

THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS:

A Review of *The Jesus Family Tomb* and *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*

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In springtime the thoughts of young media folk and religious book editors turn fondly to the mountains of shekels they're gonna rake in off this year's just-in-time-for-Easter "scholars discover radical new take on Jesus" story. Last year it was the Gospel of Judas and Ron Howard's film rendition of *The Da Vinci Code*. The first horse out of the gate this Easter season was Simcha Jacobovici's documentary *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* that aired on the evening of Sunday March 4th, on the Discovery Channel, with 4.1 million viewers the largest audience for that network since September 2005.¹ I bought my copy of the accompanying book, co-authored by Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino (along with, I suspect, an uncredited ghostwriter or two), entitled *The Jesus Family Tomb*, at one of the local Barnes and Nobles on the first of March. I had been keeping my eye out for it after reading of its release on Ben Witherington's blog a few days earlier. Where I live the program played from 11 at night to 1 in the morning, not exactly prime time, and I had to impose on friends who had cable and who would put up with me camped out in their living room until the wee hours. By the time the show was over and I had made the long drive home it was 3 AM. So whatever else might be said for the show, it goofed up my sleep schedule for a week ... just in time for daylight savings.

Just when I thought the fun was over for another season the second horse shows up on the book display at my local Costco on March 7th, only three days after the airing of *The Lost Tomb*, in the form of Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King's *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Early Christianity*. I

bought the book the same day, but haven't had a chance to read it yet. The third horse, at least in terms of the sequence of my experience encountering it, is the new edition of James M. Robinson's *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel*. Robinson, you might remember, came out with the original edition of this book last Easter season in protest of being cut out of the action with regard to the publication of the Gospel of Judas. I bought it in order to read about the contents of the soon to be published Gospel, only to find out that Robinson hadn't seen it yet. Robinson was miffed at the crude sensationalism and money motive behind the secrecy of the preparation and publication of the document. The Gospel of Judas, he writes, "has been kept under wraps until now, to maximize its financial gain for its Swiss owners. The grand exposé is being performed by the National Geographic Society, timed for the greatest impact, right at Easter."² I find it interesting that Robinson's rant against Easter profiteering last year, now makes a reappearance to play its own little part in the Easter profiteering this year. Robinson was right, however, in condemning the manner in which the gospel of Judas was brought forth. And it really was inexcusable that he, as one of the premiere Coptic scholars of the twentieth century, was left out in the cold. His understandable anger, however, did sometimes perhaps transgress the bounds here and there, as when he allowed himself to indulge in passing along to his readers a mean-spirited remark about Gospel of Judas translator Rudolphe Kasser: "Rudolphe is not to be confused with the red-nosed reindeer. This one's as brown-nosed as they come."³ Since I already had the original edition of Robinson's book I decided to pass on buying the second edition, at least for now. I was curious however to find out whether Robinson still thought Herman Hesse was a German Jewish author, a claim he made in the first edition (did the old boy confuse the author of *Demian*, *Siddhartha*, and *Steppenwolf*, with Heinrich Heine I wonder?).⁴ Happily the new edition finds him better informed.

Although the latter mentioned works make less grandiose claims about themselves, I expect they will have a longer shelf life than *The Jesus Family Tomb*, if for no other reason because, whatever else might be said about Pagels, King, and Robinson, they are established scholars, while Simcha Jacobovici, who

brain-childed *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, is an amateur who didn't even know what an ossuary was prior to September 11, 2002. Also he tends to come across both in the film and in the book as something of a cynical opportunist who thinks he has found a way to cobble together a sensational story that sounds plausible enough to appeal to media money people who don't know much about history, but know what sells.⁵

As is typical of these kinds of projects, one doesn't get very far into the book before we encounter predictions that the story we are reading might well represent "the biggest archaeological story ever,"⁶ a "truly paradigm-shifting discovery."⁷ Indeed the book's subtitle predicts that it "Could Change History," to which those of us with a long familiarity with the tendency toward gross overstatement typical of this genre of literature, having suffered through enough Easter season media hype transmogrified Jesus story experiences, say, "Yeah right!"

It is not that the discovery of Jesus's family tomb wouldn't matter, if it were *really* discovered, that is. Indeed it would pose a real problem for Christians, who have believed from the very beginning that not only was Jesus encountered by the disciples after his suffering, but that he rose from the dead, with the accompanying consequence of an empty tomb. Paul Maier, Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University, explored this issue magnificently in *A Skeleton in God's Closet* (1994), a novel that tells the story of an elaborate archaeological hoax being undertaken to make it appear that the tomb of Jesus had been found. As I worked my way through Jacobovici and Pellegrino's *The Jesus Family Tomb*, I couldn't help but thinking again and again that Maier had worked harder at weaving his plot than Jacobovici did. But then again Maier is a trained historian and Jacobovici only an amateur. Jacobovici simply doesn't know what he doesn't know that he'd have to know if he ever really wanted to sound plausible.

