

Bones of contention: The nature of the resurrection

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An old joke has a graduate student giving the news to the great theologian Paul Tillich: “They’ve discovered the bones of Jesus!” To which Tillich replies, in his thick German accent, “So he really *did* exist!” Christianity began with reports of an empty tomb and appearances of a risen Lord. For St. Paul, if God has not raised this righteous Jew, then Christian faith is futile and its adherents are still in their sins. But over the years some Christians have decided, with Tillich, that the resurrection was more of a spiritual than a physical event.

The possibility that the bones of Jesus have been discovered is the subject of a documentary by Simcha Jacobovici, who enlisted the funding and public-relations skills of film director James Cameron (*Titanic*) for *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, which aired on the Discovery Channel on March 4. Cameron also co-wrote the introduction to Jacobovici’s book, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, which is modestly subtitled *The Discovery, the Investigation, and the Evidence That Could Change History*.

The evidence is not new. Archaeologists have known since 1980 about the ossuaries labeled Jesus, Mary and Joseph and found in the Talpiot tomb in a suburb of Jerusalem. The bone boxes are part of the traveling exhibit “Cradle of Christianity,” currently in Fort Lauderdale. The “Cradle” exhibit uses the ossuaries to show just how common the names Jesus, Mary and Joseph were among Jews at the time of Jesus. Now Jacobovici and colleagues claim that it’s statistically unlikely to find these and other purported family members’ names together in one tomb. They also say DNA evidence shows that the Jesus and the Mary of these tombs were not related, which means it’s likely that they were married. The ossuary marked “Jude” is said to have contained the bones of their son.

One has to be suspicious of archaeological projects funded by publishers and movie producers and announced with sensational headlines in search of ratings. Real archaeologists toil away for years and submit their findings to peers for review before they call in Hollywood. Most scholars are extremely dubious about Jacobovici’s claim.

Yet the archaeological claim, however unlikely, does raise a theological question. Could Christianity be archaeologically falsified? Would the discovery of the bones of Jesus mean that Christianity must close up shop? In pondering the resurrection, Christians distinguish between resurrection and resuscitation. Jesus' rising from the dead can't simply mean that he had his mortal body back—in that case he'd have to die a second time. Jesus' raised body was an unusual kind of body—he walked through walls, for example. Paul talked about the resurrected body as a “spiritual body,” whatever that means. Could *something* be left behind after a resurrection?

On the other hand, early Christians insisted on the tomb's emptiness as part of their claim that resurrection is not merely a spiritual event but a physical one—as physical as the original creation. A verified discovery of Jesus' bones would cause no little amount of scrambling among Christians. Those who argue that it would change nothing about the faith have a faith that is cordoned off from history. If—speaking very hypothetically—Jesus' bones were ever to be discovered, it might put Christians closer to the position of Jews: while we may hope for the resurrection, we could offer no testimony that Jesus is the “first fruits” of God's power to destroy death.