

Introduction

The Find and the Controversy

Last year an ossuary (or bone box, used for reburial) bearing the inscription, “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus,” was made public and touched off an uproar among academics and created a fair amount of excitement among general readers as well. For academics the controversy centered on the fact that the ossuary had not been excavated by qualified archaeologists. For the general public the controversy centered on the significance of the ossuary and its inscription for understanding an important figure in early Christianity and his relationship to Jesus of Nazareth.

Apparently the ossuary had been purchased on the antiquities market, sometime in the 1980s or 1970s. It has remained in the care of its owner since its purchase, coming to the attention of a European scholar in April of 2002. Not until October did its existence become public. An article appeared the following month in a popular archaeology magazine (Lemaire 2002). The ossuary itself was put on display in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, during the months of November through January, 2002–2003. The timing of the display coincided with the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature (and other affiliated learned societies), which took place in Toronto. The present writer, along with thousands of others, had the opportunity to view the ossuary and its remarkable inscription.

The ossuary became the focus of an intense debate—a debate not limited simply to the ossuary itself, but to the larger issue of what to do with artifacts looted or otherwise not properly unearthed and handled. No consensus emerged at the meeting. Rather, arguments continued to be heard in favor of boycotting artifacts inappropriately obtained, or in favor of studying artifacts, however they may have come to light. The fact that I have written this book indicates that I am not opposed to

discussing artifacts that have been inappropriately obtained. I think scholars have no choice but to take into account everything that is available. (We cannot ignore the Rosetta Stone, for example, simply because in antiquity it was looted from its original site, later used as a stone in a wall, where it was found by the French during the time of Napoleon, and then was seized by the British Navy and taken to London, where it is now on display in the British Museum.) Nevertheless, I do agree with those who urge that steps be taken to safeguard antiquities.

Whichever side one takes, it is a fact that archaeologists and scholars routinely discuss artifacts that were looted. Prior to the twentieth century almost everything was either outright looted, or unearthed and handled in ways that today are regarded as quite unprofessional. Some of the ossuaries that will be considered in the present study appeared on the antiquities market in Israel just as mysteriously and unprovenanced as did the James ossuary (see Ilan 2001 for discussion of an inscribed ossuary in private hands). Nevertheless, scholars study and discuss these artifacts (as they should).

Because the James ossuary was not discovered by archaeologists in a properly controlled excavation and because of its astonishing inscription, it is not surprising that many scholars initially reacted with skepticism. Subsequent study of the ossuary and inscription by geologists, epigraphers, paleographers, and linguists has provided substantial support in favor of authenticity—of the ossuary itself as a first-century artifact, and of the inscription as reflecting genuine first-century Aramaic. However, a report issued by the Israel Antiquities Authority in June 2003 concluded, on the basis of the study of the geologist Yuval Goren, that the patina on the surface of the inscription was of modern origin and that therefore the inscription (not the ossuary itself) was a forgery. Other geologists (two on the staff of the Israel Geological Survey and two associated with the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto) who examined the box and inscription in the summer and fall of 2002 dispute this finding. Thus, at the time of writing this Introduction, the geologists are divided over the question of the authenticity of the inscription. Hershel Shanks, who has very ably summarized the pertinent issues in the first six chapters of the recently published *The Brother of Jesus* (HarperCollins, 2003), and others are calling for further testing. Apart from the question of the language of the inscription, which will be treated in a later chapter, matters touching authenticity will not be assessed.

The Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of the present study is not to argue for the authenticity of the James ossuary but to place the ossuary *in context*. This is stated quite deliberately in the face of the many expressions of regret over the lost context of this ossuary. Now it is quite true that much valuable information very probably was lost when the ossuary was looted (and when it was looted—in antiquity or in modern times—we do not know). Apart from a few small bone chips and dust, the ossuary was found empty. Even more important is the fact that we do not know in what burial vault the ossuary lay. Was the burial vault part of a burial complex? Which one? Presumably it rested in a family vault, but whose? Were there other ossuaries in the vault? Were there other inscriptions? Who were the other people buried in the vault? Had the ossuary been found *in situ* (i.e., in its original setting), questions such as these may have been answered. Indeed, the question of authenticity likely would never have been raised, and even the question of identity—the most intriguing question of all—may also have been answered decisively.

Had the ossuary been found in its original context we probably would have learned much more about the person whose skeletal remains were placed in it. We may have learned about his relatives (beyond what is stated in the inscription itself), perhaps even something about his beliefs and associations. Analysis of the skeleton itself may have been revealing, providing data about the person's age and health at the time of death. After all, legend has it that James was thrown from a precipice and beaten with a club. Such trauma would have been plainly evident in the skeletal remains. But these things we shall never know. This part of the context is indeed lost.

