

Jesus was not buried in Talpiot, Part II

Not long after the documentary “The Lost Tomb of Jesus” and its companion book *The Jesus Family Tomb* became known to the public after some ecstatic propaganda, an influential part of the academic community involved in Biblical studies and archaeology raised its voice in protest. The general feeling within this circle was that a number of things had been overstated and the conclusions were not exactly warranted by the data. Feeling the need to do something about the uproar, Ted Koppel, Managing Editor of Discovery Channel, moderated a panel discussion with biblical scholars, archaeologists and theologians. Film-maker and investigative journalist Simcha Jacobovici was of course there and formed a duo with James Tabor, from whose book *The Jesus Dynasty* much of the documentary/book drew its inspiration. The other participants were William Dever and Jonathan Reed, forming the opposing duo, as well as Father David O’Connell (CUA), Darrell Bock (DTS) and Judy Fentriss-Williams (VTS).

Koppel was hostile to Simcha Jacobovici, keeping him on the defensive for most of the time in the hour-long programme. He set the tone of the discussion by telling Jacobovici that his documentary was drama, not journalism. After all, he had an important task to perform, now that Discovery had come under severe criticism. He therefore also came well armed. In his pocket were written responses that came from experts who complained that their remarks had been twisted or even falsified in the documentary. There could be no doubt that the debate put the TV channel on the path to recovering its credibility. It was not Koppel, however, but Professor Jonathan Reed who stole the show by calling the whole thing “archaeo-porn”. Like Dever, he had “no dog in the fight” and it was clear that he really meant what he said when, during an exchange published some time later, he told Professor Tabor that “no one thought that denying the tomb’s connection to Jesus of Nazareth merited a serious, in-depth article.”

Whoever expected these developments to put an end to the attempts to pass off the documentary’s speculations as non-fiction was badly mistaken. On 31 December, 2007 Professor Andrey Feuerverger published his 68-page, peer-reviewed paper entitled “Statistical Analysis of an Archaeological Find” in order to defend his previous work which had come under attack due to the fact that it was mostly based on *a priori* assumptions. No one could deny that he had the right to defend his work, more so because it was being done within the framework of academic studies. But it turned out to be a waste of time in that failed to convince even the experts. While his opponent Randy Ingermanson argued that he had put “lots of statistical bias into his computations,” Professor Camil Fuchs, of the Department of Statistics at the University of Tel Aviv, went even further by stating “the probability is far from the one computed under Prof. Feuerverger’s provisos.”

As Feuerverger himself admitted in his paper, the assumptions he had employed had indeed come from Jacobovici. Which is what obviously also prompted him to state that these were not universally agreed upon and the failure of *any one* could be “expected to impact significantly upon the results of the analysis.” Basically it was the same old story, bristling with the same uncertainties about the Hasmonean names, and with so much harping on the issue it seemed to have even acquired the sound of music: How-do-we-solve-the-problem-called-Mara? He continued to maintain that ‘Mara’, from the Greek inscription MAPIAMHNOY H MAPA, was a title that could refer to Mary Magdalene as the “master” and thus prove that the ossuary was hers. But in writing that “the question of whether mara (lower case) was intended as a title, such as ‘honourable lady’ or whether it was intended only as an alternative (i.e. second) name is disputed”, he not only failed to provide any example of a feminine version of the Aramaic dominant masculine form ‘Mar’ --- a title used by the bishops of the Syrian Orthodox Church, which corresponds to ‘Dom’ in the Catholic Church --- meaning ‘lord’, ‘master’, or ‘honourable person’ but he also did not really consider the fact that other ossuaries bearing the name ‘Mara’ had been found. As former Jerusalem District Archaeologist Amos Kloner

wrote in his paper “A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries in East Talpiyot, Jerusalem”, *Atiqot* (Jerusalem) Vol. 29 (1996), “Mara, a contraction of Martha, is used here as a second name. This name too is common in the Jewish feminine onomasticon.” Another ‘Mara’ in Greek was, for instance, found inscribed on an ossuary in the Dominus Flevit Necropolis in Jerusalem, the site on which the Franciscan archaeologist Father Bellarmino Bagatti worked, and it was just a name and not a title. As for the name ‘Mary’ and others derived from it, both Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene are called ‘Mariam’ or ‘Maria’ in the New Testament, the name ‘Mariamene’ only appearing for the first time in 4th-century Gnostic literature, considered by scholars to be nothing more than fictitious philosophical/theological allegories, certainly not history.

