

THE ROD OF AARON IN CAROLINGIAN FRANCE

A Research Proposal submitted to
the National Geographic Society

by Philip Sidney Grimm, Ph.D.

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Arkham, Mass.

May, 1928

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INTRODUCTION

The Rod of Aaron, shrouded with the Ark of the Covenant in ancient legend and mystery, has since ancient times been an archaeologist's pipe dream. Fabled to have disappeared with the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 586 B. C., it has never been the subject of a serious scientific search effort, largely because its existence was thought to be purely legendary. Rumors of its appearance in the court of the Roman Emperor Constantine have been taken by most scholars as pure romantic fantasy springing from the fervency of Constantine's conversion. Recently uncovered evidence, however, suggests that the Rod of Aaron may indeed have been in the possession of Constantine's court, and passed in time from there to the court of Lothaire, the last of the Carolingian monarchs of France. Mentioned in several medieval texts, the Rod of Aaron is pictured quite clearly in a recently discovered leaf from the Chronicle of Adalberon of

Rheims, a text known to modern scholarship but long thought lost, which gives extremely specific information about the Rod and its location.

This proposal is designed to acquaint the reader with the historical and legendary background of this important artifact, discuss all the solid evidence indicating its possible location, and enumerate the details of a proposed archaeological expedition to France calculated to unearth this ancient relic.

THE ROD IN THE BIBLE

The Rod of Aaron is known to most people, scientist and layman alike, if at all from the accounts in the Bible. Most people remember it primarily as the staff which became a serpent, but it appears on several other important occasions as well. Here follow, in order, the principal appearances of Aaron's Rod. It is from these few primary sources that most of the other legends concerning the Rod take their inspiration.

The rod which would become known as the Rod of Aaron appears first in the Bible in the fourth chapter of Exodus. Moses, seeking from God a sign whereby he may demonstrate his authority to the Egyptians, is instructed by God to cast down his rod.

And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand?
And he said, A rod. And he said, Cast it on the ground.
And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent;
and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said unto
Moses, Put forth thy hand, and take it by the tail. And
he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a
rod in his hand: That they may believe that the Lord God
of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac,
and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee. And thou

shalt take this rod in thine hand, wherewith thou shall do signs. ¹

When Moses and his brother Aaron, the Levite, appear before Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelites, the rod is again turned into a serpent.

And the Lord spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, When Pharaoh shall speak unto you, saying, Shew a miracle for you: then thou shalt say unto Aaron, Take thy rod, and cast it before Pharaoh, and it shall become a serpent. And Moses and Aaron went in unto Pharaoh, and they did so as the Lord had commanded: and Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh, and before his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers: now the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents: but Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods.²

This same rod is subsequently used in bringing forth several of the ten plagues which visit Egypt.

Get thee unto Pharaoh in the morning; lo, he goeth out unto the water; and thou shalt stand by the river's brink against he come; and the rod which was turned to a serpent shalt thou take in thine hand. And thou shalt say unto him, The Lord God of the Hebrews hath sent me unto thee, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness: and, behold, hitherto thou wouldest not hear. Thus, saith the Lord, In this thou shalt know that I am the Lord: behold, I will smite with the rod that is in mine hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood. And the Lord spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Take thy rod, and stretch out thine hand upon the waters of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their rivers, and upon their ponds, and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood; and that there may be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood, and in vessels of stone. And Moses and Aaron did so, as the Lord commanded; and he lifted up the rod, and smote the waters that were in the river, in the

¹ Ex. 4:2-5,17

² Ex. 7:8-12

sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants; and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood.³

And the Lord spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch forth thine hand with thy rod over the streams, over the rivers, and over the ponds, and cause frogs to come up upon the land of Egypt. And Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up, and covered the land of Egypt.⁴

And the Lord said unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch out thy rod, and smite the dust of the land, that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt. And they did so; for Aaron stretched out his hand with his rod, and smote the dust of the earth, and it became lice in man, and in beast; all the dust of the land became lice throughout all the land of Egypt.⁵

After the Exodus, the Rod of Aaron is used to demonstrate God's will that Aaron's clan, the Levites, take on the role of the priesthood.

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and take of every one of them a rod according to the house of their fathers, of all their princes according to the house of their fathers twelve rods: write thou every man's name upon his rod. And thou shalt write Aaron's name upon the rod of Levi: for one rod shall be for the head of the house of their fathers. And thou shalt lay them up in the tabernacle of the congregation before the testimony, where I will meet with you. And it shall come to pass, that the man's rod, whom I shall choose, shall blossom: and I will make to cease from me the murmurings of the children of Israel, whereby they murmur against you. And Moses spake unto the children of Israel, and every one of their princes gave him a rod apiece, for each prince one, according to their fathers' houses, even twelve rods: and the Rod of Aaron was among their rods. And Moses laid up the rods before the Lord in the tabernacle of witness. And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and behold, the Rod of Aaron

