

THE BURIAL BOX OF JAMES, THE BROTHER OF JESUS

THE EARLIEST ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF JESUS EVER FOUND

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Not only is it the earliest archaeological artifact ever found that mentions Jesus, but it is the only one so close to the time in which He lived on earth. Here is the astounding story.

JEWISH GRAVE BOXES—In the time of Christ, when a Jew in Palestine died, his body was taken into a stone burial cave which was cut out of solid rock. It was either placed on a stone slab or within a hewn niche in one of the walls. About a year later, all that would remain would be the bones. These were then placed in a small box, called an *ossuary*, carved from a single piece of Jerusalem limestone. Rectangular in shape, it had four sides and a bottom. A matching stone cover would enclose the top. Sometimes, the bones of several members of a family were ultimately placed within the same box. This practice was widespread among the Jews of Judaea, from about A.D. 1 to A.D. 70, and was called *ossilegium*.

These burial caves are scattered all through the hills surrounding Jerusalem. The bone boxes were sometimes kept in those caves and sometimes in a special place in the homes of relatives.

Interestingly enough, it was a type of cremation. Only the bones were preserved.

TWO DISCOVERIES—In 1990, news reports created a small sensation when a very ornate ossuary was discovered in a Jerusalem burial cave. Among a dozen ossuaries was one with the inscription, “Joseph son of Caiaphas.” Inside were bones of several people, including those of a very old man. It is generally assumed that the older bones may have been those of the same Caiaphas before whom Jesus stood during His first of three trials early Friday morning, on the day He was crucified. The historian, Josephus, said that Caiaphas was a family nickname, and he called him “Joseph, who was called Caiaphas.”

More recently, another burial box was found which is far more startling: Apparently, it once contained the bones of Jesus’ oldest half-brother, James! In addition, the inscription says he is Jesus’ brother! In this article, we will discuss the varied evidence supporting this possibility.

THE BOX—This newly discovered box is a plain limestone burial container, without any decoration other than an indented line running just inside the four edges of the front side. The stone box is 20 inches in length at the base and widens out toward almost 22 inches at the top. It is 10 inches wide and 12 inches high; a flat stone lid rests on top of the box, set into a ledge indented inside the rim of the two long sides of the box.

When this burial container was found, it was empty and contained no bones.

COMPARING IT WITH OTHER BURIAL BOXES—The bone box of James was plain and had an inscription on it. However, most other burial boxes in the first century A.D. were also plain, including those of most important or wealthy people. So the fact that the box did not have engraved decorations on the outside would not be a problem.

The inscriptions on most of these ossuaries only listed the name of the special person. But, once in a while, an inscription not only listed the person’s name, but also told who his father was. Obviously, he must be an important person, if his father was also named.

But this burial box was truly unusual: The inscription not only named James’ father, but also his brother! In only one other instance is the brother of the deceased named; and in that case the father is not named.

The mention of a brother would mean that the

brother was, for some reason, very well-known.

THE INSCRIPTION—There are twenty letters, written in Aramaic, engraved on one of the long sides of this burial box. This is a transliteration of the inscription:

Ya'akov bar Yosef akhui diYeshua

This is its English translation:

James (Ya'akov), son (bar) of Joseph (Yosef), brother of (dhui) Jesus (Yeshua).

The word used here for “James” is “Jacob.” Our word, “James,” is the standard variant found in all English Bibles. But, in the Greek New Testament, the word was written “Jacob.”

DATING THE BONE BOX—This type of burial box is generally dated between about 20 B.C. and A.D. 70. As mentioned earlier, this practice was widespread among the Jews of Judaea, from about A.D. 1 to A.D. 70.

Not only do the letter shapes have to fit into the time period, but the lettering (spelling) must match also. In order to confirm that fact, it must be compared with every other inscription from that period. The language and historical context are also important.

The distinctive shape (orthography) of the Aramaic letters, engraved on the box, closely agrees with this time period. None of these letters have any of the characteristics of lettering in a later period of time.

