

TALPIOT AND MARY MAGDALENE

The Talpiot “Jesus” Tomb: A Historical Analysis

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This paper poses a simple question: Is there sufficient historical evidence to identify a modest first-century CE Jewish rock-hewn tomb, accidentally opened by a construction crew in 1980 in East Talpiot, just south of the Old City of Jerusalem, as the probable burial tomb of Jesus of Nazareth and his intimate family?

The first time this Talpiot “Jesus” tomb received any public attention was sixteen years after its excavation when a BBC produced documentary titled *The Body in Question* aired in the United Kingdom on Easter 1996. The *London Sunday Times* ran a feature story titled “The Tomb that Dare Not Speak Its Name,” based on that documentary.¹ Both the documentary and the newspaper article called attention to the interesting cluster of names inscribed on six ossuaries found in the tomb: Jesus son of Joseph, two Marys, a Joseph, a Matthew, and a Jude son of Jesus. A flurry of wire stories followed with headlines that the “tomb of Jesus” had perhaps been found. Archaeologists, officials from the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), and biblical scholars quickly weighed in, assuring the public that “the names were common.” One lone voice, Joe Zias, an anthropologist with the IAA at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, demurred, stating that the *cluster* of names considered together was so significant that had he not known they were from a provenanced IAA excavation he would have been certain they were forged.²

1. *London Sunday Times*, March 31, 1996, p. 1.

2. Zias commented: “Had it not been found in a tomb I would have said 100 percent of what we are looking at are forgeries. But this came from a very good, undisturbed

Zias called for further investigation. Within a short time the press dropped the story, and no one in the academy other than Zias saw any reason for more to be done. It was in response to that 1996 story, and the attention that it drew, that Amir Drori, then director of the IAA, asked Amos Kloner to write up an official report on the tomb, published later that year in the IAA journal *‘Atiquot*.³

The media attention quickly subsided, and other than Kloner’s article no further academic evaluations of the tomb were published. That all changed in March 2007 with the broadcast of the Discovery Channel TV documentary *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* and the publication of the book, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, both of which argued that the Talpiot tomb was indeed the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth and his family — including Mary Magdalene his wife, and an otherwise unknown “Judah, son of Jesus,” their son.⁴ Both the film and the book have generated a massive worldwide reaction, characterized by passion, emotion, and heated debate. The academic world, the traditional media, and the Internet have all been abuzz with discussion. One might have expected strong opposition to the thesis of the book and film from more traditional Christian circles, but the negative assessment by a cadre of scholars, equally passionate in their denunciation of its hypotheses, has played a significant role in highlighting many of the important issues relevant to a proper scientific evaluation of the tomb and its contents. Unfortunately, more heat than light is often generated when the media serve as the primary forum for discussions involving such emotionally charged issues.

archaeological context. It is not something that was invented” (ibid.). Zias has since changed his mind and joined those scholars who hold that the names are so common in the period that their occurrence together is of no special significance.

3. Amos Kloner, “A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries in East Talpiyot, Jerusalem,” *‘Atiquot* 29 (1996): 15-22. Two years earlier nine of the ossuaries were included in the catalogue description in L. Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority and Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), pp. 222-24. The late excavator Joseph Gath had published a short preliminary report in 1981, but before the ossuary inscriptions had been deciphered (*Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 76 [1981]: 24-26).

4. The Discovery Channel film was produced by Simcha Jacobovici and James Cameron, and the book was coauthored by Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb: The Discovery, the Investigation, and the Evidence That Could Change History* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007). A revised and expanded paperback edition was published in 2008 with an updated title: *The Jesus Family Tomb: The Evidence Behind the Discovery No One Wanted to Find* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

In January 2008 an international group of scholars gathered in Jerusalem, convened by Prof. James H. Charlesworth of Princeton Theological Seminary, in an attempt to generate the proper kind of academic and scholarly debate on what we know of the Talpiot “Jesus” tomb and how it might be responsibly evaluated.⁵ I thank Prof. Charlesworth and his colleagues for the opportunity to publish my own analysis of these questions from the perspective of a biblical scholar and historian of early Christianity and late Second Temple Judaism.

I am convinced that there is a surprisingly close fit between what we might postulate as a *hypothetical* pre-70 CE Jesus family tomb based on our textual records, correlated with this particular tomb in Talpiot and its contents. Rather than starting with the tomb and its six inscribed ossuaries, and exploring all the alternative possibilities (which, given the scarcity of data, are endless), I take a different approach.

It is true, for example, that a nickname like Yoseh — short for Joseph (or *Yehoseph* in Hebrew or Aramaic) — appearing alone without further identification could be any male of a Jewish clan of the time, whether father, brother, son, nephew, or uncle. In fact Joseph is the most common male Jewish name of the period. But if we begin with our historical records asking a different set of questions — who was the “Yoseh” in Jesus’ life and is there any reason we might expect him to be in a hypothetical pre-70 CE Jesus tomb? — the answers are specific and singular. Jesus did have a brother who bore this precise and rare nickname — Yoseh (Greek *Iōsē*), according to Mark 6:3 (RSV Joses). What one needs to ask then is whether we have any evidence to think that Jesus’ brother Yoseh might have died before 70 CE, and thus be an appropriate “candidate” for inclusion in a Jesus family tomb.

