

Excavating Jesus or Inventing a Jesus?
***An Examination of Recent Efforts to Support Historical Criticism of the Gospels with
Archaeological and Sociological Data***

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Introduction

The “Quest for the Historical Jesus” has entered a new and interesting phase. The colored marbles of the *Jesus Seminar*, which were used to vote on what Jesus may or may not have said, are being replaced, or at least supplemented, by the tools and methodologies of the archaeologist. The joining of literary and archaeological forces to study the “Historical Jesus” of course faces potential problems, as John R. Bartlett noted, “the literary scholar has not always understood the limitations of the archaeological evidence, and the archaeologist has not always understood the complexities of the literary evidence.”¹

A recent work that seeks to overcome these problems and present a coherent picture of Jesus, is by the co-chair and founders of the *Jesus Seminar*, John Dominic Crossan, and the

¹ John R. Bartlett, “What Has Archaeology to do with the Bible?” in *Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation*. John R. Bartlett (ed). (New York: Routledge, 1997): 2.

lead archaeologist of the Sepphoris site in Galilee, Jonathan L. Reed.²

In *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Text*, the authors have sought to examine the “ten most important archaeological discoveries and the ten most important exegetical discoveries”³ in a parallel effort to excavate the “real Jesus.” The ten archaeological discoveries listed by Crossan and Reed are as follows:

1. The ossuary of the high priest Joseph Caiaphas
2. The inscription of the prefect Pontius Pilate
3. The house of the apostle Peter at Capernaum
4. The fishing boat from the Sea of Galilee
5. The skeleton of the crucified Yehochanan
6. Caesaria Maritima and Jerusalem: cities of Herod the Great
7. Sepphoris and Tiberias: cities of Herod Antipas
8. Masada and Qumran: monuments of Jewish resistance
9. Gamla and Jodfat: first-century Jewish villages in the north
10. Stone vessels and stepped, plastered pools: Jewish religion⁴

The ten exegetical discoveries listed by Crossan and Reed are as follows:

1. The Dead Sea Scrolls
2. The Nag Hammadi Codices
3. The dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark
4. The dependence of Matthew and Luke on the *Q Gospel*
5. The dependence of John on Mark, Matthew and Luke
6. The independence of the *Gospel of Thomas* from the canonical gospels
7. The Common Sayings Tradition in the *Q Gospel* and the *Gospel of Thomas*
8. The independence of *The Teaching (Didache)* from the gospels
9. The existence of an independent source in the *Gospel of Peter*
10. Papyrus codices and sacred abbreviations⁵

What is interesting is that none of the 10 archaeological discoveries are all that recent⁶; and,

it is both curious why the authors list the Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi Codices as

² John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed. *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Text*. (San Francisco, California: HarperCollins, 2001).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ The discovery of the Caiaphas Ossuary was in November 1990, a little more than a decade prior to the publication of Crossan and Reed’s work, all of the others listed are earlier, some significantly so.

“exegetical discoveries,” and whether the remaining items on the list can in any sense be classified as “discoveries” at all.

This paper will briefly examine the underlying methodology and presuppositions employed by the authors of this work within the larger construct of *Social Science Criticism* in terms of their use of archaeological data, sociological models and their view of Scripture, which both colors and dictates their interpretations and conclusions.

Part One: The Use of Scripture in the Excavation of Jesus

The entire working construct of the author’s is based on what they refer to as “layering.” That is, just as an archaeological site has occupational layers⁷, the gospel accounts themselves are exegetically “layered.” That is the gospel accounts of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the culmination of building, re-building, and building yet again. The example put forth is the comparison of the modern town of Nazareth with the gospel accounts. At Nazareth “twenty centuries of history separate the former from the latter, and layers upon layers of occupational debris are stacked atop the ancient site.”⁸ Regarding the gospel accounts the authors note:

...there is now a massive consensus that the words and deeds attributed to Jesus in our New Testament gospels fall into major layers built successively one up (that is, over, under, around, the through) another. Think of them as, first, the *original* layer, coming from Jesus’ own words and deed in the 20’s; next, as the *traditional* layer, coming from the tradition’s adoption, adaptation, and creation of those materials in the 30’s, 40’s or even later; and, finally, the *evangelical* layer in the gospels we now possess from the 70’s through the 90’s.⁹

⁷ The study and identification of “layers,” (more technically known as *stratum*) known as *stratigraphy*, is a foundational tool in archaeology. For an excellent explanation of stratigraphy and its role in the archaeological method, see John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1991), particularly, 22-27.

