‘Lost Tomb’: Why a fuss?

By CHRIS FRILINGOS
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

On Sunday, the Discovery Channel aired the premier of a documentary, The Lost Tomb of Jesus. Directed by Simcha Jacobovici and produced by James Cameron, Oscar-winning director of Titanic, Lost Tomb attracted a good deal of attention even before the details of its sensationalist claims were widely known.

The film proposes that a tomb in Jerusalem, originally unearthed in 1980, contains fragments of the bodily remains of Jesus of Nazareth. It also suggests that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that they had a son, Judah. To interviews with a respected statistician and DNA scientists, the documentary adds "dramatic re-enactments" of Jesus and Mary Magdalene's married life.

Lost Tomb continues to draw fire from biblical scholars, archaeologists and scholars of religion. After the film, Ted Koppel hosted a discussion with two archaeologists who attacked the documentary, calling it "archaeo-porn." A sign of the times is that criticism persists in the blogs of scholars at colleges and universities across the United States and the world.

The question is: Why? The wave of disapproval has led some to wonder about the motives of the film's detractors. Jacobovici has suggested that the negative reaction reflects a desire to preserve Christianity. On one level, he is saying that scholars of religion are unable to separate faith and science. On another, he is promoting a conspiracy theory similar to the Da Vinci Code's: 'Traditional Christianity remains protected by gatekeepers that suppress truth so as to maintain their own authority.' Jacobovici is saying that the object isn't to protect traditional Christianity but to insist that he play by the rules of scholarly inquiry. By taking claims about Jesus' alleged family life directly to popular media, the filmmaker has denied professional scholars of religion the chance to scrutinize his evidence and methods. Scholarship at its best is a communal activity. We publish in peer-reviewed journals because our peers are in the best position to point out inaccuracies and blind spots.

But it's not the film's sins of omission and commission that have provoked such an intense outcry from normally mild-mannered professors. No, it's that the defenders of Lost Tomb ascribe to critics an ulterior motive. Scholars of religion seek the same thing that their colleagues in English and biology seek: understanding. We don't aim to uphold religious dogma but to discern what makes religion meaningful to people in different times and places.

Had Jacobovici given scholars the respect he claims to have for their work, he might have found enthusiastic partners. Instead, he has discovered that most of us see Lost Tomb as a "docu-drama" that cannot be taken seriously as either.

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