

The Lost Tomb of Jesus: Fact or Fiction?

I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. Tonight, at 9 pm on the Discovery Channel, James Cameron, the man who found the final resting place of the *Titanic* will provide another spectacular find: the tomb of Jesus.
1. Cameron and numerous experts claim that they have found an archeological discovery which will change the course of history as we know it.
 2. They claim that in a tomb discovered in 1980 are ossuaries, stone boxes which contain bones of deceased individuals, which bore the bones of Jesus; Mary Magdalene, his wife; their child, named Judah; Mary, the mother of Jesus; and a man named Matthew.
 3. In 2002, an ossuary was discovered which purportedly held the remains of James, Jesus' brother.
 - a. The inscription on that ossuary read: "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."
 - b. Most scholars now believe that ossuary to be a forgery, but the filmmakers claim that ossuary originated in the tomb in Jerusalem.
- B. What are we to make of these claims?
1. If these claims are true, they mean that Jesus did not resurrect from the dead, as we believe, and that he did not ascend to heaven, as we believe.
 2. Tonight, we want to examine these claims and show how absurd they truly are.

II. A CRITIQUE OF THE TOMB.

- A. It is quite true that ossuaries have been discovered bearing the names of individuals in the Gospel story.
1. There is absolutely no reason, as far as I am aware, to believe that these boxes are forgeries nor to doubt in the least their authenticity.
 2. The Discovery Channel on their website provides a statistical analysis of the names in the tomb and the likelihood that the ossuaries bore the remains of Jesus and his family.
 - a. They claim that using conservative statistical analysis, the likelihood that this was the burial tomb of Jesus and his family at 600 to 1.
 - b. The tomb after all contains a Mary, a Jesus, son of Joseph, and an inscription they claim should read "Mary Magdalene."
 3. The statistical analysis carried out on the ossuaries is absurd.
 - a. The fact is that all the names in the tomb were extremely popular in the time period of Jesus and his followers.
 - Joseph was the second most popular name in that time period, Judah was the fourth, Jesus was the sixth, and Matthew was the ninth.
 - Mary was by far the most common name for women in that time period. In fact, nearly a fourth of all Jewish women in the time of Christ were named Mary.
 - Therefore, is it any wonder that you would find a tomb with the inscriptions, Mary, Jesus, son of Joseph, Judah, and Matthew? It would be like finding a grave today with the name Smith, Williams, Jones, or Johnson today.
 - b. In 1926 a "Jesus, son of Joseph" ossuary was found in the basement of what is now the Rockefeller Museum. It is now in the Israel Museum.
 - c. One news report tells of an ancient document of a business deal between a man named Jesus and another Jesus witnessed by yet another Jesus.
 - d. The filmmakers make much of the name "Jose," a shortened form of Joseph, about how rare it is.
 - It is true that the name Jose is quite rare among the ossuaries of the first century.
 - It is not true, however, that Jose is a rare name in the first century.
 - It is the name of one of Jesus' brothers (Mk 6:3).
 - If you notice the NIV footnote, you notice the name James is actually "Jose."
 - The claim of the filmmakers is that this Jose in the tomb is the brother of Jesus Christ.

- One of the women who followed Jesus from a distance at his crucifixion was the mother of Jose (Mk 15:40).
- It was also the name of Barnabas (Acts 4:36).
- e. For the theory to work, this Jose must be the brother of Jesus.
 - However, the Jesus in the tomb is identified as the “son of Joseph.”
 - Since Jose is a nickname for Joseph, why could this Jose not be the father of the Jesus identified in the tomb? There is no good reason to believe this Jose is the brother of the Jesus in the tomb rather than his father.
- f. The filmmakers claim that the inscription on the ossuary which reads *Mariamme e Mara* is Mary Magdalene.
 - They claim that the inscription on the ossuary literally reads “Mary the teacher.”
 - To make the connection between Mary the teacher and Mary Magdalene, the filmmakers go to Gnostic texts to make the claim that Mary was a great teacher in the early church. Two points deserve attention at this point:
 - The Gnostics were heretics—they claimed that Jesus never really came in the flesh.
 - The texts in which Mary was called a great teacher in the early church come from the 4th century, about 350 years after the era of the apostles.
 - In other words, Mary’s being a great teacher in the early church was a later addition made by great heretics in church history.
 - One NT scholar proposes that *Mara* does not mean “teacher,” as the filmmakers claim, but is actually a shortened form of *Martha*.
 - He posits that the ossuary may have originally contained the remains of two women, one named Mary and the other named Martha.
 - The Jews actually practiced double burial—they would bury the remains of someone in a cave, like with Jesus, and then when the flesh had left the bones, the remains were placed in an ossuary. It would not be uncommon, then, to find an ossuary containing the remains of two individuals.
- g. Interestingly, the ossuary which supposedly bore the remains of Jesus reads, “Jesus, son of Joseph.”
 - Jesus was never called “the son of Joseph” by his followers.
 - Jesus was called “the son of Joseph” by his detractors.
 - Some Jews were grumbling against Jesus and said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven’?” (Jn 6:42).
 - “Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph” (Lk 3:23).
 - That’s a significant passage, for Scripture was written by the followers of Jesus.
 - This informs us why, in all likelihood, the followers of Jesus did not refer to him as the “son of Joseph”—they did not believe he was the son of Joseph.
 - Mk 6:1-6.
 - Here Jesus is referred to as the “son of Mary.”
 - In the first century, you did not refer to someone as the son of his mother, even if his father were dead.
 - Referring to someone as the son of his mother was a quite pejorative way of referring to him.
 - It’s like referring to someone today as “You blankety-blank-blank.”
 - Which brings up an interesting question—Why did the people in Nazareth refer to Jesus as the son of Mary?
 - Did they not understand that Joseph was not his father?

