

# Whited sepulchres

IN HIS condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees Jesus said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto *whited sepulchres*, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness” (Mt. 23:27).

The question is, what is a “whited sepulchre”? For the answer, it depends where you look. Some say it was the tomb or the door to the tomb that was whited. “As the law considered those unclean who had touched any thing belonging to the dead, the Jews took care to have their tombs whitewashed each year, that being easily *discovered*, they might be consequently *avoided*” (*Adam Clarke’s Commentary*).

However, this may not be what our Lord was referring to. It is much more likely he was referring to the practice of using stone boxes to store bones in after the flesh had decomposed. These boxes are called ossuaries and were usually made of limestone and often whitewashed. The following extracts from articles explain the practice of storing the bones of the dead at the time of Jesus.

“In Judaism in the first century B.C. to about A.D. 70, as space for burial tombs was scarce, it was the Jewish burial custom to place their dead in a cave for a year, and once the body had become skeletonised, the bones were collected and placed in

a chest that served as the ossuary. It is also referred to as a bone box. Some ossuaries were found to be intricately carved, some with feet. The ossuary of the high priest Caiaphas has been discovered from these times” (*Wikipedia*);

“This limestone chest was used to hold the bones of a dead person or family which had been gathered together after burial in the soil, when the flesh had decomposed. The elaborate decoration may imitate a well-known building, possibly the Temple in Jerusalem started by Herod the Great and completed in A.D. 64.

“The practice of family burial required secondary interment, that is the gathering of bones to make room for a new generation of deceased family members. Burials were usually first made in pits but the wealthy cut a tomb cave” (British Museum website, comment on a picture of an ossuary).



*Peter Cox*