Rather than starting with an endlessly open and undetermined set of unknowns, my approach, in terms of method, is to begin with the specific “knowns.” Essentially what I want to do is test a hypothesis, something we constantly do when we seek to correlate the material evidence of archaeology within our known textual and chronological horizons. It is obvious, no matter what one’s theory might be, that one can always posit other possibili-

5. The Third Princeton Symposium on Judaism and Christian Origins: “Jewish Views of the After Life and Burial Practices in Second Temple Judaism: Evaluating the Talpiot Tomb in Context,” was held January 13-16, 2008, at the Mishkenot Sha’ananim Conference Center in Jerusalem, with 54 scholars participating. On the press controversies following the conference and the various dispute and positions of the participants see James D. Tabor, “The Meyers/Magness Talpiot Tomb Statement: Some Observations,” SBL Forum, n.p. [cited Jan. 2008]. Online:<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=749>.

ties and alternatives. In terms of method I think what I suggest here can turn out to be quite enlightening, and I hope it will contribute to the discussion in a positive way.

What I want to explore first is what one might imagine for a hypothetical, pre-70 CE, Jerusalem tomb of Jesus and his family. Given our textual evidence, what might we reasonably construct in terms of likelihood? Toward the end of the article I will then briefly deal with the two main objections to my hypothesis — that the names are common and that Jesus and his followers were too poor to have a family burial cave — as well as a few closing theological observations.

The Second Burial of Jesus

I begin with what we know about the burial of Jesus of Nazareth from our earliest sources — the New Testament Gospels. Although the Apostle Paul knows the tradition that Jesus was “buried,” he provides no narrative details that we might analyze historically (1 Cor 15:4). It is often assumed that the Gospels report that Joseph of Arimathea took the corpse of Jesus and laid it in *his own new tomb* late Friday night. The problem with this assumption is that a careful reading of our Gospel accounts indicates that this tomb, into which Jesus was *temporarily* placed, did *not* belong to Joseph of Arimathea. Mark, our earliest account, says the following:

And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea . . . bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. (Mark 15:42-46)⁶

John’s Gospel, reflecting an independent tradition, offers a further explanation:

Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. So *because of the Jewish day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand*, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:41-42, emphasis mine)

6. Quotations from the NT are from the RSV.

Mark implies that it was the pressing necessity of a quick temporary burial brought on by the nearness of the Sabbath that prompted Joseph of Arimathea to act in haste and approach the Roman governor Pontius Pilate for permission to bury Jesus' corpse. The Gospel of John makes this specifically clear. This *initial* burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea was a temporary, emergency measure, with the Passover Sabbath hours away. It was a burial of necessity and opportunity. This particular tomb was chosen because it was unused and happened to be near the place of crucifixion. The idea that this tomb belonged to Joseph of Arimathea makes no sense. What are the chances that Joseph of Arimathea would just happen to have his own new family tomb conveniently located near the Place of the Skull, or Golgotha, where the Romans regularly crucified their victims?⁷ Kloner offers the following analysis, with which I wholly agree:

I would go one step further and suggest that Jesus' tomb was what the sages refer to as a "borrowed (or temporary) tomb." During the Second Temple period and later, Jews often practiced temporary burial. . . . A borrowed or temporary cave was used for a limited time, and the occupation of the cave by the corpse conferred no rights of ownership upon the family. . . . Jesus' interment was probably of this nature.⁸

Mark indicates that the intention of Joseph was to complete the full and proper rites of Jewish burial after Passover. Given these circumstances, one would expect the body of Jesus to be placed in a second tomb as a permanent resting place. This second tomb would presumably be one that either belonged to, or was provided by, Joseph of Arimathea, who had the means and had taken on the formal responsibility to honor Jesus and his family in this way. Accordingly, one would not expect the permanent tomb of Jesus, and subsequently his family, to be near Golgotha, just outside the

7. The assumption that Joseph owned this tomb is based on a theological interpolation of Matthew, where he adds two words to his source Mark, "he laid it in *his own* new tomb" (Matt 27:60), to make Jesus' burial fit the prophecy Isa 53:9, that the grave of Yahweh's "Servant" would be "with a rich man."

8. Amos Kloner, "Did a Rolling Stone Close Jesus' Tomb?" *BAR* 22/5 (1999): 26. Kloner cites several rabbinic texts to support his assertion. Compare his fuller academic treatment, "Reconstruction of the Tomb in the Rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre According to Archaeological Finds and Jewish Burial Customs of the First Century CE," in *The Beginnings of Christianity: A Collection of Articles*, ed. Jack Pastor and Menachem Mor (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2005), pp. 269-78.

main gate of the city, but in a rock-hewn tomb outside Jerusalem. These circumstances also address the issue that some have raised that the Talpiot tomb could not be that of Jesus since he was poor and from Galilee. James, the brother of Jesus, became leader of the Jesus movement following Jesus' death in 30 CE. Our evidence indicates that the movement was headquartered in Jerusalem until 70 CE. The core group of followers, banded around Jesus' family and the Council of Twelve, took up residence there as well, even though most of them were from Galilee.⁹ This evidence points strongly toward the possibility of a Jesus family tomb in Jerusalem, but one different from the temporary burial cave into which Jesus' body was first placed.

