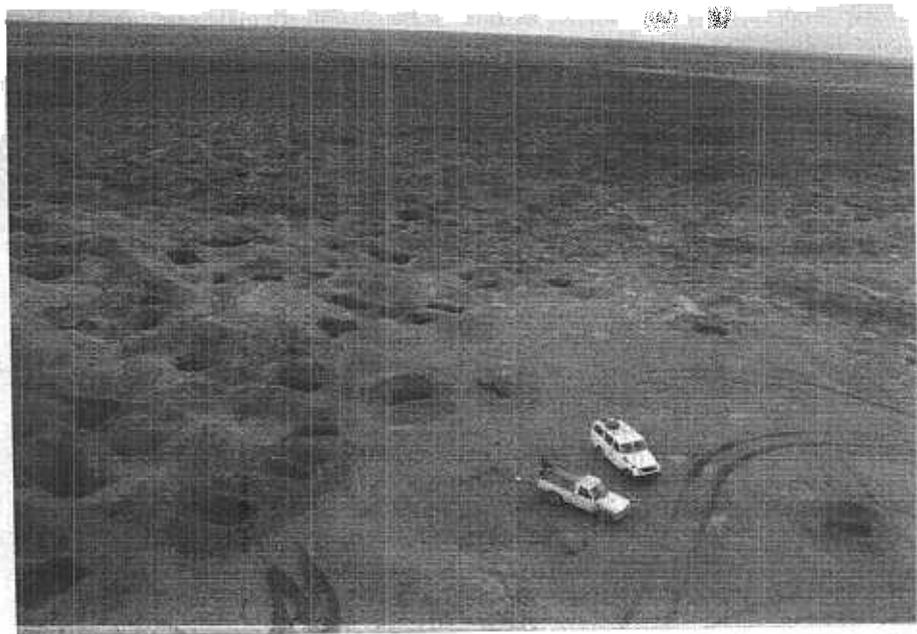


UNEARTHING THE BIBLE

Sacred relics lie scattered beneath the deserts of the Middle East. In Iraq, our religious history is being obliterated; in Israel, it's a question of faith.

BY MELINDA LIU AND CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

WHAT THERE WAS IN THE BEGINNING, IN the world of the Bible, is what there was in the land now called Iraq. There is nothing left of the Garden of Eden, no artifact at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers where myth has placed the Temptation and the Fall. But the great cities and empires from the Books of Genesis and Kings and Chronicles have left their traces: Ur, where Abraham was born; rapacious Assyria with its capital, Nineveh, and Babylon, where the ancient Israelites were





'Is the guard going to lay down his life for antiquities? Do you put a platoon at every site?'

RAVAGES OF WAR: An Iraqi guard watches over a site in Nasiriya; Russell examines a 5,000-year-old statue, stolen from the National Museum and discovered buried in a Baghdad backyard

carried into captivity and where, as the psalm tells us, they wept when they remembered Zion.

Beneath the sands and silt of Iraq, for millennium after millennium, truths have waited to be pieced together about these legendary places that loom so large in the faith and culture of Jews, Christians and Muslims. "This is where the first writing began, where the first ideas of law and religions were written down," says archeologist McGuire Gibson at the University of Chicago. Golden calves, winged bulls and rampant lions have emerged from the dust, helping explain the consequential journey from the opulent polytheism of Mesopotamia to the more ascetic monotheism of the Promised Land. It is a story that has emerged slowly, painstakingly, over the past century from

some 10,000 scientific excavations in Iraq and innumerable ones in Israel.

Across the Middle East, the quest for sacred artifacts and for the lessons they can teach us is taking on new urgency. Archeology is growing more sophisticated; the technology of dating relics is improving. Driven by curiosity and faith, ambition and sometimes avarice, diggers yearn to unearth the Bible, to try to solve its mysteries and reveal its secrets.

It is the most challenging of archeological obstacle courses. In Iraq, the fall of Saddam Hussein raised hopes that new money and new freedoms would help open up many sites to more scientific investigation and restoration. But the ravages of war are clouding that prospect. In Israel, a rising tide of funds for Bible-related projects is flowing into Jerusalem and its environs, but archeology is an overlooked casualty of the *intifada*: the violence has cut down the number of active digs.



Indeed the hunt for treasure and truth is growing ever wilder and more worrisome. In the lawless deserts of occupied Iraq, history—both of the Bible and of the larger ancient world that scriptures only hint at—is being pillaged on an epic scale for a black market where irreplaceable fragments of our past are sold to sophisticated collectors, or just to the highest bidder on eBay. "It's wiping out a whole field of knowledge, of social and cultural history," says Gibson, "just so somebody can have a beautiful object sitting on the mantelpiece."

In Israel, much care is taken to preserve the slightest trace that might reveal literal truths about the mystical teachings of scripture. The tragedy of Iraq is that contexts are disappearing as fast as the objects them-



Join Christopher Dickey for a Live...
Talk at Newsweek.com on MSNBC,
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PIECES OF THE PAST

Archeological artifacts of the Middle East can teach us about our history and can illuminate the mysteries of the Old and New Testaments. But thousands of objects documenting our past have been looted in postwar Iraq, and instability in the Holy Land has restricted research. Here's a look at some of the finds that have deepened our understanding of the Bible.



3 Calaphas Ossuary: Found in 1990 in Jerusalem. Judging by the inscription, this box probably held the bones of the Biblical priest who presided over Christ's crucifixion.



