

Initial Impressions of *The Jesus Family Tomb*
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This Sunday a documentary will air on the Discovery Channel which claims that archaeologists have discovered the family tomb of Jesus of Nazareth. Although I have not yet seen the documentary, I have read the 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 discovered 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 apparently 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, the research team 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. James Cameron's Foreword to the book 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 just read *The Jesus Family Tomb* today. 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 Excavation

Although the writers frequently claim that the Talpiot tomb excavation was a provenanced archaeological find in which the contents remained undisturbed (*in situ*) until examined by qualified experts, the archaeological team responsible for the find referred to the excavation as "salvage archaeology." Due to pressures from the

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.

construction company that accidentally discovered the tomb, excavation that would normally have taken weeks had to be rushed. Furthermore, the tomb lay open and exposed for over twenty-four hours before the archaeological team began its work. Bystanders actually observed neighborhood children using skulls from the tomb as soccer balls. The fact that the seal stones that originally walled the “kokhim” or niches where the ossuaries were placed were missing indicated to the original archaeological team that looters or vandals had entered the tomb at some point. The fact that the artifacts that were normally found in such tombs were all missing further confirmed an intrusion by looters. Although the discovery of these ossuaries presented a far better situation to the archaeologists than if the ossuaries suddenly appeared for sale on the antiquities market without any verifiable information about their origins, the excavation of the Talpiot Tomb was obviously a less than ideal situation.

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 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. 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 104 different individuals with the name Jesus from this general period (330 B.C. to 200 A.D.) and at least 232 different individuals with the name Joseph. In fact, Joseph was the second most common name among Palestinian Jewish males from the period, second only to Simon. Jesus was the sixth most common name from the period. 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!”⁵

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.

⁵ 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 men had the name Jesus, son

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 actually the speculation of Francis Bovon and is not confirmed by the Acts of Philip at all. The Acts of Philip portrays Mariamne as the sister of Philip but never identifies her explicitly as Mary Magdalene (In fact, since she is associated with Martha at one point in the Acts of Philip, she would more likely be Mary of Bethany than Mary Magdalene *if* the author of the Acts intended to identified as one of the named Marys of the New Testament). Neither Mary is ever identified as Mariamne in the New Testament or, for that matter, in any other known text. The researchers also argue that the name “Mara” is actually the title “master” or “lord” and identifies Mary Magdalene as a female apostle. This element of 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 is widely believed to be a mere abbreviated form of the name

of Joseph. Due to this conflicting information, it will take some time to develop reliable indications of the probability of the tomb belonging to someone other than the Jesus of the Gospels.

“Martha.”⁶ If this “Mary” is not Mary Magdalene and if the James ossuary is not the missing tenth ossuary from Talpiot, the presence of the names from the inscriptions in the Tomb of the Ten Ossuaries is not unusual.

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). Two 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. Several considerations betray a serious miscalculation on the part of the research team. The name Mary was the most common name for females in the period ranging from 330 B.C. to 200 A.D. The researchers noted that 1 out of every 24 Jewish women in Palestine during the ossuary period were named Mary. Consequently, 1 out of every 1,896 families included a “Jesus, son of Joseph” whose mother was named Mary. However, since Mary is not specifically identified as the mother of this Jesus and could have been a sister, daughter, sister-in-law, cousin, or aunt (assuming the family tomb theory), 1 out of every 4 men named “Jesus, son of Joseph” could have had a close female relative named Mary. Consequently 1 out of 316 families had this precise combination of names in a single generation!

⁶ See Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 89; and Kloner, “A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries,” 17.

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 7 Jewish men were named Joseph. However, since this “Joseph” could have been the father (as the inscription on the Jesus ossuary implies), the Jose inscription may not affect the 1 out of 316 probability at all. Furthermore, even assuming the family tomb theory, the probability of this Jesus having a close male relative named Jose (father, brother [as the researchers assumed], uncle, cousin, or son) were high: 1 out of 1.4. Obviously this does not significantly increase the probability that the family in the Talpiot tomb belonged to Jesus of Nazareth. Approximately 1 out of 442 families in Palestine in this period were a Jesus, son of Joseph with close relatives named Mary and Jose/Joseph.

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. Consequently, the statistical argument does not prove at all that the Jesus of the ossuary is Jesus of Nazareth. It is neither statistically impossible nor improbable that this Jesus is another Jesus.

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 Jesus. 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 the words of my friend Craig Evans, such an interpretation confuses Easter with Halloween. The resurrected Jesus was not a mere ghost. His grave was empty because the very body that had been laid in it, 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).