

A 'Simon of Cyrene' in Jerusalem

The story of the 'Alexander (son) of Simon' ossuary

BY

Tom Powers, in Israel © 2002-2010

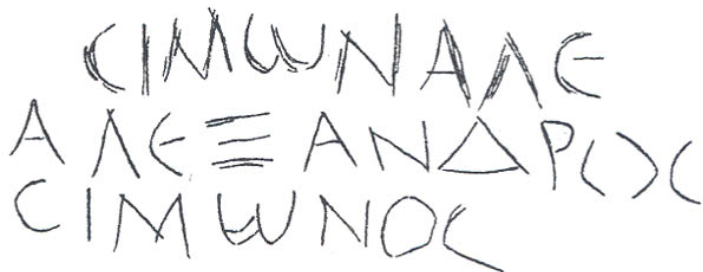
A version of this article appeared under the title "Simon of Cyrene Tomb Connection" in the Autumn 2000 issue of *Artifax* (pp. 1, 4-6), a quarterly digest and commentary on biblical archaeology published in the USA. A version was also published in the July-August 2003 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review* (pp. 46-51, 69) under the title "Treasures in the Storeroom: Family Tomb of Simon of Cyrene". The text and notes below are from the *Artifax* article; the graphics and captions (here corrected by the author) are based on the *BAR* version.

Occasionally, a significant artifact can suffer the misfortune of being buried twice: first by the dust and debris of the centuries and then, having once come to light, "buried" again through lack of public exposure and the passage of time. Such is the fate, it seems, of a little-known inscribed ossuary—found in a tomb near Jerusalem over 60 years ago—that bears a striking combination of names known to us from the New Testament.



In 1941, Israeli archaeologists Eleazer Sukenik and Nahman Avigad found the ossuary with ten others in a first-century C.E. tomb. They published the find in a scholarly journal, but the ossuary group sat unnoticed in a storeroom for the next 60 years.

However, as author Tom Powers observes, the selection of Greek and Hebrew names used on the ossuaries suggests a family connection with Cyrene, in North Africa. Could the Simon mentioned on this ossuary be the Biblical Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross on the road to Calvary?



◀ The "back" of the Simon ossuary and a drawing of its flawed inscription. The first line reads "SimonAle," clearly a mistake; the name "Simon" and the first three letters of "Alexander" have been run together and the names are in the wrong order. Realizing his error, the engraver started over on the second line, carving "Alexander" and then, on the third line, "(son) of Simon."

The story of its discovery goes back to 1941—Palestine under the British Mandate—when Hebrew University archaeologist E.L. Sukenik, along with his assistant, Nahman Avigad, opened and investigated an ancient tomb in the Kidron Valley, south of the village of Silwan. Sukenik was then well-known as the founder and head of Hebrew University's Department of

Archaeology, and several years later he was to play a key role in the acquisition of the Dead Sea Scrolls by the nascent State of Israel. (He was also the father of another eminent archaeologist, Yigael Yadin.) Nahman Avigad, then in his mid-30s, would go on to distinguish himself as a leading epigraphist—an expert in ancient inscriptions—and, toward the end of a long, brilliant career, as director of Jerusalem's Jewish Quarter excavations (1969-83).

This Kidron Valley tomb was not, as is so often the case, discovered by accident during a construction or road project (this was especially common during Jerusalem's post-1967 building boom). Instead, Sukenik and Avigad located this single-chamber, rock-hewn burial cave in the course of a systematic archaeological survey. Also, this tomb had managed to escape the ravages of looting and vandalism that frequently mar such discoveries. In this case, the archaeologists found the chamber still blocked (though not tightly sealed) by its partly-broken closing stone, with the contents apparently intact and untouched by tomb robbers.

