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# The Jesus Dynasty

*By Jim Myers*

If you haven't already heard about Dr. James Tabor's new book – **The Jesus Dynasty** – you will. Tabor has pushed the bar to a new level in the search for the historical Jesus. The complete title of the book is The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity. Just the title by itself should be a real conversation starter!

Tabor's comments in the *Preface* provide a great deal of insight into what the reader will discover in the pages that follow:

“What do we really know about Jesus and how do we know it? . . . *The Jesus Dynasty* presents the Jesus story in an entirely new light. It is history, not fiction. And yet it differs considerably, sometimes radically from the standard portrait of Jesus informed by theological dogma. *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. . . .

“In *The Jesus Dynasty* you will discover that Jesus was the firstborn son of a royal family – a descendant of King David of ancient Israel. He really was proclaimed

‘King of the Jews,’ and was executed by the Romans for this claim. Rather than a church, or a new religion, as commonly understood, he established a royal dynasty drawn from his own brothers and immediate family. *Rather than being the founder of a church*, Jesus was claimant to a throne. . . .

“*The Jesus Dynasty* explores how and why Christians gradually lost the recognition that Jesus was part of a large family, the members of which exercised dynastic leadership among his followers. This critical, alternative, story, which survives even in our New Testament records and in bits and pieces of later Christian tradition, can be effectively recovered. . . We now have a sharper and more historically reliable understanding of Jesus as he was in his own time and place.”

I have followed James Tabor's work since the late 1980's when I first met him. We both spoke at a Noachide meeting in Tennessee and I thoroughly enjoyed visiting with him. Just the fact that he introduced himself as the last surviving Ebionite created lots of interest and attracted my attention. Since then I have read

many of his articles and visited his website on numerous occasions.

Research into the life and teachings of the historical Jesus – *the real Jesus* – has been a primary focus of the Biblical Heritage Center from its beginning. We have written about **the gap** that separates the *historical Jesus* from the *doctrinal Jesus* created and promoted by the Roman religious institutions of the fourth and fifth centuries. Every year the gap becomes wider as more new information is discovered.

For whatever reasons, many scholars seem to be more concerned about keeping the institutions happy than providing the public with the full implications that recent discoveries may have on some of the most cherished religious traditions. The most important challenge for many will be the challenge of integrating the historical Jesus into their belief systems. The simple fact is that the real Jesus and the theological Jesus's created by Christian dogma have very little in common – and knowledge of this fact tends to make one very uncomfortable. I guess its no secret that denial is almost always the easiest path.

Tabor focuses on the fact that James (really Jacob), the brother of Jesus, was the undisputed leader of the movement after the death of Jesus. This is something that seems to have been overlooked in most Sunday School books and sermons.

*“Peter did rise to prominence in the group of the Twelve (apostles), as we shall see, but it was James the brother of Jesus who became the successor to Jesus and the undisputed leader of the Christian movement. Jesus, their Davidic ruler, had*

*been removed from their midst. James was next in the royal Davidic bloodline. Jesus' death was not the end of the movement politically nor spiritually. The Jesus dynasty would continue for over a century after his death. But if this is the case, how could James, the heir of the Jesus dynasty, have been almost entirely left out of the story of Christian origins – and more important – why? (p. 247)”*

*There are two completely separate and distinct 'Christianities' embedded in the New Testament. One is quite familiar and became the version of the Christian faith known to billions over the past two millennia. Its main proponent was the apostle Paul. The other has been largely forgotten and by the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. had been effectively marginalized and suppressed by the other. Even within the documents of the New Testament itself one has to look carefully to detect its presence. . . The two versions of the 'faith' are quite distinctively different both in values and in practice. (p. 261)*

The two versions of the 'faith' are those of James and Paul. It was, of course, Paul's version that ultimately dominated the movement. This is easily seen by simply counting the number of each of their books in the New Testament – **Paul 13 – James 1**. Tabor addresses this situation without any hesitation:

*“There is no evidence that he (Paul) had never met or heard Jesus. If he was witness to the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion at Passover in A.D. 30 he never mentioned it. His connection to Jesus was based on*

*his own visionary experiences in which he claimed to have 'seen' Jesus several years after his crucifixion. Paul believed that his 'calling' had been foreordained. (p. 262)*

*Paul has sometimes been accused of developing his version of Christianity by drawing upon Hellenistic or 'pagan' ideas, as if he had to move outside of Judaism for his inspiration. This is really a misconception with an oversimplified view of the various forms of Judaism in the Roman world. . . Paul developed his views of 'Christology' based on his own mystical experiences but he would have been able to draw upon a complex set of speculative Jewish traditions as well. (p. 264-5)*

