

“Bible Hunters”

Broadcast on BBC2 on 13 February 2014

A review

Parts of this programme are fascinating. It is very pleasing to see St Catherine’s monastery, Sinai, and film of Ernest Maggs bringing the Codex Sinaiticus to the British Museum in 1933. (Although in the film clip it is actually being carried by someone else.)

Janet Soskice and “Sisters of Sinai”

It was also pleasing to see Janet Soskice talking about the Scottish twin sisters Agnes and Margaret Smith, who travelled to St Catherine’s monastery a generation after Constantin Tischendorf had brought to Europe the monastery’s gift of the Codex Sinaiticus to Czar Alexander II. Not surprisingly, her book on the sisters¹ presents the story that they were told by the next generation of monks, who denied that the monastery had donated the manuscript to the Czar and claimed that it had been stolen. The account of these sisters and their discoveries is fascinating and notwithstanding a few minor errors, the book is well worth reading.²

The main purpose of the programme

The main premise of the programme is that the absence of the verses that we know as Mark 16:9-20 in Codex Sinaiticus deeply undermines or even destroys the evidence in the New Testament for the resurrection of Jesus. To hear the programme’s conclusions – indeed, its main thrust – one could be forgiven for thinking that the non-disputed rest of Mark’s gospel does not refer to the resurrection of Jesus, whereas of course it unambiguously does (Mk 16:5-6), as well as repeatedly reporting Jesus’ own prophecies of his resurrection (8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:34; 14:28).

A minor and poorly-presented concession to the facts

There is a brief reference to the fact that the Scottish twins were not concerned by the lack of the “long” ending of Mark in the Syriac Codex that they photographed, as the resurrection appearances “are included in the other gospels and in the writings of Paul”. However, this was a mere nod in the direction of a key fact that would have been given far greater prominence in a balanced presentation of the evidence.

In the context of this part of the programme, it is implied that these other resurrection appearances are only to be found in the Syriac Codex and not in the Codex Sinaiticus or other manuscripts. But all these other accounts are also included in the Codex Sinaiticus (and indeed, in vast numbers of other manuscripts of the New Testament).

Percentage of the text of Mark’s gospel affected by the missing words

As regards Mark’s gospel itself, in a document of 11,242 words (according to Robert Morgenthaler’s statistical analysis of New Testament words³), the 171 words of the long ending (my count of the words in the Nestle-Aland 27th edition of the Greek New Testament) account for a mere 1.5% of the total words in the gospel.

The total number of words in the New Testament is stated to be 138,020.⁴ The missing 171 words in the Codex Sinaiticus are equivalent to 0.12% of the total text of the New Testament, a little over one word per

¹ Soskice, Janet, “Sisters of Sinai”, London: Chatto & Windus, 2009

² [On a point of detail, the lens used in the “Bible Hunters” programme (about 38 minutes in) to illustrate the photographing of the manuscripts by the sisters in the 19th century is in fact a 20th-century Schneider Componon.]

³ Morgenthaler, Robert, “Statistik des neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes”, Zürich: Gotthelf Verlag, 1958.

⁴ <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/NT-Statistics-Greek.htm> accessed on 15.02.14.

thousand in the New Testament. The fact that this is the largest variation amongst manuscripts⁵ demonstrates how remarkably well the text of the New Testament has been preserved.

Contributions by experts: Dr Larry Hurtado

More significant are the comments of Dr Larry Hurtado, recently retired Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology at the University of Edinburgh and a prestigious scholar of international renown who is an expert of New Testament manuscripts. He was interviewed for the programme, but his comments appear to have been drastically edited so as to appear to support the presenter's argument. Dr Hurtado's blog entry for 7th February 2014⁶, seems to indicate that he had misgivings in advance concerning how his comments were going to be edited. This is what he wrote:

"Last year I was interviewed for a TV production that is to be aired soon: "Bible Hunters," which focuses on the 19th and 20th century figures "who searched Egypt for the world's oldest biblical manuscripts."

"The two-part programme airs in the UK on BBC 2, at 9 pm on 13 and 20 February. It's also airing on the Smithsonian Channel but I don't have the dates or times for that.

"You never know what use will be made of what you provide to such productions, or what kind of "story" they'll tell or what "spin" they'll put on it until the programme airs. So, I can't say in advance what I'll think of it."

The programme's presenter: Dr Jeff Rose

In contrast, the programme's presenter, Dr Jeff Rose, is reported by his own description of himself⁷ to be "a prehistoric archaeologist specializing in the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods". Among his many listed interests, no specialist knowledge of manuscripts or Christianity appears.

