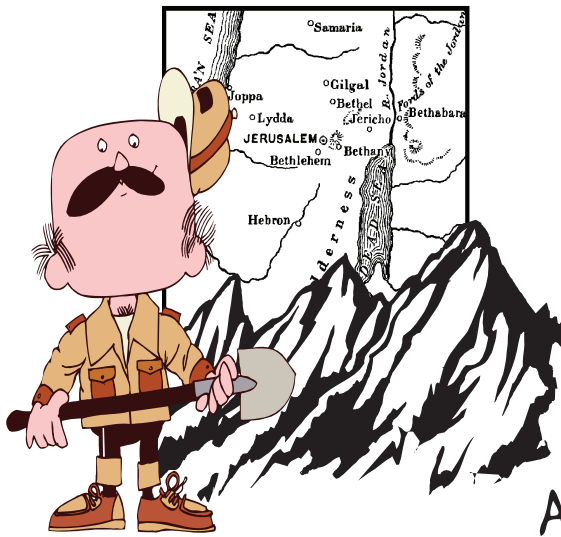


EXCAVATING A MOUNTAIN OF EVIDENCE

Bringing Archaeology into Apologetics for a Witness of Christ

by G. Richard Fisher



The Apostle Peter urges believers to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15).

Most students of the Bible are aware that the Greek root for the word “answer” is the word *apologetic*. This ancient word, *apologia*, meant to give “a verbal defense, a speech in defense”¹ rather than the contemporary meaning of an apology, which is expressing regret for wrongdoing or injury.

One of our greatest tools for a vigorous defense of the Christian faith is the field of Bible archaeology — especially when it comes to Jesus. Apologist Hank Hanegraaff reminds us:

“The manuscript evidence for the preservation of the biblical text is stronger than for any other manuscript of classical literature ... Archaeology affirms the historical reliability of the Bible. ... Truly, with every turn of the archaeological spade we see even more evidence for the trustworthiness of Scripture.”²

When it comes to the topic of Jesus and archaeology, the research and writings of Paul Maier are some of the most helpful and stimulating studies available to the Church today. For example, his recent article “History, Archaeology, and Jesus” is a significant and thought-provoking analysis.³ Christians should be indebted to Maier for the spiritual boost

his insights provide, along with the suggested trails we follow.

SEARCH AND DESTROY

With regard to the field of Jesus and archaeology, some have made huge errors in judgment because they lacked the historical and archaeological information that absolutely exploded in Israel after the declaration of the State in May 1948. Many skeptics were decades behind the evidence and made huge blunders based on ignorance or silence. Prior to the founding of the State of Israel, some even denied that the person of Jesus Christ actually existed. Parrotting the musty old arguments of past liberals, higher critics, and atheists, they proved themselves totally out of touch.

A clear example of this is Albert Schweitzer. Jack Cascione called Schweitzer “the 20th century ‘Doubting Thomas’ look-a-like.”⁴ Cascione added:

“In 1906, Albert Schweitzer wrote his doubting masterpiece, ‘The Quest of the Historical Jesus.’ The brilliant young Schweitzer was the brightest rising star in the cosmos of liberal, German Lutheran theologians. After 400 years of scholarly, insightful, critical analysis, Schweitzer came to the conclusion that there wasn’t any evidence to

prove that Jesus was a historical figure. Schweitzer wasn’t questioning the miracles or the resurrection. He simply concluded that there wasn’t anyone to do them.”⁵

That was 1906. Liberalism was flying blind. The history of the old quest for Jesus (while denying the historicity of the Gospels) from George Wilhelm Hegel through David Strauss, Bruno Bauer, Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf Harnack, Rudolf Bultmann, Schweitzer, and others is chronicled and critiqued in Robert Strimple’s fine book, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus*.⁶

Cascione also scathingly replies to Schweitzer’s pseudo-quest:

“Schweitzer’s real quest was rooted in the quest for his own personal deification. He defined truth as something that he could discover and measure by his own experience, without reliance on the words of the Bible. Was there really a Nebuchadnezzar, Abraham, Noah, or Genghis Khan? Not unless Schweitzer met them! *Was there really an Albert Schweitzer? I never met him.*”⁷

Even as late as 1975, some had not caught up with the times and the vast amount of archaeological information coming out of Israel. That year, Lloyd M. Graham wrote:

“Semienlightened Gnostic Jews created the Christ of the Gospels,

but they did not intend their Christ to be taken literally, not at least by the initiated. They were presenting an ideal, a model to be copied, but they did not reckon with the ignorant Gentile literalists who were to follow them. These seized upon the Gnostics' symbolic writings and reduced them to a literal and historic basis — the greatest error of the Piscean age."⁸

So, in Graham's view, a bunch of Gnostic neophytes invented a mythical Jesus. And wouldn't you know it, some unfortunate, uninformed, and unenlightened Gentiles took it seriously!