³ Ex. 7:15-17,19-20

⁴ Ex. 8:5-6

⁵ Ex. 8:16-17

for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds. And Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord unto all the children of Israel: and they looked, and took every man his rod. And the Lord said unto Moses, Bring Aaron's rod again before the testimony, to be kept for a token against the rebels; and thou shalt quite take away their murmurings from thee, that they die not. And Moses did so: as the Lord commanded him, so did he. And the children of Israel spake unto Moses, saying, Behold, we die, we perish, we all perish. Whosoever cometh any thing near unto the tabernacle of the Lord shall die: shall we be consumed with dying? And the Lord said unto Aaron, Thou and thy sons and thy father's house with thee shall bear the iniquity of the sanctuary: and thou and thy sons with thee shall bear the iniquity of your priesthood.⁶

The Bible's quaint prose is notoriously vague and filled with self-contradictions. Seldom are details of use to a scientist provided, and it is certainly not the author's intention to suggest that the passages above are a foundation upon which to build an archaeological expedition. On the contrary, it is precisely because the Rod of Aaron is largely a Biblical and legendary artifact that no serious search effort has ever been mounted to find it. The Bible passages, however, do serve to pique the scientist's interest, by proposing the existence of a material object of considerable historical and cultural significance which may have survived to the present day by virtue of the care afforded it in ancient times.

There is no reason to suspect that any specific material object dating from a period as remote as the Egyptian Captivity of the Israelites might still exist to be found, particularly one made of a perishable substance such as wood. Although we might reasonably expect to find some such objects dating from that period, the odds of finding a specific object would seem to be absurdly remote. However, as indicated by the passages quoted above, the Rod of Aaron was an object of immense religious significance to the Israelites. It was kept safe in

⁶ Num. 17:1-13, 18:1

the Tabernacle and given the greatest reverence and care. Given that some such perishable objects from the period have in fact survived⁷, it is reasonable to hope that an object so well attended and cared for as the Rod of Aaron might be among their number.

THE ROD IN LEGEND

It is not the aim of this work to discuss completely all legendary references to the Rod of Aaron, which would be as lengthy and confusing as it would be unnecessary, but merely to outline the Rod's place in the traditional lore of the Jewish people. These legends ascribe tremendous power to the relic, and establish it quite firmly as an artifact of overwhelming cultural significance.

To begin at the beginning, the Rod of Aaron is held by Rabbinical scholars to have been created by God in the twilight of the sixth day of creation. Just before the Seventh Day, on which God rested, he brought into being ten final objects. They were: the rainbow, which was to remain invisible until Noah's time; the manna; springs from which the Israelites drew water while in the desert; the writing upon the two stone tablets given to Moses on Mt. Sinai; the pen with which the writing was written; the two tablets themselves; the mouth of Balaam's ass; the grave of Moses; the cave in which Moses and Elijah dwelled; and the Rod of Aaron, with its blossoms and ripe almonds.⁸

Although the legends are far from explicitly clear on this point, they imply that the Rod was given to Adam by the Lord when he was driven from

⁷ B.M. Cat. 487, 3329, 45, et al; J.N.Mus. 784; to name but a few.

⁸ BaR 19.9; Tan. B. IV, 121; Tan. Hukkat 10; Yelammedenu in Likkutim IV, 526; comp. vol. III, p. 457. It will be observed that some of the older legends have a distinctly ad hoc flavor.

paradise, and from him was passed down through the generations. Adam gave it to Enoch his son, and from him it descended to Noah, then to Shem, and Abraham, and Isaac, and finally to Jacob, who wrested it from his brother Esau, and who brought it with him to Egypt, and gave it to his favored son Joseph. When Joseph died, the Egyptians pillaged his house, and the Rod, which was in their booty, they brought to Pharaoh's palace.⁹

Pharaoh had in his service a great many sacred scribes, and the most prominent of these was Jethro.¹⁰ In the performance of his office Jethro had an opportunity to see the Rod, and he felt a great desire to possess it. He stole it and took it to his house, in Midian as it happened, where for many years it lay. One day he was walking in his garden carrying it, and he stuck it in the ground. When he attempted to draw it out again, he found that it had sprouted, and was putting forth blossoms.¹¹

⁹ Mekilta Wa-Yassa' 1, 46; Mekilta RS 74; MHG II, 171; Josephus, Antiqui., III, 1.3.

¹⁰ Mekilta Yitro 1, 57a; Mekilta RS, 86; Sifre N., 78; Sifre Z., 73-74 (this passage also gives the dissenting view that Reuel was the father of Jethro); ShR 1. 32 and 27. 8; Tan. Yitro 4; Tan. B. II, 6; PRK, 37b; Lekah Exod. 4. 18. See also Philo, De Mut. Num., 17. The contradiction between Exod, 2.18 and Num. 10.11 did not escape the Rabbis, and in the passages referred to two solutions of the difficulty are offered.

