

The Jesus Tomb

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I. Discovery

The tomb was initially discovered on March 28, 1980, when a construction crew uncovered it in the process of preparing the foundations for an apartment complex in Talpiat, five kilometers south of Jerusalem. Following the law, the construction team contacted the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) to inspect the site. The IAA looked it over and assigned a salvage team to excavate and map the tomb and remove its contents for study and preservation. The IAA team assigned to this task was led by the late Yosef Gat and included Shimon Gibson. Amos Kloner, a leading Israeli archaeologist and Yosef Gat's boss, also looked over the remains at the time of the initial excavations. Excavations continued until April 14, 1980.

The salvage excavation team removed 10 limestone boxes—ossuaries—used by the Jews for secondary burials. According to Jewish practice at that time (approximately 30 BC to 70 AD), a body would initially be interred in a tomb for one year. During this time, the body would decompose, leaving only the bones. After one year, family and/or friends would reenter the tomb and the bones of the deceased would be gathered up and deposited in a bone box or ossuary.

Of these ten ossuaries, six had inscriptions bearing the names of the deceased contained therein in either Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek. It was not uncommon for surviving family members to etch or scratch the name of the remains of the deceased on the bone box before final re-interment. Three ossuaries had only geometric designs. One ossuary (the tenth) was plain, having neither an inscription nor a design. The six inscriptions were translated as

follows: (1) “Mariamene e Mara,” (Miraim and Martha); (2) “Yehuda bar Yeshua” (Judah son of Jesus); (3) “Matia” (Matthew); (4) “Yeshua (?) son of Yehosef” (Jesus, son of Joseph) (5) “Yose” (a contraction of Yehosef or Joseph) (6) Marya (Maria).

At first glance it would appear that these names would create a lot of excitement, especially the name of Jesus, as these are well known people of the New Testament. However, all of these names are so common during the Hellenistic/Roman period that they did not cause any excitement among scholars at the time—they saw no connections whatsoever with the New Testament people of the same names.

The ossuaries were deposited at the Rockefeller museum which was being administered by the Israel Antiquities Authority. Joe Zias received and catalogued the ossuaries for the museum. The numbers for the ossuaries were IAA 80 500-509. The tenth ossuary that had no inscription or design was placed by Zias in the garden area of the Rockefeller Museum near other sarcophagi. This would become the “missing ossuary” that the Discovery program would later claim was the “James Ossuary.”

II. Publications

The excavation of the tomb was quickly published by Gat in 1981 in Hebrew. A more detailed study of the ossuaries was published in 1994 by a leading expert on ossuaries and 1st century tomb practices, Dr. Levi Yizhaq Rahmani, in “A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries” as ossuaries nos. 701-709. Professor Amos Kloner, former Israel Antiquities Authority archaeologist, professor at the Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology at the Bar-Ilan University, published “A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries in the East Talpiot” in the Israeli journal *Antiqot* in 1996. Both of these studies focused only on the nine ossuaries that had either inscriptions or designs or both. Since the tenth ossuary had neither and was otherwise quite ordinary, it was omitted from both publications. Neither of

these publications on the ossuaries attracted any special interest by scholars in relationship to Jesus of Nazareth.

III. Media Attention

In 1996, sixteen years after the initial discovery the BBC produced a program. British producers Chris Mann and Ray Bruce and reporter Joan Bakewell produced a program for Easter Sunday (7 April, 1996) entitled “The Body in Question.” It used the Talpiot discovery to pose a hypothetical question—what if Jesus wasn’t resurrected? They received tremendous criticism for the program. Bakewell insists they were not trying to claim that this was Jesus’ tomb—they were just trying to be provocative. Bakewell recently expressed her own view on the matter: “The truth is that it is highly unlikely this is the actual tomb of Jesus and his family. There is certainly no positive proof of anything. The names were all common in the Palestine of that era; Jesus belonged to a poor family in Nazareth which would be unlikely to own a rich tomb in Jerusalem; another tomb, actually near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, has a greater claim to be the space offered by Joseph of Arimethea. But even speculation is dangerous.”

