The Jesus Discovery? A Sceptic's Perspective[1]

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I begin my paper with a confession. I am not an expert. I am not an expert on Jewish burial in the early Roman period. I am not an expert on Jewish ossuaries. I have no training in epigraphy and I have never written about art and visual representation in ancient tombs. So why is anyone asking for my opinion on the Talpiot tombs? It is what happens, I suppose, when you have been blogging for almost a decade. Because you get used to commenting on stories in the media as they emerge, you find yourself morphing into a slightly different person. Your natural interest in the broader area in which you do your research inevitably encourages you to pay attention to media matters that relate to that area.

My own research interests are in Christian origins and in the relationships between early Christian gospels, among other things. As someone who teaches a course on the Historical Jesus every year, I could not help but be interested by the announcement of the discovery, last year, of the earliest archaeological evidence for the emerging

[1] This is a revised version of a paper given at SECSOR (Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion) on 16 March 2013. I am grateful to Ralph Hawkins for the invitation to speak at this session, and to my dialogue partners, James Tabor and Christopher Rollston. I am also grateful to Mark Elliott for the invitation to publish this paper on *Bible and Interpretation*.

Christian movement, in Talpiot, east Jerusalem, the subject the Discovery Channel documentary, *The Resurrection Tomb Mystery* and its related book co-authored by James Tabor and Simcha Jacobovici, *The Jesus Discovery*, which was also the name given to the documentary in Canada.[2]

The heart of the discovery, brilliantly and expensively achieved with the aid of a robotic arm and a great deal of patience, was an early Roman period tomb,[3] with several ossuaries. The tomb had been excavated before, but only hastily, in 1981, and most of the ossuaries were retained in the tomb though not in the same places. Luckily, a few photographs were taken. Frustratingly, none of them pertain to the two most exciting elements in the discovery, the inscription on Ossuary 5 and the drawing on Ossuary 6. In his article on this topic in *Bible and Interpretation*, Christopher Rollston has brought his expertise to the discussion of the inscription on Ossuary 5. I would like to focus on the identification of the image on Ossuary 6, the image that has been at the centre of a great deal of discussion over the last year or so, especially among the blogs.

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[2] James D. Tabor and Simcha Jacobovici, *The Jesus Discovery: The New Archaeological Find That Reveals the Birth of Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012) and *The Resurrection Tomb Mystery* (Discovery Channel, 2012).

[3] Dating evidence is provided by means of an early Roman period pot. Although Tabor and Jacobovici assume that the tomb belongs to the decades between 30 and 70CE, it may well be earlier than this, perhaps as early as the first century BCE. See Mark Goodacre, "The Dating of Talpiot Tomb B", *NT Blog*, 6 April 2012, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/04/dating-of-talpiot-tomb-b-did-jesus-have.html .

For Jacobovici and Tabor, the image on Ossuary 6 is an image of a fish pointing downwards.[4] They argue that the ball shaped object at the bottom of the image is the head of a man emerging from the mouth of the fish. The lines just above the ball-shaped object are the lines of a stick man. The whole ensemble depicts a moment in a story, the story of Jonah, and this is the fish spitting Jonah out onto land (Jonah 2.10), and he has seaweed wrapped around his head (Jonah 2.5).

Jacobovici and Tabor argue that this image amounts to the earliest archaeological evidence of early Christian belief in the resurrection. Taking their cue (or, in fact "Q") from the double tradition saying about the Sign of Jonah (Matt. 12.38-42 // Luke 11.16, 29-32), they suggest that the image on the ossuary is used to express hope in resurrection.[5]

[4] For images of the ossuaries, see *The Jesus Discovery* website, http://thejesusdiscovery.org/, accessed 15 March 2013.

[5] On the assumption that Matthew and Luke were using the hypothetical source Q, the link between the resurrection and the Sign of Jonah is in fact only made in Matthew's redaction of Q. It does not appear in the Lucan parallel, which is universally regarded by Q scholars as more likely to reflect the original Q wording here. If the Q scholars are right, then there is no pre-70 CE witness to a link between Jonah and the resurrection of Jesus. For Q sceptics, the point is moot in that it is first witnessed in Matthew, which is usually dated after 80CE. See further Mark Goodacre, "The Talpiot Tomb, Jonah and Q", *NT Blog*, 1 March 2012, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/03/talpiot-tomb-jonah-and-q.html .

