

The Fall of an Academic Cyberbully

Man allegedly used aliases to harass scholars of Dead Sea Scrolls

Raphael H. Golb's apartment, located on a quiet, tree-canopied lower Manhattan street, one block from the New York University campus, does not evoke a traditional den of thieves. Nor does Mr. Golb -- a real-estate lawyer with a doctorate in comparative literature from Harvard and no history of civil or professional impropriety -- fit the profile of a traditional criminal.

But the crimes of which he is accused are far from traditional.

On March 5, the New York City police arrested Mr. Golb, the son of Norman Golb, a prominent religious-studies scholar at the University of Chicago, on charges that he orchestrated an Internet campaign involving harassment and impersonation to discredit particular scholars. These researchers were attacked, apparently, because they disagreed with his father's theories about one of the most important discoveries in biblical archaeology.

The Manhattan district attorney, in a prepared statement that afternoon, said that "Golb engaged in a systematic scheme on the Internet, using dozens of Internet aliases, in order to influence and affect debate on the Dead Sea Scrolls."

The arrest is the latest chapter in a nearly three-year saga during which an academic cyberbully has besieged museum officials and exhibition curators and assailed the integrity of Dead Sea Scrolls researchers -- even triggering a university inquiry into plagiarism charges -- using an army of aliases in e-mail messages, blogs, online discussion groups, and Wikipedia.

This phantom has also muddied the waters of public debate over a collection of documents that are believed to be crucial to the understanding of Judaic biblical history. "Consumers of scholarship are very much nurtured by the Internet," said Lawrence H. Schiffman, a professor at New York University and one of the people Mr. Golb is charged with impersonating. "They can easily be defrauded by people who are giving false impressions of broad consensus on a point of view, when it's really just one person."

Mr. Golb's attorney, David Breitbart, told The Chronicle that he is not permitting his client to speak the press, and cautioned the public not to jump to conclusions until Raphael Golb's side of the story is known.

Norman Golb, however, said he suspected that his son's arrest was the latest chapter in a systematic scheme to discredit him. "As far as I'm concerned, these developments have all to do with the efforts of various traditional ... scholars to block the expression of my views," he said.

[Living Documents](#)

Few academic debates are as contentious as those surrounding the Dead Sea Scrolls. These fragments of some 800 ancient documents include portions of all but one book of the Hebrew Bible. The first ones were discovered in 1947 by shepherds in caves on the northwestern shore of

the Dead Sea, and are believed to be the oldest surviving Judaic manuscripts, dating back to 250 BC.

But at the same time that the age of the scrolls has made them historically significant, it has also made the question of their authorship difficult to resolve. The early theory was that the Essenes, an ascetic Jewish sect that occupied Khirbet Qumran, the settlement where the scrolls were found, wrote the documents -- or at least copied and assembled them. But since then a number of alternative theories have been proposed.

In 1995, Norman Golb published a book advocating his alternative. The book, called *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?*, contended that the scrolls had been written by Jewish scholars in Jerusalem and then hidden away in the bowels of Qumran when Rome invaded the Holy Land in 70 AD. In a passage in the book's foreword, he credits his son Raphael for playing a "vital role in furthering the publication of several of my studies of the scrolls."

Norman Golb's thesis was rejected by a number of archaeologists, among them Robert R. Cargill, who is now an instructional-technology coordinator at the University of California at Los Angeles. He believes the Qumran settlement was at a military outpost that was abandoned and later repopulated by the sectarians.

In early 2007, Mr. Cargill -- then a fifth-year doctoral student at UCLA -- was in the process of articulating this view in his dissertation, a virtual-reality film on the Qumran settlement, which he was producing under the guidance of William M. Schniedewind, a professor of Biblical studies and Northwest Semitic languages at UCLA. The San Diego Natural History Museum was planning to include the film in a forthcoming exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

In the months leading up to the exhibition, Mr. Cargill, who had set up Google alerts to notify him of material published online concerning the Dead Sea Scrolls, began noticing posts on various blogs and message boards charging that the exhibition's curator, Risa Levitt Kohn, a professor of religious studies at San Diego State University, was "misleading the public" by omitting from the exhibition alternative views such as those of Norman Golb.