¹¹ The dry rod blossoms motif is not uncommon in folklore (F791.1; Type 756): a dry branch (rod, staff) puts forth flowers, green leaves, or fruit in token of the forgiveness of a sinner, the innocence of someone accused (E131.0.5.1), or as some other sign. Aaron's Rod blossomed as a sign of the selection of Aaron and his descendants for the priesthood. Tannh user's dry staff blossomed to disprove the judgement that he could no more be forgiven than the dry staff could bloom. Joseph won the Virgin Mary in a suitor-contest in which the reward was given to the one whose staff bloomed (H331.3). The most widespread folktale using the motif, Type 756B (probably of medieval western European origin, but known in some 209 versions in Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Siberia, Germany, Bohemia, Spain), tells of a boy sold to the Devil. He starts out for Hell to retrieve the contract, is guided by a robber, in Hell sees the red-hot chair reserved for his guide, and describes it to him. The robber does penance till his dry staff blossoms or bears fruit (Q521.1) in token of his forgiveness. "When a dry branch sprouts" is one of the by-words for the

From that day Jethro resolved to use the Rod as a test for any man that expressed a desire to marry one of his daughters. The man who could pull it from the ground would be declared worthy; but all who tried were devoured by the Rod.¹²

Moses heard this story from Zipporah¹³, Jethro's daughter, at the well in Midian: the very same well at which Isaac had met Rebekah, and Jacob had met Rachel, his future wife; the very same spring, in fact, that God created in the twilight of the sixth day.¹⁴ Upon hearing it Moses resolved to marry Zipporah, and he approached Jethro and requested her hand. Jethro told Moses to bring him

never concept (Z61). It is understandable why the Rod should have sprouted while in Jethro's possession: if Jethro, an Egyptian and an idol-worshiper, was to become the father-in-law of Moses, some sign of God's forgiveness is clearly necessary. There are in fact legends which tell of Jethro's renunciation of idol-worship and his departure from Egypt to Midian, further sanitizing him for inclusion in Jewish lore, and Jethro's apparently spontaneous decision to use the Rod as the criterion for his daughter's suitors is also readily understandable in this context. The Rod also shares features of the sword-in-the-stone motif, a common theme in folklore: Arthur's Excalibur and Sigmund's Gram being the most notable examples. And the Rod, is, of course, the very type of the magic wand, one of the most common m rchen known. (F971.1; BP, iii, 471, n. 1; Saintyves, Folklore Biblique, 59-137)

¹² Pirke R. El. 40; Sefer ha-Yashar; Yalk Ex. 168, end.

¹³ Wa-Yosha 42. The description of the Rod in the text is in accordance with PRE 40. A somewhat different version of this legend is found in Hashkem 2b; comp. Targum Yerushalmi Exod. 2. 21, 4. 20, and 14. 21, as well as Deut. 34. 12. According to Targum, the Rod was hewn from the sapphire of the divine throne, and weighed forty seah (a seah = 10.70 pounds); comp. Mekilta Beshallah 6, 58b; Mekilta RS, 81; Tan. B. II, 25, and III, 37, as well as the parallel passages cited by Buber. According to ps.-Philo, 20c at the death of Moses the Rod was placed by God as a "witness" between Him and His people, so that when the Israelites sin and God is wroth against them, He remembers the Rod, and has mercy on them, according to His loving-kindness. See also Abrahams, Rod of Moses. Zipporah is praised in the legends not only on account of her piety and virtue (Mo'ed Katan 16b; Tan. B. II, 7; ShR l. 32, end; Yashar Shemot, 143a; Dibre ha-Yamim 7), but also for her beauty; com. Sifre N., 99; Sifre Z., 82 and 204; Tehilliim 7, 71. Philo, Vita Mosis, l. 11, describes her as the most beautiful of the seven daughters of Jethro.

¹⁴ Zohar II, 12b.

the Rod in his garden, after which he would give Zipporah to him. Moses went to the garden and uprooted the Rod, whereby Zipporah came to be his wife.

The Rod was Moses' from this point onward, and here the legend begins to intertwine with the Biblical accounts quoted above. When Moses expressed his extreme reluctance to go to Egypt and speak for the Israelites, God strengthened his resolve by turning the Rod into a serpent, thereby showing to Moses that the power of the Lord would always be with him. In accordance with God's instructions, Moses gave the Rod to Aaron, who wielded it before Pharaoh. Aaron retained it after the episode of the serpents in Pharaoh's court; it became known ever after as the Rod of Aaron.

After the Exodus, some of the legends concerning the Rod of Aaron begin to differ ever more markedly from the Biblical account, and it becomes more difficult to trace a clear path through them. The Biblical data imply, and one distinct legendary tradition supports, the notion that the Rod of Aaron, used to work wonders, is the same rod which blossoms in the tent of meeting, demonstrating that it is the tribe of Levi that is to serve Israel as her priests.¹⁵ Another legendary tradition, however, has it that there were two

¹⁵ BaR 18.23, which contains the statement that Aaron's Rod is identical with the rod of Judah; Tan B. III, 66-67, which reads: Aaron's rod was placed in the middle, so that the people should not say that its proximity to the Shekinah (i.e. the ark) caused it to blossom; Tan. Ahare 8; Likkutim, IV, 44b. The rod which blossomed is the very same with which Jacob crossed the Jordan, which later came into the possession of Judah (Gen. 48. 18), and which Moses took with him on his journey to Egypt. It is the same rod with which Aaron performed the miracles before Pharaoh, and which David held in his hand in his encounter with Goliath (1 Samuel 18.40). See Yelammedenu in Yalkut I, 763, and II 869, on Ps. 110; Midrash Aggada, Gen. 32.11 (in this passage it is said that Moses divided the Red Sea with this rod); Makiri, Prov. 20.3 and Ps. 110, 183. In this legend Aaron's rod is identified not only with that of Moses, but also with the staff of the kings (i.e., Judah, David, and the Messiah), so that the blossoming of this rod proved not only the justice of Aaron's claim to the priesthood, but also established David's claim to the kingdom. See also Zerubabel (Jellinek's edition, 55; Wertheimer's edition 10b).