From the earliest discussions of Jacobovici and Tabor's case, within days of publication of both the book and Tabor's "Preliminary Report",[6] a key alternative to the "fish" interpretation emerged, the idea that the image was some kind of vase or vessel,[7] of the kind frequently found on Jewish ossuaries in this period. The interpretation of the image was difficult, however, because of the way that it was often presented on the *Jesus Discovery* website, the book, the popular media and the documentary itself. The image was re-oriented so that it appeared horizontal, in imitation of a fish swimming in the sea. The CGI reconstruction of the image was in several respects more fish-like too, more elongated than the actual image, and with a tapered "tail" and other fish-like features.[8]

There are several respects, however, in which the image makes much better sense as some kind of vase or vessel. One difficulty for the fish theory is that the patterns in the middle of the image make far better sense as an artist's attempts to recreate the varied

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[6] James Tabor, "A Preliminary Report of a Robotic Camera Exploration of a Sealed 1st Century Tomb in East Talpiot, Jerusalem", *Bible and Interpretation*, http://www.bibleinterp.com/PDFs/Tabor2.pdf (accessed 15 March 2013).

[7] Tabor himself brings forward but dismisses the suggestion in "Preliminary Report", 23-4, 46. Another interpretation suggested in the early stages, also dismissed in Tabor's "Preliminary Report", was that it was a *nephesh*, but this was quickly jettisoned as people began to realize that the orientation of the image had the broadest part at the top and not the bottom, such that the *nephesh* would have been upside down.

[8] See Robert Cargill, "If the evidence doesn't fit, photoshop it: Digital image manipulation in the case of Simcha Jacobovici and James Tabor's Jonah ossuary", *Excavator* blog, 5 March 2012, http://robertcargill.com/2012/03/05/if-the-evidence-doesnt-fit-photoshop-it/ . Cargill discusses how the CGI image was produced and subsequently marketed, and how it was problematic.

ornate markings in the middle of a vase. They do not look anything like fish scales, not least because they alternate between square patterns and triangular patterns. Further, the triangular patterns seen in the middle of the image recur as part of the border decoration of the ossuary.[9] So these are not fish scales. They are decorations on a vase.

If this is a vase, then the protrusions on either side must be handles rather than fins, something that is straightforward to see when one compares the image on the ossuary with other examples of ancient vessels.[10] Moreover, there may be corroborating evidence here from one of the other images on the ossuary. Although Jacobovici's team were unable to photograph what they call the "right end of ossuary 6" as clearly as they would have liked,[11] a photograph from the original 1981 excavation does capture this end of the ossuary quite effectively. Jacobovici and Tabor interpret the image as a "half-

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[9] See Mark Goodacre, "Scales of a fish on the Talpiot ossuary?", *NT Blog* 6 March 2012, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/03/scales-of-fish-on-talpiot-ossuary.html .

[10] See especially Juan V. Fernandez de la Gala, "Some considerations about the Icthyomorphic drawing on ossuary 6:3 from East Talpiot Tomb (Talpiot B or "Patio" Tomb), in Jerusalem, *ASOR Blog*, 13 March 2012, http://asorblog.org/?p=1906 .The point is well illustrated by Thomas Verenna, "Some Considerations about the Iconography on the Ossuary", *The Musings of Thomas Verenna*, 4 March 2012, http://tomverenna.wordpress.com/2012/03/04/some-considerations-about-the-iconography-on-the-ossuary/ . For a full and helpful illustrated discussion of the contrast between fish and vessels on ossuaries, see Antonio Lombatti, "Observations on the 'Jonah' iconography on the ossuary of Talpiot B tomb", http://www.academia.edu/2230732/Observations_on_the_Jonah_iconography_on_the_ossuary_of_Talpiot_B_Tomb , accessed 14 March 2013.

[11] See the angled shot available on the *Jesus Discovery* website, "Half-fish Pattern Right End of Ossuary 6", http://thejesusdiscovery.org/press-kit-photos/?wppa-album=3&wppa-occur=1&wppa-photo=48 , accessed 14 March 2013.

fish" that is pointing downwards, but it is actually more likely to be a vase. In this case the outlines of handles on the side of the vessel are clear, and they are certainly not fins.[12] Moreover, like the image on the front of the ossuary, the patterning inside the image reflects the patterning on the border of the ossuary. These small, triangular shapes make better sense as the artist's repetition of an ornate motif than as the scales of a fish. This image is useful because it provides context for the controversial image on the front of the ossuary 6. If this is a vase with triangular patterns and two handles, it becomes even more likely that the primary image is also some kind of vessel with handles and not a fish with fins.[13]

