

First-century Christians in the Twenty-first Century: Does Evidence Matter?

Dianne M. Bazell and Laurence H. Kant

Since the turn of the new millennium, we have seen an immense resurgence of interest in the world of the Early Christians. Even as many biblical scholars have pared Gospel pericopes into fewer and fewer passages they are willing to attribute to Jesus, and some have even abandoned altogether the search for the historical Jesus as a naive and futile enterprise, the public appetite and demand for evidence of “the way it was” in Jesus’ time appears to be increasing.

No two works could be more unlike one another in theological motivation and intent than Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*, and Dan Brown’s mystery thriller, *The Da Vinci Code*.¹ Yet popular audiences have turned them both into resounding commercial successes and generated spin-off industries for their interpretation and further appreciation. Indeed, both Protestant and Catholic congregations have used showings (or critiques) of *The Passion* as a vehicle for religious education, while *The Da Vinci Code* has become a staple of book clubs and inspired guided tours across Italy and France tracing the adventures of its protagonists.

Both works present themselves as accurate, evidence-based renditions of Christian history, and it is this popular demand for evidence, as well as its use and abuse in these two blockbusters, that we find most intriguing. No “faith in things unseen” for the modern orthodox—or for earnest heretics, either! Both Gibson and Brown appeal to source documents and reference ancient languages in their efforts to confirm or refute, respectively, specific institutional accounts of Christian history. And while many critics have praised the aesthetic experience each work offers, they also find the ways in which each work uses evidence as disingenuously selective, distorting at best and, at worst, blatantly manipulating to arrive at false conclusions.

The Passion of the Christ

Many found the cinematography of the film and its set visually compelling. The acting (especially Monica Bellucci’s performance in the role of Mary, Jesus’ mother) received critical acclaim. The use of Aramaic with English sub-titles in a popular film about Jesus is groundbreaking. The portrayal of brutality, for which the film received

¹ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

some criticism, forces us to reckon with the savage environment characteristic of many parts of the ancient world—and the modern one, as well. And the entire visual texture of the film, right down to the depiction of Jesus' wounds, reminds one of Late-Medieval and Early-Renaissance paintings and sculptures, cracked with age and begging restoration.

This leads us to the problem of *The Passion's* claims to "historicity." In interviews given in a range of popular print and broadcast media, Gibson characterized the Gospels as eyewitness accounts, "reliable sources. These are guys who were around." He dismissed over two centuries of historical-critical analysis of the New Testament by minimizing differences among Gospel accounts. "The Gospels don't contradict one another. They mesh....Because if they didn't, you wouldn't have so many people hooked into this."²

Gibson's claims notwithstanding, even eyewitness accounts cannot be naively "meshed." (At the scene of the auto accident, was the van white or blue? Did it leave the parking lot at 8:00 p.m. or at 10:30 p.m.?) One cannot simply toss all accounts into the hopper, average them out, assume that information offered by one fits into others that fail to mention some specific detail, and then arrive at a harmony without oneself doing some selection.³ To take these canonical sources seriously, one must do what New Testament scholars do, and have been doing now for generations: One must note significant differences among the four canonical Gospel accounts and ponder why this one says "this" but the others say "that."

Gibson selectively appropriated these renderings, depicting the healing of the soldier's ear (Lk 22:51), the dream of Pilate's wife (Mt 27:19), the blood libel (Mt 27:25), and Pilate's question regarding truth (Jn 18:38). Gibson adopted the synoptic Gospels' chronological sequence of the Passover *seder* preceding the crucifixion in preference to John's different ordering of the events.

Moreover, whereas New Testament scholars seek external amplification from contemporary or near-contemporary sources (for example, regarding the character of Pontius Pilate, discussed below), Gibson included many additional details drawing either on artistic license or on the spiritual visions of a nineteenth-century mystic, Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich, whose *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* inspired Gibson during a difficult life passage and whose work is now enjoying a revival due to the film it helped shape.⁴ Scenes of Jesus' childhood relationship with his mother, his building a

² Peter J. Boyer, "The Jesus War: Mel Gibson's Obsession," *The New Yorker*, 9/15/03: 64-65.

³ The first to attempt a Gospel harmony was the second-century Assyrian Christian, Tatian, in his *Diatesseron*.

