



## Sun Goes Down in Flames The Jammal Ark Hoax

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*"Will you speak falsely for God, and speak deceitfully for him? Will you show partiality toward him, will you plead the case for God?" -- Job 13:7-8 (NRSV)*

**O**n February 20, 1993, CBS aired "The Incredible Discovery of Noah's Ark," Sun International Pictures' rehash of its 1976 film "In Search of Noah's Ark."<sup>[1]</sup> At the end of June, Skeptics Society advisor Gerald Larue publicly revealed (via Associated Press and Time magazine) that George Jammal, one of the alleged eyewitnesses of Noah's Ark on Mt. Ararat, was a hoaxer, and that Larue himself had played a role in the hoax.<sup>[2]</sup> The purpose: to demonstrate the shoddy research of Sun International Pictures.

CBS, Sun, and the Institute for Creation Research (ICR) set out to control the damage to their credibility by defending the program against the criticisms of Larue. Since Jammal was continuing to defend his story, at first the three organizations went on the offensive against Larue. CBS Entertainment President Jeff Sagansky stated that "There was clearly a hoax perpetrated ... we're not sure whether it was on Sun International and CBS or whether it was on Time magazine." A press release from Sun called it "sad and unfortunate that Dr. LaRue [sic], a distinguished USC professor, would victimize Mr. Jammal and his family to execute a third party hoax in which he was the primary benefactor." John Morris, the Administrative Vice President of the ICR, made much of Larue's "long association with humanistic and anti-Christian organizations" and concluded that "This is hardly the resume of an objective critic." All defended the overall quality of Sun's research.<sup>[3]</sup>

But subsequent events began to undermine a defense based on Jammal's veracity. On August 26, 1993, the Long Beach Press-Telegram--Jammal's hometown newspaper--ran a story about the hoax. In the story, Jammal did not admit to a hoax, but stated in response to a question about his religious background that "If I told you that, you'd know the secret." The reporter noted in the article that a poem framed in glass on Jammal's piano begins, "Humanism is a philosophy for people who think for themselves ...." The September 1993 issue of Freethought Today, the monthly publication of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), announced that Jammal had been a member of the Foundation since 1986, and was scheduled to be a speaker at the group's annual convention at the end of October--where he would reveal his hoax. Sun's position evolved, and their press release was revised to say that "Sun researchers now believe [Jammal] may eventually confess to committing a hoax." It continued to defend the quality of their research, however, stating that Jammal's confession "would mean that he has through an elaborate lie successfully hoaxed well-meaning individuals, religious groups, psychiatrists, Ararat explorers, and others since 1986. Even our exhaustive research would have failed to uncover this hoaxer if that in fact is what he is by his own future admission."<sup>[4]</sup>

Now that Jammal has revealed his hoax at the FFRF convention, to the Los Angeles Times, and on a public access cable program produced by Atheists United, it is clear that Sun did present false information in their program.<sup>[5]</sup> But is their defense sound? How extensive was their research? Did Jammal engage in an elaborate hoax that resisted even the most cautious investigation? Or did Sun simply present claims which supported a particular viewpoint--that Noah's Ark has been found on Mt. Ararat--without regard for truth or accuracy?

**Jammal's Hoax: 1985-1986** Several events inspired George Jammal to play the practical joke which became a major hoax. A May 30, 1985 creation/evolution debate between Fred Edwards (now executive director of the American Humanist Association) and Duane Gish (vice president of the ICR) which aired on KABC radio apparently got Jammal to thinking. While observing railroad ties near his workplace, Jammal got the idea of telling Gish that he had found Noah's Ark and using that wood as his evidence.

On November 1, 1985, he wrote to Gish: "Since I was a little boy I was fascinated with the story of Noah and the Ark. I made up my mind that when I grow up, I will do my share as a good christian to prove the bible is the true word of God." Jammal told a story about saving money and flying to Greece in 1972, where he bought a Volkswagen. From Greece, he drove to Turkey, to the village "Nakhitchewan." There he was assisted by a man and his family, but he was unable to find the Ark. A similar trip in 1980 was also unsuccessful, but in 1984 he and a companion crawled

into a cave of ice which proved to be the Ark. Each chipped off a piece of wood to prove that they had found the Ark. Disaster then struck: Jammal's companion fell into a crevasse while attempting to take a photograph and was killed. Jammal said that he had kept his discovery secret until writing the letter to Gish.

In the letter, he reports the names of those who assisted him. The man whose family aided him was "Mr. Asholian." His companion who died was a "Polish friend" of Mr. Asholian's son-in-law, named "Vladimir Sobitchsky." The son-in-law, whose full name is conspicuously absent from Jammal's later accounts, is given in the Gish letter as "Allis Buls Hitian." (Read that name carefully.)<sup>[6]</sup>

In 1986, John Morris contacted Jammal about his story and arranged to interview him at length. In an early letter from Jammal to Morris dated January 21, 1986, Jammal gives another hint of a hoax when he writes to give Morris his phone number and adds: "But the people here are not religious at all. And I think they don't believe in my story about Noah's Ark. Please don't discuss it with them."

Jammal visited libraries and read books about Noah's Ark claims, and about Mt. Ararat and the surrounding region, which he had never visited. At some point, as part of his preparation, he watched a videotape of the 1976 Sun Classic Pictures production, "In Search of Noah's Ark."

On June 10, 1986, Morris interviewed Jammal and produced a transcript from the tape recording. A careful examination of this transcript reveals not only that Jammal's account contains numerous inconsistencies, but that much of the information flow in the conversation is from Morris to Jammal rather than vice-versa. For example, the following is their discussion about the size of Lake Kop, west of Ararat (notations in brackets are Morris'):

**JM:** How big was Lake Kop in diameter when you saw it?

**GJ:** It wasn't that big like Lake Superior. It's a small lake.

**JM:** Is it 100 feet across? 500 feet across? It changes every year. I was just wondering how it was in 1984.

**GJ:** That's it, it changes. It depends on what time of the year you are there. [pause] I think it was 100 ft or a little bit more than 100. I don't really know.<sup>[7]</sup>

A few other exchanges while viewing slides of the area also show Morris giving information to Jammal:

**JM:** This is up by Lake Kop. You saw something like this? [rocky slopes]

**GJ:** Oh yeah.

...

