

## JESUS AND ARCHAEOLOGY

### 1. The Pilate Inscription

**Matt 27:2** They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor (NRSV).

In 1962 Italian archaeologists, who were clearing sand and overgrowth from the ruined theater at Caesarea maritime (an ancient Roman seaport on the coast), uncovered a large stone. It had been turned upside down and used for renovating a fourth century theater. When they flipped it over, they saw a Latin inscription boasting the Pilate had dedicated a Tiberium (a public structure built in honor of Tiberius). The inscription stated that Pilate was a prefect, rather than an inferior procurator as he is described in the Gospels. Most importantly, it was also the first physical witness to a prominent New Testament figure.

### 2. Ossuary of Caiaphas

**Matt 26:57** Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered (NRSV).

In November 1990, construction workers building a water park in the south part of Jerusalem's Old City broke through a burial cave sealed since the Roman in 70 CE. Inside was an ornately decorated ossuary with the name Caiaphas crudely scratched in Aramaic.

An ossuary is a burial box for bones. It was Jewish tradition to enter a tomb one year after burial and collect the bones and put them into an ossuary.

Caiaphas' name, and the names of family member interred with him, made it clear that the tomb was the family-resting place for the high priest Caiaphas mentioned by name in the Gospels. The Israeli Antiquities Authority and other scholars confirmed that it was authentic.



war

The Aramaic inscription reads: "Joseph son of Caiaphas" on the side and back of the ossuary. The first century Jewish historian Josephus called him Joseph who was called Caiaphus (cf Matt 26:57; Jn 18:24)

### 3. The Galilee Boat

During the 1980s there were severe droughts in Israel. As a result, the water level of the Sea of Galilee dropped significantly. When it was at its lowest level in January 1986, the outlines of a boat buried in the mud became visible. Today the 8-by-26 foot boat lies in a climate-controlled facility. Pots and lamps within the boat dated it to the first century CE and carbon-14



dating on the wooden planks confirmed that date. It was a boat from the time of Jesus, commonly used for fishing in Galilee. It is now often called the “Jesus Boat.”

#### 4. The Crucified Man

**Josephus War 2. 306-308.** Many of the peaceable citizens [of Jerusalem] were arrested and brought before Florus [the Roman governor], who had them first scourged and then crucified. The total number of that day’s victims, including women and children... amounted to about 3,600... Florus did that day what none had ever done before, namely, to scourge before his tribunal and nail to the cross men of equestrian rank, men who, if Jews by birth, were at least invested with that Roman dignity. (Date: 66 CE during Jewish-Roman War)



In June 1968, the Israel Antiquities Authority excavated some burial caves northeast of Jerusalem. They uncovered a rock-hewn family tomb with five ossuaries inside, one of which contained the bones of two men and a young child and dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. The right heel bone of one of the men—named Yehohanan—had been pierced by a 4 ½ inch iron nail, indicating that he had been crucified.

A small wooden board had been nailed to the outside of his heel to prevent him from tearing his leg off the nail’s small head. Because the nail had bent at the end, the wooden board was still attached to his body. His arms had been tied, not nailed, to the crossbar and his legs were not broken. Contrary to common practice, his body was allowed off the cross for proper family burial. This is the only physical evidence for a crucified person in the ancient world. Roman crucifixion was a political and military punishment primarily inflicted on slaves, violent criminals, and rebels.

#### 5. The Ossuary of James

##### a. Description

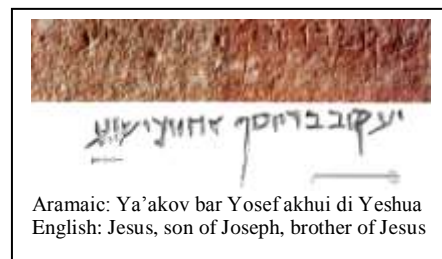
The ossuary of James became public knowledge about 15 months ago (Nov 2002). What was striking was the inscription in Aramaic says, "James, son of Joseph, brother Jesus."



of

##### b. Oded Golan (Israeli antiquities dealer)

Owner Oded Golan, 52, is a quiet engineer from Tel Aviv. He says he bought the ossuary from an antiquities dealer in the 1970s for a few hundred dollars. Last year, Golan invited one of the world's leading experts on ancient inscriptions to examine the ossuary.



Aramaic: Ya'akov bar Yosef akhui di Yeshua  
English: Jesus, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus

##### c. André Lemaire (Aramaic Scholar)

The scholar, of the Sorbonne in Paris, quickly became convinced that the ossuary—21 inches by 12 inches by 10 inches—was a fixture from the grave of James, "the Lord's brother," the leader of the Christian movement in first-century Jerusalem after the death of Jesus of Nazareth.

