

THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL & “THE TOMB OF JESUS”

By George Battey

On March 4, 2007 the Discovery Channel aired a controversial program entitled, “*The Lost Tomb of Jesus.*” Supposedly archaeologists have discovered Jesus’ tomb and inside the tomb, the very bones of Jesus Himself. If the Discovery Channel is to be believed, Jesus did not resurrect at all. He simply died and was buried in a family grave as any ordinary man. Some critics of this program speculate whether the airing of this broadcast, five weeks before Easter, might be an atheistic effort to preempt the significance of the Easter holiday.

The relevance of the entire Christian faith hinges on the truthfulness of the resurrection of Jesus. The apostle Paul framed the argument like this:

“But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up — if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! (1 Cor 15:13-17).

These conclusions are drawn because, if Jesus did not resurrect, He was simply an ordinary man. Ordinary men cannot save others from sin. Dead men cannot save others from anything.

WHAT HAPPENED?

What has happened? What have archeologists discovered in Israel to make some think the bones of Jesus have been found? In 1980 a tomb was discovered accidentally when two boys were playing on a construction site in a suburb of Jerusalem. Ten limestone boxes (ossuaries) dating to the first century were discovered in the tomb. Six inscriptions were discovered with names similar to Jesus Christ’s family and His disciples. The names were as follows: Jesua – son of Joseph, Mary, Mariamene e Mara, Matthew, Jofa, Juda, son of Jesua. Producer James Cameron (*The Titanic*) and Jewish director Simcha Jacobovici say the name Mariamene e Mara is actually the name “Mary Magdalene.”

DNA tests were performed from the ossuary labeled “Jesus” and “Mariamene e Mara” and the two people were not physically related. Cameron and Jacobovici conclude the only reason a man and woman who were not related would be buried together is if they were married to each other. They conclude, then, that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and together they had a son named Judah whose ossuary is also buried in this tomb.

Cameron and Jacobovici hired a statistician named Andrey Feuerverger to calculate the probability that this is the tomb of Jesus Christ. According to this statistician, the approximate population of Jerusalem in the first century was approximately 50,000. If all these were assembled together and given the following five instructions, here is what would happen: (a) “Everyone whose name is Jesus please stand up,” 2,796 would stand; (b) “Would all those whose father is also named Joseph remain standing,” 351 would be left; (c) “All those who also had a mother named Mary remain standing,” 173 would be left; (d) “All those who had a brother named Jose remain standing,” only 23 would be left; (e) “How many had a brother named James?”, only 1 would be left. Supposedly, then, the probability that this is the tomb of Jesus is calculated to be 1 in 600.

What should Christians think about all of this? Many people are impressed with this program on the Discovery Channel. The Discovery Channel has a good reputation and comes across as authoritative and desirous of truth. DNA testing was done. Americans are impressed with scientific testing. Statistical calculations were done. Americans are impressed with mathematical statistics. Cameron and Jacobovici are telling the world everyone has been deceived by an incredible “cover-up” all these years. Americans have been deceived before and are determined not to let it happen again. For all these reasons many people will be influenced to believe the tomb of Jesus and His bones have actually been discovered. They will believe Jesus never did resurrect from the dead. Jesus was a good man (supposedly) and He taught us many good things (supposedly), but the conclusion will be: He was not the Son of God; He was just a good man.

IF JESUS DID NOT RESURRECT

Here is where people need to think critically. If Jesus did not resurrect from the dead, then He is not a “good” man. **If He did not resurrect, He was a LIAR.** He said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. ... He was speaking of the temple of His body.” (Jn 2:19-21). “Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.” (Mt 16:21). Jesus said, “The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him, and the third day He will be raised up.” (Mt 17:22-23). The Jews correctly said to Pilate, “We remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise.’ Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first.” (Mt 27:63-64). Observe the words “deceiver” and

“deception.” If Jesus did not resurrect like He said He would, He was a liar – a false prophet. False prophets are not “good” men. They deceive people.

Someone who would lie about who they are is not a “good” man. They cannot be trusted in anything they say. Lying about one’s identity is one of the worst deceptions that can be perpetrated upon others. Jesus was going around telling people: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn 14:6); “You will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (Jn 8:24). If Jesus was a false prophet and lying about who He was, then He is evil beyond description.

