On Bone Boxes and the Brother of Jesus

Paul N. Anderson

George Fox University, panderso@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs
Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Christian Studies at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfc@georgefox.edu.
On Bone Boxes and the Brother of Jesus

As with the other episodes of the CNN special on Finding Jesus, "The Secret Brother of Jesus" builds an understanding of Jesus and his ministry on the basis of recent archaeological finds and known historical facts. In this case, an ossuary (a bone box) discovered in Jerusalem several decades ago bears a remarkable inscription: "James the son of Joseph, brother of Jesus" carved in Aramaic. Archaeologists have determined that the ossuary is authentic, but how about the inscription? Does it also go back to the first century, or was it (or part of it) added later? Inquiring minds want to know!

In 2002 I was present at the national Society of Biblical Literature meetings in Toronto, when the James Ossuary was on display and discussed by leading scholars. At the time, the judgment was that the inscription could have been authentic, but it might also have been carved later—in particular the last reference, "brother of Jesus," seems to be a bit different. The patina shows no signs of alteration, though, and it could be that the slight difference in style simply reflects the right hand, carving from right to left (as is done in Semitic languages), having gotten tired. That, however, was not the end of the debate.

As explained in the CNN special, the court case levied against Oded Golan by the Israeli Antiquities Authority, accusing him of forging the inscription, was finally unsuccessful after nearly a decade of litigation. Therefore, while it has not been proven that the inscription is a forgery, it also cannot be proven that it is authentic. Nonetheless, the James Ossuary is a first-century artifact reportedly discovered in the Kidron Valley—the site traditionally associated with the location of James' burial before his bones were moved to the site on which the church in his memory was later built.

While the historic identity of the James Ossuary remains unconfirmed, however, discussions around James the brother of Jesus over the last decade and a half have catapulted his memory to the forefront of inquiries into the history of early Christianity and the first two decades of the Jesus movement. That being the case, the following points made by the fourth CNN episode are worth noting.

First, Jesus was one of several siblings; the New Testament mentions James, Joses, Jude, and Simon as well as sisters. This is an important acknowledgment (as Ben Witherington points out), as Catholic teachings on the perpetual virginity of Mary have led to the viewing of these persons as step-siblings. Given that Domitian (emperor from 81-96 CE) threatened to kill two grand-nephews of Jesus (grandsons of Jude) for fear that they might be related to David's lineage—potential instigators of a Jewish uprising—the lineage of Jesus' family was known beyond the biblical witnesses. Upon interviewing them in Rome, however, Domitian found them to be common folk, unlikely to be a threat, and released them.
A second interest is the transition from unbelief to faith among the family members of Jesus. When Jesus' family comes asking for him, and when Peter complains about itinerant ministry, Jesus extends family membership to all who are willing to partner with him in healing, delivering, and preaching ministries (Mark 3:32-35; 10:28-31). As Bruce Chilton puts it well, Jesus may have brought dishonor to his family by leaving home and launching into itinerant ministry; that report seems to bear an echo of realism. And, given that the brothers of Jesus are reported as not yet believing in him (John 7:5), it is striking that James comes to serve as the head of the Jerusalem church. In Paul's view, this transition might be explained as a factor of the risen Lord having appeared to James as well as Peter, the apostles, Paul and five hundred others (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). As suggested by Mark Goodacre, the conversion of James thus bears indirect witness to the post-resurrection consciousness of early believers, not just the earthly ministry of Jesus.

A third contribution to understanding Jesus of Nazareth made by James the Just, as he was called, is that he was respected in Jerusalem among the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem following the death of Jesus. Luke even claims that some of the priests in Jerusalem came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 6:7); James likely maintained some connection with that part of the community. Here the leadership of the Jesus movement is presenting as something of a caliphate—more of a headship than an institutional model of leadership developed following the deaths of the apostles. James also played a pivotal role in the most important council meeting in the history of early Christianity, as it was decided that believers need not become outwardly Jewish in order to become followers of Jesus. This Jerusalem council meeting in Acts 15 led to Christianity becoming a distinctive faith tradition rather than a sub-movement within Judaism.

Therefore, the contribution of James to the Jesus movement is highly significant. Given that Paul’s mission to the Gentiles extended the promise of blessing to the children of Abraham beyond hereditary and traditional Judaism to any who received the gift of grace through faith, James played a vital role in maintaining the perception of orthodoxy among the religious leaders in Jerusalem. And yet, it finally was not enough, as the welcoming of Gentiles into the Jesus movement without having become Jewish outwardly via circumcision and adhering to other Jewish customs was too much. According to Hegesippus, around 62 CE James was pushed off the wall of the Jerusalem temple and was stoned to death on the pavement below.

While some scholars question James' being the author of the epistle bearing his name in the New Testament, those five chapters associated with the brother of the Lord offer a rich sense of Jewish wisdom as how to make sense of suffering, how to walk in faith, and how to care for the poor. They also bear a striking resemblance to the Sermon on the Mount and other material in Matthew, even though it was likely finalized in the late first century CE. Such themes as let your yes be yes and your no be no, a tree is known by its fruit, and mercy triumphs over judgment are found in these two sources of early Christianity, suggesting
some sort of contact between them. Whatever the case, reflecting on James the Just as the first leader of the Jerusalem church grants us glimpses into the Jewish ethos of the Jesus movement and his earlier ministry. Whatever sort of a family they were raised in, Jesus and James offer a compelling sense of Jewish wisdom that continues to speak across the boundaries of time and space.