

Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino.
*The Jesus Family Tomb: The Discovery, the Investigation,
and the Evidence That Could Change History.*

New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007

Reviewed by Kent P. Jackson

A secret marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, a secret child born to their union, and a secret society of believers who maintained those secrets. To these can be added the Templars, the Masons, esoteric symbols in architecture, persecution by the Catholic Church, startling new information about the origins of Christianity, and ancient and modern efforts by the establishment to cover up the truth. If these features of *The Jesus Family Tomb* are reminiscent of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, there probably is a reason.

In 1980, a tomb was discovered in Talpiot, a southern suburb of Jerusalem, during the construction of an apartment complex. Archaeologists arrived at the scene, but not before children were found playing with skulls they had found inside. In accordance with established archaeological protocol in Israel, a salvage excavation was undertaken, and the content of the tomb was removed. Specialists drew plans of the tomb, catalogued the artifacts and human remains, stored the artifacts for later research, and then reburied the bones elsewhere. As the new neighborhood was built and the homes were inhabited, the tomb was covered by a garden, and the entrance was capped with a large metal lid. The excavation report, written by archaeologist Amos Kloner, was not published until 1996.¹

The tomb is typical of many other Palestinian Jewish tombs from the first century AD. It contains a square central room (about 8 by 8 feet) with an entrance on one side and two body-length burial niches cut perpendicularly into each of the three other sides. Horizontal benches are found in the main room on two of the sides. In Jesus's day, the dead were wrapped in burial shrouds and placed on the benches or in the niches. Some were interred on the floor as well. Space considerations often led to the practice of secondary burials in ossuaries—stone boxes in which the bones were placed after the tissues had disintegrated, usually about a year after death. The ossuaries needed to be only as long as the longest bone in the body, and

thus they allowed the space in the tomb to be used more efficiently. Many ossuaries eventually contained the bones of several people. On about 25 percent of the ossuaries, names were inscribed identifying the deceased.²

The Talpiot tomb contained ossuaries with the following inscriptions: “Mariame and Mara,” “Judah son of Yeshua,” “Matya,” “Yoseh,” “Marya,” and “Yeshua (?) son of Joseph.”³ *Mariame* and *Marya* are two forms of *Mary*, *Yoseh* in the New Testament is *Joses*, *Matya* is *Matthew*, and *Yeshua* is the Aramaic original of *Jesus*. Thus the tomb contained a *Joses*, two *Marys*, a *Matthew*, a *Jesus* son of *Joseph*, and a son of *Jesus*.

The original archaeologists made nothing of the names, but shortly after the excavation report was published, a BBC documentary discussed the names and hinted that the tomb of *Jesus Christ* might have been found.⁴ Then in March 2007, the Discovery Channel broadcast *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, and HarperSanFrancisco published *The Jesus Family Tomb*. The book was authored by Simcha Jacobovici, an Israeli-Canadian documentary filmmaker, and Charles Pellegrino, a scientist-novelist. The documentary was conceived and directed by Jacobovici, and its executive producer was filmmaker James Cameron, creator of *Titanic* (1997) and the *Terminator* motion pictures (1984, 1991, 2003). In short, their claim is that the tomb of *Jesus of Nazareth* has indeed been found and that it is “the most stunning archaeological find of the last century” (viii) and “the greatest archaeology story ever” (xiii). They assert that *Jesus’s* bones were contained in the ossuary labeled “*Yeshua* son of *Joseph*”; *Yoseh* was *Jesus’s* brother *Joses* (see *Mark* 6:3) or maybe even his father, *Joseph*; one of the *Marys* was *Jesus’s* mother; and the other was *Mary Magdalene*, who they argue was the wife of *Jesus*. Their son, *Judah*, was buried in the tomb, as was one of *Mary’s* relatives, a *Matthew*. The book and the documentary go through the story of the discovery of the tomb and of these conclusions, depicted as a great adventure of forensic detective work. In the documentary, Jacobovici is the ever-present seeker of the truth, appearing in virtually every scene as he goes from one clue to the next. Along the way, he and his associates argue their case with the use of statistics, DNA evidence, passages from the New Testament and noncanonical texts, and, above all else, with unlikely speculations that build one upon the other until they arrive at their conclusions.

The documentary and the book created an uproar even before they were made public. Christian apologists came to the defense of the biblical resurrection story, and Bible scholars and archaeologists found immediate fault with the claim that the tomb had anything to do with *Jesus of Nazareth*. Academics have been virtually unanimous in their rejection of the

assertions of Jacobovici and his team.⁵ Following are my own observations and responses to some of the authors' many claims.

