very so often, when historians find incongruities in an ancient text, they err by throwing the baby out with the bathwater: They dismiss the entire document as unhistorical. This is what happened with one of the most important documents from early Christianity, an undeservedly obscure poem commissioned by Avercius, an early bishop of the church, and inscribed on his tombstone. This second-century C.E. poem, written in Greek, is the oldest existing, datable and identifiable Christian inscription. It contains one of the earliest extant extrabiblical references to the apostle Paul. It is the earliest Christian text outside the Bible to mention in one place several of the most potent and lasting Christian symbols: a shepherd, a fish and a virgin. Further, the beautiful yet enigmatic poem offers a unique glimpse of Christianity in this transitional period, as the church quietly, at times tentatively, began to establish itself in the public sphere.

Despite its importance, hardly anyone today knows this poem—or remembers Bishop Avercius.
Today we have almost 50 ancient manuscripts of the Life of Avercius, according to the versions of his Life. The elegant yet often cryptic verses shed light on a transitional stage in the establishment of the early Christian church.

Familiar with the poem from an account of Avercius’s Life, the 19th-century Scottish classicist and New Testament scholar Sir William Mitchell Ramsay (shown in a portrait by Sir George Reid, below) set out to discover the actual funerary inscription in Turkey. With some clever historical detective work, he succeeded in 1883. Photo on the preceding page by A. Bracchetti, Vatican Museums.

Avercius served as bishop of the city of Hierapolis, in the region of Phrygia, in western Turkey, during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180 C.E.). He was later canonized (October 19th is his feast day). His life story was recorded several centuries later. Today we have almost 50 ancient manuscripts of the Life of Avercius, nearly all of them in Greek.

So highly respected was Bishop Avercius that some of the versions of his Life dub him “equal to the Apostle,” that is, equal to Paul. His life story portrays him as one who imitated Paul, traveling about the Mediterranean world and performing miracles and preaching. Avercius’s greatest deed, according to the Life, was to exercise a terrible demon afflicting the daughter of Marcus Aurelius (in about 163 C.E.). The Life describes Avercius as punishing the demon by forcing him to carry a stone altar from the hippodrome in Rome to Hierapolis.

Avercius, the legend goes, commissioned his own funerary epitaph to be carved on the altar. The Life records all 22 lines of the inscription, which begins: “As a citizen of a favored city, I have had this monument made while alive in order that I might here have a prominent place for my body. My name is Avercius, a disciple of a holy shepherd.” (The entire poem appears in the box on p. 15.)

From the 19th century on, most scholars doubted the historicity of the Life (and thus the epitaph) for several reasons: First, the Life was written at a late date, at least 200 to 400 years after Avercius lived. Second, the miracles performed by the bishop and the encounters he had with spirits seem too farfetched to be historical. Third, the Life’s descriptions of Hierapolis do not jibe with the geography of the city that has long been identified as ancient Hierapolis—modern Pamukkale, in western Phrygia (see map, opposite). Fourth, the Life seems to contradict the writings of the early church historian Eusebius (c. 260-339 C.E.), who indicates that someone named Claudius Apollinarius, rather than Avercius, served as bishop of Hierapolis in the mid-to late second century C.E. Consequently, scholars discounted the entire text. Many regarded the epitaph as a fanciful fiction, one of many tall tales dreamed up by the fertile imagination of an early Byzantine hagiographer. It was dismissed as unhistorical and “late” (a dirty word among scholars).

And so it would have remained if not for Sir William Mitchell Ramsay (1851-1939), the great Scottish classicist, who pioneered the archaeological study of the Roman province of Asia Minor. In 1881, as a Fellow at Exeter College at Oxford, Ramsay—with the aid of a guide—trekked through the out-of-the-way, mostly unexplored region of west-central Phrygia. At the time, Ramsay was not familiar with the controversy surrounding Avercius. But he soon would be. Indeed, his discoveries in Phrygia would prove the historicity of at least some elements of Avercius’s Life—including the funerary epitaph. And his discoveries would remind scholars that even when a text is late and contains unbelievable elements, it should not be immediately dismissed as entirely unhistorical.

