

# **Discussing the conclusion of James Tabor related to the relationship between Jesus Pantera and Abdes Pantera, and presenting a new model for this relationship**

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James Tabor has a conclusion in his informative book “The Jesus Dynasty” (Ref: Tabor-I). He noticed a reference for a tombstone in Germany that was dedicated to a Roman soldier from Sidon with the name “Abdes Pantera”. This immediately grabbed the attention of Tabor and he started studying it. One of the conclusions in the book was that this soldier might be the true biological father of Jesus.

Although I totally don’t agree with this conclusion (metaphysically or historically), but still, all of his conclusions represented about 30% of the book, while the other 70% were high quality of information, which made the book valuable.

Furthermore, Tabor has invented a new area in the field of research, and he inserted the first flag there (i.e. the first conclusions related to this area). The hardest thing in any field of knowledge is to insert the first flag. The next flags would be much easier to insert as they depend on the discovery of new related information.

In this article, I am going to draw the attention to new information that could probably allow me to insert a new flag (i.e. to present a new model) a bit deeper in this area of knowledge, and someone else might later find another piece of information and would insert the third flag into more deeper point. This process of inserting flags will continue until we reach the truth, and this is the story of finding the truth in all fields of knowledge.

We will start by clarifying the conclusion of James Tabor in section A#, then we will present the new model in section B#.

**A1#** A tombstone has been discovered in Germany for the memory of a Roman soldier. The inscription in this stone gives the following information about him:

- His name is: Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera.
- He was from Sidon.
- He was 62 years old when he died.
- He served in the army for 40 years.
- His unit was “Cohors I Sagittariorum”

Also, it seems that he died in the mid of the first century (about 50AD).

**A2#** Tabor used the following process to present his conclusion:

1. Many People new that Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus (based on Mark 6:3 and John 8:41).
2. Jesus has been named “Jesus ben Pantera” in the Palestinian Talmud.
3. Jesus did make a private visit in Sidon which does suggest that Jesus has close relatives there.

Mark 7:24 (NIV): And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden.

4. It is possible that Abdes was stationed near Nazareth at the time of Jesus birth.

[In order for this to be applicable then Abdes should have died at maximum 36AD; so that he would be in the area of Nazareth about 4BC. This is a very stretched assumption. However, according to the “Army-Of-Roman-Palestine” (Ref: Army-I) the first attestation for the unit “Cohors I Sagittariorum” in Judaea was in 90AD. Therefore, it is going to be hard to prove that this unit was near Nazareth at 4BC].

5. Because the surname of Abdes and the surname of Jesus are similar, and because the possibility that Abdes was in the area at the time of Jesus birth, then the conclusion here is that Abdes might have been the biological father of Jesus.

**A3#** Let us discuss this conclusion point per point:

**A3.1#** In Mark 6:3:

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? (ESV).

This line is actually the main key in the model I am going to present here. Let us discuss the social naming norms in the Palestinian villages today: if the parents (and let us call them Ali and Mary, and let the surname of Ali be “Kateeb”) were from different villages, then the maternal relatives will socially refer to the son (and let his name be Hassan) by his mother name as Hassan eben Mary (eben is the Arabic dialect word for “son”). This is not a disrespectful gesture toward the father, but the maternal relatives know the mother much more than the father (because the father is from a different village), therefore it is easier for them to socially refer to the son as Hassan eben Mary. The paternal relatives will socially refer to the son as: Hassan eben Ali.

Note that we are speaking here about the informal social naming, not the formal naming. The current formal naming would be “Hassan Ali Kateeb”. After 50 years from the death of Hassan, the relatives would probably refer to him as “Hassan Kateeb”.

I am going to assume here that many of the current norms in Palestine today (especially in Galilee) are similar to the norms 2000 years ago. This assumption is based on the fact

that Galilee didn't face a sudden mass immigration to it, or a sudden mass immigration from it. Also, the land of the Samaritans didn't face a sudden mass immigration to it, or a sudden mass immigration from it. Therefore, even if the current people there are not descendant from the people 2000 years ago, but still, norms will survive.

So, the line in Mark 6:3 doesn't really imply that the people didn't know the father of Jesus, but simply it can imply that Joseph (or Joseph's father) was originally from a different village, and then settled later in Nazareth.

