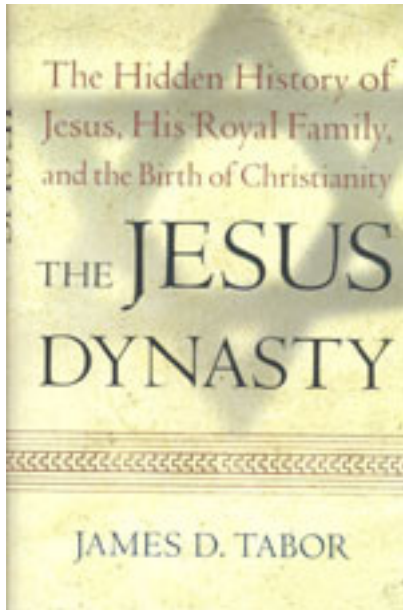


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Tabor, James D.

The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity

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Some books are written to spread knowledge, others to generate controversy. This book falls into the latter category. In his *Jesus Dynasty* James Tabor presents a reconstruction of the Jesus movement from a perspective that purports to be a neutral view at the facts. Unfortunately, Tabor's view is not neutral and his "facts" are not facts. The author fails in his plan and offers a highly biased description of Jesus and his movement, which is strongly colored by Tabor's own theological agenda. Apart from this problem, the methodology employed in the book is seriously flawed and fails every test, since the reconstruction of history should be more than offering a random selection of literary and archeological data. It may be clear by now: I have strong objections to this book and would recommend every potential reader *not* to buy or read it. It is worth neither the money nor the effort. Let me first describe Tabor's reconstruction of Jesus and his movement, then move on to a critical discussion of his argument.

Tabor sets out to position Jesus and his ministry within a first-century context by reconstructing Jesus' family parameters. To start with, the author presents his discovery of the Talpiot tomb, which, Tabor assumes, may have been Jesus' family grave. This grave contains nine ossuaries, some of which carry inscriptions on them with the names of the person buried in them. The names preserved picture a family of a man named Joseph, his

son Jesus, Jesus' son Jude, a man named Matthew, and two Marys. Tabor describes the find in careful terms but leaves open the possibility that this might indeed be Jesus' family grave. Furthermore, he seriously considers the possibility that the James ossuary, which generated such controversy in 2001–2003, has been taken from this same burial chamber, since according to Tabor the tenth ossuary from this grave is missing. (Unfortunately, Tabor overlooks the fact that Levi Rahmani mentions a tenth but broken ossuary in his report on the site.) The section on the Talpiot grave is highly speculative in nature, and Tabor refrains from drawing any firm conclusions here. But already the fact that Tabor seriously considers the possibility that this particular grave may have been the family grave in which Jesus himself was buried indicates that he lacks the critical distance that is so crucial to any scholarly work. Unfortunately, this lack of critical rigor is manifest in the rest of the book as well.

Part 1 of the book (“In the Beginning Was the Family”) deals with Jesus' family tree. It describes the virgin birth as a secondary, theologically motivated narrative. Remarkably enough, Tabor subsequently discusses the Davidic genealogy of Jesus as a historical fact: “Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a direct descendant of King David but she also had bloodline ties to a Levite or priestly lineage descended from Aaron” (58). From the narratives on Jesus' virgin birth, Tabor concludes that his father was not Joseph but someone else. This is how Tabor comes to search for Pantera as Jesus' father. This Roman soldier is mentioned as such by Celsus, and now Tabor not only argues that Celsus was possibly right but also that a Roman cemetery at Bingerbrück, near Bad Kreuznach in Germany, contains the grave of this Pantera, whose full name, according to the inscription found there, was Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera. Again, Tabor presents his material in such a way as to, on the one hand, create the impression that this Pantera was in all likelihood Jesus' biological father, whereas admitting, on the other hand, that the material evidence for this is scanty. Thus, Tabor reconstructs Jesus' family tree on the basis of Mark 6:3; Matt 13:55; and John 19:25. Tabor reads this last verse as an encrypted message on Mary, Jesus' mother: the “Mary wife of Clophas” who is mentioned there would actually refer to Mary, Jesus' mother. On the basis of this reading of the evidence, Tabor concludes that Joseph's brother had taken his place after his death and married Mary. Clophas's real name would have been Alphaeus, which makes him father of “James son of Alphaeus,” also known as James the younger. Here we come across one of the problems of this book. Why take a “decrypted version of John” (80), combine this with second-century evidence from Hegesippus, and trust the plausibility of this construct? This is not even an educated guess—it is manipulation of evidence.