1 The Dead Sea Scrolls: Found in 1947, they're 1,000 years older than any other version of the Hebrew Scriptures.



2 Pontius Pilate Inscription: Found in 1961 in Caesarea, it helps confirm the existence of the controversial Roman governor.



5 Nag Hammadi Texts: Found in 1945 near the Nile. They contain the Gnostic Gospels.



4 The Qumran Ostracon: Found in 1996 at Qumran, this deed may include a reference to the community that wrote the Dead Sea scrolls.



3 Nineveh: Looters took sledgehammers to this city associated with Jonah.

National Museum: More than 8,000 artifacts are still missing.

Babylon: Some have speculated the Tower of Babel stood here.

Garden of Eden: Tradition places the legendary paradise in southern Iraq.

James Ossuary: According to the inscription, it held the bones of Jesus' brother, but the Israel Antiquities Authority ruled it a fraud. Some experts still support its authenticity.

NEW TOOLS

Biblical archeology is catching up with other sciences by embracing high-tech methods.

DNA ANALYSIS

determined that the leather in the Dead Sea scrolls came from the same animal herd.

CARBON DATING

can now determine the age of minute samples, such as residue in pots or pigments.

SATELLITES

reveal the outlines of towns and trade routes obscured by shifting desert sands.

CHEMICAL TESTS

were used to scrutinize the patina on the controversial James Ossuary.

SOURCES: THE FOUNDATION FOR BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY, THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY, MAP COURTESY OF DANIEL LEDERMAN, KEYHOLE.COM, TEXT BY JOSH LILICK, GRAPHIC BY KARL DUDE—NEWSWEEK.

elves. Archeologists are like crime-scene investigators trying to discover how whole societies lived and died. And to do that they need to know when, how—and especially where—each clue is found. “You take an object out of context, you are losing about 80 percent of the information it can give you,” says Gibson. Near Nasiriya, in southern Iraq, a 2,700-year-old Sumerian site known as Um Al Agareb, “Mother of Scorpions,” is crisscrossed by the tire tracks of looters’ trucks. Holes are everywhere. “It makes you cry,” says John Russell, an American archeologist who advised the Iraqi Culture Min-

istry until June. The thieves no longer wait for the cover, or even the cool, of the night. One day last week a portly 35-year-old who said his name was Hassan clawed the earth with a pickax and shovel in 120-degree heat. When asked why, his answer was simple. “We are poor people,” he said. According to Donny George, director of the Iraqi National Museum, laborers like Hassan sell the pieces they find for as little as \$10 to \$15. Those same artifacts may be sold for thousands, even tens of thousands of dollars in Europe, the United States or Japan.

The looting of the museum itself last year

created an international sensation as American troops were accused of standing by while more than 100,000 artifacts were stolen. Those numbers were inflated. But more than 8,000 pieces are still missing, of which almost 30 are considered of unique historical and artistic importance. Col. Matthew Bogdanos, a Marine reservist and Manhattan assistant district attorney who led the investigation of the museum theft last year, believes that most of this hoard is being held off the market by organized gangs waiting for prices to rise. In New York, Middle East scholar and author Joseph Braude pleaded guilty this

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month to smuggling three delicately etched ancient seals into the United States. He said he paid only \$200 for the three of them together. The cylinders were marked with the letters IM, for Iraqi Museum, as well as with serial numbers from the collection. Braude's lawyer, Benjamin Brafman, tells *NEWSWEEK* his client had no part in any looting.

Treasures stolen from the ground can't be traced easily—if at all. "If you are a bad guy [looting a dig], your chances of being caught go way, way down," says Bogdanos. Artifacts can make their way to high-end boutiques, along with papers from unscrupulous dealers "proving" they were found a century ago.

