

# Surprising Archaeological Find: Proof of Jesus' Existence?

Have scholars found firm evidence of the existence of Jesus Christ, His earthly father and one of His half brothers? An intriguing find bears their names.

by Mario Seiglie

First it was the name of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate found in a monument in Caesarea, Israel, in 1961.

Then came the discovery in 1990 in Jerusalem of an ossuary, a burial box for bones, bearing the name of Caiaphas, the high priest who condemned Jesus. Just recently it appears the most spectacular of all archaeological finds relating to Jesus has surfaced.

Another ossuary has come to light, this one bearing the names of Jesus, James and

Professor Lemaire examined it. In fact, although Mr. Golan had read the inscription, he hadn't connected it with the biblical Jesus.

The dealer told Mr. Golan that the box had come from a burial site in southern Jerusalem where a bulldozer had accidentally uncovered a site containing tombs and bone boxes dating to the time of Jesus and James.

Much to the disappointment of archaeologists and scholars, the box was not excavated by a trained archaeologist from the spot

rule out the possibility. A team of experts from the Geological Survey of Israel examined the box and the inscription under a microscope and found no evidence of modern tools or tampering. Like the rest of the box, the inscription, though wiped clean in parts, has a thin sheen of particulate matter formed on it called a patina. This particular patina shows that it developed in a cave environment and that it is consistent with an age of 2,000 years.

By its very nature the artifact can be dated to within a few decades. Such bone boxes were in use from about 20 B.C. to A.D. 70, when according to Jewish custom the dead were first sealed in caves or rock-cut tombs, then their bones later transferred to a limestone bone box after the body had decayed.

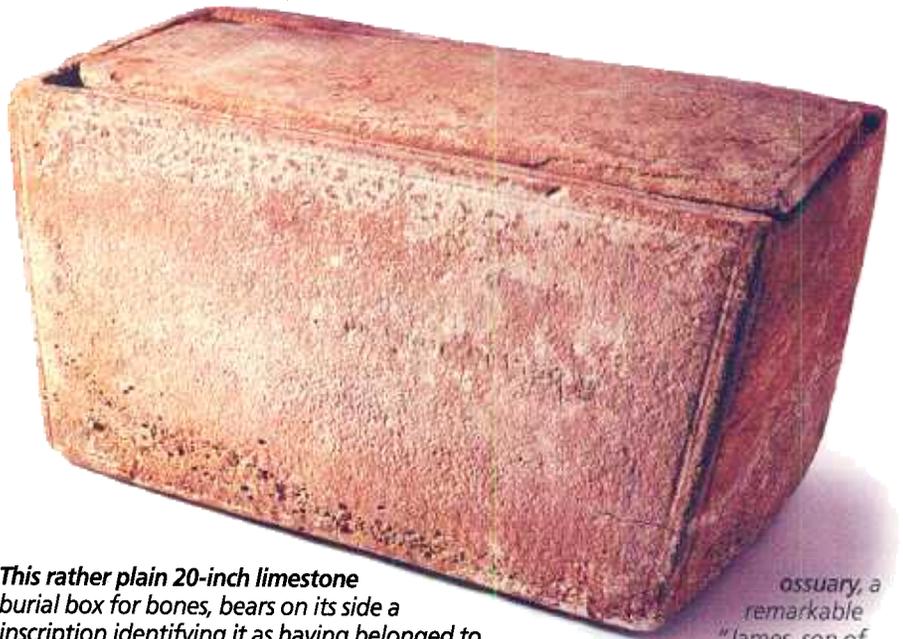
Professor Lemaire further narrowed the dating by verifying that the inscription was in a cursive style used only in the few decades before A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. Thus the inscription fits the style used around A.D. 62, when James, Jesus' half brother, died.

Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, which announced the discovery, explained that the inscription was reviewed by Joseph Fitzmyer, one of the world's foremost experts on first-century Aramaic and a preeminent Dead Sea Scrolls editor. Professor Fitzmyer was at first troubled by the spelling of the word for brother, because it was a plural form used centuries later. But further research yielded the same form in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls and on another first-century ossuary. "I stand corrected," Professor Fitzmyer said.

