



The mystery of 'The Jesus Papers'

What if everything you think you know about Jesus is wrong? Author Michael Baigent makes controversial assertions in his new book

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Michael Baigent is investigating a grisly crime. He's tracking down leads, digging for clues, and trying to shed new light on a cold case—a case that is 2,000 years old. And this isn't just any case: It is perhaps, the most well known story in history—the crucifixion of Jesus.

Sara James, Dateline correspondent: You believe that much of what we think we know about Jesus is a lie?

Michael Baigent, author: It's a lie. It's an obvious lie.



Hard to imagine? Author Michael Baigent has captured readers' imaginations before with a provocative non-fiction work in which he claimed Jesus was married. Some of the same ideas appear in *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. In fact, he sued Brown's publisher for copyright infringement. Brown and his publisher strongly deny they did anything wrong. A decision is pending in the case.

Now, Baigent has a new book, "The Jesus Papers," with an even more controversial premise, which challenges the conventional story about Jesus.

James: So basically, you're asking anybody who is a Christian to question their fundamental beliefs?

Baigent: Absolutely.

James: Some might call your position heresy.

Baigent: I should hope they would.

While he considers himself an investigator bent on exposing the truth, scholars say the tale he weaves is fiction—fantasy, rather than fact.

Elaine Pagels, religious scholar, Princeton University: It's imaginative to say the least.



Craig Evans, evangelical New Testament scholar at Acadia Divinity College: It's voodoo scholarship, it shouldn't be taken credibly.



It's criticism Baigent has heard before, back in 1982, when he and two co-authors wrote *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*.

The book's popularity has soared since the *Da Vinci Code*. Thanks to that book and the soon-to-be released movie, devoted fans around the world can recite a key story line—that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were not only married but had a child, and the descendants live on to this day.

But the plot doesn't end there. For more than 20 years, author Michael Baigent has kept the trail warm, chasing secrets from London to Jerusalem. He'd heard about a "smoking gun" of sorts, documents containing extraordinary information about Jesus—and he wanted to get his hands on them.

James: Where have you traveled on your search for these documents?

Baigent: It's not just documents of course. It's carvings, sites, underground tombs, underground temples. But I've been to Egypt a lot and spent a lot of time in the Middle East. Italy too...and, of course, France.

We followed in his footsteps in search of answers—traveling from England to France, Israel to Italy on a trail that would have twists, turns and even giant leaps. It was a journey into the shadowy world of antiquities, where the trade in artifacts is often illegal.

Baigent: This clandestine market by its very nature, you just can't get a hold of the documents.

James: Is it dangerous?

Baigent: Where lots of money is involved, there's always a risk. And one thing I've learned over the years is to keep my mouth shut, which is why I've not spoken about a lot of these things—until now really.

Baigent says he's breaking his silence because he's seen and held shocking documents, including two he named his book after, calling them "The Jesus Papers." And he makes this astonishing claim: that the Church wants to keep them secret.

Baigent: You can make sure they never see the light of day—that they're destroyed. That they're lost. That they're hidden away. And this is the situation that I've found.

James: So you're saying that there's a cover up?

Baigent: There is a cover up. Of course there's a cover up.

A cover up, he contends, because his clues point to a radical conclusion: that Jesus did not die on the cross.

Baigent: I don't think Jesus died at the crucifixion. I think he survived.

In the Bible, the story is told like this: Jesus spent his final hours on a hillside in Jerusalem. Sentenced to death, the peasant preacher was nailed to a wooden cross and left to die and was later resurrected.

The site would become holy to Christians around the world, now the location of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

What do we really know about what happened on that fateful day 2,000 years ago? The exact details of the crucifixion have always been steeped in mystery. What we do have are pieces of evidence from four different and sometimes contradictory gospels written at least 30 years after Jesus died.

James: So you believe even in the Bible, there are clues to what you believe is the truth.

Baigent: Absolutely. If we read them closely and ask the questions we can come up with a very, very different construction.

With the Bible as his source, Baigent reconstructed the story of the crucifixion and arrived at an entirely new version of events.

