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## **Hope for the Future**

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*“Don't Panic.”*

Douglas Adams, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

*And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for [a]all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, [b]pestilences, and earthquakes in various places.*

Matthew 24: 6-8

1.

My name is Boaz Ben-Frenkel and I used to be a biochemist at the government research facility in Ma'ale Adumim's industrial park, five miles from Jerusalem. But that is ancient history: the Arab-Israeli war of March 2087 changed my life, like it did to millions of others.

When the war broke out and our homeland was quickly invaded by forces from five Arab nations, I was – as a member of the military reserves – summoned to join the Israel Defense Forces in the fight to keep Jerusalem out of enemy hands. Although better trained and equipped, we were vastly outnumbered and had to retreat to strategic positions while the Arabs roamed through the Old City. I was wounded on my chest while trying to defend the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; as I was being evacuated with other casualties, I witnessed how armed men, apparently Arab extremists, looted, set the Church complex afire, and then detonated massive explosives that turned the most venerated site in the Christian world to rubble.

The destruction of a Christian holy place was, from the strategic viewpoint, a minor event in a war that killed over a million Jews. However, for many people throughout the world it was a disaster that galvanized individuals and governments into action. Dust had barely settled on the ruins of the Church when moneys began to be raised to finance the rebuilding the Church complex and, most importantly, to protect from damage the limestone burial bed contained within the shrine built inside the Church; that bed is believed by many to be the resting place where the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth had lain.

After their decisive victory over the Arab coalition in the Battle of Damascus, our country was triumphant but devastated and everyone, myself included, was in very low spirits; the nation was in mourning and had not been in such a dire state since the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. The Israeli government was therefore eager to receive international financial support for the reconstruction effort and assembled a team of experts, assisted by army personnel, to clear the rubble of what had been the shrine and excavate it to reach the burial site. The site itself had last been reached in the early part of the century, in a thorough and well documented investigation; the international team had dug through the marble cladding that covered the limestone burial bed, which was sealed by a marble slab placed during the time of the Crusades.

I volunteered to be part of the support team and was selected, in part as a reward for my injuries defending the site, to assist the archeologists and other experts that would go through every inch of the burial site to ensure that it had not been disturbed. In mid-April, after we dug our way into the burial area, we made an unwelcome discovery: the marble slab that covered the burial bed had been pulverized and a multitude of small pieces of marble were strewn over the bed. While members of the team busied themselves with the cleanup process, I spotted some small protuberances on the back of the bed and retrieved three pieces of what appeared to be

yellowish rock, but to my experienced eye looked as bone fragments, lying on the surface of the bed. I didn't know whether they had been on (or in) the bed all along, or had dropped down onto it from somewhere else.

I quickly pocketed the bone fragments without being noticed. To this day, I don't know why I took this action, which was clearly a crime. It was perhaps curiosity: my heart was beating rapidly at the thought that these could be parts of the famous cadaver that had rested on the burial bed a long, long time ago.

I complained about experiencing chest pains from my wounds, excused myself, and went back to the shack where the team stored its equipment and supplies. I picked up my top coat and my valise and went home. It was some time before my departure from the site drew the attention of anyone. Nobody cared.

## 2.

I still had access to the lab at the Ma'ale Adumim's research facility. I had wrapped the three bone fragments in tissue and now placed them in a laminar flow safety cabinet where they would remain sterilized to the greatest extent possible while I figured out what to do with them.

I had several problems. First, I was no expert in the forensic analysis of bone materials. Second, I had no idea of what information, if any, could be gleaned from such an analysis. Third, and perhaps most important, if these were human bone fragments, any attempt to associate them with the body of Jesus would result in a firestorm. Christians believe that, three days after his death, Jesus resurrected fully in body and soul, and there was no plausible explanation for some of his bones being left behind after his resurrection. Less heretical notions have resulted in bloody wars throughout history.

I was tempted to give up on my investigation. It was none of my business, and I could not return the bones to the authorities without facing criminal prosecution for my theft. On the other hand, even for a non-Christian like me, the possibility of learning more about one of the key figures in history was a lure too hard to resist. So, I decided to get help.

3.

My sister-in-law Miriam was married to an officer in the Police Department. I knew Yacov reasonably well from family gatherings and had no problem arranging for a confidential meeting with him.

“Yacov, what do you know about forensic investigations?”

“Very little, I don’t work in that area.”

“Do you know anyone who does?”

“The Police Department has a world-famous Division of Identification and Forensic Science that runs a Forensic Science Lab headquartered right here in Jerusalem. I know a fellow there; he helped me with the investigation of one of my cases.”

