

## DISCOVERING THE TRUTH ABOUT “THE LOST TOMB OF JESUS”

Dewayne Bryant, M.A.

[**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The following article was written by one of A.P.'s auxiliary staff scientists. Bryant holds two Masters degrees, and is enrolled in Masters study in Ancient Near Eastern Archaeology and Languages at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, as well as doctoral studies at Regions University. He has participated in an archaeological dig at Tell El-Borg in Egypt and holds professional membership in both the American Schools of Oriental Research and the Society of Biblical Literature.]

**R**einventing the Son of God is big business. Every year around Easter, Christians can expect to see the latest challenge to the historical picture of Jesus in magazines like TIME



and Newsweek. For producers with bigger budgets, movies and television specials provide slick visuals to illustrate these new “truths.” There has been a recent flurry of these productions, ranging from popular novels to announcements about lost gospels, that allegedly will revolutionize how we understand the New Testament. For anyone with an interest in the sensational, the most recent addition to the growing host of heresy does not disappoint.

A new documentary titled *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* aired on the Discovery Channel on March 4, 2007. At the helm were award-winning filmmakers James Cameron and Simcha Jacobovici. The documentary promised to shed new light on Jesus through the earliest artifacts connected to the rise of Christianity. They claimed to take us to the tomb of Christ Himself, showing that He was a historic figure in spite of those who would claim Him to be nothing more than a myth. Are they doing Christians a favor, or are they doing more harm than good?

### THE FIND

**I**n the modern Jerusalem suburb of Talpiyot, a construction crew uncovered an ancient tomb while digging for a new apartment complex in 1980. Archaeologists immediately were called in to document the find in a salvage operation, lasting from March 28 to April 14 of that year (Kloner, 1996, 29:22). The find was

a rock-cut tomb with 10 limestone ossuaries (bone boxes), six of which bore inscriptions identifying the occupants as Jesus, Joseph, Matthew, Simeon, and two Marys. The names were common ones to the period, so the archaeologists thought nothing of them. No special significance was attached to the tomb. The excavators finished their work, the construction resumed, and the ossuaries were placed in storage. Bone fragments found inside the ossuaries were buried in a cemetery according to Orthodox Jewish custom. The tomb soon lay buried, hidden by modern development.

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Twenty-three years later, filmmaker Jacobovici began working on a documentary on the ossuary of James, the brother of Jesus. He observed that there were several ossuaries with familiar names, including Jesus, Joseph, and Mary. Could this be the holy family of the New Testament? He explored the work of the original excavators and found the evidence too tantalizing to pass up. After talking with the archaeologists who worked on the dig and writing a proposal, his work began. The fruit of his labor is the new documentary, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, which features the hidden tomb that supposedly contained the remains of Christ.

In order to determine the accuracy of the theory presented in the documentary, we first must look at the important idea of **convergence**. When the historical, archaeological, and biblical evidence is interpreted and weighed, we expect there to be harmony. The three will converge, or come together. There may be cases where evidence from one area might be lacking, but we do not expect the evidence to be in conflict without adequate explanation. This is a key factor in determining whether Jacobovici's conclusions are right or wrong.

## Tales of Tombs and Ossuaries

Rock-cut tombs were used in antiquity at least as early as the eighth century B.C. They are artificial underground caves in the bedrock slopes of Jerusalem, nearly always located outside the city walls (Magness, 2005, 124[1]:122-123). They were choice burial sites for those wealthy enough to afford them, while those with less financial means settled for trench graves, similar to those used in modern cemeteries. Families used rock-cut tombs over several generations, a practice which is reflected in biblical phrases such as "he slept and was gathered to his fathers" (2 Chronicles 34:28). They usually appear only in periods where the Jewish people had a measure of political independence.

In Jewish tombs, there were two burials involved for a single individual. In the initial or primary burial, the body would be placed on a *loculus* or *kokh* (rectangular burial niche) for the body to decay. About a year later, the bones would be gathered together for a secondary burial, usually in a limestone ossuary (bone box). Ossuaries began to appear during the reign of Herod the Great, dateable perhaps to 20-15 B.C. (Rahmani, 1994, p. 21). Their use continued at least until the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but may have extended through the early second century.



A typical Palestinian rock-cut tomb.