**JM:** There is a prominent ice cliff here. Do you remember that? [west side]

**GJ:** Yes, I remember the big cliff, okay. [not convinced]

**JM:** This is that same glacier with the crevasses. Coming down to Lake Kop, down here. There is a very big rock [A-K rock], hundreds of feet tall. You don't remember that? There are many similar rocks, but this big rock next to the big glacier? We are standing near Lake Kop to take the picture.

**GJ:** Lake Kop is to the left of here?

**JM:** No, behind us.

**GJ:** Yes, behind us. To the left, down there.

...

**GJ:** Do you have a picture from the lake up to the summit?

**JM:** Well, you can't see it from Lake Kop; you have to climb the ridge and then look up, but I have some from up there.<sup>[8]</sup>

The transcript also points out some inconsistencies in Jammal's account:

**JM:** Where did you start from? ...

**GJ:** They told me there is a city there--it's called Nakichevan, or something, I don't remember exactly the name. It is "where the ark was landed"--that's the meaning.

**JM:** That's in Russia [pointing to a map].

**GJ:** Well, that's what they told me; I don't know where that city is.

**JM:** The one you mentioned in your letter was Nakichevan.

**GJ:** Yes, that's what they told me. This is Russia? [astonished at the

location of Nakichevan]

**JM:** Yes. This is Russia; here's the Russia-Turkey border; here's Mt. Ararat. So you drove to Turkey in your VW. Did you cross over into Russia?

**GJ:** No, I didn't go to Russia. But that's what they told me, if my memory is not failing me.<sup>[9]</sup>

Morris himself gets suspicious at one point:

**JM:** A man in Igdir, you think? Do you remember his name?

**GJ:** Asholian.

**JM:** But that's an Armenian name. I would be surprised if someone in Turkey had that name.

**GJ:** Part of Armenia is taken by the Turks, and part of Armenia is taken by the Russians. Maybe he has a different name, but that's what he told me.

...

**JM:** Please forgive me, I'm not playing the district attorney, but for clarity, a minute ago you said you thought you came from the south, but then in looking at the map you thought you came from the north.

**GJ:** Okay, this is north. We came there, this is what I mean we went between the two mountains and then we started to go from the south to the north.

**JM:** You cannot drive across.

**GJ:** No, we didn't drive, we walked.<sup>[10]</sup>

And what about Jammal's piece of wood from the Ark? What had he done with this incredibly valuable archaeological find?

**GJ:** Now you saw my place; I have to look for the piece of wood. You saw my house--you didn't see the garage. You know it is all boxes.<sup>[11]</sup>

Jammal's initial hoax was not very convincing, and nothing came of it. John Morris published nothing about it, and other Ark researchers to whom he sent tapes of the Jammal interview, such as Bill Crouse, thought that Jammal's story was obviously

untrue. The evidence was overwhelming: Jammal contradicted himself, but resorted to saying "that's what they told me" when inconsistencies were pointed out to him. He let Morris do most of the talking, and usually just agreed with what Morris had to say. He suggested that his own family didn't believe his story, and asked Morris not to talk to them. His first letter to the ICR contained obviously bogus names, one of which was a very strong hint that his story was fabricated. And his alleged most valuable possession, a piece of Noah's Ark, was stuffed away in a box somewhere that he hadn't bothered to keep track of.

Morris, however, did not--and still does not--seem to recognize the significance of this evidence. On the one hand, he has stated that "When I first interviewed [Jammal] ..., I remember thinking he had nothing of interest to tell us as far as searching for the Ark. He didn't know where he was sufficiently to be of any help and his story was so different [from other claimed Ark eyewitnesses]."<sup>[12]</sup> On the other hand, he wrote that

It is my impression that [Jammal] was on Mt. Ararat. He seems to know Lake Kop and described in reasonable detail the terrain nearby. He especially was familiar with the loose rocks. His memory of the size of Lake Kop is accurate. His feel for the elevation at the base of the main ice cap is about right.<sup>[13]</sup>

Morris continues to maintain uncertainty about whether or not Jammal's original story was true. While he agrees that Jammal's present position (that he is a hoaxer) is inconsistent with his previous position (that he actually visited Ararat and saw the Ark), he was unwilling to endorse either position in a telephone interview.

Bill Crouse of Christian Information Ministries, International, an Ark hunter who publishes the newsletter Ararat Report, was not so hesitant. Crouse disbelieved Jammal's story from the time he first heard it in 1986, and was both surprised and disappointed to see Jammal on "The Incredible Discovery of Noah's Ark," a program which he thoroughly debunked in the May 1993 issue of his newsletter. Crouse wrote on the basis of Morris' interview that Jammal

is extremely confused when confronted about the geography of the mountain. He first claims to have started his ascent from Nakhichevan (60 miles away!). ... whenever he was confronted with contradictions he would defer to: 'I was told this...' ... he says he found a man in Igdir named Asholian. An Armenia? Living in Igdir in 1980? Highly unlikely. ... We were at Ararat in 1984, and no climbers were allowed to climb on any route but the southern route. He claims, however, to have seen a group of climbers

at Kop. He claims he rented mules at Igdir. How could he do this without getting caught? ... Does he have any proof that he was ever in eastern Turkey, such as photos, or his passport? Is he willing to have his wood tested for age?<sup>[14]</sup>

Crouse's article shows that a critically thinking person-- even one who believes in the Ark and the Flood of Noah--had plenty of reasons to question Jammal's story prior to public allegations of a hoax.

