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## Have Researchers Found Jesus Christ's Tomb?

A book and movie allege the final resting place of Mary, Joseph and the King of Kings has been found. Controversy to follow.

By Lisa Miller and Joanna Chen

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March 5, 2007 issue - In Jerusalem, that ancient and holy city, people's houses are built on bones. For thousands of years, hundreds of generations of Jews, Muslims and Christians have been laid to rest in its rocky soil. Tova Bracha has always known that the tiny, rose-bordered concrete plot next to her apartment building covers an ancient Jewish burial tomb, but she never thought much about it. "It just didn't seem important when there are so many tombs anyway that have been found around Jerusalem," she says. Rushing home for the Sabbath, her arms full of groceries, Bracha laughs at the suggestion that the tomb might be of considerable religious interest. Maybe she can make a fortune selling trinkets to tourists, she jokes. Maybe the value of her home will soar.

This week the Discovery Channel, together with HarperSanFrancisco, announces the release of **"The Jesus Family Tomb," a television documentary and a book** that aim to show that the tomb next door to Tova Bracha's apartment, located in a nondescript suburb called East Talpiot, is, well, the family plot of Jesus Christ. Spearheaded by a well-known TV director named Simcha Jacobovici, and produced by "Titanic" director James Cameron, "The Jesus Family Tomb" is—both in book and movie form—a slick and suspenseful narrative about the 1980 discovery of a first-century Jewish burial cave and the 10 bone boxes, or ossuaries, found therein.

With the help of statisticians, archeologists, historians, DNA experts, robot-camera technicians, epigraphers and a CSI expert from New York's Long Island, Jacobovici puts together a case in which he argues that the bones of Jesus, Mary and Mary Magdalene, along with some of their lesser-known relatives, were once entombed in this cave. James Charlesworth of the Princeton Theological Seminary consulted with Jacobovici on the project and is intrigued: "A very good claim could be made that this was Jesus' clan." Faced with the controversial theological and historical implications of what he calls his "rediscovery," Jacobovici is sanguine. "People will have to believe what they want to believe," he says.

His critics are arming themselves for battle. "Simcha has no credibility whatsoever," says Joe Zias, who was the curator for anthropology and archeology at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem from 1972 to 1997 and personally numbered the Talpiot ossuaries. "He's pimping off the Bible ... He got this guy Cameron, who made 'Titanic' or something like that—what does this guy know about archeology? I am an archeologist, but if I were to write a book about brain surgery, you would say, 'Who is this guy?' People want signs and wonders. Projects like these make a mockery of the archeological profession." Cameron's reply: "I don't profess to be an archeologist or a Biblical scholar. I'm a film producer. I found it compelling. I think we're on firm ground to say that much."

Here is what we know. One Friday afternoon in 1980, a construction crew unearthed an ancient tomb. This was not unusual. The 1980s marked a construction boom in Jerusalem; hundreds of tombs were uncovered and, with them, thousands of ossuaries. In the first century C.E., in the time of Jesus of Nazareth, Jewish families with means built tombs in the hills throughout Judea and stored the remains of their loved ones in those caves, in ossuaries. A newly dead body would be laid out on a rock shelf. When that body decomposed, family members would stack the bones inside a box and tuck the box into a niche. Over generations the caves grew crowded with boxes, and families, eager to conserve space, often put two or three—or even six—skeletons in one box. In Israel today, first-century ossuaries are so ubiquitous they are used in gardens and living rooms, as planters.

As common as these discoveries were, the Talpiot crew knew the drill. They immediately stopped work and called in the Israel Antiquities Authority, the government agency that controls and protects Israel's archeological treasures and runs the Rockefeller Museum. That Sunday, after the Sabbath, a small team of IAA archeologists arrived to excavate the site. Under pressure from the builders, the archeologists worked fast. "I tried to record as much as I could without thinking too hard," says respected archeologist Shimon Gibson, who was a young surveyor at the time and worked on the site. "Time was of the essence, and I tried not to panic as I measured and scribbled ... This was an emergency evacuation." The human remains in the cave, he says, were given over to the religious authorities, who reburied them in accordance with Jewish law.

Ten ossuaries were taken away to the IAA warehouse. Six of them had inscriptions—labels, if you will, to remind family members of what, or who, the boxes contained. Here are the names the archeologists found carved on ossuaries in the Talpiot tomb, the names that Jacobovici found so powerful: Jesus, son of Joseph; Maria; Mariamene; Matthew; Judas, son of Jesus; and Jose, a diminutive of Joseph. The official report written by the archeologist Amos Kloner found nothing remarkable in the discovery. The cave, it said, was probably in use by three or four generations of Jews from the beginning of the Common Era. It was disturbed in antiquity, and vandalized. The names on the boxes were common in the first century (25 percent of women in Jerusalem, for example, were called Miriam or a derivative). The report does not speculate on family relationships, nor does it make any connection between the inscriptions and the figure countless Christians through two millennia believe physically rose from the dead and, according to tradition, "ascended into heaven." After taking inventory, Zias put the ossuaries on shelves in a warehouse, where they sat undisturbed (except when the BBC came to shoot them in 1996) for more than 20 years.

To this day, Kloner says the burial cave is not extraordinary. "It's a typical Jewish burial cave of a large size," he says. "The names on the ossuaries are very common names or derivatives of names." The echo of the names of the members of the Holy Family, he says, "is just a coincidence."

