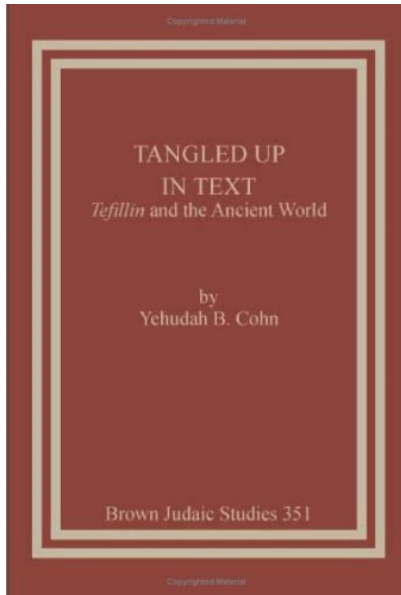


RBL 06/2009



Cohn, Yehudah B.

Tangled Up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World

Brown Judaic Studies 351

Providence, R.I.: Brown Judaic Studies, 2008. Pp. xi + 202. Hardcover. \$32.95. ISBN 1930675569.

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The nineteenth-century Russian-Jewish Yiddish and Hebrew humorist and author Shalom Aleichem (= Sholem Naumovich Rabinovich, 1859–1916) is credited with the Yiddish saying, “es is shver zu zein ah Yid”: “it is difficult to be a Jew.” Everything, including levels of difficulty, is relative, today as well as in Shalom Aleichem’s times. One aspect of this is prayer. Thus, an (Orthodox) Jewish male prays today daily, as in the past, with *tallit* (= prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (= phylacteries).¹ Jewish travelers, however, away from home and local synagogue, often find themselves praying in “full gear” in rather unusual and occasionally very public venues. An Orthodox Jewish male will not be separated from *tallit* and *tefillin* and come morning, wherever he may be, one “lays” *tefillin*, indeed not always easy everywhere. Yehudah B. Cohn, in the preface of his book, mentions the Hebrew University professor, when hearing of Cohn’s research, who encouraged him by stating that many people “do *tefillin*,” but no one thinks about them. This may have been an exaggeration, but Cohn is probably the most profound thinker and scholar on *tefillin* today, and his book is a welcome contribution to scholarship.

1. Today, *tefillin* are worn during morning prayers, only on weekdays and not on the Sabbath or festival. Generally women do not wear them, but there are and have been exceptions. They are not worn today by children and are associated with the Bar-Mitzva rite of passage when the new thirteen-year-old “adult” begins to put them on.

The Hebrew/Aramaic word *tefillin* designates a pair of small leather cases (*battim*, literally “housings”) whose parchment contents are inscribed with four passages from the Torah (Exod 13:1–10, 11–16; Deut 6:4–9; 11:13–21). The passages each contain one verse that has been traditionally associated with *tefillin*, either the case strapped to the left arm (or on the right hand, for left-handers) or with the case strapped on the head. The Greek *phylakterion*, literally “means of protection,” serves as the basis for the English (and modern European language) phylacteries. This is apparently not, however, a translation of *tefillin*.

Cohn’s book attempts to investigate the evolution of the practice of *tefillin*, focusing on the six hundred or so years from the period of the conquest of the Near East by Alexander the Great to the end of the third century C.E., but examining also earlier relevant material. The book investigates how *tefillin* practice came into being, how it developed, and why it did so in the way that it did. This is done within the religious and cultural reality of Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism and especially regarding the reception of canonized Scripture. The author also examines the practice of *tefillin* in relation to the wider world in which the practice took place.

The work is composed of five chapters. The first serves as an introduction, discussing prior scholarship, providing background and comparative material from the Jewish and Greco-Roman world, and discussing terminology and methodology. Cohn points out the need to examine further the magical function of *tefillin*, including their depiction as *phylacteria* in Greek sources. He also clearly informs the reader regarding what he does not discuss. He does not deal, for instance, with post-Tannaitic traditions, that is, those after the third century C.E., precluding most of the discussions in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. Nor does he deal with the Geonic period minor tractate Massekhet Tefillin, an assemblage of relatively late talmudic material. His discussions relate to the early material, including the Judean Desert *tefillin* from Wadi Murabba‘at and Qumran, taking care to try and avoid harmonization of this material with the later rabbinic evidence. While perhaps an expanded framework would have been desirable, separating later developments from ancient origins and initial developments is an important corrective to earlier research, which tended toward harmonization and coalescence.

The next three chapters follow a historical framework. Chapter 2 (“Deuteronomy to Alexander [Seventh Century B.C.E. to 331 B.C.E.]”) discusses the period prior to the Jewish encounter with Hellenistic culture and whether the practice of wearing *tefillin* was already in existence during the late monarchic, exilic, and/or Persian periods. As there is no archaeological evidence that would date *tefillin* to these periods, or earlier, and since the literature of the period does not depict any individual as wearing *tefillin*, the author for the most part examines the reception of the traditional *tefillin* verses in Exodus and

Deuteronomy cited above in the literature of the time to see if the practice can be reasonably dated to these times. In Cohn's view, there seems to be no reason why these verses should be interpreted at this time as relating to *tefillin*, and he comes to the conclusion that it would be more effective to search for origins of the practice after this time.

