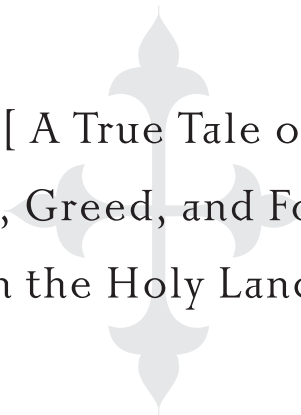


UNHOLY  
BUSINESS



[ A True Tale of  
Faith, Greed, and Forgery  
in the Holy Land ]

NINA BURLEIGH



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[ PROLOGUE ]

## A Woman with Many Cats

October 2001

*Do not consider it proof just because it is written  
in books, for a liar who will deceive with his tongue  
will not hesitate to do the same with his pen.*

—MAIMONIDES



CATS OF MANY COLORS prowl the sunken courtyard at the epigrapher's door on the edge of Jerusalem. At least a dozen of them—tabbies, orange and gray tigers, green-eyed blacks, and piebald whites—slither up and over the garbage bins, sprawl on garden furniture, and purr against my ankles as I press the rusty buzzer and wait. The occupant takes a very long while to answer, as if perhaps the doorbell isn't working properly. I press it again, and hold it down. Finally a woman pulls the door open, chiding me for being ten minutes late. She has striking pale blue eyes, red lipstick, and dyed black hair pulled back into a 1950s sock-hop-style ponytail. Her gap-toothed smile and sleepy eyes suggest the sultry actress Ellen Barkin, but this woman is in her seventies and no entertainer. She is expert in one of the most arcane fields of scholarship in the world—an epigrapher—analyst of ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Phoenician writing from the time of Jesus

Christ and before, from the Old Testament era. Museums and collectors worldwide have asked her to compare and decipher inscribed lamps, seals, and pottery for three decades. She is considered one of Israel's leading authorities on Semitic scripts.

Ancient Semitic epigraphy is a rare—but not a lucrative—pursuit, and Ada Yardeni lives modestly in a two-room garden apartment crammed with books, papers, and the collected mementos of a long life. She lives alone; her children are grown and her beloved mother recently died. Right away she apologizes for the condition of her cramped dwelling. “This is my office, and it’s my house. You think it’s nice, but I used to live in Rehavia. But things happen in life.” An air mattress is nestled on the floor behind the dining room table, at the foot of a wall-size bookcase and a small desk. Candles, papers, and yellow plastic flowers in a vase crowd the kitchen table. Walls and surfaces are decorated in a motley style—kitten pictures, posters of Errol Flynn, snapshots of children and grandchildren, and two large, dramatic canvases of a younger Ada in a summer hat, with the desert in the background. Ada’s daughter painted them in a modern style that seems lifted straight from David Hockney’s bright realism. Bookshelves bend under fat tomes in Hebrew and English such as *Textbook of Aramaic Hebrew and Nabatean* and *Documentary Texts from the Judaean Desert*. The books she herself has written are never less than three inches thick, and include *Book of Hebrew Script* and *Textbook of Aramaic and Hebrew Documentary Texts from the Judaean Desert*.

Ancient language and literature was the family vocation. Ada’s father, Menachem Zulei, born in Galicia (now Poland) emigrated to Israel and spent his entire life bushwhacking through a massive trove of Hebrew liturgical writing, called a *geniza*, found in a Cairo synagogue—two hundred thousand books and manuscripts in all, dating from 1000 CE to the nineteenth century. Ada was born in Jerusalem and married young, but she was widowed at age twenty-eight.

A young mother with two small daughters, she had to move away from the leafy, posh neighborhood called Rehavia—the most charming part of Jerusalem, home to Israeli dignitaries like Bibi Netanyahu and moneyed Europeans and Americans—and set up house in this dustier, Spartan neighborhood, across the street from a car repair shop. But her whole life still lay ahead. She returned to university and studied under a great Israeli epigrapher named Joseph Naveh. She fell in love with him and with the work. They never married, or lived together, but he has been her mentor for nearly forty years.

Ada is both a calligrapher—who can write the ancient languages—and a decipherer of ancient scripts. She has filled hundreds of book pages with carefully copied individual ancient letters, arranged so that students may compare tiny differences in handwriting between sects, kingdoms, eras, regions. Her expertise extends to knowing how writing differed from hand to hand, as scribes scratched words into limestone tablets and ossuaries, clay and bronze seals, and mostly on ostraca (shards of pottery used by the ancients as notebook or scratch paper of sorts). She is a meticulous worker, as one would expect. When someone brings her an object or a photograph of an inscribed object, she pulls out a magnifying glass and carefully traces the inscription onto plastic tracing paper, then draws it elsewhere, larger, in thick black ink, the better to see every divot, curl, and anomaly. “I have to be very precise with the letters, in order to confirm my readings,” she says. Her work depends on her access to actual ancient objects and that is why she is always happy to look at pieces from collectors—who also pay her a small fee to decipher their finds. She reckons she has examined thousands of ostraca. “You see, I have copied all these documents from the original,” she says, pulling out a manila folder of her current work. She riffles through pages covered with large Hebrew letters. “I have seen a lot of material. Joseph Naveh gave a nice example that I love to repeat. If you come to an ear doctor, and he has seen fifty

ears, that's not the same as when you go to a doctor who has seen five thousand ears, correct? So I have seen five thousand!"

When I arrived to talk about how she became a witness in an archaeological forgery trial Israeli cops had called "the fraud of the century," she was well prepared. Ada is the sort of woman who keeps detailed records of her days in small annual diaries. At the end of each year, she tucks them—filled with her tiny Hebrew script, tied with a white ribbon—into a cardboard box, and these boxes are now the piled-up story of her years. Opening a box, she easily found the diaries she needed, because they bristled with yellow Post-it notes, marking the pages she had referred to during interviews with the police and then at the court. She proceeded to leaf through each page, reading from right to left, entries highlighted with pink highlighter.

Her annual diaries always start in October, the beginning of the Jewish year. The series of events she needed to remember began in October 2001. That's when she got the first call from a Tel Aviv collector named Oded Golan, a wealthy aficionado of Bible-era archaeology whom she'd heard of but never met. Because of her reputation and experience, it was not unusual for Ada to receive calls from people she didn't know, offering to pay for her opinion, and she was always meticulous about recording her business affairs. Thumbing through her book, she turned to the first Post-it note.

"Exactly the twenty-fourth of October, 2001. You see? I wrote it down. Afterwards I made it red because they asked me about it all the time, so I marked it. He phoned me and asked me to decipher some ostraca. On the first of November, he came here and brought pictures of twelve Idomean ostraca. One with a strange Jewish script. And an inscription on an ossuary [depository for the bones of the dead] in a cursive Jewish script, difficult to read. And he showed me a bowl and I couldn't identify the script. Perhaps Arabic or Idomean. I didn't know. He promised to let me draw the ostraca from the original."

Just two weeks after his first phone call, Ada received a call from a second stranger, a deliberately mysterious man who identified himself as a member of the Israeli Secret Service, the Shin Bet. It was early November 2001, and the man told her he had a very important object in his possession—very old, inscribed in ancient Hebrew—and would she be willing to have a look at it?

