

THE JESUS TOMB? 'TITANIC' TALPIOT TOMB THEORY SUNK FROM THE START



(This picture of the Talpiot tomb courtesy of the Discovery Channel via the Toronto Star article).

Remember the tale of the Titanic? How it was supposed to be impregnable, and nothing could poke holes in it? How it would never be sunk? Well all I can say is that human hubris knows no bounds, and that hasn't changed in the last century. On April 15th 1912 the supposedly leak proof Titanic rammed into an iceberg and sank—sank like a giant stone. Sank quickly, with great loss of life.

Why do I bring this up? Because in one of the interesting ironies in recent memory, James Cameron the movie director who made the enormously successful film "Titanic", on the night after the Oscars, will give an Oscar winning performance at a news conference along with Simcha Jacobovici who have now produced a Discovery Channel special on the discovery of Jesus' tomb, ossuary,

bones, and that of his mother, brothers, wife, and his child Jude as well! Who knew! The show will air on March 4th. In addition we are now regaled with a book by Simcha and Charles Pellegrino entitled [The Jesus Family Tomb: The Discovery, the Investigation, and the Evidence That Could Change History](#) just released today by Harper-Collins timed to co-ordinate with their news conference and the Discovery Channel special. Why should we be skeptical about this entire enterprise?

First of all, I have worked with Simcha. He is a practicing Jew, indeed he is an orthodox Jew so far as I can tell. He was the producer of the Discovery Channel special on the James ossuary which I was involved with. He is a good film maker, and he knows a good sensational story when he sees one. This is such a story. Unfortunately it is a story full of holes, conjectures, and problems. It will make good TV and involves a bad critical reading of history. Basically this is old news with a new interpretation. We have known about this tomb since it was discovered in 1980. There are all sorts of reasons to see this as much ado about nothing much:

1) The statistical analysis is of course only as good as the numbers that were provided to the statistician. He couldn't run numbers he did not have. And when you try to run numbers on a combination name such as 'Jesus son of Joseph' you decrease the statistical sample dramatically. In fact, in the case of 'Jesus son of Joseph' you decrease it to a statistically insignificant number! Furthermore, so far as we can tell, the earliest followers of Jesus never called Jesus 'son of Joseph'. It was outsiders who mistakenly called him that! Would the family members such as James who remained in Jerusalem

really put that name on Jesus' tomb when they knew otherwise? This is highly improbable. My friend Richard Bauckham provides me with the following statistics:

Out of a total number of 2625 males, these are the figures for the ten most popular male names among Palestinian Jews. the first figure is the total number of occurrences (from this number, with 2625 as the total for all names, you could calculate percentages), while the second is the number of occurrences specifically on ossuaries.

1	Simon/Simeon	243	59
2	Joseph	218	45
3	Eleazar	166	29
4	Judah	164	44
5	John/Yohanan	122	25
6	Jesus	99	22
7	Hananiah	82	18
8	Jonathan	71	14
9	Matthew	62	17
10	Manaen/Menahem	42	4

For women, we have a total of 328 occurrences (women's names are much less often recorded than men's), and figures for the 4 most popular names are thus:

Mary/Mariamne 70 42
Salome 58 41
Shelamzion 24 19
Martha 20 17

You can see at once that all the names you're interested were extremely popular. 21% of Jewish women were called Mariamne (Mary). The chances of the people in the ossuaries being the Jesus and Mary Magdalene of the New Testament must be very small indeed.

By the way, 'Mara' in this context does not mean Master. It is an abbreviated form of Martha. probably the ossuary contained two women called Mary and Martha (Mariamne and Mara).

There are so many flaws in the analysis of the statistics themselves, that one must assume the statistician did not have the right or sufficient data to work with.

2) there is no independent DNA control sample to compare to what was garnered from the bones in this tomb. By this I mean that the most the DNA evidence can show is that several of these folks are inter-related. Big deal. We would need an independent control sample from some member of Jesus' family to confirm that these were members of Jesus' family. We do not have that at all. In

addition mitochondrial DNA does not reveal genetic coding or XY chromosome make up anyway. They would need nuclear DNA for that in any case. So the DNA stuff is probably thrown in to make this look more like a real scientific fact. Not so much.

3) Several of these ossuaries have very popular and familiar early Jewish names. As the statistics above show, the names Joseph and Joshua (Jesus) were two of the most common names in all of early Judaism. So was Mary. Indeed both Jesus' mother and her sister were named Mary. This is the ancient equivalent of finding adjacent tombs with the names Smith and Jones. No big deal.

4) The historical problems with all this are too numerous to list here: A) the ancestral home of Joseph was Bethlehem, and his adult home was Nazareth. The family was still in Nazareth after he was apparently dead and gone. Why in the world would he be buried (alone at this point) in Jerusalem? It's unlikely. B) One of the ossuaries has the name Jude son of Jesus. We have no historical evidence of such a son of Jesus, indeed we have no historical evidence he was ever married; C) the Mary ossuaries (there are two) do not mention anyone from Migdal. It simply has the name Mary-- and that's about the most common of all ancient Jewish female names. D) we have names like Matthew on another ossuary, which don't match up with the list of brothers' names. E) By all ancient accounts, the tomb of Jesus was empty-- even the Jewish and Roman authorities acknowledged this. Now it takes a year for the flesh to desiccate, and then you put the man's bones in an ossuary. But Jesus' body was long gone from Joseph of Arimathea's tomb

well before then. Are we really to believe it was moved to another tomb, decayed, and then was put in an ossuary? Its not likely. F) Implicitly you must accuse James, Peter and John (mentioned in Gal. 1-2-- in our earliest NT document from 49 A.D.) of fraud and coverup. Are we really to believe that they knew Jesus didn't rise bodily from the dead but perpetrated a fraudulent religion, for which they and others were prepared to die? Did they really hide the body of Jesus in another tomb? We need to remember that the James in question is Jesus' brother, who certainly would have known about a family tomb. This frankly is impossible for me to believe.

