FORGERY AND ILLICIT ANTIQUITIES – THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE



From the Guardian today – Forgers 'tried to rewrite biblical history'

Hundreds of biblical artefacts in museums all over the world could be fakes, it has emerged after Israeli investigators uncovered what they claim is a sophisticated forgery ring.

Four men have been charged with the faking of some of the most important biblical discoveries in recent years.

The artefacts in question include an ossuary which was believed to contain the bones of James, the brother of Jesus, and a tablet with a written inscription by a Jewish king in the ninth century before Christ.

The indictment against the men in Jerusalem says: “During the last 20 years many archaeological items were sold, or an attempt was made to sell them, in Israel and in the world, that were not actually antiques. These items, many of them of great scientific, religious, sentimental, political and economic value, were created specifically with intent to defraud.”

The forgers not only conned buyers out of of millions of dollars, said officials of the Israel Antiquities Authority, but also damaged the science of archaeology, casting doubt on the authenticity of every artefact not uncovered in an authorised dig.

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Shuka Dorfman, head of the Israel Antiquities Authority, said the forgery ring had been operating for more than 20 years and had been “trying to change history”. Scholars said the forgers were exploiting the deep emotional need of Jews and Christians to find physical evidence to reinforce their faith.

“This does not discredit the profession. It discredits unscrupulous dealers and collectors,” said Eric Myers, an archaeology professor at Duke University in North Carolina.

Other forgeries included an ivory pomegranate which scholars believed was the only remaining artefact from King Solomon’s Temple. The James ossuary, with the inscription “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus”, was thought to be the only physical link in existence today to the life of Jesus 2000 years ago.

Here forgers were adding inscriptions to genuine artifacts to make them part of a biblical story. To make them decidable, in Derrida’s sense [Link]

It points to the overwhelming importance for ALL archaeology of meta-narrative – the essential grounding – emotional, intellectual, cultural – supplied by narrative.

As I keep saying –

It is the stories that matter!

