

**Incredible Finds or Incredulous Fakes?
A Consideration of the Joash Tablet and James Ossuary
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Introduction

In the span of less than three months, the world of biblical scholarship was rocked by two incredible discoveries. One was an ossuary, possibly the ancient bone box of a key church leader in the New Testament. The other was an inscription, perhaps a record of repairs to the First Temple by the reforming king Joash. This paper seeks to review the backgrounds of the discoveries, survey and evaluate current assessments of the finds, and reflect on their significance for evangelicals today.

In the middle of October 2002, *Biblical Archaeological Review* made public the discovery of an ossuary containing the inscription: “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” This discovery splashed across the front pages of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Jerusalem Post* and most other major newspapers around the world. Feature stories appeared on ABC, NBC, PBS, CNN and in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. Reactions included: “Some scholars believe it may be the most important find in the history of New Testament archaeology.”¹ CNN headlines asked, “Oldest Evidence of Jesus?”² *Newsweek* pondered the incredible significance of the box: “Biblical archaeologists may have found their holy grail.”³ The Jewish owner of the box, Oded Golan, was stunned by the revelation of its significance. “How could the Son of God have a brother?”⁴ Others were much surer of the ossuary’s

¹ Royal Ontario Museum media release, Oct 25, 2002.

² Jeordan Legon, “Oldest Evidence of Jesus?” CNN.com, Oct 21, 2002.

³ Kenneth L. Woodward. “A Clue to Jesus?” *Newsweek* (Nov 4, 2002), p. 48.

⁴ Legon, “Oldest Evidence of Jesus?” Oct 21, 2002.

magnitude: “Earliest Archaeological Evidence of Jesus found in Jerusalem.”⁵

While the media swirled around the James ossuary, rumors began circulating in Jerusalem about the discovery of an inscription that once hung in Solomon’s temple. The year 2003 opened with the revelation of a tablet commemorating the restoration of the First Temple under Joash. It even quoted a portion of 2 Kings 12 in the inscription. Once again, the major world newspapers and news agencies heralded another possible groundbreaking discovery. The BBC acknowledged the double significance of the so-called Joash tablet. Religiously, “if officially authenticated, the find would be the first piece of physical evidence backing up biblical texts.” Politically, “it could also intensify competing claims to the (Temple) site in Jerusalem’s Old City, where the stone is said to have been found, which go the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict.”⁶

Background of Discoveries

James Ossuary. The ossuary is twenty inches long and eleven inches high and made of Cenomanian limestone from the Jerusalem area. Ossuaries were commonly used by Jewish families between 20 BC and AD 70 to store the bones of loved ones. Hundreds have been found in Israel. The owner found this box in the West bank village of Silwan in the mid 1970’s⁷ for a bargain price of 200-700 U.S. dollars. It contains a single line of Aramaic script. The significance of that line remained a mystery until its examination by French epigrapher André Lemaire in Jerusalem June 2002. Lemaire and the Biblical Archaeological Society released the announcement on October 21, 2002.

⁵ André Lemaire, “Burial Box of James Brother of Jesus,” *Biblical Archaeological Review* (November-December 2002), p. 25.

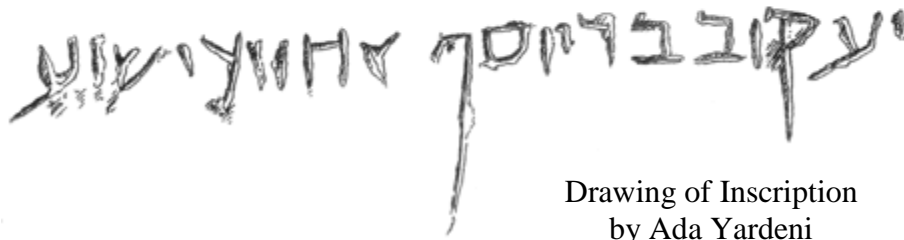
⁶ “Biblical Temple Tablet Found,” BBCNews.com, January 14, 2003.

⁷ Accounts vary on the date of purchase by Oded Golan. Early reports stated the purchase date of 1987, while later versions place the purchase in the mid-1970’s. A possible factor is the Israeli law that requires approval and extensive documentation on all artifacts purchased subsequent to 1978.

