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Edited by

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The Talpiyot Tomb and the Bloggers

MARK GOODACRE

An Early Success

When the sensationalist documentary *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* was first broadcast, in a two-hour slot on the Discovery Channel at 9:00 p.m. on March 4, 2007, several bloggers “live blogged” the event (Goodacre 2007b), commenting on the documentary as it aired. By this point, Discovery’s publicity machine had already been in full force for several days. The project was launched with a dramatic press conference and two major Web sites, the snazzy “official” site (Talmor Media 2007) as well as Discovery Channel’s own site (Discovery Channel 2007–10). Bloggers began commenting on this material as soon as it went public, with all the speed that the still-young medium encourages (Williams 2007a).¹ By the time the documentary aired, the bloggers had already put major question marks against the claims being made by Simcha Jacobovici and the other program makers.

One of the most prominent criticisms, right at the beginning, related to the use of statistics. The case for the identification of the Talpiyot Tomb with the family of Jesus of Nazareth is based largely on statistics. The cluster of names found in this tomb is said to correspond to a remarkable degree with the names of Jesus and his family. Before the documentary had aired, I was highly sceptical of the statistical case (Goodacre 2007a), not least because it appeared to rely on a dubious identification between the name “Mariamēnē” and Mary Magdalene while at the same time failing to take seriously important contrary evidence, “Judas son of Jesus,” and ignoring the non-match “Matia.”

Simcha Jacobovici had hired a top statistician, though; and surely, he argued, his expertise should be taken seriously. The statistician in

1. A companion book for the series was released at the end of February 2007 (Jacobovici and Pellegrino 2007), but it made no impact on the blogosphere in this early period. The instant and immediate access to the key materials made possible on the internet effectively marginalized the book’s contribution, though in due course highly critical reviews of the book did appear; see especially Reed 2007.

question was Dr. Audrey Feuerverger, Professor of Mathematics and Statistics at the University of Toronto. I wrote the following:

Clearly he knows *a lot* more about statistics than most of us, and I would not dream of trying to second guess him. But he revealed a very important piece of information at the press conference, that he is not an expert on the New Testament or archaeological data, so he was *working with the data given to him* by the programme makers. The relevance of this is that a significant and fatal bias was introduced into the analysis before it had even begun.

One can view the data that was given to Feuerverger on the Discovery Web site, in the PDF packet of documentation, where the grounds for the statistical analysis are given. It is clear from this that the task he was given was to work out the probability of a certain cluster of names occurring, where in each case all known examples of the given name in the given period were divided into all known naming possibilities in the given period. And the names he worked with were Jesus son of Joseph, Mariamne, Maria and Joseph. The name Matia was initially factored in too, and then removed "since he is not explicatively mentioned in the Gospels". But the problem is not just that Matia is not mentioned as a family member in the Gospels, it is that the greater the number of non-matches, the less impressive the cluster becomes. Or, to put it another way, it stops being a cluster of striking names when the cluster is diluted with non-matches. Mariamne needs to be taken out of the positive calculation and instead treated as a non-match; Matia needs to be treated as a second non-match; Judas son of Jesus needs to be treated as contradictory evidence. These three pieces of data together detract radically from the impressiveness of the given cluster. (Goodacre 2007a, referencing Discovery Channel 2007–10)

In an attempt to make the point by extending and reapplying an analogy that Simcha Jacobovici was fond of, I continued:

At the risk of labouring the point, let me attempt to explain my concerns by using the analogy of which the film-makers are so fond, the Beatles analogy. This analogy works by saying that if in 2,000 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 be interested. Jacobovici claims that the "Ringo" in this tomb is Mariamēnē, whom he interprets as Mary Magdalene and as Jesus's wife, which is problematic (see Mariamne and the "Jesus Family Tomb" and below). What we actually have is the equivalent of a tomb with the names John, Paul, George, Martin, Alan, and Ziggy. We might well say, "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.

In short, including Mariamne and leaving out Matia and Judas son of Jesus is problematic for any claim to be made about the remaining cluster. All data must be included. *You cannot cherry pick or manipulate your data before doing your statistical analysis.* (Goodacre 2007a, referencing Goodacre 2007c and Goodacre 2007d and links found there).

