

Did They Find the Bones of Jesus? **Pastor David Childs**

In 1980 in Jerusalem a construction crew uncovered a first century tomb containing the bones of 10 people in burial boxes (ossuaries) with names on 6 of them. Now, 26 years later some Hollywood producers made a television program speculating that these are the bones of Jesus and his family. The names on the bone boxes are "Jesus son of Joseph, Maria (Mary), Mariamne (which they claim is another name for Mary Magdalene), Yose (Joseph – Jesus had a ½ brother by this name), Matia (Matthew) and Judah son of Jesus". They say the probability of all these names from Jesus' family being in the same tomb indicates these are the bones of Jesus and that he was probably married to Mary Magdalene and had a son named Judah.

Recently I was asked the following probing questions about this evidence.

1. If it could be proven probable that the bones belong to Christ, why would it be damaging to the Christian faith? Would it not prove wrong those who say that Christ never existed?
2. Is it possible that Christ only ascended to heavenly "spiritually" and his body remained on earth for burial? Does the scripture specifically state that it was Christ's human body that appeared to the disciples and Mary Magdalene after his death? Does not 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 spell out that our human bodies are not meant for Heaven and that we are given Heavenly bodies that are intended for that environment?
3. Is it possible that Christ's physical body was taken from the tomb guarded by the Roman soldiers and his followers placed it in another tomb?
4. Would physical evidence of the existence of the bones of Jesus of Nazareth be damaging to the Christian faith? Would it remove his divinity in any way?

Following is my response.

What great questions!!! I'm glad you are interested in all this. It is an important discussion. Faulty views of the resurrection were some of the first heresies that the early church had to deal with and they did a masterful job of refuting these errors. These early heresies often denied that Christ existed in a body or was raised bodily.

I have heard of this discovery and I have not done much research myself, but let me give you some of my initial thoughts on this matter.

First I will talk about the Bible's view of the body of Christ and then I will discuss this particular discovery.

It is important whether Christ's actual, physical body rose from the dead. It the key Christian doctrine that a resurrection occurred and that it was the same body that was crucified that came out of the grave alive. It is important because Jesus made it an issue in John 2:19-22.

John 2:19 - 22 (NKJV) ¹⁹Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰Then the Jews said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" ²¹But He was

speaking of the temple of His body. ²²Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said.

He specifically claimed that He would raise his body from the dead. The concept of a spiritual resurrection only is inadequate because it would not fulfill what Jesus prophesied here.

You will find in reading the accounts of the resurrection in the gospels that Jesus made clear that his resurrected body was the same body as before by describing the holes made by the nails and spear and inviting Thomas to touch him and put his finger and hand in the holes (John 20:27). You are right that this is his resurrected body and it was different in some way than the former body, but not completely a different body as indicated by the wounds inflicted on his body.

In Luke's account of the resurrection Jesus appeared to the disciples and they thought he was only a "spirit". He did not want them to believe this because it was wrong. So he told them to touch him and see that he was "flesh and bone" and then he ate some fish and honeycomb (Luke 24:36-43).

There is certainly a transformation of the body in the resurrection so that it is not the same kind of "flesh and blood" that we have before death. Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 15:50. In fact his discussion in that chapter helps us understand that God does raise the physical bodies we got from our ancestors (Adam), see 1 Corinthians 15:47-49, but transforms them into something glorious and immortal (vs. 42-44). So when Christ's body went through walls/doors it does not mean that Christ only "rose" spiritually and that his body and bones could still be in a grave somewhere - it means instead that Christ's physical body was raised and transformed to reflect a new dimension, a new existence, a new life-principle, a new body that is both physical and spiritual and able to inhabit eternity and heaven. Jesus made it clear that it still had a physical element (flesh and bone in Luke 24:39). But the existence of the resurrection body does not allow for the existence of a separate corpse or bones in another place or else the new body would not be a "resurrected" body, but merely another body given to that spirit to replace the first. Jesus did not get a second body, he has a transformed first body. So we do believe that the heavenly body was capable of being felt by human touch just as it was in its former state, but the existence of the heavenly body does not require that the former body still exists somewhere else. The heavenly body is the former body in a new state.