## Archaeological Evidence

One of the primary problems with connecting the Talpiyot tomb with Jesus Christ involves the expense of owning such a tomb in antiquity. Even modest tombs were outside the price range of most people. Further complicating the matter is the fact that Jesus and His family never are portrayed as wealthy enough to afford a rock-cut tomb. If Joseph died early, as suggested by some who note his absence in Jesus' adult life, an additional financial burden would have been placed on the family, further decreasing their already miniscule chances of owning a tomb.

On the Biblical Archaeology Society Web site, scholar James Tabor (who supports the idea that the Talpiyot tomb could be that of Jesus) has objected to comments about the default burial of Jesus being in a trench grave along with others who were too poor to own a rock-cut tomb. He argues that it seems only natural that a popular religious leader like Jesus would be given an honorable burial by His devoted followers (Tabor, 2007). However, Rahmani's *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries* notes that the name of Jesus is carved clumsily on the ossuary (labeled as no. 701). If this is the tomb of a popular religious figure, why give Him a simple, unadorned ossuary with only His name shoddily scrawled on the out-

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side? Tabor's objection clearly does not fit the evidence.

Another problem is that Jesus and his family did not come from Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary originally were from Bethlehem, and settled in Nazareth. While ossuaries frequently have the names of a person's father or mother, ancient sources also typically make a distinction concerning the place of a person's origin, as in the cases of Simon of Cyrene and Saul of Tarsus. Ossuaries in Jerusalem have been found that indicate a person's place of origin when they were not originally from that city. If the tomb were truly that of Jesus Christ, we would expect Him to be identified on the ossuary as "Jesus of Nazareth" rather than "Jesus son of Joseph." No one in the Talpiyot tomb is identified by place of origin. This evidence strongly suggests that the people buried in the tomb were natives of Jerusalem.

Additional evidence concerning the names on the ossuaries found in the Talpiyot tomb complicates the conclusions drawn by the documentary. The ossuary of the woman identified as Mary Magdalene is problematic, and conflicts with other evidence. First, if the ossuary belonged to Mary, we would expect her to be identified as "Mary of Migdal," as she is in the New Testament (Luke 8:2).

Second, scholars are divided on how to translate the wording of *MARIAMENOU MARA* (the name appearing on one of the ossuaries), whether it gives two names for the same woman ("Mary, who is called Mara") or if it indicates the names of two women—Mary and Martha—meaning that two people were buried in the same ossuary, which was not unknown (there are cases of as many as five people buried in a single ossuary). Stephen Pfann's piece on the Society of Biblical Literature homepage disputes the reading used by the documentary, arguing that the inscription should be read *MARIAMENOU KAI MARA* (Pfann, 2007). In this case, the inscription would refer to two women, Mariam and Martha. Most scholars now appear to be accepting Pfann's corrected reading of the ossuary's inscription, concluding that the remains of two individuals shared this ossuary.

An additional problem with "Mary Magdalene's" ossuary is that the inscrip-

tion is in Greek. According to the documentary, Mary spoke Greek and helped her brother Philip in evangelistic work. In reality, Mary Magdalene came from Migdal, a small Jewish fishing village. Usually in the first century, only upper class Jews spoke Greek. The average Jew would have spoken Aramaic. So why is her ossuary inscription written in Greek? This evidence suggests a Jerusalemite woman named Mary who was from the upper classes, and whose family could afford to bury her in a rock-cut tomb.

The program claims that "Mara" in the inscription means "teacher," a conclusion with which no reputable scholar agrees. The word is actually a shortened form of the name "Martha." It is suggested that Francois Bovon, Frothingham professor of the history of religion at Harvard Divinity School, has equated Mariamne with Mary Magdalene (Desmond, 2000). Bovon has denied this claim, however, in a letter sent to the Society of Biblical Literature in which he says the "reconstructions of Jesus' marriage with Mary Magdalene and the birth of a child belong for me to science fiction" (Bovon, 2007).

