

Ivory Pomegranate: Under the Microscope at the Israel Museum

By Hershel Shanks

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It is more than 30 years since **BAR** first brought to the world's attention the now-famous inscribed ivory pomegranate.^a The inscription, on the shoulder of the pomegranate, contains part of the divine name *Yahweh* used by the ancient Israelites. If the inscription is authentic, this tiny head of a scepter (a hole for the scepter rod is on the bottom of the pomegranate) may be the only surviving relic from Solomon's Temple.



I first learned of the pomegranate in 1983 at a dinner in Jerusalem with the eminent Sorbonne paleographer André Lemaire. He had seen it in 1979 in the shop of a Jerusalem antiquities dealer and had subsequently published a short note about it in the rarefied French scholarly journal *Revue Biblique*, together with a black-and-white photograph.



Naturally I wanted to publish a longer piece about this pomegranate in **BAR** together with a color picture. Lemaire agreed to write the article. But could a color picture of the object be obtained? After all, Lemaire had not seen the piece since 1979. His note in *Revue Biblique* had not appeared until 1981. It was now 1983. Could Lemaire obtain a color picture from the antiquities dealer where he had seen the piece nearly four years earlier?



The answer, perhaps surprisingly, turned out to be “yes,” and we published his article in the January/February 1984 issue of **BAR**. This sequence of events has some relevance to the issue of the inscription's authenticity, which has since been raised: If it had been a forgery, one would not expect it to have been available in an antiquities dealer shop for five years or more (we don't know how long it had been there before Lemaire saw it). The object had apparently not been “shopped,” even after Lemaire published his note in *Revue Biblique*.¹

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With the publication of Lemaire's article in **BAR**, all that changed. In 1985, having been smuggled out of Israel (that's easy to do; it is only an inch-and-a-half high), the pomegranate

appeared in an exhibit in Paris's Grand Palais. Then it disappeared again.

In 1987 a tour guide named Meir Urbach (the son of the eminent Talmud scholar Ephraim Urbach), who often escorted dignitaries around Israel, approached the Israel Museum: The pomegranate was available for purchase—for \$550,000. After the inscription was authenticated by one of Israel's leading archaeologists and epigraphists (Nahman Avigad), the museum purchased the tiny object for the asking price. An unsolicited gift to the museum provided the funds.

The opening of the museum's exhibit of the pomegranate was a national event in Israel. It was the first item on the TV news that evening. The museum stayed open until midnight to accommodate the crowds. The pomegranate was placed in a small glass case on a stand, the only item in the room. A narrow beam of light from the ceiling dramatically focused on the pomegranate.

Almost 15 years later, the pomegranate was taken off display. A museum committee report published in the *Israel Exploration Journal* had concluded that the inscription was a forgery!

All this was part of a larger picture. Two other unprovenanced inscriptions (i.e., we don't know where they came from; they were not recovered in a professional archaeological excavation) had surfaced in the hands of a leading Israeli antiquities collector, Oded Golan, which the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) regarded as forgeries. One was an ossuary, or bone box, inscribed "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." The other was a longer inscription, known as the Jehoash Inscription, that appeared to have been copied from a wall of Solomon's Temple.

Why or how the IAA developed an intense interest in these two inscriptions remains a mystery. What is clear, however, is that it appointed a committee to study them and reach a conclusion regarding their forgery *vel non*. It is highly unlikely that a committee will ever again be appointed to decide the authenticity of an ancient inscription.² Virtually all scholars now agree that the question of authenticity should *not* be decided by a committee. It should be decided by open and continuing scholarly discussion. In any event, the IAA committee was clearly biased;³ the committee reached the conclusion the IAA wanted, concluding unanimously that the two inscriptions assigned to it—the "brother of Jesus" inscription and the Jehoash Inscription—were forgeries.^b



This resulted in a criminal indictment of five defendants, including Oded Golan, for forgery in what became known as the "Forgery Trial of the Century." It lasted seven years. Two of the defendants were later dismissed from the case, one pleaded guilty to a minor offense, and the remaining 53 defendants, Oded Golan and Robert Deutsch, were acquitted of all forgery charges. (Golan was convicted of minor charges, such as selling antiquities without a

license.)

