

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

1 Timothy 1:2 ...Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

“No Bones in the Box”

I. Introduction: Selling Jesus

Every year at about this time, the media blitzes us with shocking and controversial archaeological finds designed to make us question whether or not Christianity is true. One year it is “The DaVinci Code,” the next it is the so called “Gospel of Judas,” now it is “The Lost Tomb of Jesus.”

From a ratings perspective this makes sense. Christians will pay attention to defend their beliefs. Non-Christian will pay attention to defend their beliefs. Meanwhile, the price of advertising goes through the roof. Sensational stories make money.

Most people know how the media operates. They take these claims with more than a pinch of salt. But when something is repeated again and again, some people will start to believe it. A recent poll of Canadians found that one third of Canadians believe that the claims in “The DaVinci Code” are true. Most of them haven’t studied the issue. They just pick up on media sound bites and believe without thinking.

So today I want to talk about this year’s controversy, the Jesus ossuary.

II. What Is an Ossuary?

An ossuary is a fancy name for a bone box. At the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry, Jews would place a body in a tomb cut out of

stone or a cave. One year later, they would take out the bones and put them in a stone box called an ossuary. The box would be set in the back of the tomb. If another family member died, they could be placed in the same tomb. A year later, their bones would go in a separate stone box that would be put on a shelf above the first box. That way the whole family might be kept together.

Most of these boxes were simple. There was no time for elaborate decoration. Sometimes, they would have the name scratched on the stone but this was done in a very rough way. Many of the inscriptions are difficult to read. Occasionally, there might be some other symbol like a cross scratched on them too.

Those of you who are interested in Biblical archaeology may remember that a few years ago there was a big controversy concerning a James' ossuary. That was proven to be a forgery. An antiques dealer had used old coal and soil samples from ancient sites to create what appeared to be an ancient inscription saying "James, the brother of Jesus."

III. The Talpiot Tomb

The Jesus ossuary was found in what archaeologist's called the Talpiot Tomb. This tomb is located a few miles out side the Old City of Jerusalem. Archaeologists, not antiques dealers, found ten of these boxes in the tomb in 1980. Biblical archaeologists quietly made note of it but it did not revolutionize their world.

So why are we hearing about it now, 27 years later? The answer is that James Cameron, the director of "Titanic" and the "Terminator" films, decided to do a Hollywood style documentary on the boxes. The documentary has been aired on the Discovery channel.

I have to admit that I have not seen the documentary. What I have read about it is that portions of the documentary theorize that Jesus and his family were buried in this cave. They suggest that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that they had a son named Judah. This is part of the release that the Discovery channel put out:

New scientific evidence, including DNA analysis conducted at one of the world's foremost molecular genetics laboratories, as well as studies by leading scholars, suggests a 2,000-year-old Jerusalem tomb could have once held the remains of Jesus of Nazareth and his family.

The findings also suggest that Jesus and Mary Magdalene might have produced a son named Judah.

IV. The Refutation

This news release is misleading in so many ways that it is hard to know which one to approach first.

The one I will approach first is that the box has an inscription that says Mary Magdalene. The original archaeologists that investigated the box 27 years ago didn't think so. The archaeologists that look at it today don't think so. All the archaeologist except the ones hired by Cameron say it says, "Mary, also called Martha," not Mary Magdalene.

A second issue is the names. The documentary claims that the odds for these names to be found together are so high that they prove this is the Jesus and Mary Magdalene of the Bible. The reality is that one in four women in Jerusalem at Jesus' time was named Mary. Just like today, there were many Marys out there besides the Mary Magdalene and the other Marys mentioned in the Bible.

As to the name Jesus, Jesus and Joshua are the same name in Hebrew and Aramaic. Joshua was also one of the most common

names for males at that time. There were so many people with those names that statistically there should be at least 20 ossuaries with those names in that exact combination. The fact that there is a Joshua (or Jesus) and a Mary buried in the same tomb doesn't prove anything that interesting.

The third issue is the DNA evidence. The documentary claims that the evidence proves Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married with a son. The DNA evidence only proves that Joshua (or Jesus) and Mary do not have the same mother. That's it. They can't even tell from the remains whether or not they share the same father. They could be half brother and sister or any other number of possible relations or no relation at all.

As to Judah being their son, no one has been able to prove a connection to him either. We don't know whether he is Judah the son of this Joshua, or the son of another Joshua. No DNA evidence has linked him to anyone in the tomb. The evidence is so flimsy that no real archaeologists treat it seriously.

V. Conclusion: Celebrating Easter

Every year, pastors, seminary professors and other Christians spend Easter defending traditional Christian views from rumors and half-truths in the media. Unfortunately, we can get so bogged defending against every unlikely scenario that we forget to enjoy our holiday.

As Christians, this is our day. More than Christmas or any other Christian holiday, this is our day. This is the day we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, the day he conquered the world and all its lies. Our Lord rules and we shouldn't have to defend our beliefs to anyone.

I recently read an article by a Jewish author who said that Easter does not threaten Judaism like Christmas does. He said that the toys of Christmas can lure a naïve Jewish kid toward Christianity but Easter does not have that kind of pull.

The truth is just the opposite. Being resurrected from the dead is greater than any Christmas present and Easter is the proof that we will rise to eternal life. There is no more powerful lure to Christianity than Easter.

Our resurrected life won't be that of a disembodied spirit floating around on a cloud. It will be a real life in a real body. That body will be better than the body of an Olympic athlete.

We will live in a real world that will make Jurassic Park look tame. It will be exciting and invigorating. We will judge angels. We will feast. We will worship in a way that will rock your world.

That is why we celebrate Easter.

May that peace which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.