As often happens in such books, we are repeatedly needled throughout by relatively inconsequential errors of fact. We are informed, for example, that "'James' was introduced as a translation for the Hebrew 'Yakov' or 'Jacob' quite recently ... during the creation of the King James English translation of the Bible in 1611."⁸ (Better go back and have a look at the Tyndale and Wycliffe translations of Matthew 13:55!) Or again that "John [the Baptist] was beheaded as a

troublemaker by Herod the Great.”⁹ (Wrong Herod, old buddy – when that grizzly old tyrant died the infant Jesus was still in Egypt and John the Baptist still a dandlin’ on his mammy Elizabeth’s knee!) Or again that “the early Church father Irenaeus of Lyon wrote condemnations against the Gospel of Judas ... and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene.”¹⁰ (Irenaeus did write about the Gospel of Judas, but not about the Gospel of Mary!) Or again that, “in the Gospel of Thomas, Simon and Peter, in sayings 22 and 114, eventually rose up and spoke out against Mary Magdalene.”¹¹ (That’s “Simon Peter” not “Simon *and* Peter”!) Or again that the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, was “discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945.”¹² (It wasn’t!)¹³ Such ongoing factual glitches make it difficult to trust anything in the book even where it seems right.

Was the Jesus Family Tomb Discovered?

The basic claim of *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* is that a first century tomb, accidentally opened by a bulldozer at a construction site in Talpiot near Jerusalem and excavated for the Israel Antiquities Authority by archaeologists Amos Kloner, Eliot Braun, Yosef Gat, and Shimon Gibson, was in reality the tomb of the Jesus family, containing ossuaries (bone boxes) containing the remains of Jesus, his wife Mary Magdalene, his mother Mary, his brothers Joses and James, his and Mary Magdalene’s son Judah and an uncle on Jesus’s mother’s side named Matthew. An ossuary is a receptacle of secondary burial. In the time of Jesus the body of a dead person was first shrouded and then laid out for a time. Then, once the flesh had finished decaying, the bones were gathered and placed in an ossuary. In the tomb in question there were ten ossuaries six of which were inscribed as follows:

- (1) Mariamenou e Mara: Of Mariamne [also called] Mara**
- (2) Yehuda bar Yeshua: Judah son of Jesus**
- (3) Matya: Short for Matthew**
- (4) Yeshua bar Yoseph: Jesus son of Joseph**
- (5) Yose: Short for Joseph**
- (6) Marya: Mary**

Of the ten ossuaries, nine remain and one is missing. Jacobovici and Pellegrino try to show that the James son of Joseph Brother of Jesus ossuary, which made such a sensation when it first emerged in 2002, is in fact the missing tenth box. That claim will receive treatment later in the piece.

But first I mean to focus on what would be the most sensational occupants of the tomb, Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The fact that, according to Jacobovici, the two allegedly also had a child named Judah, is of course sensational as well. But not so sensational as the basic claim that the tomb contained the bones of Jesus and his wife! The best place to begin is by discussing the actual inscriptions on the ossuaries that, according to Jacobovivi, once contained the bones of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Jesus son of Joseph

One of the ironic features of this whole story is the fact that pretty much everyone agrees that the Talpiot tomb did in fact contain an ossuary bearing the name "Jesus son of Joseph." Why then hasn't this remarkable fact been revealed before now? Well it has, actually. It was written up in scholarly journals and books and even occasionally in popular ones as well. I have before me at the moment a very good picture and description of it on page 60 of my copy of the updated edition of Hershel Shanks and Ben Witherington's popular book *The Brother of Jesus* (2003).¹⁴ The picture I am looking at, it should also be said, is far clearer and more helpful for anyone trying to make out the writing than the one presented among the color plates of the Jacobovici/Pellegrino book. Another place you can find a picture of it is in James D. Tabor's *The Jesus Dynasty* (2006).¹⁵ Nor is this even the first Easter season that the "Jesus son of Joseph" ossuary from the Talpiot tomb played a part in the seasonal media hype. In 1996 the BBC featured it in a program shown on Easter called *The Body in Question*.¹⁶

The reason the appearing of the names together was not considered particularly remarkable was the simple fact that they were both common first century Jewish names. Joseph was the second most popular male name during the period, and Jesus (Joshua) the sixth.¹⁷ Nor in fact was it even the first time such an inscription was found, another was discovered by E. L. Sukenik of Hebrew University and published in 1931.¹⁸

The presence of a “Jesus son of Joseph” in the tomb is key to Jacobovici’s whole argument. David Horovitz, writing for the *Jerusalem Post*, reported that, “At the New York press conference held Monday to launch his *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* documentary, filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici was asked whether his whole thesis hinged on the inscription on the ossuary alongside him truly reading ‘Jesus son of Joseph.’ Jacobovici responded with candid good humor. Glancing at the disappointingly undistinguished ossuary in question, kindly loaned out to him for the occasion by the Israel Antiquities Authority, he acknowledged that, ‘If that doesn’t say “Jesus son of Joseph,” yes, it all falls apart. But then Jacobovici went on to insist that every epigrapher to whom he had shown the inscription ... had confirmed the reading.’”¹⁹ Jacobovici makes the same assertion about the uniform support of the epigraphers even more strongly in the book: “everyone, from the noted epigrapher L. Y. Rahmani to the legendary Frank Moore Cross of Harvard, agrees that the inscription on the ossuary must be read ‘Jesus, son of Joseph’ and no other way.”²⁰

Horovitz, catching a whiff of Jacobovici’s overconfidence, decided to put it to the test. Here’s what he found:²¹

One of those Jacobovici didn’t consult was Joseph Naveh, the preeminent Israeli epigrapher. Yet when I went to see Naveh at his Jerusalem home on Tuesday, the emeritus professor peered intently at the markings scratched into the side of the ossuary in the color photograph I’d brought him and pronounced, almost instantaneously: “Jesus son of Joseph.”

