

C¹ onechurch

bigIdea

We live in a culture that urges us to accept all religions as valid approaches to God. We are surrounded by intellectuals who urge us to abandon the notion of moral or theological absolutes. Our universities are filled with skeptics and cynics who delight in dismantling the Sunday school faith of our children.

And yet in spite of all that, millions of people world wide cling to the notion that 2,000 years ago a man came from God, spoke on behalf of God and then died for the sins of the world. How can that be? Are we simply deceiving ourselves? Do we need propping up that bad? Have we checked our brains at the door? Why would so many continue to believe in such narrow, politically incorrect, divisive ideas?



BIG IDEA: The Bible Can Be Trusted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why don't more people read the Bible?
2. Since the Bible plays a crucial role in our becoming closer to God, the question "Is the Bible reliable?" is one we need to be willing to ask and prepared to answer. Tell of a time in which someone told you that the Bible wasn't true. How did that make you feel?
3. Chris said that, "Whenever we're talking about history or things that happened in the past, that *You can't prove or disprove things that have happened in the past.*" Do you agree or disagree?
4. Chris said that, "It is not a matter of proving; it is a matter of looking at evidence." Look at the chart below, and look at the evidence.

Name of Literary Work	# of Copies	Time Gap
Homer's Iliad	643 Copies	500 years
Plato's Republic	7 Copies	1,300 years (900AD)
Aristotle	5 Copies	1,400 years
Julius Caesar	10 Copies	1,000 years (900AD)
Thucydides (How do we know that a person named Alexander the Great ever existed!!)	8 Copies	1,300 years
We have 5,492 Greek manuscripts, 10,000 Latin & 9,300 other versions	24,792 copies	90 years (125-135AD)

Frederic Kenyon said that, "Scholars are satisfied that they possess substantially the true text of the principal Greek and Roman writers whose works have come down to us, of Sophocles, of Thucydides, of Cicero, of Virgil; yet our knowledge of their writings depends on a mere handful of manuscripts, whereas the manuscripts of the New Testament are counted by hundreds, and even thousands."

5. Read the article at the end of the Big Idea Study Questions called, *Top Ten New Testament Archaeological Finds of the Past 150 Years*. Knowing that **every archaeological discovery has proven that the Bible is true**, what does that do to your faith?
6. Lastly, look at the prophecies of the Bible. There were over 300 prophecies fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

OT PROPHECY	NT FULLFILLMENT	
Born of a Virgin	Isa 7:14	Matt 1:25
Born in Bethlehem	Micah 5:2	Matt 2:1-2
Anointed by the Spirit	Isa 11:2	Matt 3:16
Rides Triumphantly on Donkey	Zech 9:9	John 12:14-15
Betrayed By Friend	Ps 41:9	Matt 26:48-49
Silent Before Accusers	Isa 53:7	Matt 27:12
Beaten and Spat Upon	Isa 50:6	Matt 26:67
Cast Lots for Clothing	Ps 22:18	John 19:23-24

Crucified With Criminals	Isa 53:12	Mark 15:27
Given Vinegar to Drink	Ps 69:21	John 19:28-30
Forsaken By God	Ps 22:1	Matt 27:46
Pierced For Our Sins	Isa 53:5	John 19:34-35
His Bones Will Not Be Broken	Ps 34:20	John 19:33
The Day Turns Dark	Amos 8:9	Matt 27:45
He Will Rise Again	Ps 118:17-18	Mark 16:6-8

Mathematician and scientist, Peter Stoner wanted to know the likelihood of just 8 of these 300 prophecies about Jesus coming true. The answer? 1 in 10 to the 17th power; that's — 1 followed by seventeen 0's. It looks like this— 100,000,000,000,000,000! Compare that to the odds of someone being struck by lightning are 1 in 709,260. Or the odds of winning the Lottery are 1 in 5,245,786. In the book, Professor Stoner, illustrates:

Imagine taking one silver dollar and putting an X on it, and dropping that silver dollar somewhere— anywhere in the state of Texas. Maybe around Austin, Lubbock, Dallas, Amarillo, Houston—anywhere in the state of Texas. In the field, on the highway—anywhere. Then, dumping 2 feet of silver dollars all over the entire state of Texas. All over the entire state of Texas, there is one coin that you need to find in 2 feet of silver dollars covering the whole state. Blindfold a man and tell him to find that one silver dollar that has an 'X' on it. You can wander and walk anywhere you want—for days, weeks, months or years if you want to. When you think you might be at the spot with the 'X' on it, reach down into the 2 feet of coins and pull out the right one.

7. What does looking at the evidence of the historical documents, archaeology, and probability do to your belief in this book?
8. The evidence of the Bible is overwhelming, so why don't you think people want to turn to this book and believe the message?
9. If this book is true, then what should we do with it? How should your day-to-day life change because of your new-found faith in God's Word? What can you practically do to ensure this change?

WHAT WILL YOU DO?

Will you take the New Thru 30 Challenge? Go to www.youversion.com and start the new reading plan New Thru 30. This reading plan will take you through the entire New Testament in 30 days, and will stretch your heart and mind. On the heading above, click on *Bible > Reading Plans* and scroll down to the *New Thru 30 Plan*. Click *Start This Plan*, and let the 'eating of this book' begin!!

NEW THRU 30 READING PLAN

Day	Date	Bible
Sunday	9/11	Grace Day
Monday	9/12	Mark 1:1-11:33
Tuesday	9/13	Mark 12:1-16:20, James, Galatians
Wednesday	9/14	1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians 1:1-11:34
Thursday	9/15	1 Corinthians 12:1-16:24, 2 Corinthians
Friday	9/16	Romans
Saturday	9/17	Grace Day
Sunday	9/18	Grace Day
Monday	9/19	Luke 1:1-9:62
Tuesday	9/20	Luke 10:1-20:47

Top Ten New Testament Archaeological Finds of the Past 150 Years

"How do boats, inscriptions, and other artifacts better help us understand the Christ of the Ages?"

Ben Witherington III

Mention archaeology to most people and they think of dramatic finds of artifacts that confirm or confute some cherished belief about antiquity or ancient history. The truth about archaeological explorations, however, is somewhat less dramatic and much more mundane most of the time. Rarely does one find something that relates to a specific person or a specific event. Most of the time one must be content with helping fill out the picture of the social world or context of some part of the ancient world—evidence of how people lived, what burial customs they followed, what sort of houses they built, what sort of artisanship they showed. This is why some have said that archaeology is the study of durable rubbish.

But occasionally something comes to light that is certainly more significant than rubbish, and even relates directly to a figure in the Bible. Such an event occurred recently when the James ossuary came to light. To appreciate the significance and rarity of that find, it will be useful to first review the top finds of the last 150 years insofar as they have relevance to the study of the New Testament, and more particularly of Jesus and his context.

Digging into New Testament archaeology

Archaeology is in fact both an art and a science, and as applied to the study of the New Testament it is a recent phenomenon. Furthermore, the truth is that New Testament archaeology has significantly lagged behind Ancient Near East and Old Testament archaeology, not least because those early Christians left few remains or artifacts behind. They were not kings or emperors or pharaohs, and most of them did not live in mansions or villas for the well-to-do. They have left us some texts, but with rare exception there is little else by way of a direct trace of the first-century figures spoken of in the New Testament.

Most scholars would say that the age of modern archaeology does not go back beyond sometime in the latter portion of the 19th century, and only really accelerated into prominence as a discipline in the 20th century.

It is also an ever changing science in the wake of the ever increasing technological breakthroughs and advances in modern scientific methods of scrutinizing and testing ancient items. And I would say that a certain scientific breakthrough forms a good starting point for discussing New Testament archaeology.