5) One more thing of importance. The James ossuary, according to the report of the antiquities dealer that Oded Golan got the ossuary from, said that the ossuary came from Silwan, not Talpiot, and had dirt in it that matched up with the soil in that particular spot in Jerusalem. In fact Oded confirmed this to me personally when I spoke with him at an SBL meeting. Why is this important? Well because the ossuaries that came out of Talpiot came out of a rock cave from a different place, and without such soil in it. To theorize that there was a Jesus family tomb, and yet the one member of Jesus' family who we know was buried in Jerusalem for a long time did not come out of the ground from that locale contradicts this theory. Furthermore, Eusebius reports that the tomb marker for James' burial was close to where James was martyred near the temple mount, indeed near the famous tombs in the Kidron valley such as the so-called tomb of Absalom. Talpiot is nowhere near this locale.

6)What should we make of James Tabor's being co-opted into this project? You will remember his book which came

out last year The Jesus Dynasty. In that book he had quite a good deal to say about the Talpiot Tomb, and about Panthera being the father of Jesus, and about Jesus being buried in Galilee, and of course nothing about a ossuary which claims that Joseph is the father of Jesus. Why such a quick reversal of his earlier opinions? This makes him appear very quixotic, not a very reliable witness who sticks by his guns when he draws a conclusion, for he has now reversed himself not just on one or two minor points, but on several major ones. My advise to James, whom I respect and who has not only done some fine archaeological work but is a nice guy, is to disassociate himself from this speculative and flawed theory just as quick as possible if he cares for his reputation as a scholar.

In the Toronto Star article from Sunday's paper, we find that the unraveling has begun before they even hold the news conference today--- here is a brief quote from the article written by Stuart Laidlaw---

“But there is one wrinkle that is not examined in the documentary, one that emerged in a Jerusalem courtroom just weeks ago at the fraud trial of James ossuary owner Oded Golan, charged with forging part of the inscription on the box.

Former FBI agent Gerald Richard testified that a photo of the James ossuary, showing it in Golan's home, was taken in the 1970s, based on tests done by the FBI photo lab. The trial resumes tomorrow.

Jacobovici conceded in an interview that if the ossuary was photographed in the 1970s, it could not then have

been found in a tomb in 1980.

But while he does not address the conundrum in the documentary, he said in an interview that it's possible Golan's photo was printed on old paper in the 1980s.”

Here is the link to the Toronto Star article.

<http://www.thestar.com/News/article/185708>

In fact the same article reports that Professor Amos Kloner from Bar Ilan University has already told the German press “It's a beautiful story but without any proof whatsoever.” He is important since he did extensive work and research on this very tomb and its ossuaries and came to negative conclusions published in a journal in 1996. In short, this is old news, to which has been added only the recent DNA testing and statistical analysis neither of which makes the case the film makers want to make.

I feel sorry for Simcha, but I know how these things happen. One's enthusiasm for a subject propels one into over-reaching when it comes to drawing conclusions. The problem with keeping these ideas secret for the sake of making a big splash of publicity, and lots of money, is that peer review by a panel of scholars could have saved these folks a lot of embarrassment down the road. 'C'est la vie.'

So my response to this is clear--- James Cameron, the producer of the movie Titanic, has now jumped on board another sinking ship full of holes, presumably in order to make a lot of money before the theory sinks into an early

watery grave. Man the lifeboats and get out now.

For those wanting much more on the historical Jesus and James and Mary see now my WHAT HAVE THEY DONE WITH JESUS? (Harper-Collins, 2006).

NEW ADDENDUM

And one more thing to add---Eusebius the father of church history (4th century) tells us that there had been since NT times a tomb of James the Just, the brother of Jesus, which was near the Temple mount and had an honoric stele next to it, and that it was a pilgrimage spot for many Christians. It was apparently a single tomb, with no other Holy family members mentioned nor any other ossuaries in that place. The locality and singularity of this tradition rules out a family tomb in Talpiot. Christians would not have been making pilgrimage to the tomb if they believed Jesus' bones were in it-- that would have contradicted and violated their faith, but the bones of holy James were another matter. They were consider sacred relics.

Here is part of the passage from Eusebius on Jesus' brother--- James "was buried on the spot, by the Sanctuary, and his inscribed stone (stele) is still there by the sanctuary." (Hist. Eccles. 2.23.18). This is clearly not in Talpiot, and remember to claim there is a Talpiot family tomb means that Jesus would have been buried there long before James was martyred in A.D. 62. In other words, the James tradition contradicts the Talpiot tomb both in locale and in substance. James is buried alone, in another place.

POSTED BY BEN WITHERINGTON AT 5:13 AM