The only problem is that there is enough in the New Testament which directly refutes Gnosticism that we cannot take Graham seriously. The Jewish milieu, into which Jesus was born, was so far from Gnostic thought and so deeply rooted and based upon the Old Testament, it makes Graham's assertions unquestionably preposterous.

There seems to be no end to the creative, esoteric fictions about Jesus. According to Barbara Thiering, the Dead Sea Scrolls are a coded document, which she claims to have decoded. She says Jesus was born into the priestly line of the Essenes, had a trial marriage to Mary Magdalene and Lydia of Philippi, and eventually retired in southern France. She disputes the virgin birth of Christ, refashions His temptation in the wilderness, reinterprets the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead, endorses the swoon theory, and denies His literal ascension into heaven. The cryptic Scrolls have given her that and much more, she says.⁹ Randall Price says that "Thiering reinterprets history and the Christian faith."¹⁰

Another recent plot established to undermine the authenticity of the historical Jesus is known as the Jesus Seminar. In 1985, a group who regarded themselves as "New Testament scholars" began meeting twice a year to determine subjectively the validity of the words and actions of Christ. Dr. Norman Geisler outlines

the identity, procedure, and result of the Jesus Seminar:

"The Seminar is comprised of liberal Catholics and Protestants, Jews, and atheists. Most are male professors, though their number includes a pastor, a filmmaker, and three women. ... The group has used colored beads to vote on the accuracy of Jesus' sayings. A red bead means words that Jesus probably spoke. Pink indicates words that could probably be attributed to Jesus. Gray represents words probably, though not certainly, came from later sources. Black indicates words that Jesus almost certainly did not speak. ... The results of their work is the conclusion that only fifteen sayings (2 percent) can absolutely be regarded as Jesus' actual words. About 82 percent of what the canonical Gospels ascribe to Jesus are not authentic. Another 16 percent of the words are of doubtful authenticity."¹¹

There is also a New Age Jesus, which is a fabrication of those seeking support for their Eastern mysticism. Ray Yungen capsulized the overall view of the New Age movement concerning Jesus:

"A basic tenet of New Age thinking is that of the *Master Jesus*. Adherents to this idea believe during the unrecorded period of His life, Jesus traveled to various occult centers and mystery schools in such places as Tibet, India, Persia, and Egypt; at these places Jesus learned the metaphysical secrets of the ages. Therefore, they claim Jesus spent seventeen years of travel on a pilgrimage of higher consciousness. According to this viewpoint, Jesus of Nazareth became the Master Jesus, one who has gained mastery over the physical world by becoming one with his higher self."¹²

It is easy to see that once one leaves the solid foundation of the Gospels, one becomes lost in a deep thicket of imagination, speculation, guesswork, and contradictions. There are more contrived and fictional Jesus figures than we can keep up with. We can take our pick from the Muslim Jesus, the Mormon Jesus, the Watchtower Jesus, and the Unitarian Jesus. But we must never forget the fact that the only real Jesus is the Jesus of the Gospels.

Even the vast majority of non-Christians say Jesus must have ex-



A replica of the Pontius Pilate Inscription Stone uncovered in 1961 and on display at Caesarea. The original is in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

isted, although they readily reject His claims and may even think that His miracles (including His resurrection) were invented by overzealous followers. Even Jewish scholarship does not reject the fact of the person of Jesus, though they may reject His Messiahship as shown by Donald Hagner in his book, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus*.¹³ Jewish scholarship today strongly asserts the Jewishness of Jesus and His historicity.

