

The Stone Box And Jesus' Brother's Bones
Bob Simon Reports On
The Mystery Surrounding the James Ossuary
CBS 80 Minutes March 23, 2008

This is a story about the Bible and truth. More precisely, it's about biblical antiquities and how they can be seen to prove that the stories told in the Bible really happened.

Five-and-a-half years ago the world of biblical archaeology was rocked to its foundations, and all because of a box. It was a stone box - called an "ossuary" - that had been discovered in Israel. Ossuaries were used to hold the bones of the dead some 2,000 years ago, in the time of Jesus. And this ossuary was said hold the bones of Jesus' brother, James.

As **correspondent Bob Simon** reports, the discovery created more excitement among Christian scholars than anything since the Shroud of Turin. And like the shroud, no sooner was it unveiled that charges of forgery surfaced. In fact, a trial has been underway in Jerusalem for almost three years.

The box is made of limestone. It's not terribly large, but it attracted a very large crowd, over a 100,000, when it was first exhibited. It made the New York Times and the cover of Biblical Archaeology Review.

New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, who wrote a book about the box, was at that first exhibit. "There was a lot of excitement. There was, you know, the atmosphere was kind of palpable really. And there were various of us just sort of buzzing around this exhibit," he remembers.

Actually, ossuaries are quite common. The [Israel Antiquities Authority](#) keeps hundreds in its basement. What was so special about this one was the mysterious engraving on its side, sort of a Da Vinci Code in stone. It's written in ancient Aramaic and it reads "James, Son of Joseph, Brother of Jesus."

The first question: could this box have contained the bones of the man the Gospels mention as Jesus' brother?

"If it can be proven it's probably one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the century," says Steve Pfann, who like his wife Claire, is a scholar of early Christianity, and based in the Holy Land.

The Pfanns believe the ossuary is the first firm archaeological evidence that Jesus once lived there. "That is really a great thing just to be able to confirm, from an extra-biblical source, that a man named Jesus existed," Claire Pfann explains.

The idea that Jesus had a brother at all is a bone of contention. Many Catholics believe Mary was a lifelong virgin, so James could not have been a blood brother. Either way, after the crucifixion,

James became the first Bishop of Jerusalem. He died, it is written, in 62 A.D. when he was stoned by an angry mob and fell from the walls of the Holy Temple.

The way things were done back then, his body would have been put in a cave. And a year later, when the flesh was gone, his bones would have been placed in an ossuary.

Archaeologists agree that the box is genuine and that it dates from the time of James and Jesus. Statisticians say the odds against it being anyone other than THE James and Jesus are enormous. Two Israeli geologists gave it their stamp of approval. But some experts felt they couldn't render a definitive verdict because it was put on public display so quickly they didn't have time to study it.

"The ossuary was kept more or less secret by a small group of scholars who knew about it," says Neil Silberman, a historian of archaeology who believes the box was presented to the public by people more interested in showmanship than science.

"It was thrust on the world in a combination of public relations campaign and huge exhibition that really didn't allow people to think about it," Silberman says.

"But that is how the world operates these days is it not, if you find something as spectacular as an ossuary with the name of Jesus on it?" Simon asks.

"Well maybe that's part of the problem in studying the history of archaeology I'd have to say that this is perhaps the most outrageous case of tabloid archaeology and the most singular celebrity artifact I've ever seen," Silberman says.

And the problem with the artifact, according to Silberman and others, is not the box itself but the inscription.

A prominent historian said the language of the inscription was "too perfect, too pat." Some epigraphers - script experts - said the two halves of the inscription don't match. The beginning, "James son of Joseph," is straight, the letters formal. But the end, "Brother of Jesus," is uneven and the letters are different. In other words, the words "Brother of Jesus," may have been added by a forger.

The question comes up because the ossuary was not dug up at an authorized excavation, where every shard is scrutinized by scholars. Like most so-called antiquities, it just turned up in the shop of an antiques dealer, which is another way of saying it was looted.

The Israel Antiquities Authority has a special unit of archaeological detectives trying to stop this trade. They spend their nights burrowing underground on the trail of tomb-raiders, like those who may have stolen the ossuary from the tomb of James. The trouble is, no one has any idea when that happened, or where.

But we do know where it turned up: in the Tel Aviv apartment of Oded Golan, an Israeli

entrepreneur, amateur pianist, and one of the world's biggest collectors of biblical antiquities. He says he bought the ossuary from an Arab dealer in the 1970s and never thought twice about the inscription, because, as a Jew, he knew nothing about Jesus.

"I didn't know at the time at all the Jesus had any siblings," says Golan, who says he had the ossuary for more than 25 years and didn't know the potential significance of it.

It was only in 2002, Golan says, that an eminent scholar happened to see the ossuary at his home and told him what the writing could mean. Golan sprung into action. He had the box scrutinized by specialists in different fields. They were impressed. So Golan shipped it off to Toronto for its unveiling before a colloquium of archaeologists, who gave it their undivided attention.

