

## All over red rover: Christianity and the bones of Jesus

Australians have a saying: “it’s all over, red rover.” We use this saying when something is finished, gone, kaput, dead-as-a-doornail. The rhyme emphasises the finality of the demise, although no one quite knows why the red dog gets a mention.

Evangelical Christians have another saying. It is not a set form of words, but something like it is said in conversations, literature and pulpits. “I’ll stop believing if they find the bones of Jesus.” It is a view something like that first expressed by the apostle Paul: “if Christ has not been raised, [our] faith is worthless ... If we have placed our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone.” [1 Corinthians 15:17,19]

So if claims made in the U.S. documentary ‘The Tomb of Christ’ are correct, then it is all-over-red-rover for evangelical Christianity.

The *Discovery Channel* does not agree, asserting that ‘The Tomb of Christ’ does not challenge a belief in the resurrection (<http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/tomb/theology/theology.html>). Jesus’ body may have been laid out in a temporary tomb and moved later to the site where his bones were finally stored—a procedure that “does not mean that he could not have been resurrected from the second tomb. Belief in the resurrection is based not on which tomb he was buried in, but on alleged sightings of Jesus that occurred after his burial and documented in the Gospels.” With this suggestion the documentary’s defenders imply that a resurrection of Jesus would not have been a ‘bodily’ resurrection.

From time to time, various lines of argument are deployed to diminish the need for Jesus’ resurrection to be historical and bodily. “Religious belief is spiritual, personal and internal. It is not related to matters of science and archaeology.” “Jesus is such a good moral teacher that his ideas remain. We can have faith in and follow them.” “Since Jesus rose from death and ascended ‘spiritually’, his ‘spirit’ lives on.” On these views it is a bit rigid or literal or unimaginative to believe that a tomb of Jesus renders Christianity ‘all over red rover’.

Yet like Paul, many millions of Christians are not interested in following a dead saviour, because dead people cannot save us from much. Various dead people can help us avoid ignorance or stupidity. But you are very much looking for a live and effective Saviour if you want to be saved from something more. There are enemies too great for us to handle. Our driven obsessions to master, use and consume people, animals and the environment; the rejection and wrath due to our ignorance, hate and divorce of God; our coming death ... whoever needs saving from these enemies discovers that the form of the resurrected Jesus matters very much.

It matters that he appeared in a way that could eat, be touched, and was not a ghost [e.g. Luke 24:37-43, John 20:27]. It also matters that there was a strange new ‘spiritual’ dimension to his body [e.g. John 20:19]. This Jesus has what Paul calls a ‘spiritual body’ [1 Corinthians 15:44], retaining the best of the old and the promise of something new. It is a jewel that signals the totality of Jesus’ victory over our enemies. A ‘spiritual body’ like his is said to be on offer to all who look to him for rescue from sin, wrath and death.

Hence evangelical Christians are genuinely interested in the claims of this documentary. We do not want to waste any more time believing in ‘spiritual bodies’ if Jesus’ never had one, and we are not offended to be asked to consider new evidence. To the contrary—if Jesus of Nazareth took his bones nowhere and offers us no hope for our long-term future, we will be thankful to be told, even if somewhat grief-stricken.

What does the documentary claim? At the time of writing it has not aired in Australia, so we are dependent upon the *Discovery Channel* (<http://www.discovery.com/tomb>) and upon the summaries of others (e.g. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17328478/site/newsweek>). In brief:

1. The documentary focuses upon a group of ‘ossuaries’ (boxes of bones) that were unearthed in 1980 at a building site in Talpiot, Jerusalem.

2. Six of these have hard-to-read names scratched upon them in either Hebrew, Greek or Aramiac.
3. The documentary asserts that these names are 'Jesua, son of Joseph', 'Mary', 'Mariamene e Mara', 'Mathew', 'Jofa', and 'Judah, son of Jesua'.
4. It is asserted that these names refer to Jesus Christ, his mother, Mary Magdalene his 'wife', two of his brothers, and his 'son'.
5. DNA analyses of the Jesus and the Mariamene remains are used to claim that these people could perhaps possibly have been married.
6. A statistical analysis is used to claim that there is only a one-in-600 chance that this particular grouping of names would *not* be the family of Jesus.
7. A technique invented for the documentary attempts to show that deposits upon the surface of the ossuaries match those upon the surface of the so-called 'James brother of Jesus' ossuary (which was in the news in 2005). If this seventh ossuary also came from Talpiot, then the likelihood that the group is *not* the family of Jesus rises, we are told, to one in 30,000.

