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A Critical Look Inside The Jesus Tomb

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A new book and documentary just released this week are making some big claims. But biblical scholars and archaeologists are casting an enormous shadow of doubt on the authors' conclusions as more is learned about the facts behind their hypothesis.

Have archaeologists uncovered the tomb of Jesus? A highly publicized new book (*The Jesus Family Tomb* by Simcha Jacobovici and Charles R. Pellegrino) and documentary (*The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, produced by James Cameron and directed by Jacobovici) claim to provide evidence to that effect. But perhaps even more compelling in the post-*Da Vinci Code* world is that ossuaries found in the tomb are said to have held the remains of not only Jesus but Mary Magdalene and "Judas, the son of Jesus." One of the conclusions this team offers is that Jesus of Nazareth was married to Mary Magdalene, and that they had a son named Judas.

Discovered during foundation work for an apartment building near Jerusalem in 1980, the tomb was surveyed, and various artifacts, including 10 ossuaries, were removed by the [Israel Antiquities Authority](http://www.antiquities.org.il/) (IAA). The excavation yielded little that was considered especially noteworthy at the time, as the IAA subsequently reported in its Journal *'Atiqot*.

In the meantime, however, Israeli-born writer and filmmaker Jacobovici launched an investigation of his own. The lynchpin in his identification of the tomb is his interpretation of the name on one of the ossuaries as “Mary Magdalene.” In Greek, as opposed to the Hebrew of the other inscriptions, is the name *Mariamenou*, followed by *Mara*. *Mariamenou* is a diminutive form of the Greek *Mariamene* and is a term of endearment. It is derived from the Hebrew *Miriam*, which we know in English as either “Maria” or “Mary.” *Mara* is normally a contraction of “Martha” (L. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*). The two names are separated by a stroke, which was used in place of a preposition when two names appeared. *Mariamenou* is in fact the genitive form of *Mariamennon* and is found only here in the extant evidence for ancient Jewish names. It is a specifically Greek formation, not used in Hebrew or Aramaic, and indicates that this woman came from a Greek-speaking family, perhaps generations removed from her Hebrew or Aramaic relatives in the tomb. This point is overlooked by the documentary team, who present all the names (except for the other Mary, whom they identify as the mother of Jesus, and “Judas, the son of Jesus”) as belonging to a single generation. In fact, the IAA archaeological report notes that at least 35 bodies had been interred in this grave, indicating that it was at best a multigenerational family tomb.

But what of the second name on the ossuary? The filmmakers wish to read the second term, *Mara*, as the Aramaic word for “Master,” thus reading the inscription as “Mariamene, also called Master” (in accordance with a current perception of Mary Magdalene as leader among the apostles). This translation of *Mara* is based on the notion that Mariamene was Mary Magdalene, which in turn is based on a work known as the Acts of Philip, a noncanonical document dating from at least 300 years after the time of Jesus and the apostles. It was written to be read at celebrations in Philip’s memory for the purpose of highlighting his saintly acts or deeds—deeds that have no basis in the New Testament. A woman named Mariamne is featured in the Acts of Philip, a fact that is being presented by Cameron as a vital clue to Mariamene’s identity, and one that the Israelis would have been unaware of in processing the tomb in 1980. But the Mariamne in the Acts of Philip is identified as Philip’s sister and possibly also the sister of Martha. The conflation of this Mariamne and Mary Magdalene results from a

tenuous link in Gnostic literature written at the earliest in the second century. What's more, the Mariamne that is identified with Mary Magdalene is not even the same name as is inscribed on the ossuary. Similar though they are, *Mariamne* and *Mariamenon* were unrelated names. So this can hardly be used as evidence linking the name on the ossuary with Mary Magdalene. The simple reading would be that this was the ossuary of a woman named Mariamenon, who was also known by the Hebrew/Aramaic name *Mara*.

But there's more from the documentary team. Hoping to further support his theory, Jacobovici and his associates arranged for mitochondrial DNA tests to be performed on material from the ossuaries they associated with Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Mitochondrial DNA is passed on only through the mother. The tests revealed no maternal relationship; hence, the two could not have had a mother-son or brother-sister relationship and must therefore have been husband and wife, or so we are to believe. Curiously, although the team assigned relationships between all the others whose names appeared on the various ossuaries (including Jesus' mother and the supposed son of Jesus and Mary Magdalene), no further DNA tests were performed to verify any of them.

More significant is the fact that, as mentioned earlier, human remains of four or five generations could have been stored in a single ossuary, which means that there can be no control over the DNA found in any of the boxes. In other words, the DNA results prove nothing. Following standard practice, the excavation team removed the bones from the ossuaries in 1980 and handed them over to the religious authorities for reburial. No record appears to have been kept of the exact contents of the bone boxes or of how many skeletons were contained in each. So while some DNA may be recovered from residues in the boxes, we have no way of knowing to whom it belonged. The initial archaeological report also indicates that the tomb had been disturbed in the distant past and that parts of skeletons were scattered in the cave. We don't know whether these were placed in the ossuaries to facilitate their removal from the tomb. Clearly, then, any DNA results are at best dubious.

What *is* known is that this is very likely a first-century C.E. tomb, as ossuaries were used only in the period from 30 B.C.E. until just before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. This raises an important question relating to traditional holy sites. Putting aside the claims made by the authors and their publicists, the tomb suggests the need for a fresh look at burial sites in the early first century. Talpiot, the site of the so-called Jesus tomb, is some five kilometers south of the Old City of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. Another first-century burial site is at Sanhedriyya, about five kilometers north of the Temple Mount. The Garden Tomb, which was

established by Protestants in the 19th century as a rival to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, has been dated to the seventh century B.C.E. and accordingly could not have been “a new tomb” at the time of Jesus’ death.

Then what about the legitimacy of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as Jesus’ burial site? According to the Mishnah (Rosh Ha-Shanah 2:5), it appears that the Sanhedrin, the governing council of the Jews under Roman rule, established a limit on the proximity of burial to the Temple Mount by establishing a perimeter 2,000 cubits (a little more than 900 meters, or about 3,000 feet) from the temple. This area was to represent the Camp of Israel. Burial, by definition, had to take place outside this limit. The problem is that the Church of the Holy Sepulcher falls *within* the 2,000-cubit radius and thus could not have been used as a burial site.

Perhaps the real value of the tomb at Talpiot is that it can encourage us to reexamine some of the myths that have been imposed on Christianity.