Jacobovici strongly disagrees. An observant Jew with an interest in Biblical history, Jacobovici became obsessed with ossuaries in 2002, when he was working on another Discovery program about another bone box. This one said, "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." Unlike the Talpiot ossuaries, which were discovered, as the archeologists say, "in situ," and were therefore accepted as authentic, the James box came to light via an antiquities dealer named Oded Golan. Despite its uncertain provenance, Jacobovici—and a number of scholars—hailed the James box as real, the first definitive link of an artifact to Jesus of Nazareth. The Discovery movie was followed by a storm of publicity—until the IAA stepped in, declared the James inscription to be fake and Golan to be a forger. Golan's forgery trial in Israel is ongoing; he denies the charges.

Jacobovici is not a quitter. He believed then, and still believes, in the authenticity of the James inscription ossuary, and he took on the task of investigating the Talpiot boxes with zeal. He had stumbled across those ossuaries in the IAA warehouse during his James research and was astonished both by the inscriptions—and by the IAA's refusal to consider them worthy of further inquiry, its refusal to "connect the dots," as he would say. Politics, religion and archeology are inseparable in Israel; unpopular opinions, of any sort, are not welcome—and, to say the least, allegations that someone had found the bones of Jesus would be immensely unpopular among Christians. Jacobovici, however, is not afraid of being unpopular. With Cameron's help, he got Discovery's backing and a \$3.5 million budget.

The filmmaker rests his case on four main points. First, he says, recent Biblical scholarship argues that Mary Magdalene's real name was Mariamene, a common first-century derivative of Miriam. Second, DNA tests show that microscopic human remains scraped from the Jesus box and the Mariamene box are not related, at least not matrilineally, leaving open the possibility that the two humans whose bones were once in those boxes were

married. Third, the patina on the Talpiot ossuaries—that is, the mineral crust accumulated over centuries—matches that of the James box. This "discovery," if provable, is complicated but critical to Jacobovici's argument: the match means, he says, that the James ossuary originally lay in the Talpiot cave, thus answering questions about the James box's provenance. It also increases the probability that the tomb belongs to the Holy Family. Jesus had four brothers, according to the Gospel of Mark; two of their names—Joseph (or Jose) and James—were found in the Talpiot tomb.

The technique Jacobovici uses to "prove" the match between the James ossuary and the Talpiot tomb is a technology he calls "patina fingerprinting," which he and his coauthor Charles Pellegrino (a scientist who helped Cameron write "Ghosts of the Titanic") essentially invented for the purposes of this project. By comparing the mineral content of shards from the Talpiot ossuaries with shards from James, and by looking at them under an electron microscope with the help of a CSI specialist, Jacobovici and Pellegrino say they have a match. But do they? It's impossible to know for sure. For John Dominic Crossan, leader of the liberal Jesus Seminar and author of "Excavating Jesus," the biggest questions relate to the early break-in: who vandalized the cave, when, what did they do there and why?

The fourth part of Jacobovici's argument is statistical. Individually, he concedes, all the names on the Talpiot ossuaries are common. Charlesworth of Princeton Theological Seminary says he has a first-century letter written by someone named Jesus, addressed to someone else named Jesus and witnessed by a third party named Jesus. But the occurrence of these names in one place, with these specific idiosyncrasies, how likely is that? Andrey Feuerverger, a statistician at the University of Toronto, came up with an estimate: 600-1 in favor of the tomb's belonging to the Holy Family.

Good sense, and the Bible, still the best existing historical record of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, argue against Jacobovici's claims. All four Gospels say that Jesus was crucified on the eve of the Sabbath; all four say that the tomb was empty when the disciples woke on Sunday morning. "The New Testament is very clear on this," says Alan Segal, religion professor at Barnard College. "Jesus was put in a tomb that didn't belong to him and then he rose and there was nothing left." For Jacobovici's scenario to work, someone would have had to whisk the body away, on the Sabbath, and secretly inter it in a brand-new, paid-for family tomb—all before dawn on Sunday. As Segal goes on to argue, "Why would Jesus' family have a tomb outside of Jerusalem if they were from Nazareth? Why would they have a tomb if they were poor?"

If this were the tomb of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, what of the other holy tombs, accepted by tradition or posited by scholars, around the world? The Roman Catholic Church accepts two places for Mary's grave: one beneath the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem, the other in Ephesus. Constantine said in 328 that the final resting place of Jesus Christ—from which he rose—lay on the rock at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. In a book published just last year, James Tabor, a Biblical scholar at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the leading academic voice who lends enthusiastic, if qualified, support to Jacobovici's claims, wrote that he looked for, and found, a legendary tomb of Jesus near the city of Safed.

Jacobovici is a maverick, a self-made Indiana Jones, and as this story unfolds he will be accused of a lot of things. Archeologists who have been sifting through sand for decades, with little recognition and less pay, will call him an opportunist riding a Dan Brown wave. (Buried in the movie is the hypothesis that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a child whose remains were in the "Judas, son of Jesus" ossuary.) Curious friends will call for further study. Perhaps Tova Bracha will even find pilgrims at her door—people in search of answers to questions that have at once confounded and inspired humankind since the tomb in which Jesus was laid was first found empty on that long-ago Jerusalem dawn.

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