

# DID THE JEWS REALLY NOT BURY THEIR DEAD?



ISRAEL MUSEUM

*A stone ossuary (bone box) from the first century B.C.E.*

“The Jews did not really bury their dead; they actually embalmed them.” (UB 2013)  
Ambiguity or Error?

by Charles R. Arterburn

**T**HE AUTHOR OF Part IV of the Urantia Book (UB), we are told, had access to “all sources of record and planetary information” (1343) in preparing the restatement of the life and teachings of Jesus. Given the author’s extraordinary vantage point, we should expect the UB’s version to be the most complete and accurate ever written. The author’s creative restatement of the *meaning* of Jesus’ life and teachings seems consistent with the book’s purpose of progressive revelation. However, it is reasonable to expect that the UB’s enlarged presentation of the *facts* of Jesus’ life and times—the dates, events, description of places and customs, etc.—would be internally consistent and not be discredited by historical research or archaeological excavations.

One example of a verifiable historical statement occurs on p.

2013. While recounting the events of Jesus’ burial, the author parenthetically comments: “The Jews did not really bury their dead; they actually embalmed them.” In this brief but sweeping statement, the actions of Joseph and Nicodemus are set in the larger context of Jewish funerary custom. Or are they? The archaeological and cultural evidence supports a different conclusion: The Jews really did bury their dead and, as a people, never actually embalmed them.

Excavations of ancient Jewish burial sites have uncovered both individual interments and family tombs, the latter rock-hewn or adapted from existing caverns. With family tombs, it was common practice, dating back to the First Temple Period (960 - 586 B.C.E.), to carry out the burial in two steps. First, the body was wrapped or covered and placed on a shelf or in a

niche inside. After the flesh decomposed, the bones were collected and deposited together (referred to by archaeologists as “secondary burial”) in a special chamber—the charnel room or pit—inside the tomb. During the late Second Temple Period (20 B.C.E. - 70 C.E.), ossuaries—special boxes made of stone or clay—were widely used for collecting the bones.<sup>1</sup> A recent article in *Biblical Archaeology Review* indicates that over 800 ossuaries from this period have been found in Jewish family tombs, including that of Caiaphas, the high priest associated with Jesus.<sup>2</sup> The Old Testament expression “gathered to his people” (e.g., in Genesis 25:8) is believed to refer to this collecting of bones in secondary burial. The practice was probably derived from the Canaanites, since older Canaanite tombs with charnel rooms have also been found. Whatever its cultural meaning, bone gathering appears to have been a practical solution to the problem of space in Jewish family tombs.

Excavations of cemeteries at Qumran and Jerusalem also present examples of typical, in-the-ground burials.<sup>3</sup> Interments in single shafts ranging from 2 to 7 feet in depth have been found, containing both single and multiple burials. Today, some of these graves can be identified by piles of stone that have remained in place. The vast majority of them have probably been lost, considering the relatively small number of cemeteries and tombs from ancient Palestine that are known.<sup>4</sup>

No evidence has been found to indicate that embalming, as in the Egyptian practice of preserving the body, was ever a Jewish custom.<sup>5</sup> This practice is mentioned only twice in the Bible (Gen. 50:2-3 and Gen. 50:26) to describe the mortuary preparation of Jacob and his son, Joseph, by Egyptian physicians. Although these patriarchs were important progenitors of the Israelites, embalming does not appear to have been carried over as a cultural practice in Israel. Jewish burial custom essentially followed the formula expressed in the Torah’s creation story: “[F]or dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19, KJV). While the Jews collected bones in their family tombs, they made no attempt to preserve soft tissue as did the Egyptians.