The story of the image does not, however, end there. Jacobovici and Tabor also make the case that there is a figure emerging from the "fish", and that this figure is Jonah. It is an interpretation that involves several elements: that the lines seen at the base of the image are the arms and legs of a stick man, that the large compressed sphere is the stick man's head and that the lines inside the sphere are the seaweed that was wrapped around Jonah's head (Jonah 2.5). Further, James Charlesworth subsequently added that

[12] See Mark Goodacre, "When is a fish not a fish? When it has handles", *NT Blog* 10 March 2012, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/03/when-is-fish-not-fish-when-it-has.html .

[13] Further, some corroboration of the vessel interpretation is provided by the *DAVAR* newspaper report in 1981, at the time of the original, hasty visit to the tomb; see Eric Meyers and Christopher Rollston, "'Jonah' Ossuary Discussed in Print in 1981", *ASOR Blog*, 10 April 2012, http://asorblog.org/?p=2237 .

the name "Jonah" appears here too, written into the very image itself.[14] These claims are all problematic, for the following reasons:

(a) The idea that the lines in the compressed sphere are attempts to depict seaweed runs aground on the fact that these lines are identical to the way that the artist shaded other areas in the image. In other words, they appear to be the artist's means of depicting dark areas on the vessel.[15]

(b) The idea that the name "Jonah" is spelled out at the base of the image runs aground on the observation that the letters would have to have been idiosyncratically formed. One of the supposed letters, the nun, is so indistinct, that it appears elongated and broken even on the supposedly accurate CGI composite image that was put together before this theory had emerged.[16] Still

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[14] This was first reported in Michael Posner, "Ancient ossuary hints at earliest reference to resurrection of Jesus", *Globe and Mail*, 11 April 2012 (updated 6 September 2012), http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/ancient-ossuary-hints-at-earliest-reference-to-resurrection-of-jesus/article4099612 , with further corroborating comments in James Tabor, "Name of 'Jonah' Encrypted on Jonah and the Fish Image", *Taborblog* 11 April 2012, http://jamestabor.com/2012/04/11/name-of-jonah-encrypted-on-the-jonah-and-the-fish-image/ and "The Hebrew name 'YONAH' embedded in the image of the fish on the Talpiot Tomb ossuary", *Bible and Interpretation*, http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/tab368011.shtml, accessed 14 March 2013. Charlesworth's own complete exposition is found in James Charlesworth, "What is the Message of 'the Patio Tomb' in Talpiot, Jerusalem?", *Bible and Interpretation*, http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/cha308011.shtml (June 2012).

[15] See de la Gala, "Some considerations".

[16] On this point, see Mark Goodacre, "Do the lines in the 'fish' head spell out Jonah?", *NT Blog*, 20 April 2013, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/04/do-lines-in-fish-head-spell-out-jonah.html. The point is that the composite CGI version provides a suitable means of testing the (later) claim about the name. For a detailed blog comment on the issues here, see Robert Cargill, "Why the so-called 'Jonah Ossuary' does

more importantly, there are simply too many lines left over. In order to build a compelling, testable case, the name would have to appear clearly and unambiguously, without the presence of lots of lines that do not participate in the alleged name.

(c) In order to make the "name" theory work, James Tabor has to adjust the way that the stick man is drawn. Different lines now constitute the way that the stick man is presented. Where an object is so unclear that it is drawn differently depending on the shifting sands of the argument, it is safest to conclude that the object is simply not there. It is a picture in the fire.[17]

It might not be unfair to invoke the Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy here, where the gunman shoots all over the barn door and then draws a target around the best cluster of shots, as if to demonstrate his sharpshooting skills. Where there are multiple lines in an image, some doing double service as Hebrew letters and stickman limbs, some acting only as mis-shapen Hebrew letters, some acting as the stickman's limbs, and some ignored altogether, one does not have a scientific theory but an arrangement of elements after the fact.

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not contain the name of Jonah", *Excavator* Blog, 13 April 2012, http://robertcargill.com/2012/04/13/why-the-so-called-jonah-ossuary-does-not-contain-the-name-of-jonah/ .

[17] See further Mark Goodacre, "The Changing Body of the Stick Man in Talpiot Tomb B", *NT Blog*, 12 April 2012, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/04/changing-face-and-body-of-stick-man-in.html .

