DR. ERWIN LITZER

SIX LIES PEOPLE TELL ABOUT THE MAN WHO SAID HE WAS GOD

SIX (II.S)

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Slandering Jesus: Six Lies People Tell about the Man Who Said He Was God

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Affectionately dedicated to John Ankerberg, a brilliant defender of The Faith, a passionate evangelist, and a faithful friend.

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix
From the Pen of an Atheist xi
Jesus in the Spin Zone
LIE #1: Jesus' Family Tomb Has Been Discovered
LIE #2: Jesus Was Not Crucified
LIE #3: Judas Did Jesus a Favor
LIE #4: Jesus Was Only a Man
LIE #5: Jesus Has a Dark Secret
LIE #6: Jesus Is One Way among Many
Finding a Jesus You Can Trust
Endnotes

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FROM THE PEN OF AN ATHEIST

Welcome to this discussion about Jesus.

The question of whether or not Jesus was God and thus the only qualified Savior is one that rational people of all stripes cannot ignore. On this, according to Christian belief, hinges not only the truth of the Christian faith but, more ominously, the eternal fate of individuals. Simply put, either historic Christianity is true or it is the most dastardly hoax ever perpetrated.

No one sees this more clearly than Sam Harris, a well-known atheist and author of the book *Letter to a Christian Nation*. In it, Harris acknowledges that there are many points on which he and Christians can agree. For example, that "one of us is right, the other is wrong." He continues:

Either Jesus offers humanity the one true path to salvation (John 14:6), or he does not. We agree that to be a true Christian is to believe that all other faiths are mistaken, and profoundly so. *If Christianity is correct, and I persist in my unbelief, I should expect to suffer the torments of hell* (emphasis added).¹

SLANDFRING IFSUS

No one can doubt that Harris understands the true nature of the Christian faith. There is no neutrality on these issues, unless, of course, one were to opt for a mere shell of Christianity that has been emptied of its distinctive beliefs and power. Let us agree that Harris is right: If Christianity is correct, he can expect to suffer torments in hell.

Writing to us as Christians, Harris proceeds with equal clarity:

Either the Bible is just an ordinary book, written by mortals, or it isn't. Either Christ was divine, or he was not. If the Bible is an ordinary book, and Christ an ordinary man, the basic doctrine of Christianity is false. If the Bible is an ordinary book, and Christ an ordinary man, the history of Christian theology is the story of bookish men parsing a collective delusion. If the basic tenets of Christianity are true then there are some very grim surprises in store for nonbelievers like myself. You understand this. At least half the American population understands this. So let us be honest with ourselves: in the fullness of time, one side is really going to win this argument, and the other side is really going to lose.²

One side is really going to win this argument, and the other side is really going to lose! Harris understands that everything is at stake in this debate: heaven or hell, paradise or suffering, judgment or oblivion. At death, our faith as Christians will be put to the final test. We will either experience conscious bliss, or, if Harris is right, an eternity of nothingness. And

as for Harris, if he is wrong and Christianity is right, horror awaits.

Slandering Jesus is not unbiased in its argument that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and therefore atheists and followers of other religions are "really going to lose." There are compelling reasons to stake our eternal destiny on Jesus, and not, say, on the writings of atheists. Pascal, you will recall, put forth a wager: Believe in Christ, and if He is the Son of God, you have heaven to gain; if He is not, you have nothing to lose. However, contrary to what Pascal says, belief in the Jesus of the New Testament is not a gamble, but a rational decision based on various kinds of evidence.

But who is this Jesus in whom Christians believe? And how is He distinguished from other "Jesuses" in our culture? To my knowledge, we have never had as many religious options as we do today, so many varieties of Jesus from which to choose.

In the pages that follow, we'll examine six views of Jesus. Each holds Him in high regard, but unfortunately, upon careful examination, we find in each case that He is "damned by faint praise." Too often He is well spoken of, but slandered nevertheless.

But before we get into these particular lies about Jesus, we first need to understand the presuppositions that give scholars permission to reinvent Him according to their liking. From there, we can move on to sample various views and show why Jesus does not easily fit into the mainstream of our endlessly tolerant religious culture. He stands above all other religious claims even when He welcomes us to be in fellowship with Him and His Father.

FROM MY HEART TO YOURS

I'm glad that you have an interest in Jesus. Perhaps it is a mere curiosity, or maybe you have a settled opinion of Him as a great teacher, a guru, or a man who elevated the status of women. Or perhaps you have concluded that He is indeed the Son of God, the Savior of the world. No matter what your opinion, we should all be interested in learning more about Him.

This book was not only written for you, but for your friends and your family. I want you as the reader to be able to dialogue about Jesus, regardless of where you are on your spiritual journey. If you are not a believer I pray you shall become one, and if you are already one of Jesus' followers, I hope you will defend His claims with both knowledge and grace. I want to encourage a whole company of Christians to seize the opportunities we have to help our world appreciate the only One who is qualified to save us from our sins.

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate that followers of Jesus—the traditional Jesus—have nothing to fear about the lies that are being told about Him, lies that seek to depose Him and slander His good name. And we shall see that He is just as controversial today as He was when on earth.

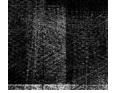
Others said, "He is the Christ." Still others asked, "How can the Christ come from Galilee?" . . . Thus the people were *divided* because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him.

JOHN 7:41, 43-44 (emphasis added)

Who was this divider of men?







Jesus in the Spin Zone

"I also believe in Jesus!"

That's what the woman told me at O'Hare International Airport before I boarded a flight to Cleveland. I struck up a conversation with her because I saw she was reading a religious book, and I wanted to know what she thought about Jesus.