⁴ Ann Catherine Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, Klemens Maria Brentano, transcrib. & ed. (El Sobrante, California: North Bay Books, 2003). Originally published in 1833 as *Das bittere Leiden unsers Herrn Jesu Christi*. See Tim Challies, "The Passion of the Christ according

comically out-of-proportion table for her at home, stamping on the snake in the garden, the devil appearing in human form, Peter's addressing Mary as "mother," identification of the adulterous woman with Mary Magdalene—none of these details can be found in the Gospels. Neither in the Gospels are found Jesus' being dropped on a rope from a bridge after his arrest and coming face-to-face with Judas, demonic children appearing in physical form to harass Judas, Caiaphas's attending the scourging and following Jesus to the cross, Pilate's wife bringing linens to Mary and Mary Magdalene, and the latter wiping Jesus' blood from the floor after the scourging, the dislocation of Jesus' shoulder to fit him to the cross, a black crow flying among the crosses, a heavenly teardrop, the soldier showered with blood when Jesus' side is pierced—all these and other additions come from Emmerich's visions and Gibson's other non-biblical sources.

Gibson further reshaped and limited the Gospel accounts by rendering a film that is a narrative of the Passion alone. The Gospels devote comparatively little space to the death process. In doing so, Gibson drew more on the medieval genres of the classic *Passion Play* and the Stations of the Cross than on the Gospels, and, in fact, the scenes of Jesus' multiple fallings on the way to the cross, his encounter with his mother on the road to Golgotha, and the character of Veronica who wiped his face with her veil, all come from the Stations and Emmerich's visions.

Other historical errors include the use of Latin in the film. Residents of ancient Palestine (Jews and non-Jews alike) spoke Greek as a second language, and inscriptions suggest that Greek rivaled Aramaic as the language of the region at that time. Thus Pontius Pilate and Jesus would probably have conversed in Greek (certainly not in Latin, as they do in the film). Neither did Pilate likely address the crowd in Aramaic, as the film would have it, but in Greek. Jews would probably have used Hebrew, especially in their traditional prayers and references to scripture.

The film devotes its attention to Jesus' torture, and here, too, its rendering draws from medieval veneration of the instruments of the Passion rather than ancient practice. In the Gospels, the Romans used reeds to whip Jesus,⁵ not the metal instruments depicted in the film.⁶ In the Graeco-Roman world, victims of crucifixion were not clothed, but naked, and Romans focused less on the preliminary torture and more on their victim's public humiliation, as the Gospel accounts suggest, for crucifixion was a Roman punishment for sedition and a message to anyone who might contemplate it. Victims carried a horizontal crossbeam only, not an entire cross, and nails (only occasionally used) were not driven

to Emmerich": (<http://challies.com/archives/000197.php>) for a useful compilation of references in the film to Emmerich's writing. Gibson also used the writings of Mary of Agreda.

⁵ Mk 15:15.

⁶ Andrea Berlin and Jodi Magness, "Two Archaeologists Comment on the Passion of the Christ": (http://www.archaeological.org/pdfs/papers/Comments_on_The_Passion.pdf) discuss the methods of torture then in use. Thanks to Ross Scaife of the Department of Classics of the University of Kentucky for alerting us to this fine article.

into the palms of hands but into the wrists (and sometimes the ankles) to keep the victim from falling.⁷

Gibson's *The Passion* achieved notoriety partly because of its depiction of Jews and Judaism and the traditions it evokes. In general, the film treats the Temple high priest, Caiaphas, more harshly than he appears in any of the Gospels.⁸ At Jesus' trial, in the film, Caiaphas supports the accusations against Jesus by appeal to Jesus' Sabbath violation, but the Gospels do not note this; the question of Sabbath observance did not occupy the priests, but rather the Pharisees, who, along with the Sadducees and other competing Jewish groups, are absent from the film, although they figure importantly in the Gospels. Rather, the film has Caiaphas and the priests stand as proxies for "the Jews" collectively, and the androgynous devil is depicted as circulating among them, as if Jews were somehow collectively inspired by the Prince of Darkness. Then Caiaphas is present at Jesus' scourging and thereafter follows him to the cross—none of this to be read in any of the Gospels.