At the time of the discovery, the archaeological team of course properly documented the find, carefully cleared the tomb of its contents, and catalogued and stored the artifacts. But then, with the exception of short notices issued by Sukenik at the time,¹ complete information on the finds was not made widely available, even to other scholars, for a number of years. So, by the time Avigad published the tomb professionally in the *Israel Exploration Journal* more than 20 years later² (Sukenik died in 1953), the artifacts of course lacked the immediacy of a "recent" find. Moreover, even this late publication predated by a dozen years or more the advent of today's popular, non-specialist magazines on biblical archaeology. Thus, this Jerusalem tomb and its contents seem never to have garnered the kind of attention they might otherwise have gotten—and some may say they deserve.

Besides the official *IEJ* publication, from which the following description is distilled, the tomb and its contents are also mentioned in a compendium of Second Temple period Jerusalem tombs, in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*.³

The tomb chamber. The configuration of the rock-hewn chamber itself is interesting, especially since it did not have either of the two typical forms of late Second Temple period burial niches. Over half of the known tombs from Second Temple period Jerusalem feature deep, finger-like niches cut back into the chamber wall (Heb. *kokhim*, Lat. *loculi*); a second type, much less common (about one tomb in eight), was a shallow, shelf-style niche, often with an arched ceiling (Lat. *arcosolium*).⁴ Instead, the primary feature of this tomb was a simple standing pit hewn down into the floor, forming in effect a continuous shelf or bench around the side and back walls, a style usually associated with the First Temple period.

The pottery finds. Despite the tomb's design, the pottery found inside left no doubt as to when the chamber was last used. The ceramic finds included 13 complete, intact vessels, among them one example of a type especially useful for dating, the so-called "Herodian" oil lamp. Taken together, the pottery finds helped Sukenik and Avigad to confidently date the tomb's last use to the First Century A.D., before the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70.

The ossuaries. Of great interest, of course, were the 11 ossuaries found stacked together on

the left side of the tomb chamber. (An ossuary—"bone box" in Greek—is a carved stone chest with a separate, removable lid used in antiquity for a secondary burial, i.e. the deposition of the gathered bones left after a body had decomposed.) Opposite the stacked ossuaries, scattered, decayed bones provided stark evidence of one or more final primary burials—wrapped bodies that would have been left lying on the benches when the tomb was last used almost 2000 years ago. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to imagine the family who owned the tomb being killed or forced into exile when Jerusalem fell to the Romans, after which the chamber was forgotten and never touched again.

(Since the published report states the tomb was found in an undisturbed state, the ossuaries probably still contained human bones, yet no mention is made of these remains or their ultimate disposition. Presumably the bones were re-interred elsewhere, the usual practice in accordance with Jewish law and tradition.)

The ossuary inscriptions. Though all 11 ossuaries were plain, undecorated chests, nine of them—an unusually large proportion—bore an inscription of some sort, and some had more than one. Ossuary inscriptions seldom reflect the hand of a skilled engraver, but, as with this group, most are rather crudely rendered, probably by a relative. Written sometimes in chalk or charcoal, or simply scratched into the soft limestone surface, their only function was to identify to family members visiting the tomb the remains contained in the various chests.

As one might expect, the style and content of these inscriptions were the key to establishing the likely identity of the ancient owners and users of this tomb: Of the 15 individual inscriptions on the ossuaries and lids, all are written in Greek characters, except for one in Hebrew and one bilingual. Of the four typically Jewish names represented, three were previously unknown on ossuaries, but they are names known to have been used chiefly in Diaspora communities. Moreover, most of the Greek-style names were previously unknown among Greco-Jewish inscriptions in Israel-Palestine, but some of these were names especially common in Cyrenaica. So, taken as a whole, the inscriptions point to a family originating in one of the large Jewish communities of the Diaspora, almost certainly Cyrenaica.

Cyrenaica and Cyrene. Having made this connection, what is generally known about Cyrenaica, Cyrene, and Cyrenians? First, the region of Cyrenaica is universally regarded as corresponding to the eastern part of present-day Libya in North Africa. Cyrene (sigh-REEN-uh), the chief city of the region in the Roman period, lay on a plateau several miles inland from the Mediterranean, between the more prominent cities of Alexandria to the east and Carthage to the west.