Curiously, other questions about common names, both masculine and feminine, that could have logically arisen were not asked. If it is true that “Jesus and Joseph were extremely common names at that time. You could have two, perhaps three Jesuses within the same extended family,” as stated by archaeologist Shimon Gibson --- who took part in the Talpiot excavation as the draftsman --- why could there not be two women with a same name in this Talpiot tomb family, ‘Mara’ thus being used to distinguish one from the other? This would be the alternative name, as maintained by Kloner. One could posit yet another possibility if there really is a stroke, used in place of a preposition, between the two names, and, if that is not certain, bear in mind that some experts expressed the view that separate tools were used for the two parts of the inscription. This could be a tell-tale sign indicating that Mariamenou (the Latin transcription of MAPIAMHNOY) was the mother of a very young daughter, perhaps a child and therefore unmarried, named ‘Mara’. As things stand today, such an alternative cannot be dismissed, in fact on the contrary little is needed to stretch the argument a bit further because archaeologists working in Israel know that it is extremely rare to find an ossuary with one person in it. As explained by physical anthropologist Joseph Zias, the rule in Judaism is that “you can get buried with whomever you sleep with... two brothers who may have grown up together, sleeping in the same bed, a husband and wife, a mother with three children who died before the age of five.” The picture that would emerge would be more convincing than claiming that the name was in Greek and the ‘title’ in Aramaic and reinforce the contention of the renowned scripture scholar and Aramaic expert Father Joseph Fitzmyer that no feminine form of the Aramaic words ‘Ma-re/Mar-ya’ (emphatic form with definite article) is known. It would also support the view that much of the controversy had arisen mainly because the inscription was clumsily carved, as on many other ossuaries that have been found, but that it is unilingual. Inscriptions were after all used to assist members of the immediate family to identify the remains and at least thirty-five people or four generations are believed to have made use of this particular tomb. No cause for surprise simply because extended, and not nuclear, families were the ones who normally used ossuaries.

That was just one of the weaknesses detected. The next one was the reference made to the comment by L.Y. Rahmani in his standard reference work *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries: In the Collections of the State of Israel*, 1994, while referring to ossuary No. 705, Yose/Joseph: “The similarity of this ossuary and its inscription with that of Marya on No. 706, both from the same tomb, may indicate that these are the ossuaries of the parents of Yeshua (No.704) and the grandparents of Yehuda (No.702).” What Dr. Rahmani, a respected authority, was saying was that it may have been No.705 Yose/Joseph and not the Josef/Joseph of No.704 Yeshua bar Josef/Jesus, son of Joseph who may have been the father of No. 704, Yeshua/Jesus. Understanding what was implied, Professor Feuerverger said in a footnote, “If this interpretation is correct, the tomb site cannot be that of the New Testament family.” Judging, then, that Dr. Rahmani’s good eyesight enabled him to detect distinctive features not only in the inscriptions but in the manufacture of ossuaries as well, it could inferentially be maintained that: No.705 Yose/Joseph and No. 706 Marya/Maria were a well-to-do couple who could afford a nice family tomb, complete with an outer courtyard, a tomb façade decorated in relief, an antechamber, acrosolia, *kokhim* and ossuaries and who appeared to have died around the same time. In contrast, Jesus’ family was an extremely poor non-Judaean family.

Rahmani's observation was just one point demanding an answer. There were a couple of others that put the documentary's assertions to the test:

- Epigrapher Joseph Naveh wrote Yeshua? bar Josef/Jesus? son of Joseph and Amos Kloner's report said the inscription was "clumsily carved and badly scratched". Graffiti is what even laymen said it looked like. The name 'Jesus' is thus not firmly established.
- Where did Matia/Matthew drop from?
- The same can also be asked of Yehuda bar Yeshua/ Judah, son of Jesus. If Jesus had a son why did he not, when nailed to the cross, ask him to look after Mary? If Judah was the son of Jesus the entire Jesus movement would take a different direction and it would not be James, a cousin and a latecomer on the scene, who would be the first (Jewish Christian) bishop of Jerusalem. Would the Church have developed from him?

And, as Professor James Charlesworth of Princeton pointed out, "After Jesus' crucifixion as a common criminal, some priests wanted to stop (even kill) those claiming Jesus was the Son of God because God had raised him from the dead. They could have produced the bones of Jesus rather easily and thus thwarted those who claimed that God had raised Jesus from the dead." Such an elegant and decorated tomb, just two and a half kilometres away from the Temple, would certainly have been very visible before Vespasian left the Tenth Roman Legion under the command of his son Titus to besiege the city in AD 70. The list of questions that could be raised does not end here, but suffice it to say that anyone attempting to paint an alternative scene in this context would also have to do a lot more homework like carefully going through Rahmani's *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries* and Josephus on account of the names on the Talpiot ossuaries.

