

# CROSS BONES



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Credit must be given to two books mentioned in the text: *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand* by Yigael Yadin, George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Limited, 1966; *The Jesus Scroll* by Donovan Joyce, Dial Press, 1973.

Last, but far from least, heartfelt thanks to my editor, Nan Graham. Her advice made *Cross Bones* a far better book. Thanks also to my editor across the pond, Susan Sandon.

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For Susanne Kirk, editor, Scribner, 1975–2004  
and

For Dr. James Woodward, chancellor,  
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1989–2005

Thanks for the years of support and encouragement.

Enjoy your retirements!



# THE FACTS

- From 1963 to 1965, Masada, site of a first-century Jewish revolt against the Romans, was excavated by Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin and a team of international volunteers. Yadin's workers recovered the fragmentary and commingled remains of approximately twenty-five skeletons from a cave complex, designated Loci 2001/2002, located below the casement wall at the southern tip of the summit. Unlike other human remains found within the main complex of ruins at the northern end of Masada, these bones were not immediately reported to the press.

In the 1990s, a photo surfaced of a single intact skeleton that was also recovered from Loci 2001/2002 during the 1963 to 1965 excavation. That skeleton was never mentioned or described by the project's physical anthropologist, Nicu Haas. It was not discussed by Yadin in his published reports or interviews.

- Formal field notes were not kept during the Masada excavation, but oral briefings took place regularly between Yadin and his staff. Transcripts of these sessions are archived at the Mount Scopus Campus of Hebrew University. Pages covering the period of the discovery and clearing of Loci 2001/2002 are missing.
- Neither the bones from the twenty-five commingled individuals, nor the articulated skeleton, nor the contents of Loci 2001/2002, are described in the six volumes of the final Masada excavation publication.
- Though Nicu Haas was in possession of the bones for more than five years, he published nothing on the commingled individuals or on the complete skeleton recovered at Loci 2001/2002. Haas's handwritten notes, including a full bone inventory, indicate he never received the complete skeleton.



- In the late 1960s, Yigael Yadin stated in press interviews that carbon-14 dating was seldom done, and that it was not his job to initiate such tests. The journal *Radiocarbon* indicates that Yadin sent samples for carbon-14 dating from other Israeli excavations during that period. Despite uncertainty concerning the age of the Loci 2001/2002 remains, Yadin never sent samples for radiocarbon dating.
- In 1968, the skeletal remains of a “crucified man” were found during road construction north of the Old City of Jerusalem. The deceased, Yehochanan, died at approximately twenty-five years of age, during the first century. A nail and wood fragments were embedded in one of Yehochanan’s heel bones.
- In 1973, Australian journalist Donovan Joyce published *The Jesus Scroll* (Dial Press). Joyce claimed to have visited Israel, met a volunteer from Yadin’s excavation team, and seen a stolen first-century scroll from Masada containing the last will and testament of “Jesus, son of James.” According to Joyce, the scroll was smuggled out of Israel, presumably to the USSR.
- In 1980, roadworkers uncovered a tomb in Talpiot, just south of the Old City of Jerusalem. The tomb contained ossuaries inscribed with the names Mara (Mary), Yehuda, son of Yeshua (Jude, son of Jesus), Matya (Matthew), Yeshua, son of Yehosef (Jesus, son of Joseph), Yose (Joseph), and Marya (Mary). The coexistence of the names in one tomb is rare. Skeletal materials have been submitted for DNA testing.
- In 2000, American archaeologist James Tabor and his team discovered a freshly robbed tomb in the Hinnom Valley, outside Jerusalem. The tomb contained twenty ossuaries, all but one shattered. The lower chamber held a burial shroud wrapping a fragmentary human skeleton and hair. Carbon-14 testing showed the shroud was first-century in age. Microscopic examination revealed the hair was clean and vermin-free, indicating the deceased had been of high status. Anthropological analysis determined the remains were those of an adult male. DNA sequencing demonstrated a

familial relationship among most of the other individuals buried in the tomb.

