the government's sponsorship of the diving operations, paid the Museum a visit on May 18, 1902 (according to the Julian calendar still used then in Greece, equivalent to May 31 in the Gregorian calendar). Stais noticed gears and tiny engraved Greek lettering on the fragments, and within a few days it was realized with excitement that they were the remains of some kind of astronomical device.



Fragment A, the principal fragment containing 27 of the 30 surviving gears, as it was in 1903 before conservation and cleaning. (Photo: Alexander Jones.)

The first big advances in making sense of the fragments were achieved by Derek de Solla Price (1922-1983), a British historian of science and technology. From the late 1950s through the early 1970s Price made several visits to Athens to study them, and through collaboration with Haralambos Karakalos, a nuclear physicist, he obtained the first x-ray radiographs of the main fragments, revealing gears and other mechanical elements that were hidden behind the surface plates. More recently, Michael T. Wright (in collaboration with Allan Bromley) and an international team called the Antikythera Mechanism Research Project have augmented and corrected Price's work using direct observation, radiography, x-ray computed tomography, and reflectance transformation imaging.

As a result, we can now say with a great deal of confidence what the Antikythera Mechanism—the name is Price's—looked like, what it did, and, in large part, how it worked. It has turned out to be the most complex and information-rich artifact of ancient science that has ever come to light.

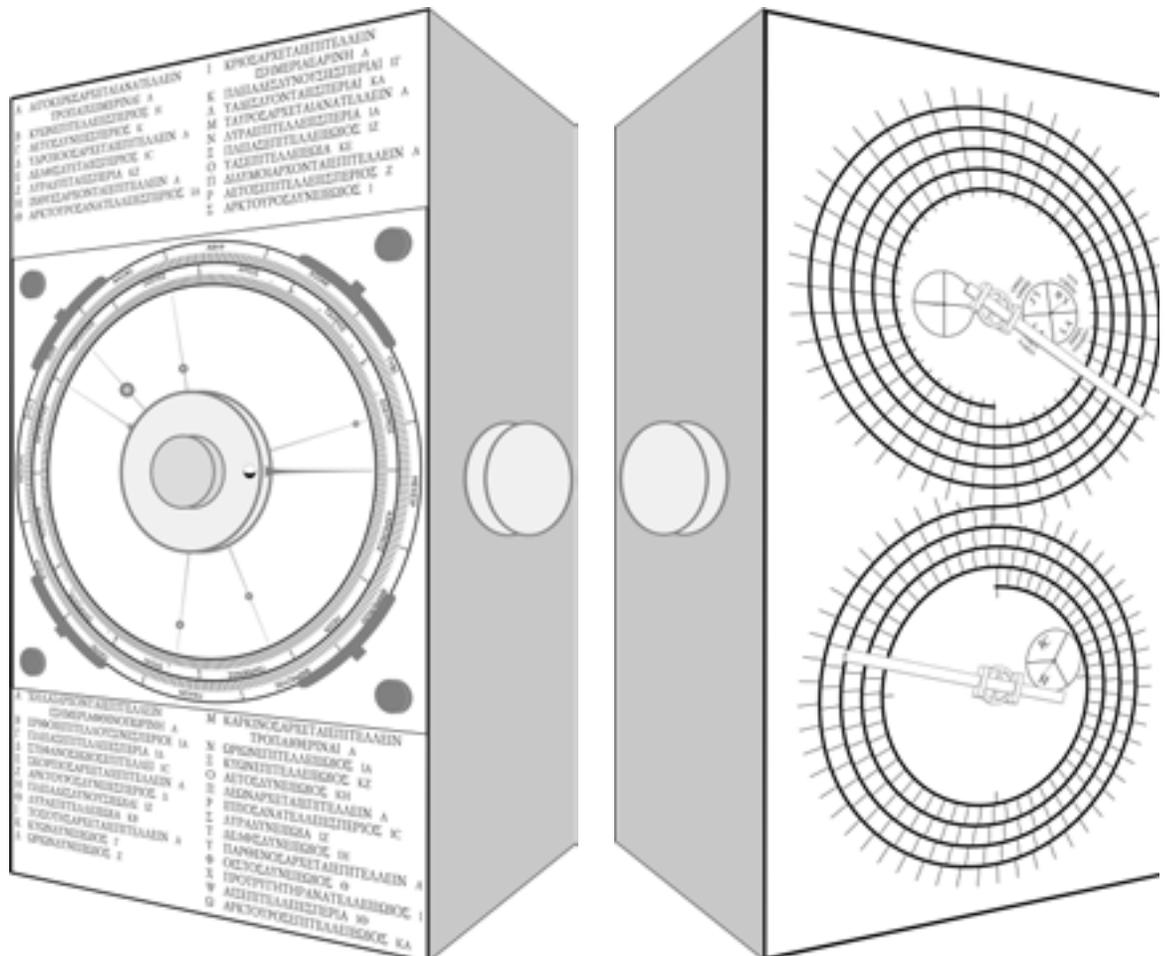
The Antikythera Mechanism was a greatly accelerated simulator of the cosmos, as Greek astronomers around 100 BCE understood it, from an Earth-based perspective.

