Inside the Numbers of the Talpiot Tomb[1]

By Mark Elliott and Kevin Kilty
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The Talpiot Tomb has generated controversy, scholarly debate, and analysis over the past year. It created an academic stir that shows no sign of ceasing just yet. Lately, some scholars have made comments that we view as doubtful and others have made assertions in some instances not supported by the data at hand. For instance, Rachel Hachlili [1] from the University of Haifa has argued that the Talpiot

> ... tomb could not be identified with a tomb of Jesus of Nazareth for a significant reason: In all references in the New Testament Jesus is named only Yeshua with no patrononymic (i.e., "son of"). Why then would the name 'Yeshua son of Yehosef' be inscribed on an ossuary of a person known only as Yeshua? More likely an inscription on the ossuary of Jesus would have been 'Yeshua from Nazareth' or 'Yeshua son of Mariame'.

We have clearly demonstrated this statement to be inaccurate as we have noted in our essay *Probability, Statistics, and the Talpiot Tomb*.[2]

> There are 227 inscribed "ossuaries recorded in Rahmani about half of the inscriptions refer to the deceased and their kinfolk,.... Very few ossuaries are inscribed with the names of the deceased person's birthplace or hometown. Out of the 227 inscribed ossuaries listed in Rahmani"there are only six such ossuaries inscribed with origins or birthplace listed in Judea or its immediate environs ... place names on ossuaries are so rare among observed inscriptions that *Jesus son of Joseph* is some twelve times more likely to occur as an inscription than *Jesus of Nazareth*.

These conclusions are confirmed in Tal Ilan [4]. We are cognizant of the fact that Ilan cautions readers that a number of her entries are doubtful[3] and

[1]We wish to thank Paul Flesher, J. Edward Wright and James Tabor for their timely comments and suggestions regarding this essay.

[2]This quotation comes from page 25 of our paper [2]. For the compilation of Rahmani see [3].

[3]See [4] p. 2.

that Pfann has also been critical of Ilan's use of sources from the Rabbinic period [5]. Ilan records 22 ossuaries inscribed with the name Jesus and its variant spellings. None of these inscribed ossuaries include a geographical origin.[4] Ossuaries inscribed with the name Joseph number 44,[5] and of these there are only two ossuaries that also record a place name.[6] If we expand our analysis to include all recorded instances in written sources of the name *Jesus* from 330BCE to 200CE the results demonstrate that geographic place names were not a usual form used for identification. Ilan lists 103 instances of the name *Jesus* located in a variety of literatures from the Greco-Roman period. There are four occurrences of place names among them.[7] Place of origins associated with the name Joseph number only 14 out of 231.[8] In effect, place names on ossuaries and other written sources are indeed unusual and there is no compelling evidence that would demand an inscription such as "Jesus of Nazareth." We would also point out that Hachlili's insistence that "In all references in the New Testament Jesus is named only Yeshua with no patrononymic (i.e., "son of")" is clearly contradicted by John 6:42. "Is not this Jesus the son of Joseph . . . "

A number of scholars have stated that *Yeshua/Jesus bar/ben Yehoseph/Joseph* is not unique in the corpus of names located in Palestine during the first century. Christopher Rollston has argued[9] that

> The names Yehosep, Yoseh, Yeshua', Yehudah, Mattiyah, Maryah, Mariam(n)e, Miryam, and Martha (or the variants thereof) all have multiple attestations in the multilingual corpus of ossuaries and some are very common. For example, Sukenik published an ossuary inscribed "Yeshua' son of Yehosep" more than seventy-five years ago (Sukenik 1931). . . . even with the small corpus of epigraphic attestations of personal names, even the Talpiot tomb occurrence of "Yeshua' bar Yehosep" is not unique.

[4] See [4] p.127-128.

[5] See [4](p.152-154).

[6] #103, The Galilean; #111, of Hin.

[7] These are:#17,Galilean; #30, of Gerasa; #32, of Ono and #34, of Uza. We did not include #4, General in Idumea and #5, General in Tiberias. Both are clearly not places of origin.

[8] We excluded origins that Ilan regarded as fictitious. On these fictitious names see Ilan, [4] p. 47; For examples see #83 and #84, specifically.

[9] Rollston, Christopher. [6], also see [7].