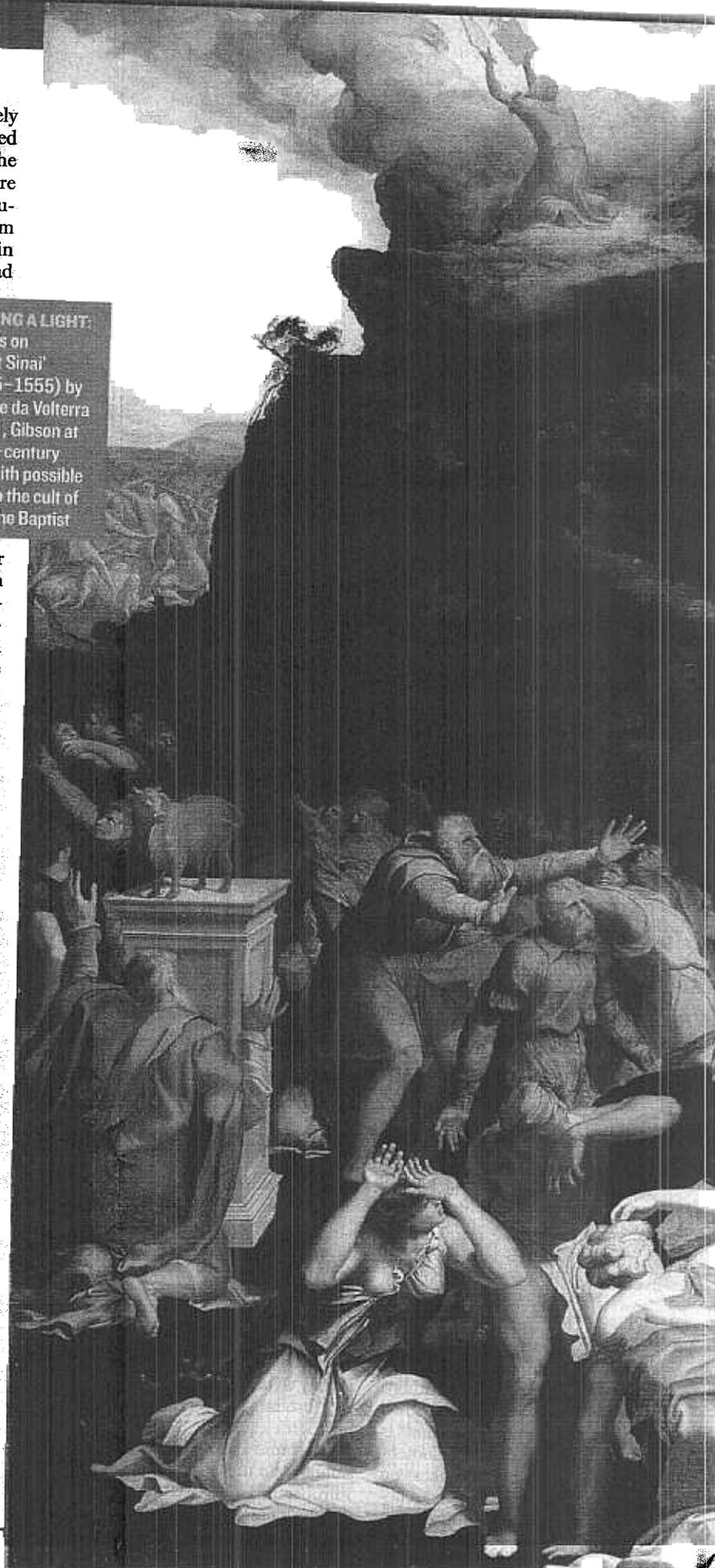
On the ground in Iraq the pil-laging is all but impossible to stop. Earlier this month American journalist Micah Garen was abducted while working on a documentary about efforts to protect Iraq's treasures. His captors have threatened to behead him. With the future of Iraq so uncertain, the protection of its buried past is not really a priority of the occupation troops or the newly sovereign regime of Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. "The reality is, we put Iraqi guards on many of the most important sites with little training, and at first they weren't armed," says Bogdanos. "Four men pull up in a pick-up truck, and they are armed: What are you going to do? Is the guard going to lay down his life for antiquities? Do you put an American platoon on every site?"

As it is, the Coalition military sometimes makes matters worse. When Columbia University professor Zainab Bahrani visited the site of Babylon late last spring, she was stunned to see an American military base spreading across the hallowed ground. Workers scooped up earth potentially rich in relics to make blast walls. Bulldozers carved out helicopter landing pads, and the vibrations from the choppers themselves did still more damage. Portions of two ancient temples have collapsed and Nebuchadnezzar II's palace is threatened. "We're very worried about the palace walls," said Bahrani. "They're made of brick. They rattle when the helicopters take off."

For believers contemplating the rise of the looters, lines from the Revelation of Saint John the Divine may come to mind: "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen." For archeologists, for the faithful, for all of us, the loss of this past impoverishes the future. Ripping artifacts from their contexts takes away the last chance we have to know those civilizations—from the world of Abraham to that of Nebuchadnezzar—that gave us our own.

With **BABAK DEGHANPISHEH** in Baghdad

SHINING A LIGHT:
'Moses on Mount Sinai' (1545-1555) by Daniele da Volterra (right), Gibson at a first-century cave with possible links to the cult of John the Baptist





SEARCH FOR THE SACRED

In Israel, archeology fuels believers' passions and provokes skeptics in a sharp debate without end.

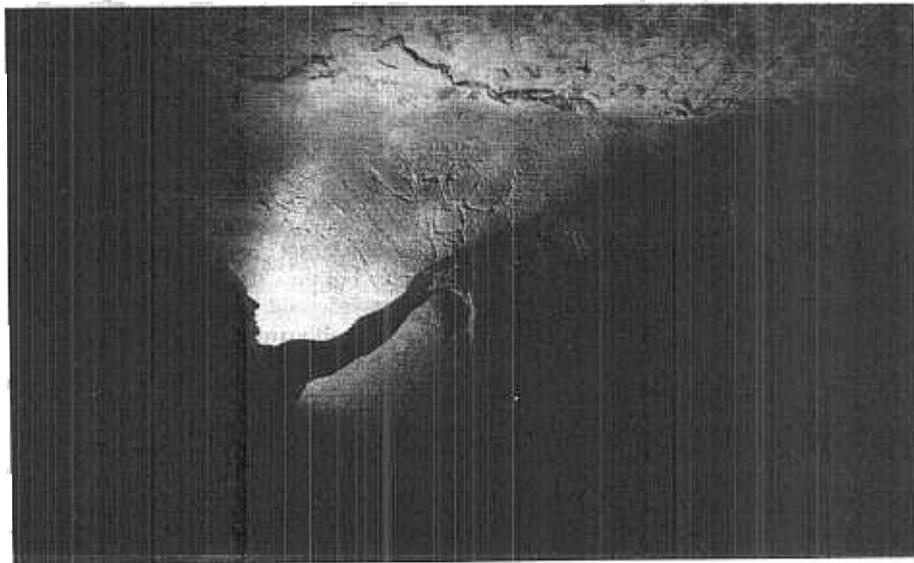
BY JERRY ADLER AND ANNE UNDERWOOD

THE 550 RESIDENTS OF KIBBUTZ TZUBA, A FEW miles down the road from Jerusalem toward Tel Aviv, mostly just want to be "left alone in their own little patch," Yael Kerem says apologetically. She ought to know, as marketing director for the guesthouse with which the kibbutz supplements its main businesses, a fruit and dairy farm and a small factory that makes bulletproof windshields. Yet even as she spoke last week, her cell phone was burbling as requests poured in for tours and interviews: a group of monks from Jerusalem, five bus-

loads of visitors from Turkey, reporters from the United States and Europe. She gestures expansively toward a stand of olive trees. "We might have to pave over this area," she says, "so we can park the buses."

