

Chapter ten: Tomb of the High Priest

There is unfortunately no surviving, autograph evidence from the first or centuries CE. There are copies, often copies of copies, dating from much later. The gospel accounts and the letters attributed to Paul/Saul now available been edited and changed, consciously or unconsciously, in the course of copying.

Paul wrote some years after an historical rebel Jesus may have existed but before the gospel authors. So, their accounts should be seen in the light of his testimony, rather than vice versa.

It would be useful to have something earlier than Paul, and ideally less altered, by which to evaluate his evidence. There is unfortunately nothing of substance in the written record.

What there is, though sparse, comes in the form of inscriptions on the stone boxes (ossuaries), in which the bones of the dead were stored, during the Second Temple Period ending in CE 70. This was when the Jewish uprising was finally crushed by the Romans and the Temple destroyed. After this, the practice of ossuary burial largely ceased. The families that could previously afford the rock-cut tombs, in which the ossuaries were placed, had been severely damaged by death and dislocation. There was no longer the wealth or the will to continue.

In excavations in 1990 for a recreational park at Talpiot, south of Jerusalem, workmen broke through the roof of one such tomb, revealing a number of stone ossuaries, some of which were inscribed in Aramaic with the names of family members. The inscriptions were scrawled untidily, quite likely to guide futures mourners as to the particular ossuaries, in which the bones of deceased family members should in future be placed.

This was quite a small tomb, containing a relatively large number of ossuaries, six still intact and a further six broken up and in disarray.

There were some common names – Mariam (Mary), Joseph, Simon and Salome – but two inscriptions, on an ossuary still in place in a loculus (recess), stood out. These were:

On the side:

יְהוֹסֵף בֶּן קַיֶּפָּא

Yehoseph bar Qaipha (Joseph son of Kaiphas)

Back:

יְהוֹסֵף בֶּן קִיפָּא

Yehoseph bar Qayapha (Joseph son of Kaiaphas)

I have shown in brackets how these names have been interpreted.

The title Qp (קפא) or Qyp (קיפא) is extremely rare and, on the evidence, confined to one prominent Jewish family, that of the High Priest Joseph.

While the other ossuaries were relatively plain, the one pertaining to Joseph was richly decorated, with a pattern of twin circles, each containing six, symmetrical rosette whorls. The ossuary contained the bones of several individuals, including those of a man who would have been in his sixties.

There was one other ossuary marked simply with the name קפא.

It does seem highly probably that this was the family tomb of the High Priest, known in the later gospels and so to us as Joseph Caiaphas.

Joseph's family rose to prominence, it would seem given the lack of any prior references, from comparative obscurity. Joseph was successful in holding on to his post from CE 18 to CE 36, longer than any other of his contemporaries. He married into another powerful family, that of Ananus, who was also a High Priest together with five of his sons.

The evidence provided by the tomb and the ossuary fit with the historical background. To have a family tomb required some wealth. But the tomb was not particularly distinguished, suggesting a family originally of modest means. On the other hand, Joseph's ossuary is splendid, as befits someone who had been a long-serving and successful High Priest.

It could be that, in the inscriptions, 'bar' denoted 'of the family of' as opposed to 'son of'. Thus, rather than being marked as contained the bones of a son of Joseph, also confusingly called Joseph, it was marked as being for the remains of Joseph himself and his direct family.

It is likely that Joseph died, old at the time, in his sixties around CE 40. The tomb would not have been used after the end of the Jewish uprising in CE 70.

A further ossuary, giving evidence apparently of the same family, was subsequently found in the hands of tomb robbers. It had come from another tomb around twenty miles west of Jerusalem, in the Elah valley. This held the inscription, more neatly incised and so possibly prepared in advance, 'Miriam daughter of Yeshua son of Kaiphaz (קִיפָא), priest from Maaziah from Beth Imri'.

This, especially if relating to the same family, provides a lot of further information. It could be that Miriam was simply related to a member of the same family. Or, specifically, she could have been the daughter of a man Yeshua (a common name and the Aramaic origin for Jesus) who was one of the sons of the High Priest Joseph. She could well have been married and ultimately interred in the tomb of her husband's family. But, it should be noted, her relationship to the family of Caiaphas/Caiphaz was deemed sufficiently significant to be mentioned on her inscription.

