THE SEARCH FOR SACRED TEXTS

“If you are dealing with antiquities, you must get your hands dirty.”

EITAN KLEIN
ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY
IN THE CLOAK-AND-DAGGER WORLD WHERE RELIGION MEETS ARCHAEOLOGY, SCIENTISTS, COLLECTORS, AND SCHEMINGERS ARE RACING TO FIND SACRED TEXTS.

The Bible Hunters
Dominican Father Jean-Michel de Tarragon studies archival photographs at the French Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. Its scholars led the search for the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest biblical texts ever discovered.

PREVIOUS PHOTO
Hand copied around 1400, a Wycliffe New Testament on exhibit at a Christian theme park in Florida gets white-glove treatment. English theologian John Wycliffe championed translating the Bible from Latin into the common language, an innovation church officials denounced.

VAN KAMPEN COLLECTION ON DISPLAY AT THE HOLY LAND EXHIBITION, ORLANDO, FLORIDA
A conservator at the Israel Antiquities Authority prepares a fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls for display. Seen here upside down, the fragile document is being placed between layers of mesh that are first pinned, then sewn together around the edges of the fragment.
The heat is merciless among the barren hills of the Judaean desert near the shore of the Dead Sea.

But it’s mercifully cool inside the cave where Randall Price lies on his stomach, staring at the crevice where just yesterday he discovered a 2,000-year-old bronze cooking pot.

“This cave was robbed by Bedouins maybe 40 years ago,” explains Price, an American archaeologist and research professor at Liberty University in Virginia. “Fortunately for us, they didn’t dig very deep. Our hope is that if we keep digging, we hit the mother lode.”

Anyone who’s heard of these famed caves near the ancient Jewish settlement of Qumran knows what mother lode Price has in mind. In 1947 young Bedouin goat herders peered into a nearby cavern and made one of the biggest archaeological discoveries of the 20th century:

Searching for more Dead Sea Scrolls, Israeli archaeologist Oren Gutfeld peers into a cave where he found bits of ancient parchment. “It was blank,” he says, “but next time maybe it won’t be.”

seven rolled parchments covered in ancient Hebrew script, the first of the famous Dead Sea Scrolls. Members of the separatist Qumran sect likely stashed the scrolls in the cave around A.D. 70, as Roman troops closed in to crush the First Jewish Revolt. Hundreds more scrolls eventually would come to light. Dating as far back as the third century B.C., they are the oldest biblical texts ever found.

The Qumran caves are in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, and many people consider Price’s work illegal under international law. But that hasn’t dissuaded him or the dig’s Israeli director, Oren Gutfeld of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, from pursuing a research agenda derived from an earlier, equally controversial exercise.

In 1993, after signing the Oslo Accords—which provided a framework for returning disputed territories to Palestinian control—the Israeli government launched Operation Scroll, an urgent survey of all the archaeological sites the country potentially stood to lose. The inventory was rushed and cursory, and the surveyors found no new scrolls. But they mapped dozens of caves that had been damaged by earthquakes and possibly overlooked by Bedouin treasure hunters. The one cataloged as Cave 53 caught the attention of Price in 2010 and later Gutfeld, who described it as a “juicy” cave. “They found lots of pottery from a range of periods of time—from early Islamic to Second Temple to Hellenistic,” he says. “There’s
Conservator Emma Nichols examines a Hebrew text at the Cambridge University Library, which houses some 200,000 Jewish manuscripts discovered at a medieval synagogue in Cairo.
Licensed by the Israeli government to sell antiquities, Khader Baldun visits a storage room below one of his family's shops in Jerusalem's Old City. To help stop the sale of looted objects, dealer must now register artifacts in a digital database. But secrecy persists, one seller says: 'It's an old custom not to mention names or sums.'
reason to hope something else might be there."

Two years ago, during their initial probe of Cave 53, the archaeologists discovered a small roll of blank parchment and broken storage jars—tantalizing evidence that the cavern might have housed scrolls. Today, after nearly three weeks of digging, their finds are arrayed across a folding table outside the cave. They include Neolithic arrowheads, an obsidian blade from Anatolia, and the bronze cooking pot. But no scrolls. And so the digging continues.