**A3.2#** in John 8:39-41

“Abraham is our father,” they answered. “If you were Abraham’s children,” said Jesus, “then you would[c] do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father.” “We are not illegitimate children,” they protested. “The only Father we have is God himself.” (NIV)

If we sever the line “We are not illegitimate children” from the context then it could imply an indirect attack toward Jesus, but the context doesn't imply that. Jesus is actually attacking them: He is saying that they are not the sons of Abraham but they are the sons of someone else. They replied that they are not illegitimate children; to enforce that they belong to Abraham. I can add here that this might be a trap for Jesus, because if Jesus followed them in their statement and said that they are “illegitimates” then probably they would be able to sue Jesus for this accusation.

Nonetheless, the context here doesn't support the idea that they were indirectly accusing Jesus of being an illegitimate son.

**A3.3#** Morality was one of the main subjects in Jesus missionary. If people thought that there is something abnormal in the birth of Jesus, then Jesus would face a constant and damaging reminder in every argument with his opponents. But this didn't happen. Therefore, the birth of Jesus (according to the people at that time) was normal and similar to all other legitimate births.

Furthermore, if people thought that there is something abnormal in the birth of Jesus, then it would be a very serious scandal for “James the Just” who was the leader of the Christians for about 30 years.

Also, the compilation of the Palestinian Talmud started about 80AD, and it was first presented in Galilee about 200AD (i.e. the Mishnah and Tosefta) and then many commentaries have been added to it later over the years. This Talmud has multiple accounts related to Jesus that originated about 100AD (as these accounts are from Rabbis Eleazar and Akiva). In these accounts, Jesus has only been regarded as heretic, and there is no mention or mocking about his birth. The Babylonian Talmud is the book that mocked Jesus about his birth, but it was compiled much later after the Palestinian Talmud (credits to Tabor for highlighting these points).

Therefore, the people in Palestine (until at least 100AD) regarded the birth of Jesus to be normal and legitimate. Therefore, the people at that time regarded Joseph to be the biological father of Jesus.

[There is a clear gap (contradiction) between this conclusion and the metaphysics. The best reconciliation between them is to say that the Virgin Birth of Jesus was a secret that only known to close members of Jesus family. However, one of them did leak this secret out about 70AD, and it didn't become public until the second century. However, in this article we are just concerned with the scientific historical data, therefore, we will just put the metaphysics aside].

**A4#** As said before, Jesus has been mentioned in the Palestinian Talmud in multiple accounts. In one of these accounts, he was named Yeshu ben Pandera (Ref: Tabor-I, Tabor-II, Liqui, Wiki-Jacob). This name wasn't mentioned in defamation; therefore, we can conclude that "ben Pandera" was Jesus known surname.

Now ... if we have a name as X ben Y or X bar Y, then Y might be the father name, the family name, or the title. "Ben" is the Hebrew word for son, and "Bar" is the Aramaic word for it. For example: Simon bar Kokhba was the leader of the Jewish revolt in 135AD, and Kokhba wasn't his father name, but it was his title.

Pandera (or more accurately Pantera) is a Greek name which is now associated with the word "Panther", but at that time, Pantera was a legendary creature that resembles a big cat with a multicolored hide (Ref: Wiki-Pantera).

Tabor has pointed out in his book (page 69) that an ossuary has been discovered near Jerusalem in 1891AD which has a name in Greek: "Joseph Pentheros". This can provide a good support for the hypothesis that Pantera (Pandera, Pentheros) was an existed Jewish surname in Palestine.

**A5#** The Roman soldier's name is "Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera".

As Tabor highlighted in his book, "Tiberius Julius" is an acquired name that is given to [honorable] discharged soldiers.

[Quoting Tabor in this matter: "The names Tiberius Julius are cognomen or acquired. They indicate Pantera was not a native-born Roman but a former slave who became a freedman and received the rights of Roman citizenship from Tiberius Caesar for his service in the army" (end of quote).

But I would assume that Abdes would have been honored by the name "Tiberius Julius" for his lengthy service regardless whether he was a former slave or not].

**A5.1#** Abdes does seem to be a Semitic name. However, Abdes (alone) doesn't mean "Servant of God". The known Jewish name of "Servant of God" is Abdiel, which pronounced as Abd-Eel. El (which is pronounced Eel) is the name of God for the Israelites, and the name of the supreme God for the Phoenicians (i.e. the Canaanite). But the name "Abdes" is far away from "Abdiel."

