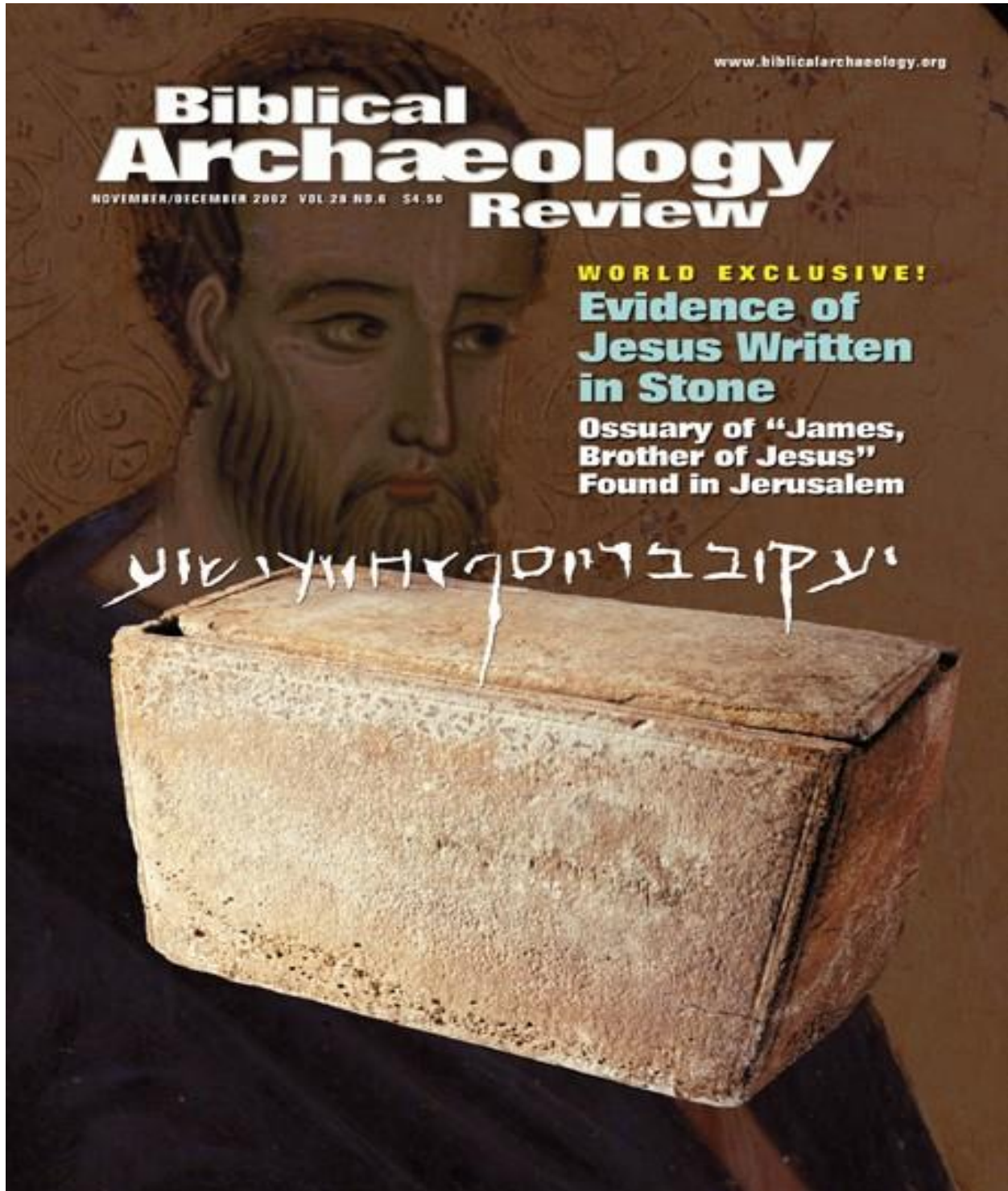


# Final Verdict @James Ossuary

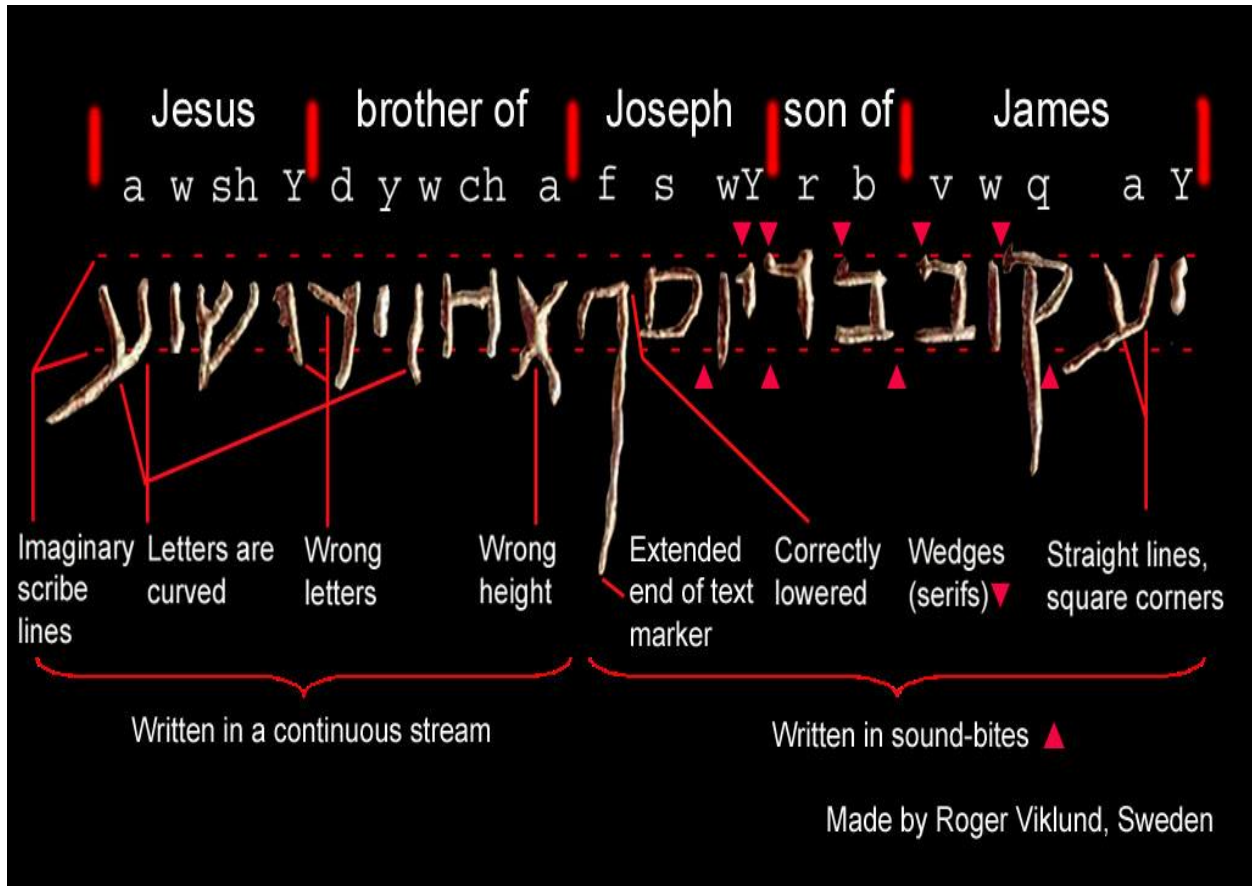
By David Lee Burris





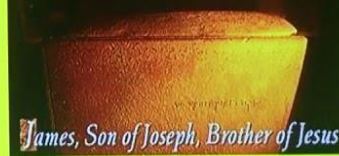
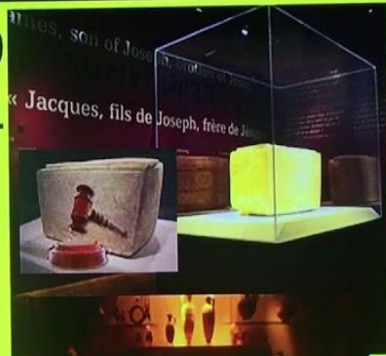
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*Above: The "James" Ossuary, Israel Antiquities Authority and Biblical Archaeology Review, used by permission. This first century AD ossuary bears the Aramaic inscription translated as "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." Because the details of the discovery of this artifact cannot be confirmed, many scholars have questioned the authenticity of the inscription.*



## FACT OR FRAUD?

A Roman-era burial box inscribed "**James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus**" was reprinted from the scrapheap of history when a Jerusalem judge completely exonerated an Israeli antiquities collector who had been accused of forging it.



Scholars dealing with such antiquities have dated the ossuary to the first century pointing out that Jews in Jerusalem, primarily Pharisees, used ossuaries only from roughly 20 B.C. to A.D. 70.

**ACQUITTED OF 44 COUNTS OF FRAUD.**



# In the News: "James, Son of Joseph, Brother of Jesus"

KYLE BUTT, M.Div.



From Issue: [R&R Volume 22 #12](#)

From most of the pictures that you have seen of “the box,” you might think that it was the size of a large coffin. Yet, at approximately 10 inches wide, 20 inches long, and 12 inches high, this box doesn’t fit our modern idea of a coffin. In fact, it’s more like a limestone Rubbermaid® crate than a coffin. At first glance, this “box” is not so unusual at all. During the first-century B.C., and continuing until the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Jews used these containers to “rebury” their relatives. Generally, the bodies of the deceased were placed on a shelf or floor of a tomb; then, about one year after the original burial, friends or relatives would open the tomb, remove the bones, and place them in an ossuary. Occasionally, ossuaries contained the bones of multiple individuals. The outer decorations varied widely from one to the next. Some were bland, with no inscriptions, while others had carved designs or the names of the individuals buried therein.

The particular ossuary that has captured the world’s attention boasts of no great decoration. In fact, a small, 7.5-inch Aramaic inscription is the only thing that sets it apart from the most boring of ossuaries. Yet, that tiny inscription not only has set it apart from other ossuaries, but also has set it apart from all other archaeological finds to date. That inscription reads: “**James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.**”

The first question that arises is whether this is the James of the Bible. While there are at least two Jameses mentioned in the Bible to which this inscription likely does not apply, one James is mentioned who seems to fit the description quite well. Matthew noted in his gospel regarding Christ:

...He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, "Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas?" (13:53-56).

