

The James Ossuary: The Earliest Witness to Jesus and His Family?

Joseph M. Holden, Ph.D.

One of the earliest and most important discoveries relating to the historicity of Jesus and members of his family is the limestone bone-box (called an *ossuary*) made known to the public in October, 2002. Ossuaries were used by Israel from about the second-century B.C. until the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Over ten thousand such ossuaries have been discovered but only about one hundred contain inscriptions. Of these, only two have an



identification similar to the one etched in the now famous and somewhat controversial “James Ossuary.” The entire Aramaic inscription reads, “Jacob (James), son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” (*Ya’akov bar Yosef akhui di Yeshua*).

If, in fact, the inscription in its entirety is recognized as authentic (which we believe to be the case), we have clear first-century A.D. testimony of Jesus, his father Joseph, and brother James. James (*Ya’akov*) is given in the Gospel accounts as a brother of Jesus (Mt. 13:55), 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 the epistle of James. James is also spoken of a number of times in the writings 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 bone-box would be approximately A.D. 62-63, allowing time for the reburial of the bones after the decomposition of the flesh, according to Jewish practices.

In December 2004, the Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA) and the State of Israel brought an indictment against antiquities dealer and owner of the James Ossuary, Oded Golan, claiming that the second part of the inscription, the portion which reads “brother of Jesus” to be a forgery. This indictment seems to have come to nothing after five years of court proceedings that concluded in March 2010 with 116 hearings, 138 witnesses, 52 expert

witnesses, over 400 exhibits, and more than 12,000 pages of court transcripts! According to Golan's written summary of the trial (supported by the 474 page Hebrew language opinion handed down by Jerusalem District Court Judge Aharon Farkash on March 14, 2012), many high-level scholars with expertise in ancient epigraphy, paleography, bio-geology, and other crucial disciplines relating to examining the inscription have testified that there is no reason to doubt that the "brother of Jesus" was engraved by the same hand in the first-century A.D. In view of this, it is very likely that we may have a very early and important historical witness to Jesus and His family. A summary of the arguments for and against the authenticity of the inscription is listed below.

Arguments against its authenticity

1. The ossuary was not discovered in situ, within a secure archaeological context, but rather obtained through the antiquities trade.
2. Though the bone-box itself and the first half of the inscription are not contested, arguments that the second half of the inscription (brother of Jesus) was recently engraved (forged) and was not completed by the same hand have been posited due to the absence of natural occurring patina. (Patina is a thin layer of biogenic material expected to be present on most, if not all, ancient artifacts to some degree. It is caused by the continuous secretions and activities of micro-organisms such as bacteria, fungi, algae, and yeast on the stone and inside some of its grooves. If the same consistency of patina is equally distributed on the ossuary and found within the engraved grooves, it would suggest the authenticity of the inscription. The absence of patina within the disputed portion of the inscription would suggest a forgery or modern engraving of letters.)
3. The foundation of the IAA's case against Oded Golan was based on an eyewitness (Joe Zias, an anthropologist formerly employed by the IAA) that claimed to have previously seen the ossuary without the "brother of Jesus" portion of the inscription.

Arguments for its authenticity

1. The size of the ossuary indicates that the bones belonged to an adult male, thus being consistent with James.

2. In 2004, while the ossuary was in IAA possession, the police (Mazap) made a silicon impression (cast) of the inscription that contaminated and mutilated the inscription. When the silicon was removed it also removed the natural occurring patina, but despite this action traces of the patina were still present in several of the letter grooves, indicating that the inscription is indeed ancient.
3. The name on the ossuary (James) reveals that the person was a male.
4. 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, the same time period that Josephus tells of the death of James at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders.
5. 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. The rare presence of a sibling's name (Jesus) would indicate that Jesus was a very prominent figure.
6. Specialist and archaeologist, Prof. Kloner, dates the ossuary to between A.D. 45 – 70, and is thus consistent with the death of James in A.D. 62 according to Josephus.
7. Though the names Joseph, James, and Jesus are common names in the first-century, the combination of "James, son of Joseph" is rare and unique to this ossuary, meaning that it is highly probable that the bone-box belongs to James, Jesus' brother even without the second half of the inscription mentioning this.
8. Prof. Camil Fuchs, head of the Statistic department at Tel Aviv University researched deceased males in Jerusalem in the first-century A.D. He concluded based on conservative estimates a growing Jerusalem population estimate (between A.D. 6-70), minus all women, minus children who will not reach manhood by time of James' death, minus non-Jews, and considering the fame of Jesus as a brother to warrant the inscription, time of death, and literacy, that with 95% assurance there existed at the time in Jerusalem 1.71 people named James with a father Joseph and brother named Jesus!
9. 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 church and half-brother of Jesus 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 interred in an ossuary.