Imagine a box, slightly over a foot tall and half a foot wide, and perhaps four or five inches from front to back. The top, bottom, and sides were a wooden frame, while the front and back were bronze plates bearing various dials with moving pointers. In the middle of one side was a knob that could be turned by hand. Turning the knob clockwise meant going forward in time, at a rate of about one year for every five complete turns, and turning it counterclockwise meant going backward.

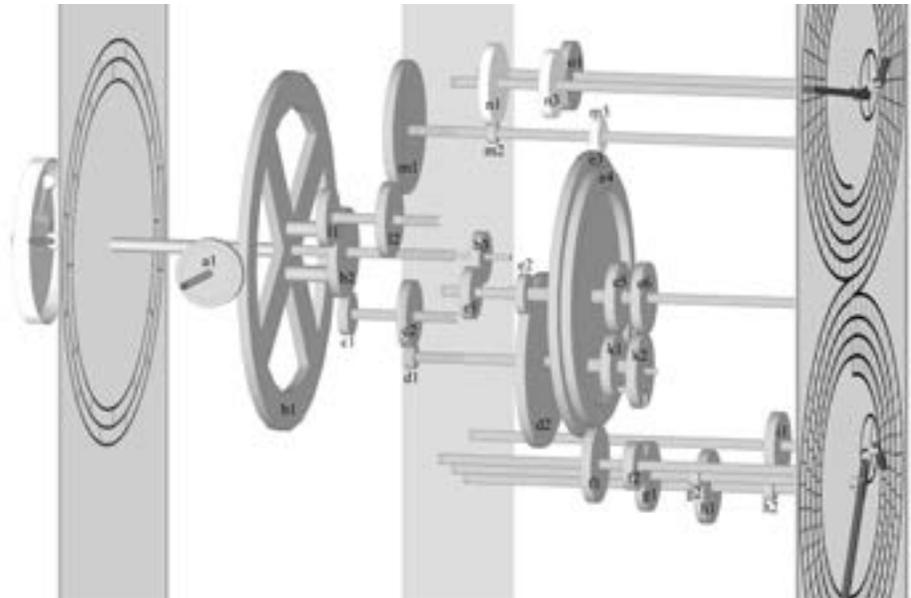
Top: The 82 known fragments as displayed currently in the National Archeological Museum, Athens. Most of the small fragments were separated from the main ones during the 20th century. (Photo: Jason Ramos)



Below: Reconstruction of the Antikythera Mechanism's exterior, front and rear views. (Alexander Jones)



On the back face there were five dials whose pointers indicated the passage of time according to a variety of time cycles ranging from four years (the cycle of the Olympic Games and other athletic festivals celebrated by the Greeks) to 76 years (the shortest calendar cycle simultaneously containing whole



Exploded view of the gearwork driving the solar, lunar, and calendrical outputs. Darker gears are at least partially extant, paler gears are restored.  
(Image by and ©M. G. Edmunds)

numbers of days, lunar months, and solar years). On the front, one big dial with seven pointers radiating from its center showed where an observer on Earth would see the Sun, the Moon, and the five planets visible to the naked eye along to a 360° zodiac scale. As one turned the input knob at a steady rate, all the pointers on the back dials would revolve at different but steady rates because they are all measuring time, but the pointers on the front would continually change in speed and some would intermittently reverse direction, just as the planets in the sky appear to do.

The Greek and Latin literature on mechanical devices that has come down to us contains descriptions of only a few gearwork devices, chiefly odometers. The only extant example other than the Antikythera Mechanism itself is a rather simple and crude attachment to a portable sundial from about AD 500 that allowed the user to set by hand a display of the days of the week and of the lunar month. The Antikythera Mechanism was far more complicated than anything else we know of until the late Middle Ages, and it used several kinds of gearing (crown gears, epicyclic gearing, pin-and-slot engagement) that are otherwise unattested in antiquity.

