Making Lemonade Out of Lemons: Using the Talpiot Tomb as a Witness

By Dr. James White

Those with an interest in the subject of the resurrection have probably already seen the film, “The Lost Tomb of Jesus.” It’s been the topic of news articles, talk shows and water-cooler chats since it aired in early March. Christian apologists have been scrambling to correct the misinformation offered as fact in the film, but on a practical level, until the needed research and fact-checking is done, what is a Christian to do?

Rather than hope no one will ask you what you think, I believe we should be on the offensive—without being offensive. Let's use this situation to God's glory and for the proclamation of the truth. Below I’ve offered some simple answers to questions your neighbors may be asking.

Well, it sure looks like the experts have put a kink in your religion! Actually, just the opposite. Instead, we have yet another example of how those who oppose the resurrection of Christ are willing to manipulate facts just to get maximum impact. In reality, the main problem with the film and book is its sensationalistic bent that leads Jacobovici and Cameron, etc., to take otherwise interesting historical facts and twist them into an attempt to turn a regular Jewish tomb into the family tomb of Jesus.

But they have DNA evidence! Yes, DNA evidence that conclusively proves that the tiny bone fragments recovered from ossuaries 80-500 and 80-503 came from people who were not related to one another *maternally.* Nothing more. They could have been related paternally, i.e., 80-503 could have been the father of 80-500 but the DNA evidence currently available cannot say much more than that. Finding people in a family tomb who are not maternally related is, of course, not unusual. In fact, it is normal. The assumption that Yeshua ben Yosef, if that inscription is being read correctly at all, was married to at least one of those whose bones were placed in ossuary 80-500 (there could have been more than one), is fanciful at best. Tell me, why do you think the authors of the book forgot to tell their readers about the paternal possibilities of relationship between these two ossuaries?

But the name cluster stastitics prove this is the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth! Listen to what you just said! Jesus *of Nazareth,* not Jerusalem. At least 20 men would, using the same statistics, have lived in Jerusalem during that time period that had a father named Joseph and a brother named James. And guess what? All twenty or more of them died. And were buried. How many had ossuaries? Hard to say. We have found multiple attestations of the name Jesus in ossuaries from the time. The Talpiot tomb is nothing new. But Jesus wasn't from Jerusalem. He did not live there, nor would there be any reason to think that a multi-generational tomb would be owned there by someone *from Nazareth,* which is far to the north of Jerusalem. But beyond the fact that it is truly stretching it to assert that a poor man from Nazareth would have a rich tomb in Jerusalem . . . where he was crucified . . . and where his followers were persecuted by the Jewish leaders . . . who would have made the tomb the main-stay of their apologetic arguments against the growing Christian faith (nothing like showing off Jesus' tomb to end rumors of resurrection!), the fact is that the odds are high against *any* particular combination of names appearing in a single tomb in any one place. The chances that your father, with his first name, would choose to marry a woman with your mother's first name, are high; then, that two such named people would choose your name for a child, is likewise higher; now add in your siblings, and you are getting the number ever higher. Yet, families, with names, exist, in some of the oddest, and statistically improbable, combinations.

But Christian scholars agree that the Mariamne in the tomb is Mary Magdalene! If "two or three" is the same as "Christian scholars," I guess so. But since the identification of "Mariamne" as Mary Magdalene is central to the entire theory, don't you find it rather odd that Jacobovici and his team overlooked the prevalence of the name and the source of it (Mariamne was the favorite wife of Herod—how many baby girls were named "Jackie" back in the 1960s?) in the contemporary records while running to a document written 1) at least three centuries later, probably four, 2) known in full only from a 14th century translation, 3) in a different language than that relevant to the ossuaries, 4) from a geographical location far removed from Jerusalem, 5) that itself never identifies Mariamne as Mary Magdalene (that is pure speculation on the part of Francois Bovon) and 6) that is utterly a-historical and mythical? Is this really how you do serious "investigation" and scholarship? Remember, this identification was the "insight" that "connected all the dots" for Jacobovici—and yet, it is the weakest link in the entire argument.

But what about their argument that the Gospel of Thomas was written by Jesus' son Judah? That's one of the more humorous speculations of the book, actually. See, the Gospel of Thomas was written far, far from Jerusalem, in a different language, and it comes from a completely different worldview. Those who are not invested in selling books promoting the Gospel of Thomas recognize that it was written no earlier than about AD 165. So, if Judah was buried around AD 65, it was quite the trick for him to write a book a hundred years after he was buried, in a land far away, in a language he would have no reason to speak!

This is just the beginning of how you might turn a skeptical inquiry into an opportunity to speak of the gospel. May God bless all of you who seek to be bold witnesses this day!