



The Jesus Dynasty

The Imaginary and Irrational Interpretations of James Tabor

by G. Richard Fisher

Professor of systematic theology Robert Strimple, in response to the charge that the Gospel writers *created* certain events in their narratives, asks, "Are we to believe that the Evangelists felt themselves free to alter radically the message of Jesus and to 'make up' events that never happened during his ministry, even though there were eyewitnesses still living who could point out their errors?"¹

The subtitle to James Tabor's book, *The Jesus Dynasty*, reads, "The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity." In the book, Tabor goes so far as to write:

"*The Jesus Dynasty* presents the Jesus story in an entirely new light. It is history, not fiction. ... *The Jesus Dynasty* proposes an original version of Christianity, long lost and forgotten, but one that can be reliably traced back to the founder, Jesus himself."²

He also writes:

"I truly believe that an understanding of Jesus and his family, and the dynasty that perpetuated his message, is one of the most important keys to completing our quest to know the historical Jesus and the origins of Christianity."³

He further claims:

"An understanding of the Jesus dynasty opens the way for us to

recover an original Christianity and its potent message for our times."⁴

However, the book does not live up to its subtitle and its claims. Instead it offers a lot of speculation and guessing. In short, Tabor believes that his particular refashioning and re-creation of Jesus is a key to the *real* Jesus that everyone so far has missed. There are so many caveats in the book we have to wonder whether Tabor believes his statement that it is "history, not fiction" or if the whole thing is publisher's hype. With the success of Dan Brown's reconstruction of Jesus in *The Da Vinci Code*, one can't help but wonder if it hasn't launched a new bandwagon.

TABOR'S OWN HIDDEN HISTORY

The dust jacket of Tabor's book says Tabor is "Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He holds a Ph.D. in biblical studies from the University of Chicago and is an expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian origins." Tabor has written a few other books as well. But those weighty academic credentials are not the end of the story.

Tabor himself has a hidden history. Pointing this out leads to the realization that many of Tabor's views,

presuppositions, and biases can be traced to his early training and cultic indoctrination. Even Tabor admits this:

"All historians come to their investigations with selective criteria of judgment forged by both acknowledged and unrecognized predisposed interests and cultural assumptions. There is no absolutely objective place to stand. ... When it comes to the quest for the historical Jesus our need to be aware of our own prejudices seems particularly acute. ... I stand open to critique and revision."⁵

What the current biography does not tell us is that Tabor is a 1970 graduate of Herbert W. Armstrong's Ambassador College. Though originally baptized in the Church of Christ, Tabor says he "was baptized ... by Tony Hammer around Passover" into the Worldwide Church of God.⁶

Most are well aware that Armstrong led the Worldwide Church of God before his death⁷ and taught Sabbath keeping, salvation by law keeping, and British Israelism. It was a mixture of cultism, Judaism, legalism, and mutant Christianity with Armstrong the chief prophet and teacher.

Tabor became disgruntled after two years at Ambassador College and

turned his back on the Worldwide Church of God organization, if not all of its teachings. During the decade from 1970 to 1980, Tabor took a convoluted journey, which he describes:

"I was exposed to the most radical historical-critical biblical studies and gradually lost all faith in God, the Bible, or any idea of ultimate human purpose. I was reading, during all that time, dozens of books on philosophy, science, psychology, etc. I would characterize myself as a romanticized, bohemian, existentialist, nihilist — basically a follower of Freud and Nietzsche. ... Just about two years ago, for reasons it is difficult to fully explain, I began to turn back toward some kind of theism, and gradually, toward faith once again in the God of the Bible, and even in the Bible itself, but in a non-fundamentalist way. ... I don't like labels, neither Jewish (which I am certainly not), nor Christian (since I think what Jesus of Nazareth was all about has so precious little to do with Christianity)."⁸

Tabor can say that Jesus had "precious little to do with Christianity" because he has constructed a subjective and speculative idea of what early Christianity was like, and fabricated a Jesus who may have had a Roman soldier as a father.

B'NAI WHO?

It also appears that Tabor's more recent history has been hidden as well. He acknowledges that in the generally understood sense, he certainly is not a Christian. That is because Tabor is fully identified with and has been a spokesman for an obscure cult called B'nai Noah. They are also known as the Noahide group or the Rainbow Covenant group. This group has activities and conferences in Israel aiming to provide ecumenical fodder for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

It is, therefore, not surprising to read Tabor admitting that "there is little about the view of Jesus pre-

sented in this book that conflicts with Islam's basic perception. The prophet Mohammed was in contact with Christian groups in Arabia, and there is evidence to suppose that the Christians he met might have been closer in their beliefs to the Ebionites than to the Western church."⁹ Tabor's Jesus is a mix of the Muslim view and Ebionite view, which we will examine shortly.

One of the more well-known leaders of B'nai Noah is Vendyl Jones:

"Vendyl Jones, who once served Baptist pastorates, has renounced his Christian faith (though he continues to minister!). He believes that the New Testament is a fraud contrived by the Catholic church in the fourth century from collections of apostolic writings with the intention of replacing Judaism. After moving for a time to Israel, divorcing his wife (leaving five children), and taking a younger Israeli wife, he started the *B'nai Noah* ("Children of Noah") movement. This group seeks ostensibly to teach Torah to Gentile Christians but in fact has disrupted local churches and attempted to make church members convert to Judaism. ... He stated that the New Testament, Jesus, and the idea of the Trinity of God are all false. He maintains that 'Jews are saved through the Abrahamic covenant, not Jesus!'"¹⁰

Jones also claims to know the location of the Ark of the Covenant.