A putative forger would have to know Aramaic better than Professor Fitzmyer, which seems rather unlikely. "To my mind," wrote Mr. Shanks, "this is one of the strongest arguments for the authenticity of the James inscription" (*Biblical Archaeology Review*, November-December 2002, p. 33).

## Many factors pointing in one direction

"It seems very probable," Professor Lemaire concludes, "that this is the ossuary of the James in the New Testament" (*ibid.*).



*This rather plain 20-inch limestone burial box for bones, bears on its side a inscription identifying it as having belonged to Joseph, brother of Jesus. The style of the inscription dates it to around A.D. 62, the year James, brother of Jesus, was martyred. The box was apparently unearthed in Jerusalem.*

Joseph, three of the most prominent people in the New Testament. The ancient Aramaic words inscribed on the limestone box state that it belonged to "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."

In late October André Lemaire, a specialist in ancient inscriptions and professor at the Sorbonne in Paris, announced the discovery of the stone container with the extraordinary script. An Israeli collector, Oded Golan, had purchased the box from an Arab antiquities dealer more than a decade ago. Mr. Golan had not thought the artifact important until

where it had rested for the last 2,000 years. Instead it was surreptitiously removed and sold on the antiquities market (as is the case with a high percentage of archaeological finds in the Holy Land). Regrettably, this prevents the examination of the box in its proper archaeological context and the elimination of any possibility of fraud.

## Strong evidence for authenticity

Yet fraud seems rather unlikely. Before the announcement of the discovery, the limestone box was subjected to rigorous scientific tests to

ossuary, a remarkable "James, son of

What makes the case that this is indeed the ossuary of Jesus' half brother so convincing is the combination of factors that point in the same direction. Dr. Lemaire notes that Joseph (Hebrew *Yosef*) and Jesus (*Yeshua*, or Joshua) were common names in the A.D. 60s and James (*Ya'akov* or Jacob) less so, but a brother would not ordinarily be named in an inscription unless he were prominent. Dr. Lemaire says the likelihood of *more than one person* named James with a father named Joseph and a prominent brother named Jesus in that precise time period is minuscule.

"It is one thing to have scattered probabilities," explains John Meier, professor of New Testament at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and an authority on first-century Palestinian Judaism; "it's another thing to have lines of probabilities all converging at one point" (UPI report, Oct. 25).

Mr. Shanks stated that the "clincher" for him was the naming of the brother of the deceased. Of some 800 bone boxes discovered, 233 have inscriptions on the outside. Of these, few are inscribed with the name of a brother—only one other in Aramaic. Mr. Shanks said if one accepts the theory that the deceased was a prominent person associated with him—rather than simply associated because the brother presided over the secondary interment—the probability that the inscription refers to Jesus of Nazareth seems overwhelming.

### The life of James

Who was James? Let's consider the

intriguing story of this half brother of Jesus.

We first read of James in the New Testament as one of Jesus' half brothers (Jesus was born of Mary, miraculously begotten of God the Father through the Holy Spirit while Mary was a betrothed virgin, as explained in Matthew 1:18-25). Yet Mary and her husband, Joseph, later had other children. In Matthew 13:55-56 we see that some residents of Nazareth asked: "Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?" (emphasis added throughout).

During Jesus' life, the Bible candidly reveals that His half brothers did not believe in Him as Savior and Messiah (John 7:5). Yet, after His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His half brother James (1 Corinthians 15:7), who then became a prominent believer. In Acts 1:14 James is pictured, along with his other brothers and his mother, Mary, as original members of the Church. This was the same group that received God's Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

James later became an apostle and leader of the Jerusalem congregation. He played a prominent role in the conference of Acts 15 (see verses 13-21). Paul later visited James in Jerusalem where he oversaw the elders there (Acts 21:18). In Galatians 2:9 Paul refers to James as a "pillar" of the Church, and in 1 Corinthians 9:5 he mentions that "the brothers of the Lord" were married, which apparently included James. (More of James' life is detailed in "James: Half

Brother of Jesus," beginning on page 22.)

James also wrote the New Testament epistle that bears his name (James 1:1). Another brother, Judas or Judah (Matthew 13:55), wrote the short epistle of Jude (Jude 1).