“He wanted me to write an official opinion,” she recalled. “And he had already been to Naveh.” In her diary, she wrote, “Maybe it is a forgery.” She hadn’t seen it yet, but the fact that the man was seeking an official opinion from her after having shown it to Naveh, the master, made her suspicious. Still, she agreed to have a look. “The situation was suspicious to me,” she recalled. “I don’t know why . . . a Shin Bet will show *me* an inscription? That was somehow suspicious.”

Like any Bible-era epigrapher, Ada was no stranger to fakes. Inscribed objects from the ancient Hebrew and Phoenician people are much less common than the prolific hieroglyphs left by the Egyptians or the cuneiform (writing composed of wedge-shaped characters) of the Babylonians. Whenever an inscription appears in biblical—or as the academics call it, Syro-Palestinian—archaeology, it is by definition an important piece, not least because of its scarcity. Experts—from archaeologists to epigraphers—know to be on their guard for forgeries, especially when the object is not from an official excavation. Ada’s mentor, Naveh, had published warnings about forged inscriptions.

A week later, according to her diary, she spoke with Naveh, and her suspicion was confirmed. The old professor told her that the same Shin Bet agent had shown him the tablet inscription and that he thought it was fake. And the circumstances had been equally mysterious. Naveh had been summoned to a Jerusalem hotel room to see the tablet. There he met two people, a man who introduced himself as Tzur and “an Arab youth who never opened his mouth

the entire time, so I don't know his name," Naveh later recalled. Tzur told him the tablet was found in a Muslim cemetery outside the Old City in Jerusalem, and speculated that it had actually come from the inner sections of the Temple Mount, a politically charged and religiously important location for Israelis and Palestinians. Tzur, Naveh said, "made me promise not to mention [the tablet] or talk about it with anyone, because the life of the Palestinian who found and sold it would be endangered." According to Ada's diary, on the same day Naveh told her the tablet was forged, the mysterious man phoned her again, and offered to send her photographs. She told him she wanted to see the original object, not a picture.

As she related this, she squinted at her diary. "And I called Oded Golan that same day. For what, why did I call him? For the pictures he had promised to let me make, of the ostraca." Eventually he did bring them to her house. He was in a terrible hurry. She promised to finish copying them quickly.

On the twentieth of November 2001, the mysterious agent finally came to her door with photos of the inscribed tablet. He introduced himself as Tzuriel, an ancient Hebrew name that means rock of God. Ada remembered the inscription, but the man's face left almost no impression. "That was very strange, because they asked me later, 'What does he look like?' I remember he had a long face. I couldn't say more than that. Usually I have a good eye for faces. But I can't remember his face! And later they showed me a picture, and asked, 'Is this the man you saw?' I didn't know. It's interesting that there are faces that you can't remember. They are very . . . regular."

The mystery man with the forgettable face gave her the photograph of the inscribed stone, asked her to analyze the writing, and went away. The photograph showed a rectangular black stone tablet, with sixteen lines of perfectly legible ancient Hebrew. The inscription she does recall. "I thought that the letters were a little similar to the Tel Dan



inscription.” The Tel Dan inscription is a basalt rock “stele” discovered in 1993 in northern Israel, in the region known as the Upper Galilee. It is theologically and historically significant as the first archaeological object ever found—dated before 500 BCE—confirming the existence of a monarchy claiming David as an ancestor. Ada thought the writing on the tablet looked like ancient Hebrew, but her gut told her something was not right. She could read the inscription, which seemed to refer to repairs to a building, but something about the style of the language itself struck her as wrong, and some individual letters seemed anachronistic. Still, she couldn’t say for sure.

“Here,” Ada pointed at her handwritten notes from that day’s meeting, “here, I wrote that ‘I feel that this is a forgery, but I can’t prove it.’”

The very next day, Ada received a phone call from yet another man she didn’t know, Shimon Ilani from a government agency called the Geological Survey of Israel. A geologist, Ilani too had been visited by the mysterious Tzuriel. “And he said he got my phone numbers from Oded Golan. He wanted to know what I thought. And I told him I had a feeling, but I didn’t know, because the circumstances were very suspicious. The script was not bad. I could somehow put it between Phoenician and Hebrew and very early times.”

Ada’s date book indicates that from the twenty-sixth to the twenty-ninth of November, the mystery man phoned her three more times. He seemed to be in a great hurry, and yet was unwilling to cooperate with her request to see the actual tablet. Finally he relented. He carried into her kitchen a package containing a black stone tablet that looked old but was surprisingly clean and shiny. It was, in fact, a lovely piece. The man let her look at the tablet, but he refused to leave it with her. Ada took more notes and pointed out some suspicious letters she had already noticed in a photograph, in particular a Hebrew letter “hay” that looked suspiciously modern in style.

The next day Shimon Ilani from the Geological Survey of Israel called Ada again. “He was very concerned because I had told the man about the problems with the letter hay. Shimon Ilani tried to convince me that it was ancient. He said that he would come talk to me, but he didn’t.” Ada felt that the government geologist was trying to convince her, and she didn’t like the pressure. “The mystery I didn’t like! The whole circumstances were suspicious somehow. The phone calls, the: ‘I bring you. I won’t bring you.’ ‘I come to you. I show you.’ . . . ‘I take it with me. I can’t leave it.’ I didn’t like the mystery.” But she needed the money so she set to writing a report.

After conferring with Naveh, she decided she couldn’t verify the inscription as genuine. But she made a comparative chart of the individual letters, and in her report Ada stated that she simply wasn’t sure what to make of it. The man paid her 1,400 shekels (about \$500) for her report. She never saw him again. She took the fee, and went on about her life, which at the time was heavy with imminent loss. Her beloved ninety-year-old mother was fast deteriorating, and while new grandchildren were being born, they were far away in Australia and she could not afford to visit them. Naveh, her emotional pillar and mentor, was also getting old and sick. For diversion, she had piles of ancient letters to trace and more and more strays on the doorstep to care for.

Ada would see Oded Golan again. (He brought her some inscribed seal impressions to trace in spring 2002, and he was again in a great hurry.) But she didn’t connect the impatient Tel Aviv collector and his artifacts and the Shin Bet man with the forgettable face and his inscribed tablet, not at all, until three years later, when a policeman arrived among the myriad cats at her doormat. He carried photographs of men, not ancient letters, for her to compare and identify, and he leaned hard on her rusty, recalcitrant doorbell.

[ CHAPTER 1 ]

## The Billionaire's Table

Spring 2002

*That's the stuff that dreams are made of.*

—HUMPHREY BOGART AS SAM SPADE  
IN *THE MALTESE FALCON*



AT SUNSET, the collector and his lucky guests can't help but notice the primal kaleidoscope in the heavens above the Mediterranean Sea. Three walls of floor-to-ceiling penthouse glass front the westward horizon, and every afternoon shades of vermilion and violet, pink and indigo streak the sky and sea. Anyone witnessing the celestial display from this vantage point feels enriched, but the old man who owns the view, Shlomo Moussaieff, is in fact one of the world's richest men.

