

by then, and a new generation arose "which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which He had done for Israel . . . And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and He delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and He sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies . . . Nevertheless the

LORD raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them" (Judg. 2:8-10,14-16). It is possible that this single campaign of Amenhotep II could be regarded as one or more of these raids, after which there are no more incursions into Palestine from this dynasty, and the Egyptian Empire declines as the era of the Judges unfolds.

Archaeological evidence for the existence of Jesus

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THE WORLD OF Biblical archaeology has been shaken by a sensational find: a limestone ossuary bearing the inscription in Aramaic, "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus". This is the first direct archaeological evidence for the existence of Jesus Christ. An ossuary is a box for the storing of bones. It was the practice in first-century Israel for the dead to be laid in a tomb for about a year; then, when the flesh had entirely decayed, to place the bones in an ossuary for permanent keeping.

We think of archaeological discoveries being made by the careful excavations of trained archaeologists. However, in the land of Israel there is a flourishing trade in ancient artefacts discovered by illegal digging, investigation of tombs and so on. Such items are sold by dealers to private collectors. The ossuary concerned is such an item.

During the summer of 2002, the French epigrapher (the name given to an expert in the study of ancient inscriptions) André Lemaire, one of the foremost authorities in the study of ancient Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions, was in Jerusalem when he was approached by a private collector who asked him to look at an ancient ossuary he had acquired in the 1970s. It had apparently been obtained from one of the ancient Jewish burial caves in the Arab village of Silwan (the Arab way of spelling Siloam), south of the old city of Jerusalem. He was amazed to discover that it bore the wording cited above. Two questions immediately arise: firstly, is the ossuary and its inscription authentic, and not a forgery? and secondly, if it is, how do we know that the inscription actually refers to the persons we know from the New Testament?

In answer to the first question, André Lemaire has spent over thirty years studying ancient Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions, and is satisfied, after carefully examining it, that the inscription is genuine. The forms of the letters are consistent with the period, and the actual usage of Aramaic is too. The use of ossuaries by the Jews in Israel ceased after A.D. 70, and the script used came into existence about A.D. 25, which puts it into the period in which James lived and died. Another prominent Aramaic scholar, Joseph Fitzmeyer, at first expressed doubts about the inscription on the basis that the spelling of the word for 'brother' was not authentic, but after further study he came across two other examples of this spelling known to be of those times and withdrew his objection.

Lemaire has had the ossuary itself studied by geological experts, who say that the limestone from which it is made comes from quarries worked in New Testament times, that the patina is ancient, and that there are no signs that it was worked with modern tools. Experts, however, greatly regret the fact that the ossuary was taken from its surroundings without them having any opportunity to study its context.

Regarding the second question, all three names occur quite commonly on ossuaries from those times; of the 233 ossuaries so far discovered, Joseph occurs nineteen times, Jesus ten times and James five times. One scholar has estimated that over two generations there could have been as many as twenty people called James with a father called Joseph and a brother called Jesus. However, by no means everyone had their bones stored in an ossuary (many were too poor), and not all ossuaries are inscribed. In addition, it is

very unusual for an ossuary inscription to refer to someone's brother (only one Aramaic example exists), but in the case of the brother of Jesus there would be every reason to have done so.

James is first in the list of the names of the brothers of Jesus in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 and was therefore presumably the oldest. Because Roman Catholics believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary, although Matthew 1:25 disproves this, they claim that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were Joseph's children by a previous marriage, but there is nothing in Scripture to disprove the obvious conclusion that they were the children of Mary and Joseph born after Jesus. Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7), and the brothers of Jesus were amongst the 120 believers who gathered in the upper room at Jerusalem after Jesus had ascended to heaven (Acts 1:14,15).

James later became the leader of the Jerusalem ecclesia, as indicated by Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18 and Galatians 2:9,12. According to Josephus, in A.D. 62 he was put to death by stoning at the instigation of the high priest Ananus. He is generally thought to be the author of the Epistle of James, although some think it was James the son of Zebedee.

The practice of keeping bones in ossuaries was a Jewish one, not known to be followed by

early Christians. Scholars regard it as confirmation that early Jewish Christians still retained many of the practices of Judaism, something which accords with what we know from Acts 21, where Paul is told by the elders of the Jerusalem ecclesia, specifically including James: "Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law" (v. 20).

The ossuary contains a few fragments of bones, and it is thought that the main bones were removed by the finder, knowing that rabbis in Israel strongly object to ancient remains being disturbed. There has been speculation that the DNA of James could be extracted from this and linked with Jesus. The ossuary was displayed (minus bone fragments) for the first time at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, last autumn. A documentary is apparently planned for this spring on the Discovery Channel.

Roman Catholics and the various orthodox churches have a long history of reverencing supposed relics of New Testament characters. Here at last is an apparently genuine relic of one whom they regard as a 'saint', regardless of the fact that the term is applied in the New Testament to all believers. It would be a pity if this remarkable discovery should end up in some specially built shrine, and visited by thousands of pilgrims.