But three letters are special. These are the *dalet*, *yod*, and *aleph*. All three are somewhat slanted (curved). As a result, these special letters and the overall pattern of the sentence date this inscription to the last few decades prior to A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed.

After careful examination, experts date this burial box to A.D. 63. As we will learn later in this study, there is evidence that James, the brother of Jesus, died only one year earlier.

A PRONUNCIATION PROBLEM—In the first century A.D., the word we translate as “James” could be written (and sounded) two different ways in the Aramaic. “Joseph” could be written two ways, and “Jesus” could be written three ways (Yeshua, “Yeshu” or “Yehoshua”). Back in ancient times, people were not as careful about how they wrote and pronounced words as we try to do today.

Fortunately, Aramaic was still a living language in the first century A.D., so it could be pronounced. But, by the first century A.D., the pronunciation of ancient paleo-Hebrew, the Hebrew of the Old Testament, had been forgotten. Instead, when it was read, the current pronunciation of Aramaic was applied to it.

The pronunciation of ancient Hebrew was lost during the time of the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C. Aramaic, which is similar, but pro-

nounced differently and written somewhat differently, became the language of the Jews and many other peoples of the region.

The first attempt to add written vowels to the Hebrew Old Testament did not occur until 1,400 years after Hebrew was no longer spoken (500 B.C. to A.D. 900), at which time the Masoretes (a group of dedicated Jewish scholars) guessed their way through it in the 10th century A.D., when they added the vowel points. About the year A.D. 900, Moses ben Asher and his son worked out a system of vowel dots and dashes, and then guessed where to place them on ancient Hebrew writings, including the Old Testament. It is for this reason that we, today, cannot know the correct pronunciation of any Old Testament word. Indeed, I believe God purposely allowed this to happen, so we would not worship words as the ancient Jews worshiped the serpent of brass (*Num 21:9; 2 Kgs 18:4*). (For much more information on this, read pp. 29-41 in my book, *The Sacred Name*.)

WHO WAS JAMES?—The brothers and sisters of Jesus are mentioned in the Gospels:

“Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?”—*Matthew 13:55-56* (*Mark 6:3 is almost identical; cf. Matthew 12:46-47*).

We know that Christ’s brothers and sisters were present when He spoke in the synagogue in Nazareth (*DA 236; Matthew 13:55-56; Mark 6:3*).

During Christ’s earthly ministry, His brothers were not in sympathy with His work (*DA 321; cf. 5BC 1135-1136*).

Paul mentions a sequence of appearances made by Jesus following His resurrection to various individuals, including one to James:

“After that, He was seen of James; then of all the apostles.”—*1 Corinthians 15:7*.

At the time of Christ’s ascension to heaven, Jesus’ “brethren” finally fully accepted Him as the Christ.

“‘And with His brethren.’ These had lost much because of their unbelief. They had been among the number who doubted when Jesus appeared in Galilee. But they now firmly believed that Jesus was the Son of God, the promised Messiah. Their faith was established.”—*6 Bible Commentary, 1054* (*cf. Acts 1:9-14*).

Paul mentions a meeting he later had with James: “I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter . . . but other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord’s brother.”—*Galatians 1:18-19* (*cf. 1 Corinthians 9:5*).

We are told that James, “the brother of the Lord” (*AA 405*), had become one of the three leading apostles; the other two were Peter and John (*6BC 1108*). “James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars [of the church].”—*Galatians 2:9* (*cf. 2:12*).

Of course, we best know James as the leader dur-

ing the very important Jerusalem Council.

“James answered, saying, Men and brethren, heard unto me . . . Wherefore my sentence is . . .”—*Acts 15:13, 19* (cf. *15:12-29*).

Apparently, James had earlier experienced a deep and thorough conversion; so much so, that the other apostles could trust this man, who was older than most of them, with the chairmanship of that important council meeting.

