

## **“The Lost Tomb of Jesus”: A Perfect Storm?**

Do we have “A Perfect Storm?” A “perfect storm,” as you might recall from the film a few years back, takes place when numerous rare occurrences happen simultaneously to produce a massive, otherwise impossible event. This is what we are told has happened in the case of a tomb uncovered over 25 years ago. While there are alternative and usually more likely explanations for each piece of evidence offered to us, we are asked to believe that in every case an unlikely scenario has taken place, and we therefore have evidence for the body of Jesus still in a tomb, and still more for his wife and a child.

So far, all that is accessible to any researcher is what the filmmakers have provided. The lack of availability of more material prevents detailed analysis. Much of what will be discussed here is taken from mass-media formats. Unfortunately, that is all anyone has been given thus far. Please keep in mind, therefore, that any analysis to this point, including the present one, is based only on hearsay and is subject to revision. It seemed best, however, given the massive media interest in the story, to offer some reaction before the airing of the show on March 4, so that pastors can share with their congregations some things that they should watch for as they see this story unfold.

Thanks to the Filmmakers

Before we offer some observations, it should be stated up front that the manner of presentation is, in some ways, more helpful than these types of things often are. The Discovery Channel website does provide original source material, such as the original archeological drawings and copies of the initial publication of the finds in scholarly literature. This is far beyond what is offered, for example, in *The Davinci Code*, which, after all, is only fiction, though many take it to be fact. Furthermore, the film makers seem to be insistent that they are not attempting to undermine Christianity. This, again, is in contrast to similar popular books and shows of recent years. Third, they offer alternative explanations and cite respected scholars who hold other views. They are, therefore, honest that we have to accept a “perfect storm” scenario for this to actually be the “Jesus Family Tomb.” But has a perfect storm happened?

Background: Burial Practice in the First Century

Ancient Near Eastern culture typically practiced secondary burial, that is, that a corpse was either buried or laid out on a shelf in a burial chamber until the flesh had decayed away. The bones were then collected in another place in the same tomb, often the space directly underneath the shelf where the body had been laid. During the OT period, this location was frequently simply a small cavity. The phrase “gathered to his fathers” (2 Kings 22:20) was actually quite a literal statement, since the bones of family members would have been, if possible, deposited in the same place, without being placed in a container of any kind.

Contemporary Hellenistic practice differed. Rather than secondary burial, bodies were placed into wooden boxes or limestone sarcophagi (which literally “ate the flesh”). Family tombs would have been held up to a dozen of these boxes, each in separate niche.

By the first century Jewish practice had adopted somewhat the Hellenistic model. Some tombs continued the practice of previous generations, with the shelf for the decaying body and a space, occasionally niches, for the bones. This appears to be the layout of the (still undiscovered)

tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, which is described in the New Testament gospels as the place where Jesus' body was laid. In some cases, however, especially in the area around Jerusalem, ossuaries came to be employed for the secondary burial. Like sarcophagi, these were made of limestone, but were smaller because they held only the bones. These would be placed in the niches, which otherwise would have held the fleshless bones. Only about 20% of the ossuaries that archeologists have recovered from the first century have any identifying inscriptions. The "Jesus" and his "family" ossuaries, however, do have names inscribed on six of the eight boxes. Inscriptions, if present, would typically give only minimal information, such as a name, family relation, place of birth, or age.

The tomb in question conforms to this blended practice of secondary burial in ossuaries placed into individual niches. The architecture of the tomb gives some immediate clues about those interred there. For example, this tomb conforms to the typical monument tomb of first century Jerusalem. Its owners were unquestionably of high status and wealthy. Notably, this tomb was originally excavated in 1980, and scholarly archeological reports were published in the mid-1980s. In those reports, no claim was made regarding a connection to Jesus of Nazareth. Nor have any new archeological findings come to light; the filmmakers are asking us to accept the way that they piece the story together.

Now we turn to some issues regarding the "The Lost Tomb of Jesus."