⁸ Crossan and Reed, *Excavating*, p. 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36-37 (italics in the original). In this view the original layer would be primarily oral tradition, while

The authors acknowledge that the results historical critical methodology to their understanding of the “layering process” noting the roles of Form Criticism, Source Criticism, Redaction Criticism, and Tradition Criticism. However, they do note, “it is probably source criticism, above all else, that forces and grounds the problem of exegetical layering.”¹⁰ Naturally, it goes without saying that both reject any notion of inerrancy of the text as traditionally understood. As Farnell notes, “dependency [of the gospel writers and their accounts] hypotheses arose as companions of the abandonment of plenary, verbal inspiration of the Gospels.”¹¹

While Crossan and Reed admit that they may not agree on all of the details of “layering”¹² they do agree that the layering model is “crucial for excavating Jesus.”¹³ However, Reed, in another recent book, seems to view the entire historical critical method on which their “exegetical layering” is dependent, with a highly skeptical eye, stating:

With rare exceptions, notably the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls or Nag Hammadi Library well over a generation ago, scholars working on Jesus and Galilee with literary evidence simple introduce new methods or innovative theories to analyze these texts. *The collage of citations is re-shuffled or re-mixed, emphasizing some passages over others, while re-interpreting a few, perhaps in dialogue with other disciplines.*¹⁴

This construct, is built on and a continuation of the work of the *Jesus Seminar*, and particularly reflects the presuppositions of the “seven pillars of scholarly wisdom” as reflected in *The Five Gospels*.¹⁵ In summary, those “pillars” are as follows:

the traditional layer would be the Q Gospel and other sources. To maintain their affirmation of the independence of *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Peter* and the *Didache*, they add the disclaimer, “it is not just a question of being later than an earlier text, but of being directly dependent upon it. Obviously all dependent texts are later, but not all later texts are dependent.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹¹ F. David Farnell, “The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins,” in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*. Robert L. Thomas (ed). (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel, 2002): 294.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 14

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Jonathan L. Reed. *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-Examination of the Evidence*. (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 2002): 214. (italics ours). For further on this work, see our review in *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 13:2 (Fall 2002): 291-94.

¹⁵ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic*

1. An essential distinction exists between the historical (real?) Jesus and the Christ of Christianity
2. The *Synoptic Gospels* (Matthew, Mark and Luke) are to be preferred over the *Gospel of John* as sources for the study of the historical Jesus
3. Markan Priority
4. The *Q-Source*, *Sayings Source* or *Q-Gospel* were used by both Matthew and Luke in the development of their gospel accounts
5. The retreat away from Schweitzer's "eschatological Jesus" to a non-eschatological model of Jesus.
6. The difference between the "oral culture" of the historical Jesus and the "print culture" of later Christianity.
7. That the burden of proof for authenticity for the accounts in the canonical gospels rests on those who claim authenticity, not those who deny authenticity.¹⁶

Birger Pearson (himself no conservative) delivered a stinging assessment of the work of the *Jesus Seminar* and its production of *The Five Gospels*.

A group of secularized theologians and secular academics went seeking a secular Jesus, and they found him! They think that they found him, but, in fact, they created him. Jesus, the "party animal," whose zany wit and caustic humor would enliven an otherwise dull cocktail party—this is the product of the Jesus Seminary's six years' research. In a sense the Jesus Seminar, with its ideology of secularization, represents a "shadow image" of the old "New Quest," with its neo-orthodox theology—and its ultimate bankruptcy.¹⁷

As the co-author of the work in question, Crossan's views on Scripture in general and the gospels in particular are noteworthy. Crossan is a prolific author and has championed the position that the historical or real "Jesus was a peasant Jewish Cynic,"¹⁸ a wandering sort of philosopher who talked about the Kingdom of God, but was "neither broker nor mediator"¹⁹ of that kingdom. The kingdom in Crossan's view consists of "unmediated physical and spiri-

Words of Jesus. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1993): 2-5.