According to Matthew, then, the Jews recognized Jesus as the brother of James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, and they also attributed at least two sisters to these brothers. Furthermore, Paul mentioned "James the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19). Apparently, this same James became a prominent leader of the Jerusalem church (see Acts 15:13; 21:18-19; Galatians 2:9,12).

Additionally, James the brother of Jesus very likely was the writer of the New Testament book by the same name. Secular sources also verify the idea that Jesus had a brother named James. **Josephus wrote that the Jewish high priest "assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus...whose name was James" (20:9:1). The historian then proceeded to document that James was stoned.**

Naturally, it first must be established that the ossuary is an authentic artifact from a time that would correspond to Jesus Christ and His brother James. In the premiere article about the inscription appearing in the Nov/ Dec 2002 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review* [BAR] André Lemaire detailed several facts that make a strong case for the inscription's authenticity. As an expert in ancient inscriptions, he stated: "This type of bone box is generally to be dated between about 20 B.C.E. [Before Common Era] and 70 C.E [Common Era—KB].... Moreover, the cursive shape of three of the letters (*dalet*, *yod* and *aleph*) indicates an even narrower span of time: the last decades before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.—the exact period when James, the brother of Jesus, would have died" (28[6]:28). Hershel Shanks, the editor of *BAR*, had the ossuary's composition tested by the Israeli Ministry of Nat'l Infrastructures, which concluded that the limestone was used extensively "during the Second Temple period," and that no modern elements or chemicals had been used to "doctor" the box to make it appear old. In addition, the patina (dirt and other build-up on the box) passed the authenticity test (p. 29).

As far as can be proven to date, the box has all the signs of authenticity. But can we conclude that the Jesus and James of the inscription are the identical characters of the New Testament writings? While the names of James, Jesus, and Joseph were common during the first century, they would not often have been found in the exact same sequence of relationship as on the ossuary and in the biblical text.

Lemaire concluded that “there were therefore probably about 20 people” who would have fit the inscription (p. 33). Yet the odds narrow even more, since only rarely would a brother’s name be included on an ossuary. In the November 4, 2002 issue of *Time*, David Van Biema reported that Lemaire believes “there is a 90% chance that the James on the ossuary was the biblical brother of Jesus” (2002, 160[19]:72). In the original *BAR* article, Lemaire stated that the ossuary “very probably” documents Jesus the Christ.

There are voices of opposition to the suggestion that this inscription refers to Christ. Since the artifact was not retrieved from its original environment, it cannot be attributed to a specific location. In the November 4, 2002 issue of *Newsweek*, reporter Kenneth Woodward quoted Bruce Chilton of Bard College: “If you cannot say where an artifact was found and where it has been for nearly 2,000 years, you cannot pretend to draw lines of connection between the object and the people it might mention” (2002, 140[19]:48).

At present, we cannot be dogmatic about the ossuarial evidence, but we **can** state dogmatic that the name of Jesus Christ refuses to vanish into obscurity, and that His life, teachings, and personality continue to be the most influential of any human ever to walk the Earth.

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Lemaire, André (2002), “Burial Box of James the Brother of Jesus: Earliest Archaeological Evidence of Jesus Found in Jerusalem,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 28[6]:24-33, November/December.

Van Biema, David (2002), “The Brother of Jesus,” *Time*, 160[19]:70-73, November 4.

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# The Jesus Ossuary Inscription

By **Wayne Jackson**

•

James, the brother of Jesus, is mentioned several times in the New Testament. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, says that on a visit to Jerusalem, he saw “James, the Lord’s brother” (Gal. 1:19). Matthew mentions James, along with Christ’s other half-siblings (Mt. 13:55-56).

Following his resurrection from the dead, Jesus appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7). James was a significant influence in the Jerusalem church (see Acts 15:13ff; 21:18-19; Gal. 2:9), and the best evidence indicates that, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, he authored the book of James.

There is also extra-biblical testimony regarding James. Josephus, the famed Jewish historian, refers to the death of “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James.” He also records that James was stoned to death (*Antiquities* 20.9.1).

Eusebius, an historian of the fourth century A.D. refers to the earlier testimony of Hegesippus, who also mentions the stoning of James, “the brother of the Lord,” and says that he was buried near the temple (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.23).

## James’ Ossuary Found?

In 2002, James, and more importantly Jesus himself, made news headlines.

According to an Associated Press article, “Jesus Inscription Found?” by Richard N. Ostling (Oct. 21, 2002), an empty ossuary (limestone burial box) has come to light that contains this inscription:

“James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.”

The inscription has been dated at about A.D. 63. If the reference is to the “James,” “Joseph,” and “Jesus” of the New Testament documents, then this is one of the most explosive archaeological discoveries ever made.



According to Herschel Shanks, editor of the prestigious *Biblical Archaeological Review*, this would be “the first appearance of Jesus in the archaeological record.”

We would note that there is, in fact, evidence of an earlier inscription containing the name “Jesus.” See our article, [Another Voice from the Tomb](#).

While this discovery is bound to be contested and debated for some time, Andre Lemaire, at France’s Practical School of Higher Studies, a specialist in ancient inscriptions, believes it is “very probable” that the find is genuine.

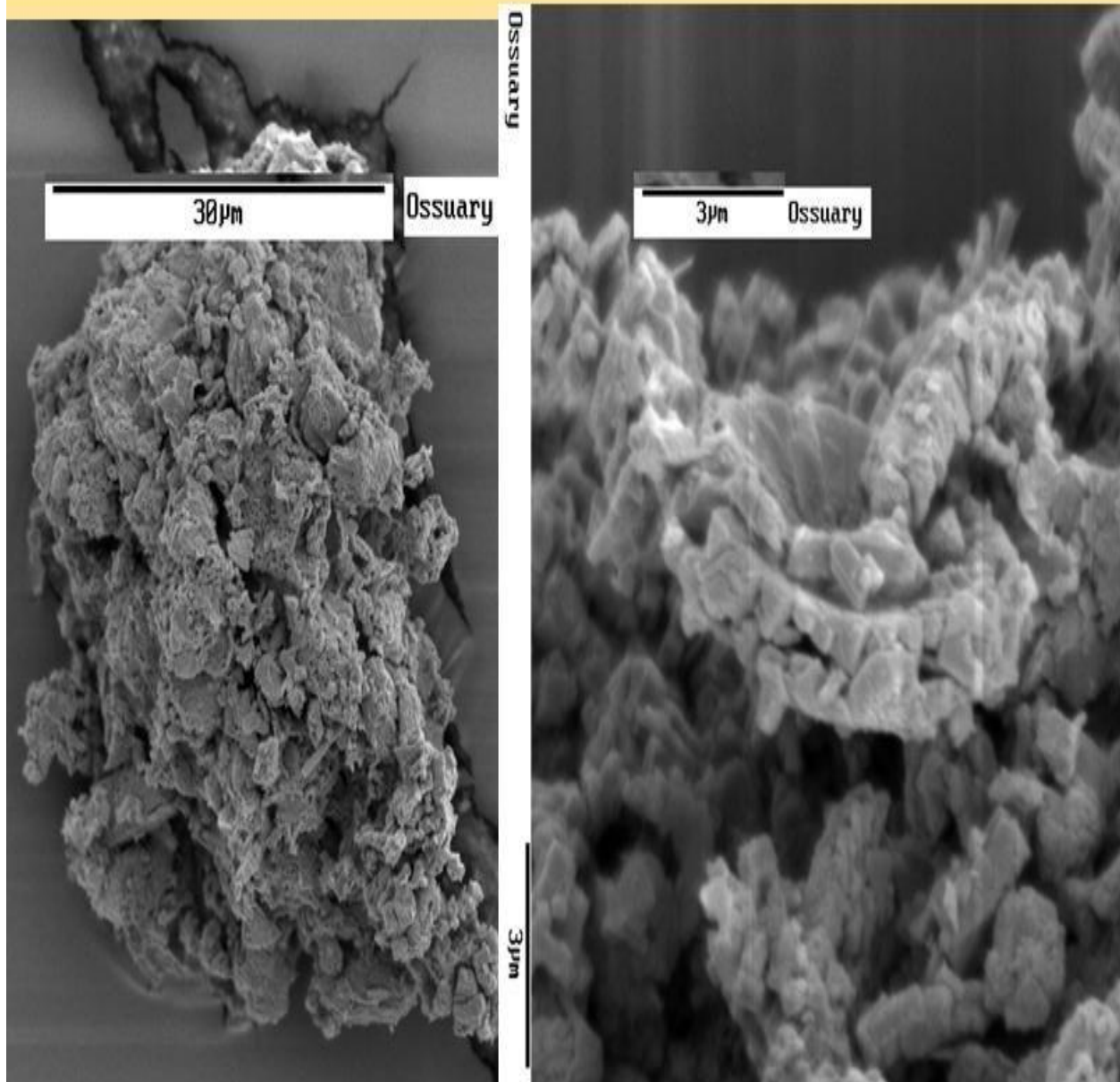
Initially there appears to be *prima facie* evidence which points to its authenticity.

- The Jews buried their dead in ossuary boxes between 20 B.C. and A.D. 70; this discovery (at A.D. 63) would fit into that time frame.
- The writing style (Aramaic) is consistent with the time of James and Jesus.
- Two scientists, affiliated with the Israeli government’s Geological Survey, conducted a microscopic examination of the inscription. Their investigation revealed “no evidence that might detract from the authenticity.”
- The fact that the inscription contains the name of the father (Joseph), and brother (Jesus) of the deceased (James) has been described as “very unusual.” Only one other such example in Aramaic has been found. Scholars have concluded, therefore, that this particular “Jesus” must have had “some unusual role or fame.” The circumstances surrounding the life and death of Christ would certainly fit that mold.

This discovery is likely to ignite controversy from several quarters. Predictably, Bible critics will attack the evidence. A few misguided Bible skeptics deny that Jesus ever lived, and so they will “choke” on this.

Some Roman Catholics will more-than-likely be disturbed since they do not believe that Jesus had any siblings due to their dogma of the perpetual virginity of Mary — a view, in fact, which is **not supported** by the evidence.