1. The fact that Jesus's body was placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea tells us that his family did not have a tomb in the Jerusalem area, otherwise he would have been put there. Archaeologist Jodi Magness believes that this fact alone goes far to disprove the book's claims.⁶ If Joseph's family had a tomb, it would have been in Nazareth, where the family lived, or perhaps in his ancestral home, Bethlehem.

2. Building on the identifications described above, Jacobovici and his team use statistical arguments to prove that there is only one chance in six hundred that the tomb could belong to any family other than Jesus's family. They multiply probabilities based on the frequency of names attested in the Jewish population at the time. Smarter mathematical minds than mine have attacked the statistical argument successfully.⁷ Statistics work only as well as the assumptions on which they are based, and the assumptions our writers present have serious flaws. For one thing, they assume that the names come from one nuclear family, whereas the ossuaries may as well have come from several different generations over a century. They also assume that all occupants of the tomb must be related, either by blood or (in the case of Jesus's supposed wife, Mary Magdalene) by marriage. Whereas it is commonly assumed that these were family tombs, nothing precludes other options as well, including non-family burials, purchased space, purchased tombs, or burials by unrelated opportunists after the first century. Jesus, after all, was buried in someone else's tomb according to the New Testament. The authors make assumptions about the names chosen for the two Marys, concluding that one must be the mother of Jesus and the other Mary Magdalene. The assumptions about the Marys not only are unprovable but they are based on a false reading of the text (see below). In fact, the names found in the Talpiot tomb are among the most common of the time, and the statistical argument comes across as mostly wishful thinking.

3. The book builds a great portion of its claim on the argument that Mary Magdalene was buried in one of the ossuaries. Mary was the most common name among Palestinian Jewish women in Jesus's day, a fact reflected in all the Marys in the New Testament.⁸ The name usually appeared in one of two forms: the Hebrew form *Maryam* (*Mariam* or *Mariamē* in Greek) or the Hebrew form *Marya* (*Maria* in Greek). Noting that one of the ossuaries bears the name *Marya*, they argue (apparently from Latin Christian tradition) that the mother of Jesus was always known as Maria, thus confirming that Jesus's mother was in the box bearing the name *Marya*. But in the Greek text of the New Testament, the Gospel of

Luke always calls Jesus's mother *Mariam*, whereas the Gospel of Matthew calls her *Maria* in every case but one.

Drawing from fanciful biblical geography and late apocryphal texts (the Gospel of Mary and the Acts of Philip), the authors conclude that Mary Magdalene was an apostle, spoke Greek, and went by the name *Mariamne*. But in the Greek New Testament, she is called *Maria* ten times, *Mariam* three times, and never *Mariamne*. In the excavation report, one of the ossuary inscriptions, the only one written in Greek, was read as "*Mariamēnou (ē) Mara*," with the translation "of Mariamene, [also called] Mara."⁹ *Mara* (not related to the name *Mary*) was another common Jewish name in Jesus's day, but Jacobovici and his team interpret it as the Aramaic word for "master." Thus they have "Mariamene the Master." They argue that the presence of the name *Mariamene* is evidence that it was *Mary Magdalene* in the box. And the presence of her ossuary in the Jesus family tomb is evidence that she and Jesus were married. The film shows re-creations of *Mary Magdalene* teaching and guiding the other disciples of Jesus, and one of the scholars, whose sound bites garnish the film, announces her belief that *Mary Magdalene* was the true founder of Christianity.

Aside from the fact that they misuse the languages and build their case by rejecting the first-century Gospels and using late fictional texts, Jacobovici and his team have an even greater problem. The original epigrapher, L. Y. Rahmani, misread the inscription. It actually reads *Mariamē kai Mara*, "Mariame and Mara." The first name is the original inscription, perhaps placed on the box when the remains of one *Mariame* were placed in it, although we have no way of knowing if she was the box's first occupant. After some time, other bones were placed in the box, and in a very different hand, someone else wrote "and *Mara*."¹⁰

The identification of the misread *Mariamene* with *Mary Magdalene* is one of the lynchpins of the authors' argument, "the key to the whole story," Jacobovici writes (204). Its disappearance, made possible by the better reading of the text, damages their claims beyond repair.