## 1. Mary Magdelene

A great deal turns on the identification of "Mariamene e Mara." This box is unique in the group. It is one of three ossuaries with elaborate carvings made up of decorative borders and large rosettes. One of those with elaborate carvings is inscribed "Judah, son of Jesus" and one has no identifying inscription. However, the inscription "Mariamene e Mara," unlike the others in this find, is written in Greek.

For the name "Mariamene e Mara" the filmmakers suggest the translation "Mary, known as the Master." "Master" is given as a translation of the Aramaic word "Mara." This is dubious, however, since the "e" in the inscription between "Mariamene" and "Mara" would have to be understood as the Greek word "the," with "Mara" an Aramaic title. Far more likely is the conclusion of the original archeologist, that the "e" represents a common abbreviation for the Greek word "and" or "also," and that "Mara" is another spelling for Martha. The translation would therefore be entirely from Greek and would read, "Mary, also called Martha." Significantly, a previously known ossuary inscription in Greek is cited by the original archeologist as a parallel: "Alexa, also called Martha." The reconstruction "Mary, also called Martha" is therefore far more likely. Furthermore, both Mary/Miriam and Martha are two of the most common female names of the period, making it more unlikely that "Master" is intended rather than a personal name.

However, the filmmakers claim that Mariamene is not a common name, and in fact that it was the specific name of Mary Magdelene. Keep in mind that "Magdala" or "Magdalene" is found nowhere on the box. So where does it come from? According to NYTimes.com (2/27/07), Francois Bovon, professor at Harvard, has "determined from the "Acts of Phillip" that Mariamene is Mary Magdalene's real name." Note, however, that the "Acts of Philip" is a fourth or fifth century composition, and that the earliest purported use of this name for Mary Magdelene apparently comes from a third century writing (though I could not locate a reference, mentioned

in Time.com 2/26/07). The link to Mary Magdelene, is quite dubious, even though on Sunday evening you will see an actress playing Mary Magdelene as Jesus' wife.

## 2. DNA Evidence

Like the National Geographic Channel's "Gospel of Judas" show last year, modern science is brought in to remove, as it were, the shrouds of uncertainty. In that show, radio-carbon dating verified that the manuscript of Judas could be dated to the early fourth century. This sounds impressive, but paleographers (scholars who date ancient texts using the material, shapes of letters, and format of the manuscript) had already given a date of around 300 for the manuscript. The radio-carbon dating looked impressive, but actually added nothing. In this "Lost Tomb of Jesus" segment it appears that we will be in for much of the same trumpeting of "science." DNA analysis, which we all "know" to be decisive in legal cases, gives scientific "proof" for some arguments. Here, however, DNA testing has only been done on residual remains in the "Yeshua, son of Joseph" box and the "Mariamene e Mara" box, apparently because residual remains could only be recovered from these two ossuaries. (The practice in Israel is to rebury remains from archeological digs, out of respect for religious traditions, so any remains found in 1980 have long been reburied). Because their DNA proves that they do not share maternal DNA, the filmmakers argue that they could have been a "couple." While this is possible, it is also possible that "Mariamene e Mara" could have been a "partner" of any of the other males in the tomb (including those which are unidentified). The lack of other remains also precludes any analysis of a relationship between "Jesus, son of Joseph" and any others in the tomb. Is "Judah son of Jesus" the biological son of the Jesus in the tomb? If so, is he by Mariamene, or the Mary who is buried there, or by someone else? Is the "Jesus son of Joseph" the son of the Joseph buried in this tomb, or the son of another Joseph? And how is anyone else in the tomb related to Jesus? Where does "Matthew" fit in? According my colleague, Dr. Robert Weise, who, in addition to being a theologian has a PhD in medicine and is an expert in biology, "Without a complete family genetic history as 'baseline,' the probability that these are relatives of Jesus or in fact the bones of Jesus are not likely to be proven, in spite of the 'circumstantial evidence.'"

There are a few other critical unknowns. The tomb has six niches. One of these held one ossuary, three held two ossuaries, and one niche held one ossuary. Unfortunately, the original location of each ossuary cannot be determined from the available material. For example, were the "Jesus," "Mariamene e Mara," and "Yehuda bar Yeshua" ossuaries all in one niche, and if so, does this indicate a nuclear family? Or were the women placed in one niche? All we have so far are bits and pieces of the information.