# Origin of microfossils in patina



UPDATED 22 JUNE, 2019 - 23:01 [PIERLUIGI TOMBETTI](#)

# Ossuary of James the Just: The First Archaeological Evidence of the Existence of Jesus of Nazareth?

## One of the Most Incredible Cover-ups in History

In the twelve years of the trial, the media, both on TV, press and on the web, disseminated incorrect information explaining how the ossuary had now been unmasked as a well-made forgery and the counterfeiters now close to conviction.

Yet, more and more scholars over the years, and these are the best specialists in the world, following tests and scientific investigations, have been convinced that the prosecution had no basis to support the thesis of the well-made forgery.

To find out the truth, I again contacted professor Lemaire, who wrote to me: **"(...) the ossuary is absolutely authentic but there are political and religious forces interested in making the find disappear." A cover-up of unprecedented proportions, whose drama took place right before our eyes.**

At the end of the trial the suspects of the Oded Golan group were acquitted, the court dropped one charge after another as more and more clarifying evidence emerged.

On June 24, 2009, while my novel *IL SETTIMO SEPOLCRO* was about to be published in Italy, the plot of which revolves around the James Ossuary, Oded Golan invited me to call him in Israel: I phoned him and he told me with extreme kindness how things really were.

While some scholars initially supported the prosecution's thesis, now all the scientists were in agreement: the patina deposited on the **inscription** had been found to be authentic by a chemical analysis. In addition, a microorganism was found on the inscription and on the ossuary, a fungus that takes at least a hundred years to expand by a few inches.

It covered a vast area of the ossuary and in particular its presence was **detected** over the entire inscription. This meant that its dating had to be forcibly backdated to many centuries ago, approximately to the 1st century AD, and the same applies to the entire epigraph.



*In testing the James Ossuary, a fungus was discovered proving the ancient artifact was authentic. (ActsNewsNetwork / **YouTube Screenshot** )*

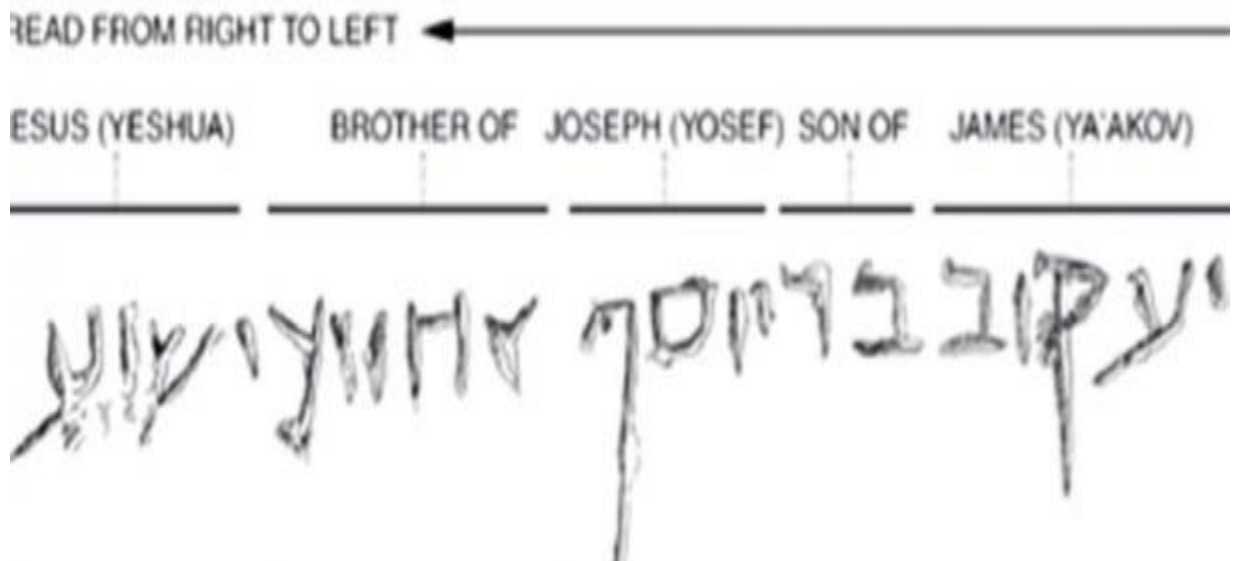
I asked Golan the same question that I posed at the time to Lemaire, why there was so much opposition to the ossuary, and he gave me the same answer as the French specialist: "(...) **This is a very delicate question because the Vatican does not admit the existence of brothers of Jesus.** Moreover, the IAA and the government that had supported its parties had raised such a fuss that now a real question of image had been created: the IAA lobby is very powerful and admitting a resounding mistake would have been detrimental to its public credibility.

In addition, several scholars at first were afraid to go against the highest authority for the control of archaeological heritage and then decided at first to support the assessments. But now everything is clear, the trial goes on and the court is less and less convinced of the initial theses. The trial could be over in a few months, but the IAA and the Israeli government do not want to lose face and continue undaunted a battle they have already lost."

**An extraordinary mystery under the eyes of all: in time the truth has come out clearly and clearly, except for most of the big audience, influenced by the view offered by the media, totally wrong about the issue, the find has remained a fake.** Only recently has some of the online encyclopaedias updated the information concerning the Ossuary of James, definitely closing the case.

The fundamental problem is that everything on the topic remains specialized information reserved to a very selected and restricted audience, that of the specialists of biblical archaeology, however you can see the latest news here on the magazine BAR ( [Bible Archaeology Review](#) ).

The magazine BAR, in its many articles dedicated to **the trial of the century**, has always consistently argued the Ossuary of James is not a fake: **the judge has definitively closed the trial by stating that "the find is authentic.** The certification is now verified and out of any reasonable doubt. Oded Golan is acquitted of all charges."



*The Ossuary of James and inscription was found to be authentic.  
(syyenergy7 / [YouTube Screenshot](#) )*

Recently I had the opportunity to contact professor Lemaire again and he told me that he had always remained of the same opinion: I perceived clearly from his words a strong bitterness, probably due both to the **lack of interest on the part of the media** and the strong opposition received while over the years he supported his thesis which finally was proved to be correct. Anyway, as often happens in history, one of the most important archaeological finds ever, **the only evidence of Christ's existence, disappears into a curtain of silence, in the effective fog of misinformation and fake news.**

### **Who Was James the Just?**

Son of Joseph and **Mary**, and flesh brother of Jesus, James was the writer of the Book of James. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry he seems to be one of his nonbelieving brothers when they commented: "He has gone out of his mind." (Mr 3:21) However, after the death of Jesus and prior to Pentecost 33 AD, James is told to be with his mother, brothers, and the apostles in an upper chamber in Jerusalem to pray.

**Jesus** appeared personally to James, as reported at 1 Corinthians 15:7, thus convincing this onetime nonbeliever that he was indeed the **Messiah**. James eventually became a highly respected member of the church of **Jerusalem**, being regarded as an apostle, or one sent forth, a disciple personally taught and trained by Jesus, with an important leading role in the Christian congregation.

The Acts and the Letters of **Paul** give us as a clearer view of the man James several years later, as an elder of the Jerusalem congregation and part of the Governing Body of the Christians. Paul implies in his letter to the Corinthians, written about the year 55 AD, that James was married, as most of the apostles and elders (1Co 9:5).

James is known also as James the Just, referring to his known way of life. Unfortunately we do not have much news about James' life and even less about his death: only Josephus reports in his *Jewish Antiquities*, XX, 200 (ix, 1) that James' death occurred during the interval between the death of Governor Festus, about 62 AD and the arrival of his successor Albinus.

The passage reads: "(...) High priest Ananus (Ananias) convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned".

## The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus and The Dogma of the Eternal Virginity of Mary

On 1 November 1950 **Pope** Pius XII, Eugenio Pacelli, who as representative of the Vatican had signed the Concordat with Hitler (1933), established a new dogma that the believers should accept as a mystery of faith, not demonstrable, the so-called dogma di Maria sempre vergine (dogma of Mary always virgin). It defined the state of perpetual virginity of the Mother of Jesus even after her marriage to Joseph.

The explanation given by the Catholic authorities to support the dogma, does not coincide with the testimonies of the Gospels. The Greek term for brothers and sisters of Jesus used in the Gospels (even in subsequent translations where there was an original Aramaic/Jewish) never indicates cousins or relatives in the generic sense, as the Church teaches, but indicates fleshly brothers from of the same uterus or same mother.

Moreover Matthew 1:24,25 clearly states: "Then Joseph woke up from sleep and did as the angel of Jehovah had told him and brought his wife **home**. But he did not have sexual relations with her until she gave **birth** to a son and named him Jesus."

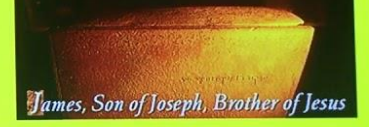


Then, after the birth of Jesus, Joseph had a normal sexual life with his wife that led to the birth of several children. The four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and two of Paul's letters mention the "brothers of the Lord", "the brother of the Lord", "his brothers", "his sisters", indicating by name four of these "brothers": James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas. (Mt 12:46; 13:55, 56; Mr 3:31; Lu 8:19; Jn 2:12; Acts 1:14; 1Co 9:5; Gal 1:19).

Scholars generally agree that the family of Jesus was composed of two parents and at least four brothers and sisters, all-natural sons of Joseph and Mary, maybe more.

During the ministry of Jesus, the Gospels tell us that "his brothers did not exercise faith in him", and this certainly excludes that they were his brothers in the spiritual sense. (Jn 7:3-5): as we have seen before, James was among these. **The Catholic thesis that the word brother has broader meaning of cousin is not correct as we consider the syntactic evidence of the Greek New Testament: when in the Gospels one speaks of the flesh brothers of Jesus it is used the Greek adelfòs (son of the same mother), while in the case of a relative the term syggenòs is used, or in the case of a cousin anepsiòs.** Ultimately there is no doubt, Jesus had several brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of Joseph and Mary.

**FACT OR FRAUD?**

A Roman-era burial box inscribed "**James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus**" was reprinted from the scrapheap of history when a Jerusalem judge completely exonerated an Israeli antiquities collector who had been accused of forging it.



Scholars dealing with such antiquities have dated the ossuary to the first century pointing out that Jews in Jerusalem, primarily Pharisees, used ossuaries only from roughly 20 B.C. to A.D. 70.