This post appeared on Thursday, March 1, three days before the documentary aired. The date stamp of 1:45 a.m. is typical in the bloggers' world, in which speedy publication is key; and losing sleep can be the only way of ensuring that a post has the timely impact that makes it worthwhile. There will always be time for the measured, assured, detailed response in due course. On this occasion, the timeliness of the post contributed to the momentum that was building all over the blogosphere (Williams 2007b, 2007c). Within 24 hours, I was able to post a follow-up (D'Mello 2007a) based on a helpful but technical e-mail from Joe D'Mello, who was concerned about some of the claims being made on the Discovery Channel Web site.

D'Mello was offering a fresh perspective on the data. Where I and others (Pahl 2007) were questioning the data that had been fed to Feuerverger, D'Mello could see that there were problems also in the interpretation of the statistical calculations. D'Mello was disputing the following claim that appeared prominently on the Discovery Channel Web site:

A statistical study commissioned by the broadcasters (Discovery Channel / Vision Canada / C4 UK) concludes that the probability factor is 600 to 1 in favor of this tomb being the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth and his family.

D'Mello was clear that this conclusion was not justified by the data. I invited him to write a guest post for me (D'Mello 2007a); and at the same time he wrote to Feuerverger and Discovery. Within two days, now the day of the broadcast itself, D'Mello had secured important corrections from Feuerverger, including the following:

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. (D'Mello 2007b).

Again, I published the material in my blog (D'Mello 2007b), and again it was not the end of the story. Within a week, by March 10, D'Mello had secured an agreement that there should be an adjustment on the

Discovery Web site itself (D'Mello 2007c), a correction that duly appeared three days later, on March 13 (D'Mello 2007d) and then throughout the site by the end of the week, on March 16 (D'Mello 2007e). The most significant of the changes was the following one (D'Mello 2007e), straightforwardly represented in synopsis format:

| <i>Original Claim</i> | <i>Revised Claim</i> |
|---|--|
| Dr. Andrey Feuerverger, professor of statistics & mathematics at the University of Toronto, has concluded a high statistical probability that the Talpiyot Tomb is the JESUS FAMILY TOMB. | Dr. Andrey Feuerverger, professor of statistics at the University of Toronto, has concluded (subject to the stated historical assumptions) that it is unlikely that an equally "surprising" cluster of names would have arisen by chance under purely random sampling. |

The second statement is, of course, significantly more cautious and nuanced than the first.² It is a small adjustment, but it is significant; and it is a change that came about because of sustained, accurate and speedy blog activity.

After the major flurry of activity surrounding the release of *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* in February and March 2007, the blog activity slowed down; and aside from occasional posts, the issue was forgotten, by many, for the rest of the year.³ Controversy reignited briefly in January 2008 as the result of 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." This conference took place in Jerusalem in January 2008; and although there was no significant representation from the blogging community,⁴ the blogs subsequently became the means by which a major statement was

2. Although the original version of the statement disappeared from the Discovery Web site, it can still be read in Jacobovici and Pellegrino 2007 (p. 114): "When he did all that, he got a 'P factor' (probability factor) of 600 to one in favor of the tomb belonging to Jesus of Nazareth." The claim is also present, though less clearly, on the official site (Talmor Media 2007; see on-line http://www.jesusfamilytomb.com/evidence/probability/jesus_equation.html). Later writers assumed that the original statement "came to be attributed to Feuerverger" (Lutgen 2009) rather than that Feuerverger himself changed his mind in the light of the discussion in the blogosphere.

3. Activity on the blogs briefly resumed in order to comment on new articles: Evans and Feldman 2007 (comment in Goodacre 2007h), and Kilty and Elliott 2007 (comment in Goodacre 2007i, with further references there).

4. Occasional bloggers Stephen Pfann (Pfann 2007–8) and James Tabor (Tabor 2007–10) were present, but they do not appear to have been invited in their specific capacity as bloggers. Tabor was one of the major contributors to the original documentary and a key voice speaking in favor of the identification of the Talpiyot Tomb with Jesus' family.

disseminated (Aviam et al. 2008; Duke University Religion Department 2008).

Meanwhile, the statistical case was now being properly written up by the scholar at the center of the discussion. Andrey Feuerverger produced a detailed, peer-reviewed article (Feuerverger 2008a and 2008b) in which some of the claims were more nuanced even if many of the historical problems remained.⁵ There were informed responses from other experts including a well-informed, critical refutation by Randy Ingermanson (Ingermanson 2008a and 2008b). The blogs occasionally reported this activity (for example, Tabor 2008), but the intensity of posts that had marked the earlier controversy had now dissipated, apparently for the long term.