At the same time, the film portrays Pontius Pilate more sympathetically than he appears in the Gospels, and certainly more sympathetically than he does in ancient sources. The film's Pilate is a weak and vacillating fellow who'd like to do the right thing but just can't bring himself up to it. In Mark and Matthew,⁹ Pilate is very much in control of the situation, perhaps manipulating it to his advantage. In John, however, Jesus tells Pilate that he is not so much to blame as those who are demanding his execution (Jn 19:11), and he is fulfilling a divine plan. Further, the *Passion's* portrayal of Pilate's wife as giving Mary and Mary Magdalene linens during Jesus' scourging (scenes taken from Emmerich's visions) serves to render Pilate more sympathetic. Near-contemporary sources outside the Gospels, i.e. Josephus and Philo, however, depict Pilate as a cruel, brutal, and very confident and decisive Roman procurator.¹⁰

Most troubling of all is how Jews and Judaism are portrayed in the film. Women are dressed in apparel that resembles nuns' habits. The priests wear robes and hoods unlike the simple tunics they probably donned. Physically, Jesus and his disciples do not

⁷ On crucifixion, see the following: Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, John Bowden, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); and A. Berlin and J. Magness, *op cit.*: 3. For analysis of the burial of a crucifixion victim in Jerusalem, see the following: Vassilios Tzaferis, "Jewish Tombs at and near Giv'at ha-Mitvar," *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970): 18-32; J. Zias and E. Sekeles, "The Crucified Man from Giv'at ha-Matar: A Reappraisal," *Israel Exploration Journal* 35 (1985): 22-27; William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255 (1986): 1455-63; and Joe Zias, "Crucifixion in Antiquity: The Evidence" (<http://www.centuryone.org/crucifixion2.html>).

⁸ Helen K. Bond, *Caiaphas: Friend of Rome and Judge of Jesus?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004). See also Margaret M. Mitchell, "The Passion of the Christ" in *Sightings* (March 11) (University of Chicago: Martin Marty Center, 2004).

⁹ Mk 15:1-15; Mt 27:1-2, 11-14.

¹⁰ Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, 100 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

resemble olive-skinned, sunburned, shorthaired Middle Easterners. In their height, weight, and dental condition, the Jews in the film seem more like well-fed American Bible Study participants than Galilean peasants and tradesmen.¹¹ Historically, Simon of Cyrene (from Libya) might well have been black-skinned. In the film, he wears a head covering (*kippah/yarmulke*), which Jews did not wear until the High Middle Ages.

The above is not mere historicist nit-picking, for Jesus, as a Jew, does not wear a head covering in the film, and the effect of this difference in portrayal is a clear theological statement: Jesus, together with his disciples (the first “Christian converts”), view Judaism as a religion of the past, and the “real” Jews are Caiaphas, the priests, and the angry mob that clamors for Jesus’ crucifixion. Granted, Simon of Cyrene, a Jew, is depicted as being kind to Jesus; yet it is intriguing that, as he aids Jesus in carrying the cross down the Via Dolorosa, our eyes rest on a man resembling a northern European Jew assisting a man resembling a medieval Christian—the first Jewish-Christian interfaith dialogue, as it were.

Gone is the Jesus who lived until his death as a Torah-observant Jew (“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets....[N]ot one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished,” according to the Gospel of Matthew 5:17-18), who kept kosher and usually observed the Sabbath, who worshipped in the Temple sanctuary and went up to the feasts in Jerusalem, and who accepted many of the principles and ideas of Pharisaic Judaism (while disputing some of their implementation).¹² Even worse, there are no Jewish prayers (even at the Passover meal), no references to the Hebrew Bible (except a predictive use of Isaiah 53 at the film’s opening), no indication of Temple rituals and sacrifices, no mention of Jewish dietary practices, no identifiable clothing such as fringes or tassels (*tzitzit*) that observant Jewish males (probably including Jesus) typically wore, no substantive references to Jewish culture and ethics, and no reference to Jewish nationalism and opposition to Roman rule

¹¹ For a possible visual representation of Jesus, see the attempt of the CNN program, “The Mystery of Jesus,” narrated by Liam Neeson; see www.nytimes.com/2004/02/21/arts/21JESU.html?th for the related photos of David Gibson, “What Did Jesus Really Look Like?” *The New York Times* (February 2, 2004).

¹² The bibliography on Jesus’ place within Judaism is massive. See Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1968; originally published in 1910 as *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*); Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Review of the Gospels* (London: William Collins, 1973); *ibid.*, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM, 1983); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995); Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1998); Peter J. Tomson, *‘If this be from Heaven’: Jesus and the New Testament Authors in their Relation to Judaism* (The Biblical Seminar, 76; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Geza Vermes, *Jesus in his Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); David Instone-Brewer, *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament* (vol. 1): *Prayer and Agriculture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004).

(to illuminate the tensions between Jews and Romans and provide some sense of why Jesus offended the Temple priests and the Roman rulers alike).