4. No early Christian would call Jesus the "son of Joseph." Fundamental to the Christian message from the beginning was the belief that Jesus was the son of God. For the sake of argument, even if Joseph were Jesus's father, Jesus's followers would not write that on his bone box, because it contradicted the story that they were telling publicly. For the same reason, early Christians would not put Jesus's name on a bone box at all while they were announcing far and wide that his dead body had risen from the grave and ascended into heaven. Rock-cut tombs were not sealed permanently but were reopened regularly as new bodies were placed inside. Early

Christians would not have produced evidence like that to contradict their own claims.

5. The New Testament reflects the culture of ancient Jerusalem by identifying Jews from elsewhere by their hometown. Thus we have Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43), Simon of Cyrene (Matthew 27:32), Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:11), Mary Magdalene (Mary of Magdala; Matthew 27:56), and Jesus of Nazareth (John 19:19 and sixteen other passages). Rahmani points out that ossuary inscriptions follow this same practice, identifying non-Jerusalemites by their home of origin.¹¹ Yet no one in the Talpiot tomb is identified in this manner, even though, according to Jacobovici and Pellegrino, they were all from out of town.

6. The inscription on the Yeshua ossuary presents problems. Some names inscribed on ancient ossuaries were written with a careful hand, seemingly to honor the deceased. Four of the six ossuaries in the Talpiot tomb have such inscriptions, inscribed in block letters rather neatly. The Greek Mariame inscription is an exception, not being particularly carefully done. But the Yeshua inscription is extraordinarily sloppy and chaotic, carelessly and thoughtlessly written amidst apparently random scratches. It is difficult to imagine followers and family members of Jesus Christ marking their Lord's final resting place in that manner, making it all the more unlikely that the box could ever have contained his remains. Nor is the reading certain. When Rahmani read the inscription, he reconstructed the first and second letters, *y* and *š* (sh), as conjectures. He did so based on the fact that there was another Yeshua inscription in the same family tomb.¹² From Rahmani's drawing, it appears that the letters of Yeshua (transliterated *yšw'*) are probably present, written in some cases partially on top of each other. But I do not rule out the possibility that later on-site examinations may suggest a different name. *The Jesus Family Tomb* and its accompanying documentary are built on a reading of the name Yeshua, Jesus, that is not entirely certain.

7. Jacobovici and his associates make much of an X mark immediately before the name Yeshua and a mark that looks like a star or asterisk on the lid of the box. They argue that the X is a cross that identifies the deceased as a holy person, and Jacobovici suggests dramatically that the star identifies him as the fulfillment of a messianic promise in the eyes of his followers (211–12): “There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17). From the photograph published in the book, it does not seem that the X and the name were incised at the same time. I doubt that they have anything to do with each other at all. Usually such marks provided instructions for aligning the lid in the correct position.¹³ The marks may mean any number of other things, including which niche

to put the box into or that the box is full. We do not know, but nothing in the authors' arguments is compelling in the least.

8. The authors emphasize DNA tests conducted on human remains in the ossuaries of Mariame and Yeshua, and the documentary depicts the tests with considerable drama. According to the laboratory that tested the remains, the surviving mitochondrial DNA proves that Mariame and Yeshua did not have the same mother. Based on the presupposition that Mariame was Mary Magdalene and that only family members could be in the tomb—unless one was the spouse of another—they conclude that the DNA analysis shows that Mariame and Yeshua were husband and wife, again confirming that Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene were married. But in this argument their assumptions have no foundation at all. The fact that there was no maternal match does not rule out a host of other possibilities, including sharing the same father, Mariame's marriage to any of the other men in the tomb or any of the thousands of other men in Jerusalem in her day, contamination with someone else's DNA in either of the ossuaries, and the possibility of a non-family member being buried in the same tomb. Even more damning to their case is the fact that the reading of the woman's name was wrong to begin with, and another woman, Mara, had her bones placed in the same box.

The Talpiot tomb was, in fact, the equivalent of a contaminated crime scene. In the excavation report, Kloner estimates that there were remains of about seventeen people found in the ten ossuaries, so some boxes were shared. He suggests that about eighteen others were interred in the tomb outside the ossuaries (conveniently not discussed by Jacobovici and Pellegrino).¹⁴ The tomb had been opened and disturbed in antiquity and perhaps on other occasions since then, and it is possible that the bones removed from the box by the archaeologists in 1980 belonged neither to Mariame nor Mara anyway. Nor is there any way to know whether the human remains used in the DNA testing came from the people called Mariame or Yeshua. In answer to the obvious question of why DNA tests were not made from the "Judah son of Yeshua" ossuary to see if its occupant was indeed the child of Yeshua and Mariame, Jacobovici states that no human remains were available from that box. I found the DNA discussion to be among the least convincing parts of Jacobovici's claim.