In 1991, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that J. David Davis and James Tabor visited Israel to promote B'nai Noah teachings.¹¹

The "General Introduction To B'nai Noah," says:

"The B'nai Noah observe seven general and basic commandments. These commandments were given to Adam, the first God-fearer, and to the biblical character Noah, and are still followed by those looking for a place in the World to Come. ... What are the Seven Laws of

Noah? 1. Do not Blaspheme God's name. 2. Do not worship idols. 3. Do not commit immoral sexual acts. 4. Do not murder. 5. Do not steal. 6. Do not eat the flesh of an animal while it is still alive. 7. Creation of a judicial system. ... Noah - a 'God-fearer' - saved the human race from extinction because he followed this ancient path. Noah entered into the Kingdom of Heaven without the aid of a mediator. As the Torah specifically states that 'Noah found grace in the eyes of God' and not in the eyes of a mediator - and so this can apply to you today! ... All you have to do is ask God's forgiveness. God will forgive you if you ask Him and follow the laws with the right intent. The God of Noah, Abraham, and Israel is awaiting for all descendants of Noah to return back to the Ark. ... Many are called but few choose the original God-made path."¹²

An e-mail correspondence was sent to Tabor to ask if he was still associated and active with B'nai Noah. No answer was received before this article was published.

SUMMING IT UP

Tabor's main scenario of a Jesus family dynasty through James is not really new at all, but by his own admission is the borrowed story line of the Ebionites with a number of his own additions. From the standpoint of historic and orthodox Christianity, the Ebionites were severely heretical, but from Tabor's perspective:

"They were known subsequently by the term 'Ebionites,' which meant in Hebrew 'poor ones.' Eusebius knows of them, though he considers them heretics in contrast to the Christian orthodoxy that he championed. Among his charges was that the Ebionites made Jesus a 'plain and ordinary man,' born naturally from 'Mary and her husband.' Eusebius further stated that the Ebionites insisted on observance of the Jewish law or Torah and that they maintained that salva-

tion was by 'works' as well as faith, as the letter of James affirms. The Ebionites rejected the letters of the apostle Paul and considered him an apostate from the original faith. They used only a Hebrew version of the gospel of Matthew — now lost to us other than in fragments. Eusebius, allied with the emperor Constantine, who had turned to Christianity himself by A.D. 325, classified each of these Ebionite views as heretical. And yet ironically, their views are grounded in the teachings of Jesus himself, and that tradition passed on by his brothers."¹³

Tabor also believes that Jesus was an ordinary man and dismisses any Scripture that disagrees with this view. Like the "scholars" of The Jesus Seminar, Tabor picks and chooses what verses belong in the original Bible — apparently those that he agrees with — and what verses were added much later — apparently those he disagrees with.

DEJÁ VU DA VINCI CODE

Tabor's reconstruction of Jesus' life reads as such: Jesus was not born of a virgin. His father might have been a Roman soldier. Joseph married Mary anyway and died early on. Then Mary married Joseph's brother. Jesus became a follower of John the Baptist and saw John as greater than Himself. However, John was killed and Jesus, by default, had to take the leadership. Jesus then was crucified on the Mount of Olives and hastily buried there. His body was soon moved, accounting for the empty tomb. Jesus was reburied, perhaps in Jerusalem or maybe in Galilee near Safed. His Davidic dynasty was turned over to His family, namely in the person of James His brother who ruled the Church from Jerusalem. Later it was Simon, another brother, who headed the dynasty.

Paul, filled with Greek/Hellenistic ideas, began to promote a celestial Christ and the idea of Jesus' deity was fabricated by later Christians who made up various contradictory gospels from a corrupted oral tradition.

There is a Q source, which no one has ever seen, that supposedly is an original gospel underneath the Gospels. Tabor acts as if he knows the exact wording of this imaginary source.¹⁴

Tabor reveals his affinity for gnostic teaching when he calls the so-called *Gospel of Thomas* "clearly the most precious lost Christian document discovered in the last two thousand years."¹⁵ To call this gnostic fragment a "Christian document" is outlandish.¹⁶ It is not a "gospel," was not written by Thomas, and is not Christian. The gnostics did not even think of themselves as Christians.

The gnostics, who wrote long after Christ's death, resurrection, and

OSSU WHAT?

Ossuaries were limestone boxes that held the bones of the dead after the flesh had completely decayed, usually in about a year. These small boxes were as long as the longest bone and about half as wide as long. The bone boxes were usually placed in family tombs. Space constraints might have driven the practice when extended families needed more compact burial space. Hellenistic influence and the preserving of individual identities rather than being merged into the ancestral collective may be another reason for ossuaries.¹⁹

Ossuaries were used in the ancient world during the Hellenistic period. They have been discovered in Egypt,

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ascension, displayed in their writings how anti-Christian they were. The early Church soundly refuted and rejected gnosticism in all of its mutant strains. Gnostics generally taught that God was unknowable, matter was evil, Christ was not divine, and He certainly was not the Savior of the world.¹⁷

Yet not everything in Tabor's book is suspect. He actually alerts us to some recent and intriguing archaeological discoveries. The Tomb of the Shroud located in the Hinnom Valley, south of the Old City of Jerusalem, reveals much about first-century life and burial practices.¹⁸ When and where Tabor stays with the facts, he is informative.

