

Jesus family tomb believed found

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New scientific evidence, including DNA analysis conducted at one of the world's foremost molecular genetics laboratories, as well as studies by leading scholars, suggests a 2,000-year-old Jerusalem tomb could have once held the remains of Jesus of Nazareth and his family. The findings also suggest that Jesus and Mary Magdalene might have produced a son named Judah. The DNA findings, alongside statistical conclusions made about the artifacts -- originally excavated in 1980 -- open a potentially significant chapter in Biblical archaeological history.

A documentary presenting the evidence, "The Lost Tomb of Jesus," will premiere on the Discovery Channel on March 4 at 9 p.m. ET/PT. The documentary comes from executive producer James Cameron and director Simcha Jacobovici.

The Talpiot Tomb

On March 28, 1980, a construction crew developing an apartment complex in Talpiot, Jerusalem, uncovered a tomb, which archaeologists from the Israeli Antiquities Authority excavated shortly thereafter. Archaeologist Shimon Gibson surveyed the site and drew a layout plan. Scholar L.Y. Rahmani later published "A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries" that described 10 ossuaries, or limestone bone boxes, found in the tomb.

Scholars know that from 30 B.C. to 70 A.D., many people in Jerusalem would first wrap bodies in shrouds after death. The bodies were then placed in carved rock tombs, where they decomposed for a year before the bones were placed in an ossuary.

Five of the 10 discovered boxes in the Talpiot tomb were inscribed with names believed to be associated with key figures in the New Testament: Jesus, Mary, Matthew, Joseph and Mary Magdalene. A sixth inscription, written in Aramaic, translates to "Judah Son of Jesus."

"Such tombs are very typical for that region," Aaron Brody, associate professor of Bible and archaeology at the Pacific School of Religion and director of California's Bade Museum told Discovery News.

Ossuary Inscriptions

At least four leading epigraphers have corroborated the ossuary inscriptions for the documentary, according to the Discovery Channel.

Frank Moore Cross, a professor emeritus in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University, told Discovery News, "The inscriptions are from the Herodian Period (which occurred from around 1 B.C. to 1 A.D.). The use of limestone ossuaries and the varied script styles are characteristic of that time."

Jodi Magness, associate department chair of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, told Discovery News that, based on the New Testament writings, "Jesus likely lived during the first century A.D."

In addition to the "Judah son of Jesus" inscription, which is written in Aramaic on one of the ossuaries, another limestone burial box is labeled in Aramaic with "Jesus Son of Joseph." Another bears the Hebrew inscription "Maria," a Latin version of "Miriam," or, in English, "Mary." Yet another ossuary inscription, written in Hebrew, reads "Matia," the original Hebrew word for "Matthew." Only one of the inscriptions is written in Greek. It reads, "Mariamene e Mara," which can be translated as, "Mary known as the master."

Francois Bovon, professor of the history of religion at Harvard University, told Discovery News, "Mariamene, or Mariamne, probably was the actual name given to Mary Magdalene."

Bovon explained that he and a colleague discovered a fourteenth century copy in Greek of a fourth century text that contains the most complete version of the "Acts of Philip" ever found. Although not included in the Bible, the "Acts of Philip" mentions the apostles and Mariamne, sister of the apostle Philip.

"When Philip is weak, she is strong," Bovon said. "She likely was a great teacher who even inspired her own sect of followers, called Mariamnists, who existed from around the 2nd to the 3rd century."

DNA Analysis

Jacobovici, director, producer and writer of "The Lost Tomb of Jesus," and his team obtained two sets of samples from the ossuaries for DNA and chemical analysis. The first set consisted of bits of matter taken from the "Jesus Son of Joseph" and "Mariamene e Mara" ossuaries. The second set consisted of patina -- a chemical film encrustation on one of the limestone boxes.

The human remains were analyzed by Carney Matheson, a scientist at the Paleo-DNA Laboratory at Lakehead University in Ontario, Canada. Mitochondrial DNA examination determined the individual in the Jesus ossuary and the person in the ossuary linked to Mary Magdalene were not related.

Since tombs normally contain either blood relations or spouses, Jacobovici and his team suggest it is possible Jesus and Mary Magdalene were a couple. "Judah," whom they indicate may have been their son, could have been the "lad" described in the Gospel of John as sleeping in Jesus' lap at the Last Supper.

Robert Genna, director of the Suffolk County Crime Laboratory in New York, analyzed both the patina taken from the Talpiot Tomb and chemical residue obtained from the "James" ossuary, which was also found around 1980, but subsequently disappeared and resurfaced in the antiquities market. Although controversy surrounds this burial box, Genna found that the two patinas matched.

"The samples were consistent with each other," Genna told Discovery News.

Upon examining the tomb, the filmmakers determined a space exists that would have fit the "James" ossuary. Given the patina match and this observation, Jacobovici theorizes the lost burial box could, in fact, be the "James" ossuary.

Statistical Data

A possible argument against the Talpiot Tomb being the Jesus Family Tomb is that the collection of names on the ossuary inscriptions could be coincidental.

But Andrey Feuerverger, professor of statistics and mathematics at the University of Toronto, recently conducted a study addressing the probabilities that will soon be published in a leading statistical journal.

Feuerverger multiplied the instances that each name appeared during the tomb's time period with the instances of every other name. He initially found "Jesus Son of Joseph" appeared once out of 190 times, Mariamne appeared once out of 160 times and so on.

To be conservative, he next divided the resulting numbers by 25 percent, a statistical standard, and further divided the results by 1,000 to attempt to account for all tombs -- even those that have not been uncovered -- that could have existed in first century Jerusalem.

The study concludes that the odds are at least 600 to 1 in favor of the Talpiot Tomb being the Jesus Family Tomb. In other words, the conclusion works 599 times out of 600.

Another Tomb?

The researchers discovered a second, as-yet unexplored tomb about 65 1/2 feet from the Talpiot Tomb. During the documentary, they introduced a robotic camera into this second tomb, which captured the first-ever recorded footage of an undisturbed burial cave from Jesus' time. The team speculates that this other tomb could contain the remains of additional family members, or even disciples, though further examination and analysis are needed.

In the meantime, Discovery has set up a special Web site, <http://www.discovery.com/tomb>, to provide related in-depth information and to allow viewers to come to their own conclusions about the entire matter.

As Academy Award-winner Cameron said in a press release, "It doesn't get bigger than this. We've done our homework; we've made the case; and now it's time for the debate to begin."