He did then qualify himself, but only a little: “The ‘Joseph’ is unmistakable,” he said. “The ‘son of’ is okay. And you can certainly read it as ‘Jesus,’ he said. “Just not definitely. There are lots of additional lines here that don’t belong.”

Another prominent expert whom Jacobovici did not consult, across town in the tranquil offices of the French Biblical and Archeological School in east Jerusalem, was Prof. Emile Puech. His response to the inscription was much the same as Naveh’s. “It’s very crude lettering,” said the bearded, French-born Father Puech. “The ‘Joseph’ is clear. The ‘son of’ is no problem.

The 'Jesus?' It's certainly possible to read it that way."

And a third leading authority, Ada Yardeni, also essentially came down on Jacobovici's side. "'Son of Joseph,' for sure," she said after an inspection. "The first name? Well, there are lots of markings here, but, yes, it could well be Jesus."

Horovitz was only discovering what was already well known, i.e., that things were not nearly so obvious as Jacobovici represents them, that indeed the claim that everyone thinks "the ossuary must be read 'Jesus, son of Joseph' and no other way" is simply not true. In the book he wrote with Ben Witherington, Hershel Shanks described this inscription as "so clumsily scratched that paleographers cannot be sure what it says, but the best guess is *Yeshua bar Yohoseph*, 'Jesus son of Joseph.'"²² L. Y. Rahmani, whom Jacobovici specifically appeals to, expresses his uncertainty by including a question mark when transliterating the inscription, "Yeshua' (?), son of Yehosef," after which he writes: "The first name, preceded by a large cross-mark, is difficult to read, as the incisions are clumsily carved and badly scratched."²³ Amos Kloner similarly included a question mark when he published his findings on the tomb in 1996: "Yeshua (?) son of Yehosef."²⁴

In the book Jacobovici himself mentions that when Amos Kloner first showed him the ossuary with its inscription the archaeologist had remarked: "It's hard to read ... Like doctors' writings ... Only pharmacists can read them."²⁵

Stephen Pfann, of the University of the Holy Land in Jerusalem, who makes a brief appearance in the documentary, actually prefers the reading "Hanun" over "Jesus."²⁶

Typical of the overconfident posture reflected throughout the book and film, Mr. Jacobovici is surer of himself than the experts: "Even my untrained eye," he writes in his description of his first encounter with the ossuary, "could clearly make out the letters that translated as 'Jesus, son of Joseph.'"²⁷

In support of reading the name as Jesus, instead of, say, Hanun, as Pfann would have it, there was also found in the tomb, as already mentioned, an ossuary with the inscription, this time in very clear and precise letters, Yehudah bar Yeshua (Judah, the son of Jesus). This would at least open the possibility that the Jesus

son of Joseph in the same tomb might be that person's father.

My own view is that the inscription is so poorly written that the current reading Jesus could be wrong and if someone could come make a good case for a reading that seemed to fit better it might well end up being accepted, and even ultimately preferred.

Mariamne, Also Known as Mara

The ossuary that supposedly contained the bones of Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus, bears a Greek inscription, which – Jacobovici translates as “Mariamne also known as Mara.”²⁸ Features of this translation are problematic in ways that go beyond what we need to deal with here. The main significance for Jacobovici is the claim made repeatedly throughout the book and movie that “Mary Magdalene’s real name was Mariamne,”²⁹ and that Mara means *lord* or *master*, so that the inscription should be read, according to the idiosyncratic James Tabor, the only biblical scholar on the planet so far as I am aware wanting to make common cause with Jacobovici and his *Lost Tomb* project, “of Mariamne, also known as the Master.”³⁰

Jacobovici claims that “According to the biggies in the field [of New Testament scholarship, Mary Magdalene’s real name was ‘Mariamne,’ the exact name we find on the Talpiot tomb buried next to Jesus.”³¹ But who are these “biggies,” and do they really say that what Jacobovici claims they say? Jacobovici names two of the “biggies” and explicitly credits them with saying that Mariamne “is Mary Magdalene’s real name”: Karen L. King and François Bovon, both of the Harvard Divinity School.³² As a New Testament scholar by training myself, I felt sure that, given the fact that Mariamne was merely a variant form of *Mariamme*, a common Greek form of the Hebrew name Miriam, and given the lateness of its use in the Acts of Philip, the source Jacobovici specifically appeals to, that Bovon and King would not have said what Jacobovici credits them with saying. So I emailed Professor King and Professor Bovon on the point and my suspicions were confirmed. Both responded by denying that they ever said that Mariamne was Mary Magdalene’s real name.³³ What Bovon actually contends is that the figure Mariamne mentioned in the fourth century Acts of Philip (Bovon co-edited the critical edition of this work for the *Corpus Christianorum* series in 1999)

represented Mary Magdalene. Commenting on this, Bruce Chilton, author of *Mary Magdalene: A Biography* (2005), writes: "Mr. Jacobovici ... pulls in Harvard professor François Bovon, who says – quite rightly – that in a 14th-century copy of a fourth-century text the Greek name "Mariamne" might be a reference to Mary Magdalene. That, of course, is completely beside the point. Did Mr. Bovon know that he would be quoted to make a claim from such late sources about a first-century ossuary?"³⁴ Craig A. Evans, author of *Jesus and the Ossuaries* (2003), agrees: "The argument that this person is Mary Magdalene, on the strength of the 4th century Acts of Philip, is completely unpersuasive."³⁵