Of the thirty gears that survive, twenty-nine belonged to the part of the mechanism that dealt with time cycles, eclipse prediction, the Moon's phases, and the movements of the Sun and Moon through the zodiac. A few additional gears—four at a minimum—have to be restored to complete this module, but in all major respects we know not only



what the outputs were but how they were connected to the input through a branching system of gear trains. On the other hand, the gears that led to the pointers for the five planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) on the front dial are lost, except perhaps for the one loose gear that does not fit into the Sun-Moon-chronology module, but we know that these pointers existed, and to a considerable extent how they behaved, from information in texts inscribed in Greek on two extra plates that accompanied the Mechanism, perhaps serving as covers.

Both the extant gearwork and the inscribed texts tell us a great deal about the astronomical theories that the designer knew and was trying to emulate. Greek astronomy around 100 BCE was undergoing significant transformation through contact with the contemporary, but more mathematically advanced, astronomy of Babylonia and also in response to the demand coming from the relatively new but hugely popular practice of horoscopic astrology for positions of the heavenly bodies calculated for arbitrary dates, on the basis of which astrologers generated their prognostications.

The Antikythera Mechanism's handling of lunar motion, calendars, and eclipses was almost entirely based on two Babylonian period relations, the 19-year period that provided the structure of the Babylonian calendar from about 500 BCE on, and the 223-month Saros eclipse cycle. The mechanical basis of its simulation of the Moon's varying apparent speed, however, conforms to Greek theories based on combinations of circular motions such as those known to have been assumed by Hipparchus around 140 BCE. The theories behind the representation of the planets' motions were also geometrical in the Greek manner, and the assumed periodicities were not Babylonian.

How does our knowledge of the Antikythera Mechanism affect our understanding of the Greco-Roman world? Obviously it is a remarkable demonstration of the capability of a metalworking shop (possibly on Rhodes) to design and execute intricate precision machinery, likely under the guidance of a mathematician-astronomer collaborating with an expert and inventive mechanic. But it is also a striking illustration of the distinctive role of public science in this civilization. It was, after all, almost certainly not a tool of specialized research, nor (I would argue) was its primary purpose to calculate quantitative data, notwithstanding frequent modern characterizations of it as an ancient "computer."

As allusions to comparable devices (*sphaerae*) in ancient literature suggest, it was probably an educational tool, a visual and dynamic counterpart of textbooks of



astronomy written for the educated layman, and also a proof of the power of the human intellect and indeed of God's. For as the Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero wrote about a similar astronomical mechanism owned by the Stoic Posidonius, "If someone took to Scythia or Britain this *sphaera* that our Posidonius has recently made, each turning of which produces the same behavior for the Sun and Moon and five wandering stars that is produced in each day and night, who in those barbarian lands would question that this *sphaera* was fashioned by reason?" (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* II 88)

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## Chapter Four

# Fighting Over the Bible: Jewish Interpretation, Sectarianism and Polemic from Temple to Talmud and Beyond



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# Fighting Over the Bible: Jewish Interpretation, Sectarianism and Polemic from Temple to Talmud and Beyond

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**By: Isaac Kalimi**

The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament stands as an important sacred text for all branches of the Abrahamic faiths, although these maintain fundamentally different attitudes towards it. Nonetheless, far from unifying Jews, Christians and Muslims, the biblical texts divided them, and have regularly been used as weapons to condemn opponents – insiders and outsiders – rather than as tokens of unification and reconciliation.

[\*Fighting Over the Bible\*](#), explores the roots of those interpretive conflicts, especially as they are reflected in pre-modern Jewish literature. It addresses the place of the Bible in Judaism, and the rich Jewish interpretative and theological methods that grew out of internal and external controversies in the Land of Israel and the Jewish Diaspora. It illustrates how the study of the Scriptures filled the vacuum left by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (70 CE), and became the foundation for Jewish life and existence at all times and places.

The focus, however, is on Jewish texts from the late Second Temple, talmudic and medieval periods, that is from ca. the 2nd century BCE to the 16th century CE. The creative intellectual and spiritual activities of the Jews – including their Scriptures – are explored within the historical, political, social, economic, religious and academic circumstances of the societies among whom they lived.