Though never a Christian himself, the late David Flusser, former professor of Early Christianity at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who is still revered in Israel, acknowledged:



The tomb complex on the Mount of Olives that the ossuaries of buried residents from the first century Bethany, including Martha, Mary and Lazarus, were found.

“We shall be saying nothing new if we maintain that Jesus was a Jew in every way. The Gospels have preserved his maxims and sayings, and thus it is not only the views and opinions of Jesus himself that have been preserved for us, but also details concerning the Jews of those days, especially concerning the world-view of the Sages, as well as information concerning the various streams in Judaism during the period of Jesus’ life and activities.”¹⁴

Careful examination of the biblical record and the record of the rocks (archaeology) convince us that the New Testament is not warped by exaggeration, myth, or embellishments. It is anything but Gnostic and anything but wispy. Jesus was born during the time of a historical Roman Emperor, Augustus, and a Roman puppet named Herod.

During His ministry, Jesus made His home on the edge of the historical Sea of Galilee. In this geographical area, at least 14 fishing villages and remains of docks have been uncovered and examined by archaeologists. A number of these are mentioned in

the Gospels and were visited by Jesus. We now have hard evidence for the city and dock of Magdala, Tiberias, Gennesaret, Capernaum, Bethsaida, Gergesa, Sussita (Hippos), and Gadara harbor. Magazines and standard works on archaeology have reported on these. They are well known.¹⁵

Contemporary historians outside the Bible mention Jesus. Among them are Josephus, Tacitus, Lucian, Philo, Seutonius, and Pliny.¹⁶

Paul Maier pushes the objective value of so much hard historical and geographical information:

“Since reality involves a ‘time-space continuum,’ geographical considerations are also important in weighing the historicity of Jesus. Legends and mythologies have settings in Shangri-La, Nirvana, Never-Never lands, Oz, Valhalla or other illusory places, while the holy books of some ‘made-in-America’ religious systems supply dubious names of imaginary locations that have never been discovered or referred to anywhere else. The Old and New Testaments, on the other hand, are studded with authentic place names: names of countries, provinces, regions, cities, and villages; names of seas, lakes, rivers, brooks, and streams; names of mountains, hills, plateaus, plains, and valleys. Such proper names fill our Bible dictionaries, and all of them are standing challenges to any who doubt that the stage for the many divine-human encounters in Scripture is rock solid.”¹⁷

So we welcome investigation, as well as “why” and “where” questions about Jesus because they can be so easily answered.

As stated, we place Jesus’ birth with Herod the Great (Matthew 2:1), who was responsible for building identifiable, datable buildings all over Israel, including Jerusalem.¹⁸

Herod had a massive fortress palace in West Jerusalem. One can stand on the massive foundation of one of its principal towers. Archaeologists recently have discovered the foundations of Herod’s fortress palace, which spread into the Armenian Quarter of the Old City. The walls were constructed of readily identifiable Herodian blocks. Jacqueline Schaalje’s report calls the discovery “an archaeologist’s dream.”¹⁹

Consider the Rabbi Leibel Reznick’s description of that western palace in Jerusalem as he paraphrases Josephus:

“To the south of the three towers was Herod’s palace. The palace grounds were 1,000 feet long and 200 feet wide and were built atop a 12-foot-high artificially con-

structed hill. Fifty-foot-high walls surrounded the palace complex. Ornamental towers were mounted on the wall all around. The royal residence was divided into two main sections, one to the north and one to the south. Between them was a park-like mall, with ponds and fountains with bronze figures from which water flowed. There were paths and springs, and tame pigeons hovering about. There were huge banquet halls with high, ornate ceilings and mosaic floors. One hundred guest rooms ornamented with gold and silver objects served to accommodate visiting dignitaries and Herod's entourage. Today the remains of the palace foundations can be found in the Armenian section of the Old City."²⁰

Herod built massive projects all over Israel and far beyond its borders. In Israel, we know of his palace complexes at Jericho, Masada, and Herodium (near Bethlehem). Herod's Mediterranean Seaport city of Caesarea, with its theater and aqueduct, has been uncovered. The additions to the Temple in Jerusalem with bridge and overpass entries are now well known. More than 80 building projects throughout the ancient world have been chronicled and detailed by historian Peter Richardson in his definitive biography of Herod the Great.²¹

