

“LOST TOMB” IS A LOST CAUSE

When “The Lost Tomb of Jesus” aired on the Discovery Channel on March 4, it wasn’t exactly met with critical acclaim. Indeed, even before the program aired, leading archeologists and historians were quick to dismiss the documentary’s claims as bunk. Below are a selection of criticisms aimed at this latest attempt to debunk the Christian faith. As you can see, the film was met with a good deal of disdain by those in academia.

Joe Zias, *former Curator for Anthropology and Archeology from 1972-1997, Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem:*

- “Simcha [Jacobovici, the director] has no credibility whatsoever...He is pimping off the Bible...He got this guy Cameron, who made ‘Titanic’ or something like that—what does this guy know about archeology? I am an archeologist, but if I were to write a book about brain surgery, what would you say, ‘Who is this guy?’ People want signs and wonders. Projects like these make a mockery of the archeological profession.” (Newsweek, 3-5-07)

David Mevorah, *curator at the Israel Museum:*

- The chances of the filmmaker’s claims being true “are more than remote...They are closer to fantasy.” (McClatchy-Tribune News Service, 2-26-07)
- “Suggesting that this tomb was the tomb of the family of Jesus is a far-fetched suggestion, and we need to be very careful with that.” (New York Times, 3-3-07).

Amos Kloner, *professor at Bar-Ilan University and archeologist in charge of the 1980 investigation of the tomb:*

- “The name ‘Jesus son of Joseph’ has been found on three or four ossuaries. These are common names. There were huge

headlines in the 1940's surrounding another ossuary, cited as the first evidence of Christianity. There was another Jesus Tomb. Months later it was dismissed. Give me scientific evidence, and I'll grapple with it. But this is manufactured." (*Jerusalem Post*, 2-27-07)

- "It makes a great story for a TV film. But it's completely impossible. It's nonsense. There is no likelihood that Jesus and his relatives had a family tomb. They were a Galilee family with no ties in Jerusalem." (ibid)

- "The claim that the burial site has been found is not based on any new idea. It is only an attempt to sell." (McClatchy-Tribune News Service, 2-26-07)

William Dever, Archeologist, professor emeritus, University of Arizona:

- "It looks more like a publicity stunt than any kind of real discovery...They're not scholars. They're not experts. They didn't discover this material. And I'm afraid they already have gone much too far. I don't know a single archeologist in this country or Israel who agrees with their findings." (CNN's "Anderson Cooper 360°," 2-28-07)

- "The Da Vinci Code is fiction. And a lot of this story is fiction as well. I mean, to argue, from DNA evidence, that the Jesus in this tomb is not related to Mary, presumably Mary Magdalene, and therefore, that they are not siblings, so they must be married, does strain one's credulity, doesn't it?" (ibid)

- (speaking to the director) "I noticed that many of the experts are quoted out of context. I can assure you that Frank Cross, who was my own teacher and who read the inscriptions for you and confirmed your reading does not agree with you, and I noticed he was carefully edited out just as he finished the reading, very conveniently. Ask him. Ask him." (Discovery Channel's "The Lost Tomb of Jesus: A Critical Look," 3-4-07)

- “I am certainly not trying to defend the Christian tradition. I’m not a believer. As I said to the press, I have no dog in this fight. I’m trying to be a good scholar... One of the problems I have as an archeologist with this whole project is it puts archeology in a rather bad light. It perpetuates the notion among many non-specialists in the public that archeology is a kind of game, a sort of romantic, mysterious treasure hunt in which amateurs can make great discoveries. For me, it represents the worst kind of Biblical archeology, even if it’s anti-Biblical, because it seems to me the conclusions are already drawn in the beginning, and that’s my real problem. I think the argument goes far beyond any reasonable interpretation.” (ibid)

Lawrence Stager, *professor of archeology of Israel, Harvard University:*

- “This is exploiting the whole trend that caught on with *The Da Vinci Code*... One of the problems is there are so many biblically illiterate people around the world that they don’t know what is real judicious assessment and what is what some of us in the field call ‘fantastic archeology.’” (*New York Times*, 2-27-07)

Stephen Pfann, *textual scholar and paleographer, University of the Holy Land in Jerusalem:*

