

ON THE RECENTLY DISCOVERED JAMES OSSUARY

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Resumen

El osario de Santiago recientemente publicitado representa otro hallazgo arqueológico impresionante que podría ser significativo en la investigación de la vida de Jesús y en la discusión de la historia cristiana primitiva. Se necesitan estudios científicos adicionales de este osario antes que se puedan aceptar su autenticidad y la sección controversial del “hermano de Jesús” de la inscripción. La comparación con otros hallazgos de osarios y el estudio de la inscripción aramea contribuirán en forma significativa en la discusión actual.

Abstract

The recently publicized “James” ossuary is yet another remarkable archaeological find that may have significance for research into the life of Jesus and early Christian history. Further scientific study of this ossuary is needed before its authenticity and the controversial “brother of Jesus” portion of the inscription can be accepted. Comparison with other ossuary finds and study of the Aramaic inscription will make important contributions to this ongoing inquiry.

1. INTRODUCTION

The public was stunned in the fall of 2002 when the media reported that an ossuary that had been in private hands bears an inscription that may refer to James, the brother of Jesus.¹ The first scholarly report published has come from the pen of the well-known French scholar and paleographer André Lemaire.²

Remarkably clear, color photographs of the ossuary and its inscription have been made available on various web sites, and the same appeared in the journal in which Lemaire’s preliminary study was published. In November 2002 the ossuary was publicly displayed in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, to coincide with the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. The ossuary is some 50 centimeters in length, at the base, widening to 56 centimeters at the top, some 30 centimeters in width at one end and about 26 centimeters in width at the other, and about 30 centimeters high. Thus the ossuary is not perfectly rectangular in form. The inscription, which is made up of five words, is 19 centimeters in length. The lid is flat

¹ The owner of the James ossuary is one Oded Golan, an engineer from Tel Aviv. Golan claims to have purchased the burial box from an antiquities dealer sometime in the 1970s, not aware of the significance of the inscription. In the spring of 2002 the inscription was deciphered by André Lemaire, who had been invited to examine other antiquities in Mr. Golan’s collection.

² See André Lemaire, “Burial Box of James: The Brother of Jesus,” *BAR* 28.6 (2002): 24-33, 70 + plates.

and rests on a ledge inside the rim. Badly weathered, the ossuary reveals faint traces of rosettes on one side. It is also reported that tiny bone fragments were present in the dust at the bottom of the ossuary.

Several issues have been raised regarding the authenticity and antiquity of the ossuary's inscription, especially the last two words. And, of course, questions have been raised regarding the identification of the person whose remains at one time rested in the ossuary. The purpose of this brief note is to review linguistic and orthographic aspects of the inscription.³ Scientific analysis of the ossuary and its inscription is ongoing and will not be discussed.⁴

2. THE INSCRIPTION

The inscription reads as follows:

יעקוב בר יוסף אחיו דישוע

Jacob, son of Joseph, brother of Yeshu'a *or*

James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus

There are no spaces between the words; the letters are quite legible, and are deeply etched into the limestone. Lemaire has concluded that the style of writing points to the last two decades prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and that in all probability the inscription is authentic and is in reference to early Christianity's James, the brother of Jesus.⁵

However, not all scholars are convinced. The *dalet* prefixed to Yeshu'a is oddly formed, almost having the appearance of a misformed *'ayin*.⁶ Because of this and be-

³ In another publication I review the James Ossuary in the light of other ossuary and non-ossuary inscriptions that have a bearing on the world of Jesus. See Craig A. Evans, "Jesus and the Ossuaries," *BBR* 13 (2003): 21-46.