One final concern regarding the archaeological evidence: a primary assumption of the documentary is that the James ossuary comes from the same tomb in Talpiyot. The program claims that the 10<sup>th</sup> ossuary went missing during the original work on the tomb. To rebut this claim, Israeli archaeologist Joseph Zias has posted an excellent "viewer's guide" to understanding the documentary on his Web site ([www.joezias.com](http://www.joezias.com)). Zias shows that the FBI proved the James ossuary was photographed in the 1970's because of a criminal investigation against Oded Golan, the ossuary's current owner (Zias, 2007). If the James ossuary was already in Golan's possession when the tomb was discovered, it could not be the tenth "missing" ossuary. Zias also shows that he had indeed accounted for the tenth ossuary when the original work was done, and that it had no inscription.

#### Scientific Evidence

People in the Western world are trained to think that scientific evidence assures the quality of any product. Ad-

vertisers make sure the public knows that their work has been "scientifically proven." This gives the consumer the idea that independent, objective research has gone into its production. The commercials for *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* did much the same in advertisements leading up to the premiere of the documentary.

The first major area of evidence concerns the DNA testing performed on two of the ossuaries, those of Jesus and Mary. Mitochondrial DNA was tested by the Paleo-DNA Laboratory at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario (Jacobovici and Pellegrino, 2007, pp. 167-174). It was determined that the two individuals in this tomb were not related to each other. Since this was a family tomb, the documentary suggests, the two **must** have been husband and wife. But the only thing this test proves is that Jesus and Mary did not have the same mother. In addition, there are a number of other possibilities in terms of family relations. Mary could have been Jesus' daughter, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law through marriage to a brother, sister-in-law from a previous marriage of his father, mother-in-law from a subsequent marriage of his father, or paternal cousins, with more distant relations remaining as further possibilities. To leap to the conclusion that the two must have been married to one another is problematic and prejudicial, to say the least.

In addition to the DNA evidence, further proof from statistics is supposed to support the claim that this is the tomb of Jesus. Andrey Feuerverger of the University of Toronto assembled the statistical evidence, shown on the Discovery Channel Web site, which supposedly proves the tomb to be that of Jesus (2007). Unfortunately, the names represented on the ossuaries are extremely common. In his book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckman indicates that the male names in the tomb are among the most popular, with Simon ranking first, Joseph second, Judah fourth, and Jesus sixth, with Mary being the most common female name (Bauckman, 2006, p. 70). This is why archaeologists initially thought nothing of the tomb when it was discovered. While the names corresponded to those of Jesus'



Exterior view of a Jewish rock-cut tomb

family in the gospel records, they were also the most common names in the first century. The equivalent today would be trying to find a modern cemetery that did not have anyone named Smith or Jones. Taking this evidence into account, the documentary claims that while the individual names are common, the **cluster** of names is not. After all, how many families in the first century could have people named Joseph, Jesus, and Mary?

While the argument initially sounds convincing, a number of problems persist with the statistics presented on the Discovery Channel Web site. In a letter to his colleagues posted on the Internet, Feuerverger admits that he made a number of assumptions before he performed his calculations. First, he assumed that the Joseph (Yose) of the ossuary and the Joseph, father of Jesus, are two different people—an unprovable assumption. He also assumed that the second Mary refers to Mary Magdalene, forcing a virtually statistical certainty that this is the tomb of Jesus. But this interpretation is impossible, as discussed earlier. A third assumption is that the presence of unknown people, such as Matthew and Judah, do not invalidate the statistical evidence, though that assumption goes against the historical evidence (Feuerverger, 2007).

The statistical evidence is invalid because the names on the ossuaries do not match the evidence for several reasons. First, there are two persons for whom the historical evidence does not account (Matthew and Judah). Furthermore, there are other family members that are missing, including His brothers James and Jude, and sisters Salome and Mary (who are named only in later tradition; cf. Mark 6:3). The documentary contends that Yose (Joseph) is not the father of Jesus. This contention drives the statistical probability higher, yet the documentary never addresses the fact that the Yose in the ossuary and the father of Jesus could have been the same person. Admittedly, this is not certain, but there is no good reason why the father of this Jesus could not have gone by Yose. Actually, a facsimile of the *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries* presented on the Discovery Channel Web site shows that Rahmani's opinion was that Yose very well could be the father of the Jesus in this tomb. Finally, attributing the ossuary to Mary Magdalene further inflates the statistics, though no evidence exists to connect the name on the ossuary to her. It also assumes that the Matthew of the ossuary is a relative of Mary, but not her son, despite a lack of any evidence to support that possibility.

