

Holy Land Bible Study Tour



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**Tuesday
May 26, 2015**

Ben Gurion Airport

David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973) was the first Prime Minister of Israel and is considered the State's main founder. He was born in Poland in 1886 and immigrated to the land of Israel in 1906. He founded trade unions and helped organize agricultural workers and self-defense groups before proclaiming the State of Israel on May 14, 1948.

The country's main international airport is named in his honor. Constructed in 1936, Wihelma airport was later renamed RAF Station Lydda in 1943. It was renamed Ben Gurion International Airport in 1973. Remodeling began in 1994, with Terminal 3 opening in 2004. The airport handled 14.2 million passengers in 2013.

Tel Aviv

Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) was a Viennese Jewish writer whose encounters with anti-Semitism led him to believe that the Jewish people must create their own nation. In 1896 he published *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State), proposing that Jews around the world contribute to a company that would work toward such a state. He convened six Zionist Congresses between 1897 and 1902 to forge and develop the movement. He coined the phrase "If you will, it is no fairytale," which became the motto of Zionism. In 1949, his remains were brought to Israel and reinterred on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem.

In Ezekiel 3:15, the prophet states, "I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Aviv near the Kebar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days—deeply distressed." This scene from the Babylonian exile became the title of Herzl's 1902 novel outlining his vision for a Jewish state in the land of Israel.

The Israeli city of Tel Aviv was founded by Jewish settlers in 1909. "Tel" means "mound," a man-made mound of civilizations built one on top of the other. "Aviv" means "spring." The city of Tel Aviv was founded by Jewish settlers in 1909 and given this name a year later to symbolize the renewal of the Jewish people, and to express solidarity with Herzl's vision for the nation.

The city was founded by Jews on the outskirts of the Arab port city of "Jaffa" ("beautiful" or "beauty"; tradition holds that Japheth, the son of Noah, founded the city). The two were merged into a single municipality in 1950. Tel Aviv is today the second-largest city in Israel, with 414,600 living within its city limits. Since the United Nations and other countries do not recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, foreign embassies are numerous here.



Tel Aviv is Israel's financial capital, and a major business and performing arts center. Its economy is second-largest in the Middle East after Dubai; it is the fifth-most visited city in the Middle East, with 2.5 million international visitors each year. It is known as “the city that never sleeps” due to its active nightclubs and party culture.

Important sites within the city include Independence Hall, where leaders signed Israel's Declaration of Independence and David Ben-Gurion announced the formation of the State of Israel; the Great Synagogue, completed in 1925 with financial support from Baron Rothschild; and Rabin Square, an outdoor plaza where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated on November 4, 1995.

Israel has the highest number of museums per capita of any country; three of the largest are located in Tel Aviv. It was named “the best gay city in the world” by American Airlines, and hosts an annual LGBT Film Festival.



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Caesarea Maritima: make Jesus your Savior

We began our Holy Land pilgrimage with a visit to Caesarea Maritima, the Roman headquarters in the region of Judea.

Caesarea Maritima (“Caesarea by the Sea”) is to be distinguished from Caesarea Philippi, to the far north of the Holy Land. Caesarea is located on the Mediterranean coast, 33 miles north of Tel Aviv, 23 miles south of Mount Carmel, and 65 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

The site was first established by Phoenician traders six centuries before Christ. After Abdashtart (known in Greek as Strato I), king of the city of Sidon, built a lighthouse and fortification here in the fourth century before Christ, the city became known as Strato’s Tower. It was seized by Jewish leaders in 96 B.C. and reopened as a Jewish settlement, but fell to Pompey and the Romans in 43 B.C. Marc Antony gave the city to Cleopatra; after his defeat by Octavian (renamed Augustus), the emperor gave it to Herod in 31 B.C.

Visitors who come to Israel by air meet Caesarea first in Ben Gurion airport, where there are three mosaic floors displayed on the entrance to the customs booths. The one on the lower right is from Caesarea, and dates to the sixth century A.D. It is decorated with animals, geometric shapes, trees and animals, as well as a woman holding a fruit basket. The mosaic depicts well the fruitful prosperity of the ancient city.

Caesarea is home to Israel’s only golf course, and is an increasingly attractive area for home building by wealthy Israelis today.

The Roman city

When Herod the Great became king of the Jews, he found that his kingdom had no suitable port. So he rebuilt Strato’s Tower in the years 25-13 B.C. and named it for Augustus Caesar, who had given it to him. By building a Roman city with a temple to the worship of the Emperor, Herod paid deference to the Romans. By also building a Jewish temple in Jerusalem for the worship of Yahweh, he paid deference to the Jews. Thus he sought to placate both.

This location appealed to Herod for several reasons. First, it was located on a major maritime shipping route that began in Alexandria, Egypt and continued along the coast of Palestine, Phoenicia and Syria. Second, this region was often hazardous for sea travel, making Herod’s port a desirable stopping point along the voyage. Third, its proximity to Jerusalem and the rest of Herod’s kingdom made the port an effective point for import and export from his country. Fourth, the fertile agricultural lands in the region made Caesarea an excellent



site for economic development. Perhaps most of all, the port's visibility to global travelers gave Herod an opportunity to showcase his architectural achievements and elevate his status among world leaders.

Here the king constructed a magnificent complex covering 1.4 square miles. According to Josephus, Herod "rebuilt it all with white stone, and adorned it with several most splendid palaces" (*Wars* 1.21.5). The city's population grew to 125,000, becoming the largest city in Judea. Herod built the largest harbor on the eastern Mediterranean coast, naming it Sebastos (the Greek name of the emperor Augustus). Roman coins identify the city as *Pontius Agusti*, the Bridge of Augustus. It may have been larger than the port of Athens, making it the largest on the Mediterranean Sea.

To build it, Herod imported over 24,000 square meters of pozzolana, a type of volcanic ash from Mount Vesuvius in Italy. This would

have required at least 44 shiploads of 400 tons each. They hardened underwater to form a 40-acre harbor which would hold 300 ships.

Josephus states that Herod used stones measuring up to 50 feet long, 10 to 18 feet wide, and nine feet deep, lowered into 120 feet of water. Recent exploration has confirmed these dimensions and discovered stones that are even larger. Herod's breakwaters protruded from the coast westward into the sea; the southern wall curved to the north, where it met the northern wall, with a 60-foot opening at the northwest corner serving as entrance to the harbor. Three massive statues of his family flanked this entrance, along with a lighthouse called Drusus, named after Caesar's son-in-law. Herod's breakwaters were eventually destroyed by an earthquake and then a tsunami; today they lie 15 feet underwater.

He built a temple dedicated to Augustus Caesar on a high platform facing this harbor. Inside stood massive statues of Augustus and Roma (the goddess of the city of Rome). He constructed elaborate public buildings, spas and entertainment facilities. Greek and Latin dedicatory inscriptions have been found here, naming governors of the province of Judea. He also constructed a theater at the southernmost part of the city, the earliest built in his kingdom. The theater held 4,000; its orchestra floor was originally paved with painted plaster, and later with marble. Its acoustics were designed so well that a coin dropped on the stage can be heard at the top of the theater. Its entrances were known as *vomitoria*, which means "vaulted passageway" in Latin. It was covered with a skin awning; visitors brought cushions to soften the stone seats.

Herod built an amphitheater in the southern sector as well. It originally seated 8,000 spectators; its capacity was eventually increased to 15,000. It functioned as a hippodrome ("hippo" is Latin for "horse"), with chariot races. A central stage was used for rulers and distinguished guests as they watched the games. An inscription has been found here to a charioteer named Morismus. In the second century, it was rebuilt and adapted as a more standard amphitheater. The western wall has been washed out by the sea, but the eastern wall and seating areas are still standing. Another large hippodrome, dating to the second century A.D. was built on the east side of the city.

The king built storerooms, palaces, public buildings, a sewer system, and a residential area. And he constructed a magnificent palace for himself just north of the theater and south of the hippodrome. Here he created a fresh-water swimming pool (115 feet long, 60 feet wide, eight feet deep), nearly Olympic size. A statue, probably of himself, once stood in the center.

Herod supplied water to the city via an aqueduct that stretches six miles to the foot of Mt. Carmel. Many inscriptions ascribe maintenance of the aqueduct to the Second and Tenth Legions. As the city continued to grow, a second aqueduct was constructed next to the first.

In the year A.D. 6, the city became the seat of Roman procurators in the province of Judea, and the headquarters of the Tenth Roman Legion. Pontius Pilate made it his headquarters, as did Antonius Felix.

The population of the city was half Jewish and half Gentile, a fact which caused continuing strife. In A.D. 66, a pagan ceremony conducted on the Sabbath near the entrance of a synagogue sparked protests which led to a revolt and the slaughter of 20,000 Jews. The Caesarean revolt escalated into the Jewish-Roman War of A.D. 66-72. Roman armies, based in Caesarea, suppressed the revolt and destroyed Jerusalem and Herod's temple in the process. Then they held games in Caesarea to celebrate their victory, slaughtering some 2,500 Jewish captives in the amphitheater during gladiatorial contests.

Roman armies were based here again during the Second Jewish Revolt (A.D. 132-35). In the second and third centuries, the city expanded further to become one of the most important in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, and became known as the "Metropolis of the Province of Syria Palaestina."

An interesting ruin is located north of the amphitheater: a large vaulted warehouse transformed into a Mithraeum. Benches along the sides and an altar at the west end were used for worship of Mithra, a pagan deity popular among Roman soldiers. An opening in the roof permits light to fall on the altar on June 21, testament to Mithra's supposed powers as the god of the sun.

The Christian city

In the early centuries of Christianity, Caesarea became an important academic center. The great scholar Origen lived here from 231-250, founding an academy with a library of 30,000 manuscripts (the largest in the Christian world). Eusebius served as Bishop of Caesarea from 313 to 340. Here he composed his church history, one of the most significant works in Christian scholarship.

An octagonal Christian church, dedicated to the martyrs, was constructed on the remains of the Roman temple which faced the original harbor. Several Corinthian capitals from this building have been discovered. Government buildings, a hall of justice, stores and warehouses were constructed. A fifth-century synagogue was built on the seashore north of the harbor, facing Jerusalem. An elaborate bathhouse has been found here as well.



Caesarea was conquered by the Arabs in 640, whose soldiers were allegedly brought through the sewers into the city. It soon dwindled in population and significance. In 1101, Crusader armies under Baldwin I captured the site. They found a green-colored hexagonal glass vessel which they declared to be the Holy Grail; it was taken to Genoa, Italy and placed in the Church of San Lorenzo. The "emerald grail" was then brought to Paris by Napoleon, and later returned to Genoa. It currently resides in a small chapel dedicated to John the Baptist.

The city was recaptured by Saladin in 1187, but retaken four years later by Richard the Lionheart, king of England, who exiled the Muslim inhabitants. Louis IX, King of France, fortified the city in 1251-52. He built a thick wall around the city, towers, and a moat that was 30 feet deep and 45 feet wide. His gatehouse was decorated with floral motifs; its doors were closed on the inside with wooden bars and protected on the outside by an iron grill, lowered through a slot in the ceiling.

Mamluks recaptured the city in 1265. Fearing a return of the Crusaders, they razed the city's walls to the ground. Its stones have been reused in other buildings all around the region, which explains why there are not more ruins at the city. In 1884, a small fishing village was established here by Muslim refugees from Bosnia; they constructed a minaret that is still visible today. They abandoned their town during the Jewish War for Independence in 1948.

Caesarea is an active archaeological site today. It is home to the world's first underwater museum, with 36 points of interest on four marked underwater trails through the ancient harbor. Divers explore these trails using waterproof maps.

The Pilate Stone

Pontius Pilatus was governor of Judea from AD 26-36, coming to his post only two years before Jesus' arrest. It was a tumultuous time.

When Pilate and his soldiers first entered Jerusalem, he required them to bring their ensigns with the image of the emperor, though earlier Roman rulers had removed these images in deference to the Jewish horror of idolatry. The Jews protested his action for five days, staging a sit-in outside his home in Caesarea. On the sixth day he gathered them in the amphitheater, where he sat upon his tribunal. He surrounded them with soldiers, and threatened to kill them if they did not drop the issue. They bared their necks to the soldiers' swords, and Pilate backed down. It was a bad beginning.

Not long thereafter, Pilate set about expanding the aqueducts which brought water into Jerusalem, but he took money from the temple treasury to pay for the project. A riot ensued which was put down only by armed aggression on the part of his soldiers.

On another occasion the governor dedicated some shields in the palace of Herod in honor of Caesar. The Jews



asked him to remove the shields, as they were inscribed with the names of donors and thus seemed idolatrous to them. Pilate refused, so the Jews appealed to Emperor Tiberius. The emperor sided with the Jews, ordering Pilate to remove the shields.

Still more recent was the incident reported to Jesus: "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices" (Luke 13:1). Apparently some Jews from Galilee had come to Jerusalem to make their sacrifices, perhaps for Passover, and had been killed by Pilate. We have no other record of this event, but it further demonstrates the governor's deteriorating relations with his subjects.

A few years after Jesus' death and resurrection, an event similar to these led to Pilate's downfall. A would-be messiah assembled a large group of Samaritans at Mt. Gerizim, where they were attacked by Pilate's cavalry. The Samaritans sent an envoy to the Vitellius, the legate of Syria, to accuse Pilate of murder. Vitellius deposed Pilate and ordered him to Rome to stand charges. But Emperor Tiberius died before Pilate reached Rome, allowing Pilate to escape. He committed suicide in AD 36.

Some historians doubted the existence of such an improbable character until June 1961, when Italian archaeologists discovered a stone in Caesarea's theater. A replica is displayed near Herod's palace; the original is on display in the Israel Museum. The carved limestone block had been reused in the fourth century as part of a set of stairs leading to the theater seats. When archaeologists unearthed it, they found this inscription:

TIBERIUM

(PON) TIUS PILATUS

(PRAEF) ECTUS IUDA(EAE)

It is most likely a dedication stone, indicating that Pilate paid for a temple dedicated to Emperor Tiberius. It had been turned upside down, which preserved its writing. Now we know that Pontius Pilatus, one of the most notorious figures in all of human history, was a fact of history.

Cornelius

Most significant for Gentile Christians is the story of Cornelius, a Roman centurion stationed in Caesarea. God gave this soldier a vision calling him to send for Simon Peter in Joppa (30 miles south along the coast); he then sent Peter a vision proclaiming all people “clean.” When Peter arrived and preached the gospel, the first Gentile conversions in Christian history resulted (Acts 10).