After they'd had their fill, the Israeli antiquities authority demanded that it be brought back to Israel so they could have a look. They appointed two committees to decide whether that inscription was cut 2,000 years ago, or much more recently. Their conclusion: it was a fake.

The ossuary was returned to Oded Golan. But then, just two months after it had been exhibited in Toronto, there was another extraordinary revelation: a tablet was secretly offered to Israel's National Museum with a reported price tag of \$4 million.

Why so much? It was billed as the only remnant of the temple of King Solomon - a godsend for religious Jews, because it would strengthen their claim to the Temple Mount, which has been contested for centuries by Jews and Muslims.

First the ossuary, then the tablet, both revealed in the space of two months. An amazing coincidence. But the amazing coincidences don't stop there.

Amir Ganor, head of the Antiquities Authority Detective Unit, was put on the tablet's trail. All leads pointed to the same address in downtown Tel Aviv: Oded Golan's apartment.

They confiscated the tablet and decided to take the ossuary as well. But when Golan led them to it, these detectives could barely believe their eyes. "He opened a small chamber on the roof, and I saw this chamber is a toilet and what I found on top of the toilet, I found the ossuary of James the brother of Jesus," Ganor recalls.

Golan doesn't try to deny that he kept the ossuary on the toilet, but he urges: don't leap to unwarranted conclusions. "I was really scared that people will come into the house and steal it, so I took it to the safest place in this building," he says.

As they continued to search the building, they stumbled upon a workshop which they found interesting. There were drills designed, they thought, to cut new inscriptions. There were half-completed seals; ancient charcoal, useful perhaps, to outwit carbon dating. There were samples of soil from archaeological sites, which could be used to make fake patinas. The cops called the workspace a factory of fakes.

"The police are talking to us also about earth and charcoal samples from a specific period that they say you would have used to make something appear to be much older than it is," Simon remarks.

"This is just a wrong allegation, it's a false allegation, that's all what I can tell you. Because all the materials that I had, which are some soils, different color soils. It's in order to give when you restore an ancient piece you would like to give a feeling to the viewer that it looks old," Golan says.

"You have restored some artifacts that you found?" Simon asks,

"Yeah, a long time ago I used to do it, yeah," Golan says.

But Golan says he has never created a fake artifact.

But Israeli police don't believe Golan. They have charged him with several counts of forgery and fraud - the James' ossuary, the tablet, and dozens of other artifacts that made their way into museums and private collections all over the world.

"Museums and private collectors, couldn't they establish the fact that these were forgeries?" Simon asks Major Jonathan Pagis, who headed the investigation.

"They really wanted to believe they were genuine," Pagis says.

Pagis says that Golan wasn't working alone and that he had help from academics, dealers, and an Egyptian craftsman.

"So Oded Golan was the head of the operation and he had an Egyptian who did the actual forgery?" Simon asks.

"Yes," Pagis says. "The Egyptian makes the forgeries, and Oded Golan is marketing them."

"So we are dealing with a sophisticated operation here. How good was the Egyptian at what he did?" Simon asks.

"He's a very talented craftsman that's for sure," Pagis says.

The Egyptian is Marko Sammech, who did work for Oded Golan over a period of 15 years.

To find him, **60 Minutes** sent producer Michael Gavshon undercover to the Cairo market where a lot of fakes are made, something the Egyptian authorities are reluctant to admit.

Marko Sammech was surprised to see **60 Minutes**. Gavshon asked him about the James ossuary and Marko denied that he had worked on it; he then showed Marko a picture of that \$4 million dollar tablet.

"I inscribed several stone slabs that looked just like this for Golan," Marko remarked.

"Yeah, but I mean, he presumably gave you the text," Gavshon asked.

"Yes, Golan brought me the text and I carved it onto the tablet," Marko replied.

Marko said Golan didn't pay him very much, but when **60 Minutes** told him that some of his work had been sold to collectors for a small fortune he was shocked.

"These seals were sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars," Gavshon pointed out.

"But these are just pieces of clay. You can barely see what's written on them. Why would collectors pay that kind of money? It doesn't make sense to me," Marko said.

"But they do, and they did. And they're very angry now because they understand that they were made in a workshop in Cairo," Gavshon said.

"Tell them to call me. I'll make hundreds for them," Marko said,

Marko may be amused, but the Israeli police are not. They desperately need his testimony to convict Golan. **60 Minutes** learned the Egyptian authorities won't let him go.

But it's not just Oded Golan who is on trial - it's the entire world of archaeology. How many of the biblical treasures we see in museums were forged in some dusty alleyway in the Middle East? Will we ever know? Whatever the outcome of this trial, the real casualty is knowledge itself - our passion to dig down to the real foundations of our history and our faith.