Israel, it has been said, is a place of too much history and too little geography. The very earth beneath Kibbutz Tzuba's nec-

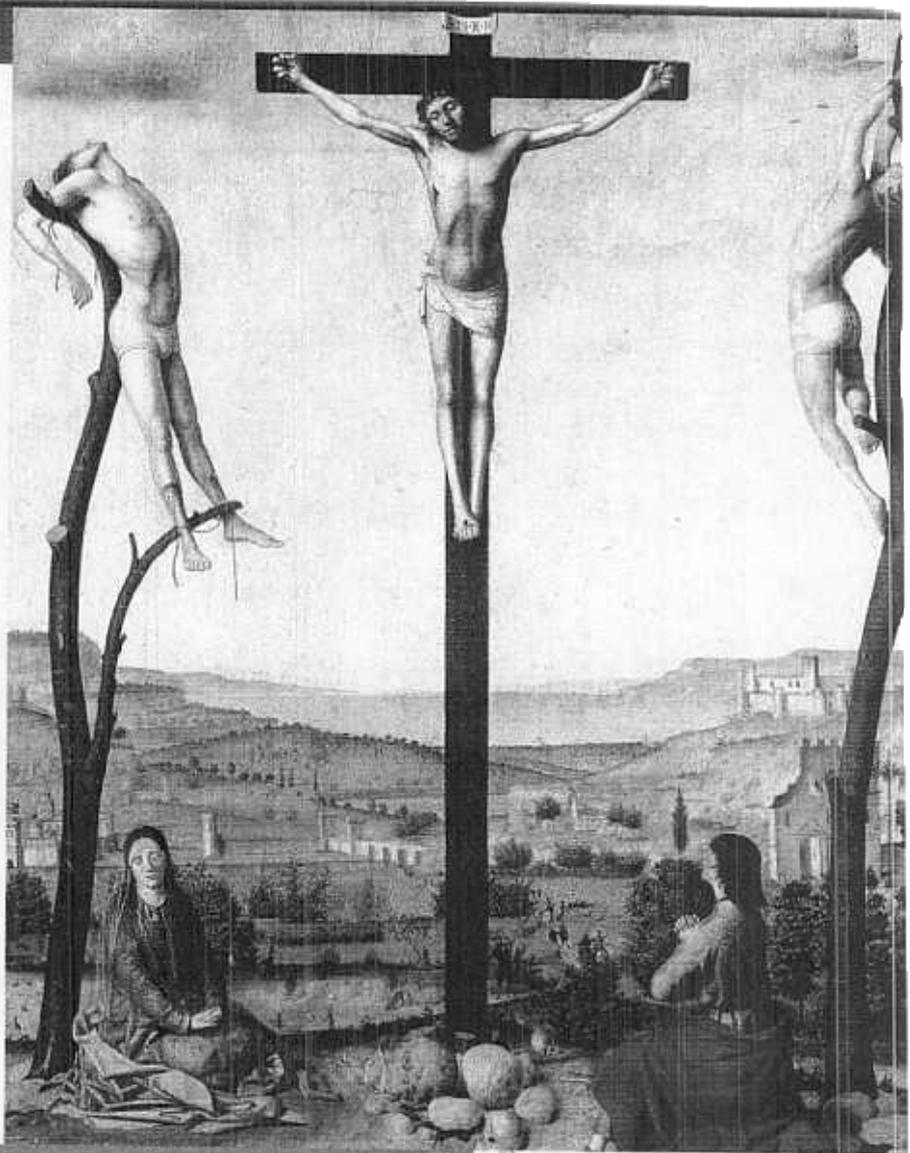
tarine trees hides the walls of settlements going back to the dawn of civilization, cisterns and caves used by wanderers in the time of Jesus. Wanderers very much like the Biblical John the Baptist, who, according to written tradition dating to the fourth century, was born just two miles from here. That distinction meant little, though, until last



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week, as word spread of a new book by one of Israel's most ambitious archeologists, Shimon Gibson, who spent three years excavating a cave on the grounds of Kibbutz Tzuba. Gibson's electrifying claim is that the cave contained a man-made pool in which John—and possibly even Jesus himself—may have performed the ritual cleansing known as baptism. If those claims are accepted—already a chorus of skeptics is rising to dispute them, and it is hard to see how they could ever be proved—the Tzuba cave would be, for Christians, one of the holiest places on earth.