People tell two versions of how Moussaieff made his billions, with a twist depending on whether the teller likes or dislikes the old man. The nice version is that for four decades he sold pricey jewelry to oil sheiks from a tiny shop on the ground floor of London's glittery Hilton Hotel, and also knew the prostitutes they employed. The sheiks paid the girls in jewelry because they deemed it more honorable to give their "girlfriends" presents than to pay them hard cash.

After these transactions, the unsentimental ladies rode the mirrored and gilt elevators downstairs and sold the jewelry back to Moussaieff, at prices far lower than what the sheiks had paid. Then Moussaieff sold the pieces again at full value. The nastier version of the story, told by men who think the old man has crossed them, is that the jeweler sold the sheiks precious jewelry and then the escorts stole the baubles and brought them back to the shop.

At eighty-five, Moussaieff's labyrinthine life story is made up of a thousand and one equally fantastic and unverifiable tales. As he tells it, an abusive rabbi father kicked him onto the streets of 1920s Jerusalem when he was a boy of twelve, so he slept in dank, ancient tombs on the Old City's edge with homeless Arab urchins, plucking his first Roman-era coins out of that hallowed dirt. He passed his teenage years lice ridden and deprived, sometimes sleeping rough in a synagogue where he overheard and memorized the Talmud, sometimes in an Arabic reform school memorizing the Koran, and sometimes in a Christian hospital. After fighting in Europe in World War II, he was briefly jailed by the Allies for attempting to smuggle valuable Judaica from synagogues the Nazis somehow hadn't plundered. He fought in the streets of Jerusalem's Old City during Israel's War of Independence, becoming friendly with general Moshe Dayan, another lover of antiquities. Together the men made forays into Gaza to acquire archaeological treasures. In London a few years later, he began amassing enormous wealth through intimacy with the world's richest Arab potentates. A stint in the Israeli Secret Service fits in somewhere. What is certain is that by the 1980s, he had created a colossal fortune from a jewelry business that landed him in the cosmopolitan upper echelon. One of his daughters is married to the president of Iceland.

These days, the old man spends less time making money and more time disbursing it to enlarge his vast collection of biblical antiquities.

He doesn't care what people say about him, either. His only interest in life now, besides smoking and flirting, he says, is "proving the Bible true"—an odd pursuit for an avowedly unreligious man, but an offshoot of an early obsession with finding God. He believes completely in the historical reality of biblical characters, but Yahweh remains beyond his reach. The antiquities inside his Tel Aviv apartment would keep a team of museum curators busy for decades. Among them are a pair of three-foot-high iron lions from what was supposedly the Queen of Sheba's palace in Yemen, chunks of long-demolished Syrian Jewish temples on the walls, whole slabs of Assyrian cuneiform from Iraq, vitrines packed with pre-Canaanite pagan cult figurines, intact tile friezes taken from Roman baths in Israel. But these artifacts are only a small sampling of the six hundred thousand Bible-era relics he has collected over the years and that he stores in warehouses in Geneva and his London townhouse. Almost all of them, he readily admits, were removed illegally from their countries of origin.

Moussaieff's collection, quirks, and financial might are well understood among the antiquities traders in Israel. On most nights when Moussaieff is in Tel Aviv, a revolving cast of dealers and collectors drop in to sell, buy, or simply sip Diet Coke, enjoy the sunset over the sea, and watch the old man in action. His guests may also include socialites, politicians, and scholars who are attracted by the money, collection, and mystique of one of Israel's most intriguing characters. A dyslexic who can barely read, he is by turns profane and refined. He tells filthy jokes, veers between Hebrew and Arabic as the mood suits him, slyly calls men and women *habibi*—the Arabic word for sweetie—and will recite, eyes half-closed, bits of Holy Land arcana he has photographically memorized from the Bible and Koran. He can wax at length on the characters whose heads are commemorated on tarnished bits of Roman coins or the significance of clay figurines representing pre-Canaanite gods and goddesses.

On a balmy spring evening in 2002, an elfin fellow named Oded Golan joined a half-dozen other men at the billionaire's long rectangular table, inhaling the fumes of the great collector's chain-lit Marlboro Lights. Golan, fifty-something, short, with oddly shaped, fleshy ear tips, and a shiny brown mop of hair over an impish face reminiscent of Joel Grey in the movie *Cabaret*, was and still is one of Israel's biggest collectors of Bible-era relics. But his collection is tiny by comparison with Moussaieff's. Besides collecting Israeli artifacts, Golan—who came from a wealthy and accomplished Tel Aviv family and studied industrial design in college—ran an architectural tour business, speculated in real estate, and was an amateur classical pianist. His calloused, short fingers attested to the fact that he also used his hands and his design training to lovingly restore the ancient items he collected.

Also at the table was the French scholar André Lemaire, an expert in ancient epigraphy at the Sorbonne. A tall, sallow, almost spectral presence, in his native French he might be described as *sec*—utterly dry and deeply restrained. One of eight sons of a provincial French Catholic farmer, born during World War II, he originally studied for the priesthood, and succumbed to the lure of Jerusalem and its antiquities after a youthful summer drive from France to Israel with a pair of seminarians. It was the late 1960s and he decided to stay in Jerusalem for a while, signing on to do research at the Ecole Biblique—an elegant, meditative, walled French Dominican monastery compound with a great library, Hellenistic columned courtyard, and towering cedars by the Old City. The scholars within were hard at work deciphering the Dead Sea Scrolls and related ancient documents. After a year there, Lemaire returned to France, dropped out of the seminary to get married, and entered the Sorbonne to study and eventually teach ancient Semitic epigraphy. In thirty years at that post, he has published hundreds of papers and dozens of books on obscure, rare

inscriptions in ancient Hebrew and Aramaic. (During Christ's lifetime, Aramaic was the common language of the Jews.) Lemaire lives modestly in suburban Paris, but since the late 1970s, he has been a familiar figure among the antiquarians of Jerusalem and Old Jaffa.

Lemaire is personally inclined to believe in the possibility of unexpectedly finding something of great significance because of an incident in his own life. "We are completely sure that they [ancient Hebrews] kept precious or semiprecious objects in temple treasures for centuries, for centuries," he told me during an interview at his Paris home. "And myself, I am perhaps more inclined to accept that, because I had an experience when I was young. I was maybe, I don't remember, sixteen or seventeen, and I visited the granary of my grandmother, near the farm where I lived with my parents. And in my grandmother's granary, I found among debris and so on, big sheets of paper. I took them outside, and finally, reading them a little bit, I realized that it was a French Bible from the end of the sixteenth century." The antique Bible contained a list of names of people from the nearby town who had owned it over the centuries. Lemaire never learned how or why the artifact found its way into the family silo, but he never forgot the fortuitous accident that recovered a piece of history.

In Jerusalem over the years, he combed the shops, hoping to discover rare pieces and occasionally authenticating inscribed objects for owners and interested buyers. Lemaire's willingness to examine and write about objects in private collections had not endeared him to the archaeological academy, however. Professional archaeologists and inscription scholars view private collectors differently. Archaeologists see collectors as encouraging the looting of archaeological sites because they pay for "unprovenanced" artifacts (archaeologists speak for any object not found in situ). Scholars who study inscriptions are relatively more willing to look at unprovenanced material. Lemaire

was one scholar who wasn't above "publishing"—in academic parlance, writing about—objects whose origins were unknown.

