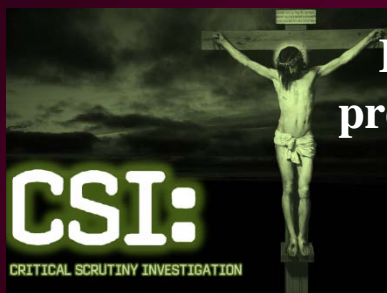
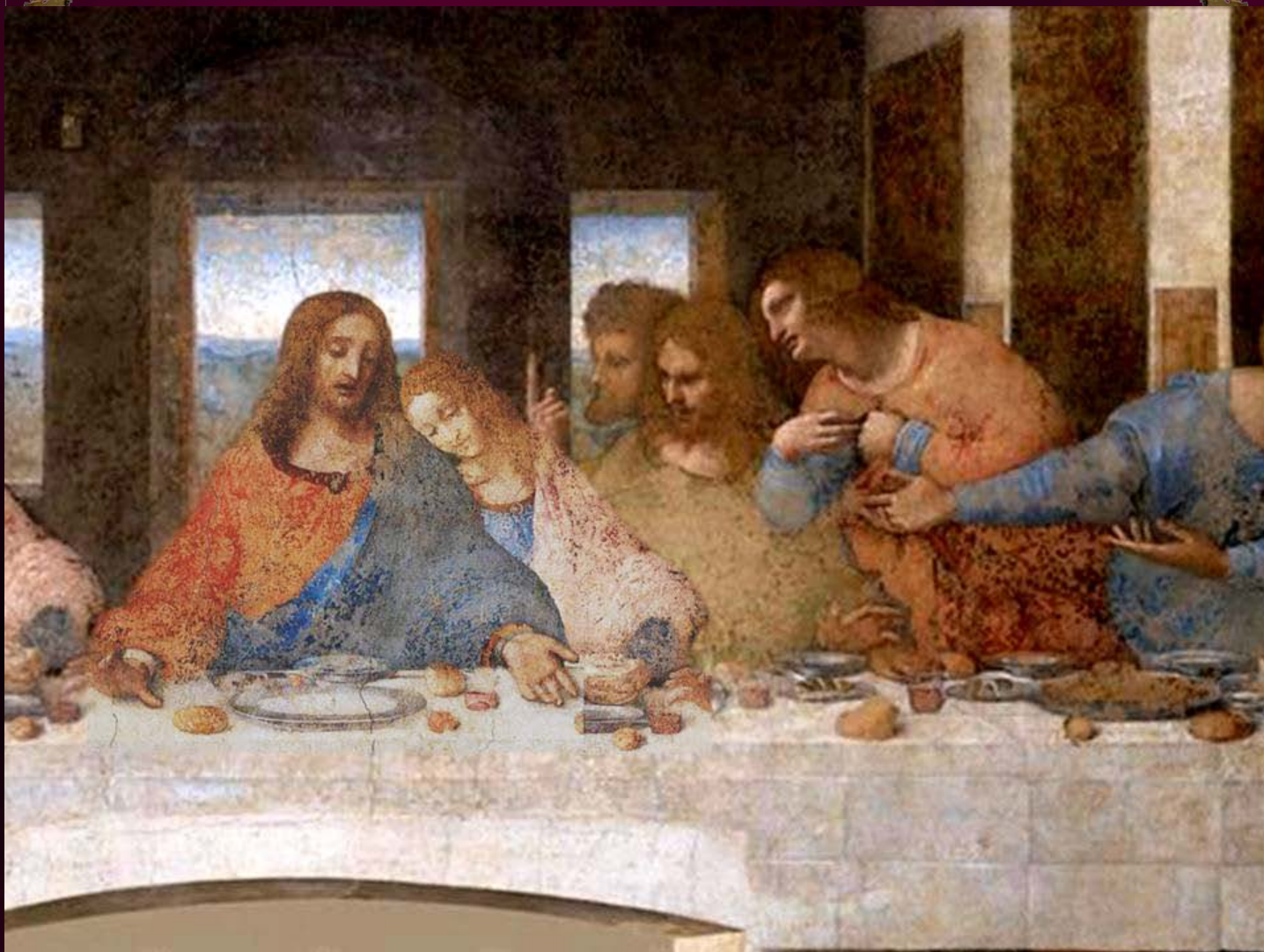


# THE JESUS SYMPOSIUM



Based on the December 4, 2009  
presentation by Pastor Dan Russell

First Christian Church  
Laramie, Wyoming







# The Jesus Symposium: *Marriage, DNA, and Tombs*

Dr. Ben Witherington III says, “We live in a Jesus haunted culture that is Biblically illiterate.” By this he notes that in our society, Jesus is all around; everyone knows the name. Our society is not, though, well informed on history, or the Bible. Because of this, claims about Jesus catch our attention, but we do not have the proper historical or literary foundation and tools to discern the validity of the claims.

