An article appeared in the *Atlantic* this past week that exposes academic fraud at the highest levels, involving millions of dollars, unscrupulous scholars, and evangelical Christians so intent on proving the truth of the Bible that they were willing, even eager, to engage in unethical and fraudulent activities to do so. It seems weird, but the case involves Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.

The article was written by one of the country’s best investigative journalists, Ariel Sabar, who earlier had exposed for once and all the modern forgery known as “The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife” in another article in the *Atlantic* (I’ve blogged on this forgery a number of times as the story unfolded; just search for “Jesus’ wife” on the blog and you’ll see the posts). Sabar has a forthcoming book on the topic, *Veritas: A Harvard Professor, A Con Man, and the Gospel of Jesus’s Wife*, due out in August. I have read it in manuscript, and it is damning indeed.

So is the current article. You can see it here: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/museum-of-the-bible-obbink-gospel-of-mark/610576/ It implicates the Museum of the Bible, Hobby Lobby, the evangelical Christian billionaires behind them, and a number of individuals employed by them, all named, including one of the foremost scholars of ancient Greek manuscripts in the world, an American who was a professor at Oxford and the general editor for the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, named Dirk Obbink.

A brief word of background. The Oxyrhynchus Papyri collection is named after an ancient city in Egypt, Oxyrhynchus, where two now-famous British archaeologists named B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt uncovered a treasure-trove of papyrus manuscripts starting at the very end of the nineteenth century. That in itself is an interesting story.

Scholars had been interested in old manuscripts for several centuries, but in the 19th century some intrepid souls made it their life mission to go abroad to find them. For the most part, they searched old libraries and old monasteries and other places where manuscripts were being stored. But Grenfell and Hunt wanted to find them archaeologically, by digging them up. How though does one do that? You can’t simply go to, say, Egypt, and start digging in the desert.

Grenfell and Hunt came up with a bright idea by that now may seem kind of obvious. Ancient manuscripts would obviously be found in an abandoned ancient city. But where in the city? Answer: the garbage dump. That’s where ancient people would dispose of their manuscripts when they were worn out or had been replaced by newer copies or were otherwise simply not needed.

And so Grenfell and Hunt decided to dig up a garbage dump. They chose the city of Oxyrhynchus, whose location was known but which had never been excavated. They started digging, and they struck gold right away. Their team dug there for years. And they found tons of stuff. Unbelievable amounts of stuff. Most of what they found was in fragments. And it comprised all kinds of written materials, on papyrus, the ancient equivalent of paper. Most of it was administrative, legal, documentary kinds of material: land deeds, sales receipts, divorce certificates, and so on; there were lots of letters (personal correspondence); and there were literary texts, for example texts of Homer and of Greek poets, and, as it turns out, of the Bible. This is hard to believe, but they found around a million manuscripts altogether (again, mainly in fragments, lots and lots of tiny fragments, some so tiny that it’s hard to know what they are).
Once such materials were seen to be valuable, a market was created, as museums and individuals wanted to get their hands on such things. But what scholars want, of course, isn’t something to hang on their wall and brag about; they want these texts published and explained—especially, for most of us, the literary texts, copies of ancient books, either ones that we already know in whole or part or ones that we have never had. If there are deeply felt reasons for wanting such materials, outside of pure scholarship, the prices can get astronomical.

That also means that those involved in obtaining such materials can face extraordinary temptation to commit fraud, for example by forging such works, claiming they are something that they are not, lying about where they were “discovered,” etc. The stakes are unusually high.

The Oxyrhynchus Papyri collection is held at Oxford University. Dirk Obbink is a world-class and famous papyrologist—that is, an expert on ancient papyrus texts. He was the general editor of the collection, that is, the one responsible for organizing the publication of the texts, a task that will take roughly forever. It may be hard to believe, but since Grenfell and Hunt started publishing the most amazing materials themselves, something like 1% of the collection has been published.

Why so few? Well, for one thing, there ain’t a lot of people in the world who can do this kind of thing. I’m a trained textual scholar and *I* certainly can’t do it. It takes far more technical training than I have. So the workers are few, even though the crops are white for harvest. And it takes an incredibly long time to do an analysis of even one scrap of papyrus: to read it, restore, it date it, describe it, and so on and on.