**ACQUITTED OF 44 COUNTS OF FRAUD.**



# The Alleged Perpetual Virginity of Mary

By **Wayne Jackson**

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A few months ago, the world was stunned by the report of a limestone ossuary (bone box), discovered in Jerusalem, bearing the inscription, "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." A number of prominent scholars believe this box once contained the bones of James, half-brother of Jesus, who is so prominently mentioned in the New Testament (cf. Mt. 13:55-56; Acts 15:13ff; 21:18-19; Gal. 2:9). For a brief discussion of the evidence, see the article elsewhere on this web site, "The "Jesus" Inscription", October 21, 2002).

Aside from the obvious importance of this discovery as such relates to the historicity of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the inscription has rekindled the controversy concerning the alleged "perpetual virginity" of Mary. Both the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Roman Catholic Church (along with a few Protestant scholars), contend that Mary and Joseph, even after the birth of the Lord, remained celibate for life.

The Roman Catholic Church alleges that Mary's parents presented her in the temple when she was but three years old, and that "the child herself mounted the Temple steps, and that she made her vow of virginity on this occasion" (Maas, 464F). This would suggest that at the tender age of three, Mary had considerable knowledge of human anatomy. It further hints that she understood the intricacies of sexual union. Moreover it indicates that she likely foreknew the fact that she would bear the Christ child, and that she perceived somehow that it would be inappropriate for her ever to engage in honorable intimacy with a legitimate husband.

This theory of Mary's "perpetual virginity" became official dogma at the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451, and thus is binding upon both the Greek and Roman segments of the Church (Pelikan, 14.1000).

## The Historical Roots of the Dogma

What is the biblical evidence for this dogma? There is none —*absolutely none*. As one scholar quaintly noted, the doctrine “is a matter of dogmatic assumption unmixed with any alloy of factual evidence” (Sweet, 3.2003).

The theory had its roots in the pagan environment of the post-apostolic period when there was a strong emphasis upon celibacy within certain heathen religions. In that day, sexual intercourse, even within marriage, sometimes carried the suspicion of sin.

Alexander Hislop has shown a remarkable concurrence between the Vestal Virgins of pagan Rome, and the propensity for virginity that evolved in the digressive church of the post-apostolic period (Hislop, 223, 236-238, 250).

The idea thus evolved that it was inconceivable that Mary should have engaged in normal marital relations. It is a baffling mystery how a Church, that holds marriage to be a “sacrament,” can entertain such a misdirected viewpoint (see Heb. 13:4).

A progressively deteriorating church (cf. 2 Thes. 2:1ff; 1 Tim. 4:1ff; 2 Tim. 4:1ff), therefore, was ever attempting to accommodate “Christianity” to paganism, in order to provide a “comfort zone” that would attract the heathen to the religion of Christ. This is an historical reality that not even Catholic scholars deny (see Attwater, 363). For an historical survey of this phenomenon, see Edward Gibbon’s famous work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Chapter XXVIII). Gibbon concludes this chapter with these words:

“The most respectable bishops had persuaded themselves that the ignorant rustics would more cheerfully renounce the superstitions of Paganism, if they found some resemblance, some compensation, in the bosom of Christianity” (II.70).

Hence the baseless notion was foisted upon the biblical records that Mary remained a virgin for life. And all biblical evidence that suggests otherwise is rationalized away with less-than-imaginative textual manipulations.

**There is, however, a compelling case *against* the Catholic view.**

## New Testament Evidence

There are a number of passages in the New Testament that argue against the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity. Note the following:

(1) Matthew affirms that Mary was found to be with child "before [she and Joseph] came together" (Matthew 1:18). The term "came together" (from *sunerchomai*) includes the idea of sexual intimacy (1 Cor. 7:5; see Danker, 970). The implication clearly is that ultimately, they "came together." H.L. Ellison comments that the construction is "incompatible with the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary" (1188).

(2) Matthew declares that Joseph "knew not" (i.e. was not sexually intimate with; Gen. 4:1) Mary "until [heos hou] she had given birth to a son" (1:25). While the expression *heos hou* does not absolutely demand that Joseph and Mary were intimate after Jesus' birth, that would be the normal conclusion, unless contextual considerations indicated otherwise (cf. 2 Sam. 6:23). In fact, "elsewhere in the New Testament (17:9 24:39; John 9:18) the phrase (*heos hou*) followed by a negative always implies that the negated action did take place later" (Lewis, 1.42). There is no valid reason why Matthew 1:25 should be the exception.

(3) In Luke 2:7, Jesus is called Mary's "firstborn" child. While the term *prototokon* does not demand unequivocally that Mary had other children, this term "most naturally suggests" that she did (Geldenhuis, 103). If the sustained virginity of Mary is such a crucial theological point, why did not Luke simply say she brought forth her "only" son? That certainly would have settled the issue.

(4) There are several passages that mention the siblings of Jesus (Mt. 12:46ff; 13:55-56). Catholic apologists appeal to the fact that the term "brother" (*adelphos*) is sometimes used in a broader, kindred sense, e.g., "cousins." While *adelphos* (which literally means, "out of the same womb") is employed loosely on occasion in some literature, in the New Testament *adelphos* is never used for a "cousin." The word *anepsioi* signifies that relationship (cf. Col. 4:10).

Moreover, Jesus is said to have had “sisters” (Mt. 13:56 – *adelphes*). Why should it be assumed that Matthew’s use of “mother” was literal, but that the terms “brothers” and “sisters” were used figuratively? If “sister” is literal in Acts 23:16 (Paul’s sister), what would compel one to view the same term in a *different* sense in Matthew 13:56? Terry notes: “It is an old and oft-repeated hermeneutical principle that words should be understood in their literal sense unless such literal interpretation involves a manifest contradiction or absurdity” (159).

(5) The alleged perpetual celibate state of Joseph and Mary’s relationship is contrary to the divine ideal. Marriage, as designed by God, was intended to bring a man and woman together as “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24; cf. Mt. 19:5-6). Subsequent to the initial physical bonding is the responsibility to “render” to one another what is “due” —these terms expressing a sacred obligation (1 Cor. 7:3). If there is to be abstinence, it is to be by mutual concession, and that only temporarily (v. 5).

## The Defense

The Catholic defense for the dogma of Mary’s “perpetual virginity” is as barren as one will ever encounter in religious controversy. James Cardinal Gibbons, in his apologetic for the concept, did not introduce a solitary scriptural argument in its favor. Rather, he appealed solely to the creeds of the post-biblical age (Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed), which are bereft of divine authority (Gibbons, 168). There is, perhaps, nothing so revealing as this “no-evidence” line of approach. The few passages that sometimes are employed in a defense of the dogma don’t even approach the borders of the territory.

But the reality of the matter is this: the Catholic clergy believes it needs no authority — save that of its own pontificating voice. It creates its own dogma, writes its own rules, has become its own “god” (cf. 2 Thes. 2:4; see Jackson, 106). It is a sad reality that numerous people, quite noble in many respects, should sincerely, though uncritically, follow an autocratic system that stands so adverse to divinely revealed truth. The doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity is bereft of any reasonable evidence. It is an ancient superstition that has been thrust upon sincere souls who have been taught to never question the voice of the Church.

# Was Mary a Virgin Her Whole Life?



MOISES PINEDO

CATHOLICISM DOCTRINAL MATTERS

The idea of Mary's perpetual virginity is critical to Catholic Mariology (see Herbermann, 1913, 15:459-472). Catholics maintain that Mary was a virgin, not only before and during the conception of Jesus, but also afterward, for the rest of her life. This idea is known as the "Perpetual Virginity" of Mary. But, was Mary a virgin for the **totality** of her life?

All Christians (or at least those who believe the biblical record is inspired) agree that Mary was a virgin when God's angel informed her that she was with child of the Holy Spirit. Matthew is plain when he states: "**Before they** [Joseph and Mary] **came together**, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit" (1:18, emp. added). Luke records Mary's question upon hearing that she was to bring forth a son: "Can this be, since **I do not know a man?**" (1:34, emp. added). The word "know" in Luke 1:34 obviously was used not for "having an idea or notion about a man," but in reference to "having conjugal relations." [Mary thought it was impossible for her to have conceived a child since "she did not know a man."] The word "know" comes from the Greek *ginosko* and, in the context of Luke 1:34, is "used to convey the thought of connection or union, as between man and woman" (Vine, 1966, 2:298). The Bible clearly teaches that Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus' conception (cf. Isaiah 7:14). But what about **after** giving birth to the Savior?

First, consider Catholicism's ideas about virginity itself. If they define virginity as "the intact conservation of a woman's hymen" (the membrane located in the vulva), naturally Mary would have "lost her virginity" at the moment of Jesus' birth. The Bible records that Mary's conception was miraculous (Matthew 1:18), but to say that her pregnancy, as well as her delivery, were miraculous would be a forced interpretation of the text.

Second, consider the word “till” in Matthew 1:25 (“and [Joseph] did not know her **till** she had brought forth her firstborn Son”), in connection with the word “before” in Matthew 1:18 (“**before** they [Joseph and Mary] came together”). The Greek phrase *heos hou*, translated “till,” does not necessarily imply that Joseph and Mary had sexual relations after Jesus’ birth. However, as Lewis noted, the rest of the New Testament bears out the fact that where this phrase is preceded by a negative, it “**always** implies that the negated action did take place later” (quoted in Miller, 2003). Most probably, Matthew’s use of the words “till” and “before” emphasizes an opposite post-condition to a virgin state. Also note that Matthew wrote his gospel account (between A.D. 40 and A.D. 70) after the events of his record had transpired. Thus, if he had wanted the reader to understand that Mary was a virgin for all her life, surely he would have been very clear on that matter. But his wording leads to an opposite conclusion.

Third, as Joseph pondered Mary’s sudden pregnancy (although they had not yet “come together,” according to Matthew 1:18), “an angel of the Lord had appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to **take to you Mary your wife**’” (Matthew 1:20, emp. added). This phrase (“to take to you Mary your wife”), as Barnes noted, means to “recognize her as such, and to **treat** her as such” (2005, p. 6). God’s angel encouraged Joseph not only to take Mary, but to take her as his wife, not as a sister or a roommate for life. The truth is clear: Mary became Joseph’s wife in the absolute physical sense of the word.

