Excavating Jesus: An interview with Jonathan L. Reed

by John Spalding in the July 29, 2008 issue

Unless we understand something of life in the first century, says archaeologist Jonathan L. Reed, we have "no chance of understanding Jesus or Paul, Peter or Mary." Archaeological finds provide "an intimate glimpse into the past," he writes, and they help us "imagine the lives of people who were once real, not just names in a book."

A professor of New Testament at the University of La Verne in California, Reed started excavating at sites in Galilee more than 20 years ago. He is a member of the research council at Claremont Graduate University's Institute for Antiquity and Christianity and is the author of Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus. *He has coauthored two books with John Dominic Crossan*—Excavating Jesus *and* In Search of Paul. *His latest book is* The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament.

What can archaeology tell us about the New Testament and Jesus, and what can't it tell us?

Archaeology doesn't confirm or deny any of the Bible's spiritual, moral or religious claims. It's not an arbiter of faith. It puts the events and stories of the New Testament into a much richer and deeper context. It cuts through 2,000 years of history and thousands of miles of geography and helps us to understand the words and deeds of Jesus more as his contemporaries would have—which is often quite different from what we take them to mean in 21st-century America.

No archaeological evidence of Jesus' first-century followers has ever been found. What does that tell us?

Most of Jesus' early followers were lower-class people who were considered unimportant by the political and literary elite. Christians flew under the radar, staying under the surface until the end of the second century, when they emerged as people with a visual and a literary culture.

It also suggests that most of Jesus' earliest followers were Jewish and didn't use images. So even if they believed in Jesus as the Messiah, they wouldn't represent that belief in a pictorial way recognizable to us. When we examine a first-century synagogue today, we can't tell if it's a place that Jesus' followers would have attended or not.

You note that according to the archaeological record, the cross didn't appear as a Christian symbol until the fifth century.

The earliest representation of a cross is actually from the second century. It was created by a pagan making fun of Christians! We're pretty sure that over the first few centuries of the Christian era the cross conveyed a sense of shame. For instance, Paul talks about it as a stumbling block for Jews and as foolishness to Greeks. It was a long time before Christians started wearing it around their necks.

Was the cross a source of shame simply because it was a reminder that the Messiah had died?

Not just that he died, but that he represented subversion and insurrection against Roman power. Even if you bought into the message, and thought of yourself as being subversive of the Roman Empire—as most Christians believed they were—that's not something you advertised. Why invite further persecution?

Some of the most significant archaeological discoveries related to the New Testament have been made within the past 30 or 40 years. How much of that is due to Middle Eastern politics?

The number one reason for these discoveries is the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. And the 1967 war made archaeology possible in parts of Jerusalem where it wasn't possible before. A generation of Jews who are curious about their heritage are excavating sites relevant to the history of Judaism. People interested in Jesus and his earliest Jewish followers are piggybacking on their work.

How would you describe current investigations against the broader history of archaeology in the Holy Land?

In the past, biblical archaeologists, if I may use that term, were trained mostly in the Bible and biblical languages, and they went to the Holy Land to try to find sites and artifacts that would prove scripture to be accurate. That never worked, and most of

the discoveries that were initially heralded as proof of events described in the Old Testament have either been completely disproved or shown to be unable to carry the burden of proof.

In the past 30 years or so biblical archaeology has changed completely. Most people working in the field have been trained in anthropology or archaeology, and they simply want to understand as much as possible, historically and culturally, the world in which the Bible was written. Some are much less aware of current research in biblical studies. Then there are people like me who try to bridge the gap and do both archaeology and biblical studies. That's difficult because both disciplines have become very sophisticated and specialized.

Let's consider one recent excavation—the work at Sepphoris, Herod Antipas's capital, four miles northwest of Nazareth. What does it tell us about first-century Jews who lived nearby?