The final piece of scientific evidence involves the use of “patina fingerprinting.” Patina is a thin layer of buildup on the surface of an artifact due to chemical reaction with the environment. According to the program, the makeup of the patina holds clues about the tomb. Though touted as an important piece of information in the documentary, it is completely inadmissible as evidence. The use of the term “fingerprinting” is a misleading description, since it gives the viewer the impression that the science behind the process is exact. The truth is, the procedure is not exact, nor would we expect it to be. The patina evidence is rigged from the start. The patinas from ossuaries discovered in other environments are tested and shown to be different from the ossuaries in the Talpiyot tomb. Those in the Talpiyot tomb were tested and shown to be relatively similar. But these conclusions are to be expected. The real test is whether ossuaries from tombs **similar** to the Talpiyot tomb are different, which would strengthen Jacobovici's case. But there is no reason to expect substantial differences in patina evidence from similar environments. No way exists to connect a single ossuary with a specific tomb. The use of this evidence is intellectually dishonest.

### Historical Evidence

While the evidence from archaeology and science—the main underpinnings of the documentary's premise—has been shown to be lacking, the program faces further difficulties in terms of the historical evidence. The basis for the documentary is drawn in part from later, extra-biblical traditions. It is strange, though perhaps to be expected, that the documentary draws on sources centuries later than the New Testament gospel accounts—further evidence of the utter lack of objectivity in the documentary. Rather than using the gospel records of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (which have demonstrated their historical reliability and are accepted even by most non-believing scholars—see Lyons and Miller, 2004, 24[6]:57-63), the documentary is guided by pseudepigraphical works of highly dubious historical value.



## First Atheist in Congress

Dave Miller, Ph.D.

Many Americans were incredulous when a Muslim was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2006 and sworn into office with his hand on the Quran (“Rep. Ellison...,” 2007). Now the first national congressman in U.S. history has announced that he is an atheist. Representative Pete Stark, Democrat from California, who actually has been serving in Congress since 1973, was hailed instantly by humanist and atheist organizations (Hoegh, 2007). Never mind the fact that, given his avowed atheism, Mr. Stark cannot uphold his own state constitution, which reads: “We, the People of the State of California, **grateful to Almighty God** for our freedom, in order to secure and perpetuate its blessings, do establish this Constitution (“Preambles to...,” emp. added). The gradual erosion of traditional American values, which most certainly has included belief in the God of the Bible, continues. A recent poll shows that 96% of Americans still believe in God, yet 37% would vote for an atheist for President (Adler, 2007, p. 47). Such is the inevitable infiltration of the nation’s political infrastructure as Christian values continue to be systematically jettisoned from schools, government, and public life (see *SilencingOfGod.org*).

So what? Does it really matter whether the population of the United States, along with its elected representatives and other public officials, maintain belief in the God of the Bible? Isn’t such diversity of ideas healthy and beneficial to the overall well-being of society? Certainly, atheists, humanists, and evolutionists answer in the affirmative, insisting that a religionless society is the ideal (e.g., Richard Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion*). On the other hand, Christians recognize that any nation that denies the existence of the one true God, and rejects the moral precepts contained within the Christian system, ultimately will meet its demise. The psalmist cut to the chase on this point: “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord” (Psalm 33:12). “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God” (Psalm 9:17).

What about the architects of America? What did the Founders of American civilization—those who orchestrated our national existence—say about the importance of belief in the God of the Bible? In the first place, **the Founders were not atheists**. Not all professed belief in Christianity and Christ, but the historical evidence shows that they all believed in God—even Thomas Paine (see Miller, 2005). A good summary of the theological beliefs of the Founders was articulated by the sixth President of the United States, whose own father was a primary Founder, and who was sufficiently intimate with the Founding era to know whereof he spoke. John Quincy Adams explained:

From the day of the Declaration, the people of the North American Union and of its

constituent States, were associated bodies of civilized men and Christians, in a state of nature; but not of Anarchy. They were bound by **the laws of God, which they all**, and by the laws of the Gospel, which they nearly all, **acknowledged as the rules of their conduct** (1821, p. 26, emp. added).

