

Various Scripts among the Ossuaries of the Talpiot Tomb

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Besides the natural distinctions in personal handwriting from one inscription to another, there are also distinct, standard styles of scripts that have been used among the ossuaries. A general distinction can be made between styles that emulate or are influenced by normal “ink on paper” handwriting and those that are “lapidary” in character. Styles influenced by “ink on paper” handwriting come in formal, semi-formal, semi-cursive and cursive scripts. Formal script is reflected in CJO 121 and CJO 702. Cursive script endeavors to create letters without lifting the pen or stylus. The best example of this form of script is that of DF 40. This closely resembles the name “Yeshua’ (?)” in ossuary CJO 704 from the Talpiot Tomb.

The “lapidary scripts” are standard for inscriptions which have been deeply engraved in stone. What tend to be gently curved lines in handwritten scripts tend to be straightened out in lapidary script. There are both formal and informal forms of this script that usually can be distinguished by uniformity and ornamentation. The more ornamented forms tend to have triangular, often hollow serifs (as in the Mariah, Yoseh, and Mattiah inscriptions in the Talpiot Tomb). The lines of the less elaborate lapidary styles tend to appear stick-like, made up of distinct separate strokes and without serif ornamentation (cf. especially DF 29 and “Yehosef” of the CJO 704 Talpiot Tomb inscription; also pertinent is CJO 9). CJO 140 is the same, but with a slight hint of some cursive tendencies with respect to the *shin* and the *ayin*.

The scripts of the “Yeshua’ (?) bar Yehosef” inscription of the Talpiot Tomb

Yeshua’ (?):

Cursive style. Diagonal, usually shorter *yodh*; vertical *waw*; pitch-fork *shin* (often two-stroke); one-stroke, diagonal, Y-shaped *ayin*, (see also Yehosef bar Qefa inscription): two-stroke *heh*; round *samekh*.

Utilizes pre-existing, earlier strokes on the surface as part of the new inscription.

Cramped/crowded execution at the beginning of the inscription is abnormal (as opposed to the end of an inscription where such crowding commonly happens when the writer runs out of room; e.g., CJO 702). However, crowding is more likely to be expected when a name or word is being inserted into a line or place where the space for the inserted word has been limited by the size of the earlier word in the inscription.

Which is the best candidate for *yodh*? Only one candidate of the two could have been made by the same tool as *shin* and *ayin* in the rest of the inscription: the short diagonal stroke attached to bottom of the *shin*. Here, *yodh* is executed as a short, diagonal stroke, as in numerous inscriptions, in order to distinguish it from the *waw*. This form is stylistically similar to other inscriptions such as CJO 63, CJO 140, DF 40 (see above) and should be considered a trait typical of the writer, whether writing in cursive or simple lapidary script. As will be seen, this is not the practice of the individual who wrote the name “Yehosef”.

Another Yeshua’ bar Yehosef (CJO 9)

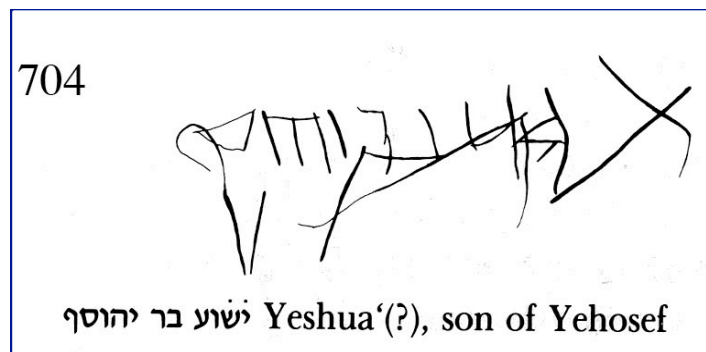
CJO 9 is the second “Yeshua’ bar Yehosef” in the CJO collection. However, this time there is no question mark next to the name Yeshua’. It is clearly inscribed in a deeply incised, lapidary stick script. The letters are unornamented (without the upturned serifs), with the exception of the word “*bar*” in the middle of the inscription. The *waw* and *yodh* are clearly distinguished.

Since there are approximately 230 Hebrew/Aramaic inscriptions among the ossuaries in the CJO series, statistically there is one “Jesus son of Joseph” for every 115 Hebrew/Aramaic ossuary inscriptions in the collection. There may have been more among the tombs, since the vast majority of ossuaries contain more skeletons than there are names inscribed on the sides. Also, in most cases where a Yeshua’ has been inscribed, no father is mentioned (there is an outside chance that any of a number of these were also a “Jesus, son of Joseph”).

Yeshua’ (?): what do the experts say about the name (Cross, Naveh, Pfann, Puech, Rahmani, Yardeni, et al.)

- 1) The *yodh* is difficult to identify. Neither stroke that has been suggested resembles the *yodh* of Yehosef.
- 2) What is taken to be a *shin* has an exceedingly long tail.

3) The top of the *waw* seems to have a hooked head. However, this in no way resembles the single stroke used to form a *waw* later in the name Yehosef.



4) The diagonal stroke of the proposed *ayin* is longer than usual. But the most unusual factors are: (a) the letter incorporates an earlier vertical stroke made by another tool. (b) The *ayin* itself is written over and intersects with the vertical downstrokes of not just one but two preceding letters proposed by Rahmani, the *shin* and the *waw*. This is almost unheard of.

5) Various additional scratches may be remnants of an earlier inscription. (Identifications subject to further scientific analysis.)

These unusual features—along with the numerous other scratches and strokes made by at least one other tool in and around the inscription—certainly justify the need for the question mark “?”.

What lies on the surface are two names with noticeable differences.

The observation that the first name was written in a different style and by a different tool than the last name raises various questions. Moreover, the fact that the first name was written over an earlier first name has certain implications for the storyline of the filmmakers and, along with other facts, works against the theory that this Jesus is to be identified with Jesus of Nazareth.

The earlier scratches/strokes are beneath Yeshua' (?) and are made by a duller tool. However, they were made by a tool similar or identical to that used in writing Yehosef. These are arguably the remnants of an earlier name. The surface was also apparently effaced and shaved. This makes the earlier name difficult to decipher. (The names Chanun or Yadun are possible but only conjectural until the inscribed lines can be thoroughly cleaned and examined.)

At least one or more of the earlier scratches appear to have been incorporated into the name “Yeshua' (?)” when it was added. This would be the case, for example, if one accepts the long stroke on the right as the *yodh*. The upper left vertical stroke of the *'ayin* has been incorporated. The *waw* is also part of the earlier layer, which may either have been incorporated into the later inscription, or if not, the later inscription was intended to read simply, “Yesha' (?)” without a *waw*.

What are the implications?

The filmmakers propose that the burials of Jesus' family in this tomb began with his own death and burial. The implication is that this “Yeshua' (?)”, (no matter how one chooses to read the name), was not the first person to be interred in the ossuary nor in the tomb. This means that the family of this individual both had a tomb and a burial in the family tomb before this “Jesus (?)” ever died.

On the one hand, this film has challenged us to consider afresh the methods by which we explore the *realia* of Second Temple history. On the other hand, unfortunately, the true family of this tomb has experienced a kind of “identity theft,” brought upon it in such a way that it is difficult to extricate this family's story from that of the family of Jesus of Nazareth. In a way, we must now “demythologize” the current story of this tomb in order to allow the actual history of this Judean family to be told through the tantalizing morsels that have been left behind.

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