**Jammal's Hoax: 1992-1993** Yet when Sun International Pictures came to John Morris asking for information about persons claiming to have seen the Ark, Morris gave them Jammal's name, along with copies of the material he had already collected. By this time, Jammal and Gerald Larue had become acquainted, and Larue had appeared on Sun's previous CBS program, "Ancient Secrets of the Bible." Larue, who was unhappy with the way his interview had been edited, encouraged Jammal and offered him suggestions for carrying out his interview with Sun. Jammal prepared a piece of wood by soaking it in a variety of sauces including wine, teriyaki sauce, spices, alcohol, and seeds, then microwaving and baking it. Jammal's interview with Sun went smoothly, and he was able to keep his story fairly consistent with his original interview in part because Morris had provided him with a transcript. Sun expressed no doubts about Jammal's claims, and his segment was prominently featured on "The Incredible Discovery of Noah's Ark."

When Larue blew the whistle on the hoax in June, he criticized Sun for making no effort to verify Jammal's story. Sun not only overlooked the overwhelming evidence of a hoax already in their possession, they continued to ignore it when it was pointed out to them.<sup>[15]</sup> Sun and the ICR have subsequently made no mention of any of this early evidence of a hoax, but instead referred to the early years of Jammal's hoax as evidence against Larue's claims. This offensive maneuver against Larue was enabled by the fact that the initial stories reporting Jammal's hoax incorrectly described Larue as the initiator of the hoax. CBS, Sun, and the ICR all latched on to this incorrect claim as a means of self- defense. CBS's Sagansky stated that "The crux of that [Time] article was that Dr. Larue from USC apparently put Mr. Jammal up to this hoax. And in fact, we have the exact same testimony from Jammal dating back to 1986." Sun Executive Producer Charles Sellier, Jr. wrote that "It is difficult for us to understand how Dr. LaRue [sic] master-minded a hoax in 1992 based on facts first recorded in 1986." John Morris reported that he sent his early Jammal materials to Time magazine with the expectation that its reporters would take it as evidence against Larue's hoax charges. He concluded:

Don't hold your breath for a Time magazine or Associated Press retraction.

If it happens, it will be buried on an obscure page. Don't look for LaRue's [sic] fellow humanists to insist on a higher standard of integrity. The damage has already been done; the goal has already been accomplished. Christianity and creation have been given another 'black eye' in public, with no recourse.<sup>[16]</sup>

Morris suggests that a retraction is in order for this relatively minor mistake--reporting that Larue initiated the hoax, rather than simply helped with its last stages--while ignoring his own failings which contributed to the success of the hoax in the first place.

The primary line of defense--denial that there was a hoax by Jammal--was accompanied by a secondary line of defense: that Sun's research was exemplary. (When it became clear to everyone--except Morris--that Jammal was a hoaxer, this became the primary defense. As Sun's Allan Pederson told the Los Angeles Times after Jammal confessed, "We certainly will be as conscientious as we can and scrutinize sources as closely as we can in the future. But frankly, we took the same due diligence before all this. My stance is that it's just about impossible to defend against that kind of well-planned and well-thought-out deception." The attacks on Larue were completely dropped from a later revised version of Sun's press release, except for a single paragraph which reiterated the point about Jammal's story being told to the ICR prior to Larue's involvement.)

The secondary defense consisted of four parts: (1) That Sun had examined Morris' interview with Jammal. (2) That Sun had conducted their own two-hour audio taped interview looking for inconsistencies in Jammal's story. (3) That Sun compared the two interviews and found them to be consistent with each other. (4) That Sun gave Jammal's interview tapes to psychiatrist Paul Meier, who pronounced Jammal credible. By late September, Sun added a fifth defense: (5) That Sun had Jammal's hand-drawn map of Ararat and his expedition routes examined by Ararat expeditioners who "assured us that it could not have been drawn by anyone who did not have experience with the mountain."<sup>[17]</sup>

The first point of this defense is clearly no defense at all, since Jammal's initial interview should have made it clear that his story was not credible. The second point is difficult to judge without knowing what questions were asked, but it is clear that Sun did not bother to check Jammal's passport, test his wood, or find anyone who could confirm any part of his story. The third defense is negated by the fact that Jammal possessed a copy of his original interview and had ample time to prepare. The fifth defense is undercut by the fact that Jammal had read books by Ark researchers in preparation for his interview, several of which contain maps of the

area. It is also counteracted by Jammal's lack of detailed knowledge of the geography of the region in his interview with Morris.

The fourth defense is the one which Sun has placed the most weight on and devoted the most space to in its press releases. Quotations from Meier--who has never met or spoken with Jammal--fill two and a half of the six pages of Sun's initial defense against the hoax allegations. Meier's qualifications are given by Sun as follows: "a well-known California psychiatrist, co-founder of the 28 Minirth-Meier clinics across America, and author of 40 books on human behavior." It is also mentioned that Meier "served as the field physician on Astronaut James Irwin's Noah's Ark expedition to Mt. Ararat."

Meier, who now practices in Richardson, Texas, combines Christianity and psychiatry in his clinics which provide "a ministry for Christ as well as ... help hurting people."<sup>[18]</sup> It is not at all clear that Meier is qualified to offer a judgment about Jammal's veracity on the basis of an audio tape but even so, some of his own statements seem to cast doubt on Jammal's story. He states that Jammal seems to be "an 'obsessive-compulsive with histrionic features' ... a perfectionist performer ... He wants fame and yet he's humble enough to admit it. ... He wanted to feel special." But Meier's statements also bring his own credibility into doubt. He states that he finds Jammal to be "the most credible" of the four alleged eyewitnesses on the program, in marked contrast to Bill Crouse, who found Jammal to be the least credible. Meier claimed that Jammal's "descriptions of the customs of the people, of the Ark itself and its location, are very accurate" and that they match "exactly what I know to be true about the Ark from the secret government reconnaissance photos." On the former point, Meier is at odds not only with Crouse, but with John Morris, who found Jammal's account unhelpful with regard to pinpointing the location of the Ark. On the latter, Meier owes an explanation of what "secret government reconnaissance photos" he is talking about and how he came to have access to them.<sup>[19]</sup>