A secret deal with Pontius Pilate

He says Pontius Pilate, who ordered Jesus's death, actually made a secret deal to save his life.

Baigent: It was rigged. It was a fraud. I think the crucifixion was set up precisely to remove a particular political problem which both Pilate and Jesus found themselves within.

Pilate, Baigent argues, he needed to appease the crowd, which was calling for Jesus's death. But because Jesus had urged his followers to pay their taxes to Rome, Baigent argues Pilate also had an incentive to let Jesus live.

Baigent: It's my hypothesis that he rigged the crucifixion such that Jesus would survive but very quickly removed Jesus from the scene.

According to Baigent, Jesus and his supporters were also in on this plot. Baigent acknowledges there no proof of his theory, but it was possible to survive crucifixion. There is at least one example in early historical records. The Jewish historian, Josephus, writes about finding three of his friends nailed to the cross.

Baigent: He pleaded with Roman authorities and got them brought down. Two of them died. One survived. If the crucifixion was arranged to allow a survival, it could be done.

It's a theory that was first raised in a book called "The Passover Plot" 40 years ago, which was dismissed by scholars. But Baigent believes the theory deserves a second look. The plot would have gone like this: Jesus would have been sedated so that he looked dead and then later revived after being taken down from the cross.

Baigent: The way to survive it would be to reduce the trauma. It would be to get the person off the cross quickly. And it would be to minister to that person as soon as possible afterwards. And all three of these factors we can find in the New Testament.

The vinegar-soaked sponge

He says where the Gospels relate how a thirsty Jesus called out for something to drink. A sponge soaked in vinegar was placed on a reed and lifted to Jesus' mouth. But rather than reviving him, Jesus died shortly after drinking the liquid. Baigent says that detail suggests how the plot might have been carried out.



A vinegar-soaked sponge is offered to Jesus.

Baigent: I think it's more likely that they raised the sponge with some kind of anesthetic, which knocked Jesus out, which would reduce the trauma and make it easier for him to survive.

James: What do you think those drugs might have been?

Baigent: Well, they used hashish, opium, belladonna. There was a mixture of drugs.

Baigent says his account would explain why Jesus apparently died so quickly. While normally a person lingered on the cross for three days, according to the gospels, Jesus died within hours. Of course, there is another widely accepted explanation for Jesus's quick death: He had been beaten, stabbed, in addition to being crucified.

James: Indeed, somebody could die after a matter of hours instead of several days?

Baigent: They could. But I think by giving someone a drug to render them unconscious would reduce this trauma and I think this is a significant factor in the Gospel account.

The Greek text

Next, he suggests, a lifeless-looking, unconscious Jesus was removed from the cross. The gospels say that Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate to ask for Jesus's body. Buried in the text of the original Greek Bible, Baigent says is a crucial clue:

Baigent: When Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate and asks for Jesus' body to take down from the cross, he asks for the "soma" of Jesus, which means the living body. Pilate allows Joseph to take the body. But he uses the word "ptoma," which means the corpse, the dead body.

So even in the New Testament, there's a distinction made between a living Jesus and a dead Jesus.

Religion scholar Elaine Pagels of Princeton University says Baigent is drawing the wrong conclusion.

Pagels: If you're talking about the removal of a body of a friend of yours, you would ordinarily not talk about "a corpse." You would not say, "my father's dead corpse." You would talk about "my father's body." It's just a bit more respectful and intimate on the whole.

'Immediate medical attention'

Once Joseph of Arimathea collected the body, Michael Baigent says there was one last, urgent step to complete the plot: immediate medical attention.

Baigent: They bring him down from the cross, they get him as quickly as possible into the tomb where under the cover of darkness, they return with drugs to treat any bleeding which may have occurred and to try to revive him.

And once again, Baigent contends the Gospels offer clues. When Joseph and Nicodemus—supporters of Jesus—visited his tomb during the night, they brought with them herbs and spices such as aloe and myrrh.



The body of Jesus is prepared for burial.

Baigent: They weren't embalming spices.