There is a third possibility, however. **If Jesus was (a) not evil (b) nor the Son of God, then He was deceived Himself; He was a LUNATIC.** In other words, many people do not want to admit Jesus was right, but neither do they want to say He was evil. Their only other option is: He was simply mistaken about who He was. Consider carefully: If Jesus was a “good” man who taught good things we should think about, but He was simply mistaken about who He was, then He was insane. Anyone going around telling people: “You have to believe in Me to be saved ...” (Jn 8:24), “I was with the Father before the creation of the world ...” (Jn 17:5), and “I am eternal ...” (Jn 8:58) is an insane person if these things are not true.

Yet, this also presents a problem: If Jesus was merely a lunatic, why did the Jewish leaders feel threatened by Jesus? Why did they have Him crucified if He was insane? Very often Jesus would silence the Jewish leaders in front of everyone. No one could answer His questions. “No one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore” (Mt 22:46); “after that no one dared question Him” (Mk 14:34); “Then the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, “Why have you not brought Him?” The officers answered, “No man ever spoke like this Man!” (Jn 7:45-46). This is all very difficult to explain if Jesus was merely insane. Insane people do not silence prominent leaders. Insane people do not make prominent leaders feel threatened enough to justify crucifixion. The leaders might feel sorry for the insane. They might try to help the insane. They do not torture the insane in public till he dies on a cross.

Here, then, are the possible options: Jesus was either: the Son of God, a liar, or a lunatic. There is no other possibility. He intended there be no other possibility. Men have to decide who Jesus was. If He lied about who He was, and He knew He was lying, He is an evil person. If He lied about who He was, and He did not know He was lying, He was insane and should be pitied, but not worshipped as the Son of God. But if He did not lie and He was not insane, then He told the truth: He is the Son of God and no one can be saved without believing in Him and obeying what He said.

EXAMINING THE “EVIDENCE”

Now, the evidence offered by the Discovery Channel, that the tomb and bones of Jesus have been discovered, will be examined.

There are four basic problems with the evidence offered and the resulting conclusions based upon that “evidence.”

1st) **The multiple bones problem.**

The tomb under consideration contained the bones of about 35 different individuals. Half of these bones were in ossuaries and there was considerable contamination of the site. The Discovery Channel does not present this information to its viewers. The facts are being manipulated and the evidence is contaminated.

2nd) **The name problem.**

Many experts are not convinced the actual names on the ossuaries are the names given by the Discovery Channel. One critic writes:

Are Cameron and Jacobovici correct about the names they assert are on the ossuaries? Not according to many experts. Some were written in Aramaic, others in Hebrew, and another in Greek. This indicates they were not buried in a similar time period. It is not even clear that “Jesus” is named on any of the ossuaries. Dr. Evans’s personal examination of the ossuary was inconclusive. Stephen Pfann, a biblical scholar at the University of the Holy Land in Jerusalem, is also unsure that the name “Jesus” on the caskets was read correctly. He thinks it’s more likely the name “Hanun.” Ancient Semitic script is notoriously difficult to decipher.
(*The Jesus Family Tomb: Fact or Fiction?*, www.y-zine.com/tomb)

Dr. Evans, mentioned here, has a PhD and is author of the book, *Jesus and the Ossuaries*. He is very qualified and he personally examined the ossuaries themselves. The point to be emphasized is this: No name on any of the ossuaries was clearly the name of Jesus.

Furthermore, the names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph were extremely common names in the first century. Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua. Joshua was the name of an Israelite hero. Many parents named their sons Joshua at this time. Dr. Evans pointed out in his book that approximately 100 tombs have been discovered in Jerusalem with the name “Jesus” (Joshua); about 200 tombs with the name “Joseph”; the name “Mary” was on far more than that.

So the Discovery Channel gives is misleading information about the names written on the ossuaries.

3rd) [The statistical problem.](#)

The statistical support that the tomb of Jesus has been found rises and falls on the question of Mary Magdalene. Does the name Mariamene e Mara mean “Mary Magdalene” as Cameron and Jacobovici claim? The film-makers themselves offer the following proof: Mariamene is the name given Mary Magdalene in an ancient book called “the Acts of Phillip” which dates to the 4th century. In other words, 300 years after Jesus, one document is found which links the name of Mariamene to the name Mary Magdalene.

