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The Ossuaries of Jesus and James
Paul V.M. Flesher

I have been researching the recently revealed James ossuary inscription that reads, "James son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." This has been sensationally touted in the media as the burial box of James the brother of Jesus, the founder of Christianity. While reading through the entries in a catalogue of nearly 1000 ancient ossuaries, I came across two ossuaries with this inscription, "Jesus son of Joseph," the exact name of Jesus as it would have been written at that time. These inscriptions were published in out-of-the-way journals and never came to the attention of the scholarly world at large, let alone the national press. Neither the excavators, the scholars who deciphered the inscription, nor the assembler of the catalogue thought it at all likely that this inscription referred to Jesus Christ. Instead, these two ossuaries were duly recorded in exactly the same way as the other hundreds of ossuaries in the catalogue with no distinguishing notes; they were essentially buried.

I wondered about how different matters would have been if someone had decided to sensationalize one of these finds, especially if they combined it with a statistical analysis indicating just how rare the combination of Jesus and Joseph would have been. We would have seen headlines that would have read like a supermarket tabloid, "Jesus' grave discovered, and he was in it!" You can imagine how it would have gone from there, especially since one of the ossuaries was found in a family tomb with the ossuary of Joseph, the father, and another of a person identified as Jesus' son.

But the scholars involved at all stages took the responsible approach and treated it like any other find. They deciphered it, studied it, dated it, and placed it in a catalogue where others would be able to find it for their own research.

Compare that to the sensationalism surrounding the James' ossuary inscription, which is getting more exciting than the find itself. Recent stories include: ossuary is to go on display at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada; ossuary was broken during shipment to the museum; owner has been

identified as Oded Golan; and Golan has been questioned by police about whether he acquired the item illegally. Not only has each of these been reported with accompanying hype and exaggeration, but also reporters from all over the world are calling scholars and asking them to comment on the "scandal" -- to use the term a French reporter said to me yesterday.

With regard to the authenticity of the James inscription, Dr. Rochelle Altman argues that the ossuary and the first half of the inscription probably are authentic, but that the second half of the inscription, the part that reads "brother of Jesus" is not. She shows that it is written by a second hand in a very different script. Whereas an experienced stone carver who formed and placed the letters with skill carefully writes the first part of the inscription, a hand not trained in cutting letters into stone clearly does the second part. The letters are uneven and inconsistently formed, some letters are simply done incorrectly, and the writer cannot even keep to a straight line. Altman thinks this second part of the inscription probably was done a few centuries after the ossuary was made.

Altman's analysis fits with my own study of the dialect of the second part of the inscription, which has found that it conforms to the standard usage of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, the Aramaic dialect used in Galilee from the late second to the seventh centuries. So in the end, it seems that although the sensationalist treatment of this inscription has generated a lot of publicity, that publicity has not subverted the careful scholarly analysis needed to verify the claims placed on this find.