The four canonical gospels’ accounts of Jesus’ burial vary in details, but all agree that some preparation of Jesus’ body occurred. The synoptic gospels (so named because their accounts agree or are similar), Matthew, Mark, and Luke, report that Joseph of Arimathea, acting alone, simply covers or wraps the body and places it in the tomb. In Luke (23:50-56; 24:1-2), the women observe Joseph’s hasty burial of Jesus, and return after the Sabbath with spices and ointments. John’s gospel is unique in portraying Joseph and Nicodemus making extensive preparation of the body immediately after crucifixion: “[Nicodemus] brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred

pound weight.<sup>6</sup> Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury” (John 19:39-40; 20:1. KJV). John does not report any need for additional preparation, or that the women observe the burial—only

that Mary Magdalene visits the tomb after the Sabbath and discovers the stone rolled away. The UB initially follows John’s account, but substitutes “large quantities of myrrh and aloes,” and uses the terms “embalmed” and “embalming” to describe the actions of Joseph and Nicodemus (2013). The UB then appears to conflate the accounts of John and Luke: The women come to the tomb after the Sabbath with *more* spices, even though they had been nearby and observed Joseph’s and Nicodemus’ lavish preparation of Jesus’ body on the day of the crucifixion.

“The Jews did not really bury their dead; they actually embalmed them.” In making this statement, did the author of the UB infer that Jesus’ tomb burial was typical of all Jewish burials—hence that the Jews did not really

bury their dead? Did the author intend something different from the primary, modern-English meaning of “embalmed” (i.e., to treat with preservatives to prevent decay)? By contrasting burying and embalming, the author seems to regard these as alternative approaches to the treatment of a corpse, which would suggest that the primary meaning was intended. Did the author simply rely upon the two isolated accounts in Genesis of the patriarchs’ embalming and John’s unique account of Jesus’ burial in making his comment?<sup>7</sup> Whatever the case, the inescapable conclusion seems to be that the UB’s author did not really understand ancient Jewish burial practices. How could such an impressive work, which claims to be divine revelation and which pays so much attention to detail, have such an error—especially in view of the book’s claim of historical accuracy (1109)? The Urantia Book has been and will undoubtedly continue to be an inspiration to many. But textual issues such as the one documented here suggest the need to corroborate its factual claims. Just as progressive Christians have had to seek and find new ways to regard the Bible as a vehicle of revelation, so critical readers of the UB may face a similar task. The Urantia Book appears to be a feature of the progressive evolution of our world, after all. ■

#### Endnotes:

1. Metzger, Bruce M. & Coogan, Michael D., Ed. *Oxford Companion to the Bible*. Oxford University Press, 1993. “Burial Customs,” p. 95-96.

2. Fine, Steven. “Why Bone Boxes?” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, September-October, 2001.

3. Zissu, Boaz. “Odd Tomb Out: Has Jerusalem’s Essene Cemetery Been Found?” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, March-April, 1999. ➤



Entrance to a first-century C.E. family tomb

4. Rousseau, John J. & Arav, Rami. *Jesus and His World: An Archaeological and Cultural Dictionary*. Fortress/Augsburg Press, Minneapolis, 1995. "Jerusalem, Tombs," p. 167: "Kloner estimates at 50 the highest number of burials in a single tomb. The corresponding number of deaths in Jerusalem from the third century B.C.E. to the first century C.E. (the period of the finds) would then be only 40,000. Kloner's estimate of the number of deaths is about 750,000 for this period; such a figure would mean that, at best, only about 5 percent have been found. Presumably these tombs belonged to the middle and upper classes, with *the rest of the population buried in simple shallow pits that have long since disappeared*" (emphasis added).

5. The subsequent cultural history of orthodox Judaism also supports this conclusion—embalming has always been proscribed. Contemporary Jewish burial practice includes ritual washing, the use of a shroud or covering, and prompt burial unless an unavoidable delay (e.g., transporting) absolutely requires embalming.

6. This amount was based on the Roman standard of weight, equivalent to about seventy-five of our English pounds. Scholars believe this quantity to be excessive for a single burial, and was intended to show reverence or status—very likely an embellishment by the author of John. The Jewish writer Josephus mentions the extravagant use of spices in the burial of King Herod (died ca 4 B.C.E.). Spices and ointments were precious commodities in the ancient world, and also markers of wealth and status. The practical purpose of burial spices was evidently to reduce the odor of decomposition. The Mishnah refers to an old custom prohibiting tombs west of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem because of prevailing winds. The use of burial spices may have begun as an effort to control the miasma of decay resulting from a concentration of family tombs.