There was another ossuary, which although not found in the tomb, could not be overlooked by Feuerverger. This was the famous James ossuary, claimed by the documentary to have been the "missing ossuary". "The dimensions of the missing ossuary seemingly match those of the disputed ossuary of James", he wrote. If this was really the case, he continued, statistical dimension matching could be used to prove that the James ossuary was the one "missing from our tomb." But judging from what Professor Amos Kloner --- who had years earlier dismissed the James ossuary inscription as a forgery in a report to Dr. Gideon Avni, appointed by the Israel Antiquities Authority to investigate the issue --- and Joseph Zias have said there was no missing ossuary. There was a nondescript ossuary that was stored together with similar ones in a courtyard at the Rockefeller Museum, which was standard procedure. Its dimensions did not match those of the James ossuary. As for the antiquities dealer Oded Golan who brought the James ossuary to the attention of the public, Professor Reed said in a review that he was "being charged with part of a larger antiquities fraud ring with a complete workshop full of inscribed artifacts in various states of production, as well as denticular drills, chemicals and soil samples from archaeological sites." Some time after this was written came the news that Marco Samah Shoukri Ghatas, an Egyptian jeweller and stone artist from the Khan al-Khalili Market in Cairo, had been manufacturing objects for Golan for the past fifteen years. Also, roughly around the same time, Discovery Channel – Canada included the James ossuary in "Our picks for the Top 10 science hoaxes of all time."

Feuerverger also wisely noted that "any tampering with the tomb site and other possibilities for fraud" would have to "be weighed and taken into account". Possibilities of fraud aside, both the late Joseph Gath, who had excavated the tomb, and Joseph Zias stated that the tomb had been robbed in antiquity. Zias added that construction workers had repeated the action. For Shimon Gibson, who had surveyed the site, it was difficult to tell who had broken into the tomb because of the soil that had gathered there. In his view it was likely to have occurred from the 19th century onwards, when stone ossuaries became marketable objects. It is common knowledge that since then illicit diggers, antiquities dealers and other go-betweens have been a problem.

Did anyone tamper with the tomb? Skulls *and bones* were indeed found scattered all over the place. The documentary makers said they believed that there was some symbolism behind the triangular shape formed by the three skulls on the floor. The speculation was that the warrior-monks of the Crusader Order of Knights Templar had entered the tomb to perform secret rituals and retrieved the skulls from the ossuaries. The possibility that the skulls fell on the floor due to the blasting activity involved in the construction work above, as a result of which part of the tomb's roof caved in, was not considered. Whatever, our knowledge of the round churches the Templars built in a number of countries in medieval Western Europe (see photos) points to the fact that they used the



The Temple Round of Temple Church, London. It was consecrated in honour of the Virgin Mary by Heraclius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, in 1185. Photographs by the author (1988).

Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, below which eight rock-cut tombs have so far been found, as their role model --- specifically the rotunda of the Anastasis. That fundamental part of the structure the Fatimid Caliph of Egypt al-Hakim was unable to destroy completely in 1009. Why then would the Talpiot tomb interest them, if they ever got there? The strong likelihood is that the 'head' they were accused of worshipping could be nothing more than a copy of the *face* of Jesus, probably based on the Turin Shroud, which may have been in their possession after the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople in the year 1204. One such copy was found in Templecombe, England, a region where they are known to have built a preceptory, and is preserved at the local Anglican Church of Saint Mary.



Round Church. View from the inside.

It is for this reason that the Templars are recorded to have chanted psalm 67, “May God show kindness and bless us, and make his face shine upon us” as part of a “holy face cult” during their special Mass. Grand Master Jacques de Molay’s last journey, from Cyprus to France, was to meet with (Avignon) Pope Clement V who had summoned him to discuss new crusading plans. It was in his interest to boost his men’s morale after Acre fell to the Saracens, and a crusade was the last thing he would be interested in if the brave knights he was leading were heretics. This was in the year 1307, a long time after the Templars had left Jerusalem. The rest of the story, indirectly laying the blame for de Molay’s end at the stake on the shoulders of King Philip the Fair can be found in the Chinon Parchment (dated 1308), released quite recently by the Vatican Secret Archives in a beautiful facsimile edition.



Effigies of knights said to have been associates of the Knights Templar. It is not certain if a crossed-legged knight (right) signified that he took part in a Crusade

But it were the other allegations and insinuations that had led to the uproar after the documentary was aired, arousing academic interest. The cluster of names had spurred Professor James Charlesworth to say that it “should have elicited a ‘Wow!’ What have we found?” In an interview given to the *Jerusalem Post* he complained about “how little archaeologists who are Jews know about the New Testament” because they were told not to read it. Apparently the situation had changed and it was now being taught at Hebrew University and Bar-Ilan University, being recognised as Jewish history. That was a rather sweeping statement, in which it was impossible to include Professors Amos Kloner, Dan Bahat and Shimon Gibson and probably many others. Kloner authored an article “Did a Rolling Stone close Jesus’ Tomb?” many years ago, not to mention the fact that Gibson linked a cave he had excavated to John the Baptist and Bahat produced an important study on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