Bovon further notes that the Mariamne of the Acts of Philip, after her missionary journeys ultimately returns home to the Jordan Valley, and that her coffin is actually placed in the Jordan river itself.³⁶ Jacobovici again misrepresents what Bovon had told him about this by saying, "Mary Magdalene returned to Jerusalem and ended her days there. Clearly, the Talpiot tomb is consistent with this tradition."³⁷ Again, however, Bovon afterward contradicted him: "I said that the Acts of Philip sends her to the Jordan Valley, but the filmmaker concludes that this means Jerusalem!"³⁸

One of the reasons Bovon's Acts of Philip comes into play in Jacobovici's story is seen where he quotes Bovon as saying that, "this Mary from the Acts of Philip, is clearly equal to the other apostles."³⁹ Not only does this woman bear the name Mariamne, the name on the tomb, but she is also likened by Bovon to an Apostle, which in Jobovici's mind connects with the second name on the ossuary – Mara:⁴⁰

The second part of the inscription 'Mara' was a Greek rendering of an Aramaic word meaning 'Lord' or 'Master' ... The title on the ossuary seemed perfectly consistent with the Mariamne described in the Acts of Philip as the sister of Philip. There, she is described as an apostle or 'master.' She is also explicitly equated with the woman the Gospels call Mary Magdalene."

Jacobovici's equating of the words *master* and *apostle* is a stretch, and his assertion that Mariamne is "explicitly equated" with Mary Magdalene in the Acts of Philip is

simply wrong. According to Bovon, Mariamne the sister of Philip, although not explicitly identified as Mary Magdalene, is nevertheless recognizable as such for other reasons.⁴¹ Bovon also sees Mary the sister of Martha being “merged in the *Acts of Philip* with Mary Magdalene,”⁴² and at at least one point, with Miriam the sister of Moses and Aaron.

By his own account, Bovon, when discussing the *Acts of Philip* is “not interested in the reconstruction of the historical figure of Mary Magdalene, but in her portrayal in literary texts.”⁴³ Nor indeed should we expect to get any real help in reconstructing historical events from the late, highly fictionalized narrative of the *Acts of Philip*.

In the memory of the Eastern Orthodox Church Mariamne the sister of Philip the Apostle and Mary Magdalene represent two different saints celebrated on two different days on the liturgical calendar: Mariamne on February 17 and Mary Magdalene’s on July 22.

Jacobovici has Amos Kloner, the archaeologist who excavated the Talpiot tomb, saying in reference to this ossuary under discussion: “Mary has a name, and it’s not Magdalene. Her name is Mariamne, which is a Hellenistic, Macabbean version of Miriam. One of Herod the Great’s wives had this name. But none of the people associated with Jesus was called Mariamne. Too bad for you, Mr. Jacobovici.”⁴⁴ What Kloner is presented as saying here is right. The Hebrew name Miriam was mainly taken over into Greek in three different ways: as *Mariam*, as *Maria* and as *Mariamme*. As to the question why the latter two forms arose, Bovon, following Bertrand Bouvier, notes that “When a Greek word ends with a consonant, the consonant can only be n, r, or s [n, r, or s]. Any name ending with another consonant therefore sounds foreign or barbaric,”⁴⁵ thus making *Mariam* undesirable. “This very fact,” continues Bovon, “may explain the two other forms of Mary.”

The New Testament never uses *Mariamme*, only *Maria* and *Mariam*. Both forms are used for Mary Magdalene in different places. With one exception, the first century Jewish historian Josephus, uses *Mariame* or *Mariamme* for all the Marys from the sister of Moses to the wife of Herod the Great. In only one case does he refer to a *Maria*, a wealthy woman from Jerusalem who in a time of terrible

famine eats her own baby. *Mariamne* shows up as a variant of *Mariamme*, for example, in the early third-century Christian apologist Hippolytus's *Refutation of All Heresies* (7.5.1, 10.9.3), and as well as in the manuscripts of the Acts of Philip.⁴⁶

But to return to the second name in the ossuary inscription, Mara, meaning *master* or *lord* in Aramaic.⁴⁷ Much of the seeming plausibility of Jacobovici's story stems from his either misstating the case or leaving things out that might lead to conclusions other than the ones he is trying to sell. I do not recall him mentioning anywhere, for example, L. Y. Rahmani's much more mundane identification of the word Mara as "a contraction of Martha,"⁴⁸ an explanation also adopted by Kloner.⁴⁹

Tal Ilan credits the unusual form of the name *Mariamne* in this inscription (*Mariamnenon*) to the inscriber's insufficient mastery of Greek, resulting in the creation, in this case, of "an elaborate declension, indicating a misunderstanding of the whole system."⁵⁰ Given this background it is hard not to be reminded as well of that famous Old Testament (Hebrew Bible), "Don't call me Naomi ... Call me Mara, because the almighty has made my life bitter" (Ruth 1:20). Or could Mara perhaps be nothing more than a nickname of some sort, with or without meaning, that originated from a play on the similarities of sound with *Mariamne*? We shall probably never know. And yet as we noted at the beginning, even if we take it to mean *lord* or *master*, such a meaning can scarcely be uncritically equated with the term *apostle*. The extent to which humor played into the giving of nicknames in Second Temple Judaism, as it does today, is beyond my ken. And yet the fact that a nickname like "the cake," has been preserved,⁵¹ I am inclined to think it at least possible that a name like Mara might as easily been assigned to a bossy older sister by say her kowtowing younger siblings as to an apostle by her admiring disciples.

