

Was Jesus Married?

by: Ronald L. Dart

As a member of the public you should know this. You should never, never take biblical scholarship too seriously. You can only afford to do that if you are a scholar yourself and you carry, not only the training, but the responsibility to examine claims made by your fellow scholars. In fact, on the face of it, I don't think the biblical scholars take themselves too seriously, so, why should you?

I'm a long-time subscriber of *Biblical Archeology Review*. Fine magazine. I find a lot of things to like about the publication, not least the editor, Herschel Shanks. He had an editorial in the September 2006 issue that brought several useful ideas into focus. He said this: "We are sometimes accused of sensationalizing finds and their relationship to the Bible in order to sell magazines. At other times we are accused of unjustly debunking claims related to the Bible in order to be controversial." Oh well, what else is new? People sensationalize stuff to sell magazines; that's what he said they said. "Neither, though," he said "is true. Our coverage is determined by the discoveries themselves and the interpretations that scholars give them. In a sense, we are a prisoner of the archeologist's spade and the scholar's interpretation." This might be a mild overstatement, but nevertheless, there's a lot of truth there.

Whatever comes out that's news, a magazine like *BAR* has got to publish it. And, of course, to publish it they have to have the scholars' interpretations of whatever it is they're putting out there. He said, "Some of our readers have complained because our pages are frequently filled with these controversies. Perhaps more than might be expected from staid scholars." Old stuck-in-the-mud scholars, and yet they will fight like cats and dogs. I don't know. Sometimes I wonder, when I read the articles that go back and forth between them, if they actually did have a conference where they were all in the same room, if some of them would have to check guns and knives at the door. But then I remember they don't take themselves anywhere nearly as seriously as you and I do, because they know that what they are advancing are theories, constructs, ideas, possibilities, the way things might have been. They know that, and other scholars who read them know that as well. So, as a member of the public, you should never ever take biblical scholarship too seriously. You can only take it seriously if you're a scholar yourself and carry the training. Then you have the responsibility to argue with your fellow scholars.

The 21st century has seen an explosion upon the public consciousness of what I would call bad scholarship. Or, in the case of *The Da Vinci Code*, no scholarship at all. This may come as a surprise, but precious little is known of the world of the Bible beyond the book itself. I don't know why this gets lost from time to time, but of the artifacts of history that one might use as evidence of what the world was like back then, the Bible happens to be one of those artifacts. It happens to be a piece of evidence about what that world was actually like. But, for some reason, if it's just in the Bible, it's not good enough; it has to be found on a rock somewhere, in a stone, in order to somehow verify what's in the Bible.

For a while, a range of scholars argued that King David never existed. They argued that King David was just a Hebrew myth. Why did they say that? Because they could find no evidence, outside of the Bible, that King David ever existed. You know, when you understand what a tiny percentage of history—or what people might call pre-history (that's history before it started getting written down)—anybody knows anything about, you begin to wonder. Just because we never found an inscription with his name, why should we conclude he never existed when we have ancient, ancient documents that not only tell us he existed, they tell us all about his foibles, his mistakes, his errors. These books present him to us as a very real historical person.

I bought a course once, from the Learning Company, I think, on the Old Testament. As I listened to the first lecture, the lecturer said that King David never existed; he was just a mythological figure. Well, I turned the thing off, and sold the course on eBay, because I thought that was not the way it should be presented. Even if it's what you think, you don't come out and tell a class of kids in college that King David never existed, when all of us have evidence in our homes that he did. It's called The Bible. As I said, the reason some thought he never existed was because no evidence of him was found in ancient inscriptions—that is, if the Bible doesn't count as evidence. Then, in more recent years, an inscription was found mentioning the House of David. So, out of nowhere, an inscription is discovered—and what is really fascinating about this inscription, it was found by accident.

An archeological surveyor and her patron were wandering around this ruin, finishing up their work at the end of the day, when she laid her transit over on one side and was getting ready to pick it up again. She glanced up and, only because it was late in the day and the angle of the sun was what it was, she noticed an inscription on a stone in what might have been a wall there. The inscription very plainly mentioned the House of David, which was the name the Bible attached to David's administration over Israel.