Fourth, both Matthew (1:25) and Luke (2:7) record that Mary gave birth to her **firstborn** son. “Firstborn” comes from two Greek words: *protos*, meaning first, and *tikto*, meaning to beget (Vine, 1966, 2:104). In these verses, Jesus is referred to as Mary’s first son, which may imply that Mary had more children after Jesus’ birth. It also is worth mentioning that while Luke referred to baby Jesus as Mary’s **firstborn** (*prototokos*, 2:7), one chapter earlier he referred to the infant John (the only son of Zacharias and Elizabeth) as Elizabeth’s **son** (*huios*, 1:57). This does not prove that Mary had other children, but adds to the weight of the case against Mary’s perpetual virginity.

Other passages in the New Testament provide evidence to conclude, beyond any doubt, that Jesus had half-brothers and half-sisters who were born to Joseph and Mary sometime after they “came together” (Matthew 1:18).

For example, Mark 3 tells us about a disturbance that arose while Jesus was teaching a crowd of people. “Then **His brothers and His mother** came, and standing outside they sent to Him, calling Him” (Mark 3:31, emp. added; cf. Matthew 12:46-50). Mark also noted that the people around Jesus “said to Him, ‘Look, **Your mother and Your brothers** are outside seeking You” (3:32, emp. added). Not only did Mark identify these people as Jesus’ direct relatives, but he recorded that the multitude (who knew Jesus) identified the same group of people as His family. Additionally, when pointing out the superiority of His spiritual family over His physical family (who was looking for Him), Jesus said: “For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). Jesus’ statement emphasizes the unique & intimate relationship between Christ and His followers. He did not intend to convey that those who do the will of God are His spiritual **cousins**, but His spiritual **brothers and sisters!**

Matthew 13:53-58 is similar to Mark 3:31-35. Matthew records Jesus’ arrival in His hometown, Nazareth of Galilee, where He taught the people in their synagogue (13:54). When the people heard Jesus’ teaching, “they were astonished and said, ‘Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? 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?’” (13:54-56, emp. added).

Various theories attempt to avoid the fact that Joseph and Mary had children together. One of the theories maintains the “brothers” mentioned in Matthew 13 were His apostles. This theory fails to recognize that Jesus did not arrive at just any country but “to **His own country**” (13:54, emp. added). Those who identified Jesus’ brothers and sisters knew very well who Jesus was and who His close relatives were, as evidenced by the fact that they identified Jesus’ family members by name. One reason they marveled at His teaching was the fact they knew His earthly family consisted of ordinary people. It is ironic that Catholics accept that the phrase “carpenter’s son” literally identifies Jesus’ adoptive father, Joseph, and that the phrase “His mother called Mary” literally identifies Jesus’ mother, while they deny that the phrases “His brothers” and “His sisters” literally identify Jesus’ half brothers and sisters. What kind of interpretation is that? Furthermore, even though the names James, Simon, and Judas (listed by the multitude) may remind us of the names of three of Jesus’ apostles (Matthew 10:2-4), no apostle was named Joses (Joseph—Matthew 13:55). It is clear that these “brothers” were not Jesus’ apostles.

Question: If “His brothers” refers to the apostles, pray tell, to whom does the phrase “His sisters” refer?

Luke offers more evidence that the men referred to as Jesus’ brothers could not be His apostles. In Acts 1:13, he identified the apostles (at this time only eleven) by name. Then, in verse 14, he added: “These all [the apostles of verse 13] continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and **with His brothers**” (emp. added). Paul made the same distinction when he asked, “Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, **the brothers of the Lord**, and Cephas?” (1 Corinthians 9:5, emp. added). There can be no doubt that “the brothers of the Lord’ about whom Luke & Paul wrote were a different group from the apostles.

Due to the weight of the biblical evidence, few Catholics maintain that Jesus’ brothers were His apostles. Rather, many of them have suggested that these “brothers” and “sisters” were His **disciples** or **followers**. But, again, the biblical evidence is overwhelming.

When the people identified Jesus in Matthew 13:53-58, they connected Him with a family composed of a “carpenter,” “Mary,” “His brothers” (James, Joses, Simon and Judas), and “His sisters.” Why would the people refer to Joseph and Mary and then connect them to His “spiritual family” (followers) in order to establish Jesus’ identity? Why would they have named only four of Jesus’ “followers”? John helps us to conclude that these “brothers” and “sisters” were not Jesus’ disciples or followers. In chapter seven of his gospel account, John tells us that “**His [Jesus’] brothers** therefore said to Him, ‘Depart from here and go into Judea, that **Your disciples** also may see the works that You are doing’” (vs. 3, emp. added). **John made a clear distinction between Jesus’ brothers and His disciples or followers. He went on to state that “even His brothers did not believe in Him” (vs. 5). By this time, Jesus’ brothers were not counted in the group known as “His disciples,” those who believed in Him.** Luke also makes a distinction when, in Acts 1:14, he identifies a group known as Jesus’ brothers, while in verse 15 he gives the number of disciples: “[A]ltogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty.” **Although by the time the event of Acts 1 transpired, Jesus’ brothers believed in Him and were counted in the number of His disciples, they still described as having been closely related to the Savior.** Truth be told, these “brothers” and “sisters” were neither Jesus’ disciples nor His followers during His ministry.



Is it possible that these “brothers” and “sisters” were Jesus’ **cousins** or other near relatives? In trying to defend this theory, a Catholic apologist turned his attention to Joses (Joseph), one of Jesus’ brothers listed in Matthew 13:55. He argued that the Jews “never name their sons after their parents.... Therefore, Joseph cannot be the son of Joseph [the carpenter—MP]” (Zavala, 2000c). This conclusion is unfounded. First, tradition may reflect what a majority of people do, but it cannot accurately represent every individual case. It cannot be said that Jews “**never** name their sons after their parents.” Second, by Jesus’ time, Hebrew tradition had been influenced greatly by Greek & other cultures (e.g., Babylonian, Persian). By this period Jewish tradition was a mixture of different customs. Third, Luke shed light on the Hebrew tradition of naming babies by Jesus’ time. Concerning the immediate time interval after the birth of John the baptizer, Luke recorded that the “neighbors and relatives...called him [John] **by the name of his father, Zacharias**” (1:58-59, emp. added). Why would Hebrew relatives and neighbors do so if it was not an accepted tradition? Luke further informs us that when Elizabeth (John’s mother) responded that the child “shall be called John” (vs. 60), they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name” (vs. 61). The conclusion is clear (and **shows the lack of Bible knowledge of Catholic apologists**): By Jesus’ time it was acceptable to name a son after his father. Therefore, Joseph (Joses—Matthew 13:55) refers to the son of Joseph the carpenter.

It is true that the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew) uses *adelphos* (brother) with a broader meaning to refer to a near relative or kinsman who is not technically a brother. However, this use does not establish the meaning “cousin” for *adelphos* in the New Testament. As Walther Gunther has indicated, “In no New Testament case can *adelphos* be interpreted with certainty in this sense [i.e., as cousins]” (see Brown, 1975, 1:256). Lewis declared, even more emphatically, “‘Brothers’ (*adelphos*) never means ‘cousins’ in New Testament Greek” (see Lewis, 1976, 1:181). Therefore, interpreting *adelphos* as “cousins” only in New Testament passages that make reference to Jesus’ brothers is an arbitrary exegesis that lacks contextual and/or textual basis (see Miller, 2003).

Paul offers additional circumstantial evidence. When defending his apostleship before the Galatians, he declared that when he arrived in Jerusalem, he “saw none of the other apostles except **James, the Lord’s brother**” (1:19). This information fits perfectly with Matthew 13:55, where James is identified as one of Jesus’ brothers. Further, when Jude wrote his epistle, he introduced himself as “a bondservant of Jesus Christ, and **brother of James**” (vs. 1).

As a way of confirmation, Matthew identified James and Jude as Jesus' brothers. [NOTE: Contrary to what some Catholics have declared (e.g., Tapias, 2006; Arráiz, n.d.), this James, brother of Jesus, was not James the apostle (cf. Galatians 1:17-19) and, therefore, was not the son of Alphaeus, but the son of Joseph the carpenter. **As far as we know, neither of the two apostles with the name James had a brother named Jude** (cf. Matthew 10:2-3).]

If Jesus, indeed, had physical half-brothers, why did He commend the care of His mother to one of His disciples while on the cross (John 19:25-27)? Does this show that Jesus had no brothers who could take care of His mother? No. Jesus' brothers disbelieved in Him during His ministry (John 7:5). [Apparently, **they became Jesus' disciples after His resurrection.**] This may have been the principal reason why Jesus trusted one of His apostles to take care of His mother instead of one of His physical brothers. Jesus always prioritized His spiritual family above His physical family (Matthew 12:48-50).

One last point should be discussed. It has been argued obstinately (as a "last ray of hope" for Mary's "perpetual virginity") that Mary had no more children after Jesus because the Bible never mentions "children of Mary" (see Salza, n.d.). Why is the specific phrase "children of Mary" needed when so many biblical passages, which we have mentioned previously, clearly indicate that she and Joseph had children together after Jesus' birth? Do they need the specific phrase "children of Mary" to come to this conclusion? It is interesting to note that while some Catholic apologists refuse to believe Mary had other children because the Bible does not record the phrase "children of Mary," they accept and promote ideas and phrases, such as "Most Holy Immaculate," "Ever Virgin," "Mother of the Church," and "Mother of God," that the Bible does not mention, much less support.

Demonstrating that Mary had more children does not, in any way, impugn her dignity. **But to justify their worship of Mary, Marianists have looked for a way to distinguish her from any other woman and elevate her to the level of "sublimely pure"—which, they think, is obtained by means of her "virginity."** When God created man and woman, it was His pure and sublime desire that the two would come together to produce descendants (Genesis 1:28). The Hebrews writer tells us that the conjugal relationship between a husband and wife is honorable (13:4), and Paul wrote that such a relationship is necessary for those who are married (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). From all we are told about Mary in Scripture, it is reasonable to believe that Mary, as an obedient servant of our Lord (Luke 1:38), also was obedient in this respect.

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# Did Jesus Have Fleshly Half-Brothers?

DAVE MILLER, Ph.D.

CATHOLICISM DOCTRINAL MATTERS

The usual word in the Greek language for “brother” is *adelphos*. It possesses the same latitude of application that the English word possesses. Hence, it can refer to a person who shares the same religion (a spiritual brother). It can refer to a person who shares the same citizenship—a fellow countryman. It can refer to an intimate friend or neighbor. All of these uses are self-evident, and do not encroach upon the literal use of the term.

