

Review: JAJ033

## A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

### MICHAEL BAIGENT AND THE GNOSTIC TACTIC: FANTASY POSING AS FACT?

a book review of  
*The Jesus Papers: Exposing the Greatest Cover-Up in History*  
by Michael Baigent  
(HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)

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A cavalcade of books on Jesus have appeared over the past fifty years that claim to give a new and more accurate portrait of Christ, but deliver a crude caricature instead. Jesus shows up as a Passover Plotter (H. Schonfield), a Radical Revolutionary (S. G. F. Brandon), a Mushroom Cultist (J. Allegro), Master Magician (M. Smith), Senescent Savior (D. Joyce), Happy Husband (Baigent, Lincoln, and Leigh), Divine Divorcee (B. Thiering), Subversive Sage (J. D. Crossan), and Misrepresented Mortal (D. Brown). After coauthoring *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*—the principal source for Dan Brown’s notions about Jesus’ marriage to Mary Magdalene—in 1982, and losing his lawsuit against Dan Brown in 2006, Michael Baigent is back. His book *The Jesus Papers: Exposing the Greatest Cover-up in History* unveils what might be called “the Surviving Savior.”

Why the Baigent book was published under the category of nonfiction rather than fiction is a mystery to me. Perhaps his publisher, HarperSanFrancisco, anticipated that reviewers would share this concern, since they refused to send out advance review galleys of the book, as is customary.

Sensationalism in these pages is rife from the start. The book jacket blares:

“What if everything we have been told about the origins of Christianity is a lie?”  
“What if a small group had always known the truth and had kept it hidden...until now?”  
“What if there is incontrovertible proof that Jesus survived the crucifixion?”

Except for the last line, these what-ifs seem so directly lifted out of another book of falsehoods, *The Da Vinci Code*, that Dan Brown might well consider a reverse lawsuit against Baigent! But he would also lose, since this has been the standard formula for pulp fiction about Jesus ever since the Gnostics invented the genre in the second century A.D. In fact, all of the books with caricatures of Christ that are spawned today on a conspiracy-happy public merely demonstrate that Gnosticism, the earliest Christian heresy, is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

**Author of the Arcane.** Born in New Zealand in 1948, Michael Baigent emigrated to England in 1976, where he received an M.A. in mysticism and religious experience from the University of Kent. In the years since his 1982 best-seller, Baigent has traveled throughout the Mediterranean world, hobnobbed with antiquities dealers and private collectors, searched excavations and tunnels for lost documents and hidden archives, and zealously pursued his attempts to rewrite the history of Jesus. Even the flap copy of his latest book deems him “a leading expert in the field of arcane knowledge,” which serves as a forewarning of the repackaged Gnosticism that lies at the heart of the book’s thesis.

However preposterous many of his claims, Baigent does hold the reader's attention as he snakes his way through hidden tunnels and ancient passageways. His descriptions of the historical and cultural settings in the ancient world are largely on-target. He offers colorful anecdotal material about his research, and no less than fifty-five color photographs illuminate these pages, although most of them have absolutely *nothing* to do with the book's basic theses.

Despite his literary flair, Baigent fails the test of serious scholarship. The book is filled with hypotheses that turn into "facts," conjectures that reflect creative imagination rather than hard evidence, hearsay in place of primary sources, and sensationalism in place of sense. At times he is honest enough to frame his theories in the form of a question, for example, "Could Jesus have?" or "Might Jesus have?" In the case of one impossible scenario on what Jesus was doing in Egypt, Baigent admits he is "indulging in pure speculation" (p. 265). This should have been the subtitle of the book itself!

Most scholars try to curb their natural biases as much as possible in the interest of conveying the truth. Not so Michael Baigent. Early on, he refers to "the myth about Jesus Christ" (14). He later mentions "the Vatican and its relentless need to protect its fraudulent picture of Christ and Christianity" (88). He states, "Our New Testament gives us a sanitized, censored, and often inverted view of the times" (63), and again, "Certainly the New Testament is bad history. This is impossible to deny. The texts are inconsistent, incomplete, garbled, and biased" (123). Baigent's formula is obvious: in order to clear the way for his weird (at places grotesque) theories—all of which are opposed by the New Testament's sober record—he must first blast away the biblical bases. This is the common strategy of all radical revisionists, biblical or secular: attack the opponent's sources.