Chapter 3 ("*Tefillin* in the Later Second Temple Period"), the central chapter of the book, deals with the archaeological evidence as well as with the references from the literature of the Second Temple period. According to Cohn, the archaeological evidence provides a *terminus ante quem* for the practice in the second or first century B.C.E. He argues in detail that *tefillin* were an invented tradition of the late Second Temple period, functioning as a long-life amulet that arose from a literalist interpretation of Scripture and informed by knowledge of parallel Greek practices. Cohn argues in this chapter that the Qumran *tefillin* were not written according to a fixed set of rules, were not sectarian exemplars, and most likely represent some kind of popular practice, perhaps as amulets, part of the religion of the of the common people.

Chapter 4 ("The Tanna'itic Era [70 C.E. to the Third Century]") takes up the story from the destruction of the Jerusalem temple until the late third century C.E. In this chapter Cohn discusses the make-up of *tefillin* and who wore them, as well as when, where, and how they were worn. Also discussed are issues of sanctity, scribal matters, and purity concerns. Now the tables are turned, as it were, methodologically speaking, in relation to the remains described in the previous chapter. In the Second Temple period, the majority of the remains were composed of archaeological findings, with a limited amount of literary material. In this postdestruction era, the archaeological remains are extremely limited, and the majority of the sources are literary and rabbinic, although this rabbinic literature does not deal with *tefillin* in a comprehensive or systematic manner.

How common was the wearing of *tefillin* in the Second Temple period and afterwards? In spite of the seeming importance of the commandment, the difficulty in preparing, paying for, and/or acquiring *tefillin* occasionally affected the level of observance. There were throughout Jewish history communities, usually located in the relatively far-flung peripheral areas of Jewish settlement, in which only the *Hacham* had *tefillin*. This, of course, might not be relevant to the ancient practice. There are, however, also scholars who would limit the use of *tefillin* during ancient times to the rabbis, sages, or the especially pious, but Cohn is opposed to this view. Cohn is a *tefillin* maximalist. Cohn sees *tefillin* as an important component of "common Judaism" and popular among common people, or at least males, adult and even children, but only to a very limited extent among women, who might have had some type of alternative practice. They might have also been worn during the entire day and not just during morning prayers, as is

generally the case today, and perhaps even on the Sabbath, not just on weekdays, as is today's practice.

The last chapter in the book, chapter 5 ("In Conclusion, the Meaning of *Tefillin* Ritual"), ties it all up after having "untangled" sources and remains in the previous chapters. *Tefillin* was a common ritual, not that just of a minority or sectarian group. The practice probably originated after the Jewish encounter with Hellenism, when verses in Deuteronomy, which seem to mention amulets, began to be read in a new way. The prevalence of inscribed amulets in the Hellenistic world led to changes in which Jews understood these and similar biblical verses and then produced their own length-of-days amulets. They were, however, not just an all-purpose amulet for long life; an analysis of the relevant verses ties them to specific protection for one's family as well for persistence on the land. *Tefillin*, in Cohn's view, can be seen, then, as an invented tradition, an adaptation to Greek life whose form was enabled by the centrality of Torah to Jewish life. Adjustment to Hellenism resulted in a reaffirmation of Jewish legacy, albeit a legacy that seemed to contain a strong dose of magic. This magical function, according to Cohn, remained significant, providing protection especially in those circumstances in which other Jewish amulets such as the *mezuzah* did not provide sufficient protection. Moreover, this *tefillin* magic revolved around the names of God, thus providing a bridge to other and later Jewish amuletic practices.

There is undoubtedly much in this book that might arouse a degree of controversy, especially the "invented" nature and the strong emphasis on magic. While all this is relatively tame enough for the scholarly world, those who actually wear *tefillin* today might look askance at all this; that, unfortunately, would be a shame. Objectively speaking, as objectively speaking as a "*tefillin* wearer" reviewer might be, this is indeed a strange ritual and practice. However, the fact that it has survived to the present would seem to imply that it is a very powerful one, in keeping with the prophylactic nature of magic and amulets, as in the case of the *mezuzah*. Cohn may stretch the meaning of this or that source, but Cohn has provided a fascinating and important contribution to the understanding of this ritual for scholar, lay reader, and practitioner.

There is, however, one serious flaw in the book, probably not Cohn's fault, but a serious problem. It is inconceivable that archaeological remains be discussed without pictures or illustrations of *tefillin* or of discovered fragments of verses. And, for that matter, there might even be the odd reader who has no idea what *tefillin* look like; not to provide some visual guidance is unfortunate. It is hard to imagine that it was the author who decided on this limited format, and it probably reflects an editorial decision related to budget. While the interested reader can find the relevant depictions in the literature cited by Cohn, the

book would certainly have been enhanced by at least some pictorial and illustrative material.