separate rods: the one which worked wonders being the one handed down from Adam to Moses and Aaron, and the one blossoming in the tabernacle being a new rod which Moses himself fashioned from a beam of wood. According to this legend, when the time came to demonstrate conclusively to the people that Aaron and his tribe were destined for the priesthood, Moses upon God's command fashioned twelve identical rods from a single beam, and bade every prince of a tribe in his own hand write his name on one of the rods respectively. He did this so that no one could claim the test had been unfair and that Aaron's Rod was somehow unique or advantaged. The rods were then laid up in the tabernacle, Aaron's Rod blossoming overnight into an almond tree, signifying that the Levites were God's chosen priests.¹⁶ According to this tradition, it was this blossoming Rod made

¹⁶ The source of this legend is extremely difficult to trace, but the principal candidates (e.g. Clement's first letter to the Corinthians (ep. 43)) can from their Haggadic style most probably be ascribed to Jewish, or more specifically, Jewish-Hellenistic sources. There are later legends about the Rod that display a clearly Christian influence. According to the legend of the Rod as given by the Syrian Solomon in his "Book of the Bee" (Anecdota Oxoniensa, Semitic Series, vol. i. part ii.), the Rod is a fragment of the Tree of Knowledge, and was successively in the possession of Shem, of the three Patriarchs, and of Judah, just as in the Jewish legend. From Judah it descended to Pharez, ancestor of David and of the Messiah. After Pharez's death an angel carried it to the mountains of Moab and buried it there, where the pious Jethro found it. When Moses, at Jethro's request, went in search of it, the Rod was brought to him by an angel. With this staff Aaron and Moses performed all the miracles related in Scripture, as noted elsewhere above. Joshua received it from Aaron and made use of it in his wars (Josh. 8.18); and Joshua, in turn, delivered it to Phinehas, who buried it in Jerusalem. There it remained hidden until the birth of Jesus, when the place of its concealment was revealed to Joseph, who took it with him on the journey to Egypt. Judas Iscariot stole it from James, brother of Jesus, who had received it from Joseph. At Jesus' crucifixion the Jews had no wood for the transverse beam of the cross, so Judas produced the Rod for that purpose ("Book of the Bee," Syr. ed., pp. 50-53; Eng. ed., pp. 50-52). This typological explanation of Aaron's Rod as the cross is not a novel one. Origen on Exodus (chap. 7) says: "This rod of Moses, with which he subdued the Egyptians, is the symbol of the cross of Jesus, who conquered the world." Christian legend has preserved the Jewish accounts of the Rod of the Messiah and made concrete fact of the idea. (Other Western legends concerning

by Moses, and not the Rod which wrought the plagues, that was stored up in the tabernacle and revered with the Ark. The Rod was laid up before the Holy Ark by Moses from the day it was used to establish Aaron's right to the priesthood, and when Solomon built his great temple in Jerusalem, the Rod was given a place of honor there.¹⁷ Solomon's temple was destroyed, however, in the year 587 B. C. by Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army. The Rod of Aaron "miraculously" disappeared, and, according to legend, Elijah will in the future fetch it forth and hand it over to the Messiah.

THE ROD IN HISTORY

Fascinating as these legends may be they are clearly self-contradictory at times and in many cases inconsistent with each other; the skeptical will conclude from this that they can therefore provide nothing of scientific value. Although a reliance on, or even the use of, legend and folk-lore is unacceptable in most established science, the archaeologist and historian have learned that legends can offer valuable clues that lead to scientific discovery. It is by no means the author's intention to suggest by including them that the legends

the connection of the cross and the Rod may be found in Seymour, "The Cross," 1898, p. 83.) The Rod is likewise glorified in Mohammedan legend, which, as is usually the case with the Biblical accounts of the Mohammedans, is plainly derived from Jewish sources. The following passage will serve as an illustration: "Moses flung his staff upon the ground, and instantly it was changed into a serpent as huge as the largest camel. It glared at Pharaoh with fire-darting eyes, and lifted his throne to the ceiling. Opening its jaws, it cried aloud 'If it pleased Allah, I could not only swallow up the throne with thee and all that are here present, but even thy palace and all that it contains, without anyone perceiving the slightest change in me'" (G. Weil, *Biblische Legenden der Museim nner*, p. 140, Frankfort-on-the-Main, 1845).

¹⁷ See Tosefta 'Arakin 2.7; Babli 13b; PR 21 (beginning); Tan. B. IV, 50; BaR 15.11; Tehillim 81, 366, and 92, 406; PRE 19; and comp. also Josephus, *Antiqui.*, VII, 12.3, as well as vol. II, pp. 115-116.

briefly outlined above are "true," but he recognizes their validity insofar as they establish undeniably that a material object known as the Rod of Aaron did exist at some point in time. It is his unshakably firm belief that the sheer number, scope, and pervasiveness of the legends surrounding the artifact imply beyond a doubt that there was a real Rod, and recently uncovered evidence holds out hope that it might be found.