## 3. Names and Statistics

The names found on the ossuaries are, in no particular order, Jesus, son of Joseph; Maria (Mary); Matthew; Joseph; Judah, son of Jesus; and the above-discussed Mariamene e Mara. All are biblical names, and none minor figures, of course. Most significantly, the fact that a Joseph, a Jesus, son of Joseph, and a Judah son of Jesus all appear in the same tomb makes it fairly conclusive that we have a burial of three generations of a family. The inscription "Jesus, son of Joseph" certainly raises some eyebrows, but do we have here the Jesus of the New Testament?

There can be no decisive proof one way or the other. In dealing with historical occurrences, someone makes an interpretation of the available data, and then others evaluate that claim. To take another example, did Brutus really murder Julius Caesar on the Ides of March? There is no video, no newspaper accounts, no courtroom eyewitness testimony to “prove” the “fact.” Scholars look at the relevant material and come to a conclusion. And even if there were courtroom testimony and a verdict, the “factualness” of the events may still not be certain, as recent celebrity murder and paternity cases demonstrate. So, just as no one will ever be able to “prove” the resurrection of Jesus, so no one will ever be able to “prove” that Jesus’ remains are in a box. Just as many people today deny the Holocaust, or think that the CIA flew the airplanes into the World Trade Center, and no “evidence” will convince them otherwise. What we can assess, though, is how likely it is that events have taken place as someone describes them.

There are two major difficulties with associating this tomb with the Jesus of the New Testament. First, the tomb clearly belonged to a wealthy family. Its architectural style matches that of tombs of other wealthy families from the period. It seems highly unlikely that a carpenter from Nazareth, or his son, made it big in Jerusalem, especially when the available evidence shows that the first followers of Jesus were not accepted within the power circles in Jerusalem, and in fact the book of Acts portrays them as being persecuted and driven out. It seems impossible that Jesus’ family could have accumulated wealth in such a situation. While the New Testament does record Jesus being placed in the tomb of a wealthy individual (Joseph of Arimathea), the filmmakers explicitly reject this tomb as the tomb of Jesus (see the quotation from their website under “Theological Issues” below). Second, the fact that the burial is in Jerusalem is significant. While James, brother of Jesus (Gal. 1:19; Acts 15) is clearly associated with Jerusalem, others are not. And the connection between James and this tomb is still open to question.

The critical argument that the names cannot refer to anyone but Jesus of Nazareth and his family turns out to be based upon statistics. I am not a statistician, so I cannot assess the procedure that led to the conclusion that there are 600 to 1 odds that this ossuary contains the remains of Jesus of Nazareth (as described on [discoverychannel.com](http://discoverychannel.com) and various articles). The fact is that all the names were extremely common in Jesus’ day. An appendix at the end of this document is a note by another colleague, Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs, which cites some recent research on the frequency of names like Joseph, Mary and, Judah. You can find numerous examples throughout both the Old and New Testaments, most famously the Marys of the resurrection narrative (see Mark 16:1, and Mary, Jesus’ mother, is not even mentioned there). Another example is the man released instead of Jesus at his trial before Pilate, who almost certainly was called “Jesus Barabbas” (see Matt. 27:17 NRSV). Director James Cameron acknowledges this, claiming “If you found a John, a Paul and a George, you’re not going to leap to any conclusions... unless you found a Ringo.” (Time.com 2/26/06) The question is, do we have a “Ringo” in Mariamene? This is unlikely, given what we discussed above. Furthermore, the names given in the New Testament for other family members of Jesus (James, Joseph, Simon, Judas – not *that* Judas) are absent from this tomb. The question that must be answered is whether this “evidence,” based on scientific procedure, can outweigh other “evidence,” such as the wealth of the family that owned the tomb, and the tomb’s location in Jerusalem, and the fact that we do not know the niche locations of the ossuaries.

