

Buried Hopes or Risen Savior: Is the Talpiot Tomb the Burial Place of Jesus of Nazareth?

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This Sunday a documentary aired on the Discovery Channel which claimed that archaeologists have discovered the family tomb of Jesus of Nazareth. These claims were published last week through a related book by filmmakers Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino titled *The Jesus Family Tomb*. The book's subtitle expresses the anticipated results of the film and book: *The Discovery, the Investigation, and the Evidence that Could Change History*.

The book describes the discovery and investigation of ten ossuaries (bone boxes) that were found in the Talpiot tomb in Jerusalem in 1980.¹ Because several of the ossuaries contain names associated with the Jesus of the New Testament Gospels, the authors argue that the Tomb of Ten Ossuaries is undoubtedly the family tomb of Jesus. The ossuaries purportedly bear such inscriptions as "Jesus, son of Joseph," "Judah, son of Jesus," "Matthew," "Mary the master," "Mary," and "Jose" (a diminutive form of Joseph). Furthermore, the authors of the text claim that the widely publicized and controversial James ossuary is the tenth missing ossuary which was purportedly stolen after the find was catalogued but before the find reached the warehouse where the other nine ossuaries were stored.

Although most of the names inscribed on the ossuaries were very common in first century Palestine, the combination of these names associated with Jesus is initially

¹ For an excellent introduction to ossuaries and their contribution to Jesus studies, see Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries: What Jewish Burial Practices Reveal about the Beginnings of Christianity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003).

stunning.² Through a series of inferences, Jacobovici and Pellegrino concluded that the Talpiot tomb contained the ossuaries of Jesus of Nazareth, his wife Mary Magdalene, his son Judah, his mother Mary, his brother James, and a Matthew who was possibly Jesus' first cousin. In his Foreword to the book, James Cameron claimed: "Their investigation proves, I believe, beyond any reasonable doubt that a first-century Jewish tomb found in Talpiot, Jerusalem, in 1980 is the tomb of Jesus and his family." Cameron later argued that the claims of the research team were "virtually irrefutable."

I read *The Jesus Family Tomb* the day of its release. It is a quick and easy read written in the fashion of the *Da Vinci Code*. This book, however, is intended for the history and religion sections of bookstores rather than the fiction section. That alone will give the book more credibility in the eyes of many readers. Despite the overstatements and leaps to conclusions unwarranted by the data, many readers will view the claims as fact. I urge everyone to read the book critically, raising the crucial questions, testing the assumptions, and carefully evaluating the book's claims. Although a detailed and carefully researched response to these claims will take some time to prepare, let me offer these initial observations.

The "Jesus" Inscription

We need to know much more about the ossuary inscriptions. Oddly, the book contains two photographs of the Matthew inscription, one photo of the entire side of the ossuary that bears the inscription and another significant enlargement of the text of the inscription. The enlargement was unnecessary since the inscription can be clearly read

² The standard scholarly work on the Jewish names from the New Testament and inter-testamental period in Palestine is Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity: Part I: Palestine 330 BCE-200 CE* (TSAJ 91; Tübingen: Mohr, 2002). A very helpful summary with frequency charts based on Ilan's research appears in Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 67-92.

even in the smaller photograph. However, the photograph of the most important inscription which reads “Jesus, son of Joseph” was not enlarged and the scratches on that particular surface so obscure the first word of the inscription that it cannot be transcribed with confidence from the photo. Perhaps the inscription does read “Jesus, son of Joseph.” However, L. Y. Rahmani’s *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries* placed a question mark behind his transcription “Yeshua” with a note “The first name, preceded by a large cross-mark, is difficult to read, as the incisions are clumsily carved and badly scratched.”³ Similarly, the research of Amos Kloner, a member of the original excavation team, expressed his reservations about the name Yeshua by marking it with a question mark and noting, “The first name following the X mark is difficult to read. In contrast to other ossuaries in this tomb, the incisions are here superficial and cursorily carved.”⁴ I have heard rumors that some well-known experts in Aramaic script have disputed the original transcription. If it turns out that this ossuary belonged to a son of Joseph bearing a name other than Yeshua, the effort to connect this tomb with Jesus of Nazareth quickly collapses. I would like to reserve judgment on the transcription of the inscription until eminent epigraphers have an opportunity to examine the inscription.

