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The Lost Tomb of Jesus

By:
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I saw the Discovery Channel special last night (March 4, 2007), and the follow-up interview that Ted Koppel conducted. My colleague, Darrell Bock, was one of those interviewed by Koppel. Although I am certainly biased, I thought he did an outstanding job in raising serious questions for James Tabor and Simcha Jacobovici.

The film was rather professionally made. (With James Cameron, who produced *Titanic*, as the executive producer, it's no wonder!) That is not to say that it accurately portrayed the facts of the case, but rather that it was slick and a good piece of propaganda. The interview that Koppel conducted only scratched the surface of the problems involved. I thought Koppel did a very commendable job of digging for the facts. William Dever, a renowned archeologist who is not a Christian, said that James Cameron's "The Lost Tomb of Jesus" gave archeologists a bad name. Jonathan Reed, another archeologist on the panel discussion, said that film was "archo-porn."

I won't get into the arguments in any detail here, as quite a bit of this is beyond my area of expertise. But I would like to point out a few things.

First, the statistical argument was the kingpin in the film's case. To find a tomb that had "Jesus, son of Joseph" along with "Mary" and "Mariamne" and "Jose" seems to be statistically improbable—if all those names refer to Jesus of Nazareth, his mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus' brother Joseph. Indeed, the statistician quoted on the show (Andrey Feuerverger of Toronto University) said that it was 600:1 probability that this was the family tomb of Jesus of Nazareth. He admitted that his calculations depended entirely on the data supplied to him and the interpretations given to such data: "The results of any such computations are highly dependent on the assumptions that enter into it." (For his full disclosure, see <http://fisher.utstat.toronto.edu/andrey/OfficeHrs.txt>) But the Mariamne is problematic both because it alone is written in Greek and because that name is not found in any literature until the second century (back to this name in a moment). There's also a Matia in the tomb, though it's anyone's guess as to who he is.

And then there is Jesus' son, Judas. Now suppose, for sake of argument, that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were really married. In the film and the Koppel interview, there was no denial of the death by crucifixion of Jesus, nor even of the resurrection afterward. Rather, there was a dispute over whether the actual body of Jesus ascended into heaven or whether just his spirit did. James Tabor argued that just his spirit ascended, leaving the body behind; Darrell Bock argued that the whole person ascended to heaven. In light of these prospects, when would Jesus and Mary have gotten married? The film doesn't indicate this, but suggests that the 'beloved disciple' standing at the foot of the cross with Mary was actually Judas, Jesus' son, and the Mary was not Jesus' mother but his wife, Mary Magdalene. Thus, when Jesus, as he is hanging from the cross, tells Mary to behold her son and the beloved disciple to behold his mother, he is speaking to his wife and son. Of course, this runs afoul of John 19.26 which explicitly records the Mary that Jesus is talking to as 'his mother.' What disturbs me here is the wholesale uncritical approach to scripture that the filmmaker is taking. John's Gospel is not considered to have much information of genuine historical worth in it by many critical scholars, but it apparently can be conveniently exploited and then twisted into any shape one wants if it fits their hypothesis. I, for one, think that Jesus did say something like this to his mother and to John, his beloved disciple. The reason for the comment would be that the spiritual family takes precedent over the physical family. Since Jesus' brothers were still not believers, and since Joseph had apparently already died, Jesus was entrusting his mother to one who was in the same spiritual family.

There's another problem with Judas as Jesus' son. If Jesus knew early on that Judas Iscariot would betray him (as John 6.70 seems to affirm), is it really likely that he and Mary would name their son after his betrayer? I can see the conversation now. "Jesus, we have a son. Let's name him Judas." "Um, I don't think that's the best name.... You'll have to trust me on this one." The only alternative is to see Jesus and Mary as married and having a child *before* Jesus knew that Judas would betray him. And if that is the case, how likely is it that the disciples would be unaware of Jesus' marriage or his son during his three-year ministry with them? Not a

shred of evidence suggests any such awareness. Either this is an incredible cover-up of Titanic proportions or it's a figment. (And this is one reason why so many liberal scholars have rejected the premise of the film.) *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* is smelling more and more like *The Da Vinci Code*.

Now, back to Mary. The name Mariamne is never used of Mary Magdalene in the New Testament. Rather, the Greek name *Μαρία* or *Μαριάμ* is always used of her (the same is true of Jesus' mother). The name Mariamne, in fact, never occurs in the NT. The earliest possible reference found that might use this name for Mary Magdalene is Hippolytus, *Haereses* 5.7, though there is not enough information in the context to make a positive identification with Mary Magdalene. After that, the apocryphal *Acts of Philip*, from the fourth century, have this name. But that is so late that its historical credibility on other fronts is deemed worthless by most scholars.

The problem is that both the statistician and the filmmaker argued that Mary Magdalene was the key to the tomb's identification. If she's some other woman besides Mary Magdalene, then the whole thesis is in serious jeopardy.