It might be said that to focus so strongly on this image on one ossuary in Talpiot Tomb B runs the risk of ignoring key contextual evidence from the nearby Talpiot Tomb A, first excavated in 1980 and subsequently covered over where an apartment block had been built. This is the so-called "Garden Tomb", the subject of the 2007 Discovery Channel documentary, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* and its associated book co-authored by Jacobovici with Charles Pellegrino. The film had backing from James Cameron, director of films like *Titanic*, and its thesis was that the concatenation of names found on the ossuaries in the tomb bore so striking a resemblance to the names connected with Jesus' family, that it is highly probable that this is, indeed, the lost family tomb of Jesus.[18]

The names in question, here Anglicized for convenience, are Jesus son of Joseph, Mariamne, Mary, Joses, Matthew and Judah son of Jesus. Jacobovici identifies Mary as Jesus' mother, Joses as the brother mentioned in Mark 6.3, Mariamne as Mary Magdalene, and Judah as her son with Jesus. The claim is a statistical one — this cluster of names, bearing so close a relationship to the names of members of Jesus' family, is highly unlikely to have occurred by accident.

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[18] *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* (Discovery Channel, 4 March 2007). The associated book is Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb: The Evidence Behind the Discovery No One Wanted to Find* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007). The website is *The Jesus Family Tomb*, http://www.jesusfamilytomb.com, 2007-13.

Since the claims were first published in 2007, I have been sceptical of them, and for a variety of reasons.[19] While many scholars have attempted to counter them by suggesting that the names are common, this is not strictly accurate. It is true that some of them are common (Jesus, Joseph, Mary, Matthew, Judah), but the point does not quite get to the heart of Jacobovici's case and so it does not answer it effectively.

Jacobovici's argument in fact relies heavily on a dubious identification between the name "Mariamēnē" and Mary Magdalene, who is identified as Jesus' wife. The suggestion is that the name "Mariamne" is peculiarly appropriate for describing Mary Magdalene, in spite of the fact that this spelling of the name never appears in works from the first century. Jacobovici turns to the fourth century *Acts of Philip* in the hope of securing the identification,[20] but this kind of *ad hoc* picking and choosing is unacceptable in serious scholarly work. The likelihood that the fourth century *Acts of Philip* is more reliable as a historical source for the Greek spelling of Mary's name than are the first century Gospels is so remote as to be unworthy of serious consideration.

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[19] See Mark Goodacre, "The Talpiyot Tomb and the Bloggers", in Eric M. Myers and Carol Meyers (eds.), *Archaeology, Bible, Politics and the Media: Proceedings of the Duke University Conference, April 23–24, 2009* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012): 56-68, reproduced at http://markgoodacre.org/Talpiotbloggers.pdf .

[20] The spelling also occurs in Hippolytus (*Haer.* 5.7); see Mark Goodacre, "Mariamne and the 'Jesus family tomb'", *NT Blog*, 27 February 2007, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2007/02/mariamne-and-jesus-family-tomb.html. James Tabor has also added reference to the spelling in Hippolytus, e.g. Tabor and Jacobovici, *Jesus Discovery*, 113.

Further, there is inconsistency in the way that the names are treated. Much later texts are allowed to trump earlier ones in the case of Mary Magdalene, but with respect to "Joses", Jacobovici insists on the spelling found in Mark 6.3, without paying attention to the Synoptic variant "Joseph" (Matt. 13.55), a name also clearly interchangeable with Joses for many of the textual witnesses to Mark 6.3, as well as Mark 15.40.[21] For statistical claims to work effectively, the evidentiary basis of the claims needs to be secure, with the same rules applied across the board. As soon as one introduces ad hoc rules for the different names in order to secure the greatest correlations, the statistical case collapses.

Most seriously, the non-matches, like "Judah son of Jesus", have to be taken seriously in a proper statistical analysis. There is no evidence anywhere in any ancient text that Jesus fathered a son called Judah. In other words, there is a contradiction between the names in the tomb and the names found in early Christian texts. Jacobovici appears to be aware of this problem but attempts to make a virtue of it. Rather than this datum

