

Hebrew inscription appears to confirm 'sign of Jonah' and Christian reference on ancient artifact

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(Phys.org) -- Following the recent announcement of the discovery of the earliest known Christian imagery in the exploration of a sealed first century Jerusalem tomb, controversy predictably erupted, with numerous members of the community of biblical scholars offering alternate interpretations of the iconography and disputing the tomb's claimed Christian connections.

Now, the exploration team has announced a previously unnoticed but highly specific detail that appears to confirm the original interpretation of the inscribed images. James H. Charlesworth of Princeton Theological Seminary has announced the identification and deciphering of a previously overlooked four letter inscription written in ancient Hebrew on the controversial "Jonah" ossuary. The inscription appears to spell out the name "Jonah" in Hebrew.

The first century CE tomb in the Jerusalem suburb of Talpiot, now two meters under a condominium building, was explored through the use of robot cameras. The associated images and their controversial interpretation were announced on February 28, 2012.

The expedition, carried out in 2010-2011, was directed by historian James D. Tabor of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and archaeologist Rami Arav of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, funded by the Discovery Channel, and is the subject of a documentary

produced by filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici that aired on the Discover Channel on April 12.

Among the robotic exploration's more controversial finds was an ossuary or "bone box" with an engraving of what the team identified as "Jonah and the fish," a symbol associated with the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. If correct, this interpretation would make the ossuary engraving the earliest Christian art ever found as well as the first archaeological evidence related to faith in Jesus' resurrection.

The image of Jonah and the fish was used by later early Christian groups as a symbol of Christ and his resurrection, based on a reference by Jesus to Jonah in a passage in the gospel of Matthew (12:39-40). The Jonah "sign" became the quintessential expression of Christian resurrection faith in later centuries with over a hundred examples of Jonah images in the Christian catacombs at Rome.

The discovery of a Jonah image in first century Jerusalem tomb—a type of tomb that went out of use in 70 CE when the Romans destroyed the city—was a surprise and predictably controversial. Various scholars have disputed the Jonah identification insisting that the image is more likely a funerary monument or an amphora-like vase of some type and not a fish at all.

After the February announcement of the exploration's results, the team continued to examine the photographs of the engraving. In puzzling over cryptic marks on the fish's head they noticed what appeared to be Hebrew script inside the design. Charlesworth, being an expert in Hebrew script of the period, was called upon to analyze the markings.

Charlesworth's discovery appears to confirm the original interpretation of the team. It appears that the lines the team originally interpreted as representing the stick figure in the mouth of the fish also form four

cryptic Hebrew letters (in the Hebrew script familiar from the [Dead Sea Scrolls](#)): Yod, Vav, Nun, Heh, spelling out (from right to left) Y O N H or YONAH—the Hebrew name of the prophet Jonah. The inscription is engraved in letters less than 4 centimeters in height—too deep to have been natural scratches in the stone, too intricate in shape to be random marks by the engraver.

Charlesworth is the George L. Collord Professor of New Testament Language and Literature and director of the Dead Sea Scrolls Project at Princeton. He has devoted his career to the epigraphical study of the original texts of the Dead [Sea Scrolls](#) and specializes deciphering the Herodian script of this period. So far, Israeli epigrapher Robert Deutsch has confirmed Charlesworth's reading of YONAH and Haggai Misgav of Hebrew University says there are definitely letters there although he reads them as ZOLAH rather than YONAH. Charlesworth has invited other epigraphers to evaluate the inscription as well.

"This discovery by Prof. Charlesworth is quite remarkable and had been overlooked in our initial analysis," noted Tabor. "The engraver has apparently rather ingeniously combined what we took to be the stick-figure of Jonah with the four [Hebrew](#) letters spelling out his name."

Tabor believes that the inscription now confirms the image as "the sign of Jonah," thus strongly supporting the view that the tomb provides the first archaeological evidence ever found that can be linked to the early Jewish followers of Jesus. The significance of this tomb is compounded in that it is less than 60 meters away from the controversial "Jesus family tomb," discovered in 1980, that had ossuaries inscribed "Jesus son of Joseph," "Mariamene," "Yose" and "Jude son of Jesus," names Tabor has linked to Jesus of Nazareth in his recent book, co-authored with Simcha Jacobovici, *The Jesus Discovery: The New Archaeological Find That Reveals the Birth of Christianity* (Simon & Schuster, 2012).

Provided by University of North Carolina at Charlotte

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