The second Jesus Symposium was held on December 4, largely because the first Symposium became too unwieldy for a single evening. The initial discussion point (historical evidence for the marriage of Jesus) has come and gone over past couple decades. There was a preliminary splash in 1982 with Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln’s *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*; once the premise of their work was revealed to be a fraud perpetrated by Pierre Plantard, only but a few persistent and amateur sleuths continued to pursue it (see for example Laurence Gardner’s *Bloodline of the Holy Grail*). However, in 2003 Dan Brown published *The Da Vinci Code*, reaching a far broader audience, and reigniting (resurrecting?) the discussion. No doubt the popularity of the novel and subsequent movie opened the door for our second discussion point, Simcha Jacobovici’s *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*; after all, the tomb had been discovered in 1980, and only a 1996 BBC documentary had tried (and failed) to raise interest.

The main purpose of the second Jesus Symposium was to address the claim phrased as follows: We’ve found Jesus still in the tomb, and DNA evidence shows he was married to Mary Magdalene. The issue of a possible marriage is first discussed, followed by attention given to the tomb.

## Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene

John Dominic Crossan writes, “There is an ancient and venerable principle of biblical exegesis which states that if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it must be a camel in disguise.”<sup>1</sup> Coming from Crossan, the statement holds a great deal of irony (one wonders if it has been levied against him from time to time), but on its own is fitting for this discussion. Crossan’s point is that we oftentimes have a way of coming to conclusions which have no bearing in fact or evidence; some arguments even go so far as to infer that lack of evidence is evidence of conspiracy.

The claim that Jesus was married seems largely to be what I can an “argument from oddity”; it just *seems odd* to many that Jesus wasn’t married. The claim undergoes a kind of evolution: it is usually initially stated that it was rare for a Jewish man in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel to be unmarried, which in turn becomes “unheard of,” which has even been stated as “practically a sin,” moving on to “he wouldn’t be caught dead without a wife!” On the one hand, unmarried Jewish men certainly were not the majority; on the other hand, “rare” rarely means “never.” But suppositions aside, what is the historical data?

Jesus himself is quoted, in a 1<sup>st</sup> century document, as praising the celibate lifestyle (Matthew 19:10 – 12). Paul and John the Baptist were unmarried, with Paul also advocating celibacy if possible (see his discussion in 1 Corinthians 7). Perhaps most telling, history knows of at least two communities of celibates, the Essenes and Therapeutae. The 1<sup>st</sup> century historian Josephus numbers the Essenes at about 4,000 (as does Philo in *Every Good Man is Free*), and states specifically in *Jewish Antiquities* (18:21) that they do not marry. Pliny the Elder had already written of their celibacy in his *Natural History* (chapter 27). Philo writes about the other group, the Therapeutae, in *On the Contemplative Life*; indeed, he posits a connection with the Essenes (though modern scholars question it). This is all to say that being a single Jewish male was not unheard of.

What, then, is the historical basis for the suggestion Jesus was married? There is none. I am unaware of a single text among any religious or political group, for over a millennia (almost two), that claims Jesus was married. “Argument from Silence” is usually poor reasoning, but when the silence is deafening, there might a point to be made. No fringe Christian group, no Jewish rebuttal, no pagan or Roman source ever makes the claim or even suggests that Jesus was married. One could almost say it’s the one thing they seem to agree on.

Current preliminary research indicates that the earliest explicit assertion of Jesus being married comes from Jedediah M. Grant, an authority within the Latter-Day Saints, in 1853:

“The grand reason of the burst of public sentiment in anathemas upon Christ and his disciples, causing his crucifixion, was evidently based upon polygamy, according to the testimony of the philosophers who rose in that age. A belief in the doctrine of a plurality of wives caused the persecution of Jesus and his followers. We might almost think they were ‘Mormons.’”

