

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 71:2

April 2007

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Theological Observer

The Lost Tomb of Jesus?

On March 4, 2007, the Discovery Channel premiered a dramatized documentary with this intriguingly sensationalized title: "The Lost Tomb of Jesus." The title alone guaranteed that it would receive a wide viewing. The program explored the basic hypothesis that the Talpiot tomb, found in Jerusalem during a construction project in 1980, was the final burial place for Jesus of Nazareth and some of his family members. This documentary featured a visually impressive combination of sleuthing in Jerusalem to relocate the Talpiot tomb which had been cataloged and covered over again shortly after its discovery, the examination of archaeological evidence focusing on the inscriptions found on the ossuaries recovered from this tomb (that is, smaller limestone burial boxes in which the bones from one person were stored), statistical probability factoring, DNA testing, commentary by several archaeologists and biblical scholars, as well as the dramatization of several theoretical events from the first century. This production is the work of James Cameron, who directed the film "Titanic," and journalist Simcha Jacobovici, who also narrated the program. Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino have released a book, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, in conjunction with this TV special.

The huge problem with this documentary is how it strings together individual untenable pieces of evidence and then argues that the cumulative weight of this evidence supports the hypothesis that the Talpiot tomb was indeed the Jesus family tomb. All one needs is a single weak link to break such a chain of evidence, and this program presented a host of weak links. The first piece is among the weakest, namely, that one of the ossuaries from the tomb bearing the Aramaic inscription "Yeshua, son of Joseph" (in translation) once contained the bones of Jesus of Nazareth. Although the fact that Yeshua (Jesus) was a very popular name in first-century Judea is acknowledged, the fact that other ossuaries from the tomb bore the names "Maria," "Mariameme," and "Matthew" was enlisted, through the use of statistical probability and limited DNA analysis, to argue that this cluster of names existed because these were probably the ossuaries of Jesus, Mary his mother, Mary Magdalene, and his disciple Matthew. Since there was an ossuary for Jesus, it is theorized that the report circulating among the Jews that his body was stolen (Matt 28:13-15) was actually true; any "resurrection" of Jesus, therefore, is deemed a spiritual—not a physical—resurrection. The documentary side-steps the obvious historical question of why disciples proclaiming Jesus' physical resurrection would preserve the evidence that this did not happen in a marked ossuary of an elaborate tomb.

The stringing together of weak links, however, did not stop there. Although the reading of some of these inscriptions is confirmed by Frank Moore Cross, a

renowned scholar from Harvard, others are not. After proposing a very dubious reading of the ossuary inscription "Mariameme e Mara" as the name and title of "Mary [Magdalene] known as the Master" (probably better rendered from Greek as "Mary, also called Martha"), the program asserts that Mary Magdalene could have been secretly married to Jesus and after his death became one of the "Masters" within the early church in Jerusalem. Moreover, because one of the ossuaries found in the Talpiot tomb bears the inscription "Judah, son of Yeshua," the documentary even went so far as to theorize that this son was the fruit of the supposed marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene! To top it all off, the one ossuary that is missing from the original find is theorized to be the "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus" ossuary which is currently swirling in scholarly debate and legal controversy as to whether it is a forgery. Numerous scholars who have examined this same evidence since 1980 have not concluded that this is the tomb of Jesus; the coincidence of very common names simply does not support the hypothesis. Finally, it should be noted that these non-evidential assertions take on a historical flavor when you see them dramatized by fine actors in proper dress and setting. Similar assertions were made as part of the historical fiction of Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*; the greater danger here is that they are presented to be possible historical facts in the context of a documentary.

In spite of the problematic content of "The Lost Tomb of Jesus," the Discovery Channel is to be commended for organizing the helpful discussion among a panel of scholars and theologians hosted by Ted Koppel immediately following the premiere. Many of the historical, scientific, and logical problems of the documentary were raised in this discussion. "The Lost Tomb of Jesus" ends up documenting more drama than history and more fanciful speculation than meticulous scholarly research. The timing of this premiere—a few weeks before Holy Week—is no coincidence; last year the media event was the publication of the (gnostic) *Gospel of Judas*. Pastors must not ignore such challenges, but need to meet them in the public square with careful scholarship in tandem with continued clear proclamation, as presented in the Scriptures, of the crucified and risen Jesus who lives and reigns to all eternity.

Charles A. Gieschen

For a significant, scholarly response to this documentary, see Buried Hope or Risen Savior? The Search for the Jesus Tomb, ed. Charles Quarles (Nashville: B&H Academic, forthcoming in January 2008).