So, back to the story. I won’t give it all away here, but simply urge you to read the article. The beginning of the story, before anyone knew there was even an issue to address or the possibility of a problem, involved a debate I had with Dan Wallace, professor of New Testament at the conservative evangelical Dallas Theological Seminary, on Feb. 1, 2012. In order to support his contention that we really can know the exact words of the original New Testament, Dan announced that the earliest copy had recently been discovered, a copy of Mark that actually dated to the first century (we have nothing that comes close to that early otherwise). But he wouldn’t say anything about it or give us any information other than that it had been reliably dated by one of the top experts in the world.

It was a stunner, and I don’t need to say anything more about the debate or the aftermath, since I’ve dealt with it on the blog a lot (just search for first-century Mark). That was the extent of my involvement in the affair, except as a rather highly interested onlooker. But the claim that we had such an early copy of part of the New Testament thrilled, titillated, and perplexed scholars, and everyone wanted to know where such a thing had turned up and why there was so much secrecy about it.

As it turns out, this alleged manuscript was published years later, and it’s a tiny scrap, from the late second or early third century. The most important point for Sabar’s article, though, is that this was just the tip of the iceberg. Once investigators wondered why a manuscript that dated from around 200 CE was being touted as coming from as early as 70 CE (virtually the time Mark actually wrote his Gospel), and wondering who had dated it, and who had possession of it, and how they had acquired possession of it, and whether they may have acquired other manuscripts that also were not what they purported to be, and on and on—once investigators did their work, they realized that not only was the claim about the dating
and significance of this manuscript completely false, there was a lot of other fraud going on.

The article shows that Obbink was at the heart of it. He made millions of dollars selling manuscripts that he actually did not own, sometimes by convincing buyers that they were something other than what they were – including not just this scrap of Mark but also several other biblical manuscripts that he also falsely claimed (knowing otherwise) were from the first century.

Why would anyone pay millions of dollars for such things? The Green family that owns Hobby Lobby was acquiring manuscripts for the Museum of the Bible that opened up in Washington D.C. in 2017. The family is passionately evangelical in its religious commitments; the Museum is designed to show not only the cultural significance of the Bible (e.g. in the fight against slavery and for women’s rights; some critics, of course, might find these claims a shade dubious) and its religious importance, but also to prove that the Bible is accurate in every way and a completely reliable guide to what one should think and how one should live. In other words, it is a museum on a mission.

There have been huge questions raised about the ethics of the entire enterprise of the museum – most importantly by biblical scholars Joel Baden and Candida Moss in their damning book Bible Nation: The United States of Hobby Lobby. But now we have a fuller article that exposes even more of the depths of deceit and fraud used to further its religious agenda, involving unscrupulous financial transactions, scholarly lies, deceptive practices, faked antiquities, claims by members of the family and employees connected with the Museum that they knew were false but that they advanced all to serve their religious agenda. And, for some, to raise their public profile and to turn a hefty profit.

Don’t take my word for it. Read the article.

Let me say that I know a lot of the people mentioned in the article, on both sides. Including some of the people who became involved with the museum and its mission only after this long period of fraudulent activity had occurred (including my oldest friend in the field). These particular people are upright and honest, committed to the purposes of the Museum, but eager to clean up its sullied reputation. Still, it is deeply sullied indeed.

The whole mess returns me to a question I have pondered intensely for years. On one hand, I completely understand the profit motive. Obbink does not appear to have had any religious or ideological motivation behind what he did; the article suggests he simply did it for the money. OK, we all get that one. We’re talking millions of dollars here.

But the others who were involved, the evangelical Christians intent to prove the accuracy of the Bible at just about any cost, literally. Why would they go to such lengths?

My question is two-pronged. The first prong is really just puzzling to me, and I wonder how often such people see the irony. Why would they invest hundreds of millions of dollars to prove that Jesus spoke the truth instead of simply following his teachings? (Think Matthew 25:31-46.) My personal view is that billionaires should spend their money any way they want, and they certainly don’t need my permission. But if what they want is to advance the agenda of Jesus, why would they spend many millions on scraps of papyrus instead of using the same funds to help people in desperate need?

The second prong of my question is far more damning. It’s a matter I have reflected on deeply for many years. Why are some intensely religious people so eager to perpetuate
deceit and lies in order to prove the “truth”? 

The Remarkable Story of Masada: Guest Post by Jodi Magness
Startling and Disturbing Development Involving Manuscripts at the Museum of the Bible