During the tumultuous years of the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress issued no fewer than nine proclamations to the nation, each of which called upon the entire country to render homage to the God of the Bible so that they might be blessed with victory, peace, and prosperity. To see the depth of the Founders’ reliance and dependency on God and Christianity, consider just one of those statements, issued by Congress in October 1780, the fourth year of war with Britain:

Whereas it hath pleased **Almighty God, the Father of all mercies**, amidst the vicissitudes and calamities of war, to bestow blessings on the people of these states, which call for their devout and thankful acknowledgments, more especially in the late remarkable interposition of **his watchful providence**, in rescuing the person of our Commander in Chief and the army from imminent dangers, at the moment when treason was ripened for execution; in prospering the labors of the husbandmen, and causing the earth to yield its increase in plentiful harvests; and, above all, in continuing to us the enjoyment of the gospel of peace;

It is therefore recommended to the several states to set apart Thursday, the seventh day of December next, to be observed as a day of public thanksgiving and prayer; that all the people may assemble on that day to celebrate the praises of **our Divine Benefactor**; to confess our unworthiness of the least of **his favors**, and to offer our fervent supplications to **the God of all grace**; that it may **please him** to pardon our heinous transgressions and incline our hearts for the future to keep all **his laws** that it may **please him** still to afford us the blessing of health; to comfort and relieve our brethren who are any wise afflicted or distressed; to smile upon our husbandry and trade and establish the work of our hands; to direct our public councils, and lead our forces, by land and sea, to victory; to take our illustrious ally under **his special protection**, and favor our joint councils and exertions for the establishment of speedy and permanent peace; to cherish all schools and seminaries of education, build up **his churches** in their most holy faith and **to cause the knowledge of Christianity to spread over all the earth**.

Done in Congress, the last day of October, 1780, and in the fifth year of the independence



of the United States of America (*Journals of...*, 1904-1937, 18:950-951, emp. added).

These men believed that the very survival of America depends on the favor and blessings of God. What a far cry from those in America today who are content with atheists in Congress, not to mention in universities all over America. As more and more Americans eliminate belief in God from their lives, as atheism progressively encroaches upon our political and educational institutions, we may expect fully to see the withdrawal of His care. In the words of George Washington:

I am sure there never was a people who had more reason **to acknowledge a Divine interposition** in their affairs than those of the United States; and I should be pained to believe that they have **forgotten that Agency** which was so often manifested during our revolution, or that they failed to consider the omnipotence of **that God who is alone able to protect them** (1838, 10:222-223, emp. added).

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## QUESTION & ANSWER

**Q** How could Jesus have seen the thief on the cross in paradise the very day that He died and was buried?

**A** The fact that Bible critics ask such a question reveals their **severe** lack of Bible knowledge. Allegedly, the promise that Jesus made to the penitent thief who hung on a cross next to Him ("Today you will be with Me in Paradise"—Luke 23:43), "could not have been kept unless Jesus went to heaven that day, in which case he would not have been buried for three days" (McKinsey, 1983, p. 3). Sceptic Steve Wells similarly commented on Jesus' promise to the thief, saying: "[H]ow can that be since it's only Friday and, according to the gospels, Jesus lay dead in the tomb Friday night and all day Saturday" (2007). Obviously, these sceptics do not understand the Bible's teaching about afterlife.

The reason Jesus could say that He and the penitent thief could be together in paradise the very day they died (even though their bodies were still on Earth), is because Jesus was referring to their **souls** cohabiting paradise, not their physical bodies. The Bible clearly teaches that when people die their souls depart from their bodies (cf. Genesis 35:18) and dwell in hades—the "receptacle of disembodied spirits" (Thayer, 1962, p. 11) where all people who die await the Lord's return and subsequent judgment.

The word "hades" occurs ten times in the New Testament, and always refers to the unseen realm of the dead. One part of hades is known as paradise (or "Abraham's bosom"—Luke 16:22), whereas the other part is known as "torments" (Luke 16:23). The spirits of the righteous dwell in paradise, whereas the wicked, like the rich man of Luke 16, find themselves "in torments in Hades" (vs. 23).

On the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted from Psalm 16 ("You will not leave my soul in Hades"—Acts 2:27), and applied this passage to Christ, saying, "His [Jesus'] soul was not left in Hades" (Acts 2:31). When was Jesus' soul in hades? After His death, and before His resurrection. Who was with Him in the part of hades known as paradise? The thief on the cross. Did Jesus lie when He told the thief, "Today you will be with me in Paradise"? Certainly not!