Curiously, the indictment in the case also referred to the ivory pomegranate inscription as a forgery, although it was not otherwise involved in the case. This detail, however, reflects the fact that the IAA also instigated the charge that the pomegranate inscription was a forgery. In conjunction with the IAA, the Israel Museum dutifully appointed what appeared to be a committee of its own to judge the ivory pomegranate inscription. (Taking no chances, the supposed Israel Museum committee also included Deputy Director of the IAA Uzi Dahari.) That committee, too, ostensibly unanimously, found the pomegranate inscription to be a forgery. The “committee report” was published in the *Israel Exploration Journal (IEJ)*, supposedly authored by the entire committee.⁴ In fact, the “committee” report was the work of one person, Yuval Goren, a Tel Aviv University professor who specializes in ceramic petrography and mineralogy but has no paleographical expertise. (He has recently left the university.) (Full disclosure: Yuval Goren has charged me with having played “a pivotal role” in the forgeries.⁵) A supposed coauthor of the *IEJ* report and the museum’s supposed representative on the so-called “committee” has acknowledged to me that they never saw the so-called “committee” report until it was published in *IEJ*. Further evidence that the “committee” report was the work of one person is reflected in the list of supposed authors in the *IEJ* report: Usually coauthors of articles in scholarly journals are listed in alphabetical order. In this case, however, Yuval Goren’s name leads all the rest; then the other names follow in alphabetical order.

At this point, I decided to convene a special forgery conference to consider the authenticity of the James Ossuary inscription (the “brother of Jesus inscription”), the Jehoash Inscription, the inscribed ivory pomegranate and a number of other inscriptions that had been recently questioned. This conference was held on January 16–18, 2007, in Jerusalem at the scholarly conference center Mishkenot Sha’ananim. Scholars came from England, France, Germany, the United States and Israel.



The American contingent was especially distrustful of all the inscriptions that had been questioned. They suspected everything that had not been professionally excavated. The other attendees were more nuanced. In the committee report, I summed up the group’s conclusion regarding the inscribed ivory pomegranate (“very probably authentic”), the James Ossuary inscription (“quite probably authentic”) and the Jehoash Inscription (“a deep division of opinion”). (A single participant—Christopher Rollston—asked that my summation not include his views.)

My report on the Jerusalem forgery conference⁵⁴ had little effect. The report I wrote was for the most part ignored. The forgery trial charging that the “Brother of Jesus” inscription was a forgery dragged on—for years—even though the government’s case was increasingly seen to falter. As for the pomegranate inscription—nothing!

I was increasingly dissatisfied. I am not a scholar, but I am an expert on experts. I know which scholars to trust. And when André Lemaire tells me that the inscription on the ivory

pomegranate is good, that's enough for me.

So I decided to call another meeting—this one focusing exclusively on the pomegranate inscription. It would be held at the Israel Museum with the pomegranate and a microscope at hand and would include Yuval Goren as well as the two language experts on the museum's committee, Shmuel Ahituv and Aaron Demsky, who had found evidence of forgery. And it would also include André Lemaire.

As we made plans for the meeting, many technical decisions—time, attendees, microscope, etc.—had to be taken. Gradually I realized that Shmuel Ahituv was pushing me out as organizer and director. It was he who would chair the meeting. And it was he who would decide who would be invited to attend. I repeatedly urged him to invite Ada Yardeni, who is generally acknowledged to be the leading Israeli paleographer regarding inscriptions of this period. Ahituv stubbornly refused; she was not invited to attend. No reason was given. In the end, however, Ada Yardeni would play a crucial role.