Absent are Jesus' defense of the poor, the homeless, and the marginalized. Missing is his critique of the plutocrats—the reigning priests and politicians, and his calling the Temple hierarchy to task for its religious and economic dominance. His agreement with the Pharisees on religious questions is not mentioned, with their emphasis on piety outside the Temple and the cultivation of a holy life distinct from the Temple (though Jesus thought the Pharisees went too far in some ways and not far enough in others). In the film, we do not see Jesus in the company of tax collectors, prostitutes, and adulterers, or the poor Jewish Galilean peasants who were among his first followers. When Jesus preached in parables to his followers to feed the hungry and thirsty, clothe the naked, nurse the sick, visit the imprisoned, and welcome the stranger, he said, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are my brothers and sisters, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). These are core Jewish values, presumably as threatening to institutionalized authority then as now. But a Jesus this Jewish does not appear in the film.

Gone also is Jesus, the rabble-rousing, trouble-making Jew, not unlike his spiritual descendants who organized exploited workers into unions and helped disenfranchised Black Americans gain and exercise their right to vote. The prophetic call to change oppressive social, economic, and religious structures is a concern that Jesus and many of his Jewish contemporaries shared (including Jesus' disciples, one of whom was a Zealot). It is a call that many Jews and Christians still share, but one that is not shared by the film. Biblical religion is not a private matter, but a community responsibility in which we share in one another's failures and successes, mistakes and good deeds.

Gibson's film, however, articulates none of this. We are left with no real explanation of why Jesus was so disliked. Perhaps a more realistic and Jewish portrayal of Jesus would have offended today's contemporary institutionalized authority. *The Passion* distorts and selectively uses the Gospels (focusing on the last portion of the Gospels and excluding the rest of their scope), ignores other contemporary evidence, and adds medieval and later material, thereby obliterating the Jewishness of Jesus and Jewish foundations of Christianity.

The Da Vinci Code

Turning to *The Da Vinci Code*, we encounter a very different figure of Jesus—one who married, fathered a child, and left a biological bloodline of descendants unacknowledged by the church that took his name. Brown's book is an easy-to-read page-turner of a suspense novel, with no chapter exceeding ten pages in length. Its immense appeal to readers from young adult and beyond, and of widely varied levels of educational attainment, has led to its translation into more than forty languages. A film version of the book, directed by Ron Howard and starring Tom Hanks, is scheduled for release in 2006.

Like Gibson, Brown presents his story as fact based on historical sources, which he announces explicitly on the page preceding his prologue: “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate”—actually a stronger claim than Gibson makes, for Brown more directly (and quite positively) assesses his own use of source material. The sources for the life of Jesus on which Brown draws include several non-canonical gospels.

The plot, in brief, is as follows: The curator of the Louvre, Jacques Saunière, has been murdered. His naked body, positioned in a contorted manner and surrounded by strange symbols and codes, some written in his own blood and others in invisible ink, lies in the Grand Gallery adjacent to the room where Leonardo Da Vinci’s painting, *The Last Supper*, hangs. A Harvard symbologist, Robert Langdon, is summoned to investigate, along with Sophie Neveu, a police cryptographer and granddaughter of Saunière. They discover that Saunière, from whom Neveu had been estranged for years, was the head of a centuries-old, secret society, the Priory of Sion, which has kept the secret of the whereabouts of the *true* Holy Grail. Following clues they find while traveling in France and England, and with the aid of a wealthy independent scholar, Sir Leigh Teabing, they learn that the Holy Grail is not the chalice from Jesus’ Last Supper, but the very person of Mary Magdalene, who not only held a primary role among the apostles but also married Jesus, bore him a daughter, and transmitted his royal bloodline which continues to this day. The Holy Grail, guarded by the Priory of Sion, consists of the Magdalene’s remains which rest in a secret tomb along with documents attesting to her life and the “complete genealogy of the early descendants of Christ” (256). Also seeking the whereabouts of this burial site and all clues pointing to it are members of Opus Dei, a conservative Catholic order that seeks to suppress the truth about Jesus’ earthly nature, his sexuality, the apostolic role that Mary played, and, indeed, the role of women in the Early Church. The Priory of Sion’s leadership has included Sir Isaac Newton and Leonardo Da Vinci, and it is in Leonardo’s depiction of the beloved figure to Jesus’ right in *The Last Supper* that the truth about Jesus and Mary is proclaimed, for the clean-shaven figure is not “the beloved disciple,” but Mary Magdalene.¹³

Brown’s argument is that the earliest documents of Christian history, which included sources that never made it into the canon, such as those discovered at Nag Hammadi, portray Jesus in more human terms, and women more powerfully, than subsequent church authorities could tolerate. Only in the fourth century, Brown posits (through Sir Leigh) did the Emperor Constantine, overseeing the Council of Nicaea, fix the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John as canonical.