While exploring Phrygia, Ramsay established that there were actually two ancient cities in this region known as Hierapolis: the well-known city at Pamukkale and a second located in a rural region to the northeast, at modern Kochisar. This northeastern Hierapolis and four other cities were part of an ancient district known as the Pentapolis (the Five Cities).¹ Ramsay identified the district and then Hierapolis through his
discovery of inscriptions in the area. In a small village outside the Hierapolis of the Pentapolis (Kochisar), in front of a modern mosque, Ramsay discovered a marble column in secondary use (that is, it had been removed from its original setting) bearing an ancient Greek inscription. The inscription (now in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum; see drawing, p. 18) was a Christian funerary epitaph for a man named Alexander, son of Antoninus, who had lived in Hierapolis of the Pentapolis. According to the epitaph, Alexander had commissioned the inscription in 216 C.E. Written in verse, Alexander's poem begins: "As a citizen of a favored city, I have had this monument made."

Readers will immediately recognize the striking resemblance between Alexander's epitaph and Avercius's. Further inspection of the Alexander inscription found by Ramsay and the poem recorded in Avercius's *Life* reveals that the two epitaphs share the same first and last three verses.

Ramsay, however, did not immediately recognize

AVERCUS'S HOMETOWN? The mineral-rich hot springs of Hierapolis, Turkey (modern Pamukkale), have attracted visitors since Roman times. The dazzling white landscape is produced by steaming water that pours from the springs, cutting shelves and basins in the adjacent cliffs and coating the area with layers of calcareous rock.

According to the medieval *Life of Avercius*, the bishop lived in the ancient town of Hierapolis. But the *Life*’s description of Avercius’s town does not match the topography of the white city of Pamukkale, leading many to question whether Avercius ever really presided here. In 1883, Ramsay solved the problem: Inscriptions found in a rural region east of Pamukkale indicated that there were two ancient cities with the same name: Hierapolis of the famous hot springs and a less well-known city called Hierapolis of the Pentapolis, which had hot springs outside the village—just as the *Life* describes.
the parallels between the two texts, since he had never studied Avercius's Life. (Remember, Ramsay was a classicist and an early church historian, not a Byzantinist.) But as Ramsay researched his find, he soon learned of the Life of Avercius and its epitaph. Back in Scotland, Ramsay surmised that Avercius's epitaph was historical, and that it must have served as the model for Alexander's later tombstone. Of course, critics could claim that Alexander's tombstone served as the model for the poem recorded in Avercius's Life. To prove that the Avercius inscription was the earlier text, Ramsay had to find the actual inscription dating to the second century C.E.—not just the poem recorded in the later Life. Ramsay decided to return to Hierapolis of the Pentapolis in search of Avercius's tombstone.

In June 1883 Ramsay embarked on a four-month expedition to Turkey. He was accompanied by the epigrapher John Robert Sterrett, then a student at the American School at Athens. He was also found by Ramsay, which borrows the first and last three verses from Avercius; and the epitaph as recorded in the various manuscripts of the Life. This has only increased the challenge of transcribing and translating this beautiful, complex poem.

Like many Phrygian tomb inscriptions from Greco-Roman antiquity, Avercius's poem opens with a description of...
The Last Words of Avercius

Several sources have aided author Laurence Kant in piecing together and translating Avercius's entire poem. The lines shown in red are copied from the extant remains of Avercius's funerary monument; lines 1-3 and 20-22 match the few lines quoted a few years later in the funerary monument of a Christian man named Alexander. The bulk of the Greek poem is based heavily on versions recorded in medieval manuscripts of the bishop's Life.

1 As a citizen of a favored city I have had this monument made while alive in order that I might here have a prominent place for my body.

My name is Avercius, a disciple of a holy shepherd, who pastures flocks of sheep on mountains and on plains,

(what is) who possesses huge eyes, which he casts down everywhere.

For he has taught me faithful writings [- - - -], he who has sent me to Rome to gaze upon a kingdom and to see a golden-robed and golden-sandalled queen.

There I saw a people who had a radiant seal,

and I saw the soil of Syria and many cities, including Nisibis, after I crossed over the Euphrates. Everywhere I had brethren while I had Paul in my carriage. Faith led me everywhere and everywhere served a fish from a spring as nourishment, (a fish) which was enormous and pure, (and) which a holy virgin grasped.

And she (Faith) bestowed it among friends so that they could always eat it, as they had excellent wine and as they gave it in its mixed form with bread.

While present, I, Avercius, said that these (words) were to be written here, when I was in fact in my seventy-second year.

Let everyone, who understands these (words) and who is in unison (with them), pray on his behalf.