But in the early days of the controversy over the Talpiyot Tomb, when energy levels were high and the media attention unrelenting, it is worth remembering the important contributions made by the academic blogs, not least because it illustrates one of the upsides of the blogging phenomenon. By providing informed comment in an up-to-the-minute way, the blogs can, on occasions like this, hold the media to account, exposing problematic claims and faulty logic,⁶ at just the moment when uninformed but intelligent members of the public are looking for reliable comment. It was this combination of speed and accuracy that made the impact of blogging so significant. The reactions were instant, at the very time that the eye of the media was on the blogging community and when Discovery wanted to avoid as much as it could of the criticism that was building up against them. The reactions were informed and accurate, and the blogging revolution was encouraging connections between biblical scholars and statisticians.

A Change in Tone

This early success, whereby accurate and knowledgeable blogging led to changes in several of the claims made on the Discovery Channel Web

5. Unfortunately, Feuerverger's article apparently remains ignorant of some of the important discussions that took place in the blogs in the year before the publication of the article, and his article is much weaker because of it. His discussion of the Mariamēnē inscription (Feuerverger 2008a: 6–7), for example, does not take into consideration Pfann's suggestion that the reading should be *Mariame kai Mara* (Pfann 2007), and it accepts the specious identification of this ossuary with Mary Magdalene (Feuerverger 2008: 20–21) on the basis of the misreading of Francois Bovon's article on the *Acts of Philip* (Bovon 2003). I pointed out the error in my blog (Goodacre 2007f), and Bovon himself later repudiated the identification (Bovon 2007). Feuerverger's presentation of "a brief NT genealogy" (2008: 13–14) is full of undocumented assertions of dubious historical value.

6. This has been a valuable emphasis in Jim Davila's *Paleojudaica* blog (Davila 2003–10). Davila writes, for example, that "All too frequently, discussion of media and other public treatments of biblical studies requires the correction of serious errors" (Davila 2005b); see also Davila 2005a.

site, was symptomatic of a larger trend according to which the early, bold, and far-reaching statements gave way to something much more cautious. Indeed, the Discovery Channel appeared progressively to distance themselves from claims that at first they had embraced. The press conference on Monday, February 26, 2009 (still available to view online at Discovery Channel 2007–10), at which the case was first made, showed a remarkable degree of confidence in the importance of the alleged discovery. The president and general manager of the Discovery Channel began the press conference by announcing:

You are joining us here for what might be one of the most important archaeological finds in human history. In the hills of Jerusalem, archaeologists have discovered a tomb, a two thousand year old tomb, which contains significant forensic evidence, and some potentially historic consequences. . . . I would like to briefly discuss how this momentous find came about and how it comes to be before you today (Discovery Channel 2007–10).

And James Cameron, who came to the microphone next, told the story of his involvement with the documentary, which he went on to produce. He said, “literally this is the biggest archaeology story of the century.” And so it goes on.⁷ But this robust beginning gave way, quite quickly, to a more cautious tone.

The reaction in the blogosphere, as well as in other media outlets, demonstrated very quickly that the vast majority of scholars assessing the case were not finding it convincing. Unlike Cameron, who said that as a layman he had found the case “pretty darn compelling” (Discovery Channel 2007–10), the experts were finding the case completely unconvincing.⁸ The statistical case was crumbling as scholars began to notice how much weight had been placed on the claim that “Mariamēnou Mara” was a unique way of identifying Mary Magdalene, a claim that appeared to be based on a misreading of François Bovon’s analysis of the *Acts of Philip*. I called attention to this before the documentary aired (Goodacre 2007f), and others made similar points—including Tony Chartrand-Burke, whose *Apocryphicity* blog specialized in noncanonical Christian materials (Chartrand-Burke 2007, and Richard Bauckham 2007).

Bauckham himself is not a blogger, but he was guest-posting on his colleague Jim Davila’s blog, *Paleojudaica* (Davila 2003–10), an ideal

7. Notice similar comments by James Cameron in the preface to Jacobovici and Pellegrino 2007.

8. The major exceptions here were James Tabor, an enthusiastic supporter of the identification (see p. 59 n. 4 above), and James Charlesworth. Charlesworth was at the press conference and was quoted in the press as saying that “a very good claim could be made that this was Jesus’ clan.” He later clarified in a statement that, by “clan,” he meant “extended family group” (Goodacre 2007e and relevant links there).

forum for this kind of contribution. *Paleojudaica* has the greatest pedigree of all the biblical studies blogs;⁹ it has a “no-frills” approach, with news reports and occasional critical comments designed to hold the media to account. Once again, bloggers were adding guest posts from experts to enhance their own efforts, and the effect was pretty dramatic.

