

Unholy Business: A True Tale of Faith, Greed and Forgery in the Holy Land

by Nina Burleigh
HarperCollins: 2008

Reviewed by Jim West¹

When Joe Zias wrote me a short email to announce a volume that was forthcoming that he thought I would find interesting, I was naturally curious as to the contents. Through the good graces of the publisher I was sent along a prepublication copy and when I started reading it (on a Saturday morning) I simply could not put it down until I had finished it. Burleigh tells the sordid and – in my estimation- disgusting tale of greed gone wild on the back of antiquities. In particular, Israelite antiquities.

When the now infamous James Ossuary first appeared on the pages of the *Biblical Archaeology Review* it looked even to an untrained epigrapher a bit dubious. Indeed, it looked like it had been composed by two separate hands. Rochelle Altman later verified this intuition and the assault was on. Naturally, the editor of BAR, Hershel Shanks, defended, and continues to defend to this day, the authenticity of the inscription (and the authenticity of the ossuary itself has never been in doubt).

And not long afterwards, word leaked out of a stone tablet purported to be from ancient times and denominated the 'Jehoash Inscription.' A simple examination of that artifact was enough to prove to most scholars that it was bogus; but still, it was defended as authentic and put through its paces in test after test.

Burleigh tells the tale of all this in an engaging and enthralling way, in the style of a novelist retelling a tale that, if we didn't know it was true, would imagine it a very fine farce played at the expense of gullible crowds of believers looking for any and every historical hook on which to hang their wavering faith.

She begins with a description of Ada Yardeni, who has 'striking pale blue eyes, red lipstick, and dyed black hair pulled back into a 1950's 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' (p. 1). And from there launches into her investigation into the seedy underworld of biblical antiquities.

The remarkable thing about Burleigh's work is that she had access to all the major players, interviewing them, recording their comments, and transcribing them verbatim. So, in this volume, the reader gets delightful descriptions of each of them along with what they told her about both the James Ossuary and the Jehoash Inscription. Some of those interviewed come off fairly well and others, well, deservedly they come off quite badly.

Chapter One, which centers on the billionaire behind so many of the artifact-ual transactions, Shlomo Moussaieff, is a study in descriptive prose and an open window on one of the most curious characters ever touched by lust for antiquities. By his own confession, his 'only interest in life now, besides smoking and flirting, he says, is proving the Bible true' (p. 11). That singular statement sums up so well the entire enterprise of biblical archaeology and the artifacts it drags from the earth for display to the faithful who are interested, like Moussaieff (an unbeliever) only in proving the Bible true rather than allowing those artifacts their own voice. Moussaieff has collected over 600,000 over the years.

In the midst of her description of Moussaieff and Andre Lemaire (who shows up on the scene at

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Moussaieff's table along with, and at the same time as, Oded Golan), Burleigh does make a factual error when she says that the 'Babylonians sacked the Temple in 800 BCE and burned it to the ground' (p. 16). One of her editors should have caught that bit of gaffe.

Returning to Moussaieff and his motivations, Burleigh asks why he collects such things and he replies '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' (p. 24).

Burleigh also shows Moussaieff's connection to Robert Deutsch, 'the biggest licensed dealer in Israel' (p. 29). And Herhsel Shanks too comes under Burleigh's microscope. 'Shanks is an odd duck – lawyer, crank, P.T. Barnum, and Indiana Jones all rolled into one man' (p. 33). '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' (p. 34). Burleigh doesn't seem to notice what this implies about both Shanks and those scholars who use, and are used by, him to advance their own public profiles.

The real star of the book, though, is Amir Ganor the chief investigator of the whole fraudulent enterprise overseen by Oded Golan. Burleigh tells his exploits with the same sort of delight a youngster has when speaking of a favorite sports hero. Indeed, the whole of chapter two focuses on him and his efforts to get to the bottom of the ossuary inscription's real nature.

Chapter three offers fine insight into why so many tromped through the Royal Ontario Museum to get a glimpse of the ossuary. She insightfully writes 'One reason an object like the James Ossuary was greeted like a rock star in Canada is that believers are more hungry for material proof now than ever before' (p. 69). Golan and company are feeding that lust with antiquities forged and the faithful duped.

While discussing antiquities' lust Burleigh introduces Joe Zias to her readers. 'Zias would not deny that he is obsessed with ferreting out and exposing the myriad shady characters digging in the Holy Land, whom he calls ark-eologists' (p. 75). 'Zias basically operates as a one man Holy Land relic fraud exposure team' (p. 75). She also points out that Moussaieff gave money to the Megiddo expedition because he hoped they would find evidence of Solomon. And when Finkelstein pointed out that the city dated to 100 years after Solomon, Moussaieff withdrew his funding. The 'donations came to an abrupt end when the results didn't fit the biblical story' (p. 84).