**Eric Lyons, M.Min.**

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The major problem is that no evidence exists to suggest that Jesus had a wife and child. There is no hint Jesus ever was married (Lyons, 2006). While archaeology occasionally fills in gaps left out by historical evidence, this fact would not have gone unmentioned in the earliest sources. The marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene is found nowhere in the ancient evidence.

The statistical probability of the Talpiyot tomb being that of Jesus hangs on Mariamne and Mary Magdalene being one and the same. Yet no **early** evidence connects the two. The only connection available comes from the *Acts of Philip*, an uncertain and widely disputed text, whose earliest surviving copy is from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, though possibly dated to the fourth. The text not only fails conclusively to connect Mariamne with Mary Magdalene, it has a few other discrediting features—including talking animals. Speaking from the historian’s perspective, it is grossly irresponsible to dismiss the best sources and use disputed evidence to support an already-drawn conclusion.

### Response of the Early Church

Finally, we must examine the response of early believers to Jesus. In the gospel accounts, after the crucifixion of Christ, the disciples are depicted as a band of disillusioned idealists. They thought their

Messiah was dead and gone, buried in a tomb, when He was supposed to save the world. Despite their initial disenchantment, they soon transformed into powerful preachers bent on evangelizing the Mediterranean world. Going on missions that put them directly in harm’s way (cf. Acts 8:1-3; 2 Corinthians 11:23-27), they defied worldly authorities for the cause of Christ. Why the turnaround?

Being a Christian did not bode well for one’s health. History records that all of the apostles but one were martyred. So was James, the brother of Jesus. Even the average Christian at the time could expect to be executed if discovered by the Roman authorities. Of all the religious choices in the first century, why choose the one with the shortest life expectancy? It is hard to believe that such a religion would be the chosen course of people who had put Jesus’ body in the tomb, then later placed His bones in an ossuary. They would have been reminded of the lie every time the next family member was buried, at the very time people were preaching His resurrection. The only explanation for this complete inability to face reality would be insanity.

We are at a loss to find any other explanation for the dramatic turnaround of some of the fiercest defenders of the faith in the early church. There was tension in the family of Jesus, which would have included His brothers James and Jude

(Mark 3:31-34). Paul actively persecuted the church (Acts 8:3). It is difficult—if not impossible—to explain such a dramatic reversal of men who were originally skeptics and even enemies of Christ.

In early church history, absolutely no awareness of this family tomb is indicated. During the reign of Constantine the Great, traditional sites of New Testament significance were marked. Churches were constructed over venerated locations, such as the purported burial place of Jesus and the site of his ascension to heaven, and even the site identified as Peter’s house. Before the reign of Constantine, Christians commemorated the final resting place of Jesus’ brother James. Yet, we are supposed to believe that the early church inexplicably lost track of the real tomb, in spite of the fact that it was used for at least four generations, until the end of the first century? Even so, the location never appears in Christian traditions or the writings of the early patristic writers. Christianity shows no awareness of the tomb from earliest times.

Both Roman and Jewish authorities were hostile to the early church. If the documentary is correct, all they had to do was point to the ossuary occupied by the body of Jesus to refute utterly the Christian claims of His resurrection. Yet there was no body to be produced. The fact that the body of Jesus was missing may well be reflected in a stone monument found in Nazareth in 1878, dubbed the “Nazareth Inscription Against Grave Robbing,” possibly dating to the time of the Roman emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54). The inscription states that tomb-robbing is a capital crime under Roman law. Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in A.D. 49 because of problems generated by the budding Christian faith. He also may have issued this order because of problems concerning the claims that Jesus rose from the dead. This observation is uncertain, however, and so must be weighed with caution (Ferguson, 2003, pp. 586-587).

