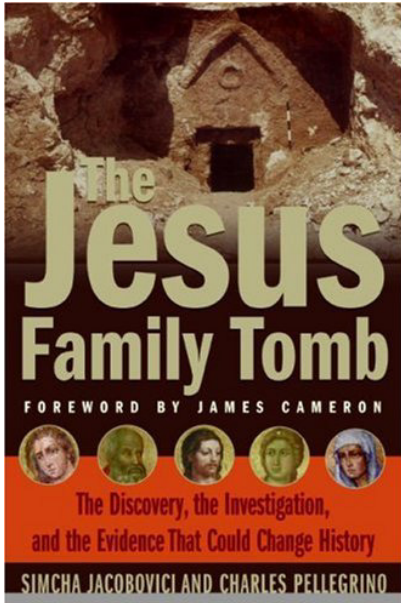


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Jacobovici, Simcha, and Charles Pellegrino

*The Jesus Family Tomb: The Discovery, the Investigation, and the Evidence That Could Change History*

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Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino's *The Jesus Family Tomb* reminds me of another book, Umberto Eco's *Baudolino*. That latter book of fiction takes place in medieval Byzantium and follows the title character's peregrinations to the legendary Prester John's utopian kingdom, which is real in this book. *Baudolino* is not alone but is accompanied by an odd assortment traveling companions, among them a poet, a rabbi, two scientists bickering over the plausibility of vacuum in nature, and a priest. They pass themselves off as the twelve magi, sell fake relics to pay their expenses, and even fabricate a holy grail. It is a forgery they eventually treat as authentic as they are torn apart by deceit and murder.

Unlike *Baudolino*, there is no murder in *The Jesus Family Tomb*, but there is plenty of deceit. And rather than finding a relic, the authors are on a quest to prove that a relic had been discovered in 1980. It was then, inside an underground tomb chamber at Talpiot outside Jerusalem, that Amos Kloner excavated, on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, ten ossuaries, of which five were inscribed with the Aramaic names *Yeshua' bar Yehosef, Marya, Matya, Yose, and Yehuda bar Yeshua'* as well as one inscribed with the Greek *Mariamenou e Mara*. The tantalizing name-combinations were dismissed by archaeologists and biblical scholars as a coincidental cluster of common names, and except for a BBC documentary and a *London Times* story in 1996, the finds were rarely

noted other than by experts. They wound up in dead storage, and their publication lies buried in the pages of *'Atiqot* (Amos Kloner, "A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries in East Talpiot, Jerusalem," *'Atiqot* 29 [1996]: 15–22) and L. H. Rachmani's *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuary Inscriptions* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 1994), works well known to scholars and archaeologists but few others. *The Jesus Family Tomb* takes a much more conspiratorial tone. The authors suggests a cover-up motivated by an Israeli reluctance to upset Christendom, a conservative Christian desire to preserve biblical literalism, and scholarly incompetence: archaeologists did not know what biblical scholars knew, and vice versa, so that no one recognized or acknowledged the discovery's historical significance.

The book presents Jacobovici as accidentally rediscovering the nine (one is since lost) ossuaries and their inscriptions inside the storage facilities of the IAA while filming a documentary on the James-Joseph-Jesus ossuary. Most scholars think the latter, which appeared in 2002, is a forgery, but not Jacobovici, who launches a controlled investigation that *Could Change History*, as the book's subtitle claims. The Talpiot tomb is that of Jesus, who was not resurrected but did marry Mary Magdalene, with whom he sired a son named Jude. Along the way, Jacobovici collects an odd assortment of traveling companions: his co-author Charles Pellegrino, a statistician, a DNA expert, a CSI examiner, and a biblical scholar/archaeologist along with Hollywood-producer James Cameron, who writes the book's foreword and foots the bill. In the end, like those pilgrims in *Baudolino*, these investigators come to be true believers and convince themselves with their own arguments.