¹⁶ Ibid. Also see Birger A. Pearson, "The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar." *The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity*, The Claremont Graduate School. Occasional Papers #35 (1996): 16.

¹⁷ Pearson, "The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar," p. 43.

¹⁸ John Dominic Crossan. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. (San Francisco, California: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994): 198.

¹⁹ Ibid.

tual contact with God and unmediated physical and spiritual contact with one another.”²⁰

His view of Gospel accounts is rather complex. He would assert that the traditional texts contained in the Bible are essentially fiction, made up by the people who would use the person of Jesus to create the religion now known as Christianity.²¹ In support of that claim he has presented his concept of “layering” and he has been using the analogy of archaeological excavation for his views of the various layers he sees in the text of the gospels for some time.

Discussing historical Jesus research he stated,

Without scientific stratigraphy, that is, the detailed location of every item in its proper chronological layer, almost any conclusion can be derived from almost any object. But although contemporary archaeology knows very well the absolute importance of stratigraphy, contemporary Jesus research is still involved in cultural looting, in attacks on the mound of Jesus tradition that do not begin from any overall stratigraphy, do not explain why this or that item was chosen for emphasis over some other one, and give the distinct impression that the researcher knew the result before beginning to search.²²

While, like his partner Reed, Crossan is indebted to the methodologies of historical criticism, he is likewise dismayed by the lack of a coherent “historical Jesus” that those methodologies have to date presented. He calls the multiple and competing pictures of Jesus thus far presented an “academic embarrassment.”²³ Of course, it can be argued that Crossan’s “peasant Jewish cynic” is simply another in the panoply of “Jesus” that have been developed by this methodology. But Crossan’s views have gone well beyond even the “secularization” that Pearson decried. For Crossan the traditional “liberal” view of the Bible (and the gospel ac-

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 145. In commenting about the passion narratives, Crossan calls them “not *history remembered but prophecy historicized*,” and continues that by prophecy he does not “mean texts, events, or persons that predicted or foreshadowed the future, that projected themselves *forward* toward a distant fulfillment. I mean such units sought out *backward*, as it were, sought out *after* the events of Jesus’ life were already known and his followers declared that texts from the Hebrew Scriptures had been written with him in mind. Prophecy, in this sense, is known after rather than before the fact” (italics in original).

²² John Dominic Crossan. *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. (San Francisco, California: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991): xxviii.

²³ Ibid.

counts) is increasingly a non-viable option. In an interview he stated,

In the case of the historical Jesus, I think you have three options. One is the fundamentalist: everything the Bible says must be taken literally. I call the second option the liberal option: not everything in the Bible need be taken literally; but it fails to tell you where, or what, or when. It defaults on practice, having announced the principle. The third I would be quite willing to call the radical option. It says, if everything in the Bible is not taken literally, what are we talking about that should be, that must be, and what not? I think the liberal option is dying all around us and the options are going to be the fundamentalist option or the radical option.²⁴

Arguing that liberalism can no longer be viewed as a viable mediating position, he continued,

But worse than being a rationalist is being a half-rationalist. Worse than being a fundamentalist is being a half-fundamentalist, and that's where many exegetes and theologians are caught at the moment –halfway between rationalism or secularism, and fundamentalism.²⁵

He concluded the interview by stating, “I have opted for a radical interpretation of the Bible.

Both fundamental and liberal interpretations foreclose the future. What we are going to have

to try and do is work out some much more powerful way of unifying reason and revelation.

That is what I'm interested in doing.”²⁶

Crossan has naturally not been without his critics, even from what would be called the “liberal” side of Christian scholarship. One scholar called his “layering” scheme “trickster-like”²⁷ and another has called his use of material from social science criticism “plagiarism.”²⁸ More conservative scholars (those he would probably call fundamentalists) would likely be more concerned with the practical outworking of his views which relegate to “un-

²⁴ James Halstead. “The Orthodox Unorthodoxy of John Dominic Crossan: An Interview.” *Cross Currents* 45:4 (Winter 95-96): 514.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 530. In the same interview Crossan affirms “inspiration” and “inerrancy” of the Bible, but his explanation of what he means by that is entirely a muddle. He moves inspiration from the authors of the text to the readers of the text.