Andrey Feuerverger, the statistician hired by Cameron and Jacobovici, admits himself that his numbers (1 in 600 odds that this is the tomb of Jesus) is based on assumptions disputed by the majority of scholars. He admits the assumptions were given to him by Jacobovici himself – the biggest assumption being that the name Mariamene e Mara means Mary Magdalene.

Feuerverger defends his role in an interview with Scientific American:

“I did permit the number one in 600 to be used in the film—I’m prepared to stand behind that but on the understanding that these numbers were calculated based on assumptions that I was asked to use.” (Fact or Fiction?, *ibid.*)

The Discovery Channel lead people to believe that statistically, this must be the tomb of Jesus. Furthermore, the Discovery Channel does not tell the mathematical odds of modern film makers discovering the tomb of Jesus, while the Jewish and Roman authorities of the first century could not find it. What are the odds of this happening?

4th) [The DNA problem.](#)

According to reports, DNA testing was done on residue found inside the ossuaries assumed to be the ossuaries of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Notice an assumption is being made right here. Mitochondrial DNA testing was used to see if those buried were related. The results proved negative indicating the two people were not related maternally. One critic asks this important question:

“If ‘Jesus’ and ‘Mariamene’ weren’t related matrilineally, why jump to the conclusion that they were husband and wife, rather than being related through their fathers?” (Fact or Fiction?)

In other words, all the DNA testing demonstrated was that the two people buried in these ossuaries did not have the same mother – but no test was done to see if they had the same father. Furthermore, an assumption is being made that if two unrelated people are buried in the same tomb, they must be husband and wife – even though 33 other bodies were buried in the same tomb.

SUMMARY

In summary, what is the Discovery Channel showing the public? They are allowing two film-makers to present “evidence” which is skewed and built upon assumptions. Evidence which contradicts their conclusions is suppressed. It all amounts to the same thing which motivated the book and movie *The Da Vinci Code*: MONEY.

The Washington Post, a liberal newspaper, published an article on February 28, 2007 entitled, *‘Lost Tomb of Jesus’ Claim Called a Stunt*. Here is part of the report:

Leading archaeologists in Israel and the United States yesterday denounced the purported discovery of the tomb of Jesus as a publicity stunt.

Scorn for the Discovery Channel’s claim to have found the burial place of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and -- most explosively -- their possible son came not just from Christian scholars but also from Jewish and secular experts who said their judgments were unaffected by any desire to uphold Christian orthodoxy.

“I’m not a Christian. I’m not a believer. I don’t have a dog in this fight,” said William G. Dever, who has been excavating ancient sites in Israel for 50 years and is widely considered the dean of biblical archaeology among U.S. scholars. “I just think it’s a shame the way this story is being hyped and manipulated.”

Later in the same article appears this:

Dever, a retired professor of archaeology at the University of Arizona, said that some of the inscriptions on the Talpiyot ossuaries are unclear, but that all of the names are common.

“I’ve know about these ossuaries for many years and so have many other archaeologists, and none of us thought it was much of a story, because these are rather common Jewish names from that period,” he said. “It’s a publicity stunt, and it will make these guys very rich, and it will upset millions of innocent people because they don’t know enough to separate fact from fiction.”

Similar assessments came yesterday from two Israeli scholars, Amos Kloner, who originally excavated the tomb, and Joe Zias, former curator of archaeology at the Israeli Antiquities Authority. Kloner told the Jerusalem Post that the documentary is “nonsense.” Zias described it in an e-mail to The Washington Post as a “hyped up film which is intellectually and scientifically dishonest.”

OTHER QUESTIONS

Besides the above mentioned problems with the “evidence” presented by the Discovery Channel, there are other pertinent questions which deserve an answer.

1st) *Why do Cameron and Jacobovici not cite scholars who disagree with their conclusions?*

For example, in 1996 when the BBC aired a short documentary on this same subject, the vast majority of archaeologists disputed their claims. Why will the Discovery Channel not tell it’s audience this information?

2nd) *Why would Mary and Joseph’s family tomb be in Jerusalem?*

Neither Jesus nor His family lived in Jerusalem. They lived in Nazareth of Galilee. There was never a “*Jesus of Jerusalem*” mentioned in scripture. It is always “*Jesus of Nazareth*” which readers find in the Bible.

