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Testing a hypothesis

James D. Tabor

The first time the 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 UK on Easter 1996. The London Sunday Times ran a feature story titled “The Tomb that Dare Not Speak Its Name,” based on that documentary. 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 at that time, 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. 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, director of the IAA, asked Amos Kloner to write up an official report on the tomb, published later that year in *‘Atiqot*.¹

The current 2007 discussion of the tomb, also prompted by a TV documentary, though heated and passionate in some quarters, has prompted some extensive and thoughtful academic responses, as witnessed by the contributions in this issue of *Near Eastern Archaeology*. Each of these scholars finds the evidence lacking for identifying this particular “Jesus” tomb with that of the historical Jesus of Nazareth and his family, and most consider the hypothesis overly speculative or even academically irresponsible.

My view is quite the opposite. 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, and this particular tomb with its contents. Rather



The inside of the Talpiot tomb, looking north. Photo courtesy of James Tabor.

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 name like Yose, appearing alone without patronym, could be any male of a Jewish clan, whether father, brother, son, nephew, or uncle. But if we begin with our historical records asking a different question—who was *the* “Yose” in Jesus’ life, and is there any reason we might expect him to be in a hypothetical pre-70 CE Jesus tomb?—the answer is specific and singular. 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 possibilities and alternatives. That is why some can still not agree on whether or not there is a “fit” between the sect described in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the site of Qumran. 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 in this article 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?

The Second Burial of Jesus

I begin with what we know about the burial of Jesus of Nazareth. Nearly everyone assumes that the gospels report that Joseph of Arimathea took the corpse of Jesus and laid it in *his own new tomb* late Friday night. A group of women,

Mary Magdalene and others, followed, noting the location of the tomb. Sunday morning when they visited, to complete the Jewish rites of burial, the tomb was empty. The problem with this assumption is that our best evidence 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 he [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 15:46).

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).

Mark does not explain the choice of the tomb, but according to the gospel of John 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 idea that this tomb belonged to Joseph of Arimathea makes no sense. What are the chances that he 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?²

Mark indicates that the intention of those involved 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 both the means and the will 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, but in a rock-hewn tomb elsewhere in Jerusalem. These circumstances also address the issue that some have raised that the Talpiot tomb could not be that of Jesus since he is poor and from Galilee. James, the brother of Jesus, became leader of the Jesus movement following Jesus's 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. This evidence points strongly toward the possibility of a Jesus family tomb in Jerusalem, but different from the temporary burial cave into which Jesus' body was first hastily placed.

A Jesus Family Prosopography

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 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 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 not imply non-existence. 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).

If 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, we come up with a more chronologically restricted list of potential candidates:

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

Jesus' father Joseph should be eliminated 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. Jesus' brothers Simon and Jude apparently lived past 70 CE based on our records, so they should be eliminated from our list. 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. 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 Josos. Given the culture, it is likely that Jesus' sisters would be married, and thus buried in the tombs of their husbands, so they are not prime first level 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.

The Talpiot Tomb

There were ten ossuaries in the Talpiot tomb with six of them inscribed. This is an exceptionally high percentage. For example, just taking the sample of ossuaries retained in the state collection of Israel only about twenty 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 thirty-five 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*, and found just below on the floor, perhaps by intruders in antiquity. 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.³ Although it is possible that the bones of more than one individual were placed in the ossuaries, the mitochondrial DNA results of the two that could be tested, that of Yeshua and Mariamene, showed clear singular profiles.⁴ The Talpiot tomb seems to be a small (2.9 × 2.9 meter), modest, pre-70 CE family burial cave with remains of a dozen or so individuals.

The six inscriptions in the Talpiot tomb show a rather remarkable correspondence to the chronologically restricted

hypothetical list of potential candidates we can construct from our textual evidence:

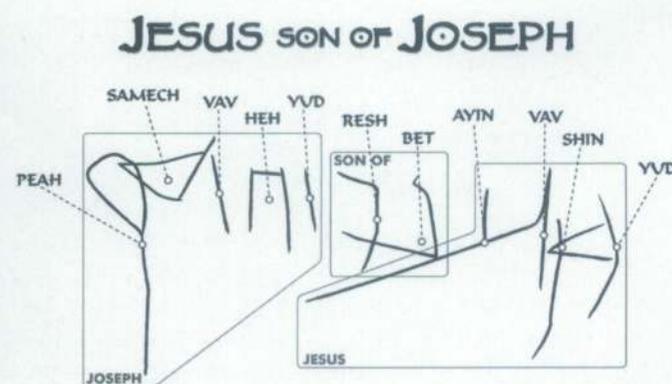
- 1) Yeshua bar Yehosef (Aramaic)
- 2) Maria (Aramaic)
- 3) Yose (Aramaic)
- 4) Mariemene [also known as] Mara (Greek and decorated)
- 5) Yehuda bar Yeshua (Aramaic and decorated)
- 6) Matya (Aramaic)