In the second part of the book (“Growing Up Jewish in Galilee”) Tabor starts out to discuss the lost years of Jesus' life. Although even Tabor admits that we do not know much about the years preceding Jesus' public ministry, he does picture Jesus as a

carpenter working in the rural environment that was heavily influenced by large building projects as Sepphoris. Jesus must have come into contact with Roman rule at an early age. Tabor pictures Herod the Great's and Herod Antipas's rule and their enormous building projects as the backdrop of Jesus' ministry. Jesus grew up as a Jewish peasant, while being heir to David's throne. Tabor reconstructs Jesus' spiritual environment as that of a combination of Essenes and Zealots.

Part 3 ("A Great Revival and a Gathering Storm") pictures how Jesus and his kinsman "John the Baptizer" came to act as two messiahs, John as the priestly messiah, Jesus as the royal messiah. Tabor describes how Jesus joined the movement initiated by John and how this movement was shocked at John's arrest by Herod Antipas. According to Tabor, it was after John's arrest that Jesus made up a plan to usher in the arrival of the kingdom of God. In order to do this, Jesus had drawn up a "Council of Twelve" in which he appointed his brothers as well. Immediately upon John's arrest, Jesus broke up this revolutionary Council of Twelve into six pairs of two, which he sent out to proclaim the nearness of the kingdom of God.

In the fourth part of the book ("Entering the Lion's Den") Tabor describes how Herod Antipas killed John the Baptizer and how Jesus subsequently tried to keep a low profile by withdrawing into Bethsaida (Luke 9:10). According to Tabor, Jesus must have realized then that the prophecies regarding the fate of the two messiahs in Zech 12 and 13 were now being fulfilled: "If the shepherd was to be struck by a sword, then the Davidic Messiah was also to be wounded by piercing" (179). This text, together with passages on the suffering righteous from the Psalms and the book of Isaiah, must have inspired Jesus to take on the fate of a martyr in Jerusalem. Tabor now argues that Jesus must have interpreted the period of three days mentioned in Isa 61 as a period of three years to be fulfilled in A.D. 30. It is for this reason, according to Tabor, that Jesus actively sought his fate as martyr in the spring of that year. Initially, Jesus hid himself near Wadi Cherith, a place just a few miles south of Pella, which later followers of Jesus apparently took as a hideout in A.D. 68. It was from this place that Jesus went up to Jerusalem in March A.D. 30. There he symbolically enacted two of Zechariah's prophecies by riding into the city as the Davidic king and subsequently "cleansing" the temple by fiercely protesting against the commercial status the temple had gained. It was after a final meal with his Council that Jesus took refuge at the Mount of Olives, eventually to be arrested there. Tabor describes how a group of six hundred men went out to hunt for Jesus and finally took him in. According to Tabor, Jesus was delivered to Pilate by Annas and Caiaphas, to be subsequently handed on to Herod Antipas. There Jesus was mocked, sent back to Pilate, and ultimately crucified. After his death, Jesus was buried in Jerusalem. Tabor accounts for the accounts of Jesus' empty tomb by surmising that Jesus was actually buried twice: if not in the Talpiot grave, Jesus may have received his second burial in Galilee. It is here

that Tabor refers to the tradition on Jesus' grave passed on by the sixteenth-century rabbi Isaac ben Luria, who located the grave of "Yeshu ha-Notzri" right outside Tsfat.