"I'm a Mormon," she said. "We believe in Jesus too . . . and there is only *one* Jesus!"

I kindly reminded her that there are many different Jesuses in our culture, and if she understood her religion better and if she understood Christianity better, she would know that although we are using the same name, our understanding of Jesus is so different that it would be a grave mistake to assume we were talking about the same person!

In the next chapter, we will consider the spectacular claim that the family tomb of Jesus has been found. But in Israel there are dozens of inscriptions on tombs bearing the name Jesus. Many men were named Jesus, but they all have to be carefully distinguished from Jesus of Nazareth, a man who made special claims and invites us all to share eternal life with Him.

So the question *Do you believe in Jesus?* in itself is quite meaningless, unless it is quickly followed by another: *In what Jesus*

do you believe? The Jesus of Islam is certainly not the Jesus of Christianity; the Jesus of Jehovah's Witnesses is not the Jesus of the Nicene Creed. As early as the first century, the apostle Paul feared that many of his readers might have begun to believe in "another Jesus" (2 Corinthians 11:4, NKJV). If ancient Corinth had a different Jesus—a Jesus without the qualifications to be a Savior—surely that is even more true today.

Living as we do at the beginning of a new century, many new Jesuses are being fabricated year by year; this is the age of designer Jesuses. Often the only similarity is the name; the character traits are entirely different. So your Jesus might not be my Jesus and mine might not be the Jesus of my next-door neighbor.

This book is about a few of the attempts that have been made to remake Jesus of Nazareth into a different kind of Jesus—a Jesus more in tune with the times, or a Jesus who will blend more nicely into the tolerance that our culture prizes so highly. Some of these revisions are touted as being new or previously suppressed when in fact virtually all of these false portraits have been around for centuries.

The Jesus whose biography is found in the New Testament is being treated like putty in the hands of those who wish to refashion Him to fit their particular view of the world. Just take a moment to browse your neighborhood bookstore and you will find dozens of books, with topics ranging from Jesus and women's rights to Jesus and Zen to Jesus and inner healing. Jesus is used—or rather, misused—for every cause imaginable, from gas-saving minivans to religious zealots. I'm reminded of the words of the late Yasser Arafat, who at a press conference at the United Nations in 1983 called Jesus "the first Palestinian"

fedayeen who carried his sword." Think of it: Jesus was the first freedom fighter for Islam!

"It seems as though everyone wants Jesus in their parade," writes Joseph Stowell. "From gay activists to abortionists to religious leaders to politicians,

making Jesus fit their agenda and flying His flag provides a guise of propriety and credibility."²

Stowell is right, but we have to ask: How can scholars take the radical, all-demanding Jesus of the Gospels and reinvent Him so that He, like a book on a shelf, is wholly within our power to do with Him as we will? This Jesus allows us to be in charge, never insisting that we come under His authority,

The Jesus whose biography is found in the New Testament is being treated like putty in the hands of those who wish to refashion Him to fit their particular view of the world.

never asking us to stake our eternal destiny on His claims.

No other name has inspired such great devotion and so much controversy; no other person has been tweaked to serve so many agendas. Scholars are writing books not about Christianity, but about "Jesusanity," as my friend Darrell Bock describes it. Learning about these evolving images of Jesus will help us identify the one Jesus who stands above all others and is actually as good as His word.

In fashioning these various false portraits of Jesus, what assumptions are used to undo the shared results of centuries of historical research in favor of a different Jesus? Jesus, I fear, is much talked about but also much misunderstood.

REINVENTING JESUS

Let's take a moment to understand the methodology used to refashion Jesus to accommodate Him to modern times. It requires some ingenuity to take the portrait of Jesus in the New Testament and make it compatible with pluralism, radical feminism, and other religious traditions. It takes some doing to turn Jesus into a harmless man who demands nothing from us and does not require us to believe anything in particular.

Obviously, some assumptions are required to reinvent Jesus. Follow along as we uncover them.

Assumption #1

One way to remake Jesus is to take a lesser aspect of His teaching and present it as the heart and soul of His ministry. For example,

No other name has inspired such great devotion and so much controversy; no other person has been tweaked to serve so many agendas.

there are those who teach that Jesus was primarily a compassionate teacher or prophet who helped those who were marginalized, especially women and the poor. Thus He healed the sick, forgave prostitutes, and had particular concern for those who were excluded from the blessings of the Kingdom.

That interpretation is quite right as far as it goes, but it misses the heart of Jesus' life and mission. True, He did elevate women; He did model care for the poor and warn the rich of the deception of selfish wealth. Jesus has had an unrivaled social impact, not only in His own time but also today. Think about the profound implications of the Sermon on the Mount and its teachings about forgiveness and fairness in human relationships. And yet if this is all that we say about Jesus—if this were the sole reason He lived and died—we would miss His primary message.

Today, people often interpret Jesus through what Darrell Bock calls the lens of "ideological feminism." The primary contribution of Jesus, it is said, is that He assured women that they are equal partners with men in the Kingdom of God. Jesus is thus presented as the great liberator of women, but no reference is made to His primary self-described mission: to save us from our sins.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

MARK 10:45

Let us suppose that someone were to write a biography of Billy Graham and say that the purpose of his crusades was to promote better race relations, supporting this claim by pointing to his refusal to preach to segregated audiences. Of course, it is true that Billy Graham's courageous decision to preach only to integrated audiences *did* give impetus to the civil rights movement. But can anyone honestly say that that was the primary contribution and message of Billy Graham's fifty years of ministry? I think not. A balanced approach to his long ministry would affirm that the heart and soul of his ministry was found in the message that sinners need to be reconciled to God, and that racial equality was an outgrowth of that conviction.