Sepphoris is one of the most deceiving sites for people interested in archaeology and the historical Jesus because all of its wonderful pagan art and architecture gives the impression that Jesus lived in an absolutely Hellenized city. But scrape off the many layers from the third, fourth and sixth centuries and one finds a small first-century Jewish city that was clearly averse to the overtly pagan influences that were sweeping over the broader Mediterranean world. In Jesus' day, it was a fairly conservative city.

But I wouldn't want to minimize how dramatic an impact Sepphoris would have had on a peasant like Jesus visiting it for the first time. There he'd have seen public architecture, large houses and impressive decorations. Also, the fact that during Jesus' youth Herod Antipas made Sepphoris a large urban center with about 10,000 people had a profound socioeconomic effect on the area. As Galilee's commercial center, Sepphoris demanded most of the region's agricultural goods. The main function of surrounding towns like Nazareth was to feed that growing city.

As eye-opening as Sepphoris must have been for Jesus, nothing could have prepared him for his first visit to Jerusalem and the Temple.

He must have been shocked. Think of his disciples— Galilean peasants—going down to Jerusalem as recorded in Mark 13 and gawking at the Temple and saying to Jesus, "Look at these enormous stones." It's not just that they're country bumpkins. A Roman officer who'd seen the entire world would have been amazed by Herod the

Great's Temple, and archaeological research has underscored why. Herod was one of the greatest builders of the ancient world, and the Temple was his greatest architectural feat. Few other structures compared to it in sheer size.

Herod incorporated Roman architectural features in building the Temple. Though he did nothing that would have directly offended the Jews, could there have been some Roman elements in the Temple's design that would have disturbed Jesus?

That's a million-dollar question: What did Jesus see at the Temple that made him upset enough to overturn the tables of the moneychangers and the people trading out front? I have a sense that as someone from Galilee who preached equality and on behalf of the poor, Jesus was not impressed by the splendor of the Temple as an offering to God or as a vehicle to draw people to God. I think he saw it as a facade—as shallow, with nothing behind it. And he realized that enormous resources were required to build the Temple and that some people were making money off it. I think he understood—and I wish there was more in the New Testament about this—that his attack was not just against a few immoral people but against a system that exploited others in the name of God.

Which is not the same criticism as that held by, say, the Essenes, who fled Jerusalem because they felt that the Temple had become too Hellenized.

Jesus seems to have been less concerned with the Greco-Roman influences. In fact, I don't find anything anti-Greek in his teachings. For him, the issue was the economic injustice that was so apparent at the Temple. The comparison I like to make is to the incredible shopping malls we have in Beverly Hills and Santa Monica, a few blocks away from where homeless people are living on the street. It's the juxtaposition of rich and poor.

What has archaeology been able to tell us about lifespan in the first century?

That's a topic on which archaeology gives us the most interesting glimpse. Consider what we know about the people buried in Galilee and Jerusalem—and remember, only people who were middle and upper-middle class, and thus had better diets, got buried in the tombs we've discovered. Half of those people died by the age of five. One in eight births resulted in the death of the mother.

If you were male and made it to your teenage years, especially to age 16 or 17, then you had a decent chance of living till 40—possibly even 60, if you had a good diet. Death was very much a part of life, and the two were not separated because, unlike today, both birth and death took place in the household.

In the bones of people who lived long lives, one finds arthritic knees, worn right shoulders and bad lower backs, especially on the left side, because everyone worked hard. I would think that the aches and pains of daily life slowly ground people down until they reached their 40s and 50s, at which point they died from any number of diseases that are easily curable today.

The most revealing medical items are the magical amulets and magical papyri that were widely used. Belief in the supernatural was very strong. Almost every little gem or inscribed item is either religious or magical, and they served primarily to protect individuals from disease. In Egypt, an incredible number of papyri have to do with spells and cures—they look like pharmaceutical prescriptions—and they almost always invoke the divine. You had to say the right words as you applied, say, a paste to your body. It was all about the magic of healing. That helps us to understand the appeal of Jesus' ministry as a healer, perhaps more so than as a teacher. He lived in a world that yearned for health and life.

Archaeology not only proves good theories but disproves bad theories. Can you give an example?

