DISCUSSION OF: STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF AN ARCHEOLOGICAL FIND

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1. Introduction. The paper by Feuerverger analyses interesting data on the inscriptions found on the ossuaries of a burial tomb unearthed in Jerusalem in 1980. A statistical analysis is made of the plausibility that the names inscribed on the ossuaries match those of the New Testament (NT) figures. The evidence on which the analysis is based is the distribution of names in the era when the tomb was dated. The results are based on assumptions which may drive some of the results.

Some questions immediately come to mind.

- The author assumes that a tomb of Jesus of Nazareth exists—this assumption is disputed by many people, as stated by Colin Aitken in the interview given on March 1, 2007 to *The Herald*. Moreover, even assuming the existence of a tomb of Jesus of Nazareth, why should it be located in Talpiyot and not, say, at the Sepulchre in Jerusalem or in another site or city?
- What is the uncertainty of the estimated number 1,100 of inscribed adult ossuaries? It would be important to measure the variability around that estimate.
- What implications does the statement that the Talpiyot finding is the "best of many trials" have on the results?
- Why was the DNA evidence available only for the ossuaries with the inscriptions "Yeshua son of Yhosef" and "Mariamenou e Mara?" Why was DNA not extracted from all the remains?
- Assumption A.7, which interprets the name on Ossuary #1 as being that of Mary Magdelene, is one factor that has a very strong influence on the results of the analysis since it is such a rare name. Is there no uncertainty in this interpretation?

Here we discuss further aspects of the paper and propose possible ways in which the statistical analysis could be extended.

The assumptions made by the author are based both on *anonymous* sources, such as the 4th century CE version of the Acts of Philip[1] and the NT gospels written between 65 and 100 CE. A possible way to handle the different reliability of these sources could have been that of assigning different weights to the assumptions based on historical sources and to those based on other sources, such as the apocryphal narratives.

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[1] Craig A. Blaising, "Philip, Apostle." In *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Everett Ferguson, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997).