In spring 2002, Lemaire was in Israel on one of his regular forays to the Holy Land to seek out newly discovered objects and strengthen his ties with local collectors, scholars, and antiquities dealers. Although Lemaire knew of Oded Golan and his large collection by name, and Golan knew Lemaire's scholarly reputation, the two men had never met, they claim, until that spring evening at Moussaieff's house.

As Moussaieff bargained with individual visitors, Lemaire and Golan talked. Golan told the French professor that he possessed an ossuary—a small limestone box in which Christ-era Jews stored the bones of their dead—with an ancient Hebrew inscription in cursive that he couldn't read. Ossuaries are quite common in Jerusalem. For about ninety years, Jews practiced *ossilegium*. This method of disposing of the dead involved first closing up the body in a cave for a year. After the flesh had fallen away, the bones were removed from the cave and closed up in a small box—an ossuary—which was sometimes inscribed with a design or a name. Scholars believe the practice was most common among the wealthy, as the peasants couldn't afford the boxes. Today, the ossuaries are so common that unadorned ones serve as planters in Jerusalem gardens, but those with inscriptions can be more valuable.

Golan, like any collector in Jerusalem interested in Bible-era objects, had collected a sizable number of inscribed ossuaries over the years. He asked if Lemaire would like to have a look at one with an inscription he couldn't read. The Frenchman said he would be happy to see it. Lemaire was, he now admits, a bit flattered by the man. "Oded more or less, maybe not using the words, but the meaning was clear, told me he knew my name," Lemaire recalled in an interview in Paris in 2007. "I didn't know him, but he told me he had



a collection and he had some inscription he should like to show me. And I told him, I am always interested to see new inscriptions. That's my job, my professional job!"

Two weeks later, Lemaire had the opportunity to follow up with Golan. He had made an appointment to visit Moussaieff, but Moussaieff was in the hospital, recovering from a minor heart attack. So the scholar called Golan, and the collector came in his car and fetched Lemaire, bringing him back into Tel Aviv and to his small, vitrine-filled apartment. "The vitrines, oh, he showed me very quickly the vitrines," Lemaire recalled. "I looked at a few things. And then he showed me pictures, mainly of his collection of ossuaries. He wanted to show me an inscription. It was in cursive and very difficult for him to read."

Golan laid out a series of photographs of ossuary inscriptions and pointed out the one in cursive ancient Hebrew that he couldn't decipher. While looking at that inscription, Lemaire spied another picture laid out on the table next to it. It was of another inscribed ossuary, and this particular inscription, Lemaire says, caught his eye instantly. In sloppily scrawled but easily decipherable Aramaic, it read, "Ya'akov bar Yosef achui Yeshua," translated as "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." When Lemaire asked Golan about the inscription, the collector casually replied that he had never thought much of it—although he could read it. Lemaire was immediately intrigued because he was something of an expert in the biblical James, having written a book about the early Christian figure described in the Bible as Christ's brother. Golan maintained that he wasn't all that interested in it. For Lemaire, though, this other ossuary, the one that Golan had accidentally shown him, seemed by far the most interesting thing he'd seen in a long time. "Now it is considered the main point, but at this time for Oded, it was not the main point," Lemaire recalled. "That wasn't the ossuary he wanted to show me. That is very key. That is very key."

Lemaire had already made one historic discovery in the Jerusalem antiquities market some two decades before, one that had had profound significance for biblical archaeology, while also making a great deal of money for an anonymous owner. The discovery was so important that his name would have been well known to Oded Golan for that reason alone. In 1981, Lemaire noticed a tiny inscribed ivory pomegranate in a dealer's shop in Jerusalem. It read, "Holy to the priests, belonging to the "T" [illegible] h." Lemaire decided that the scratched away words between the Hebrew *T* and *h* were, translated, "Temple of Yahweh," and that the tiny hole through its base meant that the pomegranate was likely once an ornament for a small priest's scepter, used in Solomon's Temple.

According to the Bible, King Solomon built a fantastic temple in Jerusalem around 1000 BCE. Lined with gold, it housed the Ark of the Covenant, the container for God's written word to mankind. The Babylonians sacked the Temple in 800 BCE and burned it to the ground. No archaeological evidence of the Temple has ever been found. Also referred to as the "First Temple," Solomon's Temple was later replaced with what is known as the "Second Temple"—the remains of the platform that once supported this temple are known as the Wailing Wall or the Western Wall—Judaism's holiest place. Built by Herod, the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE and never rebuilt. Muslims built a mosque there in the early days of Islam, the Al Aqsa Mosque, Islam's second-holiest place. The site is now one of the most hotly contested bits of turf in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Any discoveries relating to the First Temple are enormously important not only for historians but also for religious Christians and Jews who seek verification of biblical history. They are also significant to Israeli nationalists, who are eager to lay permanent claim to all of Jerusalem, and especially what they call the Temple Mount.

Lemaire's pomegranate interpretation was thus both politically and archaeologically groundbreaking. No one had ever found an archaeological object linked to the First Temple. Lemaire's new interpretation instantly increased the value of the pomegranate, which was initially offered for sale for \$3,000. An anonymous donor for the Israel Museum ultimately paid \$550,000 to acquire the piece. By 2002, it had been on display at the museum for nearly twenty years, with a placard in both English and Hebrew explaining its significance.

After finding the pomegranate, Lemaire continued prowling the antiquities shops and collections of Israel, hoping against hope to stumble upon another rare piece. A man of science, he knew that the likelihood of finding another object of such great importance was slim. Most biblical scholars work all their lives and never unearth a single sherd (the archaeological term for a bit of broken pottery) or decipher a single phrase that interests the world beyond the academy. But Lemaire was deeply ambitious. Having tasted the fruits of spectacular discovery once, he longed to experience it again. When he spotted the picture of Golan's "James" ossuary, it is unlikely that his heart actually skipped a beat because Lemaire is a rather cool man, but he certainly felt an unusual amount of excitement. To find an ossuary with the names Jesus, Joseph, and James on it was almost too good to be true. Almost. But quite possibly it was both good and true.

Lemaire asked to see the ossuary itself, and Golan took him to another location in Tel Aviv, a warehouse where he stored antiquities that he didn't display in his Tel Aviv apartment. There, Lemaire examined the small, simple limestone box—twenty inches long, twelve inches high, and ten inches wide, decorated on one side with a small rosette and on the other with a scratched inscription—and found it much like the thousands of other such boxes around Jerusalem dating from the first century CE.

Back in France, armed with pictures of the box, the French scholar set to work researching the probability that the James on the box could be the New Testament James who was the leader of the Jerusalem branch of the early Christian Church, a martyr who died for his beliefs, and in certain interpretations of the Bible (mainly Protestant, which do not accept the Catholic dogma of the perpetual virginity of Mary) was the blood brother of Jesus Christ. He based his interpretation that it was the James on statistical calculations, which were in turn based on assumptions about the number of adult males living in Jerusalem during the ninety years when *ossilegium* was common. He determined that only twenty men in that time period who also had a father named Joseph and a brother named Jesus could have been named James. The clincher was that on only one other ossuary ever studied was a brother mentioned—indicating to Lemaire that the James whose bones had lain in this ossuary had had a very important brother indeed. Lemaire decided to date the box itself to 62 CE, the year the biblical James died.