**E N COUNTER I N G S E R P E N T S** and other dangers—the burning deserts, blinding sandstorms, armed bandits—went with the territory trodden by pioneering Bible hunters of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Egypt was among their favorite destinations; its dry climate is ideal for preserving fragile manuscripts. Many of the trailblazers were studious scholar-adventurers, and accounts of their travels and discoveries conjure up images from *Raiders of the Lost Ark.*

Take, for example, Konstantin von Tischendorf, a German scholar who in 1844 made a long, dangerous journey through Egypt's Sinai desert to the world's oldest continuously inhabited Christian monastery, St. Catherine's. There he encountered "the most precious biblical treasure in existence." It was a codex—an ancient text in book form instead of a scroll—dating to the mid-fourth century. Known today as the Codex Sinaiticus, it's one of the two oldest Christian Bibles surviving from antiquity, the oldest complete copy of the New Testament.

The discovery made Tischendorf "the most famous and most infamous textual scholar in history," notes biographer Stanley Porter. According to his own account of events, Tischendorf first spotted some pages from the codex in a basket of old parchments the monks planned to burn. He rescued the pages and requested permission to take the entire codex back to Europe for study. The monks, alerted to its value by the foreign scholar's excitement, would part with only a few dozen pages.

Tischendorf made the arduous trek back to St. Catherine's in 1853 but left with little to show for it. He returned a third and final time in 1859 after securing the sponsorship of the Russian tsar, considered the "defender and protector" of the Eastern Orthodox Church, to which the Sinai monastery belongs. This time Tischendorf's luggage was paid off. After signing a pledge to return the codex once he'd made exact copies, he delivered it to his royal patron in St. Petersburg.

From there the chain of events becomes tangled in controversy and accusations of imperialist power plays. The monks eventually "donated" the codex to the tsar, but whether they did so willingly or under pressure is still debated. In any event, the priceless Bible remained in St. Petersburg until 1933, when Joseph Stalin's government, facing financial crisis and famine, sold it to the British Museum for the equivalent of nearly a half million U.S. dollars, to be torn apart and sold for various vellums. But the vast majority of texts from Christianity's earliest centuries were written on papyrus, the paper of the ancient world.

In 1896 Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, rookie archaeologists from Oxford University, were prospecting for artifacts at the long-buried Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus when they made an extraordinary find: an ancient garbage dump filled with layer upon layer of papyri. Over the next decade Grenfell and Hunt dug through a papyrus-filled pit some 30 feet deep and shipped half a million documents back to Oxford. Researchers have been painstakingly piecing together the fragments ever since.

Most of the papyri are the prosaic paperwork of everyday life: bills, letters, tax assessments, a deed from the sale of a donkey. But about 10 percent of the hoard is literary, including works by classical authors such as Homer, Sophocles, and Euripides, and some of the most dramatic finds—such as lost gospels that didn't make it into the New Testament—have shed light on the formative years of the Christian faith. And more than a century after their discovery, thousands of fragments have yet to be studied closely. How many revelations await in those many boxes of ancient trash is anyone's guess.

**F O R C L O K - A N D - D A D G E R D R A M A ,** the Dead Sea Scrolls trump all other biblical discoveries. According to one version of the story, the Bedouin goat herders sold the seven parchments they'd found to two antiquities dealers in Bethlehem. A scholar from Jerusalem acquired three of the scrolls following a clandestine meeting through a barbed wire fence. A dealer named Khalil Iskander Shahn, also known as Kando, sold the four remaining scrolls to a Syrian archaeologist in Jerusalem, who reportedly paid the equivalent of $250. In 1949, spooked by the Arab-Israeli War, the bishop smuggled the scrolls to the United States in hopes of selling them to a museum or university. After getting no (Continued on page 69)
THE BIBLE'S STORY

CONSTRUCTING THE CANONS

The "divine library" is the work of more than 35 authors spanning at least a millennium. Determining which writings should be included in the official canon of holy scripture took hundreds of years.

OLD TESTAMENT

Hebrew Scriptures are written. Agreements on authoritative books take several more centuries.

NEW TESTAMENT

The Apostles decree at the Jerusalem Council that obeying Jewish ceremonial law isn't essential for non-Jewish followers of Jesus.

The Council of Laodicea (in modern Turkey) rules that only texts confirmed to be Scripture can be used in worship.

The Council of Hippo (in modern Algeria) issues a list of the 27 books of the New Testament to use today—at canon.

MANUSCRIPT EVOLUTION

For thousands of years sacred Scripture was laboriously copied character by character. Tradition and location influenced what materials were used.