*Nightline, the popular ABC New program, interviewed Tabor and the interview can be found on their website under -- 'Jesus Dynasty' Author Asks: Were There Two Messiahs?*

*And it's with regard to Jesus' family that Tabor levels his most controversial claim. "I'm ready to let the average reader know what we scholars actually discuss. And if it's shocking, it's shocking. You don't have to accept it. Jesus had a father." Did that mean Tabor does not believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus? "I don't," he said. "I think all humans have a human father." Tabor, who studied first- and second-century Rabbinic and Greek texts, suggests a possible name for the human father of Jesus. "They begin to call Jesus, 'bar Pantera,' son of Pantera," Tabor said. "And we even have an early Greek source. He's a philosopher named Kelsus, who seems to know a bit more about it. He says that*

*Jesus was the son of a man named Pantera, who either was or became a Roman soldier. . . ."*

*If Tabor's book is controversial on the birth of Jesus, it also raises questions about Jesus' early ministry. Tabor suggests there were two messiahs, not one. Tabor took "Nightline" to a second cave on our visit to Jerusalem — this time to the East. The Suba Cave, as it is now known, is the site of a major archaeological dig. Inside the cave are primitive, centuries-old etchings, which Tabor believes depict the life of John the Baptist. The cave also contains thousands of first-century pottery shards. Tabor suggests that given the number of individuals, who may have been baptized in Suba, it's likely that Jesus, not John, was actually performing the baptisms. "I like to surprise with my answers," said Tabor.*

*"Are you ready for this? This is John's area but you know text-wise, we have no record of John baptizing here near Ein Kerem and Suba. He's up along the Jordan River in the Jordanian wilderness. The person we have a record of baptizing here is Jesus, Jesus the Baptist. . . ."*

*Tabor believes that, contrary to the New Testament, Jesus and John the Baptist were twin Messiahs. He says that early texts anticipated more than one Messiah and that the practice of baptism suggests that they were acting similarly in their respective ministries. "It hit me, how this would have electrified the country," Tabor said. "You see, all these predictions of two Messiahs, and we've got two Messiahs on the ground,*

*operating, one in the north — John the priest — one in the south — Jesus the king. And they're baptizing thousands of people."*

*In addition to Tabor's claims that Jesus had an earthly father and a fellow Messiah, his book also argues it was Jesus' intention to build a dynasty on earth. Tabor says that it was Jesus' half-brother James who would inherit the title role of dynastical king after the crucifixion. But again, Carson is adamant that the title of the book, "The Jesus Dynasty," is plain wrong. "The dynasty bit presupposes that there is continuity. That is, there's succession. But the New Testament evidence, such as it is, is that Jesus is the final king who goes on ruling and reigning. He doesn't need a dynasty, precisely because he is the ongoing king." Carson insists there was no plan to build a Jesus dynasty. "No. None," he said. "Jesus was king forever." The book itself is bound to raise questions and arouse debate. And the argument about the historical Jesus will continue for now.*

As you probably noticed, Tabor's book has its opponents. The arguments that are offered in opposition are usually based on established institutional doctrines and traditions instead of addressing the historical facts presented by Tabor. Interestingly, in several cases Tabor's positions are completely based on what is written in New Testament.

For example, the apostolic decree of Acts 15 clearly demonstrates that James is the leader of the Jesus movement, not Peter.

Therefore I (James) judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God. (Acts 15:19)

After James was executed, the apostles made the decision to select the new leader of the Jesus movement. Their choice was based on who was the next available candidate from the bloodline of Jesus -- Simeon. This part of church history seems to be unknown to most Christians.

Tabor uses accounts like the one above to create a historical model of the early years of Christian history. He is only able to construct a partial skeletal structure for the period, which has lots of gaps. Tabor uses the knowledge acquired through many years of scholarly research to fill some of the important gaps. It must be noted that he always makes it clear when he does this and he makes no attempt to pass off his position as absolute fact. In my opinion this is what elevates Tabor's work to another level. Based on my knowledge of Tabor and his work, I have am sure that he would have no problem changing any of his positions if new facts were discovered.

