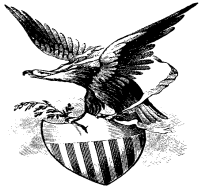


Light Brings Salt

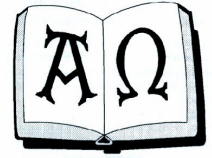
Volume 5, Issue 10

March 18, 2007



Iron Range Bible Church

Dedicated to the Systematic Exposition of the Word of God



The Bones of Jesus Controversy

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Craig Blomberg, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, recently published this response to the "bones of Jesus" controversy.

Did They Really Find Jesus' Bones?

What will they think of next? Dan Brown writes a novel (*The DaVinci Code*) that fictitiously garbles Christian history and millions of people believe it is based on fact. The end-of-the-second-century Gospel of Judas is unearthed and the normally scholarly National Geographic Society produces a documentary so biased than even skeptics like Bart Ehrman have to debunk it.

Now various news sources and websites, accompanying a Discovery Channel documentary, tout the possibility of scholars having discovered Jesus' family tomb. Ossuaries (small bone boxes into which people were re-buried after their corpses had rotted and their skeletal remains were exhumed) in a Jerusalem tomb allegedly contain the Hebrew names for Joseph, Mary, Matthew, Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Judah son of Jesus, with space for perhaps one more mini-coffin. DNA tests now demonstrate that the second Mary does not share any DNA with the remains found in the Jesus ossuary. Given the frequency of burying extended families together, it makes sense to think of this person as a wife of one of the other men, and given the location of her ossuary next to the one of Jesus, perhaps she was his husband.

One writer declares, "We've disproved the resurrection." Another boasts, "At last, the first indisputable evidence that Jesus of Nazareth actually lived." A third announces, "See, Jesus was married to Mary and they had a son named Judah." Mighty wishful thinking on all three counts! Consider the following observations that also emerge as one reads the stories carefully.

(1) There is doubt about what some of the letters in the names' inscriptions really say, particularly the name supposedly corresponding to Jesus. (2) The tomb (in the Talpiot neighborhood) is nowhere near the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, a highly likely candidate for the original site of Jesus' death. Given ancient Jewish burial practices, the likelihood of Jesus having been buried anywhere other than close to where he was crucified is small. (3) Dan Brown's fiction notwithstanding, there is not a shred of historical evidence to suggest that Jesus was married and much that says he was single. (4) The second Mary's name isn't Magdalene; it is actually three Greek (!) words that could be translated Mary the Master. But that is not a known title or form of address for the Magdalene anywhere else in antiquity.

(5) Normally when the information from tombs doesn't match existing literary information about ancient people, the assumption is made that we haven't found their tombs. For the sake of argument, let's say that this tomb does contain the remains of a Joshua (the actual Hebrew) and a Miriam who had a son named Judah. That information alone virtually disproves that this tomb had

anything to do with the “Holy Family,” since the Bible and serious Christian tradition unanimously agrees Jesus was unmarried and celibate.

(6) Speaking of reading carefully, most of the reports acknowledge that this tomb and all these ossuaries and their inscriptions were first discovered in 1980. And the information was made public then; there was no cover-up. So if there was any likelihood that these ossuaries had anything to do with Jesus of Nazareth, one would expect to find all kinds of hoopla in the scholarly literature and popular news releases from that day. In fact there was none. People in 1980 realized that the evidence didn't add up.

Ah, but now we have two new pieces of scientific data, we are told. Besides the “Jesus” and “Mary” DNA being tested and found unrelated, some patina (a fancy word for the encrustation of junk built up on the surface of an object made of wood or metal over the centuries) from the ossuaries appears to match that found on the famous James ossuary that came to light just a few years ago and that was at first highly touted as belonging to “James, son of Joseph, the brother of Jesus.” That is, until it was pointed out that the inscription adding “brother of Jesus” appeared to be in a different form of handwriting and to have come from a later date. So if the James ossuary did come from this “Jesus family tomb,” that would probably be one more reason (7) for not believing it had anything to do with the famous characters by those names.

For the coup de grace, however, the sensationalizers trot out statisticians who compute some astronomically miniscule likelihood of all these names being found together in one place and having them all correspond to the biblical names associated with Jesus' family. Of course, nothing is said about (8) the missing brothers and sisters of Jesus from this tomb. Nor does (9) any plausible explanation emerge for why one (and only one) disciple, Matthew, unrelated to this family, would show up in their tomb. Be

all that as it may, unless you know something about (10) the frequency of ancient Hebrew names in Israel during the centuries surrounding the birth of Christianity, to have Joseph, Mary, Jesus, another Mary, Matthew and maybe James all crop up in one place seems just too unlikely to be coincidental.