Even if the inscription reads “Jesus, son of Joseph” this would not be shocking. We know of at least 99 different individuals with the name Jesus from this general period (330 B.C. to 200 A.D.) and at least 218 different individuals with the name Joseph. In fact, Joseph was the second most common name among Palestinian Jewish males from

³ L. Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: The Israel Antiquities Authority, 1994), nos. 704. The information is now available online at http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/tomb/explore/media/tomb_evidence.pdf.

⁴ Amos Kroner, “A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries in East Talpiyot, Jerusalem,” *Atiqot* 29 (1996):15-22, esp. 18. This article is now available at http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/tomb/explore/media/tomb_evidence.pdf.

the period, second only to Simon. Jesus was the sixth most common name from the period.⁵ An inscription reading “Jesus, son of Joseph” would not be that sensational since another ossuary with that very inscription was found back in 1926. Even by the calculations of the authors of *The Jesus Family Tomb*, there were approximately 1,008 men named Jesus, son of Joseph who lived in first-century Palestine! They calculate that 1 out of every 79 Jewish males in Palestine during the century of ossuary use was named “Jesus, son of Joseph” (though I think that the ratio actually 1 in 358.2).⁶

The Identification of Mariamne as Mary Magdalene

One of the key elements of the statistical argument offered by the book is the assumption that “Mariamne also called Mara” is Mary Magdalene. *The Jesus Family Tomb* claims that the Acts of Philip refers to Mary Magdalene as Mariamne. Since our earliest extensive manuscript of the Acts of Philip is a 14th century text, the value of the testimony of the Acts of Philip is questionable at best. However, this theory that Mariamne is Mary Magdalene is not confirmed by the Acts of Philip at all but is actually the speculation of Francis Bovon. The Acts of Philip portrays Mariamne as the sister of Philip but never identifies her explicitly as Mary Magdalene. Mary is never identified as Mariamne in the New Testament or, for that matter, in any other known text.

Jacobovici and Pellegrino also argue that the name “Mara” is actually the title “master” or “lord” and identifies Mary Magdalene as a female apostle. This element of

⁵ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 85.

⁶ Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb: The Discovery, the Investigation, and the Evidence That Could Change History* (San Francisco: Harper, 2007), 75. These statistics conflict with those now published on the Discovery website which calculates that 1 in 190 had the name Jesus, son of Joseph. The discrepancy likely resulted from doubling the number so that women were included in the calculation and then rounding the number. This is a questionable inflation since a woman would not have a masculine name like Yeshua or be identified as the “son of” anyone. Since there was a 1 in 2 chance that the Jesus could have been feminine, the second element of the ration was doubled. This seems to distort the results of the calculation.

the argument involves an enormous amount of speculation based on questionable evidence. The researchers could not cite one ancient text in which Mary was designated a master or lord or in which that word “mara” was used as a synonym for “apostle.” Most importantly, the researchers are likely incorrect in their assumption that the “Mara” of the inscription was a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic word meaning “master.” In fact, “Mara” was the eighth most commonly used name among Palestinian Jewish females in the period 330 B.C. to 200 A.D. and the name was recognized by two specialists in ancient inscriptions including one of the members of the original archaeological teams to be a mere abbreviated form of the name “Martha.”⁷ Since Mariamne-Mara is clearly not Mary Magdalene, this name should not be included in the statistical analysis.

The Statistics

The most compelling argument raised by the book is that although none of the individual inscriptions is remarkable, the combination of so many names associated with Jesus is so unexpected that this must be Jesus’ family tomb. The team initially insisted that the probability of these names associated with Jesus of Nazareth all appearing in one tomb was 1 in 2.5 million (a figure later reduced to 1 in 600 due to criticism from expert statisticians). Several factors account for this calculation: a) the false assumption that Mariamne is Mary Magdalene, and b) the assumption that Jose refers to the brother of Jesus mentioned in Mark 6:3, and c) the assumption that Maria was Jesus’ mother. The probability analysis sometimes confuses the probability of finding a tomb with this particular group of names with the probability that the Jesus of Talpiot was Jesus of Nazareth.