Online criticisms, signed with different names, continued to crop up throughout the exhibition's six-month run, often denouncing Mr. Cargill and Mr. Schniedewind. Mr. Cargill says he and Ms. Levitt Kohn began to suspect the names were aliases belonging to one person. "We thought, man, these things look so similar," he told *The Chronicle*. "You see the same words, the same arguments, the same links."

Over the next two and a half years, Mr. Cargill compiled a dossier of posts, e-mail messages, and suspected aliases of a cyberbully whom he took to calling "The Puppet Master." Mr. Cargill now believes the Puppet Master used as many as 80 different aliases.

Concerning Mr. Cargill's film, the alias "Steve Frankel" wrote an e-mail message to the department of Near Eastern languages and cultures at UCLA to say: "The accumulation of transparently erroneous and mendacious statements made throughout the film, documented in

Dr. Golb's article and clearly designed to mislead the public, can hardly be called an example of ethical conduct on the part of a doctoral candidate."

[To Catch a Cybercrook](#)

Mr. Cargill, during his investigation into his Internet assailants, identified the alias Charles Gadda as the Puppet Master's primary henchman. Charles Gadda had planted himself in several online discussion groups as a proxy for Norman Golb's theories about the scrolls and complaints about the scroll scholarship. Gadda had also sent an e-mail message to the UCLA media relations department criticizing it for a press release it had issued about Mr. Cargill's virtual-reality film about the Qumran settlement.

Charles Gadda's base of operations was the site NowPublic.com, an Emmy-award nominated community of news blogs written by citizen journalists, from which he made 17 posts, mostly criticizing the San Diego exhibition for what he argued was a "Christian agenda" designed to suppress certain views about the scrolls, including Norman Golb's. He often would link to material written by him or other names suspected by Mr. Cargill to be Puppet Master handles.

"The idea was to not only amend every possible mention online of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the exhibits with comments that linked back to Dr. Golb's articles," Mr. Cargill said, "but also to create original content to create the illusion of a growing consensus of opposition, and then interlink Dr. Golb's material with the new aliases' material, thereby creating a web of deceit."

Mr. Cargill said Puppet Master functionaries even tried to add passages to the Wikipedia entry for the Dead Sea Scrolls mentioning the marginalization of Norman Golb's views. An editing war ensued between Mr. Cargill and nine new aliases. Wikipedia administrators eventually blocked several of the aliases for violating the site's prohibition on "sock-puppetry," according to site records.

[The Telltale IP's](#)

While he suspected early on that Charles Gadda and other aliases were connected to one another and perhaps to Norman Golb himself, Mr. Cargill had little proof.

But in November 2007, he made a breakthrough. Norman Golb had published an article on the Web site of the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute that criticized Mr. Cargill and Mr. Schniedewind. Shortly afterward, comments appeared on two separate blogs echoing Norman Golb and linking to the article. One comment was signed "Martin Elderling" and the other was signed "Leonard Davies." Mr. Cargill says he contacted the moderator of each blog and asked if they would share with him the Internet protocol, or IP addresses, associated with computers from which the comments had been posted.

An IP address is a unique number, assigned by Internet-service providers, that identifies each connection to the Internet. According to Mr. Cargill, the blogs' moderators revealed that the IP addresses for the two aliases were identical. That meant, in all likelihood, that the posts had come from the same Internet connection.

Mr. Cargill decided to see what would happen if he traced the other IP addresses.

The address attached to Charles Gadda's e-mail message to the UCLA media-relations department matched the address for the two blog comments. Mr. Cargill, knowing that certain e-mail providers include the source IP address in the e-mail header, began to contact other scholars who had been publicly criticized by the Puppet Master and asked them if they or their departments had ever received mysterious e-mail messages.

They had. Mr. Cargill collected eight IP addresses in all. Seven were affiliated with New York University. Six of these had the word "bobst" in their source codes, leading Mr. Cargill to suspect that they came from the university's Bobst Library.