*Journal of Discourses 1:346*

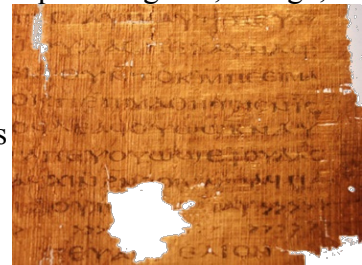
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<sup>1</sup> See his article in BeliefNet: <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Movies/The-Da-Vinci-Code/Why-Jesus-Didnt-Marry.aspx>

Grant claims as his source the 2<sup>nd</sup> century writer Celsus, whose works do not survive but is quoted at length by Origen. Celsus was quite vociferous in his attacks on Christianity and Jesus; he charges that Jesus was not born of a virgin, but rather was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier named Panthera.<sup>2</sup> He attributes Jesus' powers not to divinity, but rather having learned magical arts while in Egypt; claims of divinity are instead delusions of grandeur. Indeed, Celsus has no positive comments about Christians or Jesus at all. And yet despite this, contrary to Grant's vague reference, polygamy is one charge he doesn't make; no known quotation of his works makes any charge of plural marriage, singular marriage, or even the reason for his death (other than the ignominy of it).

It is sometimes suggested, though, that an *inference* to marriage can be made from later Gnostic writings; namely, the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Mary. As noted briefly in the first Symposium, Gnostics were a fringe group who came into being in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The irony of pointing to Gnostics for support is their tendency to elevate Jesus' divine nature even above orthodox Christianity, while likewise rejecting or minimizing his human nature (whereas orthodox Christians held a concurrent view of humanity, that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human).

The Gospel of Philip was written, at the earliest, in the mid-to-late 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Initial perusal of its texts could seem to indicate a great respect for the institution of marriage. The line that is usually noted as inferring Jesus' marriage is often quoted as follows: "Christ loved Mary more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her mouth." At first glance this might indeed seem to suggest a romantic relationship. The problem with the quote as given, though, is that we only have one copy of the Gospel of Philip—and it, quite literally, has holes in it. Said holes sometimes occur right at certain key words, and we do not know what the missing words originally were. A more accurate translation, then, is as follows (with the holes in the text represented by brackets): "Christ [ ] Mary more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her [ ]." In point of fact we do not know *where* the document claims Jesus kissed Mary; it could have been her mouth, but just as easily could have been her cheek, forehead, or hand. Furthermore, kissing—even on the mouth—was not necessarily erotic. It was a customary greeting (practiced even today in some cultures); Jesus himself was betrayed by Judas with a kiss. More importantly, other Gnostic documents portray such non-erotic kissing; note the Second Apocalypse of James, in which the recipient of the kiss (here, a man) is called "beloved;" the kiss is furthermore suggested to represent the passing of *secret knowledge*, the Gnostics' hope for salvation. This view of kissing, particularly between Jesus and Mary, fits better within the Gnostic context, as Mary is often represented as having received special teaching from Jesus.



The other text, the Gospel of Mary (also from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century), poses similar difficulties for the argument. The text does not explicitly identify its "Mary" as Mary Magdalene, though it would seem to make sense. It describes the relationship as follows: Peter says to Mary, "Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women." Such statement does not assert romance, but rather that Mary was the recipient of special teaching. Mary passes on to Peter and the others the teaching she received from Jesus, but Peter is represented as being skeptical of her claims. Levi defends her saying, "But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her?" This raises the question of how, in Gnostic theology, a woman is

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<sup>2</sup> The claim may be a play on words; the Greek word for "virgin" was *Parthenos*, very similar to the alleged father's name.

made “worthy”; one intriguing (and infuriating) answer is given in yet another document, the Gospel of Thomas. In this narrative Peter implores Jesus, “Let Mary leave us, because women are not worthy of life,” to which Jesus replies, “I will make her male in order that she also may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of heaven.” This is hardly a context for romantic relationship.

Neither of these texts states that Jesus was married, whether to Mary Magdalene or anyone. It does claim Jesus gave Mary special teaching, and this angered the disciples. However, this recurring theme in Gnostic literature could also be put into a different kind of historical context. Karen King of Harvard and Elaine Pagels of Princeton speak about such trends. Pagels is largely considered one of the leading scholarly experts on Gnosticism. Neither King nor Pagels has an interest in defending traditional Christianity; indeed, Pagels has stated she prefers the Gnostic texts.

