

# RAIDERS

of the  
LOST TOMB



## Raiders of the Lost Tomb

A documentary entitled "The Lost Tomb of Jesus," was shown on the Discovery channel and it has raised questions in the minds of some people concerning the authenticity of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, a long-held tenet of the Christian faith. Academy Award winning film director, James Cameron, and Israeli-born filmmaker, Simcha Jacobovici, were the driving force behind the three-year quest to find Jesus' tomb and are known to some as the Raiders of the Lost Tomb. While they stopped short of claiming definitively that they had found the tomb, they nevertheless left the distinct impression that their scientific evidence was incontrovertible. Jacobovici said, "This has been a three-year journey that seems more incredible than fiction. The idea of possibly finding the tomb of Jesus and several of his family members, with compelling scientific evidence, is beyond anything I could have imagined." But, really, how "compelling" is the evidence? This is a day when Christians must think more critically about these things than ever before because the potential of being deceived by media hype and special effects is at its greatest. With the aid of technology and cinematography it is possible to make things look and sound real when there are actually many flaws and/or ulterior motives in the reasoning process.

Before and since the airing of this documentary, theologians, as well as secular archaeologists have joined the discussion to express their concerns about the scholarship of the film's conclusions. For instance, Michele Piccirillo of the Franciscan Archaeological Institute said, "Before, archaeology was used to do politics. Now archaeology is just to do money." John Marshall, a religious studies professor at the University of Toronto has weighed in as a theologian saying, "To persuade me of these claims, I'd want to know that the names

are as old as the boxes, that the characters named on the boxes are the characters we know from Christianity...and we would want to know the DNA evidence is uncontaminated." Professor L. Michael White of the Institute for the Study of Antiquity and Christian Origins at the University of Texas, said, "This is trying to sell documentaries...This is not archaeologically sound; this is fanfare." Dr. R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary said, "The DNA testing is to me the most laughable aspect of this...You have to have the basis of a DNA sample that would make any sense. No one has DNA of Mary." A spokesperson for The Israel Antiquities Authority, who is responsible for the ossuaries that were found in 1980 in Talpiot, Israel, has indicated that the possibility that these limestone bone boxes being those of Jesus' family is "next to zero." Archaeologist Joe Zias, who was at the Rockefeller University in Jerusalem for a quarter of a century, said, "Simcha has no credibility whatsoever." CBS News correspondent Mark Philips reports "the archaeological establishment has lined up to label this claim as bunk." As you can see, scholars, including some who have no affinity for the Christian faith, are weighing in with significant skepticism. Unfortunately, for others who haven't looked to see the real evidence behind the supposed evidence, the damage has already been done.

One of the interesting twists to this story propounded by Cameron and Jacobovici is the fact that the archaeologist who was responsible for the original archaeological work done at the tomb and ossuaries in 1980, Professor Amos Kloner of Israel's Bar-Ilan University, believes this production "...makes a great story for a TV film...but it's impossible. It's nonsense." His concern has not been to defend the Christian faith, necessarily, but to defend good science and archaeology done according to scholarly standards. An authority on the

Talpiot ossuaries, Professor Kloner has totally rejected the claims of "The Lost Tomb of Jesus," and who should know the significance of these boxes better than he who had the greatest opportunity to examine the evidence. Kloner, in no uncertain terms stated, "I don't accept the idea that this system was the burial place of the family of Jesus" and in 1996, when this same theory was examined in Europe, he was interviewed by the Deutsche-Agentur for the Israeli periodical *Atiqot*, and he stated, "It's a beautiful story but without proof whatsoever."

### **Theories, not facts**

In order to debunk some of the proposed theories in "The Lost Tomb of Jesus," let's look at the supposed evidence this film presents and see if it can be supported by the facts of history we know to be definitive.

The New Testament consistently states that Jesus was from Nazareth (Matthew 2:13; Luke 2:4,39,51; John 1:45-46), meaning that most likely His family tomb would not have been in Jerusalem, but in the territory of Galilee. If that is the case, as it has long been held, the bodies of the family of Jesus would have to be moved from Galilee to Jerusalem, which is the location of the tomb in question, but there is no evidence that this ever took place. A Middle East researcher and biblical anthropologist, Joe Zias, said, "It (this tomb) has nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus; he was known as Jesus of Nazareth, not Jesus of Jerusalem, and if the family was wealthy enough to afford a tomb, which they probably weren't, it would have been in Nazareth, not here in Jerusalem." In addition to this, the tomb in Talpiot was that of a middle to upper class family, but historically we know that the family of Jesus was financially poor and of a lower class status (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). There is almost no way Jesus' family could have af-