Does DNA Prove Jesus and Mary Were Married?

One of the more dramatic scenes in the *Lost Tomb* movie is where we see James Tabor and Simcha Jacobovici waiting with baited breath as Dr. Carney Matheson of the Paleo-DNA lab in Thunder Bay, Canada, unfolds to them the DNA results on the bone material from the Jesus and *Mariamne* ossuaries. In the book the results of the tests are described as follows:⁵²

Dr. Matheson and his team ... were able to extract mitochondrial DNA from both the Jesus and Mariamne ossuaries. This allowed them to confirm that these were indeed Middle Eastern people of antiquity and that they were *not* related.

Forgetting for a moment that we are talking about Jesus of Nazareth, the only reason two unrelated individuals, male and female, would appear together in a *family* tomb in first century Jerusalem is if they were husband and wife."

In the movie we are told that a man and a woman unrelated by mitochondrial DNA "would be an extremely rare discovery in a family tomb, unless the individuals were husband and wife." But is this true? In the movie Dr. Matheson seems to suggest that it is true when he says that "these two individuals if they were unrelated would most likely be husband and wife."

"And so perhaps Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married," concludes the film's droning narrator, "as the DNA results of the Talpiot ossuaries suggest." But do the results really suggest that?

As I sat with my friends Jim and Dianne Kerns watching this and thinking about the basic flaws of the claims made about the DNA evidence for these two particular ossuaries, Dianne saw the other towering problem: "Why did they only test the two, why not the others? Or perhaps they really did test the others in the tomb, but, finding no support for their theories decided to leave that evidence out?" Dianne had put her finger on something important that sent me on a quest for implications and information on the following day. A number of possibilities occurred to me but since I am not a scientist I thought I had better run my understanding of mitochondrial DNA past my old friend Dr. Denis O. Lamoureux of St. Joseph College, University of Alberta, to make sure I had it right. Denis, a pugnacious little French Canadian, and I had done our doctorates together at the University of Toronto, and he had gone on to do a second doctorate and then to win a Templeton Foundation Science & Religion Award for a course he had developed. Here's what I wrote:

March 8, 2007⁵³

Hey Denis:

You got to help me out with the question of mitochondrial DNA. Here is my understanding. Mitochondrial DNA in humans passes only through the female, since the male's mitochondrial DNA is in the sperm's tail which is destroyed during fertilization. In consequence I have the mitochondrial DNA of my mother and her mother and her mother. I do not have the mitochondrial DNA of my mother's father nor my father's mother. My daughter would have the mitochondrial DNA of my wife and her mother but not of me and my mother. How am I doing so far?....

Ron

To which Dr. Lamoureux responded:

March 13, 2007

Hi,

Yup. You got the mitochondrial genetics right.

D

So I was ready to go. It occurred to me first of all that the most obvious next step would have been to test the DNA of the occupant of the ossuary inscribed "Judah, son of Jesus." If, as Jacobovici claims, Judah was the offspring of the Jesus and Mariamne in the tomb, then his mitochondrial DNA would establish a link between him and Mariamne. This, then, combined with the inscription on the ossuary naming his father as Jesus would represent a very suggestive piece of evidence. So why didn't they do that test? Or did they?

A second question I had was with the claim that if Jesus and Mariamne were unrelated they must have been husband and wife. There were originally ten ossuaries, the six with names referred to four men and two women. It occurred to me that Mariamne could, at the very least, have as easily been the wife of any of the other three named men in the tomb, or of any of the occupants of the

un-inscribed ossuaries that happened to be male, and still not be related to Jesus. Not only so, but given the fact that only the mitochondrial DNA was tested, a broad range of other interrelationships were possible as well. So, for example, if the Jesus of the tomb shared the same father as the Mary, but not the same mother, the mitochondrial DNA would not show that they are related. Dr. Carney says as much in the movie. But beyond that as well if the Mariamne were, say, Jesus's daughter, that wouldn't show up either.

Having gone this far I felt it was time to email Dr. Carney himself in order to discover whether there really were (as implied in the documentary) the remains of only two individuals submitted to him for testing, and also what his thoughts were on the possibility of some of these other explanations of Jesus and Mariamne being in the same tomb but unrelated. He responded that "Yes they submitted only those two samples for analysis,"⁵⁴ and then went on to address my other question:

Unfortunately all of the possibilities that I expressed in my interview were not shown in the documentary. These two individuals could be unrelated (I was led to believe there were only two in the tomb and why I said they would most likely be married, there were more than two people in the tomb), half-brother and half-sister sharing a father and having two different mothers (as you point out), Father and daughter, paternal cousins, maternal cousins through an uncle, paternal uncle and niece, grandfather and grandchild and I am sure there are a few I have missed. With these combinations you can clearly see that a variety of relationships could have existed between these two individuals and thus the statistical possibility of the marriage relationship occurring decreases.

In summing up his judgment of the use of the DNA evidence in *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, Dr. Matheson wrote: "They make the DNA in the documentary to be extremely significant, but I think it is the allure of the term DNA that they have worked upon. The DNA work is in fact quite a meaningless piece of evidence."

