

The Lost Tomb of Jesus

On 25 February 2007 the Discovery Channel announced that a 2,000 year old tomb may contain the coffins, burial boxes, or ossuaries (limestone boxes) of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and a child. The ossuaries were found at a construction site on a hillside in the East Talpiot neighborhood of Jerusalem. The surprising announcement preceded another announcement made by movie producers in the city of New York that *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* will air at 9:00 pm hours on Sunday, 04 March 2007 (EST) on the Discovery Channel. The following was posted on the Discovery Channel website,

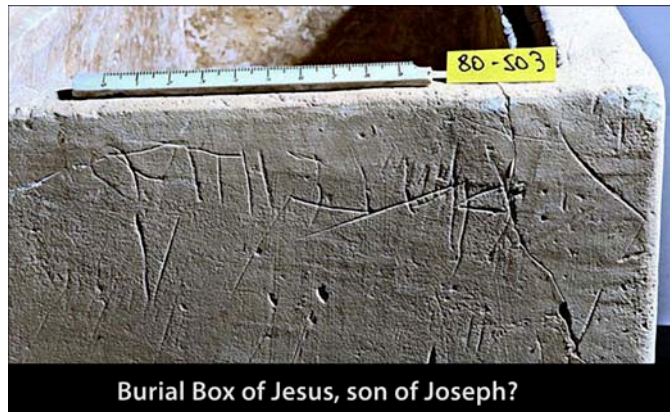
New scientific evidence, including DNA analysis conducted at one of the world's foremost molecular genetics laboratories, as well as studies by leading scholars, suggests a 2,000-year-old Jerusalem tomb could have once held the remains of Jesus of Nazareth and his family. The findings also suggest that Jesus and Mary Magdalene might have produced a son named Judah.

The DNA findings, alongside statistical conclusions made about the artifacts — originally excavated in 1980 — open a potentially significant chapter in Biblical archaeological history.¹

MOVIE PRODUCER'S CLAIMS. The producers of the “documentary” movie claim that forensic tests tie the so-called “James” (brother of Jesus) ossuary, which was “discovered” in 2002 [to] the same tomb.² The producer of

the “documentary” movie is Simcha Jacobovici, an Emmy Award-winning journalist. The documentary's executive producer is James Cameron. He was the director of the Hollywood blockbusters “Titanic,” “Aliens,” and “The Terminator.” Mr. Jacobovici is Israeli-born and currently lives in Canada. He claims that overwhelming statistical evidence exists that the ossuaries indicate that Jesus had a family. He stated that the inscriptions on the ossuaries are “Jesus, son of Joseph,” “Mary” (whom he believes is Mary Magdalene), “Judah, son of Jesus,” and James” (brother of Jesus). The producers ignored the fact that the vast majority of authorities consider the James' ossuary to be a forgery whose inscriptions were carved into place recently. The filmmaker of the

Titanic, James Cameron, stated on the Today Show,



I don't pretend to be an archeologist and I don't pretend to be an historian, but when I get interested in a subject, I'll read voraciously on it . . . We also knew that the investigation would take us on a journey - and it did. We couldn't have

predicted exactly where it would have come out; we couldn't have predicted for example, that we'd be successful in chemically fingerprinting the James ossuary to the Talpiot tomb, which I think is hugely significant in the analysis in the outcome of this.³

Mr. Cameron added that DNA analysis of the remains suggests that the two adults, Jesus and Mary, were not blood relatives and perhaps were married. During the interview he

1. Discovery Channel (dsc.discovery.com)

2. The Jerusalem Post, 27 Feb. 2007 (www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=11718

94526073&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FPrinter).

3. Today Show, MSNBC (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17349123/).

stated,

We now know more about [Jesus of Nazareth] than we've known for literally thousands of years. I think that's pretty amazing,⁴

ISRAELI REBUTTAL. Strong reactions by archaeologists and biblical scholars have denounced the claims made by the producers and the Discovery Channel. But what is the truth? Surprisingly, the strongest rebuttal has come from Jews, who have rejected the claim of Christians that Jesus was both God and the Jewish Messiah.

