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THE "JESUS FAMILY TOMB" REVISITED

Jesus of Nazareth had a wife whose name was Mary Magdalene, and together they had a child who carried on Jesus' lineage after His crucifixion and death. So goes the fictional premise of the 2004 best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*. It is also the theory espoused by biblical scholar James Tabor and journalist-turned-amateur-archaeologist Simcha Jacobovici.



TALPIOT TOMB A

In 2007 the Discovery Channel documentary *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* made headlines when filmmakers claimed they had found the tomb of Jesus and His family. The film, directed by Jacobovici and produced by James Cameron (of *Titanic* fame), posits that a tomb found in the Talpiot suburb of modern Jerusalem contained the burial bone boxes (ossuaries) of Jesus of Nazareth, Mary (Jesus' mother), Mary Magdalene, and Judah ("son of Jesus"), among others. One additional claim is that the so-called James Ossuary, which bears the inscription "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus," was originally found in the Talpiot Tomb. The filmmakers were heavily influenced by the work of James Tabor, who published *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden*

Facade of the Talpiot Tomb. The rediscovery and reinterpretation of its contents caused quite a stir in 2007, when filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici, and scholar James Tabor, claimed this was the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth and his family. To date, there is no archaeological evidence linking the historical Jesus or his relatives with this first-century burial.

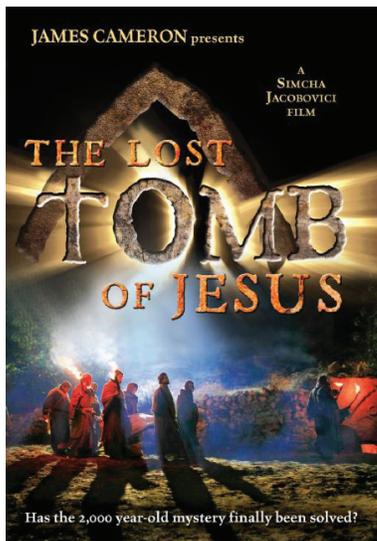
History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity in 2006.

The basis for these claims comes from the names inscribed on six of the ten ossuaries found in the Talpiot Tomb: Yeshua (Jesus), son of Yehosef (Joseph); Marya (Mary); Yose (Joseph); Yehuda (Judah), son of Yeshua; Mariamene (supposedly Mary Magdalene) and Mara; and Matya (Matthew). Jacobovici's conclusions (supported by Tabor) about the Talpiot Tomb are based on five major assumptions: (1) the incidence of the names Jesus and Joseph together is rare in the archaeological record; (2) Joseph (Yose) is Jesus' half

brother; (3) Mariamene is another name for Mary Magdalene, and Mara is not another name but a title; (4) this Mariamene is the wife of Jesus; and (5) the James Ossuary is the one missing ossuary of the ten taken from the tomb, and it belongs to Jesus' brother. The statistical analysis presented as evidence in the film relies on these assumptions to be correct.

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze all the pitfalls of the film's premises. It should be mentioned that a number of world-renowned experts in archaeology and epigraphy have seriously challenged and refuted each of these five assumptions.

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The Lost Tomb of Jesus DVD cover.

For one, there is simply no archaeological evidence connecting this tomb with Jesus of Nazareth; his mother, Mary; his half-brothers, Joseph and James; or his disciple, Mary Magdalene. The whole argument is built on the coincidence of certain names (Jesus, Mary, and Joseph), but it is what the names don't say that is most telling. While it may be reasonable to assume that the Yeshua of the Talpiot Tomb had a son named Judah,

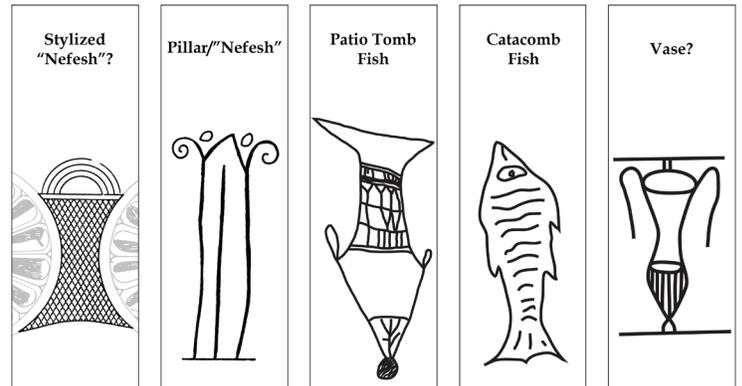
there is no empirical reason to assume the Talpiot Mary was this Yeshua's mother, or that this Joseph was his brother.