Which is, perhaps, a mixed blessing, and not just for the kibbutzniks who would prefer an olive grove to a parking lot. The buried history of the Holy Land is a subject of no less contention than its endlessly fought-over land and water. In this part of the world, shards of pottery and scraps of parchment are weapons. The father of Israeli archeology, Yigael Yadin, who died in 1984, sought to show that the Jews' claim to the land of Israel dates back 3,200 years to the conquests of Joshua. The extreme wing of the so-called minimalist school—which claims that Biblical accounts of a Jewish presence in the Holy Land have no basis in fact—is suspected in Israel of trying to undermine the case for Zionism. Both sides, though, have had to hold their fire in the face of the Palestinian uprising, which in four years has reduced the number of full-scale academic digs in Israel from about 45 to approximately four. William Dever, pro-



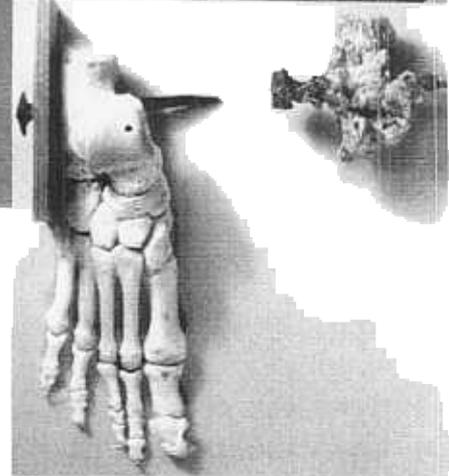
In this case, the Romans put the feet on either side of the cross, fixed with a horizontal spike

DO NOT WEEP: 'Crucifixion,' c. 1475, by Antonello da Messina (above). A full skeleton of a crucified man, including his feet (right), was found in a burial box in northern Jerusalem in 1968.

fessor emeritus at the University of Arizona at Tucson and one of America's leading authorities on Near Eastern archeology, calls the situation in his discipline "a crisis." And Jews and Arabs are both wary and solicitous of the powerful American Christian groups who support research aimed at vindicating the Gospels, for which there is virtually no surviving physical evidence. For all that his words did to change history, during Jesus' time on earth he was but one man among 300 million, his tracks long since covered by the dust of the centuries.

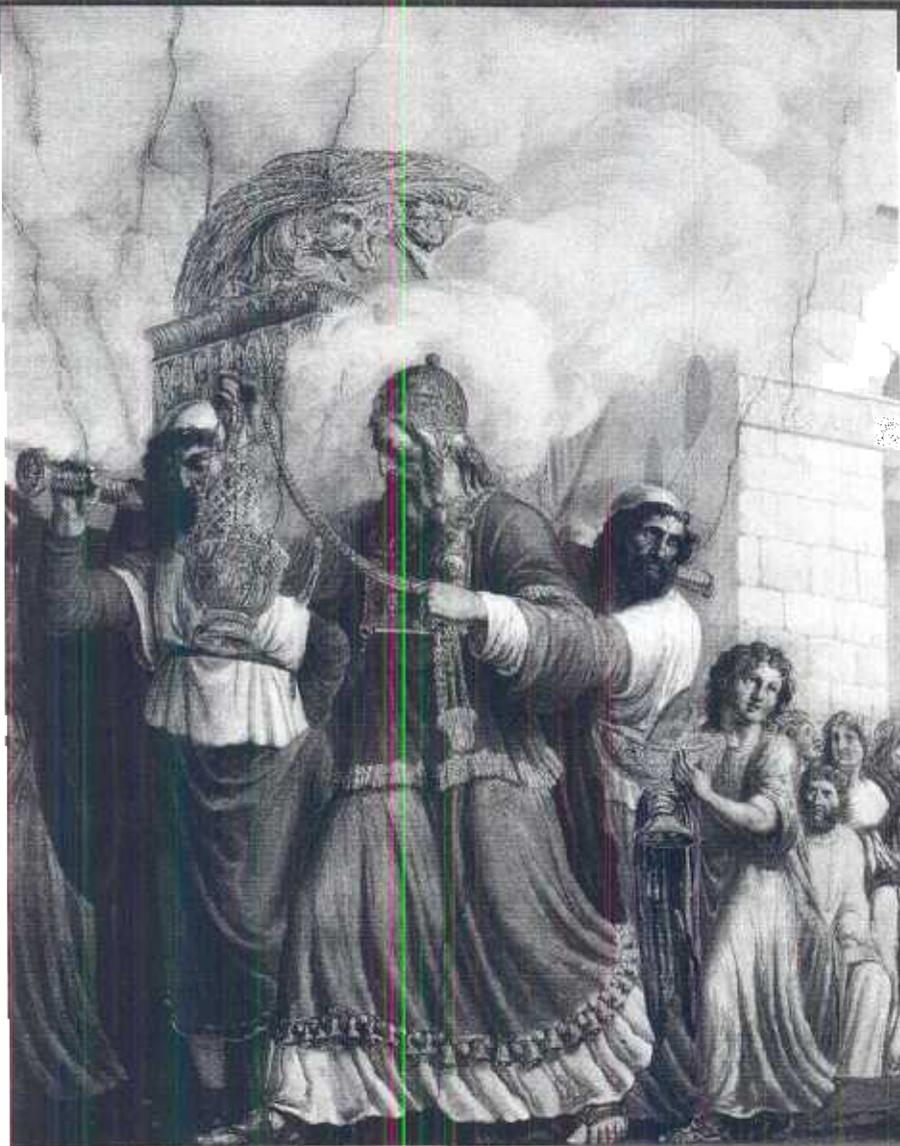
The quest for artifacts related to Jesus Christ spans virtually the entire history of the church, from the fourth century, when Saint Helena is said to have retrieved a piece of the True Cross, to two years ago, when an Israeli antiquities collector produced a stone box with an inscription sug-

gesting it had held the remains of Jesus' brother James. Each era sees in these relics a reflection of what it values most. The touch of the Cross was believed able to bring back the dead; the owner of the so-called James Ossuary valued it at \$2 million. The magic powers of neither were put to the test, however, because both are now considered forgeries. Just two years ago the fragment of the Cross supposedly found by Helena—she said it was a part of the Titulus, the headboard with its famous inscription ("Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews")—was dated by scientists to be between the 10th and 12th centuries. As for the inscription on the ossuary (a limestone box in which first-century Jews stored the bones of their dead), "the overwhelming scholarly consensus is that it's a fake," according to Eric Meyers, a Judaic-studies



scholar at Duke. The Israeli police have confiscated the box from the owner, who claimed to have bought it for \$200. A minority, though, holds to the view of Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archeology Review*, and co-author of a book on the ossuary, that the inscription may be genuine.