King and Pagels note that said texts were not intended to be taken as historical (the writers of the documents are not suggesting these were actual events or discussions). Rather, the Gnostics are putting forth what I would call a “Polemic Metaphor” (“polemic” being defined as an “aggressive attack”). At the Forum of Grace Cathedral, commenting on a similar literary situation in the Gospel of Judas, Pagels says of its author, “He’s upset at the leaders of the Church, and he pictures them as the Apostles, because the leaders claim to be successors of the Apostles.” Dr. Philip Jenkins affirms this view, calling these documents tools used in “an era of intense literary warfare between orthodoxy and heresy.” Thus the heroes of mainstream Christianity were depicted as oafs (or outright evil), and sideline characters such as Mary Magdalene, or even the “villain” Judas Iscariot, are depicted as heroes. In this way the Gnostic community sought to represent their own struggle against orthodox Christianity: Peter’s bickering with Mary served as a metaphor for orthodox Christianity’s criticisms of Gnostic theology; one could almost say the Gnostics adopted Mary as their mascot. Jenkins also suggests that *if* one can make a case for sexual union between Jesus and Mary in these documents, it may more likely be a Gnostic exercise in metaphorically justifying their own (ritual) sexual practices. There is, however, no *historical* value in the texts.

Incidentally, how “sideline” a character was Mary Magdalene? That Magdalene is consistently suggested as Jesus’ wife is odd, given her minor role in the New Testament stories; indeed, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, would seem to be a much better candidate. As for Magdalene, we are told Jesus exorcised seven demons from her (Luke 8:2), and she was present at his crucifixion. Nothing else is known of her within Jesus’ earthly ministry. It is sometimes suggested that her presence at the crucifixion is implied evidence for marriage, but such arguments forget other women were there as well. Where Magdalene becomes significant, though, is the resurrection: in John’s Gospel it is Mary who receives the first post-resurrection appearance of Jesus, and proclaims it to the disciples. As such her importance ought not to be diminished; but this is no grounds on which to suggest a marriage or romantic relationship.

The bottom line is simply this: there is no evidence, *at all*, for a married Jesus. No ancient texts suggest it. Explicit claims of the 19<sup>th</sup> century come far too late to be historically reliable, and are likewise without historical substantiation. Inferences to marriage are drawn from misreading of later texts, which themselves are historically unreliable to begin with.

Very well; but if the textual and historical evidence is lacking, could recent DNA evidence make the case?

## **We found Jesus still in the tomb, and DNA evidence shows he was married to Mary Magdalene.**

In 2007 an upcoming documentary was beginning to make headlines: filmmakers claimed to have found the family tomb of Jesus—*with Jesus' bones still in it*. The documentary, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, aired on the Discovery Channel. It was directed by Simcha Jacobovici, and produced by James Cameron of *Terminator*, *Titanic*, and upcoming *Avatar* fame.

The documentary chronicles the re-exploration of a tomb that was initially discovered in 1980, in a neighborhood outside of ancient Jerusalem known as Talpiot. It was found by accident; a construction crew was preparing to build an apartment complex, and stumbled across a buried tomb. Archaeologists were called in to examine the tomb, and inside found several skeletons; they likewise found objects known as ossuaries.

Ossuaries reflect a practice sometimes referred to as “second burial.” Sometimes bodies would be placed in a tomb with the intension of allowing decomposition. One year later, the remaining bones would be placed in a small box known as an ossuary. We find this practiced in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel, squarely in the time of Jesus, making this an authentic 1<sup>st</sup> century tomb.



Within the tomb (known as the Talpiot Tomb), archaeologists found ten ossuaries, six of which had inscriptions:

- Jesus son of Joseph
- Judah son of Jesus
- Mary (or more specifically Maria, a common Latinized form)
- Mariamne (a variant of Mary)
- Jose
- Matthew (specifically, Matia)

The name “Jesus son of Joseph” naturally jumps out, but two other names were deemed significant as well. “Jose,” a variant of Joseph, is the nickname given in Mark 6:3 to one of Jesus’ brothers; Mariamne was claimed to be another form of Mary Magdalene’s name.

The filmmakers compared the DNA of two remains, belonging to Jesus and Mariamne. In a press conference, Jacobovici announced:

“If the DNA matched, that would mean that this Jesus and that Mary were brother and sister, or mother and son; they could not be husband and wife, so the Mariamne match [matching Mariamne’s name to Mary Magdalene; see below] would not matter. We held our breath, you’ll see it in the film because we shot it as it happened—the DNA did not match. The forensic archaeologist concluded that they must be husband and wife.”

Filmmakers also brought in a statistician, Dr. Andrey Feuerverger, who concluded that the odds of this *not* being the tomb of the Biblical Jesus were, at the most conservative, 600-to-1; the odds could go as high as a million-to-one. With all this in mind, the conclusions and reasoning sound very compelling. However, some proper context needs to be given.



