James H. Charlesworth, ed.

The Tomb of Jesus and His Family? Exploring Ancient Jewish Tombs Near Jerusalem’s Walls


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This volume contains twenty-six papers (plus an introduction and conclusion by the editor) presented at a conference that was held Jerusalem in January 2008 on “Jewish Views of the After Life and Burial Practices in Second Temple Judaism: Evaluating the Talpiot Tomb in Context.” Although most of the papers focus on some aspect of the Talpiyot (or Talpiot) tomb and its ossuaries and/or the “James ossuary,” they are written by scholars with widely varying perspectives and fields of expertise, including archaeology, epigraphy and paleography, theology, social history, biology, statistics, New Testament, rabbinics, religious studies, geology, women’s studies, and mathematics.

For those who may not remember, in March 2007 the Discovery Channel broadcast a documentary by Simcha Jacobovici in which he claimed that the lost tomb of Jesus and his family had been discovered in Jerusalem (also published in a related book). This was none other than the Talpiyot tomb (so-called after the Jerusalem neighborhood in which it is located), which was excavated by archaeologists in 1980 after it was discovered during construction work. A final report on the Talpiyot tomb excavation was published in ‘Atiqot in 1996. The tomb contained ten ossuaries, six of them inscribed (five in Aramaic and one in Greek), while the remaining four are plain (one is now missing). Archaeologists noted that some of the names in the inscriptions (e.g., Yeshua son of
Yehoseph; Marya; Mariam/Mariame; Yoseh [apparently a diminutive of Yehosef] recall individuals associated with Jesus in the New Testament accounts but considered this a coincidence, as these were common names among the Jewish population at the time. However, in the documentary Jacobovici claimed that the inscriptions identify this as the tomb of Jesus and his family, marshalling an array of supporting evidence that includes statistical and DNA analyses. The implications of this claim are that Jesus was not resurrected (as his physical remains were placed in an ossuary), that he was married to Mary Magdalene (who supposedly is named in one of the inscriptions), and that he had a son named Judah (as one of the ossuaries is inscribed Yehudah bar Yeshua). Jacobovici also has attempted to prove that an adjacent, unexcavated tomb (the Patio tomb) contains the remains of followers of Jesus and that the James ossuary (which has no archaeological provenience but surfaced in a private collection) is the tenth (now missing) ossuary from the Talpiyot tomb.

The conference from which these papers are derived was held in the aftermath of the airing of the documentary. As a result, everyone seems to have a dog in this fight. Not only do the papers reflect a lack of consensus about the tomb and ossuaries, but often the claims made in one paper are contradicted by those in another. The following are some examples.

C. Cohen-Matlofsky: Jesus was married, had a child, and was buried in an ossuary in a rock-cut tomb outside Jerusalem’s walls (although not necessarily the Talpiyot tomb). Mary Magdalene could have been descended from Galilean, Greek-speaking pagans who were converted to Judaism by the Hasmoneans. Jesus’s father Joseph was not included in the Jerusalem family tomb because he could not be buried with his adulteress wife Mary.

E. Keynan: The Talpiyot tomb, into which Jesus’s body was laid, could have been a “court tomb” belonging to the Sanhedrin. Mary Magdalene was a gentile who converted to Judaism while pregnant with Jesus.

L. M. McDonald: There is no convincing evidence that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene or anyone else, that he fathered a child named Judah, or that his earliest followers misplaced the location of his tomb.

M. Aviam: When Galilean Jews died while on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, their remains generally were brought home for burial.

R. Hachlili: If Jesus and his mother Mary had been buried in an ossuary in a Jerusalem tomb, the names inscribed on the ossuaries would have been Yeshua or Yeshua of Nazareth, and Maryam/Mariah mother of Yeshua of Nazareth. Because Mary Magdalene
was not a family member, she would not necessarily have been buried in a family tomb belonging to Jesus. The Talpiyot tomb is a Jewish family tomb “with no connection to the historical Jesus family” (143).

S. Pfann: The ossuary from the Talpiyot tomb is not the only one from the Jerusalem necropolis inscribed with the name Jesus son of Joseph, and, statistically, one in every ten tombs in the necropolis would contain the remains of a male with this name (whether indicated by an inscribed ossuary or not). The claim that Jesus was married and fathered a child is unsupported by our earliest sources. Ossuaries often contained the remains of more than one individual, and the fact that two individuals were named on the side of an ossuary does not limit the remains inside to only those two individuals. The correct reading of the inscription on the ossuary attributed by Jacobovici to Mary Magdalene indicates that it contained the remains of two individuals named Mariame and Mara.

M. Elliott and K. Kilty: The inscription “Jesus son of Joseph” is rare on ossuaries, and no tomb comparable in size to the Talpiyot tomb contains a group of names so close to what we would expect of a Jesus family tomb. If Yoseh is a variant of the name Joseph, the probability that this is the family tomb of Jesus is 3 percent.

