

INTRODUCTION

Thinking Responsibly About The Gospels In A Most Exciting Time

The following paragraph appeared in John Elson's article, "The New Testament's Unsolved Mysteries" (TIME Magazine, December 18, 1995 Volume 146, No. 25):

Archaeology may have cast doubt on the historicity of such Old Testament characters as Moses and Abraham, but what of the central figure of the New? Was Jesus of Nazareth a real person who trod the dusty roads of Palestine in the 1st century? Or were his life, death and resurrection, as recorded in the four Gospels, events that belong entirely to the realm of faith? Science has neither proved nor disproved the existence of the itinerant preacher and wonder worker who Christians believe was the Son of God. After all, writes biblical scholar R.T. France, "no 1st century inscription mentions him and no object or building has survived which has a specific link to him...."

These lines of John Elson's represent irresponsible journalism and impoverished thinking on multiple counts. Eminent archaeologists would consider the idea that "Archaeology may have cast doubt on the historicity of such Old Testament characters as Moses and Abraham" patently false and misleading, for they speak of "recoverable history" as extending back in time precisely to the era of Abraham. The question in the second sentence would never be asked by a serious historian nor by any intelligent citizen of present-day Israel who sees the evidence of the historical Jesus every time he steps out his front door. Elson's third question assumes a false dichotomy between history and faith that is contrary to the biblical definition of *faith*. Furthermore, to bring up the issue of scientific "proof" in connection with a historical question is to entirely misunderstand historical enquiry, and finally, the claim of R. T. France is simply outrageous.

What's the point? I contend that whether one ultimately chooses to believe or disbelieve the Gospels, we are all better served by scholarship that thinks and speaks responsibly when it discusses these texts. At the very least, our understanding of history hinges on what we can learn from the gospels; at the very most, eternity balances on these same texts. It is the purpose of this course to help students become accurately informed about the corroboration or lack of it that is available for the Gospels, and to promote responsible thinking about these crucial documents.

There has never been a more important nor a more interesting time to explore these matters. The canonical Gospels are under such heavy attack today that one has to ask, "What is it about Jesus that they hate so much?" Yes, Christians are under attack for the age-old charges of hypocrisy, self-righteousness, intolerance, bigotry and

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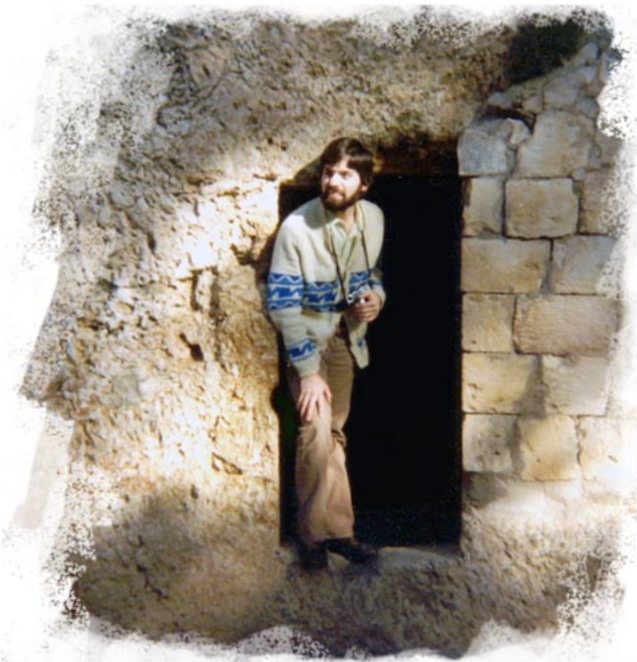
plain old party-pooping, but in our culture these attacks are still somewhat random and disorganized. The sustained and methodical attacks are against Jesus Himself and the documents that assert His Lordship, namely the Gospels and the New Testament literature that supports and interprets them.

Never before this generation in America could a book like Bart D. Ehrman's have seen publication with a title like: ***Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed The Bible And Why***. But now, this book that takes the picayune textual discrepancies of Greek New Testament manuscripts — discrepancies that scholars have recognized since the invention of the printing press — and sensationalized them into a scandal, is capturing the imagination of a biblically illiterate public. Nevertheless, I have to agree with Timothy Paul Jones who says in his answer to Bart Ehrman, ***Misquoting Truth***, "Thank you, Bart Ehrman — thank you for showing people that these issues really matter." Yes, the textual controversies, like the historical and archaeological ones surrounding our New Testament Gospels matter. These controversies and criticisms matter because they shine the interrogator's spotlight on the foundational documents of our faith, and if we will pay attention and *think responsibly*, they will help us discover a treasure trove of fresh insight into the life and ministry of our Lord *and* will help us detect and eject unfounded assumptions both about the New Testament texts and our New Testament faith.

Truth can withstand the spotlight of scrutiny! I hope you will enjoy this learning adventure of exploring the archaeological and historical backgrounds of the Gospels with me. I'm confident that our study will renew our confidence in the apostolic testimony that has been redeeming lives and withstanding the fires of criticism for 2,000 years. All glory to the resurrected Lamb who was slain for the sins of the world!

Roderick A. Graciano

Tacoma, WA, August 2008



At the Garden Tomb, 1978.

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Conventions Used In This Syllabus

References

I have adopted a computer-friendly format for chapter and verse references that utilizes zeroes as initial place holders. When a given biblical (or other ancient) text has more than nine chapters or verses but less than 100, I will incorporate zeroes to give all references double digits. John 3.3, for example, becomes John 03.03. If a text has more than 100 verses, as does the Gospel of Thomas, I use multiple zeroes to give all references triple digits (verse 1 becomes 001, etc.). In the commentary section (Section E) of this syllabus, double-zero chapter references indicate introductory material that does not refer to a specific chapter of the gospel.

I have adopted a similar computer-friendly system for recording dates for periodicals. I use zeroes for initial place holders to give all numbers the same number of digits, and I record dates in the order of year-month-day. The September 1988 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review thus becomes BAR 8809 (this periodical has no *day* of publication).

Sources are identified by author's last name unless that name is unavailable. When one author has more than one title that I refer to, a number in parentheses will follow the author's name identifying the specific title as it appears in the alphabetical Sources list (Section H). William Albright's second book in the list, for example, appears as Albright (2). Occasionally there are different authors with the same last name. They will be distinguished by this same convention. George Smith's book is referred to as Smith (1), and George Adam Smith's is Smith (2).

Abbreviations Used

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| Ant | <i>Antiquities of the Jews</i> by Josephus |
| ARC | Archaeology Magazine |
| BAR | Biblical Archaeology Review Magazine |
| BRV | Bible Review Magazine |
| c. | circa, i.e. "about," referring to approximate dates |
| CRD | Christian Reader Magazine |
| CT | Christianity Today Magazine |
| DIS | Discover Magazine |
| ET | English Translation (or Translator) |
| Gk or Grk | Greek |
| Heb | Hebrew |
| LXX | Septuagint (Gk. translation of Old Testament) |
| ms | Manuscript (pl. mss) |
| NWK | Newsweek Magazine |
| TIM | Time Magazine |
| Wars | <i>Wars of the Jews</i> by Josephus |

NOTES