

Who's who in Jesus' family: What does the ossuary tell us?

by [John Dart](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

The stone box that possibly held the skeletal remains of James the brother of Jesus has continued to come under critical scrutiny. Should the church and scholars take seriously this item of unknown origin sold to an antiquities collector? Did one hand or two scratch the Aramaic inscription on the limestone ossuary? Does the inscribed phrase “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” really narrow the box to the Holy Family?

A new book, *The Brother of Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco), offers a helpful account of the archaeological debate, coming down on the side of the relic's authenticity. Coauthor Hershel Shanks, editor of the popular *Biblical Archaeology Review*, wrote that inconsistencies appear in ossuary owner Oded Golan's accounts of his purchase and of where it was stored. Yet Shanks thinks Golan is “a truth-teller,” and that private collectors “who rescue important items from the market should be honored,” since many relics are unearthed not by archaeologists but by looters.

Some professors and pastors pooh-pooh the find as “old news.” They say the essential “who's who” in the Jesus story is rock solid on scriptural grounds, and the James ossuary is not all it is cracked up to be. (It was revealed that the box arrived at a Toronto museum last November not just badly cracked but broken in five pieces before being patched together.)

According to Paul's letters, the historian Josephus and other ancient writers, the male members of Jesus' family included a brother named James, who led the Jerusalem church in its earliest decades and was put to death about the year 63. Joseph functioned as father to the young Jesus, according to the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John. Protestants usually have no problem believing that Mary bore James and other children after Jesus was born. At least one other brother—Judas, or Jude—has been credited (as was James) with writing one of the letters incorporated into the New Testament canon.

When I first heard about the bone box and its inscription, I was 1) fascinated by the appearance of Joseph's name, and 2) curious about what this meant for understanding the portrayal of Jesus' family in the Gospel of Mark, which compared to the other Gospels appears to denigrate those close to Jesus. Other Gospel writers apparently sought to repair reputations besmirched in the earliest Gospel.

For instance, Joseph goes unmentioned in Mark, and Mark portrays folks in Nazareth as skeptical of Jesus' sudden fame, asking, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (6:3). Matthew, however, rewrites Mark to call Jesus "the carpenter's son." And Matthew calls Joseph the "husband of Mary" (1:16), while Luke (3:23, 4:22) and John (6:42) identify Joseph as the man thought to be the father of Jesus.

Most scholars caution against treating the conflicting nativity accounts of Matthew and Luke, each with their theological motives, as historical remembrances. But if the ossuary inscription is increasingly deemed authentic, then the matter-of-fact "son of Joseph" inscription conceivably strengthens the case for the historical place of Joseph—and strengthens the conclusion that Mark is particularly critical of Jesus' family and followers.

Further evidence of this is the way the author of Mark demonizes Peter ("Get behind me, Satan!") and shows him denying Jesus thrice, as Jesus predicted. Judas Iscariot betrays Jesus, and all of the Twelve forsake Jesus at his arrest, again as foretold. The three women at the tomb, including the mother of Jesus, are so afraid when a "young man" inside says Jesus had risen that they flee and tell no one. Mother Mary and the brothers of Jesus are identified in Mark as unbelieving (3:21-35, 6:4).

Commentators on Mark increasingly cite the Gospel's subtle but biting ironies, evident in the play on proper names. When someone has to carry the cross for Jesus, soldiers recruit one Simon of Cyrene—Simon Peter has fled. When someone has to bury Jesus' body, it falls to Joseph of Arimathea because Joseph the father of Jesus is not around (according to this reading, the reference to Joseph of Arimathea is an indirect indication that Mark's author knew the father's name). Likewise, when Mark identifies Jesus' mother as a witness to his crucifixion and entombment, she is called "the mother of James the lesser and of Joses" (15:40), "the mother of Joses" (15:47) and "the mother of James" (16:1). Some argue that this is a different Mary, not the mother of Jesus, but it is more likely that Mark is reminding readers that James and Joses, two brothers of Jesus, were absent for the burial.