Bart Ehrman and others have admirably reviewed some of Brown’s key misuses of source material and missteps of inference. Included among these are the following: a

¹³ Brown (2003): 244, Sir Leigh proclaims, “*The Last Supper* practically shouts that Jesus and Magdalene were a pair.”

misdating of the discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls and mischaracterizing them as “among the earliest Christian records” when they are in fact Jewish texts that make no reference to Jesus; misattribution to the Nag Hammadi documents of an account of the Grail story and an emphasis on Jesus’ human nature; a glossing over the nearly three-centuries-long process by which multiple Christian communities came to determine a shared collection of authoritative texts; mischaracterization of the date at which multiple Christian communities came to accept the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John as authoritative—the date was much earlier than Brown suggested; misrepresentation of these four Gospels as sources that emphasize Jesus’ divine nature and minimize his humanness; a false claim that Constantine “commissioned and financed a new Bible” which was voted on at the Council of Nicaea, and which omitted Gospels that emphasize Jesus’ human traits and embellished Gospels that make him godlike; exaggeration of the number (eighty) of Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, and mischaracterization of these sources as “recordings” of Jesus’ life by thousands of his followers; and attribution of the hypothetical “Q” source as Jesus’ own writing.¹⁴

Brown’s aim was to address two distinct concerns: a) the place of the “feminine” in conceptualizations of divinity, and b) women’s standing in the Early Church. His argument is that a) non-canonical sources emphasize the human aspects of Jesus’ nature and the feminine aspects of divinity (while, conversely, canonical sources unduly divinize Jesus and remove him from contact with women), and b) ecclesiastical decisions redacted the importance of women in the Early Church, removing it from official canonical records, while non-canonical texts show that women were more positively viewed and that they took a more central leadership role.

Ehrman and others more than adequately show that both canonical and non-canonical sources either belie these claims or reveal strong ambiguity. In addition, neither do views of the feminine divine reflect a social reality in which women are necessarily prominent, nor can one infer positive theological renderings of the feminine from prominent roles of women in a community.¹⁵ Jesus’ human nature is patent in the canonical Gospels, especially in the Synoptics, where he fraternizes, preaches, eats, drinks, and emotes; the docetist view that Jesus only appeared to be human and suffer was

¹⁴ Brown (2003): 231-34, 256; Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): xiv-xv *et passim*.

¹⁵ The worship of the Syrian goddess, Atargatis (*Dea Syria*), involved male priests (eunuchs, *gallī*) exclusively, not women. On this cult, see also Monika Hörig, “Dea Syria—Atargatis,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1983), ser. 2, vol. 17, fasc. 4: 1536-81; and Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, Antonia Nevill, trans. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996): 133-43. The prominent place of Priscilla and Maximilla in the Christian Montanist movement did not prevent Tertullian, himself a Montanist, from disparaging women—“each an Eve,” “the devil’s gateway,” and destroyers of “God’s image,” and hence the cause of Jesus’ need to die. See Ehrman (2004): 173-74.

condemned as heretical.¹⁶ Jesus as depicted in the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* (114) speaks of the need for every woman to “make herself male” in order to enter the kingdom of heaven,¹⁷ while it was Paul for whom gender differences were eliminated “in Christ.”¹⁸ In all four canonical Gospels, Mary Magdalene and her female companions are the first to learn of Jesus’ resurrection,¹⁹ whereas the Magdalene’s private revelations and post-resurrection visions of Jesus are disputed by Andrew and Peter in the *Gospel of Mary* precisely because the Magdalene was a woman.²⁰

While no sources either canonical or non-canonical identify Jesus as being married, the central passages on which Brown rests his case for the marriage of Jesus and Mary are found in the *Gospel of Philip*. The first is where Mary Magdalene is described as Jesus’ companion and partner, to distinguish her from his mother Mary and his sister; the other depicts a rivalry between Mary and the other disciples and (gaps in the manuscript notwithstanding) implies that Jesus kissed Mary and loved her more than he did the other disciples.²¹ Setting aside the singularity of this source, the ambiguity of the status of “companion” and “partner,” and possible implications (other than sexual or marital) implied by kissing, a more basic, and feminist, question remains: Why is it necessary for Mary to be Jesus’ wife and bear him children for her to be either important or even his favored, or favorite, disciple? Why would her possible roles as financial supporter, organizer, strategist, theological interpreter, private recipient of revelations, and family confidante to his mother and sister alone not render her operationally critical to the nascent movement of Jesus-followers?

