The Ketef Hinnom Silver Scrolls: Their Significance for the Authority of the Bible as God’s Word

Two small silver scrolls, found in Ketef Hinnom on the western side of Jerusalem, and “dated to the mid-seventh century B. C.,” contain parts of Deuteronomy 7:9 and Numbers 6:22-27 on two small silver sheets. (When unrolled the larger is about 1 inch wide by 4 inches long and the smaller is about 1/2 inch wide by 1–1/2 inches long).

Deuteronomy 7:9:
Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations;

Numbers 6:24-26:
The LORD bless thee, and keep thee:
The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:
The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

The scrolls were discovered with other items in the burial cave of a wealthy and prominent family. Pottery in the cave dates as far back as the seventh century, confirming the 7th century date for the scrolls. Furthermore, scroll one’s outer edges were worn and split, implying it had been used for a long time before being buried. Paleography likewise indicates a date between the 9th-7th centuries, and “before the sixth century B.C., hence somewhere in the eighth and seventh.” In conclusion, “the convergence of archaeological, paleographic, and orthographic data favors a date around the seventh century B.C. for the composition of this document.”

A picture of scroll #1.

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A picture of scroll #2.  

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The significance (in part) of these silver scrolls can be illustrated in the following way. Let us imagine that someone claimed that the Greek historian Herodotus did not write his
Histories c. 440 B.C., but that his histories were compiled 1,000 years later by an anonymous person who used sources we will call J, E, D, and P. Advocates of this (imaginary) view would point out that the earliest actual substantial manuscripts of Herodotus date to the 10th-14th centuries A.D. Therefore, they might argue, Herodotus’s Histories were not really written by him c. 440 B.C., but were compiled c. A.D. 560 from the J, E, D, and P sources for Herodotus. However, we have a number of fragments of Herodotus, each of which are papyri that are “fragments of a page,”
9 dating to the 1st-3rd centuries A.D. What is the natural conclusion from the existence of fragmentary papyri of Herodotus that date to the 1st-3rd centuries A.D.? The natural conclusion is that it is impossible to date the composition of Herodotus’s Histories any later than the 1st century A.D., and that perhaps advocates of the JEDP theory of Herodotus ought to consider that the work might just have been written by “Herodotus of Halicarnassus”
10 as it claims.

Advocates of the JEDP theory of the Bible argue that the Pentateuch was compiled largely from four alleged source documents—J, E, D, and P—and that these four documents were patched together by an unknown editor or editors “to produce JEDP by about 400 B.C.; and the Pentateuch in its extant form emerged about 200 B.C.”
11 There are huge numbers of fatal problems to the JEDP theory—such as, for example, that it is utterly contrary to the internal evidence of the books of Moses,
12 that no fragment of

9 http://www.tertullian.org/rpeares/manuscripts/greek_classics.htm#Herodotus
12 For example, Dr. K. A. Kitchen (Professor Emeritus of Egyptology and Honorary Research Fellow of the School of Archaeology, Classics, and Oriental Studies at the University of Liverpool, England) notes:
[O]n the basis of real, genuinely ancient, firsthand documentation from the third to late first millennia B.C. we must [note that] . . . the literary profile of Gen. 1–11 basically identical with the profiles of comparable Mesopotamian literature relating to creation, flood-catastrophe, and long “linkup” human successions—and, as a search of the ancient literatures shows, as a topos in vogue creatively only in the early second millennium B.C. (and earlier), not later[,] . . . [M]ain features in the much-maligned patriarchal narratives fit so well (and often, exclusively) into the framework supplied by the independent, objective data of the early second millennium[,] (E.g., details in Gen. 14; Elamite activity in the west, uniquely then; basic slave price of twenty shekels for Joseph; etc.) This . . . comes straight from a huge matrix of field-produced data. . . . [T]he human and other phenomena at the exodus show clearly Egyptian traits (not Palestinian, not Neo-Babylonian . . . of the thirteenth century . . . AND NOT LATER. . . . Tabernacle-type worship structures are known in the Semitic world (Mari, Ugarit, Timna) specifically for the nineteenth to twelfth centuries; the Sinai tabernacle is based directly on Egyptian technology of the thirtieth to thirteenth centuries (with the concept extending into the eleventh). The Sinai/plains of Moab covenant (much of Exodus–Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Josh. 24) is squarely tied in format and content exclusively to the massively documented format of the fourteenth–thirteenth centuries . . . after which the formats were wholly different; we have over ninety original exemplars that settle the matter decisively[. . . .] In short, to explain what exists in our Hebrew documents we need a Hebrew leader who had had experience of life at the Egyptian court, mainly in the East Delta . . . including knowledge of treaty-type documents and their format, as well as of traditional Semitic legal/social usage more familiar to his own folk.
J, E, D, or P has ever been found, and that no extant work of history, or any other extant document of any kind, breathes the slightest hint of the existence of these mythical documents until modern times when it was developed by rationalists with a bias against Biblical inspiration.

The Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls constitute another extremely difficult problem for opponents of Mosaic authorship and advocates of JEDP. Why are fragments of the Pentateuch extant centuries before it was supposedly created? An advocate of JEDP might reply that Numbers 6:24-26 and Deuteronomy 1:7 existed in some hypothetical source, but the Pentateuch as a whole did not exist. This reply is fraught with the same sort of extremely serious problems plaguing the JEDP theory as a whole. First, Deuteronomy 1:7 was allegedly part of a D document forged in 621 B.C. and falsely ascribed to Moses. But how could the scrolls quote Deuteronomy 1:7 before the alleged D document was created? Second, Numbers 6:21-27 allegedly “formed part of P,” but P was allegedly composed centuries after the date of the silver scrolls. How could the scrolls quote from P if P did not come into existence until centuries later? Third, the presence of both passages in a single scroll indicates that they were viewed as part of a single document—the Pentateuch. Rather than being the product of hypothetical source documents that have not a scintilla of extant archaeological evidence for them, the Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls are very strong evidence in favor of the claim that the Pentateuch is exactly what it repeatedly and regularly claims—the product of Moses, writing under the inspiration of the one true God, Jehovah, after the exodus of Israel from Egypt.

Of course, when the JEDP theory received its classical formulation from Wellhausen in the 1800s when the many archaeological proofs against it did not yet exist. Those who wish to maintain JEDP against the ever-growing tide of archaeological evidence to the contrary might argue that Deuteronomy 1:7 existed, and Numbers 6:24-26 existed, but the book in which they are found—the Pentateuch—did not exist. Such a

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In other words, somebody distressingly like that old “hero” of biblical tradition, Moses, is badly needed at this point, to make any sense of the situation as we have it. Or somebody in his position of the same or another name. On the basis of the series of features in Exodus to Deuteronomy that belong to the late second millennium and not later, there is, again, no other viable option. (K. A. Kitchen, On the Reliability of the Old Testament [Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006], 459–460, 295)

contrived answer, however, manifests extremely inconsistent historiography. Would the JEDP advocate make the same claim for Herodotus? Would they make it for any other ancient writer for whom we possess small early fragments and much later larger manuscripts? Why are fragments from Herodotus proof that his *Histories* existed, but fragments from the Pentateuch are not that the Pentateuch existed?

Furthermore, the Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls validate the existence of predictive prophecy in the Bible. The Pentateuch very plainly predicts the Babylonian exile (e. g., Deuteronomy 28), an event that took place many years after these silver scrolls were made. The scrolls evidence that the Pentateuch existed in the seventh century B. C., and, therefore, that predictive prophecy exists in the Bible, validating Scripture as the Word of God.

In conclusion, the Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls validate once again the words of Hebrew Union College President Nelson Glueck:

> It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a Biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible. And, by the same token, proper evaluation of Biblical descriptions has often led to amazing discoveries. They form tesserae [tiles] in the vast mosaic of the Bible’s incredibly correct historical memory.¹⁶

The Bible has been confirmed by archaeology over and over again because it is the very Word of God, the revelation of the holy Creator of the Universe who is truth and who cannot lie.

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