SCROLL

Hebrew Scriptures were copied onto scrolls of animal skin parchment or occasionally, papyrus. Synagogues today continue to use handwritten scrolls.

Early codices

Early Christian texts were written mostly on papyrus and bound into single- or multi-quire codices, often with one column of text per page.

Multiple quires

Later codices

Parchment grew more popular in the fourth century. Manuscripts tended to be larger, longer, and starting in the fifth century, ornamented.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

The translation and distribution of the Bible in English has been a key aspect of its spread and influence.
SCRIPTURE/shared

Jews and Christians share many sacred writings, but Jews don’t regard the New Testament as Scripture. Neither Jews nor Protestants recognize the books of the Apocrypha as Scripture.

OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS

The 24 books of the Hebrew Bible are arranged in Christian Old Testament groups:

- Pentateuch: The five books
- Historical: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings
- Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel
- Writings: Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon
- Wisdom: Ecclesiastes, Job, Song of Songs
- New Testament Books
- Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
- Acts: History of the early church
- Epistles: Letters of Paul, John, and others
- Revelation: Apocalyptic visions

A variety of images, as well as gold leaf, were used to illustrate Illuminated text.

APOCRYPHAL BOOKS

These texts are considered parts of the Old Testament by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, where they are referred to as Neo-Testamental books.

NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS

Protestants, Roman Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox accept the same New Testament canon. Other Orthodox sects may use a slightly different order or selection of books.

DIGITAL REVELATIONS

Powerful imaging tools are enabling researchers to see inside scrolls too fragile to unroll and recover texts too faint to see, making thousands of invaluable manuscripts readable again.

READ THE ASHES

Computer scientist Brent Seales devised software to virtually unfold a charred scroll discovered decades ago at the site of En-Gedi in Israel.

1. A CT scanner reveals the scroll's internal structure in thin slices. Bright spots are detected points of charring.

2. Using the CT data, software creates a 3D model of the scroll and its layers to enhance faded texts.

3. Software sorts the density values to produce a sharper rendering of the text.

4. The 3D model and text data are mapped to a plane to create a digitized 2D image.

5. Repeating the process for five images reveals 3D lines from the Book of Leviticus. Dated to the third or fourth century, this is the oldest Hebrew text outside of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

THE BIG REVEAL

Digital archaeologist Todd Hanrheinlen combined two imaging technologies that detect traces of color and texture to dramatically enhance faded texts.

1. Spectral Imaging
   - Core element: Imaging panels
   - Diffuser
   - Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI)
   - White lights
   - Swinging arm

2. RTI lights a manuscript from several angles to show highlights, shadows, and texture, even if ink is quite faint.

3. Spectral RTI merges the images, blending texture and color in a single amplified view.

PHOTOS AND SOURCES: SETH PARNES IMAGES, BRET SEALS. COURTESY THE DIGITAL RESTORATION INITIATIVE, UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY, LEFT COLUMN. HANRHEINLENN, ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY, BOTTOM RIGHT, FOUR.
OLDEST TESTAMENTS
How old are the earliest surviving copies of the stories of Noah's ark, David and Goliath, the birth of Jesus? While the oldest complete Bibles come from the fourth century A.D., many portions of Scripture endure from earlier times. This chart is based on some 400 of the oldest texts, including the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Christian writings, dating from the second century B.C. to the early fourth century A.D.

OLD TESTAMENT
The Hebrew Scriptures; creation to the end of the Israelite kingdoms

The Pentateuch
Legal, moral, and ceremonial code traditionally ascribed to Moses

Genesis (50 chapters)

Creation
Noah's ark
Tower of Babel
Abraham offers Isaac
Moises and the Ten Commandments
Tabernacle

Lev.

Numbers (36)
Moses sends spies to Canaan; they bring back fruit

Deuteronomy (34)
Moses dies on Mount Nebo

Josh.

Joshua (cont.) (24)
Fall of Jericho
Samson
Ruth (4)
1 Samuel (21)
Saul, Israel's first king
David and Goliath
2 Samuel (24)
David, Israel's second king

1 Chronicles (29)
King David
2 Chronicles (56)
Sennacherib of Assyria

Wisdom
Songs, poetry, proverbs, and pastoral teaching

Job (42)
Suffering, Job confers with his wife and friends

Esther (10)
Rebuilding the wall

Ezra (10)
Second Temple

2 Chronicles (cont.)
King Josiah finds the book of the Law

1 Kings (22)
The Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem

2 Kings (25)
The fall of Jerusalem

1 Samuel (cont.)
Timeline of events

1 Chronicles

Ezra

Reconstructed text from other sources

Surviving text

For this I was born

and for this I came into the world, that I might bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice. — Says to him Pilate, “What is truth?” And this having said, again he went out to the Jews, and he says to them, “I do not find in him guilt.”