“James presided at the council.”—*Acts of the Apostles, 194*.

“James also bore his testimony with decision . . . and his final decision was, ‘Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God.’ This ended the discussion.”—*Ibid.*

Thus you can see why the ossuary of James would deserve an inscription providing it with special recognition—an unprecedented mentioning of three names.

IN WHAT WAY WAS JAMES THE BROTHER OF CHRIST?—There are three views of this matter. One is that James was the full brother of Jesus, and Joseph and Mary were the parents of all the children. Two third-century church writers held to this theory, along with many Protestants today.

Another view is that James was only the cousin of Jesus, being the son of Clopas and the Mary who stood near the cross. Jerome (who translated the Bible into Latin in the early fifth century) and many modern Catholic theologians believe this.

The correct view is that James was the half brother of Jesus. All of Christ’s “brothers and sisters” were born to Joseph through a previous marriage; and Mary had only one child, Jesus.

This position has the strong support of an early writing, the *Protevangelium of James*, which says that James led the she-ass upon which Mary rode (while Joseph followed), on their way to Bethlehem. For reasons, stated below, James may have been about 16 by that time. That manuscript also stated that James was the son of Joseph by an earlier marriage. This view is held by the second-century writer, Origen; the fourth-century church historian, Eusebius; a number of other ancient writers; and the Orthodox Church today. This is our position also.

“His brothers, as the sons of Joseph were called . . . (DA 86). “The sons and daughters of Joseph” (DA 90). “The sons of Joseph” (DA 321; 450).

“[John 7:1-5, quoted] The brethren here referred to were the sons of Joseph.”—*5 Bible Commentary, 1135*.

WHEN DID JAMES DIE?—Jesus was born in the fall of 4 B.C. We have observed that the sequence in Matthew 13:55-56 and Mark 6:3 indicates that James was the oldest of Joseph’s children. His lead-

ership at the Jerusalem Council (*Acts 15*) would appear to confirm this.

James, as the oldest of at least six children sired by Joseph, may have been about 14 to 18 years of age when Jesus was born. This would make him about 47 when Jesus was crucified. He would be at least in his 50s—and one of the oldest of the leaders of the young church—when the Jerusalem Council convened. This may have been the reason he was selected to chair that important gathering.

The first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, dates James’ death to A.D. 62, when the high priest Ananus had “one James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ” brought before the Sanhedrin (*Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 20, 197-203*).

Such a date would fully agree with the style of writing on the burial box. (If James died in A.D. 62, he would be about 78 when he died.)

According to Josephus, when James was brought before the Sanhedrin, they had him condemned and slain (*ibid.*). Eusebius of Caesarea (c.A.D. 324; lived c.260-339) quoted Clement of Alexandria and especially the Christian historian, Hegesippus (c.A.D. 180), as saying that James’ preaching won many converts, including some from the ruling classes. It so alarmed the Jewish leaders that the Pharisees ordered him to stand in front of the Temple and retract his statements. When, instead, he preached that Jesus was the Messiah, the leaders ordered the crowd to slay him. As soon as James died, he was buried in Jerusalem.

Eusebius quoted Hegesippus as saying, “He [James] was buried on the spot, by the Sanctuary,”—*Eusebius, Church History, 2:23, 18*.

Josephus dates James’ death as having occurred during the administration of the Roman procurator (governor) Festus, who held office in the year A.D. 62.

Josephus wrote that a priest, named Ananus, accused James and others of breaking the law and immediately sentenced them to death by stoning. In that statement, Josephus calls him “James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ.” This sentence is one of only a few ancient mentions of Jesus.

A more lengthy passage by Josephus about Jesus can be found in *Antiquities 18.3.3* and in the writings of the Roman historian, Tacitus, who mentions His crucifixion by Pontius Pilate (*Annales 15.44.3*).

