Out of the Dust: The Ossuary of James, . . . Brother of Jesus

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A recently discovered ossuary with the inscription “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” may be the resting place of the bones of James the Just, the brother of the Lord, from the New Testament. Analyses of the carving, the language, and the history of Israeli ossuaries are being undertaken in an attempt to unveil further information on this ossuary. If this ossuary is authentic and corresponds to the correct time period, it can be more strongly proposed that the bones that used to rest inside the ossuary did, in fact, belong to James, the brother of Jesus of Nazareth.
The Ossuary of “James, . . . Brother of Jesus”

Recent media attention on an inscribed ossuary—an ancient stone box that was the final resting place for the bones of a certain “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus”—has caught the imagination of most of the Christian world. Might this box have once held the remains of the James whom Christians know as both the “brother of the Lord” and “the Just” (see Galatians 1:19). If it does, then the box forms the earliest known artifact that affirms the existence of the Savior, even earlier than the gold plates that underlie the Book of Mormon. How so? Because the plates whereon Moroni and Moroni inscribed the Book of Mormon were manufactured probably in the latter half of the fourth century A.D. when the two men were actively working on their records (the small plates preceded the Savior and were not contemporary with him). In comparison, the box and its Aramaic writing date to the first century A.D., the custom among Jews was for relatives to bury a person in a tomb and, about a year later, after the soft tissues of the body had decayed away, to move the bones into this type of a box, which was then stored in a niche or on a shelf in the family tomb. Two hundred thirty-three of the almost 900 known ossuaries recovered in Israel bear inscriptions that repeat the name of the deceased person whose bones are stored in the box. Other decorations, including floral designs in the form of roundels or rosettes, appear on the sides of some ossuaries.

The ossuary bearing the names of James, Joseph, and Jesus exhibits both an inscription and one decorative roundel on the opposite side. Unfortunately, the place and time of discovery of the stone box—what scholars call its provenance—are not known. The current owner, a Mr. Oded Golan of Jerusalem, who is an antiquities collector, bought the ossuary from a dealer who, presumably, had purchased the box from the person who had excavated the box illegally.

During the past autumn, the box was packed and then shipped by air to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada, where it was on display from 16 November to 29 December 2002. Regrettably, during transit a crack developed near the bottom of the box that runs almost around the entire circumference of the ossuary. The crack crosses a few of the letters near the end of the inscription so that the best views of that part of the writing come from photographs taken before the ossuary was moved to Toronto.

Currently, the main questions under review are (1) whether the ossuary is authentically ancient and dates to the first century A.D. and (2) whether the inscription—the writing on the side of the ossuary—is authentic and dates to the same period of time. If scholars can answer both positively, then there is a reasonable possibility that the deceased James is indeed the brother of the Savior, Jesus of Nazareth.
At the moment, virtually all scholars agree with André Lemaire, the French scholar who first studied the ossuary and authored the initial study, that the stone box fits the general pattern of Jewish ossuaries known from the first century A.D. And all agree that the box was manufactured to hold the remains of an adult, not a child. Beyond these points of agreement, there is a very wide range of views about the inscription itself and the persons whom it identifies.

Concerning the inscription, scholars are divided over the question of whether the writing was incised on the side of the box all at the same time. A number of individuals, including paleographer Ada Yardeni, have concluded that the second part of the inscription—“brother of Jesus”—was written later than the first part. They believe there were two carvers, one who inscribed his letters in a formal way and a later one who was less careful in his work. In the opinion of these scholars, the earlier carver plied his craft in the first century A.D. and the second did so at a later date, though there is no consensus on a date. Hence, in their view the expression “brother of Jesus” is a later addition. If that is so, one has to suggest a plausible motive for adding this expression to an ossuary that would be hidden in a tomb out of the public gaze. And none comes readily to mind, unless one could show that the phrase “brother of Jesus” is modern and therefore a clear forgery. A second set of issues has to do with the customary first-century A.D. Aramaic spelling of the term for “brother of” and why a later carver would not only be acquainted with this spelling, an unlikely prospect, but would also want to reproduce it.

On the other side of the debate stands Lemaire, who is an expert on inscriptions from the biblical period. He maintains that the inscription dates to the right time frame, the early 60s A.D., when James was martyred as a result of a plot against him. And science seems to stand on his side, for one of the important aspects of the physical makeup of the ossuary concerns the patina adhering to its outer surface. This patina, which consists of the discolored surface owing to contact with surrounding soil over an extended period of time, shows evidence of ancient date because it does not flake off when touched and has even penetrated the cuts made by the artisan’s tools after he incised the letters of the inscription except, apparently, the part that reads “brother of Jesus.” That the patina is old is affirmed by the laboratory report from the Geological Survey of the State of Israel, which concludes that “the patina does not contain any modern elements (such as modern pigments) and it adheres firmly to the stone.” In addition, the “same gray patina is found also within some of the letters” of the inscription.1