In the end, the tomb discovery has wide-ranging theological implications. Some of the most basic tenets of the Christian faith hang upon the bodily resurrection of Christ. While the producers of the

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documentary have downplayed this aspect, claiming that Jesus could have had a spiritual resurrection, their view is yet another instance of failure to understand properly the ancient evidence. The unusual aspect of Christ's resurrection was not that it was physical—which is what the Jews anticipated. The unexpectedness of it is the fact that it occurred before the end of time. According to Jewish belief, resurrection was physical, as can be seen in the book of 2 Maccabees. In chapter 7, one of several individuals being tortured expresses the belief that his mutilated body parts would be restored in the resurrection. In 2 Maccabees 17:46, a man named Razis, who committed suicide by pulling out his own intestines, called upon God to restore them to him again, presumably in the afterlife. It has been suggested that the point of having an ossuary was to preserve the bones for a physical resurrection (Rahmani, 1981, 44[3]:175-176).

### Responses from Experts

While critics of the Christian faith make fun of believers scurrying to do damage control in the wake of the documentary's premiere, it is not Christians who are leading the charge against the film, but atheists and agnostics. The majority of the archaeologists who have denounced the program are unbelievers. Their ire is not because the program controverts the gospel message, but because it violates standards of scientific and academic professionalism (Thompson, 2007). The established process of presenting new discoveries and interpretations is by means of scholarly venues, such as papers presented at professional conferences and articles published in peer-reviewed journals. By announcing the findings of the program in the popular media, complete with a perfectly-timed news conference to coincide with the release of the book and documentary, Cameron and Jacobovici have stepped on the toes of scholars everywhere.

Amos Kloner, the archaeologist who initially worked on the excavation and later published his findings in 1996, argues that the documentary is nothing more than a commercial enterprise (Nissenbaum, 2007). Kloner's colleague in the ex-

cavation, Joseph Zias (one-time curator of the well-known Rockefeller Museum in Israel), has lamented that the documentary makes a mockery of the archaeological profession (Zias, 2007). From their comments in the popular media, it is readily apparent that both men, who are reputable archaeologists—but unbelievers—are frustrated with the project.

Some of the harshest language about the documentary came immediately after its airing. In a scholarly program that discussed the validity of the documentary's radical claims, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus—A Critical Look*, Ted Koppel interviewed two archaeologists. The first was William Dever, arguably the most recognized American archaeologist. The other was Jonathan Reed, a well-respected archaeologist who currently excavates at the site of ancient Sepphoris. Dever, who noted that he was not a believer and did not "have a dog in this fight," labeled the program a "docu-drama." Reed was even more hostile in his evaluation, denouncing the documentary as "archaeo-porn." Reed's evaluation of the evidence was that the theory is much like a chain made up of links, but one in which each link has a tremendous number of "ifs" that makes the final product difficult to accept.

It must be noted that Cameron and Jacobovici were unable to find archaeological experts to agree with their conclusions. While a few scholars have been sympathetic to the premise of the documentary, no one has endorsed it *carte blanche*. The vast majority of experts are frustrated, even angry, about it. In addition to the comments by Dever and Reed noted above, other archaeologists have expressed dismay and quickly moved to refute the thesis of the program. Jodi Magness, professor of archaeology at the University of North Carolina, has published articles on the Web sites of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Archaeological Institute of America exposing the shortcomings of the documentary (2007). Joseph Zias' viewer's guide posted on his Web site refutes nearly every claim made by the show, giving additional insight into what went into the program behind the scenes (2007). Tel Ilan, the scholar whose *Lexicon of Jew-*

*ish Names* was used in providing the evidence for the statistical research presented in the program, has expressed outrage that her work has been connected to the documentary. The Web site of *Scientific American* has quotes from both Ilan and Magness expressing their anger and frustration (Mims, 2007). The verdict of the scholars? Professionals have given responses ranging from irritation to anger and disgust. Indeed, reaction of the experts is almost unanimously negative.

### CONCLUSION

When one steps back from the documentary and looks to see if filmmakers handled the evidence properly, the result can be described only as pure disappointment. Rather than converging, the scientific, archaeological, and historical evidence are thrown into chaotic disarray. Evidence from one area is pitted against evidence from another. The best sources are dismissed, while disreputable sources are given an undeserved prominence in the conclusion of the program. Jacobovici has been unable to find any expert who will agree with him. The evidence is cherry-picked to create the appearance of the strongest possible case, but the end result is that the chain of evidence is weak at every link.