MAP AREA

Egypt

Lebanon

Israel

Wiltana

(USA)

Emmaus

Nazareth

John 18:37-38

(Direct translation)
From humble fragments of papyrus to lavishly illustrated tomes, biblical texts reflect the eras in which they were created.

Copied in Egypt and dated as early as the second century A.D., this papyrus fragment is among the oldest known surviving texts from the New Testament. Just a few lines in Greek from chapter 18 of the Gospel of John appear on each side.

**Below**

This Arabic translation of the Gospels was published in 1590 in Rome by Ferdinand de' Medici, a wealthy former cardinal, in hopes of converting Muslims to Christianity.

A woodcut depicts the Visitation, when the Virgin Mary goes to see Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist.

**Bottom**

So-called slave Bibles, like this one published in 1681 for the British West Indies, included only selected portions of the Old and New Testaments. References to freedom and escape from slavery were omitted; those encouraging obedience and submission were highlighted.
The entire Bible has been translated into over 700 languages; the New Testament alone can be read in more than 1,500 additional languages.

FIRST ROW
1) The Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, from 1530, translated into English by William Tyndale. 2) Book of hours and Psalter (book of Psalms) from the 1500s. 3) Annotated Bible printed in Strasbourg, France, in 1481. 4) Codex Climaci Rescriptus written in Aramaic in the sixth century, then overwritten in Syriac in the late ninth or early 10th century.

SECOND ROW

THIRD ROW
9) Elotu Indian Bible translated into Wampanoag, 1663, first complete Bible printed in the Americas. 10) Handwritten and illuminated Saint John's Bible, 2013. 11) Seville Bible in Hebrew, 1468. 12) Parchment Ashkenazi Torah scroll, late 13th century.

FOURTH ROW

FIFTH ROW
They found to Kando. His greatest purchase was the nearly 30-foot-long Temple Scroll, the longest of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In 1967, during the Arab-Israeli Six Day War, Israeli intelligence officers seized the Temple Scroll from Kando's home, claiming it as government property. After the incident Kando reportedly started furiously moving his remaining scroll fragments to relatives in Lebanon and later to a bank vault in Switzerland.

In 2009 Steven Green began buying rare Bibles and artifacts at an unprecedented pace, eventually acquiring some 40,000 objects—one of the largest private collections of biblical material in the world. His multimillion-dollar shopping spree inevitably led him to the Kandos' doorstep. (Kando's son William took over the family business after his father's death in 1993.)

"Steve Green came to see me many times," William Kando tells me through a cloud of cigarette smoke the morning we meet in his Jerusalem shop. "He's an honest man, a good Christian. He offered me $40 million for my Genesis fragment. I refused. Some people say it is priceless." Green, through a spokesperson, says Kando set the price at $40 million, and he opted not to purchase it. Instead he bought more affordable scroll fragments.

The merchant offers me more coffee, then fumbles through a ledger. "Here, you can see," he says, pointing to a notation that he had sold seven Dead Sea Scroll fragments to Green in May 2010.

Today the Museum of the Bible has five scroll fragments on display. When I visit the museum a day before its official opening, I notice a sort of disclaimer accompanying the exhibit acknowledging that the fragments might be fakes. Kando indignantly denies that his family sold inauthentic fragments, suggesting that any forgeries must have come from less reputable dealers.

Green, for his part, seems a bit defensive when I ask about his prize acquisitions. "There've been some who've questioned some of our items, but it hasn't been conclusive," he says. "What's their evidence it's fake?" Still, Green concedes, "you would hope it would be different in the biblical world. But as it turns out, like in any other business, there are some shady people just trying to make a buck. All you can do is learn from your mistakes and not do business with them anymore."

---

One hundred tiny microform Bibles flew to the moon with astronaut Edgar Mitchell on Apollo 14 in 1971. The "lunar Bibles" were created by the Apollo Prayer League, NASA employees who prayed for the astronauts' safety. Later some were set in gold and sold to collectors.