Absolutely do not let anyone put another person in my tomb. If anyone does this, he or she will pay two thousand gold coins to the Roman treasury and one thousand gold coins to my eminent city of origin, Hierapolis.

1 [Ἐκλεκτῆς πόλεως ὁ πολείτης τῶν ἐποιήσα] Ἰωάν, Ἰδα ἐξο φανερήπος σύμμαχος ἔθεων, ὁ ἄβρακς ως ὁ μαθητής σουμένος ἐγνομ, ὁ ἄρτος πρόβατος ἀγέλας ὄρεσιν πεδίοις τε, ὁ ὑγίης ὁ ἄρμος ὁ ἄρτος ἄγελας ὄρεσιν πεδίοις τε.

10 Ταῦτα Εὐφράτης ἔμεν ἐν οἴκοις ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλέους ἰδεῖν χρυσόστολον χρυσότερου. Λαὸς δὲ εἶδον ἐκεῖ λαμπρὸν σφαράγιον ἔχοντα, καὶ Συρίας πέδων ἐδώ καὶ ἁσταῖ πάντα. Νισίβιν, Ἐφραύτην διαβάς; πάντη δὲ ἐγκεκριμένων παρθένων ἐχούσα, καὶ Σιρίων πέδων ἐδώ καὶ ἁσταῖ πάντα. Νισίβιν, Ἐφραύτην διαβάς; πάντη δὲ ἐγκεκριμένων παρθένων παρθένος πάντα ἐν οἴκοις ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλεύσαι νικήτας, ὁ ἄρτος πάντας ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλεύσαι νικήτας, ὁ ἄρτος πάντας ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλεύσαι νικήτας. Ταῦτα δὲ ἐγκεκριμένων παρθένων παρθένος πάντα ἐν οἴκοις ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλεύσαι νικήτας, ὁ ἄρτος πάντας ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλεύσαι νικήτας.

15 Καὶ τοῦτον ἐπέδωκεν φιλίᾳ, ἐδέσμην διὰ πάντως, ἄονον χρυσίτων ἔχοντα, κέρασμα διδύσα μετ’ ἄρτον. Ταῦτα παραστῆσαι ἐπίθον ἄβρακος ἀντίλευσαι, ἐβδομήσασαι οἴκοι καὶ διὰ τῶν ἐν οἴκοις ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλέους. Ταῦτα δὲ ἐγκεκριμένων παρθένων παρθένος πάντα ἐν οἴκοις ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλεύσαι νικήτας, ὁ ἄρτος πάντας ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλεύσαι νικήτας. Ταῦτα δὲ ἐγκεκριμένων παρθένων παρθένος πάντα ἐν οἴκοις ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλεύσαι νικήτας.

18 Ο留下来 τοῦτον τοῦμήν τις ἐγκεκριμένων παρθένος πάντας ἐν οἴκοις ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλεύσαι νικήτας. Ταῦτα δὲ ἐγκεκριμένων παρθένων παρθένος πάντας ἐν οἴκοις ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλεύσαι νικήτας. Ταῦτα δὲ ἐγκεκριμένων παρθένων παρθένος πάντας ἐν οἴκοις ἀντίλευσαι καὶ βασιλεύσαι νικήτας.

19 Εἰ δὲ ὁνίμων ἔχοντα θρόνος διαστελεῖ χρυσά καὶ χρυσά, παρθένος ἐπέδωκεν φιλίᾳ, ἐκείνων χρυσά καὶ χρυσά, παρθένος ἐπέδωκεν φιλίᾳ, ἐκείνων χρυσά καὶ χρυσά, παρθένος ἐπέδωκεν φιλίᾳ, ἐκείνων χρυσά καὶ χρυσά, παρθένος ἐπέδωκεν φιλίᾳ, ἐκείνων χρυσά καὶ χρυσά, παρθένος ἐπέδωκεν φιλίᾳ, ἐκείνων χρυσά καὶ χρυσά, παρθένος ἐπέδωκεν φιλίᾳ, ἐκείνων χρυσά καὶ χρυσά, παρθένος ἐπέδωκεν φιλίᾳ, ἐκείνων χρυσά καὶ χρυσά, παρθένος ἐπέδωκεν φιλίᾳ, ἐκείνων χρυσά καὶ χρυσά.

