

Ossuary of James, son of Joseph and brother of Jesus

In November 2002 what might be "the most astonishing find in the history of archaeology" surfaced in the private collection of Israeli engineer Oded Golan. Stories about it ran in most of the world's leading newspapers and TV shows. Almost 100,000 people came to see it when it was on display in Toronto. It was an OSSUARY (bone box) that bore the phrase (in Aramaic), "*Ya'akov bar Yosef akhui diYeshua.*" Translated, the inscription reads, "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus. If authentic and if belonging to the James of the New Testament, this ossuary provides the only archaeological evidence yet found of either James, Joseph or, more importantly, Jesus.

Of course, this assessment is only valid if the inscription on the ossuary is authentic,¹ and this is the crux of the debate. Almost immediately upon being made public, the ossuary became the center of a decade-long firestorm of controversy, discussion, suspicion, and even legal action. Golan claims he purchased the bone box from an antiquities dealer in 1976. The dealer told him it was found in Silwan, an Arab neighbourhood in Jerusalem (near the City of David). Golan claimed "he was unaware of the inscription's significance" until he showed a photograph of it to André Lemaire, "one of the world's leading epigraphers" at the Sorbonne. Lemaire was in Jerusalem lecturing at Hebrew University's Institute for Advanced Study, and is "often asked to examine such 'fresh' finds" as the James ossuary, and by chance met Golan. As soon as he looked at a photograph of the ossuary, he knew it was important. A press conference was held, announcing the discovery of an ossuary that may have belonged to James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus. Many scholars, upon cursory inspection of the inscription (and some without even that), claimed it "too good to be true" and declared it a forgery. Because of its suspicious provenance (it was not found in an official archaeological dig), many scholars would "have nothing to do with the ossuary," and the Israel Antiquities Authority decided to make the ossuary (and its owner) an example of its zero tolerance policy regarding "forged" artifacts. In 2004 Golan, along with Robert Deutch, Shlomo Cohen and Faiz al-Amaleh, were arrested and charged with "forgery and antiquities trafficking." Eventually Cohen and al-Amaleh were dropped from the indictment. The trial has only recently come to a conclusion.

Although "all agree that the ossuary itself is authentic and ancient," scholars have lined up on both sides of the debate over the ossuary *inscription's* authenticity. Lemaire, upon "a detailed examination of the object and of the inscription" declared the inscription "is genuinely ancient and not a fake." But even more than the trained eye of an experienced master epigrapher, the ossuary was studied by the Geological Survey of Israel using a Scanning Electron Microscope. The GSI reported that the patina² in the inscription "does not contain any modern elements (such as modern pigments) and it adheres firmly to the stone. No signs of the use of a modern tool or instrument was found. No evidence that might detract from the authenticity of the patina and the inscription was found." They reported that the patina in the inscription was the same as the patina on the rest of the ossuary, "eliminating the possibility that the inscription was a modern forgery on a genuine ancient ossuary." However, another geologist at the GSI (working for the IAA), Avner Ayalon, later doubted the ossuary's authenticity based on "the patina's isotopic ratios". The part of the inscription naming "the brother of Jesus," he argued, displays evidence of being created later. His conclusion became one of the major pieces

of evidence used by the IAA during their forgery trial. On the other hand, James Harrell, professor of geology at the University of Toledo, disputes this claim, arguing Aylon's assessment is "based on flawed chemistry" and that there is "solid...evidence supporting the inscription's antiquity."

Further, when the inscription was showed to Joseph Fitzmyer, "one of the world's leading experts in first-century Aramaic and a pre-eminent Dead Sea Scroll editor," he was "troubled" by the spelling of the Aramaic word for "brother" on the ossuary, which would not appear for "hundreds of years." Could a forger have accidentally committed an anachronism? However, upon further study Fitzmyer found two examples from the same period that match the spelling on the ossuary, including one where a deceased person's brother is identified. Thus, Shanks argues, "Either a putative forger had to know first-century Aramaic better than Father Fitzmyer [by purposely including a very rare spelling of an Aramaic word] or the inscription is authentic." Experts from the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, after examining the ossuary, also declared it authentic, as did Ada Yardeni, a "prominent paleographer in Jerusalem." In fact, to date, "no paleographer of any repute has even suggested that this inscription might be a forgery."