However, his name might have been Abd-Shaddai or Abd-Shalom as Shaddai and Shalom were Jewish recognized names for God. If this is accurate, then the Romans shortened it and they just called him Abdes, but I truly don't know if these names ever existed.

It is also possible that Abdes was Phoenician; as there are many Phoenician names that start with "Abd".

**A5.2#** There are two possibilities regarding the name "Pantera":

- The first possibility: Pantera is the family surname of Abdes.
- The second possibility: Pantera is an acquired surname and not a family one. Adolf Deissmann wrote in his book "Light from the ancient east" (1909, Ref: Deissmann, page 74):

"The name Panthera is known in Attic inscriptions, but it occurs frequently in funeral and other inscriptions of the Imperial period as a cognomen of both men and women".

He did mention in the footnote that the detailed proofs will be found in his article "Der Name Panthera", which I don't think it was translated to English. However, it seems from the footnote that some of these names are from the start of the second century, which probably means that Abdes is the first Roman soldier to have this surname.

I found a note in Wikipedia (Ref: Wiki-Abdes) which highlight a possible reason for this surname to be favored by many of the Roman soldiers, but I couldn't find any reference for this note, nonetheless, it is interesting:

"The standard bearer [i.e. flag-bearer] of a Roman unit wore an animal fur on official occasions. In this case this would have been the fur of a predatory cat [i.e. panther]".

So, the idea here is that soldiers who were standard-bearers would acquire the surname "Pantera". Therefore, the suggestion here is that Abdes was the standard-bearer for his unit, therefore, he acquired the surname "Pantera". But this suggestion does depend on many unsupported assumptions.

Before leaving this point, it should be noted that Deissmann drew the attention (in the footnote, page 74) to a Greek inscription of a soldier in Ashmunén (ancient city in Egypt) with a name "Cottio the son of Abdes" (Κοττίων Ἀβδέουζ). Therefore, "Abdes" was a recognized name at that time, and it might have been a the Greek short for a Semitic name.

**A6#** In Palestine today, the large village will have many small villages clustered around it. I can assume that the large villages 2000 years ago have the same phenomenon. Yafia was the largest village in Galilee (according to Josephus). So, I can assume that there

were many small villages clustered around it including Nazareth, which was about 3km from Yafia.

These large villages at the old times didn't have the ability to expand geographically. Therefore, I expect that many of the new generations in this large village (i.e. Yafia) would settle down in one of the small villages around, or they even might start their own small village.

**A7#** The general direction of immigration is from the villages to the cities and not the other way round.

**A8#** In the model that we are about to present, we tried our best to choose the simplest valid options available. To explain this, we need to clarify the "Razor Rule", which is an important concept in logical analysis. This rule can be simplified as the following:

If we have multiple valid solutions for a problem, then the simplest solution should be considered first. We might decide later to go for a complex solution due to factors outside the frame of the problem. But within this frame, the simplest solution should be considered first.

One of the main parameters to differentiate between the complex and simple solutions is the number of unsupported assumptions in them: The solution with the highest number of unsupported assumptions would be the most complex, while the one with the lowest number of unsupported assumptions would be the most simple one.

**B#** With the above notes we can present the following assumptions that represent a specific model:

**B1#** The people in Nazareth referred to Jesus as "Jesus ben Mary" because Mary was from Nazareth, but Joseph was a stranger (A3.1#).

Therefore, we can assume that Joseph (or his father) was from a different village and then he settled later in Nazareth.

**B3#** Joseph can be from any village around, but taking note A6#, then we can say that the probability of Joseph to be from Yafia is more than the probability of the other villages.

**B4#** Mark have mentioned that Jesus made a private visit to some people in vicinity of Sidon (A2.3#), which could indicate that Jesus had close relatives there.

**B5#** From note A7#, the probability of Jesus large family to be from Galilee, and some of them settled later in Sidon is much higher than the probability that Jesus large family originated from Sidon.

Therefore, we can conclude that a member of Jesus large family settled in Sidon, and he helped other members to settle there as well.

**B6#** By notes B4# & B5#, we can conclude that an uncle or an aunt of Jesus did settle in Sidon and Jesus was obliged to visit them as he passed nearby.