SLANDERING JESUS

"Isn't the main message of Jesus that God loves everybody?" I once heard a politician say. Well, yes, Jesus did teach that God loves us and we should love one another, but He also described in vivid detail the fires of hell, warned about judgment, and urged His listeners to repent. Yet today a misunderstanding of what God's love entails is used to cancel out everything the Bible says about homosexuality, the value of human life, and the necessity of Christ's sacrifice for our reconciliation to God. Some people scour the Scriptures to find the one phrase or idea they want, and then present it as the primary message of the Bible.

Our generation loves the buffet approach to religion. In a sincere but often misguided quest for meaning, seekers take a sampling of Jesus if it is to their liking, then add insights from other teachers, and compile a spiritual meal that is just right for them. They develop a Jesus who confirms all they want to believe, and because He is tailor-made to their tastes, they tell us they have found the "real Jesus." Whether we are believers or not, we all are in danger of cherry-picking in the Gospels—looking for verses that support an agenda and then discarding, or at least ignoring, the rest.

Oprah Winfrey, whose view of Jesus is the subject of a future chapter, represents our culture all too well. Her view of Jesus might be right for her, but not necessarily for her neighbor who might choose a different path to God. Spirituality is in, and specific doctrines—such as the exclusivity of Jesus—are out. Jesus is talked about, discussed, and often dethroned. He is a tame Jesus who condemns no one, lets us live according to our desires, and is but one more guru who can be sought for advice.

Assumption #2

Another assumption is that the Jesus of history should be separated from the Christ of faith. By that I simply mean that some scholars assume that Jesus was a mere man who was declared to be

God/Messiah by His misguided but enthusiastic followers. They did this either out of ignorance or because of their desire for religious and political power. So there is a gap between Jesus the man and the dogma that the disciples believed.

Later in this book we will encounter the Jesus Seminar, which is famous for insisting that the grand claims of Jesus were not made by Him but only attributed to Him by His followers. These scholars pay Jesus many compliments, but what they will not say is that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God. Thus the human Jesus—the mere man—stands on one side of the historical divide, and the "fabricated" message about

Today a misunderstanding of what God's love entails is used to cancel out everything the Bible says about homosexuality, the value of human life, and the necessity of Christ's sacrifice for our reconciliation to God. Some people scour the Scriptures to find the one phrase or idea they want, and then present it as the primary message of the Bible.

Jesus—His miracles and divine claims—stands on the other.

As Darrell Bock puts it, "What the essence of this scholarship says is: Jesus is a bearer of wisdom, a model, a great teacher and example, but *he stays put as Jesus of Nazareth*. He is not the link between God and man, and even if he is, he certainly is not the only link between God and man. Any other religious leader could serve just as well. At best he points the way, but he is not the way."³

As we shall see, this attempt to separate Jesus the man from the Christ of faith is quite arbitrary and contrary to thoughtful historical investigation. On the Day of Pentecost, did Peter—a disciple who was well acquainted with the historical Jesus, suddenly invent a different Jesus (the Christ of faith) to preach to his listeners? I think not. For the disciples there was no difference between the Jesus they knew and the Jesus who was later proclaimed as Lord by the early church.

Separating the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith makes Jesus very believable—so believable that there is nothing significant about Him to believe! Stripped of His miracles, His claims, and His resurrection, He appears as a pitiful figure with nothing to offer us except, perhaps, some pious platitudes we don't have the strength to live up to. In contrast, the Jesus of the New Testament does not let us off the hook; He tells us that we must make up our minds about Him—and that our choice determines our eternal destiny.

Let Him speak for Himself:

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. JOHN 5:24-25

You can separate the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history, but only if you do so arbitrarily, disregarding the continuity of the New Testament accounts.

Assumption #3

We can thank postmodern thought for the assumption that history is subjective and that one historical viewpoint is really no better than another. In The Da Vinci Code, Dan Brown quotes Napoleon as saying, "What is history but a fable agreed upon?" One of Brown's leading characters says, "History is written by winners." The clear implication is that the New Testament is highly suspect because it was written by the followers of Jesus, who used their story not because it was true, but because it was the pathway to power.

So this assumption claims that history can be fashioned according to one's own liking and viewpoint; it cannot be trusted to be factual and unbiased. Some moderns say we should study history because of its psychological benefit for minorities, but not in order to uncover some "truth."

These notions about the subjectivity of history mean that ancient texts can be reinterpreted according to one's personal fancy (for noble purposes, of course). This has permitted novelists to blur the distinction between fact and fiction. They argue that because everyone views history from the limitations of his or her own narrow perch, it follows that there is no core of agreed-upon facts in history.

SLANDERING JESUS

The popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* is but the tip of an iceberg; similar diverse interpretations of Jesus are being widely discussed and explored in our universities and in pop literature. Alternate theories that challenge the traditional view of Jesus are growing in popularity, and the media makes these ideas part of mainstream culture. Early church history is being rewritten with interpretations that reflect these recent discoveries and trends. History is being turned on its head: Orthodoxy (the historic Christian faith) is now considered heresy, and what was known in the early church as heresy is now considered to be the true Christian faith!

This presupposition that history is subjective has also led to a kind of multiculturalism that insists that all cultures and religions are equally true and we cannot make any value judgments about them. The fact that they contradict one another is accepted because this is the nature of faith—faith is essentially irrational and hence we don't have to be consistent in holding any particular worldview. Therefore, some would say, the quest for truth is wrongheaded. The modern spirit says that we have to be content with the irrationality of religion, trying to find meaning beyond ourselves as best we can.