James: The spices they took to the tomb weren't the kinds of things they would be taking if Jesus were dead?

Baigent: Exactly.

James: So you're saying they were going to deal with an injured Jesus rather than a Jesus who had perished? That's not the way the Gospels read.

Baigent: That's the way the Gospels read if you read them closely.

Craig Evans, an evangelical New Testament scholar at Acadia Divinity College, completely dismisses Baigent's theory. And he says spices were brought to the tomb and there was a very practical reason.

Evans: Bodies were spiced because of the bad smell. That's what they were doing, not to treat his wounds and hopefully help him revive and get out of the tomb alive.

All of the accounts agree that Jesus was crucified and died and what strikes me as remarkable that had he not died that would have been enormous good news for his followers.

James: So rather than keep such news a secret, you'd be shouting it from the rooftops?

Pagels: Absolutely. God delivered him.

But Michael Baigent takes his unorthodox ideas even further—he contends there is hidden evidence that Jesus was alive and well long after the crucifixion.

There's been talk of treasure buried in the hills in Southern France for centuries. Year after year, people make pilgrimages here in search of fortune.

Author Michael Baigent says what drew him here were the whisperings of something far more valuable—he was looking for evidence that Jesus survived the crucifixion.

He says information about a mysterious document arrived in a letter he got his hands on 20 years ago.

Michael Baigent, author: The letter came out of the blue. And there seemed to be some treasure associated with it.

The letter reads: "*The treasure is not one of gold and precious stones, but a document containing incontrovertible evidence that Jesus was alive in the year 45 AD.*"

It's significant date because it's more than a decade *after* the accepted date for the crucifixion.

Sara James, Dateline correspondent: Because if he had been alive in 45 A.D. He couldn't have died on the cross?

Baigent: Exactly.

Baigent says that mysterious document was last seen at the Church of San Sulpice in Paris. He believes it calls into question the accepted story about when and how Jesus died.

James: For you, San Sulpice is more than a beautiful church. You believe this is a place where clues have been found?

Baigent: Absolutely. Archaeologists were digging up material and here is where it was brought together.

And where according to Baigent, in the late 1800s, that mysterious document was seen by a prominent member of the English Church, Canon Alfred Lilley. The alleged document written supposedly indicated Jesus didn't die on the cross. But soon after, Lilley's document vanished, never to be seen again. Baigent admits he has never met Lilley who is dead, he's never seen the document, nor does he have any idea what the document said. Even Baigent concedes this story has a lot of holes.

Baigent: I know—it's terrible isn't it.

James: It's a pretty tall order.

Baigent: It is a tall order and I wish I could make it more solid. But we can't.

James: Especially when you're talking about something as fundamental as questioning whether or not Jesus died on the cross.

Baigent: I know but what can we do.

Baigent wondered if someone else had seen the mysterious document?

Baigent returned to the letter he'd seen which reads: "*clues left behind by the good cure have never been understood*"... and goes on to say...."*the document was exchanged for a large sum and concealed or destroyed.*"

The good cure' he believed was a priest named Berenger Sauniere, who lived and preached in an idyllic hilltop village in the South of France called Rennes-le-Chateau.

What's beyond dispute is that the cure, Sauniere, had been a young penniless priest who suddenly came into enormous wealth. Local legend has it that, while renovating the church, Sauniere found a valuable document buried under the altar.

Baigent suggest perhaps, what that country priest found was that mysterious document which supposedly contained explosive evidence that Jesus survived the crucifixion. And he speculates the Church paid Sauniere a fortune to get a hold of it.

Baigent says there is revealing information on the walls of Sauniere's church that suggests this cure—or abbe—believed Jesus survived the crucifixion.

James: You believe that the abbey was leaving a clue in this picture of what his view was about the crucifixion?

Baigent: That's the only conclusion I can come to.

This picture is one of a series of friezes illustrating the story of Jesus's final hours, or the Stations of the Cross. While the friezes are identical to others found in southern France, he believes the priest himself added an incongruous detail—a detail so innocuous, yet so important it can't be overlooked.