The meeting was held at the Israel Museum on May 3, 2007. The result was a continued division: Ahituv, Demsky and Goren continued to maintain the inscription was a forgery, and Lemaire continued to maintain that it was good. Again, a report was published in the *Israel Exploration Journal*—one part by the three who held the inscription to be a forgery and the other by Lemaire, who denied any evidence of forgery.⁵

Oddly, the *IEJ* article by those who concluded the inscription was a forgery inexplicably failed to mention a letter in the inscription, a *heh*, that I regarded as crucial. This letter was strong evidence that the inscription was not a forgery. I wrote a letter to the editor of *IEJ* calling attention to this strange omission from the report of those who had concluded that the inscription was a modern forgery. I received a reply stating that the journal did not print letters to the editor (not quite true). The editor of the journal, of course, was Shmuel Ahituv.

I was not yet ready to give up. I couldn't get out of my mind that Ahituv had insistently excluded Ada Yardeni from our meeting at the Israel Museum. I decided to ask her if she would look at the inscription and give me her judgment. If both she and André Lemaire found no evidence of forgery, this, it seemed to me, would more than outweigh the doubters, none of whom was experienced in detecting forgeries.

Yardeni agreed to examine the pomegranate, and the museum willingly cooperated. I eagerly awaited the results of her examination.

It was not long before her email arrived: "I'm sorry to disappoint you," she wrote. She focused on a different letter (a *taw*) than the one that I had (a *heh*):

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I could not ignore the fact that the right upper stroke of the letter *taw* does not reach the old break, called the 'bulge' by [the original IAA committee that had declared the inscription a forgery]. I could not think of any convincing explanation [of] this fact rather than that the engraver, for some reason, did not continue the

execution of the stroke at this point. I asked myself if it is possible to forge such an inscription, and I have to admit that it seems possible ... I'm sorry to disappoint you in that, in view of my examination of the inscription, I cannot confirm its authenticity.

Yes, I was disappointed, but I promptly reported Ada's judgment in **BAR**.^d

The critical issue now was whether the right upper stroke of the *taw* reached the old break. If it did, there was no indication of a forgery. In subsequent conversations with André Lemaire, he indicated that he thought Ada had not looked at the critical part of the *taw* from the critical angle, that the upper right stroke of the *taw* did reach the old break and that he could demonstrate this to her if they looked at the inscription together under a microscope. This was the only lifeline I had left. But I had faith in André.

At this point I contacted Bruce Zuckerman at the University of Southern California, who specializes in a unique photographic procedure called Reflectance Transformation Imaging, or RTI for short. In RTI photography, dozens of digital images with light from different angles are taken so that every part of the object can be seen with light shining on it from the angle that will best illuminate the particular features of that part of the object. I asked if he would photograph the pomegranate inscription⁰⁵⁷ with RTI, and he agreed. Ada Yardeni and André Lemaire would also be there with a microscope. Perhaps they could resolve their differences.

Nothing is secret in Jerusalem. At this point a new actor appeared on the stage: I received an email from Robert Deutsch in Tel Aviv asking me if he could attend the meeting with Lemaire and Yardeni. Deutsch is perhaps Israel's leading antiquities dealer. He was also a defendant in the forgery trial. He was acquitted and has now sued the IAA for accusing him falsely and without justification and nearly ruining his life. He has spurned an IAA offer of \$200,000 to compensate him. The case goes on.

He is an expert paleographer (he holds a doctorate from Tel Aviv University) and has taught at Tel Aviv University and Haifa University. He also has wide experience in detecting forgeries; he handles them every day.

I responded positively to Deutsch's email requesting permission to attend the session at the Israel Museum with Ada Yardeni and André Lemaire.

The meeting at the Israel Museum took place on June 15, 2015. In attendance were Bruce Zuckerman and his team (it takes three people to take these photographs), André Lemaire, Ada Yardeni, Robert Deutsch, members of the museum staff and me (and the Biblical Archaeology Society president and publisher of **BAR**, Susan Laden). Without a break for lunch, the photographing went on from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Simultaneously, Lemaire, Yardeni and Deutsch continued to examine the pomegranate with the museum microscope.