A Jesus Family Cluster

Based on our earliest textual sources, I propose the following list of individuals as potential candidates for burial in a *hypothetical* Jesus family tomb:

- Jesus himself
- Joseph his father
- Mary his mother
- His brothers: James, Joses, Simon, and Judas/Jude; and any of their wives or children
- His sisters: Salome and Mary (if unmarried)
- Any wife or children of Jesus

There had to be, of course, many other names we simply do not know, with various connections to the Jesus family, but these names and relationships we can at least consider as hypothetically likely. I realize that the matter of Jesus having a wife and children is usually seen as unlikely, but one has to factor in the nature of our records and the social context in which Jesus lived. None of the wives or children of any apostles or the brothers of Jesus are ever named in the Gospels, yet Mark indicates that Peter was married (Mark 1:30), and Paul mentions that the apostles and brothers of Jesus traveled about with their wives (1 Cor 9:5). Silence regarding women, in late, post-70 CE, theological sources such as our New Testament Gospels, does

9. See Jeffrey Bütz, *The Brother of Jesus and the Lost Teachings of Christianity* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2005), pp. 95-99, for a survey of a growing scholarly consensus that James, the brother of Jesus, had likely already taken up residence in Jerusalem prior to Jesus' crucifixion.

not imply nonexistence. Also, when Paul strongly recommends celibacy as a superior spiritual lifestyle, he fails to use Jesus as an example even in a context where he is desperate to refer to him for authority (1 Cor 7:8-12).

We next ask which of these individuals might hypothetically be buried in a pre-70 CE Jesus family tomb in Jerusalem, *after* the year 30 CE when Jesus was crucified. In 70 CE the Romans devastated Jerusalem and exiled much of the Jewish population; and normal Jewish life, including the common use of burial caves around the city, diminished. Given this watershed disaster we come up with a more chronologically restricted list of potential candidates, since we would only include those in the family that we can assume might have died before 70 CE:

- Jesus himself
- Mary his mother
- Joseph his brother, and perhaps James
- Any wife and children of Jesus who died before 70 CE

Jesus’ father Joseph we would eliminate because he seems to have died decades earlier, probably in Galilee, and we have no record of him in Jerusalem in this period (see Acts 1:14). Jesus’ mother Mary, given her age, could well have died before 70 CE, and as a widow, according to Jewish custom, would be put in the tomb of her oldest son. Based on our records, Jesus’ brothers Simon and Jude apparently lived past 70 CE, so they should be eliminated from our list.¹⁰ Jesus’ brother Joses is a strong candidate since he is the “missing brother” in our historical records. When James is murdered in 62 CE, it is Simon, the third brother, not Joses, the second, who takes over leadership of the movement — indicating that he had most likely died by that time. The New Testament letters of James and Jude testify to their influence, and we even have an account of the death of Simon by crucifixion, but nothing survives whatsoever regarding the brother Joses. Given the culture it is likely that both of Jesus’ sisters would be married, and thus buried in the tombs of their husbands, so they are not prime candidates either. Since we have no textual record of a wife or children, we can only say, hypothetically, that if such existed they might be included.

10. For the historical records of what happened to Jesus’ brothers and the disastrous impact of the 70 CE Roman destruction of Jerusalem see my *Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), pp. 284-304.

The Talpiot Tomb

There were ten ossuaries in the Talpiot tomb, six of them inscribed. This is an exceptionally high percentage. For example, just taking the sample of ossuaries retained in the Israeli State Collection, only about 20 percent are inscribed, but that percentage is much too high for ossuaries in general, since plain ones are regularly discarded. It is not the case, as has been reported, that the remains of up to 35 additional individuals were found in this tomb. As Kloner makes clear in his article, this is a demographic estimate, not data based on any kind of anthropological study of the Talpiot tomb remains. There were remains of at least two or possibly three individuals — skulls, vertebrae, and limb bones — apparently swept from the arcosolia, perhaps by intruders in antiquity, and found just below on the floor. Cooking pots dating to the Second Temple period were also found in three corners of the main chamber. That the bones of these individuals were never gathered and put in ossuaries seems to indicate that the 70 CE destruction of Jerusalem terminated the family use of the tomb.¹¹ Although it is possible that the bones of more than one individual were placed in the ossuaries, the mitochondrial DNA (mitDNA) results of the two that could be tested, that of Yeshua and Mariamene, showed clear singular profiles.¹² The Talpiot tomb seems to be a small (2.9×2.9 meters), modest, pre-70 CE family burial cave with remains of at least a dozen or so individuals.

The six inscriptions in the Talpiot tomb show a rather remarkable cor-

11. Rahmani writes, “Following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the manufacture of both hard limestone and chip-carved soft limestone ossuaries ceased” (*Catalogue*, p. 23). Such is the case with the Akeldama “Tomb of the Shroud,” found by Boaz Zissu in 1998 and subsequently examined by Shimon Gibson and me; here the shrouded remains of a skeleton dating before 70 CE were found (see Zissu, Gibson, and Tabor, *Ḥadashot Arkheologiyot* 111 (2000): 70*-72*. For a discussion of Jewish tombs that postdate 70 CE see Amos Kloner and Boaz Zissu, *The Necropolis of Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period*, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion* 8 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 144-48. The exceptions are relatively rare, and each tomb must be looked at individually to determine if artifacts or other evidence indicates continued use past 70 CE.