First-century Jews considered Gentiles to be firewood for hell. Many of the first Jewish Christians were convinced that Gentiles could become Christians only if they would first become Jews. Such a position would have kept the Christian movement confined almost exclusively to a small sect of Judaism.

Enter Cornelius. He was a “centurion,” with command over 100 soldiers within the “Italian Regiment.” (The Roman army was divided into legions of 6,000, cohorts of 600, and centurion groups of 100.) We know this to be an “auxiliary” group composed primarily of local soldiers rather than a group sent from Rome.

He was “devout and God-fearing,” a Gentile who worshiped the Jewish God. He had given so much that his “gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God” (v. 4); the phrase refers to a sacrifice accepted by the Lord. So he was told to send messengers for “a man named Simon who is called Peter” and who was “staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea” (v. 6). The fact that this Jew would stay with a tanner (whose work with dead animals rendered him ritually unclean and unable to participate in synagogue or temple services) would have been encouraging to these Gentiles.

Meanwhile, Peter went to the flat roof of Simon’s home to pray “about noon” (v. 9). He became hungry and asked for food (the Jews ate in mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and after dark). Then he saw a “large sheet” being let down, perhaps resembling an awning over the roof or the sails of boats on the Mediterranean. It contained “animals,” “reptiles,” and “birds,” the three-fold division of created life (cf. Genesis 6). Among them were unclean animals which did not chew the cud or have a cloven hoof. As dietary regulations were one of the chief divisions between Jews and Gentiles, this vision related directly to Cornelius and the conversion of Gentiles.

This vision prepared Peter to receive Cornelius’s messengers, and to go with them to the centurion. There he preached the gospel in its most fundamental form; they came to faith in Christ and began to speak in a Spirit language as proof of their conversion; and Peter had them baptized (probably by the six Jewish Christians he brought with him from Joppa). In this way the gospel came to the Gentile world.

Scholars have long viewed this story (the longest narrative in Acts) as occurring in seven stages:

- Cornelius's vision (vs. 1-8)
- Peter's vision (vs. 9-23)
- Peter's meeting with Cornelius (vs. 24-33)
- Peter's sermon (vs. 34-43)
- The conversion of the Gentiles (vs. 44-46)
- Their baptism and discipleship (vs. 47-48)
- Peter's defense of Gentile conversion before the Jerusalem leaders (Acts 11), culminating with this stunning statement: "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life'" (v. 18).

From Cornelius and Caesarea, the gospel spread to the Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 11:19-30); and from them, to the Gentile world (Acts 13:1-3). We can trace our Gentile acceptance into the Kingdom of God to Cornelius and Caesarea; here we find our true spiritual roots.

Significance in Scripture

Next to Jerusalem, Caesarea may be the most prominent city in the New Testament. Let's consider its significance in chronological order.

First, as we have seen, the city was renamed and rebuilt by Herod the Great, who was "king of the Jews" from 37-4 B.C. His fingerprints are all over the city and its ruins still today. Second, Caesarea is important to the historicity of Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator who condemned Jesus to be crucified. Third, the city was home to Cornelius and thus the launching pad for the global Christian mission to the Gentiles.

Fourth, Herod Agrippa I met his demise in Caesarea. This ruler was grandson of Herod the Great and king of Judea from AD 37-44. He executed James, the brother of John, and would have executed Peter as well if the apostle had not been freed miraculously (Acts 12:1-19a). After Peter's escape, the tyrant "went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there" (v. 19b).

While there, he greeted the public and "took his seat upon the throne" (v. 21), most likely in the theater. The people shouted, "This is the voice of a god, and not of a man!" (v. 22). Because he did not give God the glory, "an angel of the Lord struck him down" and "he was eaten by worms and breathed his last" (v. 23). Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, documents the same: "A severe pain arose in his belly, striking with a most violent intensity. . . . when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly . . . he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age and in the seventh year of his reign" (*Antiquities* 19.8.2).

Fifth, Caesarea was important to the life and work of Paul. The apostle visited Caesarea during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:22) and again at the end of his third missionary journey (Acts 21:7-11), where he was warned that he would be imprisoned if he continued to Jerusalem. The church at Caesarea had no idea that this imprisonment would take place in their own town.

After the Jewish leaders tried to kill him in Jerusalem, the Apostle was taken to Caesarea to stand trial before Felix the Roman governor (Acts 23:23-24). Here he was imprisoned for two years by Felix (Acts 24:27). And here he stood trial before his successor Festus, who wanted to do the Jews a favor by returning him to Jerusalem (where he would almost certainly have been assassinated). So Paul appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:11).

Agrippa's son Herod Agrippa II was the ruler of the region during the imprisonment of the Paul in Caesarea. The apostle defended his faith and ministry before him (Acts 25:13-26:32). It was from this port that the Apostle sailed to Rome and the end of the Book of Acts.

Making Christ your Savior

It is altogether appropriate that we would begin our pilgrimage in Caesarea Maritima, for this is where Gentile Christianity began. Cornelius is spiritual father to every Gentile Christian. If God would receive him, the Lord will receive us.

Have you asked Jesus to forgive your sins and become your Lord and King? If not, take a moment now to pray this prayer:

Dear God,

Thank you for loving me. Thank you that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins and failures. I admit to you that I am a sinner, that I need you to save me. I ask you to forgive me for my sins. I turn from them now. I invite Jesus into my life as my Savior and Lord. I turn my life over to him. I will live for him as long as I live. Thank you for giving me eternal life and making me the child of God. In Jesus' name, Amen.

If you just prayed this prayer for the first time, please tell someone about your decision. Christianity cannot be lived alone. A coal by itself goes out—it needs the heat of other coals. Share your new faith with someone you trust, and with a church where you can grow in your commitment to Christ.

Mount Carmel: stand for your King



“Carmel” is Hebrew for “fruit garden.” Mount Carmel is actually a 13-mile-long mountain range composed of limestone and flint, four to five miles wide, standing some 1,800 feet above sea level. Haifa, Israel’s third-largest city is located on its northern slope. Human remains in caves throughout the region demonstrate activity here for more than 200,000 years.

It sits astride the Via Maris (the Way of the Sea), the most significant roadway in Israel. It runs from Egypt through Israel and on to Syria, Assyria, and points east. Armies from the ancient world marched its lengths. Passes through the Carmel mountain range were strategic trade and military sites. For instance, the 1918 Battle of Megiddo was fought at the head of a pass through the Carmel Ridge. General Allenby led British forces, whose victory was the decisive turning point in the war against the Ottoman Empire.

On the western edge of Mount Carmel is Stella Maris Monastery, the world headquarters of the Carmelite order. This movement was founded in the 12th century and takes its name from this location. They identified a cave in the area with Elijah and claimed that Jewish hermits had lived there from the time of the prophet. During the Crusades, the monastery was sometimes used for a church, sometimes for a mosque, and was converted into a hospital in 1799 by Napoleon. It was destroyed in 1821 and rebuilt by the Carmelites.

Tour groups stop at the southeastern peak of Mount Carmel, a site known as Muhraka (“the Scorching”). Here we find a stone statue of Elijah slaying a prophet of Baal, and a small Carmelite monastery. On the plain below is the Kishon Brook, where Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal.

Mt. Carmel is never mentioned in the New Testament, but it has a rich history in the Hebrew Bible:

- “The king of Jokneam in Carmel” was defeated by Joshua and his forces during the conquest of the land (Joshua 12:22).
- It stood as the western border of the territory of the tribe of Asher (Joshua 19:26).
- After succeeding Elijah, the prophet Elisha “went on to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria” (2 Kings 2:25).
- Elisha apparently lived here, for the Shunammite mother whose son died “set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel” (2 Kings 4:25).
- Solomon lauded his bride: “Your head crowns you like Carmel” (Song of Solomon 7:5).
- Isaiah 35:2 extols “the majesty of Carmel.”
- God would judge his people through the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who is exalted “like Carmel by the sea” (Jeremiah 46:18).
- At God’s judgment, “Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves” (Isaiah 33:9), and “the top of Carmel withers” (Amos 1:2; cf. Nahum 1:4).
- Sinners could “hide themselves on the top of Carmel,” but God will “search them out and take them” (Amos 9:3).
- God will one day “restore Israel to his pasture, and he shall feed on Carmel” (Jeremiah 50:19).

This area has long been significant to many religions. For instance, the Baha’i (a syncretistic religion founded in 19th century Persia which focuses on peace and unity) have made Mount Carmel their administrative headquarters. Here the remains of the Bab, a forerunner of their faith, are interred beneath a beautiful mausoleum and golden dome. Egyptians made it a holy place and sanctuary. Greeks erected a temple to Zeus.

It is no surprise that Israel’s greatest battle with pagan deities would occur here (1 Kings 18). A national movement was sweeping Israel into the worship of Baal, the Canaanite god of fertility and weather. If the tide did not turn, the Jewish people would lose their relationship with God, their identity, and their future.

At the top of Mt. Carmel, Elijah called the 850 prophets of Baal and Ashtoreth (his “wife”) to a duel. Elijah and these idolatrous prophets would each make an altar with a sacrifice. The God who sent fire to consume his altar would be the one true God. After the prophets of Baal called all day to their master without success, Elijah summoned the fire of heaven from the Lord of the universe. His fire fell; the nation returned to God; and the future of Israel was saved.

The next time you wonder if your life can accomplish anything of significance, remember the lesson of Mt. Carmel: one + God = majority. To make Jesus your King, choose him as your only Lord.

William Borden, heir to the Borden dairy fortune, gave up his inheritance to follow God’s call as a missionary to Muslims in China. Along the way, he contracted meningitis and died at the age of 25. A friend found these words written in Borden’s Bible: “No reserve. No retreat. No regrets.” When the story was published, thousands of college students volunteered for foreign missions.

Will you stand with courage for the only King today?

Sepphoris: engage your culture

Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, chose Sepphoris in 3 B.C. to be the capital of his government. He chose well.

The city

The site was likely fortified by Assyrians in the seventh century B.C. Babylonian, Persian, and Greek authorities utilized it as well. In 104 B.C., Jews conquered the city and named it Tzippori, which means “bird” and points to the city’s bird’s-eye view atop its hill. Herod the Great captured it in 38 B.C. during a snowstorm and brought it under Roman rule. After his death, the Jewish residents rebelled against the Empire. Roman soldiers burned the city and crucified 2,000 rebels.



Herod Antipas, after succeeding his father, rebuilt the city and renamed it Autocratoris, in honor of the emperor (“Autocrator” in Greek). Under his rule, Sepphoris became the largest city in all of the Galilee, with a population of 50,000 inhabitants. Josephus called Sepphoris “the ornament of all Galilee.” The city was home to a theater, 10 synagogues, several churches, a council chamber, an archive, two markets, temples, a mint, an extensive aqueduct system, and a cemetery. The Jewish character of the city is demonstrated by the fact that archaeologists have discovered virtually no pig bones from the first century.

When the Jews revolted against Rome in A.D. 66, the people of Sepphoris surrendered to the Empire without a fight, ensuring the preservation of their city. In the second century, the city was renamed Diocaesarea (dedicated to the god Zeus and Caesar). After the Second Jewish Revolt (A.D. 132-35), many Jewish refugees settled here, turning Sepphoris into a center of Jewish religious and spiritual life.

Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi (c. 135-217) lived here for 17 years and moved the Sanhedrin, Israel’s highest religious court, to the city (it was relocated from Sepphoris to Tiberius in A.D. 150). At least 10 synagogues were functioning in Sepphoris at this time. Here Rabbi Hanasi compiled the Mishnah, a very significant biblical commentary. Joseph of Tiberius, a convert from Judaism, was authorized by Emperor Constantine (ruled 306-37) to build a Christian church here. The city was destroyed by an earthquake in 363, but rebuilt quickly.

Sepphoris fell to the Muslims in 634 and became known by Saffuriya. In 1187, Crusaders built a fortress and watchtower here, dedicated to Anne and Joachim (the parents of the Virgin Mary). It reverted to Muslim rule when the Templars left in 1263. The city came under Ottoman rule in 1516, and was captured by Israeli forces on July 16, 1948.

Excavations in Sepphoris were first conducted in 1930 by a team from the University of Michigan. Another team from the University of South Florida began working here in 1983, followed by a joint team from Duke University and Hebrew University in 1985, led by Eric Myers and Ehud Netzer.

Sites of interest

The Crusader/Ottoman Fortress still stands. The upper part was added in the 19th century and used as an Arab school until 1948. The lower section was built by Crusaders. However, the sarcophagi embedded in the cornerstones likely come from an even earlier period, probably Byzantine, and perhaps indicate that a structure stood here which the Crusaders made into their fortress.

Jewish ritual baths have been found here, as well as a Roman theater with seating for 4,500. The narrowest ancient synagogue in Israel (27 feet wide by 68 feet long) has also been discovered in the lower section of the city. Oddly, it has a floor mosaic picturing the chariot of Helios (Greek god of the sun) and the 12 astrological signs of the zodiac. Archaeologists recently discovered a second century A.D. Roman temple, perhaps to the worship of Zeus; a Byzantine church was later built over it.

The theater was built in the first century and refurbished in the third and fourth centuries; it seats between 4,000 and 5,000 people. The “Nile Festival House” is especially impressive. It covers an area of 164 feet by 98 feet with some 20 rooms. The most elegant pictures the celebration when the Nile reaches its peak; the river emerges from a woman personifying Egypt. Pharos, the lighthouse in Alexandria, is depicted as well; it was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The tower in the center of the hunting scene is a Nilometer, used to measure the rise of the river during its annual inundation. Next to the Nile mosaic is a floor decorated with Amazons, the first ever discovered in Israel. They were mythical female warriors who cut off their right breasts so they could shoot their bow and arrow more accurately.



The “Mona Lisa of the Galilee” is here as well. She is part of a mosaic made in the floor of a large home constructed around the year 200 and destroyed in the earthquake of 363. The house had two floors and was built around a colonnaded yard; it might have been the home of a city or district governor. The triclinium (three couches) mosaic includes 15 panels, most dedicated to Dionysus, the god of wine, along with Pan and Hercules. Dionysus is pictured holding his goblet upside down to prove that he can drink more wine than Hercules. The mosaic contains 1.5 million stones in 28 colors.