(The square brackets indicate letters missing from the stone of the Alexander inscription. Letters inserted by the author are marked with angle brackets, and those the author believes are incorrect are encircled in wavy brackets.)
the recipient, the epitaph seems to imply. The eucharistic meal seems to have been understood as a prized gift from a higher power.*

The poem culminates with a description of the "enormous and pure" fish (verse 14). The poet has used all his tools to emphasize this passage: This line alone of the poem has five trisyllabic dactyls (DA-DA-DA, as in the word BAR-na-cle). In addition, the fish section is full of alliteration: The p sound (Greek pi and phi) appears 13 times here.

Avercius’s poem closes with a standard type of Phrygian postscript, in which the bishop asks all who "understand" his epitaph to pray for him, and threatens anyone who buries someone else in his grave (verses 17-22).

So when was this inscription carved, and who was this Avercius? In the inscription Avercius says that he commissioned the monument "while alive" (a common practice in Phrygia in his day), at the age of 72. We know it was written before the Alexander inscription of 216 C.E., which quotes it. As we have already seen, the church historian Eusebius identified the bishop of Hierapolis in this period as one Claudius Apollinarius. But we now know there was more than one Hierapolis in ancient times. Claudius must have been bishop of the western city (Pamukkale). Eusebius also refers to one Avercius Marcellus, who was apparently heavily involved in the church in the Phrygian Pentapolis region in the early 190s C.E. 8 I believe this is our Avercius.

This makes the Avercius epitaph the oldest Christian inscription that we can date with a high degree of certainty (between 190 and 216 C.E.). It is thus one of the oldest pieces of physical evidence of early Christianity, along with some wall paintings from Roman catacombs and the earliest New Testament papyri. 6 Of course, much of the New Testament and other early Christian texts (such as the writings of the apostolic fathers) originated earlier than the Avercius inscription (c. 50 to 150 C.E.), but the extant manuscripts date hundreds of years later. 9 Furthermore, unlike texts transmitted over a span of centuries, the Avercius inscription comes to us, at least in good part, unmediated by copyists.

The enigmatic text provides us with some of our earliest information about the Christian movement—its geographic extent, its emphasis on travel, its liturgy (especially the Eucharist), its close relation to the greater Greco-Roman world, its emergence as a religion that built monuments and created beautiful poetry. It is thus tempting to look at the inscription for historical evidence of the social world in which Avercius lived. Can Avercius’s meal of fish tell us anything about ritual dining or the roles of Rome in his day? Ramsay favored this sort of literal reading of certain passages. For example, he insisted that Avercius had traveled to Rome to meet a historical king and queen. 7

But Ramsay failed to recognize that this carefully con-
The epitaph of Avercius, like other ancient inscriptions (even those that are not written in poetic meter), should not be viewed as a transparent window on ancient times. Indeed, the epitaph probably tells us more about the symbolic language employed by the early Christians than about any specific historical events. For example, Avercius's journey to Rome and Mesopotamia may have been real, but the reference to Paul ("I had Paul in my carriage") is clearly symbolic; Paul was long dead by the time of Avercius. Avercius apparently wanted to suggest that he saw himself as extending the work of Paul further east, beyond the reach of the apostle's mission. And perhaps Avercius was reading the New Testament letters of Paul. Everywhere Avercius goes, he finds like-minded compatriots with whom he shares ritual meals—evidence of the success of early Christian evangelists. Avercius emphasizes the widespread success of the early mission and the universality of Christianity by repeating a variant of the Greek word πᾶς (English, pan, meaning "all," "every" or "always") no fewer than eight times. He reinforces πᾶς by frequently repeating the sound of its first letter, π, throughout the poem.

Christianity had begun to permeate Avercius's entire world, the Mediterranean region that earlier writers had referred to as the "inhabited world" (οἰκουμένη). The Greco-Roman religious terminology scattered throughout the poem led the earliest interpreters to try to demonstrate that Avercius was not Christian at all, but pagan or syncretic (combining elements from various religions). The German scholar Gerhard Ficker argued that Avercius was a priest of the Phrygian god Attis who journeyed to Rome to see a sacred stone from a statue of Attis's consort, Cybele. In 1896 the great German historian of religion Albrecht Dietrich proposed that Avercius visited Rome for the unusual marriage of the emperor Elagabalus (218-222; born