#### **d. Geological Survey of Israel**

The Biblical Archaeology Society in Washington asked the Geological Survey of Israel (GSI) to analyze the ossuary. The GSI found no reason to doubt its authenticity. Regarding the patina, they said there is "no evidence that might detract from the authenticity of the patina."

Patina = a film formed from chemicals that seep out of or drip onto the stone over hundreds of years; the coating that builds up on an ancient artifact.

Last October, the BAS presented the bone box as authentic. It published the findings of Lemaire and the GSI in its flagship publication, *Biblical Archaeology Review*. Hershel Shanks, *BAR*'s editor, called the ossuary "the most important find in the history of New Testament archaeology."

#### **e. Royal Ontario Museum (ROM)**

The ossuary was on display at the Royal Ontario Museum from Nov 15 2002 to Jan 5 2003, which coincided with the annual meetings of the SBL and AAR meeting in Toronto that year. A team from the Royal Ontario Museum studies the ossuary and was satisfied that it was an authentic artifact with an authentic inscription from the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.

#### **f. Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA)**

1. Some archaeologists immediately questioned the bone box because it was reportedly bought from an antiquities dealer and not excavated by professional archaeologists under controlled conditions.

2. The Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA)—which has a history of hostility toward collectors such as Golan—studied the ossuary and, on June 18, June 2003, announced that the ossuary was a forgery. However, the IAA did not release their full reports until three months later (Nov 2003), and so there was no room for other scholars to interact with, or question, the procedures of the IAA.

3. Then, on June 19, 2003, headlines went out around the world—**JAMES OSSUARY DECLARED HOAX, INSCRIPTION SAID TO BE CERTAINLY A MODERN FORGERY.**

4. There were two primary reasons why the IAA thought the ossuary's inscription was forgery:

First, they found what they call “fake patina” on the inscription, which is made up of chalky substance and what looks like the residue of modern tap water.

Second, they claim that the inscription cuts through the patina on the ossuary.

5. Regarding the first point, Golan maintains that his mother tried to clean the first part of the inscription. What the IAA calls fake patina, placed on the letters, is probably no more than modern cleanser and water. Regarding the second point, in Nov 2003, a team of scholars from the Royal Ontario Museum examined the letters carefully under electron microscope and concluded that the inscription does not cut through the patina.

6. Police searched Golan's Tel Aviv home in July. They reported finding tools that could be used in forgeries. Authorities arrested Golan on July 21 on suspicion of forging ancient artifacts. Four days later, however, they released him without pressing charges. Golan maintains his innocence.

### **g. Not the end of the story**

Archaeologists and scholars remain divided about the James bone box. After the IAA press conference, a group of scholars from Toronto published more of their findings.

They and the curator of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Ed Keall, concluded that the inscription on the James ossuary is certainly not a modern forgery.<sup>1</sup>

André Lemaire, the first Aramaic scholar to examine the ossuary, continues to hold that the inscription is authentic despite the IAA's report.

Ada Yardeni, a leading Israeli authority on Hebrew and Aramaic script, maintains that the inscription is authentic and nothing in the IAA's report disproves this.

The members of the Israel Geological Survey, who originally announced that the patina on the inscription was ancient and dated it to the first century CE, were gagged by the IAA.

It appears that the IAA has an axe to grind or an agenda that goes beyond the James ossuary. Long before the James ossuary came to light, the IAA repeatedly made clear that it wanted to stop looters and forgers of antiquities. Apparently, Golan and the James ossuary have been made the poster child of this crusade.

Archaeology in the Holy Land is not just about science, but also about politics and power. Politics, as much as the spadework, determines what is deemed authentic and what is not. It is about private collectors versus professional standards; academic archaeologists versus amateurs; skeptics versus Bible believers wanting to “prove” the Bible; and about magazines with different audiences and agendas.

---

<sup>1</sup> The IAA claims that the inscription cuts through the patina on the ossuary; but the Toronto team (which also examined the letters carefully under electron microscope) say it does not.

## **h. Conclusion**

There are two points.

First, the inscription may be a forgery, but it has not been demonstrated so far. In fact, the weight of scholarly opinion is the side of the inscription's authenticity.

Second, although the ossuary adds nothing to our knowledge of the person of Jesus, it does show the importance of archaeology in the Holy Land. Archaeology is the only remaining source for potentially new knowledge about the life and times of Jesus.

In this case, the ossuary confirms several things:

- (1) The names, Jesus and James, are Jewish. Jesus was Jewish and needs to be understood that way.
- (2) It underscores the Jesus and the earliest Christian-Jews spoke Aramaic.
- (3) The ossuary itself reminds us that early Christians like James believed in resurrection. James is in the box because of a belief in the resurrection.

