

work. His capacity to discuss issues in terms of the meaning on the ground is unparalleled especially in relation to the crossing of the 'sea of reeds', which he places in the vicinity of his excavations at Tell el-Borg. The reliability of his field work and particularly the paleoenvironmental and geomorphological analysis will have to await publication more comprehensive than that available on the excavation's website. However for some time to come no one will be able to consider the wilderness tradition without reference to this study.

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Reviewed by Christopher Davey

When studying archaeology one of my lectures stated to my surprise that archaeologists are really in the entertainment industry. He meant that if public are not interested in what archaeologists do, funding will evaporate and it will be necessary to get a job not so dependent on people's curiosity.

It is not easy to keep people interested and at the same time be intellectually honest as archaeology can be downright boring, especially at the beginning of an excavation when funds are often desperately short. Speculation may spice up the situation and may not be a problem when one is expounding the significance of archaeological material in the context of personal interest, how people once lived and died, but step into the realm of history and in particular religious history and issues will become contentious.

There is a tradition of British archaeologists writing popular books describing their work. Layard and Kenyon are two such archaeologists. Gibson also comes out of the British

archaeological world and is associated with the Palestine Exploration Society. He appears to be a genuine and careful archaeologist. But there is a very real question about the lengths that this book, or at least the cover, goes to gain attention.

The title of the book ensured a good level of interest in the 'Di Vinci code' world and sales have borne this out. However many readers with expectations fostered by the title and blurb will close the book wondering what it was all about. Gibson's book after all reports on a professional excavation of a late Iron Age cistern located near Ain Karim west of Jerusalem that had some rather indistinct drawings on the wall. It does not seem to be the stuff that will change the course of Christian history.

Press releases issued during the excavations claimed that the place where John the Baptist lived had been found. After such hype, it is hard to write a popular book unless the excitement is maintained. However the connection of John the Baptist with this site remains highly speculative.

Gibson discusses the church and biblical traditions associated with John the Baptist, and describes related archaeological and ecclesiastical sites. The Biblical material will be familiar to most readers of the Bible, but the development of church traditions may not and it is these that occupy a significant portion of the book.

Gibson's venture into John the Baptist's theology and significance assumes that his importance was diminished by Jesus' disciples and the traditions of the Christian church, and that his theological meaning was modified so as not to conflict with the Church's view of Jesus. The suggestion that John saw himself as Elisha waiting for Elijah will not gain much support. His ideas at this point are superficial and lead one to conclude that he is probably a good archaeologist.

While the treatment of John by Church tradition is criticised, the reader has to be interested enough in such traditions to read numerous chapters about them. This aspect of the book is heavy going, something that is compounded by the suspicion that Gibson is himself in unfamiliar territory.

The arrangement of the book is rather frustrating. Figures do not have captions, only a number referring to a list at the front of the book, so that with endnotes at the back one needs to have the book open at three places much of the time. The endnotes are useful, but not comprehensive. The drawings of the cave itself are small and do not give the reader a feel for the structure. The colour photographs and line drawings are helpful, but maps are limited leaving much of the geographical context, an important issue for the study, to the imagination.

While the book will probably sink without trace, one hopes that the cave itself will be the subject of a careful archaeological publication. Such an enterprise takes time, but it is something that British archaeologists have been good at.