"ONE ALTAR STONE HALF BURIED," the epigrapher John Robert Stilington Sterrett recorded at the discovery of the Avercius inscription. A student at the American School at Athens, Sterrett accompanied Ramsay on his journeys through Phrygia, carefully copying into his notebook the many inscriptions they encountered. His drawing of the Avercius inscription (below left) is accompanied by notes detailing the location, with mention of the town of Sandikli (just north of the findspot), some hills "immediately to the right" and a nearby fork in the road.
A PURE FISH AND A HOLY SHEPHERD—two of the images of Averius’s poem—are common themes in the earliest Christian art, which began to appear in Roman catacombs between about 175 and 200 C.E., around the time the poem was written. The detail of fish and loaves, below, is painted on the walls of the catacomb of Callistus; the roundel at right, depicting the Good Shepherd flanked by two birds, a ram and a sheep, is from the catacomb of Priscilla.

Both images may be interpreted in diverse ways: Depending on the context, the fish could illustrate a popular meal, a ritual sacrifice in Greco-Roman tradition or the Eucharist; the shepherd might represent a pastoral theme, a pagan deity or the Christian Good Shepherd. According to Laurence H. Kent, the emerging Christian community designed its new public funerary monuments and art so that fellow Christians could understand their fuller meaning while outsiders were left to make their own, more limited interpretations.
refer to the prized dish served by the wealthy at ancient banquets. It might also refer to the Christian fish symbol, which represented Jesus, his followers and the Eucharist. In addition, in Greco-Roman times fish were sometimes used to represent fertility and productive power, which could have both nonreligious and religious connotations, implying growth and life in the face of death, suggesting the missionary success of Jesus (as in the New Testament fishing passages) or simply demonstrating the wealth of the host who could afford to serve such a sumptuous meal.

In antiquity a reader could have understood this text on multiple levels: nonreligious, Greco-Roman and Christian. Avercius himself seems to realize this. In the last verses of the epitaph, Avercius asks those who understand his poem to pray for him: "Let everyone, who understands these (words) and who is in unison (with them), pray on his behalf." Avercius knows that some readers will not get it and will read the poem on a different level.

I believe that the Avercius inscription represents a shift among early Christians to a more public stance during the reigns of the Antonine and Severan emperors (175-225 C.E.). It is in this period that Christian art emerges (especially in the Roman catacombs) and New Testament papyri appear. Earlier Christians may well have produced monuments, but they were probably not identifiable as specifically Christian. The move to public acknowledgment likely indicated that Christians had attained a large enough membership, sufficient wealth and appropriate status to promote themselves to others and to one another in the form of monuments (funerary stones and inscriptions, graffiti, art, buildings etc.);

Like the earliest catacomb paintings, the Avercius inscription displays its Christianess more openly than ever before, yet its message remains hidden, at least for some, in the oblique language. Christians would immediately recognize the references to the Eucharist and to the apostle Paul, just as they would recognize the face of Jesus in a catacomb fresco of a young beardless man bearing a sheep on his shoulders. But those people outside the Christian community who were not "in unison" with the message, as Avercius himself put it, would simply not understand.

Today we find ourselves in a different position from both the Christians and non-Christians who lived in the time of Avercius. We no longer possess the personal connections to the historical and social contexts that made this poem so evocative and moving for those who first heard and read it. And yet our historical distance enables us to explain the language and images in ways that individuals in antiquity probably could not have articulated for themselves. Only by reconstructing the cultural context of the text and the motivations of its author, as well as translating its beauty and power, will we rescue this wonderful poem from obscurity.

1 The other cities of the Pentapolis were Brouzos, Orotus, Eukanopia and Seleucia.
2 The fragments were found 2.5 miles south-southwest of Kochisar.
3 The Greek language changed considerably between the classical period of the fifth century B.C.E. and late antiquity. By the late Hellenistic and Roman periods, accents rarely indicated pitch (a musical tone) to Greek speakers, but rather signified stress (presumably emphasis and volume). Likewise, in Greek speech vowel quantities (long and short vowels) lost their oral and aural significance, no longer indicating differences in sound (phonetics) or in time quantity (long vowels having originally taken more time to enunciate than short vowels). This disconnected the literature of Greek poetry from the spoken language, since meter was dependent on the phonetic and quantitative differences between long and short vowels. Through much of the Roman period most literate Greeks still understood the significance of vowel quantities in Greek meter, but by the fourth century C.E., this comprehension had declined by a considerable degree. The Life of Avercius indicates a hagiographer whose knowledge of Greek quantitative meter was substantially less than that reflected in the original text of the Avercius inscription and thus must have been written at a much later date.