It is interesting to note that many of the animals depicted in Sepphoris’ mosaics did not live in this region when the mosaics were created. However, identical motifs appear in mosaics found in other Roman cities. It would appear, therefore, that the Sepphoris mosaics were created by traveling artisans who brought fashions of the day to the city.

Also note that sidewalks in the lower part of the city were repaved with mosaics at the end of the Byzantine period (late 6th and early 7th centuries). One reads, “Under our most saintly father Euthropius the Episcopus, the whole city, the time of the fourteenth indiction.” West of the ancient city stands a 12th century church dedicated to Anne and Joachim; only three apses were completed, and are now integrated into a modern monastery.

Jesus and Sepphoris

There are three good reasons for believing that Jesus frequented Sepphoris. The first is financial. Given the tiny size of Nazareth (perhaps 10 families), and proximity to Sepphoris (just five miles to the south, an hour’s walk away), it is likely that Jesus came to Sepphoris for work with his father. According to Jerome Murphy-O’Conner, Herod Antipas’ “decision to rebuild in 3 BC probably drew the artisan Joseph and his family to settle in nearby Nazareth (Matt. 2:21-3); the project would provide work for many years.”¹

The second relates to family. Tradition claims that Sepphoris was the birthplace of Mary, and that her parents Joachim and Anna lived here. It is reasonable that Mary and Joseph would live in a city close to Jesus’ grandparents. In A.D. 570, a pilgrim to the area was even shown a chair reputed to be where Mary was sitting when she was visited by the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26).

The third relates to Jesus' public ministry. "Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager" (Luke 8:3) probably lived in Sepphoris, as the city was central to Herod's administration in the Galilee. Joanna was one of the women who followed Jesus and provided for his ministry out of her personal finances. As a result, it is likely that Jesus frequented Sepphoris, both as a boy and as an itinerant rabbi.

We can imagine our Lord sitting in this theater, or perhaps helping to build it. His condemnation of religious authorities as "hypocrites" (Mark 7:6) may derive from this place, the closest theater to Nazareth, as the word has no Semitic equivalent and would not have been part of his normal vocabulary.

The mosaics show the city to have pagan culture as well as Jewish. Here we note the cosmopolitan nature of Jesus' life and interest—he would be the Savior of the entire world, Sepphoris included. To make him your King, take his word to your culture today.

Mt. Arbel: tell the world

Mount Arbel (*Har Arbel* in Hebrew) stands 593 feet above sea level but 1,246 feet above the surrounding valley and Sea of Galilee, which is 696 feet below sea level. The mount is named for the nearby village of Arbela. It sits across the Jordan Rift Valley from Mount Nittai; this valley makes a natural wind tunnel opening onto the Sea of Galilee. A road through this valley connects Sepphoris and Nazareth to the west with Capernaum to the east.

This area was settled during the Persian and Greek periods, and heavily populated during Roman and Byzantine times. A deep spring well to the southeast provided water, as did the Sea of Galilee. Villages, roads, and public structures were built. Trade routes from Megiddo to the southwest and Tiberius to the south converged here before continuing around the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum.

The village of Magdala (for which Mary Magdalene was named) lay just below the mount and along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The plain of Gennesaret, mentioned often in Jesus' public ministry, is north of Magdala. From here we can see to Capernaum and across the Sea of Galilee to the Golan Heights and the country of Jordan. On a clear day, Mt. Hermon is visible to the north and the Dead Sea to the south.

Ruins of a magnificent fourth century A.D. synagogue have been discovered here. Cliff dwellings date to the 17th century and were built by the Druze. More than a hundred caves in the area show signs of human habitation, some as old as the second century B.C. and some with cisterns and ritual baths.

The location is very advantageous for military campaigns. As a result, numerous battles have been fought in the area. The Assyrian invasion of Israel in 841 B.C. was led by Shalmaneser III and may be the occasion of Hosea 10:13-14, "Because you have trusted in your own way and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed, as Shalman destroyed Beth-arbel on the day of battle."



According to Josephus, a Syrian general named Bachchides marched into this area during the Maccabean wars (161 B.C.; cf. 1 Maccabees 9). He "pitched his camp at Arbela, a city of Galilee; and having besieged and taken those that were there in caves, (for many of the people fled into such places,) he removed, and made all the haste he could to Jerusalem" (*Antiquities* 12.11.1).

Jewish rebels hid in these caves a second time when revolting against Herod in 38 B.C. The Romans built a siege wall above the western cliffs, more than a thousand feet long with nine towers, for the purpose of sealing them off. Herod personally led the expedition against the rebels; an ancient wall atop Mount Nittai could be the remains of his camp. Herod chose this means of attack:

Yet did he at length make use of a contrivance that was subject to the utmost hazard; for he let down the most hardy of his men in chests, and set them at the mouths of the dens. Now these men slew the robbers and their families, and when they made resistance, they sent in fire upon them [and burnt them]; and as Herod was desirous of saving some of them, he had proclamation made, that they should come and deliver themselves up to him; but not one of them came willingly to him; and of those that were compelled to come, many preferred death to captivity.

Josephus especially notes the bravery and sacrifice of one particular rebel:

And here a certain old man, the father of seven children, whose children, together with their mother, desired him to give them leave to go out, upon the assurance and right hand that was offered them, slew them after the following manner: He ordered every one of them to go out, while he stood himself at the cave's mouth, and slew that son of his perpetually who went out. Herod was near enough to see this sight, and his bowels of compassion were moved at it, and he stretched out his right hand to the old man, and besought him to spare his children; yet did not he relent at all upon what he said, but over and above reproached Herod on the lowness of his descent, and slew his wife as well as his children; and when he had thrown their dead bodies down the precipice, he at last threw himself down after them. By this means Herod subdued these caves, and the robbers that were in them (*Wars of the Jews* 1.16.4-5).

Josephus later used these caves to store fortifications during the Jewish-Roman war of A.D. 66-70. And Teutonic knights built a small fort here in the 13th century during the Crusades.

Given its bloody history, some wonder if the valley between Arbel and Nittai could be the "valley of the shadow of death" to which David refers (Psalm 23:4). As the highest peak in the region, it may have been the location for Satan's temptation of Jesus, when "the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (Matthew 4:8). No one place on a round planet can show "all the kingdoms of the world," so this may have been a spiritual, visionary experience. However, the text could mean "all the kingdoms of Jesus' world," in which case Mt. Arbel would be the only place that would show Jesus all of Israel, from north to south.

Josephus describes the fertile plains visible all around:

The Galileans are inured to war from their infancy, and have been always very numerous; nor hath the country been ever destitute of men of courage, or wanted a numerous set of them; for their soil is universally rich and fruitful, and full of the plantations of trees of all sorts, insomuch that it invites the most slothful to take pains in its cultivation, by its fruitfulness; accordingly, it is all cultivated by its inhabitants, and no part of it lies idle. Moreover, the cities lie here very thick, and the very many villages there are here are every where so full of people, by the richness of their soil, that the very least of them contain above fifteen thousand inhabitants (*Wars* 3.3.2).

From Mt. Arbel we can see Capernaum, Jesus' ministry headquarters; Gadera, where he cleansed a man filled with a legion of demons; and the fields and villages where his public ministry began. From here his movement spread across the world, so that more than two billion people claim him as their Lord today.

If you would make Christ your King, you must tell the world. We are each commissioned to make disciples of every nation (Matthew 28:19-20). His call is now ours.

If he would make his home in Galilee, he'll make his home in your heart and mine today. The One who healed the sick and met the needs of multitudes here will do the same for every problem you entrust to him today. Now he calls us to take his love to our world, continuing the movement he began 20 centuries ago, here.

Tiberias

The city of Tiberias was constructed in A.D. 18-22 by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and Jewish ruler of the Galilee (4 B.C. to A.D. 39). He made it the capital of his realm and named it for the Roman Emperor Tiberius (who ruled from A.D. 14-37, succeeding Augustus). The city was built to take advantage of 17 natural mineral hot springs in the area and was populated primarily by Jews. Jewish tradition identifies the site with the fortified city of Rakkath ("strip" or "coast"; Joshua 19:35). It became so important that the Sea of Galilee was sometimes called the Sea of Tiberias (cf. John 6:1; 21:1).

However, the presence of a cemetery rendered the city ritually unclean to priests (Numbers 19:11-13). While Jesus traveled throughout this region during his earthly ministry, he is not recorded as having ever visited Tiberias. Its only mention in the New Testament is in John 6:23, where we read that "other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks."

During the first Jewish Revolt, Josephus took control of the city and destroyed Herod's palace, and surrendered the city to the Roman emperor Vespasian. After Jews were expelled from Jerusalem in A.D. 135, Tiberias and Sepphoris became major Jewish cultural centers.

In A.D. 145, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai cleansed the city of ritual impurity, allowing priests to settle there. The Sanhedrin was moved from Sepphoris to Tiberias in A.D. 150. Thirteen synagogues were built to meet the needs of the growing Jewish population. The city supplanted Sepphoris to become the largest city in the Galilee and the political and religious center for Judaism.

As Jerusalem had been destroyed by Rome, they referred to Tiberias as *Tabur*, meaning "navel," as the city had become central to the rabbinic world. Since the 16th century, it has been considered one of Judaism's Four Holy Cities, along with Jerusalem, Hebron, and Safed. A city wall built in the 6th century is still visible in parts.

Tiberias fell to Islam in 634. It was destroyed in the great earthquake of 1033 and rebuilt. Crusaders took the city in 1099; Saladin retook it in 1187. Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, also known as Maimonides or Rambam, was buried here after his death in 1204. His tomb is an important pilgrimage site today, as is the second-century tomb of Rabbi Akiva. The city continued under Mamluk and then Ottoman control into the 20th century. The great flood of 1934 destroyed much of Tiberias. It has been almost entirely Jewish since the founding of Israel in 1948. Some 30,000 people live here today.

A 2,000-year-old Roman theater with seating for 7,000 has been discovered here; excavations in 2004 uncovered a structure that may have been the seat of the Sanhedrin. Tourism is a major economic contributor, with more than 30 hotels in the city. The Tiberias Marathon is run annually; at 600 feet below sea level, it is the lowest race in the world.

The Church of the Primacy of Peter is here, built over a rock said to be the place where Jesus lit a fire and cooked breakfast for Peter and the other disciples (John 21:9). The modern church was built on the ruins of a Crusader church (ca. A.D. 1100) that had one nave and narrow windows meant to symbolize an overturned boat. Its stained glass windows depict fish and holy figures, and houses a copy of a statue of Peter brought from Rome in 1833.

Significantly, the vowel "pointing" system used in the Hebrew language was developed here in A.D. 900. The Hebrew alphabet contains no vowels. To assist in pronunciation, these "points" (a system of dots and dashes) were added below the consonants, producing what is known as the Masoretic Text. It is used by all major Bible translations today.



**Thursday
May 28, 2015**

The Sea of Galilee: make Jesus the King of your storm

The rabbis of old said, “The Lord has created seven seas, but the Sea of Galilee is his delight.” Jesus apparently felt the same way, as 10 of his recorded 33 miracles occurred near its waters. By conducting his ministry here, he fulfilled the prophecy that the Messiah would live in Galilee by “the way of the sea” (Matthew 4:12-17, citing Isaiah 9:1-2), a reference to the Via Maris which runs around its western shoreline.

The Sea of Galilee lies 650 feet below sea level. It is 14 miles long and 7.5 miles wide at its widest point, with a 32-mile shoreline. At 64 square miles, it is nearly the size of Washington, D.C. Its depth reaches 200 feet. From its waters, visitors can see the Golan Heights, towering to more than 2,500 feet above sea level. It is part of the Jordan Rift Valley, which is part of the greater Syro-African geological fault line running 4,000 miles from Turkey through the Dead Sea and into Africa.

In the Bible its waters are alternately called the Sea of Galilee, the Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1; 21:1), the Sea of Kinnereth (Numbers 34:11; Joshua 12:3), and the Lake of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1). It is also called simply “the lake” (John 6:16).

The area was heavily populated in Jesus’ day, with numerous villages exceeding 5,000 residents. Its shoreline has changed dramatically from the first century to today. In ancient times there were as many as 16 ports around the lake, some with piers extending 100 feet into the lake. They were similar in design to Herod’s port at Caesarea: a short pier jutted into the water, while a longer breakwater ran parallel to the pier and then curved toward it to provide protection against storms. These breakwaters were as much as 10 feet tall; their foundations are all that remain today. Since the lake is four feet higher today than in the first century, these harbors were undetected until the 1990s, when a severe drought lowered the lake to ancient levels.

Located around the Sea are Capernaum to the north, Bethsaida on its northeastern shore, and Kibbutz Ginosar to its west. Degania Aleph lies at its southern tip, and Kibbutz Kinneret nearby. The region of Gadera, where Jesus cleansed the demoniac, lies to the east; the plain of Gennesaret and village of Magdala lie to the west. The Jordan River enters the Sea of Galilee near Bethsaida and exits at its southern tip, proceeding southward to the Dead Sea.

As we will see, Capernaum was the base for Jesus’ public ministry. Bethsaida was the home of Peter and Andrew; the feeding of the 5,000 occurred nearby. Kibbutz Ginosar was home of Yigal Allon, one of Israel’s most important statesmen, and houses the “Jesus Boat” (see below). Degania Aleph, Israel’s oldest kibbutz (see below), was founded in 1909; Kibbutz Kinneret was established in 1911.



The lake is known to Israelis as “the Kinneret” (“violin,” named for the shape of the lake). It is the largest source of fresh water in the nation, supplying about one-third of the nation’s annual water needs. Beaches surround the lake, many offering various water sports, water slides, and parks. The lake is home to St. Peter’s fish (a kind of tilapia), one of 22 different species of fish, as well as more than 3,000 commercial fishermen. It has been so overfished that Israeli authorities closed parts of the lake to fishing from 2010 to 2012.

We began our day with a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee, where we viewed the setting for the vast majority of Jesus’ public ministry. Then we considered the episode of Matthew 14—one of the great miracles of Jesus’ ministry, and an event which unfolded on the very waters beneath our boat. Here Jesus walked on the water to his disciples, and called Peter to do the same in faith.

This story is not in the New Testament for Peter’s sake but for ours. Each of us encounters sudden storms on the seas of our lives. Give yours to Jesus. Call to him: “Lord, save me!” and he will. If you want to walk on the water, you have to get out of the boat.