On the whole a good and respected scholar, Charlesworth organised a symposium on Judaeo-Christian origins with the general subject “Jewish views of the After-Life and Burial Practices in Second Temple Judaism. Evaluating the Talpiot Tomb in Context”. It was attended by 67 scholars in various fields such as biblical and historical studies, archaeology, DNA, patina, carbon dating, statistics, prosopography and onomastics, forensic autopsy, the architecture of tombs, philology and epigraphy. The intention was “to start getting to the bottom of the Talpiot tomb.” Whether from top to bottom or from bottom to top the conclusion reached was that, given the evidence that had been presented, it was not possible to identify the Talpiot tomb with the New Testament family. It was also an occasion to show that Charlesworth had not taken into account that it was not enough for the archaeologists he mentioned to know the New Testament. They would also have to be scholars, particularly if there was no inclination to lean over the biblical text when attempting interpretations. The occasion, described as a small “bombshell” by some, was the surprise appearance of Mrs. Ruth Gath, wife of the Talpiot tomb excavator Joseph Gath. She told the academics gathered there that he had discussed the excavation with her “at the kitchen table”, feeling that the tomb belonged to the

New Testament family, but that he did not make his views public for fear of producing a “global backlash of antisemitism.”

Technical field archaeologist Joseph Gath had reportedly suffered from a trauma, which was understandable. The poor man had seen a terrible manifestation of evil from close, living as a Jewish child in Nazi-occupied Poland, in the very heart of the Holocaust. All that could be said, without disrespecting Mrs. Gath’s memories, was that exception had to be taken to one of her declarations. It looked as though she was trying to impose what she had heard “at the kitchen table” on the academics --- some of them highly-qualified and internationally-known scholars, both Christians and Jews --- by saying that she thanked God “his fears did not come true in light of the discovery of the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth.” Inevitably, the talented and charismatic Simcha, who unfortunately made big mistakes liable to be interpreted as wishful impulses, was suspected of having orchestrated this as one more publicity stunt.

The other archaeologists involved in the excavation were swift in their reactions. Shimon Gibson disputed the claim, saying that Gath had never told him he believed that the tomb was that of Jesus. Amos Kloner, who wrote the excavation report from Gath’s minimal notes 16 years after the find, said the notion that Gath believed he had found Jesus’ tomb was “absolutely not the case.” Mrs. Gath had come to the conference also to receive the “Lifetime Achievement Award” on behalf of her late husband, making it just one more thing that led Joseph Zias, who had been the IAA curator from 1972 to 1997, to react more than the others. He felt that “cynical use” had been made of the “Holocaust story” and Gath, “a man of known integrity, would not have agreed nor accepted such a cynical award.” He also pointed out that despite his many years with the Department of Antiquities Gath had only authored one short article and a few popular articles in the press. Zias did not stop there and took the matter further in an exchange with Jacobovici by saying, “According to Simcha he had excavated 400 (sic) sites. I felt that a bit of bibliography would be useful and asked, for reasons of space, give me ten, if that is time-consuming, then make it 5 peer-reviewed articles which were not penned by Rahmani, Gibson and Kloner with his name added for reasons of courtesy.”

As if this was not enough, more noise was to come. It was outside Jerusalem this time and took the form of a post-Symposium development. A press release announcing that “Princeton Conference Vindicates Associate Producers James Cameron and Simcha Jacobovici on ‘Lost Tomb of Jesus’” was distributed to the media and repeated in some major means of communication. When the participants got home and picked up a newspaper or switched on TV they were surprised to see what was being announced, in fact the reports said they could hardly believe it. The release had its origin in J9 Communications, the organisation that was doing Jacobovici’s PR work, prompting some of the more well-known scholars, both American and Israeli, to react swiftly and issue a counter-statement saying “We wish to protest the misrepresentation of the conference proceedings in the media, and make it clear that the majority of scholars in attendance --- including all of the archaeologists and epigraphers who presented papers related to the tomb --- either reject the identification of the Talpiot tomb as belonging to Jesus’ family or find this claim highly unlikely.”

That was all about Talpiot tomb, No 1. Some twenty metres away lies Talpiot tomb, No. 2. Amos Kloner had entered this tomb and managed to retrieve one of the eight sarcophagi containing the bones of a child but had to abandon the site with the arrival of the *Haredim*, ultra-orthodox Jews who oppose the excavation of tombs and graves. Charlesworth, believing that both tombs belonged to the Jesus clan, but that Jesus was not buried there, told the press that the symposium ended with a motion empowering him to open the tombs and obtain the data necessary to help formulate better questions. For that he would need permission from the Jerusalem municipality and the support of the IAA. This was months ago. So far there is no news, but in the event permission is given and both tombs are opened a sequel to this article will have to be written.

(Louis C. de Figueiredo, August, 2008).