Key witness for the prosecution: Professor Simon Goldhill

Likewise, Dr Rose's main contributor in support of his thesis, Professor Simon Goldhill from Cambridge University, is speaking on a subject that is not part of his area of professional expertise, which is Classical Greek literature (covering approximately the period 800-300 B.C.), the history of Judaism, the treatment of Jews in Victorian fiction and other aspects of Jewish studies.⁸ Not surprisingly, he is sceptical about the resurrection of Jesus. One can naturally appreciate where he is coming from, but his specialist areas of research do not make him well-placed to make an informed and impartial assessment of the text of New Testament manuscripts.

Ignored experts (1): Professor D.C. Parker

I am surprised that the presenter didn't interview D.C. Parker, who is Professor of Theology and Director of the Institute for Textual Scholarship at the University of Birmingham, England. Professor Parker was the author chosen by the British Library to produce the book "Codex Sinaiticus"⁹, the publication of which accompanied the publication of the facsimile of the Codex. Also, as well as being the author of numerous scholarly articles in the academic press, Professor Parker's authoritative "Introduction to the New

⁵ The programme chose not to refer to the "pericope adulterae" in John's gospel, so it is not included in this calculation.

⁶ <http://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/> It is possible to sign up to receive an e-mail whenever Dr Hurtado makes a posting.

⁷ <http://ronininstitute.academia.edu/JeffreyRose> Accessed on 15.2.14.

⁸ <http://jewishstudies.group.cam.ac.uk/directory/sdg1001@cam.ac.uk> Accessed on 15.2.14.

⁹ Parker, D.C., "Codex Sinaiticus: The Story of the World's Oldest Bible", London: The British Library and Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 2010

Testament Manuscripts and their Texts” was published by Cambridge University Press in 2008¹⁰.

I have no knowledge of Professor Parker’s religious stance, since those books of his that I have read limit themselves to a neutral presentation of the relevant facts and don’t go into his personal beliefs.¹¹

Ignored experts (2): Dr Dirk Jongkind

It would also have been good if the programme had interviewed the other contemporary expert on the Codex Sinaiticus, Dr Dirk Jongkind (author of “Scribal Habits of Codex Sinaiticus”¹²), who was employed by the British Library to help prepare the facsimile. He is now Research Fellow in New Testament Text and Language and Fellow of St. Edmund’s College, Cambridge.

I also don’t know what he would have said, but it seems strange that the programme ignored both of the main contemporary experts on the text (both conveniently located in the UK) and went instead for an academic whose discipline does not include a study of manuscripts of the New Testament.

The source of the programme’s thesis

It seems to me that most of the programme is no more than a rehash of James Bentley’s 1985 “Secrets of Mount Sinai”¹³. Like that book, the programme is sensationalist and repeatedly inaccurate in its presentation of facts.¹⁴

Unsubstantiated allegations and non sequiturs (1): corrections to the manuscript

The programme makes repeated unsubstantiated allegations and statements that are non sequiturs. Thus, it states that the number of corrections in Codex Sinaiticus “suggests that the scribes were unsure of the text”.

On the contrary, the opposite is the case: the corrections show that they compared what they had actually written with the (by definition older) texts from which they had copied, and corrected their copying errors, in order to produce a text that was as close as possible to their source material. This shows clearly that the text of the Bible was already fixed, and that changes were not permitted. Analysis of the handwriting of the manuscript of Codex Sinaiticus shows that in addition to each scribe checking and correcting his (her?) own copies, another contemporary scribe was involved in the checking and correcting process.

Unsubstantiated allegations and non sequiturs (2): the source of the “long ending” of Mark’s gospel

Elsewhere (25’52” in) the programme states that “it appears that [centuries later] a long ending of Mark had been inserted into the official Bible text”.

In fact, all that the absence of the last twelve verses of Mark indicates is that the manuscript from which the scribes copied did not have these verses. When old manuscripts are stored in imperfect conditions (as was the case with all early manuscripts of the New Testament), it is the last pages that are most susceptible

¹⁰ Parker, D.C., “An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and their Texts”, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 4th printing 2012

¹¹ My review of Parker’s book on the Codex Sinaiticus is here: http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/071235803X/ref=dp_top_cm_cr_acr_txt?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1

¹² Jongkind, Dirk, “Scribal Habits of Codex Sinaiticus”, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007

¹³ Bentley, James, “Secrets of Mount Sinai”, London: Orbis, 1985

¹⁴ If this link works, you will be able to read my review of “Secrets of Mount Sinai” on amazon.co.uk here: http://www.amazon.co.uk/review/R2PTWTTDCVFTIM/ref=cm_cr_pr_viewpnt#R2PTWTTDCVFTIM (If the links don’t work, you can find the books on the Amazon.co.uk website and there will be links to the reviews. My reviews are signed “TRA”.)

to damage and possible loss. It must have been such a copy that reached the scriptorium where the Codex Sinaiticus was produced.