forded a tomb of this quality on the wages of a carpenter. The fact that some of the ossuaries found in the tomb are very ornate with elaborate engravings on them and the tomb itself, with its apparently large size, both point to a family of means who could afford this type of burial ground. There is also the issue that Jesus was not primarily known to His followers as "Jesus, son of Joseph," as the ossuary engraving supposedly says, but as "Jesus of Nazareth." That is how He was commonly referenced throughout the New Testament (Matthew 26:71; Mark 1:24; 10:47; 14:67; 16:6; Luke 4:34; 18:37; 24:19; John 1:45; 18:5,7; 19:19; Acts 2:22; 6:14; 10:38; 22:8; 26:9) and you would think that His followers and family would have used that designation on His ossuary (had He needed one), since that would have been one way to clearly distinguish Him from other Josephs of that day.

Something else to consider about the supposed tomb of Jesus' family in Talpiot is the fact that it is not close to the original site of the crucifixion of Jesus. Because of Jewish burial laws Jesus would have been buried in a tomb near the place of His death and this tomb does not fit that criteria. The Bible tells us that Jesus was laid in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. If the family could afford an ornate tomb and ossuaries, why borrow a tomb? Scripture indicates in all four gospels, that the tomb was in close proximity to the crucifixion site and that the location was well-known to Jesus' followers. (Cf. Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:43-47; Luke 23:50-54; John 19:38-42.) On the day of His resurrection there was no confusion as to the place the women were going to finish the preparation of His body for burial, nor did the disciples have any trouble finding it as they ran to see the empty grave. The location of the Talpiot tomb makes it historically and biblically impossible for it to be the tomb of Jesus, let alone of His family. I suppose that the filmmakers would have us to surmise

that on the evening of Jesus' burial someone took His body from the grave to another location, in spite of the fact that there were Roman guards placed outside the tomb to prevent this very thing. Then the stolen corpse was hidden somewhere until it had time to decay (approximately one year) and then His bones were taken back to Jerusalem to be buried in this tomb with His other family members. All the while the Christians of Jerusalem were proclaiming the bodily resurrection of Jesus (not just a spiritual resurrection) and the church was exploding with growth. Somehow, those who took the body were never discovered and no one ever knew that the body of Jesus was returned to Jerusalem approximately a year later to be placed in this family tomb, that is, until Mr. Cameron's and Mr. Jacobovici's documentary. How plausible does that sound to you?

Much is made in the Discovery Channel documentary of the names that were found inscribed on some of the ossuaries, even to the point of using statistical data in an attempt to show that this combination of names lends support to the hypothesis that this is the tomb of Jesus and His family. The six names that are found there are: Mariamenou-Mara (possibly Mariam or Mary), Yehuda bar Yeshua (Judah, son of Jesus), Matia (Matthew), Yeshua bar Yehosef (Jesus, son of Joseph), Yose (abbreviation for Joseph), and Maria (a form of Mariam or Mary). According to Richard Bauckham, who is a professor, author, and New Testament scholar, "All the inscriptions are in Aramaic except the first, which is Greek." He continues, "...the surviving six names are only six of many more who were buried in this family tomb. There may have been as many as 35. The six people whose names we have could have belonged to as many as four different generations. This is a large family tomb, which would certainly have been used for quite some time by the same family." These six names are among the most common names of that era. Some

historians estimate that as many as 25% of 1st century Jewish women were named Mary. The New Testament alone confirms the frequency of the name by mentioning six different women whose name was Mary, including three who were prominent in Jesus' life (Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary of Bethany). Neither would it be uncommon for 1st century Jewish families to have the names Jesus, Joseph, and Judah, because these were popular Jewish names. According to Darrell Bock, professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, "Joseph is the second most common male name in the period. Jesus is the sixth. Matthew's the ninth; Mary is the most popular female name — 21 percent of the female names of the period. So, you're dealing with a lot of familiar names." Consequently, it wouldn't be that unusual to find this combination of names in a family grave, especially if the grave was used over "four generations" as Professor Bauckham surmises.