When Lemaire told Golan that he wanted to publish a paper on the ossuary in French, Golan urged him to publish in English, “because,” Lemaire recalled, “he doesn’t read French.” Lemaire chose to publish his first article about the ossuary in the popular English language magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review*—the same magazine that had published his interpretation of the ivory pomegranate twenty years prior.

Months later, when Lemaire’s article was finally published, news of the box was touted in the world media as the first material proof of the existence of Jesus Christ—a man with a brother. The box was shipped to Canada and exhibited at a major museum with great fanfare. The faithful lined up by the tens of thousands to stand before it in silent prayer. A book was written. A documentary was filmed. By then, the saga that the Israeli police described three years later as

“the fraud of the century,” involving a series of increasingly brazen archaeological forgeries designed to fool scholars and religious believers, was well under way.



I FIRST READ about the curious case of the forged biblical artifacts in the *New York Times* around Christmas 2004. A story buried in the international section reported that Israeli police had indicted four men (they would soon add a fifth), accused of enhancing existing ancient artifacts, or fabricating entirely new ones, to make them appear to prove Bible stories. I am a nonreligious person, ever more mystified and fascinated by the religious mania erupting in my generation. The news from Israel intrigued me. My own religious training was nonexistent. As a child of the 1960s, I was weaned on a *laissez-faire* “figure it out when you grow up” attitude toward religious belief. What I know of believers comes mainly from the Mennonites who proselytized our family when we lived in a farmhouse in Michigan in the 1960s and 1970s. From them, I learned that there are some very decent people who live every waking minute in a state of unshakable faith in an otherworldly power. But their best efforts to lead us down that path were never sufficient to turn me into a believer.

As I read the article about the forgery scheme, I wondered what manner of men would deviously prepare objects to feed the desire for proof among people of faith, and why would faithful people—who by definition transcend materiality—want such proof in the first place? Eventually, my curiosity led me into a thriving, if murky subculture—that of the antiquities dealers who specialize in ancient Holy Land artifacts, the scholars who verify them, and the millionaires who collect expensive bits of cracked clay, stone, and bronze with the avidity and obsessiveness of boys collecting baseball cards. My research took me from the penthouses of Tel Aviv

and Fifth Avenue to the barricaded Arab cities of the West Bank, across the void of the Negev Desert, into dusty, sun-baked archaeological sites, and through pristine university laboratories where men and women of science struggle to carve a path of reason through a thicket of ambition, hype, and blind belief. Always, though, I found myself wandering back through the Arab throngs at the Damascus Gate, under the crenellated walls of Jerusalem's Old City, and into the warren of ancient, whitened stone lanes that are ground zero for believers from all three great faiths.

Here, the death match between reason and superstition—monitored by laughing commerce—plays out in a city that for millennia has nurtured the great religions that shape the world in which we live. Here, devout practitioners are everywhere, scurrying hither and yon in black hats and flowing robes and tightly wound headscarves, holy books in hand, trailing prayer beads and crucifixes and shawl fringe, redolent of frankincense and myrrh, observing ancient purity laws, muttering prayers beneath their breaths, adhering to codes that date back a millennium or two or three. Each belongs to a specific group clinging to its own interpretation of God's law and to a man, woman, and child, they exist on the precipice between godless modernity and submission to ancient supernatural instruction. They dare not look a different believer in the eye, for fear of meeting a challenge they cannot possibly walk away from.

Jerusalem seethes with political and theological conflicts involving Orthodox Jews, Muslims, and Christians, Israeli nationalists, Palestinian gunfighters, and atheist scientists, all existing in a framework of machine guns and guardhouse checkpoints, metal street barricades and barbed wire. It is so rich with spiritual history that newly arriving believers who do not first faint, literally kiss the ground and weep. And into this world had stepped an imp of deceit, or so the police alleged.

When I embarked on this project, I thought of it as an exotic crime story, *The Maltese Falcon* meets *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with a little bit of *The Da Vinci Code* thrown in. I had no way of knowing that the story was not only that but also much, much more, and that it would bring me to contemplate the psychological motivations of believers, hucksters, scholars, and police, and the political significance of bits of the past scraped out of limestone dust and dirt on a piece of real estate the size of Vermont—the most bitterly contested and spiritually prized turf on the planet.



BEFORE I KNEW any of that, though, I found myself inside Mousaieff's sunset-daubed apartment on an October evening in 2006. He was not easy to reach by phone, though journalists had reported from his aerie, and I had been led to know that this was a very special occasion, engineered for me by a filmmaker friend of his who shares the old man's interest in Kabbalah—the mystical, New Age branch of Judaism to which Madonna now adheres. In requesting the interview over his cell phone in Hebrew, the filmmaker had used one word in English that I understood—"sexy"—with a broad wink and devious grin in my direction. Apparently, it worked.

The old man ushered us in cheerfully, speaking heavily accented English, frequently lapsing into Hebrew, and wearing a boyish striped polo shirt. He had lively brown eyes and a few wisps of gray hair combed over his liver-spotted pate. The apartment, atop a luxury beachfront hotel, was painted ultraminimal white, the better to display the hundreds of ancient objects scattered on the walls, floors, and built-in, museum-style vitrines. Over the course of a long evening, interrupted frequently by the arrival of men and women who were never introduced and who simply seated themselves around the long rectangular table and waited for Shlomo to take them aside

and do business, the old man told me his life story. As he spoke, his eyes sometimes rolled back, like a man in a trance, hypnotized by his own tapestried past.

The Jerusalem into which he was born, in the 1920s, was an Arab city of mosques, camels, and Bedouins, little electricity, and few cars. It was a city in which religious Jews had begun to settle in the past fifty years. The idea of Zionism—the return of the Jews to Palestine—was just gaining hold in Europe, but Shlomo was not of European stock. He was the eldest son of a rabbi descended from wealthy Bukharan traders who had been in Jerusalem for five generations. Bukhara is a very old Silk Road city in central Asia—located in what is now Uzbekistan—and Moussaieff’s ancestors had grown rich on precious stones in the caravan trade. Moussaieff’s father was unforgiving and rigid to his twelve children. The dyslexic eldest boy—unable to read the Torah—was a great disappointment to the conservative patriarch, and it was paternal punishment for Shlomo’s inquisitive nature that first set the boy searching for God. One night, his father brought home an oil lamp with a wick that could be turned up and down by a handle. The boy was fascinated, having never seen such a modern device. When his father was not looking, he turned the wick higher and higher until the glass lamp suddenly exploded.

“I get punishment,” Moussaieff recounted, eyes closed. “A beating nearly to death!” Between blows, his father threatened God’s wrath as well as his own. “‘God will punish you, burn you! Like this!’ And he take me to the kitchen and he put my hand in the little stove. Until now I have the sign of this burning on my hand.”