It was heartwarming to see the gracious, respectful, scholarly exchange among these three individuals. Ada and André (by this time we were on a first-name basis) are old friends. Ada repeatedly drew Robert into the conversation. He was clearly adept at focusing and turning the microscope to reveal angles of the

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critical break. Ada was charming and comfortable in considering changes to her previous position.

After the meeting Ada wrote me the following note:

Following my new examination of the tiny pomegranate with the microscope, I am now convinced and agree with André Lemaire that there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the pomegranate [inscription] ... I have to admit that at my latest examination of the pomegranate under the microscope, I missed the angle at which I should have looked at the object in order that I could clearly see the crucial part of the fragmentary left stroke of *taw* at the break. Thanks to the guidance of Robert Deutsch, who showed me where and how I should look at the old break from the left upper angle, I was able to see clearly that the protrusion was lower than the old break ... Many thanks and warmest regards.

With this in hand, there is no paleographer of note who maintains that the inscription is a forgery. Shmuel Ahituv and Aaron Demsky have remained silent. Robert Deutsch has offered to accompany them to the museum. They have not responded to requests to reexamine the inscription.

Despite the length of this article, I have not dealt with the substantive question: Why is the pomegranate inscription likely to be authentic? I have not even quoted the full text of the inscription.

Nor have I discussed why the “brother of Jesus” inscription is also likely to be authentic.

The Jehoash Inscription is different. Deep divisions remain regarding its authenticity.⁶

Substantive considerations concerning the pomegranate inscription and the ossuary inscription mentioning Jesus are too long for a continuation of this article. So we will take them up individually in my First Person column in the next two issues of **BAR**: (1) why the ivory pomegranate is very likely authentic; and (2) why the “brother of Jesus” inscription is also authentic.

Stay tuned.

Footnotes:

- a. André Lemaire, “Probable Head of Priestly Scepter from Solomon’s Temple Surfaces in Jerusalem.” **BAR** 10:01, with sidebar, “Pomegranate ‘Priceless’ Says Harvard’s Frank Cross.”
- b. See Hershel Shanks, “Predilections—Is the ‘Brother of Jesus’ Inscription a Forgery?” **BAR**, September/October 2015.
- c. Strata: “**BAR** Editor Charged with Pivotal Role in Fraud and Forgery,” **BAR** 35:01.
- d. Hershel Shanks, First Person: “A New Target.” **BAR** 40:06.
- e. See Hershel Shanks, “Assessing the Jehoash Inscription: The Paleographer: Demonstrably a Forgery.” **BAR** 29:03; Hershel Shanks, “Ossuary Update: What About

the Jehoash Inscription?” **BAR** 29:05; David Noel Freedman, “Don’t Rush to Judgment.” **BAR** 30:02; Strata: “New Study Supports Authenticity of Yehoash Inscription.” **BAR**, May/June 2009; Hershel Shanks, First Person: “Gold from the Temple?” **BAR** 40:04.

Endnotes:

1. André Lemaire, “Une inscription paléo-hébraïque sur grenade en ivoire,” *Revue Biblique* 88 (1981), pp. 236–239.
2. Compare the remarks of Gaby Barkay at the conference I called to discuss the various allegations of forgeries, referred to below: “No committee and no court can establish the authenticity of an inscription. If a committee made up of the most important experts in the world decides that the earth is flat, it is not going to make the earth flat. So the decision of committees is neither originating in the Israeli law of antiquities, nor is it a procedure which is common in scholarly methods. Committees I think are good for communist regimes. They establish a view that has to be accepted by all, but they are not for scientific methods.”
3. Pieter W. van der Horst, *Saxa Judaica Loquuntur: Lessons from Early Jewish Inscriptions*, Biblical Interpretation Series 134 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 67–87.
4. Yuval Goren, Shmuel Ahituv, Avner Ayalon, Miryam Bar-Matthews, Uzi Dahari, Michal Dayagi-Mendels, Aaron Demsky and Nadav Levin, “A Re-examination of the Inscribed Pomegranate from the Israel Museum,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 55 (2005), pp. 3–20.
5. Shmuel Ahituv, Aaron Demsky, Yuval Goren and André Lemaire, “The Inscribed Pomegranate from the Israel Museum Examined Again,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 57 (2007), pp. 87–95.