There are questions about three of the names. The Mariamne and Jose inscriptions were actually minor variants of the names (and thus connections) being claimed. The Jose name is more accurately Josah; indeed, careful listening of the documentary reveals the Jose/Josah name used interchangeably by the filmmakers. These are perhaps minor variants; but potentially most problematic is that the name *Jesus* is in question—and without Jesus, the entire claim falls apart. In the documentary, Dr. Frank Moore Cross of Harvard concludes the name is Jesus, but others are unsure, and the original archaeologists filed their report with a question mark by the name. However, for the sake of argument the names will be granted.

Each of the names was among the most common in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism. Twenty-five percent of all women were named Mary; some figures suggest that inclusion of the variants (such as Mariamne) brings the number to almost fifty percent. The documentary gives certain rankings for the men's names, but these were based on older data; currently, the men's names are all within the "Top 10" most common of the day. Each name held a connection to the Hasmoneans, a family from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. important to Jewish history. According to the most recent data, Joseph was the second most common name, Judah the fourth, and Matthew the ninth. Though Jose was rare, it was a variant (or nickname) of Joseph, and so still qualifies as popular. Jesus was the sixth most common; the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish historian Josephus records twenty-one different men by the name, ten of whom would have been alive during the same period as the Jesus of the Bible. Likewise, we have twenty-two inscribed ossuaries with the name. Such commonality was why experts in 1980 concluded the tomb held no Biblical significance.

Jacobovici himself concedes the point, with a caveat (see below). In the documentary, statistician Dr. Feuerverger asserts that, while Jesus and Joseph were common names, a Jesus *son of* Joseph would have been much more rare. Others disagree; Gary Habermas suggests that in Jerusalem alone, 1,000 such men would have been known during the age of ossuary burial; Darrell Bock posits 1,500 in the region—*with a Mary as mother*. Jacobovici's response in such areas is as follows: finding a tomb with the names John, Paul and George is one thing—find "Ringo," though, and you've got the Beatles. Who among the inscriptions qualifies as "Ringo?" The claim is made that Mariamne is another form of Mary Magdalene's name.

On what basis is such a claim made? Nowhere in the 1<sup>st</sup> century is Magdalene known by this name. Instead, the connection is based on a document known as the Acts of Philip, a 4<sup>th</sup> century writing. However, only one copy of the document exists, and it dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century—a one thousand year gap. The name in the document is slightly different from the name on the ossuary, and the character in the document is not specifically identified as Mary Magdalene.<sup>3</sup> In the document she is neither married nor a mother; and perhaps most telling, the document advocates celibacy. This is hardly stunning evidence of a connection, particularly one related to marriage. Dr. James Tabor, a scholar associated with the documentary, has since claimed that he can make the connection between the names as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, though Dr. Craig Evans disagrees. Even more interesting, Jacobovici has declared in many interviews that the Mariamne/Mary Magdalene connection was commonly known to scholars; yet the book describes Tabor's surprise when Jacobovici, having done a Google search, clues him in: "He

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<sup>3</sup> It was François Bovon who initially connected the Mary of the document with Magdalene, and is present in the documentary. However, since its airing, Bovon has reevaluated his position. In a letter to the Society of Biblical Literature he writes, "I do not believe that Mariamne is the real name of Mary of Magdalene," though he notes the portrayal of Mariamne fits with other Gnostic literature. See his letter: <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=656>

nearly fell off his stool. No exaggeration.” Regardless, there is no 1<sup>st</sup> century connection; in the earliest records, Mary Magdalene is not known as Mariamne.

In regards to the DNA, the actual bones of the ossuaries were reburied (in keeping with local Jewish customs) in 1980. DNA testing was done on fragments of bones still inside the ossuaries. However, records show that the Mariamne ossuary contained remains from two different sets of bones. Which set belonged to the name on the inscription, and which set was tested, cannot be known. Furthermore, the DNA testing was mitochondrial; results showed only that the two remains were not related on their mother’s side. The two could have been cousins, an uncle, or even father and daughter; a number of familial links are possible. As there were no records in the tomb, we cannot know their relationship.

On the night of the initial airing, the documentary was followed with another program hosted by Ted Koppel, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus, a Critical Look*. Though only given six days preparation, Koppel was nonetheless able to obtain retractions from three figures quoted in the documentary (other retractions later became commonplace). One such retraction was from Dr. Carney Matheson from the Lakehead University Paleo-DNA Laboratory, the same man Jacobovici above claims concluded the two must be husband and wife:

“There is a statement in the film that has been taken out of context. While marriage is a possibility, other relationships like father and daughter, paternal cousins, sister-in-law or indeed two unrelated individuals [are also possible]...My conclusion is that they are not maternally related. You cannot genetically test for marriage.”