It's time to do some real historical research. In 2002, the Israeli scholar Tal Ilan wrote the book that will never be a bestseller (at \$220 even through Best Buy) but becomes an invaluable resource in debates like this: *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity, Part I: Palestine 330 BCE—200 CE* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck). Richard Bauckham's outstanding 2006 volume, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans)—which is affordable and which I have reviewed in the *Denver Journal*, accessible from the seminary's homepage—provides the excerpts most relevant for New Testament studies.

For example, Bauckham reproduces the 99 most popular male names among Jews in Israel throughout this period from every known inscriptional and documentary source preserved or recovered. Here's the list of the top eleven, in order, beginning with the most frequent: Simon, Joseph, Eleazar (Lazarus), Judah, Yohanan (John), Joshua (Jesus), Hananiah (Ananias), Jonathan, Mattathias/Matthias (Matthew), Menahem (Manaen), and Jacob (James). The names in parentheses are the English equivalents of the Greek versions of the Hebrew names that precede them. Notice anything interesting? Indeed, every male ossuary name from the Talpiot tomb is on the list, in positions 2, 4, 6 and 9, respectively, and, if James belonged there, too, he is number 11. Or, to use raw numerical data, we know of 218 Josephs from this period, 164 Judahs, 99 Joshuas, 62 Matthews and 40 Jacobs. And, of course, only the tiniest fraction of ancient evidence has survived the centuries.

What about the women you ask? Mary is number one! Then come Salome, Shelamzion, Martha, Joanna, Shiphra (Sapphira),

Berenice, Imma and Mara. So two Marys in an extended family calls for about as many raised eyebrows as a modern Hispanic family with two Marías. For that matter, would anyone bat an eye if that same family had a José (Joseph) and a Jesús as well? Would this prove that such a family included the long lost descendants of Jesus himself?

Or take a more chronologically relevant example. Scholars have long known about (and tourists can still visit) the tomb in Bethany where inscriptions were discovered referring to Mary, Martha and Lazarus (and others). But every scholar worth his or her salt, no matter how conservative, acknowledges that those names were just so common that even to find them together in one tomb in the very town that the Bible says the three New Testament characters by those names lived proves statistically insignificant. It's entirely possible that it happened completely by chance. There may easily have been a whole bunch families in Bethany with lots of children, including three with those names, in an age when parents had as many children as they could in hopes that a few might survive to care for them, if necessary, in their old age,

The same approach must be taken with the cluster of names in the Talpiot tomb. In fact, Bauckham's tables extracted from Ilan's monumental reference work add one very interesting footnote. The Hebrew woman's name listed as ninth most common (actually tied for eighth with Imma) was Mara, like the form announced to have been found with the second Mary in the Talpiot tomb. Not only does Mara not mean Magdalene but, although it could be the Grecized feminine equivalent to the Aramaic masculine mar or "master," it actually appears on one ossuary, discovered elsewhere in Israel much longer ago, as an alternate form of the name Martha. And the feminine form of "master," in a highly patriarchal culture, was not used nearly as often as the masculine form. So the "Mary" that may have been a spouse to this Joshua/Jesus more likely was named Mary Martha, not Mary Magdalene, and not Mary

the Master.

One of the best kept secrets in the last quarter of a century from those who try to learn history exclusively from the popular media is the massive amount of evidence that has come to light or been more accessibly compiled supporting the accuracy of the New Testament documents. For details just on the Gospels themselves, see the first book I ever wrote, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1987), which will be appearing this year in substantially revised form for a twentieth-anniversary edition. Recent works by Darrell Bock, Craig Evans, Ben Witherington, Tom Wright, and a host of others all rely on solid, sober scholarship of a kind Dan Brown, National Geographic and the Discovery Channel will apparently never care to publicize. Bolstering conventional belief about anything has never made much money and that's all it's really about in these endeavors. (Lest you think I'm being too cynical, Darrell Bock has shared stories with me of what representatives of the major networks told him face to face he'd have to raise in millions of dollars before they'd ever consider doing it.). In a postmodern world, post-Communist world truth gives way to fiction to fuel capitalism. It is tragically reminiscent of the comment Russians used to make during their Communist era when their two major news organs were Pravda (meaning "Truth") and Izvestia (meaning "News"): "there is no pravda in izvestia and there is no izvestia in pravda!" My, how far things have deteriorated in this country in the seventeen years since the fall of the Soviet regime!