We are virtually "touching" many of the key figures around Jesus. One of Herod's sons, Herod Antipas, became ruler of Galilee during the time of Jesus. We can absolutely date Herod Antipas and his Galilee capitol of Sepphoris. Remains of the city have been unearthed for all to study and examine.²²

Coins of Herod, Herod Antipas, and Pontius Pilate, are plentiful on the antiquities market. These and other ancient Judean coins are commonplace.²³

Tourists to the Holy Land can visit Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida.²⁴ One can also look across the Sea of Galilee at the sloping Golan Heights and envision the pagan Deca-

polis and the swine plunging down into the Sea of Galilee as the Gospels record. The low mountain rise north of the Sea brings to mind the Mount of Beatitudes and the activities of Jesus.

In Jerusalem, in the Peace Forest south of the old city, a dramatic unexpected find in 1990 brought Jesus' trial back into the headlines. Workers in the area accidentally uncovered the ossuary and bones of the 60-year-old High Priest Caiaphas (the man to whom Jesus was taken after His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane).²⁵ Josephus gave his name as Joseph Caiaphas. The ornate bone box which was uncovered said *Qafa* and *Yehosef bar Qayafa* ("Caiaphas" and "Joseph, son of Caiaphas").²⁶

Paul Maier reminds us that Buddha, Zoroaster and other religious figures have "hazy chronologies."²⁷ Jesus and the people and places around Him are indeed set in stone.

John 11:1 mentions Bethany. Bethany is still on the southern part of the Mount of Olives and today is called El Azaria, commemorating Lazarus. Harold Mare informs us that:

"Excavations in 1951-53 uncovered pits, caves, cisterns, tombs, and grave objects which pointed to site occupation from the sixth century B.C. to the fourteenth century A.D. Clay lamps, other vessels, and coins of the first century A.D. were found, artifacts that are to be dated to the time when Jesus frequented Bethany."²⁸

This writer has had the opportunity to visit Bethany on the Mount of Olives on numerous occasions. I also have witnessed, just outside of Bethany and over the west slope of the Mount of Olives on the grounds of the Dominus Flevit Chapel, the dramatic, now-famous, discovery of the 1950s. It was here, in a tomb complex, that the ossuaries of buried residents from the first century Bethany community were found. The apologetic value in this well-documented archaeological find is that three of the ossuaries discovered in Tomb 79 are those of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

Jack Finnegan wrote extensively on the Bethany ossuaries and others in his 1969 work, *The Archaeology of the New Testament*.²⁹ Likewise, two issues of the *Jerusalem Christian Review* ran articles on the Bethany ossuaries complete with photos. Jean Gilman entitled her first article, "Jerusalem Burial Caves Reveal Names, Testimonies of First Christians."³⁰ Her second front-page article was titled "Priestly Artifact, Cross Marks Discovered in Tomb of Lazarus, Martha, Mary."³¹ For a complete history of Bethany, one can read *Children of Bethany* by Said K. Aburish.³²

Then there was Pontius Pilate. Coins of Pilate are plentiful, but archaeology has given us more. Editor Kenneth Holum recounts the dramatic discovery of Pilate's name on a memorial stone discovered at the coastal city of Caesarea:

"One of the most sensational archaeological discoveries at Caesarea was made in 1961 by the Italian Mission. They were excavating the theater, which had been extensively remodeled in the fourth century C.E., when they found a stone in reuse in a small stairway. A brief Latin inscription on the stone identified a small temple that had stood on the site centuries earlier and named the temple's builder. The text of the inscription, with appropriate restoration, reads. ... [Po]ntius Pilatus [praef]ectus Iud[ae]e ... The inscription confirms that a man named Pilate once served as governor of Judaea and could indeed have presided over the trial, as the New Testament declares."³³

The well-preserved "Pilate stone" has been moved to The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, but a full-size replica is on display at Caesarea and is a favorite of pilgrim picture takers.³⁴

As one walks the Old City of Jerusalem, the ruins and remains of the Pool of Bethesda (John 5) are located just inside the eastern Sheep's Gate. A walk south down the Kidron Valley takes one to David's City, the Gihon Spring, and the Siloam Pool (John 9).

The pedestrian stairway into the southern entrances of the Temple is now uncovered and in plain view — truly we can walk in the footsteps of Jesus and His Apostles.