12. Despite claims to the contrary the mitDNA tests carried out on bone samples taken from the Jesus and Mariamne ossuaries were collected and handled with proper scientific rigor and care to avoid any possibility of modern contamination. My university supervised the tests, and samples were shipped to the Paleo-DNA at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Dr. Carney Matheson, who did the mitDNA work, says more than one individual would have shown up in the sample given the methods of testing that he followed.

respondence to the chronologically restricted hypothetical list of potential candidates one can construct from the textual evidence.¹³

1. Yeshua bar Yehoseph (Aramaic)
2. Maria (Aramaic)
3. Yoseh (Aramaic)
4. Mariamene [also known as] Mara (Greek and decorated)
5. Yehudah bar Yeshua (Aramaic and decorated)
6. Matyah (Aramaic)

Yeshua bar Yehoseph is an appropriate inscription for Jesus of Nazareth. Its messy informal style and the lack of honorific titles (“the Messiah,” or “our Lord”) fit what I would expect for his burial in 30 CE. I would also not expect the place designator “of Nazareth” since the use of the terms “Nazareth/Nazarene,” like the titles, is more reflective of later theology than contemporary informal usage — especially within the family.¹⁴

The Aramaic form of the nickname *Yoseh* (ܝܫܘܥ), short for *Yehoseph*/Joseph, is rare in the Second Temple period, found only here on an ossuary and in two other inscriptional examples. It is equivalent to the later popular spelling of this nickname as *Yosey*/*Yosi* (יׁסׁי) found in rabbinic texts from the late second to third century CE. However, in the first and second centuries CE it is extremely rare. It corresponds to an equally rare form of the name in Greek, *Yōsēs* or *Yōsē* (Ἰωσῆς/Ἰωσῆ ~), which occurs only five times in all our sources, literary and inscriptional. This is the precise form of the nickname

13. Two of the decorated ossuaries had inscriptions (IAA 80.500: *Maramenon* [*he*] *Mara* [Greek] and IAA 80.501: *Yehudah bar Yeshua*) and four of the “plain” or undecorated ones (IAA 80.502: *Matyah/Matah*; IAA 80.503: *Yeshua bar Yehoseph*; IAA 80.504: *Yoseh*; and IAA 80.505: *Maria/Maryah*). See Rahmani, *Catalogue*, pp. 222-24.

14. Jesus is legally known as the “son of Joseph” in both the Synoptic tradition and in John (Luke 3:23; 4:22; Matt 13:55; John 1:46; 6:42). One other example of “Yeshua bar Yehoseph” is known on an ossuary (no. 9/pl. 2 in Rahmani). It was “discovered” by Eleazar Sukenik in a basement storage area of the Palestinian Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem in 1926 but unfortunately is unprovenanced. He published a report about the ossuary in January 1931, and the news that such an inscription existed, the only one ever found until the Talpiot tomb in 1980, created no small stir in the world press, particularly in Europe. See L. H. Vincent, “Épitaphe prétendue de N.S. Jésus-Christ,” *Atti della pontificia: academia romana di archaeologie: Rendiconti* 7 (1929-1930): 213-39. The nickname Yeshua, a contracted form of Yehoshua/Joshua (which makes up 3.9% of male names in the period), occurs elsewhere on eleven ossuaries.



Figure 1. Close up of the “Yeshua bar Yehosef” inscription (Photo: James D. Tabor)

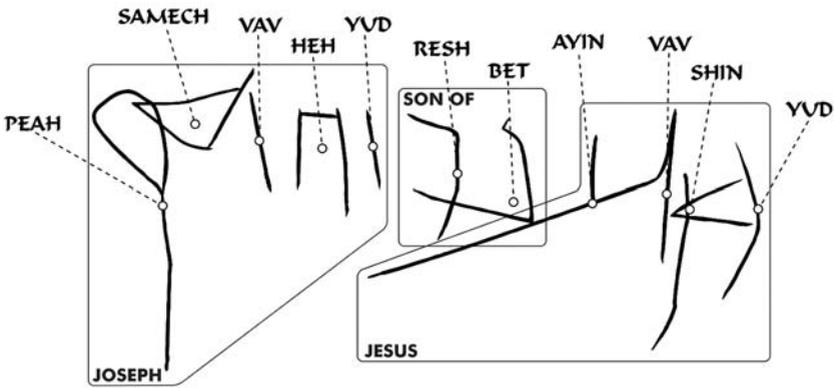


Figure 2. Schematic drawing of the “Yeshua bar Yehosef” inscription with letters traced (Drawing: Associated Producers, Ltd.)

by which the Gospel of Mark, our earliest source, knows Jesus’ second brother, Joseph/Joses (Mark 6:3).