Let me make one other reference to *The Da Vinci Code*. If you saw the movie, you might remember that near the end, Robert Langdon, played by Tom Hanks, refers to Jesus and says, "Human or divine, divine or human, what difference does it make? Maybe human is divine." So there you have it: Nobody can know who is right and who is wrong about Jesus—and in the end it makes no difference.

It is this perceived inability to make rational historical judg-

ments that has led to an aversion to all historical or religious claims. Mention Islamic terrorists and someone is likely to remark, "Well, they are no different from those Christians who have killed abortionists." Such comparisons, so much a part of our culture, ignore some vital differences. But who cares? In a world where truth does not exist—where there are no shared value judgments and only subjective opinion matters—clear thinking only gets in the way of the spirit of our times.

You realize where all this leads: Given the bias involved in the study of history, nothing really matters; the content of our belief is not important—only the experience of it matters. History is thus reduced to a personal quest designed to help us understand ourselves better. Why not deny that the Holocaust happened as does Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the current president of Iran?

Admittedly, every historian writes history from a particular viewpoint—yes, even a biased viewpoint—but this does not mean that we cannot agree upon a body of historical facts that inform our understanding of a particular era. In the end, history can be stubborn and immune to the human desire to tweak it according to our preferences. When Paul argued for the historicity of the physical resurrection, he said Jesus appeared to Peter and then the Twelve, and that "after that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:6).

Paul tells his readers that the Resurrection could be verified by many eyewitnesses who were still living and encourages his readers to go and ask them about it!

SLANDERING JESUS

We would never adopt a subjective view of history in the practical matters of everyday living. I can't write a check insisting that my "truth" is that I deposited ten thousand dollars if the bank's "truth" is that I didn't! Sober people know that history is not merely subjective opinion.

We must confront the notion that history is too prejudiced for it to yield any solid historical or religious claims. In the epilogue of this book we will expose the book *The Jesus Papers*, which insists that its fiction is actual history. We will show that such philosophies of history are fatally flawed and self-defeating.

Assumption #4

Much of biblical scholarship today assumes antisupernaturalism, the notion that all miracles are to be summarily dismissed

We must confront the notion that history is too prejudiced for it to yield any solid historical or religious claims.

as impossible because of the supposed consistency of natural law. Thus in a world where miracles cannot occur, Jesus is reduced to a mere man—perhaps a remarkable man, but just a man nonetheless. This means that He could not have been virgin born and that we either have to

discard the miracles or reinterpret them within a thoroughly naturalistic framework.

A well-known example of this kind of closed-mindedness will be found in our discussion of the Jesus Seminar, to which I've already referred. To quote the exact words of the introduction of *The Five Gospels*, a book published by the Seminar, "the Christ of creed and dogma who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope."⁴

We have seen the heavens through a telescope, the argument goes, and therefore we cannot believe in miracles. Little wonder the Seminar arbitrarily insists that the early church invented the Jesus of the New Testament and that the husks (the miracles) have to be peeled away to uncover the "real" Jesus, Jesus the *mere* man.

In a later chapter of this book we will show that the notion that the apostles fabricated the stories of Jesus' miracles is bogus. The best historical streams of Christianity take us back to the early apostles, who knew Christ personally and received their teachings from Him. Even the Pharisee Nicodemus had to confess, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him" (John 3:2). If God exists, we can believe in His miracles and know that Christ had the credentials to perform them.

Assumption #5

Whatever is new is true appears to be a mantra in today's highly spiritualized cultural atmosphere. Think of the hype that surrounded *National Geographic*'s publication of the Judas Document. Many people assumed that if it was a recent discovery and if it had been "hidden" from the populace, it must contain the *real* story of Jesus and Judas.

The Judas Document has now been replaced by the more recent claims that the family tomb of Jesus has been discovered.

Standing with an ossuary in the background, James Cameron of *Titanic* fame claims that it is not only plausible but "irrefutable" that the bones of Jesus were interred in a similar limestone ossuary. Each year, it seems, we have a new sensational discovery about Jesus that is marketed to millions via the media.

Hype is one thing, sober reflection another. We'll explore the claims about Jesus' family tomb in the next chapter, and we'll find them to be lacking in critical support. And in our chapter on Judas, we will learn that Irenaeus quoted the Judas Document in about AD 180. Although the full text was found more recently, its contents have been known throughout the centuries. What is more, it belongs to a whole family of manuscripts called the Gnostic Gospels that were written long *after* the events of the New Testament had taken place. These writings were produced by enemies of Christianity who tried to combine the sayings of Jesus with Greek philosophy. More on that later.

To a culture with a short attention span, whatever is new and fashionable is assumed to be the long-hidden path to truth, or something akin to it. According to an article published in *Newsweek*, what we have today is "a passion for an immediate, transcendent experience of God. And a uniquely American acceptance of the amazingly diverse paths people have taken to find it." The latest is always deemed to be the most reliable, at least for *today*.

Assumption #6

A prevailing assumption is that *all religions of the world are essentially the same*, so Jesus has to be refashioned to fit into the continuum of religious history. Thus, He is viewed as essentially the same as Buddha or Gandhi or Mithras, even if stubborn

facts must be ignored to do so. At all costs the unique claims of Jesus are brushed aside to make Him fit in the pantheon of our culture's many gods.

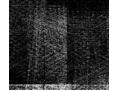
Consider, for example, the bizarre notion that Jesus paid a visit to India and studied under various masters before He returned to Israel at age thirty. The desire to place Jesus there is so strong that, although faced with contradictory historical evidence, a case is nonetheless made for this "historical" oddity. The question is not "What is the best historical evidence for this view?" Rather, the question becomes "What scenario can we envision that would place Jesus within the grand history of religious tradition, rather than placing Him above all of these traditions?"