It is remarkable that the movement of the two messiahs did not stop after Jesus' death. With John and Jesus both executed, total defeat had arrived for their movement. In the final part of the book ("Waiting for the Son of Man") Tabor describes how three factors explain the survival and revival of the Jesus movement: the leadership of Jesus' brother James; the message proclaimed by the two messiahs; and the eschatological fervor of the approaching "end of the age." Tabor extensively argues that Jesus' brother James was appointed leader of the movement after Jesus' death, to be succeeded by another brother (Simon) after his death in A.D. 62. In the meantime, an alternative leader of the movement had risen: it was Paul who changed the message of the Jesus movement into a mystical gospel about Christ the heavenly Lord. It was also Paul who redefined "Israel" by equating it with the Christ movement and interpreting the Torah in a spiritual manner. It is Paul's gospel that has conquered most of the Christian world, but according to Tabor this gospel is only remotely connected to the original message of the Jesus dynasty. Tabor traces the legacy of this dynasty in the ethical teachings found in the Q source, in the Epistle of James, and the Epistle of Jude: "James, Jude, and the Q source stand as witness to an original version of the Christian faith that takes us back to Jesus himself, with firm historical links reaching back to John the Baptizer" (280). It is this form of the Christian faith that has also left its direct traces in the Didache and the Gospel of Thomas. In the final chapter of the book Tabor argues that the developments in Rome and the Jewish war of A.D. 66–72 eventually caused the development of the Christian movement away from the original shape it had taken in the Jesus dynasty. Uncovering the Jesus dynasty was an important task for Tabor, and the reason for this task is given in the final clause of the last chapter: "Jesus was the most influential figure in human history and who he was and how he is remembered matters greatly to all of us, whether secular or religious, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim" (304). Tabor's concern with this book is this: "The message that Jesus preached was transformed into the person of Jesus *as* the message—the proclamation that Christ had come and died for the sins of the world" (306), and: "what was lost, marginalized, and largely forgotten was the *original* story, which was Jesus' own story—what he in fact was in his own time and place, as a 1st-century Jewish Messiah who lay claim to the throne of David and inaugurated a Messianic Movement with the potential to change the world" (307).

The Jesus Dynasty pretends to uncover a hidden history and shed light on the original contours of the Jesus movement. Unfortunately, the work does neither. The problem with Tabor's method is that he tends to *construct* history instead of *reconstructing* it. It is fully unclear, for instance, what Tabor's reasons are for accepting Luke's portrayal of Jesus and John the Baptist as kinsmen. Why should the fact that Jesus is pictured as a Davidic heir

by Matthew and Luke be accepted as a historical fact—regardless of the point that their reconstructions of his Davidic past differ from each other? Why build a whole dynasty of Jesus’ brothers on the identification of Mary, mother of Jesus, with Mary wife of Clophas, an identification that is allowed only by seriously tampering with the evidence and modifying the crucial verse John 19:25? The fact that Tabor has a problem with methodology comes most clearly to the front in his discussion of the Q source. On page 136 Tabor argues that this source can be reconstructed by comparing Matthew and Luke and “extracting from” these two Gospels “the material that the both have in common, but that is not in Mark.” But on the same page Tabor mentions a “Hebrew version of Matthew that offers a version of this Q saying that is untouched by the Greek copyists and editors”! How on earth should these two approaches be combined? Theoretically it is possible to assume that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew, but in that case the whole Q hypothesis falls to the ground. The only sound alternative is to allow Q as a *Greek* source incorporated into the texts of Matthew and Luke, but in that case the Hebrew text of Matthew (presented by George Howard, 1995) cannot be seen as the original version.

Doing history should be something else than picking historical “facts” at random from all kinds of literary traditions and archeological digs. A scholarly publication should not contain the level of speculation that characterizes this book. It is a pity that plotting theories such as Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* are now even entering into the academic arena. Read as an entertaining thriller, *The Jesus Dynasty* deserves a certain degree of popularity, but preferably not on the nonfiction list.