- “The so-called ‘Mariamene’ ossuary contained the names and remains of two distinct individuals. The first name on the ossuary, ‘MARIAME.’ was written in the common Greek documentary script of the period on the occasion of the interment of the bones of this woman. The second and third words ‘KAI MARA’ were added sometime later by a second scribe, when the bones of the second woman Mara were added to the ossuary....In view of the above, there is no longer any reason to be tempted to link this ossuary (nor the ambiguous traces of DNA inside) to Mary Magdalene or any other person in Biblical, non-Biblical or church tradition.” (www.uhl.ac,

"Mary Magdalene is Now Missing," 3-13-07)

Jonathan Reed, professor of religion at the University of La Verne, co-author of *Excavating Jesus Beneath the Stones: Behind the Text*:

- "It's what I would call 'archeo-porn,' it's very exciting, it's titillating, you want to watch it...but deep down you know it's wrong." (Discovery Channel's "The Lost Tomb of Jesus: A Critical Look," 3-4-07)

- "The thing that I really oppose is the approach to it. That is to say someone is trying to make a chain, and takes a series of links. We've nailed this one now lets move to the next one. We move on to the next one, and at the end, they created a chain. There are so many 'ifs' in that chain, what you need is scientists, archeologists, biblical scholars, to step back, and in dialogue and peer review, evaluate how much weight can that chain bear. And I think at the end of the day when we do that, I think overwhelmingly archeologists, scientists will weigh in and say this can't be supported." (ibid)

Jodi Magness, Professor of Judaism, University of North Carolina:

- "There are people who somehow would like to have physical validation for biblical figures and events, and this feeds into that. But most of the general public doesn't have the expertise to validate these claims. This pretty outrageous claim is being thrown out in the public arena, and it's set up like a situation where it seems like there's legitimate debate about whether it's true or not, and it's virtually impossible to explain in a one-minute sound bite why this can't be true." (Cox News Service, 3-1-07)

Garrett G. Fagan, classics professor at Pennsylvania State University and author of *Archaeological Fantasies: How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Past and Misleads the*

Public:

- “Modern architects of fantastic finds try to provide an air of legitimacy by invoking scientific jargon. They’re not scientists but they need to dress themselves in the clothes of science to past muster. Television is not in the business of education, even with the so-called educational channels like Discovery. Ultimately, they’re in the business of making money.... By the time the rebuttals come out, the mass media would have moved onto the next sensation, and people will have this vague notion that they have found the tomb of Jesus.” (Cox News Service, 3-1-07)

Alan Segal, professor of religion, Barnard College:

- “The New Testament is very clear on this. Jesus was put in a tomb that didn’t belong to him and then he rose and there was nothing left. Why would Jesus’ family have a tomb outside of Jerusalem if they were from Nazareth? Why would they have a tomb if they were poor?” (Newsweek, 3-5-07)

Sandra Scham, editor of Near East Archeology:

- “In the ’90s, I believe, they excavated tombs not far from there, in north Talpiot, where they found similar names. And, in those tombs, the bones themselves, they found as many as three or four individuals in one ossuary. So, the idea that, even the inscriptions on the ossuaries really identifies the one individual therein is sort of strange. It’s just there are so many anomalies here. They don’t have the direct evidence.” (CNN’s “Anderson Cooper 360°,” 2-28-07)

Ted Koppel, former anchor of ABC’s “Nightline” and moderator of the Discovery Channel’s panel discussion about the film:

- “This is drama. This is not journalism.” (Discovery Channel’s “The Lost Tomb of Jesus: A Critical Look,” 3-4-07)

Ronald Hendel, professor of Hebrew Bible and Jewish studies at

the University of California, Berkeley:

- As reported by the paper *The Forward*: “These are hucksters and snake-oil salesman who play fast and loose with historical details, said Hendel.” (3-2-07)

Bruce Feiler, journalist and author of Where God was Born:

- “They [the Holy Family] lived...Three days away in Nazareth. They could not have afforded [the tomb in Jerusalem]. There is no evidence that this man and woman ever knew each other. There’s no evidence they were married. There is no evidence they ever sired a child. I mean, these same filmmakers last year produced a documentary saying that the Exodus was real. Now they’re saying... that the New Testament is false. One of these documentaries is false. At least Dan Brown called his book fiction. In fact, I’m prepared to say... there is more truth in Dan Brown’s fiction than there is in Simcha’s [Jacobovici’s] fact.” (CBS’s “The Early Show,” 2-27-07)