

The Case of the Missing Phylactery

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THEORIES ASCRIBING a Hebrew origin to the American Indians have emerged repeatedly throughout the course of our history, each time, it seems, accompanied by an interesting tale. One of the most unusual episodes in this centuries-old tradition is the famous case of the Jewish phylactery excavated in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1815.

This phylactery, a leather strap containing verses from the Bible and made to be worn on the head or arm in observance of Jewish custom, became the object of intense excitement among a group of clerics, scholars, and antiquaries who believed that it had been brought from the deserts of Assyria across Asia and the Bering Straits by the ancestors of the New England Indians. Cited as proof of the Indians' Hebraic ancestry by the Vermont minister and antiquary, the Reverend Mr. Ethan Smith, reported by the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith in his church newspaper *Times and Seasons*, popularized by Josiah Priest in *Antiquities of America*, and once owned by Elias Boudinot, author of *A Star in the West*, the Pittsfield phylactery caught the attention of nearly every major nineteenth-century proponent of the Lost Tribes theory before it mysteriously disappeared.

The case of the phylactery's disappearance is inextricably bound to the early history of the American Antiquarian Society; the Society briefly held the famous document and regularly received inquiries regarding the whereabouts of the phylactery for more than 150 years. Thus, the American Antiquarian Society was the logical place for a recent donation by the antiquarian bookdealer William Reese of New Haven, Connecti-

cut. Mr. Reese's gift to the Society was a letter dated March 30, 1821, from the Reverend William Allen, president of Bowdoin College, to Dr. John James of Albany, New York. This letter discusses the excavation of the phylactery in some detail, as well as the ensuing speculation regarding its origins, and also contains Allen's own opinion and conclusion regarding the significance of the find. William Allen had been the minister of the First Congregational Church in Pittsfield before accepting the Bowdoin position and was able to examine the inscribed documents before one of them was destroyed by a curious throng of onlookers shortly after its discovery.

Dr. John James, the original recipient of the letter and a prominent physician, corresponded with many of the intellectuals of the period. His brother, Edwin James, was the chronicler of Maj. Stephen Long's expedition to the Rocky Mountains in 1819-20. More than a casual reader of science and history, Dr. James had apparently taken the trouble to learn that William Allen was one of the first scholars to examine the phylactery. William Allen's response to James's query helps to solve the question of where the phylactery might have come from, and why it has been the object of curiosity for the past century and a half.

Starting with some of the earliest chroniclers of the New World, writers through the centuries have attempted to reconcile the origin of the American Indians with biblical accounts. This impulse to weave together the pasts of the Old World and the New stemmed in part from a desire to confirm the validity of the Bible as well as to extend its authority to cover the previously unaccounted region of America. The sixteenth-century Spanish historian Francisco Lopez de Gomara was among the first to explain the existence of man in the New World by suggesting that the Hebrew tribes lost in the Diaspora found their way across the Bering Strait to America and became the ancestors of the American Indians. Among the most famous proponents of this theory was James Adair, whose *History of*

the American Indians (1775) compared the manners, customs, and languages of the Southeastern tribes to those of the ancient Hebrews. In New England, Congregational minister and Yale College president Ezra Stiles believed that the 'descendants of the sons of Japheth' found their way to America in a boat and left an inscription on Dighton Rock in Narragansett Bay as proof of their journey. Later writers such as Elias Boudinot, author of *A Star in the West, or A Humble Attempt to Discover the Long Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, Preparatory to Their Return to Their Beloved City Jerusalem*, and the Reverend Ethan Smith, author of *A View of the Hebrews*, argued more passionately for the kinship of the Israelites and the American Indians. Their arguments, along with a host of others, found their way into one of the most popular books published in the early nineteenth century on the subject of ancient America, Josiah Priest's *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West*.

Of course, the most famous and successful proponent of the connection between the ancient Hebrews and the American Indians was Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet. He was born about 1805 in Sharon, Vermont, and lived there until 1815, when his family moved to Palmyra, New York. In 1827, Smith claimed to have discovered an ancient Hebrew text buried in a hill in the Palmyra area. After its 'translation,' the *Book of Mormon* became the final myth which knit together American prehistory and the Bible.

The Pittsfield documents, then, are particularly interesting in light of this persistent cultural theme. The William Allen letter affords an opportunity to reconstruct the facts behind the discovery and to track the ways in which these facts were distorted to fit a religious vision of American prehistory.