Jammal's most concrete piece of evidence for his claimed visit to the Ark was his piece of wood, and Sun's program made much of it. Near the end of the broadcast, the narrator's voice says, over a scene from a dramatization of Jammal's fictional Ark visit and then a photograph of Navarra's wood: "Samples of the wood taken from the vessel have been dated to the time when the Bible indicates a worldwide flood occurred." This strongly suggests that Jammal's wood was tested, but it was not. Gerald Larue, in *Time*, specifically criticized Sun for failing to perform any tests on the wood. Sun's excuses for failing to do so have evolved. In the original Associated Press story on the hoax, Sun's chief researcher David Balsiger stated that "We couldn't test the wood in time for our deadline." In the September Long Beach Press-

Telegram article, Balsiger stated that "This is an entertainment show. We're not supposed to make our own news or tests," a position also taken by Sun's press releases. In a letter from Sun's Charles Sellier to CBS Vice President Steve Warner, Sellier wrote that "Even if we had the money and time to test every piece of evidence presented by experts, it would not have been definitive as there would still be those who would disagree and take exception to the findings." The first Sun press release expanded on this, claiming that "the sample according to the Time article was contaminated by baking and juices. This would have prevented obtaining accurate carbon-14 dating results."<sup>[20]</sup>

As Gerald Larue has pointed out in his reply to Sun, the contaminants would have been discovered by a dating test, and would themselves have indicated that something fishy was going on. He further points out that the sauces the wood was baked in have caused it to reek of teriyaki sauce, which could have been determined by simply smelling the wood.<sup>[21]</sup> Sellier's claim that a carbon-14 test would "not have been definitive" seems to be completely without foundation.<sup>[22]</sup>

Sun International Pictures claims that they made every reasonable effort to validate Jammal's story, and that they cannot be held responsible for being taken in by his hoax. While this defense is highly implausible in light of the evidence that was available to Sun prior to the broadcast of their program, it becomes even more implausible when it is noted that Jammal's story was not the only one on the program lacking in credibility.

**Other Hoaxes?** "The Incredible Discovery of Noah's Ark" featured the stories of several other people who have claimed to have found the Ark on Ararat. One of these was Ed Davis of Albuquerque, New Mexico, who was stationed in Hamadan, Iran in 1943. Davis claims that while there, he saw a snow-capped mountain in the distance and was taken there by Lourd natives of the region, including one named Abbas, who showed him the Ark. The Sun program made much of the fact that Davis took and passed a polygraph test. But the show failed to mention certain relevant facts. These include: (1) Davis' polygraph test consisted of a total of six questions, one of which showed unusual stress. That question was "Are you lying when you state that no one ever told you about the Ark other than Abbas and the Bible?" (2) Davis claims he saw Ararat from Hamadan, which is 400 miles away. (3) Davis claims his trip to Ararat took about half a day. (4) Davis' story has changed significantly over time--e.g., he now says Kurds, not Lourds, took him to Ararat.<sup>[23]</sup>

Another claimed Ark eyewitness was Ed Behling, who has refused to talk about his claims since the early 1980's. (His appearance on the Sun program was taken from an

older interview.) Behling claims to have been shown the Ark while in Turkey with the Air Force. Behling's story contains dubious details which, when he was questioned about them, he refused to answer. For instance, he claims to have built a campfire just below the Ark (above 13,000 feet), but would not answer questions about the nature of the campfire and what he used for fuel. Those who know Behling have described him as a sincere Christian who sometimes embellishes stories.<sup>[24]</sup>

A third claimed Ark eyewitness was Fernand Navarra, a Frenchman who has been variously described as a "junk dealer" and an "industrialist." Navarra traveled to Ararat on several occasions in the 1950's and 1960's, and claimed to have found wood from the Ark in 1955 and 1969. The Sun program reported that

Navarra himself had the hand-hewn wood that he had found tested in three different laboratories. He was told that its age was around 5,000 years, clearly in line with the biblical account of the flood. The scientific tests prove beyond question that something very old, something very mysterious, was definitely on Mt. Ararat.

What the show did not say is that one of Navarra's expedition members and his guides have said that Navarra purchased the wood from natives in town and carried it up the mountain himself, prior to his 1955 discovery. The show also did not reveal that the testing methods which gave an age of 5,000 years were of dubious scientific value, and that radiocarbon tests on Navarra's 1955 and 1969 wood by six labs yielded ages from 1,190 to 1,690 years old. Finally, the show failed to note that Navarra has pointed out several different locations as where he found his wood.<sup>[25]</sup>

All of the above information was in Sun's possession during the production of the show. Ark researcher Bill Crouse provided Sun with copies of all back issues of his Ararat Report, which included critiques of these alleged Ark eyewitnesses. Crouse, who was filmed for "The Incredible Discovery of Noah's Ark" but was not used in the program, says that he specifically told Balsiger when the film crew was at his office that Jammal, Davis, and Behling were not credible.

**Is Sun Biased?** In Charles Sellier's letter to CBS defending the quality of "The Incredible Discovery of Noah's Ark," he stated that "our role is to present all of the known information and let the audience decide." Sun's Allan Pederson told the Los Angeles Times that "we don't take a point of view, creationist or otherwise."<sup>[26]</sup>

These claims, however, stand in stark contrast to the facts. First, the program's foregone conclusion is given in its title. It claims that Noah's Ark has been

discovered, and that therefore the creationist claim that the Flood of Noah was a historical event is true. Ark researcher Bill Crouse has complained of his disappointment with the program and how he has "absolutely hated" to tell excited Christians who viewed the program that "No, that's still premature; the discovery of Noah's Ark has not yet been authenticated."<sup>[27]</sup>

Second, the program was scripted by Sun; token skeptics were given straw man arguments to read for the cameras. The scripts for Sun's programs are written in advance and approved by the network even before some of the actors are selected to read their parts. In some cases, skeptics have been allowed to write their own scripts, but Sun freely edits the results. Skeptic Farrell Till, who appeared on the Sun program "Ancient Secrets of the Bible II," was allowed to write his own script for three taped segments. Sun discarded one, edited one down to almost nothing, and aired one as written and read by Till. The straw man script which had originally been written for Till was read by someone else.<sup>[28]</sup>