Station 14, with moon visible in upper left.

At Station 14, this familiar tableau shows three people carrying Jesus's body after he's taken down from the cross.

James: What's different about this Station of the Cross?

Baigent: Station 14 traditionally is them carrying Jesus into the tomb having died on the cross. But as you can see, the night sky, the moon has risen, Passover has begun. So they're not carrying the body into the tomb. They're carrying it out of the tomb.

Out of the tomb? That's not in any traditional Bible story. And neither is the full moon—a clear sign of nightfall.

Baigent: The moon has risen. There's a very clear distinction made between these two times of day. And I think that's important.

Important because Jewish law dictated a body needed to be buried before sundown and before the start of Passover.

Baigent: In the New Testament, it stresses that they had to get this body into the tomb before the Passover began. And anyone touching the dead body would be ritually unclean.

Unmistakable evidence, he argues, of Saunier's discovery.

Baigent: I think that he's revealing and yet hiding a major secret to do with the Christian faith. And that is that Jesus survived the crucifixion.

But religion scholar **Craig Evans** argues the artwork is evidence only of one thing—a mistake.

Craig Evans, religious scholar: The moon was added to the picture mistakenly by someone who thought that Jesus's body was taken down when it was already night. But to infer from that some secret, some special knowledge that suggests that Jesus actually was taken down from the cross still living...is very far fetched.

As for the priest's fortune, there does seem to be at least one mundane explanation: There is evidence that Saunier was suspended from the church for selling mail order prayer services for the dead.

So the mystery remains unsolved. And if the document exists, where is it?

James: What do you think happened to the document, the one that said that Jesus was alive in 45 A.D.?

Baigent: I think it's in the Vatican.

James: Michael, are you suggesting the Vatican knows Jesus was alive in 45 A.D. and is hiding that fact?

Baigent: I am suggesting that, oddly enough.

James: But you have no proof?

Baigent: I have no proof.

Even so, Baigent also claims the Church is hiding two other documents—the ones he names his book after: *The Jesus Papers*. What are they and do they even exist?

People have been searching for more information about the life of Jesus for centuries. For years, Michael Baigent says he had heard rumors of mysterious documents, which could make us think about Jesus in an entirely different way.

Michael Baigent, author: They were always mentioned in hushed tones. But no one quite knew where they were or who had them. They just knew that these documents existed which gave a different perspective on something important to the Vatican.

Where were these documents? Did they even exist? His investigation led him to an Israeli businessman living in an undisclosed European city. But once again, Baigent is short on details. He won't tell us the man's name, or anything about him, except that he's a wealthy collector.

Baigent: He can very easily produce large sums of cash to buy antiquities for which he doesn't require a receipt. And he has an amazing collection of antiquities.

According to Baigent, the businessman told him he bought a home in the Old City of Jerusalem in the 1960s and excavated the foundation.

Baigent: He found these papers. He must have had some idea of where the repository was.

Baigent says the businessman told him he'd discovered two significant papers from approximately 34 AD. Eventually, he says the businessman showed him the documents, which he describes as preserved in glass frames, hidden away in a large temperature-controlled safe in the businessman's home.

They are around about nine or ten inches long, four five inches high. There are two of them. They may be two parts of one document. They're on papyrus. They're written in Aramaic.

James: You call them the “Jesus papers”?

Baigent: I do indeed. I do indeed.

James: Are they here? Are they in England?

Baigent: I can’t say where they are.

James: Are they in France?

Baigent: It’s not for me to reveal where they are or reveal the owner. If he wishes to do this, then that’s up to him. It’s not for me to do it. I respect his desire for privacy.

But Baigent is more than willing to reveal what’s in them. And as improbable as this sounds, he describes the “Jesus Papers” as two letters written to the Jewish Court, the Sanhedrin, by a writer who called himself the “Messiah of the Children of Israel”—Jesus himself.

Baigent: They were answers to a charge made by the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin had been accusing someone of claiming that he was god. This someone wrote back in his defense. And this Messiah was writing back to the Sanhedrin saying in effect, “No, no, no, I’m not saying that I’m god. I’m saying that I’m filled with the spirit of god.”

