

Jesus was not buried in Talpiot

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Earlier this year Discovery Channel aired the programme "The Lost Tomb Of Jesus" directed by James Cameron and largely based on some investigation made by the Israeli-born, Canadian-based film maker Simcha Jacobovici. In conjunction with the film came the companion book *The Jesus Family Tomb. The Discovery, the Investigation and the Evidence That Could Change History* by Jacobovici and the paleobiologist Charles Pellegrino. It was claimed that a tomb discovered during some construction work in the East Talpiot region of Jerusalem in 1980 contained the ossuaries of Jesus and his family because they had inscriptions saying:

Yeshua bar Josef/ Jesus, son of Joseph
Maria
Matia/ Matthew
Yose/ Joseph
Yehuda bar Yeshua/ Judah, son of Jesus
Mariamene e Mara

Some of the ossuaries were found broken. Of those found intact five had inscriptions in Hebrew or Aramaic, one in Greek, and the last one was plain. In his report *A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries in East Talpiyot, Jerusalem* Prof. Amos Kloner, then Jerusalem's District Archaeologist, explained that the Greek inscription 'Mariamene e Mara' referred to a Mariamene, a variant of the name Mariam, Maryam and Marya, while 'Mara' was a contraction of Martha, this name also being "common in the Jewish feminine onomasticon." 'Mariamene' was central to the programme because it was interpreted as referring to Mary Magdalene. "That's the ringo, that's what sets the whole film in motion", the producer said. The claim that the Talpiot tomb was the "Jesus family Tomb", and particularly that "Mariamene e Mara" meant "Mary Magdalene, the Master" provoked bitter contestation and indignant criticism. Overnight a number of people appeared on the scene proffering interpretations of the controversial inscription in Greek. The Jesuit scripture scholar Father Joseph A. Fitzmyer, who edited the Aramaic Tobit texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls found in Qumran, cave 4 and whose impeccable critical credentials are widely known, provided the best interpretation.

According to him the Greek inscription certainly does not refer to Mary Magdalene. It is not 'Mariamne' but rather MAPIAMHNOY H MAPA, which in Latin transcription would mean "Mariamenou e Mara". The first word ends in a masculine or neuter ending (-ou), the second could be the Greek particle "or" and the third word was problematic. "Why would anyone have an alternate Greek name Mara, gratuitously said to be the Aramaic word meaning 'Lord' or 'Master'?" he wrote. He also pointed out that the Aramaic word for "Lord" would be MA-RE; "the Lord" would be MAR-YA (emphatic form with definite article) and no feminine form of the word was known.

So on what evidence was MAPIAMHNOY H MAPA said to be Mary Magdalene? The fact was that there was no evidence at all but only a claim made on the authority of Professor François Bovon of Harvard University, who had written that Mary Magdalene was called 'Mariamne' in the fourth-century *Acta Philippi*. Bovon was totally unaware of the premise of the programme when he was interviewed and later justifiably sought to distance himself from what eminent scholars and archaeologists judged to be sensationalism and a publicity stunt. The problem was that the damage had been done. He therefore explained that the "Mariamne of the Acts of Philip is part of the apostolic team with Philip and Bartholomew; she teaches and baptizes. In the beginning her faith is stronger than Philip's faith. This portrait of Mariamne fits very well with the portrayal of Mary of Magdala in the Manichaeon Psalms, the Gospel of Mary, and Pistis Sophia. My interest is not historical but on the level of literary traditions." That was only part of the story for it was clear that Professor Bovon was using extraneous (fourth-century) Gnostic sources, poor material to rely on for historical data, to maintain that the 'Mariamne' in the *Acta* was Mary Magdalene.

Fitzmyer, also an authority in several other ancient languages, was quick to point out that "Mariamne was alluding to Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:37-8 and John: 11:1), there being no further mention of Mariamne in the *Acta* that would contradict that implied identification." So apparently Bovon's article "Le privilege pascal de Marie-Madeleine" published in *New Testament Studies* in 1984 was a good discussion about her in Part I and of subsequent extra-biblical writings of the following centuries about her (Part II) but when it came to treating the *Acta Philippi* in Part III no evidence was given that the Mariamne in that writing was the name of Mary of Magdala.

Professor Bovon gave the impression that he had been led into a trap and made it clear that, to him, "reconstructions of Jesus' marriage with Mary Magdalene and the birth of a child belonged to science fiction."