The Jesus Boat

Jesus spent much time in boats during his public ministry. He walked on the Sea of Galilee to join his disciples in their boat (Matthew 14:25); he slept in a boat (Mark 4:37) and performed miracles from it (v. 39). He joined his disciples as they rowed their boat (John 6:19), and taught from one as well (Luke 5:3).

Now we can see a boat dating to his time; some call it “the Jesus boat.”



According to Josephus, Roman forces marched on the city of Migdal (Magdala) in A.D. 67 as part of their response to the Jewish revolt. The city walls protected Migdal from invasion, but the town was unprotected on the lake side. Titus, the Roman general, sailed his mounted cavalry around the walls; they entered the city and massacred most of its residents. Some fled in a group of fishing boats. The next day, the Romans built vessels, engaged the Jews in nautical battle, and killed them. The shores were covered with derelict Jewish boats as a result.

Fast forward to 1986. Moshe and Yuval Lufan are brothers and fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. That year, the Sea of Galilee was at a record low due to drought. The brothers were walking along its western shore when they found some ancient nails in the mud. As they explored, they discovered that this was an ancient boat. The fishermen contacted local archaeological authorities, who confirmed that the boat dated to the first century. It is the oldest boat ever found in fresh water anywhere in the world.

The boat measures 26.9 feet long, 7.55 feet wide and 3.94 feet in height. Its hull is made primarily from Lebanese cedar, while most of its frames are oak. At least ten other types of wood, all local to the area, were used in its construction as well. Iron nails were driven from the outside to secure the frame to the hull. Techniques used in its construction were common on the Mediterranean from 100 B.C. to A.D. 200. Radiocarbon analysis confirms that the boat was constructed between 120 B.C. and A.D. 40.

The “Jesus boat” is the largest type of boat used on the Sea of Galilee in the first century. It may have functioned as a ferry boat, but was used primarily by fishermen who cast a dragnet or “seine” into the sea (cf. Matthew 13:47-48). It could be either sailed or rowed, with a single square sail amidships. It would have a basic crew of four to five rowers and a helmsman/captain, with a capacity for as many as 15. It was steered by means of two steering oars.

A cooking pot was found outside the boat near its prow; a lamp was found inside the boat. Both date to the time of Christ. Small piles of iron nails were discovered as well, left by the part of the boat that was exposed above mud level and disintegrated.

When the boat sank 2,000 years ago, it filled up with silt which slowed its decay. Over the centuries, however, the inner cells of the wood decayed and were replaced with water. Preservation required that the wood be kept wet at all times. Over the 11 days of excavation, the boat was constantly sprayed with water and was kept shaded. Fiberglass ribs were then installed inside the boat, and the entire vessel was filled with polyurethane foam which created a protective cocoon.

Water was then pumped back into the excavation pit, lifting the boat, while a passage was cleared in the dike surrounding it. The boat then floated on the Sea of Galilee for the first time in 20 centuries. It was taken to a conservation pool at the Kibbutz Ginosar, where an archaeologist from Texas A&M University perfected a solution of polythene glycol, a synthetic wax. The boat was submerged in this solution; over a seven-year period, the water inside the wood was replaced with the wax.

The boat was then wrapped, lifted by crane, and lowered into its new exhibition space. This area is equipped with an environmental control system which ensures proper humidity, temperature, and air pressure. This is the closest we have been able to come to the first century in the 20 centuries since. Jesus ministered on this boat, or one just like it.

Capernaum: listen to the Spirit

“Capernaum” is the English transliteration of the Greek, *Kapharnaoum*, from the Hebrew, *Kepar Nahum* or “Village of Nahum.” “Nahum” has been variously identified with the Old Testament prophet (though there is no mention of his ministry in connection with the area), another Nahum, and the Hebrew words for “consolation” (*nhm*) and “beauty” (*n’m*). It is best pronounced “Capharnaum.”

The site is known by the Arab population as “Talhum” (or “Tell Hum”). The name likely was derived from “Tanhum,” a famous rabbi who was buried in the area. It does not mean “tell [hill] of Nahum,” though it is often explained in this way.

The site is located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, 2.5 miles west of the upper Jordan River. In ancient Israel, it was situated on the border between the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali (Matthew 4:13).

The city

Capernaum was inhabited in the Hellenistic period (predating the Romans in 67 B.C.) and was occupied until the Islamic invasion (7th century A.D.). However, remains of dwellings appear to date to the 13th century B.C. Ceramics have been discovered from the Persian era (538-332 B.C.) and from the Middle Bronze period (1900-1530 B.C.).

Capernaum was never a large city, and is not mentioned in the Old Testament. Its ruins stretch 300 meters east to west along the Sea of Galilee, and 200 meters north from the lake to the hills. It numbered 1,500 inhabitants at most. By contrast, the ancient historian Josephus says that the city of Magdala, on the southwest coast of the Sea of Galilee, contained 40,000 residents.

However, Capernaum was one of the most significant towns in Galilee, for four reasons.

First, it was a thriving business center. The town stood astride the Via Maris, the international trade route connecting Damascus and Mesopotamia to the north with Caesarea Maritima (the major seaport in ancient Israel) and Egypt to the south. An ancient Roman milestone was found alongside the road in 1975; it bears the names “IMPERATOR CAESAR DIVI” (the divine Emperor Caesar) and several others.

Caravans made their way through its streets daily—those from Damascus brought silk and spices, while those traveling there brought dried fish and fruit. A large number of coins and imported vessels from Syria, Phoenicia, Asia Minor and Cyprus have been found here.

Second, Capernaum was home to a thriving fishing business. Nearby springs and the upper Jordan River feed into the Sea of Galilee, making this part of the lake especially vibrant for fish even today. It is likely that Peter and Andrew moved for this reason from Bethsaida, further east along the shoreline, to Capernaum.

A seawall two meters thick was built of basalt stone along the coast. Parallel walls extended into the water and served as boating docks. A structure with indoor ponds has been discovered in the area and was most likely a fish market. Numerous fishhooks have been found in the floors of houses across the city.

Third, Capernaum was a major agricultural center. Standing on the plain of Gennesaret, it enjoyed abundant rainfall and a warm climate. Olives, dates, and citrus were grown here in abundance. Hills to the north provided black basalt stone that was used to build houses and synagogues. Giant millstones and olive presses found in the area attest to its agricultural vitality. Glass vessels were also manufactured here.

Fourth, Capernaum was an important political center. It stood just inside the eastern border of Galilee in the territory of Herod Antipas; the tetrarchy of Herod Philip lay to the east. As a result, it was a major port of entry into the region of Galilee, serving as a customs station and military outpost.

The city was thus home to a Roman centurion and detachment of troops (Matt. 8:5-9), a customs station (Matt. 9:9), and an “official” of the king (John 4:46). The military garrison included a Roman bath with caladium, frigidarium, and tepidarium. A bathhouse near the lake also attests to Roman culture in the city.

This influence is visible in the plan of the city. Capernaum was laid out with a main North-South avenue (the *cardo maximus* or *via principalis*) and numerous East-West intersecting streets (*decumani*). People lived in “clan” dwellings, in which rooms were arranged around internal courts, and in individual houses. In the “clan” houses, windows opened onto the internal courts where meals were prepared and family life was conducted. Stairs in the courts allowed access to the flat roof of the structure.

Shops have been located on the eastern side of the *cardo maximus*. Ceramic pottery has been discovered, including lamps, plates, bowls, pans, pots, and cups. (Many of the bowls are stamped with crosses.) Vases made of white stone held water; basalt containers held other foods and materials. Walls were made of basalt blocks, while interiors were finished with pebbles in ornamental patterns. Masonry walls were very rare. Floors were made of basalt pebble work.

The synagogue(s)

The largest synagogue yet discovered in Israel (80 feet by 61 feet and two stories tall) was located on the highest point of the town. Actually, there are two synagogues here.

The first dates to the time of Christ, but was built over remains dating back nearly 2,000 years. Its foundation and four-foot-thick walls were built of basalt blocks, with an atrium on the eastern wall and a wall-bench along the western wall. Its construction was funded by the local Roman centurion: “He loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue” (Luke 7:5).



This structure served as Jesus' "home church." He taught here regularly (cf. Mark 1:21), healed a demoniac (vs. 23-27), and gave an extended teaching regarding faith, salvation, and eternal life (John 6:25-59).

Centuries later, this synagogue was torn down and a new synagogue was built of white limestone on its foundation. Coins and pottery sealed beneath its floor date to the 4th-5th centuries. This "late" synagogue still stands today.

It was built in two stages. The first section, completed in the late fourth century, contains a rectangular prayer hall. Its dating is based on pottery and more than 30,000 late Roman coins discovered in the area.

On the southern wall (facing toward Jerusalem) stood an image of the Ark of the Covenant and the "chair of Moses" (where the teacher sat, cf. Matt. 23:2). Several sculptured stones have been discovered that appear to have belonged to this Ark; one clearly depicts the Ark being transported on wheels (cf. 1 Chronicles 28:18). A menorah in relief form was found here as well. Benches stood on the eastern and western walls, with a prayer room on the northern side.

Two columns bear inscriptions dedicated to those who donated to the building. One, in Greek, states: "Herod, son of Mokimos and Justus his son, together with the children erected this column." The other, in Aramaic, declares, "Alphaeus, son of Zebedee, son of John, made this column; on him be blessing." These New Testament names have given rise to much speculation.

The second stage, completed in the fifth century, comprises an annex with roofs on three sides, nearly as large as the main synagogue. It stands to the east of the main hall and functioned as a community center. The size of both synagogues is much larger than would be typical for the town's population, probably indicating the religious zeal of its residents.

Jesus and Capernaum

Early in Jesus' public ministry, he was rejected by his hometown of Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30). As a result, "he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee" (v. 31). Here he called his first disciples (Matt. 4:18-22), healed many (Matt. 8:5; Mark 1:21-28; 2:1-12; Luke 7:1-19; John 4:46-54), and taught often in the synagogue (Luke 4:31-38; John 6:22-59).

He prayed atop the ridge of hills to the west of the town (Mark 6:46) and met the disciples there after his resurrection (Matt. 28:16). Here Jesus lived with Peter and Andrew (Mark 1:29). Matthew 9:1 calls it "his own city"; Mark 3:20 says that Jesus "went home" to it.

Some in Capernaum joined Jesus' movement. Jewish rabbis after the time of Christ referred to Capernaum as a center of the "minim," Jewish Christians. Fourth century rabbis castigated the residents as sinners, since they were followers of Jesus.

However, most of the people did not join Jesus' movement. As a result, he indicted the town for its unbelief: "And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you" (Matt. 11:23-24).

His prediction came to pass. When Muslims invaded the area in 638, Jews and Christians abandoned the city. Islamic inhabitants settled in the area and reused much of its earlier building materials for their purposes. The settlement was destroyed by an earthquake in 746, which perhaps caused residents to remember Jesus' prediction that "you will be brought down to Hades" (Matt. 11:23). It was rebuilt further to the east, where the Greek Orthodox church stands today; 282 gold coins were discovered there under a stone slab in the floor of a large building.

The area was abandoned by the 11th century except for a few fishing huts during the Middle Ages. Crusaders were unwilling to develop the site, as it was too exposed. Some Arab families made the area their home until the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. It was otherwise abandoned across the centuries.

The house of Simon Peter

At least four homes in Capernaum are mentioned in the Gospels: The house of Matthew, where Jesus ate with tax-collectors (Mark 2:15-17); the house of Jairus, the synagogue official whose daughter was healed by Jesus (Mark 5:21-23, 35-43); and the house of the Roman centurion (Luke 7:1-10). In addition, James and John apparently lived in Capernaum, as did their father Zebedee (John 1:19-20), though their house is not mentioned.

However, by far the most significant home belonged to Peter. He and his brother Andrew lived in Capernaum (Mark 1:29). Archaeological evidence indicates that their house had been occupied in Hellenistic times; Peter must have purchased it when he moved from Bethsaida (John 1:44) to Capernaum.

The house stands only 30 meters south of the synagogue and on a geographical line to Jerusalem. It was vast, with three courts around which were several living rooms. These three courts correspond to the fact that the house was shared by the families of Peter, his mother-in-law, and Andrew.



Jesus' presence here is substantiated by the authorities' question of Peter, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" (Matt. 17:24, referring to the annual tax for maintenance of the Jerusalem temple). Peter would have been liable for Jesus' obligation only if the latter was recognized as a resident in his home. When Peter "came into the house," Jesus was already there and was ready with a solution (vs. 25-27).

A large space in front of the house opened to the *cardo maximus* ("Main Street" from north to south) and was the place where "the whole city was gathered at the door" for Jesus' healing ministry (Mark 1:33). In this home he healed Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:30-31), "all who were sick or oppressed by demons" from the town (v. 32), and a paralytic lowered through the roof (Mark 2:1-12). He spoke to the crowds from here, including scribes from Jerusalem and his mother and brothers (Mark 3:20-35).

After Jesus' ministry, two rooms on the northern side of the house were turned into a "house church," apparently the first in Christian history. The floor and walls were paved with lime plaster (the only house in Capernaum to receive such treatment), while the walls were covered with Judeo-Christian emblems. Prior to that time, broken pottery found in the floor reflects normal family use; thereafter, only storage jars and lamps are found. Early Christian pilgrims made 131 spiritual inscriptions on the walls in Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Aramaic, as well as crosses, a boat, and other letters. Here we find at least two references to Peter.

In the fourth century, after Constantine the Great legalized Christianity, Joseph of Tiberias rebuilt the house church in Capernaum. This friend of Constantine, a converted Jew, added a new roof and two new entrances as well. Egeria, a pilgrim to the area between A.D. 381 and 384, recorded: "In Capernaum the house of the prince of the apostles has been made into a church, with its original walls still standing. . . . There also is the

synagogue where the Lord cured a man possessed by the devil. The way in is up many stairs, and is made of dressed stone.”² Aetheria, a nun, also recorded a visit to the site in A.D. 385.

In the latter fifth century, the Greek Orthodox church razed the house. On the same spot, two meters above the original house church, they erected a church with two octagons to mark Peter’s house. The interior octagon was roofed with tile. The rooms were paved with mosaics of flowers and a peacock. A baptistry was added on the eastern wall. Similar structures were built in Italy and Syria; the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem mirrors this octagonal plan as well.

The “late” synagogue and Peter’s house were apparently destroyed even before the Arab conquest in 638, perhaps during the Persian (AD 614) or Byzantine (AD 629) invasions.