The volume comprises two essential parts. The first offers a broad overview and detailed discussion of the role of the Bible and the nature of its interpretation especially in pre-modern Jewish religion, literature, and culture. The wide-ranging discussion of “The Place of the Bible in Jewish Religion and Culture: Written and Oral Torah” notes the paradox that while the Hebrew Bible is repeatedly commended as the source of Jewish religion, thought, culture, and literature, it has in reality often been neglected,



while Jews have occupied themselves almost exclusively with the Oral Torah.

There were two key reasons why Jews came to focus so much more attention on the Oral Torah than on the simple meaning of the Written Torah. First, in the context of exile and dispersion, they clung to the practical aspects of their religion, the Halachot, as means of maintaining their distinct religious and cultural identity and heritage in all their communities. Second, because their situations were ever-changing, the halachic traditions also had to remain flexible, and were continually debated.

Yet no matter how far they developed away from the Written Torah, it remained the essential basis for the Oral Torah; Sages were careful not to question or critique it. Textual and content difficulties were harmonized or explained away, leading to ever-expanding interpretive traditions, while only a few medieval Jewish commentators concerned themselves with the literal/simple meaning of the biblical text. Even the latter generally still upheld the traditional Jewish principles and the classical interpretations of the *mitzvot*/Halachot.

Nevertheless, despite their outspoken insistence that the Torah is inviolable and eternal, and that the simple meaning of a biblical text is always to be maintained, the Rabbis sometimes offered interpretations that appear to contradict it. “Rabbinic Exegesis in Contradiction to the Simple Meaning of Biblical Texts” addresses the reinterpretation of *lex talionis* (the law of retaliation), which the Rabbis pointedly replaced with a principle of monetary compensation. Additional examples of such contradictory interpretations are also discussed.

Next, “Theologies and Methodologies in Classical Jewish Interpretation: A Study on Midrash Psalms and Its View of God,” exemplifies the importance of the midrashic and aggadic literature for the study of rabbinic theologies, ethics, thoughts, and ideas. Some theological and methodological features of this literature are discussed with specific reference to the Midrash Psalms, while focusing on the diverse perspectives juxtaposed in the Midrash, and their polemical aspects.

“Encounters and Polemics between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Medieval Jewish Exegesis” shows how medieval period Jewish biblical exegesis flourished in the varied



Jewish Diaspora, and often led to interactions with Christianity and Islam. This resulted in internal and external disputes, which saved Judaism from becoming fossilized. New horizons were opened for understanding specific biblical passages, theological themes, and exegetical methods, and many Jewish scholars were encouraged to study the Bible for its own merit and search for its simple meaning in its original context. These new methods were profoundly different than those employed in the talmudic and midrashic literature.

Yet the common use of the Bible by Jews, Christians and Muslims was not only unable to bring about any agreement, but rather sharpened the conflicts between them. Jewish scholars polemicized against Christian Christological and allegorical interpretations, and rejected their tendency to use biblical verses against the Jews. Similarly, though they applied Islamic interpretive methods to the Hebrew Bible, they also disputed with Muslims, especially the belief in Mohammad as God's messenger. Thus, in addition to self-defense, many Jewish scholars boldly criticized key articles of Christian and Islamic belief, often in the face of extreme persecutions. Thinking and writing offered medieval Jewish scholars a means of escape, and even amidst intense oppression they were remarkably prolific, writing not only biblical commentaries but works of Halachah, theology, philosophy, philology, and poetry.

In light of this history of conflict and oppression, has the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament indeed formed "A Bridge or a Barrier?" between Jews and Christians? Unfortunately, the interpretation of these shared scriptures usually has *not* bound Jews and Christians together. Both between Jews and Christians generally, and between particular Jewish and Christian groups, the shared text has been read in dramatically conflicting ways. Further, even the common assumption that the HB and the OT are essentially equivalent is deeply problematic, ignoring dramatic differences in contents and arrangement between the canons of various Christian and Jewish communities. Nevertheless, the HB and OT retain an essential commonality with the *potential* for mutual understanding and engagement.

Moreover, both Jews and Christians depend on one another's canons to ascertain aspects of their own traditions and histories. They must therefore intensify their search for better understanding and respectful acceptance, in spite of their many differences

and unique interpretations and conceptualizations of common texts and issues.

