

Religion Today
October 27-November 2, 2002
Does the James' Ossuary really refer to Jesus Christ?
Paul V.M. Flesher

This past week, the popular magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review* published an article in which a leading French archaeologist, Andre Lemaire, claims that an ancient coffin from Palestine had held the body of James, the brother of Jesus. If it could be verified, this coffin, more correctly called a bone box or an ossuary, would form a direct archaeological link to Jesus Christ.

Such archaeological evidence for Jesus and his historical existence has never before been found and would have important ramifications for Christianity. This sensationalist claim has been repeated in major newspapers across the country and around the globe. But before we believe this story, we should note the questions that must be answered before this claim can be demonstrated, or even made more probable. After all anyone can make claims and even the best scholars can make mistakes.

Is it a fake? Dr. Lemaire has brought in experts from several different areas of archaeology, archaeogeology, ancient writing styles, and carving techniques. Their verdict is that there is no evidence of modern tampering.

Where was the ossuary discovered? That remains unknown, for grave diggers stole it from its original site. This means that there is no scientific or archaeological record of where the box was buried or of the items that were in the ground around it. Not only does this mean that it cannot be proven that the ossuary comes from the Jerusalem area, it also means that it cannot be dated through archaeological criteria. This is because archaeology dates non-organic objects (like stone bone boxes) from things found with them, such as pottery, coins or organic material on which carbon-14 test can be done. Thus neither the place nor the date of the ossuary can ever be verified with archaeological methods. The looters stole more than an ossuary, they robbed us of knowledge about the human past.

This lack of archaeological context means that only the ossuary itself can be studied. What questions should be asked about it?

When and where did the ancient Jews use ossuaries in their burials? Lemaire argues that ossuaries are known from Jerusalem in the first centuries A.D. and B.C. This is true. But Jews also used ossuaries in the Jordan Valley and in Galilee, at least into the third century A.D. So while the find fits Lemaire's claim, it also fits elsewhere and at other times.

Does the ossuary have any writing that may contain historical clues? Yes, there is a short Aramaic inscription on the box which reads: Jacob son of Joseph, brother of Jesus. (Note that Jacob is the Aramaic equivalent of the Greek name James.) Lemaire and Dr. Joseph Fitzmyer, a widely respected American scholar, have evaluated the script and found that its style fits the style found on other Jewish inscriptions of first-century Jerusalem. However, it may also fit script styles from other places, such as Galilee--especially the burial grounds of Beth Shearim.

In what Aramaic dialect is the inscription written, and is that dialect appropriate for first-century Jerusalem? It turns out that although the dialect of the inscription can be made to fit into first-century Jerusalem, it actually fits much better with the Galilean dialect of the late second to sixth century.

These last three questions provide an indication for how to understand the future discussion in the press of this find. The questions are answered with the response: yes, it fits into first-century Jerusalem. But readers should also ask, does it fit elsewhere as well? An analysis based on the earliest available evidence from the press suggests that the ossuary may fit as well or even better into Galilee of the second or third century A.D. It will be fun to follow the coming scholarly debate.