If these letters are real, Baigent contends it would mean Jesus was saying he was an ordinary man and not divine. But Baigent admits he can’t back up his claim.

James: Were you allowed to copy the papers?

Baigent: Nothing.

James: Were you allowed to photograph them?

Baigent: Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

James: Did anybody else see them with you?

Baigent: No one else was there. Just me.

James: So you were in a room looking at papers you couldn’t read that were in Aramaic?

Baigent: Yes.

James: So in essence, you’re asking people to believe what you say about documents, but they’ll never see the documents. They’ll never have the proof.

Baigent: The alternative is to ignore them and I can’t do that.

Was it possible for a discovery such as this to be uncovered here in the Old city of Jerusalem, 40 years ago? Could it have been kept secret all

these years? Archaeologists agree treasures are still out there. But while some are authentic, others are well-disguised fakes.

Shai Bartura, an investigator with the Israeli Antiquities Authority says the chance these papers are real is about one in a million.



Shai Bartura, investigator with the Israeli Antiquities Authority:

The whole story sounds suspicious. Every time we hear about an artifact or a piece—an archaeological piece that has such huge implications... well, then immediately it's suspect for forgery.

He points to a revealing clue in the Baigent's own description—that the documents are on papyrus. He says almost certainly, they would have disintegrated long ago unless they were preserved in a dry uninhabited area like a desert.

Bartura: The chance of a document written on papyrus being preserved in the ground, underneath a home in the city of Jerusalem is as slim as it gets. And even more so if you're talking about a document that's written by the hand of Jesus.

So Baigent's story hangs on a guy we've never met, on papers we've never seen, and on claims that are impossible to verify. But Baigent has an explanation for that too. He says that the reason we can't see the "Jesus Papers" is because that Israeli businessman made a secret deal with the Vatican.

Baigent: The Vatican asked him to destroy them. But he refused. But he did promise that he would keep them under wraps for 25 years. Now when I met with him, he had long passed the 25 year mark.

Is it possible the Vatican made a deal to suppress those so-called Jesus Papers? Or to hide those other alleged documents claiming Jesus was alive in 45 AD? Has the church tried to keep secrets about Jesus? Is there any evidence of Baigent's allegation of a cover up?

Father Thomas Williams is dean of theology at a college closely affiliated with the Vatican and an NBC News analyst.

Sara James, Dateline correspondent: What do you make of the Jesus papers?

Father Williams, dean of theology and NBC News analyst: The Vatican is an easy target. If [the papers] exist, which I'm not convinced of yet because I've never seen them—I've never seen them on film. If they exist, it would be nice for scholars to analyze them and see what century they're from. Right now, I doubt their existence.

James: Baigent says that there's a cover up.

Father Williams: The Vatican's organization is bent on revealing everything it knows about Jesus. It's not this secretive mysterious thing that's going on making side deals with people about covering up documents.

New Testament Scholar **Craig Evans** passionately agrees. He says he doesn't have any faith in Baigent's investigation or conclusions.

Craig Evans, New Testament scholar: I see it as a sensationalist and uncontrolled pseudo-scholarship. He puts them all into a blender, stirs them all up and pours out an interesting theory that relies mostly on his imagination, on legend and on speculation, but not on facts.

But as unlikely as some of the scenarios may be, scholar Elaine Pagels says we should be open to new theories, even unorthodox ones, because they can lead to a greater understanding of Jesus.

Elaine Pagels, religious scholar: There's a great deal we don't know, and there's a great deal we still have to learn about what happens.

James: Even if it's speculation?

Pagels: Questions often lead to new insights. So I think that is a very useful thing to do. As a historian that's what we do.

James: It strikes me that what you're doing is asking us to take a leap of faith.

Baigent: I suppose in one sense that could be true. There is an irony. But what I'm asking is for people to ask questions and to find out things for themselves. Not to be satisfied with what is written in ancient documents or even what is written in my book.

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