A university-based information-technology security expert consulted by The Chronicle said Mr. Cargill's conclusion was reasonable. A Chronicle reporter repeated a trace on the same IP addresses and came up with the same sources, including "bobst," identified by Mr. Cargill.

The final IP address -- the only one used by Charles Gadda -- had no obvious affiliation, so Mr. Cargill used a Web site called DNSstuff.com to trace it. The site identified New York City as the location of the Internet connection. The Chronicle replicated this search, with the same result. The Chronicle also ran a trace on this IP address using another Web site, WhatIsMyIPAddress.com, which claims to be able to pinpoint a source's location within 25 miles with 81-percent accuracy. The trace pointed to lower Manhattan.

[Crossing the Line](#)

Mr. Cargill, who knew that Raphael Golb lived near NYU, was convinced that he was behind the e-mail messages. But the evidence was all circumstantial.

Then, last summer, the Puppet Master stepped over a line with Mr. Schiffman.

The professor of Hebrew and Judaic studies at NYU was walking up the steps to his second-floor office one day at the beginning of August when he ran into one of his graduate students.

"He says, 'I got your e-mail from last night,'" Mr. Schiffman recalled in an interview with The Chronicle. "I didn't know what he was talking about."

It was a message -- a copy of which was provided to The Chronicle -- from the e-mail account "larry.schiffman@gmail.com" and addressed to the young man and three other of Mr. Schiffman's graduate students.

"Apparently, someone is intent on exposing a minor failing of mine that dates back almost 15 years ago," the e-mail read. "You are not to mention the name of the scholar in question to any of our students, and every effort must be made to prevent this article from coming to their attention. This is my career at stake."

Beneath this text was a link to an article published on NowPublic by a user named "Peter Kaufman" that accused Mr. Schiffman of plagiarizing Norman Golb. Charles Gadda had written in the comments section, hailing the article.

"Then I found out that the deans were getting these letters, and colleagues were getting them," says Mr. Schiffman. The charges drew attention from the dean of the faculty of arts and sciences and the vice provost for research, who instructed Mr. Schiffman to draft a formal refutation of the claims. "There was no serious belief that I was a plagiarist," Mr. Schiffman said, "but there was a serious requirement that this be disposed of in the formal manner."

Mr. Cargill, who was still tracking the Puppet Master's activity, saw the plagiarism charge on NowPublic and contacted Mr. Schiffman to share his suspicions about the single author behind these complaints.

"Once I realized I was being impersonated, I realized that this is a crime," said Mr. Schiffman.

Under New York State law, a person is guilty of identify theft "when he or she knowingly and with intent to defraud assumes the identity of another person by presenting himself or herself as that other person." It can be a felony.

After consulting with a Federal Bureau of Investigation agent whom he had advised on a manuscript theft years ago, Mr. Schiffman contacted the district attorney's office, which began its own investigation. And it led them to Raphael Golb.

Mr. Golb, who was released on his own recognizance after his arrest, stands accused of 30 counts of criminal impersonation, 18 counts of forgery, 21 counts of misdemeanor identity theft, one count of felony identity theft, one count of aggravated harassment, and one case of unauthorized use of a computer.

['He is a Blogger'](#)

Norman Golb told The Chronicle that he was "aghast and horrified at these charges. My son's only interest has been to follow my work, and -- since he is a blogger and I am not a blogger -- to engage in debate with other bloggers." The elder Mr. Golb added, "He used a pseudonym because that's what he preferred to do."

When a Chronicle reporter asked if that pseudonym was Charles Gadda, the older Mr. Golb replied, "Yeah, that's right."

At the heart of this entire episode is the debate over who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. And while media have come a long way since the unsigned documents were scrawled on shreds of sheepskin and calfskin, the problem of authorship has re-emerged in the Internet era. How should academics be engaging with Web audiences on their topics of expertise?

Scholars of the scrolls -- who, because of the intense religious interest in their research, see their theories batted about online more than many other academics do -- have mixed feelings about the effect of the Web on discourse about them.