Shimon Gibson has stated that because there is evidence the inscription "has been tampered with," "the inscription has therefore to be regarded as dubious. I am not saying the inscription is a fake, but the way it has been cleaned (and the resulting patina-like material within the incised letters) must now render it highly suspect." He concluded, "What we are left with is an artifact [sic] with hardly any apparent archaeological or historical significance. Hence any attempt to pursue the truth about the James ossuary is definitely a lost cause."

The eight hundred pound gorilla in the controversy,³ the IAA, built its forgery case against Golan largely using the ossuary. After authorities had confiscated the bone box (along with the rest of Golan's collection), the IAA organized a "blue-ribbon panel of experts," divided into two groups (a "Writing and Content" committee and a "Materials and Patina" committee), to study it. Not surprisingly, they subsequently announced that the inscription was a forgery. The Writing committee (which apparently did not include a single palaeographer or epigrapher), disagreeing with Lemaire and Fitzmyer, unanimously decided the writing was a modern forgery.⁴ Lemaire has "little confidence" in this conclusion, based on several serious flaws he identifies in their report, and Fitzmyer has also "harshly" criticized their work.

In apparent opposition to one of the panel members' earlier conclusions (Ayalon, mentioned above), the IAA Materials committee found that the "brother of Jesus" part of the inscription *was* authentic, while the first part had a "fake patina" applied in modern times. In other words, the bone box originally only said "brother of Jesus" and "James, son of Joseph" was added in modern times. In the report, Ayalon does not explain the reversal of his opinion concerning *which part* of the inscription is authentic and which is a forgery. Also, as mentioned above, James Harrell disputes the Materials committee's findings. He studied some of the data omitted from the IAA's report and found that it supported the conclusion that the inscription on the ossuary was ancient. He contends that some of the chemical data the Materials committee interpreted as evidence of forgery could just as easily (if not better) be explained as the results of cleaning the inscription.⁵ In fact, Golan claims his mother cleaned the ossuary not long after he purchased it. To

verify this, *Biblical Archaeology Review* tested several "popular" cleansers readily available in Israel and found that one of them almost exactly matched the chemical data used as evidence of forgery. The chairman of the committee, Yuval Goren, admitted in 2004 that he and other members of the committee were mistaken in some of their interpretations of the data, and during the forgery trial was forced to admit that some of the "original ancient patina could be seen in several letters of the inscription, including one of the letters of the word 'Jesus,'" something he vehemently denied in the IAA report. Moreover, it appears Ayalon did a "very sloppy job of taking the [patina] sample" he used to test the authenticity of the inscription because it was highly contaminated with the patina's underlying limestone base. In 2005 Ronny Reich, a member of the Writing committee admitted that, "Based on his own expertise in reading ancient inscriptions, he would have found the inscription authentic," but he was "forced" by the "hard scientific evidence" to conclude the ossuary inscription was a fake, and that "after studying the scientific evidence in more detail" he changed his mind and announced he believes the inscription is authentic. Joseph Fitzmyer, James Harrell, and Hershel Shanks, among others, have called for a "re-study" of the ossuary.

In 2004 Eric Meyers, professor of Judaic studies at Duke University, claimed that "On separate occasions in the mid-1990s...two Jerusalem scholars saw the same controversial ossuary...in an antiquities shop in the Old City, but at the time they saw it the inscription read only 'James, son of Joseph.' And they are 'certain' that it was the same ossuary. One of them has even given a sworn statement to this effect to the Israeli police..." These scholars were later revealed to be Joe Zias and Emile Puech whose testimony, after the IAA's report began to lose credibility, were heavily relied on by the prosecutor in the forgery case against Golan and Deutch. However, it has been shown that Puech has "published rather widely" on the ossuary and not only has never mentioned this story, but he even "seems to regard the James ossuary inscription in its entirety as authentic." Moreover, the owner of the shop where the ossuary was allegedly seen claimed it "had never been in his shop" and says the IAA conducted yearly inspections and kept records of everything in his shop, a claim backed up by Amir Ganor, the head of the IAA "robbery unit" tasked with policing the antiquities trade in Israel. In 2005 Puech "admitted that he never saw the ossuary inscription..." and in 2012, after the verdict in the trial had been announced, Zias said he was "only kidding" about seeing the ossuary.

Seven years after the initial indictment and five years after the trial began, after 130 witnesses created 12,000 pages of testimony, in 2012, Israeli judge Aharon Farkash finally handed down his 474 page opinion, summarized in short: Oded Golan and Robert Deutch are not guilty. Judge Farkash acquitted them of all counts of forgery. Deutch, who was said to be "more furious with the Israel Antiquities Authority than elated with the verdict," has said he intends to sue the IAA for damages. Unfortunately, while in the custody of the IAA, the ossuary has become "contaminated" with a "red smear."