But the James ossuary has a context, nevertheless. The ossuary is an important part of Jewish burial practices in late antiquity. Who is buried and how, what is inscribed on the ossuary or burial chamber, the quality of the ossuary itself, what artwork may be present, the inscription's names—all of these are important questions and addressing them may provide important clues that can in fact provide some meaningful context. Learning more about Jewish burial practices will put us in a position to assess more accurately several issues that relate to Jesus and his world (on this subject, see especially McCane 2003). For example, fuller understanding of Jewish burial conventions and sensitivities almost certainly rules out the controversial hypothesis advanced nearly a decade ago that Jesus was perhaps not buried at all, but was left hanging on the

cross to be mauled and eaten by animals. (This hypothesis will be criticized in chapter 5.) Other ossuary inscriptions actually shed light on various teachings of Jesus and various persons and officials with whom Jesus probably came into contact. All considered, there is in fact much context to explore.

The discovery of the James ossuary and the interest it has aroused provide an opportunity (now that scholars, as well as the general public, are paying attention) to survey the most important artifacts for the study of Jesus and his earliest followers (for overview, see Meyers and Strange 1981; Meyers 1988; Strange 1992; Boadt 1993; Feldman and Roth 2002). Jewish sepulture is but one aspect of archaeology. We have important inscriptions, usually incised in stone, though sometimes in metal or pottery, and we have important things written in ink (e.g., on potsherds or *ostraca*) or even in charcoal (e.g., on the walls of burial vaults). Sometimes interesting things are found in ossuaries and burial vaults, such as coins and pottery, which help us with dates and sometimes surprise us with unexpected customs.

The focus of the present study is deliberately quite narrow. Ossuaries and burial inscriptions are the primary focus, but other important inscriptions will also be taken into account. Other aspects of archaeology are not the focus of the present study. Much here could be said about recent archaeology in Galilee—the ongoing work at Sepphoris, some of the new work under way at Nazareth (superseding the older reports in Bagatti 1967), the promising finds recently made at Capernaum, and so forth. Continuing work in and around Jerusalem is of immense importance, whether in reference to the Temple Mount, the ruins of the priestly mansion, and the many other building foundations and ruins from the Herodian period excavated since the Six Day War (June 1967). The impact that this work has had for better understanding of Jewish Palestine in the first century can hardly be overestimated.

One interesting and highly significant feature may be mentioned briefly. It is a feature that helps find the broader context for all that follows. Archaeology of Galilee in the last two decades or so has exposed the extent to which the Jews of Galilee prior to 70 C.E. adhered to their faith. It was not long ago that it was fashionable among New Testament scholars to think of Galilee as a Greek-speaking cosmopolitan world, where the Jewish people readily compromised in matters of tradition and religion, adopting Greco-Roman beliefs and practices. But commerce in earthenware (where the evidence suggests that Jews bought only from Jews, whereas non-Jews bought from Jews and non-Jews), the

presence of stone water pots (which are not susceptible to impurity) and *mikvaot* (Jewish “baptistries,” for ritual cleansing), the absence of pagan buildings (such as nymphaea and temples in honor of various Greco-Roman deities) strongly attest to the Torah-observant nature of the Jewish people. Pockets of non-Jews may well have been present in Galilee (and they were, especially in the cities of the Decapolis), but they did not dominate the province, nor did the Jewish people capitulate in matters of religion (Meyers 1992a).

The relevance of these findings cannot be more dramatically illustrated than in the case of Sepphoris (e.g., Meyers, Netzer, Meyers 1986; Miller 1992; Meyers 1993), a city just four miles from Nazareth. The discovery of a theatre, which may have been built in the early first century C.E. (Batey 1984), a paved, colonnaded street, and several buildings, which at points reflect Greco-Roman architecture, led some scholars to think that Jesus grew up in the shadow of a Greco-Roman city, a city perhaps not too Jewish in ambience. Add to this picture a hypothetical Cynic or two and perhaps one can conjure up a Cynic Jesus (Crossan 1991, among others).