Being a priest would have been unexceptional and hardly worth mentioning on an inscription; therefore, I suggest, the designation 'priest' was shorthand for 'High Priest' in this context. Furthermore, Yeshua and Miriam were from a priestly family going back to one of the 24 priestly courses, Maaziah, said to have been established by King David to serve at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The patina on the Miriam ossuary was examined and found to be intact. There was also no indication that the identifying names on the ossuaries in the Joseph tomb had been altered.

So, this is all evidence that is original, unaltered and, in the case of the Joseph inscriptions, it likely predates the writings of Paul. But does it tell us anything that we do not already (seem to) know?

The later gospels refer to the High Priest Joseph and this is confirmed by brief references to the High Priest's tenure of office in *Antiquities* by Josephus. There are two forms of the name in Aramaic on the Joseph ossuary, one disyllabic and one trisyllabic, and this is neatly paralleled by two similarly varying forms in different manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. Here, we have both Kaiphaz (Καίφαζ) and Kaiaphaz (Καϊαφαζ).

The trouble is that this way of looking at the evidence is based on the possibly shaky presumptions that have subsequently been made. It should be said by individuals who have had, from the first century onwards, a very bad record of transliterating and translating from Aramaic to Greek.

So, let us look at the evidence of the inscriptions as these are, unaltered and from the mid first century, without the distraction of what we think, from later interpretations, to have been the case.

The first point is that written Hebrew and Aramaic lacked vowels, except in some cases where consonants certain were used to indicate, not always precisely, the presence of a vowel. So, the Greek writers of the New Testament would have had to guess in, working from their Aramaic sources, what vowels were intended. They may also have had no way of checking reliably, working many years later and without good access to Jewish sources, who in many cases were hostile to Christians.

These writers do not appear, from the evidence, to have paid sufficient attention to the differences between Greek and Aramaic in terms of the letters used and the sounds represented.

Another point is that some consonants could be used as they are, or to carry certain vowel sounds. As such, these are described as *matres lectionis*, mothers of reading.

One of the vowel carriers was the letter, and in its own right a consonant, waw. This was often used as a vowel-carrier, carrying the ‘o’ or the ‘u’ sound. It can be seen, though the rough lettering is hard to distinguish, as representing the long ‘o’ sound in Yehosef on both the back and side of the Joseph ossuary.

The letter yodh, also a consonant in its own right, may also be used as a vowel-carrier. At the beginning of a word, as in Yeshua or Yehosef, it is invariably a consonant. But, in the middle of a word, it most often acts to represent a vowel, usually e, i or possibly the diphthong ai. When it does this, of course, it does not create a new syllable, just represents one of the vowels that have to be guessed at by Greek (and for that matter English) interpreters.

Thus, without all the overlay of subsequent interpretation, what we may well have in the case of the Joseph ossuary is just the same disyllabic name written twice. The second inscription was quite likely made when the ossuary was moved, so obscuring the first identifying inscription from view.

What is thus most probable is that קפא and קיפא are just alternative ways of writing the same name, which is properly represented in Greek as Καϊφας or Κηφας and in English as Kaiphas or Kephias. The sounds represented are close and there is no way of telling which was used at the time. It could, even for a title, have been a matter of usage or dialect.

Some of the early New Testament Greek writers encountered קפא in their sources and reasonably wrote Κηφας. Others came across קיפא, failed to recognise the yodh as a vowel-carrier and mis-transliterated the word as Καϊφας. The latter form came to predominate in New Testament manuscripts.

So, how then did the Jewish historian Josephus refer twice to the High Priest Joseph, in his *Antiquities* written in CE 93, as ‘Joseph who was called Kaiaphas (Καϊαφας)? The answer is that we do not know what Josephus wrote, since the copies which have survived of *Antiquities* date at the earliest from a thousand years later. The manuscript has been copied and recopied and recopied and recopied over long centuries, chiefly by Christian scribes interested in preserving material which they believed gave evidence of Jesus. In that long time, it is of course no surprise that in so doing, whatever was originally there, they used the long (though incorrect) version that was most familiar to them.

This has not been an unproductive exercise.

We have established that, on the balance of probability, yodh was used as a vowel-carrier in the High Priest’s Joseph’s title and that this was consequently disyllabic. The case is that, just as with the fictional nickname ‘Peter’, the High Priest Joseph was not called Caiaphas/Kaiaphas.

What he was probably called, and we cannot choose the spelling for certain because of the lack of vowels in written Aramaic, was Kaiphas or Kephaz (כפז). This is a matter of some consequence, as we registered in earlier discussion. The character (or characters) in Paul's letters called Cephas/Kephaz (not meaning a stone!) held the title of the High Priest Joseph's family.