Gibson and Brown Together

Despite the stark contrasts between Mel Gibson’s and Dan Brown’s theologies and interpretations of Christian history, they share some remarkably similar historiographic leanings. Both Gibson and Brown claim that the Gospels (though they differ about which ones are more credible) are “eye-witness accounts” and “recordings” of Jesus’ followers. Ironically, however, both *The Passion* and *The Da Vinci Code* focus to an extraordinary degree on Jesus’ physicality as a foundation for their respective claims about Jesus:

¹⁶ PHEME PERKINS, “Docetism,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, E. Ferguson, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998): 341-42.

¹⁷ “Simon Peter said to them, ‘Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘See, I am going to attract her to make her male so that she too might become a living spirit that resembles you males. For every female (element) that makes itself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.’” BENTLEY LAYTON, trans., *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1987): 399.

¹⁸ Gal 3:28, and Jesus appears to diminish gender roles in the kingdom of heaven when he says that humans will not need to marry because they will be like angels (Mk 12:25, Mt 22:30, Lk 20:35-36).

¹⁹ Mt 28:1-10; Lk 24:1-10; Mk 16:9; Jn 20:11-18.

²⁰ *The Gospel of Mary*, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 3rd ed., James M. Robinson, gen. ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988): 526-27. See also Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2003).

²¹ Layton (1988): 339; *Gospel of Mary* 59.6-10; 63.32-64.5.

Gibson's film lingers on Jesus' bodily abuse, omits most of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching, and only briefly touches on the resurrection; Brown conceives of Jesus' continuing presence in the world through biological progeny, identifies the Grail with the body (now relics) of Mary Magdalene, and frames her elevated status in Christian history in terms of child-bearing wife, yet little of this is to be found in the "eye-witness accounts" and "recordings" so prized by both the film-maker and the novelist.

Further, both Gibson and Brown envision (in different terms) a cosmic battle of good and evil. For Gibson, the battle is between God and Satan (graphically depicted as flitting among the Jews—and perhaps also envisioned among those who sought to suppress Gibson's film). For Brown, the battle is among human protagonists who try to cover up the true nature of the divine, including the struggle between the two groups, the Priory of Sion and Opus Dei. Each raconteur displays a world view not unlike that reflected in a medieval mystery play, where events on earth reflect drama at the cosmic level.

Both Brown and Gibson are conspiracy theorists—Brown charging the Constantinian Church with conspiring to suppress Jesus' true nature and the Magdalene's leading role in the spread of Christianity, Gibson finding conspiracy in the opposition to his film.

The Ossuary of James

To set the use (and misuse) of evidence in a different light, let us turn from documentary to material sources. Over the last ten to fifteen years, a large number of finds, apparently verifying biblical texts, have come to light. Seemingly out of nowhere, a veritable treasure trove of these objects has spawned a scholarly publishing industry that has further drawn the lay public into its intellectual vortex. These intriguing artifacts include an ivory pomegranate inscribed in paleo-Hebrew with a reference to the Temple of Yahweh; the Mattanyahu decanter, believed to be an offering from the Temple of Solomon; the Shishak bowl that bears an inscription of the king of Egypt who invaded Israel in the tenth century B.C.E.; the Jehoash tablet, which lists a series of repairs made by King Jehoash (Joash) in the ninth century B.C.E.; the King Manasseh seal; the Moussaieff ostraca, inscribed potsherds from the seventh century B.C.E. that mention King Josiah, and one of which was thought to constitute one of the only physical remnants of Solomon's Temple; the Baruch ben Neriyah bulla, apparently a seal belonging to the scribe of the prophet himself, Jeremiah; and the ossuary of James, a bone box that bears an inscription in Aramaic referring to a deceased man named James, son of Joseph and brother of Jesus.²²

²² See the various articles in the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) *Forum* (March 11, 2005) for full discussion of the evidence, especially the following, which also have extensive bibliography: Christopher A. Rollston and Andrew G. Vaughn, "The Antiquities Market, Sensationalized Textual Data, and Modern Forgeries: Introduction to the Problem and Synopsis of the 2004 Israeli Indictment" (<http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID-373>); and Yuval Goren, "The Jerusalem Syndrome in Biblical Archaeology" (<http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID-374>).