There are two Marys in this tomb, known by different forms of that name, Maria and Mariamene. The mitDNA test indicates the Mariamene in this tomb is not related to Yeshua as mother or sister on the maternal side. That leaves open the likelihood that Maria could well be the mother, especially if we have two of her sons, Yeshua and Yoseh, in this tomb. It would make



Figure 3. The “Yose” inscription (Photo: James D. Tabor)

sense that she would be buried with her children in this intimate, small, family tomb and that her ossuary would be inscribed “Maria.”

Given the presence of the named son of Yeshua in this tomb, namely Yehudah/Jude, and based on the mitDNA evidence (that she is neither mother or sister of Jesus), it seems quite likely that Mariamene is the mother of this son. If this is indeed the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth, the speculation that she might be Mary Magdalene is based on a cluster of later evidence.

There were three intimate Marys in Jesus’ life: his mother, his sister, and Mary Magdalene. Indeed, it was Mary Magdalene, his mother, and his other sister Salome who attended to his burial rites (Mark 16:1). Family intimates carried out this important rite of washing and anointing the corpse for burial. If Mariamene is not Jesus’ mother or sister, as the mitDNA indicates, it seems a logical possibility that she could be the third Mary, namely Mary Magdalene, his follower and close companion, based on her inclusion as a named intimate in our earliest records. We do not know much about Mary Magdalene in our New Testament sources, but she does seem to be a woman of means and she is associated with several other women of standing from Galilee (Luke 8:1-3). The Mariamene ossuary is decorated and the inscription is in Greek, which surely fits this data, as Migdal, according to the record of Josephus, was a large, thriving, and cul-

turally diverse “Romanized” city with theater, hippodrome, and a large aqueduct system.¹⁵

Some have suggested that this Greek inscription be read as *Mariame kai Mara* — Mary and Martha, referring to two individuals.¹⁶ Even though these two names might fit a hypothetical Jesus family tomb, given the two sisters Mary and Martha mentioned in the Gospels, I find this extremely unlikely even beyond the strict epigraphical issues involved.¹⁷ The inscription itself appears to be from one hand, written in a smooth flowing style, with a decorative flourish around both names — pointing to a single individual who died and was placed in the inscribed ossuary pictured on page 259.

I accept the reading of Rachmani (reaffirmed by Leah Di Segni) that Mariamene is a diminutive or endearing form of the name Mariamne, derived from Mariame.¹⁸ Although Mariame is a common name, the form Mariamene — spelled with the letter *n* (*nu*) — is quite rare. In fact, a check of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, a comprehensive digital data base of Greek literature from Homer through 1453 CE, finds only *two* ancient works that use Mariamn- as a form of the name Mariame — both referring to Mary Magdalene! One is a quotation from Hippolytus, a third-century Christian writer who records that James, the brother of Jesus, passed on secret teachings of Jesus to “Mariamene,” that is, Mary Magdalene.¹⁹ The other is in the fourth-century CE *Acts of Philip*, which regularly refers to Mary Magdalene as *Mariamene*. It seems unlikely to the point of impossibility that Rahmani, who made no association whatsoever between his reading of the ossuary name as *Mariamene* with Mary Magdalene, would have just happened to come up with this exceedingly rare form of the name Mariame as

15. See Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

16. See S. J. Pfann, “Mary Magdalene Has Left the Room: A Suggested New Reading of Ossuary CJO 701,” *NEA* 69 (2006): 130-31. Pfann’s reading is accepted by Jonathan Price and others.

17. Luke 10:34-41; John 11-12. It is conceivable that one of Jesus’ brothers, or for that matter Jesus himself, might have married one of these sisters, thus accounting for their presence in this tomb.

18. See Rahmani, *Catalogue*, p. 222, as well as his introductory comments, p. 14. The Greek reads Μαρταμῆνου, in the genitive case, a diminutive form of Μαρταμῆνη. This form of the name is rare and is found also on one other ossuary, Rachmani, no. 108. Di Segni also continues to support Rahmani’s reading (as per private email correspondence with me in 2007).

19. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 5.7.1.



Figure 4. The “Mariamene” inscription (Photo: James D. Tabor)

his preferred reading. It seems clear to me that Rahmani’s keen eye and years of experience have unwittingly provided us with one of the most important correlations between the names in this tomb and those we might expect, hypothetically, to be included in a Jesus family tomb — a name uniquely appropriate for Mary Magdalene. That this rare form appears in later sources strengthens rather than diminishes the case here since one would not expect such a “later” literary form of a name for Mary Magdalene to appear on a first-century CE ossuary in Jerusalem.

