

# Nine Facts That Disprove the Claims About The Lost Tomb of Jesus

By Dr. John Ankerberg and Dillon Burroughs

1. Jesus Family Tomb would not have been in Jerusalem, but Nazareth.
2. If this is the Family Tomb of Jesus, why does it contain so many non-family members?
3. The statistical analysis concerning Jesus is highly exaggerated. The name “Jesus” was a popular name in the first century. It has been found in 98 other tombs and on 21 other ossuaries.
4. The statistics are also distorted regarding Mary of Magdalene.
5. The DNA evidence is irrelevant and untrustworthy.
6. There is no historical evidence that Jesus was ever married or had a child.
7. There is no historical evidence that connects Mariamne and Mary Magdalene.
8. The trouble with James, the brother of Jesus, is history says he was buried alone in another tomb.
9. There is multiple historical attestation that both Christians and non-Christians knew where the tomb of Jesus was, and that it was found empty on the third day.

On February 26, 2007, filmmakers and researchers unveiled two ancient stone boxes they claim may have once contained the remains of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. On Sunday, March 4, 2007, “The Lost Tomb of Jesus,” produced by Oscar-winning director James Cameron aired nationwide on the Discovery Channel. A related book by Simcha and Charles Pellegrino entitled *The Jesus Family Tomb*:

*The Discovery, the Investigation, and the Evidence That Could Change History* (Harper Collins) released the day of the press conference to coordinate with the special.

These researchers argue that 10 small caskets discovered in 1980 in a Jerusalem suburb may have held the bones of Jesus and his family. They even claim that one of the caskets bears the title, “Judah, son of Jesus,” hinting that Jesus may have had a son. But what truth can be found in this story? This is not a question of what are the chances of finding another tomb in the Jerusalem area with these same names but what are the chances of the people in this tomb not being the biblical family of Jesus?

The truth is that several unsupportable assumptions have been made to provide maximum hype for the book and television event. In an effort to bring out facts which disprove the major assumptions of the film and the book, we have provided the following nine facts that disprove The Family Tomb of Jesus with the help of some of our friends who serve as professors and experts on Christianity in today's universities and graduate institutions.

### **1. Jesus Family Tomb Would Not Have Been in Jerusalem, but Nazareth.**

Dr. Darrell Bock, research professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, asks, "How did his family have the time in the aftermath of his death to buy the tomb space, while also pulling off a stealing of the body and continue to preach that Jesus was raised BODILY, not merely spiritually?"

"The bodily part of this resurrection is key because in Judaism when there was a belief in resurrection it was a belief in a bodily resurrection, a redemption that redeemed the full scope of what God had created. If one reads 2 Maccabees 7, one will see the martyrdom of the third son of seven executed who declares that they can mutilate his tongue and hands for defending the law, because God will give them back to him one day.

"To lack a bodily resurrection teaching is to teach in distinction from what the earliest church had received as a key element of the hope that Jesus left his followers, a hope that itself was rooted in Jewish precedent. Paul, our earliest witness to testify to this in writings we possess, was a former Pharisee who held to a physical resurrection as 1 Corinthians 15 also makes clear. Paul matches the Maccabean picture noted above. He explicitly denies an approach that accepts only a spiritual resurrection."

### **2. If This Is the Family Tomb of Jesus, Why Does It Contain so Many Non-Family Members?**

Jesus was born in Bethlehem and his family lived in Nazareth. It would be strange enough for his family to be buried together in Jerusalem. Even stranger, why would the family tomb include several non-family members? There is not a shred of historical evidence to account for this inconsistency. For example, Matthew and Judah are not mentioned in the four Gospels as members of Jesus' family.

