

A grieving widow's token to her archaeologist husband?¹ Where is the 'Bethel Seal' now?

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Much of the excitement of archaeology has come from the discovery of long-dead languages or their decipherment. The Rosetta stone; the Dead Sea Scrolls; Linear B are all phrases associated with great discoveries and, in some cases, great academic quarrels. Few of these, however, have been more intriguing than the controversy which arose from the discovery in 1957 of a fragment of a stamp seal, during excavations at Bethel, not far from Jerusalem.¹



Figure 1: The clay stamp acquired by the Bents in the Hadramaut in 1894 (detail from Bent and Bent Southern Arabia (1900), facing page 426)

In 1957 an inscribed, and seemingly insignificant, lump of pottery was found by the archaeologist James Kelso, 1.90m below surface level while excavating at Tel Beitin, the important Biblical site of Bethel, about 20km north of Jerusalem, which was first explored by William Foxwell Albright in 1934. This modest clay find, best described as originally a rectangle about 10cm long and 7cm high, inscribed and with the remains of a 'handle' on the reverse, but found with the top left-hand corner broken off, was soon recognized as a stamp or seal, used presumably by a merchant for designating ownership, or contents, of traded merchandise. It was also quickly recognized that it was far from insignificant and very possibly far from home.

Two scholars, Gus Van Beek and Albert Jamme, published the find a year later.² In 1960 Jamme made a major discovery of his own. While looking through a collection of Arabist Eduard

¹ Blake, I., 'The Bethel Stamp Seal: A Mystery Revealed?', *The Irish Times*, 16 August 1973.

² Van Beek, G. W. and Jamme, A., 'An Inscribed South Arabian Clay Stamp from Bethel', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 151, 1958, 9-16.

Glaser's (1855-1908) paper 'squeezes', Jamme had one of those flashes of association and recognized the startling similarity of the impression of seal (A 727), acquired in the Wadi Hadramaut area in the 1890s by the explorer/antiquarian J. Theodore Bent (1852-1897) [Figure 1], with the clay stamp dug up from Bethel a few years previously. He published his discovery with Van Beek in 1961,³ being of the 'opinion that the two seals are identical, yet distinct' and that the 'South-Arabian character of the stamp... is beyond any possible doubt' and totally 'excludes the possibility that it was introduced in modern times'. To Van Beek and Jamme the seal proved an early link between the spice and luxuries routes, beginning some 2000 km to the south, which linked South Arabia with Palestine and King Solomon with the Queen of Sheba.

So there were two seals? Kelso's 1957 find and that representing Glaser's squeeze A 727? For the scholar Professor Yigael Yadin the seals were too close for comfort, and in a 1969 paper⁴ he declared they are 'but one and the same'. The gist of Yadin's argument is that there is but one stamp, and that Theodore Bent's find had somehow arrived later at Bethel; indeed the similarities are so close that opinion still remains divided – aggravated by the fact that the present whereabouts of the stamps (or single stamp) are uncertain. Where is it? Where are they?

In 1970⁵ Van Beek and Jamme, and also Kelso,⁶ replied in further contributions to the debate, the tone of which grows cooler as the debate heats up. How was it possible that a stray find from the Hadramaut could reappear in ancient Bethel? 'The coincidence, therefore, of the seal being lost at Bethel, one of the three temples cited in ancient Israel in which such a seal would likely be found because of their connections with incense trade, is altogether unbelievable... Since there were two identical but distinct stamps, the historical, economic, and cultural significance of the Bethel stamp remains as we originally described.'

³ Jamme, A. and Van Beek, G. W., 'The South-Arabian Clay Stamp from Bethel Again', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 163, 1961, 15-18.

⁴ Yadin, Y., 'An Inscribed South-Arabian Clay Stamp from Bethel', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 196, 1969, 37-45.

⁵ Van Beek, G. W. and Jamme, A., 'The Authenticity of the Bethel Stamp Seal.' *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 199, 1970, 59-65.

⁶ Kelso, J. L., 'A Reply to Yadin's Article on the Finding of the Bethel Seal', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 199, 1970, 65.

