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The Jesus Ossuary: A Critical Examination

Amid the flurry of interest in the James ossuary, a calculated attempt on the part of one of the United Kingdom's most widely-sold authors to use the heightened curiosity about ossuaries to deny the resurrection of Christ has gone unnoticed by the scholarly community.¹ While resurrection skeptics have come and gone for centuries, the stature of the researcher and the potentially explosive nature of the evidence offered for his case compel a response.

The researcher in question is Laurence Gardner, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, British constitutional historian, Presidential Attaché to the European Council of Princes, and the appointed Royal Jacobite Historiographer.² Gardner's best-selling books combine the so-called swoon theory of H. Schoenfield's infamous book *The Passover Plot* with his own expertise in genealogies. Gardner argues that Jesus survived the crucifixion, married Mary Magdalene, fathered children by her, and that his bloodline survives to this day in the royal houses of Europe. The recent best-selling novel *The DaVinci Code* also features such a bloodline mythology.

Last November Gardner re-published a March 31, 1996 *London Sunday Times* article on his website entitled, "The Tomb That Dare Not Speak Its Name." The story detailed the saga of a limestone ossuary (65 cm x 25 cm x 30 cm) in a family tomb bearing the inscription, "Jesus, son of Joseph." The so-called Jesus ossuary had been discovered, examined, and catalogued by an Israeli archaeologist in 1980. Archaeologists then moved the tomb's ossuaries into museum storage at Romemma. The ossuary was eventually published by the Israeli Antiquities Authority in L.Y. Rahmani's *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (1994).³ Joseph Zias, Curator of Archaeology and Anthropology for the Israel Antiquities Authority, later commented that, unlike the James ossuary, this find was "really impressive" since it emanated from "a very good, undisturbed archaeological context."

The story was eventually picked up by the AP, but came more fully to Western attention on Easter Sunday, April 7, 1996, when the BBC aired a TV special, filmed in Jerusalem, that featured the find. Joan Bakewell, now Lady Chairman of the British Film Institute, hosted the much publicized feature documentary "The Body in Question."

¹ The Jesus Ossuary discussed herein was not mentioned in Craig Evans recent article, "Jesus and the Ossuaries," *BBR* 13:1 (2003): 21-46. Of the six ossuaries listed in Rahmani's catalogue that bear the name Jesus, Evans apparently includes only no. 9. However, in view of the bibliographic data provided by Evans, as well as the fact that he provides only the modern font for the inscription, I am not sure ossuary no. 9 in this paper is the same as Evans' "Jerusalem Tomb Ossuary 8" (p. 28).

² The biographical information comes from Gardner's website: <http://graal.co.uk/>.

³ For scholarly treatments of ossuaries, see E. M. Meyers, *Jewish Ossuaries: Reburial and Rebirth. Secondary Burials in Their Ancient Near Eastern Setting* (BibOr 24; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1971) and P. Figueras, *Decorated Jewish Ossuaries* (Documenta et Monumenta Orientis Antiqui 20; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985).

The Ossuary and the Inscription

Why did Joseph Zias call the Jesus ossuary impressive? Several significant data points from the *Sunday Times* article and Gardner's website contextualize the Jesus ossuary and reveal why he and others think it is their first century smoking gun. Afterwards, I will offer a response.

- 1) The Jesus ossuary is no. 704 in L.Y. Rahmani's *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (1994, Israeli Antiquities Authority).
- 2) The ossuary was found in Jerusalem in the vicinity of East Talpiyot, about three miles from the heart of the city.
- 3) The ossuary bears the inscription, "Jesus, son of Joseph" on it, and bears what some consider a cross.
- 4) The ossuary was found in what is likely a plain family tomb, along with ossuaries bearing the names "Joseph," "Mary," "Matthew," and a second "Mary" in Greek. In no case were the bones found.

Here is the inscription and Rahmani's comments, taken directly from his catalogue. The "cross" mark preceding the name is, as Gardner enthusiastically points out, typical of the way the cross or *tau* is represented in other inscriptions from the period of the early church.

On narrow side of chest, under rim: See below,
Inscr.

Inscr. Narrow side, under rim, preceded by mark:



ישוע בר יהוסף: Yeshua'(?), son of Yehosef

Bibl. *H*A 76, 1981:24-25.

Comm. 1. See *Comm.* 701:1.

2. The first name, preceded by a large cross-mark, is difficult to read, as the incisions are clumsily carved and badly scratched. There seems to be a vertical stroke representing a *yod*, followed by a *shin*; the *vav* merges with the right stroke of the *'ayin*. The reading ישוע is corroborated by the inscription on No. 702 referring to Yeshua', the father of Yehuda. For the name, see *Comm.* 9:1.

3. יהוסף: For the name, see *Comm.* 9:2.