The word "Jesus" in the inscription is unclear and may read, "Hanun" according to Stephen Pfann, President of Jerusalem's University of the Holy Land, who appeared in the movie. "Also, Jesus' ossuary was very plain compared to the others found in the cave. The idea that the originator of a religion would end up in such a plain ossuary as compared to the others found in the cave is kind of telling as to whether this is really potentially the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth or not." Further only 6 of the 10 ossuaries in the Talpiot tomb were inscribed - 4 were not. In addition, Mariamne is not part of Jesus' family in the New Testament, and we shall see there is no historical evidence equating Mariamne with Mary Magdalene. There is also not a shred of historical evidence that Jesus and Mary were married or had a son by the name of Judah. Finally, Jose is probably not Jesus' brother because then his ossuary would have read, "Jose, son of Joseph" just like Jesus'.

On the contrary, the Israeli archeologist who actually discovered the ancient burial caves 27 years ago says there is absolutely no proof to Cameron's outlandish claims. What's more, the archeologist says that Cameron and his team are merely trying to profit by attacking a central tenet of the Christian faith that Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day and that his body has never been discovered.

"The claim that the burial site [of Jesus] has been found is not based on any proof, and is only an attempt to sell," says Israeli archeologist Professor Amos Kloner." A similar film was released 11 years ago, and Kloner said that this current film was merely a renewed effort to create controversy in the Christian world in order to make a bigger profit. He added, "I refute all their claims and efforts to waken a renewed interest in the findings. With all due respect, they are not archeologists."

### **3. The Statistical Analysis Concerning Jesus Is Highly Exaggerated. The Name "Jesus" Was a Popular Name in the First Century. It Has Been Found in 99 Other Tombs and on 22 Other Ossuaries.**

The name Jesus was a popular first century name, discovered on 121 other tombs and ossuaries during this time period. According to the details in a famous catalogue of ossuary names that has been out since 2002 with the information known about this locale since c. 1980, we find: Out of a total number of 2,625 males, these are the figures for the ten most popular male names among Palestinian Jews. The first figure is the total number of

occurrences, while the second is the number of occurrences specifically on ossuaries.

- 1 Simon/Simeon 243 59
- 2 Joseph 218 45
- 3 Eleazar 166 29
- 4 Judah 164 44
- 5 John/Yohanan 122 25
- 6 Jesus 99 22
- 7 Hananiah 82 18
- 8 Jonathan 71 14
- 9 Matthew 62 17
- 10 Manaen/Menahem 42 44

This indicates that of all existing tombs and ossuaries of the period, that there is nearly a 1 in 20 (4.6%) chance that any male tomb would have the name Jesus on it. Yet according to the film's statistics, the evidence is 600 to 1 in favor of their story being true.

This is one of the most exaggerated portions of the program. The individual compiling the statistics, Andrey Feuerverger, has gone on record to state: 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. The interpretation of the computation should be that it is estimating the probability of there having been another family at the time whose tomb this might be, under certain specified assumptions.

But in order to begin any true calculation, we need to know for sure the names mentioned are truly members of Jesus' family as described in the Gospels. In the end, the stats are only as good as the assumptions used to construct them.

#### **4. The Statistics Are Also Distorted regarding Mary of Magdalene.**

This inscription on this ossuary in the tomb is written in Greek and literally says "Mariamene e Mara." The film wrongly claims this should be translated, "Mary, known as the Master." But Mariamene should be translated "Mary", but Mara in Greek is translated "Martha" as the Discovery Channel's own expert, L.Y. Rahmani explains on their own website. So where did they come up with the translation, "Mary, known as the Master" which they linked later to Mary Magdalene? You get that only if the words are in Aramaic. But remember, the inscription is in Greek, not Aramaic and cannot be translated that way. Therefore, this ossuary probably contains the remains of two women, named Mary and Martha. It was a common Jewish practice for multiple generations to be placed in one bone box.

The name Mariamne, a variation of Maria, was one of the most common names of the time.

According to the details on names provided by Prof Richard Bauckham of St. Andrews and sourced in a famous catalogue of ossuary names that has been out since 2002 with the information known about this locale since c. 1980, we find: For women, we have a total of 328 occurrences (women's names are much less often recorded than men's), and figures for the 4 most popular names are thus:

- 1 Mary/Mariamne 70 42
- 2 Salome 58 41
- 3 Shelamzion 24 19
- 4 Martha 20 17

The true statistics reveal that Mary was the most common name on tombs during this time period. 21% of Jewish women were called Mariamne (Mary). This is hardly strong evidence suggesting Mary as the Mary Magdalene of the New Testament.