Inscription on the James/Joseph/Jesus ossuary

Yeshua brother of Yosef son of Ya'akov

Text reads from right to left



Drawing of Inscription
by Ada Yardeni



Joash Inscription. The so-called Joash Tablet is rectangular Arkosic sandstone 12 inches by 24 inches by 3 inches. The story is told that it was unearthed during renovations by Muslim authorities on Haram as-Sharif, known to Jews and Christians as the Temple Mount.⁸ The owner has remained anonymous, represented by Israeli attorney Isaac Herzog, a former cabinet secretary and Knesset candidate. On the tablet are written 10-15 lines of ancient Hebrew text. The text contains allusions to 2 Kings 12 and an apparent quote of 2 Kings 12:15. A report

released by the Geological Survey of Israel (GSI) seemed to authenticate the tablet as once hanging on the walls of Solomon's temple.

The Discovery Debates

Since the initial announcements, experts around the world have offered their views. Reactions to the two discoveries have polarized scholars in the fields of biblical studies and archaeology.

⁸ "Biblical Temple Tablet Found."

James Ossuary. Several scholars have concluded that the ossuary indeed represents the bone box of James the brother of Jesus. André Lemaire, the Sorbonne epigrapher who first assessed the inscription, cautiously stated that “it seems very probable that this is the ossuary of the James in the New Testament... (however), nothing in this ossuary inscription clearly confirms the identification.”⁹ Part of Lemaire’s assertion comes from the unlikely combination of phrases in the inscription. Out of hundreds of ossuaries found, only two mention a brother.¹⁰ Likely a brother is only noted when he is someone of significance. Lemaire estimates that of the 40,000 Jerusalem residents, as many as 20 Jameses could have had a father named Joseph and a brother named Jesus. However, it is unlikely that more than one would have had a brother of such significance.¹¹ Eric M. Meyers, archaeologist at Duke University, agrees with Lemaire’s assessment: “The rarity of this configuration of names occurring, especially the inclusion of a brother’s name, lends a sense of credibility to the claim.”¹² Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, has offered the most positive evaluation. He states that it represents “the first appearance of Jesus in the archaeological record”¹³ and that “it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that the three names refer to personages so identified in the New Testament.”¹⁴

Not all scholars have joined the chorus to hail the ossuary as genuine. Robert Eisenman, California State University, responded that the discovery was “just too pat.”¹⁵ Frank Zindler, editor of *American Atheistic Press*, remarked: “Considering the fact that virtually all religious

⁹ John Noble Wilford, “Jesus Inscription on Stone May Be Earliest Ever Found,” *New York Times*, October 22, 2002.

¹⁰ According to Levi Yizhaq Rahmani, only one other Aramaic example has been found. *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 1994), number 570.

¹¹ Legon, “Oldest Evidence.”

¹² Wilford, “Jesus Inscription.”

¹³ Quoted on USNEWS.com.

¹⁴ Legon, “Oldest Evidence.”

¹⁵ “Was James’ Ossuary Found in Israel?” ReligiousTolerance.com. It should be noted that in the same article, Eisenman is quoted as saying that an historical Jesus is “a very shaky thing.”

relics claimed to date from before the second century are hoaxes or misunderstandings, it is *a priori* likely that this ‘find’ will be found fraudulent if objective scientific study should ever be allowed.”¹⁶ One of the first scholars to reject the ossuary inscription was Rochelle Altman. She called the “brother of Jesus” inscription “poorly executed” and reflective of third to fourth century script rather than first century Aramiac.¹⁷

As scholars continue to uncover issues necessary to address, many are reserving judgment until broader examination can be done. For others, ambiguity will perhaps always remain. “We may never be absolutely certain. In the work I do we’re rarely absolutely certain about anything.”¹⁸

Joash Inscription. Just as scholars have proposed arguments concerning the veracity of the ossuary, so too the lines have been drawn concerning the Joash tablet. Gabriel Barkay, Israeli archaeologist, leans toward its genuineness and concludes that if the tablet is authenticated, it would be a “sensational discovery.”¹⁹ Shimon Ilani, researcher at the GSI, asserted that the findings of the material tests “show that it is authentic.”²⁰

Other scholars have expressed doubt concerning the tablet. Frank Moore Cross of Harvard University determined that the forger “errs catastrophically in at least two cases.” Similarly, Joseph Naveh, Hebrew University, observes that “numerous details do not coincide with [proposed] dates.” Robert Deutsch, Haifa University, evaluated the inscription as “a very poor forgery” combining Moabite, Phoenician and Hebrew script.²¹

As time for reflection and evaluation progresses, the questions regarding authentication mount. A feature published by Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* exemplifies the uncertainties. The tablet’s owner

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Rochelle I. Altman. “Official Report on the James Ossuary.” BibleInterp.com.