Founded as a Greek colony ca. 630 B.C., Cyrene later became subject first to Alexander the Great and then to his successor dynasty, the Ptolemies of Egypt, and by the 1st century B.C. the city had become the center of a Roman province. The site of the ancient city of Cyrene lies near the modern-day city of Shahat, Libya. The excavation of Cyrene, carried out mainly by Italian teams in the early 20th century, brought to light extensive ruins including a sanctuary of Apollo, the agora-forum, the theater, and a vast necropolis.

Land of the five cities. Founded in the early seventh or sixth century B.C.E., the city of Cyrene (its Roman forum is shown) stood 200 miles west of the modern Libyan-Egyptian border. Cyrene achieved prominence in the Hellenistic period as the capital of the Libyan “Pentapolis,” or land of the five cities: Cyrene, Apollonia, Ptolemais, Tauchira and Berenice. Tellingly, one of the ossuaries in the Kidron Valley tomb bears the inscription “Sara (daughter) of Simon, of Ptolemais.” This may be another indication that the people buried in the tomb had come from the Jewish Diaspora community in the province of Cyrenaica.

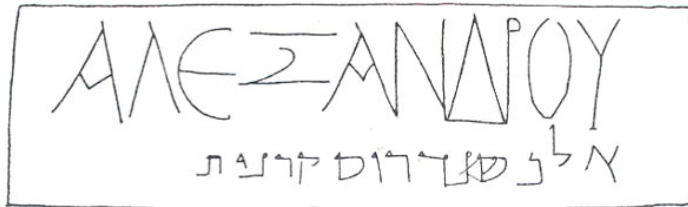


The Jewish community of Cyrene dates from ca. 300 B.C., when they came as settlers from Egypt under the Ptolemies, and grew to considerable size. And, like any thriving Diaspora community, Cyrenian Jews not only would have visited Jerusalem for the three great pilgrim festivals, but it is clear that some settled there as well. In the account of the Pentecost event in Acts 2 (see vs. 5, 10), Jews from “the districts of Libya around Cyrene” are among the listed nationalities said to be “living” or “dwelling” in Jerusalem. Also, from Acts 6:9 it is evident that a community of Cyrenian Jews, some of whom disputed with Stephen, lived permanently in Jerusalem and had their own synagogue (or perhaps constituted an identifiable group within a larger synagogue of Diaspora Jews). Given this presence, it should not be surprising that Cyrenians are represented among the early Christian communities of both Jerusalem and Antioch, as seen in Acts 11:19-20 and 13:1.

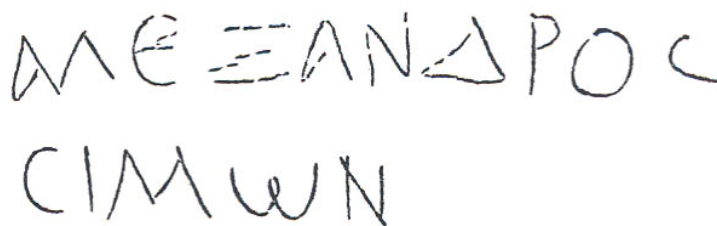
The “Simon” ossuaries. Returning to the Herodian period tomb found in Jerusalem—now seen to belong to 1st century Jews almost certainly originating in Cyrenaica—two ossuaries become the focus of special interest. It is because they bear the name “Simon,” providing us with a tantalizing parallel to the biblical “Simon of Cyrene,” the man who carried the cross of Jesus to Golgotha.