In a different vein, what are the chances that a family from the first century A.D. would include the names of Joseph, James, and Jesus, the first as father and the other two as sons? Lemaire has drawn together a few statistics based on the inscribed ossuaries known from ancient Palestine. One problem, of course, is that such statistics rest on artifacts that happen to have been preserved and then discovered—a random enterprise—rather than on all ossuaries that were carved during the New Testament age. Based on an estimate that the total number of inhabitants of Jerusalem at the middle of the first century A.D. was probably about 80,000 people (thus about 40,000 males), and based on the frequency of the names Joseph, James, and Jesus in all recovered inscriptional materials, Lemaire calculates that in Jesus’ day about 0.05 percent of the population of the capital city—1 in 2,000 males—would have been named James with a father named Joseph and a brother named Jesus. That is, there were perhaps 20 males living in Jerusalem whose name and family names would fit the expression “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” The unknown factors here are how many such persons received final burial in ossuaries and, next, how many of their ossuaries were inscribed.2

Naturally, the most intriguing matter concerns the expression “brother of Jesus.” One sees quickly that there are four possibilities for understanding this phrase. First, the bones of the two brothers, James and Jesus, were buried in the same ossuary. Second, the brother Jesus was responsible for seeing to the proper burial of his brother James and therefore inscribed his name. Third, because the brother Jesus was a prominent person, the carver—on his own or at the instruction of a family member—added the phrase in order to identify James with his famous brother. Fourth, as Yardeni and others have urged, a later carver added the phrase to an already existing inscription. But the motives for taking this action are...
not readily apparent. On the surface, there is no way to tell what the artisan intended when he carved “brother of Jesus” unless, as noted, it is a modern forgery.” Most believing Christians today incline to the view that, because of the reference to James as a brother and Joseph as the father, the Jesus of the inscription was a very prominent person. And the most prominent person named Jesus during that era was Jesus of Nazareth, the Savior.

It would help, of course, if the James of the ossuary had been called by one of the titles by which Jesus’ brother was known, such as “brother of the Lord” or “the Just.” But the inscription on the ossuary offers no such hint, leaving us without a firm piece to grasp. Even so, there are reasons, taken together, that point to James the brother of Jesus of Nazareth. First and foremost, it is highly unusual for the name of a brother to appear on the ossuary of a deceased person. Without evidence for an established custom of naming the man who is responsible for the burial of a brother, it seems likely that the mention of Jesus on this ossuary points to a prominent, known brother of James. Second, because inscriptions appear on only about 25 percent of the known ossuaries, there must have been a reason to inscribe the name of the person whose bones went into the box. In this view, it is probable that the James of the ossuary was himself a notable personality. This dimension, too, fits what we know of Jesus’ brother—before his death he became the leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem and, according to sources outside the New Testament, among fellow Jews and Christians he enjoyed a reputation for righteousness. Third, the statistical probability that a person named James whose father was Joseph and whose brother was Jesus had his name inscribed on an ossuary is very low, even in the Jerusalem area. Fourth—we have not noted this point so far—the Aramaic form of the language of the inscription clearly fits in the middle of the first century a.d., the time of James’s death. Such observations lead one to see the ossuary as very possibly belonging to James the brother of the Savior, though one cannot be fully certain.

If the James of the ossuary is indeed the brother of the Savior—and this is an imposing if—a number of biological and theological points rise from the language of the inscription, “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” There has never been any question that James was the son of Joseph, even though in the New Testament he is not formally linked to Joseph. Instead, he is known as a brother of Jesus (see Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). Because of the language of the inscription, questions arise about the ties between James and Jesus and between Joseph and Jesus. Assuming that the entire inscription is authentic, it then seems evident—the objections notwithstanding—that the James mentioned on the ossuary is a biological brother of a person named Jesus. As many are aware, an early Christian tradition grew up that James “the Just” was a son of Joseph by an earlier marriage and that Joseph, after losing his first wife, married the young Mary but shared no physical intimacies with her. Thus Mary remained a virgin and Jesus reportedly was her only child. But the inscription clearly stands against this view. Moreover, the inscription on the box does not affirm that the Joseph and the Jesus are biologically related. One might assume that the inscription says as much. But the only father-son connection that the inscription firmly demonstrates ties James to his father Joseph.

The last point to make is that the current owner of the stone box and others intend to subject the box to DNA analysis, hoping to learn whether it held the bones of more than one person. If the results are positive—and this appears to be a distant possibility because the box has been subjected to cleaning—then scholars would understand that James the brother of the Lord may have been buried with another person. The Savior, of course, is eliminated as a person buried in the ossuary because he is resurrected and his body lay in a tomb for only a short time, not long enough for his bones to be transferred to an ossuary. If the results are negative and show that the remains of only one person were stored in the stone box, we are no farther along in resolving with certainty the identity of the James and Jesus of the ossuary.
The Ossuary of “James, Brother of Jesus”


3. Josephus reports that the high priest Ananus led the opposition against James that brought about the latter’s death (Antiquities of the Jews 20.9.1; secs. 197–203). Although the account of James’s death at the temple that Eusebius repeats, which is based on a report by the second-century writer Hegesippus, exhibits legendary characteristics, it does affirm that James died and was buried in Jerusalem (see Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.23.1–18), an observation that would agree with the estimate by Lemaire that the ossuary was recovered in the immediate Jerusalem area (see Lemaire, “Burial Box of James,” 26, 28).


5. Ibid., 33.