That Mariamene is also known here on the ossuary by the Aramaic designation “Mara” (the absolute feminine of *Marā*), which, like “Martha” (the emphatic feminine), means “lordess,” seems all the more appropriate.²⁰ Recent scholarship on Mary Magdalene has gone a long way toward rehabilitating her important place in the earliest history of the Jesus movement. In a diverse collection of early Christian sources dating from the late first century

20. There is another ossuary in the Israeli State Collection, Rachmani, no. 868, that reads in Greek: *Αλεξας Μαρα* (of Alexa Lordess), which offers a strong parallel to this usage. The name Alexa is also in the genitive case, followed by Mara. See the limited examples of the use of Mar/Mara in Aramaic and Greek in Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, part 1, *Palestine 330 BCE–200 CE*, TSAJ 91 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), pp. 422–23.

through the fourth, she is a prominent leader and voice among the apostles and an intimate companion of Jesus, holding her place over against better-known male disciples.²¹

I find it striking that five of the six inscriptions correspond so closely to a hypothetical pre-70 CE family tomb of Jesus in Jerusalem as we might imagine it based on textual evidence. The one inscription we cannot account for in terms of what might be expected in our hypothetical Jesus family tomb is Matya or Matthew. The name is relatively rare (2.4% of males, compared to Joseph at 8.6% and Yeshua at 3.9%). It is worth noting that Matthew is a name known within the family of Jesus (see the genealogies of Matt 1; Luke 3). Also, the only Matthew known to us in the Gospels, also called Levi, is said to be of the Alphaeus family clan (Mark 2:14). In some early Christian traditions this Alphaeus or Clopas is the brother of Joseph, the father of Jesus. Still, just who this particular Matthew was and why he would be in this tomb, if it did belong to Jesus and his family, we simply do not know. The most likely supposition is that this Matthew was married to one of the sisters of Jesus, whose ossuary is unnamed.

I find this hypothetical fit between the intimate pre-70 CE family of Jesus and Nazareth and the names found in this tomb quite impressive, and it argues strongly against an out-of-hand dismissal of the tomb as possibly, or even likely, associated with Jesus of Nazareth.

How Common Are These Names?

The most common reaction to this interesting cluster of six names found in the Talpiot tomb — a Jesus son of Joseph, two Marys, a Joseph, a Jude son of Jesus, and a Matthew — is that these are common names. That perception is why the tomb was not given any special attention when it was discovered in 1980, nor again in 1996 when it briefly came to public light and was subsequently forgotten. The problem is, statistical probabilities are not intuitive. It is possible to test the oft-stated assertion by scholar and nonspecialist alike that this cluster of names is highly probable/common and thus meaningless. Is it the case that in the time of Jesus there would have been any number of

21. Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge, 2003); and Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, HTS 51 (Cambridge: Harvard Divinity School, 2003).

other tombs and/or families with these precise names — rendering this cluster meaningless in terms of any historical identification with what we know of Jesus of Nazareth and his family? One needs to clarify what one means by “common.”

For example, the name Joshua, from which we get the nickname Yeshua or Jesus, has a frequency percentage of 3.9% among the 2,538 examples of male names of the period surveyed by Tal Ilan.²² Is 3.9% a high enough number to call it common? I suppose it depends on how one uses the word “common.” But remember, that is the percentage of all forms of the name Joshua in Aramaic and Greek, not the specific nickname Yeshua. If we just take the Rahmani catalogue of 231 inscribed ossuaries in the Israeli State collection, there are three examples of Yeshua (nos. 9, 121, 140) plus the two in the Talpiot tomb, for a total of five out of 286 total names.²³ Should one refer to that as “common”? The Rahmani collection does not include all inscribed ossuaries found in the Jerusalem area for the period, but the name frequencies and distributions appear to be fairly representative of our large body of data.²⁴

“Joseph” was certainly a relatively common name (14%), but then the specific form Yoseh, in Aramaic, occurs only one other time on an ossuary, and two additional times in other sources. One would surely not call the name Yoseh common.

Still, in the end, it is not merely the frequency of the names but the cluster that one has to consider. If we are considering a hypothetical “Jesus family tomb” with these names we would then ask: What are the probabilities of a Jesus son of Joseph, with a brother named Yoseh, and a mother named Mary being found in a first-century Jewish family tomb? That is actually something a statistician can work with and the results can be correlated with what a historian might then postulate as the likelihood of these particular names being in a pre-70 CE Jesus tomb. The fact is that of the hundreds of tombs in the Jerusalem area that have been opened in a random way over the past two hundred years, *no other tomb* so far has been found with even this limited cluster of names: Jesus son of Joseph, Maria, and Yoseh. So

22. The percentages of the most common male and female names and their variants based on data from Ilan and Rahmani are conveniently tabulated by Andrey Feuerverger, “Statistical Analysis of an Archaeological Find,” *Annals of Applied Statistics* 2 (2008): 3-54.

23. Rahmani, *Catalogue*, p. 11.

24. Rahmani’s catalogue, though published in 1994, only covers ossuaries in the Israeli State collection up through August 1989; see Rahmani, *Catalogue*, p. 1.

it is not the case that most family tombs in the period are likely to have a person named Yeshua, and certainly not a Yeshua son of Joseph. If the Talpiot tomb had contained other names, such as Eleazar, Menahem, or Daniel, for instance, or names of women such as Sarah, Martha, or Joanna — all common Jewish names of the period, but with no connection to the family of Jesus — then identifying the ossuaries in this tomb with the family of Jesus would be more problematic.

