

# Ossuary This, Ossuary That!



By Philip E. Busby

Several months ago I read about an ossuary that was found in a private collection. The word ossuary probably did not mean a whole lot to many people just a few weeks ago, but now it is the talk of the world! Over the Easter season this issue got plenty of attention, and I guess I should not have been surprised. However, I was and am surprised that this “find” has stirred so many people!

Those who have not been reading the paper may not be aware of the hype; and many may be asking, what on earth is an ossuary anyway? An ossuary is a simple box (most are made of stone) that was used to place the bones of dead people in. Many are familiar with the story of Jesus being laid in a tomb; and as believers in Christ know, Jesus did not have a long-term need for a tomb. However, it is a different story for the common man. Having a place for laying a dead body is a long-term problem, but putting it in a tomb was not, for most, a long-term solution. The Bible tells us families, such as Abraham’s, bought and used places to bury their dead. Many times these were caves, or cave like places carved into the rock. (Gen. 49:29-31) However, you must understand that tombs were not only expensive, but they were very space consuming. Even today we face a lack of room for the graves of the deceased. Can you imagine if we tried to build a tomb for everyone? So they needed a system - if you will - to deal with this problem.

There is a system found to be used in the tombs of kings. As archaeologists excavated tombs in and around Jerusalem, they found tombs they believed were the burying places for at least some of the kings of Israel. These tomb chambers were found to consist of not just the burial shelf where the body was to be laid, but they also found box like structures carved into the rock. Many of these were under the burial shelves themselves. These “box” structures, which are called repositories, were, many times, filled with bones. From this it is believed a system existed that went something like this. A body was laid in a tomb on the burial shelf. After a period of time - likely a year or more - it decayed to the point that there was nothing left but the bones. Sometime after this happened - maybe when the next family member died - these bones were put into the repository. So, many times kings would be laid on a shelf in the tomb, and after their body was nothing but bones, the bones would be placed with the bones of his fathers in one of these repositories. This would mean that literally kings were “gathered” unto their fathers! (II Kings 22:18-20)

However, for the common man the system may have been a little different. We know that an ossuary is not big enough for a whole body. So, the bones must have been placed in them sometime after the body of the deceased had decayed. It is reasonable to believe that, many times, bodies were placed in tombs after death; and because these tombs needed to be used by others, who may or may not be family members, they did not build repositories in most. This meant the bones of the last occupant had to be dealt with. So, the bones would be removed and stored in a box. We call these boxes ossuaries!

The discovery of the ossuary everyone is talking about these days brings out an interesting point in the existence of denominations, churches, and religious philosophy of all sorts. On this ossuary was the inscription “James, the son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” The inscription was written in Aramaic, and many things about the box tells us it is most likely from sometime in the first century after Christ. If this inscription is a reference to Jesus Christ - and many believe it is - it would be the oldest reference to Jesus that has ever been found, and one of the greatest evidences (outside of the Bible, of course) of Jesus’ existence.

However, that is not what many people are interested in! Everyone seems to be more interested and worried about what this new “discovery” will mean to their doctrine. Everyone is scared of the fact it might dispute something they believe. They are putting up their guard against how this “find” might be interpreted. The Catholics are the most interesting, in the idea that they are

already calling for the possible interpretation that the word “brother” on the ossuary may mean only something like cousin and not really brother, as in the same mother and father. They want this because they are afraid the idea that Jesus had a brother thwarts their doctrine, which states Mary was a perpetual virgin. If Jesus had a brother, then that could not be true! Of course, the Bible tells us Jesus had siblings. (Matt. 13:54-57) So, this doctrine is silly in light of what the Bible directly states. Mary did not have to remain a virgin to be a virgin when Jesus was born. Mary and Joseph were not the physical parents of Jesus! Mary’s womb was simply used as an incubator for Jesus’ Physical form.

The fact Mary and Joseph went on with normal lives after the birth of Christ is evident in the Scripture. When Jesus was left behind at Jerusalem, they found Him in the temple, about His “Fathers business.” (Luke 2:41-52) It is evident by Mary and Joseph’s reaction they did not understand what Jesus meant when He said this. They simply were your typical worried parents looking for what they saw as a lost son who was too young to be out by himself! For their sake and the sake of the family, the Scripture tells us Jesus went home and submitted Himself to them. The Bible makes it clear that Mary and Joseph intended to get married even before the news of Jesus’ birth. It states that Mary was espoused to Joseph. This is to say they were a normal couple who most likely had every intent of starting a family. The fact God chose them to be the caretakers of His Son did not change that. I believe this fact was one of the factors as to why Mary and Joseph were chosen. Mary and Joseph were given a big blessing, along with a gigantic responsibility! Of course, they fit all the lineage criteria for being the parents of The Messiah, but beyond all the specialness of the fact they were chosen to raise the Son of God, they were a God fearing couple who lived and raised a family!

It is no wonder why people are so easily led astray by every false doctrine that comes along. Many people just do not know their Bible! It is amazing to me how many people are comfortable sending their children off to anything that calls itself Sunday school. They do not care or think about what is being taught there, and this is a big mistake on the part of parents everywhere. Many churches use materials that are not even written by true believers. Many would be shocked to find out just how much “Christian” material there is out there that is published by companies who are nothing more than “for profit” organizations. In these materials there are not just a few things that can be brushed off as extrapolations, but many things that are downright fallacies. Here the seeds of many false doctrines are planted. However, this

does not disturb nearly as many people as the fact that one, or many of those false doctrines are shown to be untrue by the newest “discovery.”

Now, many will argue for a long time about what the ossuary’s inscription means. Many will argue, not because they seek the truth, but because they seek to protect and defend their doctrine(s). This fact will inevitably affect the interpretation of the find, and what is said about the inscription will not necessarily be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. However, that will not affect the truth of the Word of God! If we really believe the Bible is the infallible Word of God, then we should be looking at this find with excitement, for what it might tell us! The Bible is truth, so the truth of this ossuary will line up with what the Bible says, but it will not necessarily line up with what you believe! If what is said about the ossuary, or any new “discovery,” doesn’t line up with what we think the Bible says, then we should not get all crazy about it. Our first reaction should not be to try and reinterpret the find to fit our own doctrine. We should take the time to reexamine what the Bible actually says. You may find that what you have held to, in your personal set of beliefs, is not actually in the Word of God! You may be holding onto something because a man said it, and not because the Bible did!

Centuries ago a man by the name of Copernicus said the earth was not the center of the universe. He said it was not even the center of our solar system! That fact upset the church so badly, they killed him for saying it. Today we have photos to prove Copernicus was right, and amazing as it may have seemed to those in the church many years ago, it’s OK! Our earth is not the center of the universe. Our solar system isn’t even the center! As a matter of fact, we don’t really know where the center is and we are finding that our planet is a very small place in this universe. However, God still loves us. He still cares, and He is still sending His Son back to this little planet to gather all those who believe in Him, unto Himself! So, it’s alright to sleep well at night without worrying about the newest “discovery.” Though it may disrupt our beliefs at times, it will never destroy or even shake the Word of God! The first chapter in the book of John tells us that Jesus is the Word; and if Jesus survived death itself, I don’t think He’s worried by a little box of bones, and neither should you be!