As for the statistics, much has been made of it since the documentary aired. Other statisticians question the numbers and methods, and Dr. Feuerverger has since given his own retraction:

“It is not in the purview of statistics to conclude whether or not this tomb site is that of the New Testament family. Any such conclusion much more rightfully belongs to the purview of biblical historical scholars who are in a much better position to assess the assumptions entering into the computations. The role of statistics here is primarily to attempt to assess the odds of an equally (or more) ‘compelling’ cluster of names arising purely by chance under certain random sampling assumptions and under certain historical assumptions. In this respect I now believe that I should not assert any conclusions connecting this tomb with any hypothetical one of the NT family.”

Research into the methods used by Dr. Feuerverger reveal that certain assumptions were made to arrive at the statistical conclusions. The first assumption is that the Biblical Jesus *did* have an ossuary, and it *is* among the ossuaries we’ve found. This is a massive assumption; even discounting resurrection, there were other forms of burial in use at the time. Furthermore, criminals were not typically allowed burial, and victims of crucifixion were seen as such; this is why, in the New Testament accounts, an outsider named Joseph of Arimathea needs to procure special permission from Pontius Pilate to bury Jesus.

Other assumptions made are as follows:

- The Biblical Mary Magdalene is the wife of the Biblical Jesus
- The Talpiot Mariamne is the wife of the Talpiot Jesus
- Talpiot Mary is the mother of the Talpiot Jesus
- The Talpiot Jose is the brother of the Talpiot Jesus

These are sweeping assumptions which have no basis. The only familial connection between two ossuaries known with any degree of certainty is Judah and Jesus. Rather than being brothers, Jose might be the same Joseph who fathered the Talpiot Jesus (although Simcha and Pellegrino dismiss this possibility in the book). We do not know that Talpiot Mary was the mother of any of the men in the tomb. We do not even know these inscribed ossuaries represent an immediate family; they could span up to three or four generations. Any such assumptions are based on not-so idle speculation; indeed, based on these assumptions I'm surprised the statistics weren't *higher*—they seem to be just one step short of merely assuming their entire case.

At the same time, there is one assumption they did not make: the Matthew ossuary is the anomaly of the group. The documentary states, "Because Feuerwerker takes a conservative approach he eliminates Matia altogether, since he is not a known member of Jesus' immediate family." One would think, though, that the presence of an anomaly would affect the final statistical outcome. Even more odd, earlier in the documentary much was made of this name as a natural inclusion to the family. Tabor notes that the lineage of Jesus given in Luke's Gospel (which he identifies as Mary's, a common and traditional view) lists several Matthews; he suggests that a Matthew in the family is almost to be expected, "one more congruence and fitting together." Yet when it comes times for the statistics, Matthew is removed completely; is this to keep the anomaly from negatively affecting the final odds? In all it suggests the filmmakers arranged the numbers to their favor; indeed, this is Dr. William Dever's assessment when he says, "it seems to me the conclusions are already drawn in the beginning."

There are some other things to keep in mind as well. The inscriptions on the ossuaries are often given in different languages (Aramaic and Greek); though the documentary seeks to explain this, members of an immediate family most likely would have seen uniform inscriptions. Noted above were the two sets of remains in the Mariamne ossuary; additionally, three dozen skeletons were found in the tomb. We do not know their relationship, or the identity of the unmarked ossuaries. The documentary gives no indication that these problems were taken into consideration.

Furthermore, the documentary often quotes experts out of context, giving rise to the many retractions. Jacobovici grants that some have changed their mind, though he does not ever seem to concede that they were quoted improperly. Jacobovici himself comes across as an interesting fellow. He tends to initiate interviews dispassionately: he is only a reporter, after all; he is not, he insists, trying to prove anything. Indeed, he is happy for the scholars, historians, and archaeologists to weigh in. Yet when such experts do precisely that and come to opposing conclusions, he in turn detracts them, at one point calling them "shoot from the hip scholars."<sup>4</sup> In an interview with Michael Coren, he suggests that the myriad of retractions have come about due to pressure from the media; at one point in the interview he even infers anti-Semitism as the cause.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bib-arch.org/debates/jesus-tomb-11.asp>; the irony of his response is he laments being attacked personally while simultaneously attacking others personally. He can be seen doing the same in the Michael Coren interview.