But ongoing excavations at Sepphoris have dashed to pieces this fanciful picture. The city dump has been found, and stratigraphical analysis reveals that whereas one third of the faunal remains (i.e., animal bones) *after* 70 C.E. are pig, none of the faunal remains prior to 70 C.E. are pig. A non-Jewish population in Sepphoris *prior* to 70 C.E., that is, in the time of Jesus, either did not exist at all, or, if it did, did not eat as non-Jews usually do. It seems that the inhabitants of Sepphoris were rather strongly Jewish after all. But there is more. Several *mikvaot* have been uncovered, no pagan structures have been found, fragments of stone water pots have been found, no pagan images have been found, and Jewish symbols have been found (such as depictions of the menorah). The impression thus far gained is that Sepphoris was a thoroughly Jewish city (Chancey and Meyers 2001; Chancey 2002). The hypothesis of the presence of a Cynic philosopher or two, recruiting and making disciples of young Jewish men from nearby villages like Nazareth, seems most improbable. What we have learned is that although there were urban centers in Galilee of the first century, where Greek was in fact spoken, and that aspects of Jesus’ teaching and activity reflect this reality (cf. Strange 1992), the Jewish population was committed to its historic, biblical faith. It is in this context that Jesus’ teaching and activities should be understood.

The investigation of Jewish burial practices that follows is one aspect of the study of material culture, that is, the physical remains of culture (as opposed to culture inferred from written sources). The literary evidence will be consulted, to be sure, but the primary focus will be upon the artifacts that have been found, particularly those bearing inscriptions, artwork, and designs. What we shall find is that the newly discovered James ossuary is part of Jewish life in late antiquity, richly attested by the remains of material culture, that tells us a great deal about the world of James and his brother Jesus.

Scholarly Sources

The present study has been made possible by several important catalogues and studies. Foremost among these is Levi Yizhaq Rahmani's *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries* (1994a), which catalogues some 895 ossuaries, providing descriptions, photographic plates (of most), and facsimiles of inscriptions (which appear on about one quarter of the ossuaries). This tool is indispensable. However, it is not complete. There are other Jewish ossuaries discussed in the literature that do not appear in this catalogue. The older work by Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, though dated, is still useful. The first three volumes of this thirteen-volume work are the most pertinent, with volume 1 (1953a) discussing archaeological evidence, including ossuaries and tombs, from Palestine, volume 2 (1953b) discussing archaeological evidence, including ossuaries, from the Diaspora (i.e., places where Jews lived outside the land of Israel), and volume 3 (1953c) exhibiting photographic plates of the artifacts discussed in volumes 1 and 2. Pau Figueras's *Decorated Jewish Ossuaries* (1983) updates Goodenough's classic at important points. For synthesis and interpretation Eric Meyers's *Jewish Ossuaries* (1971) is the critical point of departure for the subject at hand.

Other scholars in the field of Jewish ossuaries, tombs, and burial practices, who have made important and helpful contributions, include Nahman Avigad, Zvi Greenhut, Rachel Hachlili, Amos Kloner, and Ronny Reich. Frequent reference will be made to the excavation and study of the Beth She'arim necropolis in Galilee. Volume 1, edited by Benjamin Mazar (1973), publishes the findings from catacombs 1–4, which includes some Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions. Volume 2, edited by Moshe Schwabe and Baruch Lifshitz (1974), publishes the Greek inscriptions, and volume 3, edited by Nahman Avigad (1976),

completes and summarizes the findings of all of the catacombs and tombs excavated. The finds at Dominus Flevit, at the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, are also very important and are referred to many times (Bagatti and Milik 1958). The early collections of Jewish Palestinian inscriptions, collected and edited by Samuel Klein (1920) and Jean-Baptiste Frey (= *CIJ*), and Eleazar Lippa Sukenik's pioneering works in archaeology, involving tombs, ossuaries, and ancient synagogues, are quite valuable. I might also mention that the finds and seminal studies by the great French archaeologist of the late nineteenth century, Charles Clermont-Ganneau, though dated, are still worth consulting (see Clermont-Ganneau 1873; 1878; 1899; as well as the pioneering studies of others, such as Hornstein 1900; Vincent 1902; Macalister 1908; Lidzbarski 1913; Gray 1914; Spoer 1914; Sukenik 1928; 1929; 1931a; 1932a; 1934b; Savignac 1929; and Maisler 1931).

There are other important collections of primary texts that should be mentioned. The collection of Aramaic texts (literary and inscriptional) assembled by Joseph Fitzmyer and Daniel Harrington is invaluable (1978). The Jewish inscriptions of Greco-Roman Egypt catalogued by William Horbury and David Noy (1992), of Rome catalogued by Harry Leon (1995), and of the Diaspora in general catalogued by Pieter van der Horst (1991) were of great help. The published ostraca from Masada (= Mas), by Yigael Yadin and his many successors, were also of great help. And finally, Tal Ilan's *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity* (2002) was enormously helpful.