Northern Africa, and Israel, approximately 300-100 B.C. and even beyond A.D. 70, though there was a dramatic increase of use in the Jerusalem area during the reign of Herod the Great. This was probably due to the extensive quarrying for the temple, great amounts of cut limestone, and the number of stone masons available.²⁰

Having at least an introductory acquaintance with ossuaries will help us grasp part of Tabor's premise as we move through his book. Also one need take into account three major considerations as we look at *The Jesus Dynasty*:

1. *The Tentative Nature of Tabor's material.* Tabor's book is filled with

what can be labeled as fall-back language. His use of constant caveats strongly suggests that he is either uncertain or that he needs a back door if academic colleagues press him.

Consider his escape language: “presumably,”²¹ “the gospels imply,”²² “possibilities,”²³ “inconclusive,”²⁴ “possibility of it,”²⁵ “it is impossible to prove,”²⁶ “was likely buried,”²⁷ “new evidence might emerge,”²⁸ “One might assume,”²⁹ and “One has to assume.”³⁰

At one point, Tabor says of history that it involves an attempt “to retrieve and *imagine* a past”³¹ and “at this point there is no proof” and that “evidence might come to light.”³² These kinds of phrases are used repeatedly and things he proposes are possible or probable, but not certain.

He goes on to say that “there is much we can never know,” “some areas we are left to guess or speculate,” and that his explanation “seems reasonable” and “might have taken place.”³³ But Tabor is not finished, he adds “there is evidence to suppose” and “might have been.”³⁴ Based on this, no one should take this book seriously or think it offers objective and sure conclusions. It is not true history or even true archaeology.

The same James whom Tabor claims to hold in high esteem said, “But let your ‘Yes,’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No,’ lest you fall into judgment” (James 5:12).

MYSTERY!

This now takes the reader into a major campaign of Tabor’s book: what Tabor calls “The Mystery of the Talpiot Tomb.”³⁵ However, there really is nothing mysterious about the tomb’s find, its location, or its contents. There are many unanswered questions that Tabor admits simply because there was not enough evidence *in situ* to answer those questions.

Tabor begins his story this way:

“The tomb was in East Talpiot, just south of Jerusalem’s Old

City. The tomb had been uncovered when TNT was detonated by a construction crew putting up a new apartment complex. Israeli archaeologist Joseph Gath, now deceased, excavated it quickly so the construction could proceed.”³⁶

There were ten ossuaries. Six had names inscribed on the outside and four were plain. There was a Joseph, two Marys, Jude son of Jesus, Matthew, and a Jesus son of Joseph. Before we jump to unbiblical conclusions, as did Tabor, we must realize that there is no exact dating for the Talpiot Tomb and the span could run more than 150 years. The above names were so common that even Tabor has to admit such a grouping is “inconclusive.”³⁷

There is no way to know the exact relationship of the Marys to the others. Were they married to any of the men? Siblings to any? Parents? Offspring? Aunts? No one knows. Mary was the most common female name in that period and Joseph the second most common male name. The name Jesus, or Yeshua, also was very common. There was another “Jesus son of Joseph” ossuary discovered in Jerusalem around 1926.³⁸ Yet no serious scholar suggested it belonged to Jesus of Nazareth.

Tabor quotes Amos Kloner, who published a report on the Talpiot tomb. Kloner maintained that the “possibility of it being Jesus’ family [is] very close to zero.”³⁹ And Tabor himself admits that “it is impossible to prove that this particular tomb was related to Jesus of Nazareth.”⁴⁰ Yet Tabor somehow wants us to believe it might be, or that there just might be a Jesus family tomb in Jerusalem somewhere. It is an amazing exercise without an outcome. The bottom line seems to be to get our minds accustomed to the idea that there *might* be a tomb of Jesus somewhere in Israel.

Tabor works hard to inject a bit of sensationalism and mystery around the Talpiot tomb:

“The questions mounted: When had the tomb been discovered? Why had it not been immediately

reported to the public? Was there some type of cover-up due to the shocking contents of the tomb?”⁴¹

Like *The Da Vinci Code* author Dan Brown, Tabor is contriving a conspiracy for effect. The tomb was so uneventful and so unsensational that it added very little to archaeological research. There certainly was no cover-up, and we know when it was discovered.

NOT REALLY NEW

Moreover, Tabor was not the first to call attention to the Talpiot tomb. It was reported soon after it was opened. Joseph Gath released a public report in Hebrew in 1980, immediately following its discovery. The ossuaries were cataloged in *Levi Rahmani’s Catalog* in 1994, and available to the public for study. *Rahmani’s Catalog* of ossuaries is one of the “bibles” for ossuary study. He has cataloged almost 900 ossuaries. The actual Talpiot ossuaries are available to scholars and can be seen in Beth Shemesh, along with many others.