Likewise, there is no evidence to suggest that Mariamene was Mary Magdalene or that Mariamene was married to this Yeshua. Strong arguments against the linguistic link between these names have been made. For that matter, there is no ancient evidence that Jesus of Nazareth married at all or that He had any offspring. In the case of the James Ossuary, all the evidence suggests that it was not part of the Talpiot Tomb. It must be emphasized that all of these names were very common in the first century A.D., and because people did not use surnames, they are very difficult to differentiate. Their collective coincidence in this tomb is exactly that—a mere coincidence. [For a detailed scholarly discussion of Talpiot Tomb A, see *Near Eastern Archaeology* 69: 3-4 (2006)]

TALPIOT TOMB B

Three years after the airing of *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* (and the release of its companion book *The Jesus Family Tomb*), Jacobovici and Tabor returned to Talpiot to investigate another tomb. Having received criticism for investigating the first Talpiot tomb as part of a television production, this time Tabor and Jacobovici obtained an excavation license from the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) and partnered with archaeologist Rami Arav. In February, Tabor released a preliminary report of their investigation of this second Talpiot tomb, or Talpiot B (also called the "Patio Tomb" by the excavators). [For the report, see <http://www.bibleinterp.com/PDFs/Tabor2.pdf>]

Like Talpiot A, which was originally excavated in 1980, Talpiot B was first discovered and documented in 1981. Unlike Talpiot A, however, the IAA archaeologists were unable to properly excavate the contents of Talpiot B. A construction crew preparing to build a condominium



Top: computer enhanced picture of the Talpiot Tomb B fish-like image. Notice the excavator's "stick-like human figure" coming out of the "mouth" of the fish (the image is rotated 90° clockwise) that provoked the Jonah and the big fish interpretation. Bottom: comparison of different ossuary decorative motifs with the fish image. [Source: <http://thejesusdiscovery.org>]

complex exposed the tomb, which contained a number of ossuaries and skeletal remains. The archaeologists were able to take a few photographs and sketch some drawings before their work was stopped by a group of ultra-Orthodox Jews protesting the desecration of the burial site. The tomb was covered back up, with the ossuaries and their contents sealed inside.

In 2010, using a custom-made robotic arm with a camera mounted on its tip, Tabor and his team were able to remotely explore the inside of the tomb. In their examination, they discovered that the IAA archaeologists had missed some important features carved on the sides of the ossuaries. Of special interest are two ossuaries, one with a four-line Greek inscription, and the other with an unusual icon. Tabor has interpreted the inscription to read "O Divine/God Jehovah, raise up!" This is coupled with an image which Tabor unequivocally asserts is "a clear image of a fish, complete with tail, fins, and scales with a stick-like human figure with an oversized head coming out of its mouth."

If this is an image of a fish on a first-century A.D. ossuary, it would be unprecedented. Tabor, however, goes even further and suggests that this image



Reproduction of the Talpiot Tomb B inscription. The excavators' proposed readings for the inscription include "The Divine Jehovah raises up from [the dead]" or "The Divine Jehovah raises up to the Holy Place" or "God, Jehovah, Raise up! Raise up!" [Photo by Donna Ward/Getty Images]

is a representation of the biblical story of Jonah and the “big fish.” Given that Jesus mentioned the “sign of Jonah” when speaking of His own resurrection in the Gospels, Tabor explains this is further evidence that the people buried in this tomb believed in the resurrection and were perhaps early Christians.

Tabor reaffirms his belief that the inscription “clearly makes some affirmation about either resurrection from the dead or lifting up to heaven.” He goes on to add that, although he considered other likely interpretations for this image, such as a funerary nephesh (pillar) or an amphora, “we soon realized that we were dealing here with something far different—never seen before on an ossuary.” Tabor concludes by making a connection between Talpiot A and Talpiot B: “we are convinced that the best explanation for these unusual epigraphic features in [Talpiot B] tomb is its proximity to the Jesus family tomb less than 45 meters away. What we apparently have is a family connected to the Jesus movement who reaches beyond the standard burial norms of the Jewish culture of the period to express itself individually in these unique ways.”