In any case, serious scholars rarely bother with religious relics that turn up in churches or dealers' shops, removed from



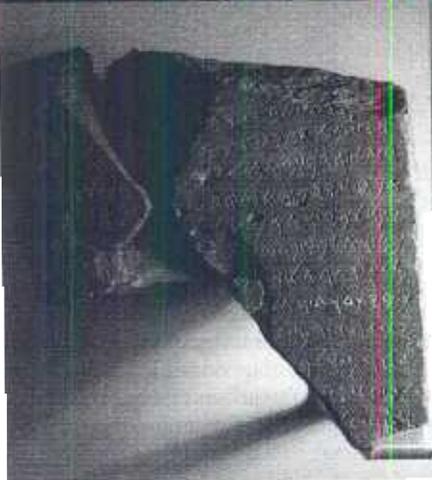
fessor emeritus of religious studies at DePaul University and former co-chair of the Jesus Seminar, can read volumes into a simple signpost in the Biblical town of Ephesus. "There's a gate to the market that Paul would have walked under," Crossan relates. "On top, it says Caesar is the son of God. When Paul applies that name to Jesus, it's not just a nice title. It's the title of Caesar. That is known as high treason."

Even more evocative to Crossan is a fishing boat discovered in the Sea of Galilee in 1986: a sturdy workhorse of a vessel with two oars on each side, a keel and mast, very likely the sort of boat on which Jesus himself might have set out. Crossan is intrigued by signs that the boat's owner fell on hard times, patching it over and over and finally removing the nails before pushing it out to sea. To Crossan—although other scholars dispute the point—this suggests that hard economic times had befallen the Galilee fishermen. Against this backdrop he sets the Biblical account of fishermen leaving their nets and following Jesus. "Did they just drop everything and take off after Jesus? Well, maybe. But maybe there were human reasons. Life was getting tough around the lake."

Perhaps the most revealing Biblical site excavated in recent years has been Sepphoris, five miles from Nazareth, which has been under excavation since 1985. Although not mentioned in the Bible by name, Strange believes it was the "city on a hill" Jesus had in mind in Matthew 5:14. It

Orthodox Jews consider it a sin to disturb Jewish graves, and can be militant about preventing it

KING OF THE JEWS: The Tel Dan inscription, discovered in 1993, may prove that King David existed: 'House of David,' it says, and 'King of Israel': a 19th-century portrayal (above)



take their money," says James Strange of the University of South Florida, Tampa, who directs one of the excavation teams at the first-century city of Sepphoris, the capital of lower Galilee. "They say, 'Would you help me find the giants of Genesis 6?' A serious archeologist can't expend his credibility on that."

The value of archeology is not in validating scripture, but in providing a historical and intellectual context, and the occasional flash of illumination on crucial details. An ossuary containing the only known remains of a victim of crucifixion suggests that artists may have erred in their depictions of Christ on the cross; this victim's feet were not nailed one on top of the other, but positioned on either side of the cross and fixed with a horizontal spike. Scholars like John Dominic Crossan, a pro-

was razed by the Romans right around the time of Jesus' birth, and reconstructed afterward, and it's not unreasonable to think Jesus himself might have worked there. But more important than the chance of finding Jesus' tool belt is what it tells us about his milieu. "Jesus has a lot to say about the rich, and most of it is not good," says Strange. "This is where he would have encountered the rich, not in Nazareth." Archeologists have excavated three villas with interior courtyards, richly frescoed walls and luxury goods similar to those found anywhere in the Roman Empire—but unmistakably the homes of Jews, with ritual baths and inhabitants who obeyed Jewish dietary laws. (At least until the fourth century, when Christianity became the official religion and pig bones make a sudden appearance in the garbage.) "It gives us an entirely new way of

the vital archeological "context" that situates them in a time and place. "Even if the [James] Ossuary is genuine, it provides no new information," says Andrew Overman, head of classics at Macalester College. Nor do archeologists generally set out to prove, or disprove, a point of scripture, although there are fundamentalist groups that try to enlist them in that quest. "They've got big checkbooks, but they can't get anyone to

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thinking about the social context of Jesus' life," says L. Michael White, a religious-studies professor at the University of Texas at Austin. "He is not just a poor peasant from a remote village; he's living close to a large, multilingual urban center, heavily influenced by Roman culture."