While Mr. Schiffman believes that descending into the fray on Web forums is a fool's errand, Jodi Magness, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who was also criticized by one of the aliases, suggested that doing so may be a scholar's obligation in the modern communications era.

"We have a responsibility to disseminate our information to the wider public," she said. "The fact of the matter is that many people now get their information from the Internet, so we do have a responsibility to make what we find out known."

But while the Web allows scholars to engage the public directly, Ms. Magness said it is "not a suitable venue for the dissemination of unvetted scholarly interpretations."

Norman Golb, however, said that the opportunity to self-publish on the Web has helped him navigate around what he perceives to be the hegemony of stubborn elites who previously monopolized the channels of publication. "In all the cases where I've used the Web site," he said, "it's because of the more immediate necessity of publication, which wasn't available before Web sites existed. So the result of that is I can critique exhibits of the scrolls."

At the same time, the elder Mr. Golb said he thinks "there should be tighter rules in general for bloggers so that everyone would have to have his own identification -- bona fide identification."

As for the alleged crimes of Norman Golb's son, said Mr. Schiffman -- who remembers the elder Mr. Golb as a congenial colleague -- the whole stir might easily have been avoided if Raphael Golb had come to him in his own name.

Mr. Schiffman said that if Raphael Golb had knocked on his office door saying, "I think my father's right, and I think you're wrong, and is it OK if I come to some conference and bring the reasons why?," he would have had no objection. "The guy could have been a big friend of ours. That's what's so stupid about all this."

[An Internet War of Words](#)

These e-mail messages and online comments, though from different "signers," may be from the same individual attacking Dead Sea Scrolls scholars.

From "Charles Gadda"

Apparently this scholar has decided to rehash the findings of several prominent Israeli archaeologists and present it in the form of "evidence" found by himself....

From "Steve Frankel"

... Will steps Will be taken to ensure that he responds to Dr. Golb's criticisms, corrects his false statements and issues a public apology for having misled 450,000 people? Will Mr. Cargill be allowed to receive a Ph.D. for work of this quality, in the face of an unanswered refutation published for all to see by an influential historian teaching at the University of Chicago? ...

From "Emily Kaufman"

... He will succeed, of course, in blocking the information with his false and abusive claims. Does that make you feel good? Is that what UCLA is all about? Petty loyalties at the expense of basic principles of academic responsibility?

[Tracking an Army of Aliases](#)

During the past several years, in online forums and on Wikipedia, dozens of "individuals" have defended the theories of Norman Golb, a professor at the University of Chicago, about the Dead Sea Scrolls, and vehemently attacked those who disagreed with him. But at least 18 of those names appear to be aliases, and can be traced to just a few computers that may have been used by Mr. Golb's son Raphael.

ALIAS
Steve Blau(*)

(*) The alias
has been
used at more
than one
Internet
connection.

ALIASES

Critical Reader
Ethical concern
Harold Milton
Phillip Kirby

David Saunderfeld
Jacob Stein
Myriamist

Exratheologian
Rachel Greenberg
Steve Frankel
Don Matthews
Joshua Reznick
Steve Blau

ALIASES

Charles Gadda
Jessica Friedman
Paul Kessler

Don Matthews
Leonard Davies
Martin Elderling

INTERNET
CONNECTION

Computer
at NYU

INTERNET
CONNECTION

Six computers
in Bobst Library
at NYU

INTERNET
CONNECTION

Provided by
Mindspring.com
and most likely located
in New York City
area

Raphael Golb?
Lives one block
NYU

PHOTO (COLOR): Arguments over the authorship of the Dead Sea Scrolls led to online attacks on researchers.

PHOTO (COLOR): The debates over the Dead Sea Scrolls allegedly prompted Raphael H. Golb, shown here leaving a court building in Manhattan after his arraignment, to create dozens of Internet aliases. Those aliases defended the ideas of his father, Norman Golb, a professor at the U. of Chicago, and attacked the work of other scholars.

PHOTO (COLOR): Robert R. Cargill, an instructional technology coordinator at the U. of California at Los Angeles, alleges he has attacked the online campaign against him and others back to Raphael H. Golb.

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By Steve Kolowich

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