In examining the Talpiot tomb a first step is to run the statistics on the six names and their specified relationships in the Talpiot tomb itself without any reference to Jesus of Nazareth or his associates or family. One has to decide whether to handle the names generically (count a special form Yoseh as just another “Joseph,” Mariamenon as just another “Mary,” etc.), or include the aspect of “rarity.” It is always best to take a more conservative approach at the outset, so taking the names generically — that is, a Jesus son of Joseph, two Marys, a Jude son of Jesus, a Matthew, and a Joseph — is a good beginning. The question then becomes what is the probability of this cluster of names and the specified relationships based on frequency ratios? The latest statistical studies indicate that the chances of the combination of this cluster of names, in these relationships, are exceedingly rare.²⁵ This addresses the question of whether the cluster is common (i.e., probable), but leaves the matter of whether these names might fit with a hypothetical tomb of Jesus of Nazareth to the historians.

I want to make one final point about the argument over how common the names are and how significant the cluster in this particular tomb might be. As it turns out, my hypothetical “family tomb of Jesus” is not all that hypothetical. Approximately 600 inscribed ossuaries, out of 2,000 or more found in the

25. The primary and most fundamental statistical study is that of Feuerverger, “Statistical Analysis,” followed by six discussion papers in response and a final rejoinder by Feuerverger, pp. 66-73, 99-112. Since that publication the statistical discussion and its variables have been considerably advanced by Kevin Kilty and Mark Elliott, “Probability, Statistics, and the Talpiot Tomb” [cited June 2007]. Online: <http://www.lccc.wy.edu/Media/Website%20Resources/documents/Education%20Natural%20and%20Social%20Sciences/tomb.pdf>; and “Inside the Numbers on the Talpiot Tombs” [cited March 2008]. Online: <http://www.lccc.wy.edu/Media/Website%20Resources/documents/Education%20Natural%20and%20Social%20Sciences/tombNumbers.pdf>. A comprehensive overview of the various statistical proposals with their strengths, weaknesses, and varied assumptions is provided by Jerry Lutgen in his most enlightening paper, “The Talpiot Tomb: What Are the Odds?” [cited Oct. 2009]. Online: <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/tomb357926.shtml>.

Jerusalem area, have been documented. They come from an estimated 900 tombs. Of these 600 only 21 ossuaries have the name “Jesus,” whether in Hebrew/Aramaic (13) or in Greek (8).²⁶ If you take out the Talpiot tomb, which has two, that leaves us with only 19 ossuaries total with the name Jesus. Keep in mind these are not 19 individuals named Jesus, since the name can occur more than once in a given tomb, on more than one ossuary, but still refer to the same single individual. What is clearly the case, however, is that there is not another tomb that contained a Jesus ossuary that one could even hypothetically argue might be connected to Jesus of Nazareth and his family. Unfortunately, the provenance of a few of the “Jesus” ossuaries is unknown, but most can be studied in the context of the tombs in which they were found. Invariably, they are surrounded with names like Shelamsiyon, Chananiya, Shapira, Dositheos, or Sara that have no known association with Jesus of Nazareth in our texts. This means that the Talpiot tomb, with its inscription “Jesus son of Josph,” surrounded by other names, even nicknames, that we can trace to the Jesus family, is the only one known to us for which one could even argue its possibility or probability. This does not prove that the Talpiot tomb is the family tomb of Jesus, but it goes a long way toward addressing the oft-made but invalid point that we have lots of tombs with Jesus inscriptions, as if to say that this one is like all the others. Such is simply not the case, so this objection, considered by some to be the weightiest, simply fails.

Was the Jesus Movement Too Poor to Have a Burial Cave?

Some scholars have suggested that Jesus and his family, as well as his movement as a whole, was too small, insignificant, and poor to have a family burial cave in Jerusalem.²⁷ The argument is that whoever took the body from the initial cave burial would have buried him in a simple trench grave with no marker since the family was too poor to afford a rock-hewn tomb. This objection overlooks that at least one follower of influence and means,

26. See Hannah M. Cotton et al., eds., *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*, vol. 1, *Jerusalem*, part 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 8-9. The 21 “Jesus” inscribed ossuaries in this latest catalogue are the following: nos. 36, 109, 139, 195, 206, 239, 247, 267, 295, 320, 425, 456, 473, 474, 479, 480, 489, 546, 547, 548, 583.

27. See Jodi Magness, “Has the Tomb of Jesus Been Discovered?” SBL Forum, n.p. [cited Feb. 2007]. Online: <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=640>; as well as my response: James D. Tabor, “Two Burials of Jesus of Nazareth and the Talpiot Yeshua Tomb,” SBL Forum, n.p. [cited March 2007]. Online: <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=651>.

Joseph of Arimathea, did see to the initial burial in a rock-hewn tomb. Why would one assume that either Joseph or other followers of means who were devoted to his messianic program would not be able to provide a permanent tomb? We also have evidence that a group of wealthy and influential women, including Mary Magdalene, were supporting Jesus' movement financially, had followed him from Galilee, and were involved in the preparation of spices and ointments for his proper burial. The descriptions and circumstances all fit well with the idea of a body prepared for burial in a rock-hewn tomb with ossuaries.²⁸

The Jesus movement, led by James the brother of Jesus following his crucifixion, was headquartered in Jerusalem for the next forty years, and their numbers and influence were enough to be noted by Josephus.²⁹ The family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who lived in Bethany and with whom Jesus was intimately connected, could afford to bury their dead in a rock-hewn tomb. It has also been argued that some of the rock-tomb burials with inscribed ossuaries elsewhere in Talpiot, at Dominus Flevit, and on the Mount of Offense are connected to the early followers of Jesus.³⁰

On more general grounds what this objection overlooks is the extraordinary devotion that followers exhibit toward their spiritual/messianic leaders. Mark tells us that the followers of John the Baptizer went to collect his body and that they placed him in a tomb (Mark 6:29). The Syriac *Ascents of James*, for example, recounts how devout followers of James buried another murdered leader, known in some traditions as Stephen, in a tomb to which they made an annual pilgrimage close to Jericho.³¹ I have studied apocalyptic and messianic movements, both ancient and modern, and it is universally

28. See Luke 8:2-3; 23:55-56.

29. *Ant.* 20.200-201.