¹⁸ Kyle McCarter. John Hopkins University archaeologist. Legon, “Oldest Evidence.”

¹⁹ “Tablet Found,” BBCNews.com.

²⁰ Shimon Ilani. Geological Survey of Israel. Quoted on BBCNews.com, January 14, 2003.

²¹ Hershel Shanks, “Between Authenticity and Forgery,” SBL-site.org, February 2003.

offered to sell tablet to Israel Museum, but they refused because they were unable to confirm either authenticity or forgery.²²

The Ambiguity of Uncertainty. For both the ossuary and tablet, the issue of genuineness and the process of authentication have grown murkier. Equally respected scholars have taken opposing sides. In these two cases, the finds seem to pit the conclusions of geologists against those of epigraphers.²³ The following section will attempt to address the key specific issues for assessment of the two finds.

Scholarly Assessment of the Ossuary and Tablet

For both discoveries, a similar process has been followed to authenticate them. The focal points include the setting of the find, material evaluation of the stone and patina, tool marks, and assessment of the script.

Setting of the Finds. One of the first and certainly an important part of evaluating an artifact is the study of its archaeological setting. Stratigraphy plays a crucial role in determining the date and significance of a find.²⁴ Placing an artifact in its proper setting is the archaeological equivalent to interpreting a biblical passage in its surrounding context. Unfortunately, neither the ossuary nor the tablet were found *in situ*, but surfaced in the antiquities market. While all scholars acknowledge this significant loss of setting, opinions vary as to extent of the loss. Bruce Chilton, professor of religious studies Bard College in New York, “If you cannot say where an artifact was found and where it has been for nearly 2,000 years, you cannot pretend to draw the lines of connection between the object and the people it might mention.”²⁵ Many agree, including Eric M. Meyers of Duke University who doubts the authenticity of the ossuary and respected Israeli archaeologist Eilat Mazar who questions the genuineness of the tablet. Both base their

²² Nadav Shragai, “Sensation or Forgery? Researchers Hail Dramatic First Temple Period Finding,” Haaretzdaily.com, February 3, 2003.

²³ Epigraphy is the study of inscriptions.

²⁴ See the good basic description of the process of stratigraphy in John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) pp. 24-30.

²⁵ Woodward, “Clue to Jesus?” p 48.

views on discovery without context.²⁶ The Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) and American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) have policies urging members to ignore unprovenanced finds. Further, no articles may be published in their journals on such discoveries.

Hershel Shanks suggests this position is too extreme. While he abhors the looting of archaeological sites and the black market of antiquities, he notes that scholars cannot ignore the existence of an artifact simply because it is unprovenanced. Such a policy, he observes, would ignore notable finds like the Dead Sea Scrolls and more than 90% of all discovered ancient coins.²⁷

The original settings of the ossuary and tablet are lost to us. While some use this basis alone to disqualify a find, it seems better to acknowledge the significant loss yet seek to evaluate the artifact on remaining grounds of evidence.

Material Evaluation. This aspect of assessment centers on two areas, the stone itself and the patina. Both of these fall into the realm of geological experts.

Material Evaluation of the Stone. The James ossuary itself has generally been recognized as a genuine first century bone box. The Cenomanian limestone is consistent with a Jerusalem setting and was employed as the building material for many ossuaries.²⁸ This also fits with the common use of limestone ossuaries around Jerusalem from 20 BC to AD 70.²⁹ Even those who have

²⁶ Meyers on ossuary in John Noble Wilford, "Experts Question Authenticity of Bone Box for 'Brother of Jesus,'" *New York Times*, December 3, 2002. Mazar on tablet in "The Rabbi and the Yehoash Tablet," *Israel National News*, January 13, 2003.

²⁷ Hershel Shanks, "Cracks in James Bone Box Repaired," *Biblical Archaeological Review* (January-February 2003), p. 25. More than 90% of all ancient coins have been found on the antiquities market rather than in proper excavations.

²⁸ For a discussion of the geology of Israel, see Barry J. Beitzel, *Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), pp. 42-46.