**B7#** Jesus surname was Pantera (A4#).

**B8#** There is a Roman soldier from Sidon with the surname “Pantera”.

This need a lengthy analysis:

It is clear that the name Abdes seems to be Semitic. However, he might be Jewish (**J**) or Phoenician (**P**). Also, the surname (Pantera) might be the family name (**F**) or it might be an acquired name (**A**) – (See notes A5.1# & A5.2#).

So, we have four possibilities: JF, JA, PF, and PA.

# However, we have information that Pantera is an existed Jewish surname (the ossuary note in A4#), but we don't have any information (other than plausible assumptions) that this surname existed in Phoenicia. Therefore, PF is the least probable in the list.

# We know that Pantera did exist as a Jewish surname (Jesus Pantera and Joseph Pentheros in A4#), and we know that some Roman soldiers preferred to acquire this surname (A5.2#). Nonetheless, when we see the surname inscribed, then the “null-hypothesis” (i.e. the initial assumption) would regard the surname to be family rather than acquired; because most of the surnames are family names. This will put higher points to JF over JA & PA.

# Also, Jesus surname is Pantera, and Abdes surname is also Pantera. Jesus did have close relatives in the vicinity of Sidon, and Abdes is from Sidon. These similarities would also increase the probability of JF over JA & PA.

**B9#** Therefore, this soldier would probably be a paternal cousin to Jesus.

If we want to include the metaphysics, then Abdes would be a paternal cousin to Joseph.

**C#** Now ... we need to clarify an important feature in the “best probable model”:

Suppose we have an event that consist of three elements and each element has three options as follows:

Element-1: A1, B1, C1.

Element-2: A2, B2, C2.

Element-3: A3, B3, C3.

Let us suppose that the A's have the highest probability with 34% while the B's and C's have 33%. Therefore, the best available model for this event is “A1, A2, A3”.

To clarify this, we took the best option in every element, and they were A1, A2, A3 and we create our model on them.

But what is the probability of the accuracy of this model?

The answer:  $0.34 * 0.34 * 0.34 = 0.04$  (i.e. 4%). This means that the margin of error is 96%.

How this could be?

We have 27 possible models (i.e.  $3*3*3$ ). Among these models, our model was the most probable one. But the probability for its accuracy is low.

So, if our best model has a very low accurate probability, then why bother looking at it?

Because the best available model can be inserted and highlighted in the field of knowledge, which would encourage other people to find new information to improve it (or even change it to a better one). The continuation of this process would increase the accuracy of the model and reduce the margin of error,, and this how models are developed in all fields of knowledge.

### **The References:**

- Army-I: §400 Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera, Database of Military Inscriptions and Papyri of Early Roman Palestine, <https://armyofromanpalestine.com/%C2%A7400-tiberius-julius-abdes-pantera>
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- Wiki-Jacob: Jacob the Heretic, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob\\_the\\_Heretic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_the_Heretic)
- Wiki-Pantera: Panther (legendary creature), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panther\\_\(legendary\\_creature\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panther_(legendary_creature))



## Revision notes:

A summary of this article was published in Bart Ehrman blog in March 2023, and there were many useful comments and arguments about it, and it is useful here to highlight the following four notes extracted from these comments:

### Note-1:

James Tabor has highlighted the following:

I want to make it clear that the oft repeated assertion – “Tabor thinks Jesus’ father was a Roman soldier,” etc. is simply unfounded. What I say clearly, in the book and since, is that if we filled out Jesus’ proverbial “birth certificate” I think we would put father “Unknown.”

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However, there is an impression in the book that Abdes might have been the biological father of Jesus, and this article followed this impression.

### Note-2:

The new information that this article is depending on is that: if the parents in Palestine 2000 years ago were from different villages, then the maternal family would identify the son “socially and informally” by the mother name. I did mention my reasoning clearly in the article. However, I can argue here that this social naming is common in all civilizations, current and past. For example: Suppose someone is talking with a neighbor about their maternal relatives, and these were the alleged dialogs:

# Did you know! Mary’s son visited us yesterday, and he brought so many gifts for us, we truly love him!

# Have you heard! Nicole’s son bought a new car, it is really a lovely car, I just wonder how he got the money for it!

I would assume that the social naming here is normal for the maternal family in the villages of USA.