Tabor and Jacobovici have also published a book titled *The Jesus Discovery: The New Archaeological Find That Reveals*



Journalist and filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici (left) with professor James Tabor (right) at *The Jesus Discovery* press conference in New York City, February 28, 2012. [Photo by Donna Ward/Getty Images]

the Birth of Christianity, and a new Discovery Channel documentary that is set to air sometime this Spring.

SCHOLARLY RESPONSE

Once again, Tabor and Jacobovici’s interpretation has provoked a flurry of responses from the scholarly community. [For the most up-to-date discussion, see: <http://asorblog.org>] Scholars have criticized Tabor and Jacobovici’s

perceived lack of academic rigor in reaching dramatic conclusions. Jodi Magness (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) bemoans Tabor and Jacobovici’s endeavor as another “sensational archaeological claim relating to Jesus.” [<http://asorblog.org/?p=1654>] Eric M. Meyers (Duke University), in reviewing *The Jesus Discovery*, has similarly dismissed the book as “much ado about nothing . . . we may regard this book as yet another

in a long list of presentations that misuse not only the Bible but also archaeology.” [<http://asorblog.org/?p=1612>]

At least one epigrapher, Christopher A. Rollston (Emmanuel Christian Seminary), believes Tabor has completely misread the inscription. [<http://asorblog.org/?p=1642>] Rollston is not convinced that the word “Yahweh” (the personal name of God in Hebrew) is present in the inscription. He also argues that Tabor has overstated the case that there is a word that implies resurrection. The word in question simply means to “lift up,” and it is by no means a certain reference to the resurrection of the dead.

Rollston is equally unconvinced that Tabor has found the image of a fish, much less the big fish of Jonah. “I must emphasize that I am confident the engraving is simply a standard ‘nephesh tower motif,’ an ornamental motif that is fairly widely attested on the corpus of ossuaries,” he explains. Yet even if one were to interpret this image as a fish, the hypothetical fish could be a nautical motif or “a reflection of the profession of the owner of the ossuary (e.g., a fishmonger).” Many other scholars, including Meyers and Magness, have adopted this nephesh tower interpretation of Tabor’s fish image.

The arguments made in the preliminary report and book are based on a long string of “ifs” leading to a sensational conclusion. But if one “if” collapses (and all of them appear highly suspect), then the whole conclusion collapses. In the end, it reminds us to be careful of the interpretation of data and the desire to sensationalize a claim. Perhaps this is nothing more than a media blitz for the Easter season, ironically exactly five years after the producer’s first film, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, aired on the Discovery Channel. ✍



Reproduction of the Talpiot Tomb B ossuary with fish-like image. Other proposed interpretations include a nephesh tower (funerary pillar) and an amphora (vase) [Source: <http://thejesusdiscovery.org>]

WINTER PRESENTATIONS

In addition to teaching and publications responsibilities, the Institute of Archaeology staff held a couple of public presentations this Winter.

ANCIENT PASSPORTS: SEALS AND SCARABS FROM KHIRBET QEYAF A

Some of the greatest finds discovered in archaeological excavations are surprisingly small. Ancient Near Eastern seals are only about the size of a thumbprint but they have been intricately engraved with letters and images that can tell us a lot about the socio-political, cultural, and, most interestingly, religious affiliations of their owners. These objects served as the equivalent of modern passports and authenticated not only business transactions and political treaties, but also served as important artifacts in the cultic sphere of the Ancient Near East.

On February 15, 2012, Dr. Martin G. Klingbeil, associate director of the Institute of Archaeology, presented "Ancient Passports: Seals and Scarabs from Khirbet Qeiyafa" as part of the Lynn H. Wood Archaeological Museum Lecture Series. The lecture served as an introduction to the interpretation of ancient Near Eastern seals, focusing specifically on two previously unpublished seals excavated at Khirbet Qeiyafa during the 2011 season. The lecture discussed the importance of iconographic objects for the interpretation of Ancient Near Eastern history and religion. The second seal was specially important for the excavators; it provided some important information concerning the dating of the site, as it belongs to a specific group of seals which, according to its form and motif, is archaeologically most frequently attested between 1050-950 B.C.