The negative reactions of the BBC production did not deter James Cameron, producer of the successfully and critically acclaimed movie “Titanic,” and Israeli-born filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici from using the same discovery for their production of “The Lost Tomb of Jesus,” broadcast this March by the Discovery Channel. While the program was one of the most successful for Discovery Channel in the last couple of years, it received so much negative criticism from Christian groups and academics alike, that they pulled their plan for a rerun broadcast.

IV. Claims of the Discovery Team

The essential claim of the Discovery Channel team is that the individuals whose names are found on the ossuaries of the Talpiot tomb are none other than the well-known people mentioned in the New Testament. They attempt to support this claim with the following additional claims:

- (1) The most sensational claim, of course, is that the Jesus, son of Joseph, whose ossuary was found in the Talpiot tomb is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. They base this on their assertion that this combination of father/son names (Jesus son of Joseph) is very rare. Out of thousands of inscriptions catalogued, only one other “Jesus son of Joseph” inscription ever has been uncovered. Obviously, the discovery of an ossuary of Jesus would mean that he did not undergo bodily resurrection, but rather was buried after the crucifixion, allowed to decompose for one year and then his bones were reburied in an ossuary.
- (2) They claim that the ossuary with Maria is the mother of Jesus. They argue that the name of the mother of Jesus always has been referenced in one way: “Maria,” i.e., the Latin version of “Miriam.” They believe that finding a Latin version of a Hebrew name inscribed phonetically in Hebrew letters is very rare. In fact, out of thousands of ossuaries discovered so far, only eight other such inscriptions ever have been identified.
- (3) They suggest that Matia (Matthew) may be a member of Jesus’ mother Mary’s family (based on the genealogy of Luke 3:23)—and possibly the author of the gospel by that name.
- (4) They suggest that Jose (a nickname for Joseph) is Jesus’ brother—they claim that Jose, which appears as the name of Jesus’ brother in the gospel of Mark, is a rare form of the full name Joseph, appearing only on this ossuary to date. This makes it likely that this is Jesus’ brother.
- (5) They claim that the ossuary inscribed “Mariamene e Mara,” provides a unique form of the name Maria or Mary and was used especially by early Christians as a name for Mary

Magdalene. They translate this inscription as “Mary, known as the Master,” based on a 4th century apocryphal work known as the Acts of Philip and another work known as the Gospel of Mary Magdalene both of which suggest that Mary Magdalene became an apostle, teacher and master in her own right.

(6) The next claim is that the ossuary with the “Judah son of Jesus” inscription proves that Jesus was married and had a son! Obviously, this would require that Jesus had a wife, and the Discovery folks fall back on a Da Vinci Code claim that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, who they have already established was buried in this same tomb. To bolster their claim, the Discovery team claims they took DNA samples from the ossuaries of Jesus son of Joseph and Mariamene e Mara, and that the DNA did not match—thus supporting the claim that these two individuals were unrelated biologically and thus could have been a married couple.

(7) In order to bolster their claim that the Talpiot tomb is the family tomb of Jesus, the Discovery team claims that the 10th ossuary which was not listed in either the Rahmani or Kroner publications was none other than the infamous, “James son of Joseph brother of Jesus” ossuary whose find was announced a few years ago and is now the subject of tremendous controversy over its authenticity (Biblical Archaeology Review magazine had led in the discussion of this find). If this, ossuary is indeed authentic, and if it was found in the Talpiot tomb with the other ossuaries noted above, it would strengthen the Discovery team’s claim that this was the family tomb of Jesus.

V. Criticisms of the Claims

Reaction to the claims of the Discovery team has been rapid and almost universally negative. Criticisms have been provided by Christian thought leaders and theologians, as well as notable archaeologists—both Christian and non-Christian. The archaeologists include several of those who were involved with the original excavation, cataloguing, and publication

(Amos Kloner, Joe Zias).