MUSEUM OF THE BIBLE, WASHINGTON, D.C.
One of Greece's cannabis busts—importing thousands of clay tablets and other artifacts that were looted and never located—are exact duplicates of the original. The fact is, these artifacts are distributed across the world, in museums and private collections, and there are the original versions. The fact that they're distributed across the world makes it difficult to track their origins.

There are more than 50,000 clay tablets in the British Museum alone. They're valuable for their content, which can include literary works, religious texts, and scientific records. They're also valuable for their condition, which can range from excellent to poor. The condition of the tablets can affect their value, and some tablets may be worth more than others.

The tablets are made from a mixture of clay and water, which is molded into the desired shape. They are then baked in a kiln to harden them. The tablets can be written on with a stylus, which is made from a hard, flat tool.

The tablets are used for a variety of purposes, including recording astronomical data, keeping track of tax records, and recording religious texts. They are also used for playing games, such as the Greek version of chess, and for recording poems and stories.

The tablets are valuable for their historical and cultural significance. They can provide insights into the development of the ancient Greek language, literature, and culture. They can also provide information about the daily lives of the people who used them, including their food, clothing, and religion.

The tablets are also valuable for their artistic and aesthetic qualities. They are often decorated with intricate designs, and some tablets even have inscriptions written on them.

The tablets are also valuable for their rarity. Many of the tablets are unique, meaning that they are the only example of their type. This makes them highly valuable to scholars and collectors.

The tablets are also valuable for their potential for future discovery. As new tablets are discovered, they can provide insights into the history and culture of the ancient Greeks. They can also provide information about the development of the ancient Greek language, literature, and culture.
Billing itself a "living biblical museum," the Holy Land Experience in Orlando features period reenactors and a replica of the Dead Sea Scrolls caves.
what they believe isn’t just a bunch of fairy tales.”

But how good is that evidence? Assuming for the moment that the God of the Bible actually exists and that he somehow spoke to the authors of the ancient biblical documents—do we now what they wrote them? After all, none of their original writings, what scholars call the autographs, have been found. Their words survive only because they were hand copied countless times until the invention of the printing press in the 15th century. And even conservative scholars admit that no two copies are entirely exact.

Few publishers would bet that such questions would produce a national best seller, but that’s what happened in 2005 with the publication of the cleverly titled _Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why_. The book’s author, Bart Ehrman, argues that the “facts” about Jesus set forth in modern Bibles are based on centuries of copies, all of which say different things, so we may not know what the original looked like.

In person, the goateed evangelical turned atheist is even-tempered if subversively caustic. Over coffee near the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he’s a professor of religious studies, Ehrman recites a host of scriptural passages that he views with scholarly suspicion. The last 12 verses of the Gospel of Mark, he says, were likely tacked on many years after the fact, as was the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, foreshadowing Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem.

Many of Ehrman’s assertions are debatable (literally so: he and Wallace have squared off in three public debates), but some scholars agree that Christian scribes deliberately corrupted certain passages over time. The question is one of degree.

“Broadly, I support what Ehrman is saying about this,” says Peter Head, an Oxford scholar who studies Greek New Testament manuscripts. “But the manuscripts suggest a controlled fluidity. Variants emerge, but you can sort of figure out when and why. Now, it’s in the earlier period that we don’t have enough data. That’s the problem.”

The “earlier period” that Head refers to begins with the birth of Christianity in the first century A.D. and concludes in the early fourth century. And while it’s true that more than 5,500 Greek New Testament manuscripts have been found, close to 95 percent of those copies come from the ninth to the 16th centuries. Only about 125 date back to the second or third centuries, and none to the first.

None of these figures rattle Ehrman’s sparring partner Wallace, who considers Ehrman a friend and refers to him by his first name.

“Bart likes to point out that we don’t have any autographs, only copies,” Wallace says. “But the fact is, we don’t have the autographs of any Greco-Roman literature, except possibly one fragment from one classical author.”

Wallace acknowledges that the thousands of New Testament manuscripts contain myriad differences owing to scribes’ errors, but he argues that because scholars have such a wealth of texts to study and compare, they’ve been able to identify those errors and largely recover the original wording. He also points out that an important measure of the trustworthiness of any historical document is its nearness in time to the events it purports to record.

“On average the earliest surviving copies of Greco-Roman literature are half a millennium removed from the time of composition,” he says. “But in the case of the New Testament, the earliest copies are only a few decades after the fact. That’s a huge difference.”