As an interesting sidebar to all this, Jacobovici and Pellegrino did seem to have had at least some inkling of the significance a DNA test of the Judah son of

Jesus ossuary might have, since they offer the following rather puzzling excuse for not doing one:⁵⁵

Simcha wanted few things more in the world now than to have a DNA sample from “Judah, son of Jesus.” But sadly, despite repeated efforts, his path to a sample from IAA 80/501 appeared to be irreversibly blocked. No one was being particularly clear with him about what had happened to the bone material. By one account, the accretion bed had been scoured out of the Judah ossuary as part of a cleaning in preparation for a museum display ... By another account, DNA work might be possible in the future after swabbing stains on the ossuary walls.

Why then, I wonder, weren’t attempts made to obtain DNA samples by swabbing the stains on the ossuary walls? Also, is it really the habit of museum curators to “scour” ossuaries before displaying them? Are we to imagine them subjecting the ancient artifacts to a good scrubbing with hot soapy water and a stiff bristle brush? What exactly do Jacobovici and Pellegrino mean when they use the term “scour”?

Did the James Son of Joseph Brother of Jesus Ossuary Come from the Talpiot Tomb?

As we mentioned earlier on, one of the claims of the film is that the “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” ossuary that made such a sensation in 2002 was in fact the missing tenth ossuary from the Talpiot tomb. In the film James Tabor says that the owner of the James ossuary, Oded Golan, claims he obtained it in “around 1980,” i.e., the same time as the discovery and excavation of the Talpiot tomb.” In addition Tabor also says: “I checked the dimensions, I was just curious. The missing ossuary was catalogued, it’s just gone. The dimensions of that ossuary are the same as the James ossuary.” This latter statement is merely a more general repetition of a claim Tabor made in his 2006 book *The Jesus Dynasty*, where he claimed that, “Just recently I noticed that the dimensions of the missing tenth ossuary are precisely the same, to the centimeter, to those of the James ossuary.”⁵⁶ Neither of Tabor’s claims, however, are accurate.

As to the first claim, Oded Golan, the collector who is currently being tried in Israel for allegedly faking the James inscription, has recently submitted photographs of the James ossuary bearing the date 1976 into evidence. In these pictures, according to a recent story in *Haarets*, "the ossuary is shown on a shelf, apparently in Golan's home. In an enlargement, the whole inscription can be seen with great difficulty. The photo was examined by Gerald Richard, a former FBI agent and an expert for the defense. Richard testified that 'Nothing was noted that would indicate or suggest that they were not produced in March 1976 as indicated on the stamps appearing on the reverse side of each print.'"⁵⁷ If these pictures really are authentic then it proves the James ossuary has been in Golan's possession too long to have come from the Talpiot tomb. Whether or not they are authentic they prove that Golan is not claiming that he obtained the ossuary in "around 1980." He is saying he already had it in 1976.⁵⁸

The second claim, that the dimensions of the lost tenth ossuary and the James ossuary are the same, is also incorrect. The dimensions of the missing ossuary (IAA 80/509) are given by Kloner as 60 (long) x 26 (wide) x 30 cm (high).⁵⁹ The dimensions of the James ossuary are 50.5 (long) x 25 (wide) x 30.5 cm (high).⁶⁰ The 50.5 refers to the length at its base, but it flares out to 56 cm at the top, which is still four centimeters short of the length of the lost tenth ossuary from Talpiot. In other words, the Talpiot ossuary was a bit over one and a half inches longer than the James ossuary, just shy of a half an inch wider, and about a fifth of an inch thinner.

In the book, Jacobovici tries to explain this problem away, and interestingly, although the dimensions he gives for the missing Talpiot ossuary are the same as recorded in Kloner's report, those for the James ossuary, which Jacobovici gives as 56.5 x 26 x 30.2, have nudged closer (but still not close enough) to matching those of the missing Talpiot ossuary.⁶¹ Jacobovici then attempts to make further excuse for the difference in dimensions by raising the possibility "that, because the James ossuary broke en route to Toronto and was then re-glued, its original length changed slightly."⁶² That argument fails, however, because the dimensions I have given above were reported *before* the James ossuary broke.⁶³

But that is only the beginning of the troubles facing the theory that the

James ossuary is actually the missing ossuary from the Talpiot tomb, since not only the dimensions were reported but also other features of the ossuary were described as well. This fact contradicts Jacobovici's claim in the book that the tenth ossuary "vanished before it could be photographed or properly scrutinized for insignias, decorations, or inscribed names."⁶⁴ In his report Kloner noted that "Six of the ossuaries are inscribed (60%),"⁶⁵ implying that four of the ossuaries were not inscribed (40%). All six of the inscribed ossuaries were saved, along with three of the four ossuaries without inscriptions. Nine of the ossuaries had either inscriptions without decorative rosettes (80/502 [Matya], 80/503 [Jesus (?), son of Joseph], 80/504 [Jose], 80/505 [Marya]), decorative rosettes without inscriptions (80/506-508), or both inscriptions and decorative rosettes (80/500 [Mariamne], 80/501 [Judah, son of Jesus]). According to Kloner's report, the "number of ornamented ossuaries equals the number of plain ones."⁶⁶ In other words five and five. When we tally all this up we see that the missing ossuary was the only ossuary found in the tomb that had neither an inscription nor decorative rosettes. And indeed this is what Kloner reported. On the one hand, he said there were six ossuaries with inscriptions, all of which we still have, and on the other he explicitly describes the tenth ossuary as "plain."⁶⁷ L. Y. Rahmini both confirms Kloner's report and adds an additional detail when he describes the tenth ossuary as "a plain, broken specimen."⁶⁸ In contrast, the James ossuary has an inscription, decorative rosettes,⁶⁹ and it was not broken prior to its being shipped to Toronto in late October 2002.