Surprisingly, the Jerusalem Post offered the following,

But the Israeli archeologist responsible for the 1980 excavation, Prof. Amos Kloner, on Monday night intensified his criticism of this assertion, lambasting the documentary as “absolute nonsense.”⁵

In a question and response interview with the internationally renowned archeology professor Amos Kloner, who provided oversight of the original archaeological dig of this tomb in 1980, we discover the following,

What do you make of the assertion that Jesus and his family were buried there?

It makes a great story for a TV film. But it's completely impossible. It's nonsense. There is no likelihood that Jesus and his relatives had a family tomb. They were a Galilee family with no ties in Jerusalem. The Talpiot tomb belonged to a middle class family from the 1st century CE.

But there is apparently such a confluence of resonant names.

The name “Jesus son of Joseph” has been found on three or four

ossuaries. These are common names. There were huge headlines in the 1940s surrounding another Jesus ossuary, cited as the first evidence of Christianity. There was another Jesus tomb. Months later it was dismissed. Give me scientific evidence, and I'll grapple with it. But this is manufactured.

What of the assertion that the 10th ossuary disappeared from your care and may be none other than the “James” ossuary?

Nothing has disappeared. The 10th ossuary was on my list. The measurements were not the same (as the James ossuary). It was plain (without an inscription).⁶

In another interview conducted and reported by YNetnews Prof. Kloner is quoted as saying,



The claim that the burial site [of Jesus of Nazareth] has been found is not based on any proof, and is only an attempt to sell.

“I refute all their claims and efforts to waken a renewed interest in the findings. With all due respect, they are not archeologists,” Kloner said, referring to the filmmakers.⁷

Four other news agencies provided these reports,

In a telephone interview with The New York Times, Kloner said the inscription on the alleged Jesus ossuary is not clear enough to ascertain.⁸

Hebrew University archeologist and epigraphist Leah DiSegni said that the names found in the tomb, Mary, Joseph and Jesus, were among the most common names of the day. It would be like finding a tomb with the name George on it in the future and

6. Ibid.

7. YNetNews.com (www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3369346,00.html)

8. WebIndia123.com, 27 Feb. 2007 (news.webindia123.com)

4. Ibid.

5. The Jerusalem Post 27 Feb. 2007. (www.jpost.com).

asserting that it must have been the tomb of President George Bush, DiSegni told the Cybercast News Service. In addition, biblical scholar Stephen Pfann has questioned even the actual inscription on the tomb, claiming it's "scratchy" and hard to read. For all we know, it's Johnny, Mabel and Jerry.⁹

His critics are arming themselves for battle. "Simcha has no credibility whatsoever," says Joe Zias, who was the curator for anthropology and archeology at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem from 1972 to 1997 and personally numbered the Talpiot ossuaries. "He's pimping off the Bible. He got this guy Cameron, who made 'Titanic' or something like that-what does this guy know about archeology? I am an archeologist, but if I were to write a book about brain surgery, you would say, 'Who is this guy?' People want signs and wonders. Projects like these make a mockery of the archeological profession."¹⁰

"This was just another Jewish tomb from the time of the second Temple period with ossuaries. Nothing more," said anthropologist Joe Zias.¹¹

SOME DETAILS. Now let us consider some additional facts and test the producers' claims that the ossuaries contained the dead bodies of Jesus and His family. First, we will look at the prevalence of the names in Jesus' day, the statistics associated with six names appearing in the tomb, and then the likelihood that the woman in the tomb was Mary Magdalene.