Using a statistical analysis of the likelihood of finding these names in one tomb, Jacobovici and Cameron seek to further their claims that this was the tomb of Jesus and His family. The problem with statistical analysis is that it is no more accurate than the data you input into the formula you use. If the data used for the calculation had included the names found in many different settings (engraved on walls and pottery, in literary texts, and from other known sources), rather than just on the 1,000 or so ossuaries they have discovered thus far, then the statistical data would not have been so convincing. It is a lesson many learn early, that is, you can skew results by failing to use the data that is unfriendly to your hypothesis.

There are at least two problems that arise when considering two of the names on the Talpiot ossuaries. The name Yeshua bar Yehosef ("Jesus, son of Joseph") is in

dispute as to whether it really is the name “Jesus” that is engraved on the ossuary. Dr. Craig L. Bloomberg, Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Denver Theological Seminary says, “There is doubt about what some of the letters in the names’ inscriptions really say, particularly the name supposedly corresponding to Jesus.” Stephen Pfann, a biblical scholar at the University of the Holy Land in Jerusalem, is also unsure that the name “Jesus” on the ossuary was read correctly. He indicates that it is more likely the name “Hanun.” If this is true, then no amount of statistical data, no matter how skewed it may be, will change the fact that this cannot be the family tomb of Jesus. When considering this detail alone, doesn’t it make you wonder why the people who so venerated Jesus Christ and laid His bones to rest would do such a poor job inscribing His name on His ossuary?

The second matter related to a name on one of the ossuaries concerns that of Mariamenou-Mara. The documentary presents this as being another name for Mary Magdalene and says that this name literally means “Mary, known as the master.” To arrive at this conclusion the producers appealed to data outside of the biblical tradition, turning to Gnostic writings from the second and third centuries, which are known to be corrupt and have long been rejected by the Christian church. Using this translation of the name and DNA evidence that supposedly shows that these two people (“Jesus, son of Joseph” and “Mary Magdalene”) were not related maternally, they deduce that this Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married and that the ossuary inscribed with the name “Yehuda bar Yeshua” (Judah, son of Jesus), is the son that Mary bore by Jesus. This is an incredible leap of faith since there is no evidence that Jesus was ever married to anybody or that He ever fathered a child. The conclusion reached is the same one espoused by Dan Brown in his blockbuster

book entitled "The DaVinci Code," that was thoroughly disproven by the scholarly community. (For more information on the Gnostic writings and the problems with these texts, see my booklet entitled, "Unlocking The DaVinci Code," available from The Daily Walk).

Aside from the fact that the Gnostic texts are notoriously heretical, there is another problem with this proposed theory. Dr. Richard Bauckham, Professor of New Testament Studies and Bishop Wardlaw Professor at the University of St. Andrews, who has done extensive research on the name Mariamenou-Mara, has concluded that this should not be translated as a reference to Mary Magdalene. Dr. Bauckham, states, *"I...found that the second and third century evidence makes it much more plausible that the form Mariamne is a late deformation of Mariamme that occurred only in a context outside Palestine where the name was not known. So the Discovery Channel film's claim that the name on the ossuary is the same as the name known to have been used for Mary Magdalene in the Acts of Philip is mistaken.*

*"...We must also consider the rest of the inscription. The Discovery Channel film proposes to read Mara as the Aramaic word 'the master' (as in Maranatha). But, since we know that Mara was used as an abbreviated form of Martha, in this context of names on an ossuary it is much more plausible to read it as a name. This woman had two names: Mariamenou, or it could be that the woman was known by Mariamenon, treated as a Greek name, and the Aramaic name Mara, conforming to the common practice of being known by two names, Greek and Semitic...There is no reason at all to connect the woman in this ossuary with Mary Magdalene, and in fact the name usage is decisively against such a connexion."* Mary Magdalene's name during the New Testament period

and well into the middle second century was commonly "Maria." She would not have been known by Mariamenou-Mara at the time of her life and death.

Another puzzling aspect of this debate is, when the DNA from the Yeshua bar Yehosef and the Mariamenou-Mara ossuaries did not match maternally, meaning they could not be brother and sister, why did the filmmakers automatically jump to the conclusion that these two people had to be married? Is it not also plausible that they could have been related paternally? And, doesn't it seem strange that when Jesus was crucified, among His last words He asked John to take care of His mother, Mary, but He doesn't mention anything about caring for His supposed wife, Mary Magdalene? ("The Lost Tomb of Jesus" implies that Jesus was asking His son – Judah – to take care of his mother – Mary Magdalene, but this interpretation lacks any biblical support. The filmmakers are twisting scripture to fit their theory.) Further, why is there no mention of remains of the other half-brothers and half-sisters of Jesus found in the tomb? Mark 6:3 lists four half-brothers of Christ: James, Joses (or Joseph), Judas (not Judas the traitor), and Simon. He also had half-sisters, according to the passage. Although there may have been an ossuary for a James and a Jose (Joseph), no other ossuaries with inscriptions for these additional brothers and sisters were found. If this is a family tomb, then why aren't all of Christ's family members found there?