When questioned about the tenth ossuary in a recent interview, Kloner responded: "Nothing has disappeared. The 10th ossuary was on my list. The measurements were not the same (as the James ossuary). It was plain (without an inscription). We had no room under our roofs for all the ossuaries, so unmarked ones were sometimes kept in the courtyard (of the Rockefeller Museum)."⁷⁰

One of the strongest points against Jacobovici and Pellegrino here is that in order for their scenario to be true, Kloner has to be either incompetent or a liar who deliberately misrepresented the size and characteristics of the tenth ossuary. This is true even if the "James son of Joseph brother of Jesus," inscription was added later by a forger. You still have to explain why Kloner and Rahmini would say what

they did about its size, lack of ornamentation, and its being broken. And what about the other archaeologists who worked with Kloner at the time? Do we want to suggest that they were in on the “conspiracy” too? And then there is the question of why Kloner would actively suppress the James ossuary but not those of Jesus son of Joseph and Judah son of Jesus.

Against all this evidence stands Pellegrino’s attempts to come up with a way of discovering a method of tomb-specific “patina fingerprinting,” as a way of establishing a connection between the James ossuary and the ossuaries in the Talpiot tomb. And naturally by the end of the day, Pellegrino’s attempts were declared successful, and the claim put forth that a “‘beyond a reasonable doubt’ case,” had now been made, “that the ossuaries inscribed ‘James’ son of Joseph, brother of Jesus,’ and ‘Jesus, son of Joseph’ had once resided together inside the same tomb, for millennia.”⁷¹

As I read the chapter on Pellegrino’s attempt to develop a methodology for “patina fingerprinting” I found it quite interesting, but ultimately unpersuasive in the light of the evidence I have outlined above. And I again found myself being drawn back to the question of why they didn’t simply test the mitochondrial DNA from the James ossuary. If James really was the brother of the Jesus in the Talpiot tomb, they would have shared the same mitochondrial DNA, that is, of course, unless they didn’t have the same mother.⁷² Still one would have thought it worth a try!

Conclusion

So at the end of the day where do we place *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* and *The Jesus Family Tomb*? Two years ago, Princeton University Press published a trim little volume by philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt, entitled *On Bullshit* (2005). I was charmed by it and bought a copy, since, as Frankfurt says in his opening paragraph, there is so much of it around. More recently Judge Richard A Posner, senior lecturer in law at University of Chicago, wrote another pleasing little volume entitled *The Little Book of Plagiarism* (2007). Even though there is a lot of plagiarism around, I passed on the book partly because I’m not made of money and partly because I wasn’t sure I entirely went along with his distinction between

intellectual fraud and plagiarism proper. I have often thought that the time is ripe for me to undertake writing a third volume along similar lines entitled something like *On Rubbish*. As with each of the other two items, there is a lot of it around as well. If I ever do get around to writing it Mr. Javobovici will no doubt be pleased to hear that *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* and *The Jesus Family Tomb* shall both enjoy a prominent place alongside such other classics of the genre as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, Donovan Joyce's *The Jesus Scroll*, Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, and John Shelby Spong's *Born of a Woman* in the bibliography.

¹ James Hibberd, "Is Discovery Burying 'Lost Tomb'? Net Pulls Repeat, Declines to Tout Ratings," *TV Week* (March 8, 2007) <http://www.tvweek.com/news.cms?newsId=11681>.

² James M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006) vii.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵ Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb: The Discovery, the Investigation and the Evidence That Could Change History* (forward by James Cameron; HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹³ James M. Robinson writes: "I was the first to make the *Gospel of Mary* available in English, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. The *Gospel of Mary* is not among the Nag Hammadi Codices, but is found in a similar Gnostic codex, Papyrus Berolinensis 8502" (*The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* (fully revised and updated ed.; HarperSanFrancisco, 2007] 186).

¹⁴ Hershel Shanks & Ben Witherington III, *The Brother of Jesus: The Dramatic Story & Meaning of the First Archaeological Link to Jesus & His Family* (updated and expanded ed.; forward by André Lemaire; HarperSanFrancisco, 2003) 60.

¹⁵ James D. Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2006) 25.

¹⁶ Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity: Part I, Palestine 330 BCE - 200 CE* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 131.

¹⁷ Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names*, p. 56.

¹⁸ Shanks & Witherington, *brother of Jesus*, p. 59. See photo page 60.

¹⁹ David Horovitz, "Editor's Notes: Giving 'Jesus' the silent treatment," *The Jerusalem Post* (March 1, 2007). Online edition: <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1171894551868&pagename=JPost%2FJP%2FShowFull>.

²⁰ Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p. 194-95.

²¹ Horovitz, "Silent Treatment," (March 1, 2007).

²² Shanks & Witherington, *brother of Jesus*, p. 59.

²³ L. Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collection of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: The Israel Antiquities Authority, 1994) no. 704. Discovery Channel makes this material available at http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/tomb/explore/media/tomb_evidence.pdf.

²⁴ Amos Kloner, "A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries in East Talpiyot, Jerusalem," *Atiqot* 29 (1996)18. Discovery Channel makes this material available at http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/tomb/explore/media/tomb_evidence.pdf.