For some believers, no doubt, this kind of information helps make the Bible more real; others, perhaps, don't really want to be told that the economics of the Galilee fishing industry was a factor in spreading the Gospel. But Christian believers have no quarrel with archeology, because they assume it will vindicate scripture eventually. On a hot and wind-swept Saturday afternoon, 34 tourists from Poland, most of them born-again Protestants, tramped the barren plateau of Megiddo behind their pastor, Janusz Szarzec. They had already spent the morning in Nazareth, and now they were taking in the high stone gates believed to be part of King Solomon's northern citadel—a simple demonstration, says Szarzec, that "excavations prove what was written in the Bible." His sky-blue eyes glistening, the pastor read to them a prophecy of the battle of Armageddon (Megiddo) from Revelation. "You must take this literally," he urged his flock, "because it's going to happen!"

But the issue is more complicated for Jews. Orthodox Jews consider it a sin to disturb Jewish graves, but Dever, the American scholar, suspects the issue of Jewish graves is hiding a more serious agenda: "They don't want scientific investigation," he charges, "because they're afraid it will prove their

It is a workhorse of a vessel, very likely the sort of boat on which Jesus himself might set out

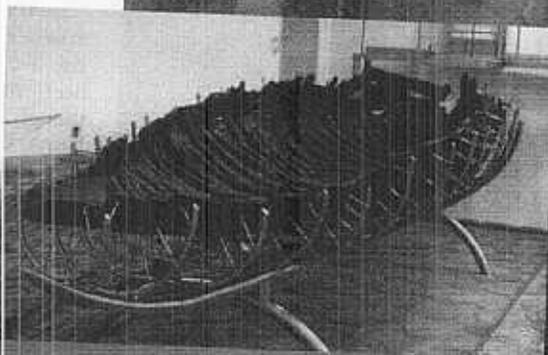
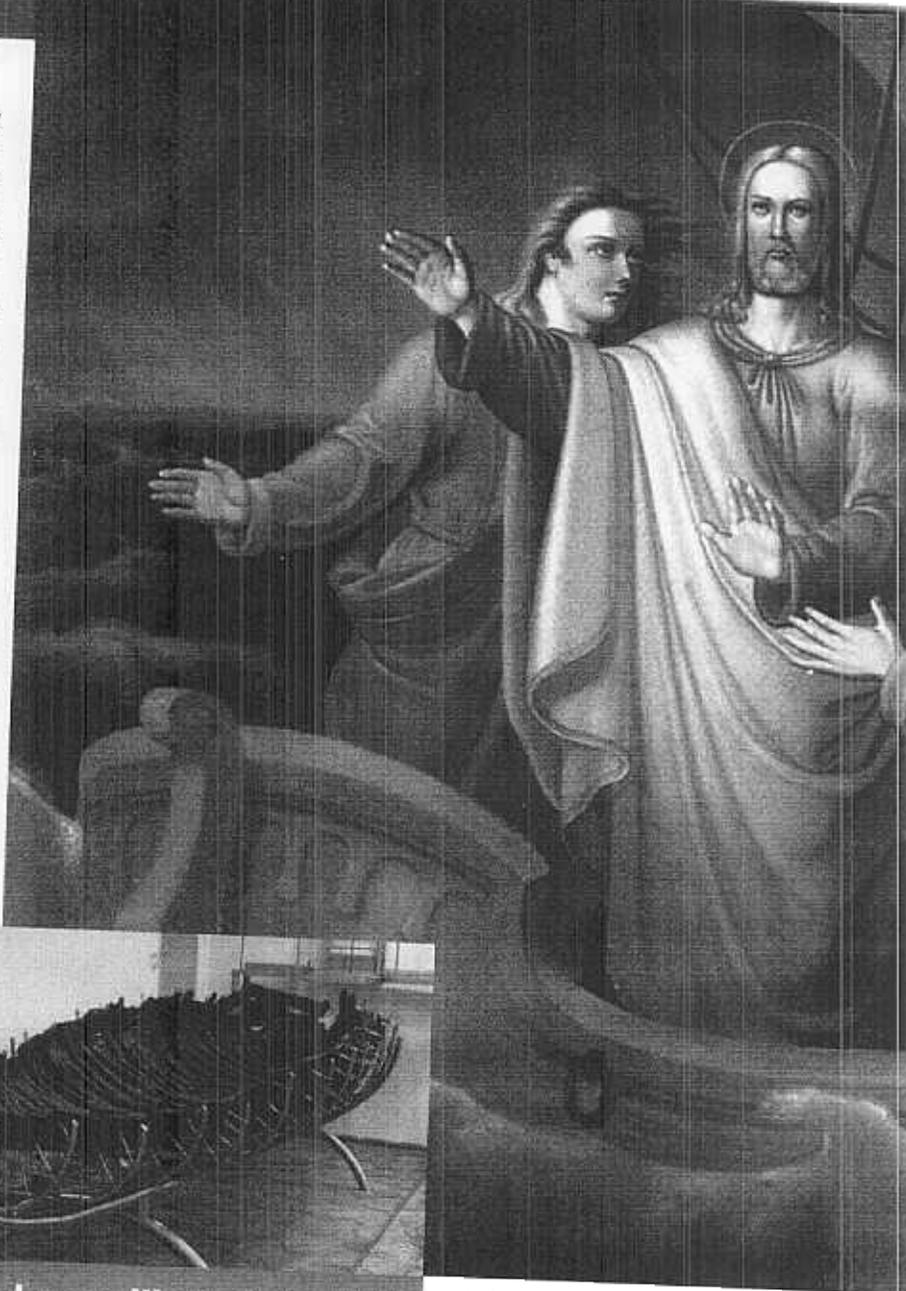
SEA OF GALILEE: Discovered in 1986 at the bottom of the Biblical lake, this boat took nine years to restore (above); 'Christ Commands the Storm to End' by Wilhelm Kretzschmer, 1806–1897 (top)

patriarchal stories aren't historical." And, in fact, current scholarship is not especially congenial to Old Testament literalists. There is, essentially, no evidence for the existence of Abraham and the other patriarchs, and—despite more than a century of intensive study of Pharaonic Egypt—only the barest wisps of support for the Exodus, the central event in Jewish theology. There are accounts of Egyptian raids into Palestine that brought back captives, presumably as slaves, and a dispatch from a border guard in the early 12th century B.C., reporting that two people had escaped from