It might surprise you to know how many significant archeological finds have come about entirely by accident. You may have heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls. No one found the

Dead Sea Scrolls because they were looking for them. No one was following a systematic approach to looking for things like this—no one even knew that they existed. What happened was, as I recall the story, a shepherd boy out looking for a lost goat or sheep, threw a rock into a cave. Much to his surprise, he heard pottery break. He went inside and found pots full of scrolls. Out of that comes the whole story of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the community of Qumran and the things connected with that, and all of the strange ideas regarding the nature of this community. For a long time people thought it was a community of Essenes, monks in a scriptorium who copied manuscripts—and that may or may not have been true. The latest scholarly theory regarding Qumran is that it was a pottery factory. Now think about that. Here is the evidence on the ground, and we can arrange this evidence, think it through, and develop a theory. And, in one way of looking at it, we come up with the idea that it was a monastery with a scriptorium, and the other way, it comes out as a pottery factory.

Well, the problem with archeology is that we are left to put together a picture of the past from very little hard evidence. In point of fact, the Bible itself is hard evidence, but scholars are obligated to approach the Bible with a blank slate. They can't start out believing the Bible is true, and then set out to prove that it's true. I think that's fair. I have no problem with biblical scholars who write as if there was no evidence of the supernatural at all. That is their duty as scholars. But they must not take themselves too seriously. And if they must not, then you and I certainly must not.

My duty, as a member of the public, is to keep all this in mind and not give too much credence to some theory of this or that scholar. Why should I lend more credibility to the scholars than they are willing to lend to the Bible? In the Bible I have a good solid written word; they don't think it's credible. Well, take a look at their books, and I will say I don't think they're credible. If I take, for example, a book review in the September 2006 issue of the *Biblical Archeology Review*, Michael Baigent, co-author of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, has come out with a new book titled *The Jesus Papers*. The subtitle—*Exposing the Greatest Cover-up in History*. That should get everybody. That's headed for best seller country. It's reviewed in the magazine by Herschel Shanks, who is the editor-in-chief of *BAR*. He says this: [and he says this, by the way, somewhat tongue in cheek] "Finally, after two thousand years we have Jesus' own admission that he is not the physical son of God. He actually recognizes that fact in writing. The revelation comes in a new book by dragon slayer, Michael Baigent, who in 1982 co-authored the best selling *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which explains how Jesus survived the crucifixion, married Mary Magdalene, and ultimately moved to France where they had a family." That's the way Herschel Shanks characterizes Baigent's theory. At least *The Da Vinci Code* was just a novel. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* was supposed to be history. Now, how did Baigent come to discover these purported writings of Jesus himself? That is an interesting story.

The Jesus Papers, as they are characterized by Michael Baigent, were actually found through his contacts in the antiquities trade. The antiquities trade is a rather disreputable arrangement to buy and sell antiquities, which, often as not, may be forgeries. They are not attested as to provenance, and provenance is the history of where they were found. In other words—they weren't dug out of the ground, we weren't there when they came out of the ground, somebody says he found them, somebody says they are ancient. But, unless and until someone has looked at them who knows what he's looking at, how can you tell?

To give you an idea of how important provenance is, suppose you were on the jury of a murder case. No fingerprints were found at the murder scene, but the DA presents a glass purchased through an evidence dealer that has the fingerprints of the accused, and that the evidence salesman says he found at the scene of the murder. Moreover, the evidence salesman himself is not in court—only the dealer who bought it from the salesman is there to attest to the provenance. Anyone who watches *CSI* or *Law and Order*, or even *Perry Mason*, knows how far the DA will get with that line of evidence. You can't bring that kind of stuff into court, because there is no chain of evidence and no control of the evidence from when it was originally found to when it was presented to the jury.