The one scholar in his corner, James Tabor, is also a curious fellow. As it turns out, this is not the first time Tabor has found the tomb of Jesus: the book for which he is best known, *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity* (released April 2006), cites its location as being just north of Tsfat in Galilee. Make no mistake, though: Tabor is no Acharya S (see the first Jesus Symposium); he is a qualified academic, and aspects of *The Jesus Dynasty* (though certainly not the conclusions) are praised by both Bock and Evans. He thus far appears to be the only expert who has not made a retraction on the tomb, and blogs periodically on the topic. In such writings he maintains a certain distance from the subject, although his complaints about predetermined conclusions unwittingly smacks of a certain irony given some of the detractions of the documentary. Tabor himself has a much more sober view of the statistical approach; in a recent blog he wrote:

“I do not think it is possible to construct any meaningful *statistical* model that will tell us whether this tomb, or any other, might be the hypothetical Jesus of Nazareth family tomb. There are simply too many variables and no one could account for them all, or even anticipate them.”<sup>5</sup> [emphasis his]

Credentials aside, though, Tabor is in the minority as pertains to the identification of the Talpiot Tomb as belonging to the Jesus of the Bible.

The original archaeologists who examined the tomb were unanimous that this was not the tomb of the Biblical Jesus; in point of fact very few archaeologists give the claim credence. Indeed, experts have been forthright in their criticism of the claim. Joe Zias, Curator of Archaeology at the Israeli Antiquities authority, called the documentary a “hyped-up film which is intellectually and scientifically dishonest.” William Dever was one of the guests on Koppel’s follow-up program, along with Dr. Jonathan Reed. Dever, himself an archaeologist with experience in Middle Eastern digs, first clarified his religious position by saying:

“I’m certainly not trying to defend the Christian tradition, I’m not a believer...I’ve no dog in this fight. I’m trying to be a good scholar and an honest historian...”

The irony of Dever is that of all the detractors, he seems to be the most angry about the conclusions and methods used, noting, “For me it represents the worst kind of archaeology...” Jonathan Reed assessed the documentary by saying, “It’s what I would call archaeo-porn. It’s very exciting, it’s titillating, you want to watch it, but deep down you know it’s wrong.”

There is a wide diversity of scholarship weighing in on the issue, and with the exception of Tabor, they are almost unanimous. Bock notes this by writing:

“In fact, what is amazing about this find is that scholars of every stripe—conservative Christians, liberal Christians, believers in Judaism, and secular Jewish scholars—agreed en masse that the special missed the mark and hadn’t come close to making its case... This special did something very few historical claims about Jesus have managed to do: it brought almost unanimous agreement in the guild across all kinds of ideological and religious lines.”

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<sup>5</sup> See his November 8, 2009 entry here: <http://jamestabor.com/blog/>

Finally, there are a few logical problems with the claim. The first Symposium demonstrated resurrection as one of the earliest Christian claims. If Jesus' tomb and body were readily available *and marked* in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, though, Christianity would have never managed to get off the ground. The earliest Christians proclaimed "Jesus is risen"; detractors would merely needed to have responded, "No, the body is right here."

Despite these problems, the tomb continues to make waves. In January 2008, scholars and archaeologists attended the "Third Princeton Theological Seminary Symposium on Jewish Views of the Afterlife and Burial Practices in Second Temple Judaism: Evaluating the Talpiot Tomb in Context." An article quoted Jacobovici as proclaiming the advent of the Symposium a victory for his work: "we feel totally vindicated." In response to this, an open letter of protest was released, signed by fifteen of the participants. Among other things they noted:

"...we wish to protest the misrepresentation of the conference proceedings in the media, and make it clear that the majority of scholars in attendance—including all of the archaeologists and epigraphers who presented papers relating to the tomb—either reject the identification of the Talpiot tomb as belonging to Jesus' family or find this claim highly speculative."

Princeton Theological Seminary itself posted a like statement:

"Unfortunately, many of the initial reports in the press following the symposium gave almost the exact opposite impression, stating, instead, that the conference proceedings gave credence to the identification of the Talpiot tomb with a putative family tomb of Jesus of Nazareth. As is abundantly clear from the statements to the contrary that have been issued since the symposium by many of the participants, such representations are patently false and blatantly misrepresent the spirit and scholarly content of the deliberations."<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, the drama continues. The Biblical Archaeology Review site has posted several comments from participants; perusal of said comments indicates the event (and press coverage) was a lively one.<sup>7</sup> Not since Indiana Jones has archaeology been seen as so dramatic, no doubt to the dismay of many serious archaeologists.