However, a closer look at the distribution of *Yeshua/Jesus* and *Yehoseph/Joseph* do not support Rollston's assertions. In the 44 inscribed ossuaries containing the name Joseph listed in Ilan, there are only two combinations of Joseph and Jesus.[10] In effect, in arguing for the commonness of the Talpiot Tomb combination of *Yeshua/Jesus and Yehoseph/Joseph*, Rollston points as an example to the only other documented occurrence. When we expand our inquiry to all instances of Yehoseph/Joseph in the literary corpus in Ilan, over 231 examples, we find but one more additional example; Joseph, Joshua's brother.[11] There are no other combinations of Yehoseph/Joseph with Yeshua/Jesus in Ilan's lexicon. Considering that Ilan's work records "712 valid persons recorded on ossuaries" and 2826 in all sources,[12] three occurrences of *Yeshua* with *Yehosep* cannot be considered typical or common patronymics for Greco-Roman period in Palestine. One of these occurences is actually "brother of."

Several statisticians have written about the Talpiot tomb [10], and we wish to comment specifically on the web based paper by Ingermanson [11]. While Ingermanson and Cost originally proposed applying Bayes' Theorem to an analysis of the Talpiot Tomb independently of us, Ingermanson's most recent paper uses essentially the same statistical model as found in our paper, and contrasts his results with ours. However, while we confined our analysis to names,[13] Ingermanson analyzes name frequencies on the inscribed ossuaries in the Talpiot Tomb, and then adds computations regarding the improbability of Jesus' burial in a rock cut tomb and Jesus' martial status. Ingermanson argues

> If Jesus had been buried in a rock-cut tomb used by other members of his family, it is certain that the earliest Jesus movement in Jerusalem would have known about it. One then has to explain a number of knotty questions: why no mention of such a tomb is ever made in any historical sources; why the tomb did not become an object of pilgrimage; and why the apostle Paul

[10]Ilan [4] #44 and #51. In particular, see Ilan's footnote 113 which refers to Rahmani #704.

[11]Ilan [4] #177,Babatha archive.

[12]These figures are from pages 43 and 57, respectively in Ilan's work [4].

[13]Not only did we confine analysis to names alone, but we mentioned at the time that our calculation was for purposes of illustration alone. Obviously in view of the commentary and criticism of our work we are preparing a corrected and more comprehensive analysis.

> knew nothing of the tomb. These are not statistical questions, so well not pursue them here.

Here we agree. However, Ingermanson insists that

> We don't know the probability that any given man of Jerusalem would have been buried in a rock-cut tomb. However, we can say with high confidence that Jesus of Nazareth was less likely to have been reburied in a rock-cut tomb than other Jewish men of his era.

We disagree with this assertion. We have no evidence, whatsoever, regarding the probability of Jesus being buried in a rock cut tomb relative to that of other men of the period. We have no records from 30-70 CE that indicate whether his tomb is known or unknown. Of the period, all we have is Paul's letters, and he has nothing to say about whether Jesus is buried in a rock cut tomb.

Moreover, Ingermanson quotes Jodi Magness [12] who maintains that

> Jesus' family, being poor, presumably could not afford a rock-cut tomb, as even the more "modest" ones were costly. And had Jesus' family owned a rock-cut tomb, it would have been located in their hometown of Nazareth, not in Jerusalem.

We know that Jesus died in Jerusalem. The last place of residence of his mother and a number of his brothers was Jerusalem (Acts 1:14) and his brother James died in Jerusalem (Antiq. 20.9.1). We agree that Jesus' family was, most likely, not in a position to purchase such a tomb, but the early followers of Jesus certainly had the means and the desire to do so. The fact is that we have no evidence that the early Christians would have been prohibited financially from building or buying this tomb. There are number of scenarios that could explain how this was accomplished. The tomb could have been built or even donated immediately after Jesus' death by someone such as Joseph of Arimathea (Mt 25: 57).[14]

Certainly the community had skilled artisans among their members to build a tomb, or they could have raised the necessary funds to purchase a

[14]Though the Gospels do not agree on all the details regarding Joseph of Arimathea, they all depict him placing Jesus' body in a tomb after his death. See Mk 15:43, Lk 23:51, and Jn 19:38.