²⁷ Pearson, “The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar,” p. 13

²⁸ Bruce J. Malina, “Social-Scientific Methods in Historical Jesus Research,” in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*. Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina and Gerd Theissen, ed's. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2002): 4.

historical,” that is fiction, all of the essentials of Biblical Christianity (e.g., the Virgin Birth, the deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection and the second coming). While in the realm of theology Crossan is perhaps to be classified as a universalist,²⁹ in terms Biblical studies his position on the Bible is that of a minimalist or perhaps better a radical minimalist.³⁰ In that position, his collaborator, Jonathan Reed would echo a similar statement:

For the most part, biblical scholarship has been the domain of literary studies and text-centered. The text of the Bible was the primary object of study, and exegesis the chief goal. This near myopic focus on words, perhaps a remnant of Christian and particularly Protestant theology, rendered archaeology biblical studies “handmaiden,” whose role was to assist exegesis or discover new written materials.³¹

For Crossan and Reed then the role of the Scriptures in the quest to “excavate Jesus” is minimal at best, since the text is largely a collection of fictional or error-strewn accounts. Speaking, mainly about Old Testament issues, the comment of the noted archaeologist and theologian G. Ernest Wright still speaks to this issue, “In Biblical faith, everything depends upon whether the central events actually occurred.”³² Bock helpfully pinpoints the issue when he states,

One of the problems in the pursuit of historical Jesus questions is that a knowledge of the scriptural story is either lost or greatly devalued, even though is the Gospel portraits of Jesus that have been the real source of historical impact.³³

With the text of Scripture minimalized, the authors rely more heavily on archaeological data

²⁹ Halstead, “The Orthodox Unorthodoxy,” p. 517.

³⁰ For an excellent summation of the issues of minimalism, particularly as it relates to the Old Testament, but certainly by extension, the New Testament, see William G. Dever, *What Did the Bible Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us About the Reality of Ancient Israel*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001).

³¹ Reed, *Galilean Jesus*, p. 1

³² George Ernest Wright. *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*. Studies in Biblical Theology 8. (London: SCM Press, 1952): 126.

³³ Darrell L. Bock. *Jesus According to the Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2002): 50.

and sociological models to “excavate Jesus.”

Part Two: The Use of Archaeological in the Excavation of Jesus

As previously noted Reed laments that in the past archaeology was the “handmaiden” of Biblical studies³⁴ and demands that archaeology have a much wider role in New Testament studies. He states, “there is a growing need in New Testament scholarship to take account of the archaeological data as a whole by listening to the interpretations archaeologists have to offer and to integrate the archaeological findings in a more sophisticated manner.”³⁵ Again, as already while, Reed views the “literary” constructs of New Testament scholarship with a level of skepticism³⁶ he apparently views the results of archaeological research and the varying social-science critical constructs that under gird his interpretations with a much more optimistic attitude.

The question must be asked, “which interpretations” of “which archeologists” would Reed want to integrate into New Testament scholarship? Given his view of Scripture, certainly not those affirm an inerrant or even a maximalist view of the text. And, of course, therein lays the problem. Speaking of the process archaeological of interpretation Schoville, states,

The surviving remains from antiquity preserve only a tiny fraction of the full picture of ancient life, and even these fragments are mute as they are wrestled from the soil. They speak on through informed, imaginative minds. The drawing of inferences involves the human element . . . so the inferences drawn by an archaeologist are infused with his experiences and philosophy of life. What he is will tint his imagination and influence his judgments of what the evidence suggests . . . Historical reconstructions are necessary, but they are not identical with what really may have been. Hypotheses possess only varying degrees of probability, ranging from certain, to probable, to possible, to improb-

³⁴ Reed, *Galilean Jesus*, p. 1

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁶ Reed, *Galilean Jesus*, p. 214.

able, to impossible.³⁷

Two examples of this problem in *Excavating Jesus* will demonstrate the point. In discussing the residential houses of Capernaum in the New Testament era, the authors (Reed?) makes note of the episode in Mark 2:4 of the type of roof that the men lowered their paralytic friend through. It is noted, based on the archaeological research done (to date) in the area, that the roofs were of a lower economic class, a conclusion based largely due to “the complete absence of roof tiles”³⁸ uncovered in the area. The problem of course is that in the parallel passage in Luke 5:19, Luke mentions that the man was lowered, “through the tiles.” The authors reconcile these passages in the following manner:

A generation later, miles away and a social stratum higher, Luke edits Mark to read that they lowered him “through the tiles” (5:19), a statement inapplicable to Capernaum, but certainly appropriate to Luke’s more urban environment and upper-class audience, while lived under tiled roofs.³⁹

Later in the same section the issue of the synagogue in Capernaum is addressed, the authors denying that there was a Jewish synagogue in town during the time of Christ. The problem is that Luke not only speaks of a synagogue in Capernaum, but mentions in 7:5 that a Roman Centurion had effected the construction of it. This problem is answered in a like manner as the first example, the authors state:

But Luke narrates events from a viewpoint outside Palestine, where Jewish diaspora communities more clearly use this term [synagogue] for an actual structure⁴⁰, and at a much later period, when the classical synagogue structure was developing. Luke, remember was also wrong about the roofs at Capernaum, the synagogue at Nazareth, and the scrolls read by Jesus . . . The issue of a building at Capernaum was surely incidental to Luke, and to speak about the “synagogue of Jesus” at Capernaum has no archaeologi-

³⁷ Keith N. Schoville. *Biblical Archaeology in Focus*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1978): 122.

³⁸ Crossan and Reed, *Excavating Jesus*, p. 83.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83-84.

⁴⁰ The authors argue that references to a synagogue in the Capernaum is not a reference to a building, but rather to the literal meaning of the word of an assembly “gathered together” at some location within the city.

cal credibility.⁴¹

The assertion is made, based on the archaeological data and its interpretation, that Luke erred at various points in his gospel. But what archaeological data is this? It must be remembered that when archaeologists speak of “excavating a site” normally very little of the totality of the site is actually examined. Schoville notes that with few exceptions “seldom more than five percent of a site is excavated today.”⁴² While archaeological work has been going on in the south of Israel, particularly the region in an around Jerusalem for about 150 years, work in Galilee in general and Capernaum in particular is still in its relative infancy. In *Excavating Jesus*, the authors are much too quick to make assertions at the level of certainty based on the current state of research. Their conclusions too, are driven by a combination of a minimalist view of the text combined with the constructs of historical criticism.

One other observation must be made on one of the presuppositions of Crossan and Reed as it relates to the cultural world of the gospel accounts. Speaking on the issue of literacy, they comment about Jesus at length:

But, more important, Luke presumes that Jesus is not only literate [based on the narrative in 4:16-30], but learned. He does not simply “begin to teach” (Mark 6:2), he “stood up to read” (Luke 4:16). Luke, himself a learned scholar,⁴³ takes it utterly for granted, as do many modern scholars, that Jesus was literate and learned. This is very unlikely. The best general work on ancient literacy in the Mediterranean basin concludes about a 5 percent literacy rate. The best specific work on ancient literacy in the Jewish homeland concludes about a 3 percent literacy rate. In that world, as mentioned earlier, literacy was the prerogative of elite aristocrats, trained retainers, and scribal experts. If Jesus was an illiterate peasant, as one would expect from his Nazareth origins, that does not mean he could not think, does not mean he did not know his tradition, and does not mean he could not teach. It just means he did not read. It just means that he was more likely

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 91.

⁴² Schoville, *Biblical Archaeology*, p. 122. See also McRay, *New Testament Archaeology*, p. 22.

⁴³ Who, according to the Crossan and Reed, is apparently wrong in his factual information at least as often as he is correct.

to concentrate on the core of his tradition than on its footnotes.⁴⁴

Two things are at work here. First of all, the sociological assumption made by the authors is that the conflict surrounding Jesus was one of a conflict of world-views. It was the Romanization and urbanization of Israel, particularly Galilee begun by Herod the Great (as typified by his building of Caesaria Maritima) and continued by his son Antipas (as typified by the building of Tiberias and Sepphoris) versus the “Kingdom of God” social justice and personal equity (anti-urbanization) message of Jesus.⁴⁵ If the concept of “exegetical layering” is central and foundational to Crossan’s contribution; this sociological construct of “kingdom” conflict based Herod the Great (Caesaria Maritima), Herod Antipas (Sepphoris), and Jesus (Capernaum) is likewise to Reed.⁴⁶ So, despite the fact that the text of Scripture makes several direct and indirect assertions that Jesus was literate, those are explained away in the labyrinth of “exegetical layering” and the “kingdom” construct is supported. One of the key problems with this type of sociological reconstruction, social-science criticism, or what Mulholland calls, *Sociological Criticism* is:

The sociological approach starts with a presupposition that the text manifests and plays a role in the power games of the sociological context of the text. Such an approach imposes an interpretive grid upon the text which predetermines what sociological context will be seen. The sociopragmatic approach then uses reader-response theories of interpretation which decenter the text from its original context in order to read it as a vehicle for the expression of the reader’s own sociological agenda.⁴⁷

Key here then is the driving concept that beyond the rejection of inspiration and inerrancy, the text is not even a reliable or even objective reporting of truth (propositional or factual), it

⁴⁴ Crossan and Reed, *Excavating Jesus*, p. 30-31.

⁴⁵ Ibid. See the chapter, “How to Build a Kingdom” (51-97).

⁴⁶ See Reed, *Galilean Jesus*, esp., p. 160-69. He also recently lectured at UCLA on this particular subject.

⁴⁷ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., “Sociological Criticism,” in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery, ed’s. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001): 179.

is nothing more than a vehicle of the community by who it was created to further their own ends for power, influence, etc.

Schoville, insightfully notes:

The integrity of the Bible and of its statement of faith is established on the grounds of their own intrinsic merit. But archaeology can and does provide illumination, illustration, and, more rarely, confirmation of biblical statement of fact.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The work being done by those in the field of *Social-Science Criticism* is not really new or unique at all. Serious and thorough exegetes have always sought to bring the full scope of information about the history and social settings of the Biblical eras in order to determine the correct interpretation of any particular passage. And, the ever-expanding knowledge base provided by the disciplines ancillary to exegesis has been invaluable in closing more of the gap between the immediate settings of the original readers and the reconstructions necessary by the modern interpreter.

The difference here is that the tools of the archaeologist are not being used to develop an understanding of the text of Scripture, based on the Scripture itself; but rather, an understanding of the text of Scripture, determined almost entirely apart from Scripture itself. This would be like trying to, some millennia in the future, excavating a baseball stadium and try-

⁴⁸ Keith N. Schoville. *Biblical Archaeology in Focus*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1978): 123.

ing to determine all of what went on in that venue while all the time ignoring an extant copy of the rules of baseball.

Any exegetical methodology that would view demon possession as a “socially accepted way to deal with tension,”⁴⁹ and interprets the exorcisms of Jesus as threatening “a social order in which demon possession was an escape valve”⁵⁰ is clearly disconnected from the centrality of the text itself.

The “Jesus” that such methodologies excavate is not the real Jesus as presented in Scripture but rather an invention by men who have become “futile”⁵¹ in their speculations” (Rom 1:21; Eph 4:17-18). The hollow warning of the editors of *The Five Gospels* is certainly applicable here, “the last temptation is to create Jesus in our own image, to marshal the facts to support preconceived convictions.”⁵²

While their spadework in the backgrounds surrounding culture and life of the Biblical eras will undoubtedly continue to yield valuable insights and information that can be utilized by those who seek to properly interpret Scripture; as long as they continue to be bound by the presuppositions of historical criticism in general, and the *Jesus Seminar* in particular, and a minimalist view of Scripture rather than that of an inspired and inerrant text, their evaluation and interpretations will be of little more value than *The DaVinci Code*⁵³ whose literary genre their works more closely resemble.

⁴⁹ Santiago Gujarró, “The Politics of Exorcism,” in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*. Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina and Gerd Theissen, ed’s. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2002): 165

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁵¹ eˊmataiwꝓqhsan from mataio/w “render futile, worthless; to be given over to worthlessness” (see *BAGD*, p. 495), this word was used as “*invent* a vision of their own” in the LXX Jer 23:16 (see *Liddell and Scott* 9th Edition, p. 1084). Commenting on this phrase in Rom 1:21 Moo states, “It is in the reasonings of people that this futility has taken place, showing that, whatever their initial knowledge of God might be, their natural capacity to reason about God is quickly and permanently harmed.” (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT. [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996]: 107).

⁵² Funk, *Five Gospels*, p. 5.

⁵³ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*. (New York: Doubleday Publishers, 2003).