I believe it can be shown that all the religions of the world are *not* essentially the same but with superficial differences; rather, the opposite is true: When compared with Christianity, *other religions are superficially the same but with fundamental differences*. That's why it takes so much ingenuity to make Jesus fit within the framework of other religions. The feat can only be accomplished by a radical historical dance in which we close our eyes to important historical data within the context of New Testament events.

Let's survey six views of Jesus to help us better understand how He is regularly slandered through misrepresentations by false religions and popular culture. Then we will be in a better position to see why the New Testament portrait fits both the historical facts and the kind of ministry we might expect from a man who claimed to be the Son of God.

And with that, we begin.





LIE #1

Jesus' Family Tomb Has Been Discovered

- "... the odds [are] 2.5 million to one in favor of the Talpiot tomb being the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth."
- —The Jesus Family Tomb

The family tomb of Jesus has been discovered!

That's what I was hearing on CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC along with several other news channels. The buzz was that a tomb discovered in the Jerusalem suburb of Talpiot in 1980 has turned out to be the tomb of Jesus and His family. Several ossuaries were found in the large tomb and one of the inscriptions read "Jesus son of Joseph," and four others were purported to have the names of Jesus' other family members.

An ossuary is a bone box. For the well-to-do, the custom was to keep the dead body for a year or so until the flesh rotted; then the bones were placed in a limestone box where they could remain for centuries. So this latest finding suggests that after Jesus died, His disciples laid His body in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea and then returned to steal His body to keep it somewhere until

the flesh decomposed, and that later the bones were reburied in an ossuary in the family tomb.

After hearing the reports, I bought a copy of the book *The Jesus Family Tomb*, by Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino. I read it on a flight to Phoenix and then I watched the two-hour Discovery Channel documentary, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, that detailed the discovery of the tomb. It was cleverly, and shall I say seductively, presented with the clear agenda of persuading people that the location of the bones of Jesus had been found.

Many people are asking: What are the chances that these authors could be right? And what difference would it make to Christianity if in fact the bodily resurrection did *not* occur?

WHAT WAS DISCOVERED

When this tomb was first discovered in March 1980, it included ten ossuaries and dozens of skeletons, some of them on various shelves along the tomb walls. Because such burial sites are common in Israel, the bones no longer exist today—either having been disposed of or destroyed by vandals. Six of the ten ossuaries in this particular tomb were inscribed, the others were not. Reportedly, the following inscriptions were found:

Yeshua bar Yosef—Jesus, Son of Joseph
Mariamene e Mara—Mariamne, also called Master
Maria—a Latinized version of the Hebrew "Miriam"
Matia—Matthew
Yehuda bar Yeshua—Judah, son of Jesus
Yose (or Yosa)—a nickname for Joseph

Let's review these six names to better understand the claims that are being made. The primary ossuary reads "Jesus, Son of Joseph" and would have contained the bones of Jesus; "Mariamene e Mara" is supposedly a reference to Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus; "Matia" refers to Matthew, who was a disciple of Jesus but not a relative (no one knows why his ossuary would have been placed in the family tomb of Jesus); "Judah, son of Jesus" is believed to be the son of Jesus and Mary Magdalene; and finally "Joseph" who is listed in the Gospel of Mark as a brother to Jesus (Mark 6:3).

Before I proceed, I should point out that only nine of the ten ossuaries were actually catalogued when the Talpiot Tomb was excavated in 1980. The tenth had no markings and since ossuaries are common in Israel, it was deemed of no special value and left to be discarded or sold.

However, both in their book on *The Jesus Family Tomb* and on the Discovery Channel documentary, the authors argue that the tenth was actually the ossuary of James, the brother of Jesus. If this ossuary, which has been widely publicized, was originally in the tomb, they believe there is even a greater probability that the names are those of the family members of Jesus.

However, we can quickly dispense with the notion that the ossuary of James was originally in this "family tomb." First, it was found in the 1970s—before the discovery of the so-called family tomb of Jesus in 1980. Second, the original archaeologists who found the Talpiot Tomb assure us that the tenth ossuary was simply not catalogued because it had no markings. Third, the dimensions of the James ossuary do not match the recorded dimensions of the tenth ossuary found in the Talpiot Tomb.

Fourth, fourth-century historian Eusebius says that the body of James (the half brother of Jesus) was buried alone near the Temple Mount and that his tomb was visited in the early centuries. And finally, at least part of the inscription on the James ossuary was deemed forged, and Oded Golan, the man who bought it, is currently on trial for fraud.¹

Facts, however, did not get in the way of the hype that surrounded the revelation that the family tomb of Jesus had been found! The authors requested patina testing to be done on the soot or dust of the James ossuary to see if it matched the materials found in the tomb. To their own delight, they declared, "It is a match!" But the scientist who did the tests backed away from such a conclusion, saying that the test did not *prove* that the James ossuary had been in the Talpiot Tomb but only that it was *possible* it had been there. In other words, the "match" only meant that the James ossuary was consistent with the Talpiot Tomb; presumably it would have been consistent with other tombs as well. The bottom line is that the testing establishes no positive links to the tomb.²

Without the James ossuary, we still have five names, all purportedly linked to the family of Jesus. So, we must ask, could this be the place where the bones of Jesus were buried?

Moviemaker James Cameron was involved in the project and wrote the preface to the book on the family tomb. He says that the conclusions of the documentary are virtually irrefutable and stunning in their implications. He writes that the story told about Jesus' family tomb "is pieced together from hard physical evidence, evidence that cannot lie."³

So, what shall we believe?

DISPENSING WITH MYTHS

Before we evaluate the evidence, we must dispense with some myths and rather foolish notions that have surrounded this discussion.

