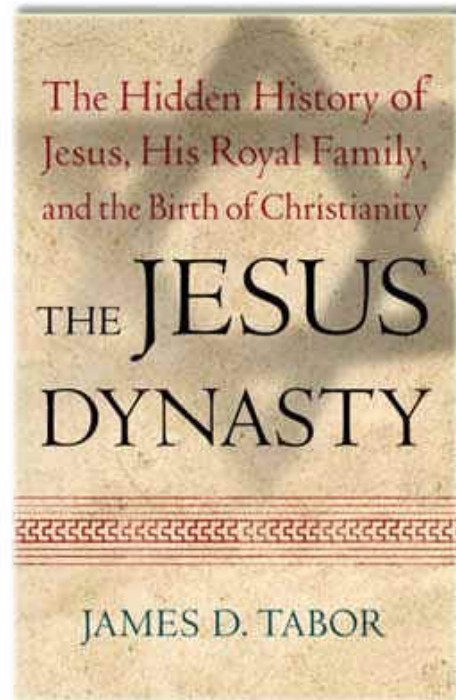


**Review:** *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity*, by James D. Tabor. Simon & Schuster, 2006.

Professor Tabor has a deservedly high profile in his field. Dead Sea Scrolls scholar Michael Wise acknowledges his valuable input in writing *The First Messiah* (“To him I say, “Thanks, Jim”) and his endorsement appears on the back cover of Israel Knohl’s *The Messiah Before Jesus*. Even in the field of crime fiction Dr Tabor earns recognition from writer and colleague Kathy Reichs, who adapted some of his ideas in her bestseller *Cross Bones*. Tabor has previously written on the siege of David Koresh’s Branch

Davidian compound (*Why Waco*), and his academic writing appears in the bibliographies and footnotes of such notable scholars as Richard Horsley.



No surprise then that his new book, carefully targeted and marketed, is selling well. *The Jesus Dynasty* is a racy read, given the content matter, and at just over 300 pages, with photographs, maps and artwork, it is an attractive and accessible book. This is anything but a dry, academic discourse; here he addresses a wider, popular audience. His straight shooting is refreshing, though the book can be expected to get a rough ride from reviewers in the traditional and evangelical camps - and from some of his more sober and cautious colleagues. Luke Timothy Johnson is probably fulminating at this very moment!

Tabor’s basic thesis is that the focus on Paul as the purveyor of genuine “apostolic” Christianity is all wrong. The Real McCoy is found in the tradition followed by the Jerusalem church, led by James the brother of Jesus. These Ebionites, later regarded as heretics, were the authentic inheritors of the Jesus dynasty – led by his blood relatives. It is interesting to note that Robert Eisenman, author of the monumental *James the Brother of Jesus* (over 950 pages excluding notes) heads Tabor’s list of acknowledgements. Perhaps there’s also strategic significance in the last name on the list of “academic colleagues,” Tom [N.T.] Wright, the Anglican Bishop of Durham who, given his track record as a preeminent evangelical apologist, could be expected to take an exceedingly dim view of Tabor’s revision of history.

The author’s love of the places that resonate with early Christian history is hard to miss. He tells of a night-time visit, as a teenager, to the Garden of Gethsemane, and what it meant to feel a sense of continuity with Jesus there. This is a man who is clearly passionate about history and archaeology. Later he tells of standing on the uncovered mosaic floor of Herod’s banquet hall, the

place where Salome danced before ordering up the head of John the Baptist (in Tabor's view, Jesus and John were a team ministry corresponding to the Two Messiahs expected in some sections of first century Judaism.) Some of the book's most convincing passages concern the archaeological finds the author has been associated with, including the recently discovered "cave of John the Baptist."

*The Jesus Dynasty* alternates between a surprisingly conservative, literal reading of the New Testament, especially of John's gospel, to a critical one. Tabor appears to have no doubts about the authorship of the letters of James and Jude, for example:

Many Bible readers today would be surprised to learn that we in fact have within the New Testament itself letters from not one but two of Jesus' brothers. (p.277)

To which one can only add, so would most New Testament scholars, as both works are generally regarded as pseudepigrapha. To cite just one example, Harvard scholar Helmut Koester notes of James: "Of course, this letter is not a product of the Aramaic-speaking brother of Jesus,"<sup>1</sup> and refers to Jude as a pseudonymous epistle.<sup>2</sup>

But Tabor is clearly no literalist. Nor is he a fan of Paul's contribution to Christology, or of the impartiality of Acts. The Jesus portrayed in this book is an apocalyptic figure – nothing like the Cynic sage of The Jesus Seminar - whose birth was likely illegitimate (believe it or not, Tabor identifies the possible father) but who nevertheless claimed a royal Davidic genealogy through Mary's lineage. While he builds on the established work of people like Bart Ehrman and Paula Fredriksen, he also goes well beyond them. Right off the edge of the cliff, some might argue.

The book is definitely readable (not something you could easily say about Eisenman's), but at some cost. For example Tabor adopts a very firm dating for the crucifixion of Jesus (Thursday April 4, 30 C.E.), though he is surely aware that there is no consensus on this. As conservative Catholic curmudgeon Luke Timothy Johnson observes: "although we can place Jesus' ministry between the years 28 and 33 with some confidence, trying to determine with more precision its exact beginning or ending is notoriously difficult."<sup>3</sup>

Those who share with the author a past incarceration in the Worldwide Church of God may find the writing style at times reminiscent of that association. Early signs are, however, that former co-religionists are too busy being shocked by Tabor's "liberalism" and unwillingness to genuflect in the direction of Bible-belt Biblicism, a reaction which is not exactly unexpected. The church has produced very few scholars (incredibly the towering figure of Lester Grabbe, a contributor to both the *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*

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<sup>1</sup> Helmut Koester, *History and Literature of Earliest Christianity*, 2000. p161.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.252.

<sup>3</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 1996. p.90.

and the *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, is largely overlooked) and shown little interest in producing a thoughtful, open and questioning approach to faith. Tabor might take comfort in the aphorism about prophets being without honor in their own bailiwick.

*The Jesus Dynasty* is “just” a reconstruction, as is any treatment of this subject, but the way Tabor joins the dots can be quite breathtaking. It also leaps around a bit, and occasionally seems to lose focus. An alternative study, which is equally accessible and more tightly structured, comes from Jeffrey Bütz, a Lutheran minister teaching world religions at Penn State. In his 2005 book *The Brother of Jesus and the Lost Teachings of Christianity* (which Tabor seems unaware of) he presents a provocative, informed discussion about James and the early Christian community, reaching some of the same conclusions, and drawing on both conservative and liberal scholarship. Orthodoxy, says Bütz in a memorable line, “is merely the most successful heresy.”

*The Jesus Dynasty* seems to have found an initial marketing niche alongside some fairly dubious material that taps into the *Da Vinci Code* brouhaha. This is misleading. Tabor is far from an amateur (he chairs of the department of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and holds a Ph.D. in biblical studies from the University of Chicago) and his reconstruction, while raising eyebrows, is at the very least historically credible (if unlikely in places). It is probable that conservative Christians will find *The Jesus Dynasty* too disturbing for their tastes, while those familiar with critical scholarship may find his face-value acceptance of some textual evidence a little naive (professional historians might well choke on their beer.) No matter which side of the divide the reader stands on however, they’re guaranteed a highly controversial but stimulating discussion courtesy of a learned and lucid guide.