Of the two “Simon” ossuaries, one is inscribed: “Sara (daughter) of Simon, of Ptolemais.” (The name “Simon” on both chests is rendered in the usual manner of Greek ossuary inscriptions, with the genitive *-os* ending denoting a generational line of descent; that is, “daughter” or “son” is understood from the ending.) As for the “Ptolemais” that Sara was from, Ptolemais-Acre (modern Akko) is unlikely, based on the family’s apparent Diaspora origins; a better possibility would be the city of the same name in Egypt or, more likely still, a third Ptolemais known to have existed in Cyrenaica, to the west of Cyrene.

The other “Simon” ossuary—the one that has drawn the most interest from students and scholars of the New Testament—reads "Alexander (son) of Simon" in two places. Among the three separate inscriptions on the front, back and lid of this chest, one contains an obvious engraver’s error (and correction), and another includes an enigmatic appellation for this Alexander, a word whose interpretation has always remained uncertain.⁵



◀ This drawing of the inscription on the lid of the Simon ossuary supports the identification of this ossuary as that of Simon of Cyrene’s son. The first line spells “of Alexander” in Greek; the second line, in smaller Hebrew characters, reads “Alexander QRNYT.” The meaning of qrnyt is unclear, but it is possible the engraver made a slight error, and meant instead to write *qrnyh*—Hebrew for “Cyrenian.”



◀ *Alexandros Simon*, “Alexander [son of?] Simon”, reads the crude, badly-faded inscription written in green chalk on the “front” of the chest. The plain stone ossuary, or bone box, is from the Kidron Valley in eastern Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, the identity of the interred—“Alexander (son) of Simon”—is perfectly clear, making a leap to the gospel tradition found in Mark 15:21 almost irresistible. There we are told that the “Simon of Cyrene” who bore the cross of Jesus was “the father of Alexander and Rufus”—a direct parallel to this 1st century Jerusalem ossuary inscription with Cyrenian connections!

‘Simon of Cyrene’ in the Bible. What else can we learn from the gospel text about Simon of Cyrene, his family, and his fleeting role in the drama of Jesus' passion? First, the three synoptic gospels do not actually say that Jesus ever took up his own cross at all, but rather that a “Simon of Cyrene” was compelled to carry the cross “as they went out” (Mt. 27:32) or “as they led Him away” (Lk. 23:26). John, on the other hand, simply tells us that Jesus “went

out bearing his own cross" (Jn. 19:17), and does not mention the incident with Simon at all. Our traditional conception of the story, then, attempts to harmonize these two gospel strands: Jesus, having been scourged and thus already near death, stumbles and falls under the burden of his cross, and only then is Simon pressed into service by the Romans.

It is worth noting, too, from what is known of the actual Roman practice of crucifixion, that Jesus—and Simon—despite our traditional depictions, probably carried *only* the horizontal cross-beam, which would have been fixed to an upright at the crucifixion site.⁶ Another commonly-held notion about Simon is that he was a black man, apparently based solely on his origins on the African continent, but this tradition, of course, is unfounded. The only other information we really have about Simon from the Bible (in Mark and Luke) is that he was “coming in from the country.” However, this sheds little additional light on his identity: Had Simon traveled from Cyrene especially for Passover, did he live full-time in or near Jerusalem, or was he perhaps a pilgrim from elsewhere within the country? We simply don’t know.

How interesting it is, though, that despite the brief, involuntary nature of Simon’s role in Jesus’ death-march to Golgotha, the names of his *sons* seem to be already known to Mark’s 1st century audience! Notice that it is *Simon* who is being identified—in relation to his two sons—to the reader of Mark 15:21. Indeed, “reading between the lines” of the gospel text, one wonders whether Simon, drawn into and impacted by the events of Jesus’ passion, might have joined that early Judeo-Christian community in Jerusalem, along with his entire family. By the time the gospel traditions were being written down and circulated decades later, it would make sense that Simon—by then probably no longer living—is remembered as “the father of Alexander and Rufus.”