The most common criticism of the Discovery claim is that the names—even the supposed rare derivative forms—are not as unusual or rare at the program leads viewers to believe. The leading scholar in gathering and compiling these names from the various extant sources is Tal Ilan, currently professor in the department of Jewish Studies at the Freie Universität in Berlin, who has published a couple of important works. The first work was published in 1987 in the Israeli journal, *Eretz Israel* (19:238-241, Hebrew) and is entitled, “The Names of the Hasmoneans in the Second Temple Period.” In this work Ilan studied some 1,986 names from various sources of the Hellenistic/Roman period. More recently she has published the *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity Part I: Palestine 330 BCE – 200CE*; Tübingen, 2002) which expands the list of names to 3193 individuals.

Subsequent to her work, Richard Bauckham, Professor of New Testament Studies and Bishop Wardlaw Professor, St Andrews, published 2,625 males and 326 female names (varying slightly from Ilan’s work) in chapter 4 of his recent book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* [Eerdmans, 2006]). Bauckham notes that all of the names found in the Talpiot tomb were actually quite common during the time of Jesus. Out of the 2,625 men, the name Joseph (including Yose, the abbreviated form) was borne by 218 or 8.3%. It is the second most popular Jewish male name, after Simon/Simeon. The name Judah was borne by 164 or 6.2%. The name Jesus was borne by 99 or 3.4%. The name Matthew (in several forms) was borne by 62 or 2.4%. Of the 328 named women (women’s names were much less often recorded than men’s), a staggering 70 or 21.4% were called Mary (Mariam, Maria, Mariame, Mariamme).

While Ilan’s and Bauckham’s works show how common the names from the Talpiot tomb were in Jesus’ time, it does not address the question of how likely it would be that the particular combination of names found in this tomb would occur together. A number of statisticians have suggested different possibilities, but the most complete analysis we have seen of the possibilities has been presented by Dr. Randy Ingermanson, a theoretical physicist

and a popular Christian author. Based on the data of Ilan and Bauckham, Ingermanson calculates the number of men in Jerusalem between 20 B.C. and A.D. 70 (when ossuaries were in use) who would have been named “Jesus son of Joseph.” The number is 1.26% of 80,000 men, which works out to 1,008 individuals. Allowing for possible deviations, Ingermanson suggests that the number was somewhere between 900 and 1,100 men with this name.

More important is the question as to what are the odds of a Jesus son of Joseph being buried with the particular combination of two women and three men in the Talpiot tomb. Ingermanson calculates that one would expect at least 11 men known as Jesus son of Joseph would be buried with a set of other people that meets or beats the “amazing coincidence” cited by the Discovery team, found for the Jesus of the tomb.

To illustrate that the occurrence of names as found in the Talpiot tomb could show up in other tombs of this period, Dr. Michael S. Heiser (an ancient Near Eastern language scholar) points out that in 1953-1955, Bellarmino Bagatti excavated the site of Dominus Flevit (“The Lord wept”) on the Mount of Olives. The excavation uncovered a necropolis and over 40 inscribed ossuaries. The ossuaries included the names of Mary, Martha, Matthew, Joseph, Jesus. These ossuaries are not included in Rahmani’s catalogue probably because they are not the property of the Israel Antiquities Authority (see Rahmani’s Preface)—hence this find was not mentioned by the Discovery team people.)

Regarding the claim that Jose is a rare name used only for the brother of Joseph, Richard Bauckham notes that Jose is only rare in the ossuaries. It is not as rare among the broader corpus of names from this period. Even in the NT, one of the brothers of Jesus bore that name, Mark 6:3. However, one of the sons of Mary the mother of James the younger bore that name too, according to Mark 15:40, and he was not Jesus’ brother. And it was a name of Barnabas, according to some manuscripts containing Acts 4:36.

As to the claim that the ossuary refers uniquely to Mary Magdalene, most scholars

translate this inscription as “Mariamene [also called] Mara.” Rather than meaning “master.” Mara is a contraction of the name “Martha.” While some have suggested two women were buried in this ossuary, it is more likely that this woman was known by two names. Moreover, the name on the tomb is not Mariamene or Mariamne, but Mariamenou which, as Richard Bauckham convincingly argues, has a very different etymology. Thus, this ossuary cannot refer to Mary Magdalene.

