

Hope in a Box of Bones

J.W. Francis

The Master's University, Santa Clarita, CA

Editor: T.C. Wood

Received March 24, 2016; Accepted March 25, 2016; Published May 9, 2016



At the Master's College where I teach, we have a collection of fossil replicas representing an array of hominins with tongue-twisting names: *Australopithecus afarensis*, *Ardipithecus ramidis*, Neandertals. We use these bones in our teaching labs to give students first-hand experience with the shape and size of these long-dead creatures. The bones come in handy for other things too, and when I was asked to speak about creation at a church in northern California, I took a box of bones with me.

After checking into the hotel, I went back to my car to get my bones. Heads turned and eyebrows raised as I carried them through the lobby, so I assured the concierge that the bones were just replicas and I was not a serial murderer. With a sly smile, she said, "Maybe I won't tell the cleaning staff. I want to see their faces."

Arriving at the church the next day, I carried my box to the front of the auditorium, where I was quickly surrounded by curious

children and teens. I was supposed to be getting ready for my presentation, but I was pelted with questions. What are these? Are they real? Where did they come from? Is this "Lucy?" I tried to answer as many as I could.

Many young people (including my current students) have been taught very strict things about human origins, and human evolution is understood as an enemy of Christian faith and the teaching in their churches. Yet they remain fascinated and interested in that box of bones, as if they were something almost taboo. After all, if they're not ape-men intermediates, then what are they? What could they mean?

In young-age creationism, this question of interpreting the data of human origins is one of our most pressing questions. From nearly every corner of the culture, we are buffeted with supposedly "incontrovertible" evidence of human evolution. We are accustomed to hearing it from atheists and museums, but recently,

some evangelical scholars have begun to say the same sort of things. A minority of evangelicals have sided with the culture, viewing young-age creationism as a pariah, an embarrassment, a disease on the healthy life of the church. The resulting conflict and debate whether real or perceived leads to one important question. If these fossils are not ape-men intermediates, then what are they?

The good news is that we need not fear this state of affairs. A box of bones doesn't have to be intimidating. A box of bones can hold hope too. In Genesis 49, as Joseph's life was coming to an end, he used his own bones as a sign of hope for the Israelites. "Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.'" So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt" (Gen. 49:25-26).

God's promises had given hope to Joseph while he suffered in Egypt (Psalm 105:17-19). That seems to be the purpose of the promises that God gave to Joseph in his dreams (Genesis 37:5-10). And Joseph wanted to leave something so that God's promises would give hope to the family during their troubles. What he left was his own bones (<http://www.usefulbible.com/hebrews/bones-of-joseph.htm>).

Joseph wanted his bones buried in a certain place as a message of hope to the Israelites after their many years of tribulation and enslavement so they had to carry them around. He knew they would attract attention. Etched in my memory is a scene from a Hollywood movie about the Exodus showing the Israelites reverently carrying the bones of Joseph in an elaborate box.

And so it is with my box of bones. Here we are as scientist Christians living in a hostile, evolutionary culture, just as the

Israelites lived in the hostile Egyptian culture. Though oppressive, that culture is tempting and strangely attractive. It would be easy to just accept the culture and forget about all the theological problems evolution entails, but if we really believe that God has revealed the true history of the world in the opening chapters of Genesis, then we should not be afraid of or annoyed by the latest fossil hominins. They ought to inspire hope and excitement that God's Word is still true and that we will better understand His creation the more we learn about it. And the more we learn, the better we will be able to respond to that hard question: If these fossils are not ape-men intermediates, then what are they?

Building a better understanding of God's creation is why I am so thrilled about this special issue of the *Journal of Creation Theology and Science*. This collection of papers represents one of the first concerted efforts by a group of young-age creationists to explain human origins and hominin fossils in a peer reviewed format. The papers presented here were inspired by the announcement of the newly-discovered *Homo naledi* in September, 2015. This new box of *H. naledi* bones spurred this group of scholars once again to re-examine their understanding of human origins, and they asked difficult questions. Can we creationists continue to claim that there is a hard line between human and nonhuman? What about evidence of gradual evolution? What do these new discoveries mean for our understanding of the Flood or the tower of Babel? I'll let you discover for yourself what their answers are, but I think you will be as excited as I am to read their conclusions. Just like the Israelites carrying Joseph's remains out of Egypt, I think you too will discover God's gift of hope in a box of bones.