#### **5. The DNA Evidence Is Irrelevant and Untrustworthy.**

First, why was DNA testing not done on all the ossuaries in the cave but just on two? If the DNA of three or four of the bone boxes did not match, then this would destroy the whole theory.

Second, in the film, there is a DNA test showing that Mariamne and Jesus' DNA residues do not match. Based on that one shred of evidence, the

researchers claim the couple was married and that this couple must be Jesus and Mary Magdalene. With how many women in Judea would Jesus' DNA not match? Even women named Mariamne? This proves nothing. It only states the obvious, that the two were not related, nothing more. Even this DNA evidence is scientifically shaky.

Dr. Jim Tabor, a professor involved in the special, answered in an interview, "No one had ever contacted a statistician or a DNA person. There's a sense in which one reason he did this is that I wasn't thinking of doing this, and the DNA guy wasn't thinking about it—it almost needed a single person to say 'This is what I want to do.' Then it just began to skyrocket because Cameron came in and it became high profile and that gave us the budget. If we were just talking about one subject, the names, then I think it would be correct that we would not say let's have a documentary on that—we'd publish first.

The publicity of it all was then picked up by Discovery, but that's their decision—they've taken a lot of heat for it. I don't want to be critical of that—I'm not paid by them in any way. I and about four other people were brought in as consultants—Shimon Gibson for archaeology, me for history, etc.

Nobody was paid—they paid our expenses, but no stipends and we have no stake in the film."

According to Dr. Witherington, "There is no independent DNA control sample to compare to what was garnered from the bones in this tomb. By this I mean that the most the DNA evidence can show is that several of these folks are inter-related. Big deal. We would need an independent control sample from some member of Jesus' family to confirm that these were members of Jesus' family. We do not have that at all. In addition mitochondrial DNA does not reveal genetic coding or XY chromosome make up anyway. They would need nuclear DNA for that in any case. So the DNA stuff is probably thrown in to make this look more like a real scientific fact."

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Flyer available for PDF download at [www.johnankerberg.org](http://www.johnankerberg.org)

## **6. There Is No Historical Evidence That Jesus Was Ever Married or Had a Child.**

The argument that Jesus was married or had a child comes solely from silence. No New Testament document speaks of such relationships, nor do Christian or secular writings from the early centuries of Christianity. The closest document is the apocryphal Gospel of Philip, written approximately 275 A.D., written neither by the apostle nor in the time period of the New Testament. As our book *The Da Vinci Code Controversy 10* notes, even the passage used to suggest a married Jesus is used grossly out of context.

## **7. There Is No Historical Evidence That Connects Mariamne and Mary Magdalene.**

To get Mariamne to match Mary Magdalene rather than one of numerous other Mary's, a researcher would be required to find historical information that notes such a connection. But there is none. The movie's assumption was based on the unhistorical assumption of François Bovon concerning the Acts of Philip written in the fourth century. According to one report:

François Bovon of Harvard was brought in to make the critical link between the name Mariamne and Mary Magdalene. This link is made possible by the Acts of Philip and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, as this is a variant Greek name for Mary. Now, in fact, things are more complicated. The inscription actually reads Mariaamnou, a diminutive of Mariamnon. It is the only inscription in Greek out of the six found in the cave. All he did was to verify that such a link exists between the fourth century text and Mary Magdalene. The way the special used experts was to ask them to verify points of fact to lay the ground work for the speculation but did not follow up to ask them what they thought of the actual hypothesis.

This was done with Frank Moore Cross of Harvard, who simply confirms the inscriptions read the now well publicized names on the ossuaries.

In the end, there is not a shred of historical evidence in the first four centuries to prove that Mary Magdalene should be equated with the Mariamne found in the Talpiot tomb. This is a major blow to the entire theory of the film.