- Didn't they likely believe that Jesus was illegitimate and therefore that he had no right to speak to them about divine things?

B. What about the DNA evidence from the tomb?

1. The bones were removed from the ossuaries and reburied according to Jewish custom.
2. DNA testing was done on the "Jesus, son of Joseph" ossuary and the so-called Mary Magdalene ossuary.
3. They were only able to do mitochondrial DNA testing which is only able to test maternal lines. Thus, the filmmakers were able to establish that the Jesus in the tomb and the Mary were not related through their mothers. They did not have the same mother.
4. They take quite a leap and say that they were married.
 - a. It is possible they were—there would be nothing at all unusual about a first century Jew by the name of Jesus being married to another first century Jew by the name of Mary.
 - b. But, the fact that they were not maternally related does not establish that they were husband and wife. If the Jose in the tomb were a brother of this Jesus, Mary could have been married to him; she could also have been married to the Matthew buried there.

C. What about the other evidence? What does it establish?

1. The ancestral home of Joseph was Bethlehem.
 - a. Then, he and his family lived in Nazareth.
 - b. It is quite likely, but not established fact, that Joseph died when they family was living in Nazareth.
 - c. Why would Joseph's family have a familial burial plot in Jerusalem?
2. We have absolutely no evidence or hint from biblical or other sources that Jesus was ever married, let alone that he had a child. Remember the *Da Vinci* code is fiction and does not claim to be otherwise.
3. Where was Mary, the mother of Jesus, buried?
 - a. One traditional location is another place in Jerusalem.
 - b. Much more likely, however, is Ephesus, according to Eusebius, the great church historian, and other ancient church tradition, which has much more validity. Ephesus is a logical place for Mary's tomb since she was committed to the care of the apostle John, and he lived much of his life in Ephesus.
4. There is no ancient church tradition that any part of Jesus' family was buried in Jerusalem.
 - a. Had part of the family been buried in Jerusalem, the family tomb would likely have been a popular place for Jesus to visit.
 - b. Even in this day and age, graves tend to be popular tourist spots—I've been to the tomb of Henry Clay, Alben Barkley (Harry Truman's VP), Daniel Boone, and J. W. McGarvey.
5. The tomb to be displayed tonight on the Discovery Channel is a quite expensive tomb. The family of Jesus was far from wealthy. For them to have been able to afford this type of tomb, they would have had to have had the support of the Jerusalem church. What are the implications of that?
 - a. The early church would have known where Jesus was buried.
 - The early church would have gone to his grave to show him honor.
 - But the church didn't go to any tomb for many centuries, because they didn't know where the garden tomb was, which was only temporary until the Resurrection.
 - b. If the early church knew where Jesus was buried, why would they have gone out into the world proclaiming that he had been resurrected and ascended back to heaven? Why would they have died proclaiming such a message?

III. HOW SOLID IS THE BIBLICAL FAITH?

A. I had hoped tonight to spend time on the historical reliability of the resurrection.

1. Time will not permit that this evening.
2. Next week, however, we will discuss the resurrection in light of the rigors of historical investigation.

B. Tonight, we have seen how absurd the claims the claims made by James Cameron and his ilk are. I want us to close, though, with a look at the Scriptures regarding the resurrection of Christ.

1. Mk 16:1-8.
2. Jn 20:1-22.
3. Rm 1:1-4.
4. 1 Cor 15:12-34.