Yadin's torch, however, was picked up three years later by Ray Cleveland (1973)⁷, who put two and two together, hypothesizing that Mabel Bent, widow of the explorer/antiquarian might well have taken the stamp to Bethel and buried it there. Cleveland, in part, based his theory on Mabel's note in her very odd little tract *Anglo-Saxons from Palestine*⁸ that she was in the course of writing while in Palestine. He also suggested that, badly missing Theodore, her mental state was distressed. A reporter for the *Irish Times* (1973)⁹ – Mabel was Anglo-Irish – quickly realized the human interest of all this and published the most accessible account of what was turning from a controversy into a melodrama.

Jamme does not seem to have countered confidently until 1990,¹⁰ even though his strongly-held views on the significance of the two stamps were under fire. But when he did reply he did not pull his punches, disregarding Cleveland's paper as groundless in terms of Mabel's fragile mental state and assuming that Cleveland was accusing her of simple fraud: 'Such an accusation of fraud – unique in the annals of archaeology, leveled against a lady respected by everyone interested in ancient South Arabia and who, having died on July 3, 1929, could not defend herself – was shocking in itself.' And ending thus: 'Mrs. Bent's memory was and remains unblemished and unscathed in spite of Cleveland's charge. But the latter's unprovoked, unsubstantiated indictment based on the uncalled-for intrusion upon the intimate, affective life of a widow has become the first true mystery of the whole affair because the reader cannot even remotely fathom what the reason behind such an irresponsible accusation of fraud might have been.'

What Jamme, and Cleveland, were not aware of was that Mabel Bent was a frequent traveller to Jerusalem and Palestine in the first decade of the 1900s (Theodore having died in 1897), and she soon began to demonstrate apparently irrational behaviour, taking sides in a romantic squabble between two British residents in Jerusalem and making herself rather a nuisance to the authorities generally. On one occasion, now over 60, she rode off mysteriously and alone into the countryside of the southern Dead Sea, falling off her mount and breaking her leg. A convert to British Israelitism, she became

⁷ Cleveland, R. L., 'More on the South Arabian Clay Stamp Found at Beitîn', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 209, 1973, 33-6.

⁸ Bent, Mabel V. A., *Anglo-Saxons from Palestine; or, The imperial mystery of the lost tribes*. London, 1908.

⁹ Blake, I., 'The Bethel Stamp Seal: A Mystery Revealed?', *The Irish Times*, 16 August 1973.

¹⁰ Jamme, A., 'The Bethel Inscribed Stamp Again: A Vindication of Mrs. Theodore Bent', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 280, 1990, 89-91.

involved in the committee of the 'Garden Tomb' (Jerusalem),¹¹ and began the bizarre *Anglo-Saxons from Palestine* referred to above, which attempted to explore 'tribal' connections between the Jews and the British.

In addition, and what might have been the decisive factor, was that Mabel had to sit helpless on the sidelines and watch as Theodore's 'big idea' – i.e. that proto-Arab cultures had ventured as far south as modern Zimbabwe, building the great stone monuments there – was being disproved by contemporary researches, and that the twenty years of their travels and work together were ultimately undervalued by the establishment.

If Mabel Bent were sad and unhappy at Bethel, is it not easy to imagine her in a lonely moment in the early 1900s dropping a broken clay stamp from the Hadramaut¹² into a hole and covering it up, muttering the while to her dead husband, with whom she had travelled such landscapes for so long, about how she had brought him, at last, to the end of one of the frankincense trails exploited by his trading proto-Arabs? What could be more forgivable – not deliberate archaeological fraud but rather fondness. Who might not do the same thing? And, indeed, there were *three* seals¹³ the couple acquired in the Yemen – where did she drop the other two? Jerusalem, Hebron, Mizpah?¹⁴

¹¹ Crawley-Bovey, A.W., *The Garden Tomb of Golgotha and the Garden of the Resurrection*, Jerusalem, undated, but c.1925. ('Revised and enlarged by Mrs. Theodore Bent and Miss Hussey', London)

¹² 'It would have been remarkable if she did not carry with her little momentos of her former conjugal happiness.' (Cleveland, 1973, 36)

¹³ *Southern Arabia*, Mabel and Theodore Bent (London 1900, illustration opposite page 436).

¹⁴ 'Jerusalem, Hebron, Mizpah, and Bethel [being] the only biblical towns mentioned in *Anglo-Saxons from Palestine*.' (Cleveland 1973, but see Jamme 1990, who refutes this)