Of course the early legends of the Rod's creation by God and its travails from the beginning of the world down until its recovery by Moses can be discounted without consideration. Almost no one now claims historical significance for the creation stories and their like. Many of the fantastic details in these early legends can be explained as an attempt to provide Israelite origins for what were in essence Canaanite ceremonies. They are, in any case, almost impossible for a modern scholar trapped in the twentieth century to substantiate, and unless the Rod of Aaron when found is shown to be a 428-pound sapphire¹⁸, very little credence can be given them. The "essential historicity" of the legends about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is still defended by determined believers, but a stronger case can be made for the view that these were legends about the founders of Palestinian shrines whom the Israelites, after their conquest of Palestine, adopted as ancestors.¹⁹ Once Jacob and his children have settled in Egypt the Old Testament knows practically nothing of their stay - a clear indication that there was no continuous tradition connecting the pretended "patriarchal period" of the 1700s with the exodus, which by Biblical chronology would have to be dated in the first half of the thirteenth century.

¹⁸ The sapphire legend is, admittedly, an extreme example.

¹⁹ See Rowley, H., The Growth of the Old Testament.

But when the new cycle of legends begins, with Moses as its hero, the tradition becomes less imaginative literary creation and more history. It is at this point, particularly in his dealings with the Egyptian king, that these legends become in part subject to scholarly research and confirmation.

It is not known with absolute certainty what Pharaoh ruled Egypt, then known as Misraim, at the time of the exodus. Best estimates conclude it was Menephtah (19th Dynasty), although Rameses II (19th Dynasty) is another leading candidate. One of a group of polychrome wood panels from the tomb of Djehuty-Nakht, El Bersha, of the third intermediate period which were discovered in 1916²⁰ features a cycle of pictures which to some interpreters correspond to the Biblical account of the plagues of Egypt. The pictures show an unidentified king (possibly Menephtah) surrounded by eight small groups of people, each group seeking remedy or redress for a different plight. The figures in the upper left group pour a red liquid, by popular opinion blood, from jars and vessels; beside them the River Nile is shown painted red. Below this group another group laments over a dead child, and beside it are several small groups of similar scenes. In another group, a man wearing elaborate, possibly priestly, clothing and bearing a flail confronts a large frog, which is surrounded by many smaller frogs. In a fourth group, insects, popularly taken to be locusts, surround two figures. Of the ten plagues described in the Bible, four are not clearly represented in the panel: the murrain, the lice, the hail of fire, and the darkness. Two of the pictures on the panel, one of a man bearing a sheaf of grain, and the other of a man leading a wagon surrounded by other figures bearing various tools, have no readily identified Biblical counterpart. At the bottom of the panel, below the figure of the king, are depicted two men, one of whom bears a serpent. This has

²⁰ Lange, K. and Hirmer, M.: 'The Egyptian Mystique' in The National Geographic; Volume XIV, No 13, pp. 436-467.

been popularly taken as a depiction of Aaron and Moses, and as such is the earliest known record of the Aaronic legend outside of the Old Testament.

Of the other panels, four in number, two feature pictures that represent scenes from what is presumed to be the daily life of the decedent, one picture representing scenes from the afterlife, and one a city scene with Egyptians before a king (again possibly Menephtah). They are fairly mundane in nature and have no other reference to any but established Egyptian mythology.

Discovery of the panel, with what appeared to be independent corroboration of what was commonly believed to be a purely fantastical and exclusively Semitic legend, excited much speculation when it was first unearthed, and it was this panel that initially gave the author hope that the Rod of Aaron might be more than a mere fairy tale.²¹ There seemed to be no easy explanation for the appearance of legendary Israelite heroes in an Egyptian funerary document. The nature of the panels in general suggested to some that the Moses panel might be an historical rather than a literary record. If so, it is the first of its kind.

Pictures of Aaron and the Rod are not uncommon in world literature. They find their way into numerous Haggadahs and illuminated Bibles, and many are deeply impressive. A random sampling conducted by the author reveals that when Aaron appears in an illustration, he is shown holding a rod of some kind just more than half of the time. Seventy per-cent of the pictures showing a rod depict it as an unadorned or otherwise nondescript staff, generally resembling a pikestaff or shepherd's crosier;²² twenty-five per-cent of the pictures depict

²¹ The panel, along with other artifacts from the tomb of Djehuty-Nakht, are now at the Aegyptisch-Orientalische Sammlungen of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

²² Quite notable among such depictions is that from the Ashburnham Pentateuch, c. 1250. A series of four paintings show scenes from the lives of

the Rod as a serpent of some kind.²³ Only one known picture depicts the Rod with its blossoms and almonds.²⁴

These pictures, and the works in which they are found, are not historical in nature. They are products and perpetuators of the legendary tradition. They offer no real clues to the scientist, but serve only to tantalize and spur the imagination.

There are, fortunately, historical documents in which the Rod of Aaron is mentioned, although until recently no historical picture of it had ever been found. The earliest is one of the minor writings of the Roman Tacitus, extant in a number of fifteenth-century texts.²⁵ In describing the booty brought by Titus from his destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, Tacitus includes "the staff of their priests, which had been taken from the temple in the years before."

Moses and Aaron (Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, Nouv. Acq. Lat. 2234, fol. 65v.).

²³ Two notable examples: a full-page miniature from the Golden Haggadah, Barcelona, c. 1320, depicts the rod as a snake in Aaron's hand (London, British Museum, Add. ms. 27210, fol. 10v.); the Sarajevo Haggadah, 14th cent., shows the Rod as a lizard, devouring four other lizards, while Pharaoh and his magicians look on (Spain, Sarajevo National Museum, Fol. 21).