Sound impressive? Disturbing? Let not your heart be troubled. There are good reasons why this discovery didn't change anything.

Response: The Inscription

In most general terms, the apparently unskilled hand of the inscriber invites a question. If this ossuary was truly that of Jesus of Nazareth, one would expect much greater care to be exercised in its incision. But, as Gardner and others counter, if the body is that of the biblical Jesus, it may have been buried here very quietly to avoid scandal.

One might also be tempted to argue that the New Testament doesn't have Jesus buried in a family tomb, but interred in a new tomb donated by the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea. However, as proponents of the Jesus ossuary accurately point out, it was the custom to remove a body from its initial burial place once the flesh had rotted off the bones, and then place the bones in an ossuary among other ossuaries of family members. Hence the New Testament itself has little to say on the matter (other than affirming a resurrection in the first place).

While the inscription on ossuary 704 is of fair legibility, the first two letters are scrawled so sloppily that Rahmani, the authority on such ossuaries, marks them with question marks. However, the two questionable letters become more readable once the style of the *yodh* and *shin* in other ossuary inscriptions bearing the name of Jesus get fixed in one's mind.

Yes – I said other ossuary inscriptions with the name of Jesus – a fact that Gardner rather deceitfully omits. In fact, this artifactual reality undermines the meaning he seeks to attribute to the ossuary.

Other References to a "Jesus" on an Ossuary:

Rahmani, no. 9

9 Pl. 2

[S 767] 58 × 30.5 × 35.5 cm. Chip carved.

Prov. Unknown

Descr. Damaged. Inner ledge on two sides. Low feet.

Ornam. F Two metopes in line frames; broadened 'triglyph'. In each metope, a six-petalled rosette inside concentric line circles.

Mark On R of chest: 

Inscr. A. F In 'triglyph':

 Yeshu

ישׁו Yeshu

B. F In left metope:

 Yeshu'a

Rahmani, no. 121

121

Pl. 17

[46.183] 52.5 × 30.5 × 32 + 17 cm. Thickness of walls: 5.5 cm. Hard limestone. Relief carved.

Prov. Mt. Scopus (west of Augusta Victoria Hospital), Jerusalem.

Descr. *R* Part of rim and wall repaired in antiquity with iron rivet.

Ornam. *F* and *B* One raised rectangle resembling an ashlar. *L* Raised rhomb.

Lid Vaulted; base broadened into cornice (54 × 35 cm).

Inscr. *Lid F*, left-of-centre:

יֵשׁוּעַ בְּרִיגָרְסָתָם
Yeshu'a

140

Pl. 20

[53.1223] 21 × 24 cm. Fragment.

Prov. Unknown

Inscr. Inside circle:



ישוע Yeshua'

Bibl. Figueras 1983:21, 105-108.

Comm. For another example of a name within a carelessly drawn circle, see No. 856. The similarity of the circle to a fish is coincidental and the inferences drawn by Figueras excessive.

Rahmani, no. 63

63

Pl. 11

[36.913] 62 × 25.5 × 31.5 cm. Chip carved.

Prov. Kidron Valley (near Silwan), Jerusalem.

Descr. Red wash. Low feet.

Ornam. F Two metopes in zigzag frames, doubled at top and sides; broadened 'triglyph' containing large zigzag. In each metope, a six-petalled rosette inside zigzag circles.

Lid Flat. Broken.

Inscr. R Vertical, ascending:



Yehoshu'a is a
recognized alternate
spelling for Jesus

יהושע Yehoshua'

Bibl. Sukenik 1936:92.

Comm. 1. See Comm. 61:1.

2. יהושע: For the name, see Comm. 9:2.

3. For the central zigzag, cf. No. 32.

Finally, ossuary no. 702 from Rahmani's catalogue bears the inscription, "Jude, son of Jesus." Rahmani is of the opinion that the Jesus referenced here is the individual of ossuary 704, the Jesus ossuary. This is plausible since ossuary 702 comes from the same family tomb as the Jesus ossuary, no. 704.⁴

⁴ Rahmani notes in Table 2 at the back of his book that the family tomb of no. 704 included numbers 701-709.

Rahmani 702

702

Pl. 101

[80.501] 55 × 23 × 27 cm. Chip carved.

Prov. East Talpiyot, Jerusalem.

Descr. Inner ledge on two sides. Low feet.

Ornam. F Two metopes in zigzag frames, in each, a six-petalled rosette inside a zigzag circle.

Inscr. F Right metope. Top, left of circle:

יהודה בן ישוע

ישוע יהודה בר Yeshua'

Bibl. HA 76, 1981:24-25.

Comm. 1. See Comm. 701:1.

2. יהודה: For the name, see Comm. 24:3.

3. ישוע: For the name, see Comm. 9:1. For the ossuary which probably contained the remains of this person, see Comm. 704:2.