And John the Baptist's Cave has already been on television.²³ These finds made headlines in news outlets and especially in the journal that popularizes biblical archaeological scholarship, *Biblical Archaeology Review (BAR)*, which announced several of the finds.²⁴ The ossuary of James proved of such great interest that almost immediately the editor of *BAR* and a New Testament scholar collaborated to produce a best-selling book.²⁵

From the outset, however, some scholars doubted the authenticity of these objects: The scripts are not quite right; multiple chisels seem to have carved inscriptions; the contents of the inscriptions seemed too good to be true; the inscriptions involved appear to be out of sync with other, comparable inscriptions; and the objects have all been purchased without regard to provenance, that is, in alleged ignorance as to how they were acquired, where and by whom, and under what circumstances in some murky antiquities market. None of the finds had a connection to an archaeological context in which scholars might verify dates and context with greater precision and certainty. The collector of the ossuary of James, Oded Golan, claimed to have found the inscription some twenty-five years before his announcement of its existence: Such a gap between discovery and disclosure invites suspicion. After travel from Tel Aviv to Toronto for display at the Royal Ontario Museum in 2002, the ossuary developed a significant crack, casting further doubt on the professionalism of the entire enterprise. Then, under the aegis of the Israel Antiquities Authority, a team of epigraphers and geo-archaeologists studied the ossuary and declared it a forgery with a decipherably modern patina. Finally, in December 2004, Israeli authorities indicted several individuals and accused them of fabricating these and other objects.

We still await the full investigation and trial of these persons, but the final determination of the authenticity or inauthenticity should not preclude our asking some basic questions. In the case of the ossuary of James, why did a number of scholars assume veracity in the face of so many doubts? Jodi Magness has convincingly demonstrated that James was much more likely buried in a trench grave (where the poor and marginalized nearly always found themselves) than in an ossuary in a wealthy tomb.²⁶ No extant texts indicate that James was ever taken up after his burial and interred by Jewish-Christian followers of Jesus.²⁷ Nor do we have evidence for reburials of those previously interred in the trench graves of the less well-to-do. The reference to "brother of Jesus" is odd and very uncommon in funerary inscriptions in the Mediterranean world, where parental lineage (especially that of the father) almost always holds sway. Ancient inscriptions generally follow set patterns and rarely deviate from them. While these observations seem rather

²³ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5724143>

²⁴ For discussion of the role of the *BAR*, see Edward M. Cook, "The Forgery Indictments and *BAR*: Learning from Hindsight" (<http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=371>).

²⁵ Hershel Shanks and Ben Witherington III, *The Brother of Jesus: The Dramatic Story & Meaning of the First Archaeological Link to Jesus & His Family* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003).

²⁶ "Ossuaries and the Burials of Jesus and James," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 (2005): 121-54.

²⁷ If the community had reburied James, it would be surprising for Josephus, Eusebius, or other commentators not to have mentioned it.

straightforward now, the emotions during the period immediately following the discovery may have caused many to forget such obvious and mundane matters.

Why should we care about these objects in the first place? What difference do they make? What do they prove? Perhaps some doubt the existence of the first Temple or the existence of certain biblical kings and other figures; yet, virtually no one questions the historicity of the central figure of the Gospels, Jesus (Joshua or Yeshu, son of Joseph). Many debate his historical mission, his purpose, his theology, his religious beliefs, and his political attitudes, but almost all scholars now accept the fact of his existence. Why then do we need the ossuary of James, and why do we need it to refer to the New Testament James and Jesus?²⁸ On the one hand, proof of their historical existence, and perhaps their importance to some people in the ancient world, would add one more brick to the wall of our understanding of antiquity; on the other hand, persons of faith—like doubting Thomas—very often crave tangible evidence for what they want to believe.

Does Evidence Matter?

If “evidence matters,” why does it matter? Why do people of faith need such evidence to believe in things of ultimate concern? Well before the time of the Enlightenment, both Jews and Christians sought to show that divine commandments were rational—for example, Maimonides’s explanation of the healthfulness of *kashrut* (Jewish diet and purity regulations), and Anselm’s ontological “proof” of God’s existence by reason alone, apart from scriptural authority. But we can say that the Enlightenment accentuated the need for the “reasonableness” of things believed and heightened the demands for evidence as a condition of faith. It is no small irony that Enlightenment thinking, which set the stage for the modern biblical scholarship that Gibson so disregards, also fomented the worldwide public appetite for a visually compelling account, purportedly based on eye-witness accounts, focused on the physical agony of Jesus during his last few hours.