⁴ The Israeli government's Geological Survey tested the ossuary and its inscription, concluding that both are ancient and probably date to the first century. See the letter by Amnon Rosenfeld and Shimon Ilani of the Geological Survey of Israel, published as an exhibit in Lemaire, "Burial Box of James," 29: "No signs of the use of a modern tool or instrument was [sic] found. No evidence that might detract from the authenticity of the patina and the inscription was found." The Royal Ontario Museum reached a similar conclusion (as reported on its web site). See now the follow-up by Hershel Shanks, "Between Authenticity and Forgery," *Religious Studies News: SBL Edition* 4.2 (2003): 6-8; and idem, "Cracks in James Bone Box Repaired," *BAR* 29.1 (2003): 20-25. In June 2003 the Israel Antiquities Authority issued a report disputing the antiquity of the inscription. The report has itself been challenged.

⁵ Lemaire, "Burial Box of James," 28, 33.

⁶ The vertical stroke of the *dalet* extends above the horizontal stroke more than necessary. In many instances the vertical stroke does not extend beyond the horizontal stroke. But there are other exam-

cause of what appear to be slight differences in style among the words themselves, some scholars suspect that the last two words, אַחוי (“brother [of]”) and דִּישׁוּעַ (“of Yeshu‘a”), were written by a second hand, perhaps at a date much later than the first century. One writer in the popular media even claimed that the Aramaic was spurious and that the last two words, in combination, were redundant, meaning “brother of of Jesus.”⁷

The latter objection, however, is completely without foundation, for the construction אַחוי (“brother [of]”) followed by a noun or proper name prefixed with a *dalet* is well attested in Aramaic. One need look no further than the Targum for examples. In Gen 14:13 “brother of Eshcol and of Aner” in Hebrew is אָחִי אֶשְׁכּוֹל וְאָחִי אֶנֶר, but in Aramaic it is אַחוי דאשכל ואחוי דענר (cf. *Tg. Neof.*), precisely the form we have in the James ossuary.⁸ The אַחוי form is also attested in an inscription from the Umm el-‘Amed synagogue: שמעון אחוי (“Simeon his brother”).⁹ More importantly, the form is attested in 1QapGen 21:34 לוֹת בֶּר אַחוי (“Lot, son of his [Abram’s] brother”).¹⁰

Perhaps the closest and most important parallel is found inscribed on another ossuary, dating from either the first century BCE or the first century CE and found on Mount Scopus.¹¹ The inscription reads:

שימי בר עשיה אחוי [ד]חנין
Shimi, son of Asaiah, brother of Hanin

The *dalet* prefix must be partially restored; the horizontal stroke is effaced. The name Hanin is quite legible, as well as the preceding אַחוי (“brother [of]”). The *dalet* is therefore probable, for no other letter will serve the context. שימי is a contraction of שמיאי (“Shemaia”). Both forms of the name were used by rabbinic authorities (for

ples that resemble the *dalet* in the James ossuary; cf. Levi Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: The Israel Antiquities Authority and the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), 132 no. 226, 201 no. 572.

⁷ See the column by Claude Cohen-Matlofsky in the *Globe and Mail* (November 6, 2002).

⁸ For more examples, see *Tg. Neof.* Gen 10:21; 28:5; 43:29 (*Onqelos* reads אַחוי דאשכל ואחוי דענר).

⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Daniel J. Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts* (BibOr 34; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 268-69 and 298 (for notes). The inscription was published earlier by Nahman Avigad, “An Aramaic Inscription from the Ancient Synagogue of Umm el-‘Amed,” *Louis M. Rabinowitz Fund for the Exploration of Ancient Synagogues Bulletin* 3 (1960): 62-64 + plate XIV/2.

¹⁰ Fitzmyer and Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts*, 122. 1QapGen probably dates to the end of the first century BCE or the beginning of the first century CE.

¹¹ Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 200 no. 570 + plate 81; *Archaeological News* 54-55 (1975): 19 (Hebrew); Amos Kloner, “The Necropolis of Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period” (Ph.D. diss.; Hebrew University Jerusalem, 1980), 158-59.

Shemaia, cf. *b. Pesab.* 7a; *b. Yebam.* 71a; for Shimi, cf. *b. Ber.* 10a, 31a; *b. Shab.* 109b). The name עשיה (“Asaiah”) appears in the Bible (cf. 2 Kgs 22:12, 14; 1 Chr 4:36; 6:30; 9:5; 15:6, 11; 2 Chr 34:20). The name חנין (“Hanin”), a contraction of חנינא (“Hanina”), is very common in the late second temple period, well attested in rabbinic literature and—in the uncontracted form—in ossuary inscriptions.