Terminology

At the close of this introduction it will be useful to review the terminology involved in Jewish burial practices. This terminology will at points have a bearing on some of the issues. The focus here is primarily on the terminology. Burial practices will be further discussed in chapter 1.

In the Hebrew Bible the words used most often for tomb (or grave) and burial are the verb קָבַר (*qabar*, "to bury") and its nominal cognates קֶבֶר (*qeber*) and קְבֻרָה (*qeburah*), both meaning "grave." The Greek version of Scripture (i.e., either LXX or OG) usually translates these words with the verb θάπτειν (*thaptein*) and the cognate noun τάφος (*taphos*) or the nouns μνημεῖον (*mnemeion*) and μνήμα (*mnema*; the root meaning of these last two is "memorial," not burial). Accordingly, Abraham buys a cave for Sarah, his deceased wife, as a "burying place" (so the

RSV), or tomb (Gen 23:4, with קבר, *qeber*, in the Hebrew, and τάφος in the Greek). Similarly, Rachel is buried near Bethlehem (Gen 35:19, with קבר in the Hebrew, and θάπτειν in the Greek) and her husband Jacob (Gen 35:20) places a pillar or monument (in Hebrew מצבה, *mazebah*; in Greek στήλη, *stèle*) over her grave (in Hebrew קבור, *qeburah*; in Greek μνημείον). King Asa is buried in a “tomb [in Hebrew קבר, *qeber*; in Greek μνήμα] which he had hewn out for himself in the city of David” (2 Chr 16:14). While engaged in his campaign of religious reform, King Josiah “asked, ‘What is yonder monument [in Hebrew צִיָּיִט, *ziyyun*; in Greek σκόπελον, *skopelon*] that I see?’ And the men of the city told him, ‘It is the tomb [in Hebrew קבר, *qeber*; no equivalent in Greek] of the man of God . . .’” (2 Kgs 23:17). Sometimes “house” (in Hebrew בית, *bayit*; in Greek οἶκος, *oikos*) is used euphemistically in reference to a tomb (e.g., Isa 14:18).

The biblical terminology appears in later Jewish epitaphs: “. . . with my bridal garments, I, untimely, have received this hateful tomb [τάφος] as my bridal chamber . . .” (*CIJ* no. 1508; Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 31); “But you, passer-by, beholding the grave [τάφος] of a good man, depart with these favorable words . . .” (*CPJ* no. 1530a; Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 39); “I am Theon, son of Paos, who, best in counsel, lie here dead in this tomb [μνημηῶν, *mnemeon* = *mnemeion*]” (*CIJ* no. 1489; Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 114); “Tomb [μνήμα] of Eusebius the Alexandrian and of Theodora his wife” (*CIJ* no. 696; Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 144); “Tomb [μνήμα] of Cyril and Alexander, Alexandrians” (*CIJ* no. 934; Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 150); “The gravestone [στάλα, *stala* = *stèle*] bears witness: ‘Who are you that lie in the dark tomb [τύμβος, *tumbos*]?’” (*CIJ* no. 1530; Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 38); and “Look on my gravestone [στήλη], passer-by, and having considered it, weep” (*CIJ* no. 1512; Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 35).

Specific words that mean “ossuary” do not appear in the Bible, but words in the Bible that mean coffin, chest, or the like, were later used in reference to ossuaries. One of these words is גדיש (*gadish*), which occurs four times in the Hebrew Bible, one of which refers to a coffin: “When he is borne to the grave, watch is kept over his coffin [גדיש]” (Job 21:32). In the OG *gadish* is translated with σορός (*soros*). Another word is ארון (*aron*), which can mean ark, box, or coffin, as in the interment of Joseph: “So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin [רון] in Egypt” (Gen

50:26). Again in the OG *σορός* is used in the translation. This Greek word appears in an inscription on an ossuary found in Jericho: “Ossuary [*σορός*] of Theodotos, freedman of Queen Agrippina” (Rahmani 1994a, no. 789; Hachlili 1979, 55). When *σορός* appears in Luke 7:14, it clearly refers to a coffin, in which a corpse not yet decomposed has been laid.