⁷ See Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 89; Ilan, *Catalogue of Jesus Ossuaries*, name 701; Kroner, “Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries in East Talpiot,” 17.

First, as discussed above Mariamne is clearly not Mary Magdalene. Second, the possibility that this Jesus had a relative named Mary does not increase the probability that this Jesus is Jesus of Nazareth. The name Mary was the most common name for females in the period ranging from 330 B.C. to 200 A.D. The researchers claimed that 1 out of every 4 Jewish women in Palestine during the ossuary period were named Mary (I believe the correct ratio is 1 in 4.67). Consequently, 1 out of 760 (1 out of every 1,672 families based on Bauckham's stats) Jewish men in Palestine during the period of ossuary use were named "Jesus, son of Joseph" and had a mother named Mary.⁸ However, unlike the Jesus ossuary which specifies the nature of the relationship of this Jesus to Joseph (Jesus, son of Joseph), the nature of the relationship between this Jesus and this Mary are unknown. Since this Mary could have been his mother, aunt (and he probably had several), sister (and he may have had several), sister-in-law, or close female cousin (and he probably had many), *he probably had several close female relatives with the name Mary*. If any Palestinian Jewish male of the period had 12 close female relatives (e.g., 1 mother, 2 aunts, 2 sisters, 2 sisters-in-law, and 5 female cousins), 3 of these close female family members were probably named Mary. Consequently, the presence of a Mary in this tomb does not increase the probability that the Jesus of the ossuary is Jesus of Nazareth at all.

Third, Jose is a shortened form of Joseph. Joseph or Jose is the second most common male Jewish name from this period. The researchers calculated that 1 out of 20 Jewish men were named Joseph or Jose (I think that 1 in 12 is more accurate). However, since this "Joseph" could have been the father (as the inscription on the Jesus ossuary

⁸ Although the Mary ossuary inscription was written in Hebrew characters the spelling was the Latin spelling. The combination of Hebrew, Greek, and Hebrew characters with Latin spelling is puzzling if this tomb contained family members from the same approximate time period.

implies) of the Talpiot Jesus, the Jose inscription may not affect the probability at all. Furthermore, even assuming the family tomb theory, the probability of any person having a close male relative named Jose was quite high. Let's assume that a first-century Jewish man had 1 father, 2 uncles, 2 brothers, 4 male cousins, and 2 sons. The probability was 1 in 2 that a man had a close male relative named Joseph/Jose. If the Joseph and Jose of the ossuaries are two different people, this Jose would not be Jesus' father and would probably not be his uncle (since parents were unlikely to give two sons such similar names). Furthermore, since the Judah inscription (Judah, son of Jesus) explicitly identified the son of this Jesus, we can assume that Jose was not his son. Thus the probability was 1 in 4 that this Jesus would have a close male relative named Jose. The probability that a Jewish man in Palestine during the ossuary period would be named Jesus, son of Joseph, and have close family members named Mary and Jose is 1 in 760 (1 in 1,432 using Bauckham's name frequencies). The likelihood that the Jesus of the ossuary is Jesus of Nazareth though is made doubtful by one important consideration. If Jose were the brother of this Jesus (Mark 6:2), then one must explain why Jesus was identified as "son of Joseph" but Jose was not. Although I will allow that this Jose was the brother of this Yeshua for the sake of argument, I think that the lack of the "son of Joseph" description significantly decreases the probability that Yeshua and Jose were siblings.

Matthew ranks as the ninth most common name from the period. Furthermore, since even the research team recognized that it was improbable that this Matthew was Matthew the Apostle, they speculated that this Matthew must have been a first cousin of

Jesus who is unmentioned in the New Testament. Obviously, the presence of this Matthew in the tomb contributes nothing to their case.