In 1996, the BBC aired an Easter special on the Talpiot tomb. So even to the English-speaking world, the information has been available for more than a decade. Also in 1996, a detailed report on the tomb with drawings was released by Amos Kloner. The report shows the discovery as uneventful and Kloner concludes, “This burial cave was probably used for three or four generations.”⁴² The exact relationship between the occupants of the tomb is impossible to determine.

Craig Evans’ informative book, *Jesus and the Ossuaries*, has an entire chapter called “Significant Ossuaries for Research in the Historical Jesus.”⁴³ Talpiot is not even mentioned.

There is no reason to think there would be a family tomb of Jesus in Jerusalem. A family from Nazareth would have its tomb in Galilee. Archaeologist Gordon Franz writes:

“According to early tradition, Joseph was buried in Nazareth. ... Early tradition also places Mary’s burial in Nazareth. ...

However, there is a 5th century AD tradition that places her tomb in the Kidron Valley near Gethsemane. ... The ossuary containing the bones of 'Yeshua' (704) could not be that of Jesus of Nazareth for two reasons. First, the New Testament is very clear, Jesus bodily rose from the dead. Since His flesh did not see corruption (Ps. 16:8-11; Acts 2:25-32), there could be no need for an ossuary. Second, ossuary No. 702 contained the bones of 'Yehuda, the son of Yeshua.' Apparently the Yeshua of ossuary No. 704 had a son named Yehuda. Again the gospels are clear, Jesus never married and never had children."⁴⁴

What makes little sense in the Tabor scenario is the hasty burial story he proposes with the body of Jesus later being moved. A Roman decree existed at that time making it a capital crime to desecrate a tomb and move a body.⁴⁵ The already fearful disciples would hardly want to add a capital crime to their resume just for a defunct hope and a corpse. Joseph of Aramathea would not have intervened had there already been a family tomb in Jerusalem; Mary and the beloved disciple would have taken care of the burial arrangements. Tabor's material is so speculative and tentative that no one should believe his conclusions.

2. The Deceptive Nature of Tabor's Material. Tabor makes much of a cave discovered in 1999 by Shimon Gibson. The cave is west of Jerusalem near Ein Karem. The cave also is referred to as the Suba Cave. It is about 70 feet long by 12 feet wide and 12 feet high.

Ein Karem is the *traditional* birthplace of John the Baptist. The cave, originally dug hundreds of years before Jesus, is an ancient cistern that *may* have been used by the Byzantine monks (A.D. 300-400) for shelter and cleansing rituals. There is a stick figure scratched into the wall that archaeologist Shimon Gibson suggests may be associated with John the Baptist, given the tradition of his

nearby birthplace. No one knows for sure what the figure represents or when it was put there or that John ever knew of the cave or ever visited it.⁴⁶ The Scriptures are clear and unequivocal that John baptized in the Jordan River east of Ein Karem, many miles away. There is no dispute that the area of the wilderness that was his ground for ministry was not the lush green hilly area of Ein Karem.

In 2004, Shimon Gibson's book, *The Cave of John the Baptist*, made a big splash because of the title and its subtitle, which claimed, "The Stunning Archaeological Discovery That Has Redefined Christian History." The book did not live up to the hype. The book fell flat and Gibson offered no evidence whatsoever that the cave had anything to do with John the Baptist in the first century.

Tabor tries to present a case that even Jesus used the cave for baptisms. In a section called "The 'Lost Years' of John,"⁴⁷ he strongly suggests the use of the cave by John and Jesus. In a later section, "Jesus in Judea,"⁴⁸ Tabor reverts totally to evasive language and imagination:

"I remember sitting outside the cave late one afternoon at sunset trying to *imagine* what could have occurred. Was it possible that Peter, James, John, and the other apostles, and maybe even Jesus' mother and brothers, had stood on this very ground and entered this very cave? ... Our Suba cave *might* well have been a central staging ground for Jesus' preaching and baptism campaign in late A.D. 27. That afternoon I found it easy to *imagine* Jesus and his followers at the Suba cave."⁴⁹

This seems to be an exercise in turning from the truth to fables. However, there were no ifs, maybes, mights, or imaginative scenarios in August 2004 when Tabor himself informed the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation that he was skeptical about the cave:

"James Tabor, who participated in the excavation with some of his students, is skeptical. He feels

there is no proof that John himself actually used the cave, located more than five kilometres from the New Testament preacher's hometown of Ein Kerem, now part of Jerusalem. However, both Tabor and [Shimon] Gibson agreed that the wall carvings — which depict a man wearing animal skins and holding a staff — tell the story of John the Baptist. The carvings are believed to have been made by monks in the fourth or fifth century."⁵⁰

Tabor just cannot seem to let go of a good tale:

"Since the discovery of this amazing site I have naturally wondered whether John the Baptist himself might have come to this cave. Clearly, short of an inscription, which we did not find, that can never be proven. However, it is far from unlikely and may even be probable."⁵¹

THE MAN BEHIND THE THEORY

Tabor also seems to relish introducing radical theories just for the sake of being novel. For instance, he writes that, "A more likely site for Jesus' crucifixion is on the Mount of Olives, east of the city."⁵² He offers neither historical nor archaeological evidence for this assertion. His references, "the Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 68a; Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 6:1,"⁵³ written long after Christ, do not buttress the case and do not say that Jesus was crucified on the Mount of Olives. They only speak of the red heifer and the scapegoat. Unless Talmudic materials, which postdate second temple times, can be verified by earlier history and hard archaeological discoveries, they cannot be offered as firm proof.