**"Amazing" Allegations.** The basic scenario proposed in *The Jesus Papers* runs as follows. Jesus spent much of His youth in Egypt (rather than Galilee), where He learned religious mysticism and incorporated it into His teachings. Later, when He changed water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana, the event itself was to celebrate *His own marriage* to Mary Magdalene, whose subsequent leadership in the church is cited in the Gnostic gospel bearing her name. On Good Friday, Jesus survived His own crucifixion, assisted by close friends and in collusion with Pontius Pilate. He was taken down from the cross, still alive, and placed in an empty tomb. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus came by night with medicines, revived Him, and removed Him from the tomb.

Baigent is not dogmatic about what happened next, but speculates that Jesus and His wife went to Egypt, where they settled in or around the Temple of Onias, some twenty miles from today's Cairo. Troubles that arose there around A.D. 38 caused Jesus and Mary to go perhaps to Narbonne in southern France, where some other Jewish families claimed Davidic descent.

These wild claims have not a spark of supporting evidence. Let us dismantle them one by one. For years, imaginative authors have had young Jesus saddled with a case of wanderlust and traveling everywhere from Egypt to India, without a shred of evidence, when in fact, He grew up in Galilee. Later, at Cana, Jesus and His disciples were specifically *invited* to the wedding feast (John 2:2), a verb hardly used for one's own wedding! There is not a scintilla of evidence in any ancient (even Gnostic!) source that Jesus married anyone, let alone Mary Magdalene. Jesus would have been a perfect example for St. Paul to include in 1 Corinthians 9:5, where he lists Peter and others who are in the marital category, but Jesus clearly is not listed. Furthermore, on Good Friday, how could Jesus provide for His mother Mary, but fail to do so for his wife, if that's what Mary Magdalene was, when she too was standing at the foot of the cross? Mary Magdalene obviously was no "Mrs. Jesus."

Pontius Pilate never could have been involved in any plot to *save* Jesus after publicly condemning Him to the cross. Such a scheme would have been far too dangerous politically for any Roman governor, especially one who already had a record of turbulence with his Jewish subjects, as did Pilate; moreover, he had no motive for doing this, despite Baigent's unconvincing efforts to find one.

Finally, that Jesus truly died is beyond debate. The Romans were deadly efficient at crucifixions, and victims did not escape by feigning death or indulging in charade. The pike piercing Jesus' heart area was the executioners' final gesture to make doubly sure of His death.

One wonders if Baigent is not using the fanciful events and locations he conjures up for Jesus as an excuse to take the reader on long deviations from any serious presentation on his alternate Jesus. Endless pages are devoted to a travelogue of the author's explorations in Africa, Israel, and Italy, meeting mysterious people, climbing mountains, or spelunking through caverns and tunnels without Jesus *once* being mentioned. The truest statement in the entire book comes after a long section that has nothing to do with Jesus: "These matters may seem far too arcane to have any relevance whatsoever to our story, which, after all, concerns Jesus and the source of his teaching" (208).

**A Catalogue of Errors.** The listing that follows should not be regarded as nitpicking on the part of a jaundiced reviewer, but rather as a sad commentary on Baigent's sloppy scholarship and his publisher's editorial failures. Baigent claims that the following italicized statements are true:

*The first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus "defected to the Roman side" during the Great Jewish War with Rome, committing "treachery against his own people" (34).* In reality, however, Josephus was a commander of Jewish forces in Galilee and fought against the Romans until captured by them; he did not defect, and was not a traitor.

*In A.D. 68, "Nero was murdered. After him, two emperors came and went in quick succession" (49).* In fact, however, Nero committed suicide, with the assistance of a faithful servant, and it was not two but three emperors who quickly succeeded Nero: Galba, Otho, and Vitellius.

*"So far as can be ascertained, the marriage of Herod Antipas and Herodias took place in A.D. 35. Hence John the Baptist was executed in A.D. 35. So Jesus must still have been alive at this date" (52).* He certainly was, as the resurrected Lord, but the rest of this chronology is as much as six years in error, and is shared by no knowledgeable scholar on earth.

*Constantine, the first Christian emperor "was only converted to Christianity himself on his deathbed" (88).* This is totally false! Constantine was a proven (though controversial) Christian for more than 25 years before his death. He was baptized on his deathbed, but only because people in those days had the strange idea that, since baptism wiped people's slates clean of sin, people should do all of their sinning ahead of time, and only then receive baptism so that they could go to heaven with a clean passport!

*"We can be certain of only one thing: wherever it was that Jesus lived [during His 'silent years' as a youth], it could not have been in Israel" (133).* All evidence supports the fact that young Jesus grew up in Galilee (Israel), and nowhere else.