Since the probability of bearing the name Jesus, son of Joseph and having close relatives named Mary and Jose was 1 to 760 (1 in 1,432 using Bauckham's name frequencies) and since the male population of Jerusalem during the period of ossuary use was at least 80,000, somewhere between 56-105 male Jews in Jerusalem would have met the criteria of the Talpiot tomb.⁹ Thus even if one rejected the New Testament claim that Jesus of Nazareth's body was resurrected, the probability of this tomb containing his remains would be 1 in 56 to 1 in 105. In other words, it is 56 to 105 times more likely that this tomb housed the bones of a Jesus other than Jesus of Nazareth than that it contained the bones of the Jesus of the Gospels. Consequently, the statistical argument does not prove at all that the Jesus of the ossuary is Jesus of Nazareth. On the contrary, it is much more likely that this Jesus is another Jesus.

The probability that the Jesus of the ossuary is someone other than Jesus of Nazareth is even greater when one considers certain features of this archaeological find that do not fit descriptions of Jesus in our most ancient sources. For example, no ancient

⁹ The population of Jerusalem was approximately 40,000 during Herod's reign and climbed to 80,000 during the Roman period (M. Broshi, "Estimating the Population of Ancient Jerusalem" *BAR* 4:10-15). Jacobovici and Pellegrino argued that only 80,000 males lived in Jerusalem during the period of ossuary use. This is questionable. Perhaps wrongly influenced by the work of Hachlili and rabbinic tradition, they appear to assume that ossuary use began around 40 B.C.E. and was discontinued with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. However, ossuaries were used in Palestine throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Ossuary use in Jerusalem greatly escalated during Herod's building campaigns when masons, quarries, and rejected blocks of limestone were abundant in the city (Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries*, 28-29). If the population of Jerusalem averaged 50,000 during the period of ossuary use and the period of ossuary use spanned several generations, the total number of male may have been higher than Jacobovici and Pellegrino estimate.

document describes Jesus as married, romantically involved with a woman, or fathering a child. The fact that one of the ossuaries bears the inscription, “Judah, son of Jesus” makes it highly unlikely that this tomb belonged to Jesus of Nazareth. This statistical analysis also does not reflect the scholarly uncertainty over whether the most important inscription actually reads “Jesus, son of Joseph.” Nor does this analysis take into account the improbability of a family that resided in Nazareth would be buried in Jerusalem! If one denies the bodily resurrection of Jesus, one would have expected the bones of Jesus to be transferred to Nazareth for interment in a family tomb there. The claim that statistical analysis proves the Jesus of the Ten Ossuaries to be the Jesus of the Gospels grossly misinterprets the archaeological and historical evidence.

Jacobovici and Pellegrino Name Frequencies				
	Jesus, son of Joseph	Maria	Jose	Probability
eliminating unmatched name Mariamne	1/190	1/4	1/20	1/15,200
accounting for other possible family relations	1/190	1/1	1/4	1/760
Richard Bauckham Name Frequencies				
	1/358	1/1	1/4	1/1,432
Total male population of 80,000 / 760	= 105			
Total male population of 80,000 /1,432	= 56			
Probability that Jesus of ossuary is Jesus of Nazareth: 1 in 105 to 1 in 56 (.9 to 1.8 %)				
This probability analysis <i>does not</i> account for negative factors that significantly diminish the probability that the Jesus of Talpiot was Jesus of Nazareth. In combination, these negative factors may <i>preclude</i> the identification of the Jesus of Talpiot as Jesus of Nazareth				

The DNA Evidence

The appeal to DNA proof really proves little. Since the research team was unable to extract and map the nuclear DNA of the remains in the Jesus and Mariamne ossuaries, they resorted to mitochondrial DNA testing. Such testing determines whether there is a maternal relationship between two individuals. This test could thus demonstrate whether Jesus and Mariamne were mother and child, brother and sister, or two maternally

unrelated individuals. The test concluded that Jesus and Mariamne were not related maternally. The team then rushed to the conclusion that they must be husband and wife since one could not otherwise explain the presence of two unrelated people in a family tomb. This argument is riddled with problems. It is not clear that all of the remains interred in the Talpiot tomb belonged to members of the same family. Two of the males in the tomb were clearly related, Jesus and Judah. A third Jose may have been related since Jose is a nickname for Joseph and *may* refer to the Joseph mentioned in the Jesus inscription. However, it has not been demonstrated that Matthew, Mary, Mariamne, or those in the unmarked ossuaries belong to the same family. Furthermore, even if this is a family tomb, Mariamne could have been a half-sister, sister-in-law, cousin or aunt from the father's side, rather than the wife of the Jesus of the ossuary. Such relationships would be fully consistent with the present DNA evidence.