The first bit of nonsense says that if the bones of Jesus were discovered, it would *not* affect the Christian faith. Incredibly, I saw self-proclaimed Christians on television saying that if the documentary were true, it wouldn't invalidate Christianity. After all, the argument goes, Jesus arose spiritually not physically. The book *The Jesus Family Tomb* perpetuates the same fantasy by arguing that the discovery of Jesus' bones would not harm Christianity because "the New Testament does not tell us that its chroniclers believe that Jesus, when he ascended, needed to take his entire body with him!" That's like saying that Columbus crossed the ocean spiritually, but not physically. According to these authors, Christianity would not be affected if Jesus did not rise from the dead!

Let us say it boldly: If the bones of Jesus were discovered, our faith would collapse like a house of cards held together by ropes of mist! For one thing, Jesus predicted that He would rise from the dead in His body (Luke 9:22 and John 2:18-22). Furthermore, the whole point of Jesus' death and resurrection is that He redeemed us body, soul, and spirit. Jesus conquered death, and because He lives we shall live also.

Understandably, when Jesus appeared in His resurrected body, the disciples were so astonished that they were tempted to think they were seeing a ghost. So Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost

does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24:38-39). Then, as further proof, He asked if they had anything to eat and they gave Him a piece of broiled fish, which He ate in their presence (Luke 24:41-43).

Consider the explicit words of Paul:

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. . . . And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 1 CORINTHIANS 15:14-15, 17

If Christ has not been raised, we are shown to be *false witnesses of God!* Our faith is futile and we are still in our sins.

If the bones of Jesus were discovered, our faith would collapse like a house of cards held together by ropes of mist!

The notion that Jesus rose from the dead with a new body, while His old body lay in the grave, is a modern idea and is contrary to the Jewish understanding of resurrection.

If Jesus' bones rotted in an ossuary, our faith is in vain and we are of all men and women

most miserable. We have no hope of heaven, no hope of seeing Jesus—and we have believed a lie. Like the old country preacher Vance Havner used to say, "If the resurrection of Jesus is a myth, then I am *myth*taken, *myth*ified, and *myth*erable!"

There is, of course, a form of Christianity that does not need an empty tomb. But it is a powerless kind of Christianity that is unable to save us from our sins—a Christianity that has no confidence in the final triumph of Jesus over sin and death, and that reduces Christianity to the wishes and ideals of other religions.

But before we assign Christianity to the dustbin of history, we have to ask: How valid is the claim that the family tomb of Jesus has been found? How does the evidence that these are the bones of Jesus compare to two thousand years of historical discussion and research on this topic? More on that in a moment.

We must dispense with a second inconsistent notion—the claims that the Bible should be treated differently than other ancient books. For some reason, when it comes to the Bible, the standard rules of textual analysis do not apply. For example, in his preface to *The Jesus Family Tomb*, James Cameron says of Jesus, "... a compelling case has been made that he never existed at all but was a myth created to fulfill a specific need."⁵

He continues, "Until now, there has been zero physical evidence of his existence. No fingerprints, no bones, no portraits done from life, nothing. Not a shred of parchment written from Jesus' own hand." So, Cameron says, this discovery of the tomb of Jesus is doing Christianity a favor because now at least we know He existed! At last Christians can breathe more easily!

The question, of course, is this: What if the same standard of evidence were used for the existence of Plato, Socrates, or Julius Caesar? Do we have fingerprints of these historical individuals? Of course not! Even if we had fingerprints of Jesus, how could we know that they were His? The value of fingerprints applies only when they are compared to existing fingerprints to see if a match can be discovered. Clearly, Cameron's requirement is preposterous.

SLANDERING JESUS

Do we have the bones of Plato, Socrates, or Julius Caesar? Of course not! Do we have portraits drawn from real life? Of course not! So why don't we conclude that they are but myths created to fill a specific need? *No fingerprints, no bones, no portraits from life. Nothing.*

By insisting on evidence that is demanded of no other historical figure, Cameron has in a single sentence dispensed with both Christian and pagan sources that affirm that Jesus lived and was put to death, and also that He rose from the dead. The shared results of centuries of scholarship are neatly set aside by the demand for a level of evidence that in principle cannot exist.

Given this kind of methodology, we get a hint early on as to how the evidence for Jesus will be treated. From now on, the Bible will be quoted only when it supports a theory, and will be summarily dismissed when it disproves a theory. These researchers are willing to accept a story that describes the burial of Jesus in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea because it can be pressed into service to support their family-tomb theory, but they are unwilling to accept the next paragraphs in Scripture, which describe the resurrection of Jesus with equal detail. Many such examples exist throughout the book.

Finally, we must dispense with the notion that the Gnostic Gospels present a more reliable historical account than the canonical Scriptures. The Gnostics were teachers who tried to combine Greek philosophy with Christianity. Their so-called Gnostic Gospels were written later than the New Testament Gospels and were known by the early church to be fraudulent. They do not even purport to be historical. Yet in books such as

The DaVinci Code and The Jesus Family Tomb, these later documents are quoted as if they are infallible.

While *The Da Vinci Code* was advertised as fiction (though it purported to be historical fiction), *The Jesus Family Tomb* claims to be sober history. And yet, as we shall see, the authors must turn to a dubious fourth-century text to make a crucial identification of one of the ossuaries in the family tomb.

THE MATTER OF PROBABILITY

So, let's go back to our original question. What is the probability that the Talpiot Tomb is indeed the family tomb of Jesus? In their book, Jacobovici and Pellegrino say that the odds of these names occurring together randomly is one in 2.5 million. The Discovery Channel special modestly suggests that the odds are one in six hundred. Still, these are very great odds that would point to this Talpiot Tomb being the tomb of Jesus and His family.