## **8. The Trouble with James, the Brother of Jesus, Is History Says He Was Buried Alone in Another Tomb.**

Eusebius, Christianity's earliest historian (fourth century), recorded that there had been a tomb of James the Just, the brother of Jesus, known in Jerusalem since New Testament times. Its location was near the Temple mount and had an honoric stele next to it. The spot was known as a pilgrimage site for many Christians.

“It was apparently a single tomb, with no other holy family members mentioned nor any other ossuaries in that place,” states Dr. Witherington. “The locality and singularity of this tradition rules out a family tomb in Talpiot. Christians would not have been making pilgrimage to the tomb if they believed Jesus’ bones were in it—that would have contradicted and violated their faith, but the bones of holy James were another matter. They were consider sacred relics.”

This is clearly not in Talpiot, and remember to claim there is a Talpiot family tomb means that Jesus would have been buried there long before James was martyred in A.D. 62. In other words, the James tradition contradicts the Talpiot tomb both in locale and in substance. James is buried alone, in a completely different place.

Further, the supposed missing ossuary - assumed to be the James ossuary - couldn't have been found in the Talpiot Tomb in 1980 because it was photographed in the home Oded Golan in the 1970's.

The film makers were also told that the tenth ossuary found in the Talpiot tomb was never missing when it was discovered it was a blank ossuary having neither ornamentation nor inscription. Therefore it was not cataloged with the other nine, but stored in Israel. So there never was a mystery about the tenth ossuary, however one concocted for the show but this was false. In addition, the tenth ossuary does not measure the same dimensions as the James bone box, proving that the James ossuary did not come from, and should not be placed in the Talpiot tomb.

## **9. There Is Multiple Historical Attestation That Both Christians and Non-Christians Knew Where the Tomb of Jesus Was, and That It Was Found Empty on the Third Day.**



Dr. Ben Witherington, professor of New Testament at Asbury Seminary and author of *What Have They Done with Jesus?*, notes: “By all ancient accounts, the tomb of Jesus was empty—even the Jewish and Roman authorities acknowledged this. Now it takes a year for the flesh to desiccate, and then you put the man’s bones in an ossuary. But Jesus’ body was long gone from Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb well before then. Are we really to believe it was moved to another tomb, decayed, and then was put in an ossuary? Its not likely. “Implicitly you must accuse James, Peter and John (mentioned in Galatians 1-2 in our earliest New Testament document from 49 A.D.) of fraud and coverup. Are we really to believe that they knew Jesus didn’t rise bodily from the dead but perpetrated a fraudulent religion, for which they and others were prepared to die? Did they really hide the body of Jesus in another tomb? We need to remember that the James in question is Jesus’ brother, who certainly would have known about a family tomb. This frankly is impossible for me to believe.”

"Although we are only at an early point in the research, the consensus so far has been that this tomb is not Jesus' burial site," says Dr. Gary Habermas, Distinguished Professor and Chair of the Dept. of Philosophy and Theology at Liberty University.

Dr. Stephen Pfann, a biblical scholar at the University of the Holy Land in Jerusalem who was interviewed in the documentary, said the film’s hypothesis holds little weight.

“I don’t think that Christians are going to buy into this,” he said. “But skeptics, in general, would like to see something that pokes holes into the story that so many people hold dear.”

Dr. Pfann is even unsure that the name “Jesus” on the caskets was read correctly. He thinks it’s more likely the name “Hanun.” Ancient Semitic script is notoriously difficult to decipher.

William Dever, an expert on near eastern archaeology and anthropology, who has worked with Israeli archeologists for five decades, said specialists have known about the ossuaries for years. “The fact that it’s been ignored tells you something.... It [the film] would be amusing if it didn’t mislead so many people.”

Should we be concerned about The Lost Tomb of Jesus? Yes. As Christians, we should be bothered that others would speak of the Jesus we worship as anything less than God's divine Son. But should we be worried? No. The evidence fails to prove anything other than the fact that controversy about Jesus continues to draw attention.

Our challenge should be to know the truth of God's Word and to continue to communicate it to others through our actions and words. As Dr. Bock noted, "Hopefully our times have not slid to the point where we can no longer tell the difference between Jerusalem and Hollywood."

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