²⁹ Rahmani, *Catalogue*, p. 11.

concluded that the inscription is forged have recognized the antiquity of the stone box itself.³⁰

The Joash tablet stone has met mixed conclusions. Shimon Ilani and the rest of the GSI research team placed the tablet in the ninth century BC and even acknowledged that material analysis of the patina may support that the tablet once hung on the walls of the First Temple.³¹ However, Israeli archaeologist Yuval Goren is suspicious of the dark sandstone employed for the tablet.³² First millennium BC royal inscriptions typically employ black basalt.³³ Goren suggests that the use of iron-rich dark sandstone enabled an easier forgery.³⁴

In the evaluations of the stone used for the ossuary and tablet, experts have come to different conclusions. The ossuary has been acknowledged to be genuine first-century. The tablet, on the other hand, has been questioned because of the use of stone not typical for royal inscriptions. Closely related to the evaluations of the stones is the examination of the weathering of the artifact, the patina.

Material Evaluation of the Patina. An artifact's patina is the surface coating that results from aging and weathering. A number of factors affect the patina, including exposure to air and soil pH level.

Geologists at the GSI judged the patina of the James to be approximately 2000 years old.³⁵ Like

³⁰ Altman. "Report."

³¹ "Tablet Found," BBCNews.com.

³² The tablet is black, fine-textured Arkosic sandstone. It likely originated from the Cambrian Shehoret Formation of southern Israel and Sinai, or its equivalent beds east of the Dead Sea and the eastern Arabah Valley. Goren, "Alternative."

³³ Examples include Mesha Stele (Moabite Stone), Tel Dan inscription and various Aramaic dedication inscriptions.

³⁴ Goren, "Alternative." He has created a presentation on the process of forgery of artifacts. It may be accessed at <http://www.bibleinterp.com/presentations/index.htm>.

³⁵ Amos Bain, Amnon Rosenfeldt, and Michael Dvorchik, Geological Survey of Israel Report on James Ossuary, 2002. See also quotes in Wilford, "Experts Question."

the ossuary stone itself, the patina has not been specifically challenged in regard to the authenticity of the artifact.

Regarding the Joash tablet, the GSI study of the patina resulted in them presenting five proofs of authenticity: 1) Patina on and inside the letters is identical with the encrustation in-between the letters and in the crack. The encrustation is also very firmly and naturally attached to the stone. 2) Many minute pieces which make up the encrustation are identical to those of the stone itself. 3) Globules of pure gold found in the patina on the tablet and inscription seem consistent with intense burning, such as the Temple destruction. 4) Edges of some letters are ragged in accordance with expected aging. 5) Chemical components needed to forge patina would have been easily detected, but were completely absent.³⁶ The patina was also subjected to carbon-14 dating. This radiocarbon dating was done by Beta Analytic Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory in Miami, Florida. Carbon particles in the patina were dated to 400-200 BC with 95% certainty.³⁷

Scholars who reject the authenticity of the tablet inscription have offered two concerns regarding the patina. Altman notes that many websites describe how to fake patina on forged artifacts. She argues that the tablet and original patina are genuine, but that the inscription and a second patina were later added.³⁸ However, geologists have not indicated the presence of a second patina.

Yuval Goren surfaces a more difficult question concerning the patina. The GSI reported that the patina contained only natural minerals of similar stone.³⁹ Goren notes that Jerusalem geology

³⁶ GSI Report, pp. 114-116. The process included: Nine samples of the patina coating the stone in various locations and three samples of the rock were taken by peeling with a scalpel, scratching with a diamond pencil and drilling with a fine hand drill. Surface examination as well as chemical and mineralogical analyses were performed using stereoscopic microscopy, Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) equipped with an Energy Dispersive Spectrometer (EDS), X-ray diffraction (XRD), and inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectroscopy (ICP-AES).

³⁷ Patina would of course date later than the inscription itself due to the slow aging process. Shanks, "Between Authenticity and Forgery."

³⁸ Altman. "Report." She cites for example www.armana.com/docs/iskandar.html, but the author could locate this website.