The next museum lecture is by Dr. Daniel Master (Wheaton College) and will be held on March 21, 2012. For more information on the Lynn H. Wood Archaeological Museum Lecture Series, visit: <http://www.southern.edu/archaeology/lectureseries/Pages/lectureseriesprogram.aspx>

DISCOVERIES OF A LIFETIME

On February 17 and 18, 2012, Dr. Mark Finley, speaker and former president of *It is Written*, and Dr. Michael G. Hasel, director of the Institute of Archaeology, presented a "Discoveries of a Lifetime" series, in Mobile, Alabama. Archaeological discoveries of the past two centuries have greatly enriched our understanding of the biblical text. Archaeology has not only become an indispensable tool of the biblical scholar but also a valuable aid for evangelism because it helps to bring the Bible to life in a tangible way. Hasel presented a number of archaeological artifacts and emphasized the connection between archaeology and biblical history. The two-night series were a prelude to the main evangelistic meetings that took place in the Mobile Civic Center in the following weeks. The meetings were well attended with an average of 200 people each night.

This Fall Hasel will present another series on archaeology and the Bible titled "Astonishing Discoveries in the Land of the

Bible" with Dr. Ron Clouzet, professor of Christian ministry and theology at Andrews University. 



Ancient stamp seals from Khirbet Qeiyafa.



Professor Klingbeil speaking on the power of icons at the museum lecture.

THE OLDEST EGYPTIAN REFERENCE TO ISRAEL?

Merenptah (1213-1203 B.C.) was the thirteenth son of Ramesses II, the longest reigning king of the Egyptian New Kingdom. By the time his father died, Merenptah was already 66 years old when he ascended the throne. One of the most fascinating discoveries was made in 1896, when Sir Flinders Petrie uncovered an inscription in Thebes by Merenptah. The Merenptah or "Israel" stele (an inscribed commemorative stone slab) recorded the military campaign of Merenptah against the Libyans and, in the last few lines, described another campaign against entities in Canaan, including the cities of Ashkelon, Gezer, Yenoam, and the people of Israel. It has been widely recognized that Israel in this account is located in Canaan by the time of the campaign in Merenptah's fifth year, around 1209 B.C. The inscription is significant for the debate concerning the origins of Israel (see Hasel 1994) for it was the oldest mention of Israel outside of the Bible. In the 1940s-70s, the inscription was central in arguments concerning the date of the exodus from Egypt and Israel's arrival in Canaan. Those in favor of an early date in the fifteenth century B.C. cited the Merenptah stele as the best evidence, claiming that it would have been impossible for Merenptah's father, Ramesses II, to be pharaoh of the exodus and try, at the same time, to fit in a 40-year wilderness wandering and assume that there was a death of a pharaoh while Moses was in exile from Egypt. The long 67-year reign of Ramesses would make these details of the story difficult to fit. Some proponents of the late twelfth-century date claimed that as Ramesses II's son, Merenptah sought revenge against the Israelites and went after them in Canaan. Since the 1980s, these issues have faded into the background as most scholars have dismissed the notion of a massive exodus from Egypt, often citing the lack of references to the Hebrews in Egyptian records (on these debates, see Hasel 2008). That has now been challenged recently as new data has emerged from an Egyptian text found at the Egyptian Museum in Berlin [see, most recently, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 38/1 (2012) 59-62, 63].

The small fragment of a pedestal from

Berlin (slab no. 21687), 18 inches high and 14.5 inches wide, contains three place names. The first two are well known: Ashkelon, the Canaanite city on the coast of the Mediterranean; and Canaan, the territory. The third name is broken but has been reconstructed to read 'I3-šr-il/y3-šr-il "Israel." The inscription has been dated by various scholars to the reigns of Amenhotep II, Amenhotep III, and Ramesses II.



However, while arguments put forth by scholars advocating for the reading of "Israel" in the Berlin pedestal are well articulated, others remain cautious. James K. Hoffmeier, an Egyptologist who wrote the volume *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 1997), objects to the reading of "Israel" for a number of reasons, primarily citing obvious differences between the writing of the name on the Berlin fragment as compared with the writing on the Merenptah Stele in Cairo. The Egyptians wrote in syllables, trying to accurately transliterate the Canaanite/Semitic language into Egyptian hieroglyphs. This was not an easy task, as there could be several equivalent hieroglyphic signs for the same sound. These challenges have now been answered in the recent scientific publication by Peter van der Veen, Christopher Thies, and Manfred Görg (*Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 2 [2010] 15-25) where they convincingly show that a more archaic version of the same name may have been spelled out with slight variations.