tomb. The ossuary could have been moved from several modest tombs until this final resting place. Furthermore, several wealthy benefactors who were impressed with Jesus' message could have donated money for the purpose of a dignified tomb shortly after his death. We believe that it was possible early on that followers of Jesus did have the financial means to purchase a tomb after his crucifixion. Luke (8:1-3) indicates that a small group of women provisioned Jesus and the Apostles: "Joanna, the wife of Herods steward Chuza and Susanna and many others, who provided them out of their resources." These women apparently followed Jesus to Jerusalem and we are informed that "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary mother of Jesus and the other women" were at the empty tomb (Lk 24:1-10). These women could have pooled their resources with other followers of Jesus and purchased a tomb.

Luke records that the followers of Jesus grew quickly (Acts 2: 41). Though we question the feasibility of 3000 baptisms in one day, Acts is unequivocal that early on the followers of Jesus "had all things in common" and "would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45). The communal nature of this group is underlined again, "no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4:32). It is likely that the collective wealth of the community could have easily purchased a tomb for Jesus early on in the movement's history. As for "why no mention of such a tomb is ever made in any historical sources," we have no idea.[15] This is an area of speculation. Our best guess is that the early followers of Jesus had a need to keep the location of the tomb silent; its existence contravenes the movement's theological claims to resurrection. A publically revered tomb containing an ossuary of Jesus' bones would have compromised early Christian doctrine. As the Gospel of Matthew states, "He is not here; for he has been raised . . . " (28:6). Such a tomb would have been antithetical with early Christian belief. A secret tomb was not.

Ingermanson also argues that:

> The ossuary inscribed "Judah son of Jesus" creates a serious problem for Jacobovici's "Jesus family tomb hypothesis." The reason is that no son of Jesus is known in the historical record. It is possible that Jesus had a son. In his culture, this would also imply that he was married. It is possible that Jesus was married.

[15] Ingermanson: 9-10.

> Most historians would consider both possibilities quite unlikely. In first-century Jerusalem, most Jewish men were married and did their best to fulfill the Biblical commandment to be fruitful and multiply. While it is impossible to estimate precisely the probability that Jesus might have had a son, we can say with high confidence that Jesus of Nazareth was less likely to have had a son than were other Jewish men of his time.

Again, we do not see merit in this assertion. For the brief period of Jesus' life, Jesus' marital status arouses little interest in the Gospels. On whether Jesus had been married previously or had a son, the Gospels are silent. Moreover, the Gospels rarely reveal any information on the marital status of Jesus' apostles. There is a brief mention of Peter's (Simon's) mother-in-law but nothing on his wife or possible children (Mk 1:30). Can we suppose that all the original disciples excluding Peter were not married simply because their marital status remains unmentioned in the Gospels? If it wasn't for Paul's brief comment concerning the wives of the other apostles and the brothers of the lord and Cephas (I Cor 9:5), we would have no creditable information concerning the wives of the apostles. The Gospel writers scarcely show any interest in the marital status of Jesus or his disciples.

In addition there is a curious omission that critics who defend the celibate nature of Jesus must address. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he maintains that the unmarried and the widows should "remain unmarried as I am (I Cor 7:8)." Why not use Jesus as the ideal illustration of one who is unmarried or that celibacy is a special gift? Nowhere in Paul's letter does he insist his unmarried circumstances is an emulation of Jesus.

We think it is unwarranted to include assumptions concerning the existence of a rock cut tomb and an ossuary inscribed *Judas son of Jesus* in calculating name frequencies located in the Talpiot Tomb. Ingermanson has not demonstrated that his negative assumptions about these issues actually exist. Indeed, we believe that there is circumstantial evidence for the existence of a rock cut tomb. As for Jesus' marital status and the inscribed ossuary *Judas son of Jesus*, we suggest that the Gospels and Letters of Paul cannot provide the evidence needed to insert these elements in any form regarding a statistical analysis of the names engraved on the ossuaries at Talpiot.

References

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[3] L. Y. Rahmani, Catalog of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel, Israeli Antiquities Authority, Jerusalem, 1994: 11

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[10] Annals of Applied Statistics,

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`lib.stat.cmu.edu/aoas/99g/supplement.pdf`

[12] Jodi Magness, http://sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=640