³⁹ GSI Report, 2002, p. 114.

consists of limestone, chalk and dolomite stone capped by *terra rosa* soils. If the sandstone tablet had been buried around Jerusalem, the patina should have also revealed elements of these stones as well.⁴⁰

Material Evaluation Conclusion. The material evaluation of both the stone and patina of the ossuary seem to strongly support its authenticity. Evaluation of the same aspects of the Joash tablet brings mixed results. Geological evaluation seems to support the authenticity, but questions remain concerning the use of sandstone for the tablet and the lack of a Jerusalem setting reflected in the patina.

Tool Marks. A common procedure for inscriptional evaluation is the scrutiny of the tool marks. Researchers especially look for evidence of the use of modern tools and metals that would indicate a forgery. Microscopic examination of both the ossuary and the tablet revealed no traces of modern tools. While this supports the genuineness of both articles, it is not decisive since many forgers employ only iron tools similar in composition to ancient tools.

Script Evaluation

Much of the controversy swirling around the two discoveries centers on the two inscriptions themselves. Epigraphers from around the world have begun to examine the scripts on the ossuary and tablet.

James Ossuary. Several experts have concluded that the ossuary inscription fits with the material evaluation results and thus represents a genuine first century reference to Jesus. Lemaire, the epigrapher who first reviewed and translated the inscription, dated the script to the pre-AD 70 period.⁴¹ Ada Yardeni, Israeli archaeologist, judged that the script followed the classical shape of first century Aramaic, not later writing developments.⁴² For Shanks, the

⁴⁰ Goren. "Alternative."

⁴¹ Wilford, "Jesus Inscription."

⁴² Quoted in Lemaire, "Burial Box," p. 28. See also her work, *Textbook of Aramaic, Hebrew and Nabataean Documentary Texts from the Judean Desert and Related Material*. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2000), pp. 168-169.

determination was clear: “There is not much question about the authenticity of the James ossuary inscription.”⁴³ Against those who claim apparent variations in writing style on the inscription, Shanks asserts that any variation in writing style argues against forgery: “it would be a dumb forger who doesn’t start from scratch so the writing is consistent.”⁴⁴ These possible deviations have led scholars such as McCarter and Altman to seriously question the ossuary.⁴⁵ Part one (James son of Joseph) is “carefully executed and expertly spaced ‘inscriptional cursive’ – including careful angles and added cuneiform wedges on the bets, the resh, and the yod.” Part two (brother of Jesus) is “poorly executed, mostly commercial cursive without any signs of wedges.”⁴⁶ John Painter, Australian author of *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition*, has introduced an additional concern. He says he would expect the James inscription to follow the pattern of his New Testament book: “brother of Jesus the Lord.”⁴⁷

Joash Tablet. The Joash inscription has also divided scholars attempting to authenticate it. Key paleographers have expressed qualified support for the genuineness of the inscription. These include Gabriel Barkay of Bar Ilan University, Shmuel Safrai of Hebrew University, Ada Yardeni, leading Israeli paleographer, epigrapher André Lemaire, and Chaim Cohen of Ben-Gurion University. Not ready to pronounce it genuine, they say script evidence does not point to forgery.⁴⁸ The GSI concluded that “it would be virtually impossible to engrave a large number of the letters after the formation of the crack without causing breakage to the plate.” This crack contained the same patina as rest of stone and was judged to have been formed over centuries.⁴⁹

⁴³ Shanks, “Cracks Repaired,” p. 25.

⁴⁴ Wilford, “Jesus Inscription.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See her expanded discussion in “Official Report on the James Ossuary.” BibleInterp.com

⁴⁷ Woodward, “Clue to Jesus?” p. 48.

⁴⁸ Shanks, “Between Authenticity and Forgery.”

⁴⁹ Ibid. See also Geological Survey of Israel Report. Barkay specified that the script reflected ancient Hebrew writing and was similar in style to the Moabite Stone. Temple Mount Faithful interview.