We must begin with what the authors also acknowledge, namely that the names on the ossuaries were very common in New Testament times. Scholars tell us that there are about eighty tombs and about twenty-six ossuaries with the name Jesus on them. The exact number is disputed because the inscriptions on ossuaries are notoriously difficult to decipher and not all are agreed on. However, to find the name Jesus inscribed on an ossuary is not in itself remarkable, since about one out of every twenty males was named Jesus.

Twenty-five percent of all the women who lived during the time of Jesus were named Mary, which explains why there are six Marys in the New Testament. And among the 233 ossuaries

catalogued, the name Joseph appears about 14 percent of the time. So the experts agree that about one out of seven males was named Joseph.⁷

The fact that these names were so common in the first century explains why, when archaeologists discovered this tomb in 1980, no one thought this could be the tomb of Jesus and His family. The ossuaries were carefully catalogued and put into the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) warehouse in Israel.

The fact that these names were so common in the first century explains why, when archaeologists discovered this tomb in 1980, no one thought this could be the tomb of Jesus and His family.

Then, more than ten years later, the BBC told the story of the tomb, and Amos Kloner, Israel's most prominent archaeologist, affirmed that these were common names and that it was farfetched to say that this could be the tomb of Jesus' family. So the report simply disappeared off the news radar, only to be recycled in a sensational book and a Discovery Channel special. The fact that the BBC viewed it as a

nonstory should tell us something about its importance.

But the authors of *The Jesus Family Tomb* say that they did take the fact that the names were common into account, and still reached a high degree of probability that this was Jesus' tomb. So we have to analyze their results more carefully. Probabilities are based on assumptions; bad assumptions lead to bad probabilities.

Although the "Jesus, Son of Joseph" ossuary is the most sig-

nificant, second in importance is the ossuary with the inscription "Mariamene e Mara," which is said to belong to Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus. How do the authors conclude that this name refers to Mary Magdalene, since the names are very different?

They argue that some members of the early church called Mary Magdalene *Mariamne*, and the authors appeal to the Aramaic to say that the word *Mara* means "master." They translate the inscription as "Mariamne Master." From this, the fiction is developed that Mary Magdalene was not only the wife of Jesus, but also recognized to be His lead disciple.

But they still have to find a reason to suspect that the name Mariamene is a reference to Mary Magdalene; if this identification cannot be sustained, then the probability that this is the family tomb of Jesus is significantly reduced. To make this identification, the authors turn to a fourth-century Gnostic document, *The Acts of Philip*, in which we are told that Mary Magdalene is referred to as Mariamene. However, when you read the Gnostic document, you find that while there is a reference to a woman who is called Mariamne (though there is a difference in spelling), this woman has no clear connection with Mary Magdalene. The woman in *The Acts of Philip*, is spoken of as the sister of Philip (the Gnostics fraudulently used the names of disciples to gain credibility) and she is preaching in Greek. It is quite a stretch to say that this is a reference to Mary Magdalene.

I can't stress too often that these Gnostic documents are dated later and therefore were not written by eyewitnesses, or by anyone who even knew Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Scholars tell us that the earliest possible date this document originated was the middle of the second century, although the present known

copies are from the fourth century. Significantly, none of the eyewitnesses' canonical writings call Mary Magdalene by a different name.

The authors make much of the fact that the DNA in the Mariamene ossuary does not match with the DNA in the Jesus ossuary. This, they say, is further proof that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married. But the fact that their DNA does not match doesn't prove marriage any more than saying that because your DNA does not match the woman who is sitting behind you in church, you must be married to her. All that the DNA proves is that the two people were not biologically related. No wonder those who were enlisted to do the DNA testing are now backing away from the unwarranted conclusions being drawn from their work.

As I mentioned earlier, deciphering names on ossuaries is a difficult and controversial task. There are archaeologists who believe that the word *Mara* does not mean Master, but rather is a form of the name Martha, another common name in New Testament times. If this is the case, the bones of two different women might have been placed in the ossuary. Also, because the bones of several people were commonly placed in the same ossuary, there is no way of knowing which fragment of bone belonged to whom.

There is more: The inscription "Jesus, Son of Joseph" on the famous ossuary is not undisputed. This is known as the graffiti ossuary because the names are scrawled on the side of the box with sloppy markings. This explains why some archaeologists are not convinced that the name on the tomb is Jesus, but rather a reference to someone entirely different. Furthermore, I can't

believe that this is the way the disciples would have treated the bones of someone they regarded as Messiah! Some of the other ossuaries in the tomb had ornamentation—why not this one?¹⁰

Andrey Feuerverger, the Toronto statistician who did the probability calculations for the tomb, says that his work was based on assumptions he was given. He says, "It's not a secret that the assumptions are contestable. I tried to stay with things that vaguely seemed reasonable to me but I'm not a biblical scholar." 11 Tal Ilan, who compiled the *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, vehemently disagrees with the supposition that this could be the tomb of Jesus. 12 Little wonder that Jonathan Reed, who is not a Christian, called the conclusions of the Jesus Tomb "archaeo-porn," the worst sort of misuse of archaeological evidence to support a hypothetical theory. 13 Significantly, no dissenting archaeologists were quoted in *The Jesus Family Tomb* or the Discovery Channel documentary.

LEFT UNEXPLAINED

This novel scenario leaves a number of other matters unexplained. Let us consider each one.

The nature and location of the tomb

The authors admit that this family tomb, if it can be called such, was owned by very wealthy individuals. We have to ask, how would Jesus' family have afforded this burial site? Also, why would the family tomb be in Jerusalem, where His family were only pilgrims? He was, after all, "Jesus of Nazareth." What is

more, Jesus was never called "the Son of Joseph" by His followers, but rather "Messiah" or "Son of God."