Various spellings of the Hebrew word *aron* appear in at least seven burial inscriptions found at Beth She‘arim. Most, if not all of them, are in reference to coffins or sarcophagi. However, two of them may have been in reference to ossuaries, in which the bones of two or more persons were placed, e.g., “This is the *aron* of the three sons of Rabbi Judan” (Avigad 1976, no. 22), and perhaps “Miriam, the daughter of Rabbi Jonathan, with her two daughters” (Avigad 1976, no. 21). The first inscription seems to imply that the remains of the three sons of Rabbi Judan were together in the same *aron*. Since *bodies* as such were not placed in the same coffin or sarcophagus, it seems best to conclude, as does Meyers (1971, 52), that it was the *bones* of the three sons, which were placed in the single *aron*, not their corpses, prior to decomposition. Thus, the *aron* mentioned in the inscription is an ossuary. The second inscription that refers to Miriam “with her two daughters” does not mention an *aron*. But the statement that the mother is *with* her daughters seems to imply that we have yet another instance of the use of an ossuary at Beth She‘arim (probably dating to the third or fourth century C.E.). The other five inscriptions where *aron* is used are all in reference to single individuals, but whether the word is in reference to a full body-sized coffin or to an ossuary, in which the bones of the deceased were later placed, is not certain.

In late antiquity the coffin was often called a *sarcophagus*, from the Greek word *σαρκοφάγος*, which literally means “flesh eater” (i.e., the genitive *σαρκός*, “of flesh,” plus *φάγος*, “eater”; accordingly, “eater of flesh”). Many sarcophagi were made of stone, though they could be made of wood or even of clay (which are attested at Beth She‘arim). The Greek word does not occur in the Bible, but its nominal cognate *σαρκοφαγία* (“eating flesh” or “meat”) does (4 Macc 5:8, 14), as well as the verbal cognate *σαρκοφαγείν* (4 Macc 5:26). The related term *σοματοθήκη*, meaning “place of body,” is attested in Jewish epitaphs (CIJ nos. 785, 792, 793; Meyers 1971, 50). The concept of “flesh eater” is seen in rabbinic literature: “At first they would bury them in ditches, and when the flesh decayed they would gather the bones and bury them in ossuaries” (y. *Sanh.* 6.12; translation by Meyers 1971, 59). What is

translated “when the flesh decayed” is literally “when the flesh was eaten” (נְהִאכַל הַבָּשָׂר, *nitekol habasar*).

The similar word *ostophagus*, from the Greek word ὀστοφάγος, which literally means “bone eater” (on analogy with sarcophagus), is our earliest term for ossuary attested in Palestine (Conder 1876; Meyers 1971, 49–50; Hachlili 1979, 55–56). An ossuary was discovered in the Kidron Valley, Jerusalem, on which only the word ὀστοφάγος, written twice, appears (cf. Sukenik 1937, 130 + plates 5–6; Rahmani 1994a, no. 85). Meyers (1971, 49) rightly comments (*pace* Sukenik 1937, 13) that *ostophagus* was not understood to mean “bone eater,” since the receptacle was meant to *preserve*, not *consume*, the bones of the deceased. He is probably correct. Nevertheless, the word ὀστοφάγος literally does mean “bone eater,” just as surely as *sarκοφάγος* literally means “flesh eater.” But in what sense are these receptacles—coffins, ossuaries, or whatever—“eaters” of anything? The answer may lie in the observation of ancient bone receptacles fashioned to resemble a head and face, with mouths opened wide. These receptacles “ate” (or perhaps, better, “swallowed”) whatever was placed in them, whether a corpse that still possessed flesh, or a satchel of bones, whose flesh had long ago disappeared. In other words, the receptacle itself does not consume, or “eat,” either the flesh or the bones, it merely swallows what is placed in it. The receptacle becomes an “eater” of something, merely by virtue of having something placed in it.

Meyers (1971, 49–50) draws our attention to several other related Greek terms that refer to ossuaries, or bone boxes. These include ὀστοθήκης, ὀστοθήκιον, and ὀστοθηκάριον, all of which basically mean “bone chest” (from ὀστέον, “bone,” and θήκη, *theke*, “chest,” i.e., a place where things, in this case bones, are *placed*, from the verb τίθειναι). Apparently ὀστόν, “bone,” by itself, can mean “bone box” or ossuary, as we see in an inscription from Beth She‘arim: “This is the very grave, the one from the lowermost of the ossuaries [ὀστῶν]” (Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974, no. 131; cf. Meyers 1971, 51). The Greek word ὀστόν may well underlie the textually uncertain reading in an important passage in the rabbinic tractate *Mourning*: “Whoever finds bones in a tomb [*qeber*] should place them in an arcosolium, so Rabbi Aqiba. The Sages say, ‘One should not remove them from their place. If one found them in a niche or ossuary, he should not move them from their place’” (*Semahot* 13.6; Zlotnick 1966, 84; Meyers 1971, 61). The Hebrew underlying the word translated here “ossuary” is, in most manuscripts, אִיסְטָרוֹן (*isteron*). But Meyers (1971, 62) plausibly suggests that the original reading was

איסטדון (*istedon*), on the assumption that the *dalet* (i.e., the letter d) became confused with *resh* (i.e., the letter r). If איסטדון (*istedon*) is the correct reading, then we probably have a loanword from the Greek ὀστῶν, “bone.” Accordingly, איסטדון may well mean “bone box” or “ossuary,” as was translated.