Mark Goodacre has commented on the statistics involved at his academic website (<http://ntgateway.com/weblog/2007/03/statistical-case-for-identity-of-jesus.html>):

At the risk of labouring the point, let me attempt to explain my concerns by using the analogy of which the film-makers are so fond, the undefined *Beatles analogy*. This analogy works by saying that if in 2,000 years a tomb was discovered in Liverpool that featured the names John, Paul and George, we would not immediately conclude that we had found the tomb of the Beatles. But if we also found so distinctive a name as Ringo, then we would be interested. Jacobovici claims that the 'Ringo' in this tomb is Mariamene, whom he interprets as Mary Magdalene and as Jesus's wife, which is problematic (see [Mariamne and the "Jesus Family Tomb"](#) and below). What we actually have is the equivalent of a tomb with the names John, Paul, George, Martin, Alan and Ziggy. We might well say, 'Perhaps the 'Martin' is George Martin, and so this is a match!' or 'Perhaps John Lennon had a son called Ziggy we have not previously heard about' but this would be special pleading and we would rightly reject such claims. A cluster of names is only impressive when it is a cluster that is uncontaminated by non-matches and contradictory evidence.

There are other serious problems with the family identified in the tomb. It would be gratuitous to specify what each name represented, yet the film has no problem doing so: Mary is the mother of Jesus, Mariamne is Mary Magdalene, Jose is Jesus' brother. Matia is a problem, but the film suggests that this could be the Mathan in Jesus' genealogy (his great-grandfather). But if so, where is Joseph or his father Jacob? Indeed, where are numerous people from Mathan on who could have been interred here? Matia is a spoiler, as is Mariamne, as Professor Goodacre points out.

All this reminds me of Samuel Clemens' sarcastic quip about statistics: "There are lies, damn lies, and statistics." I am not opposed to the use of statistics at all; rather, I am opposed to tampering with the database that the statistician has to work with. The filmmaker has done this in the case of the names on the ossuaries.

Finally, Joe Zias, the curator of the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem from 1971-1997, has weighed in on the discussion. His full review is well worth reading (<http://www.joezias.com/tomb.html>). We will here only quote brief snippets.

Zias first discusses the 'cast of characters' in the film, noting in particular:

The film's 'experts' several of whom hold academic positions with proven track records in every field except Biblical Archaeology. Most experts however have no credibility within the profession. Charles Pellegrino is an example of this. His past books are *The Ghosts of Atlantis*, *Ghosts of Vesuvius*, *Rtn to Sodom and Gomorrah*, and *Unearthing Atlantis*. The first two deal with psychic phenomena while the last two deal with mythical places. He co-authored the book as well as appears from time to time in the film.

As to the names on the tombs, Zias notes what is missing:

The important thing to remember here is that individuals outside of Judea, buried in Judea were named according to their place of origin, whereas in Judea this was not necessary. Had the names been Jesus of Nazareth, Mary of Nazareth, Joseph of Nazareth etc I would have been totally convinced that this may be the family tomb, but as none of the names have place of origin, they are all Judeans.

Zias goes on to debunk the rest of the arguments that the film makes. He discusses the DNA, mentions that he contacted many of the bona fide scholars who were quoted in the film (whose statements were lifted from their contexts or made to fit the filmmaker's purposes), and even discusses the James ossuary. The film alleges that the James ossuary, which speaks of James, the son of Joseph and brother of Jesus, could be the tenth ossuary of the Talpiot family tomb. If so, that would seem to seal the deal. But there are numerous problems with the identification, not the least of which relates to the archeologist who entered the Talpiot tomb in 1980 and who measured the ossuaries. The film alleges that James' ossuary somehow mysteriously vanished from the collection. But since the original archeologist measured this ossuary, it could be verified that the James's ossuary could at least be the same ossuary if its measurements were the same. The film claims that this is the case. But Zias notes that not only was the James' ossuary discovered no later than 1976 (rather than 1980, when the Talpiot tomb was discovered), but that "an enterprising skeptic here in Jerusalem checked the dimensions of the two 'identical' ossuaries and found that the Talpiot plain white 'missing' ossuary is approximately 20% longer than the James brother of Jesus ossuary! So much for 'identical'."

What are we to make of this lost tomb then? On the one hand, Christians should never be afraid to pursue truth regardless of where it takes them. The incarnation actually requires us to do this, because Jesus came in time-space history; the gospels are full of specific historical data that could have been verified when written. The Christian faith is never against history; indeed, it embraces history. And our convictions are modified when genuine historical facts come to light. That is how it should be, because faith cannot be compartmentalized as though it did not relate to the real world. On the other hand, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* is bad archeology, bad history, and biased investigative reporting. It is sensationalist eye-candy for a bored generation. But make no mistake: this is not the end of the non-substantive attacks on the Christian faith. Jesus is big business these days, especially for those who have a Jesus in mind who is other than the one portrayed in scripture. The onslaught will continue to come, and unwary Christians will be caught off-guard. It is imperative that believers integrate their faith with an understanding of the culture and history of the ancient world, because the only thing worse than being gullible to silly arguments is sticking one's head in the sand, hoping that those who make such arguments will go away.