On your third question on the plausibility of the disciples taking his body to another tomb while the Roman guards were incapacitated that would not be acceptable because 1) the Bible tells us it didn't happen by telling us what did happen and 2) the big problem with that idea is that those disciples were ALL willing to die for the story of the resurrection and nobody believes that many smart men would die for something they knew was a lie.

So don't back away from a physical, bodily resurrection. Paul says if this didn't happen we do not have any basis for hope and we are still in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:17)! This is because the resurrection of Christ is connected to our justification (Romans 4:25). It really is a deal-breaker and always has been. When Paul preached he always used the resurrection as his main message. So this is truly an important topic and God didn't do a half-way job when it comes to our salvation or Christ's resurrection.

On this particular discovery of the ossuaries, I obviously believe it cannot be the bones of Christ since he is resurrected. Then how do we explain the findings. Let's look at the evidence they

have. They have writing on stone boxes. So they are basing their findings on ancient writings. So are we. Why would their writings carry more weight than our writings? Why do scratches on stone have more import than writing on parchment or papyrus? Our writings (I'm of course speaking of the New Testament documents of which we have over 5000 copies of portions of the New Testament) clearly teach that Jesus' bones are not in those boxes. Their writings only indicate that the remains of "someone" by those names are in those boxes. There really is no contradiction between the boxes and the New Testament. Those names are so incredibly common that there is no story here. Even the name Mariamne (which they say has to be the Mary Magdalene of the Bible) is a very common name and does not have to be her.

From what I hear they admit that the only reason to think they may be Jesus' bones is because of the "probability" of all those names being some other "family" than his. But I think that is overstating the case by a long shot. I have heard statistics that it is from 100 to 1 to as much as 1000 to 1 that it could be anyone else but Jesus and his family. Even if that were true there were easily thousands of families that existed in Jerusalem in that time and were buried. For instance the estimates of the population of Jerusalem in Jesus' day are 80,000 to 100,000 with about 3 million visiting the city at Passover (and many of the visitors would probably like to be buried there). Let's take the lowest numbers. If 80,000 people lived there and the average family was 4 people there would be 20,000 families. If the probability of these names grouping like this are 1 in 1000 there would be 20 other burial sites in Jerusalem with these names all together. Probably there are more. They just haven't been found yet. What will happen when they find the second and third ones? Do we have two Jesus's?

Anyway, I am not at all concerned about this finding. The people pushing it are into sensationalism anyway. And the media would love this story to be true. It will pass.

Most importantly we must ask ourselves this question, where do I get my truth from? What I mean by that is what evidence convinces you? If there is contradictory evidence, which do you consider more authoritative? If science contradicts the laws of probability which is more weighty to you? If eyewitness accounts contradict DNA lab tests which is more convincing? If the smartest man of modern times (say Stephen Hawking) believes one thing and the smartest man of ancient times (Solomon) believes the opposite (as they do about the existence of God) who would be more convincing to you?

I believe the ultimate source of truth is the Word of God revealed in the Holy Scriptures. I don't believe this just because it is pious, but because the other options are all flawed. Nothing is perfectly accurate, not science, not intelligence, not logic, not eyewitness, not experience. They all fail in some way. The Word of God was given to us by a perfect God who expects us to believe it is truth (John 17:17; Psalm 119:89) and that it is everything we need to know God and be complete in this life (2 Timothy 3:16-17). I would encourage you to consider making the Scriptures the basis for truth and when anything contradicts the Bible you can know it is wrong. That is a very basic mindset that is being abandoned by many today but I believe it is exactly the mindset God expects us to have. Those who would say you are hardheaded and arrogant to accept the Bible "regardless" of other evidence are doing the same thing with the other evidence (accepting it "regardless" of what the Bible says). Everything is ultimately by faith and determined by your worldview. Mine says there is a perfect God who has spoken and given us perfect guidance in a book he declares to be trustworthy. You either believe that or you don't. Jesus gave a story to describe this choice in Matthew 7:24-27. He talks about those who hear his word (for us that's the Bible) and what they do with it. I am going to believe it and build my life on it. I believe it will always stand the test. It has for 2000 years and it will for 2000 more. Guaranteed!