That night, Shlomo ran away from home and slept in one of a series of cave tombs, called the Sanhedrin Caves. Ancient Jewish sages were supposedly buried there, and the sites are holy to Orthodox Jews of Jerusalem (who have installed fluorescent lights and prayer nooks inside them today). In the 1920s, the caves, which



still smell faintly of death, were home to hundreds of Arab urchins. Young Moussaieff joined them. In that place, he says, he began his search for both relics and God. “This [burning of his hand] was God’s work! And I wanted to look for this god, I want to speak with him. I went to look for god. He burned me.”

Like any real Jerusalemite, the homeless boy got a proper grounding in all three religions at a young age. Among his temporary shelters were both a synagogue and an Arab reform school—where he was sent after being arrested for looting coins and metal from tombs. He also spent time in a Christian hospital, where nuns periodically cured his worms and deloused him. At the synagogue, Moussaieff memorized the Torah. At the Arab reform school, he learned not only Arabic, but memorized the Koran. And from the nuns, he learned the New Testament. Moussaieff considers himself an “Oriental Jew” and is proud of his Arabic connections. His Arabic has obviously served him well in business, but he seems to feel a special kinship with Arabs also because of his childhood experiences. “Arab boys never went to school. European Jews regarded the Oriental Jews exactly like Arabs. They didn’t send them to school or give them an education. And I couldn’t learn, so I was just like the Arab boys.”

Shlomo started collecting old coins from the unguarded tombs that dot the hills at the city’s edge, selling the small treasures for food. He has saved one of the coins from those days— an ancient Jewish coin with a menorah on it—and he pulls it out and meditates on it sometimes because it reminds him of a period of deprivation and the beginning of his seeking God. “My motivation was always to see God. I wanted to see who punished me. I said, ‘I am not going to believe until I can find God.’” He paused, took a drag off his cigarette, then continued, “God you have to find. If you don’t know what he looks like, look more!”

As a seeker, not a practitioner, he has avidly collected biblical

relics for seventy years. “You won’t like what I tell you,” he responded when I asked him to explain why he collects. “Money buys everything. I use it only to prove the Bible is genuine. I don’t practice religion. Since I got beaten for the sake of religion I don’t practice at all. My religion is in the heart, in understanding the universe. It has nothing to do with these laws: Don’t do this. Don’t do that. But if you know the Bible well, it is a great book. Why? Because to the monotheistic people in the Bible, it never says, ‘I command.’ It says, ‘God commands.’ You see, it’s not the ego motivation. It is about building a society, so life can continue.”

In the course of the evening, Moussaieff frequently retreated into a corner of his apartment to have private discussions with one of the men and women who had arrived alone or in pairs. It took a few of these interruptions, and some discussion with the people who remained, for me to understand what was going on. It turned out that each of them had objects of possible interest to sell to Moussaieff. All were experts of a sort in ancient Near Eastern antiquities. They knew the difference between an ostrakon and a bulla. And they could tell a real Christ-era oil lamp from a fake one at a glance. One woman, originally from Brooklyn, unwrapped an incantation bowl she said was from Iraq. The bowl would be for sale, she said, but she also had “a present” for Shlomo, an antique baby crib from the European Jewish diaspora, circa nineteenth century.

Moussaieff is a voracious collector, and he often makes deals on feel alone. For this reason he is both a shrewd operator and an easy mark. If he likes something, he’ll write a check on the spot. But he’s no fool. He might write a check, and *then* take the object to have it verified by a scholar. Sometimes he will postdate a check for a year, awaiting scholarly verification. But first, he trusts his own instincts about an object, relying on his photographic memory and his seventy-odd years handling bits of Holy Land archaeology. And indeed, he

can recite historical details about any of the thousands of ancient coins in his collection with barely a glance at the object. "I didn't learn this in school," he says. "I had no teacher. Like a computer, I see it in my head. I know the moment I bought it, from whom I bought it, the atmosphere, everything."

The possibility that he might buy forgeries—that his judgment calls might sometimes be off—doesn't bother him unduly. Fakes in the storeroom are a collateral cost of making a collection. "They made fakes twenty-five hundred years ago! A lot of coins were faked. I can make mistakes but I never have a contract. I buy it and—get lost! I have a million on a statue of King David right now. Why do I need a contract? I bought it! I have it! I know I am breaking the law, but I have no other way." This is not to say he is unbothered to discover someone has taken him for \$100,000. He didn't become a billionaire without mastering an arsenal of psychological tools, tools that have made him not a few enemies even among the people who gather at his table and sip his cans of Diet Coke.

Moussaieff sees himself as a man heroically safeguarding biblically significant objects that might otherwise be lost, overlooked, broken, dispersed, or misinterpreted. He has an ambivalent relationship with scholars. He sometimes needs them to verify his instincts, and he has helped finance numerous digs, including, he claims, giving \$200,000 to Columbia University to find Noah's Ark. But archaeologists generally deplore collectors, and Moussaieff doesn't take kindly to being second-guessed. He is suspicious of scholars who warn that his artifacts might be inauthentic. Some he accuses of a kind of secular bias against the Bible itself. "I know I am bound to make a mistake. But the biggest scholars who say these things are fake also say there was no truth in the Bible. They won't say it's real. They will say it's fake. If I were them, I would do the same, because they don't believe. And for me, the most important thing is to prove

the Bible, from the time of the First Temple. You see, here and here and here!” For emphasis he pulled out one of the numerous catalogs of his collection, and jabbed his finger at photographs of ancient scripture, carved in stone.



IT IS NOT A CRIME to buy, sell, or trade antiquities in Israel. Israel is almost alone among what are known in the parlance of cultural heritage experts as countries of origin in allowing the trade; it is the only Middle Eastern country to permit it. One reason for this is that holy relic collection is an integral part of the history of archaeology in Israel. Theology is a cornerstone of the field. The first archaeologists in what was then called Palestine and Syria were pastors carrying the Bible in one hand, and spade and map in the other. Even secular excavators today still get healthy infusions of cash from religious institutions and believers. A significant number of Bible archaeologists are also seminarians, that is, people schooled both in theology and the science of archaeology.

The interaction between Book with a capital *B* and shovel has a long and storied history in the Holy Land. The Byzantine emperor Constantine and his mother, Helena, back in the mists of history, were among the first Christian relic seekers. Helena is credited with locating the site of Christ’s crucifixion in the fourth century CE, a site now known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In the intervening years, Christian pilgrims from Chaucer’s Wife of Bath onward have voyaged to the Holy Land hoping to bring back a piece of something as significant as John the Baptist’s head, or simply—today—a clear plastic amulet containing Jordan River water or a crown of locally grown thorns.

Today, the field known as biblical archaeology is in a state of profound flux, disarray even. Scholars argue about whether the

Bible should be viewed as a historical document, a rough guide to the ancient world, or total fiction. Meanwhile, the number of biblical archaeological “finds” has increased dramatically in the last two or three decades. Since the Six Day War in 1967, Israel’s expanded borders have meant more Western digging, motivated by theology, politics, and science. Where historians seek clues to the puzzle of the ancient world, evangelical Christians seek proof of their literal interpretation of the Bible, and nationalist Israelis want evidence of ancient Jewish inhabitation.