Several scholars have raised concerns over the Joash inscription. Altman offers several reasons for her rejection. Her first reason rests on the seemingly mixed script of 7th century Aramaic and Phoenician graphs on a supposed 9th century inscription. Also, the inscription seems a mix of cursive and monumental fonts. Altman's assessment of fonts leads her to reject the carbon dating conclusions by GSI. Altman evaluated the tablet based on script styles, xenographic exchange (insertion of foreign characters to distinguish a particular item, used especially of sacred from secular. In this case the use of the tetragrammaton in the inscription pointed to forgery), use of seemingly variant forms (alephs and waws), partial stress and duration notation (notes found only on part of the inscription), haphazard punctuation, orientation on tablet, tablet shape, tablet size, format. Altman views that the tablet only passed assessments concerning orientation and format (writing filled tablet and was properly portrait rather than landscape).⁵⁰

Nadav Neeman, historian at Tel Aviv University, concludes "the inscription looks problematic. It's not like any other royal inscription I am familiar with from the ancient Near East, and it is one of a kind in every possible way. It contains several words that do not appear in the Bible and mainly the conclusion of the supposedly royal inscription: 'Yitzav hashem et amo bivrakha' [May the Name command His people with a blessing.]" The familiar royal inscriptions from the ancient Near East, "usually end with a curse on anyone who harms the inscription, or sometimes with a blessing for the person who wrote the inscription, whereas here 'Yitzav hashem et amo bivrakha'?" There is nothing else like it. Even the emphasis in the inscription on the contribution of the people of Judea to Jehoash's repairs of the Temple is unique, because in royal inscriptions, a king always emphasizes his own activities and completely ignores all the others who participated in the construction."⁵¹ Yet for his criticisms, he acknowledges the limitations of epigraphy, saying that epigraphy cannot settle the debate due to its subjectivity and due to the lack of precedent of an ancient Judahite royal inscription for comparison. Geological evidence is more objective and conclusive.⁵²

⁵⁰ Altman. "Report."

⁵¹ Nadav Shragai, "There is Nothing Else Like It," Ha'aretz.org, January 19, 2003.

⁵² Shanks, "Between Authenticity and Forgery."

Ed Greenstein, professor of ancient Semitic languages, Tel Aviv University, adds three additional concerns. He sees the inscription as a forgery because of three anachronisms. 1) The use of “bedek bayit” in the inscription. The term “bedek” is used in Hebrew Bible for “cracks.” Only later did it come to mean “repairs” as it is utilized in the inscription. 2) The presence of “edut.” The term “edut” is not found in the Hebrew Bible except to refer to “covenant.” The inscription uses it to refer to “witness.” 3) The idea of the work prospering is late Hebrew. The phrase “titzlah hamelakha” [may the work succeed] comes from the later second Temple period. He cites Psalm 1 as an example of this usage⁵³

Conclusions Concerning Script Evaluation

The evaluation of the ossuary centers on the variations within the script and their significance. For some epigraphers, the variations represent such clear indications of forgery that geological evidence of authenticity is overridden. For others, the variations argue against forgery. The logic is that a forger would seek to avoid detection by using common conventions rather than variations. The conclusion comes down to scholarly judgment calls.

The criticisms leveled against the authenticity of the Joash tablet warrant further consideration. Altman’s claim that the tablet contains a mix of scripts is not supported by all.⁵⁴ Second, the inclusion of the tetragrammaton cannot be used to show forgery. The lack of ancient Judahite royal inscriptions precludes one from making strong assertions concerning what should be contained in them. This lack also undermines Neeman’s assertion that a royal inscription must include a curse. Further, Neeman’s criticism of inclusion of the people’s role is not decisive. Clearly, Scripture recorded the importance of the people in reconstructing the Temple (2 Kgs 12:9-16 for ex.). So cannot one expect to find such acknowledgement on official inscriptions as well? Greenstein’s concerns revolved around supposed anachronisms. The use of “bedek” (בדק) does not necessarily indicate a late date for the inscription. The term is used in 2 Chr 34:10 to describe the repair of the Temple.⁵⁵ This usage is quite close to that of the inscription. Greenstein

⁵³ Shragai, “There is Nothing Else Like It.”

⁵⁴ Those scholars noted above as supporting authenticity would say that the style fits the parameters of ancient Hebrew.

⁵⁵ Note its pairing with תיקן, clearly pointing to a reference to repair rather than damage.

is correct in noting that the dominant use of “*edut*” (עֲדוּת) refers to “covenant.” However, it is also employed in the superscriptions of Psalms 60 and 80 where the meaning is not as clear. Further the LXX translation עֲדוּת suggests an early connection of the term to the concept of a “witness.” Finally, Greenstein’s assertion that using the concept of work prospering demonstrates late Hebrew is also not clear. He cites as proof the same idea in Psalm 1:3. The difficulty lies in our inability to accurately date Psalm 1. Most would agree that it was added to the Psalter as an introduction to the collection, but this does not require that it originate from this later period.