And this is the problem with the antiquities trade. There is money in it and, consequently, a strong motive to produce phoney antiquities. It calls to mind the practice of maintaining relics in a church. Some monasteries were said to have in their collection a piece of the cross upon which Jesus was crucified. That's an electrifying thought if you could actually hold it in your hand, or even look at it in a glass case. But, as someone observed, if you could gather all the pieces together that are alleged to be pieces of the genuine cross, you'd have enough wood to build a small house.

But what about these Jesus papers? What are they? Where did they come from? Well, Baigent says he actually saw the papyrus letters in which Jesus admits that he is not the physical son of God. These are the letters he tells us about in his new book, *The Jesus Papers*, the letters from Jesus to the Sanhedrin. "They existed. I have held them in my hands." Now Shanks is properly impressed. He can only say, "Wow!" at this point, with his tongue placed firmly in his cheek. But then Herschel Shanks goes on to put these things in perspective. He says this: "Baigent allegedly saw the letters in a large walk-in safe that was temperature and humidity controlled. The owner of the papyrus letters was a wealthy Israeli who had dug them up in the basement of his house in the old city of Jerusalem. How convenient."

Even I would have been skeptical of this. I know that old papyrus documents have to be handled with extreme care or they will fall apart in your hands. I wondered, if they have to be carefully kept in an air conditioned, humidity controlled vault, how on earth did they

survive buried for 2000 years in the dirt to be dug up in some guy's basement? But, I would not have known what Herschel Shanks pointed out. Excavations in Jerusalem have been going on now for something like 150 years and not the smallest scrap of papyrus has ever been found. Why? Because it was never there? Oh no, that's not the reason. The reason is that the wet climate would cause papyrus to quickly disintegrate to nothing. The same is true with textiles. None have ever been found. That, all by itself, attests to the impossibility of these papyrus Jesus letters.

Even in Egypt's very dry climate, only scraps of papyrus have ever been found, very brittle, very fragile. Time and environment are very hard on ancient relics. Yet Baigent was handed papyrus letters that measured 9x18 inches, and they allegedly survived the handling. According to Baigent, according to the owner, the letters can be dated to about 34 A.D. "How convenient," says Herschel Shanks, especially as he notes "archeological finds cannot usually be dated so precisely." So why were these? Well, because that places them right in the provenance of when Jesus walked the earth.

But there is more. He says, "The letters are written in Aramaic and neither Baigent nor the owner of the letters can read Aramaic." Now, you see the problem this poses. I mean, here I've got these letters. They are written in Aramaic. I can't read Aramaic, the guy I showed them to can't read Aramaic. So how do we know what they are? Well, the owner of the letters did say he showed them to famous Israeli archeologists who said, according to the owner, that the letters were important. But those two archeologists are conveniently dead. Baigent does not say whether these two authorities translated the letters or any part of them. How the owner can attest to the content of the letters when he can't read them is not clear.

And, you know, it would be so easy to settle it. Just go get some scholars who can read Aramaic, drag them over to his friend's house, and have them translate the letters. Apparently that was not done. Then Herschel Shanks quotes a citation from Baigent's book so you can get a feeling for what's going on. He says this: "The two Aramaic letters were written to the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin. This figure, the Messiah of the children of Israel, was defending himself against a charge made by the Sanhedrin. He had obviously been accused of calling himself 'son of God' and had been challenged to defend himself against this charge. In the first letter the Messiah explained that what he meant was not that he was God, but that he had the spirit of God which was in him. Not that he was physically the son of God, but rather that he was spiritually an adopted son of God, and he added that one who felt similarly filled with the spirit was also a son of God."

Again, I just don't have any clue how Baigent knew what was in those letters, because he couldn't translate them and neither could the owner. Where did this information come from? Now Shanks said, "These are the letters that Baigent characterizes as the 'smoking

gun.' The gig is up; Christianity has been exposed." What has been exposed is something rather different.