30. See Jack Finegan, *The Archaeology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 359-74, for a summary of the positive case. Not all scholars agree. James Strange offers an assessment of the evidence for and against in "Archaeological Evidence of Jewish Believers," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007), pp. 710-41. For other dissenting views see Joan Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), as well as Gideon Avni and Shimon Gibson, "The 'Jewish-Christian' Tomb from the Mount of Offense (*Batn Al-Hawa*) in Jerusalem Reconsidered," *RB* 115 (1998):161-75.

31. See the Syriac *Recognitions* 1.43,3 as reconstructed by Robert E. Van Voorst, *The Ascents of James: History and Theology of a Jewish-Christian Community*, SBLDS 112 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

the case that devoted groups have the collective means to support their leaders. It is an open and debated question in the field of Christian origins as to whether Jesus was poor and without means of any sort, but even if that were granted, to rule out the likelihood that devoted followers of means would have provided him and his family with a place of burial is unwarranted.

The Talpiot tomb is quite modest in size and arrangement, measuring under 3×3 meters and less than 2 meters high. It is nothing like the more monumental decorated tombs closer to the city. Also, of the six inscribed ossuaries, four are “plain,” and only two are “decorated” (Mariamene Mara and Yehudah bar Yeshua). I am not convinced that the mere existence of a modest rock-hewn tomb of this type indicates high status and wealth. Indeed, the comprehensive Kloner and Zissu survey of Jewish burial in and around Jerusalem in the period indicates little evidence of trench burials. Instead, rock-hewn burial tombs in and around Jerusalem were the norm for most of the population. As one moves away from the “front row” seat near the Old City, the tombs south of Akeldama, around the Mount of Offense, and south into Talpiot are often more modest in form and size.³²

A Final Theological Note

I want to note here that I do not consider the investigation of this tomb as an attack on Christian faith. Any scientific or academic investigation of an archaeological site related to biblical history, by definition, cannot be an “attack” on faith. I often tell my students, “Good history can never be an enemy of proper faith.” Historians neither disallow nor preclude evidence, and the methods and tasks of history cross all lines of faith. Proper historical investigation involves posing hypotheses and testing them in order to determine what we can know, what we might suppose, and what we might responsibly assume to be the case. In the case of the Talpiot tomb, which is in fact a tomb of a first-century Jew named “Jesus son of Joseph,” it is entirely proper to investigate in an objective manner whether this particular Jesus might be identified with Jesus of Nazareth.

In terms of Christian faith I would also maintain that belief in the resurrection of Jesus does not have to be understood as a literal flesh-and-bones event, with Jesus ascending to heaven as a physical being. Jesus himself, when asked about resurrection of the dead, indicated that those so

32. Kloner and Zissu, *Necropolis of Jerusalem*.

raised would have spiritual bodies undifferentiated as male and female (Luke 20:34-36). The book of Revelation speaks of the “sea” giving up the dead that is in it — indicating the former physical body is completely lost and destroyed (Rev 20:13). The earliest testimony to the resurrection of Jesus comes from Paul writing in the 50s CE (1 Cor 15). He writes that Christ “appeared” to him, but he distinguishes between a “natural” or physical (*psychikos*) body and what he calls a “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*) body, which he attributes to Christ, whom he says was raised as a “life-giving spirit.” When Paul describes death in general, he speaks of “putting off” the body like a tent or garment, and “putting on a heavenly dwelling” or new body (2 Cor 5). When he describes the future resurrection of the “dead in Christ,” he says they will be raised with incorruptible bodies, and there is no implication that the physical components of their physical bodies, now turned to dust, will be literally raised.

Mark, the earliest Gospel, has no “appearances” of Jesus, while the account in Matthew takes place in Galilee and has a “visionary” quality to it. Although it is true that Luke and John, as our latest Gospel records, written in the 90s CE, picture Jesus eating food after his resurrection, that view does not necessarily imply a physical body. Angels in the Bible are often portrayed as eating with physical mortals, but remaining nonetheless in a spiritual form (e.g., Gen 18). When Jesus speaks of the future resurrection of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he pictures them as “sitting at table” in the kingdom of God, but clearly they are in a new and transformed state — not a physical body of flesh and bones (Matt 8:11)

One might even see the discovery of the tomb of Jesus as a boon to faith in that it serves to ground his life and death in the very real history of the times. Such tangible evidence of Jesus and his family, buried together in death as in life according to the common Jewish custom of the times, provides a real “time-space” context for the gospel stories that some might otherwise take as mythological.