Pittsfield, Massachusetts, arose on the site of an earlier Mohegan village in the Berkshires called Poonstoosuck. In 1754, during the French and Indian War, the citizens of Pittsfield built a stockade for protection against the enemy on Indian Hill, the site of the former Mohegan settlement. The

citizens renamed the settlement Fort Hill. The fort was gone by 1800 when Joseph Merrick, an innkeeper and farmer, moved to Pittsfield and purchased the land.

In June 1815, a boy employed by Merrick 'to clear the yard between the house and the wood house' found a black leather strap among the debris left by plowing. According to Josiah Priest, who took the account from the Reverend Mr. Ethan Smith, author of *A View of the Hebrews*,¹ Merrick tossed the object in a box and forgot about it for several days until his curiosity got the better of him. When Merrick cut the strap open, he found that the box contained several tightly scrolled pieces of parchment inscribed with Hebrew characters.

In a letter of November 10, 1815, Elkanah Watson, the famous canal entrepreneur, the father of the American Agricultural Society and fair, and the most illustrious citizen of the small town, recounted his memories of the find: 'Immediately on hearing of the rumor of the discovery, I repaired to the house of Mr. Merrick, where I found several clergymen, whose curiosity was greatly excited by the strange incident, and who believed with me that the article must have found its way into this recent wilderness, by the agency of some descendents of Israel. . . . This discovery forms another link in the evidence by which our Indians are identified with the ancient Jews.'²

Among the ministers Watson saw in the farmhouse puzzling over the discovery was the youthful Presbyterian Sylvester Larned, who, at age twenty was already 'greatly distinguished for talents and moving eloquence.'³ Although educated at Middlebury, Williams, and Princeton, Rev. Larned apparently did not read Hebrew, for he enlisted the help of William Allen,

¹ Josiah Priest, *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West* (Albany, 1833), p. 68.

² Lee M. Friedman, 'The Phylacteries at Pittsfield, Mass.,' *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 25(1917):82. Friedman cites *Men and Times of the Revolution, or the Memoirs of Elkanah Watson* (New York, 1856), p. 388.

³ Rev. David D. Field, *A History of the Town of Pittsfield, in Berkshire County, Mass.* (Hartford, 1844), p. 59.

one of Pittsfield's two Congregational ministers, to decipher the documents.

As his letter to John James indicates, Allen identified the artifact as a Jewish phylactery, containing four pieces of parchment upon which were verses from Deuteronomy and Exodus written in Hebrew. According to his letter, he at first concurred with Elkanah Watson and Sylvester Larned on the antiquity of the artifact: 'At first I had the impression, that it was an "ancient relic" . . . and that it furnished proof that our Indians were descendants of the ancient chosen people.'⁴

Allen changed his opinion about the phylactery, however. In his letter he outlines the reasons for supposing that the artifact was *not* an ancient one. Allen pointed out that the phylactery had been found in an area 'in which chips and dirt had accumulated for years.' Although Allen tried to learn whether the phylactery was unearthed from the old ground below the wood chips, or from the more recent debris, he was unsuccessful. Because 'no other phylactery had been found among the Indians' and because of the well-preserved condition of the phylactery, Allen posed an alternative to the hypothesis of his colleagues. Joseph Merrick had employed German and British prisoners during the War of 1812. Allen suggested that one of them had dropped the phylactery in the course of his labors.⁵ With Sylvester Larned's permission, Allen sent the phylactery to another scholar whom he knew to have an interest in Hebraic inscriptions, Abiel Holmes of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Dr. Holmes had inherited an interest in Hebrew inscriptions from his former instructor at Yale College, Ezra Stiles.

We have no record of Holmes' opinion of the phylactery, but in his letter Allen notes that Holmes was the person who delivered the artifact to the American Antiquarian Society. Sylvester Larned apparently maintained his belief that the phylac-

⁴ William Allen, ms. letter to Dr. John James, March 30, 1821.

⁵ *Ibid.*

tery was proof of the connection between the Hebrews and the Indians. In 1818, displeased with the fact that nothing had come of the discovery, he wrote to Dr. William Bentley, a councillor of the Society: 'In some conversation during the summer at Salem I remarked to you that I had sent a phylactery to the American Antiquarian Society. I also added that the condition on which this article was to become theirs was that a description of it should appear in their next annual report. This condition remains unperformed. Unwilling that so curious an anomaly should be lost, I have presented it to Hon. Elias Boudinot of New Jersey.'⁶

It seems likely that Larned sent the phylactery to Boudinot after the 1816 publication of *A Star in the West*, since it is mentioned nowhere in the book. What became of the phylactery after this is a mystery. The scholar Lee Friedman took the trouble to search for it in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, where the Boudinot papers are located, but he was unable to locate the artifact.⁷ Sylvester Larned accepted a ministry in New Orleans shortly after the Pittsfield incident and died there of yellow fever in 1820. It is not known whether Boudinot or his heirs had returned the phylactery to Larned; however, the illustration and translation in the William Allen letter is the most accurate and thorough description of the missing artifact that is available.