Other Novel Claims

The Da Vinci Code-like elements of the book are especially speculative. Even though archaeologists have claimed that an awkward X-like mark on the Jesus ossuary was a mason's mark, the researchers disagreed. They first attempted to claim that the mark was a cross which confirmed that the ossuary bore Christian significance. When they discovered that the cross did not become a symbol of Christianity until much later, they scanned other ancient texts attempting to devise an explanation that confirmed their other theories. They finally resorted to Ezekiel's *tav* mentioned in Ezekiel 9:4 and claimed that the mark was a sign of the righteous. They added an appeal to Jesus' statement that he is the Alpha and Omega (Rev. 22:31) and pointed out that the Hebrew

tav is, like the Greek *omega*, the final letter of the alphabet. This appears to be imagination running wild.

Even more imaginative is the supposed connection between the mark that adorned the tomb entrance, a chevron with a circle inscribed beneath it, and the artwork of one of Leonardo Da Vinci's disciples, Pontormo. One could almost suspect that the fictional Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon served as a consultant for this research project. Such arguments strain credulity. When the researchers finally toss in the Knights Templar, their secret rituals, and the skull and crossbones of the Jolly Roger, one can be certain that the book belongs on the fiction aisle along with the latest Dan Brown thriller rather than beside serious works of history.

Confused Theology

Christians must not be deceived by the claim that they can embrace this find as the authentic tomb of the Jesus of the Gospels without compromising their faith. The authors claim that Jesus' resurrection body was a "spiritual body" without any real connection to his physical body. Consequently, it does not really matter if his bones were buried in Jerusalem and are now deposited in an antiquities warehouse. This claim is based on a gross misunderstanding of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 15. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul described the resurrection body as a "spiritual body" and contrasts that body with a "natural body." Some interpreters incorrectly assume that a spiritual body is a body composed of spirit, i.e. an immaterial body.¹⁰ However, the adjectives "natural" (*psuchikos*) and "spiritual" (*pneumatikos*) are used frequently in Paul's writings

¹⁰ Thiselton refers to the view that "spiritual" means "immaterial" as both startling and astonishing "since all the exegetical, theological, and lexicographical evidence is against it." See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1277.

and particularly in 1 Corinthians. In other contexts it is clear that they do not refer to persons or objects as either made of matter or spirit. In 1 Corinthians 2:14-15, for example, the terms refer respectively to people influenced by human drives versus people under the control of the Spirit. It is likely that Paul's use in 1 Corinthians 15:44 is related to this earlier use. Furthermore, if Paul had wished to state that the resurrected body was made or composed of spirit, he would likely have used another adjective (*pneumatinos*) or equated the body with spirit. In light of this evidence, Paul described the resurrection body as a "spiritual body" because it is a body completely under the control of the Holy Spirit. The resurrection body will no longer experience the war that is presently waging between flesh and Spirit described in texts like Galatians 5:16-18. The resurrection body will be perfectly suited to the Spirit's domination and control and will joyfully comply with his will.

In the words of my friend Craig Evans, the view of the resurrection body suggested by Jacobovici and Pellegrino confuses Easter with Halloween. The resurrected Jesus was not a mere ghost. His tomb was empty because the very body that had been laid in the tomb rose and walked out.

Conclusion

Christians must not attempt to dismiss the claims of *The Jesus Family Tomb* by claiming that they do not really matter. Instead, they should appeal to the compelling eyewitness accounts of the resurrection preserved in New Testament texts, our oldest and most reliable accounts of the events following Jesus' crucifixion, and then carefully scrutinize the exaggerated, illogical, and poorly substantiated claims of the book and film. The sensational claims of *The Jesus Family Tomb* will be major news for some time

and this book and film, like the *Da Vinci Code*, will provide informed believers with an excellent opportunity to present the compelling evidence for Jesus' bodily resurrection, an essential element of our Christian faith (Romans 10:9). But let's "make no bones about it," the bones in the Talpiot tomb were not the bones of Jesus of Nazareth.