The chapters unfold more or less along the lines of the tomb's discovery, rediscovery, and investigation. They sometimes alternate between those written by Jacobovici, who tends to tackle archaeological and historical matters (e.g., chapter 3, titled "Simcha: The Lost Tomb"), and Pellegrino, who tends to cover the scientific experiments (e.g., chapter 4, titled "Charlie: On Probability, Possibility, and the 'Jesus Equation'"). As the book unfolds, layers of information are stacked atop each other so that the mounting evidence is deemed "virtually irrefutable" in the foreword (xi). However, if the evidence is not viewed vertically as stacked up but horizontally as chain links, with each link having to bear the weight of the thesis, then the book remains utterly unconvincing. There are too many ifs.

The argument has five key links, which the book treats in this sequence: (1) the cluster of names fits Jesus' family; (2) the Greek inscription *Mariamenou e Mara* is Mary Magdalene; (3) DNA evidence from Jesus and *Mariamenou's* ossuary shows they were not siblings—hence married; (4) a statistical analysis concludes that the odds are 600 to 1

for this being Jesus' tomb; (5) finally, a purported patina match of the James-Joseph-Jesus ossuary, allegedly once inside the Talpiot tomb, makes the case a "statistical slam dunk."

But other than the first, each link in the chain is questionable if not dubious. François Bovon's careful and serious work on the fourth-century C.E. Acts of Philip is high-jacked to say that the first-century C.E. Mary Magdalene was called, in Greek, Mariamne—this in spite of the fact that Bovon's important article clearly states: "I am not interested here in the reconstruction of the historical figure of Mary Magdalene, but in her portrayal in literary texts, particularly in the Acts of Philip" ("Mary Magdalene in the Acts of Philip," in *Which Mary: The Marys of Early Christian Tradition* [ed. F. Stanley Jones; SBLSymS 19; Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2002], 80). Indeed, no scholar has ever suggested to have found evidence that she was called Mariamne in the first century. *The Jesus Family Tomb* deceives both its reader and Bovon, who has since made his position clear in no uncertain terms: "the reconstructions of Jesus' marriage with Mary Magdalene and the birth of a child belong for me to science fiction." The authors try to make the claim more plausible by asserting that Magdala was a cosmopolitan Greek-speaking Galilean city, a description no archaeologist familiar with Galilee takes seriously.

The DNA analysis is both scientifically and morally questionable. Tiny samples of mitochondrial DNA were scraped off Jesus and Mariamne's ossuaries and—without IAA permission and hence illegally—shipped to a Canadian lab, which concluded that the two samples were not maternally related. But the reader is again deceived and is not told that this *Yeshua* and *Mariamne* could have had the same father with different mothers or could be paternally related as cousins, aunts-uncle, grandparents, or father-daughter. They could even be close family friends. Two tiny flecks with human remains, encrusted in an ossuary for two millennia and removed under suspicious conditions, are insufficient for the kind of repeated testing of sufficiently sized samples to hold up to peer review. Never mind that a negative (they do not share the same mother) is used to support a positive (they were married). And no mention that airing this "experiment" only further antagonizes the Jewish religious authorities against Israeli archaeologists, who are perennially stuck finding a reasonable balance between scientific inquiry and religious sensitivities when it comes to Jewish bodily remains.

The use of statistics borders on the absurd. Technically, the math is certainly correct, but the data provided is skewed. Underlying the calculation is the assumption that this is a nuclear family tomb from one generation, but the reality is that all Second Temple tombs around Jerusalem are intergenerational and contained extended families, perhaps even including visitors from abroad (the Greek *Mariamne*?). The statistics work only if one assumes that Jesus was born to one Mary (the Aramaic *Marya*) and married another (the Greek *Mariamne*). How many Jesuses were there with a father named Joseph? Based on

these name's occurrences on published ossuaries (9% and 14%, respectively), there were probably close to four hundred in the first century C.E. (based on 40,000 males having died in Jerusalem when ossuaries were in use). How many of those had any combination of two female relatives named Mary (and called *Marya* and *Mariamne*), whether a combination of sisters (in one case, granting the DNA test, a half-sister), sister-in-laws, mothers, grandmothers, daughters, grand-daughters, aunts, great-aunts, or even family friends? Since one fifth of all women were called some form of Mary, there were surely dozens of Jesuses who died in the first century C.E. to whom this tomb could apply. Why should this be Jesus of Nazareth, is the pressing question.