7. The only other Biblical account of a similar tomb burial is that of Lazarus—found only in the Gospel of John (11:1-44). Lazarus' body is wrapped or bound and laid in a cave tomb with no mention of spices. Prior to the resuscitation of Lazarus, his sister, Martha, protests to Jesus that "by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days" (11:40, KJV). Martha's comment here seems to indicate that Lazarus' body was definitely not embalmed. There is no reason to suspect, from the story, that Lazarus' preparation would not have been typical. The UB also reports this episode (1865), rephrasing Martha's statement more explicitly: "My brother has now been dead four days, so that by this time decay of the body has begun." This makes it doubly difficult to understand the UB author's assertion that the Jews embalmed their dead.

*Additional References:*

Crossan, John Dominic & Reed, Jonathan L. *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts: The Key Discoveries for Understanding Jesus in His World*. Harper, San Francisco, 2001.

Lamm, Rabbi Maurice. *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. Jonathan David Publishers, New York, 1969.

Meyers, E. M. "Second Burials in Palestine." *Biblical Archaeologist*, 33.

Rahmani, L. Y. "Ancient Jerusalem's Funerary Customs and Tombs." *Biblical Archaeologist*, 44:3,4. 45:1,2.

The human mind prefers to be spoon-fed with the thoughts of others, but deprived of such nourishment it will, reluctantly, begin to think for itself—and such thinking, remember, is original thinking and may have valuable results.

—Agatha Christie (1890-1976) *English author, dramatist*.

## Regarding Translations

*Jacques Lecouturier*

TRANSLATING IS A DIFFICULT and subjective task. I consider myself privileged, among Urantia Book readers, to have lived with two languages long enough to appreciate the nuances of both. I often find it amusing that scholars, after learning a language through books, think they have mastered its nuances, which can only be learned from years of experience.

Understanding spiritual concepts is akin to understanding humor. It took me a good ten years before I could readily understand most staged English humor. Humor draws on so much social knowledge and is highly dependent on the evolution of culture. Like a symphony, a passage can be interpreted with many different nuances, depending on the musician.

Canadians speak French, but the Atlantic Ocean creates a discernible distance for the meaning of modern words to travel across. When the Weiss French translation was republished in 1983, I had been studying the book in English for five years and, after three readings, already knew it pretty well. I found reading the French text to be difficult. The translation could not keep up with the natural flow and the harmony in the construction of the phrases that I had become accustomed to.

One day I came across a passage that drew my attention. Its meaning seemed to be substantially different from the one I remembered. I took the English version and translated the passage in French. I then took the Weiss French translation and translated it into English. Finally, after some time had passed, I went back to my own translation and translated it back into English. I then compared the two English translations, and the twist in the meaning became evident. It was an important passage that dealt with seeding truth in the mind of a nonbeliever and letting it grow rather than openly confronting error.

This deviation was eventually corrected. After reflection, it was not as bad as I first thought it was. The first translator was most likely influenced by a Catholic upbringing. (I understand that Weiss relied on several students for its translation). Maybe this deviation was more in tune with what a typical French reader, raised Catholic, could deal with at the time.

I no longer subscribe to the idea that if a translation is not perfect the first time around, it is better to have none at all. I think that it is better to have a shanty to protect you against the elements than to be left naked, exposed to wind, rain, and burning sun.

People grow spiritually. Once truth seekers have tasted truth, it is difficult for them to let go of it. Readers of the Fifth Revelation meet other readers, sooner or later. The quest for truth is a communicative fever. Eventually, one learns of the original English version and starts to make comparisons that are shared with other readers. And we have not yet begun the era where a planetary school will be dedicated to the sole purpose of correctly interpreting the English version. ■