

## *A Few More Nails for the Da Vinci Code Coffin*

The spate of recent works purporting to have discovered a massive effort by later Catholic Christianity to suppress other (equally valid) models of earliest Christianity continues unabated. From the popular novel and soon to be movie, *The Da Vinci Code* to mass marketed books like liberal NT scholar Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*, the foundations of orthodox Christianity are being incessantly pummeled. In the face of the onslaught by these **revisionists**, a number of orthodox scholars have produced cogent and decisive defenses against these new 'conspiracy theorists.' (see recently for example Liberty professors Dr. Ed Hindson or Dan Mitchell's critiques of the *Da Vinci Code*'s premises, and NT scholar Ben Witherington's blog *Misanalyzing Jesus* which dismantles Ehrman—who it should be mentioned rejects the scholarship behind *The Da Vinci Code*). I believe these erudite men and many others have already made the coffin for the revisionists, placed them in it, and tightly nailed them inside. For my part, I simply hope to add a few more nails.

A major premise of the **revisionists** asserts the rewriting of the New Testament by three centuries after Christ for apologetic reasons—to support the male-dominated beliefs and hierarchy of the Catholic Church. No doubt proof of their claim would be a traumatic if not fatal blow inflicted on the defenders of orthodox Christianity. But can this view that the NT text has suffered intentional dramatic alteration be sustained? Methinks not and I offer two pieces of evidence from the NT itself indicating that the text could not have been rewritten in the manner the **revisionists** prescribe.

In his recent epic film *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson brought to the world's attention that the language Jesus spoke during his brief life on earth was not Hebrew or even Greek, but the tongue of Aramaic. In recreating Christ's Passion, Gibson wanted to strive for linguistic accuracy, so he had Jesus speak in Aramaic and let the movie audience read the words of Christ using English subtitles. THE POINT IS JESUS SPOKE IN ARAMAIC IN THE EARLY FIRST CENTURY A.D. AND SO DID HIS FIRST JEWISH FOLLOWERS!!

But, strangely when you turn to the writings of the New Testament, you find them written in Greek; the common literary language of much of the known world from the time of Alexander the Great's conquests, and perfectly appropriate for transmitting the inspired Word of the nascent Christian faith to its Greek speaking and reading converts. Why is that important? Because the **revisionists** claim that the NT text was rewritten to promote an agenda hundreds of years later! If that is so, then why do we still find places where the original spoken Aramaic is recorded in the Greek text?

Both Matthew and Mark record the oft-called 'Cry of Dereliction' where Jesus cries out from the Cross "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?", but they do so in Aramaic 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!' and not in Greek only transliterating the Aramaic characters (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). Indeed the inspired evangelists have to translate these passion-filled words of Christ for their Greek speaking Christian readers who wouldn't understand Jesus' spoken tongue. Thus, they have intentionally preserved the very words of Christ on the Cross as originally uttered.

If the NT text is radically altered centuries later (either by sloppy or agenda driven scribes-Ehrman or church council-*Da Vinci*) as the **reversionists** say, why would these Aramaic words still exist in the text? Would they not have been rewritten in Greek or even Latin? It seems to me much more reasonable that this preserved Aramaic saying represents clear evidence of Christ's Passion (death on the Cross) including the Lord's own interpretation of the horrific event as remembered by apostolic witnesses. With deep reverence, these men preferred to record these holy words of Christ, his *ipsissima verba*, if you will, as they were originally spoken rather than translate them into Greek; perhaps because they recounted their Lord's self-identification as the Davidic Messiah portrayed in the Psalm from which Jesus quoted.

Consider also, the enigmatic switch from Greek to Aramaic by the beloved apostle Paul who virtually closes one of his Greek epistles (1 Corinthians A.D. 56-57) with the Aramaic saying, *Maranatha*. The words literally mean "O Lord come!" or possibly "Our Lord has come!" depending on how one divides the Aramaic letters. Whichever translation is chosen, the phrase clearly confesses either the first or second coming of Christ designating him by the term Lord--the Aramaic word used for the Jewish God by the prophet Daniel (5:23)--which Paul equates with the Greek word *kurios* (meaning Lord) and applies to Christ in this benedictory passage (1 Cor. 16:22-24). Paul here may preserve an Aramaic confession of faith (or prayer) pronounced by the members of the infant Jewish Church worshipping their risen Lord in their native tongue, which like the Aramaic Jesus saying from the Cross has to be translated for the benefit of his Greek speaking recipients in the Corinthian church. Again, how could this term be the product of revisionists centuries later? Is it not more plausible that Paul, an Aramaic speaking Palestinian Jew (Acts 22:3) inscribes here one of his own confessions of faith which was also confessed by the earliest Jerusalem(?) church and translates it for the sake of his Gentile Greek speaking brethren--the letter's recipients?

From these early primitive Aramaic confessions we can already construct portions of an orthodox Christology. His Aramaic 'Cry of Dereliction' preserves his original cry of agony as he suffered a terrible death on a Cross and while dying revealed himself as the promised OT Davidic Messiah, the Savior of both Jew and Gentile. Paul's benedictory statement likewise shows that the very earliest believers called Him Lord--the Aramaic term for the Jewish God--and confessed His soon return from the earliest days of the Jewish Aramaic speaking church.

There is not a hint in these early to mid 1st century A.D. texts of Jesus the family man; married with children. Rather, these texts speak of a Jesus who identified himself as the Davidic Messiah who after he suffers on the Cross returns and establishes God's everlasting kingdom for he is God incarnate. At the end of the day, orthodoxy is after all just as the 'unrevised' Scriptures have always said and the latest form of **reversionist** Christianity remains dead in the coffin with I hope two more nails in its lid.

David D. Pettus, Ph.D.  
Assoc. Prof. OT  
Liberty Theological Seminary/DLP