Egypt into the Sinai. On the basis of what has been found so far, "there was no Exodus, at least not of hundreds of thousands of people making a miraculous escape across the desert," Dever says. "And there was no conquest" of the land of Canaan by Joshua. "There are several chapters in Joshua on Jericho," says Carol Meyers, a professor of Biblical studies at Duke, "but Jericho wasn't even inhabited at the time." Some things do check out: an Egyptian artifact, the Merneptah stele, refers to a victory by Pharaoh's Army over the Israelites in about 1200 B.C. That date falls in the pe-

riod when the minimalists deny that Jews even lived in the Holy Land. This particular question is so politically fraught, according to Claire Pfann, a New Testament scholar in Jerusalem, that minimalists have accused their opponents of forging evidence to bolster the Zionist case.

So the territory on which Gibson has embarked is a treacherous one, both politically and geologically, but for good or ill he has jumped in with both feet. Gibson, 45, was born in England to a mother who moved the family to Israel when he was 9, and he studied archeology at London's prestigious Institute of Archaeology. His peers consider him an outstanding archeologist in the field, but his decision to publicize his cave finding in a popular book before publishing in a scientific journal has raised some eyebrows. "I don't want to spoil the celebration," says Ronnie Reich, a respected archeologist with the Israel An-





tiquities Authority, "but I'm skeptical."

He first crawled inside the cave, Gibson writes, in 1999, brought there by a kibbutznik who had discovered it years earlier. On a wall he saw an incised drawing of a crude stick figure holding a staff, with one arm raised upright as if in blessing; he recognized it immediately as an icon of John the Baptist. That meant two things to him: that the cave was worth excavating, and that with the right connections, money would be available to help excavate it. He contacted an archeological enthusiast from Texas, Joseph Peeples, who raised funds from donors including John C. Whitehead, a wealthy New York banker and former deputy secretary of State under President Ronald Reagan. Whitehead, on a trip to Israel, visited the cave with Gibson and, after one look at the drawings, agreed to bankroll the excavation along with his friend and fellow financier

Roger C. Altman. "You can't help but be a little tingly about what might have taken place there," Whitehead recalled last week. What neither of these men apparently realized—and what Gibson himself denies knowing—is that Peeples, who died in 2002, served time in prison on two separate federal fraud convictions. But there is no evidence that his connection to Gibson had any sinister purpose.

Peeples's other contribution was to put Gibson in touch with James Tabor, professor of early Christianity at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, who agreed to help with the dig—a role that included supplying students to wield the shovels. On a March day in 2000 two of those students, Lee Hutchison and Jeff Poplin, reached the floor level of a shelf on the right side of the cave. For days, the team had been unearthing pieces of thick, gray pottery from the fourth and fifth centuries. Gibson had

already concluded that Byzantine monks, the ones who had engraved the icons on the wall, had probably established a shrine to John in the cave. At their feet, the students saw something new, a delicate red shard of pottery. They took it to Tabor, who showed it to Gibson, who at a glance pronounced it "First-century Roman."

And that put an entirely new face on things. As Gibson dug down, he found thousands of these shards, suggestive, to him, of pottery that was intentionally shattered, as if in a ritual. He uncovered a stone with an indentation in the shape of a human foot, linked by a channel to a small basin: it looked to him like a kind of font for anointing the foot with oil. And armed with those archeological clues, and the oral and written traditions linking John to the region, he makes what some of his colleagues call the stupefyingly audacious leap to the conclusion that John himself may have used the cave to baptize believers.

"In archeology," Gibson admits, "nothing is certain, not even written evidence." But, he says, the evidence that the cave was used by John "is as strong as you can get in terms of archeological remains. Of course it would be nice to have an inscription saying, 'I, John the Baptist, was here and my disciples are using it as a ritual site.' But you usually don't get that."

Few of his colleagues, even the few who have seen the cave, go along with him. "Maybe Gibson and the kibbutz want to attract tourists," says David Amit, a senior archeologist with the antiquities authority who describes himself as a friend of Gibson's. "It's pure fiction. It's not archeology." Even Tabor, who agrees with Gibson that the cave was undoubtedly used for ritual purposes in the first century, concedes that "you can't prove John was there." Among other objections to Gibson's theory, there is nothing in scripture to suggest that John baptized believers anywhere except in the Jordan River. And there is little more than conjecture for a scenario sketched in Gibson's book by which John "might very well have sent Jesus intentionally to visit the scene of his early baptism activities ... and our [Tzuba] was just that place."

In any case, unless someone comes along with conclusive evidence to refute Gibson, for better or worse the cave will be attracting tourists for a long time to come. Two thousand years ago, Jesus, John and the disciples changed human destiny forever, and then disappeared into history. One way or another we have been trying to bring them back into our lives ever since.

With DAN EPHRON and JOANNA CHEN in Israel, EMILY FLYNN in London, JULIE SCELFO, MARY CARMICHAEL and CLAIRE SULMERS