E. Keynan: The names in four of the inscriptions are not common in the Second Temple period, and Yoseh is extremely rare.

C. Fuchs: The various analyses of the names on the ossuaries from the Talpiyot tomb unanimously conclude that this cluster of names is not statistically significant. They also agree that the claim that this is the family tomb of Jesus is not even ‘more likely than not,’ which is the standard of proof required in the civil law” (392). This is a lesser standard of proof than “beyond reasonable doubt,” which is required in criminal law and is sometimes considered comparable to reaching statistical significance. Most of the statistical analyses conclude that there is only a slim probability that this is the family tomb of Jesus.

M. Spigelman: The claim that ancient mitochondrial DNA from one of the inscribed ossuaries belongs to two individuals who may have been husband and wife does “not in any way support the theory that this could be the DNA of Jesus and Mary Magdalene” (231). In fact, the sampling process appears to have left open the possibility of contemporary contamination, and we have no idea what material was sampled. Furthermore, there could have been other contamination, as we do not know how many people looked inside the ossuary since the burial (not only archaeologists but ancient grave robbers). In fact, it is unclear if the mitochondrial DNA found belongs to a human or a rodent.
C. Pellegrino: Analyses indicate that the elements in the patina on the walls of the Talpiyot tomb are consistent with the patina on the James ossuary.

A. Rosenfeld et al.: The patina inside the letters incised on the ossuary appears to have accreted gradually, rather than being artificially deposited, and it has “the same geochemical fingerprints” as the patina in the Talpiyot tomb and its ossuaries. (The claim that the patina on the James ossuary matches the patina in the Talpiyot tomb received renewed media coverage recently [Easter 2015], when A. Shimron, an Israeli geologist, announced the results of his own analyses [still unpublished]. Even if these results are correct, it is not clear to me how other tombs in the vicinity could be ruled out as possible matches without testing them all).

A. DeConick: Mary Magdalene was a single woman who was one of Jesus’s disciples and a prominent public leader in his movement. When the apostolic church emerged as the orthodox tradition by the fourth century, Western theologians transformed the foundational stories about Mary, casting her as a prostitute, while Eastern traditions tended to portray her as the Virgin Mother.

J. Schaberg: The central role of Mary Magdalene in the canonical Gospels suggests that some of Jesus’s followers could have honored her as Mara (“master”), in which case the ossuary with the inscription that can be read as “Mary the Master” might contain her remains.

J. Price: The correct reading of the inscription on the ossuary supposedly associated with Mary Magdalene “does not allow the name Mariamene/Mariamne, and thus there is no epigraphical or onomastic evidence to ascribe it to Mary Magdalene” (307). Furthermore, the fact that this is the only Greek inscription in the tomb tells us nothing about the individual named, as “[t]he language of an epitaph does not necessarily reflect the mother tongue or even linguistic knowledge of the deceased” (307).

While the quality of the papers varies as much as the opinions expressed in them, several papers stand out. C. Rollston provides an excellent, critical analysis of the names on the ossuaries from the Talpiyot tomb. He notes that only two of the names have patronymics, and there is a complete absence of matronymics, references to marital status, and fraternal or sororal relationships, all of which makes it impossible to ascertain the precise relationships of the individuals named in the inscriptions. Rollston concludes, “Based on the dearth of epigraphic evidence, it is simply not possible to make assumptions about the relationships of those buried therein, and it is certainly not tenable to suggest that the data are sufficient to posit that this is the family tomb of Jesus of Nazareth” (221).
The most important paper in the volume is by A. Kloner and S. Gibson, both archaeologists who were involved in the excavation of the Talpiyot tomb (which was published by Kloner). They set the record straight regarding the events surrounding the tomb’s excavation and provide a clear and detailed description of its contents (including the fact that the tenth [missing] ossuary was plain and therefore cannot be the “James ossuary”). Kloner and Gibson conclude that “there is nothing to commend the Talpiot tomb as the family tomb of Jesus” (51). In fact, all of the archaeologists who spoke at the Jerusalem conference rejected the identification of the Talpiyot tomb as the tomb of Jesus and his family.

Overall, the volume is well-edited, but there are a few errors. For example, contrary to Cohen-Matlofsky’s claim, I have never questioned “the familial character of the Jerusalem rock-cut tombs” (79); see Magness, “Ossuaries and the Burials of Jesus and James,” JBL 124 (2005): 121–54 (123); Magness, Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 145. Spigelman’s otherwise excellent paper incorrectly refers to Kloner as “deceased” (232), whom he apparently confused with Joseph Gat, the tomb’s original excavator.

Full disclosure: I attended the Jerusalem conference and presented a paper there but declined the invitation to contribute to this volume. These published papers likely will stimulate the ongoing controversies surrounding the Talpiyot tomb and the James ossuary, rather than laying them to rest.