*"Unfortunately, there is no evidence whatsoever that Nazareth even existed in Jesus's day" (134).* Aside from the obvious references to Nazareth in the Gospels, archaeologists at Caesarea recently discovered a list of first-century synagogues, including one in Nazareth.

*"...the death of the famous Cleopatra in 60 B.C." (141).* Cleopatra instead died in 30 B.C.

*The "Gospel of Mary of Magdala...like the Gospel of Thomas...has as much claim to validity as the Gospels in the New Testament" (241).* This statement is an outrage. All apocryphal, Gnostic writings such as these were authored later than were the New Testament Gospels, are derivative of the true Gospels, are not eyewitness documents, have false authorship attached to them, and contain grotesque addenda that are incompatible with Christianity. The Gospel of Thomas, for example, claims that women will not inherit the Kingdom of God!

*The Dead Sea Scrolls are virtually "early Christian documents" (262).* In actuality, no relationship to Christianity is contained in them.

*"The Dead Sea Scroll materials...reveal a long hidden reality, embarrassing to both Judaism and Christianity, a reality that had long been manipulated by a small group of scholars" (247).* Now that all Scroll texts have been made available to the worldwide scholarly community, this tired old calumny can be put to the rest it so richly deserves.

Such disregard for factual truth on the part of both author and publisher is more than evident in this abbreviated listing. This is not to say that all of Baigent's stinging criticisms of Christianity are

unwarranted. For parts of church history, particularly the medieval period, they are justified indeed, as church historians long have admitted.

**The “Jesus Papers”?** But whence the title of this book? The author reserves that surprise for a concluding chapter. Baigent claims to have learned from an unnamed Israeli friend, during one of Baigent’s many trips to Israel, about two papyrus documents in Aramaic that the friend said he had discovered in the early 1960s while excavating the cellar of a house he had bought in the Old City of Jerusalem. The house was in the area where the temple was situated in early Christian times.

The documents were two letters to the Jewish Sanhedrin written by someone who called himself *bani meshiha* – “the Messiah of the Children [of Israel?]” (a designation that does not appear in the New Testament Gospels). The writer seemed to be defending himself against a charge that he had claimed to be “son of God.” In the first letter, the writer said that he did not mean to suggest he was “God,” but that the “Spirit of God” was upon him, and that he was an adopted “son of God” in a spiritual sense. Baigent does not tell us what the second letter purportedly contained.

As Baigent proceeds with his story, it becomes even more sensational: when archaeologists Yigael Yadin and Nahman Avigad supposedly confirmed the authenticity of these documents, Pope John XXIII allegedly asked that they be destroyed. Baigent’s friend refused to do this, but promised not to release them for 25 years. After that quarter-century had long expired, the friend told Baigent that releasing the documents would only create problems between the Vatican and Israel, and inflame anti-Semitism. He did, however, purportedly show Baigent the two documents, both about 9 x 18 inches large and framed under glass.

I do not intend to impugn Baigent’s basic honesty; however, this seems to be part of the same song sung throughout the book. Every time some apparently important documents that could help prove Baigent’s theses appear, they are *never* either quoted for the reader or supplied to the scholarly world so that it could gauge their possible authenticity. The personalities involved are unnamed or they disappear into the thin air of the past, as do the documents themselves, leaving only the author’s hopes that they might be revealed in the future.

However “sensational,” then, I am totally unimpressed by these “Jesus papers.” The one message cited doesn’t at all sound like Jesus—He was never deferent to the Sanhedrin in this manner. The language instead sounds exactly like a liberal New Testament critic explaining “the son of God” designation today. In a city such as Jerusalem that seems to mushroom with forgeries, this appears to be more of the same, if the alleged documents even exist.

Baigent suitably summarizes the religious mysticism that he imposes on Jesus throughout (which Jesus supposedly learned in Egypt) in his explanation of Jesus’ statement, “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). Baigent comments, “And how does one travel within? This much we know: by entering the silence. Jesus has returned us to the concept of incubation and the still, dark, silent underground crypts and caves where a seeker can be initiated into the world where the dead live—the Far-World” (228).

This, of course, is Michael Baigent at his purely autobiographical best. It is not Jesus of Nazareth.

Christianity rests on fact, not on fantasy, but Gnostic writers, now just as then, remain eager to superimpose their own image and fantasies onto the facts of history. *The Jesus Papers* is a prime example.

— reviewed by Paul L. Maier