“Can you put me in contact with that person?”

“What is this about?”

“It’s a very sensitive matter, and it’s best if I don’t tell you.”

“Be that way. I will e-mail you his name and contact information.”

4.

Shimon Behar was a wiry, gray haired man in his sixties. He had a permanent scowl on his face and in less than two minutes he let you know he was nobody’s fool. In our first meeting in April, I broached the subject of my visit:

“In your lab, do you do much work with bones?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what kind of information can you get from the analysis of human bones?”

“All kinds of information, depending on the condition of the bones.”

“Can you do DNA reconstruction?”

“Certainly. We have developed several methods for recovering the DNA of a deceased person from fragments of his or her bone materials. We at the Forensic Science lab use a technique known as total demineralization to reconstruct such DNA with surprising fidelity, depending of course on how long after death the reconstruction is attempted, the circumstances of the death, and the environmental conditions under which the bone fragments had been maintained.”

“Well, if I gave you some ancient bones, could you reconstruct what ethnic group the person belonged to, where he or she lived, and what his or her physical appearance and other characteristics were?”

“For the most part, yes. Finding the time of death is simple. For human or animal remains from the past 50,000 years or so, we look at levels of carbon-14 in the sample. While alive, a person’s body – including the bones – contains the same levels of carbon-14 as the surrounding environment. But when a person dies, a radioactive decay process starts that takes the carbon isotope back into nitrogen. So, we compare the amount of carbon-14 with the levels of carbon-12 and carbon-13 in the bones to determine how much time has passed since the person died.

“Other things require genetic assessment. Analyzable DNA often persists in bones and teeth much longer than in the soft tissues of the body, because the rigid structure of bones and teeth provide some protection against DNA degradation. Of course, the conditions under which

the bones have been kept is important to how well they are able to preserve DNA. What is the history of the bones that concern you?"

"I think these bones are a couple thousand years old and were kept in a dry area, out of contact with the outside environment."

"That is good. Using current DNA evaluation techniques and comparisons with very large databases of genetic materials collected throughout the world, it is likely that analysis may provide information regarding the person's geographic ancestry and general physical appearance."

"Can you do such analysis for me?"

"The question is not whether I can but whether I want to do it. You have not told me what bones are these and why are you interested in identifying their owner."

"Doctor Behar, this is a very sensitive and confidential matter. It would be best if I don't give you any further details."

"I will not get involved in anything that could be illegal or put me or my institution in jeopardy. Sorry, but I can't proceed without knowing more."

"Look, the investigation that you will conduct is important and may result in making you famous. I can see you writing a book with your findings and becoming rich overnight."

Behar gave me a calculating look. "Is this something that could have political implications?"

"Perhaps."

"Then I don't want any part of it."

“Wait” I said eagerly. “Why don’t you get started with your analysis? You will have veto power over whether the results are shared with anyone except you and me and whoever in your lab participates in the project. It will stay confidential as long as you wish it to be so.”

“Mmm.... You have piqued my curiosity. How is this project going to be set up and funded?”

“It will have to be a private project, sort of moonlighting by you and your team. I will pay for the project myself, out of my retirement account.”

“I will get started but, I promise, I will cancel the whole thing if there are any complications.”

5.

The first thing Behar determined was that these three bones were from the toes of the left foot of the same individual, an adult male. One of the bones, apparently a portion of a middle toe, exhibited a diagonal groove at one end that could be the sign of traumatic injury. Carbon-14 analysis determined that the owner of the bones had died about twenty-five hundred years previously.

“That puts them during the Roman occupation of Judea” noted Behar. “Could it be a martyr from the First Jewish – Roman war of 3826?”

“Maybe” I replied disingenuously. “The Romans destroyed the Second Temple and killed many rebels when they captured Jerusalem near the end that war, and there were many other deaths during the Jewish civil war that preceded the Roman occupation.”

“The chiseling of that toe points to a potential crucifixion, a preferred method used by the Romans to execute notorious rebels and other criminals.”

“So, the death of the owner of these bones occurred around 3830?”

“I would put a forty-year bracket around that date; the carbon tracing is accurate but not that precise. Somewhere between 3790 and 3870; that is, between Common Era 30 and 110.”

6.

Through misdirection and ambiguity, I succeeded in keeping Behar off track while he and his team conducted the delicate DNA analyses. I had history on my side for the prevarication: by the end of the First Jewish-Roman war, the Jewish uprising leaders either perished in battle, disappeared into obscurity, or were subjected to the ruthless judgment of the Roman conquerors. “My” corpse could be any of a large number of people.