### The death of James

The death of James, the Lord's brother—not to be confused with the two original apostles named James (see Matthew 10:2-3)—is not mentioned in the New Testament. But Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, does record it.

He writes: "Festus [the Roman procurator] was now dead, and Albinus [his successor] was but upon the road; so he [Ananias II, the high priest] assembled the Sanhedrin of the judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 20, chap. 9, sec. 1).

Eusebius, a fourth-century church historian, records even more of the details of James' death: "Conducting him [James] into a public place, they demanded that he should renounce the faith of Christ before all the people; but contrary to the sentiments of all, with a firm voice, and much beyond their expectation, he declared himself fully before the whole multitude, and confessed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, our Savior and Lord.

"Unable to bear any longer the testimony  
*Continued on page 27*

## Controversy Over the Term 'Brother'

One long-debated issue that has resurfaced with the recent ossuary discovery is whether James was really the half brother of Jesus. To maintain the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary (which holds that Mary remained a virgin even after Jesus' birth and had no more children), Roman Catholics teach James was only a "cousin" of Jesus.

Yet the biblical evidence points to James being a half brother, not a cousin, of Jesus, since Mary was his mother and Joseph his father. The Bible does not call Jesus the *only* son of Mary; it calls Him the *firstborn* son. "Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her *firstborn* Son. And he called His name Jesus" (Matthew 1:24-25, emphasis added throughout).

Note also that the word *know* is the biblical euphemism for Joseph and Mary having sexual relations as husband and wife after Jesus was born.

The Gospels consistently show that Joseph and Mary had children other than Jesus. For instance, Mark 6:3 says: "Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?"

Also, Paul calls James "the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19). The term used here for "brother," *adelphos*, means a brother, not a cousin. Paul uses a different Greek word that means "cousin," *anepsios*, in Colossians 4:10: "Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the *cousin* of Barnabas." So the idea that James was a cousin of Jesus has no biblical basis.

Another line of argument is presented by the Greek Orthodox Church, which also believes in the perpetual virginity of Mary but holds that James was Joseph's son by

a supposed previous marriage, making him merely Jesus' *stepbrother*, having no immediate blood relation. Yet a close blood relation seems implicit in the distinction "brother of Jesus." And again, the idea of children by previous marriage is also contradicted by Matthew 1:24-25, which calls Jesus Mary's *firstborn* son and states that Joseph "knew her" after Jesus was born.

Corroborating evidence is found in Psalm 69, a psalm written by Israel's King David



"James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus," reads this inscription.

but widely recognized as messianic in content—prophesying the suffering of Jesus. David prefigures Christ lamenting, "I have become a stranger to my brothers, and an alien to my mother's children" (verse 8)—showing that Jesus' brothers were children of Joseph and Mary, not just of Joseph by a previous marriage.

Moreover, when Joseph fled to Egypt before the massacre of the young boys in Bethlehem, an angel appeared to Joseph and told him, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother; flee to Egypt . . ." (Matthew 2:13). It's apparent that the only ones in that family were Joseph, Mary and Jesus. No other brothers or sisters were there from a supposed previous marriage of Joseph. Jesus was clearly the firstborn son, and later Joseph and Mary had several other sons and daughters.

# Proof

*Continued from page 21*

of the man, who, on account of his elevated virtue and piety was deemed the most just of men, they . . . slew him . . . But, as to the manner of James's death, it has been already stated in the words of Clement, that he was thrown from a wing of the temple, [to be stoned] and beaten to death with a club" (*Ecclesiastical History*, 1995, pp. 75-76).

## **Names of other biblical figures found**

Although the evidence so far points to the listing of Jesus, James and Joseph on the newfound ossuary as being the same persons mentioned in the New Testament, it cannot be proven with *absolute* certainty. Perhaps testing methods yet to be developed will be carried out that can further confirm the find.

In the meantime, the find nevertheless appears to be powerful evidence for the accuracy of the Gospel accounts and the literal existence of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, and His earthly family.

And by no means is this find unique; the existence of many biblical figures has been proven by archaeological finds. So far biblical names that have been positively confirmed include Herod the Great, Herod Agrippa, Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, David, many of the kings of Judah and Israel, and even Jeremiah's scribe, Baruch