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The Lost Tomb of Jesus: A Response to the Discovery-Channel Documentary

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The Lost Tomb of Jesus:

A Response to the Discovery-Channel Documentary
Directed by James Cameron



by Dr. Gary R. Habermas and Colleagues

Jesus Burial Tomb?

Recently, questions have been raised regarding the historicity of the death and resurrection of Jesus. These issues emerged from the directorial genius of **James Cameron** and is entitled, "**The Lost Tomb of Jesus.**" This new Hollywood-quality documentary is set to air March 4th, 2007 on the Discovery Channel. However, this documentary is poorly supported by the historical and scientific data, regardless of how well the film has been made.

Good TV, Bad History & Science

"[The Lost Tomb of Jesus] will make good TV but involves a bad critical reading of history. Basically, this is old news with a new interpretation. We have known about this tomb since it was discovered in 1980. There are all sorts of reasons to see that this is much ado about nothing much."

-Dr. [Ben Witherington](#), New Testament professor at Asbury Theological Seminary and author of *What Have They Done With Jesus?*

An incredible number of problems are present in the recent claim that Jesus' grave has been found. In the end, the time-honored, multi-faceted evidence for the Gospel data of the Deity, death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus are more convincing than ever. Even the early opponents of the Christian message acknowledged that Jesus' tomb was empty. **And the evidence for Jesus' bodily resurrection appearances has never been refuted.**

12 Major Problems for the "Jesus Tomb" Theory

Leading Scholars Dispute Discovery Channel
Documentary

1. The Names "Joseph" and "Jesus" were very popular in the 1st century. "Jesus" appears in at least 99 tombs and on 22 ossuaries. "Joseph" appears on 45 ossuaries.
2. "Mary" is the most common female name in the ancient Jewish world.
3. The DNA evidence establishes **no** positive links in this tomb whatsoever.
4. The statistical comparison to Jesus of Nazareth is severely flawed.
5. There is no early historical nor tomb connection to Mary Magdalene.
6. There is no historical evidence anywhere that Jesus ever married or had children.



An Ancient Jewish Ossuary or "Bone Box"

Source: Craig A. Evans - CraigAEvans.com

I've known about "The Lost Tomb of Christ" and the story behind it for quite some time. Last summer (2006), I interviewed James Tabor, the main scholar involved with "The Lost Tomb of Jesus" project. James was very helpful in answering my questions about the Talpiot site and we have become friends. Still, I am convinced that he is mistaken at virtually every evidential turn in the road.

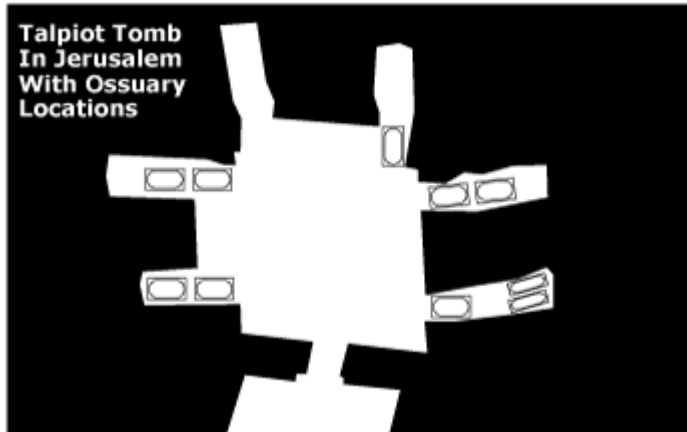
There is no way this should challenge a Christian's faith.

- The tomb was discovered in 1980; it is a very old story and it did not take anyone by surprise.
- The BBC did a documentary on the tomb in 1996.

... So why is this situation suddenly getting media attention?

7. The "Jesus" in the tomb was known as "Son of Joseph," but the earliest followers of the New Testament Jesus didn't call him that.
8. It is unlikely that Jesus' family tomb would be located in Jerusalem.
9. The Talpiot tomb was costly. It apparently belonged to a wealthy family.
10. The tenth ossuary has been accounted for without recourse to the "James" ossuary.
11. All ancient sources agree that, very soon afterwards, the burial tomb of Jesus of Nazareth was empty.
12. The Talpiot tomb data fail to account for Jesus' resurrection appearances.

Used with permission from a Media Advisory of [Christian Newswire](#) February 26, 2007; adapted from the original version written by Ben Witherington and Gary Habermas.