There is far more historical evidence for the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as the crucifixion site, but even that is far from absolute. Tabor writes that Jesus "was hastily and temporarily buried in an unknown tomb."⁵⁴ The tomb is unknown today, but was known to His followers (Luke 23:55). Neither Tabor nor anyone else can

state that Jesus was buried on the Mount of Olives or temporarily, despite the inclusion in his book of "a 1st-century empty tomb on the Mount of Olives."⁵⁵

Tabor has borrowed this whole scenario from Ernest Martin, a former Worldwide Church of God fellow traveler. In the 1980s, Martin released a detailed study of his ideas based on vigorous text-twisting and heavy typology. Martin's paper has to do with the scapegoat being released over the Mount of Olives, east to the wilderness to die. To really press the typology, Jesus would have had to die in the wilderness somewhere near the Dead Sea. Martin identified the Mount of Olives as being "without the camp" (Hebrews 13:11), or outside the gate (v. 12).

What is the point of Hebrews 13:11-12 and the mention of Christ's sacrifice outside the temple and city? The point is not location, but identification. Where Christ was crucified is certainly not as important as why and its impact on us. Jesus identified with the ancient sacrifices and fulfilled them, being willing to suffer and die away from the temple. Now we who identify with Him should also be willing to identify with His rejection as verse 13 declares: "therefore let us go forth to Him outside the camp bearing His reproach." We are not called to go to the place of His sacrifice, but to boldly identify with Christ beyond the confines of the Jewish order. Martin made it all about location and made nothing of the main point of identification, which is the whole thrust of the context.

It is truly amazing what Martin does with Bible verses to fit his scenario. Somehow the Mount of Olives becomes *ros* or "head" from 2 Samuel 15:30,32, which he quickly shapes into the place of the skull. Patching verses together, Martin tries to form them into a shape to fit his theory. He, at times, selectively takes secondary meanings of Greek words to try to make a point. An example:

"So, if people wish to deny our new explanation, then interpret-

ing the words differently can give some evidence on their side. As stated before, almost all the words used in the description of the location and manner of Christ's crucifixion are capable of double interpretations — even triple or more meanings! This is the irony of the whole affair. It shows that God is capable of *revealing* absolutely, yet he can also *conceal* absolutely simply by choosing words to describe the events which can be differently interpreted!"⁵⁶

So if the Bible's words have two or three meanings and God conceals the meaning, then Martin would have us believe only he can tell us what the words really mean.

As with Tabor, Martin's view is not really a "new explanation," but one concocted by R.F. Hutchinson in the 1870s. It was ignored by the scholarly community and fell into oblivion until Martin tried to revive it.

Tabor does not go as far as Martin with the wilder typology. Martin contends that Jesus and the two thieves were all together crucified on the same tree trunk. This way they could look like a candelabra or Menorah with their arms extended up (though in crucifixion they were extended out), as well as look like and be a symbol of an almond tree, which represents the tree of life. He never explains why this typology is important.⁵⁷

3. The Distasteful Nature of Tabor's Material. Not only is Jesus denigrated and reduced to a failed Messiah, but Mary is seriously maligned. Tabor is correct when he says:

"For millions of Christians any suggestion that Jesus was conceived through the normal process of human sexual reproduction, even if somehow sanctified by God, is viewed as scandalous if not outright heresy."⁵⁸

Tabor then writes that we have two choices: either Joseph or some unnamed man was the father. Later, he names the "unnamed man" and suggests he has found his grave.

GOD'S GIVING BIRTH

Tabor throws out a red herring that, "This idea of humans being fathered by gods is quite common in Greco-Roman culture. There was a whole host of heroes who were said to be the product of a union between their mother and a god."⁵⁹ Here he is suggesting that early Christians just got confused and fell into mythology and legendary thinking. Neither the Bible nor early Christians ever suggested that Christ was the product of an intimate relationship of God with Mary. The cohabiting of gods in Greek mythology is quite unlike the annunciation story. The Bible is very discreet as it speaks of a miracle created within Mary by the Holy Spirit. Any suggestion otherwise is a gross distortion of the Bible's teachings and Christian belief.

The only modern group that comes close to that kind of thinking is the Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Former Mormon President Joseph Fielding Smith claimed that, "Christ was begotten of God. He was not born without the aid of Man, and *that Man was God!*"⁶⁰

All the tentative language in the world cannot mute where Tabor tries to take us. Chapter 3 is titled, "An Unnamed Father of Jesus?" Here Tabor alleges that later Christians tried to "'fix' the scandal"⁶¹ of Mary by altering Bible texts. Tabor leads his readers further along:

"So, if Jesus' father was not Joseph, who might it possibly have been? And what circumstances led Mary to being accused of fornication and labeled a 'whore'? In terms of any historical certainty we probably will never know. If we were filling out Jesus' birth certificate we would have to put down 'father unknown.' But the case is not entirely closed. There are stories and rumors that circulated quite early, and there is a name — *Pantera* — that seems to crop up here and there with some consistency."⁶²

Tabor says there is no certainty and we will probably never know because there are “stories and rumors.” Tabor then produces a name. The next section of the book is titled, “The Mystery of Pantera Solved.”⁶³

Tabor begins in A.D. 178, almost 200 years after the birth of Christ, and quotes an anti-Christian work called *On the True Doctrine* written by the Greek philosopher Celsus. At least we know where Tabor is coming from: He trusts pagan writers, but not the Gospel writers. He references the Babylonian Talmud and other questionable sources for Jesus, son of Panteri, though he admits the word and its meaning are obscure and has various spellings including “Pantira, Pandera, Pantiri, Panteri.”⁶⁴ He also gives no Talmudic context for the reference to Jesus, son of Panteri.