Why, when these entrepreneurs went into the Talpiot Tomb, did they find a large Greek inscription, but no Christian inscriptions, such as a cross or monogram? That tells us that this was not the family tomb of an Aramaic couple whose son was known as the founder of the church. Furthermore, these tombs were kept over a period of decades, so this tomb could contain a conglomerate of people or even adopted family members from subsequent generations.

Who is in and who is out?

If this is the family tomb of Jesus, where is Joseph, the husband of Mary and the supposed father of Jesus? As the patriarch of the family, would he not also be buried here? Even if he had died elsewhere, his bones could have been carried to where the others were interred. And why is Matthew buried here? If this Matthew was indeed the disciple of Jesus, there is no evidence that he was a family member.

Christian beginnings

Even the authors of *The Jesus Family Tomb* agree that the original tomb of Jesus (the one that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea) was empty, but they speculate that the disciples stole the body and later interred the bones in an ossuary. But if this were the case, why then did the disciples proclaim the Resurrection and even die for that belief? Yes, throughout history many have been willing to die for what turned out to be a lie, but there are no

obvious examples of those who died for what they *knew* to be a lie.

Think of what this novel theory entails: It insists that in the aftermath of Jesus' death, the family had to steal the body and keep it until the flesh rotted, then they had to buy this very expensive tomb, all the while proclaiming that Jesus rose from the dead.

And what about James, the half brother of Jesus? He surely would have known of the family tomb. How could he have believed and preached the Resurrection when in point of fact he knew that his brother's bones were interred in the tomb?

Also, why didn't the Romans expose these inscriptions to silence the Christians who were proclaiming the Resurrection? Word that Jesus had not been raised would have soon spread, and the claims of resurrection would have proved to be a hoax.

Many witnesses

If Jesus' bones were buried in an ossuary, how can we account for the kind of evidence that Paul presented for those who doubted the Resurrection? In one of the earliest books of the New Testament, written in about AD 52, he writes:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to

James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. 1 CORINTHIANS 15:3-8

Paul is saying that Jesus appeared to many people who were still living, so if the people in Corinth had doubts about the Resurrection, they could simply ask those who had seen Him. The Christian doctrine of the Resurrection does not rest with one eyewitness, or for that matter with the disciples—although that certainly would be sufficient for faith. Rather, hundreds saw the risen Christ, and many were still living to testify to it.

Up close and personal

Those who are bent on discrediting the Resurrection accounts like to surmise that the disciples were gullible fishermen prone to hallucinations and superstitions. Thus, they readily believed in the Resurrection based on group hysteria. But history shows that they were actually hardheaded fishermen who were not given to wild speculations or an irrational eagerness to believe in miracles.

"Doubting Thomas," as he is frequently called, reminds us that Jesus is accommodating to skeptics whose hearts are open to embrace the truth but who sincerely believe there is not enough evidence. Sincere doubt is welcomed. It has been said that those who have never doubted have never truly believed. I've also heard doubt referred to as "stumbling over a stone we do not understand," while unbelief is "kicking at a stone we understand all too well."

Thomas had a streak of pessimism, a hunch that in the end nothing would ever come out quite right. When Christ told His disciples that it was time to return to Jerusalem, Thomas said to his friends, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). He was a loyal pessimist, the kind who would describe a cup as half empty rather than half full.

After the Resurrection, Christ appeared to His disciples in the upper room, but Thomas was absent. Like most melancholics, he likely preferred to suffer alone. As far as he was concerned, it was all over; he had witnessed a tragic end to a beautiful life.

Was Thomas justified in his doubt? The miracles of Jesus should have given him the confidence that not only was the grand miracle of the Resurrection possible, it was also necessary. This was one life that could not end on a cross.

Thomas also should have believed because of the report of the disciples. When they saw Him, they all shouted, "We have seen the Lord!" This would have been a lawyer's dream: ten testimonies, and they all agree! But such evidence was not enough for this pessimist.

Thomas was not the kind of disciple who was so gripped with "messianic fever" that he was seeking reasons to believe in the deity of Jesus. He was only willing to believe if the evidence was beyond reasonable doubt. He famously said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it" (John 20:25).

A week later, Jesus granted his request. He came through the closed doors and said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27). Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). The evidence met his expectations and was convincing.

SLANDERING JESUS

Is the evidence for Jesus' resurrection just as obvious as 2 + 2 = 4? No, it cannot be, for mathematics is simply the joining of two concepts in the mind. Nor is it like science, whose experiments can be repeated. The evidence for the Resurrection is rooted in proper historical investigation based on accepted rules of manuscript evidence. The evidence is enough for the honest doubter, but not enough for the dishonest one.

The evidence for the Resurrection is rooted in proper historical investigation based on accepted rules of manuscript evidence. The evidence is enough for the honest doubter, but not enough for the dishonest one.

Your name just might be in the Bible. When speaking to Thomas, Jesus added, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). We could paraphrase this, "Blessed are you—Tom, Ruth, or Marie—because though you have not seen, you have believed!"

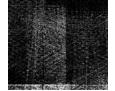
Our faith is open to investigation. We do not give religious truth a privileged position, immune from rational evidence. There are good reasons

to believe that God entered our world in Bethlehem, was crucified and buried in Jerusalem, and rose from the dead in a spectacular act of victory and redemption.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed *and on the third day be raised to life*.

MATTHEW 16:21 (emphasis added)

To disbelieve this promise is to slander the One who made it.



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SLANDERING JESUS

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