The DNA analyses proceeded along a well-known approach: DNA profiles were developed from the unknown sample and compared with known reference samples, until a potential “match” was found. Statistical analyses were then performed to establish the confidence in the match, which in this case turned out to be high.

7.

Days later, I was summoned by e-mail and reported to Behar’s office.

“I compared the DNA profile obtained by our lab analysis with the collection of worldwide DNA databases kept by our organization. This man’s genes are very closely associated with those of a Jewish population group most commonly found in western Iraq in ancient times. He was definitely Jewish.

“The bones belong to a man between thirty and fifty years old. He was in good physical condition at the time of his death, so he most likely met a violent end. He had curly dark to black hair, olive skin, and brown eyes. He was short in stature (about 1.5 meters tall) and probably had a beard, in accordance with the Jewish practices of the time. I can’t give you any more physical details. In any case, where did you find these bones?”



“They were in a crypt in a location in the Old City that was disrupted during the recent hostilities.”

“What makes them significant?”

I tried to find a way to avoid answering the question, but could come up with nothing but the truth. “They were in the ruins of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.”

There was a very long silence. Finally, Behar spoke:

“I don’t want to be associated with your investigation any further. I suggest destroying what is left of the bones.”

I protested: “No, I want to keep the fragments. Please give them back to me.”

“Well, I recommend that you bury these bones or cast them into the sea. If they are what you seem to say they are, nothing but grief can come out of the world learning about them.”

8.

They gave me a plastic bag with the bones, which I took home and put in my refrigerator. Although out of sight, the bones were an ever-present reminder of my predicament. Should I follow Behar’s advice, dispose of them, and forget the whole thing? Should I go public with my findings and risk imprisonment or worse? I was not a religious person and did not care much about the feelings of the Christians, but did I have any ethical obligations to make a full disclosure?

I became distracted and morose. My wife noticed my odd frame of mind and, after asking in vain several times what was wrong with me, gave up questioning and in a huff went to visit her mother in Tel Aviv for some Spring shopping. So, I was left home alone with the bones.

Days after she left, I had a nightmare. A disheveled, bearded young man wearing a short one-piece brown tunic appeared to me in my sleep and began talking in an archaic version of

Hebrew which I nonetheless was able to understand. He had an angry glower on his face and addressed me sternly:

“Why did you steal those bones?”

At first, I didn't know what to say but then I gathered enough courage to reply: “I thought it would be interesting to check on the person who owned them.”

“Have you now found out who that person was?”

“Yes, they belonged to Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified by the Romans two thousand years ago.”

“And why do you still keep them?”

“I'm not sure. Maybe I thought that through them I would be able to ask their owner some questions.”

“Well, ask me.”

“Are you the son of God?”

“We are all God's children.”

“I mean, are you the Messiah, God's messenger, come to deliver the Jewish people?”

“Do you believe the Jewish people are really in need of deliverance?”

“Perhaps. The situation in Israel is very difficult these days and there is fear that the country may ultimately collapse. Anyway, were you resurrected after being dead for three days?”

“Some say I was.”

I got irritated. “Why are you not answering my questions?”

“You are asking things that you don't need to know. Ask something important *to you*.”

“Well, here is something very important to me. Israel has been at war with its Arab neighbors ever since the country was founded. We have had six wars; this last one almost

brought us, and potentially the rest of the world, to destruction. Will we survive? Is the end of mankind coming upon us?”

“I have been asked that more than once. There will be wars and disasters, and many instances of great pain and suffering in the years to come. But God is provident, and will not allow His children to be extinguished. Have faith: the world will survive until the time marked for its demise, and the end will not occur through one of your silly wars.”

“Will Israel and the world stay in one piece while I’m alive?”

“Yes.”

“So, what should I do the rest of my life?”

“Live the best you can, obey the Commandments, and avoid hurting others. And have faith. Now, you need to get rid of those bones, for they have served their purpose.”

“How come they just appeared out of nowhere a few weeks ago?”

“Maybe they were planted for you to find them and look into their origin, so we could have this conversation.”

“Why did you pick me? I’m just an ordinary man.”

“Common people, even children, have received wisdom before and have known what to do with it. I counsel you to follow their example,” said the visitor as he vanished.

Whether the dream was a true vision or just a figment of my overstressed mind, I woke up feeling reassured. “Some mysteries are beyond human understanding,” I told myself.

It was time to empty the refrigerator and stop worrying about the future of the world. I would put to use my recently acquired wisdom and let the world know we were still safe. It was not yet clear how I would do this, but I knew I would eventually think of something.

THE END