SO MUCH IS VERIFIABLE

So many of the cities and sites visited by Jesus are identifiable today. Samaria, Bethlehem, and Caesarea Philippi are easy to locate and visit, making the stage of biblical events solid. The digs at Jesus' boyhood hometown take Nazareth back into the first century and show it to be a humble Jewish village, as stated by the Gospels.³⁵ The hard evidence is spectacular.

Time and place references show us an authentic personality — a man named Jesus. He lived in a definite time in history and moved around between specific locations that can be visited, identified, and examined nearly 2,000 years later. Roman census-taking, as in the birth story of Jesus, was a proven practice, showing up in census papyri in Egypt.³⁶

As Jesus walked with His disciples near the Temple in Jerusalem, they marveled and said, "Look, what massive stones" (Mark 13:1). Today we know, without a shadow of doubt, that the Temple stones weighed many tons. These bear testimony to Jesus and the accuracy of the Gospels. Rabbi Reznick describes these massive stones that are there for all to see, either in the lower courses of the western retaining wall or in the debris thrown down by the Romans and discovered along the southwest corner:

"The stones used in the great Herodian Temple walls were huge rocks carved into blocks, called ashlar. Most weighed between 2 and 5 tons. However, many weighed 10 tons, some 50, and one in particular weighed almost 400 tons."³⁷

In what is called the Western Wall Tunnel (or the "Rabbinical Tunnel"), there is one continuous stone which is "estimated to be about 15 feet high, 42 feet long, and 14 feet deep, and weighs about 1,200,000 pounds!"³⁸

In 1986, Israel suffered a severe drought and the Sea of Galilee exposed its bank for the first time in centuries. In the mud of the exposed shoreline, Moshe and Yuval Lufan from Kibbutz Ginosar discovered the remains of a 2,000-year-old fishing boat near the city of Magdala. *Biblical Archaeology Review* covered the tedious and cautious extraction of the two-millennium-old "buried treasure" which was dubbed "The Jesus Boat," obviously because it was a craft much like that used by Christ and His Apostles.³⁹

The boat has been preserved and now is on display at the specially constructed museum in Kibbutz Ginosar. The craft mentioned in Mark 4 fits exactly with the archaeological remains. Additionally, the fishing practices mentioned in the Gospels exactly parallel everything we know about first-century fishing on the Sea of Galilee.⁴⁰

Josephus and other early Jewish writers, as well as secular historians, all attest to Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and local rulers including Roman Governors, Roman Emperors, and High Priests; all of which are prominent figures within the pages of the New Testament. Paul Maier observes:

"Accordingly, the sum total of the geographical, archaeological, and historical-literary evidence from the ancient world dramatically supports the New Testament record not only on the absolute historicity of Jesus, but also on crucial aspects of His extraordinary ministry. The many points of tangency between the Biblical and non-Biblical evidence show corroborative correlation in nearly every instance, the secular facts from the ancient world easily supporting the sacred records. Those who claim otherwise are sadly misinformed, tragically closed-minded, or dishonest."⁴¹

Christians have absolute reason to believe that Christ and Christianity are the most well-attested facts in human history. Jesus, His life and His

times are more well known to us than some events in American history.

Roman writers give vivid details about crucifixion that fit the Bible record exactly. Absolute evidence of crucifixion was brought to light in 1968 when the heel bone of one, Yohanan ben Ha'galgol was discovered in his tomb in Giv'at ha-Mivtar (north of Jerusalem) with the 7 inch Roman nail still embedded in the bones.⁴² Even the secular media took note of this important archaeological discovery.⁴³

Historian Martin Hengel has done extensive research into the history of crucifixion. He says:

"Crucifixion was and remained a political and military punishment. While among the Persians and the Carthaginians it was imposed primarily on high officials and commanders, as on rebels, among the Romans it was inflicted above all on the lower classes, i.e. slaves, violent criminals and the unruly elements in rebellious provinces, not least in Judaea."⁴⁴

In both Matthew 27:32 and Luke 23:26 we are told that Simon, a man from Cyrene, assisted Jesus in carrying His cross. Who could have ever thought that almost 2,000 years later we would meet up again with strong evidence for this crossbearer, but we may well have, as Alan Millard explains:

"In 1941 a tomb was opened in the Kidron Valley which held eleven ossuaries. ... In fact, the tomb was a burial place for Jewish people from Cyrenaica. Their presence in Jerusalem is mentioned both in Acts 2:10 and in Acts 6:9. One ossuary was marked explicitly in Aramaic 'Alexander of Cyrene' on the same ossuary is a notice in Greek, giving his father's name — 'Alexander, son of Simon'. ... Mark adds that Simon was 'the father of Alexander and Rufus' (Mark 15:21). Was the Alexander of Cyrene, son of Simon, whose bones lay in that ossuary, the man whose father carried the

cross? It may, of course, be a coincidence, yet the identification does seem very likely."⁴⁵

Even the time of the death of Jesus was sovereignly chosen by the Father and marked in Scripture. Mark 15:33-37 tells us that He died precisely at the ninth hour. According to Jewish reckoning that was at 3 p.m. Why 3 p.m. and why the emphasis on that hour? Roland de Vaux informs us:

"...in New Testament times, the lamb was sacrificed in the

Perhaps we could loosely apply Luke 19:40 where the Savior rebuked the Pharisees with: "I tell you that, if these [His disciples] should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out." And we can affirm: "They are!"

So we are to sanctify the Lord God in our hearts and be ready to give a defense of any who asks for a reason for the hope that is within us. That becomes much easier for us as the days wear on and God providentially



One of the many flat circular rolling stones found on tombs at burial caves in Israel. The above is on display at the Garden Tomb site in Jerusalem.

middle of the afternoon, about three o'clock (according to Josephus and the Mishnah), the hour at which Jesus died on the cross (Mt 27:46-50 and parallels)."⁴⁶

Furthermore, the flat circular rolling stones are found on tombs all over burial caves in Israel. These were common for Jesus' day.

The evidence for Jesus is massive, overwhelming, breath-taking, even mind-boggling. We have a defense — we have an answer. And better than that, we have a living Savior who left behind an empty tomb. The evidence was so overwhelming that early Christians gave their lives for the Savior.

allows to come to light so much contributing evidence to Jesus and the Bible record.

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WATCHMAN NEE

(continued from page 1)

endorsement of a questionable teacher.

NOT ALL THAT GLITTERS

Not all the reviews in 1984 were as glowing as Wiersbe's. A report came from mainland China that churches there had split and joined Nee's assembly, believing that his was the one way to please God. Many in China did not see him as "one of the giants of the faith," but as sectarian and rigid.

The report stated that Nee's early endeavors seemed like a real work of God:

"Later however, he sees pride coming in, with strong denunciation of denominational churches, and an unhealthy authoritarianism."³

Along the way, this writer began to notice that people who were really enamored with Nee's teachings were very pushy and insistent that his was

the last word on everything. Followers asked others questions simply to see how their answers stacked up against Nee's teachings. These people also seemed off-balance and tended toward a mystical and elitist position. But it was brushed aside and reckoned as a few unbalanced people who took Nee's writings too far or were off-center.

Further research into Nee's teachings brought a surprise. This led to a brief article, "Watching Out For Watchman Nee," which appeared in PFO's newsletter nearly two decades ago. Since then, the influence of Nee's teachings has grown. A deeper and broader look at this religious icon and presumed hero of the faith seemed necessary. No one wants to be overly critical of a giant with a few flaws unless the classification of giant itself is flawed.

A CUT ABOVE

Avid Nee followers are the poorest advertisements for his teachings. Their mentality can be cultlike. Judging Nee leaves one in the position of

being judged by his followers as judgmental. Ardent Nee disciples often display one or more of the following characteristics:

1. They often assume that everything — including the Bible — is judged by Nee's writings. They appear to be unaware that they are quoting what Nee *said* the Bible says. This mind set may not characterize all Nee devotees, but it is prevalent in many. Those who disagree with Nee may be considered sub-spiritual and a dwarf challenging a giant. Whole churches have been summarily judged with Nee's teachings as the ultimate test.

2. When clear statements by Nee point toward error or even heresy, Nee's followers tell those who express doubt that they misunderstand Nee. Pressing for a clearer interpretation is futile.

3. Nee's followers say his writings had to be translated from Chinese and therefore may not be precisely rendered in English. If this is true, then no one can know for sure what he wrote.