The James and Shimi ossuaries are the only two that bear inscriptions that read “brother of.” There are two other ossuaries that should be mentioned in this connection. One, found in Jerusalem, on French Hill, reads in Aramaic and Greek:¹²

מרי קבר

Masters of the tomb

and on the underside of the lid:

ΜΑΘΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΣΙΜΩΝ
 ΑΔΕΛΦΟΙ ΤΟΥ ΙΑΙΡΕ
 ΚΥΡΕ ΤΙΣ ΤΟΥΤΟΥ¹³

Mathia and Simon,
 brothers, sons of Yair;
 masters of the place (i.e., tomb)

On another ossuary, found in Jerusalem, an inscription reads in Greek:¹⁴

ΑΔΕΛΦΟΣ
 ΑΔΕ¹⁵

brother
 bro...(?)

¹² Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 197-98 no. 560 + plate 80; Kloner, “The Necropolis of Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period,” 193-95.

¹³ With diacritics: Μαθία καὶ Σίμων, ἀδελφοί, τοῦ Ἰαίρε, κύριε τῆς τοῦτου (=Μαθία καὶ Σίμων, ἀδελφοί, υἱοὶ Ἰαίρε, κύριοι τοῦ τοπου). Syntax and spelling are careless.

¹⁴ Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 111-12 no. 135 + plate 20. See also Samuel Klein, *Jüdisch-palästinensischer Corpus Inscriptionum* (Vienna: Löwit, 1920; repr. Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1971), 21 no. 16; Peter Thomsen, “Die lateinischen und griechischen Inschriften der Stadt Jerusalem und ihrer nächsten Umgebung,” *ZDPV* 44 (1921): 113-21 no. 203b.

¹⁵ With diacritics: ἀδελφός, ἀδε...

It is not clear what the inscriber intended in the second line, whether he was repeating himself, or beginning a new identification that was left unfinished.¹⁶

We also have a mausoleum inscription from Beth She‘arim, in which reference is made to brothers: “I, the son of Leontios, lie dead, Justus, the son of Sappho, who, having plucked the fruit of all wisdom, left the light, my poor parents in endless mourning, and my brothers [αὐτοκρασιγνήτους] too...”¹⁷ But this reference, imitating Homeric style, offers no real parallel to the James and Shimi inscriptions. A first-century epitaph from Leontopolis enjoins passersby: “Stand near and weep for Asua ... weep for her, brothers [ἀδελφοί]!”¹⁸ But again, this reference to brothers does not really parallel the inscriptions in question.

One more curious inscription should be mentioned. At Beth She‘arim we find inscribed (in catacomb 20, hall A) הַרְיָא (“her brother”). It is speculated that the inscription was left behind by a man visiting his sister’s tomb.¹⁹ We do not know the names of either brother or the sister. These few and imprecise parallels attest the rarity of Jewish inscriptions that mention brothers or sisters of the deceased.

It has been plausibly suggested that the addition of the words “brother of Jesus” or “brother of Hanin” to the respective inscriptions implies that the brother is better known than the occupant of the ossuary. If the occupant of the James ossuary is none other than James, brother of Jesus, this is certainly the case. Who was Shimi’s brother Hanin? Because the name is so common, it is not possible to identify this person. Identification with the high priestly dynasty of Hanin would certainly satisfy the hypothesis, but this identification is doubtful. Hanin, the great patriarch (Annas [Ἄννας] in the New Testament; cf. Luke 3:2; John 18:13, 24; Acts 4:6), sharply criticized in rabbinic literature (cf. *b. Pesah.* 57a “Woe is me because of the house of Hanin!”), was the son of Sethi (or perhaps Seth), according to Josephus (cf. *Ant.* 18.2.1 §26 “Quirinius [...] installed Ananus the son of Sethi [Ἄνανου τὸν Σεθί] as high priest”), not the son of Asaiah. He cannot therefore be the brother of Shimi. We also have a well known Rabbi Hanin (cf. *b. Ber.* 32b; *b. Shab.* 32a; *b. Yoma* 41b), but there are other