Similarly the claim that the DNA evidence supports a marriage between the “Jesus” found in the tomb and “Mariamenou” has been vastly overstated and has been dismissed by knowledgeable scholars. One of the forensic experts on the DNA, Carney Matheson, Associate Professor at Lakehead University, who was consulted for the program, made the following comments online afterwards: “In the report it concludes that these two profiles from two different individuals were not maternally related. That is all the report states.” Matheson went on to say, “When they did the filming and on the documentary they asked every question under the sun with permutations and manipulations. I provided the investigators with all the possibilities. They were not brother and sister, mother and child, maternal cousins, maternal grandparent and child, etc. I also mentioned all of the possibilities, which I should not have done in hindsight. These included, father and daughter, paternal cousins, half brother and sister (sharing the same father) or simply unrelated individuals.” Nothing in the findings indicates that the Jesus and Mariamenou were married—that was a conclusion that the film makers jumped to on their own.

There has been additional criticism of the techniques and assumptions involved with the collection of the DNA samples by the film crew. The original bones were not available for analysis since they had been reburied at the time of the original excavation (as is the practice of the IAA). Susanne Sheridan from Notre Dame notes that the DNA results are probably invalid due to poor sampling techniques—it is as likely that the DNA samples came from the collectors as the ancient remains. If they did obtain samples from ancient remains (residue in

the ossuaries that would have remained after the bones were removed), it has to be remembered that there were many bodies in the tomb originally—bones were scattered around and ossuaries could be reused. In short, there is no way of knowing precisely from which body or individual a given DNA sample was derived—the entire tomb was probably “contaminated” in antiquity. Thus, DNA conclusions are ultimately meaningless.

Finally, the claim by the Discovery team that the 10th ossuary went missing after the original excavation and is actually the infamous “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” ossuary that was presented to the world a few years ago, is purely bogus. First of all, the original ossuary, never “went missing.” It was catalogued by Dr. Joe Zias in the Rockefeller museum and deposited in the garden of that museum, precisely because it had no decoration or writing on it. Second, the dimensions of the 10th ossuary that were taken at the time of excavation and those of the “James” ossuary are not the same size. The so-called missing “Tenth ossuary” measures 60 x 26 x 30 cm, while the “James” ossuary measures 56 x 25 x 30.5 cm. Third, claims that the patina of the James ossuary matches that on the other ossuaries of the Talpiot tomb has been disavowed by the very expert who was cited in the program. Fourth, there is a serious question as to the authenticity of all or part of the inscription on the James ossuary—it is thought by many to be a fraud. Finally, Eusebius makes it clear that James the brother of Jesus was buried in Jerusalem proper, close to the temple—probably in the Kidron Valley—not 3 miles south in Talpiot.

In addition to these refutations of the specific claims of the Discovery Channel program, scholars have noted many other problems. Some of the more significant have been noted by Dr. Jodi Magness, an archaeologist at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and an expert on first century tombs. She notes in her article published on the Archaeological Institute of America website that at the time of Jesus, only wealthy families buried their dead in tombs cut by hand from solid rock, putting the bones in niches in the walls and then, later, transferring them to ossuaries. Jesus’ father was a poor carpenter and there is no evidence that

Jesus' family was affluent enough to afford a stone cut tomb and ossuary. The location is wrong. "If Jesus' family had been wealthy enough to afford a rock-cut tomb, it would have been in Nazareth, not Jerusalem," according to Magness.

Moreover, Magness notes, the names on the Talpiot ossuaries indicate that the tomb belonged to a family from Judea, the area around Jerusalem, where people were known by their first name and father's name. As Galileans, Jesus and his family members would have used their first name and hometown. Magness also correctly notes that there is no information on analyzing the relation of "Mary" and "Jesus son of Joseph" or any other tomb occupants.

In summary, then, there are virtually no leading archaeologists or Biblical scholars who find the claims of the Discovery Channel that they have identified the actual tomb of Jesus of Nazareth credible.