As Rahmani's note above states, the Yeshu'a likely referred to here would be the one whose remains were placed in ossuary 704. This is plausible since it appears to be a family tomb. This raises the question of how no. 704 helps Gardner's reconstruction of how Jesus survived the crucifixion, fled to what is now France with Mary Magdalene (where his bloodline was protected and thus survived), by whom he fathered children. Are we to suppose that the above ossuary is that of one of Jesus' children, and that this child's bones were retrieved from Rennes L'Chateau in France for burial in the family tomb? Where is the documentary evidence for this (much less the logic)? Perhaps Jesus' son Judah went back to the ancestral home (Jerusalem) of his father. Again, where is the documentary evidence – even the traditional evidence – for such an idea?

Response: The Names Mary, Joseph, and "Too Many Jesuses"

These inscriptions are all referring to separate "Jesuses" whose bones were interred in and around Palestine. The presence of six Jesus ossuaries in Rahmani's catalogue points to the fundamental problem for those who would use the ossuary to deny the resurrection and why this ossuary did not cause a religious and cultural upheaval – there are too many "Jesuses".

But what about the presence of ossuary 704 in a family tomb containing ossuaries for Mary, Joseph, and Matthew, and two other biblical names? What are the odds of such a juxtaposition? The answer is, "not bad."

Simply put, the names "Jesus," "Mary," and "Joseph" are among the most common in first century Palestinian epigraphic artifacts, especially ossuaries. Note below the occurrences of Jesus, Joseph and Mary:

יהוסף *see* יוסף
יהועזר *see* יעזר
יחוסה 8(?)
חזקיל *see* יחזקאל
יהוחנן *see* יחנה
חזקיה *see* יחקיה
יני (ינאי=) 61
יסון 477
יעקב 290, 865; יעקוב 104, 396, 678
יעקב *see* יעקוב
יששבה *see* ישבח
ישוע *see* ישו
→ ישוע 9, 121, 140, 702, 704(?); ישו 9; *see also* יהושע;
'Ιησους Jesus (varied spellings)

יחנה 31; *see also* Ἰωάννης; IOHANA (Latin)

יהונתן 68, 107, 222; יהותן 232; *see also* Ἰωνάθης

יהוסף *see* יהוסף Joseph (various spellings)

→ יהוסף 9, 12, 15, 16, 83, 256, 290, 327, 603, 704, 773, 893;
יהוסף 22(?); יהסף 730; יוסה 705; יוסף 573; *see also* Ἰωσέ

יהועזר 151, 783, 797, 801, 802, 803; יועזר 15; *see also*
Ἰωέζερως

יהושע 63; *see also* ישו, ישוע; Ἰησοῦς

יהותן *see* יהונתן

יהסף *see* יהוסף

יהקים 718

יוסה *see* יהוסף; Ἰωσέ

יוסף *see* יהוסף

יהועזר *see* יהועזר

יחוסה 8(?)

חזקאל *see* יחזקאל

ישוע 9, 121, 140, 702, 704(?); ישו 9; *see also* יהושע;

Ἰησους

ישבח (= ישבחז) 3

יתרא 57, 773

כבליון(?) 573

לוי 610

ליעזר *see* אליעזר; *see also* Λεάζαρος

מלושה 610(?)

מניס 82(?)

מנשה *see* מלושה

מרתא *see* מרה

Mary (varied spellings)

→ מריה 152, 706, 796; *see also* מרים; Μαρία, Μαριάμ

יחוסה *see* מריחוסה

מריאמנה *see* מרים

→ מרים 31, 243, 351, 502, 559, 821; מריאמנה 108(?); *see also* מריה; Μαριάμ; ΜΑΡΙΟΝ (Latin)

מריס 820, 822; *see also* Μάρεις

מרתא 67, 220, 256, 354, 468; מרה 648, מרתה 290; *see also* Μάρα, Μάρθα

Rahmani's catalogue lists a total of 233 inscriptions. Of those, some form (including Greek and Latin) of "Joseph" is found 19 times and "Jesus" 10 times. After a statistical analysis of the names "Jesus," "Joseph," and "James," and the estimated male population of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus, *Biblical Archaeology Review's* article on the James ossuary concluded that there could be roughly 20 people named Jesus who could be matched to a Joseph as a father and a James as a brother.⁵

⁵ "Burial Box of James the Brother of Jesus," *BAR* 28:6 (Nov/Dec 2002): 33.