Tabor quotes historian Adolph Deissmann, who published an article on inscriptions from the first century that used the name Pantera/Panthera. Deissmann noted that a Pantera “had died in the middle of the 1st century A.D. and had come to Germany from Palestine.”⁶⁵ Tabor learned the tombstone was in Germany. He then muses about going there:

“Was it remotely possible that I would soon be standing before what might be an authentic relic of the family of Jesus?”⁶⁶

He then asks, “Is it remotely plausible that among all the thousands of tomb inscriptions of the period that this might be the tombstone of Jesus’ father?”⁶⁷ The short answer for the Christian is that it was not even remotely plausible or possible.

DOING THE MATH

Recalling that Deissmann said Pantera had died in the “middle of the 1st century,” Tabor says that Pantera died “at age sixty-two.”⁶⁸ Tabor also reveals that Pantera’s tombstone and the “other nine tombstones appear to date from around the same period — mid to late 1st century A.D., based on the coin evidence found in the cemetery.”⁶⁹ Jesus was born in 6-7 B.C., so if one just does

the math on Deissmann’s dates, Pantera would have had to have been five years old or younger when he met Mary or, as Tabor later suggests, raped Mary.⁷⁰ Based on Tabor’s “mid to late 1st century” date, Pantera may not even have been born, let alone cohabited with Mary in 6-7 B.C., the actual year of Jesus’ birth.

In his 535-page book, *Light From the Ancient East*, Deissmann gives just three-quarters of a page to the Pantera inscription, which demonstrates that he must have considered it insignificant. He says it was a common Roman name and appeared in late Jewish tradition “for the purposes of Jewish polemics.”⁷¹ What this means is simply that later Judaism made up a story of Jesus possibly being fathered by a Roman soldier.

All of Tabor’s ramblings and imagined stories are very distasteful and it is unfortunate to have to even address them. He certainly is opposed to the virgin conception — or miraculous conception — of Jesus, more commonly called the Virgin Birth.

Certainly the Bible gives us reason to believe that Jesus was conceived by and born to a virgin. For all the debate over Isaiah 7:14 and the Hebrew word *almah*, or virgin, the New Testament settles the issue when Matthew uses the Greek word *parthenos* and says, “Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call His name Immanuel, which is translated ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:23).

Luke confirms as well that Mary was a virgin (Luke 1:27). When the angel gives the message that, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you” (1:35), any Jewish mind would understand this as a creative act of God. Additionally, every Jewish mind would have had to connect Genesis 1 and the Spirit hovering over the waters in creation. Jesus was the beginning of a new creation. This creative act of God is alluded to in Hebrews 10:5, “a body You have prepared for Me.”

The idea of a miracle birth was not unfamiliar to Jewish thinking. The birth of the patriarch Isaac had a miracle element attached to it: “And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD *did* for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time that God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him — whom Sarah bore to him — Isaac” (Genesis 21:1-3, emphasis added).

Hebrew linguists Keil and Delitzsch call this “a miracle of grace ... the promise of God and the pledge of its fulfillment on the one hand, and the incapacity of Abraham for begetting children, and of Sarah for bearing them, on the other; and through this name, Isaac was designated as the fruit of omnipotent grace working against and above the forces of nature.”⁷²

In Hebrews 11 we find that Sarah’s faith is applauded, “By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised” (v. 11). The Jewish mind may have been accustomed to the idea of a miracle birth. Rabbinic teaching allowed for at least miraculous revitalization of the Matriarchs to conceive.⁷³

Robin Griffith-Jones explores the Gospels and suggests that Jesus is presented in Matthew as the new and greater Moses. The many parallels are striking. Of the many comparisons to Moses, Griffith-Jones points out a Jewish birth story of Moses and then compares it to Jesus’ birth in Matthew. It regards Moses and his father:

“‘Amram, a well-born Israelite,’ said Josephus, ‘fearing that his whole nation would be extinguished, and anxious for himself, for his wife was pregnant, was at a loss what to do; he prayed for God’s help on his people.’ We hear in other stories that the Jews in Egypt gave up all marital relations — anything to prevent the birth of children that Pharaoh would murder. The Jews’ re-

straint, of course, could have prevented the birth of just the one child that they needed; Moses himself. There is in one version of this story a clue that God himself ensured Moses' birth by a miraculous conception. Moses and Jesus may have even more in common than at first appears."⁷⁴

Surely the Gospels must have been circulating early since in A.D. 105 Ignatius declared Jesus "was truly born of a virgin."⁷⁵ The early Church and the early Church Fathers were all on board as far as the Virgin Birth. Justin Martyr (A.D. 160) echoed Ignatius, stating, "We even affirm that He was born of a virgin."⁷⁶

Irenaeus, in A.D. 180, said Christ "humbled Himself to be born of a virgin."⁷⁷ He also said that it was heretics who denied it. Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 195) believed "He who made the universe — assumed flesh and was conceived in the virgin's womb."⁷⁸ This is the universal voice of the historic orthodox faith that we call Christianity.