The second half of the volume, “Interpretation, Sectarianism, and Disputes” focuses on key biblical texts or themes as reflected in late Second Temple period and rabbinic literature. It opens with a discussion of one of the masterpieces of the ancient Israelites’ literary heritage, the dramatic biblical story in Genesis 22 concerning the binding of Isaac, and how this was interpreted in late Second Temple and rabbinic exegesis and thought. In particular, it focuses on the diverse ways in which the characters and actions of Abraham, Isaac and Sarah are portrayed in the Jewish literature, and the theological and interpretive principles that drive these differences.



Binding of Isaac, Bet Alpha synagogue, 6th century CE. (jtr.shanti.virginia.edu)

“The Day of Atonement in the Late Second Temple Period: Disputes between Sadducees, Pharisees, and Qumranites” demonstrates the uniqueness of Yom Kippur against its ancient Near Eastern background. Its central place in the Torah and consequently in the Jewish religion, may have been attained already during of the First Temple period, but definitely by the Second Temple. This chapter explores the differences between the Sadducees and Pharisees regarding the rite of Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16), especially regarding how to carry out the burning of the incense in the Holy of Holies. Another example of priestly conflict over Yom Kippur in the Second Temple period is reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where a number of texts imply that the Qumranites celebrated Yom Kippur on a different day than mainstream Jewish

communities. Such conflicts over the proper implementation of the Yom Kippur rituals resulted in surprisingly bitter polemic, and attest to the central importance of this holiday within Jewish life in the Second Temple period, and beyond.

“The Hiding of the Temple Vessels in Jewish and Samaritan Literature” addresses the preservation and restoration of the Temple vessels during and after the Babylonian exile. This is stressed in Ezra and Chronicles, in contrast with later traditions in which the Temple vessels remained hidden even during the Second Temple period. The latter sought, first and foremost, to explain the disappearance of the Ark of Covenant. Yet they maintained that not only the Ark, but also other sacred vessels were hidden in the earth, where they were to remain until a future eschatological time when the cultic service would be restored.

“The Relations between Jews and Arabs–Syrians in Pre-Islamic Jewish Sources” turns to the well-known animosity between the inhabitants of the cultivated land and wanderers in the wilderness in various biblical stories. In the Second Temple and



Left: Maurycy Gottlieb, Jews praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur, 1878. Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

Below: Aerial view of the Qumran settlement. ([world-destiny.org](http://world-destiny.org))



early rabbinic periods, those conflicts were projected onto the Jews' contemporary neighbors, the Arabs and Syrians. For example, in the books of Maccabees and the writings of Josephus, Arabs and Syrians were regularly described as antagonists, who joined in warfare against the Jews, and even committed acts of brutality exceeding those of the Jews' more powerful enemies, such as the Seleucids and Romans.

Jewish biblical exegesis flourished in the early medieval period across France, Spain, North Africa and the Middle East, and gave rise to new schools of thought, the most notable being the Karaites. Exemplifying the various inter-Jewish conflicts discussed above, Saadia Gaon and ibn Ezra both vigorously challenged the Karaites, and defended the rabbinic tradition in the Oral Torah, especially regarding halachic issues. They attempted to show that the simple meaning of the text itself complements the rabbinic interpretations of the Oral Torah, while drawing from their extensive philological knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic, and other sciences. Their mastery of Arabic philology, and awareness of the Islamic religious world, theology, and methods of interpretation, were helpful in their linguistic and interpretive works. At the same time, they also polemicized against Christian and Islamic doctrines and biblical interpretations. These polemics were not just intellectual; they grew out of these scholars' experiences of oppression under foreign rule.

Nonetheless, as much as this history of fighting over the Bible contributed to disastrous conflicts and prejudices between different groups of Jews, Christians and Muslims, it



James Tissot, Reconstruction of Jerusalem and the Temple of Herod, 1886-1894. Brooklyn Museum.



also reflects ongoing engagement. Even at their most harsh, these conflicts forced each side to carefully consider their own theological and interpretive positions, improve their study methods, and return to the text again and again to search for new insights and better arguments. This back and forth prevented traditions from stagnating, and pushed them to continue developing.

Moreover, the harsh conditions that the Jews experienced in Christian and Islamic societies raised difficult theological questions, particularly regarding the relationship between God and Israel, which significantly influenced their interpretive and intellectual works. In the end, therefore, Jewish interpreters not only fought among themselves and with their foreign contemporaries, but even pictured their struggle as God's fight against them. As Isaac Abarbanel described the situation: "I saw God face to face fighting with his people, his portion of inheritance."

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