SIDEBAR

Israel Museum: Public Can’t See Inscribed Ivory Pomegranate Yet

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It is too soon to allow the public to view the inscribed ivory pomegranate that may have come from Solomon’s Temple, the Israel Museum has ruled. Museum director James S. Snyder has decided that the object must wait until an “academic debate ... develops” concerning the findings in this article; only then will it be displayed in the museum.

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Magazine:

Biblical Archaeology Review, March/April 2016

Volume:

42

Issue:

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Biblical Archaeology Society

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL. University of Southern California (USC) professor Bruce Zuckerman, who specializes in Reflectance Transformation Imaging, took dozens of digital photos of the famous ivory pomegranate inscription at the Israel Museum. He was aided by his team of Marilyn Lundberg, Associate Director of USC's West Semitic Research, and brother Kenneth Zuckerman, pictured here peering into the camera. The tiny pomegranate sits on a stick under the camera.



Zev Radovan

The famous inscribed ivory pomegranate may have been the head of a scepter from Solomon's Temple—if it's authentic.

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Paleographer André Lemaire of the Sorbonne was the first to introduce the inscribed ivory pomegranate to a popular audience in a 1984 **BAR** article.

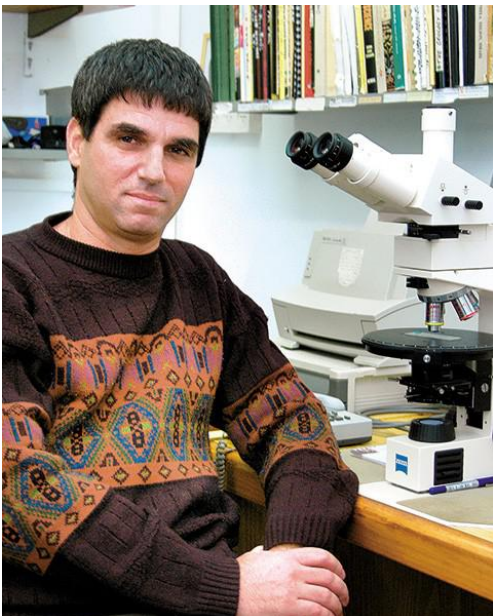
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Ziv Koren/Polaris

Oded Golan, an Israeli antiquities collector who owns the hotly contested James Ossuary and the Jehoash Inscription, was charged as a forger in the seven-year “Forgery Trial of the Century.” At the conclusion of the trial, he was acquitted of all forgery charges. Although it was otherwise not involved in the trial, the inscribed ivory pomegranate was referred to as a forgery in the forgery case.



The hotly contested James Ossuary.



Yuval Goren, then a Tel Aviv University professor specializing in ceramic petrography and mineralogy, had studied the ivory pomegranate inscription as a member of a committee appointed by the Israel Museum. The inscription was “unanimously” declared a forgery in a report supposedly coauthored by eight scholars. In fact, the report was almost solely Goren’s work.



Biblical Archaeology Society

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE. In a meeting at the Israel Museum on June 15, 2015, paleographers Ada Yardeni (center), André Lemaire (right) and Robert Deutsch (left) met to examine the ivory pomegranate inscription. The previous year, Yardeni had examined the inscription, and, focusing on the letter *taw*, could not confirm its authenticity. Here she agreed to take another look.

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Courtesy of Robert Deutsch

GANG OF FOUR. Robert Deutsch and André Lemaire were integral to Ada Yardeni’s reconsideration of the authenticity of the pomegranate inscription. Deutsch peers over the shoulder of Lemaire, who is flanked by Yardeni to his left and **BAR** editor Hershel Shanks to his right.

Magazine:
Biblical Archaeology Review, March/April 2016

Volume:

42

Issue:

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Source URL (modified on 2017-01-17 17:41): <https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/42/2/6>