²⁵ Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p. 43.

²⁶ According to Horovitz, "Silent Treatment," (March 1, 2007).

²⁷ Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p. 44.

²⁸ According to Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p. 62.

²⁹ Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p. 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 64 and 62.

³³ Professor Bovon wrote: "I did not say that this was the real name of Mary Magdalene." (email, March 7, 2007), and Professor King wrote: "I did not say any such thing and was quoted without my knowledge or permission," (email, March 11, 2007).

³⁴ Bruce Chilton, "Have They Found Jesus?" *New York Sun* (March 2, 2007). <http://www.nysun.com/article/49701>.

³⁵ Email to the author (March 10, 2007). See also Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2003).

³⁶ François Bovon, "Mary Magdalene in the *Acts of Philip*," in *Which Mary?: the Marys of Early Christian Tradition* (ed. by Jones, F. Stanley; Atlanta, Ga. : Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 84.

³⁷ Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p. 205.

³⁸ Email to the author (March 7, 2007).

³⁹ Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p. 97. See also Bovon, "Mary Magdalene in the *Acts of Philip*," p. 81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴¹ Ben Witherington, for example, writes: "In fact, in regard to the former manuscript what we have is a 14th century manuscript which is theorized to go back to the fourth century A.D. It does not identify Mariamene as Mary Magdalene, rather it identifies her as the sister of Philip the apostle. It is the unproven theory of Francis Bovon, without real supporting evidence that Mariamene refers to Mary Magdalene. (Problems Multiply for Jesus Tomb Theory," (Wed., Feb 28 2007) <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/02/problems-multiple-for-jesus-tomb-theory.html>.

⁴² Bovon, "Mary Magdalene in the *Acts of Philip*," p. 79, nt. 20.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴⁴ Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p. 43.

⁴⁵ Bovon, "Mary Magdalene in the *Acts of Philip*," p. 78.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80, where Bovon notes that Mariamne is sometimes spelled Mariamme "in one or two manuscripts, particularly the oldest one."

⁴⁷ Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, p. 423.

⁴⁸ Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, nos. 701-709. Comm. 3.. Jacobovici may have mentioned it, I simply don't remember.

⁴⁹ Kloner, "Ossuaries in East Talpiyot," p. 17.

⁵⁰ Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, pp. 22-23.

⁵¹ Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries*, p. 67.

⁵² Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, pp. 206-07.

⁵³ Some spellings in the original corrected.

⁵⁴ Email from Carney Matheson (March 8, 2007).

⁵⁵ Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p. 174.

⁵⁶ Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty*, p. 32.

⁵⁷ Amiram Barkat, "Collector accused of forging 'James ossuary' says old photos prove authenticity," *Haaretz* (Feb 9, 2007). Online edition: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/823215.html>.

⁵⁸ It is true that Golan has been inconsistent in the stories he tells about when he obtained the ossuary. But this probably relates to the importance to his case of Golan being able to say he owned the ossuary prior to 1978. Shanks explains: "One gray area is the date of purchase of the ossuary. It is important because it may determine whether Golan or the state of Israel has rights to the ossuary. According to Israeli law, if an object was acquired before 1978 (when this law was passed), no questions about its provenance are raised, even if it was bought from a looter. Since 1978...Israel has required purchasers to retain a receipt from a licensed antiquities dealer, who in turn must keep a record of how he legally acquired a given artifact...Press reports state variously that Golan has owned the ossuary for fifteen, twenty-five, thirty, and thirty-five years. Some stories say he owned it since

the early 1970s, others since the mid-seventies; still others, since the early to midseventies. It was I who told the press that he had had the ossuary for about fifteen years, based on what I believed Golan had told me (Shanks & Witherington, *Brother of Jesus*, pp. 83-84).

⁵⁹ Kloner, "Ossuaries in East Talpiyot," p. 21.

⁶⁰ André Lemaire, "Burial Box of James the Brother of Jesus," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Nov/Dec 2002) 27-28.

⁶¹ Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p. 210.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ The article containing the dimensions I quote appeared in the November/December *Biblical Archaeology Review*. That issue came out on 21 October 2002. We know this because of Hershel Shanks's report that "The day after we released the issue of **BAR**, the bone box, or ossuary, was featured in color on the front page of the *New York Times* ("Cracks in James Bone Box Repaired: Crowds Flock to Toronto Exhibit," *Biblical Archaeology Review* [Jan/Feb 2003] 21). The ossuary appeared on the front page of the October 22, 2002 *New York Times*, with the story on page A14. Shanks got early news of the ossuary's having broken on November 1, 2001, after it having broken during shipping the day before (Shanks & Witherington, *Brother of Jesus*, p. 3 and 36).

⁶⁴ Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p. 15.

⁶⁵ Kloner, "Ossuaries in East Talpiyot," p. 16.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

⁶⁸ Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, Nos. 701-709, Comm. 1.

⁶⁹ While most photographs of the James ossuary only show the side with the inscription, I was able to view the James ossuary in the round while attending the 2002 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Toronto.

⁷⁰ David Horovits, "Kloner: A great story, but nonsense," *The Jerusalem Post* (Feb 7, 2007): Online edition:
<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1171894527185&pagename=JPost/JParticle/ShowFull>.

⁷¹ Jacobovici & Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, p.189.

⁷² The traditional doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary would of course rule out Jesus having brothers, but the New Testament evidence can very easily be read in a way that is not supportive of such a doctrine.