If this inscription does read "Israel," it places Israel in Canaan

much earlier than the time of Merenptah. This would mean that many of the reconstructions of Israel's early history would need to be rewritten. It would also lend support for an earlier date for the biblical exodus from Egypt, as this inscription may suggest that Israel was already located in Canaan by that time. The Berlin pedestal would now be the oldest mention of Israel outside of the Bible, placing Israel within the context of the mid-second millennium B.C. ✍️



Pedestal slab no. 21687 from the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. The fragmentary cartouche on the right is the one which may contain the earliest reference to Israel. If the reading is correct, Israel would have been in Canaan centuries before Merenptah and Ramesses II.

RECENT SIGHTINGS

DOUBTS ABOUT ‘THE JESUS DISCOVERY’ (MSNBC)

Now that the word about “The Jesus Discovery” is out in the open, outside experts are weighing in—and many of them look upon the robotic exploration of a 1st-century Jerusalem tomb as a technological tour de force resulting in an archaeological faux pas. On one level, the “Jesus Discovery” investigators saw this project as a follow-up on the sensational claim they made five years earlier in “The Lost Tomb of Jesus,” that Jesus and members of his family were buried in . . .

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4500-YEAR OLD SUMERIAN TEMPLE FOUND IN UR (Archaeology News Network)

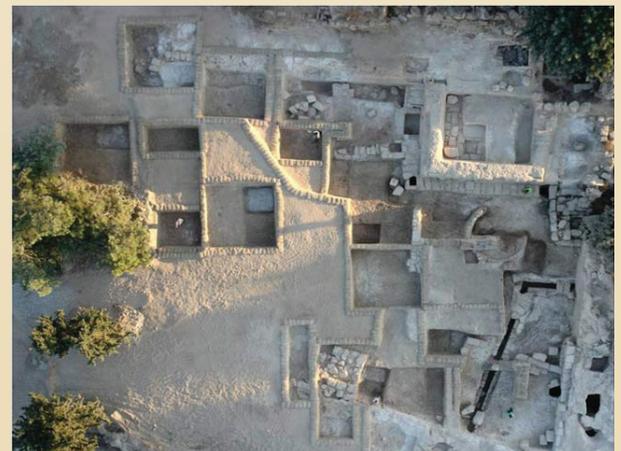
Iraqi and foreign archaeologists have uncovered a temple at the Sumerian city of Ur, which dates back to about 2500 B.C., the head of the Antiquities Department says. So far the scientists have uncovered one of the walls of the temple along with numerous graves from the same period, said Hussein Rashid. Ur is one of ancient Iraq’s most fascinating cities. It has given the world priceless treasures from the Sumerian civilization that flourished in southern Iraq . . .

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ANCIENT BIBLICAL GARDENS ‘BLOOM’ AGAIN (LiveScience)

An ancient royal garden has come back into bloom in a way, as scientists have reconstructed what it would’ve looked like some 2,500 years ago in the kingdom of the biblical Judah. Their reconstruction, which relied on analyses of excavated pollen, reveals a paradise of exotic plants. The luxurious garden had been discovered at Ramat Rahel, an archaeological site located high above the modern city of Jerusalem, about midway between the Old City of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. This site was inhabited since the last century of . . .

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ARCHAEOLOGISTS STRIKE GOLD IN QUEST TO FIND QUEEN OF SHEBA’S WEALTH (The Guardian)

A British excavation has struck archaeological gold with a discovery that may solve the mystery of where the Queen of Sheba of biblical legend derived her fabled treasures. Almost 3,000 years ago, the ruler of Sheba, which spanned modern-day Ethiopia and Yemen, arrived in Jerusalem with vast quantities of gold to give to King Solomon. Now an enormous ancient goldmine, together with the ruins of a temple and the site of a battlefield, have been discovered . . .

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UPCOMING EVENTS



LYNN H. WOOD ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM LECTURE SERIES

March 21, 2012, 7 p.m.

“Transformations in the Twelfth Century B.C.: The Coming of the Philistines to Ashkelon,” by Daniel Master, PhD (Wheaton College)

The museum lecture series is free and open to the public. For more information, visit our website at <http://www.southern.edu/archaeology>

SPEAKING SCHEDULE

April 12-14, 2012, Dalton, GA

ASI Southern Union Spring Meeting.

DIG SIGHT

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