2 In his Ecclesiastical History (5:161-5), Eusebius refers to an anonymous anti-Montanist writer who sent a treatise to one Avricus Marcullus. (Montanism was a second- to third-century Christian prophetic movement centered in Phrygia.) Eusebius also refers to "our presbyter, Zoticus of Orotus," that is, a fellow presbyter of the anonymous author and possibly also of Avricus Marcullus. Given that Eusebius mentions Orotus—almost certainly the Phrygian Pentapolis city—in the same passage in which he writes about Avricus (whose epigraphic nameplate comes from the same area), it is probable that the man named Avricus Marcellus is identical with our Avercius of Hierapolis. The two references to two very important early Christian individuals—each involved in some way with church affairs, living in the same time period, bearing virtually the same name, and most likely living in the same region of Phrygia—suggests that they are one and

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the Gnostics preferred to focus on the divinity of Christ and on the inherent inferiority of the material world. Denying that the God of the Hebrew Bible was the One God, the Gnostics developed a mythic system (including male-female pairs, or "synchronies") that explained the origins of physical creation and humanity. According to the Gnostics, the visible world resulted from the actions of higher spiritual beings who misunderstood or misinterpreted the One God (also the "All") and, in so doing, turned away and created an inferior realm of matter. Human beings need to acquire self-knowledge (gnosis) to learn the story of their true origins, and that is what the Gnostics sought to provide.

11 Several factors point against pagan identification: There is no mention of Cybele or of a statue; verse 7 does not mention a "king," but rather a "kingdom"; there is no citation of the sun; the attempt to interpret the Greek term for "people" (laos) as "stone" (lava) is very strained and based on occasional usage there is no reference to a priest, and while Dietrich argues that Attis' priests could eat the sacred fish of the Syrian goddess Atargatis, all of Aretus's competitors eat the fish. The identification of Aretus as a "shepherd" is possible, but the connection to Jesus is discussed more decisively, as in Clement of Alexandria's hymn to Christ (Instructor 3), which not only mentions Jesus as a holy shepherd but also cites holy fish!

Furthermore, the use of "laos for "people" is much more common in Jewish and Christian epigraphic contexts than in pagan ones. Though the combination of fish, bread and wine is indeed possible in a non-Christian context, the religious ritual character of this meal fits a Christian context much better than a pagan one. The connection of a "disciple" to a "shepherd" more likely than not alludes to Christianity. In addition, the language of the inscription corresponds rather closely in places to language used in other Jewish and Christian texts, such as the inscription of Maritima in the Catacomb of Priscilla and several passages in Books Five and Eight of the Jewish and, in places, Christian-influenced Sybiline Oracles. On the Maritima inscription, see Knoe, "Fish Symbolism," appendix 5, chart 2.133. Three passages mention a "holy virgo" in the Sybiline Oracles: 8.270, 8.280-91 and 8.357-58. Sybiline Oracle 5.434-37 also uses the following words that match (or closely resemble) words in the Aretus inscription: "universal" (or literally, "prevailing in all cities"), "mountains," "kingdom," "golden-sandalled," "golden" (twice) and "Euphrates."

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**AUTHORS**

Laurence H. Kant ("Earliest Christian Inscription," p. 10) teaches at Lexington Theological Seminary in Kentucky. A fellow of the American Academy in Rome and a historian of Judaism and Christianity, Kant is a founder of the Interfaith Center for Community and Spiritual Renewal. He invites comments from all BR readers: Contact him by e-mail at DBLKCI@worldnet.att.net.

Gary A. Rendsburg ("Reading David in Genesis," p. 20) is the Paul and Berthe Hendrix Memorial Professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Cornell University. His most recent book is The Bible and the Ancient Near East (Norton, 1997), a general survey of the biblical world coauthored with Cyrus H. Gordon. Rendsburg has participated in excavations at Tel Dor and Caesarea, and he is a frequent lecturer at Biblical Archaeology Society seminars.

Shalomith Varon ("Sperm Stealing," p. 34) teaches at the Open University of Israel, specializing in biblical history and biblical literature. She has contributed articles to the Encyclopedia of the History of Eretz Israel and to the World of the Bible Encyclopedia.