Archaeologists working in Israel, as elsewhere, need money. Wealthy collectors like Moussaieff do donate to digs. Archaeologists who disdain the antiquities trade are uncomfortable with this kind of funding, but they often have no choice. Digs are expensive. It costs tens of thousands of dollars to transport, house, and feed the human labor chains that painstakingly brush dirt away from ancient walls and tombs and sort through tons of sherds seeking the one scrap that holds meaning.

Moussaieff takes a dim view of the scientific pretensions of the scholars who criticize him for buying unprovenanced objects. “I know what an excavation is,” Moussaieff told me sarcastically. “I financed Megiddo.” (Megiddo is a major archaeological site, a pile of succeeding cities dating back millennia, much contested in ancient times between the great civilizations to the north—Babylon and the Hittites—and the Egyptians to the south. It is also the site of the biblical Armageddon, or battle at the end of the world. Tel Aviv University scholars who dug at Megiddo throughout the 1990s say the old collector did donate in the five figures over a period of years.) “Since then, they have no budget. They have students from Germany out there digging, complaining that it’s too hot so they work at night. At night! That’s the time to make love, not to dig! Everywhere, it’s the same thing. I was there! I know! They take children—sixteen,

seventeen, eighteen—out in the sun! They want to enjoy life. They don't want to dig in the heat!"



RATHER THAN RELY ON BORED, randy teenagers and their professors to haul ancient Bible evidence out of the dirt, Moussaieff and most other private collectors rely on a semi-illegal system that begins with an unauthorized digger—usually, an Arab.

Amateur, nonacademic digging, treasure hunting, or looting, is a common enterprise in the Holy Land, and even a profession for some Palestinians. These “excavators” form the bottom tier of the antiquities trade, digging up objects that increase hundredfold and thousandfold in value as they move farther away from their origins. It is not uncommon for some collectors and licensed dealers to step across a military checkpoint, go no farther than a few hundred meters into Palestinian territory, cut a deal with a digger or more likely a middleman, then bring back into Israel an object whose provenance is utterly unverifiable under Israeli law. Usually, though, collectors like Moussaieff rely on one of seventy-five licensed dealers. These dealers—most of them Israelis, a few Palestinian—are officially licensed by the government to deal in the ancient objects. They pay a fee and submit to a background check for the privilege of the license, and they agree to tell the authorities when and where they acquired their collections, and who is buying their pieces.

Palestinian dealers have shops along the narrow lanes in Jerusalem's Old City, while Israelis keep their concerns near the big hotels in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. But each is recognizable by a glass front crammed with all the flotsam and jetsam of the Holy Land's storied past the owner can fit into display—Byzantine crosses, medieval Islamic swords, Roman glass and coins, Christ-era oil lamps. Israeli

authorities estimate that 90 percent of the stuff in the shops is fake, but that warning doesn't stop tourists or collectors from buying.

The biggest licensed dealer in Israel, an individual Moussaieff relied on much in recent years, is a man named Robert Deutsch. The Romanian-born son of Holocaust survivors who emigrated to Israel in 1963, Deutsch is a dealer with an unusual academic pedigree. He studied archaeology and dug at Megiddo—to the horror of the traditional archaeologists in the department—and eventually held an adjunct university teaching job as well. His twice-yearly antiquities auctions involve almost all the dealers in Israel.

I met Deutsch in his Jaffa shop on a summer's day in 2007. Sunlight winked off the Mediterranean a few blocks away, and sparkled blindingly on the white concrete plaza in the new visitors' park near Jaffa's Old City. Now a suburb of Tel Aviv, Jaffa has a long and rather macabre history. An ancient port town, it was the scene of ferocious historic battles as armies fought their way up and down the coast. As recently as 1800, a French massacre of Ottoman Turks left so many dead that visitors reported the stench of carnage still hung over the area three years later. In 2007, however, only a small, underground, and blissfully air-conditioned museum commemorated this grisly history. Deutsch's shop is located on one of the steep and narrow old lanes lined with pricey antiques shops and French restaurants. Farther on, vendors sell cheap collectibles at outdoor stalls in an open-air flea market.

Deutsch calls his emporium an "archaeological museum." His door is plastered with the logos of at least a dozen credit cards, and the sign hanging above it reads Licensed to Sell Ancient History. Deutsch operates as a clearinghouse of sorts, running an annual auction from a Tel Aviv hotel, mediating deals between collectors and other dealers for commission.

A tall, lumbering man with great goggles of aviator-style glasses that magnify his already large blue-green eyes, Deutsch had a hang-dog look about him when I sat down across from him at his desk in a room filled with vitrines organized by era and floor-to-ceiling shelves of books on archaeological arcana. By the summer of 2007, he had been on trial for three years already, and was a defendant in not one but two trials involving what the Israeli authorities charged were illegal business practices, fraud, and the sale of stolen objects. After three years in court defending himself against charges that he denied, he was understandably embittered at having had to keep paying expensive lawyers and live in legal limbo while his career and reputation have suffered.

The son of a dentist, born in 1951 in Romania, Deutsch has been involved in the antiquities trade since his college years. In his late thirties he decided to go back to school and earn advanced degrees in archaeology and epigraphy from Tel Aviv University. Deutsch's presence at the Archaeology Department was always controversial. When he was snared in the forgery case, the university swiftly severed its ties with him.

Deutsch fell a long ways. A confidant and friend of Moussaieff's, who had published books and articles about the old man's collection, Deutsch lost his patron's trust—and his professional and academic reputation—in one day.

Although he denied the main charge of knowingly selling fake ostraca (inscribed bits of ancient pottery) to Moussaieff, Deutsch was not inclined to explain to an outsider exactly where he got his objects, how he verified their authenticity, and how he conducted his business.

The biblical archaeology trade is clannish, a bit brutish, and very murky. Everyone knows everyone else's dirty laundry, and airs it when convenient. Literal blackmail is a job hazard—and a tool of the trade. If an Arab looter/excavator asks too much for an object,



a collector or dealer need only threaten to turn him in to the Israeli authorities to get a better bargain. Similar threats work all the way up the food chain. To move his objects in and out of the country, Moussaieff employs a Byzantine process involving diplomats, corrupt government officials, and customs officials with sticky palms.

None of the Bible archaeology dealers I interviewed ever answered a question straight, and Deutsch was no different. They are a breed of men (all the dealers I met were male) able to talk for hours about antiquities arcana, waxing on about vendettas being run against them by other dealers, greedy collectors, or the Israeli antiquities police, and the incompetence and corruption in those official ranks. But while they scrupulously avoided describing their own methods of acquiring objects in any detail, they were often happy to reveal one another's tricks of the trade.

When I met with Deutsch, I had already interviewed a number of dealers in Jerusalem. I was becoming used to their oblique, sideways method of talking, their ability to change the subject seamlessly, and cast aspersions on fellow dealers' honesty and integrity. They were never reluctant to rat one another out. Thus, in my first meeting with him, I was not surprised Deutsch was eager to tell me how he'd been betrayed by Shlomo Moussaieff, a man to whom he had sold hundreds of thousands—probably millions—of dollars' worth of objects over the years.