A survey of the second Jesus Symposium audience showed unfamiliarity with the 2007 documentary, and with good reason. Had there been any merit to the claim, it would have shaken Christianity to its core: Jesus was *not* Resurrected. The Apostle Paul himself gave grounds for the foundation of the movement in 1 Corinthians 15:14, writing "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." This verse is not offered so much as Scripture as a 1<sup>st</sup> century understanding of the historicity of the resurrection among the earliest Christians. It demonstrates their certainty that resurrection was not just a spiritual truth, but an historical event—something they believed really happened. If the claim of a body could be made, at the very least Christians would need to rethink resurrection, or perhaps the ascension; at most, though, it could dismantle the system altogether. However, there is a reason for the

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<sup>6</sup> The statement can be found here: <http://www.ptsem.edu/NEWS/talpiottombsymposium.php>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bib-arch.org/debates/jesus-tomb-01.asp>

unfamiliarity with the claim: despite a couple brief media flurries, there was no basis to substantiate continued discussion on the matter among the broader populace.

At the risk of leaving the academic setting, I quote Proverbs 18:17, which says, “The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.” To be fair, Jacobovici has made a very interesting documentary, with many good elements to it. Rediscovery and re-exploration of the tomb was captivating, and watching the CSI-like DNA process held interest as well. At first glance, the argument does seem compelling. It is not until experts, and not just Christians, give their critique that the fatal shortcomings are revealed.

This is a classic example of why it is important for Christians to approach such questions in a critical manner. It is, firstly, a matter of intellectual honesty—we need to be honest with the world. It was for this reason many non-Christians were quoted in this Symposium, to show that the response was not merely Christians doing mental gymnastics to arrive at certain far-fetched rebuttal conclusions. These are real-world facts and sciences. What I have come to learn in such critical interactions is that there is nothing to be afraid of; time and again, Christianity has survived these sorts of attacks and questions. We are on good footing, not just as a faith, but as a faith based in the real world.

## Addendum: What if Jesus *Had* Been Married?

The theological implication of finding Jesus' bones has been briefly noted above: Christians would have to rethink the nature of the resurrection, or at least the historicity of the ascension. But what of the other conversation: what if Jesus had been married?

Marriage proposals of Jesus (no pun intended?) always seem to rest, ultimately, on an additional factor unrealistic for the time: the conspiracy, by a (not yet existent) monolithic Church, to cover up the fact. Which raises the question, why would they? Such conspiracies posit the desire for a male-dominated power structure, yet we've already seen the alternative's view of women above. History likewise shows early Christianity *elevating* the role of women compared to neighboring cultures and faiths.<sup>8</sup> If the early Church had concocted a ruse to erase Mary Magdalene's role from history, why not eradicate mention of her altogether in the canonical Gospels, or other examples of Jesus' progressive views towards women? And quite frankly, were the Christians—early *or* modern—really *that good* at accomplishing such machinations?

Following the media attention of *The Da Vinci Code*, several conservative Evangelical scholars were asked, on varying occasions, what would change if Jesus were married. Noted scholars such as Darrell Bock, Craig Blomberg, Jeffrey Bingham, Ben Witherington, Gary Habermas, and Craig Evans have each noted that nothing fundamental to Christianity or Christ would change if we were to learn Jesus had taken a wife during his time on earth. It would change our understanding of the events of his life, but not so much our understanding of theology. Orthodox Christianity has always acknowledged simultaneous attributes of divinity and humanity in Jesus; marriage would be seen as an extension of his humanity. It would raise perhaps questions of why he chose one particular woman over others. And were he to have bore children, it might pose the very interesting question of divine attributes being passed down through a bloodline. But again, objections to Jesus' marriage should rest solely on lacking historical evidence, not a desperate attempt to retain a seemingly fragile theological system.

What became of the family Jesus did have? James, (half) brother of Jesus, played a very important role in the early church, demonstrating authority even over the Apostle Paul. 1 Corinthians 9:5 alludes to Jesus' other brothers (and their wives) having become traveling evangelists. Perhaps even more interesting is the attention given them in later history. Several early church historians could account for the family of Jesus and their descendents down through grandchildren and great grandchildren (for example, Judah Kyriakos, great grandson of Jude).<sup>9</sup>

This is the interest given Jesus' extended family; surely a wife and offspring would have been even more venerated. But history knows no such claims, neither stated nor inferred. From an historical viewpoint, no claim can be viably made or substantiated.

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<sup>8</sup> See especially Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*, particularly chapter 5, "The Role of Women in Christian Growth."

<sup>9</sup> See Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, Epiphanius' *Panarion*, and quotations of Hegesippus.

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