The inclusion of the James ossuary in the equation increases the probability but strains credulity. A test on the patina from the James and Jesus ossuaries, tracing the elements with a Scanning Electron Microscope/EDS is said to match. But that kind of test tells us much more about the composition, care, and storage of the ossuaries than the micro-climate of a single cave. The authors' appeal to the James ossuary deceives the reader. We are told that its owner, Oded Golan, is on trial for forging the inscription. This is only partially true. He is in fact charged with being 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. He is being prosecuted by the IAA, not persecuted.

Alongside the essential argument for Jesus' family tomb, the book makes several excursions that are occasionally necessary but usually gratuitous. Fanciful speculation on the "mysterious" chevron symbol above the tomb's entrance is given much space and even tied to Knights Templar. But the design is common on Jewish ossuary lids, and similar faux-gables appear on tomb facades; the faux-gabled roof and circular *patera* are also common in Roman domestic shrines (*lararia*). The chevron symbol is indeed interesting, but only insofar as it shows Jewish adaptation of Roman architectural or ornamental themes. Contrary to almost universal scholarly consensus against the existence of pre-Constantian crosses, the authors argue that x-marks on a few ossuaries are crosses and that the so-called "cross" at Herculaneum is a Christian mark. They further accept the now outdated Franciscan theory of Jewish-Christians burials at Dominus Flevit in Jerusalem and even argue to have found Peter's ossuary (with the inscription *Simon bar Jonah*). The fleeing naked youth of Mark 14 is identified with Jesus' son Judah, whose inscription appears on another of the Talpiot ossuaries. Many of the scattered ideas mimic aspects of the *Da Vinci Code* and capitalize on the popular notion that Jesus was married and bore a son. Paradoxically, while the *Da Vinci Code* relied on conspiratorial silence and a late tradition that Mary Magdalene and Jesus' son fled to France, *The Jesus Family Tomb* both plays to the *Da Vinci Code* audience while at the same time gutting its basic proposition, Mary's flight to France.

The treatment of textual, especially biblical, evidence is inconsistent—whatever fits the thesis is accepted, what does not, rejected. Biblical literalists will refute the thesis since it directly contradicts the Gospels' account of the resurrection as well as Paul's firm commitment to the bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15). Others, more skeptical of the miraculous in the Gospels, who think that those who knew what happened to the body of Jesus did not care and that those who cared did not know, will find the authors' pitch for a publicly visible family tomb of Jesus hard to accept. It undermines so many different early Christian texts, not the least of which are Paul's letters. He knew Jerusalem and had many disputes with the Jerusalem church, but he did not have the faintest clue about this tomb. His and other early Christian's silence on a matter that would gut their central theological claim is inconceivable.

Over the last few decades serious archaeologists working in Galilee and Jerusalem have made enormous strides in understanding the context in which Jesus lived and the religious, social, economic, and political aspects of village and urban life. And much of their work has had to fight against the now-outdated image of biblical archaeologist setting out to dig in order to prove the Bible true. *The Jesus Family Tomb* is, in a way, this kind of biblical archaeology at its worst, even though it is antibiblical. The authors have an agenda and doggedly stick to it in spite of the evidence.

Can we prove that this is not the family tomb of Jesus? No. A historian or archaeologist has little chance of absolutely disproving that possibility. Can we prove that it is? No. It is *possible* that the tomb of Jesus has been found, but this book's attempt to make the case is an absolute failure. It is highly unlikely that this is Jesus' family tomb, unless one is inclined to follow Umberto Eco's Baudolino, who at one point is reminded of Tertullian's famous quote, *Credo quia impossibile* ("I believe because it is impossible").