In the 1920s, '30s and '40s, there was an attempt by some to make Jesus non-Jewish, to make him an Aryan. In the scholarship of that time, Jesus was said to be a descendant of a group called Itureans, who lived north of Galilee. Others have tried in a more subtle anti-Semitic way to suggest that because Jesus was so open and cosmopolitan he couldn't have been Jewish. Or that Galilee must have been more mixed and syncretistic, and therefore Jesus was not a typical Jew. But archaeology makes it very clear: Galilee was settled by people from the south, in and around Jerusalem, in about the second century BCE. So Jesus and almost all Galileans had to have been Jewish.

I wonder if Galileans in Jesus' day would have been likely to ever see a Roman soldier. Rome didn't station troops throughout conquered territories, but rather placed them on frontiers, like Syria, to ward off invading armies. On the other hand, the Gospels mention Jesus' encounter

with a centurion.

I don't know if I can resolve that question. On the Greek side of Capernaum, there's a Roman legionnaire bathhouse. At first people were excited about a possible connection between this bathhouse and the figure of the centurion in the Gospels. Unfortunately, we dated the bathhouse to the second century. I doubt that the Romans were to be found in Capernaum in the 20s and 30s, at the time of Jesus. This is a great example of how archaeological layering helps us understand the layering of the Gospels.

So the centurion was an invention of later Gospel writers?

That's possible. The term *centurion* is actually a Greek word that means "ruler or leader of a hundred." It's a basic term for a military or administrative person in Greek armies and Greek civic life. We know that the Herodians adopted Greek terms for people that they employed, whether referring to the overseer of the market or of a police-military force. I'm pretty sure that the guy the Gospels talk about is a pagan—it's obvious from the stories—and I'm pretty sure he's not a Roman centurion. It's possible that as the story got told again and again over the years, and by the time someone wrote it down—by the time of Luke or Matthew—the writer was thinking of that person as a Roman, because in that writer's mind, it was the Romans who were there.

Many of Herod's forts and palaces—such as Herodium, Masada and his winter palace at Jericho—were originally Hasmonean structures. Why is that significant?

It's illustrative of what Herod was doing, and his architecture bears it out much more so than do the texts of, say, Josephus. In effect Herod was saying, "I'm just a new Hasmonean. I'm married into the family and we're in continuity, so don't think I'm a new ruler. There was just a little court intrigue, but I'm one of those guys, part of that dynasty." That's what he was trying to do by claiming these fortresses and refurbishing and expanding them—and he did that at every single site.

And I gather that he lived a little more high on the hog than his Hasmonean predecessors did.

He lived a *lot* better. I would love to know how many guests Herod entertained. The same with Antipas, in Jesus' generation. I'm sure they wooed many wealthy people

and powerful elites at their palaces, and I wonder how and to what extent an understanding of that lifestyle would have filtered down to someone like Jesus. Of course, Jesus never would have been inside one of those places. Would he have met a guy who visited Herod Antipas' palaces? Or would Jesus have met the guy who met the guy who visited Herod Antipas' palaces? Or would Jesus have been four removed, and thus received no communication whatsoever about it? In Luke 7, Jesus talks about John the Baptist—"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? Those in soft clothing and fine raiment, those who live in luxury in kings' palaces?" I think Jesus was juxtaposing John the Baptist with the likes of Herod Antipas, so I think he was aware of the disparity.

What's the biggest misperception people have about what biblical archaeologists do?

I'm always embarrassed when I come back from excavations and people ask me, "What did you find?" The archaeologists I work with are looking at social history, and particularly at issues of gender. We're not looking for huge palaces, fortifications or gold crowns. We're literally excavating in the houses of the common people. So what did I find? Well, I found a beaten floor. I found where they threw their kitchen scraps. I know what they ate over a hundred-year period. I know that they weren't wealthy enough to have nice frescoes. None of what I found is pretty—none of it is going to make it into a museum. But it helps me paint a picture of what was going on in Jesus' Galilee.