¹⁶ We face a similar difficulty in the Alexander, son of Simon, ossuary; cf. Nahman Avigad, “A Depository of Inscribed Ossuaries in the Kidron Valley,” *IEJ* 12 (1962): 1-12 + plates 1-4 (ossuary no. 9). For another example, also involving the name Alexander, see Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 120 no. 179.

¹⁷ Moshe Schwabe and Baruch Lifshitz, *Beth She‘arim. Volume II: The Greek Inscriptions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1974), 97 no. 127; Pieter W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs: An Introductory Survey of a Millennium of Jewish Funerary Epigraphy (300 BCE–700 CE)* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991), 151-52 no. 8.

¹⁸ William Horbury and David Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 154-56 no. 83.

¹⁹ Nahman Avigad, *Beth She‘arim: The Excavations 1953–1958. Volume III: Catacombs 12–23* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976), 241 no. 13.

rabbis named Hanin (and Hanina, the uncontracted form of the name). None of these rabbinic authorities is further identified as a “son of Asaiah.” Therefore, unless another inscription or source comes to light, in which this Hanin, son of Asaiah, is identified, we shall never know who he was or why the inscriber of Shimi’s ossuary thought he was an important person.

All three names of the James ossuary (Jacob, Joseph, and Jesus) were common in the late second temple period and are well represented among ossuary and crypt inscriptions. In the James ossuary Jacob is spelled with the *waw*: יַעֲקֹב (as in Jer 30:18 יַעֲקֹב). It appears in this form in at least three other ossuaries: “Jacob,” “Aha and Jacob, his son,” and “Jacob.”²⁰ Jacob also appears on two ossuaries without the *waw* (i.e., יַעֲקֹב, as in Gen 25:26 et passim יַעֲקֹב): “Martha, daughter of Joseph, son of Jacob, wife of Joseph, from Hin” and “Jacob Birebbi” (or “Jacob, son of the great”).²¹ In Greek inscriptions Jacob appears, spelled variously Ἰακώ, Ἰακώβ, Ἰάκωβος, Ἰάκκωβος, Ἰακώς, and Ἰκουβος.²² In the LXX it regularly appears as Ἰακώβ, while in the New Testament it appears as Ἰακώβ or Ἰάκωβος. The latter form is an accommodation to Greek inflection.

In the James ossuary Joseph is spelled יוֹסֵף, which is the standard spelling of the name in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Gen 30:24 יוֹסֵף). There is one other example of this spelling in an ossuary inscription: “Pinhas, son of Joseph.”²³ The most common spelling is יהוֹסֵף, which only occurs once in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Ps 81:6 [Eng. 81:5] יהוֹסֵף). There are numerous examples of this spelling: “Our father, Shim’on the elder, Joseph his son,” “Master Joseph, son of Benaia, son of Judah,” “Joseph, son of Haggai,” and many others.²⁴ Other Semitic forms include יהוֹסֵף, יהוֹסֵפִי, and יוֹסֵפִי. Greek forms include Ἰωσέ, Ἰωσή, Ἰωσήφορ, Ἰώσεφορ, Ἰώσεπος, and Ἰωσήρ. The most common biblical Greek form is Ἰωσήφ, though Ἰώσηπος is attested a few times in the Apocrypha.

There is a similar range of diversity in the forms of the name Jesus. In the James ossuary it is ישוע. This form is late biblical and is vocalized יֵשׁוּעַ, occurring several times in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles. The older, fuller form is יהוֹשֻׁעַ, or Joshua. In post-biblical Hebrew ישוע was sometimes abbreviated יֵשׁוּעַ. ישוע, the form found in the James ossuary, is attested in at least another four or five ossuaries: “Jesus, son of

²⁰ Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 103 no. 104, 167 no. 396, and 219 no. 678.