More interesting than the fate of the phylactery is the embroidery of the story of its discovery. Apparently, William Allen's cool-headed analysis of the phylactery and its probable source did not put an end to the speculation that surrounded it. Eight years after the discovery, for instance, Dr. John James heard a report that it was an ancient relic 'found in digging a well, at a depth of thirty feet.' Although Larned and Elkanah Watson both took the document to be evidence of the Lost

⁶ Quoted in Lee M. Friedman, 'The Missing Phylactery,' *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 38(1948):49.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Tribes in America, the first to publish the assertion was the Reverend Mr. Ethan Smith of Poultney, Vermont. Upon learning of the Pittsfield phylactery, he went to Pittsfield and interviewed Joseph Merrick, from whom he took the following account:

in 1815 he was leveling some ground under and near an old woodshed, standing on a place of his situated on Indian Hill.

He plowed and conveyed away old chips and earth to some depth. After the work was done, walking over the place, he discovered, near where the earth had been dug the deepest, a black strap, as it appeared, about six inches in length, and one and a half in breadth, and about the thickness of a leather trace to a harness.

He conveyed it to his house and threw it in an old tool box. He afterwards found it thrown out of doors, and he again conveyed it to the box. After some time he thought he would examine it; but in attempting to cut it he found it as hard as bone; he succeeded, however, in getting it open and found . . . four pieces of folded parchment. They were of dark yellow hue, and contained some kind of writing. The neighbors coming to see the strange discovery, tore one of the pieces to atoms, in true Hun and Vandal style. The other three pieces Mr. Merrick saved and sent them to Cambridge, where they were examined and discovered to have been written with a pen in Hebrew, plain and legible.⁸

This account of the discovery of the phylactery corresponds with William Allen's description. Interestingly, Allen illustrates four pieces of parchment in his letter, suggesting that he examined the phylactery before the neighbors tore it 'to atoms.' One significant conscious or unconscious omission on the part of Mr. Smith is any reference either to William Allen's examination of the phylactery shortly after the discovery, or of his opinion regarding its origin. Either Merrick omitted Allen (and Larned for that matter) from the story, or Ethan Smith edited them out of the account in order to render it more supportive of his theory.

⁸ Priest, pp. 68-69.

Smith's investigations did not stop with Joseph Merrick. From a Dr. West of Stockbridge he found that 'an old Indian informed him that his fathers in this country, had, not long since, been in the possession of a book which they had, for a long time, carried with them, but having lost the knowledge of reading it, they buried it with an Indian Chief.' He concludes with the argument that 'these passages . . . were found in the strap of rawhide; which unquestionably had been written on the very pieces of parchment now in the possession of the Antiquarian Society, before Israel left the land of Syria, 25000 years ago.'⁹ Although he clearly had not troubled himself to inquire about the phylactery at the American Antiquarian Society before publishing his account, Smith later sought to locate the artifact and was unsuccessful.

Ethan Smith's account is interesting because it represents a step towards the formation of a mythology about the phylactery, combining the story of the phylactery with the legend of a lost book in the possession of the Indians, and its burial in a hill with the body of a chief.

A View of the Hebrews went through two editions, in 1823 and 1825 and apparently enjoyed some local popularity in New England. Fawn Brodie, a biographer of Joseph Smith, asserts that the Mormon prophet took most of his ideas about the Israelites in America from *A View of the Hebrews*. Brodie speculates that Joseph Smith learned of the legend of the Pittsfield phylactery from Ethan Smith's book, for he quoted the Ethan Smith account in 1842, in *Times and Seasons*, the church newspaper published in Nauvoo, Illinois.¹⁰

Did Joseph Smith's idea for *The Book of Mormon* come from having read *A View of the Hebrews*? Or did it come from the rumors, stories, and legends regarding ancient Hebrews in

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History, The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York, 1945), p. 47.

America, stories that were current in the early nineteenth century in New England and Upstate New York? Opponents of Mormonism throughout the last 150 years have pointed to a series of tenuous links between Joseph Smith and his associate Sidney Rigdon, and an unpublished fictionalized account of the ancient Hebrews in America, written by a man named Solomon Spaulding to prove that Joseph Smith borrowed the idea for *The Book of Mormon* from other sources. Brodie effectively disproved this popular explanation for the source of Joseph Smith's inspiration.