²⁴ A surviving fragment of a carpet page from the First Leningrad Bible depicts the Tabernacle and its implements. It is surrounded by a fence with a triple gate. In the court is the menorah; above it, the Ark of the Covenant with stylized cherubim flanking it; the incense altar, top right; below it the jar of manna; and to the left Aaron's blossoming Rod and other vessels. The picture on the whole is extremely stylized, and the depiction of the Rod is unique. It is shown as a spiralling central spindle oriented vertically at the ends of which rest large double trapeziform caps, their wider ends facing the center of the Rod. From the lower set of caps extend on the right stylized leaves and branches, and on the left a double-headed arrow. The caps might be interpreted as some sort of device designed to hold the Rod securely. (First Leningrad Bible, written by Solomon ha-Levi bar Bouya'a, a pupil of Said ben Farjoi, in 929 A. D., probably in Egypt, for Abraham and Zahlah, sons of Maimon. Leningrad, Public Library, ms. II 17)

²⁵ An early manuscript of the work from the Hersfeld Abbey in Germany was discovered just thirty-five years ago in a private library in Italy, which has proven to be the copy from which all known later versions descend.

According to Tacitus, the "staff of the priests" had been in the hands of Portius Festus, the last Roman governor of Jerusalem, who in turn had found it among the effects of the governorship, apparently left behind by some earlier official. When Titus cleared out the city, he brought this staff with him to Rome, and presumably handed it over to the emperor Vespasian.

No further mention of the Rod is found until the reign of Constantine. Medieval writers²⁶ make the claim that the great Christian emperor declared that he had recovered both the Ark of the Covenant and the Rod of Aaron, displaying them in his new capital at Constantinople. The source of their information is unknown, and, consequently, suspect.²⁷ However, these rumors persisted and were amplified into the end of the eighth century, when they began to include the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne. According to a list found in the Polychronicon of Ranulph Higden, Monk of Chester,²⁸ the "ferula serpens, reliquae Iudaeorum" was among the curious objects in Charlemagne's treasury.

The most intriguing of all medieval historical references to the Rod, however, was the Chronicle of Adalberon, Archbishop of Rheims. Adalberon of Rheims (b. 928 - d. 999) served as canon and subsequently archbishop of Rheims during the reign of Lothaire, the last of the Carolingian monarchs. It was, in fact, Adalberon who was most instrumental in overthrowing Lothaire, urging and eventually presiding over the election of Hugh Capet to the kingship in 987.²⁹

²⁶ i. a., Bede; Reginald, bishop of Ely; Hugh and Richard of St. Victor; Fulk le Rechin of Anjou; the unknown author of Annales Blandeniensis; Raoul Glaber.

²⁷ Some scholars have ventured the guess that the source is two short quotations from Cosmas Indicopleustes, a traveller of Constantine's time whose work remains only in a few mss., most of them in Greek.

²⁸ Cambridge, Bodelian ms. B4986, fol. 17.

²⁹ Richer's Histoire de France; J.-F. Lemaignier, Le Gouvernement royal aux premiers temps capetiens (978-1108), Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, Acq. Fr. 859, dr. 3v.

Adalberon kept a chronicle of events during his tenure in office, as had Hincmar of Rheims, the archbishop who had preceded him, and from whose work and library Adalberon could have drawn much of value. He moved among men who could still remember Hincmar himself, his great erudition, and his commitment to recording contemporary events for the moral enlightenment of future generations. Hincmar's shadow must often have fallen on Adalberon's work. But even more important, in Rheims, Adalberon found himself right in the center of events well worth recording. The archiepiscopal city was on the king's regular circuit; Adalberon met or knew well by reputation the great men of Francia north of the Loire; indeed he was personally involved in national politics, perhaps more deeply than anyone at that time suspected.³⁰

Adalberon's Chronicle, then, would be a rich source of information about the final years of Carolingian France, a period which is sadly lacking in historical records. Whether through civil war, alien aggression, or simple loss of self-confidence, the habit of recording events wore woefully thin. In fact, the period 888-987 in West Frankish history is almost as much a dark age as the seventh century. Until recently, however, Adalberon's chronicle was completely lost to us except for three quotes from later authors.

Ademar of Chabannes, whose Chronicle describes events up to 1028, was one of these three. Ademar was a monk of noble Aquitanian family, who spent his life at St. Cybard at Angoulême and St. Martial in Limoges. His work seeks to provide a full history of the Frankish people from their origin till 1028 - in itself an interesting project for a southerner to engage on - but it is all derived from

³⁰ Later writers (Ademar of Chabannes, Raoul Glaber, and the author of the Chronicle of Nantes, most notably) have suggested or implied that Adalberon, with the help of conspirators in Lothaire's entourage, orchestrated an attack by Saracen raiders on Lothaire and his knights in 986. It was in this attack that Lothaire suffered wounds from which he never fully recovered, and hastened his decline as king, clearing the way for Adalberon's candidate, Hugh Capet.

other sources until he reaches the late tenth and early eleventh centuries in the second half of book III. The following passage from Ademar is derived from Adalberon:

Lothaire to keep the edge on readiness retired to the woods outside his castle at Paris with a company of his knights and retainers, etc., where they fought in anticipation of the battles to come while the king with his advisors and his retinue looked on. And Basle accompanied him, and gave to Lothaire his counsel for how best to address the pressing troubles, and the learned Basle carried with him to the field his books which he consulted, and the king's staff, which he had from the court of Charlemagne, from the Jews. Basle's tools of scrying however did not enable him to foresee the attack which came from Saracen raiders, who descended on the company there without warning.³¹

The "king's staff, which he had...from the Jews" could of course be any number of things, perhaps the least likely of which would be the Rod of Aaron. However, the mention of the court of Charlemagne, rumored as it was to be the resting place of the Rod, held out hope for the Rod's recovery and kept its memory alive for some scholars, who were on the lookout for other contemporary references to it. The Basle referred to in the text was Lothaire's principal advisor, his most trusted fidelis. Very little is known of him except that he was a Burgundian nobleman with a reputation for great erudition which he put in the service of Lothaire.³² Ultimately, he laid down his life in defense of his king, for Basle was killed in the Saracen raid of 986. The text implies that the rod in question was used by Basle for "scrying," which indicates that it was

³¹ Ademar of Chabannes, Chronique, ed. B. Guerard, Abbey of St. Martial, III, 19.

³² He is said to have been a priest of Nyarlathotep, but I for one certainly don't believe that. Also rumors that he was the reincarnation of Balaam, the chief magician of the Egyptian court at the time of the Exodus, are probably highly exaggerated. More probably Balaam never actually died, but just kept making up new identities for himself. I mean, hey, "Basle"/"Balaam"? Just think about it.

attributed with some unusual power, or that Basle's great learning included some occult matter.

The second of the three writers who quote Adalberon is the Cluniac monk Raoul Glaber, dedicated to St. Odilo of Cluny, who began to write around 1048 at St. Benigne under the aegis of St. William of Volpiano. Raoul covered West Frankish history, from about 900 to his own times, from the view-point of one who felt himself close to the end of the world. As the millennium of Christ's death (1033) approached, his apprehension grew; once safely past that dreaded date, he saw new peace on earth. His purpose in writing was to inspire profound meditation on the ways of God; consequently there was nothing mundane in his selection or interpretation of facts. Yet St. Benigne was no backwater; Abbot Odilo was a frequent visitor; William of Volpiano regularly reported back to his old house on his triumphs in Normandy. Raoul's sources of information were good, although for material before his own time he relied on earlier written accounts, e.g. Adalberon's.

Here follows Raoul's passage on the Rod:

Basle stood at the king's side, armed with his holy book and his Lord's sceptre, the sapphire rod of righteousness, the rod which God in his infinite care had directed to his hands. His wisdom was great, and with the sceptre he had worked wonders for the king. Would that it might, as the Rod of Aaron, part the sea of unrest, the better to aid his king to heal the dying Frankish state.³³

The intriguing description of the rod as sapphire links it to the Rod of Aaron, to which Basle's rod is directly compared. Curiously, Raoul makes very little mention of the Saracen attack, and does not describe the raiders as Saracens at all. And only later in the work does he give the hint that Basle has died, and without mentioning when or how.

³³ Raoul Glaber, *les cinq livres de ses histoires (900-1044)*, ed. M. Prou (Paris, 1886), 8.

The third work in which Adalberon's Chronicle is quoted is the Annals of St. Riquier, compiled in 1088 by unknown monks, led, it is believed, by Hariulf.³⁴ The St. Riquier Annals are a terse collection, barely more than a chronology, of events prior to about 1080. After that they expand to include more detail. The source of the information therein is uncertain, but this brief passage on Lothaire and the Saracen attack is known to be from Adalberon, because the Annals themselves acknowledge the source.

In the summer of that year Lothaire was surprised at his castle at Paris by Saracen bandits, and Basle with him, and knights and ladies attending also were surprised. And the knights engaged the bandits, and defended the king and his advisor, who with his Hebrew rod worked a protection; but the advisor was killed, and the rod and the book were taken up, and the king suffered a greivous wound, and the ladies were taken and not heard from again, as was the custom with the raiders. And the news spread quickly, and to Rheims, where Adalberon heard the news, from whom we know what we know, and from what he did then.³⁵

These three writers were the only link to the missing Chronicles of Adalberon, which were apparently lost sometime in the mid twelfth century, when portions of the episcopal library were dispersed to Corbie, Soissons, St. Denis, and other locations. But in April of 1926, a cataloguer working in the abbey library of St. Denis, Marcel Abelhard, discovered a palimpsest copy of Codex Enuntiationis, a fourteenth century book of religious doctrines compiled at the scriptorium there. The leaves in the manuscript come from many another book, Biblical and classical: although some have yet to be identified, one leaf has been shown to be from Adalberon's Chronicle, which was until this discovery

³⁴ Hariulf is known to be the author of a life of St. Arnulf, appearing in Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina (Paris, 1844-55), J. P. Migne, ed.; the style and hand of that work have led many scholars to conclude that Hariulf took part in the assembly of St. Riquier's annals.

³⁵ Hariulf (?), Annales de l'abbaye de Saint-Riquier, ed. F. Lot (Paris, 1894), 246.

thought hopelessly lost. X-ray analysis of the leaf revealed an older painting beneath the illumination of the later text, and with the kind permission of the abbey, Abelhard began the difficult work of restoring the original.