#### 4. Science, Scholarship, and the Rush to Mass Media

No doubt you recall last year's *Gospel of Judas*. The documentary aired on the National Geographic Channel on Palm Sunday, and books and translations were available on the following day. Just before Christians celebrated the events of that Thursday, Friday, and Sunday, we were told that there was an alternative version of the story, that Jesus actually asked Judas to betray him, and that Judas was the hero of this version. Unfortunately, the TV show, books and translations appeared before the original text (in Coptic) was made available to the larger scholarly community. It now appears that the initial impressions were incorrect. A special discussion session was held at the national Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Washington, D.C. in November, 2006. The presentations and discussions there brought to light the wide range of interpretations and complete lack of consensus on the Gospel of Judas. For example, one Coptic and Gospel of Thomas scholar, April DeConick, has written:

My examination of the Coptic transcription has led me to think that certain translational errors and one mistaken reconstruction of a Coptic line led the team to the erroneous conclusion that Judas is a saint destined to join the holy generation of the Gnostics. The result is that certain claims have been made by National Geographic that the *Gospel of Judas* says things it just does NOT say: Judas is the perfect enlightened Gnostic; Judas ascends to the holy generation; Jesus wants Judas to betray him; Jesus wants to escape the material world; Judas performs a righteous act, serving Jesus by "betraying" him; Judas will be able to enter the divine realm as symbolized by his vision of the great house; as the thirteenth, Judas surpasses the twelve disciple, and is lucky and blessed by this number. ([http://forbiddengospels.blogspot.com/2007\\_01\\_01\\_archive.html](http://forbiddengospels.blogspot.com/2007_01_01_archive.html))

Whatever the eventual consensus, it is clear that what was initially – and quite dramatically – presented about the Gospel of Judas not completely correct, and perhaps entirely wrong. However, such slow, painstaking research does not make headlines. CNN is not running any stories these days called "Gospel of Judas Misinterpreted?"

A second example of this is the "James Ossuary," which made headlines in 2002. It was reported that an ossuary bearing the inscription "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus" had been recovered. The location and circumstances of its find were unavailable, and questions of its authenticity were raised immediately. This find, however, was portrayed as one which "proved" the existence of Jesus, for here was the burial box of his brother (who is mentioned in the NT). Shortly, however, questions were raised regarding both the date of the inscription and the person who "found" the box. It appears that the ossuary itself is ancient, but that the inscription – or part of it – was not. The matter is still open to question, and the individual who "found" the ossuary is now on trial in Israel for antiquities fraud (this is not the only example of his work, apparently). But there is little question that what was once hailed as a great discovery – and "proof" of the "truth" of the Bible – was false.

Surprisingly, the filmmakers make a connection between the James ossuary and this recent find, claiming that James' ossuary was originally found in this same tomb, and later removed or stolen. The fraudulent activity, according to the filmmakers, was the adding of "brother of Jesus" to the inscription, but the rest of it was, in their opinion, authentic. Such claims are widely questioned, to say the least. In any case, when dealing with new evidence, particularly regarding issues that are quite controversial, patience and peer review are called for. Such is hardly possible, however, when a TV show is aired that depicts Mary Magdalene placing her dead husband Jesus into a tomb – and he doesn't come out of it. Be prepared to be offended

if you watch the show. If you want you children to watch it, which may not be advisable, you will certainly want to prepare them for such depictions in advance.

It seems that again in this case conclusions are being presented before thorough peer review has taken place. This first round of announcements to a larger audience was in a press conference, and shortly a television broadcast will take place. Only a handful of scholars have been given parts of the research, and nothing has been laid out in an organized, thorough manner. Troublingly, the research is quite obviously incomplete. Even the filmmakers acknowledge this. NYTimes.com (2/27/07), quotes Simcha Jacobovici, who is described as “the documentary’s director and its driving force,” as follows: “We’re not scientists. At the end of the day we can’t wait till every ossuary is tested for DNA,” he said. “We took the story that far. At some point you have to say, ‘I’ve done my job as a journalist.’”

