

The Jesus Family Tomb: *Fact or Fiction?*

Jesus' Bones Discovered?

Has the tomb of Jesus Christ been discovered in the Jerusalem suburb of Talpiot?

In a 2007 Discovery Channel TV documentary, producer James Cameron (The Titanic) and Jewish director, Simcha Jacobovici, attempted to prove that Jesus' burial cave and bones were discovered near Jerusalem. Cameron and Jacobovici further cited evidence that Jesus sired a son with Mary Magdalene.

If Jesus Christ's tomb has really been discovered, then all of Christian history has been based upon a false claim---that Jesus physically rose from the dead, was seen alive by over 500 followers at once, spent 40 days teaching his disciples, and then ascended into heaven. But before we get caught up in another Da Vinci type conspiracy, let's look at the facts behind Cameron's claims.

The Facts Claimed:

1. In 1980 ten limestone bone boxes (ossuaries) dated to the first century, were discovered in an excavated tomb in the Jerusalem suburb of Talpiot.
2. Six inscriptions were discovered with names similar to or the same as some of Jesus Christ's family and disciples:
 - Jesua, son of Joseph,
 - Mary
 - Mariamene e Mara
 - Mathew
 - Jofa
 - Judah, son of Jesua.
3. Cameron attempts to prove that Mariamene e Mara is Mary of Magdalene, and that she and Jesus had a son named "Judah son of Jesua".
4. DNA analysis identifies that tissues from the ossuaries of Jesua and Mariamene e Mara were not related, raising the possibility they may have been married and had a child.

Checking the Evidence

So, what are the odds that this is Jesus' tomb? According to Cameron and Jacobovici, the statistical improbability of these names belonging to another family than that of Jesus Christ is 600 to 1. However, scholars challenge many of the assumptions in their interpretation of the facts. Let's look:

1. It is true that these ossuaries were discovered in an ancient tomb. But thousands of similar tombs have been discovered in Jerusalem. And ossuaries were often used for the bones of more than one individual. In fact, according to Dr. Craig Evans, PhD, author of *Jesus and the Ossuaries*, the tomb carried the bones of about 35 different individuals, and about half were from these ossuaries. Evans also notes that there was considerable contamination of the site.
2. Are Cameron and Jacobovici correct about the names they assert are on the ossuaries? Not according to many experts. Some were written in Aramaic, others in Hebrew, and another in Greek. This indicates they were not buried in a similar time period. It is not even clear that "Jesus" is named on any of the ossuaries. Dr. Evans's personal examination of the ossuary was inconclusive. Stephen Pfann, a biblical scholar at the University of the Holy Land in Jerusalem, is also unsure that the name "Jesus" on the caskets was read correctly. He thinks it's more likely the name "Hanun." Ancient Semitic script is notoriously difficult to decipher.

Additionally, it should be noted that the names of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were extremely common in the first century. About 25% of the women in Jesus' day were named Mary. Joseph was also a common name. And about one in ten had the name, "Jesua". Dr. Evans 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 far

more.

"Each name with the exception of Mariamene seemed common to their period, and it was only in 1996 that the BBC made a film suggesting that, given the combination, it might be that family. The idea was eventually discounted, however, because, as New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham asserted 'the names with Biblical resonance are so common that even when you run the probabilities on the group, the odds of it being the famous Jesus' family are "very low."

3. The statistical support for the entire "Jesus tomb" theory rises or falls on the question of Mary Magdalene. So did the name Mariamene e Mara mean Mary Magdalene, as Cameron and Jacobovici attempt to prove? Not according to most experts. Their interpretation is simply not supported by evidence. Bauckham notes, "The first use of 'Mariamene' for Magdalene dates to a scholar who was born in 185, suggesting that Magdalene wouldn't have been called that at her death. "

So, even though Cameron and Jacobovici employed a statistician, Andrey Feuerverger, to support their case, his numbers were based upon assumptions disputed by the majority of scholars. In fact, Feuerverger himself admits that the assumptions were given to him by Jacobovici, and that the single biggest factor in his 600 to 1 odds was the identity of Mariamene e Mara being Mary of Magdalene. Feuerverger defends his role in an interview with Scientific American, "I did permit the number one in 600 to be used in the film—I'm prepared to stand behind that but on the understanding that these numbers were calculated based on assumptions that I was asked to use."

Yet Dr. Randy Ingermanson's statistical analysis of the probability indicates that there is [less than one chance in 10,000 that this was the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth](#).

4. But what about the DNA tests? Doesn't that prove Jesus was in the tomb? Let's look closer at what the DNA test measured. It took residue (there were no bones to examine) from the ossuaries Jacobovici identified as belonging to both Jesua and Mariamene, and used mitochondrial DNA testing to see if they were related. The results proved to be negative, indicating to him that the two individuals were not related maternally. He thus assumes the two were married. But Bauckham isn't impressed. He writes, "If 'Jesus' and 'Mariamene' weren't related matrilineally, why jump to the conclusion that they were husband and wife, rather than being related through their fathers? "

It is the fact that these particular names have been discovered in the same tomb that has fueled speculation that it really could be Jesus' tomb. But many scholars believe Cameron and Jacobovici have skewed the evidence to build a case that just isn't there. Additionally, there are many contradictory questions that need to be answered before one jumps to a conclusion that overturns centuries of historical scholarship.