The most common word for ossuary is the Greek word γλωσσόκομον, which is transliterated into Hebrew and Aramaic as גלוסקמא and דלוסקמא (cf. Jastrow 247; Krauss 2:175–75), meaning “chest,” “box,” “coffin,” or “coffer” (originally, *apud* LSJ, “a case for the mouthpiece of a pipe”; cf. Meyers 1971, 53). The Greek form of this word occurs in only one passage in the OG, where it appears in reference to a money box placed by the Jewish temple, into which people could drop money (cf. 2 Chr 24:8–11). In the New Testament the word appears twice in the Gospel of John, with essentially the same meaning, both times in reference to the money box kept by Judas Iscariot (cf. John 12:6; 13:29). The word appears in one of the Greek inscriptions from Beth She‘arim, though spelled irregularly: “Magna rests in the ossuary [γλωσσόκομῳ]” (Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974, no. 78; cf. Meyers 1971, 54; Hachlili 1979, 55).

The Hebrew and Aramaic forms of the word are common in rabbinic and targumic literature. We see this at Genesis 50:26 (as pointed out by Meyers 1971, 53): “So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt” (RSV). In the Hebrew “coffin” is ארון (*aron*), in Greek it is σορός (*soros*), and in the Targum, that is, the Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible, it is (*apud* Ps.-Jonathan, Fragment, and Neofiti in a marginal note) גלוסקמא (*glosqoma*). We also see it in the oft-cited passage in the rabbinic tractate on *Mourning*: “My son, bury me at first in a fosse. In the course of time, collect my bones and put them in an ossuary [גלוסקמא]; but do not gather them with your own hands” (*Semahot* 12.9, following the translation by Zlotnick 1966, 82; cf. *Semahot* 3.2).

Aramaic and Hebrew, however, had their own terms for ossuary. The above mentioned ארון (*aron*) is one. Another is הלה (*halah*), or הלה / הלהה / הלהה (*halat / haltah / halta'*) in the construct, which appears in several ossuary inscriptions: “Ossuary [הלה] of Salome, daughter of Saul, who failed to give birth” (Rahmani 1994a, no. 226; Fitzmyer and Harrington 1978, 172–73 no. 88); “Ossuary [הלה] of Balzama” (Rahmani 1994a, no. 461); “Everything that a man will find to his profit in this ossuary [הלהה] . . .” (Milik 1956–1957: 235 + figs. 2 and 3; Fitzmyer 1959; Fitzmyer and Harrington 1978, 168–69 no. 69); and

“Ossuary [הלהיא] of Maryam, daughter of Simeon” (Rahmani 1994a, no. 502).

Finally, a few words need to be said about the general design and function of the Jewish tomb. Many tombs consist of a central chamber, with two or more niches branching out from it. Some tombs are honey-combed with niches (cf. Oren and Rappaport 1984). In Hebrew the niche is called a כֹּחַ (*kokh*); in Latin *loculus*. Some tombs also contained *arcosolia*. An *arcosolium* is a ledge beneath an arch, on which a body or a sarcophagus could be placed. Bodies were placed in these *arcosolia* and niches. The family mourned for seven days (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 17.8.4 §200). Usually about one year later (as inferred from *b. Qiddushin* 31b; cf. Figueras 1984–1985, 45) the bones of the deceased were gathered and placed in an ossuary. The ossuaries themselves were then placed in a room, often stacked. They were sometimes placed in the niches themselves or in the central chamber. (In a tomb at Jericho four ossuaries were found in a single niche; cf. Hachlili 1979, 56–57.) There are burial inscriptions in which the word *kokh* appears: “This *kokh* [כֹּחַ] was made for the bones of our fathers. Length two cubits. Not to be opened!” (*CIJ* no. 1300; Fitzmyer and Harrington 1978, 168–69; Meyers 1971, 66). *Kokh* can also be spelled קֹק (qoq), as in this poorly preserved inscription: “This is the *kokh* [קֹק] of . . . Alas! And his daughter” (*CIJ* no. 1222; Fitzmyer and Harrington 1978, 182–83). Sometimes the niches were sealed with stone blocks or doors. The tombs themselves were sealed with large stones, which were usually square blocks; but the wheel-shaped stones that rolled in front of the opening were also used (as in the popular Garden Tomb in Jerusalem).