Third, the "experts" on the program were overwhelmingly believers in the Flood of Noah and the reality of the Ark on Ararat, even though the scientific consensus is the reverse. I counted forty on the pro-side and only three on the con- side. Of the forty pro-Ark "experts," at least six (John Morris, Ken Cumming, Henry Morris, Larry Vardiman, Walter Brown, and Carl Baugh) make their living as advocates of creationism, the first four for the ICR. These affiliations were not disclosed, but instead these six people were identified as "Professor of Geology," "Professor of Biology," "Professor of Hydraulics," "Professor of Atmospheric Sciences," "Professor Emeritus--Physics," and "Paleoanthropologist," respectively. Other creationists on the program included John Whitcomb, Ethel Nelson, Don Shockey, and Roger Oakland. (No doubt there were many others.) None of these experts address the numerous scientific absurdities in the Ark story.<sup>[29]</sup>

A fourth and related point is that credentials of "experts" were frequently misrepresented. Just examining the above examples, the misrepresentations get progressively worse: John Morris is a professor of geology for the ICR's Graduate School, but his title on ICR stationery is "Administrative Vice President." Henry Morris has been a professor of hydraulics at respected universities, but he presently serves as the President of the ICR. Walter Brown's Ph.D. is in mechanical engineering, and he is presently the Director of the Center for Scientific Creation, which he operates out of his home in Phoenix, Arizona. Carl Baugh, advocate of the Paluxy River "mantracks" and the proprietor of the Creation Evidences Museum in Glen Rose, Texas, has claimed a remarkable assortment of degrees in theology and science, but his credentials have been found to be of dubious validity. He has

claimed a Ph.D. in theology from the California Graduate School of Theology, an unaccredited school not even listed in most college directories, but he has subsequently admitted that despite completing the required work he never actually obtained a degree. He has claimed other theology degrees which have also failed to stand up under scrutiny. All of his science degrees are from unaccredited institutions run by himself or by a former associate, Clifford Wilson. His claimed degree in paleoanthropology is from Pacific College, a small religious school in Australia run by Wilson, where it is not accredited or authorized to grant science degrees.<sup>[30]</sup>

Perhaps the two worst misrepresentations of credentials (apart from Baugh) were the show's on-screen identifications of "Dr. Ethel Nelson, Chinese Pictograph Linguist" and "Dr. Don Shockey, Professor of Anthropology." The viewer was given the impression that both are academic researchers with Ph.D.s in the fields identified. In fact, Ethel Nelson is a medical doctor in Dunlap, Tennessee and Don Shockey is an optometrist. In the latter case, at least, Sun knew full well it was misrepresenting Shockey's credentials--in the closing credits of the program, "Don Shockey, O.D." is credited as a technical advisor.<sup>[31]</sup>

Fifth, the program made statements which the producers knew or should have known to be untrue or misleading, even apart from the credential misrepresentations. For example, footage at the end of the program showed a photograph allegedly taken from the air by former astronaut James Irwin during his last flight over Ararat. In fact, the photo shown was taken by Bob Garbe, an Ohio pharmacist, while standing on the mountain. The photo has been analyzed and the formation pictured is too small to be Noah's Ark. Bill Crouse has reported that he provided Sun with the Garbe photo and identified its source, and that it had also been published in a book by John Morris with the correct attribution to Garbe. This factual error was the only one on the program which John Morris found worthy of note for the ICR's Acts & Facts readership.<sup>[32]</sup>

The program devoted one lengthy segment to a reenactment of the alleged discovery of the Ark by a Russian expedition in 1916. This story apparently comes from an article which appeared in New Eden magazine in 1940. Floyd M. Gurley, the author, has admitted that the story was a hoax. Ark researcher David Fasold says that when he tried to show a copy of a letter from Gurley to Balsiger, Balsiger refused to look at it. Balsiger says that he doesn't remember such an event.<sup>[33]</sup>

One person on the show, Vence Will, identified as "World War II USAF," said that he saw photos of the Ark around 1944 published in the military newspaper Stars & Stripes. The newspaper and photos were not shown on the program, because despite

extensive searches, no such photos have ever been discovered. Sun's Balsiger and Sellier report these negative results in their 1976 book.<sup>[34]</sup>

Other misleading omissions include the fact that "Ararat" refers in the Bible to a region, not to a specific mountain (see 2 Kings 19:37; Jeremiah 51:27). Some of the ancient writers appealed to by the program, such as Berosus, specifically claimed that the Ark was in the Cordyaeon mountains, more than two hundred miles south of Mt. Ararat.<sup>[35]</sup>

Sixth, Sun has produced numerous shows filled with wild speculation and dubious factual content. Past Sun productions have included "Ghosts from the Dead," "The Lincoln Conspiracy" (also a book co-authored by Balsiger and Sellier), "Hangar 18," "The Bermuda Triangle," and "The Mysterious Monster" (about Bigfoot). Planned future productions included "Mysteries of the Ancient World" (still forthcoming on CBS in February), "Revelations," and "The UFO Phenomenon." The latter two projects were canceled by CBS as a result of the controversy over "The Incredible Discovery of Noah's Ark."<sup>[36]</sup>

A seventh and final point bearing on whether Sun knew what it was doing is that its researcher, David Balsiger, has a past history of involvement with Christian hoaxes. During the early seventies, Balsiger wrote both books and newsletter articles for the Christian publisher Logos International. He ghost authored or co-authored a number of "autobiographical" books giving Christian testimonies, including Fernand Navarra's Noah's Ark: I Touched It, self-proclaimed former Satanist turned Christian comedian Mike Warnke's The Satan Seller, and faith healer Morris Cerullo's The Back Side of Satan. Warnke's story was exposed as a hoax in a lengthy article in the Christian magazine Cornerstone in 1992, though Balsiger continues to defend it. Cerullo, for whom both Balsiger and Warnke worked prior to the formation of Warnke's own ministry, has come under heavy fire from Christian critics for his incredible claims (e.g., that he was taken from an orphanage by angels and transported to heaven for a face-to-face meeting with God) and unorthodox theology. Logos International, which is no longer in business, also published a hoaxed biography of a former rabbi turned Christian and a book which initiated the "urban legend" about NASA computers discovering a "missing day" and proving the biblical account of Joshua making the sun stand still (Joshua 10:12-14).<sup>[37]</sup>