He gave another indication of his convictions by calling attention to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

That there must have been an early tradition about this church as the true site of Jesus' burial was the view of the German Benedictine scholar and archaeologist Father Bargil Pixner, whose excavations leading to more discoveries about the Essene Quarter in Jerusalem were praised by the eminent Israeli archaeologist Dr. Nahman Avigad. Pixner based his conclusions on the information that had been provided by the Church historian Eusebius (260-341) in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* about a very large assembly (*maguite ekklesia Judaion*) of Jews in Jerusalem up to the year AD 135 and that Judah bar Kyriakos, the last of the fifteen Jewish-Christian bishops of Jerusalem, had rebuilt Golgotha. Several Israeli archaeologists, Kloner included, believe that this is where Jesus was buried. Still, bits of information are needed to fill the gaps in the track leading to Golgotha, making alternative views like the one proposed in the programme inevitable.

Of the ossuaries that had been found intact in the excavation at the Talpiot cave by archaeologist Joseph Gath only one was plain, with no inscription. It was described as the tenth or "missing ossuary that disappeared from the cave" by the proponents of the Jesus Family Tomb hypothesis and claimed to be the so-called "James ossuary" with its controversial inscription saying "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus". The second half of the inscription does appear to have been made in a different hand (as maintained by this author in an article written three months before it was officially considered to be a partial forgery). It is obvious that it is not going to be easy to prove that the "missing ossuary" is the "James ossuary", only one of the reasons being that the dimensions are different. The report by Dr. Wolfgang E. Krumbein of Carl von Ossietzky University, Oldenburg, which has been used in favour of saying that the James ossuary was originally in the Talpiot tomb, also states that it was not in a cave environment for centuries, being exposed to sunlight and atmospheric conditions during this period. The Talpiot ossuaries show no signs that they were kept in such conditions. It was also reported that Oded Golan, the artefact's owner, told Ben Witherington III of Asbury Theological Seminary that it came from Silwan. Witherington had jumped to the conclusion that it was time for the Catholic Church to "revisit" the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary --- ignoring the fact that there was no Aramaic word for "cousin" --- and then found himself in the uncomfortable position of seeing the artefact, about which he co-authored a book with Hershel Shanks, associated with the Talpiot tomb. His reaction was to defend the position that "the James tradition contradicts the tomb in locale and in substance. James is buried alone, in another place". Given the confusion that has arisen in the discussion about the ossuaries, perhaps it would have been opportune to add: in a trench grave, probably in the Kidron valley. That would correspond to the ancient tradition on where James lies buried.

The official version about the ossuaries, therefore, has not been contested on solid grounds. Both Prof. Amos Kloner, who wrote his report based on the notes made by archaeologist Joseph Gath and is a respected authority in first-century Jewish burials, as well as Dr. Joseph Zias, the chief anthropologist for the Israel Antiquities Authority at the time the Talpiot cave was found, have insisted that the tenth ossuary was plain and non-descript. It was the well-known Zias who catalogued all the ten ossuaries as they came to the Rockefeller Museum. It was also he who discovered a Greek inscription on Absalom's tomb and sought the help of the French Dominican philologist and epigrapher Father Émile Puech, also one of the editors of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Puech deciphered it as: "This is the tomb of Zachariah, very pious priest, father of John." They were not dogmatic about this really being the site where Zachariah, father of John the Baptist, was buried and published their findings in the *Revue Biblique*. Who knows, perhaps things may have taken a different turn had those involved in the programme consulted heavyweights like Fathers Fitzmyer and Puech.

Given the success he has had in the past it is obvious that unfortunately Simcha Jacobovici did not continue to use his talent, as he should have done. Sadly, he appears to have been misled by some of the esoteric material that sells like hot cakes and is in fashion and so took the wrong direction, making archaeologists and professors detect an "ulterior motive" or a hidden theological agenda behind the programme. Scholars have also dismissed another of his works, *The Exodus Decoded*, which goes to say that just as he was unable to find Moses' footprints, so was he unsuccessful in his attempt to find Jesus' bones. The programme threw many of the rules overboard. It went further, resorting to DNA tests to maintain that as the 'Yeshua' (which can also be read as 'Hanun') and 'Mariamne' in the cave were not related they must have been a couple. The fact that the bones of some seventeen people had been found in the bone boxes, as also the finding that at least thirty-five people had been buried in the cave, was not addressed. It could have been a multi-generational tomb and Kloner is on record saying that "slaves" and even "lonely people" could have been entombed there. Surprisingly, no one seems to have also bothered about the need for an independent control sample. And how could that be obtained?

