

The Burial Box of James, the Brother of Jesus

Purpose of this page

In recent years, many new archaeology discoveries have been made that directly relate to people and events in the Bible. Many "scholars" have declared that the stories in the Bible are little more than mythology. After all, few of the Kings of Israel or Judah are mentioned any place other than the Bible. Their reasoning is that if the kingdom of Saul, David, and Solomon were as great as the Bible says, why are they not mentioned in the writings of other great kings of the day? As Christians, we take the Bible on faith and that is as it should be. However, there have been some significant discoveries in archaeology recently that Bible believers should celebrate.

It is the purpose of this page to present some of those discoveries to church lay persons. Do not become addicted to "proofs" as the basis for your faith, but, take joy in the fact that many people and events in the Bible can be substantiated by scientific study.

The Burial Box of James, the Brother of Jesus

This is an excerpt of an article that was published in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, November/December, 2002

After nearly 2,000 years, historical evidence for the existence of Jesus has come to light literally written in stone. An inscription has been found on an ancient bone box, called an ossuary, that reads "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." This container provides the only New Testament-era mention of the central figure of Christianity and is the first-ever archaeological discovery to corroborate Biblical references to Jesus.

The bone box had been purchased by a private collector from an antiquities dealer. The box had been looted from its original burial location somewhere close to Jerusalem several years earlier. Unfortunately, the bones had been removed and the exact location of the burial is unknown.

The Aramaic words etched on the box's side show a cursive form of writing used only from about 10 to 70 A.D., according to noted paleographer André Lemaire of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (popularly known as the Sorbonne University) in Paris, who verified the inscription's authenticity. The ossuary has been dated to approximately 63 A.D. Lemaire details his full investigation in the November/December 2002 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, the leading popular publication in its field.

Ancient inscriptions are typically found on royal monuments or on lavish tombs, commemorating rulers and other official figures. But Jesus, who was raised by a carpenter, was a man of the people, so finding documentation of his family is doubly unexpected.

In the first century A.D., Jews followed the custom of transferring the bones of their deceased from burial caves to ossuaries. The practice was largely abandoned after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 A.D. No one knows for certain why the practice started or stopped, but it provides a rare period of self-documentation in which commoners as well as leaders left their names carved in stone.

The new find is also significant in that it corroborates the existence of Joseph, Jesus's father, and James, Jesus's brother and a leader of the early Christian church in Jerusalem. The family relationships contained on the new find helped experts ascertain that the inscription very likely refers to the Biblical James, brother of Jesus (see, for example, Matthew 13:55-56 and Galatians 1:18-19). Although all three names were common in ancient times, the statistical probability of their appearing in that combination is extremely slim. In addition, the mention of a brother is unusual--indicating that this Jesus must have been a well-known figure.

Laboratory tests performed by the Geological Survey of Israel confirm that the box's limestone comes from the Jerusalem area. The patina--a thin sheen or covering that forms on stone and other materials over time--has the cauliflower-type shape known to develop in a cave environment; more importantly, it shows no trace of modern elements.

The 20-inch-long box resides in a private collection in Israel. Like many ossuaries obtained on the antiquities market, it is empty. Its history prior to its current ownership is not known. The container is one of very few ancient artifacts mentioning New Testament figures. One such object is the ossuary of Caiaphas, the high priest who turned Jesus over to the Romans, according to the Biblical account. Caiaphas's tomb was uncovered in 1990. Also, some 40 years ago, archaeologists discovered an inscription on a monument that mentions Pontius Pilate.

"The James ossuary may be the most important find in the history of New Testament archaeology," says Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*. "It has implications not just for scholarship, but for the world's understanding of the Bible."