9. No scripture states that Jesus was married. Nor does even any ancient apocryphal text claim that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married. Yet their supposed marriage is central to *The Jesus Family Tomb*, as is the existence of a son named Judah, who is even identified by the authors as the beloved disciple in the Gospel of John. "Clearly, the Gospels harbor a deep secret" (207). Recent history shows that ideas like this sell books.

10. The authors make much of two shapes carved above the entrance of the tomb, a circle under an inverted V that looks like a gable. They found a medieval analogue and argue from it that the symbol represents the royal family, thus announcing that members of the Jesus dynasty were buried inside. They fail to notice that they make that claim at the same time arguing that the burials inside of Jesus and his family members were secret. In fact, the decoration is probably of no consequence whatever. It looks like the short end of an ossuary with a pointed lid and an unfinished rosette or wreath, both found very commonly on ossuaries.¹⁵ The purpose of the decoration, if there was a purpose, was probably to show that the place was a tomb.

11. Ten ossuaries were found in the tomb, yet only nine were placed in the storage facility of the Israel Antiquities Authority. The authors attempt to create a mystery over the absence of the tenth box and suggest that it was the one that is now owned privately and bears the inscription “James son of Joseph brother of Jesus.” That ossuary created a sensation when it surfaced in 2002. Scientists have identified the James inscription as a modern forgery carved into an authentic ancient ossuary.¹⁶ My own examinations of it (behind glass) led me to the same conclusion. But that ossuary did not come from the Talpiot tomb. The archaeologists who excavated the tomb have stated that the tenth ossuary was plain, with neither decoration nor inscription, so it was not stored for research but placed with other plain boxes in the courtyard of Jerusalem’s Rockefeller Museum. It apparently is still there today.¹⁷

12. The authors tell of early followers of Jesus who rejected the theology that later became orthodox Christianity and accepted a simpler view of the Christian faith, including knowledge that Jesus did not ascend to heaven with his body but was buried in the Talpiot tomb. Those Christians preserved the secret Christianity through the centuries. During the time of the Crusades, they shared it with the Templars, who became converted and were consequently persecuted and eventually slaughtered by the Catholic Church for their beliefs. Needless to say, this kind of intrigue attempts to spin a good story, but it is not based on history.

13. Perhaps the most important argument against the whole idea of *The Jesus Family Tomb* is the fact that the first Christians did not believe that Jesus’s bones were ever contained in an ossuary. The New Testament presents multiple accounts that Jesus’s body lay in a tomb and was resurrected on the third day. The passages in Paul’s writings and in the Gospels are the earliest sources for the story, all dating from the first century AD and reflecting the beliefs and experiences of Christians from the beginning.

They are the closest evidence there is to the events they describe, and they tell the story in a remarkably consistent way.

14. I found reading *The Jesus Family Tomb* to be a tedious and unpleasant experience. It is not a captivating read like many found in *The Da Vinci Code* and other such books on which it is modeled. The mood of conspiracy, cover-up, and discovery of secrets that it attempts to depict just does not work. It is far from being a good detective story. It is full of excessive feigned pathos, attempts at clever language, and dramatic overkill.¹⁸

But the weakest part of the book is not its writing but its attempt at scholarship to reconstruct history. After Jacobovici and Pellegrino describe in the chapters how they discovered and confirmed the secrets about Jesus's tomb, Jacobovici adds a lengthy conclusion in which he restates all of the arguments of the book. Unfortunately, with each telling of the story, it becomes less convincing. James Cameron calls the discovery "electrifying," "a veritable avalanche" of evidence, proving, "beyond any reasonable doubt that a first-century Jewish tomb found in Talpiot, Jerusalem, in 1980 is the tomb of Jesus and his family" (vii). It is based on "hard physical evidence, evidence that cannot lie" (x), "brilliant scholarly research and forensic lab work," and it is "virtually irrefutable" (xi). Cameron writes as though these discoveries will do Christians a favor: heretofore, no physical evidence of Jesus had ever been found, but this find proves his existence (vii–viii). Then, in what appears to be a condescending tone aimed toward Christians, he writes, "There are those who will find the results of the investigation revealed in this book to be too challenging to their belief system. For these readers, no amount of scientific proof would be sufficient" (xi). But this book is not science, let alone scientific proof. Scholars who know the archaeology, the languages, the writing customs, and the ancient texts are not finding it convincing at all. Scholarship is presented in scientific meetings and published in academic journals. The key to both of those venues is peer review, which is scrutiny by specialists to determine if a proposal or interpretation is worthy of publication. Peer review includes, and is followed by, rigorous discussion before ideas are accepted and become viewed as legitimate. Jacobovici, Pellegrino, and Cameron chose to skip those necessary steps. They went instead directly to marketing—first to a television audience with stories on network and local news all over the world and with a well-produced documentary. A day or two later, they entered the popular book market with *The Jesus Family Tomb*, bearing the eye-catching subtitle, *The Discovery, the Investigation, and the Evidence that Could Change History*. But history is not being changed. With the benefit of all the publicity, the book sold well for the first week. But in the absence of positive responses from readers, its