Excavations

In 1894, the site of Capernaum was acquired from its Arab caretakers by the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land. The first excavations occurred in 1905, beginning on the central and eastern naves of the synagogue. Other excavations began that same year, continuing to the beginning of World War I. Excavations resumed in 1921 and began reconstruction of the “late” synagogue.

Before 1968, no remains of the city from Jesus’ time were visible. In April of that year, excavations began again under the leadership of Fr. Virgilio C. Corbo. He led 18 different campaigns up to 1991, discovering many homes as well as the first-century synagogue under the foundations of the 4th-5th century synagogue.

Fr. Corbo also discovered the house of St. Peter. The present-day Catholic church was built over it in 1990. This structure was constructed to protect the ruins and to provide a place for worship, with a design intended to convey the image of a boat. Fr. Corbo died on December 6, 1991 and was buried near it.

Listen to the Spirit

Capernaum will always be known as the home of Jesus (Matt. 9:1). Of all the places in Israel where he could have based his public ministry, he chose this town. Its cultural, economic, and global significance made it the ideal platform for his global movement.

Here Jesus called his disciples to “follow me,” with the promise that “I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). We cannot make ourselves “fishers of men,” for human words cannot change human hearts. We cannot convict anyone of sin or save anyone’s soul. Only the Holy Spirit can produce such transformation. But if we will follow Jesus, he will use us for eternal significance.

The key to following Jesus is found here in Capernaum, where “very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35). He began the day by surrendering it to his King. May we each do the same.

Chorazin: choose integrity

Chorazin is located 2.5 miles from Capernaum and 900 feet north of the Sea of Galilee. The ancient city was excavated from 1962-64 and 1980-87. Its ruins cover 25 acres in five separate quarters, with a synagogue at the center.



The city was denounced by Jesus for its unbelief (Matthew 11:20-24). Due to earthquakes that confirmed this judgment in the minds of its residents, it was eventually abandoned.

Here we find a synagogue in the typical “Galilean” style: a basilica shape with three hallways separated by two rows of pillars. Three doorways (the central is largest) open to a large hall with benches around the interior walls.

The excavated synagogue dates from the 2nd century A.D., but an earlier synagogue has been found 200 meters west. A ritual bath is nearby as well.

A “seat of Moses” was discovered here in the 1920’s, calling to mind Jesus’ warning: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (Matthew 23:2-3).

Here we learned the significance of integrity. Character is critical to our witness. As D. L. Moody noted, “What you are in the dark is what you are.” Make Christ the King of your thoughts as well as your actions, your inner life as well as your outer world. And others will be drawn to the light they see in you.

Caesarea Philippi—assault the Gates of Hell

The Golan Heights

“Golan” in Hebrew can mean “something surrounded” or “district.” This area encompasses approximately 500 square miles. It extends from the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee north into Syria and Lebanon.

Israel captured the area during the Conquest (Deuteronomy 3:1-11). The half-tribe of Manasseh and tribe of Dan inhabited the region (see more on Dan below). The area was captured by Assyria in the 8th century and came under the Persian Empire in the 5th century B.C. Alexander the Great took control of the region in 332 B.C. after the Battle of Issus, and joined the Seleucid Empire after his death.

After Rome captured the area, Augustus gave it to Herod the Great in 20 B.C. His son Philip ruled the region from 4 B.C. to A.D. 33; Agrippa I and his son Agrippa II then ruled the region. In A.D. 250, a group of Arab Christians established a kingdom here; Muslims conquered it in A.D. 614. Crusaders held it for a time, before Muslims recaptured it. The Ottoman Empire controlled it until the end of World War I.

The Golan Heights then became part of the French Mandate, then were incorporated into Syria in 1944. Israel captured it in 1967 and successfully defended it in 1973. It is significant for military purposes as well as for water (Lake Hula helps feed the Sea of Galilee).

Mount Hermon is the highest peak in Israel, standing 9,232 feet above sea level. It can be seen from the Dead Sea, more than 100 miles to the south. It is most likely the site of Jesus’ “Mount of Transfiguration” experience (Matthew 17:1-8). Mount Tabor has been traditionally identified with this event, but it is not a “high” mountain as the text specifies, is too far away to fit the text, and was populated with a fortress. Eusebius (died A.D. 340) states that Caesarea Philippi was the site of the Mount of Transfiguration.

Etymology

Caesarea Philippi is 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, located at the base of Mt. Hermon. Here we find the most eastern of the springs feeding the Jordan River as it flows into the Sea of Galilee.

The site was given to Herod the Great in 20 B.C. by the emperor; four years later, Herod built a temple here in Augustus' honor. The adjacent city was built by Philip II (ruled 4 B.C.-A.D. 33), his third son, and renamed Caesarea in 2 B.C. He made it his capital city; thus it is known as Caesarea Philippi (to be distinguished from Caesarea Maritima). The city was likely destroyed in the great earthquake of A.D. 363.

This area has long been associated with idolatry. The tribe of Dan settled here after they were driven from their original inheritance by the Canaanites. In 1340 B.C., the people turned to idolatry and away from the God of Israel (Judges 17-19). In the city of Dan (less than two miles to the west), king Jeroboam (ruled 931-910 B.C.) constructed a high place that led the people to worship Baal (cf. 2 Kings 17:21-23). Fourteen temples to Baal have been identified around the area. As a result, this site was known in the Old Testament as Baal Hermon and Baal Gad. (Note that the tribe of Dan was destroyed in 734 B.C. and is not listed among the 12 tribes in the book of Revelation.)



Later the site was renamed Panias for the Greek god Pan, who was worshiped here. The cult of Pan originated in Arcadia, a beautiful agricultural area on the Peloponnese peninsula in Greece; when Greek travelers found this place, it reminded them of Arcadia, so they established the worship of Pan here and claimed that the god lived in its large cave. The area is today known as Banias, the Arabic version of Panias (Arabic has no equivalent for the letter “p”).

The site

Caesarea Philippi was located on a major intersection of trade roads. From here a road to the north leads to Syria; a road to the east leads to Damascus; the road to the south leads to Galilee; and the road to the west leads to Tyre/Sidon and the coastline branch of the Via Maris.

The ruins most people visit at Caesarea Philippi today are only a small part of a much larger complex. South of the parking area stood the northeast tower of the city, over which we can see ruins of a tall Syrian house. A 25-foot-wide dry moat ran from it directly south along the eastern side of the Crusader city. To the west of the parking area was a very large Byzantine church dedicated to the healing of the bleeding woman (Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-50); south of it stood the *Cardo Maximus* (Main Street).

The palace of Agrippa II (ruler of this area from A.D. 50-90), one of the largest in the nation, stood further to the west, as did a synagogue which served the populace until the 11th century. During the Byzantine period, part of the palace was converted to a bathhouse, with an under-floor heating system.

The waters from Banias flow west, where they join the Guveta stream, and make their way into the Jordan River. The stream powered a hydroelectric power station before 1967, and a flour mill until the 1970s. The water was channeled into the roof of the mill, where it fell down into a chimney and turned a waterwheel. Near their intersection stands an ancient Roman bridge, part of the road to Damascus. (Paul would have ridden over this road in Acts 9.) The Sa'ar (“stormy”) stream gets its water from the southwestern slopes of Mt. Hermon and joins them south of the Crusader city. It protected the city as its southern moat.

Pan

In antiquity, the cave housed a gigantic spring that flowed out and formed one of the four sources of the Jordan River as it feeds into the Sea of Galilee. Josephus described it thus:

And when Caesar had further bestowed upon [Herod the Great] another country, he built there also a temple of white marble, hard by the fountains of Jordan: the place is called Panium, where is a top of a mountain that is raised to an immense height, and at its side, beneath, or at its bottom, a dark cave opens itself; within which there is a horrible precipice, that descends abruptly to a vast depth: it contains a mighty quantity of water, which is immovable; and when anybody lets down anything to measure the depth of the earth beneath the water, no length of cord is sufficient to reach it (*Wars of the Jews* 1.21.3).

An earthquake in 1837 filled in the cave and diverted the spring, which now emerges at the foot of the cave.

Pan was the half-goat and half-man god of fright (thus “panic”). He was so known because of his lust for women, chasing and frightening them. He once chased a nymph named Syrinx, who turned herself into a stand of marsh reeds; he made a flute from the reeds, and so is known for playing the flute.

The ancient Greeks thought their fertility gods lived in the underworld during the winter and returned each spring to the earth. To entice Pan to come back, his worshipers would make animal sacrifices in this cave. Beginning in the 3rd century B.C., such sacrifices to Pan were cast from the back of the temple into the spring.

If the sacrifice disappeared in the water of the spring, it was thought to have been accepted by the god. If, however, blood appeared in the nearby springs, the sacrifice had been rejected. In addition to such sacrifices, the people engaged in all manner of prostitution here. Some even engaged in sexual interaction with goats. Given Pan’s lustful nature, the worship of Pan in the area would have involved all forms of sexual immorality.

Herod built his temple to Augustus in front of this cave. Above the cliff we can see the grave of Nebi Khader (“The Green One”), a holy man for Druze and Muslims.

Niches next to the sacred cave were made to house various Greek gods. We know from depictions on coins found in the city that Pan was housed in the first, largest niche; beneath it are inscribed the words, “to Pan and the Nymphs.” Above this large niche is a smaller one which housed Echo, the mountain nymph and consort of Pan. Beneath it stands this inscription: “The priest Victor, son of Lysimachos, dedicated this goddess to the god Pan, lover of Echo.”



Hermes, the messenger god known to the Romans as Mercury, was thought to be the father of Pan and was housed in the next niche to the right. Its inscription reads: “For Pan and the nymphs, Victor son of Lysimachos with his children dedicated a likeness in stone of Hermes, child of Maia, son of Zeus, having

vowed it, the year 150” (A.D. 87). A fifth niche is located above and to the right of the fourth; its inscription begins “Pane . . .” but the rest is lost.

The founding of the “church”

This site is mentioned in three Old Testament references:

- “So Joshua took all that land, the hill country and all the Negeb and all the land of Goshen and the lowland and the Arabah and the hill country of Israel and its lowland from Mount Halak, which rises toward Seir, *as far as Baal-gad* in the Valley of Lebanon below Mount Hermon” (Joshua 11:16-17, italics added).
- Among the nations left in Canaan were “the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, *from Mount Baal-hermon* as far as Lebohamath” (Judges 3:3, italics added).

- “The members of the half-tribe of Manasseh lived in the land. They were very numerous from Bashan to *Baal-hermon*, Senir, and Mount Hermon” (1 Chronicles 5:23, italics added).

Rock badgers are known in this area. They are called “wise,” as they seek sanctuary in safety among high caves and crags (cf. Psalm 104:18; Proverbs 30:26). However, they were unclean animals according to kosher dietary laws (Leviticus 11:5; Deuteronomy 14:7). Those living here were indeed in an unclean place of idolatry and sexual immorality.

According to tradition, the woman who suffered bleeding for 12 years before being cured by Jesus was from Pania (Luke 8:43; Mark 5:23; Matthew 9:20). As the story goes, she later constructed a statue of Jesus in one of her rooms. The pagan emperor Julian the Apostate (A.D. 361) had it removed and replaced by a statue of himself, but violent fire from heaven fell upon it and destroyed it.

However, we have no New Testament reference to this place before Matthew 16 and one of the most significant events in history. In Jesus’ day, a gleaming white marble temple to the worship of Caesar stood before the massive cave. To its right stood a temple to the worship of Zeus. Behind it was the cave and its immeasurable spring; an ancient inscription testifies to this as “the gate of hell.” This spring served as one of the sources of the most significant river in Judaism.

Standing before this Roman temple, surrounded by statues of pagan deities, with temples to Baal scattered around the region and the Jordan at his feet, Jesus asked his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” They said: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Then Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” This was the most radical statement Peter could have made. Jesus replied, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” He used the word *Petros* (small pebble) to describe Peter; then said, “on this *petra* [large stone] I will build my church.” Jesus built his church on the statement of Peter, and on himself as Lord.

Then he said, “The gates of Hell will not withstand its assault.” He pointed to the cave behind him with its massive, gleaming temple to idolatrous worship. Jesus and his disciples, men and women of everyday status and means, were to assault the very gates of Hell. The church is not a building but an army—and we are all drafted.

The military significance of this site may have been in Jesus’ mind when he made this statement. The Battle of Panium occurred here in 198 B.C., between the Egyptian army of Ptolemy and the Syrian army of Antiochus III (Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.3.4). Antiochus’s victory gave him control of Israel until the Maccabean revolt in 167 B.C.

The site would continue to hold military significance after Jesus’ time: the Roman armies of Vespasian camped here for 20 days in July A.D. 67 before advancing on Tiberias to crush Jewish resistance in Galilee. After the Jews were defeated, 2,500 captives were slaughtered here in gladiatorial games. According to Josephus, “many of the prisoners perished here, some thrown to wild beasts, others forced to meet each other in full-scale battles” (*War* 7.24).

In 1129, Crusaders made the place a camp and used it to stage their battle with the Sultan of Damascus. They built a large wall and gate around the city, and constructed Nimrod fortress (Qal’at Namrud, Qal’at Subeiba), one of the largest fortresses in Israel, above it. The present ruins date from the Mamluks in the 13th century.

The Mongols conquered the area in 1260; it was transferred to the Ottoman Empire in 1516. Only around 200 people lived in the area when Israel took it from Syria in 1967 and made the site a popular nature preserve. Excavations began in 1988.

Caesarea Philippi’s greatest significance is this: here Jesus established his church. And here he commissioned us to assault the gates of hell. How are you using your influence for this purpose today?

The Mount of Beatitudes: live biblically

Up the hill and slightly to the west of Capernaum stands the Mount of Beatitudes, a location built to commemorate Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We know that our Lord "went upon a mountain" to deliver these immortal words (Matthew 5:1). We have no other way to identify his specific location, or need to do so. Great speeches transcend their locale. So with the greatest sermon ever preached.

Some consider the Horns of Hattin (*Kurun Hattin*) seven miles to the west of the Sea of Galilee to be a possible site for the Sermon. However, ancient tradition identifies the Mount of Beatitudes as the likely location for this transformational event. The Mount of Beatitudes is also known as Mount Eremos (from a Greek word meaning "solitary" or "uninhabited"). It stands 574 feet above the Sea of Galilee; tests demonstrate that words spoken here can be carried on the wind down the hill and heard a mile away.