Still, the lack of Christian writings from the first century would seem to be a point in Ehrman’s column—a point Wallace is eager to eliminate. Too eager, perhaps.

**During a Debate**

_Ehrman in February 2012, Wallace dropped a bombshell. A manuscript fragment of Mark’s Gospel had recently been discovered that was authoritatively dated to the late first century—more than a century earlier than the oldest known text from the Book of Mark. It would be the only first-century New Testament document ever discovered, and the earliest surviving Christian text. A study of the ancient manuscript would likely be published in 2013, the Texas theologian said._

The Bible-hunting world went into hyperventilation over Wallace’s disclosure. Who discovered the Mark manuscript? Where was it being kept? Was it on the market? How many millions would it cost to buy? But five years passed, and the document had yet to see the light of day.

I begin making calls in December 2017. A month later I show up at the Sackler Library on the campus of Oxford University, which houses the world’s largest collection of ancient papyri. An Italian woman in a laboratory coat leads me through a secure area. She is Daniela Colomo, a researcher associate at Oxford and curator of the legendary Oxyrhynchus papyrus collection excavated by Grenfell and Hunt around the turn of the 20th century.

In marked contrast to the regal Oxford townscape, the papyrus room containing one of the most vital repositories of biblical texts is a chaotic, fluorescent-lit assemblage of strewed papers, mislaid coffee mugs, and low-tech microscopes. Colomo produces a piece of acid-free paper and places it in the manner of an envelope. A brownish fragment of papyrus, not much bigger than my thumb, lies in the middle. Squinting, hovering a foot above it, I can make out a series of scratches across the ancient scrap.

“This is Mark,” Colomo says. “The date is probably late second century, early third century. We never intended to take an official position, but there were all those blogs being written, and all the rumors. So, because of all the anonymous publicity, we have to publish it soon.”

Colomo and her colleague Dirk Obbink, an American papyrologist and Oxford professor, published their findings last May. The fragment, cataloged as P.Oxy. LXXIII 5345, was among the thousands unearthed by Grenfell and Hunt that had yet to be fully examined. The Egypt Exploration Society, which sponsored the Oxyrhynchus excavation and retains ownership of the collection, issued a statement that reads in part: “This is the same text that Professor Obbink showed to some visitors to Oxford in 2011/12, which some of them reported in talks and on social media as possibly dating to the late first century A.D. on the basis of a provisional dating when the text was catalogued many years ago.”

The buildup and subsequent letdown over the much touted Mark fragment have obscured the actual importance of the discovery. Only two other fragments of Mark from before A.D. 300 are known to exist. Colomo chalks up the frenzy to first-century fever among some researchers who dream of unearthing a Gospel or epistle penned by an Apostle.

“Among the New Testament scholars, particularly in the States, there’s this tendency to look for the earliest documents, hoping to find an autograph from people who met Jesus,” Colomo says. “They tend to date a papyrus very early, using random similarities. This is not scholarly.”

For his part, Wallace has apologized to Ehrman for announcing an unverified find. “I take full responsibility,” he says. “I didn’t vet it properly. It was na"ive on my part.”

It may also be naive, Ehrman says, to expect a single, small fragment to settle the long-simmering debate over the Bible. “Would it change anybody’s mind about anything?” he says. “My answer is, it’s very unlikely.” He has repeatedly said that if you find three or four early manuscripts from different places and they all say the same thing, then you have an argument. I just don’t think that’s likely.”

**Randy All Price**, the Qumran excavator, is also having to come to terms with long odds. In all but the rarest cases, archaeological finds are measured in increments rather than moat lodes. His and Gutfeld’s of team’s students, friends, and family members are wrapping things up in Cave 53 one morning in late January when a shout rings out. Price’s wife, Bevèreem, emerges from a natural chamber, not quite a cave itself, that the team discovered recently. In her hand is a clay object about two inches long.

Price studies it. “Yep,” he slowly murmurs. “That’s a rim.” Meaning: the rim of what might have been a scroll jar. Chances are, whatever else the shed belonged to has long since been carted off by Bedouin. But the Bible that Price reads and believes teaches, above all else, to have faith. And where there are scroll jars...

“Hey, come on out!” he hollers into Cave 53.

“We’ve got some digging to do!”

---

Contributing writer Robert Draper reported on the surveillance boom in the February 2018 issue. Photographer Paolo Verzone is a three-time World Press Photo award winner.

---

74 National Geographic

The Bible Hunters 75