²¹ Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 145 no. 290, 257-58 no. 865.

²² Schwabe and Lifshitz, *Beth She’arim, vol. II*: for Ἰακώ, see 58-59 no. 83, 114 no. 130, and 95-96 no. 126; for Ἰακώβ, see 49 no. 75; for Ἰάκωβος, see 95 no. 125; for Ἰάκκωβος, see 5 no. 6; for Ἰακώς, see 190 no. 203; for Ἰκουβος, see 73-74 no. 94, and 75 no. 96. Ἰακώ is also found in an inscription from Jaffa; cf. *CIJ* ii no. 956. Ἰάκωβος and Ἰακουβος are also found in Jewish inscriptions from Egypt; cf. Horbury and Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, 185 no. 107 (= *CIJ* ii no. 1482); 124-25 no. 56 (= *CIJ* ii no. 1467) and 153 no. 81 (= *CIJ* ii no. 1505).

²³ Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 201 no. 573.

²⁴ Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 77-78 no. 12, 152 no. 327, 207 no. 603.

Dostas,” “Jesus,” “Judah, son of Jesus,” and “Jesus, son of Joseph.”²⁵ In one example, the longer form יְשׁוּעָה and its abbreviation יְשׁוּ occur together: “Yeshu ... Yeshu‘a, son of Joseph.”²⁶ In rabbinic literature the abbreviated form is used in reference to Jesus (cf. *b. Sanh.* 43a, 103a “Yeshu ha-Nosri”). Greek forms of the name Jesus include Ἰησοῦς (the most common form in the LXX and New Testament), Ἰησοῖος, Ἰεσοῦς and Ἰέσουος.²⁷

Although these names are common, the constellation of the three names, in their proper familial relationship, along with the unconventional addition of “brother of Jesus,” which probably implies that Jesus is far better known than either James or father Joseph, is what strongly suggests that this ossuary did indeed contain the remains of the New Testament James, brother of Jesus.

3. CONCLUSIONS

We still have to await a final verdict from geologists, as to date and authenticity. If authentic, then the identification with James becomes plausible, perhaps even probable. If the identification with James is accepted, what do we learn? There are four important data potentially confirmed or clarified by the James ossuary:

❶ James and family spoke Aramaic, which scholars have long recognized as Jesus’ first language. The James ossuary lends an important measure of support to this hypothesis.

❷ James, originally of Galilee, continued to live in or near Jerusalem. We are left with this impression in the New Testament (particularly the book of Acts and Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia).

❸ The James ossuary suggests that James probably died in or near Jerusalem, as early church traditions maintain. If the ossuary was discovered in a burial vault near the Temple Mount, perhaps in the Kidron Valley, as has been conjectured, this may offer a measure of support to the tradition that James was closely associated with the temple, even if at odds with the powerful priestly family of Annas (a.k.a. Hanin).

❹ And finally, secondary burial, according to Jewish burial custom, implies that James, though a follower of Jesus and part of a movement that was beginning to drift away from its Jewish heritage, continued to live as a Jew, and so was buried as a Jew.

²⁵ Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 108 no. 121, 113 no. 140, 223 no. 702 and no. 704. The “Joshua” form is also attested; cf. 92 no. 63.

²⁶ Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 77 no. 9.

²⁷ For examples of Ἰησοῦς and Ἰησοῖος, see Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 106 no. 113 (“Jesus, son of Judah”), 99 no. 89 (“of John and Jesus”). For an example of Ἰέσουος, see Schwabe and Lifshitz, *Beth She‘arim*, vol. II, 125-27 nos. 138-40. For an example of Ἰεσοῦς, see Klein, *Jüdisch-palästinensischer Corpus Inscriptionum*, 24 no. 46.

The Christianity of James, we may infer, was not understood as something separate from or opposed to Jewish faith.

All of this supports, to a limited degree, what we know of James from the New Testament and from early patristic traditions. Because we do not know where it was found and what may have been in it and around it, we shall probably never know what other important clues this remarkable ossuary could have provided.