Some contend that Mark's abrupt ending does not rule out a reunion of Jesus with his disciples and family in Galilee. But Rice University's Werner Kelber says that "a rehabilitation of the disciples is positively excluded" in Mark. In books published in 1979 and 1983, Kelber contended that the failure, at the end of Mark, of mother Mary, Mary Magdalene and Salome (and the absence of Jesus' brothers) was part of a critique against the Jerusalem church community once led by James. By the time Mark was written in the 70s, James and other authorities were dead, and Rome had smashed the Jewish revolt, the Jerusalem Temple and much of the city.

Also ending around 70 was the decades-old Jewish practice of collecting the bones of a deceased relative for an ossuary in keeping with resurrection beliefs of Pharisees and of Jewish Christians. Interest in the James ossuary is high because of the reported statistical probability that the grouping of a James with a father named Joseph and a brother named Jesus could hardly refer to any other family than that of the biblical Jesus. Adding a brother's name was rare.

But this coincidence reminds me of a curious coincidence of leaders' names in the New Testament pointed out by Kelber. "While, curiously, Paul and Mark specify three identical names (Peter, James, and John), the James named in Galatians is Jesus' brother, whereas the James in Mark is the son of Zebedee," said Kelber. Kelber did not try then to explain the "discrepancy," but I think such coincidences should be discussed, especially if the author of Mark attempted to discredit the family and followers of Jesus.

What, then, is the probability that the supposed unbelieving, stay-at-home brother James would head the Jerusalem church less than a decade after the crucifixion? Paul says that Peter (Cephas), James and (just plain) John were "acknowledged pillars" of the church (Gal. 2:9) and that only Peter and James received individual sightings of the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:3-7).

To my mind, logic suggests that James and Peter became top church leaders because they were both top disciples. But Mark says the chief disciples under Jesus were Peter and the sons of Zebedee, "the sons of thunder," who happened to be named James and John (3:16-17). Contrary to Mark, some primitive apocryphal writings indicate that two brothers—James and Judas—were followers of Jesus before his death. The Gospel of John says "even his brothers did not believe in him," though they urged him to "show himself to the world" (7:4) as does "Judas (not Iscariot)," who calls Jesus Lord at 14:22.

Matthew and Luke, who relied greatly on Mark's detail-rich narrative, did soften or omit harsh portrayals of disciples and family but did not dispute Mark's way of identifying Peter, James and John. The writer of Luke-Acts, however, deleted Thaddeus from Mark's list of the Twelve and substituted Judas, son, or brother, of James (alternate translations in Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:13).

With the ascension of the resurrected Jesus at the opening of Acts, the 11 returned to their place in Jerusalem where they had been in constant prayer together with Mary, the mother of Jesus, "as well as his brothers." But John, presumably the brother of James, later engages in ministry with Peter, and James, brother of John, is only mentioned again when King Herod has him slain (12:2).

Liberal-to-moderate biblical scholars normally warn against treating Acts as a historical account. Dennis MacDonald of Claremont School of Theology calls Luke-Acts "an idealization of Christian origins." Fred Craddock of Candler School of Theology, writing on Luke in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, said most studies rule out the ideas that Luke, the physician-companion of Paul, is the author of Acts, "given the differences in the presentations of Paul and his message in Paul's own writings and in Acts." This issue is pertinent because the other author of *The Brother of Jesus*, Ben Witherington, treats this Luke as the author of Luke-Acts and as reliable history.

Witherington, a New Testament professor at Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, also suggests that the Letter of James reflects the historical James's theological outlook. That position may get a better hearing among scholars. "We can be fairly confident that we hear the authentic voice of James in the letter that bears his name, even if he had a scribe helping him or if there was light editing of the letter after the fact by another Jewish Christian." The Letter of James reflects the wisdom teaching of Jesus seen in Matthew and Luke, he said.