Although the verdict does not answer the scholarly question over the ossuary inscription's authenticity, it does mean that after a decade of research and study, the IAA was unable to *prove* that it is an intentionally faked artefact. Despite some claiming the "vast majority of scholars" think the inscription is not authentic, as evidenced above, some of the best experts in the world *have* declared it authentic.

A separate but equally divisive issue relates to the question of *who* was buried in James's ossuary. Despite it being vogue among many within academia to pronounce the ossuary a relic whose story belongs not within scholarship but among "mystery writers and filmmakers who, in the style of Indiana Jones, might make a decent living from the intriguing plot which has all the ingredients of a fascinating detective story," or nothing more than one of a number of interesting archaeological "curiosities" with no academic value, there are strong arguments that this ossuary has tremendous scholarly (not to mention apologetic) value. Ben Witherington having studied and weighed the evidence, stated, "I see nothing...at this juncture to cause me to change my earlier conclusion that the James ossuary is what it purports to be - the burial box of James." Witherington goes on to theorize that the "Jewish Christians who buried him wanted to honor him in burial, and we may suspect that they expected some would come and visit the burial spot and see the inscription on the side of the box." On the other hand, Jodi Magness argues that "all available evidence suggests" James was buried in a trench grave, not a rock-cut tomb, where ossuaries were used, and that people buried in trench graves were not dug up and moved to ossuaries. She contends, "Even if the inscription is authentic and is not a modern forgery, this ossuary did not contain the bones of James the Just, the brother of Jesus." Emile Puech "denies in the strongest possible terms that the inscription refers to Jesus of Nazareth." He argues that if it was the James' ossuary, he would expect it to name him as "James the Just" or "brother of the Lord."

However, although the names "James" (Ya'akov), "Joseph" (Yosef) and "Jesus" (Yeshua) "were all fairly common among Jews at the turn of the era [first century B.C. to the first century A.D.]" in Judea, the specific arrangement of these names listed on the ossuary is not. Based on inscription evidence, Lemaire estimates that no more than twenty people could have been called "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus" during the span of about 40 B.C. to A.D. 70. While it is "impossible to estimate how many of these 20 people were buried in ossuaries and how many of these ossuaries would be inscribed," the chances are very high that this bone box once contained the remains of James, the brother of Jesus. Although the mention of someone's father on an ossuary is very common, the mention of the individual's brother is extremely rare. It was usually only done if the brother "had a particular role, either in taking responsibility for the burial, or more generally because the brother was known, and the deceased had a special connection with him." Based on this information, Lemaire was led to state that "it seems very probable that this is the ossuary of the James in the New Testament." Camille Fuchs, head of the Department of Statistics at Tel Aviv University, goes even further. Using known cultural data from the first century, he has argued that there is an almost certain statistical probability that *only one* person living between the years A.D. 45-70 could have been "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus," died in Jerusalem and was interred in an ossuary inscribed in Aramaic. Thus, it is "possible to determine with an extremely high probability that the ossuary had contained the bones of Yaakov (Jacob), the brother of Jesus of Nazareth, who was stoned to death in 62 AD."

In 2007, Simcha Jacobivici and Charles Pellegrino claimed that the James Ossuary was the "missing tenth ossuary that was originally found in the Talpiot tomb" in Jerusalem. This assertion is considered, at best, "highly unlikely" and at worst, "nonsense." The Talpiot tomb was discovered and excavated in 1980, while during the forgery trial against Golan, he produced a verified photo of the James ossuary taken in

1976. Further, the measurements and description of the James Ossuary do not match those of the "missing ossuary."⁶ Unfortunately, this information has not stopped scholars from both asserting and simply assuming the James Ossuary was found in the Talpiot tomb as late as 2012.

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¹ Virtually no one doubts the authenticity of the box itself.

² A thin layer of material covering the outside of ancient objects, created over the centuries through the result of chemical reactions.

³ Although scholars can debate and scholarly opinion goes far in determining whether an object is authentic or fake, only the IAA has the authority of law in Israel.

⁴ Although at least one member of the committee changed his mind from "authentic" to "forged" after reading the Materials committee report.

⁵ Which explains why it was omitted!

⁶ The "missing" ossuary was smaller and described as "unadorned" (i.e., no inscription or decoration, unlike the James Ossuary).