By far the most prominent use of the term is the **literal** sense—a blood brother or half-brother, the physical son of one’s mother or father. With reference to the physical brothers of Jesus (i.e., the sons of Joseph and Mary conceived **after** the birth of Christ), the literal sense is clearly in view in the following passages: Matthew 12:46-48 (the parallel in Mark 3:31-32); Matthew 13:55-56 (the parallel in Mark 6:3; in both passages, “sister” also is used in the literal sense); John 2:12; John 7:3,5,10; Acts 1:14; and Galatians 1:19. Even a casual reading of these verses demonstrates that **Jesus had literal, physical brothers**. The only reason the face-value import of these verses would be questioned is to lend credence to the *post facto* Catholic Church doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary.

At least two assertions have been advanced by those who wish to discount the existence of Jesus’ brothers, and thereby defend the doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity. One attempt seeks to broaden the meaning of the Greek word for “brother” to mean “**cousin**.” According to this view, the “brothers” of Jesus were actually His cousins—the children of Mary’s sister. The assertion that “brother” has this enlarged meaning is made largely on the basis of the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint). The Septuagint translators sometimes used the Greek word for brother (*adelphos*) in the Old Testament passages in which a close relative or kinsman, who was not technically a physical brother, was under consideration. This claim is true. The Hebrew term for brother (*’ach*) occasionally was used to refer to a more remote descendant from a common father who was not technically a brother (Gesenius, 1979, p. 27; Harris, et al., 1980, 1:31; Botterweck, 1974, 1:190).

For example, Laban, Jacob's uncle, was referred to as Jacob's "brother" (Genesis 29:12,15). Likewise, Abram's nephew Lot was said to be Abram's "brother" (Genesis 14:14,16).

However, it must be noted that the decision of the Septuagint translators to adjust to the nuances of the Hebrew term does not prove that the Greek term *adelphos* had the meaning of "cousin" in the passages referring to Jesus' kinsmen. After listing a few Old Testament verses where a broader meaning than strictly "brother" is in view, Bauer noted that such passages "do not establish the meaning 'cousin' for *adelphos*; they only show that in rendering the Hebrew *'ach*, *adelphos* is used loosely in **some isolated cases** to designate masculine relatives of various degrees" (Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, p. 15, emp. added). In other words, no linguistic justification exists to support the notion that *adelphoi* could refer to the "cousins" of Jesus. The Septuagint translators employed *adelphos* for *'ach* in those passages where additional contextual evidence clarified the intended meaning. No such contextual evidence exists in the allusions to Jesus' brothers in the New Testament, and is therefore an irrelevant comparison.

When we come to the **New Testament**, where the reference to the brothers of Jesus occurs, Von Soden correctly listed only two possible meanings for *adelphos*, namely, "either 'physical brotherhood' in the strict sense or more generally the 'spiritual brotherhood' of Israelites or Christians" (Kittel, 1964, 1:144). A broadened meaning for *adelphos* (to refer to a cousin) does not exist in the New Testament. As Walther Gunther clarified: "In no case in the New Testament can *adelphos* be interpreted with certainty in this sense" (Brown, 1975, 1:256). That's putting it mildly. McClintock and Strong explained: "When the word is used in any but its proper sense, context prevents the possibility of confusion.... If, then, the word 'brethren'...really means 'cousins' or 'kinsmen,' it will be the **only** instance of such an application in which no data are given to correct the laxity of meaning" (1968, 895). Lewis stated even more decisively: "'Brothers' (*adelphoi*) **never means 'cousins'** in New Testament Greek" (1976, 1:181, emp. added). Indeed, the Greek language had a **separate** and distinct word for "cousins"—*anepsioi* (Colossians 4:10). When a **nephew** was meant, the relationship was clearly specified (e.g., Acts 23:16). To summarize: "There is therefore no adequate warrant in the language alone to take 'brethren' as meaning 'relatives,' and therefore the *a priori* presumption is in favor of a literal acceptance of the term" (McClintock and Strong, 1:895).

Further, when referring to Jesus' brothers, the expression "**his brothers**" occurs nine times in the Gospel accounts and once in Acts. In every instance (except in John 7:3,5,10), the brothers are mentioned in **immediate connection** with His mother, Mary. No linguistic indication whatsoever is present in the text for inferring that "His brothers" is to be understood in any **less literal sense** than "His mother" (see Alford, 1980, pp. 152-154). Likewise, the contemporaneous Jews would have construed the terms "brothers" and "sisters" in their ordinary sense—like our English words—unless an extenuating circumstance indicated otherwise. No such circumstantial indication is present.

Additionally, if the phrase "brothers and sisters" means "cousins" in Matthew 13:55-56 and Mark 6:3, then these "cousins" were the nephews and nieces of **Mary**. But why would the townspeople of Nazareth connect nephews and nieces of Mary **with Joseph**? Why would the townspeople mention nephews and nieces **at all** while omitting **other** extended family relatives? The setting assumes that the townspeople were alluding to the **immediate** family of Jesus. Barnes noted that to recognize these brothers and sisters as the sons and daughters of Joseph and Mary is the "fair interpretation," and added, "the people in the neighborhood thought so, and spoke of them as such" (1977, 1:150). As Matthews commented, "Joseph, Mary, and their children were recognized as a typical family of Nazareth, and when Jesus began his unusual career, they merely asked if He was not a member of this family mentioning their names. If these children were nephews and nieces of Mary, **why are they always associated with her and not with their mother?**" (1952, pp. 112-113).

*A second assertion maintains that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were the children of Joseph by a previous marriage. Of course, this alleged prior marriage is without any biblical support whatsoever. The New Testament is completely silent on the matter. To postulate its occurrence, at best, is to introduce a question regarding Joseph's own marital eligibility in his relationship with Mary.*

In addition to the verses that allude to the brothers and sisters of Jesus, a corroborative verse is seen in Matthew 1:25. When Joseph awoke from a dream, wherein an angel of the Lord explained the circumstances of his wife's pregnant condition, Matthew wrote that Joseph "knew her not until she had borne a son." Use of the word "knew," a common euphemism for sexual intercourse, means Joseph and Mary abstained from sexual relations prior to the birth of Jesus.

While it is true that the Greek construction *heos hou* (until) does not necessarily imply that they engaged in sexual relations **after** the birth of Jesus, the rest of the New Testament bears out the fact that where this phrase followed by a negative occurs, it **“always implies that the negated action did take place later”** (Lewis, 1976, 1:42, emp. added). Bruce observed: **“Subsequent intercourse was the natural, if not the necessary, course of things. If the evangelist had felt as the Catholics do, he would have taken pains to prevent misunderstanding”** (Nicoll, n.d., 1:69). Alford agreed: **“On the whole it seems to me, that no one would ever have thought of interpreting the verse any otherwise than its prima facie meaning, except to force it into accordance with a preconceived notion of the perpetual virginity of Mary”** (1980, 1:9).

The insistence that Mary remained a virgin her entire life is undoubtedly rooted in the unscriptural conception that celibacy is spiritually superior to marriage and child bearing. In both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible speaks of marriage as an honorable institution that was intended by God to be the norm for humanity from the very beginning of the Creation (Genesis 2:24; Proverbs 5:18-19; Matthew 19:4-6; 1 Corinthians 7:2; Hebrews 13:4). Mary’s marriage to Joseph, and their subsequent production of offspring after the birth of Jesus, had both the approval and blessing of heaven. To engage in hermeneutical gymnastics in an effort to protect a doctrine conceived from a misassessment of the sacred and divine nature of marriage and family is the epitome of misplaced religious ardor.

M’Clintock and Strong well summarized the evidence which supports the conclusion that Jesus had literal, uterine brothers: “[S]uch a supposition is more in agreement with the spirit and letter of the context than any other, and as the force of the allusion to the brothers and sisters of Jesus would be much weakened if more distant relatives are to be understood” (1968, 1:895). **It is reassuring to know that Jesus experienced familial and fraternal ties.** He had four brothers and at least two sisters (Matthew 13:55-56; Mark 6:3). **He experienced what it was like to have His own brothers reject God’s truth** (Matthew 12:46-50; John 7:5). Fortunately, those brothers, especially James, later embraced the truth and became active members of the church of Christ (Acts 1:14; 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Corinthians 9:5). **“We do not have a High Priest who can’t sympathize with our weaknesses” (Hebrews 4:15). “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same” (Hebrews 2:14).**

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blow to catholic doctrine of perpetual virginity of mary

# JAMES BROTHER OF JESUS

*The Forgery Trial of the Century*



with **Hershel Shanks**  
editor, *Biblical Archaeology Review*



## **BAR** 38:04, Jul/Aug 2012 “Brother of Jesus” Inscription Is Authentic!

By Hershel Shanks



In all the hubbub and flurry of the verdict last March in the “forgery case of the century,” one question—the central question—seems to have gotten lost: Is the ossuary inscription “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” genuine or not? And if it is, does it refer to Jesus of Nazareth? After all, “Jesus” was a common name at the time.

These are enormously important questions to the world of Christianity, as well as to anyone else interested in the material world as it existed at the time Jesus walked this earth.

As to the authenticity of the inscription, while we should not avoid reasons for doubting the authenticity, neither should we dismiss it simply because it is “too good to be true.”

Is the inscription authentic? **The court held only that the prosecution failed to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the inscription was a forgery. But it surely did not find that the inscription was authentic.** I have no doubt, however, that it is.



## Why the Inscription Is Authentic

Two world-class experts in paleography (the art & science of authenticating and dating inscriptions based on the shape and stance of the letters) have expressed their view that it is. They are André Lemaire of the Sorbonne and Ada Yardeni of the Hebrew University.



I would like to see any paleographer of any repute get up and state that Lemaire and Yardeni are wrong in their paleographical judgment in this case and then tell us why they believe Lemaire and Yardeni have erred.

I don't think such a paleographer can be found!

