

Rope-a-Dope?

By Dr. Mike Caba

There I was, sitting in church, listening to a fine sermon. The music had been soulful, the preacher was now in great earnest expressing some lofty divine dogma—all was good. Then out of the blue I heard it declared once again, the very thing I had listened to so many times in various Christian settings—namely, “They even tied a rope around the priest before he went into the Holy of Holies so that they could pull his body out in case he died in the midst of his duties!” Wow, such a need for reverence and careful dealings when entering the inner sanctum of Judaism! Indeed, it really is a great story, except for one rather important detail: the story is based upon very dubious sources. That’s right, regardless of how many times you may have heard it, if a priest got dopey and committed some grievance in the Holy of Holies, there very likely was no rope by which he could have been retrieved.

To see how a tale like this could have gained such widespread traction, we can begin by noting a slight resonance with a scriptural text—namely, Exodus 28:34–35, which reads, “The gold bells and the pomegranates are to alternate around the hem of the robe. Aaron must wear it when he ministers. The sound of the bells will be heard when he enters the Holy Place before the LORD and when he comes out, so that he will not die” (NIV). Along with this, the 2010 edition of the NIV Study Bible included a note for this verse that said, “According to Jewish legend, one end of a length of rope was tied to the high priest’s ankle and the other end remained outside the tabernacle. If the bells on his robe stopped jingling while he was in the Holy Place, the assumption that he had died could be tested by pulling gently on the rope.”¹ To be fair, the study Bible also said, “It is unknown if this legend has any historical validity.”² Further, the revised 2020 edition deletes the note altogether,³ which is entirely appropriate given that there is no reference to any scheme involving a rope tied to the priest “in any ancient source, including the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, the Apocrypha, the Mishnah, the Babylonian Talmud, or the Jerusalem Talmud.”⁴

It is, of course, impossible to trace the exact lineage of a story such as this, but it appears that the first known reference to the rope actually occurs in the Zohar, which is a Cabbalist⁵ text: “They raise their hands towards him in prayer. A knot OF ROPE of gold hangs from his leg, FROM FEAR PERHAPS HE WOULD DIE IN THE HOLY OF HOLIES, AND THEY WOULD NEED TO PULL HIM OUT WITH THIS ROPE” (capitalization in the original).⁶ However, it should be noted that the Zohar is a 13th-century-AD text that is not a historical rendition of events; instead, it is a mystical text that “pretends to be a revelation from God.”⁷ Thus, while absent from any ancient source, the rope story appears to have arisen in a mystical, nonhistorical text from the late Middle Ages, well over a thousand years after the destruction of the temple.

The exact route the story followed into the Christian community after its probable inception in the Zohar is not known with certainty. One possible pathway, and the earliest known Christian source that mentions the story, is the commentary on the whole Bible by 18th-century theologian John Gill, in which he references the Zohar and says, “The Jews say, that a cord or thong was bound to the feet of the high priest when he went into the holy of holies, that if he died there, the rest might be able to draw him out.”⁸ John Gill was a predecessor to Charles Spurgeon in London and also strongly supported George Whitefield. Given these connections, it is easy to see how such a story, despite the lack of any ancient corroboration, could spread so far and wide in the Christian world.

Today we are blessed with a plethora of resources, both Christian and Jewish, that call the rope story into question. One of the best examinations is by Rabbi Dr. Ari Z. Zivotofsky, who says, “In summation: Despite the paucity of rabbinic sources, the notion that the Kohen Gadol [high priest] wore a rope around his ankle when entering the Kodesh Hakodashim [Holy of Holies] is widespread. The historical evidence of such a rope or chain seems dubious and the halachic acceptability of such an arrangement is questionable.”⁹

Now, to be clear, I am not suggesting that the repetitious proclamation of this story is of weighty theological consequence to the Church; really, it’s more of a gnat than a camel. Further, it is very often impossible to prove a negative; that is, it is impossible to prove that there was no rope. Because of this, this article does not definitively declare the story to be a myth; instead, I have described it as “very likely” a myth. In any case, such dubious stories should not be used in conjunction with the divine Word.

Finally, for those interested in historical accuracy—and we all should be—perhaps a change of tactics is in order. Given the very low probability that the story is true, it may be time to be proactive against it. Accordingly, I suggest that whenever and wherever you hear it, you politely let the speaker know, preferably in private, that the story is very likely a myth. Further, I would like to recommend that we all preemptively let people know of the story's suspect nature if we are teaching on the subject of the temple or related matters; in effect, we should get ahead of the curve. To assist in these efforts, permission is hereby granted for you to download, print, and distribute this article in full by visiting the following link on the ABR website: <https://biblearchaeology.org/images/Rope-a-Dope.pdf>