1. A total of six persons are named in the ossuary inscriptions (Rahmani 701-706). They are: Mariamenou-Mara (the first name is a unique form of the name Mariam), Yehuda bar Yeshua (Judah son of Jesus), Matia (Matthew), Yeshua bar Yehosef (Jesus son of Joseph), and Yose (a common abbreviated form of Yehosef), and

9. Townhall, 28 Feb. 2007 (www.townhall.com/Columnists/BrentBozell-III/2007/02/28/what_bones_of_jesus) and Crosswalk.com (www.crosswalk.com)

10. MSNBC Newsweek (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17349123)

11. NBC6 News, 28 Feb. 2007. (www.nbc6.net/entertainment/11136658/detail.html)

Maria (the second name, a form of Mariam, Mary). All the inscriptions are in Aramaic except the first, which is Greek.¹²

2. Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 tell us that the names of Jesus' brothers were James, Joses (or Joseph), Judas and Simon. He had sisters who were not named. Only three of the names found in the tomb correspond to family names: Mary, Jesus, and Joses. Mary was Jesus' mother. The name Matia or Matthew is not found in the Matthew or Mark passage. Judah is assumed to be the child of the man named "Jesus" one of the women. Unfortunately, the child's skeletal remains are missing making that assertion pure guess work. Yose or Joses is the same name as one of Jesus' brothers.
3. The ossuaries spanned about three or four generations according to Prof. Kloner. Consequently, there were many ossuaries in the tomb and they were not just from the first century. According to Prof. Amos Kloner, there were about 35 ossuaries in the Talpiot tomb.¹³ How many ossuaries with the name Jesus were in the tomb?
4. All of the [six] names on these ossuaries were extremely common names among Jews in Palestine at this period. We have a great deal of evidence about this (the data is collected in the enormously useful reference book: Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, part 1 [Mohr-Siebeck, 2002], and also analyzed in chapter 4 of my recent book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* [Eerdmans, 2006]). We have a data base of about 3000 named persons (2625 men, 328 women, excluding fictional characters). Of the 2625 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

12. Richard Bauckham. (<http://www.christilling.de/blog/2007/03/guest-post-by-richard-bauckham.html>)

13. Prof. Amos Kloner. (<http://www.ntgateway.com/weblog/2007/02/ben-witherington-iii-on-jesus-family.html>)

or 21.4% were called Mary (Mariam, Maria, Mariame, Mariamme).¹⁴

5. Dr. Evans, PhD, author of *Jesus and the Ossuaries*, indicates that approximately 100 tombs have been discovered in Jerusalem with the name “Jesus” and 200 with the name “Joseph.” The name “Mary” is on one out of every four ossuaries discovered.¹⁵ Other experts have stated that Mary occurs in one out of three ossuaries. A brief look at the New Testament reveals that there were many Marys.
6. The statistician whose results were presented on “The Lost Tomb of Jesus” is Andrey Feuerverger. He used Rahmani’s (1994) Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel, and Tal Ilan’s (2002) Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity in his calculations. He posted the many assumptions he used in his computations on a web site for the world to read.¹⁶
7. Mr. Feuerverger says he was neither asked nor did he attempt to calculate the odds that the Talpiot tomb was the final resting place of Christ, the Messiah. As Aleks Jakulin, a statistician at Columbia University, points out, “I doubt Professor Feuerverger really estimated ‘the odds that these ossuaries were not Jesus’s family’s final resting place.’ Instead . . . one should say that one in 600 families (on the conservative side) would have that particular combination of names purely by chance, based on the distribution of individual names in the population.”¹⁷ That is, he concluded that given 600 families, only one family would have this combination of names.
8. It should be noted that his 1-in-600 statistic assumes that Matthew and Mary Magdalene are members of this family. His statistic also assumes that Judah was a child of the “Jesus” and “Mary Magdalene.” If even one of the names were excluded the odds would change

significantly in favor of many other families having the remaining names. Mary Magdalene is the key person affecting the statistical calculation.