Understandably *The Jesus Dynasty* has produced a number of responses by his fellow scholars. I will include a few that are found on the [Jesus Dynasty website](#). The first is from **Bart Ehrman**, Chair, Dept. of Religious Studies, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Ehrman has been creating a tremendous amount of discussion about early Christianity and the historical Jesus through his recent books *Misquoting Jesus* and *Lost Christianities*. Ehrman wrote:

*James Tabor is a rare creature among academics, combining solid expertise in*

*traditional literary and archaeological scholarship with creativity and a sense of the truly sensational. Many scholars have undertaken studies of Jesus and his legacy; none has dared advance the boldly provocative theses of The Jesus Dynasty. For sheer breadth of vision and imaginative reconstruction, rooted deeply in the historical sciences, this promises to be a book unlike any the public has ever seen.*

**Robert Eisenman**, author of *James the Brother of Jesus*, wrote:

*A good introduction for the first-time and/or non-specialist reader to the real dynastic situation surrounding the person and family of 'Jesus' and, in particular, the dynastic situation of his 'brother' James. James Tabor takes the people-friendly and low-key, highly-accessible approach. He applies his extensive knowledge of Christian hermeneutics and interpretation and Jewish history and tradition in this attempt to more accurately portray 'the Historical Jesus' in the context of his Jewish family and Community, as well as against the background of the Messianic Movements of the time.*

*A useful and an important first step into the world of complex theology and controversial archaeological activity for those of Christian and Jewish backgrounds alike. Tabor diplomatically weighs in on long-standing controversies in a manner that readers of either Jewish or Christian background may well find conciliatory. One hopes that this book will help to increase*

*understanding and sympathy across the lines dividing the Abrahamic traditions.*

The next comment is from **Steven Collins**, Ph.D., Director, The Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project, Jordan; Dean, College of Archaeology & Biblical History, Trinity Southwest University, Albuquerque, NM concluded:

*While I have serious disagreements with many of his historical constructions and conclusions, I must say that in The Jesus Dynasty Dr. James Tabor has made what must be considered a remarkable attempt to make sense of the ancient evidence for the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Of course, those in the Christian mainstream will cringe and even shriek aloud over much of what Dr. Tabor has written, but his ideas cannot be considered far-fetched when viewed from a perspective that considers the New Testament gospels to be non-eyewitness, late-1st-century aggregations of oral embellishment layered over the "real" Jesus. Unlike the painfully absurd approaches of recent books such as The Da Vinci Code, The Jesus Papers and The Templar Legacy, Tabor, as a serious scholar, has kept his wits about him and broached the subject with the skill of an historian, albeit in a purposed attempt to push the envelope of Jesus studies to the limits of what he considers reasonable speculation. As one who has spent nearly three decades assembling evidence in favor of the eyewitness nature and historical accuracy of the New Testament gospels, I look forward to discussing our differing views this coming October at the 2006 International Symposium on Archaeology*

*and the Bible in Jordan. That will be great fun!*

How are traditional Christian organizations reacting to Tabor's book? *Christianity Today's* title of their book review provides a clue -- *The Jesus Dynasty: How to Explain Away the New Testament*. The author, Darrell Block, opens his review with the following words:

*For Tabor and other scholars, one thing is clear: The Bible is difficult to believe. What does a historian do with a book that claims God was born as a human to a virgin, later died and was resurrected? The simple answer is to explain such problems away.*

Block's words produced the following reaction that was posted on [petrosbaptistchurch.blogspot](http://petrosbaptistchurch.blogspot) –

Of course the purpose of the book isn't to "explain away" anything- its purpose is to explain. But when you write for a fundamentalist publication you use hot button words or phrases in order to prejudice your audience against that which you oppose so that a) it doesn't receive a fair hearing and b) the "troops" are mobilized against something they have never, and will never, read.

Of all of Block's arguments, I think his closing statement reveals much about his methodology and agenda:

*Above all, one can see there was no dynastic line in this movement. All our earliest sources (what historians are supposed to rely on the most) show that Jesus was seen as a unique, exalted*

*figure—not the first in a line of rulers, but the Son of God.*

Block's conclusion is a statement of doctrine, not historical fact. Interestingly, it would just take a quick study of church history to discover that it took several centuries of debate for the Roman church to formulate the doctrines upon which Block's words are based. Apparently, "all our earliest sources" must exclude every early source that doesn't agree with Block's conclusions.

I wish every church that promoted *The Passion of the Christ* would get as actively involved in promoting *The Jesus Dynasty* as they did the movie. The lives of over two billion people would never be the same – and neither would the world. New realities would be created as people discovered more accurate information about their biblical heritages. To purchase your copy of *The Jesus Dynasty* visit our website -- and click on the book cover. I think it would be great if Steven Spielberg decided to make a movie about *The Jesus Dynasty!*