Of course, if you are more interested in supporting your hypothesis than in discovering the truth, the tendency would be to see only the evidence that lends credence to your theory. Herein is one of the most egregious errors made by these filmmakers: the failure to submit their findings to a peer review and to scholarly journals for others to test their theories. Had they done this Mr. Jacobovici and Mr. Cameron might have recognized

that there were problems with their conjectures before potentially leading people astray from the faith or further hardening the avowed skeptic.

By this point you should be significantly uncertain about the validity of the conclusions purported in "The Lost Tomb of Jesus" and about the so-called proof they put forward to support their suppositions. But, if you're looking for incontrovertible evidence to eliminate the theories of this documentary, once and for all, then you only need to look to the facts surrounding the resurrection recorded in the New Testament because there you will find the silver bullet you are looking for. Jesus was taken down from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and partially prepared for burial in the late afternoon of His crucifixion. Roman guards were placed outside the tomb to prevent anyone from coming by stealth, rolling away the stone, and stealing His body. These soldiers performed their duties with full knowledge that if they failed they could lose their lives as a result. On Easter Sunday several women were making their way to the tomb early in the morning to finish the preparations of His body for burial and wondering how they were going to get the stone removed that sealed the tomb. When they arrived they found that it was already open and that Jesus was not there. From their discovery we have many infallible proofs of Christ's bodily resurrection from the grave. He was seen by Mary Magdalene very early the first day of the week (Mark 16:9; John 20:16-18), and a little later that same morning by the other women (Matthew 28:5-10). That Easter Sunday afternoon, He was seen by Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5), and by two men who were walking along the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:31). On Easter Sunday evening Jesus was seen by the eleven disciples (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:33-39; John 20:19) and then one week later at a similar time by the same group (John 20:26). Additional appearances of Christ between His

resurrection and ascension include: to seven disciples at the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1), to 500 brethren at one time (1 Corinthians 15:6), to His half-brother James (who was a skeptic about Christ until after his resurrection encounter – 1 Corinthians 15:6), to the eleven in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-17), to the eleven in Jerusalem (Mark 16:14-15; Luke 24:44; Acts 1:4), to the twelve who would ultimately proclaim His resurrection (Acts 1:3-8), and at His ascension forty days after His resurrection (Luke 24:50; Acts 1:9-12). Finally, Christ was seen after His ascension by Stephen at his martyrdom (Acts 7:55) and by Paul (who was also a skeptic about Christ until his post-resurrection encounter – Acts 9:5; 1 Corinthians 15:8). Who could deny that Jesus was alive with so many eyewitnesses to His resurrection? And with the early church proclaiming that He was alive, if it was all a hoax, why didn't someone produce a body as evidence?

## **Who would die for a lie?**

History tells us that 11 of the 13 Apostles (including Matthias) died martyrs' deaths for their faith. Why would eleven men (and for that matter, thousands of others, as well) give their lives for something (i.e. the bodily resurrection) they knew to be a lie? How could they keep it secret that Jesus was really not alive and prevent anyone from finding His burial site with His body in it? Why was it that even the Romans could not disprove the resurrection of Jesus and stop the growth of the early church by producing a body?

For any thinking person, the questions that this film *doesn't* answer are enough testimony against its false premise and the questions that it supposedly answers are not at all definitive, as I have shown you. William Dever, who is the professor emeritus at the University of Arizona and an expert on Near Eastern archaeology

and anthropology, who has worked with Israeli archaeologists for five decades, said, "The fact that it's been ignored (the ossuaries and tomb) tells you something. It would be amusing if it didn't mislead so many people." He continues, "I'm not a Christian. I'm not a believer. I don't have a dog in this fight, I just think it's a shame the way this story is being hyped and manipulated."

Historical facts stand behind the Christian assertion that Jesus had no need of a tomb, except for the brief time that He borrowed one from a friend. Many eyewitnesses saw Him after His resurrection and confirmed that He is alive and, as He promised, He is ready to save all who will come to Him. Why not stop right now and acknowledge Jesus Christ and ask Him to be your personal Savior? "For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Romans 10:13).



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