Relevance of Topic for New Testament Study

Acquaintance with Jewish burial customs will shed light on many passages in the New Testament Gospels. Here are a few examples; others will be treated in context of specific finds that will be reviewed in chapters that follow.

The presence of tombs and monuments is presupposed in the Gospels. One immediately thinks of Jesus’ angry denunciation of religious leaders: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs [τάφοι], which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men’s bones [ὀστέων νεκρῶν] and all uncleanness” (Matt 23:27); and “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you build the tombs [τάφοι] of the prophets and adorn

monuments [μνημεῖα] of the righteous” (Matt 23:29; cf. Luke 11:47–48).

Secondary burial may well be presupposed in Jesus’ startling retort to the would-be follower: “Leave the dead to bury their own dead!” (Matt 8:22 = Luke 9:60). According to rabbinic tradition, secondary burial of one’s family members was one of the three most important religious ceremonies (cf. *Semahot* 12.5; Figueras 1983, 9). In at least one tradition, a father specifically commands his son regarding the former’s eventual reburial (*Semahot* 12.9). Accordingly, when the would-be follower of Jesus says to Jesus, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father” (Matt 8:21 = Luke 9:59), he is not talking about waiting for the death of an aging or ailing father, but anticipation of the approaching time when he must gather his father’s bones and place them in an ossuary, at which time the mourning and rites for his father are finally completed. Jesus’ reply, moreover, probably should be taken as referring to the literal dead, not metaphorical or spiritual dead. “Leave the dead to bury their own dead!” means let the dead who are in the family tomb with the corpse of the would-be follower’s father see to the burial (McCane 1990, 40–41). The surviving and living son should get on with the urgent work of proclaiming the kingdom of God.

Josephus and the Gospels narrate the arrest and execution of John the Baptist (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.5.2 §116–19; Mark 6:14–29 and parallels). According to the Gospels, to keep an oath made before dinner guests Herod Antipas has John beheaded and then delivers his head on a platter to his step-daughter (Mark 6:27–28). John’s disciples collect the body (but not his head, we should assume) and they place it in a tomb (v. 29). The head went to the girl’s mother, the new wife of Herod (v. 28). What is interesting is that some time later, when Herod hears of Jesus’ ministry, he comes to believe that Jesus is John, declaring “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised” (v. 16). To readers familiar with Jewish burial customs and beliefs, this would be truly astounding. The raising of John would be amazing in itself. But for him to be raised without his head would only add to the hyperbole of the comparison with Jesus. The skull was the most important bone of the skeleton. In fact, some secondary burial only involved the skull (cf. Meyers 1970, 19, who draws our attention to the basket of skulls found in the Bar Kokhba cave at Nahal Hever; see also Bennett 1965, 525 + fig. 266; Meyers 1971, 9). The absence of the skull, which in the possession of Herod’s angry and vengeful wife would surely not have been properly buried and therefore would never have been rejoined to the rest of John’s body,

would make resurrection all the more doubtful, at least a resurrection before the time of the general resurrection and judgment. Herod's declaration that Jesus must be John, whom he beheaded, attests to the despot's fearful respect of the power he sensed was at work in Jesus, a power that not only must be from beyond the confines of the mortal realm, but a power not limited by the conventions of death, burial, and resurrection.

Familiarity with Jewish burial practices fills in details in the story of the death, burial, and resuscitation of Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha (John 11). Lazarus dies and is buried in a *μνημεῖον*, or tomb (vv. 17, 31), which later we are told is a *σπήλαιον*, or cave (v. 38). Many of the tombs in Israel, including in and around Jerusalem itself, are natural caves, which have been shaped and dressed to some extent (and recall, too, that Abraham purchased a cave [OG: *σπήλαιον*] for the burial of Sarah, and then was later himself buried in it; Gen 23:9, 19; 25:9-10). Although obviously dead and interred, Lazarus is said, euphemistically, to be "asleep" (cf. the verb *κοιμᾶν* in v. 11; the noun *κοίμησις* in v. 13). We find this euphemism in early Jewish Christian literature (e.g., 1 Cor 15:20; 1 Thess 4:13; 2 Pet 3:4) and in Jewish burial inscriptions: ". . . I too, who loved my brothers and was a friend to all the citizens, fell asleep [*κοιμᾶν*] . . ." (CIJ no. 1489; Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 114); "May your portion be a good one, Aristeas; may the sleep [*κοίμησις*] of the pious Aristeas be in peace" (from Beth She'arim; cf. Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974, no. 173); and "May your sleep be in peace" (see CIJ no. 1535; Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 120; for the same formula, but in Latin, see CIJ no. 644; Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 142); as well as in Christian epitaphs, "Father Menas has fallen asleep in Christ" (Lifshitz 1963b, 265).