There are scholars who have expressed their doubts about the inscription's authenticity. The doubter-in-chief is my friend Eric Meyers, professor at Duke University and former president of **ASOR** (the American Schools of Oriental Research). Read his reaction to the judge's verdict.<sup>1</sup> He is very doubtful, but he gives absolutely no reason for his doubts. **In fact, he is not even a paleographer.** His position is grounded in the fact that he is against unprovenanced artifacts. It is true that we don't know where the ossuary was found. It was probably looted from some burial cave. But this doesn't mean it is forged. If it is forged, tell me why you think so. **But don't tell me it is forged simply because it was looted.** Meyers also objects to the way the ossuary was first presented to the public—at a joint meeting of **ASOR & SBL** (Society of Biblical Literature) at their annual convention. In Meyers's view, the inscription should not have been presented in this way. It should have been studied and then published in a scholarly journal, perhaps years after it came to light. What in the world does this have to do with whether the inscription on the artifact is authentic or not?

Professor Meyers goes on to say: "I also drew attention to aspects of the inscription that seemed questionable at best." Please tell us what aspects you are referring to and why you find them questionable.

The Israel Antiquities Authority (**IAA**) learned of the inscription from this "hoopla," rather than as an insider. The **IAA** was furious.

## The Real Reason for the IAA's "Doubt"

I first learned of the ossuary and its inscription from Professor Lemaire when we had dinner together at a Jerusalem fish restaurant catty-corner from the King David Hotel. Realizing the potential significance of this ossuary, I arranged (and **BAR** paid for) a scientific examination of the inscription by the official Geological Survey of Israel (GSI). **GSI geologists found no reason to question the authenticity of the inscription.** I also arranged for the inscription to be examined by Father Joseph Fitzmyer, the world's leading expert in Aramaic (the language of the inscription), who gave his imprimatur to the Aramaic. And of course, Professor Lemaire had found the inscription **paleographically sound.** I thought this was enough to publish Professor Lemaire's article on the ossuary and its inscription, which he wrote at my request.



We announced the find at a press conference on October 21, 2002. The next day the ossuary was on the front page of every newspaper in the world, including *The Washington Post* & *The New York Times*. When journalists contacted the **IAA** for comment, they were embarrassed and furious: They knew nothing about the object.

Within a month of this announcement, thousands of Biblical archaeologists and Bible scholars would be having their annual meetings in Toronto. So, I arranged for an exhibit of the ossuary at the **ROM**. We had special showing for the scholars and—horrors!—the general public was also allowed to see it. A hundred thousand of them waited in line to do so.

In order to export the ossuary from Israel to Canada, however, we needed the **IAA**'s permission. I asked Oded Golan, the owner of the ossuary, to ask the **IAA** for its permission. He did so, informing the **IAA** of the contents of the inscription and noting that the object had been insured for \$1 million. Permission was granted.

If the **IAA** was furious at the announcement of the ossuary at our press conference, it went bonkers at the fact that it was on display in Canada—and with their permission. (When we asked their permission to extend the exhibit for a few weeks because of the crowds who wanted to see the ossuary, the **IAA**, awakened to the importance of the inscription, refused. Permission denied!)

Professor Meyers tellingly reveals—perhaps unintentionally—the real reason for doubting the authenticity of the James inscription. Professor Meyers does not pretend to be a paleographer. And he has not specified any aspect of the inscription that is questionable on paleographical grounds. He just has a generalized doubt about seemingly important inscriptions that are unprovenanced and are announced to the public with “hoopla.”

Unlike Professor Meyers, Professor Christopher Rollston is a paleographer of some note. He contributed two pieces to the **ASOR** blog after the judge handed down his verdict in the forgery trial. In one he talks about past forgeries. In the other, he talks about the motivations of forgers. But he says not a word about the inscription on the James Ossuary. He doesn't even cast “doubt” on the authenticity of the James Ossuary inscription. He doesn't like unprovenanced inscriptions—in fact, he hates them—and that's a reason to be suspicious of all of them. But that's as specific as he gets.

## **Why the **IAA** Lost the Case, According to the **IAA****

**One other point: The **IAA** would have us believe that it lost the case because it could not get a crucial witness, an Egyptian craftsman or jeweler named Marco, to testify on behalf of the government. His absence from the trial was important enough for the **IAA** to mention it in its post-verdict press release; that's why the **IAA** lost the case: “During the investigation, involvement of an Egyptian citizen by the name of Marco became apparent, who acted together with Oded Golan. Marco, a craftsman and jeweler by training, created several of the items for Golan.**

**Nevertheless, all attempts by the state [of Israel] to bring the Egyptian to Israel in order to testify in court in Jerusalem were unsuccessful.” If they could only have gotten Marco to testify, they would have won the case.**

On the contrary, the report of the team of Israeli police who went to Egypt to interview Marco says that Marco denied he did anything wrong. And Marco’s denial is consistent with what Marco told an Israeli newspaper. And that is consistent with what Marco told me.

I talked with Marco in his small third-floor walk-up workshop in Cairo’s dense Khan Khalili bazaar. He was very clear that he never helped Oded Golan to forge anything.<sup>2</sup> **It’s a good thing the prosecution did not call Marco as a witness: He would have hurt their case still more.**

In any event, to think that Marco, who makes his living crafting tourist trinkets, could forge “brother of Jesus” so skillfully at the end of the inscription on the side of the James ossuary that it would fool André Lemaire and Ada Yardeni is laughable.

There is no question that the IAA wanted to get Oded Golan. And they found two human vehicles for doing so. The first was the aforementioned clay specialist from Tel Aviv University named Yuval Goren. The second is a former IAA employee named Joe Zias who had been let go during a budget squeeze in 1997.

**Early in the government’s investigation of the James ossuary inscription, Professor Goren discovered a fake patina on the inscription that he said the forger put on it in order to cover-up evidence of forgery beneath. Goren cleverly called this fake patina the “James Bond” because, like real patina, it was supposedly bonded to the surface of the ossuary.**

**Problems quickly developed, but they were just as quickly overlooked. Professor Goren said the James Bond was made of crushed limestone & water, but this mixture wouldn’t bond without the addition of acid, which would easily be detected—and there was none. Besides, the James Bond wasn’t bonded; it could be removed with a toothpick.**

**Moreover, in his earliest report Professor Goren admitted that the James Bond could have been produced by cleaning the inscription, something antiquities dealers customarily do to inscriptions to make them “show” better.**

**Finally, one member of the government's team, a conservationist named Orna Cohen, found original ancient patina in the word "Jesus," despite Professor Goren's contention that it was a forgery covered with James Bond.**

In its eagerness to prosecute, the IAA ignored all these signs of trouble ahead. The criminal indictment alleged that "Defendant No. 1 [Golan] ... disguised the fact that part of the inscription was added recently. Defendant No.1 did so by applying various substances on the ossuary, in order that the inscription, when tested, would appear to be an inscription entirely written during the Second Temple period, by virtue of its being covered with patina which is supposedly from the Second Temple period."

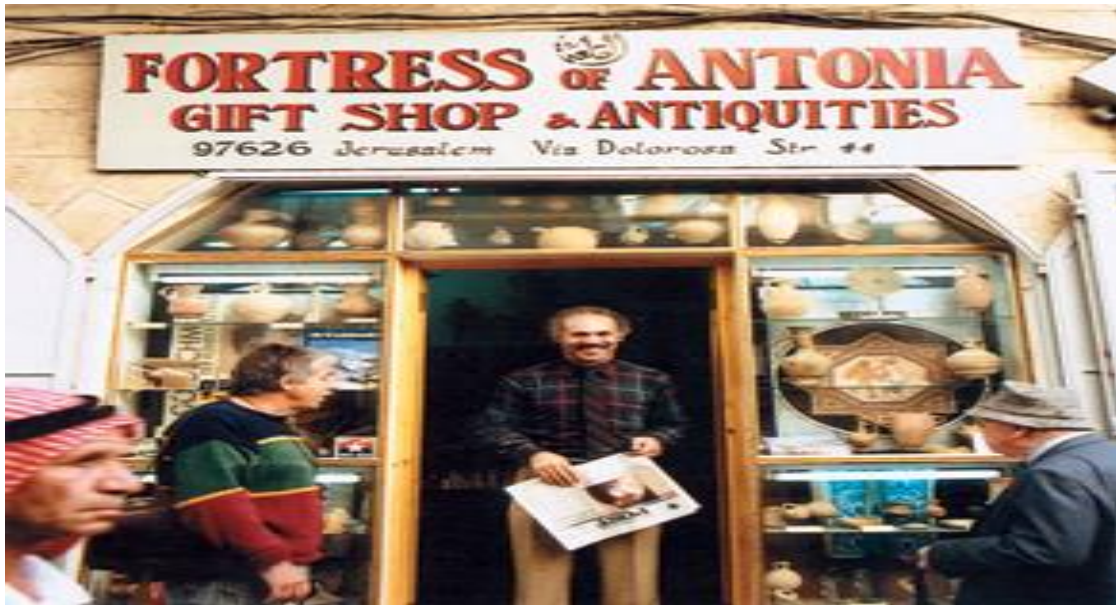
Under cross-examination at the trial, Professor Goren crumbled. When shown pictures prepared by the defendant's expert showing original patina under the James Bond, Professor Goren became flummoxed and asked for a recess so that he could examine the ossuary itself as opposed to the expert's pictures. The next day, Professor Goren returned to the stand and admitted the original patina was there—in the word "Jesus" yet! And if original patina was there, the letters were at least hundreds of years old.

Does this mean Professor Goren now accepts the authenticity of the inscription? Not quite. He has suggested that the forger may have used—as strokes in the forged letters—ancient scratches in which natural patina developed over the centuries.

The second major prop in the government's case was Joe Zias. What he had said was damning: He had seen the ossuary in a Jerusalem antiquities shop in the mid-1990s without the critical phrase, "brother of Jesus"! If this were true, the addition of these words had to be a modern forgery.

In the words of the criminal indictment: "Defendant No. 1 [Oded Golan] used an ancient ossuary ... which bore an engraved inscription of 'Jacob [James] son of Joseph.' Defendant No. 1 added to this ossuary, either alone or with the assistance of others, the words 'brother of Jesus' in such manner that these words were made to appear as part of the original inscription which had already appeared on the ossuary for two thousand years."