Hence it is no surprise (and wasn't in 1980 when no. 704 and its associated ossuaries were discovered) that we would (a) find the name "Jesus" on a bone box in Jerusalem, and (b) find that name on a bone box in a tomb associated with these other common names. **There could have been 20 such family tombs.**

Response: The "Cross"

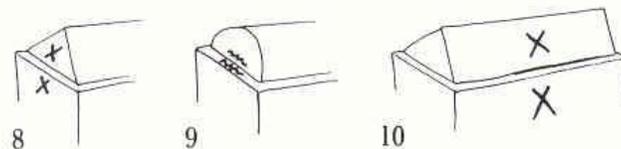
Briefly here, the "cross" referred to by Gardner and others on no. 704 is not a cross. It's a typical example of what Rahmani (p. 19) calls an engraver's "direction mark." These marks were designed to ensure accurate alignment of lid and ossuary. Usually they occur in pairs, but can occur alone or in foursomes. Here are several examples from Rahmani's book (including a cross shape):

7. Marks

Approximately 40% of the decorated and plain ossuaries listed in this catalogue bear marks.

A. DIRECTION MARKS

Most of the marks on ossuaries are incised or drawn with charcoal. They usually occur in pairs, one on the lid and the second on either the narrow side (Fig. 8) or rim (Fig. 9) of the chest or occasionally on the chest's long side (Fig. 10). In a few cases (e.g. Nos. 803, 868), paired marks were made on all four sides of the lid and the chest. Usually these paired marks are identical, though exceptions occur (e.g. Nos. 51, 88, 150); their most common forms are zigzags, nicks, stars (e.g. No. 322) or triangles. Single straight lines also occur, sometimes extending unbroken from the lid to the chest (e.g. Nos. 206, 326, 433, 840). Two large or small crossed lines are also a common mark (e.g. Nos. 747, 568, 841). At times pairs of marks are inverted (e.g. Nos. 78, 270).



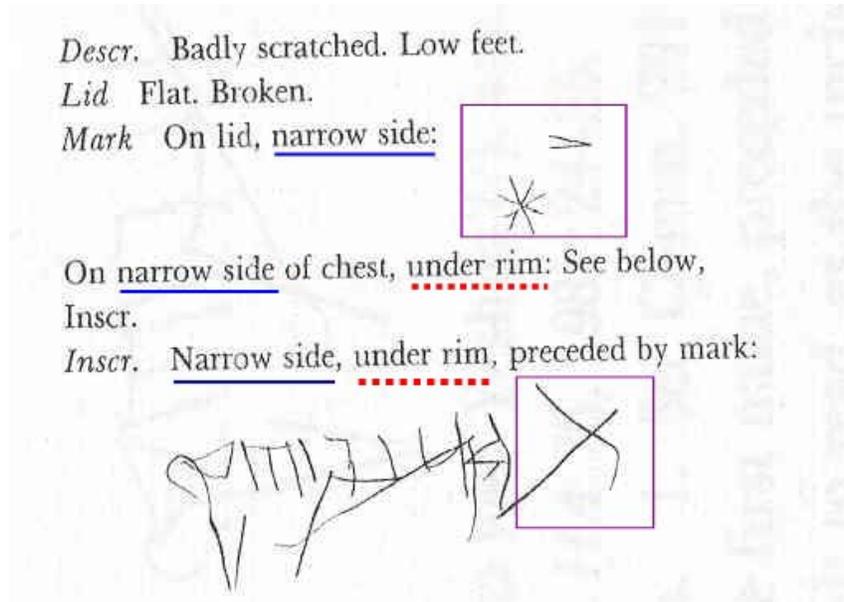
Figs. 8-10

8: ossuary with corresponding marks on lid and narrow side of chest; 9: ossuary with corresponding marks on lid and narrow rim of chest; 10: ossuary with corresponding marks on lid and long side of chest

It is pretty obvious that the "cross" next to "Yeshu'a" on no. 704 corresponds to these clear direction marks. But is there any other evidence that the "cross" of no. 704 is indeed a direction mark and not a sign of a crucifix? Yes – and it's right on the same ossuary (which begs the question as to why Gardner and company did not

tell this to the public when releasing their research last month. Note the image below:

Returning to the Jesus ossuary 704, note Rahmani's description:



Note carefully the color-coded points of correspondence. We have a mark (a "greater than" sign with an asterisk-type mark) on the lid on the ossuary's "narrow side." This marking is directly above the inscription and its mark, as indicated by Rahmani's note that the inscription is oriented on the same side – the ossuary's "narrow side" UNDER the rim.

This is exactly the pattern the other direction marks above follow. There is no crucifix sign next to the name Yeshu'a – it is an engraver's direction mark. Hence this is no circumstantial proof that the Yeshu'a here is Jesus of Nazareth.

Conclusion

Given the carelessness with which 704 is carved, the statistical probability that there could have been as many as 20 families with members named Jesus and Joseph, and the fact that Mary is also among the most common names witnessed in first century artifacts, Gardner's argument can be (pun intended) laid to rest.

It's unfortunate, though, that scholars are either uninformed of this object or do not bother to critically demonstrate the lack of reliable ancient documentary material to a Jesus survival or bloodline. Where are the Jesus Seminar critics when you need them?