

7. JAMES OSSUARY*

Possibly one of the most important finds that reveal the historicity of Jesus the Messiah is a bone box, called an ossuary, was made known to the public in November, 2002. Ossuaries were used by the Jewish people in Israel until the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, which provides a helpful chronological key to the age of their use. Over ten thousand such bone boxes have been discovered but only about one hundred contain inscriptions. Of the hundred, only two have an identification similar to what one observes with what has been called the “James Ossuary.” The entire Aramaic inscription reads, “James the son of Joseph and brother of Jesus” (*Ya’akov bar Yosef akhui diYeshua*). If, in fact, the inscription in its entirety is recognized as authentic, we have clear testimony of three persons relating to the biblical account. James (*Ya’akov*) is given in the Gospel accounts as a brother of Jesus, but he is also one of the most important figures in the New Testament. The book of Acts reveals that he was the pastor of the Jerusalem church, moderator of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and penned an epistle that we call the book of James. James is also spoken of a number of times in the writing of Josephus. He was put to death by certain Jewish leaders in A.D. 62, so if the James Ossuary is the one in which his bones were placed, then the dating of the box would be approximately A.D. 62-63, allowing time for the second burial of the bones after the decomposition of the flesh, according to Jewish practices.

The Israeli Antiquities Authority has claimed that the inscription on the box, particularly the portion “and brother of Jesus” to be a forgery, so the owner of the ossuary, Oded Golan, was put on trial. This seems to have come to nothing after several years in court, with even the chief antagonist acknowledging his error.¹ Many important scholars with expertise in ancient epigraphy, paleography, and xxx, have testified that the inscription is genuine and that the first part, James the son of Joseph and “and brother of Jesus” are from the same hand in on the ossuary. In view of this, it is likely that we may have a very important historical witness to the relationship of Jesus to his brother James, through Joseph and Mary.²

If the inscription on the ossuary is judged as genuine, does this definitely prove that Jesus of Nazareth and James his brother are the ones referred to? Let us examine the evidence for and against this proposition.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST ITS AUTHENTICITY

1.  The ossuary was not discovered in situ, within an archaeological dig, but purchased in the open market.
2. The bones that were originally in the tomb are absent, and may have been dumped out by

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¹ See the following for discussion of its exhibition in Toronto, damage to the ossuary, and subsequent trial. XXX

² Only Protestants would consider James to be the half-brother of Jesus through Joseph and Mary, since both the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodoxy believe that Mary remained a perpetual virgin. Roman Catholics consider James and the other brothers and sisters of Jesus in the Gospels to be cousins of Jesus through the supposed brother of Joseph. On the other hand, the Eastern Church believes that James and the other siblings were stepbrothers and stepsisters of Jesus born to Joseph from a former wife.

- those who found the ossuary, since having these bones unburied would have been offensive to the orthodox Jews and probably would have caused problems.
- Arguments that the inscription was recently done and that the second portion of the inscription (brother of Jesus) was not done by the same hand have been set aside by testimony at trial, something that has been averred by the finest epigraphers in the world.

ARGUMENTS FOR ITS AUTHENTICITY

- The size of the ossuary indicates that the person was an adult.
- The name on the ossuary reveals that the person was a male.
- Ossuaries were only used by Jews only in the area of Jerusalem and from the end of the first century B.C. until A.D. 70.
- Of all those ossuaries bearing an inscription almost all speak of the deceased occupant's father, but occasionally has the person's brother, sister, or other close relative, if that person was well known. This would indicate that Yeshua' was well known.
- Specialist and archaeologist Prof. Kloner dates the ossuary to between A.D. 45 – 70.
- Though the names Joseph, James, and Jesus are common names in the first century, the combination of "James son of Joseph" is rare.
- Prof Camille Fuchs, head of the Statistic department at Tel Aviv University researched deceased males in Jerusalem in the first century A.D. He concluded that with high probability (essentially 100%) that between A.D. 45-70, not more than one adult male Jew with the name Ya'akov, whose father was Yosef, and died in Jerusalem were buried in an ossuary. The custom of burial inscribed with name of the deceased was limited to those Jewish families who were literate, about 20%. Ossuaries were used by wealthy families or groups able to afford a cave.
- Golan affirms that he purchased the ossuary from an antiquities dealer who said it was found in the Silwan (Kidron Valley area) in Jerusalem.
- James the Just, pastor of the Jerusalem church³ and half-brother of Jesus⁴ was stoned and thrown from the pinnacle of the temple according to Josephus. According to Christian tradition, he was buried in a rock-cut tomb in the Kidron Valley, and one year later, in accordance with Jewish tradition, his bones were interned in an ossuary.⁵
- The inscription in its totality was inscribed by the same hand, as testimony demonstrated at trial, though this was a much disputed item until experts were put under oath at trial. Moreover, the patina on the ossuary is found in the inscription "James the son of Joseph" and "and brother of Jesus," demonstrating the antiquity of the inscription.
- The Aramaic is fully consistent with first century style and practice.
- Adding the words, "the brother of Jesus" is exceptional among the ossuaries found in Jerusalem.⁶

³ Confirmed by his role at the council of Jerusalem and the words of Eusebius.

⁴ The evidence appears clear that James was truly the half-brother of Jesus and son of Mary. The perputal virginity of Mary was not taught at the earlier periods of the church and even was rejected by Augustine. The word of brother in Greek is $\alpha\delta\epsilon\lambda\phi\acute{o}\varsigma$ (*adelphos*), while the word for cousin is $\alpha\nu\epsilon\psi\iota\acute{o}\varsigma$ (*anepsios*). BDAG, 78. Louw and Nida, 118, say, "The interpretation of $\alpha\delta\epsilon\lambda\phi\acute{o}\varsigma$ in such passages as Mt 12.46; Mk 3.31; and Jn 2.12 as meaning 'cousins' (on the basis of a corresponding Hebrew term, which is used in certain cases to designate masculine relative of various degrees) is not attested in Greek nor affirm in the Greek-English lexicon edited by Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker. Such an interpretation depends primarily on ecclesiastical tradition." The relationship is confirmed by the second century father Hegesippus where he distinguishes James and Jude as brothers. Moreover Jude in his letter says that he is the brother ($\alpha\delta\epsilon\lambda\phi\acute{o}\varsigma$) of James. Matt 1:25 is plain that the lack of sexual relations between Joseph and Mary was only until the birth of Jesus. It was morally proper for Jewish husbands and wives to have sexual relations and bear children, in contrast to some of the extreme ideas of celibacy practiced in some segments of the patristic period. The church historian Eusebius says that James was the head of the Jerusalem church and was brother of Jesus.

⁵ Oded Golan, "The Authenticity of the James Ossuary and the Jehoash Tablet Inscriptions – Summary of Expert Trial Witnesses," (March, 2011), 13-15.

⁶ Paul L. Maier, "The James Ossuary," Issues, Etc. <http://www.mt.io/articles/bissar95.htm> (last visited November 13, 2011).

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