



Religious Scholar Available To Discuss 'Tomb Of Jesus' Discovery

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February 27, 2007

DURHAM, N.H. -- David Frankfurter, professor of religious studies and history at the University of New Hampshire, is available to talk with the media about claims that the tomb of Jesus Christ has been discovered. The upcoming Discovery Channel show, "The Lost Tomb of Jesus," airs Sunday, March 4, 2007.

Frankfurter can be reached at 603-862-3015 and davidtf@hopper.unh.edu.

According to Frankfurter:

"The Discovery Channel announcement about Jesus's family tomb hinges on an actual Jewish tomb excavated in 1980, in which a number of ossuaries were found buried beneath the soil. (Ossuaries are stone boxes for storing bones traditionally recovered after the initial burial.) The excavations were properly done, the ossuaries properly studied and housed, and the whole thing published in 1996. There does not seem to have been an opportunity for planting fake name inscriptions, such as the 'James ossuary' of two years ago turned out to have. Israel is, admittedly, a place of very accomplished forgers.

"The names on the ossuaries in the tomb -- Yeshua, Mariam, Joseph, Judah -- were extremely common in Roman Palestine around the time of Jesus of Nazareth. They are not remarkable in and of themselves.

"The argument that the Discovery team and their scholarly supporters are making has to do with statistics: what is the chance that all these names would be in the same tomb? Even if compelling, statistics based on names do not make reliable historical evidence.

"We must, therefore, be extraordinarily careful not to draw wild, preliminary conclusions off these ossuaries and their names, especially in an era consumed with the Da Vinci Code.

"On the other hand, it is absurd to call the find or its announcement to be an attack on Christianity. Those evangelical leaders who are making this accusation are the same who promote biblical archaeology as a way of discovering 'evidence' for David, Solomon, Jesus, and Noah's Ark. Proper archaeology should never be at the service of the Bible or its authenticity, while Christianity does not rely on 'scientific' evidence for its basic faith in the resurrection of Jesus.

"If there is some truly compelling scientific reason to incorporate this tomb into the history of the earliest Jesus movement, then we must be able to discuss its implications. One implication might concern the well-established record of Jesus's advocacy of a celibate and anti-family lifestyle -- would the family tomb be evidence of a late-life shift? Another implication might concern the early tradition that Jesus's body had disappeared when the disciples went to retrieve it -- did a family member retrieve it instead? But it's entirely premature to address these questions, and I myself am not at all convinced of the link."

Frankfurter, a specialist in ancient Mediterranean religions, is the author of "Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History" (Princeton), which investigates the social and psychological patterns that have given rise to myths of witches, demons, satanic cults, and cannibalism throughout history. He also is the author of "Religion in Roman Egypt" (Princeton), which won the 1999 award for excellence in the historical study of religion from the American Academy of Religion.