If It Really Was Jesus' Tomb—

1. Why don't Cameron and Jacobovici cite scholars who disagree with their conclusions? For example, in 1996, when the British Broadcasting Corp. aired a short documentary on the same subject, archaeologists challenged the claims. In fact, the vast majority of archaeologists dispute their claim.

2. Since the custom was to bury the dead in their home town, why would Mary and Joseph's family tomb be in Jerusalem instead of Nazareth? Middle East researcher and biblical anthropologist Joe Zias states, "It has nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus, he was known as Jesus of Nazareth, not Jesus of Jerusalem, and if the family was wealthy enough to afford a tomb, which they probably weren't, it would have been in Nazareth, not here in Jerusalem." Zias dismisses Cameron's claims as "dishonest".

3. Why didn't Jesus' enemies, the Jewish leaders, expose the tomb? They searched unsuccessfully throughout Jerusalem for any evidence of Jesus' body, claiming that Jesus' disciples had stolen it. They hated Jesus enough to want him crucified, and would have been elated to discover his tomb, if it indeed existed.

4. Why didn't the Romans expose the inscriptions as belonging to Jesus? Roman soldiers controlled the entire city of Jerusalem, and they knew his body was missing from a tomb they had been guarding.

5. Why didn't contemporary Roman or Jewish historians write about the tomb? Not one single contemporary historian mentions the tomb in question.

6. Why was the James Ossuary, which has been labeled a forgery, cited by Cameron and Jacobovici as one of the reasons for the tomb's validity? CBS News correspondent Mark Philips reports "the archeological establishment has lined up to label this claim as bunk. This is the second time The Discovery Channel has been

involved in a disputed claim about an ancient tomb," reports Phillips. The man at the center of the previous case is now facing trial for forgery." Ben Witherington, an early Christianity expert who was deeply involved with the James Ossuary, says "there are physical reasons to believe it couldn't have originated in the Talpiot plot."

7. Why are Jacobovici and Cameron waiting until just prior to Easter to launch both the book and documentary? Amos Kloner, the first archaeologist to examine the site, said the idea fails to hold up by archaeological standards but makes for profitable television. "They just want to get money for it," Kloner said.

8. Why would Jesus' disciples endure torture for claiming he was resurrected, if they knew it was a hoax? New Testament scholar Darrell Bock asks, "why would Jesus' family or followers bury his bones in a family plot and then turn around and preach that he had been physically raised from the dead?"

Asking the Experts

Stephen Pfann, who was interviewed in the documentary, said the film's hypothesis holds little weight. "I don't think that Christians are going to buy into this," Pfann said. "But skeptics, in general, would like to see something that pokes holes into the story that so many people hold dear." "How possible is it?" Pfann said. "On a scale of one through 10 – 10 being completely possible – it's probably a one, maybe a one and a half."

Osnat Goaz, a spokeswoman for the Israeli government agency responsible for archaeology, said the Antiquities Authority agreed to send two ossuaries to New York, but they did not contain human remains. "We agreed to send the ossuaries, but it doesn't mean that we agree with" the filmmakers, she said.

William Dever, an expert on near eastern archaeology and anthropology, who has worked with Israeli archeologists for five decades, said specialists have known about the ossuaries for years. "The fact that it's been ignored tells you something," said Dever, professor emeritus at the University of Arizona. "It would be amusing if it didn't mislead so many people."

In fact, Cameron and Jacobovici are not the only ones to assert Jesus' tomb has been discovered. Let's look at others who have cited "evidence" in books and on websites:

Scholar's Verdict

So has Jesus' tomb really been discovered? To find out, let's hear from leading experts.

Jodi Magness, an archaeologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, expressed irritation that the claims were made at a news conference rather than in a peer-reviewed scientific article. By going directly to the media, she said, the filmmakers "have set it up as if it's a legitimate academic debate, when the vast majority of scholars who specialize in archaeology of this period have flatly rejected this," she said.

Magness noted that at the time of Jesus, 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.

She said Jesus came from a poor family that, like most Jews of the time, probably buried their dead in ordinary graves. "If Jesus' family had been wealthy enough to afford a rock-cut tomb, it would have been in Nazareth, not Jerusalem," she said.

Magness also said the names on the Talpiyot 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 home town, she said.

"This whole case [for the tomb of Jesus] is flawed from beginning to end," she said.

And that conclusion seems to be the consensus of the vast number of archaeologists. As an unbiased scholar who has been excavating ancient sites in Israel for 50 years, William G. Dever shares that view. He is widely considered the dean of biblical archaeology among U.S. scholars. Dever writes,

"I'm not a Christian. I'm not a believer. I don't have a dog in this fight, I just think it's a shame the way this story is being hyped and manipulated.

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