**Conclusions** In David Balsiger's most recent public statement about George Jammal's hoax, he writes that

There is something wrong with the ethics of the news media when they glorify the acts of humanist hoaxers who intentionally and successfully

deceive 40 million TV viewers; and then blame the show producer and CBS for not discovering their elaborate hoax. This is not a case in which the producer or the network is guilty of deceiving viewers, but rather one more example of humanists who tout themselves as 'Ethical Humanists' being neither ethical nor honest when it comes to advancing their hidden agenda.[38]

Had circumstances been different, Balsiger would have had a point. If Jammal's hoax had really been "elaborate" and carefully constructed to resist anything less than the most scrupulous and detailed investigation; if it had not been filled with inconsistencies and intentional clues; if Balsiger had not been warned about Jammal being a hoaxer prior to the show's completion; if the show had not otherwise misrepresented and omitted facts; if Balsiger and Sun had a reputation for sober and accurate research, then his criticism would carry some weight.

There are, of course, serious moral questions which should be raised about the kind of hoax Jammal performed. Is the intent to discredit an entire worldview, or to reveal the inadequacies of particular organizations or individuals? If the latter, is the hoax the only way to bring public attention to these inadequacies, or are other methods available which would be about as effective? Are those being hoaxed given adequate chance to avoid falling into the trap?[39] Whatever Jammal's intent, his hoax has clearly demonstrated the inadequacy of the research of Sun International Pictures and brought it to public attention after letter writing campaigns and even books of criticism have failed to do so.[40] Sun had every chance to avoid being caught by the hoax, but disregarded the evidence and chose to produce a program filled with inaccuracies and misrepresentations. Now it must face the consequences.

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**Notes** [1] The earlier film was released theatrically, then shown on NBC on May 2 and December 24, 1977 (Bailey 1978, p. 124). Bill Crouse (1993) estimates that as much as 20% of the 1993 program was cannibalized from "In Search of Noah's Ark." For criticisms of the earlier program, see Bailey (1978), especially ch. 7; Montagno with Lisle (1977); and Teeple (1978), especially pp. 125-127.

[2] Associated Press (1993), Jaroff (1993), Skeptic (1993). The hoax had actually been revealed in March in a press release from the Committee for the Scientific

Examination of Religion (CSER 1993), but hardly anyone took any notice of it.

[3] Pierce (1993), Sun International Pictures (1993a) p. 6; Morris (1993b), p. 3.

[4] Wiscombe (1993), Freethought Today (1993a), Sun International Pictures (1993b, p. 3).

[5] Cerone (1993), Freethought Today (1993b). The Atheists United program, which was recorded on September 11, 1993 and not aired until after Jammal's FFRF speech on October 23, is available on videotape from Lee Baker, Atheists United, P.O. Box 5329, Sherman Oaks, CA 91413.

[6] I obtained copies of this early material from John Morris in October 1993. Morris said he sent the same material to Time magazine. A large portion of Jammal's letter to Gish was published in Freethought Today (1993b).

[7] Morris (1986a), p. 7.

[8] Ibid, pp. 11-12.

[9] Ibid, p. 1.

[10] Ibid, pp. 3-4.

[11] Ibid, p. 9. Morris also told me (both in a letter dated October 8, 1993, and in a telephone interview on November 2, 1993) that he had called Jammal several times asking about the piece of wood, but Jammal said he hadn't really bothered to look for it.

[12] Morris telephone interview, November 2, 1993.

[13] Sun International Pictures (1993b), p. 1; Sellier (1993), p. 3.

[14] Crouse (1993), p. 5. Crouse believes that the biblical story of Noah's Ark is true, but that the Ark landed some 200 miles south of Ararat.

[15] Sun's press releases state that they examined Jammal's interview with Morris as part of their investigation (Sun International Pictures 1993b, p. 1; Sellier 1993, pp. 2-3). Sun's researcher David Balsiger stated in a telephone interview on December 7, 1993 that the earliest account from Jammal that he had seen was the 1986 Morris interview, though he also said that he had looked through Morris' files. In light of how readily Morris has sent out copies of the 1985 Jammal-to-Gish letter to skeptics, I find it hard to believe that he concealed the existence of this letter from Sun.

Ark researcher David Fasold, in a telephone interview on November 27, 1993, said that Sun's researcher David Balsiger came to his home on August 8, 1992 to discuss his (Fasold's) appearance on the show. Fasold says that he told Balsiger on the basis of the Morris interview transcript that Jammal's account was clearly untrue. He was quite surprised when Balsiger told him that Jammal was to be the show's star eyewitness. Fasold did not appear on the program. David Balsiger says that he does not remember any conversation with Fasold about Jammal. Ark researcher Bill Crouse said in a telephone interview on December 7, 1993 that he specifically warned Balsiger that Jammal (and other claimed Ark eyewitnesses) lacked credibility, and gave Balsiger reasons for his opinion.

[16] Pierce (1993); Sellier (1993), p. 3; Morris (1993b), p. 4. Morris' (1993b) article, prior to the quoted conclusion, claimed that "most" statements in the Sun program were "essentially accurate"; that "Especially powerful were interviews with several who claim to have seen the Ark," including Jammal; that while Time and the Associated Press "have branded Jammal as a fraud," a "quick phone call to Jammal proved that he had not retracted his testimony and had offered to take a lie detector test"; that Jammal "had not benefited financially from his story, except for a modest interview fee paid by Sun Pictures"; that Larue is not "an objective critic"; that "Psychiatric evaluation of Jammal's taped interview pronounced him to be credible"; and that Jammal's "knowledge of the mountain and its people could hardly have been coached by someone who had never been there." When I read Morris his strongly worded conclusion (without the above summary) and asked him if he felt that a retraction was in order for his defense of Jammal's story, he answered that he didn't remember his article well enough to know if he needed a retraction. He stated that "I don't remember it well enough to know that I stood behind Jammal that he saw the Ark; I don't know that I've ever thought that, so I doubt that I said it." When pressed, he did say that "I have no stomach for saying things that are wrong, and if I've done that, then yeah, I'll retract."