The Latin text of the leaf, what little there is of it, was brought back to light by the diligent application of ammonium bisulphide, and it follows in its entirety:

...in his majesty, in the forest of Montlhery, accompanied as always by the learned Basle, who stood at his right with his book of knowledge, and the Hebrew rod, the Rod of Aaron, with its inscription of Hebrew characters, its sapphire tip; would that he, like the Jews in ancient times, might part the swelling sea of discontent with it. The king foresaw the rising tide, and so moved to ready...³⁶

The leaf also features a painting, now restored, that shows quite clearly Lothaire, dressed in yellow and blue robes, sitting on a throne under a large pavilion, his hands in the traditionally stilted pose so common of the period. Behind the king stand ladies in waiting, and at his feet sits a jester playing a mandolin. To his right stands the imposing figure of Basle, dressed in red and black, with a silver three-pointed shield-shaped crest decorating the front of his tunic. In Basle's left hand, a large black book; in his right, the Rod of Aaron.

This picture of the Rod is absolutely unique in that it is the only picture known in which the Rod is shown in the hands of someone other than Aaron himself. Only one other picture, that from the First Leningrad Bible, shows the Rod independent of its eponymous bearer, and no other picture shows the Rod in the possession of any other individual. The fact that the individual pictured, Basle, is one who is known to have lived in a specific time and place offers the distinct hope that the Rod itself occupied that same time and place. Thus it is

³⁶ The Chronicle of Adalberon of Rheims, P. S. Grimm, ed. (St. Denis, 1926).

the first solid clue to the Rod's whereabouts, and suggests that it waits to be found.

The Rod is pictured as a fairly straight light brown staff, apparently of wood, with a large blue (perhaps sapphire?) tip at the bottom and an upper end vaguely suggestive of a serpent's head. It is about as long as Basle is tall, which, given the average height of tenth-century men would make the Rod just over five and a half feet in length. The picture also shows quite clearly an inscription in Hebrew characters, which, unfortunately, cannot be completely identified. The picture shows no trace of blossoms, branches, or almonds.

The picture is neither a picture of legendary figures nor rendered in a particularly stylized fashion. It is clearly meant to be a realistic representation of actual historical figures, known to have lived in France at the end of the tenth century. That the Rod should be presented realistically and divorced from its legendary context implies that it really existed. Basle clearly must have been holding something in his hand, which from the picture corresponds to a reasonable likeness of the Rod of Aaron, and which is clearly identified as such in the text.

Although, as the skeptical will immediately answer, it is perhaps extremely unlikely that it is the same piece of wood handled by Moses during the exodus, the rod held by Basle of Burgundy was certainly known as the Rod of Aaron, or had the reputation of being the same rod. The Hebrew inscription and the "sapphire" tip must make us stop to wonder if it could, in fact, be the lost relic of the Egyptian captivity.

How might the Rod of Aaron have come to be in the court of Lothaire, a French monarch living over two thousand years later? Of course the precise path it travelled is impossible to trace, but one possible route is this: Aaron took it with him from Egypt, and it was subsequently sealed into the tabernacle of

the Israelites, where it was revered and cared for. When Solomon built his temple in Jerusalem, the Rod, along with the Ark of the Covenant, were transferred to safety there, until Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city in 587. At this point both Ark and Rod were said to have "miraculously" disappeared. That the Ark of the Covenant should have disappeared is not "miraculous" in the slightest: a chest of solid gold found by a conquering army with no respect for its religious or symbolic significance would surely be taken as loot, perhaps even melted down. The Rod, however, being a stick of wood, may have survived the invasion, and been left behind. If so, it would have remained, in hiding, perhaps, under the care of the Jews, in the city. With the coming of the Romans and the provincial period, the Rod found its way into the hands of the Roman governors, eventually ending with Portius Festus. When Titus razed the city for Rome in 70 A. D., he brought it with him back to the capital, giving it to the Emperor as a souvenir.³⁷ It remained in Rome, a curiosity of a conquered people devoted to a foreign god, until Constantine's conversion in 313. Constantine, in the fervency of his new-found Christianity, and perhaps with a belief in the Christian modifications of the Rod legends identifying the Rod with the Cross, brings it with him to Constantinople as a treasured relic from his religious heritage. When the empire begins to crumble under the invasion of the Huns, the Rod is carried by the victors to Germany, or perhaps it flees with refugees back to Rome. From either location it easily finds its way to France and the court of Charlemagne, whence it is handed down with the royal demesne to Lothaire. This is of course a very broad outline, and only one of countless possible paths.

And where has the Rod of Aaron been since the deaths of Basle and Lothaire? There is no further mention of it in any historical source found to date. It is still a prominent character in religious texts and collections of

³⁷ Tacitus, III, Historiae; British Museum, ms., Harl. 3100.

legends, but no historical document later than 1092 mentions it at all, and all documents that postdate 986 refer back to Adalberon's Chronicle. The trail stops in France in 986. And it is in the French countryside, in the forest of Montlhery just outside of Paris, that the author proposes to look for the missing Rod of Aaron.

In the next section, the author outlines the specifics of a proposed expedition to France designed to follow the trail of the Rod and bring it at last under the direct scrutiny of modern scholarship.