Ignored manuscripts (1): Codex Vaticanus

I am surprised that the programme did not refer to the Codex Vaticanus (Manuscript 1209, “B”). It is the other major fourth century codex of the Bible, and was probably produced no later than 20 years after Codex Sinaiticus, possibly at nearly the same time. Like Sinaiticus, it does not contain Mark 16:9-20, but after Mark 16:8 there is a blank column long enough to accommodate the missing text. The parchment used for these manuscripts was expensive, and scribes made maximum use of the space available on the page, never leaving blank columns. Indeed, this is the only blank column in Codex Vaticanus, and suggests that the scribes who produced the text knew that the final section of the gospel was missing from the manuscript that they had before them, and so they left space, hoping to add the missing text after receiving a complete copy of the gospel.¹⁵

Ignored manuscripts (2): Codex Alexandrinus

It is also strange that when the programme makers went to the British Library they failed to consult the Codex Alexandrinus, which is usually displayed next to the Codex Sinaiticus. It was produced in the 5th century A.D., less than 100 years after Sinaiticus, and it does contain Mark 16:9-20 (folios 18r and 18v). A photographic copy of Alexandrinus can be consulted in the manuscripts reading room, and the manuscript can also be consulted on the British Library website, as the whole of it has been digitised, naturally in colour.¹⁶ Since every manuscript that we have was of necessity copied from an existing (hence, older) manuscript, Alexandrinus gives us evidence of the earlier existence of the so-called “long ending” of Mark.

Misleading claim about Codex Syriacus

Talking of the text of the four gospels in the Codex Syriacus, the programme states (41’10” in) that “there’s no mention of Jesus’s appearances to his disciples after the crucifixion.” This is of course at best misleading, as Codex Syriacus contains repeated and detailed accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances in all of the other three gospels (plus of course the statement “He is risen” in the extant text of Mark’s gospel).

Unsubstantiated allegations and non sequiturs (3): implications for the other gospels

Among the non sequiturs is the statement that the absence of Mark 16:9-20 “meant that there was a real doubt about all of the gospels.” This of course is not a justifiable conclusion, even if there were no other evidence. In fact, there is also massive other evidence, in the form of much older manuscripts of the gospels, discovered at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. Perhaps these will be covered in part two of the programme.

Unsubstantiated allegations and non sequiturs (4): significance of a scribal comment

Another non-sequitur is Professor Goldhill’s comment (41’25”) that after Mark 16:8, one (unspecified) manuscript has the words “This is the ending”. He states, “After that, there can be no debate.” This is of course a claim that is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the way in which manuscript copies were produced. When a Biblical manuscript was copied, an introductory title that is not part of the Biblical text was added at the beginning of each book, and a similar tail piece¹⁷ was added after the end. In the Codex Sinaiticus, the tailpiece to Mark’s gospel merely states “Gospel [or “Good News”] according to Mark”. Notably, it does not state, “This is the ending”.

¹⁵ I refer to the “Prolegomena” to the Vatican’s 1999 facsimile of Codex Vaticanus, page 4 col 1 (and footnote 18), page 35 col 2.

¹⁶ http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Royal_MS_1_d_viii

¹⁷ Technically known as a “colophon”

Many manuscripts also have artistic flourishes after the end of each book, reflecting the whim and artistic skill of the scribe who produced the copy. Some even pronounce a blessing on those who read the book, or request the reader to pray for the scribe who copied it. These are likewise not part of the Biblical text, and their presence or absence does not have any significance at all as regards the content of the Biblical text itself.

When Dr Goldhill tells us that a certain, unnamed, manuscript of Mark's gospel has after our verse 8¹⁸ the words "This is the ending", it would of course be interesting to know in which manuscript Dr Goldhill has seen this, and in which century the manuscript was produced. In any case, the addition of these words underneath the Biblical text merely shows what the monk making the copy decided to write as an additional and personal comment.

The conclusions drawn by Professor Goldhill are thus totally unjustified. He says, "The threat is there is no resurrection – there's no good news. ... The central event of Christianity – the resurrection – has been called into question." This claim actually goes against the evidence of even the "short" ending of Mark, which states, "He has risen" on the very same page of the manuscript to which the programme directed so much attention. In addition, the first words of Mark's gospel describe it as "the good news" and the actual colophon after the end of the gospel says "Good News according to Mark" – both statements being a clear contradiction of Professor Goldhill's claim.