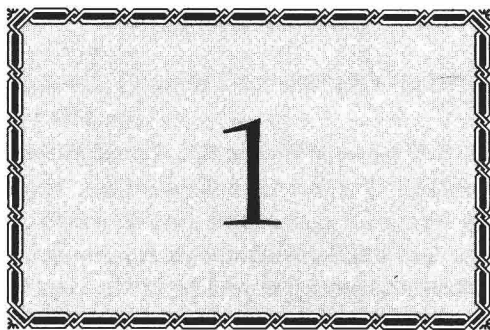
- In 2002, Israeli antiquities collector Oded Golan revealed the existence of a first-century ossuary inscribed “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” That fall, the ossuary was made public. While experts agree that the small stone coffin is first-century in age, controversy surrounds the authenticity of the inscription. Circumstantial evidence suggests the ossuary came from the vicinity of the Hinnom, possibly from Tabor’s “shroud” tomb.

A formal request was submitted to the Israel Antiquities Authority for DNA testing of bone material found in the James ossuary. DNA sequencing would allow comparison of the James ossuary remains with those recovered from Tabor’s Hinnom “shroud” tomb. The request was denied.

As this book went to press:

- In January of 2005, indictments were issued against Oded Golan and several others for the forgery of antiquities. Mr. Golan maintains his innocence, and continues in his insistence that the James ossuary is authentic. Experts remain divided.





FOLLOWING AN EASTER DINNER OF HAM, PEAS, AND CREAMED potatoes, Charles “Le Cowboy” Bellemare pinched a twenty from his sister, drove to a crack house in Verdun, and vanished.

That summer the crack house was sold up-market. That winter the new homeowners grew frustrated with the draw in their fireplace. On Monday, February seventh, the man of the house opened the flue and thrust upward with a rake handle. A desiccated leg tumbled into the ash bed.

Papa called the cops. The cops called the fire department and the Bureau du coroner. The coroner called our forensics lab. Pelletier caught the case.

Pelletier and two morgue techs were standing on the lawn within an hour of the leg drop. To say the scene was confused would be like saying D-day was hectic. Outraged father. Hysterical mother. Overwrought kids. Mesmerized neighbors. Annoyed cops. Mystified firefighters.

Dr. Jean Pelletier is the most senior of the five pathologists at the Laboratoire de sciences judiciaires et de médecine légale, Quebec’s central crime and medico-legal lab. He’s got bad joints and bad dentures, and zero tolerance for anything or anyone that wastes his time. Pelletier took one look and ordered a wrecking ball.

The exterior wall of the chimney was pulverized. A well-smoked corpse was extracted, strapped to a gurney, and transported to our lab.

The next day Pelletier eyeballed the remains and said, “*ossements.*” Bones.

Enter I, Dr. Temperance Brennan, forensic anthropologist for North Carolina and Quebec. La Belle Province and Dixie? Long story, starting with a faculty swap between my home university, UNC-Charlotte, and McGill. When the exchange year ended, I headed south, but continued consulting for the lab in Montreal. A decade later, I’m still commuting, and lay claim to the mother lode of frequent flyer miles.

Pelletier’s *demande d’expertise en anthropologie* was on my desk when I arrived in Montreal for my February rotation.

It was now Wednesday, February 16, and the chimney bones formed a complete skeleton on my worktable. Though the victim hadn’t been a believer in regular checkups, eliminating dental records as an option, all skeletal indicators fit Bellemare. Age, sex, race, and height estimates, along with surgical pins in the right fibula and tibia, told me I was looking at the long-lost Cowboy.

Other than a hairline fracture of the cranial base, probably caused by the unplanned chimney dive, I’d found no evidence of trauma.

I was pondering how and why a man goes up on a roof and falls down the chimney, when the phone rang.

