

Duke University Professor Claims:

A Third of Israel Museum's Inscriptions Are Forgeries

By Ann Byale

A forgery crisis—or a forgery frenzy, depending on how you look at it—is currently facing Israel.

“Estimates are running as high as 30 or 40 percent of all inscribed materials in the Israel Museum [in Jerusalem] have been forged,” said Professor Eric Meyers of Duke University in a lecture sponsored by Cornerstone University’s Center for the Study of Antiquity (CSA) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, this past May.

“There is no doubt but Israel and its Antiquities Authority is faced with its gravest moral crisis in the history of the State, if not the history of modern archaeology,” Meyers added.

Among the forgeries in the museum collection is an inscribed ivory pomegranate said to be from Solomon’s Temple for which the museum paid \$550,000. The ivory pomegranate itself is genuine, but the inscription around the neck of the pomegranate is said to be a forgery. The pomegranate was once the head of a priestly scepter (it has a hole in the bottom for the rod), and the inscription reads, “Holy to the priests ... (Belonging) to the Temple of [Yahweh].”^{*} The inscription “is now clearly assessed to be a forgery,” Meyers claimed, although he did not elaborate.

Museums buy looted as well as forged artifacts, Meyers charged. “The Metropolitan Museum in New York has one of the worst records in the world on this ... Very immoral,” he said.

Meyers also outed an unnamed scholar who has been accused of possibly lying that

he had seen the famous James ossuary in an antiquities shop in the mid-1990s without the reference to Jesus.

An article in the May/June 2004 *BAR* reported an Internet posting by Meyers in which two unnamed scholars were said to have seen the James ossuary—now inscribed “James son of Joseph brother of Jesus”—in the mid-1990s in a Jerusalem antiquities shop but *without the reference to Jesus*.^{**} If true, the reference to Jesus must have been added later—and is a clear forgery.

The two unnamed scholars had told the same story to *BAR* editor Hershel Shanks, but only one of them asked not to be named, so Shanks named the other one in his story—Joe Zias.[†]

Although the other scholar remained unnamed, a picture of him with a pixilated face was published in *BAR*. Shanks explained why he concluded that this scholar was very probably lying: The scholar had written widely about the James ossuary inscription, claiming that it could not refer to the New Testament Jesus (the name was not uncommon at the time), but had never mentioned that he had seen the ossuary in the mid-1990s without the reference to Jesus. Instead, he gave numerous reasons why the inscription could not refer to Jesus of Nazareth. And he assumed the authenticity of the inscription and was very clear that it was by one hand.

But who was this scholar who now claims to have seen the James ossuary inscription in the mid-1990s without the

^{**}Hershel Shanks, “Lying Scholars?” *BAR*, May/June 2004.

[†]“A Tale of Two Cities,” *BAR*, March/April 2004.



ERIC MEYERS of Duke University: Israel's Antiquities Authority is facing the greatest moral crisis in the state's history.

Correction

In our May/June 2004 issue we reported an interview with a former antiquities dealer named Mahmoud Abushakra, who denied knowing Joe Zias, a Jerusalem scholar who claims that he saw the James ossuary in Abushakra's shop in the mid-1990s without the reference to Jesus.^{*} We also published a picture of Abushakra standing in the doorway of his shop. It has come to our attention that the passerby in the picture is none other than Joe Zias, suggesting that Abushakra did indeed know Zias. As we go to press, we are attempting to contact Abushakra to determine whether or not we misunderstood him and whether he continues to be clear that the James ossuary was never in his shop.

^{*}“Lying Scholars?” *BAR*, May/June 2004.