But let us think about this for a minute. James lived in an honor and shame culture, and crucifixion was the most shameful way to die in that culture. If crucifixion had been the final event in Jesus' earthly life, then it is hard to believe that 30 years later someone would be bragging on an ossuary about being related to him.

## **6. Stone Vessels and Ritual Pools**

Archaeologists have found many stone vessels (made of white chalk stone) and many ritual pools called *miqwaoth* (sg *miqweh*). Both the stone vessels and the ritual pools were used for purity purposes. Both are found in Galilee and in Judea, indicating the many Galilean were just as scrupulous about keeping the purity laws as those living in Jerusalem, which was considered the center of Judaism.



The presence of the stone vessels and the ritual pools tells us much about what was taken for granted in the Gospels concerning Jewish religious and Jewish distinctiveness at the time of Jesus.

## **7. Sepphoris and Tiberias**

During the time of Jesus, Herod Antipas ruled Galilee as tetrarch (something slightly less than a king). He was a client ruler on behalf of Rome. Herod Antipas was not as rich or as powerful as his father, Herod the Great, but he managed to urbanize Galilee with the building of the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias.

Tiberias is still a thriving seaside resort, so it has not been thoroughly excavated as Sepphoris. Sepphoris, which is uninhabited at the moment, lies about 4 miles north of Nazareth where

Jesus lived. Over the last decade, Sepphoris has been excavated by four different teams, who has uncovered some spectacular discoveries, including a Roman-style theater, a massive underground aqueduct, a very large Dionysiac mosaic, numerous homes and building, and all sorts of other artifacts. The city, which probably numbered 24,000 people during the time of Jesus, reflects a very sophisticated and Hellenized atmosphere, even through the people were Jewish.

## 8. Caesarea Maritima and Jerusalem

Over the last 20 years, there has also been ongoing excavations at Caesarea Maritima and the Temple area of Jerusalem (right).

There have been enough artifacts found to fill all the museums and storage facilities run by the Israel Antiquities Authority. The most impressive discoveries have been at Caesarea Maritima, which Herod the Great (37-4 BCE) built and named after Caesar. At Caesarea Maritime, Herod built an enormous harbor, magnificent temples, an aqueduct, and a theater.



Jerusalem and the *Dome on the Rock* where the ancient Jewish Temple use to sit.

At Jerusalem, Herod expanded the Jewish Temple and made the Temple Mount the largest monumental platform in the Roman Empire. Many ancient eyewitnesses describe the Temple as the most beautiful structure ever seen. Around the Temple, archaeologists have found luxurious priestly quarters, thousands of graves, tombs made from caves, and monumental tomb carved out the rock. Thousands of other artifacts have been found that date to the time of Jesus.

All of this provides indirect knowledge of the life and times of Jesus and sheds tremendous light on what is taken for granted in the Gospels.

## 9. Qumran

Lastly, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls near Qumran has been the most important discovery in the last century regarding the religious and cultural life of ancient Jews. Over 15,000 scroll fragments have been found that, once pieced together, reveal tremendous new knowledge about 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism, the time of Jesus.

Qumran offers a monastery complex built and maintained by one or more Jewish sects between 160 BCE and 68 CE. It witnesses to a communal and nonviolent resistance to both Rome and the Jewish priestly establishment in Jerusalem. The archaeologist have found a three-story tower, an aqueduct, ritual baths, storage areas, a laundry, a kitchen, a pantry that still contained over 1,000 eating-bowls, jars, dishes neatly arranged into sets of a dozen, a assembly hall or refectory, several workshop, a pottery studio with kilns, and what may be stables. Limestone walls surrounded the complex. Based on an analysis of the water storage facilities, it is estimated that the settlement was sufficient for the needs of 750 people.

Outside the walls are three cemeteries with the bodies lined up neatly with their heads to the north. A large cemetery to the east had about 1,100 graves, a small one to the north had 12 graves, and a small one to the south had 30 graves. In the large cemetery, De Vaux's team excavated 43 graves, which contained thirty men, seven women, and four children. Only 20% of the adult graves were women. A large number of the bodies broken bones or had been burned, indicating they were war victims.

In the nearby caves—eleven in all were discovered—about 850 different scrolls were found, but in only ten cases has more than 50 per cent of the original scroll survived and only one scroll is complete (one of the Isaiah scrolls). The scrolls date from 200 BCE to 100 CE. Many of the manuscripts were fragments that had to be meticulously reconstructed.

## **Conclusions**

Archaeological discoveries, dating to the first century Palestine, indirectly shed light on the life and times Jesus. It sheds light on early Jewish and Christian beliefs, on their ritual practices, on their messianic and resurrection hopes. It also witnesses to the intersection of Roman, Jewish, and Greek culture that impinged on Jesus and his followers. Archaeology fills in, enriches, and has the potential to add new knowledge about Jesus.