What are we, as members of the jury, supposed to think about all this? That Michael Baigent is a gullible dupe? Or that he's a complete fraud and is making the whole thing up? That we can conclude that his wealthy Israeli friend, if he exists at all, is a fraud is all too obvious. Some people delight in thrilling people with pranks like this. They are masters of the tale told with a straight face. And I'm reasonably sure that they laugh heads off after the fact. But, of course, Michael Baigent smells a bestseller, vis-a-vis the days of *The Da Vinci Code*. Baigent, by the way, sued Dan Brown for plagiarism. The judge threw the case out of court and made Baigent pay one million dollars in Brown's legal fees. His newest book, *The Jesus Papers*, will easily pay for that. If he's lucky, he'll make the cover of one of the news magazines like Jim Tabor did recently, with his own highly creative (to put it kindly) alternative Jesus story.

And this is why I said from the start, as a member of the public you should never, never take biblical scholarship too seriously. You can only do that if you are equipped by training, by disposition, by education, and by the responsibility to examine such claims. This is something that Herschel Shanks does with *Biblical Archeology Review* most admirably. He'll publish something by a scholar and then, in the next issue, publish a rebuttal. Often, interleaved among the controversy, you'll find remarkable little pieces of insight into the ancient world of the Bible.

In the same issue of *BAR*, Ben Witherington addressed an issue which he concluded was bound to arise, and it has to do with the marriage of Jesus.

In the wake of the huge success of *The Da Vinci Code*, Ben Witherington said, "The sleuths have all gotten out their magnifying glasses and have been looking for hard historical or biblical evidence that Jesus was married. One interesting suggestion, is that the wedding in Cana, described in the second chapter of John, is Jesus' own wedding. After all, the mothers, the brothers, the disciples are all there, and in the end Jesus does the catering himself, by direct miraculous intervention no less, turning Jewish purification water into gallons of Gallo. What should we think about this suggestion?" Witherington also notes, "We must recognize that it's entirely an argument from silence to say that Jesus got married unless John 2 says so."

I think he's wrong, because for there to be an argument from silence, some effort has to be made to show that the silence is significant. Otherwise, an argument from silence goes nowhere. This is not an argument from silence; it's an argument from the imagination. But since we have it readily at hand, why not look at what the account of the wedding says.

You'll find it in the second chapter of John, probably right there on your coffee table. *"On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding."* Now, since when do you invite a groom to the wedding? You know, he's not invited, he's the person getting married.

Anyway, they ran out of wine: *"Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. [Gallo as he suggests] He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."*

Ben Witherington concludes with a, pardon me, withering observation, citing the end of the story. It says in verse 11: *"This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum, he, his mother, his brothers, and his disciples and they didn't stay there for very long."* Witherington, at this point says, "Whatever else you say about an early Jewish wedding, one thing is sure. The groom definitely doesn't go home with his mom, his siblings, or his students." Which, I think, buries the whole issue of Jesus' marriage, because this is it. This is all there is. And when you're thoroughly familiar with the writings of the New Testament, when you've digested all the words, you are left with the conclusion that there is no way Jesus could have gotten married without his disciples commenting on it. Somebody would have said something. It would have been an event of enormous significance. It didn't happen. You may safely forget about it.

Now, here comes another attempt at the bestseller list. This one by William Dever, titled *Did God Really Have a Wife?* In all fairness, once you get past the provocative title, Dever is not talking about establishment religion. Rather he is talking about what he calls "folk religion in all its variety and vitality." Now if you're a reader of the Bible, you should know by now that what Dever calls "folk religion" was roundly condemned again and again by the prophets. They didn't claim that God had a wife. They simply recognized that many of the gods around them claimed to have wives. All the nations had their male gods: Dagon, Moloch, Baal. And all those gods had wives. Actually, consorts. I don't think marriage played much into the sex lives of the gods. What was odd about this is that the consort

always appeared to be the same goddess, Asheroth. She was an ancient fertility goddess, which is a scholarly way of saying she was a sex goddess.

In point of fact, the title of Dever's book is designed to sell; not enlighten. And it's obviously of a piece with a compulsion to put a woman in the picture with God. The religions all around Israel attempted it, and it seems like people are still working on it today. Woman is there; man and woman, in the image of God.

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