Yeshua bar Yehosef 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. The toponym "of Nazareth," like the title Nazarene, is more reflective of later theology than contemporary informal usage—especially within the family.⁵ The Aramaic form of the nickname Yose (יֹסֵה), short for Yehosef/Joseph, is rare in this period, found only here on an ossuary and on two other inscriptional examples. It is equivalent to the later popular nickname Yosi (יוֹסִי).⁶ It corresponds to an equally rare form of the name in Greek, namely Yoses or Yose (Ἰωσῆς/Ἰωσή), that occurs only five times in all our sources, literary and inscriptional. This is in fact the precise form of the nickname by which the gospel of Mark, our earliest source, knows Jesus' second brother Joseph (Mark 6:3).

There are two "Marys" in this tomb, known by different forms of that name, namely Maria and Mariamene. The mitochondrial DNA 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 Yose, in this tomb. It would make sense that she would be buried with her children in this intimate, small, family tomb and that her ossuary would be inscribed Maria.



A close-up of the inscription "Jesus son of Joseph." Photo courtesy of Associated Producers.



The reading of the "Jesus son of Joseph" inscription.

Given the presence of the named son of Yeshua in this tomb, namely Yehuda/Jude, and based on the mitochondrial DNA evidence, it seems quite likely that Mariamene is the mother of this son. The speculation, if this is indeed the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth, 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, that 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 mitochondrial DNA indicates, it seems a logical possibility then that she could be that “third” Mary, namely Mary Magdalene, his

“ We don’t 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. ”

follower and close companion, based on her inclusion as a named intimate in our earliest records. We don’t 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 culturally diverse “Romanized” city with a theater, hippodrome, and large aqueduct system. Despite alternative proposals, I accept the reading of Rahmani (and Di Segni) that Mariamene⁷ is a diminutive or endearing form of the name Mariamne, derived from Mariame, a name that is associated with Mary Magdalene in early Christian tradition (Hippolytus, *Acts of Philip*, Origen, Greek fragments of the *Gospel of Mary*). That she is also known by the Aramaic name “Mara,” (the absolute feminine of מַרְאָה/מַרְאָה) which like “Martha,” (the emphatic feminine) means “lordess,” seems all the more appropriate.⁸ Recent scholarship on Mary Magdalene has gone a long way toward rehabilitating her important place in earliest history of the Jesus movement. In a diverse collection of early Christian sources dating from the late-first century 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.

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, Matya or Matthew, remains a puzzle. The name is relatively rare (2.4 percent of males, compared to Joseph at 8.6 percent and Yeshua at 3.9 percent). 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 Clophas 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.

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.

Notes

1. Kloner (1996: 15–22). Two years earlier nine of the ossuaries were included in the catalog description in Rahmani (1994: 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).
2. 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 in Isa 53:9, that the grave of Yahweh’s “Servant” would be “with a rich man.”
3. Such is the case with the Akeldama “Tomb of the Shroud,” found by Boaz Zissu in 1998 and subsequently examined by Shimon Gibson where the shrouded remains of a skeleton dating before 70 CE were found (see Zissu, Gibson, and Tabor, *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* (2000: 70–72).
4. Carney Matheson, who did the mitochondrial DNA work, says more than one individual would have shown up in the sample given the methods of testing that he followed.
5. 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 Yehosef” 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 was discovered in 1980, created no small stir in the world press, particularly in Europe; see Vincent (1929–1930: 213–39). The nickname Yeshua, a contracted form of Yehoshua/

Joshua (which makes up 3.9 percent of male names in the period) occurs elsewhere on eleven ossuaries.

6. The onomastic data here is from Ilan (2002). Although her chronological period is broad, her inclusion of all known ossuary (not just the ossuaries in the state collection of Israel), textual, and inscriptional evidence, offers an impressive data base upon which to do work on name frequencies among males and females in ancient Palestine.

7. The Greek reads *Μαριαμήνου*, in the genitive case, a diminutive form of *Μαριαμήνη*. This form of the name is rare and is found also on one other ossuary, Rahmani (1994: no. 108).

8. There is another ossuary in the state collection of Israel, Rahmani (1994: no. 868) that reads in Greek: *ΑλεξαςΜαρα* [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 Ilan (2002: 422–23).

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