Even statistics were used to reinforce the case and it was concluded that the probability factor was 600 to 1 in favour of the tomb being the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth and his family. It was obvious that the computation assumed that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were not siblings, and were therefore married. Soon after, statistician Andrey Feuerverger of the University of Toronto began to realise that he had been drawn to endorse conclusions he never meant and publicly stated, "It is not the purview of statistics whether or not

this tomb site is that of the New Testament family. Any such conclusion more rightfully belongs to the purview of biblical historical scholars who are in a much better position to assess the assumptions entering into the computation." In other words, he had made calculations associated with assumptions, so he ended by saying that "in this respect I now believe that I should not assert any conclusions connecting this tomb with any hypothetical one of the NT family."

That was not the end of the story. Another claim in the form of the chevron and rosette pattern at the entrance of the cave, interpreted as an early Jewish-Christian symbol. Jacobovici carried that further with the speculation that the façade could have something "to do with the promise of Jesus --- as a Jewish messiah --- to build a Third Temple at the 'end of times.'" A little research would have yielded the following results: it is found on Hasmonean coins and on the coins of Philip, Herod the Great's son; there is also coinage where the chevron circle pattern is depicted together with the Jerusalem temple. Was there anything else in the box? Yes, there was. Three skulls found on the floor, below the acrosalia, also became the object of wishful speculation. It was said that Crusaders or Knights Templar may have entered the cave and placed the three skulls in "an odd and clearly ceremonial configuration". Archaeologist Shimon Gibson, who surveyed the site, was reported to have also had this impression, suggesting that they formed a triangle pointing to the Temple mount. What is more probable is that they rolled off the acrosalias when bulldozers and dynamite were being used in the construction area above. Part of the cave's roof had fallen because of the construction work and children were seen playing soccer with skulls in the neighbourhood. Did these too belong to members of the "Jesus family"?

It is a pity that the programme, announced as though it was gospel truth, necessarily drew the attention of scholars and that most of those involved in the debate have shown little interest in the Turin Shroud. This relic is far more convincing than what has been said about the Talpiot cave, not least because it has the support of some of the world's most educated people, some of whom have published articles in peer reviewed journals and scholarly books. This is not the case with the Talpiot tomb. James Tabor, one of the scholars closely associated with the programme, had earlier reported that he had found a shroud in Akeldama, in fact named the tomb where it was found as the "Tomb of the Shroud". It only helped to provide an example where a burial shroud and not any strips of ragged cloth like those used on Egyptian mummies was found in a first-century Jewish tomb. Jesus was buried in a two-piece shroud, he said. As far as Shroud scholars understand, Jesus was buried in a one-piece cloth, known as the Turin Shroud, the second piece, "the cloth that was over his head" in the Gospel according to John, probably being the Sudarium of Oviedo. This, however, does not make the relic preserved in Turin a two-piece cloth. The Oviedo cloth appears to have been used to wrap Jesus' head as he was taken down from the cross, with some blood flowing from his nose. It is likely to have been stored in a separate place inside the sepulchre because it had served its purpose. Blood spilled at death (life blood) on clothing and other things had to be buried together with the dead person according to Jewish law, which fits what is learnt from John's gospel.

References to the Sudarium of Oviedo have so far been traced to the beginning of the fifth century. There are coincidences between the bloodstains on the Shroud and the Sudarium. A report after the recent 2nd International Congress on the Sudarium of Oviedo mentions "the same blood types (life blood and post-mortem blood) in the same areas and the dramatic overlay of stains on the nape of the neck, all of which suggest that the two cloths were used on the same corpse." That raises the question of the difference in the carbon dating results of the Turin Shroud and the burial cloth found in Akeldama, a problem that can be easily solved by studying the abundant literature on the Turin Shroud/Sudarium of Oviedo, as well as on the science involved, particularly cases demonstrating how carbon dating results can be skewed.

Many are bound to wonder if Jesus' dead body was left to decompose in Talpiot or wrapped in the Turin Shroud and laid in the sepulchre at Golgotha. The solution is not difficult. It is just a question of weighing the evidence.