10. Expert witnesses have confirmed that the inscription in its totality was inscribed by the same hand in the first-century, though this was a much disputed item (especially by Yuval Goren and Avner Ayalon) until experts were put under oath at trial.
11. Experts have confirmed the presence of microbial patina on the ossuary and both parts of the inscription “James, the son of Joseph” and “brother of Jesus,” demonstrating the unity and antiquity of the inscription. In addition, this patina is generally deemed ancient, without the possibility of it occurring naturally in less than 50-100 years, making a recent forgery impossible. The world’s leading expert in bio-geology and the patination process, Wolfgang Krumbein of Oldenburg University in Germany, affirmed the patina on the ossuary and inscription most likely reflects a development process of thousands of years. He added that there is no known process of accelerating the development of patina. In addition, he concluded that the patina covering the inscription letters are no less authentic than the patina covering the surface of the ossuary (which the IAA says is authentic). Other researchers from the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto confirmed that the patina within the letter grooves is consistent with the patina on the surface of the ossuary, thus legitimizing the entire inscription’s antiquity.
12. According to expert paleographers (Andre Lemaire and Ada Yardeni) who authenticated (and dated) the inscription based on the shape and stance of the letters, the Aramaic is fully consistent with first-century style and practice. No credible challenge to their findings has yet to be published.
13. Adding the words, “brother of Jesus” is exceptional among the ossuaries found in Jerusalem. During the trial, it was revealed that what eyewitness (Joe Zias, who does not read Aramaic) thought he saw (i.e. James Ossuary) was actually a different (but similar) ossuary with three Aramaic inscribed names (Joseph, Judah, Hadas) known as the “Joseph Ossuary”. Prior to rendering the final verdict by Judge Farkash, apparently Zias said to Hershel Shanks that he was “joking” when told that the “brother of Jesus” portion of the inscription was missing from the ossuary!

So extensive and strong is the support for the authenticity of the ossuary and its inscription, according to Golan, Dan Bahat (the prosecutor), said in his closing arguments that the State would probably dismiss the charges that the ossuary inscription is a forgery. In fact, many of the IAA witnesses who initially claimed that the inscription was a forgery appeared to have changed their minds after closer analysis and scientific testing. What is more, many prosecution witnesses (witnesses for the IAA/State who argue that the inscription is a forgery) confirmed the authenticity of the inscription based upon careful analysis of the patina and the engraved inscription. The following chart offers a survey of several expert witnesses and their conclusions about the ossuary inscription.

Expert Witness/Opinions Regarding the Authenticity of the James Ossuary

Person	Expertise	Comments
Andre Lemaire	Epigrapher, ancient Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions.	Has no doubt that the entire inscription was ancient and inscribed in a single event. No reason to believe the contrary.
Ada Yardeni	Paleographer, researcher, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.	Examined the inscription in 2002 and concluded that the entire inscription is of ancient origin, and inscribed by a single individual. She also stated, "If this is a forgery, I quit."
Hagai Misgav	Member of the IAA Committee, expert in Hebrew and Aramaic ossuary inscriptions.	Found no indication of forgery in the inscription.
Shmuel Ahituv	Member of the 2003 IAA Writing Committee to examine the authenticity of the inscription and expert on Hebrew inscriptions.	Found no indication that the inscription is a forgery or is modern. The text and paleography make it difficult to rule out the authenticity of the inscription.
Yosef Naveh	Professor, prosecution witness	No indication the inscription is a forgery.
Y.L. Rahmani	Archaeologist, has published the corpus of IAA ossuary inscriptions in IAA's possession.	After examining the inscription, found no indication that the inscription (or any part of it) was a forgery.
Dr. Esther Eshel	Prosecution witness	She cannot rule out the possibility that the entire inscription may be ancient
Roni Reich	Jerusalem professor, archaeologist, and researcher	Ossuary inscription is ancient, no reason to doubt its authenticity, and most likely comes from the late second temple period.
Gabriel Barkay	Jerusalem archaeologist and professor	Ossuary is ancient and found no scientific evidence to doubt its authenticity.
Gideon Avni	IAA "Writing Committee" appointed to examine the	Never testified against the authenticity of the inscription.