“It seems I need your assistance, Temperance.” Only Pierre LaManche called me by my full name, hitting hard on the last syllable, and rhyming it with “sconce” instead of “fence.” LaManche had assigned himself a cadaver that I suspected might present decomposition issues.

“Advanced putrefaction?”

“*Oui.*” My boss paused. “And other complicating factors.”

“Complicating factors?”

“Cats.”

Oh, boy.

“I’ll be right down.”

After saving the Bellemare report on disk, I left my lab, passed through the glass doors separating the medico-legal section from the rest of the floor, turned into a side corridor, and pushed a button beside a solitary elevator. Accessible only through the two secure levels comprising the LSJML, and through the coroner’s office below on eleven, this lift had a single destination: the morgue.

Descending to the basement, I reviewed what I'd learned at that morning's staff meeting.

Avram Ferris, a fifty-six-year-old Orthodox Jew, had gone missing a week earlier. Ferris's body had been discovered late yesterday in a storage closet on the upper floor of his place of business. No signs of a break-in. No signs of a struggle. Employee said he'd been acting odd. Death by self-inflicted gunshot wound was the on-scene assessment. The man's family was adamant in its rejection of suicide as an explanation.

The coroner had ordered an autopsy. Ferris's relatives and rabbi had objected. Negotiations had been heated.

I was about to see the compromise that had been reached.

And the handiwork of the cats.

From the elevator, I turned left, then right toward the morgue. Nearing the outer door to the autopsy wing, I heard sounds drifting from the family room, a forlorn little chamber reserved for those called upon to identify the dead.

Soft sobbing. A female voice.

I pictured the bleak little space with its plastic plants and plastic chairs and discreetly curtained window, and felt the usual ache. We did no hospital autopsies at the LSJML. No end-stage liver disease. No pancreatic cancer. We were scripted for murder, suicide, accidental and sudden and unexpected death. The family room held those just ambushed by the unthinkable and unforeseen. Their grief never failed to touch me.

Pulling open a bright blue door, I proceeded down a narrow corridor, passing computer stations, drying racks, and stainless steel carts on my right, more blue doors on my left, each labeled *SALLE D'AUTOPSIE*. At the fourth door, I took a deep breath and entered.

Along with the skeletal, I get the burned, the mummified, the mutilated, and the decomposed. My job is to restore the identity death has erased. I frequently use room four since it is outfitted with special ventilation. This morning the system was barely keeping up with the odor of decay.

Some autopsies play to an empty house. Some pack them in. Despite the stench, Avram Ferris's postmortem was standing room only.

LaManche. His autopsy tech, Lisa. A police photographer. Two uniforms. A *Sûreté du Québec* detective I didn't know. Tall guy, freckled, and paler than tofu.

An SQ detective I *did* know. Well. Andrew Ryan. Six-two. Sandy hair. Viking blue eyes.

We nodded to each other. Ryan the cop. Tempe the anthropologist.

If the official players weren't crowd enough, four outsiders formed a shoulder-to-shoulder wall of disapproval at the foot of the corpse.

I did a quick scan. All male. Two midfifties, two maybe closing out their sixties. Dark hair. Glasses. Beards. Black suits. Yarmulkes.

The wall regarded me with appraising eyes. Eight hands stayed clasped behind four rigid backs.

LaManche lowered his mask and introduced me to the quartet of observers.

"Given the condition of Mr. Ferris's body, an anthropologist is needed."

Four puzzled looks.

"Dr. Brennan's expertise is skeletal anatomy." LaManche spoke English. "She is fully aware of your special needs."

Other than careful collection of all blood and tissue, I hadn't a clue of their special needs.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," I said, pressing my clipboard to my chest.

Four somber nods.

Their loss lay at center stage, plastic sheeting stretched between his body and the stainless steel. More sheeting had been spread on the floor below and around the table. Empty tubs, jars, and vials sat ready on a rolling cart.

The body had been stripped and washed, but no incision had been made. Two paper bags lay flattened on the counter. I assumed LaManche had completed his external exam, including tests for gunpowder and other trace evidence on Ferris's hands.