Criticisms of these claims can be found elsewhere and will be mentioned below. In summary:

1. This tomb was probably used by many families over a long period of time, as evidenced by the different languages used for the inscriptions.
2. Not everyone agrees that the inscriptions have been deciphered correctly; and the claims that 'Mariamene e Mara' is equivalent to 'Mary Magdalene', and that 'Mathew' and 'Jofa' refer to brothers of Jesus, are both very unlikely.
3. The DNA evidence only shows (inconclusively) that the two individuals were unrelated. Hence the speculation that 'Jesua' and 'Mariamene' could have been married is insecure, and ignores several other possibilities.
4. All historical judgments are to some extent probability based. But in this case, the analysis of probability relies upon disputed premises; and other statistical approaches yield very different probabilities.
5. The attempt to connect the James ossuary with the others is tenuous. Indeed the claim is rather odd, because the ossuary has been denounced as a forgery and its owner has been charged with fraud.
6. In the twenty-seven year gap since the ossuaries were discovered, no professional archaeologist has thought the tomb was that of Jesus of Nazareth. This recent claim comes not from a historian or an archaeologist, but from a journalist (Simcha Jacobovici) and a filmmaker (James Cameron), with the support of a mathematician (Andrey Feuerverger) whose calculations are based upon assumptions supplied by Jacobovici. A large number of experts in the field, including scholars who are not Christians, are being quoted as discounting the claims of the documentary.
7. The documentary's claims bear no resemblance to what is known of Jesus from the best historical records we have, the Gospels of the New Testament:
  - (i) The ossuary site is nowhere near where Jesus lived.
  - (ii) There is no record of Jesus marrying or having a son. (Although Jesus strongly approved of marriage, he was also an early exponent of a counter-cultural idea: the excellence of sexually abstinent singleness as an honourable alternative to marriage. This thread in his teaching makes it quite plausible that he was single.)
  - (iii) Many claimed to have seen and touched his living body a few days after his death, and no dead remains were produced to refute them. The empty tomb of Jesus was

essential to the logic of the first public Christian sermon [Acts 2], which succeeded because of the public consensus that Jesus' body no longer lay anywhere.

8. Other ancient tombs were remembered and revered. The 'Jesus family tomb' would have been known by all and revered by some. But there is no evidence of the veneration of any supposed tomb of Christ, and we cannot even find an ancient friend or opponent of Christianity suppressing such veneration as misguided.

More detailed versions of the above summary can be found at [http://www.y-zine.com/tomb\\_print.htm](http://www.y-zine.com/tomb_print.htm) , <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/02/jesus-tomb-titanic-talpiot-tomb-theory.html> & <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/02/problems-multiple-for-jesus-tomb-theory.html> which mainly comprise arguments put by biblical scholars Dr Ben Witherington III and Dr Richard Bauckham. Some further useful points are added by Dr Jodi Magness at <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=640>, who shows how the documentary fails to take into account much that is well-known about ancient Jewish burial practices.

We might suspect that arguments made against the documentary by Christians are ruined by their Christian bias. But if that is so, then we should equally discount the documentary as ruined by its maker's bias. In reality these suspicion-based attacks are only inflammatory, and do not really help us to get at the truth about whether Jesus rose from death. Although our histories and commitments do colour and affect our handling of evidence, we can still search together for truth about this matter.

But if there is some reason to think that Christ is not alive and well, this documentary has not found it. As Dr Andrew Shead of Moore College puts it, "for the documentary's conclusions to be true, not only would a long list of incredibly unlikely speculations all have to be true, but a long list of incredibly well authenticated ancient sources would all have to be false." The documentary makers will need to think again, and acknowledge how spurious and lightweight are their claims. It would also be good for them to reconsider Jesus' bodily resurrection with the same open mind they ask of the viewers of their documentary.

It will be embarrassing and frightening for us to meet a Jesus we claim is dead. Thankfully, he does not want it to be all-over-red-rover for people who are now making this error. He takes all comers, even those who say "I will never believe!" [John 20:25.] His words of kindness to Thomas are followed by kind words to people like us: "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." [John 20:29.] Jesus knows that even those who were there found it hard to believe he had beaten death. He knows it is even harder for we who were not there. But "those who have not seen" can hear the testimony of the ones who met him. Until the day they died, they kept proclaiming that Jesus had beaten death, and touched them. It will take more than a tenuous chain of speculation about some ancient bones to unravel their amazing story.

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### **Further Reading:**

Paul Barnett, *The Truth about Jesus*. Anglican Press Australia 2004.

Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity: the First Twenty Years*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.

John Dickson, *The Christ Files: how historians know what they know about Jesus*. Sydney: Blue Bottle, 2006.

N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Volume III of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.

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