It seems likely that Joseph Smith could have heard second- or third-hand about the story of the Pittsfield phylactery as a young boy. There is ample evidence that, even as a child, Joseph Smith was fascinated by stories of Indians. For example, Fawn Brodie cites the account of his mother, Lucy Mack Smith that describes the young Joseph Smith's imaginative play-acting of Indian battles. Did the ten-year-old Joseph Smith hear about the Pittsfield find, and years later, perhaps even subconsciously, weave it into a story about the discovery of the golden tablets? Of course we will never know. However, the broad outline of a story of a Hebrew inscription found in a hill which proved the connection between the Indians and the ancient Hebrews closely resembles the tale Joseph Smith spun about his golden tablets. If the Pittsfield discovery was not a direct source of the Mormon legend, at the very least it contributed to the contemporary mythology that caused other writers to concoct tales about ancient historical manuscripts found in America.

Although it is interesting to trace the means by which the Pittsfield phylactery became a legend, it is no less significant that William Allen, one of the first scholars to examine the phylactery, was able to assess rationally the facts surrounding its discovery and to offer a logical explanation. As his letter suggests, he, too, was initially caught up with the excitement of discovering a possible link between the Hebrews and the

Indians. However, his is perhaps the only existing account that considers the facts in a balanced manner.

It is also interesting to reflect upon the steady stream of inquiries regarding the Pittsfield phylactery that have been addressed to the American Antiquarian Society. It seems logical to assume that members of the Church of Latter Day Saints who read Joseph Smith's account of the discovery would attempt to follow it up. It also seems likely that some readers of Josiah Priest's *American Antiquities* would have been curious enough to pursue the story. The persistence of the inquiries, however, suggests that the mythology that the Pittsfield phylactery engendered has been strong enough to hold sway over the American imagination for more than a century and a half, and that even the rational assessment of individuals such as William Allen have little chance of putting an end to that mythologizing.

[*Transcription of the letter written by William Allen to John James*]

Bowdoin College, March 30, 1821

Dr. John James,
Dear Sir,

In reply to your favor of the 9th inst. & making some inquiries respecting a Jewish phylactery found in Pittsfield about 7 or 8 years ago, I will give you all the information which my leisure will at this time allow me to give you.—You are incorrect in supposing it was found digging a well, at a depth of 30 feet. It was found, as I was told at the time, in the removal of rubbish before the house, in clearing the yard between the house and the wood house, in which chips and dirt had accumulated for years;—and found at a depth of from 2 to 4 feet from the surface,—whether among the chips or below them in the old earth, I could not learn. A boy living with Mr. Joseph Merrick found the phylactery. On the last page I will give some description of this curiosity which may refresh your memory.—Rev. William Sylvester Larned, then living in Pittsfield, brought the article to me

to decipher the obscure Hebrew letters. On four pieces of parchment & formed in beautiful small Hebrew letters the four passages of scripture which have commonly constituted phylacteries[. . .]

At first I had the impression, that it was an "ancient relic," as you express it; and that it furnished proof that our Indians were descendants of the ancient chosen people. A part of the phylactery seemed to be made of untanned deer skin, and to be sewed with the sinews or entrails of animals. and who so likely to use such leather, as Indians?—But against this impression of the origin of the phylactery rose up the considerations, that no other phylactery has been found among the Indians;—that if it had been in the ground for ages, it would have become not merely defaced, as to the manuscript, and hard and horney, as to the leather, but decomposed and destroyed;—that a straggling Jew, (one of whom was remembered in Pittsfield a few years before) might have dropt it;—and, what is the most probable supposition, that a concealed Jew, among the German and British prisoners then in Pittsfield, had lost it while employed as a laborer by Mr. Merrick, for he had thus employed prisoners. However, on inquiry you may possibly find that circumstances will discredit this last supposition, if the article was actually dug up two or three feet from the surface. If a prisoner dropt [it,] it must have been at the time of digging.

I am glad that you propose to investigate the subject. You will do well to get a particular statement from Mr. Merrick.—soon after receiving the article from Mr. Larned, I sent it, by consent to the Re. Dr. Holmes, Cambridge, for the American Antiquarian Society. In their museum at Worcester I presume it may be seen.—

I am, My Dear Sir, Very Respectfully,
Your obed. Servant,
William Allen

Editor's note: The text of the letter is followed by an annotated illustration of the phylactery.]

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