One of the leading Jewish archaeologists who worked on the burial site, Amos Kloner, did not link the tomb to Jesus at all and has declared firmly that this recent effort is totally off-base for a number of reasons. **Virtually no other critical scholars have evaluated the evidence positively**, while many have criticized the conclusions. Why is this the case? What are some of these scholarly reasons?

Why are the majority of scholars, both conservative and non-conservative, responding so negatively to the Jesus tomb hypothesis? For one thing, the generic names "Mary," "Joseph," and "Jesus" are among **the four most popular names in the ancient Jewish world**. For example, studies have shown that "Mary," or a derivative of that name, may have been used by one-quarter of Jewish women at his time! If we multiply this frequency of usage over the more than 100-year period of ossuary use (Ossuaries are "bone boxes" used to re-house the bones of the deceased.), there would be many, many people with these names and family connections. In addition, "Joseph" is only found in the tomb as a nickname, "Jose." And some scholars have said that the name "Jesus" in the inscription is unclear, and may actually be a different name. This alone would obviously change everything.

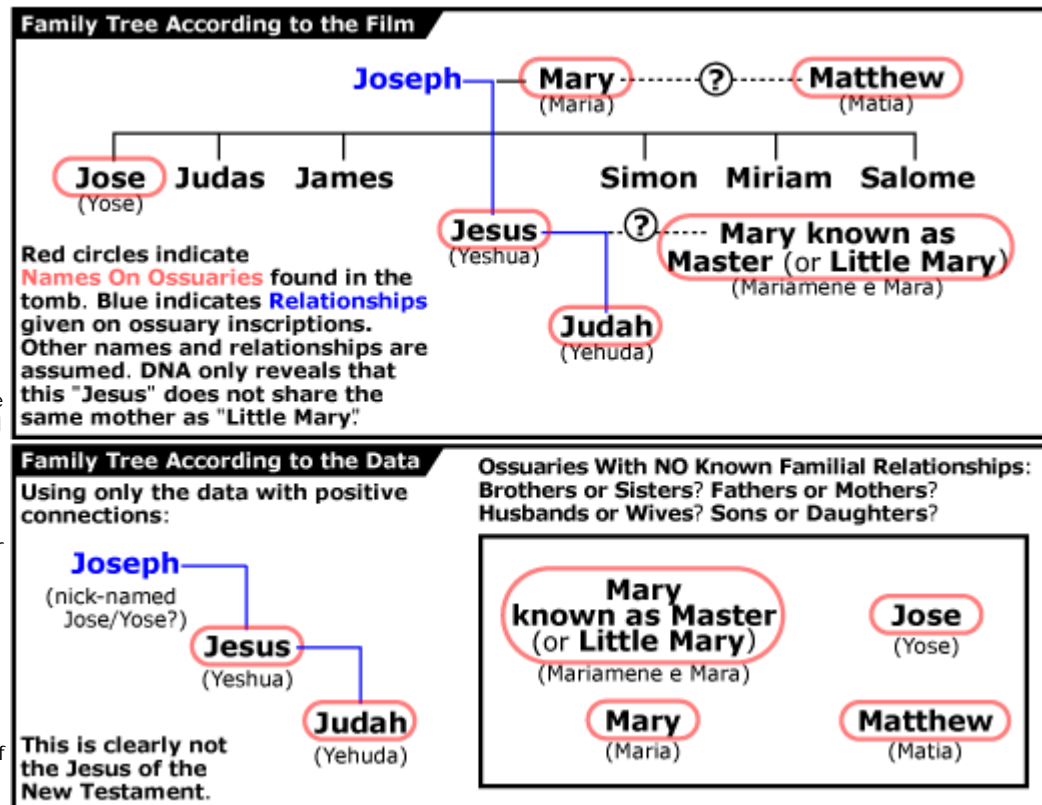
Of course, since these names were so common in that society, many individuals would be the son or daughter of others by these same names. For example, Richard Bauckham, perhaps the major scholarly source on this topic, has said that the name **"Joseph" is written on 45 burial ossuaries and the name "Jesus" is found on 22 ossuaries**. Even **"Jesus son of Joseph" has occurred on ossuaries at least 3 or 4 times**.

So how rare can a small group of burial boxes with biblical names be? And this is only one major problem among many (see the list above). These are some of the major concerns that critical scholars have had. Although we are only at an early point in the research, **the consensus so far has been that this tomb is not Jesus' burial site**.