When the documentary aired on Sunday, March 4, Discovery added an extra program that followed on immediately afterwards—a studio discussion, hosted by Ted Koppel, called *The Lost Tomb of Jesus: A Critical Look*. The first half of the program was a debate between Simcha Jacobovici and James Tabor, representing the case for the defense, and Jonathan Reed and William Dever, representing the case for the prosecution. Jacobovici was fairly defensive throughout, perhaps not surprisingly in view of some hostile questions from Koppel, who suggested on several occasions that he had quoted people out of context. There were barbed comments too from Jonathan Reed, who called the program “archaeoporn.” The second half of the program was devoted to “religious responses” and included Darrell Bock and David O’Connell alongside Jacobovici and Tabor. Some at the time saw the scheduling of this program as an opportunity for Discovery to imply some critical distancing from the claims made in the documentary, claims that they had been heartily endorsing only a week earlier. When the first repeat of *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* was dropped from Discovery’s schedules, it began to look as if they were indeed feeling less confident about the documentary than they had at first.

It was not only the bloggers, then, who were playing a role in holding the program makers to account. Other key events included the appearance of Eric Meyers with Simcha Jacobovici, engaging in heated yet reasoned debate, on the Diane Rehm show on March 5,¹⁰ the morning after the documentary aired. In only the recent past, radio appearances and newspaper op-eds would have been the only major public venues for providing critiques of programs like this. Now the blogging revolution had changed all that; and the reactions were thorough, detailed, varied, and fast.

The Talpiyot Tomb provided the first major test for the bloggers in the area of academic biblical studies and its related disciplines, and it is a test that they passed with flying colors. The contrast with the earlier and similar story, the James Ossuary, only a few years earlier in 2002, is telling. At that point, blogging was only in its infancy, and in biblical

9. AKMA’s *Random Thoughts* (Adam 2003–10) predates *Paleojudaica* by several months, but its subject matter ranges widely, and Adam only occasionally posts on biblical studies.

10. A recording of the interview can be found on the official Web site of *The Diane Rehm Show*: <http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2007-03-05/jesus-family-tomb-story>.

studies it was nonexistent.¹¹ The James Ossuary story took some time to unravel; and, although furiously debated on the then-more-popular e-lists,¹² the latter did not attract the same degree of expertise or the same degree of publicity now reached by the blogs. Indeed, two occasional bloggers were themselves involved directly with the Talpiyot Tomb project: Darrell Bock, who was highly critical of the documentary's claims, and James Tabor, who remained sympathetic and provided a sane if lonely voice speaking up for Jacobovici.

When Bloggers Fail to Make an Impact

It may be a little too easy to celebrate blogging successes in relation to this story. This was an occasion when several expert voices spoke up quickly and accurately and created a strong wall of opinion that had the effect of seriously undermining the claims made by the filmmakers. But it is not always so straightforward. Indeed, the kinds of successes witnessed on this occasion are the exception rather than the rule. It is much more common for academic bloggers to be ignored by the media, even when they are pointing out errors and inaccuracies that are actually embarrassing those making the claims. A clear example of this occurred in relation to a lengthy and fairly detailed blog post I wrote entitled "Jesus Family Tomb Website: Errors and Inaccuracies" (Goodacre 2007g).

I published the post on March 11, 2007, a week after the documentary aired, and it took some time to write. It was one of those posts with which other bloggers will be familiar, the post that keeps expanding and that makes one ask repeatedly, "Is this really worth the effort?" The post concerns the "official" Web site for *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* at www.jesusfamilytomb.com (Talmor Media 2007). This Web site, more slick, more snazzy, and far more detailed than Discovery's site (Discovery Channel 2007–10), had gone on-line at the same time, the end of February. But unlike Discovery's site, it was riddled with errors and inaccuracies.

Some of the errors were simply careless and sloppy, such as confusing *Acts of Philip* with the *Gospel of Philip*, mistaking "AC" for "AD," and mentioning Jesus at age thirteen being with "local rabbis" rather than at age twelve being at the Jerusalem temple. Others, though, were more substantial. Several claims about the Talpiyot Tomb discoveries were

11. See previous note. Jim Davila's *Paleojudaica*, the pioneer, began in March 2003. My *NT Blog* began six months later in September 2003, though then under the name *NT Gateway Weblog*. The *NT Gateway Weblog* and the *NT Blog* became separate entities in February 2009.