sales dropped precipitously after that. I predict that the whole episode will be forgotten very soon.

Kent P. Jackson (kent_jackson@byu.edu) is Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. He received his PhD in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Studies from the University of Michigan. He is the recent author of *The Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), and various articles in this journal including the recent "Behold I," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 169–75.

1. Amos Kloner, "A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries in East Talpiyot, Jerusalem," *Atiqot* 29 (1996): 15–22.

2. L. Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority and Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), 11, 304–7.

3. Kloner, "A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries," 17–20.

4. The documentary, *The Body in Question*, aired at Easter in 1996.

5. Among the many who have weighed in on the topic, the only exception of which I am aware is James D. Tabor, who recently entered the field of religious sensationalism with a book of the same genre, *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006). Tabor helped with Jacobovici and Pellegrino's book and appears in the film.

6. Jodi Magness, "Has the Tomb of Jesus Been Discovered?" Society of Biblical Literature Forum (online), <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=640>.

7. See the excellent treatment by Randall Ingermanson, "Statistics and the 'Jesus Family Tomb,'" <http://www.ingermanson.com/jesus/art/stats.php>.

8. From the known women from 330 BC to AD 200, 25 percent were named Mary; see Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity, Part I Palestine 330 BCE–200 CE* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 55, 57.

9. Kloner, "A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries," 17.

10. The corrected reading was first posted by Stephen J. Pfann, "Mary Magdalene Is Now Missing: A Corrected Reading of Rahmani Ossuary 701," <http://www.uhl.ac/MariameAndMartha>. Brigham Young University colleagues Eric D. Huntsman and Thomas A. Wayment confirm the corrected reading.

11. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 17.

12. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 223.

13. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 19.

14. Kloner, "A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries," 22 n. 2.

15. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, plates, ossuaries 14, 37, 60, 208, 222, 282, 294, 311, 392, 407, 408, 418, 490, 569, 596, 597, 604, 626, 654, 841, 844, 893.

16. The entire inscription is modern. The report from the Israel Antiquities Authority is posted on their web site at http://www.antiquities.org.il/article_Item_eng.asp?module_id=&sec_id=17&subj_id=175&id=266.

17. Joe Zias (archaeologist and curator at the Rockefeller Museum, 1972–97), “Viewer’s Guide to Understanding the Talpiot Tomb ‘documentary’ to be aired on the Discovery Channel,” <http://www.joezias.com/tomb.html>.

18. Some examples: “In the subterranean night, ten ossuaries lay facing the vanished Jewish Temple, as if waiting for rediscovery, or rebirth, or both. And on one of them, these words seemed poised to endure forever: ‘Jesus, son of Joseph’” (67). “The Tomb of Ten Ossuaries was a mystery beyond imagining, emerging as if by sheer accident, into their own time. Like a message in a bottle, the cluster of ossuary inscriptions had sailed a gulf of two millennia, bringing its odd mixture of archaeology and the sacred, of DNA and patina, of Jesus and Magdalene” (92). “Another century came and went. And another. And another. Everything in the world was changed, and changing, and yet, except for a slowly deepening patina, everything in the Tomb of Ten Ossuaries remained the same” (103). “The Tomb of Ten Ossuaries was as silent as the deserts of space. But silence was only a respite. It could not last forever. Nothing lasts forever” (109). “As I left the edit suite and emerged into the Canadian cold, far from Jerusalem and the secrets beneath its soil, my mind wandered to many unanswered questions” (211).