Halftime Score and Highlights

The evaluation and discussion of these two finds has just begun, so any conclusions at this point are halftime observations on an incredibly complex game. The two primary fields involved in the assessment of the ossuary and tablet, geology and epigraphy, represent highly specialized and technical endeavors. Most of us are avid fans with serious interests in the outcome of these ongoing studies. However, we lack the specialized training and experience to fully interact with the scholars. In fact, the number of key qualified players is relatively small. Therefore, we are forced to be spectators of this important game. With this acknowledgement, some observations may be offered as one interested fan to another.

The James ossuary has received wide acknowledgement as a genuine first century bone box. Most scholars have accepted as genuine the first half of the inscription (“James son of Joseph”). The debated portion remains the second half (“brother of Jesus”). Epigraphers seem evenly split in their assessments of this script. Therefore, the evidence seems to lean toward authenticity since the geological results are strong and many also accept the inscriptional data as supporting genuineness.

The Joash tablet has received qualified geological acceptance. The GSI pronounced it genuine. However, Goren raises significant concerns regarding the use of sandstone and the lack of Jerusalem limestone deposits in the patina. He calls for continued testing with new measures.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ He suggests the tablet be subjected to microerosion, thermoluminescence dating, and uranium/thorium dating tests. Goren, “Alternative.”

Many have accepted the inscription as a genuine ancient Hebrew script similar to the script on the Moabite Stone. However, several significant challenges have been raised. The above discussion attempted to answer the challenges involving Hebrew word usage, but the issues concerning script style are extremely technical and subjective as well. It seems to this observer that the case for the authenticity of the ossuary is considerably stronger at this point than the case for the Joash tablet.

Acknowledging the lack of archaeological context, the complexities of the issues, the continuing debates, and the inherently subjective nature of epigraphy, one must recall the words of Shanks on uncertainty. “If you’re looking for certainty, I like to say, go into mathematics, but stay away from ancient history.”⁵⁷

Implications

These two finds, if proven authentic, could have far-reaching implications. The ossuary inscription and its interpretation may impact the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox views concerning the relationship of Jesus to his siblings (or cousins). The Joash tablet could affect the continuing conflict between Jews and Arabs over the Temple Mount. Some say it greatly strengthens the Jews’ claim to the Mount. The Arabs deny any Jewish temple ever existed on Haram as-Sharif. For evangelicals, the implications revolve around the attestation of Scripture and the resulting apologetic opportunities.

Supposing that both artifacts were demonstrated to be genuine, what effect would this have for evangelicals? How important would this verification of Scripture be to us? The benefit of this possibility resides primarily in the encouragement of Bible-believers. For those of us who already trust in Jesus Christ and acknowledge the inerrancy of Scripture, the authenticating of these two finds would greatly bolster our faith. It may also provide opportunities for witness.

With these two authenticated finds before them, how differently would the world respond to our message? Two observations may be offered. First, these finds would not represent the only witnesses to Scripture. Important finds include the Ebla tablets, Moabite Stone (Mesha

⁵⁷ Shanks, “Between Authenticity and Forgery.”

Inscription), Sargon and Ashdod stelae, Nabonidus Chronicle, Amun temple wall inscriptions, siege of Lachish reliefs, Babylonian chronicles, Cyrus Cylinder, the Pilate Inscription, the discovery of the house of Caiaphas, and of course the Dead Sea Scrolls. While offering incredible witnesses to the veracity of biblical accounts, none of these have caused international revivals. Second, the world rejected the greatest archaeological discovery of all time.

No archaeological find has ever rivaled that of Mary Magdalene on that early Sunday morning. She discovered the empty tomb of a once dead, but now alive and victorious Savior. The original setting of the find was clearly established, external attestation abounded in the accounts of eyewitnesses. Yet an unbelieving nation persisted in its rejection. Presentations by eyewitness experts followed the discovery with some positive results (a few thousand anyway!). Soon, however, the empty tomb fell silent in the nation's ear. The Savior was sadly correct when He predicted the outcome of this astounding find: "They will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Lk 16:31).

Though these finds will not likely bring apologetic success or evangelistic revival, they do provide a tremendous opportunity. Whether finds or fakes, they get people talking about CNN and the Bible. They open doorways to conversations that lead us to the real foundations of our faith: the Scriptures and the Son.