12. For an annotated list of academic e-lists in the area of biblical studies, see my *NT Gateway: E-Lists*, on-line: <http://www.ntgateway.com/tools-and-resources/e-lists/>.

so badly stated that they amounted to misleading information, such as the assertion that one of the ossuaries actually read “Mary Magdalene,” alongside other familiar difficulties such as the misreading of François Bovon’s analysis of Mary in the *Acts of Philip*.

The most remarkable elements on this site, though, were not so much these misguided and inaccurate statements, but entire sections consisting of historical fiction. The site claims, for example, that the *Gospel of Thomas* was “suppressed by Christian authorities due to the status allotted to Mary of Magadala [*sic*] as master” and that “the Essene Gospel of Peace” is “one ancient manuscript discovered in the Secret Archives of the Vatican.” Perhaps the most striking example of this type of material is a section of the site headed “The Gospels Nazarene: The Gospel of the Holy Twelve,” which is breathtaking on a site aspiring to be doing something resembling academic history:

The Gospel of the Nazarenes or the Gospel of the Holy Twelve is considered to be the original Gospel or one of the first complete written manuscripts of the original word of Jesus. The term “Nazarene” is used by some to refer to early Jewish followers of Christianity in connection with the ancient Essene sect of Judaism which Jesus is often associated with. The original Gospels of Nazarene are said to have been written by St. John, who passed the manuscript along to a trusted friend in 70 A.D. following his arrest.

In the nineteenth century, the Gospel of the Holy Twelve was rediscovered by a friar. However, since its exposure to Church Authorities in Rome, it has remained hidden in the Vatican archive, which some say is due to newly discovered content that would discredit the Church and the Council of Nicea (Talmor Media 2007).

There is, of course, no historically reliable information here of any kind.

Since it was greatly to the discredit of the “Jesus Family Tomb” project that material such as this appeared on their site, I thought it worthwhile to draw attention to it. I documented each of the errors and inaccuracies that I could find, linking to the page in question, quoting the problematic material, and explaining where the errors lay. I suspected that a still-more-careful reading would reveal many more errors, inaccuracies, and fictions; but my list gave the site’s authors—I thought—a head start on where to find the most egregious and embarrassing difficulties. I hoped that they would take the list seriously and amend their site accordingly. They did not. Each error still remains on the site to this day.¹³

This somewhat depressing example of blogging without impact provides a sobering contrast to the successful blogging surveyed earlier.

13. James Tabor (personal communication, March 13, 2007) noted that he had reported this list to those responsible for the site but no adjustments were made, either then or in the subsequent three years.

Perhaps it could be said that examples such as this remind bloggers of the potential for wasting time on sites that are driven by commercial concerns and that are uninterested in honest intellectual engagement. Academics all too easily fall into the naive belief that people will want to set the record straight, that they will want to eliminate disreputable and ignorant statements, and that accuracy, precision, and nuance matter.¹⁴ One cynical comment on the blog post in question noted that, while the link to the *Gospel of Philip* was inaccurate, the links to “Buy the DVD” and “Buy the book” were working without trouble.

Nevertheless, posts such as this still have value. When a glitzy site retains misinformation on a large scale, there is value in the academic bloggers’ publicly setting out the errors and inaccuracies involved. If “googlization” democratizes the process of attaining knowledge, one of the values of the process is that any researcher looking for material on “the Jesus family tomb” will quickly come into contact not only with the glitzy, commercial, error-ridden official site but also the mundane, noncommercial, accurate academic blogs.

As in other areas—politics, religion, journalism—the blogs have empowered experts who have something intelligent, well researched, and cogent to say. When we are using the medium thoughtfully, they can place us in a surprisingly influential position, even when those with the money, the staff, the time, and the publicity might at first seem to be formidable opponents. In spite of our failures, it is a responsibility worth taking seriously.

14. Cf. Paula Fredriksen on the difficulties she and others had in corresponding with Icon Productions about the script for the *The Passion of the Christ* (directed by Mel Gibson in 2003): “In retrospect, we also functioned with a naïveté that is peculiar to educators: the belief that, once an error is made plain, a person will prefer the truth” (Fredriksen 2003: 27; see Goodacre 2004 for context).

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