Everyone knows Jesus was buried in a tomb near Jerusalem after He was crucified. “The place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews’ Preparation Day, for the tomb was nearby” (Jn 19:41-42). But why would the entire family (Joseph, Mary, James) be buried there? Remember, all these people were supposedly buried in this “tomb of Jesus,” in the Jerusalem vicinity, according to the Discovery Channel. None of these people lived in Jerusalem. They lived in Nazareth. Furthermore, archeological evidence shows people who lived in Jerusalem were called by their first name followed by their father’s name (e.g. “Jesus, son of Joseph”). But people who lived in Galilee were named by their first name followed by the place where they lived (e.g. “Jesus of Nazareth”). The tomb in Jerusalem supposedly bears the name “Jesus – son of Joseph,” but if this was the Jesus of scripture, the name should read, “Jesus of Nazareth.”

3rd) *Why did Jesus’ enemies not expose the tomb?*

When Peter stood up on the Day of Pentecost, he preached that Jesus resurrected.

“Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.” (Acts 2:29-32).

If Jesus had not actually resurrected, the Jewish leaders could simply have gone to the tomb and produced the body. If the tomb on the Discovery Channel was the family tomb of Jesus and ten ossuaries are contained therein, this was a prominent tomb of a prominent family in Jerusalem. Everyone would have known about its existence.

4th) *Why did the Roman soldiers not expose the tomb?*

Scripture records:

Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, “Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.’ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. (Mt 28:11-15)

Roman soldiers would not have told this story if Jesus’ body had merely been moved to another tomb. They would have found the new tomb and exposed what happened. Sleeping on guard-duty was an offense punishable by death. These soldiers would not have freely told this story if Jesus and all His family were buried some elaborate tomb near Jerusalem.

5th) *Why would a poor family have such an elaborate tomb and ossuaries?*

Only prominent families had tombs carved out of solid rock. Only rich families used ossuaries. Poor families buried their dead in common graves. Jesus’ family was poor. When they came to Bethlehem, there was no room in the inn and they had to stay in the stables (Lk 2:7). If Joseph and Mary had been prominent citizens the inn keeper would have made room for them. When Mary offered an offering, she offered what poor people offered (Lk 2:22-24). Jesus said He had no where to lay His head (Mt 8:20) – indicating His poverty. Joseph, Jesus’ adoptive father, was merely a carpenter – a “blue-collar worker” – not a prominent citizen.

6th) *Why did contemporary Roman or Jewish historians not write about the tomb?*

Not one single contemporary historian mentions the tomb in question.

7th) *Why did the disciples all suffer persecution for something which was untrue?*

Jesus warned, “They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake” (Lk 21:12). Paul wrote, “And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased” (Gal 5:11). All the

apostles died violently maintaining their testimony that Jesus resurrected from the dead. Why would they all do this if they knew it to be false?

CONCLUSION

Contrary to what the Discovery Channel produced and presented to the public, the bones of Jesus have not been discovered. Evidence was manipulated. Other evidence was suppressed. Statistics were calculated based on unproven assumptions. The DNA testing was incomplete and the conclusions drawn were likewise based on assumptions. Most scholars reject the idea that this tomb is the tomb of Jesus.

One person made the following pertinent observation:

William Dever, an expert on near eastern archaeology and anthropology, who has worked with Israeli archeologists for five decades, said specialists have known about the ossuaries for years. ***“The fact that it’s been ignored tells you something,”*** said Dever, professor emeritus at the University of Arizona. ***“It would be amusing if it didn’t mislead so many people.”*** (Fact or Fiction?, *ibid.* – emphasis added - GFB)

Most importantly, the facts from the scriptures disagree with the claim that this tomb is the tomb of Jesus. There is a reason the bones of Jesus have not been found – because He resurrected and ascended back into heaven.

One day, those involved in the production of the movie, *The Da Vinci Code* and the present production of the Discovery Channel, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, will stand before God in judgment. All the actors and actresses, the producers and publishers, the advertisers and sponsors, the television and film-makers – everyone involved in the production of these works will all stand before God to give an account for what they have done. Then will come to pass the words of the Book of Revelation:

The kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (Rev 6:15-17)

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