Deutsch now said of the billionaire collector, "I never was good friends with him because he is an impossible man. He's not normal. He's not a normal man. My wife always told me, 'Why do you have to stand this man? He's such an ugly man, ugly in his behavior.' And I said, 'I want to publish his stuff!' But he can tell you, 'You are the best,' and after you leave the apartment, he will tell someone else, 'He just stole some coins from me.' And after two days he finds the coins and then never tells people I didn't steal his coins. This kind of

stuff. For him to talk about somebody or destroy his name is nothing.” Deutsch snapped his fingers angrily. “It’s a play. It’s a game.”

Even Oded Golan—who was never a licensed dealer and who insisted that he never sold an object “outside Israel”—had problems with Moussaieff’s business style. He accused him of inflating prices. “Moussaieff is the most suspicious person in the world, because he doesn’t know how to behave with the dealers, and dealers are paying it back to him in the same coin. Moussaieff crushes the dealers, if he can. You see, if they ask \$1,000, he offers them \$100. It’s not a way to make a deal, you know. And if he doesn’t succeed to lower the price 50 or 60 percent, he doesn’t buy the antiquity even if it’s worth five times more. And of course, most of the dealers in the world know it now. They figured it out, maybe fifty years ago. So everybody offers antiquities at five times more than they are worth, knowing he will try to bring it down! So you see it’s a ridiculous situation. Now he cannot understand who is really giving him the real price and who is giving him the suspicious price in order to try to bring it down. That’s the world. That’s Moussaieff!”

In a life as long as his, in a business as fraught with miscreants as the antiquities trade, it is not surprising that Moussaieff picked up enemies along the way. But they continued to flock to his table, and he always welcomed them even if he saw glints of envy or resentment in their eyes, so profoundly did he want first dibs on the rare piece.



BASED ON LEMAIRE’S FRESH INTERPRETATION, the James Ossuary, as it was soon to be named, had enormous meaning for Christians and the history of Christianity. The ossuary now had the potential to become at least as important as the Shroud of Turin in the pantheon of objects that provide physical proof for biblical stories, and in this case, the biggest story—the existence of Jesus Christ. Quite soon

after he saw the ossuary, Lemaire tipped off his friend, the editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, to the find. *BAR*, as it is known, is an American popular journal with a subscription base of a quarter of a million lay readers and amateur biblical archaeologists, many of whom are evangelical Christians interested in seeing their beliefs verified with material objects. *BAR* is not peer reviewed like an academic journal, but scholars do publish in it, partly because it gives them a wider audience than the more respected scholarly journals.

The founder and editor of *BAR* is a Washington, D.C., lawyer named Hershel Shanks, who has been publishing popular news of biblical archaeology since the mid-1970s, through his nonprofit organization, the Biblical Archaeology Society (BAS). BAS also operates scholar-guided Holy Land tours, has a Web site, offers stateside seminars, and sells books and advertising.

Shanks is an odd duck—lawyer, crank, P. T. Barnum, and Indiana Jones all rolled into one man. *New Yorker* writer David Samuels compared him to “a Saul Bellow character.” He spends a good part of the year globe-trotting with major names in the world of biblical archaeology. At home, he reports to work at his own offices in upper northwest Washington in a brown leather explorer’s hat and leather jacket, a somewhat incongruous kit for a septuagenarian. A curmudgeon, known for bringing lawyerly argumentativeness to scholarly gatherings, Shanks attends all the major biblical archaeology conferences, invited or not, and always times the annual conference of his own Biblical Archaeological Society to take place side by side with annual meetings of the official scholarly societies, the Society for Biblical Literature and the American Society for Oriental Research, the latter an organization of archaeologists and scholars who study the ancient Near East. Among the real scholars, the American lawyer is something of a joke, but they take him seriously insofar as he can deliver their papers to a wide audience and pay them handsome

fees—including travel expenses—to lead tours around areas of the world to which they are deeply attached.

Shanks is always on the lookout for the rare find, and he knows well how to make the most out of a potential piece of news. He was the first, for example, to publish word of the famous pomegranate two decades prior. He is deeply committed to supporting the private antiquities trade and philosophically inclined to believe that not to do so results in the loss of history. He often notes that most of the Dead Sea Scrolls, widely considered to be the most significant archaeological discovery of the twentieth century, were looted and purchased from middlemen. Yet no one suggests the scrolls are forgeries.

When Lemaire told him about the James Ossuary, Shanks was so excited that he personally arranged for two researchers at the Geological Survey of Israel to authenticate the ossuary's inscription as well. The main business of the Geological Survey, or GSI, is mapping Israeli mineral and water resources. But certain scientists employed by the GSI were known to have an interest in private collections and Shanks knew they would be happy to examine an important but unprovenanced find. The geologists examined the James Ossuary's patina—the natural coating that builds up on objects over time. After a single day of tests, the geologists said it was consistent with two-thousand-year-old stone and didn't appear to contain any modern materials.

Shanks then turned to the task of getting backup for Lemaire's epigraphic conclusion, and first on his list was Ada Yardeni. According to Ada's datebook, on September 15, 2002, Susan Singer, an associate of Hershel Shanks, called to invite her to a dinner with Hershel in Jerusalem in two weeks. Ada knew Shanks "superficially," she says, and had written occasionally for *BAR*. The invitation flattered her, and she accepted. They met at a Jerusalem restaurant, joined by a classics professor from Hebrew University.

"Hershel saw me before we went inside and he said, 'You know, Ada,

we have something very important to talk about.' I thought he meant the stone tablet. I said, 'Well yes, I think I know what you mean.' And then he said, 'Ya'akov.' And I said, 'Why Ya'akov?'" She didn't think of the ossuary, because, she says, she didn't know Jesus had a brother named James. Then Shanks told her about the ossuary, and insisted it was very important. "He tried to pressure me to go to Oded and draw the original. I said, 'I can't leave my mother. My mother is ninety-five, and I cannot leave her alone to go to Tel Aviv.' And he said, 'Look, it is important.'" Shanks offered to pay her cab fare to Tel Aviv and back.

Ada reluctantly agreed, but went home after the dinner feeling troubled. "I couldn't sleep. Somehow it bothered me. I had a bad feeling about the whole thing—I don't know why. My intuition is very, very strong. And I had a really bad feeling about the whole thing. I phoned Oded Golan Sunday morning and asked him if I can come to see this ossuary. And he said I should come the same day, in the afternoon, because he was going to put the ossuary in Shanks's magazine soon."

She left her aged mother at home, and took a taxi for the one-hour trip from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. Shanks and Golan were waiting for her at Golan's apartment when she arrived about three in the afternoon on Sunday, September 29.

"I saw three ossuaries. He put them in the kitchen, where I could really see them under the window where the best light is, because his apartment was very dark. I don't know why, but it was dark and gray. Not nice! Beautiful piano. But I didn't like his apartment."

Oded and Shanks watched as Ada took tracings onto her paper from the ossuary. As soon as she'd finished, Shanks hurried her out the door. "I drew all this, and then Shanks immediately took me to a Xerox machine. We took a taxi to the shop. And in the taxi he asked me, 'Ada, do you like adventures?' I said, 'No, I'm not particularly fond of adventures.'" She laughed at the memory. "This was strange you know? Strange."