Conclusions. To put the Jerusalem ossuary inscription into perspective, it is worth noting, as Prof. Avigad did in 1962, that “Simon” is not only the most common name among Jews in the Hellenistic period—there are nine “Simons” in the New Testament—but is also *by far* the most common of all names appearing on Jewish ossuaries. This observation has been echoed more recently by Dr. Tal Ilan, an Israeli expert in Jewish and early Christian history. Ilan has compiled, from both inscriptions and written sources, a directory of all Jewish names used in classical antiquity, and in her listing “Simon,” the most popular name, appears 250 times. What is interesting, though, by contrast—and statistically significant—is the relative *scarcity* of “Alexander” as a Jewish name, with only 20 occurrences in the same directory. Indeed, this leads Dr. Ilan to say it is “very likely” that the ossuary discovered in Jerusalem might actually belong to the Alexander mentioned in Mark’s gospel, the son of Simon of Cyrene!⁷

Once one seriously entertains this possibility, however, certain issues beg to be addressed: For example, what became of the remains of Simon himself? (Based on the published plan of the tomb, the two un-inscribed ossuaries that were found appear too small to hold the remains of an adult.) And why is Rufus not represented among the finds? Could he be the same person who, along with his mother, is present in Rome—from where many say Mark wrote his gospel—and is greeted by the Apostle Paul in Romans 16:13? Obviously, the questions, though intriguing, are endless!

To simply summarize, everything about this artifact seems to “fit” with the individuals named in Mark 15:21: the historical and geographical context (1st century A.D. Jerusalem); the family origin reflected in the inscriptions (Cyrenaica); and the combination of names, one rather rare in a Jewish context, found in the correct familial relationship (“Alexander son of Simon”).

Of course there is no proof, nor can there ever be, that what Sukenik and Avigad found in Jerusalem so many years ago is the family tomb of the man who carried Jesus' cross. It remains, at best, a good possibility. There is no denying, though, that what we have—etched in the stone of a 2,000-year-old burial chest—is a thought-provoking, contemporaneous parallel to the "Simon of Cyrene" and his son Alexander known from the gospel record.⁸

NOTES

1. *BASOR*, 88 (1942), p. 38; *Kedem*, 1 (1942), p. 104 (Hebrew)
2. N. Avigad, "A Depository of Inscribed Ossuaries in the Kidron Valley," *IEJ* 12 (1962), pp. 1-12.
3. N. Avigad, "Tomb South of the Village of Silwan," *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, Vol. 2, p. 753.
4. H. Geva, *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, Vol. 2, pp. 748-49.
5. Interestingly, of the 15 inscriptions from this tomb, the inscription on this lid is the only bilingual one (Greek and Hebrew), and the only one appearing neatly incised. It also contains the puzzling term in Hebrew, *qrnyt*. Some scholars, assuming an engraver's error in the final letter, have tried—for obvious reasons—to render this word: "of Cyrene." However, Avigad did not share this conclusion and, as he wrote in 1962, "finally had to leave the question unsolved."
6. Jouette Bassler, "Cross," *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 1985, p. 194.
7. "The Tomb That Dare Not Speak Its Name," *London Sunday Times*, Mar. 31, 1996.
8. The tomb itself is registered as Serial No. XXXI. The "Alexander (son) of Simon" ossuary resides in the collection of Hebrew University's Institute of Archaeology located on Mt. Scopus in Jerusalem. Catalogued as Inventory No. 1965, this intriguing artifact has been loaned in the past for exhibition but is unfortunately not on regular public display. The other ten ossuaries and most of the pottery from the tomb are held by the Israel Antiquities Authority.

Tom Powers holds degrees from Florida Atlantic University and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and has been a full-time volunteer in Israel since 1999. He has served as a guide and teacher for the Biblical Resources center in Ein Karem-Jerusalem and for the Nazareth Village project; he has also participated in projects with the Jerusalem Archaeology Field Unit and in the excavations at Bethsaida and Kursi. He previously worked in church-related social ministries and with the non-profit home builder Habitat for Humanity. He can be reached at tapow@hotmail.com.