The antiquities shop that Zias identified as the one where he had seen the inscription was on the Via Dolorosa, owned by a man named Mahmoud Abushakra. By the time the indictment was filed, Mahmoud Abushakra had closed his shop and moved with his German wife to a little village in Saxony, Germany. When I finally tracked him down, Abushakra told me that he had never had in his shop an ossuary with the inscription that Zias claimed to have seen there. **Licensed antiquities dealers, of whom he was one, must keep an inventory of all items in their shop. To have this in the shop without including it in the inventory would have been illegal, not to say very dangerous; the IAA had its own inspectors coming around regularly to check his inventory. And this ossuary was not in his inventory.**

**Not long before the judge handed down his decision, Zias admitted that he was only joking when he told me (and others) that “brother of Jesus” was missing from the inscription when he first saw it at Mahmoud’s shop; “having no sense of humor,” I took him seriously, he wrote in an email.<sup>c</sup>**

**At the trial, things turned worse. Zias admitted on the stand that he had never seen the inscription on the ossuary in Abushakra’s shop! Indeed, he could not read it even if he had seen it, he then admitted. He explained he was not an epigrapher; his specialties lie elsewhere. Where then did he learn of the inscription? ... Abushakra told him. That’s where he learned of the inscription that became the basis of the criminal indictment!**

## Is the Inscription to Jesus of Nazareth?

My bottom line is simply this: There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the inscription on the James Ossuary. Whether it refers to Jesus of Nazareth remains a question.

A prominent statistician of Tel Aviv University, Professor Camil Fuchs, has attacked this problem,<sup>3</sup> but the problem with statisticians is that they never give you a plain or easy answer. They talk only about probabilities expressed in percentages. As Fuchs tells us, a yes/no dichotomy is “beyond the purview of statistics.” He can give us only “an estimate of the ‘likely’ number of such individuals” named James with a father Joseph and a brother Jesus. And even these estimates are based on a number of assumptions.

Let me begin by giving you Fuchs’s (simplified) answer: **There is a 38 percent chance that this is the only instance of a James with a father named Joseph and a brother named Jesus in Jerusalem at this time. There is a slightly smaller chance (about 32 percent) that there were two such men named James in Jerusalem at this time. What’s the chance that there were three such people? Only 18 percent. Beyond three, there’s only a minute chance. In layperson’s language there were probably one, two or possibly three people with this name at this time. Expressed another way, with a confidence level of 95 percent, we can expect there to be 1.71 individuals in the relevant population named James with a father named Joseph and a brother Jesus.**

Fuchs's methodology is similar to that used in DNA testing: For each site on the DNA, the investigator determines the relative frequency of the specific allele in the relevant population.

A number of assumptions underlie Fuchs's estimates in addition to the size of the population of Jerusalem at this time. First, however, what is "this time"? Based on the published research regarding the period of time in which reinterment in ossuaries was practiced, Fuchs assumes it is the period between 6 and 70 A.D. (He always, as here, assumes "conservative" numbers.)

Fuchs assumes the ossuary came from Jerusalem because almost all known stone ossuaries were found there and Oded Golan says the antiquities dealer from whom he bought the ossuary said it came from Silwan, a village that is part of Jerusalem. The next step is to estimate the population of Jerusalem at this time (38,500 in 6 A.D., growing to 82,500 in 70 A.D.). Fuchs reduces this number because we're interested only in males; none of the women can fit the name profile we are looking for. Next, the James whose bones were placed in this ossuary was obviously a grown-up; therefore, eliminate children who will not reach manhood from the population pool.

Two other overlapping characteristics are statistically relevant: Someone in the family must have been literate; otherwise, why inscribe a name (or three names) on the ossuary? (Fuchs assumes a conservatively high literacy rate of 20 percent, more than the accepted figures in highly urban areas, to reflect the unique status of the city of Jerusalem at that time.)

Also, they must have been fairly well-off to be able to afford an ossuary (and a burial cave in which it would be placed). The distribution of the number of children in the families in that period of time was also factored in the equations.

All these factors figure in Professor Fuchs's computations of probability, often more subtly and in greater detail than I suggest. Fuchs also depends on some of the assumptions derived from L.Y. Rahmani's catalog of ossuaries in the state collection.<sup>4</sup> Of the approximately 900 ossuaries in the catalog, only 230 are inscribed. Moreover, as Rahmani points out, this "seemingly high proportion of inscribed ossuaries is, in many respects, misleading since plain and uninscribed ossuaries were either discarded by the site excavators or excluded from the catalogue." Fuchs then estimates that no more than 15 percent of all ossuaries bore inscriptions.

A number of reasons account for the inscriptions on ossuaries—to express pride in the social standing of the family or the deceased, to console the bereaved or to allow later burial parties to identify the ossuary of the deceased when placing others in the burial cave. **But why include the name of a brother? Only one other ossuary in the catalog lists a brother. Another single ossuary inscription mentions the son of the deceased. As Fuchs sensibly observes, "There is little doubt this was done only when there was a very meaningful reason to refer to a family member of the interred deceased, usually due to his importance and/or fame."**

Fuchs's computations also depend on the frequency of the three names in the inscriptions in Rahmani's catalog. Among the 241 male names on the ossuaries in the catalog are 88 different names. "James" (*Yaakov*) appears 5 times or 2.15 percent of the time; "Joseph" appears 19 times or 7.9 percent of the time; and "Jesus" (*Yeshua* in Hebrew) appears 10 times or 4.1 percent of the time. **Based on the frequency of these names among the 241 male names on the ossuaries in the Rahmani catalog, the statistical probability of the three names appearing together is 0.006787 percent.**

Fuchs concludes that the estimate for the relevant population includes 7,530 men, and the likelihood of someone named James with a father named Joseph and a brother named Jesus in this local population is 0.0227 percent. That is, the estimate of the number of individuals in that population who bear the three names with this relation is 1.71. Expressed another way, there is a 38 percent chance that only one individual had this combination, a 32 percent chance two individuals had this combination, an 18 percent chance that three individuals had it & an 8 percent chance four individuals had it. And Fuchs can state this with 95% confidence.

That's about as simple an answer as statistics can give us.



# OSSUARY ORIGIN: CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF AFTERLIFE PURGATORY:

## Morbid Monday: Resurrection through Decomposition



1694 memento mori painting in the Augustiner Museum in Germany (photo by [Wolfgang Sauber](#))

For some cultures, death is the beginning of a purification process that starts with decomposition and ends with skeletonization. These people believe that when a loved one takes his or her final breath, it is the beginning of a journey to the land of the ancestors, and the corpse must completely decay before a soul is considered purified and can ascend to the afterlife.

There are typically two burial phases in some of these societies: initial and secondary burial. During the first, or initial, burial, the body may be buried or exposed while it decays, and the funeral ceremony during this phase marks the beginning of the soul's journey. Once the remains are completely skeletonized, the bones are collected, cleaned, and placed in a secondary burial, like an [ossuary](#). At this point the deceased is considered truly dead and the soul is resurrected to join the rest of their ancestors in the Land of the Dead.

Secondary burials have been practiced by many cultures throughout history into the modern era. Below is a discussion of burials customs of Jews of the early Roman Empire; burial customs of Southern Italy that were practiced until early 20th century; and the Malagasy [famadihana](#), or turning of the bones, which is practiced today.

The Jews of the early Roman Empire practiced a burial custom called *ossilegium* between 30 BCE and 70 CE. *Ossilegium*, a Latin word that means the collection of the bones, was a two-part process. During the initial burial, the corpse was placed in a niche or on a bench in a tomb. Secondary burial occurred one year later, after the soft tissue had decayed. Family members collected the bones and placed them in an ossuary, a container that holds human bones, which was then placed in a niche in the family tomb. A single ossuary could be used for the bones of more than one individual.



*first century Jewish ossuary (via [Walters Art Museum](#))*

**Jews of this era believed the deceased's soul was purified during decomposition, which was essential for resurrection. Catholics in southern Italy had similar funerary customs based on the belief that death was as a slow process that started with decomposition and ended with the collection of the skeletal remains.**

Some Catholic churches in southern Italy, like [Santa Maria del Purgatorio in Naples](#), had architectural structures built into underground crypts beneath the church for initial and secondary burial. **According to these Neapolitan funeral customs, the soul traveled to Purgatory immediately after death and stayed there during decomposition. It was believed that while the soul of a family member was in Purgatory, the living could atone for the sins of the deceased to ensure safe travel to the afterlife. They also believed that if they took good care of the decomposing remains the dead would look favorably on the living and reciprocate those good deeds.**

Lay people of the Roman Catholic Church in Italy used structures called [terresante](#) and sitting [colatoio](#) to facilitate decomposition up until the early 20th century. *Terresante* were underground crypts that contained rows of loose dirt where bodies were placed for their initial burial, with only a few inches of loose dirt to cover them. On All Soul's Day, people would visit the dead to put fresh clothes on the decaying bodies. Bodies were exhumed shortly before complete skeletonization and placed in niches along the walls, where they continued their decomposition. After the body had fully decomposed, the skulls were either placed on a long ledge above the niches or all of the skeletal remains were put in an ossuary.



*Putridarium at the Cimitero delle Clarisse in Ischia, Italy (photograph by [Orric/Wikimedia](#))*



Sitting *colatoio*, or *putridarium*, were masonry structures that were built into underground chambers of Catholic churches. Sitting *colatoi* were a row of masonry seats within niches along walls, each *colatoio* had holes in the middle of wooden seats that were connected to drainage canals. Corpses were dressed in cassocks and placed in a seated position on the *colatoio*. During their decomposition, fluids would pass through the hole, and the remaining bones were collected and placed on altars or in ossuaries.

**Once the soul was purified and the body had skeletonized, thanks to the *terresante* or sitting *colatoio*, Italians believed the soul could ascend from purgatory into the afterlife — a very similar idea is at the center of a Malagasy funeral tradition practiced today.**

The *famadihana* (fa-ma-dee-an), or “turning of bones,” is a funerary celebration practiced every seven years by the people of the highlands of Madagascar. During this ritual, they remove bodies of their ancestors from family crypts and swathe them in fresh shrouds and spray expensive perfume over the remains. Once the bodies are rewrapped, the bundled corpses are placed on the ground, where family members touch the bodies. This is a tradition that strengthens family bonds between the living and the dead.

*Famadihana* is a centuries old custom that may have been adapted from pre-modern funeral customs of southeast Asia. The “turning of the bones” is related to the Malagasy belief that the soul of a deceased family member can only enter the Land of the Dead when the corpse completely skeletonizes. Until this happens, the Malagasy lovingly take care of the bodies of their ancestors until the body completely decomposes.

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