9. Now we look at the name Mariamenou-Mara (a unique form of the name Mariam) . . . The Hebrew name Mariam was very popular among Palestinian Jews at this period . . . It was usually rendered in Greek in one of two forms: Maria and Mariamme (or Mariame) . . . In the Gospels Mary Magdalene’s name is always given in the Greek form Maria, which is the New Testament’s standard practice for rendering Mariam into Greek, except for Luke 10:39-42 . . . However, from probably the mid-second century onwards we find some references to Mary Magdalene . . . that use the alternative standard Greek form Mariamme (or Mariame). These references are all either in Gnostic works (using ‘Gnostic’ fairly loosely) or in writers referring to Gnostic usage . . . Mariamme . . . occurred only in a context outside Palestine where the name was not known. So the . . . film’s claim that the name on the ossuary is the same as the name known to have been used for Mary Magdalene in the Acts of Philip is mistaken. The conclusion is that . . . there is no reason at all to connect the woman in this ossuary with Mary Magdalene, and in fact the name usage is decisively against such a connexion.¹⁸
10. There is no solid, objective data to support the view that Mariamenou-Mara is Mary Magdalene. Yet, she is a key factor in the theory. She significantly drives the statistical calculation down to 1-in-600. Another scholar, New Testament expert Richard Bauckham notes, “The first use of ‘[Mariamenou-Mara]’ for Magdalene dates to a scholar who was born in 185, suggesting that Magdalene wouldn’t have been called that at her death.”¹⁹
11. It is important to notice that the ancient Talpiot tomb in Jerusalem was first discovered in the 1980s. The inscriptions on the ossuaries had been read and little has been said about them for almost twenty-five years. The inscriptions are very difficult to read. Yet the movie,

14. Richard Bauckham, *Ibid.*

15. Y-Jesus. (<http://www.y-zine.com/yJesus.htm?gclid=CLihpsaW4IoCFQtpGAodlw4S2g>)

16. Andrey Feuerverger. (<http://fisher.utstat.toronto.edu/andrey/OfficeHrs.txt>)

17. Scientific American.com (<http://sciam.com/article.cfm?articleid=14A3C2E6-E7F2-99DF-37A9AEC98FB0702A>)

18. Richard Bauckham. , *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

The Lost Tomb of Jesus, makes it appear the inscriptions are easy to read and understand. Even if one assumes that the names on the ossuaries are the names of Jesus, Maria, and Judah, it is important to remember that they were very common names in Israel in the first century.

CONCLUSION. We can thank our Jewish friends for their honesty and lack of bias. In our twentieth century western world, Christianity is now the target of bias and hatred by the non-Christian elite. Truth is no longer important. Only the removal and eradication of Christianity is important.

The producers of the “The Lost Tomb of Jesus” have made false claims in an attempt to create interest in their movie. Unfortunately, there are many who do not care about the truth. They are only interested in financial gain and the deception of others. It would appear that this movie is an attempt to profit off the interest created by the Da Vinci Code and the recent marketing of heretical Gnostic teachings.

Most fundamentally they have ignored a critical custom of the day that the dead were buried in their home town. The New Testament tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-4) and raised in Nazareth (Luke 2:4, 39). Mary Magdalene was born and raised in the city of Magdala (Luke 8:2). Neither one was born or raised in Jerusalem. Therefore, we should ask, “Where are their ossuaries, if in fact, they have one?” The common people were buried in shallow dirt graves. Finally, no DNA test can prove that the bones in the tomb belong to Jesus of Nazareth or that the male and female in the grave were married. Maybe this “Jesus” was married to another woman in the tomb. Or, it is possible that his wife is not in the tomb at all. Jay Tolson adds this comment about the woman,

Could she not have been married to any of the other named males in the tomb?²⁰

In summary, we live in a godless era that the Holy Spirit predicted would come.

20. Jay Tolson. “Who Is Entombed In The Jesus’ Tomb?”. Us. New and World Report., March 12, 2007, p. 35.

The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him. All his thoughts are, “There is no God.” (NASB) Ps. 10:4

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. (NASB) 2 Tim. 3:1-5

The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good. (NASB) Ps. 14:1

For our struggle is . . . against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (NASB) Eph. 6:12

May the Lord encourage you in the faith.