THE INVESTIGATOR—Epigraphy is the study of ancient inscriptions. André Lemaire is one of the world’s leading epigraphers. His field of expertise is Old Testament Hebrew and Aramaic from the Babylonian captivity on down through the first several centuries A.D.

From April to September 2002, he was in Jerusalem, working at Hebrew University’s Institute for Ad-

vanced Study. Scholars from all over the world go there to consult with other scholars and work on projects.

Each time Lemaire comes to Jerusalem, he learns of important new finds and is asked to analyze the writing on objects. New discoveries are continually coming to light, either through archaeological studies or the antiquities market.

Sometimes Lemaire is shown objects owned by antiquities collectors. One day during his recent stay in Jerusalem, Lemaire met a collector who asked him to examine some objects he had. One was the James ossuary.

Lemaire was first shown photographs of the ossuary. The inscription was easy to read, and he immediately recognized its importance.

After very carefully examining the actual burial box, Lemaire concluded that, due to the spelling, shape, and slant of Herodian-era letter forms—the inscription was genuine.

Lemaire has examined purported finds for so many years that he can sense when he is examining a fake—an inscription and object, declared to be genuine and/or ancient, which is not. He concluded that this burial box was fully genuine in every way.

But, before arriving at his final conclusion, he had the ossuary checked by geologists, to see if the inscription or the box revealed evidence of having been made in modern times.

THE GEOLOGY REPORT—The November/December 2002 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review* contains a full-page reproduction of the official analysis made by the Ministry of Infrastructures, Geological Survey, in Jerusalem.

Drs. Amnon Rosenfeld and Shimon Ilani prepared the report. Here are a few significant excerpts:

“The use of chalk (limestone) was extensive during the Second Temple period of Jerusalem, primarily for the manufacture of stone vessels and ossuaries.”

The report goes on to state that this type of limestone was only used for burial boxes during the first and second centuries A.D. So the type of material used fits the dating.

However, there should also be evidence, from normal surface blemishes, that would indicate great age for both the box and the inscription on it. “Patina” is the name for the thin discoloration, caused by age, on the stonework and inscription. In order to carefully investigate this discoloration, a 50 to 100-power binocular microscope was used. In addition, samples, each, of the limestone, patina, and attached soil were

studied with a scanning electron microscope, equipped with electron dispersive spectroscopy.

“The stone and the patina were examined by magnifying lenses (binocular). We observed that the patina on the surface of the ossuary has a gray to beige color. The same gray patina is found also within some of the letters, although the inscription was cleaned and the patina is therefore absent from several letters.”

The investigators were also able to determine where the box had been stored for centuries.

“The patina has a cauliflower shape known to be developed in a cave environment.”

The probable location of that cave was also determined:

“Remains of soil were found attached to the bottom of the outer side of the ossuary . . . The soil in which the ossuary laid is of Rendzina type, known to develop on chalks of the Mount Scopus Group.”

Mount Scopus is an elevated area on the northeast, quite close to Old Jerusalem.

The geologists concluded that the box and its inscription were genuine.

It is worth mentioning that “the patina 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.”

CONCLUSION—Before the James burial box was found, the earliest mention of Jesus was in the *Rylands Papyrus*, the earliest known Gospel fragment (containing a portion of John 18:31-33, on one side, and 18:37-38 on the other) which dates to c.A.D. 125. This new discovery is magnificent.

Putting all these facts together (the dates, the names, the shape of the letters), the limestone of the box; its patina, with the earth clinging to it; and the triple names on the inscription—point to the fact that this is a genuine inscription of the James mentioned in the New Testament who was the son of Joseph and the brother of Jesus.

LATE OCTOBER—News release: The burial box of James has been sent to Toronto, there to be inspected by additional experts for three months. When it arrives back in Jerusalem in February, the State of Israel may try to purchase it.

NOVEMBER 4—News release: It was reported on this date that the Royal Ontario Museum, in Canada, announced that it has notified Israel that the James burial box was damaged in transit. —*vf*