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THE JAMES OSSUARY - IS IT AUTHENTIC? *

In the introduction to my *JAMES THE BROTHER OF JESUS*¹, I stated that James was so well known and so important that taking the brother relationship seriously was perhaps the best "confirmation that there ever was a Historical Jesus"². Put in another way, it was not whether Jesus had any brothers, but rather whether the brothers had a "Jesus". Now four years later, we are suddenly presented with this very proof supported by many of the same people who previously questioned the reality of these same brothers and downplayed the importance of James.

So why do I find this discovery suspicious - what is so questionable about it? Aside from its sudden miraculous appearance, no confirmed provenance - i. e., where it was found and it has been all these years (from the photographic evidence it seems in remarkable good shape), no authenticated chain of custody or transmission - in most cases, these in themselves would be enough to rule such a find out of consideration — there is the nature of the inscription itself.

An ossuary is a stone box, usually limestone, in which bones previously laid out in rock-cut tombs such as the one pictured in the Gospels for Jesus, are retrieved by loving relatives or followers - if they could afford them or cared enough; otherwise the bones might simply be swept aside to make room for the next burial.

* Concerning André Lemaire's article *Burial Box of James the Brother of Jesus*, "Biblical Archaeology Review" Nov./Dec. 2002, pp. 24-33 and 70.

¹ Cf. Robert Eisenman, *James the Brother of Jesus. The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Penguin Books 1998.

² Cf. p. XXIII.

There is no problem getting hold of ossuaries from this period. They are plentiful in the Jerusalem area, most not even inscribed and some never having even been used. So confirmation of the Jerusalem origin of the stone is to no avail, nor particularly is the palaeography. The Sorbonne palaeographer André Lemaire authenticated the Aramaic handwriting inscription 63 C.E. What precision, but why 63? Because he knew from a generally credible notice in Josephus³ that James died in 62 and so specifying an earlier date would be largely useless.

But margins of error in such imprecise disciplines (and palaeography of the late Biblical period, with its lack of secure "pegs" - meaning verifiable chronological exemplars - is certainly one of these) are notoriously wide - say fifty years or one hundred years depending on the conservatism of the mason or scribe (even here, the two may not agree), his origins, his innovativeness, etc. - a multitude of variables.

In any event, if one were going to latterly craft an imitation, one would be sure to get one's palaeography right, particularly if one had the financing to do so, which in the present case, does not seem to have been a problem. So with the right palaeographer or mason, the value of an uninscribed ossuary could jump from, say \$500. to \$500,000,000, a not untempting differential.

The only really strong point the arguers for authenticity have is perceived patina homogeneity, this seemingly having been measured at several Israeli institutions. As this is a new science, it is hard for me to gauge its value (precise carbon testing, for instance, in manuscript studies is another of these limbo areas)⁴ I must defer to the experts on this.

Still, the letters do seem unusually clear and incised and do not, at least in the photographs, show a significant amount of damage due to erosion or the vicissitudes of time. Did this object come from a tomb or was it in the ground - another of the provenance arguments. If the latter, one might expect a lot of wear. In addition, of course, there is the clear discrepancy between the hand of the first part of the inscription, "Jacob the son of Joseph" and that of the second, "the brother of Jesus".

But since I am not a palaeographer or epigraphist, I will not labor these parts of the conundrum. My main objection to the ossuary, however, is the nature of the inscription itself not its patina or epigraphy, and I say this as

³ Cf. Josephus Flavius, *Antiquities*, XX, 9, 1.

⁴ See the article in "The Qumran Chronicle" (vol. 11 in press) by Joseph A. T. Will et al., *Redating of Radiocarbon Dating of the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

someone who would like this artifact to be true, someone willing to be convinced. I would like the burial place of James to be found. I would like this ossuary to be authentic. How marvelous that would be, but this suddenly miraculously appearing ossuary, as it were, is just too pat, too perfect.

In issues of antiquities verification this is always a strong warning sign. It seems pointed not at an ancient audience, who would have known who James (or Jacob his Hebrew/Aramaic name) was, but at a modern one - this to confirm that modern audience's belief and this is just what is happening, something like the Turin Shroud - the first contemporary epigraphical evidence of a Jesus!

If the ossuary had simply said "Jacob the son of Joseph", it might have passed muster or been more normal. Even this would have raised concerns on my part because the sources are not clear who this "Jacob"'s father really was, Cleophas, Clopas ("James the son of Mary the wife of Cleophas"), Alphaeus ("James the Less"). If the inscription had said "James the son of Cleophas", "Clopas", or even "Alphaeus" (all three probably being interchangeable); I would have jumped for joy. But "Joseph"? This is what a modern audience, schooled in the Gospels, would expect not an ancient one.

Then there is the ascription, "the brother of Jesus", but almost no ancient source calls James this. This is what we moderns call him! This is why I say, the inscription is pointed, as if purposefully to what modern ears would expect or want to hear, not ancient ones. Even Paul, our first witness, does not call James this or ever mention a "Joseph". He calls him "James the brother of the Lord"⁵ - whom and whatever he means by this.

If the ossuary said something like "James the Zaddik"/"James the Just One", which is how many referred to him - some even like Hegesippus from the Second Century and Eusebius from the Fourth, use the cognomen in place of his very name itself - then I would have more willingly credited it. But to call him not only by his paternal but also his fraternal name - however one chooses to explain it - this I am unfamiliar with on any ossuary I know and again seems directly pointed at us.

But James was well enough known in the Jerusalem of his day not to have needed such identity boost. After all Jesus had died over thirty years before, if we can believe the reports, and there is hardly any other contemporary evidence for Jesus outside the Scripture, which is largely second century - no other ossuaries, no other inscriptions. This is what I mean by

⁵ Paul, *Gal.* 1, 19.

the formulation being too perfect. It just doesn't ring true. To the modern ear, particularly the believer - perhaps. But to the ancient? Perhaps a later pilgrim from the fourth or fifth century might have described James in this way, but this is not what our palaeographers are saying. They are trying to insist it is a first-century inscription - therefore the pilgrim aspect of the puzzle goes by the wayside.

Finally, the numerous contemporary sources I have already referred to know the location of James' burial site. Hegesippus, a Palestinian native, the closest to the time of James living perhaps fifty years after the events in question, tells us James was buried where he was stoned beneath the pinnacle of the Temple in the Kedron Valley. Eusebius in the fourth century, also from Palestine and Constantine's Bishop, confirms this.⁶

So do Jerome⁷ and Epiphanius in the fifth, both of whom knew Palestine and say the burial site and marker designating it were there until their own time and that they actually seem to have seen it - and this in the Fifth Century! In addition, of course, a burial is not an ossuary nor does it require one. Only laying out someone in rock-cut tombs of the style of the Garden Tomb or The Holy Sepulchre would require this. After that, the Byzantine Empire started to come apart and there was the Muslim conquest in the Seventh. But none of these sources ever mention an ossuary! For them, James was buried in the normal manner and he remained buried at the location they specify until their own time - but our creative artificers presumably never read any of these sources (nor presumably my book beyond its first several chapters) or they would have known better.

⁶ Cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, 23, 17-19.

⁷ Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 2; cf. Eusebius, *op. cit.*, II, 23, 18.

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