These artifacts have been known for 27 years, yet no one of scholarly repute has thought much of them until now. As vocal as critics of Christianity are, it is strange that this sleeping giant has lain undisturbed for nearly three decades. This is the kind of ammunition that the Bible's detractors drool over, yet it never made a blip on the radar despite being published in 1996 and being featured on a BBC special the same year. Apparently, it takes a filmmaker to connect the dots on 2,000 year-old "evidence" that contradicts Christianity.

*The Lost Tomb of Jesus* has the potential to shake Christianity to its core, but the utter lack of good evidence means the documentary goes forth more with a whimper than a bang. Both Cameron and Jacobovici have admitted that neither is an archaeologist or scientist. They make it appear as if anyone with a budget



and a film crew can do archaeology. This is painfully obvious at the end of the program, when Jacobovici goes to find the location of the tomb. He eventually discovers it and removes the concrete slab that seals it shut, essentially committing archaeological “breaking and entering.” Eventually, a representative from the Israel Antiquities Authority shows up to force the intruders to leave. Jacobovici demonstrates a flagrant disregard for proper procedure; the same may be said for the rest of his work.

In the wake of the program’s premiere, it appears that those involved are attempting to distance themselves from the project. In an e-mail to evangelical theologian James White posted on the Alpha and Omega Ministries Web site, Dr. Carney Matheson (the scientist responsible for DNA testing on the Jesus and Mary ossuaries) indicated that his responses in interviews with the filmmakers were manipulated (White, 2007). In a letter to his colleagues, Andrey Feuerverger, the statistical expert from the University of Toronto, emphasizes the assumptions that went into his calculations (2007). Even the Discovery Channel is refusing to promote the documentary, and now appears to be backing away from it. Despite drawing over four million viewers for the premiere, the channel has not celebrated its ratings. Subsequent re-airings of the show were cancelled. The channel scheduled the panel debate in *The Lost Tomb of Jesus—A Critical Look* quite abruptly, the conclusions of which cast serious doubt upon Jacobovici’s findings.

Do Christians have anything about which to worry? **Not at all.** The documentary’s conclusion is based on poor use of evidence and faulty statistics. The evidence in the documentary has been skewed, even manipulated—a charge brought by scholars who have no spiritual stake in the program. While the documentary makes for sensational television, it has no scholarly basis. Rather than the evidence achieving convergence, the documentary pits different aspects of the evidence against other aspects. The difficulties in reconciling the scientific, archaeological, and historical data in a meaning-

ful way can be solved by one simple solution: this is not the tomb of Christ.

If we could travel back in time nearly 2,000 years to the territory now occupied by the suburb of Talpiyot in modern-day Jerusalem, we could observe Jesus’ funeral, with mourners dressed in first-century Jewish garb solemnly marching toward a rock-cut tomb. The family of the deceased would gather around sorrowfully to lay their beloved to rest in the cool, stone chamber. A year later, they would put his bones in a limestone ossuary. Our hearts would go out to the family—even though the deceased was not Jesus of Nazareth.

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## NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

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### DO YOU FIND *R&R* HELPFUL?

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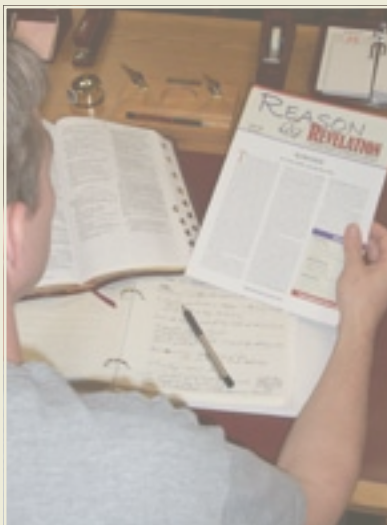
We are living in critical times. With every passing day, it seems as if the Christian value system on which America was founded suffers multiple attacks. A relentless barrage of hostility continues against Christian morality—from the incessant clamor for homosexual rights to the ongoing struggle to rescue the unborn from the abortionist's instruments of torture. Christian sensibilities are assaulted on every hand, at every turn, on a daily basis. Anti-Christian encroachments are so widespread that they seem surreal, leaving the Christian bewildered at how such hedonistic forces could have gained so much ground.

What is the solution? The truth—God's truth, the Gospel. The key is getting God's views out to people. And that is precisely what A.P. has endeavored to do for 28 years and counting. *Reason & Revelation* is one of the tools we

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**Dave Miller**



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