Other textual and non-textual evidence for the resurrection

Moreover, there is the ample evidence of the other three gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the rest of the New Testament, all of which *is* included in Codex Sinaiticus and makes constant, frequent and unambiguous references to the resurrection of Christ and his appearances to hundreds of people.

It was because of this experience of the resurrection of Jesus that the disciples were prepared to die, and without the resurrection experiences there would have been no preaching of the gospel on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), no conversion of Saul (the Apostle Paul), no evangelisation (that means, "telling the good news") and no founding of churches. Today, Christianity would not exist and Jesus would be a little-known or unknown historical figure of no significance, at best a footnote in some learned treatise on Roman Palestine in the first century.

Alleged changes to the Biblical text

The comments (about 30' in) about the text of the Bible being changed in fact merely refer to the changes from the King James' Authorised Version English translation of 1611 to the Revised Version English translation of 1881 – not changes to the original Biblical text. Even these changes did not create in 1881 the angst and doubt claimed for them in the programme, and now, over 130 years after the publication of the Revised Version, such changes are a mere historical curiosity.

A solid foundation for confidence in the reliability of the New Testament text

Still older manuscripts have been discovered since 1881 and the science of textual criticism has progressed to the point where we have a much clearer and more reliable picture of the content of the original text. In the 21st century, apart from a small number of people (most of them in the United States) who believe that the English text of the King James Version is the "inspired word of God", Christians are not concerned by the principally minor variations between Biblical manuscripts. In any case, most of these variations consist of phonetic spelling instead of classical spelling or simple transpositions of letters or words – and none of them affect the teaching of the Bible or the beliefs of Christians.

¹⁸ The verse numbers are not in the original text.

Comments on Mark's Gospel by Dr Hurtado

In his "Lord Jesus Christ"¹⁹, Dr Hurtado brings together the conclusions drawn from decades of academic research and publication. He is a highly-respected scholar and (in the books that I have read by him) has an easy-to-read style.

He makes some very insightful comments on the long ending of Mark's gospel, and it is remarkable that none of these comments are reflected in the parts of the interview with him that the programme maker chose to include.

Interestingly, he points out (p. 309) that Mark's gospel starts by describing itself as "The *beginning* of the gospel of Jesus Christ". He explains that there is good reason to believe that this refers "to the whole of the following account of Jesus, and not merely the introductory material in 1:1-15." It is the beginning, but not the end of the good news.

He also gives an interesting insight into reasonable conclusions that might be drawn even if Mark 16:9-20 were *not* in the original text (p. 311). He says that the

"concern to make Jesus both the basis of redemption (10:45, 14:22-24) and the pattern for his followers probably gives the best explanation of the overall shape and limits of the Markan account, for what Mark does and does not include in it. We have in Mark a story of Jesus that is shaped just like the life of the disciples. In the words of Philip Davis²⁰, the Markan story line is 'a blueprint for the Christian life': it begins with a baptism and then issues in mission, opposition, and persecution involving death, and ends with divine vindication by resurrection."

He goes on to say:

"Whether Mark knew of any miraculous birth tradition we cannot say. But if he did, he had good reason for not including one in a story of Jesus shaped to serve as a paradigm for his readers. As Christians, their life too began with their baptism, and Mark emphasizes that they too are called to follow Jesus in proclaiming the gospel and with a readiness to undergo persecution, trusting that if they lose their life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, they shall receive eschatological vindication (e.g., 8:34-38). Likewise, no resurrection appearance was necessary or even appropriate. For readers who are to live with trust in God for their own vindication, it was sufficient to affirm that God has raised Jesus, the paradigmatic figure for their own lives and hopes (16:5-6). ... For the intended Christian readers of Mark, the ending was not nearly so doubtful in meaning as it has often been made by modern scholars."²¹

I am surprised that none of these comments found their way into the programme.

Conclusion

To have presented factual information, supported by genuine experts in the subject matter under consideration, might have resulted in less sensationalist television. But it would have given viewers a more balanced and more accurate understanding of the issues. Instead, in "Bible Hunters, Part I" we have been served prejudice and incomplete information, masquerading as fact.

¹⁹ Hurtado, Larry W, "Lord Jesus Christ", Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005

²⁰ Davis, Philip, "Christology, Discipleship and Self-Understanding in the Gospel of Mark" in *Self-Definition and Self-Discovery in Early Christianity: A Study in Shifting Horizons, Essays in Appreciation of Ben F Meyer from His Former Students*, edited by David J Hawkin and Tom Robinson, Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990, p. 109

²¹ Emphasis added