The pilgrim Egeria visited this place sometime between A.D. 383 and 395, and records a tradition that Jesus preached his sermon on a terrace above a nearby cave called Mughara Ayub: "On the hill which rises nearby is a grotto, upon which the Lord ascended when he taught the Beatitudes."³ He may have retreated to this cave when seeking solitude with his Father (cf. Mark 1:35; 6:45-46).



The hill was so craggy that it was uncultivated, so that Jesus did not harm cultivated fields when he and his crowds gathered here. A Byzantine church was erected in the 4th century downhill from the present church, and was used until the 7th century. Remains of a cistern and monastery from that era are still visible.

The Basilica of the Church of Mount of Beatitudes was designed by Italian church architect Antonio Barluzzi and constructed in 1936-38. It is octagonal in shape, with a stained glass window on each wall containing one of the beatitudes in Latin. The interior contains mosaics

depicting the seven virtues of justice, charity, prudence, faith, fortitude, hope, and temperance. Pope Paul IV visited the church in 1964; Pope Saint John Paul II visited in 2000.

The church is part of a Franciscan monastery; the beautiful grounds contain gardens, statues, benches, and signs with biblical excerpts.

Here we heard the Sermon on the Mount, the greatest sermon ever preached. And we learned that making Christ our King requires that we live biblically. Is your life aligned with his word today?



**Friday
May 29, 2015**

The Jordan River: surrender all

The Jordan River is mentioned some 175 times in the Old Testament and 15 times in the New. “Jordan” comes from the Hebrew *yarden*, meaning “descender.” The name is appropriate, as the river begins 656 feet above sea level on the slopes of Mt. Hermon and ends at the Dead Sea, 1377 feet below sea level (a drop of some 2,033 feet).

The Jordan River is typically no wider than 20 yards and no deeper than 17 feet. Its four sources lie at the base of Mt. Hermon, which join to become the Upper Jordan River. It flows into the Sea of Galilee and out at its southern end, becoming the Lower Jordan River. From here the river flows southward until emptying into the Dead Sea. This section of the river constitutes the border between Israel and the country of Jordan. It winds for 142 miles, though its course would be only 65 miles in a straight line.

Its first biblical mention is in Genesis 13:10, “Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord.” The Jews crossed the river after God dried its flood (Joshua 3:15-17); Elijah and Elisha crossed on dry ground as well (2 Kings 2:8). David escaped Absalom by crossing the river (2 Samuel 17:20-22). The river is most noted as the site where John baptized (Luke 3:3; Mark 1:4-5).

Where on the river did he baptize? This is a confusing question. Many tourists visit Yardenit, a baptism site built at the point where the Jordan flows out of the Sea of Galilee.

However, it is much more likely that Jesus was baptized at Qasr el Yahud, just north of the Dead Sea and east of Jericho. John 1:29 describes the setting: “These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.” John 3 adds that “John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized” (John 3:23). And we learn that Jesus was a day’s walk from Bethany, near Jerusalem, when he heard about Lazarus’ death (John 11:3) while staying at “the place where John had been baptizing at first” (John 10:40).



For centuries, pilgrims visited Qasr el Yahud; five different churches were built here in the 5th century and following as memorials to Jesus’ baptism. However, after the 1967 war, this became a frontier area, located between Israel and Jordan. As a result, the Israeli government opened Yardenit in 1981; and reopened Qasr el Yahud only in 2011.

Water from the Jordan is becoming increasingly contentious, after nearly 600,000 Syrian refugees have settled in the country of Jordan. Their water demands have heightened the growing concern over the river's capacity and future.

Wherever John baptized Jesus, we know that this event occurred. As our Lord chose to submit to his Father's will, the Spirit descended on him and the Father pronounced his blessing. Here we learned to begin every day by surrendering it to God as our King and asking the Spirit to "fill" and empower us (Ephesians 5:18). We cannot do divine work in human strength—only when we ask the Spirit to control us each day can we be the Kingdom Christians we are called to be.

F. B. Meyer, one of the greatest preachers of his generation, asked a young minister to preach in his pulpit one Sunday morning. The man spoke with a power Dr. Meyer had never before encountered, so he asked the man his secret. He said, "I don't have any secret. It's just that I've given all the keys of my life to the Lord." That night Dr. Meyer had a dream in which an angel came to ask for his keys. He gave all but one, and the angel said, "All or none." Finally he gave that last key, and his ministry and life were never the same.

Have you given all the keys of your life to God?

Cana of Galilee

On our way to Judea we drove through modern-day Cana, in the vicinity of the village where Jesus performed his first public miracle. Our Lord could have begun his ministry anywhere, in any way. He could have begun by walking on water, feeding 5,000 families, or raising the dead. But he began by blessing a peasant wedding. Just as the Father invented marriage, so Jesus began his ministry by blessing a wedding and marriage. His earthly ministry began and ended with compassion.

Nazareth

Along the way we drove by modern-day Nazareth. This was a very small town in Jesus' day, with perhaps 150 inhabitants at most. It was not mentioned by Joshua in his list of settlements for the tribe of Zebulun (Joshua 19:10-16). It is not mentioned among the 63 towns listed in the Talmud, nor by Josephus.

After the Hasmonean conquest of the region (134-104 B.C.), a massive influx of Jewish immigrants occurred. Even still, Nazareth itself remained a small town. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) was a joke of the day.

What man overlooks, God often uses. In Nazareth the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary (Luke 1). Early tradition says that the angel spoke to Mary at the village well. A well has been discovered here, so the Church of the Annunciation was built over the spot.

Here Jesus grew up, returned to begin his ministry (Luke 4), and was rejected, foreshadowing his death for us all. In this tiny town Joseph chose to take the pregnant Mary as his wife, to flee with her from the wrath of Herod, and to raise a son who was not his. God calls us to serve and love with him such passion today.

Megiddo: be ready today

Next we stopped at Megiddo. There were 27 different levels of civilization here; the site has been occupied since 7000 B.C. We walked through the Canaanite gate which dates to 1500 B.C. The first battle in recorded history was staged here; 'Megiddo' was always a symbol for warfare and conquest. Solomon built walls here, then Ahab further fortified the city. Revelation 16:16 makes this statement: "Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon." (This is the only reference to Armageddon in the Bible.) "Armageddon" is a transliteration of Har-Megiddo (the mount of Megiddo).



Some interpreters link this text to passages in Revelation 19 and 20 and teach that a literal final battle to end all history will occur here. Others see the reference to Armageddon as symbolic of conflict and conquest (like "Gettysburg" in America today). They teach that Armageddon is not predicted as the geographic place of a final battle, but is a symbol of the fact that God is still on his throne and good defeats evil. First-century Christians reading Revelation could know that God will destroy their enemies and win their victory.

Either way, Megiddo is a place of great spiritual significance. More battles have been fought here than any other place on earth. Because human nature doesn't change, we still "will to power" and fight for possessions and significance. But God is still on his throne. Whatever "Armageddon" you may be fighting today, God will grant you the victory.

But we have only today to be ready for the day when he will come to us or we will go to him. To make God your king, be ready for eternity now. If you had only today to prepare, what would you change?

The Springs of Harod: trust God always

The springs of Harod were our next stop, close to the hills of Moreh. These are clean spring waters which emerge from Mt. Gilboa and flow today into a large swimming pool in the midst of a beautiful park.

In Judges 7, Gideon called together the Israelite army to wage war against the Midianites, a massive army of 135,000 troops and camels (the tanks of the day) beyond counting. When he summoned the national army, 32,000 men responded. God said, "This is too many—they will think that they have won the victory themselves." Gideon sent home all who were afraid, and 22,000 left. God said, "This is still too many." So he instructed them men to go to the springs to drink. Only 300 lapped the water with their hands; the rest drank with their faces in the water. God said, "Use only the 300--send the rest home." Gideon did.



At night Gideon and the 300 advanced against the Midianites, each one carrying a torch and trumpet. Typically the torchbearer would represent 100 to 1,000 soldiers. Thus the Midianites thought that many times more soldiers were coming against them than Gideon led. They blew their trumpets and the Midianites began fighting each other in the nighttime panic. Gideon called for troops from the surrounding tribes, who pursued the Midianites and defeated them. In this way Gideon led the people to victory.

The spiritual point: God wants us to trust in his power and ability, not our own. If our goals are such that we can accomplish them in our abilities, our ambitions are too small. Begin each day by submitting that day to the leadership and power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). We must have God's power to fulfill God's purposes.

And we must trust his leading even when we do not understand it. As the song says, “When you cannot see his hand, trust his heart.”

Beth Shan

Next we journeyed to Beth Shan. In 1 Samuel 11 we find the story of Saul and Kadesh Barnea. Enemy troops surrounded Kadesh, threatening its inhabitants. They called for help, and Saul mustered troops and destroyed their enemy. They never forgot his kindness.

In 1 Samuel 31, Saul and his sons (including Jonathan) were killed by Philistines at Mt. Gilboa. (Saul committed suicide when he was wounded.) The Philistines beheaded Saul’s body, then nailed it with those of his sons on the wall of Beth Shan. The soldiers of Kadesh Barnea heard of this outrage, risked their lives by traveling across the Jordan river to Beth Shan, took the bodies of Saul and his sons back to Kadesh, cremated and buried them, and grieved for them seven days.

Excavations at the Beth Shan tell have discovered walls from the time of King Saul, 10 feet from the top on the other side of the tell. A first-century Roman city was built around the tell, the ruins of which are now being reconstructed. We saw the theater, the main streets, the gymnasium, the bath houses, and the assorted arches and columns which decorated this Roman city.

We learn from Beth Shan that we must begin well and end well. Saul began his rule with great promise, but ended it with suicide and disgrace. We must stay faithful to God, to the end.

Entry to Jerusalem: welcome home



We ended the day at an overlook above the religious capital of half the world’s population.

The Old City is home to around 37,000 people, living in four quarters (Muslim to the northeast, Christian to the northwest, Armenian to the southwest, and Jewish to the southeast). The Armenian is the smallest, home to 2,500 residents (with another 1,500 Armenians elsewhere in Israel). They adopted Christianity in A.D. 286, even before Constantine was converted, and have lived in Jerusalem since that time. Their Quarter was established in the 14th century.

Their St. James Church was built in the mid-12th century and is named for the half-brother of Jesus and first bishop of the Jerusalem church. James is said to be buried in the central nave; a shrine beyond the wooden doors is said to hold his head. The St. James Monastery is home to a library of more than 100,000 volumes. Syrian, Maronite Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Anglican churches are found in this section as well.

Seven gates pass through the city walls:

- New Gate, west on northern side (built 1887)
- Damascus Gate, middle on northern side (built 1537)
- Herod’s Gate, east on northern side (date of construction unknown)

- Lion's Gate, north on eastern side (built 1538-39)
- Dung Gate, east on southern side (built 1538-40)
- Zion Gate, middle on southern side, leads to Jewish Quarter (built 1540)
- Jaffa Gate, middle on western side (built 1530-40).

Each of the gates is constructed with a sharp turn, so enemies could not charge through on horseback and battering rams would be more difficult to use. Above Zion gate we can see a hole through which boiling liquids could be poured on attackers. Below Damascus Gate is an arch dating to A.D. 135, built by the Roman Emperor Hadrian as the main entrance to the city.

Just inside Jaffa gate is a small enclosure with two graves, believed to be the burial place of the two architects of the walls. They were supposedly murdered, either because Suleiman did not want anyone to be able to build such magnificent walls again, or because they failed to include Mount Zion within the walls. Lion's Gate is so-named because of four lions on the wall, two on each side of the gate. According to tradition, Suleiman had a dream that he would be eaten by lions if he did not protect Jerusalem with walls. It is also known as St. Stephen's Gate, since tradition says the first martyr was executed nearby. The Israeli army entered this gate in 1967 when they recaptured the Old City.

Our Communion service was a wonderful introduction to the Holy City. Here we claimed the promise of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1-5), and joined pilgrims across 30 centuries who have come "up" to Jerusalem. Welcome home.



**Saturday
May 30, 2015**

The Garden of Gethsemane: serve in gratitude for God's grace

“Gethsemane” comes from two Hebrew words meaning “olive press.” It was a large area in Jesus’ day. Here our Lord chose to die for us.

He knew he would face three illegal trials from the Jewish authorities, and three Roman trials ending in his conviction. He would suffer crucifixion, the cruelest form of execution every devised. His perfect, sinless soul would be made to bear our sin, so that he would cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). And he would die, that we might live.

In this place, Jesus made the decision to bear our sins on our cross and go to our grave. He died for us—now he calls us to live for him. To make Jesus your King, serve him in gratitude for his grace.

The story is told of the drawbridge engineer who brought his young son to work one day. He showed his son how he pulled the levers to raise the drawbridge so ships could pass beneath, then lowered them so trains could pass over.

The engineer heard the air horn of an approaching ship and began maneuvering the levers to lift the drawbridge. As the ship was sailing through the raised bridge, he noticed that his son was not with him. Looking out the window, he spotted his young boy climbing and playing on the gears. He started out to get him when he heard the ear-splitting whistle of an oncoming train. The bridge must be lowered, immediately.

In that moment he realized: if he rescued his son, the passengers on the train would crash and die. If he lowered the bridge, the passengers would live but his son would be crushed and killed. It was the most horrible of dilemmas. The father pulled the lever.

Your Father loves you for who you are, not what you do. He sees you as if you'd never sinned. He calls you to serve him in gratitude for his unconditional grace. Please, never again wonder if God loves you.



The pool of Bethesda: give him your need

The New Testament specifically describes 35 miracles of the Lord Jesus; 17 of them involve the healing of a suffering person. Our Lord was indeed the Great Physician, a fact never more demonstrated than in the miracle we remembered here.

Jesus met an invalid, a man who had not walked for 38 years. He was waiting beside the Pool of Bethesda, a body of water 315 feet long near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. Jesus asked him if he wanted to be healed. He then commanded him to get up, take up his mat and walk, and the man was healed.

Where do you need his touch? As the song says, when you can't see his hand, trust his heart.

The Via Dolorosa and Church of the Holy Sepulchre



The most venerated site on earth to most Christians is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, first built by Constantine the Great in A.D. 326 (it was completed in A.D. 335). Here we find the last five “stations of the cross.”

