

DISCUSSION OF: STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF AN ARCHEOLOGICAL FIND—SKEPTICAL COUNTING CHALLENGES TO AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIND

BY SHEILA M. BIRD

MRC Biostatistics Unit

The New Testament (NT) tomb in East Talpiyot, Jerusalem was discovered around Easter in 1980. Its surveyors at the time included Amos Kloner, whose 1980 PhD thesis was entitled “Tombs and Burials in the Second Temple Period,” a topic on which he continued to publish for at least the next 15–20 years. Why did such a scholar not seize avidly the apparent historical opportunity that fell to his lot?

The tomb’s excavator, Yosef Gath of the Department of Antiquities and Museums, died (date not specified) of heart failure not long after completing his work at the site. Upon completion of salvage excavations, “such bone material as remained was reburied” in accordance with Jewish ritual law. How much bone material remained? I assume that the orthodox rabbinate properly records reburials? Coincidentally, the NT tomb was discovered just as Sir Alec Jeffreys (1978–84, in Leicester, UK) was discovering DNA fingerprinting [see http://genome.wellcome.ac.uk/doc_wtd020877.html and Jeffreys, Wilson and Thein (1985)]. Some DNA analysis has been essayed, which Feuerverger side-steps. Shimon Gibson’s archaeological drawings at the time of excavation indicated 10 ossuaries.

Ossuaries from the NT tomb were taken into the State of Israel Collections, but not until 1996 was it realized that records of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) show only nine as having been received by it. Counting them all out and counting them all in, as famously reported by a UK journalist in the Falklands War, was inexplicably lax.

According to a 1994-published interpretation by authority Rahmani, and endorsed in 1996 by Kloner, six were found to have such Hebrew inscriptions as “Marya,” “Yoseh,” “Yeshua son of Yehosef,” “Yehuda son of Yeshua,” “Matya”...or Greek inscription of “Marmamene [diminutive] who is also called Mara.” Attributions of authority are notoriously fickle: Rahmani had also interpreted Mary and Joseph as the parents of Yeshua and grandparents of Yehuda. Feuerverger argues that, if Rahmani is correct in this interpretation, then the tomb-site cannot be that of the NT family. The heretical alternative (which ancient religious authorities may have disavowed, or been unaware of) of Yeshua’s having had a son by Mara is not admitted as a scientific (prior) consideration.