[21] See also Acts 4.36. It would be fair to say that wherever one sees the name "Joses" in the Gospels and Acts, one also sees textual variants that use the name "Joseph". It is not a reasonable answer to this point to note that "Joseph" in Matt. 13.55 is a redactional modification of Mark given that Matthean redaction in other places is regarded as acceptable evidence, e.g. the Sign of Jonah (see above, n. 5). See further Kevin Kilty and Mark Elliott, "Regarding Magness and Talpiot", *Bible and Interpretation*, http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/kil368009.shtml, accessed 15 March 2013; and Kevin Kilty and Mar Elliott, "On Yoseh, Yosi, Joseph, and Judas son of Jesus in Talpiot", *Bible and Interpretation*, http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/kil368024.shtml, accessed 15 March 2013. My responses are at "Returning to the Talpiot Tomb", 12 January 2012, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/01/returning-to-talpiot-tomb.html and "Returning once again to the names in the Talpiot Tomb", *NT Blog*, 24 April 2012, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/04/returning-once-again-to-names-in.html

putting the theory to rest, it becomes integrated into the case in such a way that it becomes a new discovery:

> The most controversial ossuary pulled from the Tomb of the Ten Ossuaries was undoubtedly the one inscribed "Judah, son of Jesus," the ossuary of a child. If indeed the tomb uncovered in East Talpiot in 1980 is that of Jesus and his family, and if indeed Jesus of Nazareth had a son, this ossuary contradicts dramatically nearly 2000 years of Christian tradition.[22]

The dramatic contradiction should in fact be taken seriously in a case that is based on claims of dramatic and impressive correlation.

The difficulties over the statistics are perhaps best illustrated by developing an analogy that Jacobovici likes to use, an analogy based on the Beatles. It works by saying that if in two thousand years a tomb was discovered in Liverpool that featured the names John, Paul and George, we would not immediately conclude that we had found the tomb of the Beatles. But if we also found so distinctive a name as Ringo, then we would indeed be interested. Jacobovici claimed that the "Ringo" in this tomb is Mariamēnē, Mary Magdalene, Jesus's wife.

The analogy, however, is without merit. What we actually have is the equivalent of a tomb with the names John, Paul, George, Martin, Alan and Ziggy. We might well say,

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[22] *The Jesus Family Tomb*: "Judah son of Jesus", http://www.jesusfamilytomb.com/the_tomb/yehuda_bar_yeshua.html.

"Perhaps the 'Martin' is George Martin, and so this is a match!" or "Perhaps John Lennon had a son called Ziggy we have not previously heard about" but this would be special pleading and we would rightly reject such claims. A cluster of names is only impressive when it is a cluster that is uncontaminated by non-matches and contradictory evidence.[23]

But even to entertain the discussion of statistical probabilities here masks an assumption that is unwarranted, the assumption that we would expect to find Mary Magdalene in Jesus' family tomb. It is an assumption that is so deeply embedded in the discussion that one can easily miss it. The discussion of "Mariamne" as a peculiarly appropriate designation for Mary Magdalene provides misdirection and prevents viewers and readers from asking the much bigger question about the evidence for Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene. But that evidence is not found in early Christian texts. It is found in the *Da Vinci Code*. And Simcha Jacobovici's obsession with Dan Brown's book in part informs his approach to history, seen as a kind of code that needs breaking, as a mystery that requires solving.[24]

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[23] See further my "The Talpiot Tomb and the Beatles", *ASOR Blog* 7 March 2013, http://asorblog.org/?p=1842 .

[24] For a discussion of Simcha Jacobovici's fascination with the *Da Vinci Code* and his conceptualizing of his own work as a "real life" version of the *Da Vinci Code*, see my "The Da Vinci Code and the Talpiot Tomb", *NT Blog* March 9 2012, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/03/da-vinci-code-and-talpiot-tomb.html .

I began with a confession and I will end with a lament. The difficulty for those of us who devote our lives to studying ancient history is that we are all the time painfully aware of the gaps in our knowledge. There are so many missing pieces that we might begin to despair. How can we ever hope to paint a complete picture of the world we spend so much time studying? Our anxiety inevitably leads us into temptation. Perhaps there are not so many missing pieces after all? Perhaps a fresh focus on an ancient Jewish tomb will point us unexpectedly to Jesus, his wife, his son and his family. Perhaps reflection on a neighbouring tomb will provide the earliest archaeological evidence for early Christian belief in the resurrection. And yet this is where a healthy scepticism is always, inevitably a part of the ancient historian's perspective. It is true that sometimes exciting connections can be made, as new discoveries come to the surface, but in order to be sure that we are on solid ground, it is always worth remembering that remarkable claims require remarkable evidence. In the case of the Talpiot Tomb, the sceptic's perspective is our only serious option.