A new article informing ICR followers of the hoax, if not a retraction of Morris' previous article, appears to be in order. A recent article by Morris (1993c) agreeing that there is no good evidence of "flash frozen" mammoths is perhaps a promising sign, but his overall record for correction of mistakes and falsehoods is less than perfect. For example, when the alleged human footprints at the Paluxy River were shown to be dinosaur tracks, Morris' 1980 book on the subject (Tracking Those Incredible Dinosaurs and the People Who Knew Them) was officially pulled from circulation in January 1986, but he has continued to suggest that there is evidence of human footprints at the site (Morris 1986b, 1986c, 1988; Cole 1986; Schadewald 1986, p. 12). Also see Cole and Godfrey (1985), Hastings (1989), and Kuban (1986, 1989a).

Morris appealed to the withdrawal of his 1980 book as evidence of his commitment to truth during my interview with him, but he has failed to retract other erroneous statements even after learning of his errors, e.g., the claim that Donald Johanson has been keeping quiet the location where "Lucy"'s knee joint was found (Morris 1989; Lippard 1990, pp. 27-28) and that there are fossil-bearing strata on Mt. Ararat (Zindler 1989). Further, while Morris' Paluxy "mantrack" book was officially withdrawn, the book continued to be sold- -former Creation/Evolution editor Fred Edwords was one person who successfully ordered a copy (personal communication from John Cole, November 30, 1993). The book and the "mantrack" claims continue to be touted in Henry Morris' 1993 History of Modern Creationism (2nd edition), pp. 291-292.

[17] Cerone (1993); Sun International Pictures (1993a), pp. 2-5; Sellier (1993), pp. 2-4; Sun International Pictures (1993b), pp. 1-3.

[18] Wiscombe (1993). Also see Cohen (1993).

[19] Sun International Pictures (1993a), pp. 3-5; Sellier (1993), pp. 3-4; Sun International Pictures (1993b), p. 2. Chapter 13 of Balsiger and Sellier (1976) is titled "Satellite, Spy Plane and CIA Involvement." In this chapter John Morris is quoted saying that he had interviewed the pilot of a spy plane who claimed to have viewed secret photos of the Ark, but that his attempts to get copies have failed. Bill Crouse, in a telephone interview on December 7, 1993, said that he suggested that Sun have Meier examine the interview tapes but was quite surprised that Meier endorsed Jammal's veracity. He also provided some information about the spy photos, saying that an acquaintance of Meier claims to have seen photos of Mt. Ararat taken from a U-2 plane which bear some resemblance to a large ship. Crouse suggested that the story about the photos may well be true, but the object pictured was probably a "phantom Ark" basalt formation, of which there are many on Ararat.

[20] Associated Press (1993); Wiscombe (1993); Sun International Pictures (1993a), p. 5; Sellier (1993), p. 5; Sun International Pictures (1993b), p. 3. In a telephone interview on December 7, 1993, Sun's David Balsiger stated that he got in some trouble with CBS for "making news" by testing a soil sample as part of his research for one of Sun's "Ancient Secrets of the Bible" programs, and that had that not happened he probably would have tested the wood.

[21] Larue (1993), p. 62. Larue actually wrote of "soy sauce," but Jammal has said that it was a combination of blueberry and almond wine, iodine, sweet-and-sour barbecue sauce, and teriyaki sauce (Cerone 1993, longer version). Jammal also said at his FFRF convention speech on October 23 that a creationist found a seed from one

of his baking sauces on the wood, but thought nothing of it.

[22] Cerone (1993) also claims, apparently on the basis of information from Jammal, that Robert Dietz, professor emeritus of geology at Arizona State University, asked Sun for a piece of the wood for testing, and that Jammal was told by Sun not to give a sample to Dietz. Dietz (personal communication, November 29, 1993) says that he never asked Sun for a sample of the wood.

[23] These details and others are presented in Crouse (1993), pp. 3-4. Crouse has also discussed Davis in more detail in the January-February 1988 and January-February 1989 issues of Ararat Report. Crouse suggests that Davis was taken to the mountain "Kuh e Alvand," 60 miles west of Hamadan, which is believed by many in the region to be where the Ark landed.

[24] Crouse (1993), p. 4.

[25] Crouse (1993), pp. 2-3; Bailey (1978), chapter 6; Fox (1993), p. 44. Navarra's own account is given in Navarra edited with Balsiger (1974). Balsiger and Sellier (1976), chapter 12, discusses the tests of Navarra's wood and raises standard creationist objections to radiocarbon dating-- objections which have now been rejected by the ICR (Aardsma 1989).

Sun International Pictures (1993a), p. 6 states that "No one has come forward with evidence that any of these remaining eyewitnesses [other than Jammal] are perpetrated hoaxes on Sun International." Crouse told me in a telephone interview on December 7, 1993 that while he never called any of these people "hoaxers," he did present Balsiger with considerable evidence that their stories were not credible, prior to the completion of the show. Crouse (1993) also predates Sun's reply.

[26] Sellier (1993), p. 5; Cerone (1993).

[27] Crouse (1993), p. 1.

[28] See Barker (1993), Larue (1993), Malone (1993), and Till (1993). This practice of making skeptics into defenders of straw men via pre-scripted positions and biased editing was a major factor in Larue's encouragement of Jammal to hoax Sun. Sun's David Balsiger, in a December 7, 1993 telephone interview, stated that those who appear on Sun's shows are given the opportunity to rewrite and improve their scripts, and that the initial scripts reflect what they think a given expert is likely to say on the basis of telephone interviews and other research.

[29] A detailed account of the numerous scientific, engineering, and practical

problems with the Ark story is given by Moore (1983). Problems with Ark sighting claims are discussed in Bailey (1978), Moore (1981), and Teeple (1978). David Balsiger has stated that the on-screen identifications were limited by CBS to two lines: one for the person's name, and one for some identification of their field of expertise.