DNA and Statistics

It has been acknowledged that **the recent DNA evidence did NOT provide positive connections among anyone in the tomb**. This lack of evidence is then used to presume a marriage relationship between "Jesus" and "Mariamene," who is identified as Mary Magdalene. But the **ONLY THING** the DNA evidence establishes positively is that this "Jesus" and this "Mariamene" found in the tomb are not maternally related. This hardly shows that they were probably married! So this is only a guess. She could have been married to any one of the four men, or to other family members, or she could someone's daughter. We must remember that family tombs were from extended families and were often multi-generational. So, Mariamene could have lived decades earlier or later than Jesus.

But not to be deterred, "The Lost Tomb of Jesus" calculates the probability that this collection of names could be together in the grave. Then they compare this to the known family members of Jesus of Nazareth and calculate the odds as 600 to 1 that the tomb is that of Jesus. However, Chris Rosebrough of [Extreme](#)



[Theology](#) has taken a closer look at the statistical analysis. He argues that the calculations were **extremely overstated** by many orders of magnitude.

On the other hand, if we only make the connections that are explicitly made in the tomb, then we only know that "Jesus" is the son of "Joseph" (or "Jose" if this is Jesus' father's nickname) and that he had a son named "Judah." The DNA does not relate him to "Mariamene." From the ossuaries alone, we know of no other connections. We do not know even that "Maria" is Jesus' mother. We do not know that the relation of "Matthew." Further, no early source records Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene. **Clearly, there is no way to link this tomb to the Jesus of the New Testament** (see bottom half of chart at right). As we have said, several ossuaries are known to bear the name "Jesus son of Joseph," and the addition of "Judah" only complicates the puzzle; it gives us no help in identifying this as Jesus of Nazareth. And as we said, if the name "Jesus" is unclear or turns out to be a different name, as some scholars have argued, then everything is moot.

Thus, the statistical analysis given in the Discovery Channel's "The Lost Tomb of Jesus" reached its striking conclusion by making several assumptions that are supported neither by ossuary inscriptions nor by DNA.

It turns out that the DNA evidence shows very little and a faulty statistical comparison to Jesus' family cannot be maintained. But many viewers may be unable to ascertain this. "DNA" and "statistical analyses" carry an air of near factual certainty. But their reputation is not very helpful on this occasion. So what do they show? How are they useful? What do they evidence? Almost nothing! This new "evidence" does not realistically threaten the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, died, was buried, or rose by God's power, and appeared to his followers.

For reasons like these, Rosebrough re-computes the calculations based on the connections for which we have evidence and comes up with a much different answer. He concludes that there is 1 chance in 15,000 that the assumptions made by James Cameron and Simcha Jacobovici hold true.

Other Problems

On top of all the above, there is a long list of other problems with the premature conclusion that this is Jesus' family tomb. Here are some of them:

- All the indications we have dictate that Jesus was not from Jerusalem, so why would the family tomb be located there, especially for more than one generation, as was usually the case?
- This tomb is considered to be an upper class crypt, or at least to have been a very expensive one, unlike Jesus' family standing.
- It should not be forgotten, either, that these tombs were frequently kept over a period of decades. Therefore, this tomb could easily contain persons from earlier family generations, or even adopted members whose parents had passed away, or even treasured servants!
- In the ancient literature, Jesus is not known as "the son of Joseph."
- If family members readily knew of Jesus' death, burial, and lack of bodily resurrection appearances, how did Christianity get off the ground, since this was the central proclamation?
- Where was the body hidden?
- Who moved the bones later to the family tomb?
- Since names were so prominently displayed on the outside of the ossuary, it does not appear that this matter was being concealed at all.
- Much research has shown that, from the very beginning, Jesus was proclaimed by his followers as having been raised from the grave, appearing bodily to many, including the dreaded persecutor Saul (Paul) and the skeptic James, the brother of Jesus.
- What did Paul think he saw on the road to Damascus?
- James would have readily known of the family burial plot and who was interred there. How could he truly believe that his brother had been raised from the dead and that he had appeared to him?
 - In the Jewish context of that time, where the predominant conception of a resurrection was that of a literal, bodily resurrection, how could James believe and proclaim his brother's resurrection appearances while knowing that Jesus' body had already rotted and that his bones had been labeled and reburied? This exceptionally strong historical evidence must all be explained.

There is a Talpote family tomb and a "Jesus" may well have been buried there. However, the evidence argues overwhelmingly that he is not the same person as Jesus of Nazareth.

Links for Further Consideration



[Ben Witherington's Blog](#)



[Darrell Bock's Blog](#)



[Craig A. Evans](#)

(View Book: [Jesus and the Ossuaries](#))



Chris Rosebrough: www.ExtremeTheology.com