The “Via Dolorosa” (the “Way of Suffering”) is traced each Good Friday by the Catholic tradition. Its “Fourteen Stations of the Cross” are found in Catholic and many other liturgical churches around the world. The Stations:

1. Jesus is condemned to die (Pontius Pilate’s judgment hall)
2. He is made to carry his cross (the Monastery of the Flagellation)
3. He falls for the first time
4. He meets his mother (not recorded in Scripture)
5. Simon of Cyrene carries his cross (the V on the wall marking the station is clear; the stone pilgrims touch is said to be the place Jesus put his hand when he fell under the cross)
6. Veronica wipes his face (not recorded in Scripture)
7. He falls the second time
8. He speaks to the women of Jerusalem
9. He falls the third time.

Note that these stations are along the road as it makes its way to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The last five stations are found within the church:

10. His clothes are stripped from his body
11. He is nailed to the cross
12. He dies
13. His body is removed
14. His body is buried.

Is this where Jesus died?

What the Bible says

The Gospels clearly describe the death of Jesus Christ by Roman crucifixion, and his burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. However, they do not tell us the precise location of his execution and burial. Muslims visit and venerate the burial place of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina; followers of Confucius visit his grave; but we cannot be sure where Jesus of Nazareth died and was buried. Why not?

One answer is historical. As we will see, two sites are proposed. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is believed by the vast majority of scholars to stand over the place of Jesus' death and burial. Gordon's Calvary and the Garden Tomb are believed by others to be the place where he was crucified and entombed. Still others believe that neither site is accurate.

The other answer is theological: since Jesus rose from the grave, his tomb is empty. Early Christians did not venerate it, since his body was not there. Unlike the tombs of other religious leaders, Jesus' grave contains no remains to visit. What matters most to us is not where he died, but the fact that he rose from the dead and is alive today.

Here is what Scripture tells us about the place of Jesus' death and burial:

- He was executed at “the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha” (John 19:17; cf. Matt. 27:33; Mark 15:22; Luke 23:33).
- This place was outside the walls of Jerusalem: “Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood” (Hebrews 13:12). Jews typically buried outside the city walls.
- Yet it was “near the city” (John 19:20).
- This place seems to have been on level ground, so that “standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” (John 19:25). The belief that “on a hill faraway, stood an old rugged cross” comes from hymnology and tradition, not Scripture.
- His tomb was “close at hand” to the place of his death (John 19:42).
- It was inside a garden: “in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid” (John 19:41).
- This tomb was owned by “a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus” (Matt. 27:57). He took Jesus' body and “laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock” (v. 60a; cf. Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53).
- Joseph “rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb” (Matt. 27:60b).

So, the site of Jesus' burial must have been outside the walls of first-century Jerusalem, at a place that could be described as “The Place of a Skull,” on level ground, near a garden in which a new tomb could be cut in the rock.

History of the Church

In the eighth or seventh century B.C., the area was a large limestone quarry. It was used for this purpose until the first century B.C., at which time it was filled and covered with a layer of reddish-brown soil mixed with stone flakes. The quarry then became a garden or orchard, where cereals, fig trees, carob trees, and olive trees grew. It also became a cemetery; at least four tombs dating from this period have been discovered.

One of them is an *arcosolium*, a shallow, rock-hewn tomb cut lengthwise in the side of a burial cave. This is the tomb believed to be that of Jesus, together with its antechamber. Centuries of pilgrims have completely deformed it by chipping away pieces of rock. It is also covered with later masonry.



No church buildings were constructed at this time, as such structures would not become legal until Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in A.D. 313. Rather, the site would next become a pagan shrine. After the Second Jewish Revolt of A.D. 132, Emperor Hadrian banned Jews from Jerusalem and sought to rebuild the city as Roman. On the site where the Holy Sepulchre Church would later be built, he constructed a gigantic raised platform on which he built a shrine to the worship of Venus. This platform filled in the quarry and garden below.

In A.D. 325, at the Council of Nicea, the bishop of Jerusalem petitioned Constantine to demolish Hadrian's temple and uncover the tomb of Christ below it. This site was shown to Constantine's mother, Queen Helena, on her visit to Jerusalem in A.D. 326. After her visit, the Christian community removed the Hadrianic temple, platform, and fill dirt beneath it. An eye-witness named Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, reports:

As soon as the original surface of the ground, beneath the covering of earth, appeared, immediately, and contrary to all expectation, the venerable and hollowed monument of our Saviour's resurrection was discovered. Then indeed did this most holy cave present a faithful similitude of his return to life, in that, after lying buried in darkness, it again emerged to light, and afforded to all who came to witness the sight, a clear and visible proof of the wonders of which that spot had once been the scene, a testimony to the resurrection of the Saviour clearer than any voice could give.⁴

Constantine then built a rotunda around Jesus' tomb and a long basilica that enclosed Calvary. The rotunda's design may have been inspired by the circular pagan temple constructed earlier by Hadrian. Two original columns of Constantine's rotunda have been preserved.

In A.D. 614, the Persians invaded Jerusalem. They damaged the church by fire, but did not destroy it. However, in A.D. 1009, on the order of the Muslim Caliph of Cairo, the entire church was demolished, including the tomb. The rotunda, however, was preserved to a height of five feet.

Between 1042 and 1048, the Byzantine emperor Constantine IX Monomachus restored the rotunda and built three chapels adjacent to it. The Crusaders, who ruled Jerusalem from 1099 to 1187, then rebuilt the church in 1149, essentially in its current form. For the first time, the traditional rock of Golgotha was included in the church. It underwent an extensive renovation in the 16th century.

A fire in 1808 and an earthquake in 1927 damaged the structure extensively. In 1852, the Catholics, Greeks, Armenians, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox agreed to the "Status Quo of the Holy Places," which guarantees rights and privileges of these communities. As a result, repairs such as those undertaken in 1959 must be agreed upon by all.

Sites to note

Visitors to the Church begin with doors on the southern wall of the structure. Above the door they note an example of the "status quo": the "immovable ladder." It was placed on this upper floor, below a window belonging to the Armenians, sometime before 1839 (when it is shown in an engraving). No one is sure when or by whom. As a result, no one is willing to move it, lest they antagonize other groups.

The doors to the Church are opened and closed each day according to an ancient ritual. When Saladin defeated the Crusaders in A.D. 1187, he allowed Christians to continue using the site only if the key to church remained in Muslim hands. Descendants of that Muslim family, the Nuseibehs, held the 10-inch key and opened the door every morning to Christianity's most sacred shrine. In 1789, after tensions arose between the Nuseibeh family and the Ottoman Empire, the keys were entrusted to the Joudeh family. Now one of their descendants brings the key to Wajeeh Nuseibeh, a descendant of the Nuseibeh family, who then unlocks or locks the door.

On days when there is no special feast or event, the doors are opened at 4 AM. Between April and September, they are closed at 9 PM; between October and March they are closed at 7 PM.

Each of the three communities (Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian) appoints a sexton for this task, which is rotated among the three. First, the Muslim doorkeeper unlocks the doors. Then, for "simple" openings, the sexton opens one of the doors. For "solemn" openings, the sexton opens the left door while the Muslim doorkeeper opens the right door. For the closure, the same ritual is followed, after which the Muslim locks the doors.

Once inside the doors, visitors note a staircase to the right. It leads up to Calvary, where Stations 10-12 are located. At Station 10, his clothes are stripped from him; at Station 11, he is crucified; at Station 12, he dies. The rock under glass at the altar is said to be Calvary. The room on the ground floor beneath the rock is the Chapel of Adam, commemorating the tradition that Jesus was crucified over the place where Adam's skull was buried. A window on the altar wall opens to Calvary, with a crack said to have been caused by the earthquake that occurred when Jesus died (Matt. 27:51).

Back down the stairs to the main floor, visitors see a long rock laid on the ground with incense lanterns suspended over it. This is the "Stone of Anointing," commemorating Joseph of Arimathea's preparation of Jesus' body for burial. (However, this stone was placed here in the 1810 reconstruction.)

Continuing past the Stone of Anointing, visitors turn to the right and enter the rotunda. In its center is the Edicule, a small chapel containing the Holy Sepulchre. Its first room holds the Angel's Stone, thought to be part of the stone that sealed Jesus' tomb. The second room is the tomb itself. To the rear of the Rotunda is a rough chapel with a rock-cut chamber thought by some to be the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

On the northeast side of the complex is the Prison of Christ, where Franciscans believe Jesus was held by the Romans. An Armenian chapel to the east of the Tomb leads to the Chapel of the Invention of the Holy Cross, where the cross of Christ is said to have been discovered. A chapel north of the Tomb indicates the place where Mary Magdalene met Jesus; another chapel commemorates Jesus' meeting with his mother after the resurrection.

Is the Church the right site?

Arguments for the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as the place of Jesus' death and burial:

- Christians were never dispersed from Jerusalem, and preserved the memory that Jesus was executed and buried here.
- No other site was proposed prior to the 19th century.
- Excavations prove that the area had been an ancient cemetery.
- The site was near the city (John 19:20), whose walls stood 500 feet to the south and 350 feet to the east.
- It stood outside the city walls of Jesus' day. A wall has been discovered beneath the Russian Orthodox

St. Alexander's Chapel, running north and south before turning east and forming a corner gate. The Church is located just west of this wall/gate. The Third Wall built by Herod Agrippa enclosed the site (causing many at one time to question whether the Church's site was "outside the gate"), but we now know that it was built between A.D. 41 and 44, a decade after Jesus' death.

- Melito of Sardis (ca. A.D. 160) describes the site of Jesus' execution as "in the middle of Jerusalem," which would be true by his time. The site was outside the city in Jesus' day, but inside the city a century later.

Arguments against:

- There are no remains from the first century to prove that this was the place of Jesus' death and burial, since they were destroyed by Muslims in 1009.
- Jesus' crucifixion apparently occurred at a level place, whereas the site within the Church stands atop a hill identified as "Calvary."
- The present-day hill of "Calvary" would not be large enough for three people to be crucified there. (However, the Muslim destruction of 1099 may have modified the hill.)
- Jewish execution sites were considered to be unclean; it is perhaps unlikely that Jesus' crucifixion (while "near the city," John 19:20) would have occurred so close to the city walls and gates of the day.
- Hadrian's temple was located at a typical site for Roman cities: adjacent to the Forum, at the intersection of the main north-south road with the main east-west road. He would have had no reason to desecrate a Christian site in A.D. 135, as he was fighting Jews, not Christians, during the Second Revolt. The Jews would have not held Jesus' tomb to be significant, or cared if the emperor built a pagan temple over it.
- Helena is known to have located Christian buildings and sites where they would be most available to pilgrims, whether they marked the actual event they commemorated or not.
- Early Christians did not venerate the place of Jesus' death and burial, making the later designation of the Holy Sepulchre site questionable.
- First-century Jewish leaders condemned burial on the western side of a city.⁵ The location of known Jewish graves corroborates this tradition.
- Eusebius describes "Golgotha" as "north of Mount Zion" (*Onomasticon* 365). The Church is north of the hill known as "Mount Zion" today. However, in Eusebius' day, "Mount Zion" referred to the Temple Mount itself, which is east of the Church, not south.
- The location of the Church requires that a wall existed to its immediate east, but the low elevation of that location makes it less suitable for defending the city (the primary purpose of city walls). The elevation of Golgotha would have provided the enemy a significant military advantage, making it more likely that the area would have been included in the city wall. However, the Church would not then be "outside the gate" (Heb. 13:12).

Ultimately, what matters is not where Jesus died and was raised, but that he was. Christians did not mark his tomb, since he is not there. "He is risen indeed!"

Bethlehem

Next we crossed the Palestinian border to the Church of the Nativity. Constructed by Helena, its fourth-century floor mosaics are still visible. The church was destroyed in the Samaritan Revolt of 529 and rebuilt by Emperor Justinian in 565. The Crusaders made further repairs and expansions. Today the church is administered by Armenian, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic authorities.

We entered through the Door of Humiliation, a low doorway constructed to keep animals and marauders on horseback out of the church. We visited “Jerome’s Cave,” located beneath the Catholic church. Here St. Jerome translated the Bible into Latin; this cave is part of the cavern system in which Jesus was born. Here our Lord chose to be born to peasant parents and worshipped by field hands. He became one of us that we might be one with him.

We heard the genealogy of Jesus, and rejoiced that we are included in the family of God. And we noted that history is filled with men who would be gods, but only one God who would be man. If he would be born in a cave, he would be born anywhere—even in your heart and mine.





**Sunday
May 31, 2015**

The Temple Mount and Dome of the Rock

We began the day by walking through the Western Wall tunnels, excavations that took us to the first-century street of Jesus' day. Next we returned to the Western Wall itself. This is what remains from the first-century Temple Mount destroyed by Titus in A.D. 70. Jewish people come from across the world to pray here, as this wall stands close to their Holy of Holies. We joined them, claiming God's promise that "my eyes and my heart will always be there" (2 Chronicles 7:16).

The area where the Temple once stood is called the Temple Mount today. After they destroyed the Jewish Temple, the Romans constructed a temple and altar to Zeus on the site. Under Constantine, the Church removed this temple and built a church in its place.

When Muslim armies captured Jerusalem, their leaders sought to build a structure on the site where the Qur'an claimed that Abraham offered Ishmael. Between A.D. 687 and 891, *Qubbat As-Sakhrah* was constructed, the "Dome of the Rock." It is not a mosque but a *mashhad*, a shrine for pilgrims. Adjacent to the Dome, the Al-Aqsa Mosque was built as a place for worship and prayer.

The dome was originally covered with pure gold, but the gold was removed over the centuries and the dome is now made of gold leaf. The 16 columns inside were taken from different churches in Jerusalem which had been destroyed during the Persian occupation of the city in A.D. 614.

During the Crusades which captured Jerusalem in 1099, the Dome of the Rock was made into a Christian shrine named *Templum Domini* (Temple of the Lord). When Muslims recaptured the city in 1187, they returned the structure to its present use.

The Western Wall (known as the "Wailing Wall") is all that remains of the Second Temple. This wall was part of the outer perimeter of the Temple, not the Temple itself. Here Jews and pilgrims come to place prayer requests in the spaces between the stones and pray. Many Jews consider it the holiest place on earth.

Recent archaeological work has strengthened our belief that the Dome of the Rock does in fact house the site of the Jewish Temple. A few years ago, a Christian scholar was allowed to measure an indentation on the top of the rock inside the structure. He discovered that it fits *exactly* the dimensions of the Ark of the Covenant. Further, the obvious corner cut into the rock fits precisely the dimensions of the Holy of Holies. This is probably the very place where the Holy of Holies once stood.