Eight eyes tracked me as I crossed to the deceased. Observer number four reclapsed his hands in front of his genitals.

Avram Ferris didn't look like he'd died last week. He looked like he'd died during the Clinton years. His eyes were black, his tongue purple, his skin mottled olive and eggplant. His gut was distended, his scrotum ballooned to the size of beach balls.

I looked to Ryan for an explanation.

"Temperature in the closet was pushing ninety-two," he said.

"Why so hot?"

"We figure one of the cats brushed the thermostat," Ryan said.

I did a quick calculation. Ninety-two Fahrenheit. About thirty-five Celsius. No wonder Ferris was setting a land record for decomposition.

But heat had been just one of this gentleman's problems.

When hungry, the most docile among us grow cranky. When starved, we grow desperate. Id overrides ethics. We eat. We survive. That common instinct drives herd animals, predators, wagon trains, and soccer teams.

Even Fido and Fluffy go vulture.

Avram Ferris had made the mistake of punching out while trapped with two domestic shorthairs and a Siamese.

And a short supply of Friskies.

I moved around the table.

Ferris's left temporal and parietal bones were oddly splayed. Though I couldn't see the occipital, it was obvious the back of his head had taken a hit.

Pulling on gloves, I wedged two fingers under the skull and palpated. The bone yielded like sludge. Only scalp tissue was keeping the flip side together.

I eased the head down and examined the face.

It was difficult to imagine what Ferris had looked like in life. His left cheek was macerated. Tooth marks scored the underlying bone, and fragments glistened opalescent in the angry red stew.

Though swollen and marbled, Ferris's face was largely intact on the right.

I straightened, considered the patterning of the mutilation. Despite the heat and the smell of putrefaction, the cats hadn't ventured to the right of Ferris's nose or south to the rest of the body.

I understood why LaManche needed me.

"There was an open wound on the left side of the face?" I asked him.

"*Oui*. And another at the back of the skull. The putrefaction and scavenging make it impossible to determine bullet trajectory."

"I'll need a full set of cranial X-rays," I said to Lisa.

"Orientation?"

"All angles. And I'll need the skull."

"Impossible." Observer four again came alive. "We have an agreement."



LaManche raised a gloved hand. "I have the responsibility to determine the truth in this matter."

"You gave your word there would be no retention of specimens." Though the man's face was the color of oatmeal, a pink bud was mushrooming on each of his cheeks.

"Unless absolutely unavoidable." LaManche was all reason.

Observer four turned to the man on his left. Observer three raised his chin and gazed down through lowered lids.

"Let him speak." Unruffled. The rabbi counseling patience.

LaManche turned to me.

"Dr. Brennan, proceed with your analysis, leaving the skull and all untraumatized bone in place."

"Dr. LaManche—"

"If that proves unworkable, resume normal protocol."

I do not like being told how to do my job. I do not like working with less than the maximum available information, or employing less than optimum procedure.

I *do* like and respect Pierre LaManche. He is the finest pathologist I've ever known.

I looked at my boss. The old man nodded almost imperceptibly. *Work with me*, he was signaling.

I shifted my gaze to the faces hovering above Avram Ferris. In each I saw the age-old struggle of dogma versus pragmatics. The body as temple. The body as ducts and ganglia and piss and bile.

In each I saw the anguish of loss.

The same anguish I'd overheard just minutes before.

"Of course," I said quietly. "Call when you're ready to retract the scalp."

I looked at Ryan. He winked, Ryan the cop hinting at Ryan the lover.

The woman was still crying when I left the autopsy wing. Her companion, or companions, were now silent.

I hesitated, not wanting to intrude on personal sorrow.

Was that it? Or was that merely an excuse to shield myself?

I often witness grief. Time and again I am present for that head-on collision when survivors face the realization of their altered lives. Meals that will never be shared. Conversations that will never be spoken. Little Golden Books that will never be read aloud.