Of course my personal inclinations would make this bit stand out- 'An arch-skeptical faction – known as revisionists or 'minimalists' and based in England and Denmark – promotes the notion that most of the Old Testament is politically motivated fiction, and the great Hebrew kings David and Solomon are inventions' (p. 90).

Burleigh also, in chapter three, introduces us to such characters as Sy Gitin and Rami Arav. But in chapter four, the arch-villain of the tale, Oded Golan (my term, not hers) comes on the scene in full form. Burleigh tells his life story and as a counterpoint to his dealings introduces Morag Kersel, a scholar specializing in ancient near eastern antiquities and their appearance on the market, illegally. We also learn a bit about Lenny Wolfe, who is 'always sly, salacious, raunchy, and suggestive' (p. 115) and I might add, a bit of a potty mouth too, as Burleigh quotes him using language not proper for public consumption. These latter persons are set in stark contrast to Golan.

By the time Burleigh has weighed through the major players and arrived at chapter five, she's ready to point out the beginning of doubt that began attaching to the ossuary of James. The foolishness of Simcha Jacobovici is noted who, when seeing some bone fragments in the ossuary, relates to Burleigh that he thought 'Oh my gosh, if this is real, then Jesus's DNA is there' (p. 130). Contrast that with the sanity exhibited by Rochelle Altman as she debunks the ossuary in *Bible and Interpretation* (p. 132). Robert Eisenman too warned journalists of possible forgery and for their efforts these and others were denounced by Shanks who 'called them 'Lying Scholars' in a cover story in his magazine' (p. 133).

Naturally the name of Eric Meyers comes as well to Burleigh's attention and his famous

smackdown with Shanks at the 2002 SBL is described in gorgeous detail. Meyers accuses Lemaire of being on an ego trip concerning the ossuary and he denounces those who write for BAR, saying 'By publishing in Hershel's magazine, they pick up a couple hundred thousand readers. But it is kind of self-serving. I used to publish there until it got too nasty' (p. 142).

Right on the heels of the ossuary appeared, almost as if by magic, the Jehoash tablet. Chapter six of Burleigh's tome considers it and those involved in it and connected to it. Included too is a fun and romping description of Israel Finkelstein and his work and his opinion of those who use archaeology for 'messianic' purposes. This chapter is, alone, worth the price of the book. And the fact that Yuval Goren comes on the scene debunking the Tablet is just an added bonus not to be missed. Goren's concerns about the artifact was published at Bible and Interpretation as well.

In chapter seven, Golan's middleman 'Tzuriel' is introduced and the chapter reads like a Bond novel. Here, Burleigh really is at her best. The pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place and it becomes more and more evident that antiquities aren't just being found, they are being forged.

Chapter eight describes the rising scholarly skepticism associated with both the ossuary and the tablet whilst still being defended by Shanks and his magazine. Indeed, just as Shanks book on the ossuary was being published, proceedings were beginning against Golan and others connected with him for fraud. A fact that Shanks ignored though a fact which he obviously knew. Those scholars named and described in this section include Ronnie Reich (who initially supported the authenticity of the artifacts and was called as a defense witness in the trial of Golan) and Avigdor Hurowitz who denounced the frauds for what they were.

One of the more curious facts presented by Burleigh is this: 'When I interviewed him in 2006, Ganor said of Shanks, 'He's connected. I don't know how. He's invested. There's a book.' A year later, in 2007, Ganor would not elaborate on his suspicions, and would only say that Shanks is not under investigation, and that he 'is a very good journalist.' (p. 200). Make of that what you will. And, finally, one of the more enjoyable bits is Burleigh's description of how the ossuary was found on the rooftop toilet along with instruments and materials best described as the exact sorts of things a forger would have at hand. And speaking of a forger, we are here introduced to Samech Marco Shokri Ghattes, who was employed by Golan on several occasions to make fakes.

Several chapters remain and they themselves contain excellent material. Here in this all too brief review I've skimmed the surface only of what is found in this volume. It is an important one for several reasons. First, it shows, via clear and irrefutable evidence, that the inscription on the ossuary of James and the Jehoash tablet are frauds. Second, it shows for one and all to see the seedy and disgusting underground world of the antiquities trade. Third, it shows that, far too often, scholars are more interested in self-aggrandizement and fame than they are in the search for facts.

Everyone interested in archaeology owe it to themselves to read this book. And everyone interested in how archaeological artifacts are used, misused, and even fraudulently constructed owe it to themselves to do the same.

ADDENDUM: A short while after I posted the above review and sent the publisher a copy, they replied that the errors I had noted in the edition sent me have been corrected now and that the volume coming out on October 21 will be the corrected one.