During the 20th century, and accelerating after World War 2, there have been a plethora of important finds for understanding the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. For example, we now have 5,000 manuscripts or portions of manuscripts of the New Testament. Many, indeed most, of these have been discovered in the last hundred or so years. The earliest piece of the New Testament we have is **a small portion of John 18** copied on a piece of papyrus and dating to about A.D. 125. Of course we know that the New Testament books were written in the first century A.D. But we don't have any of the original manuscripts. What we do have is copies of copies of

copies. It can be said, however, that today, as a result of careful critical textual study and lots of hard work, we are closer to the original form of the Greek text of the New Testament than at any time since at least the third or fourth century A.D.

If we are talking about artifacts other than texts the following is important. The now famous **House of Peter** in Capernaum, which was found in 1906, but was only properly excavated between 1968 and 1998, has provided us certainly with very early evidence of a house church in which Christians met after the time of Christ, and it is not impossible it was a house where one of the original Twelve may have lived, at least for a time.

Of course mention must be made of the **Qumran scrolls** that began to come to light in 1946-47, but despite some occasional exaggerated claims, these scrolls do not contain any portions of the New Testament, or any Christian documents. They provide evidence of how a particular sect of early Jews lived near the Dead Sea, and what they kept in their library (mostly books from the Hebrew Scriptures we call the Old Testament). Indirectly, these scrolls shed light on the time of Jesus, on some early Jewish beliefs, and on their messianic hopes, but we find no direct evidence of Jesus or his family or his movement here (despite the eccentric and widely rejected claims of one scholar that the Teacher of Righteousness might in fact have been James, the brother of Jesus).

Of more direct relevance is the finding of the **Pontus Pilate inscription**



at Caesarea Maritima in 1962. This provided inscriptional confirmation of the existence of Pilate and the role he played in Judea for over a decade (he is called a prefect in the inscription). Here we can actually talk about confirmation of one or more biblical claims about a historical figure. Of a more grisly nature was the find in 1968 of the ossified foot complete with spike of a crucified Jewish man, called Yehohanan. This provided some confirmation about the process of crucifixion, though interestingly the Gospels do not directly mention the nailing of Jesus to the cross in the crucifixion accounts (only afterward is this suggested in John 20:25).

The various excavations at **Herodian sites** (Masada, the Herodium, the Temple Mount) have certainly confirmed the image of Herod as a builder with dreams of grandeur, and have helped us reconstruct what the Temple and Temple Mount must have looked like in Jesus' day. It gives us a feel for a Temple-centered religion, and helps us to imagine what Jesus saw and what he must have found objectionable. It only confirms the megalomaniac Herod is depicted to be in the New Testament and in Josephus' writings.

From the 1970s to the present there have been excavations at **Scythopolis** (a.k.a. Beth Shean), the Greco-Roman city that was part of the Decapolis, the only city in the Decapolis east of the Jordan. It reminds us that Jesus did not live in a milieu far removed from the Greco-Roman world. The same can be said even more so about the significant excavations done at Sepphoris, Herod Antipas' own building project just outside of Nazareth. It is possible, though we have no direct evidence of this, that Jesus or members of his family, since they were woodworkers/carpenters, may have worked in this city and been exposed to a very Hellenized way of life. We cannot be sure, however, of this conjecture.

In **1986**, an ancient boat was pulled from the mud along the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was a unique and exciting find that gives us an idea of the sort of boat used during the time of Jesus. Now dubbed "**Jesus boat**", it dates back to the first century A.D. It does provide us with an image of the sort of boat, made of hand-hewn beams, that Peter and Andrew, or the Zebedee brothers, may have practiced their trade in.



Bones of contention

We now come to the finding of ossuaries, two of which call for special mention. In the early 1990s the finding of the **burial box of the high priest Caiaphas** caused a great deal of stir. This highly ornate limestone burial box reminded one and all that Jews between 20 B.C. and A.D. 70 practiced reburial. It is probably not an accident that the rise of this practice paralleled the rise of the Pharisaic movement. Pharisees, as we know, had as one of their chief beliefs a conviction about the bodily resurrection of the dead, in particular of the righteous. Reburial was practiced because of this strong form of a belief in the afterlife.