[30] Kuban (1989b, 1989c) gives [the details on Baugh's degrees](#). Baugh (1989) is a reply of sorts which does not deny any of Kuban's substantive claims. Bill Crouse, in a telephone interview on December 7, 1993, says that he warned David Balsiger that Baugh lacked credibility among Ark researchers.

[31] Nelson was the author of the ICR's Impact No. 169 (July 1987), titled "The Chinese Language and the Creative Hands of God." In that publication she was identified as an M.D. and as "a physician in Dunlap, Tennessee." Nelson claims that "the ancient Chinese worshiped the same Creator-God as the Hebrews" based on her study of Chinese pictographs.

Fox (1993) points out that a number of "experts" on the program are not listed in directories of professionals for the fields in which they are supposedly expert.

[32] Crouse (1993), p. 7; Morris (1993a). Morris wrote of the identification of the photo as Irwin's that "While many facts [on the program] were somewhat overstated, only one piece of evidence was 'wrong.'" I'm afraid I must disagree with Morris's tally.

[33] Telephone interview with David Fasold, November 27, 1993; with David Balsiger, December 7, 1993. Fasold says he has a file of information about Gurley's hoax, and read me excerpts from Gurley's letter. Some details about the New Eden hoax have been published in Bailey (1978), pp. 55-56 and Teeple (1978), pp. 103-107. Balsiger and Sellier (1976), pp. 102-109 and Berlitz (1987), pp. 29-41 defend the Russian expedition story on the basis of testimony from Alexander Koor, who did not begin telling it until 1945. The details of Koor's story suggest that it was derived from Gurley's, though both Berlitz (1987) and Balsiger and Sellier (1976) reject any connection.

[34] Balsiger and Sellier (1976), pp. 155-157. They report that it was supposedly in a summer 1943 issue, and one 1973 report of seeing the issue came from a woman whose husband had been stationed in Tunisia in 1943. The Tunisia edition (December 1943 to June 1944), Mediterranean edition (December 1943 to January 1944), the North African edition (May 1943 to May 1944), and the Africa-Middle East-Persian Gulf edition (April 1943 to December 1945) were all searched by a researcher at the Army Library at Balsiger and Sellier's request. They report that "there were nearly 25 other editions in the European war theater which possibly could have run the story" (p. 156) as their explanation for why they called off the search.

[35] Josephus (1987), *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.3.5-6, p. 34. Other errors and omissions are detailed in Fox (1993).

[36] Balsiger and Sellier (1976), p.218; Cerone (1993); Rosenberg (1993b); Teeple (1978), p. 125.

[37] Balsiger's involvement with Cerullo and with Logos International is discussed briefly in Trott and Hertenstein's (1992) exposé of Mike Warnke, and more extensively in their book (Hertenstein and Trott 1993). He was the media director for Cerullo's World Evangelism from 1970-1972 and Logos' director of marketing from 1972-1973. They also briefly comment on "rabbi" Michael Esses' 1973 biography, *Michael, Michael, Why Do You Hate Me?*. The fabricated story about NASA and the "missing day," which originated in Harold Hill's 1974 book *How to Live Like a King's Kid*, is discussed by McIver (1986), Brunvand (1991), and Loftin (1991). A Christian critique of Morris Cerullo and other advocates of the "Faith" movement such as E.W. Kenyon, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, John Avanzini, Robert Tilton, Marilyn Hickey, and Paul Crouch may be found in Hanegraaff (1993).

The term "ghost author" is Balsiger's own--Balsiger and Sellier (1976), p. 218 say that he "has authored or ghost authored seven other books including *Noah's Ark: I Touched It*, *The Satan Seller*, *It's Good To Know*, *Beyond Defeat*, *On The Other Side*, *One More Time*, and *The Back Side of Satan*." These books claim to be, respectively, the stories of Fernand Navarra, Mike Warnke, Randy Bullock, James E. Johnson, Marvin Ford, Don Musgraves, and Morris Cerullo. I have located only the first two of these books, but Ford's is probably of considerable interest. It is an account of Ford's near-death experiences and supposedly includes visions and prophecies for the future--made in 1978.

Balsiger has been politically active. He was involved with the Coalition on Revival, which is devoted to "rebuilding our civilization on the principles of the Bible ... until the day we die," serving on its steering committee from 1985 to "a few years ago" when he resigned (personal communication from Jay Grimstead, December 3, 1993). (See Porteous 1993. Some information about the COR may be found in McIver 1988 and Porteous 1991.) In the 1980's, he produced a series of "Biblical Scoreboards," glossy magazines designed to instruct fundamentalist Christians on how to vote in accordance with the Bible. He has worked on a number of Republican political campaigns in California and organized and headed some political organizations (National Citizens Action Network; the Ban the Soviets Coalition, which worked to ban the Soviet Union from the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics; and the Restore a More Benevolent Order Coalition, which worked to help Soviets defect).

Balsiger sometimes identifies himself as "Dr. David W. Balsiger," and he has letterhead which identifies him as "David W. Balsiger, L.H.D." (doctor of humane letters). His entry in *Who's Who in America* lists the source of this degree as Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee (a four-year college which does not have any doctoral programs), with no date given. (In the 45th (1988-89) and later editions of *Who's Who in America*, this degree is identified as an honorary degree.) Balsiger says that the degree was awarded for his book, *The Lincoln Conspiracy*. Balsiger's undergraduate career was lengthy--his *Who's Who* entry lists five colleges attended between 1964 and 1977, with a B.A. awarded by National University in San Diego in 1977. Oddly, Balsiger's *Who's Who* listing says that he was a student at Chapman College's World Campus Afloat in 1967-68 and a member of the board of directors of the same program in 1967. Balsiger says that he was not on the board of directors, but a member of a student association.

[38] Balsiger (1993).

[39] See Bok (1978) for a discussion of some relevant questions, though she does not specifically address hoaxes. Bok (1983), chapter 16, does go into more detail about some moral considerations involving the use of deception to expose certain kinds of practices. MacDougall (1958), pp. 262-282 describes historical examples of "hoaxes of exposure" designed to expose excessive credulity and other failings.

[40] See note 1.

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