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WASHINGTON -- A stone box from the first century could be the elusive artifact that scholars have long searched for to link the Jesus of Scripture to the Jesus of history, researchers announced Monday (Oct. 21).

The small stone box, called an ossuary, was used by ancient Jews to hold the bones of the dead. The inscription on the ossuary, dated to about 63 A.D., says it contained the bones of "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."

Researchers from the Biblical Archaeology Society said chances are "extremely slim" that the inscription refers to three men other than Jesus, his brother and Jesus' father from the Bible.

"This is a startling, mind-boggling inscription," said Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, which published the findings in its November/December issue.

If authentic, the ossuary would be the first historical artifact linked to Jesus or his family. While scholars seem to agree the box is genuine and not a hoax, they are divided on just who James was.

"In the shuffle between (church founders) Peter and Paul, James sort of gets lost," said Ben Witherington, a professor of New Testament of Asbury Theological Seminary, who called James a "neglected figure" from history.

Biblical accounts record James as the first bishop of the Christian church in Jerusalem. Historians, not the Bible, recorded his martyr's death in 62 A.D. He is repeatedly referred to as the "brother of Jesus" throughout the New Testament, but his exact relationship remains unclear.

Catholics believe James was a cousin or other relative to Jesus because of Mary's perpetual virginity. Many Orthodox Christians believe he was Joseph's son from a previous marriage. Protestants tend to think he was a blood brother of Jesus.

"Whether James was a full brother, a half-brother or a cousin of Jesus, the significance of the James bone box is not diminished," the journal article said. "It likely held the remains of the leader of the early church in Jerusalem, known in the gospels as `James, the brother of Jesus.'"

The Rev. Joseph Fitzmyer, a professor of biblical studies at Catholic University, acknowledged the box's potential impact for Catholic teaching. "It all centers on the meaning of the word `brother,'" he said. "If you take it to mean a blood brother, then yes, it would (disqualify) the Roman Catholic position."

But another, more important, question remains: Is the James of the ossuary the James of the Bible, and therefore somehow related to Jesus? Researchers seem to think he is, but can never be sure.

One problem is that James, Jesus and Joseph were all common names in the first century. But Andre Lemaire, a respected paleographer from the Sorbonne who led the study, estimated that only about 20 men in first century Jerusalem would have the James-Joseph-Jesus name relationship.

He added that it is highly uncommon for a man's brother to be listed on the ossuary, unless that brother is prominent or important. Shanks noted that of all the ossuaries that have been discovered, only one other mentioned both the father and the brother of the deceased.

The style of Aramaic script used on the box was popular only from 10 to 70 A.D. Extensive tests dated the plain box to 63 A.D., well within the half-century when the containers were in popular use.

Jews customarily placed bones in such a box after the body had decomposed for a year; the box is dated to a year after James' death.

Shanks said that Israeli government investigators confirmed that there is "no evidence of any modern tinkering" or forgery with the box, which is 20 inches long, 10 inches wide and 12 inches high.

P. Kyle McCarter, a professor of biblical studies at Johns Hopkins University, said the inscription "most likely" means a blood brother relationship but is "only suggestive" that it means the Jesus from the Bible.

"We may never be absolutely certain ... but in the work we do, we are rarely ever absolutely certain about anything," McCarter said.

The box was bought by an Israeli collector 15 years ago from an Arab antiquities dealer for "several hundred dollars." There were no bones in the box, and the owner didn't think much of the inscription because he "didn't think the son of God could have a brother," Shanks said.

The owner, who wants to remain anonymous, may make the container available for an international tour and exhibition. The Discovery Channel is planning a documentary on the ossuary to air next year at Easter.

In many ways, the discovery is likely to raise as many questions as it answers. Still, scholars say it is an important addition to a small but growing collection of historical footnotes that shape the historical Jesus.

"If it is Jesus of Nazareth -- and that's a big if, in my opinion -- it would be one of about five or six references to Jesus of Nazareth outside of the New Testament," said Fitzmyer, of Catholic University.