## Theological Issues

The Discovery Channel website has a section that discusses “Theological Considerations.” On this page they claim that this “discovery” does not dismantle Christian claims for the resurrection. To be honest, I fail to follow the logic of how this can be so, but I will quote the entire section, so that I do not distort what they say:

In the Gospel of Matthew (28:12) it states that a rumor was circulating in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion. This story holds that Jesus’ body was moved by his disciples from the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, where he was temporarily buried. Ostensibly, his remains were taken to a permanent family tomb. Though Matthew calls this rumor a lie circulated by the high priests, it appears in his Gospel as one of the stories surrounding Jesus’ disappearance from the initial tomb where he was buried. Even if Jesus’ body was moved from one tomb to another, however, that does not mean that he could not have been resurrected from the second tomb. Belief in the resurrection is based not on which tomb he was buried in, but on alleged sightings of Jesus that occurred after his burial and documented in the Gospels.

So, Jesus may have been raised from the “second tomb” (which is not mentioned in any account). But his remains were in the box, and apparently reburied a few years ago. This would seem to me to rule out the resurrection.

This ruling out of the resurrection seems to be confirmed by the manner in which they describe the ascension. According to the website, “If Jesus’ mortal remains have been found, this would contradict the idea of a physical ascension but not the idea of a spiritual ascension. The latter is consistent with Christian theology.” The last sentence is simply false; such a claim would not be consistent with orthodox, creedal Christianity. Such an argument seems to understand the event on that Sunday morning not as a “resurrection,” where Jesus is raised to a new, perfect bodily existence, but as a “resuscitation,” so that Jesus is the same as he was before, just not dead. This would be the same what Jesus did for Jairus’ daughter, the widow’s son, and Lazarus, but the New Testament describes Jesus resurrection – and our future resurrection on the last day – as something other than mere resuscitation. As you watch the program on Sunday evening, and continue to read and ponder this news, carefully filter what you hear labeled as “Christian theology” or “Biblical witness,” for what is presented will often not be either.

## A Perfect Storm?

To summarize the difficulties of the new interpretation of this tomb, which was discovered in 1980, here is what must be accepted in order for this tomb to be the “Lost Tomb of Jesus”:

IF Some of the most common names among first century residents of Judea can only apply to Jesus of Nazareth and a few (but by no means all) of his family members mentioned in the NT;

AND IF the Mary in the tomb is Jesus’ mother and not his wife, sister, or other relative;

AND IF Jesus and his family relocated to Jerusalem, and lived there for at least three generations;

AND IF this family came into a great deal of money in Jerusalem;

AND IF they were prominent enough, while Christians were being driven from Jerusalem, to build an elaborate and expensive tomb in a prime location;

THEN this could be the “Jesus Family Tomb.”

Furthermore,

IF Mara, though written in Greek is an Aramaic title, not (as in other inscriptions) a Greek name;

AND IF Mariamene is a name that can only apply to Mary Magdelene, even though there is no evidence that she is called that until at least 150 years after Jesus;

AND IF Mariamene could only have been Jesus’ wife, not that of the other men in the tomb like Joseph or Matthew

THEN Jesus of Nazareth might have been married to Mary Magdelene and they had a child

A Perfect Storm? Decide for yourself.

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Appendix: Note from Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs regarding the frequency of these names in Jesus’ day

Richard Bauckham's new book, "Jesus the the Eyewitness" (Eerdmans, 2006) cites the work of Israeli scholar Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity: Part I: Palestine 330 BCE--200 BCE*, (TSAJ 91; Tuebingen: Mohr, 2002). Bauckham reports that Ilan's work culled names from Josephus, NT, texts from Judean desert and Masada, ossuary inscriptions from Jerusalem, and Tannaitic rabbinic materials (68). He continues to say (p. 68), that "... we know the names of as many as three thousand Palestinian Jews who lives during the five centuries covered by Ilan's "Lexicon." Bauckham reports that "the practices of name-giving seem to have remained fairly constant over this period" and "a large proportion of the data actually comes from the first century CE and early second century (to 135 CE)." (all on p. 68) Bauckham adjusts her research a bit, but on page 70 he gives Ilan's and his lists of the six most common male names. Joseph is second in both, Judah is third and fourth respectively, Joshua is sixth on both. (p. 70) The chapter is called "Palestinian Jewish Names." By the way, he reports that 28.6% of women "bore one of the two most popular female names, Mary and Salome" (p. 72), after noting that "Mary" is more popular than Salome in all the sources (p. 71).