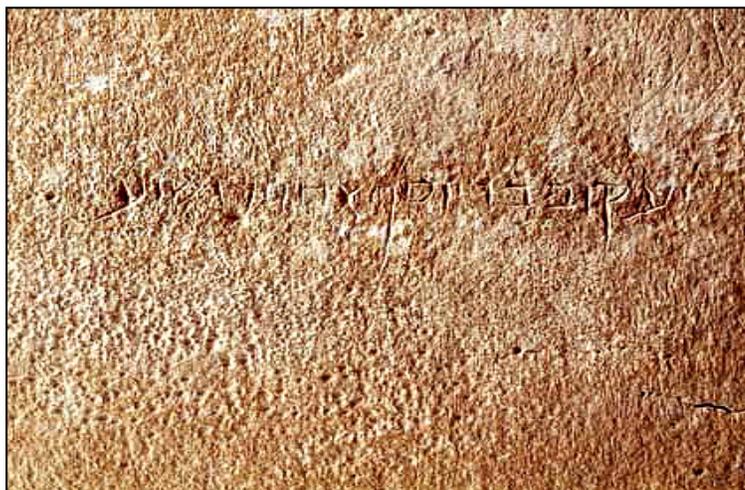


The Significance of the James Ossuary

by Dr. Randall Price



The discovery of the “James Ossuary,” with the earliest known archaeological mention of Jesus, has been reported by every major news service around the world. I was privileged to view this new discovery in late November at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. The James ossuary, so-called because this limestone burial box once held the bones of a Jew named James, was used in the custom of secondary burial that existed only in the late Second Temple period, the time when Jesus carried out His ministry. Understanding this practice helps us understand the seemingly harsh reply of Jesus to the objection of a man who wanted to postpone

following Jesus so he could “go and bury his father” (Matt. 8:21-22; Lk. 9:59-60). Jesus’ statement does not address an immediate need for burial but the traditional secondary burial in the ossuary which would occur a year later. Such a request to perform a non-biblical ritual a year away was not worth neglecting the immediate call to follow the Savior!

Most ossuaries have inscriptions recording the identity of the remains in the form of the name of the deceased plus his paternal relation. The James ossuary bears a typical Aramaic inscription, however, it is unique in that it also includes the additional relation of a brother. It read: “James) the son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” The combination of these three famous names suggests that this person was the James of the New Testament who was called “the Lord’s brother” (Matthew 13:55). It was this James who witnessed Jesus’ resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7), and who as the leader of the Jerusalem church was martyred in AD 62 (Acts 15:12; Josephus Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20. 197-203). This date would fit within the upper limit established for the manufacture of chip-carved Jewish ossuaries (such as this one) which ceased around AD 70.

However, an epitaph bearing such important New Testament names has also made some scholars skeptical of the genuineness of the inscription. Historian Robert Eisenman, who has made a career seeking to identify James as the leader of the Qumran Community, has stated that the inscription is “too perfect,” implying that it may be a forgery or at best altered to include the name of Jesus. Yet, tests conducted by the Geological Survey of Israel have revealed that the inscription appears to have been made at the same time as the ossuary. Moreover, the ossuary can be traced to a first-century quarry and workshop in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the Aramaic spelling of “brother,” although rare, has been confirmed from one of the oldest of the Dead Sea Scrolls known as the *Genesis Apocryphon* and from one other first-century Jerusalem ossuary (see below). This argues strongly for the authenticity of the inscription on the James ossuary, however it does not prove it actually refers to New Testament figures. French scholar André Lemaire, who first published the inscription in the *Biblical Archaeological Review* (Nov/Dec 2002: 24-33), has been reticent to make such a claim. He has calculated that these popular names could have been found in this relationship in Jerusalem two generations before AD 70 in as many as 20 different people. Is there any evidence that could narrow the

identification and make more probable identification with the James of the New Testament? I believe there is.

Even though it is plausible that 20 people could have possessed this exact combination of names, it is improbable that all would have been buried in ossuaries, and even more improbable that any would have had their ossuaries inscribed with the addition of the brother's name. In fact, according to the *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel*, the most extensive listing of known ossuaries, there is only *one* other Jewish ossuary that mentions relation to a brother. The only reason for such an addition would be that the brother was responsible for the burial or was especially well known and the deceased had a special relationship with him. By the time of James' death Jesus' messianic claim and career were well known (see Josephus, *Antiquities* 18. 548), and James' reputation was well established as His half-brother and leader of His church in Jerusalem. Yet, another piece of evidence coming from the early messianic community itself helps to strengthen this conclusion.

In the first-century, the Jewish-Christian community buried their dead in the Mount of Olives/Mount Scopus range. Hundreds of ossuaries of Jewish believers have been discovered in this area and a number are on display at Dominus Flevit, the traditional site where Jesus wept located on the northeastern slope of the Mount of Olives. In light of the fame attached to the name Jesus, if this was the ossuary of a Jewish-Christian, who regarded Jesus as his "Lord," it is unthinkable that he, or a family member responsible for his burial, would have risked irreverence by using this now holy name in so common a manner. No one except the one who could legitimately claim such a relationship would be permitted to do so, and this would limit us to only one candidate, the New Testament James. Soil sample tests on the ossuary revealed that it indeed had been buried in the area of Mount Scopus.

Therefore, while it is possible that this "James" could be someone from *before* the time of Jesus, all of the factors considered argue favorably argue for this being the James of the New Testament.

However, while news reports have claimed that this ossuary is the *earliest* archaeological evidence of Jesus, an even earlier ossuary from the Mount of Olives dated to AD 43 (on the basis of coins found inside) was reported over a decade ago. It contains an even more controversial inscription to a "Jesus who ascended." In the case of this ossuary inscription there could be no doubt that the deceased was making reference to the Jesus of the Gospels. However, the Israeli scholar who made the discovery and first published the inscription, Eleazar Sukenik, late professor at the Hebrew University and father of the famous archaeologist Yigael Yadin, sought to re-interpret the inscription to reduce this connection. He attempted to argue that the word for "ascend" might mean something else based on comparisons with related Near Eastern roots. Although his argument was not persuasive, it was sufficient to keep the proper interpretation of the inscription from media attention. At present this ossuary is reported to be irretrievably stored deep within the basement of the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem. However, my contact in Jerusalem, who possesses Professor Sukenik's notes on the ossuary, has a sketch of the inscription that I hope soon to re-publish. Its significance lies not only in being the earliest testimony to Jesus, but in the possibility that it bears the eyewitness testimony of one who saw Jesus ascend to heaven from the Mount of Olives (Mk. 16:19; Lk. 24:50; Acts 1:9-12; 1 Cor. 15:6). It would also represent historical evidence of how early belief in a divine Messiah existed within the Jewish messianic community. This theological concept has long been thought by liberal theologians to be the result of Greek mythological influence through Gentile Christianity more than a century later.

Is it not providential that such rock witnesses to our Lord Jesus Christ should come today from the city to which He has promised soon to return? May the continued evidence of His Person bring the conviction that each of us must be in a personal relationship with Christ and be prepared for that great day!

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