

Archaeological Evidence for the Historicity of Jesus

Kenneth J. Coughlan

March 21, 2019

In Chapter 23 of *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*, Joseph M. Holden and Norman Geisler concede that archeological evidence providing direct corroboration of Jesus is rare. However, they contend that a variety of evidence exists to provide indirect evidence in support of the historical Jesus.¹ While they identify a number of important archeological discoveries, perhaps none has as much potential to confirm biblical claims, if genuine, as the James ossuary. The full inscription on this ossuary reads, “Jacob (James), son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.”² As the authors explain, ossuaries were only used in ancient Israel up until 70 AD when Jerusalem fell.³ Thus, if this inscription is genuine, and if it refers to the same James who was the head of the first century Jerusalem church, then we have clear first century archaeological evidence to support the existence of Jesus and other biblical details.

The controversy over authenticity does not concern the ossuary itself, nor does it concern the first part of the inscription (i.e., Jacob (James), son of Joseph”). Rather, the contention of the Israeli Antiquities Authority was that the final portion, “brother of Jesus,” was a more recently added forgery.⁴ Holden and Geisler make a strong argument in favor of the genuineness of the entire inscription by pointing out how traces of an ancient patina were found in the latter part of the inscription and by giving explanations for why the extent of the patina may have varied

¹ Joseph M. Holden and Norman Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013), 307.

² Ibid, 311.

³ Ibid, 310-11.

⁴ Ibid, 311.

throughout.⁵ Furthermore, the patina of the “Jesus” portion of the inscription is itself ancient, meaning it could not possibly have developed naturally within the last 50 to 100 years.⁶

However, other objections have been raised besides those related to the patina (or alleged lack thereof). Paul V.M. Flesher has claimed that some linguistic features on the latter part of the inscription were not commonly used until the late second to early third century.⁷ However, he gave something of a concession (perhaps unknowingly) when he stated these features were “rare in the Aramaic used in Judea in the first centuries BCE/CE.”⁸ “Rare” does not mean “non-existent.” As Margaretha Folmer observed, “the low frequency of a given linguistic feature within a given period does not necessarily make it probable that an undated text that displays this feature belongs to a later period in which this feature is more frequent.”⁹ At most it provides a “terminus post quem” (earliest possible date) for the dating of that text.¹⁰

Another critical approach, taken by Jodi Magness, is to question whether the ossuary is consistent with other historical data about James. Magness argues that the “claim that this ossuary contained the remains of James the Just is inconsistent with the archeological and literary evidence.”¹¹ In support, she argued that because James was not wealthy, he would not

⁵ Ibid, 312-15.

⁶ Ibid, 314.

⁷ Paul V.M. Flesher, “The Aramaic Dialect of the James Ossuary Inscription,” *Aramaic Studies*, vol. 2 no. 1 (2004), 51.

⁸ Ibid, 51-52.

⁹ Margaretha Folmer, “Response to Paul Flesher, ‘The Aramaic Dialect of the James Ossuary Inscription’,” *Aramaic Studies*, vol. 2 no. 1 (2004), 58-59.

¹⁰ Ibid, 59.

¹¹ Jodi Magness, “Ossuaries and the Burials of Jesus and James,” *Journal of Biblical Studies*, vol. 124 no. 1 (2005), 122.

have been buried in a tomb and had his bones transferred into an ossuary.¹² Magness also cites a second century reference by Hegesippus for the proposition that a tombstone marked the spot of James' burial, again casting doubt on whether he was buried in a rock tomb.¹³

Magness' objections, however, have a lot to overcome. Holden and Geisler, for example, cite a competing tradition which states that James was buried in a rock-cut tomb in the Kidron Valley, very near where the ossuary was allegedly found.¹⁴ Furthermore, as James K. Hoffmeier noted, "The three names that appear on the ossuary were very popular during the first century AD, but finding all three together enhances the likelihood that we are dealing with James of the New Testament."¹⁵ Furthermore, Holden and Geisler cite work performed by statistician Camil Fuchs who concluded "with 95 percent assurance there existed at the time in Jerusalem 1.71 people named James who had a father named Joseph and brother named Jesus."¹⁶

When all three names appear together, with each person being described as having the same relationship to the others as is included in the Bible, on an object that is from the right location and is the right age, the odds of this ossuary belonging to someone other than the James of the Bible appear slim. Thus, the James ossuary would seem to provide extremely early evidence of Jesus along with certain members of his family.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Holden and Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*, 313-14.

¹⁵ James K. Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Oxford: Lion, 2008), 168.

¹⁶ Holden and Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*, 313.