For many moderns, indeed, nothing is truly real until it is made tangible, and yet the more we are delighted by computer-generated realities on monitors and silver screens, the more slippery our hold on external reality becomes. Actual objects allow us to touch, to see, and to feel—to use our senses. While this desire has existed for centuries, the triumph of radical empiricism, or to quote a colleague, “empiricism run amok,”²⁹ has made the imagination and the abstract world of the mind less relevant or helpful or meaningful. Physicists may accept the existence of tiny particles (electrons, quarks, etc.) that no one has ever seen, and mathematicians may live in a symbolic world of numbers (with some numbers that are literally “imaginary”), but the ordinary public—movie goers and novel

²⁸ Even proving the antiquity of the ossuary and its full inscription would not establish the precise identity of the named individuals, James and Jesus. Many people in ancient Israel were named James (Jacob) and Jesus (Joshua or Yeshu).

²⁹ Jerry L. Sumney in an oral communication.

readers—adheres to more tangible standards before we are willing to believe. Despite the talk of “faith”—“the evidence of things not seen”—many of us depend almost exclusively on the support of corporeality, without which we are lost and become unhinged.

Evidence and its proper use have both practical and ethical dimensions not to be minimized. No one would doubt the superiority of DNA over eye-witness accounts (of, say, whole communities who watched the application of red-hot tongs to the flesh of heretics or the dunking of alleged witches and confessed Anabaptists in the town pond) as an evidentiary basis for determining criminal responsibility, and reports regularly surface nowadays of prisoners released from death row because some group of law students compelled the authorities finally to get the evidence right. Tampering with evidence can ruin individual lives and oppress peoples by erasing their histories. Minorities and subaltern populations struggle to counter the dominant histories of those with more powerful pens and word-processors.

Conquerors know this, and so do movie makers. The conscious destruction of evidence in an effort to annihilate a people is nowhere more vividly expressed than by the character of Amon Goeth, the Nazi commandant of Plaszow, in Steven Spielberg’s film, *Schindler’s List*. Surveying the city of Krakow before a raid to decimate its Jewish ghetto, he says, “Today is history.... For six centuries there has been a Jewish Krakow. By this evening those six centuries will be a rumor. They never happened.” A respect for evidence is a pre-condition for our respect for truth.

At the same time, could our modern demand for hard evidence and certainty be infringing upon, and even eroding, our commitment to truth? Can evidence matter too much? Can it matter so much that, in its absence, modern faith requires its fabrication to persist? Who are the most despairing? Are they the biblical critics who have found the “quest for the historical Jesus” to be so elusive as to border on Zeno’s paradox, either because their methodological standards are too demanding or the available sources are too unyielding? Or are the modern faithful in greater dismay because their devotion to their version of the divine requires suppression of sources that point to unwanted conclusions, the misreading of sources to arrive at foreordained results, and even the forging of evidence to fill in the gaps?³⁰ The ironic parallel of Gibson and the Enlightenment persists: The Enlightenment commitment to the idea of truth has paved a path to the Postmodern disregard and contempt for it.

³⁰ Forgeries exist everywhere in the world; for example, recently in Japan where Shinichi Fujimora, an amateur archaeologist nicknamed “God’s hand,” apparently faked numerous prehistoric finds. A few years ago, a find, “Hitler’s Diaries,” duped some of Germany’s best historians, at least for a while. The “Piltown Man,” a famous archaeological fake of a prehistoric human skeleton, has become synonymous with the game of hoaxes that forgers seem to enjoy perpetrating on a gullible public, both professionals and ordinary people alike.

Restoring the First-century Church in the Twenty-first Century

Evidence matters, but to require it as a condition of faith—to the point where one would forge it—is nothing less than idolatry. Making evident fact alone the criterion of faith constricts the hermeneutical space, as it were, between what we can actually prove at the moment and a larger scope of living. Understanding the limits of our understanding requires intellectual humility, a willingness to “watch and wait,” in the words of the *Gospel of Mark*, until we may gain further understanding. A willingness to act provisionally “as if” a divine reality were so, even before we can prove it to be so, requires not *blind* faith, but epistemological reserve—humility before an enormous task—that is the foundation of our capacity for further rigorous inquiry. Those with this kind of faith need neither to disavow, misattribute, abuse, or forge their sources nor to rely on a theological foundation that is liable to crack with the next archaeological find.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (Jn 20:29)

Don Haymes is one of these.