There is another detail in this story that is clarified by Jewish burial traditions. Twice it is stated that Lazarus had been dead for four days (vv. 17, 39). We probably have an allusion to the popular belief that the soul, having lingered near the body for three days, has now finally departed: "For three days (after death) the soul hovers over the body, intending to re-enter it, but as soon as it sees its appearance change, it departs" (*Lev. Rab.* 18.1 [on Lev 15:1-2]). This tradition presupposes the idea that after three days, the corpse bursts and is no longer recognizable: "The full intensity of mourning lasts up to the third day because the appearance of the face is still recognizable" (*Qoh. Rab.* 12:6 §1). Thus, when Jesus arrives at the tomb of Lazarus, despair has reached its

lowest point. There is now, even with the arrival of Jesus, absolutely no hope of recovery: the body is dead (and has begun to stink; cf. v. 39) and the soul has departed. Hence, the sister of Lazarus says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (v. 21). The only hope left is resurrection some day in the future (v. 24). Seen in the light of these popular assumptions, Jesus’ ability to raise Lazarus, dead for four days, would have been viewed as astounding.

Jesus’ command to “Remove the stone” (v. 39), in order to enter the tomb of Lazarus, parallels the story of his own burial and the subsequent discovery of the empty tomb. In this story too a stone is rolled against the opening of the tomb (cut from rock; not a natural cave; Mark 15:46). The stone is large, for although it is round (as implied by the question, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?” in Mark 16:3; and “it was rolled back” in 16:4), it is too heavy for the women (Mark 16:4: “it was very large”). Again, what the Gospels depict is consistent with what is known from archaeology and from literary and epigraphical sources.

Finally, we may wonder if Jewish burial practices, particularly the custom of gathering bones and placing them in ossuaries, can clarify the exceedingly odd story found in Matt 27:51-53, where at the moment of Jesus’ death an earthquake occurs:

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints [*hagioi*] who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

This story is unparalleled; there is no counterpart in Mark, Matthew’s principal narrative source. Nor does the story appear in Luke, which also follows Mark. The story does remind us somewhat of John 5:28-29: “. . . the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth . . . to the resurrection . . .” (cf. Dan 12:2: “. . . many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake . . .”; Zech 14:4-5: “. . . the Mount of Olives shall be split in two . . . earthquake . . . the LORD your God will come, and all the saints with him”; and Ezek 37:12-13: “I shall open your tombs”). If Daniel and Zechariah in part lie behind this strange story, then we are perhaps to imagine the prophecy in Daniel 7:22, 27, in which the saints (OG: *hagioi*) are given the kingdom, have their tombs opened by God (Ezek 37:12-13), are raised up

(Dan 12:2), and, in Zechariah 14:4-5, after the earthquake, come as saints (OG: *hagioi*).

The absence of the story in Mark, the parallel with the saying in John, and the grammatical and temporal awkwardness of the story in its Matthean context lead one to suspect that this story is a later interpolation, perhaps inspired by John 5. The greatest difficulty is the temporal problem. According to our amazing story, the saints “who had fallen asleep,” that is, died, were raised when their tombs were unsealed during the earthquake, which occurred at the moment of Jesus’ death. But because Jesus is the “first fruits” of them that sleep (cf. 1 Cor 15:20, 23), these raised saints can hardly emerge from their tombs before Jesus himself does a couple days later. Consequently, they must linger in their tombs until Sunday morning. Then they may emerge and show themselves alive. The clumsiness of the chronology argues for viewing this strange story as an insertion into the Matthean narrative, an insertion perhaps dating to the second century (though some think it may be older, traditional material, dating to the first century).

Whatever the editorial history of the story, the practice of gathering bones and placing them in ossuaries is very probably presupposed. These dead saints are resurrected, as foretold in Daniel 12, and come with the Lord, as foretold in Zechariah 14. As such, they foreshadow the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision of the bones that are reassembled and restored to life (Ezek 37). In Ezekiel 37:12-13 God promised to open the tombs of his people; in the death and resurrection of Jesus God fulfilled this promise.

In the chapters that follow several other Gospel passages will be examined in light of burial practices and inscriptions. It is hoped that readers will find this admittedly macabre topic enlightening and interesting. I am reminded, of course, that in the opinion of some rabbinic authorities long ago the reading of epitaphs impedes learning (cf. *b. Hor.* 13b). Let us hope in this instance their warning does not apply!