ANOTHER MAN BEHIND THE THEORY

If we use Tabor's tactics, we can selectively and subjectively dismiss any verse that does not agree with what we are trying to teach. This way we make the Bible say anything we want. We can torture the Bible to make it confess what we wish. We could say, as Tabor often does, that certain verses in the New Testament not fitting our particular scenario were added generations later, but that would be dishonest.

This all smacks of the obsolete theories of existentialist theologian Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976). Bultmann, a German higher critic who lectured at Marburg, said that the idea of a suffering servant Messiah was unknown in first-century Judaism. Therefore, Bultmann said, references to Jesus as a suffering Messiah must have been written generations later. He did this with many Bible themes and dismissed the Bible as untrustworthy.

Now with the discovery and translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the proliferation of knowledge of first-century Judaism, the theories of Bultmann have been discredited. Messianic ideas were part of the fabric of Judaism during the time of Jesus. A suffering Messiah was certainly in the thought processes of many Jews as shown by the Thanksgiving Scroll.⁷⁹

Just like Bultmann, Tabor relegates much of the material in the Gospels to the Byzantine era. He assigns less to the early Hebrew Christians in Israel and the few things left are attributed to Jesus. Bultmann taught in his principle of form criticism that oral tradition about Jesus, passed down for generations, became corrupted. In fact, Bultmann concluded that we can know almost nothing about the life of Jesus. All of Tabor's speculations are driven by Bultmann's presuppositions that a few stories of Jesus were handed down orally for many years and became seriously flawed. The post-apostolic Church corrupted them further by adding ecclesiastical material and mythology. The core assumption of Bultmann and Tabor seems to be that *there were no eyewitnesses* to Jesus. So we are to believe that the entire Church, after the first century, was involved in either massive delusion or deception. They just made up events — and the world bought it. Even if there was a long period of oral transmission (and we do not believe there was), why would we assume it was corrupted?

With the explosion of archaeology in Israel, especially in Jerusalem, we are lightyears beyond Bultmann in terms of knowledge about Jesus and first-century Judea.⁸⁰

NO DYNASTY HERE

The word "dynasty" may fit the Herods, but not Jesus. It may fit the Maccabean priests and kings, but not Jesus. It may fit Roman emperors, but certainly not Jesus. Jesus said that His kingdom was not of this world, but was rather a spiritual rule in hearts. He spoke about becoming like a child (Mark 10:15). He said, "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them,

and their great ones exercise authority over them. *Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant*" (Mark 10:42-43 emphasis added). Jesus' kingdom was the opposite of this world. Not dynasty, but ministry. Not rule, but cross-bearing. Not lording it over others, but loving and serving others.

Tabor seems to think that James took precedence and became the ruler of the dynasty, but it was James who condemned exalting the rich and mighty and called partiality sin. According to James 2:1-9, the idea of a ruling dynasty would prove people to be transgressors of God's law. He also asserted, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (4:6).

So we are to believe that verses which are a problem to Tabor were insertions into the Bible centuries after the fact by misguided Christians. With the discovery in Alexandria, Egypt, of ancient P fragments, the text of the Bible is virtually being pushed to the doorstep of the authors of the New Testament.⁸¹

Tabor plays a selective game with Scripture. The verses he disagrees with are brushed off as later insertions. This surely is not scholarship or objectivity, but sleight of hand making Tabor the sole arbiter of truth. It is a subjective exercise. Many of the so-called "Jesus scholars" do this and then try to tell us that though the New Testament cannot be trusted, the much later, heretical gnostic writings can be — because they have said so.

New studies of the texts of the New Testament by Carsten Thiede and others indicate that Matthew's Gospel dates to roughly A.D. 60. Before his death, Thiede was calling for a re-evaluation and redating of the New Testament text. Scholarly research is indicating a completion of the entire New Testament before A.D. 90, and some for a completion before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. This certainly is not a closed issue.⁸²

Thiede's words are both perceptive and profound:

"One consequence of this ... has been the tyranny of theory and interpretation. If the Gospels are assumed to be unreliable, then the theorist becomes our only guide to the life of Jesus. It follows from this that almost anything can be — and has been — said about Jesus. If Jesus was not an Essene, then he was a Buddhist; or a profeminist and worshipper of the goddess 'Sophia'; or a Marxist revolutionary; or a politically correct left-winger who would feel at home on a university campus. It does not take much imagination to see that excessive use of theory makes us see Jesus as we want to see him, as a reflection of us, not as he was."⁸³

Endnotes:

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3. *Ibid.*, pg. 317.
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 311.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 316, 317.
6. "James D. Tabor's Genesis 2000," *Ambassador Report*, March 1989, pg. 11. Document also available at: <http://thepainfultruth.org/ar/AR41.html>.
7. See further, Peter Ditzel, "The Two Faces of the Worldwide Church of God," *The Quarterly Journal*, January-March 1997, pp. 5-11; and Peter Ditzel, "Transforming the Truth - The Worldwide Church of God Continues to 'Make' History," *The Quarterly Journal*, July-September 1998, pp. 5-12.
8. "James D. Tabor's Genesis 2000," op. cit., pg. 12.
9. *The Jesus Dynasty*, op. cit., pp. 315-316.
10. Randall Price, *In Search of Temple Treasures*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1994, pg. 146.
11. Haim Shapiro, "B'nai No'ach Delegation Visits Israel Tora Belt' Prospers Among American Baptists," *Jerusalem Post*, July 14, 1991, pg. 2.
12. Billy Jack Dial, "General Introduction to B'nai No'ach." Document available at: www.bnainoach.com/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=1.
13. *The Jesus Dynasty*, op. cit., pg. 303.
14. See further, Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999, "Q Document," pp. 618-621.
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16. See further, G. Richard Fisher, "The

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 18. *The Jesus Dynasty*, op. cit., pp. 6-15.
 19. See further, Bryon McCane, *Roll Back the Stone*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 2003, pp. 8-15, 40-47, 53-55.
 20. See further, Craig Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries*. Waco, Texas: Baylor Press, 2003, pp. 28-30.
 21. *The Jesus Dynasty*, op. cit., pg. 24.
 22. *Ibid.*
 23. *Ibid.*, pg. 25.
 24. *Ibid.*
 25. *Ibid.*
 26. *Ibid.*, pg. 27.
 27. *Ibid.*, pg. 33.
 28. *Ibid.*
 29. *Ibid.*, pg. 151.
 30. *Ibid.*, pg. 152.
 31. *Ibid.*, pg. 305, emphasis added.
 32. *Ibid.*
 33. *Ibid.*, pg. 308.
 34. *Ibid.*, pg. 316.
 35. *Ibid.*, pg. 22.
 36. *Ibid.*, pg. 24.
 37. *Ibid.*, pg. 25.
 38. *Jesus and the Ossuaries*, op. cit., pg. 94.
 39. *The Jesus Dynasty*, op. cit., pp. 25-26.
 40. *Ibid.*, pg. 27.
 41. *Ibid.*, pg. 23.
 42. Amos Kloner, "A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries in East Talpiyot, Jerusalem," *Atiqot* XXIX, 1996, pg. 21.
 43. *Jesus and the Ossuaries*, op. cit., pp. 91ff.
 44. Gordon Franz, "The Ossuaries of Joseph, Mary and Jesus Rediscovered in Jerusalem," undated paper, pg. 2, copy on file.
 45. *Jesus and the Ossuaries*, op. cit., pp. 35-37.
 46. See further, "Has John the Baptist's Cave Been Discovered?," *The Quarterly Journal*, January-March 2005, pp. 26-27.
 47. *The Jesus Dynasty*, op. cit., pp. 129-134.
 48. *Ibid.*, pp. 149-152.
 49. *Ibid.*, pg. 152, emphasis added.
 50. CBC Arts, "Archaeologists dispute discovery of biblical baptism cave," Aug. 16, 2004, copy on file.
 51. *The Jesus Dynasty*, op. cit., pg. 133.
 52. *Ibid.*, pg. 226.
 53. *Ibid.*, pg. 340.
 54. *Ibid.*, pg. 228.
 55. *Ibid.*, pg. 229.
 56. Ernest L. Martin, "The Place of the Crucifixion," *The Foundation Commentator*, September 1983, pg. 8, italics in original.
 57. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-12.
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 59. *Ibid.*, pg. 60.
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 62. *Ibid.*, pg. 63.
 63. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-72.
 64. *Ibid.*, pg. 330, note 8.
 65. Deissmann quoted in *ibid.*, pg. 65.
 66. *Ibid.*, pg. 67.
 67. *Ibid.*, pg. 70.
 68. *Ibid.*, pg. 69.
 69. *Ibid.*
 70. *Ibid.*, pg. 70.
 71. Adolph Deissmann, *Light From the Ancient East*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1978, pg. 73.
 72. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985, Vol. 1, The Pentateuch, pg. 243.
 73. See further, Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979, Vol. 5, pg. 835.
 74. Robin Griffith-Jones, *The Four Witnesses*. San Francisco: Harper, 2000, pp. 124-125.
 75. David Bercot, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, pg. 670.
 76. *Ibid.*
 77. *Ibid.*
 78. *Ibid.*
 79. See further, James Fleming, *The Messianic Idea in Israel*. LaGrange, Ga.: Biblical Resources, 2004; Israel Knohl, *The Messiah Before Jesus - The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000; and Michael Wise, *The First Messiah*. San Francisco: Harper, 1999.
 80. To really understand how far we have come from Rudolph Bultmann, and for insight into post-Bultmannianism and the present Jesus Quest, consult *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus*, op. cit., and *The Jesus Quest* by Ben Witherington III. Both of these works are essential for a historical study of Jesus. The most complete and thorough refutation of Form Criticism and Bultmann was done in 1975 by Josh McDowell in *More Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pp. 183-347.
 81. See further, Philip Wesley Comfort, *The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1992.
 82. See further, Carsten Peter Thiede, *Eyewitness to Jesus, Amazing New Manuscript Evidence About the Origin of the Gospels*. New York: Doubleday, 1996; and Carsten Peter Thiede, *The Emmaus Mystery*. New York: Continuum, 2005.
 83. *Eyewitness to Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 161, emphasis added.