Ezekiel's prophecy had said that God could put flesh back on "those dry bones." Thus, it was deemed more than wise, it was deemed a religious duty, to

keep the bones together, in sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, there is the **James ossuary** which Hershel Shanks and I have dealt with in some detail in *The Brother of Jesus* (Harper, 2003). It is my belief that this ossuary, having passed several batteries of scientific tests, is indeed the burial box of James the brother of Jesus. As such it is the oldest physical evidence of any kind that Jesus and his family existed. Remember that the manuscripts we have of the New Testament date no earlier than the second century A.D. Here finally we have an artifact that has a direct connection to various central figures of the New Testament dating to within 30 or so years of Jesus' death (in A.D. 30) Here we have what I like to call the Word made visible.

What really is the significance of this find? First, it reminds us that James and Jesus and the holy family were all Jews, indeed thoroughly Jewish.

Second, it underscores that they spoke Aramaic, the language Jews spoke to each other in the Holy Land. This was not the language of the Jews of the Greco-Roman world west of Jerusalem. The inscription is not in



Hebrew, the sacred language of the Old Testament; not in Greek, the lingua franca of the Greco-Roman world; not in Latin, the language of the Romans. No, this is Jews talking to Jews.

Third, the ossuary itself reminds us that early Christians like James believed in resurrection. James is in the box because of a belief in the resurrection. But there is more to be said. The inscription on the box is unusual, almost unique. Most ossuaries do not have inscriptions on them, and of the 250 or so that do have inscriptions only one other mentions a brother. What we can say with some assurance is that when someone adds something to the ossuary inscription beyond the usual X son/daughter of Y, it is honorific in character. In the one other ossuary that mentions a brother, it appears he is mentioned because he is more famous than the deceased, and the deceased will be identifiable through mention of the name of the brother. The same seems to apply to the James ossuary.

But let us think about this for a minute. James lived in an honor and shame culture, and crucifixion was the most shameful way to die in that culture.

If crucifixion had been the final event in Jesus' earthly life, then it is hard to believe that 30 years later someone would be bragging on an ossuary about being related to him. The last part of the inscription reads, almost emphatically, "his brother [is] Jesus!" or "He's the brother of Jesus!" What had happened that redeemed the honor of the crucified Jesus? It was his resurrection. So, I like to say, James is in the box, and Jesus is on the box, because of the resurrection. And perhaps, if we are able to test the bone fragments of the box soon, and compare the DNA evidence to the evidence produced in the '80s about the gene string and DNA derived from the blood samples on the Shroud, we may just have a double confirmation of the artifacts I have discussed at the beginning and end of this essay. Stay tuned.

For now I will say this. We live in a Jesus-haunted culture, yet it is also one that is largely biblically illiterate. Furthermore, we live in a culture of increasingly visual learners who nonetheless are largely skeptical about biblical faith. Their spiritual birth certificates seem to be from Missouri. They demand, "Show me". Well perhaps in the fullness of time and at the cusp of a new millennium God has seen fit to make the Word visible once more in the form of an ossuary.

You will remember the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey. The disciples and crowd were singing, "Hosanna, blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." A critic demanded that Jesus silence such acclamations. Jesus replied: "I tell you that if these are silent the very stones would cry out!" While most archaeological stones are mute, this one called the James ossuary is indeed crying out. And it is saying James, and it is saying Joseph, and it is saying Jesus. Here finally we can see what an impact archaeological work and study can have on the study of the New Testament, and indeed on the search for the historical Jesus and his family. The James box is not durable rubbish; it is an enduring legacy, the Word made visible.

As such it provides some confirmation and gives us one more reason for the hope that is within us.