Furthermore, the Gospel of Mark is a mix of history and theological thoughts. But, I can argue that Mark 6:3 was written from a historical perspective: it was about “peasants” leaving the synagogue after hearing Jesus, and probably standing a moment at the front of the synagogue (as many would do after a sermon) and there were gossiping and talking about what they have heard, and one of them said (translated to the current terms): Hey guys, seriously, isn’t he Mary’s son, don’t we know him, doesn’t he have four brothers, how on earth did he get this knowledge?

So, my argument here is that when peasants having a chat between themselves, they would probably use a “social style” of naming, rather than a formal one, and Mark just put it as is, as historians normally do.

However, when a highly educated theologian is writing a philosophical book, then he will probably use the formal naming, hence we find the name in the Palestinian Talmud: Jesus ben Pantera.

Therefore, I argue here that the story in Mark need to be interpreted from a social context rather than a formal one.

**Note-3:**

There are actually two hypotheses in this article, the first one is that Abdes is the cousin, and the second one is that the Pantera family were originated from Yafia. I am assuming that new emergent information could probably either support or reject this Yafia hypothesis. So, there is something here to look for.

**Note-4:**

There are 3 main conclusions in Tabor’s book that I don’t agree with. It should be noted here that I am not criticizing the work of Tabor; as I have said before, all the conclusions in the book might have been about 30%, and the rest (70%) is high quality of information. I did discuss the first conclusion/impression in this article, and I am not planning to write an article about the other two conclusions. Therefore, it might be useful to discuss them here.

**1#** In page 49, Tabor highlighted something that was hidden in plain sight: the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew includes 4 women (excluding Mary). Surprisingly, these 4 women have negative reputation [according only to the Jewish scripture]. This is really abnormal: genealogies in ancient times didn’t normally include women, and Matthew included 4 with negative reputation. So, what was Matthew’s intention?

Tabor’s conclusion was: “Matthew was trying to put Jesus’ own potentially scandalous birth into the context of his forefathers and foremothers”.

This was a direct and straightforward conclusion, which, to me, was inaccurate as it doesn’t fit with the apparent theologies of Matthew. But this conclusion was very useful: This was the first solution for this abnormal point. Therefore, it was the first inserted flag for solving this puzzle. This would encourage others to challenge it and forward new flags. But still, the most important work in these series of flags is the first observation and the first flag!

My suggested flag for this puzzle is the following: It has been observed that Matthew did sever the text in the Old Testament (OT) out of context and configured it to fit his arguments. But this can confirm that Matthew was very

informed about the OT, and I truly think he was either a qualified Rabbi or a son to one.

This could answer some questions here: He was probably using the Midrash interpretation style. Therefore, Matthew didn't think that he was falsifying the text from the OT, but rather he used a style of interpretation that was considered by many at that time to be legitimate.

Also, I don't think Matthew regarded Jesus to be God or to be literally the son of God, but Matthew did believe in the Virgin Birth. Also, it seems clear to me that Matthew was a very argumentative person. Now, Matthew had two propositions to argue for: Jesus is the right heir for the throne of David, and Jesus birth was from a virgin.

The first proposition has been established by confirming that Joseph was the adopted father for Jesus. Therefore, according to the current dominant Greek culture (and probably the Jewish culture as well, but I am not very sure) Jesus can inherit the throne of David.

For the second proposition, I am assuming that Matthew could argue that Jesus blood is pure because God didn't let him be a descendant of these 4 scandalous women, therefore, Jesus birth was from a virgin. I assume that Matthew couldn't put this argument plainly in the gospel, but it would be a plausible argument in private discussions.

2# In page 77, Tabor has highlighted a very smart observation that Joseph died and then Mary probably married "Clophas" who might have been the brother of Joseph.

However, Tabor's final conclusion about this observation was influenced by his first main conclusion (Jesus father might have been unknown): Mary married Joseph, but died before having a son (as Jesus is not his son), and in this particular case, the Jewish culture force the brother (i.e. Clophas) to marry the widow (i.e. Mary).

But if we omit the first conclusion, then we could have a simpler interpretation for Tabor's observation: We could say (from a mere scientific historical perspective. See: "The methodology" - 54.02# in [omr-mhmd.yolasite.com](http://omr-mhmd.yolasite.com)) that Mary married Joseph and she gave birth to Jesus and probably James. Then Joseph died, and then Mary married Clophas (who might have been the brother of Joseph), and she gave birth to Joses, Simon, Jude and unknown number of sisters either from Joseph before or from Clophas after. And Clophas probably died before Jesus missionary.