	paleography and inscription in 2003.	
Orna Cohen	Senior antiquities conservator for the IAA and Israeli museums, archaeologist, chemist, and specialist in the conservation of ancient stone items.	Based on her careful analysis of the patina within the letter grooves under various light conditions, she concluded with certainty the phrase “brother of Jesus” had been engraved in ancient times.
Wolfgang Krumbein	One of the world’s leading experts (Oldenburg University, Germany) on the patination process, stone patina, geology, and bio-geology.	Analyzed samples of patina taken from the ossuary letter grooves, and concluded that this patina would require 50-100 years to develop, and most likely reflect a development process of thousands of years. The patina in the letter grooves was consistent with the patina on the surface of the ossuary, whose antiquity has not been contested.
Shimon Ilani Amnon Rosenfeld	Experts in Archaeometry (scientific testing of archaeological artifacts) at the Geological Survey of Israel in Jerusalem	After examination of the inscription in 2002, they identified natural bio-patina in all the letter grooves, thus demonstrating the inscription occurred prior to the scratches and patina forming. They have no doubt about the ancient origin of the entire inscription.
James Harrell	University of Toledo (OH), Expert in geology and stone of the ancient world	Found no indication that any part of the inscription was forged.
Dan Rahimi	Royal Ontario Museum of Toronto	Museum researchers tested the patina and found natural patina in the letter grooves under a granular substance that is consistent with detergent used by the IAA to formerly clean the ossuary.
Yuval Goren	Expert in petrography of potsherds and clay/silt, former member of IAA, and prosecution witness	Though Goren initially had submitted an opinion on the ossuary at the IAA’s request in 2003 in which he denied any presence of natural patina in the letter grooves, he later contradicted this by reversing his finds. Later in 2007, after a reexamination of the inscription, he admitted to finding natural patina in the second half of the inscription.
Avnor Ayalon	Geo-chemist of the Geological Survey of Israel in Jerusalem and prosecution witness	He proposed to examine isotopic composition of the oxygen and carbon in carbonate patina, and compare it to the same found in stalactite caves in Jerusalem. Similar isotopic values would prove the carbonate patina on the ossuary may be natural, but a dissimilar value would demonstrate it is not natural and most likely a forgery. However, Ayalon’s model has been demonstrated by others to be based on false assumptions and deemed inappropriate for examining ancient artifacts.
Elisabetta Boaretto	Expert in Carbon 14 dating, prosecution witness	Found no evidence to support that the inscription is forged or new. Only signed the IAA petition against Golan because Goren (who later reversed his

		opinion) and Ayalon (whose model was subsequently shown to be mistaken) had previously asserted that they had found no patina, not due to her own analysis of the inscription.
Jacques Neguer	Chemist for the IAA and prosecution witness	Asserted the inscription had been cleaned (with detergent) in the past, but cannot determine whether it was a forgery.
Israel Police Forensic Department (Mazap)	Forensics	Letters in the first half of the inscription (which are not contested), were engraved by the same individual who engraved the second half of the inscription.
Gerald B. Richards	Adjunct professor of forensic science at George Washington University, and senior consultant to the FBI	Conducted scientific tests of Oded Golan's photos (including infra-red and ultra-violet tests) of the ossuary, proving that the inscription had been engraved prior to 2002 since the photography (Kodak) paper used was discontinued in the 1980s. The indictment against Golan had claimed Golan had forged the inscription around 2002. This claim is now impossible to sustain.
Dan Bahat	State prosecutor in the case	Announced that the State would most likely dismiss the charges involving the ossuary and retract its claim that the ossuary inscription was a forgery had the bill of indictment not involved other charges.

Golan summarizes the outcome of extensive scientific tests performed on the ossuary and its inscription when he writes,

Neither the prosecution nor the IAA presented even a single witness who was an expert on ancient stone items, or patina on antiquities and who ruled out the authenticity of the inscription or any part of it. On the contrary, the findings of all the tests, including those of prosecution witnesses Goren and Ayalon, support the argument that the entire inscription is ancient, the inscription was engraved by a single person, and that several letter grooves contains traces of detergent/s that covers the natural varnish patina that developed there over centuries, and was partially cleaned (mainly the first section), many years ago.

The apologetic and historical implications following from this ossuary are far-reaching since it informs us that: 1) James, Joseph, and Jesus have historical corroboration as individuals and a family in the first-century; 2) early Christians, like James, may have been buried according to Jewish custom; 3) Aramaic was used by early Christians; and that 4) early Christianity emerged from its Jewish roots, making it extremely difficult to divorce Christianity from its Jewishness. As such, the inscription's primary apologetic value rests in the notion that after the most intense interdisciplinary expert scrutiny according to the rules of law, the James Ossuary is destined to be the most authenticated/scrutinized artifact in

history. We now can appreciate the ossuary as an authentic artifact that provides the earliest direct archaeological link to Jesus and his family!

Copyright © 2012 Joseph M. Holden. All rights reserved.

Dr. Holden is the President of [Veritas Evangelical Seminary](#) and the author/coauthor of [The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible: Discoveries that Confirm the Reliability of the Scriptures](#), [Living Loud: Defending your Faith](#), and [Vital Issues in the Inerrancy Debate](#).