Just to the south of the rock there once hung a curtain--60 feet tall, as thick as the width of a man's palm. This purple curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the world. When the High Priest would go through this curtain, a rope tied to his ankle would trail outside. If the people standing outside the curtain heard the bells of the Priest's robe stop ringing, they would know that he had died in the holy presence of God and could drag his body back out. Such was their veneration for this place.

A Priest did indeed die in the holy presence of God, and his death affected this curtain forever. Scripture says that the moment Jesus died on the cross, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split" (Matthew 27:51). In the moment of Jesus' death for our sins, the great Atonement was made. The penalty of our sins was paid, once and for all. And so the Holy of Holies was no longer needed.

As a result, the curtain separating mankind from God was torn in two. From top to bottom. Not as a religion, from us to God--as grace, from God to us. And now every one of us can go into the holy presence of God as priests before him.

Today the Dome of the Rock is a fascinating historical site. And the rock it houses may well have been the place in ancient Israel where God "lived." But we are now where God "lives." We are the true Temple of the living God today (1 Cor. 3:16).

The mountains of Jerusalem

Psalm 125 states, "As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore" (v. 2). What "mountains"?

There are seven mountains in the vicinity of Jerusalem:

- Mt. Moriah is the location of the Jewish temple, where the Dome of the Rock now stands.
- Mt. Scopus stands to the east of the Old City.
- The Mt. of Olives stands south of Mt. Scopus.
- The Mt. of Corruption stands south of the Mt. of Olives.
- Mt. Zion stands to the west of Mt. Moriah.
- Mt. Ophel is a hill to the east of Mt. Zion and is the place where David first established Jerusalem.
- Mt. Acra stands north of Mt. Zion.

According to rabbinic legend, Mt. Moriah was the first land to appear during the creation of the world. It was said that Moriah was the center of the Garden of Eden; its soil was used to create Adam; he was buried there.

Scopus, which means "one that watches" in Latin, was the "lookout" mountain for the Romans; hence its name. According to Josephus, it gave "a plain view of the great temple" (*Wars* 5.2.2). It rises to 2,600 feet above sea level, some 250 feet higher than the Temple Mount. It was known as "Nob" in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Samuel 21:1) and was the place where priests resided in the time of King Saul.

South of Scopus is the Mount of Olives, the central peak in the range. It is named for the olive groves which once flourished on its slopes.

The Mount of Corruption was named from 1 Kings 11:7, “Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem.” Nearly five centuries later, good king Josiah “defiled the high places that were east of Jerusalem, to the south of the mount of corruption, which Solomon the king of Israel had built for Ashtoreth the abomination of the Sidonians, and for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites” (2 Kings 23:13).

Zion is a mountain standing 2,529 feet in height. Over time, it has also given its name to the entire city, so that Jerusalem and Zion are often synonymous. And its name has been used for the movement to secure a Jewish homeland, often called “Zionism.”

Ophel is named for *opel*, the Hebrew word for “hill, swell, rise” (equivalent to the Greek *acropolis*). It stands east of Mt. Zion and was fortified by a separate wall. Josiah “did much building on the wall of Ophel” (2 Chronicles 27:3). Manasseh later “built an outer wall for the city of David west of Gihon, in the valley, and for the entrance into the Fish Gate, and carried it around Ophel, and raised it to a very great height” (2 Chron. 33:14).

Acra originally stood 2479 feet in elevation, 39 feet higher than Moriah. Simon Maccabeus reduced its height to make it lower than the Temple. In addition, Mount Bezetha is located west of Acra. It was not included in Jerusalem during Jesus’ ministry, as it was outside the city walls of the day.

Mt. Moriah

Of all the mountains encompassing Jerusalem, Moriah is by far the most significant to world history. It is venerated by the Jewish people as the place where Abraham offered Isaac (Genesis 22) and the location of the temples of Solomon and Herod. Its Temple Mount is esteemed by Christians as the site of Jesus’ Passion Week and focus for much of his ministry. And it is considered the third holiest place on earth to Muslims, for reasons we’ll explore in this essay. More than half the world’s population considers Moriah vital to their culture and faith.

Its biblical story begins with God’s call to Abraham: “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (Genesis 22:2). By the time of King David, this area belonged to a Jebusite named Araunah. David bought it from him “in order to build an altar to the Lord” (2 Samuel 24:21).

Later, his son Solomon “began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to David his father, at the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite” (2 Chronicles 3:1). In 587 B.C., Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroyed this temple: “he burned the house of the Lord and the king’s house and all the houses of Jerusalem” (2 Kings 25:9).

The temple was rebuilt under Zerubbabel at the same location (Ezra 3:8-13). This “Second Temple” was greatly enlarged in a massive building project begun by King Herod and completed in A.D. 66. Four years later, the Second Temple (also known as Herod’s Temple) was destroyed by Roman general Titus. Jesus had predicted this destruction 40 years earlier (Matthew 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6).

This area is still known today as the “Temple Mount” (known as the Noble Sanctuary or Al-Haram al-Sharif by Muslims). The only structure that remains from the first century is the Western retaining wall that surrounded the Temple compound. This Western Wall (also known as the Wailing Wall) is the holiest site on earth to observant Jews today.

In A.D. 688, the Muslim ruler Abd al-Malik began construction of the Dome of the Rock, completing the structure in A.D. 691. It stands over the rock that was originally the uppermost section of Mt. Moriah, the site where Jews built their First and Second Temples. This rock is often called the “foundation stone.” Man-made carvings and trenches validate its original use for Jewish sacrifice, as they would have carried away the blood of offerings.

The site is venerated by Muslims due to their tradition that Muhammad ascended from this rock into heaven one night. During the “night journey” (*al-Isra*), he is believed to have been transported from Mecca to Jerusalem, where he ascended into heaven (*al-Mi'raj*, “the ascent”). During his time in heaven he met with Allah, Moses and Gabriel, and was told that his followers should pray five times a day. He was shown the torments of the damned and then returned to his bed in Mecca.

This miracle is recorded in only a single verse of the Qur'an:

Glory to (God) who did take His servant for a Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts We did Bless,--in order that We might show him some of Our Signs: for He is the One Who heareth and seeth (all things) (17:1).

In addition, many Muslims believe that Moriah was the place where Abraham offered Ishmael to God (see Qur'an 37:99-106). (Note that some Muslims agree that Isaac was the son sacrificed, and that the Qur'an never names the son who was offered by Abraham. Others believe that Ishmael was offered to God near Mecca or in the valley of Mina, six miles north.) And Muslims claim that an angel will come to this rock to announce the Last Judgment with a trumpet call.

The Dome of the Rock



The “Dome of the Rock” (known to Muslims as *Qubbat as-Sakhrah*) is not a Muslim mosque (though it is sometimes erroneously called the Mosque of Omar). Rather, it is a shrine for pilgrims and the oldest Muslim monument standing today. Its *mihrab* (a niche pointing toward Mecca) is also the oldest in the world.

Abd al-Malik intended the Dome to be more than a Muslim site. He patterned it after the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. However, he constructed it to compete with the largest Christian churches in the world as a symbolic statement of Islam's superiority.

Its design is truly remarkable. For instance, each outer wall is 67 feet long, which is precisely the dome's diameter and its height from the base of the drum. The exterior was covered by inscriptions which were replaced by Suleiman the Magnificent in 1545 and again during the major restoration of 1956-62. They are verses from the Qur'an. The inscriptions on the drum (just beneath the golden dome) tell the story of Muhammad's Night Journey.

The columns supporting the inner octagon were taken from other structures, many from church buildings. The wooden screen around the rock itself was donated by the Ayyubid sultan al-Aziz in 1198. The reliquary near the rock contains a hair from Muhammad's beard. Beneath the rock is a cavity known as the Well of Souls. There was once a tradition that those who prayed here and walked around the rock would be given a certificate granting them admission to paradise.

The golden dome was originally made of gold. It was eventually replaced with copper and then with aluminum. The aluminum is now covered with gold leaf, donated by the late King Hussein of Jordan in 1993 at a cost of \$8.2 million.

Non-Muslims are allowed to enter the Temple Mount area, but are not permitted to pray there. They are not allowed into the Dome of the Rock, however. The Temple Mount has been under Muslim governance since the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israeli leaders gave authority over the site to an Islamic religious trust.

Al-Aqsa Mosque

At the southern end of the Temple Mount stands Al-Aqsa (“the farthest”) Mosque. It was so-named because it was the most distant sanctuary visited by Muhammad. It was constructed by the builder of the Dome on the Rock, Abd al-Malik, between A.D. 709-715. It is 272 feet long and 184 feet wide, and can hold up to 5,000 worshippers. The mosque has been destroyed by earthquakes and rebuilt a number of times.

Its form has remained the same since its 1033 reconstruction by the Kalif Al-Dhahir, though it was used by the Crusaders as the headquarters of the Knights Templar.

When Saladin defeated the Crusaders in 1187, he turned it back into a mosque. Suleiman the Magnificent restored it in the 16th century; some of its stained-glass windows date to this period. The mosque is the third-holiest site in the world to Muslims (after Mecca, where Muhammad was born, and Medina, where he died and was buried).

An extensive renovation was begun in 1922, with further repairs in 1938 and 1942. In 1951, King Abdullah of Jordan was assassinated at its south end; bullet holes can still be seen in a pillar. Every Friday, Muslims gather here to pray and hear a sermon from the imam.

Several attempts to destroy the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock have been made in recent years. In 1969, an Australian tourist started a fire in the mosque, attempting to hasten the return of Christ. In the 1980s, a group tried to blow up both the mosque and the Dome to clear the way for the Third Temple to be built on the site. In March 2013, a group of extremist Israeli settlers stormed the mosque, claiming that it should be destroyed so the Third Temple could be built in its place.

The Southern Steps: live a life of worship

We walked next to the southwestern part of the Temple Mount. Here we observed shops where the moneychangers were driven from the area by Jesus (Matthew 21:12-17). We viewed the “pinnacle of the temple” where Jesus was tempted to presume on his Father’s protection rather than follow him to the cross (Matthew 4:5-7). And we considered the massive stones thrown down to the first-century street by the Romans 20 centuries ago. Jesus warned his disciples that this tragedy would come (Matthew 24:1-2).

Then we sat on the first-century southern steps of the temple, the very steps Jesus would have climbed as he came here to worship his Father. We are now his hands and feet (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), called to carry his grace to our world today.

We reviewed the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-34) and joined pilgrims, including Jesus, who sang these psalms as they journeyed “up” to Jerusalem and the temple. And we learned to live a life of worship, a daily communion whereby we are empowered by the Spirit to be Kingdom Christians.



Upper Room: depend on the Spirit

Located directly above the traditional Tomb of King David on Mount Zion, the Upper Room commemorates the Last Supper and the miracle of Pentecost. The Crusaders built the present structure in the 12th century as part of the Church of St. Mary of Zion. The site was restored by the Franciscans in the 14th century before being converted to a mosque by Muslims in 1524. Since the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948, Christians have been allowed to return to the room for worship.

We reviewed the biblical texts which describe the Last Supper and the Pentecost miracle, and focused on the need for us to be as controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit as were the disciples on the day of Pentecost. Each of us is called by God to begin our day in surrender to him, asking his Spirit to guide and control us (Ephesians 5:18). Only in this way can we walk and serve in the power of his Spirit, doing God's work in God's strength.



Monday June 1, 2015

Masada: pay the price to follow Jesus

“Masada” means “fortress.” This desert fortification stands 1,300 feet above the Dead Sea below. Fortifications here were expanded significantly by Herod the Great between 37 and 31 B.C. In AD 66, a group of Jewish revolutionaries captured the Roman garrison at Masada and occupied the fortress. They were commanded by Eliezer ben Yair; in AD 70 they were joined by additional revolutionaries after the fall of Jerusalem, totaling 967 occupants of the fortress.

In AD 70, the Roman governor of Judea, Lucius Flavius Silva, marched against Masada with the Roman Tenth Legion and laid siege to it. They were finally able to breach the wall of the fortress with a battering ram on April 16, AD 73. When they entered it, however, they discovered 960 dead inhabitants. Their story was related to Josephus, the first-century historian, by two women who survived by hiding inside a cistern along with five children.

Because Judaism forbids suicide, the people died in a stunning way. The men killed their wives and children by their own swords. Ten drew lots, then killed the other men while they lay beside their slain families. They drew again; one killed the other nine and then himself.

Today the national motto of Israel is, “Masada shall never fall again.” On one of my trips to its plateau, two Israeli fighter jets passed by on patrol rounds. They tipped their wings at Masada.



As they died for their faith, so we are called to live for ours:

I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:1-2).

What is God asking you to give him today?

Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls



Prior to their discovery in the caves at Qumran, the oldest complete copy of the Old Testament known to scholars dated to the tenth century AD. When a shepherd looking for a lost sheep found the first of the scrolls in 1947, the most dramatic discovery in the history of biblical archaeology and manuscripts resulted. We now possess Old Testament manuscripts dating back to the first century before Christ. The Scrolls contain every book of the Old Testament except Esther. They take us a thousand years closer to the originals.

How close was the Masoretic Text to these documents? In other words, how accurate were the scribes who copied the text for a thousand years?

The results are amazing. There is word-for-word accuracy in more than 95 percent of the texts. The variations which remain are the results of obvious scribal errors. For instance, translators of the Revised Standard Version made only 13 changes from the Masoretic Text for the Book of Isaiah, none affecting faith and practice.

Here we remembered that God not only inspired his word—he transmitted it to us. All so we could have a personal, intimate, daily relationship with our Father. The Bible is “God preaching” (J. I. Packer), “love letters from home” (St. Augustine). God inspired his Scriptures, then he transmitted them to us today. You can trust the Bible as the very word of God.

The Dead Sea

Measuring 10 miles across by 50 miles long, the Dead Sea stands at the lowest spot on earth. At 1,385 feet below sea level, its waters descend to a depth of 1,240 feet, so that its floor is 2,600 feet below sea level. It is ten times saltier than seawater, so that nothing but microbes can grow in it. Sodom and Gomorrah are thought to have been located near (or even at the bottom of) the Sea. David hid in this area from Saul.

The Sea of Galilee is one of the most vibrant bodies of water on earth; rivers flow into it from the north and out of it to the south. Water flows into the Dead Sea, but not out. In fact, seven million tons of water evaporate from the lake every day. Nothing grows there. We must breathe out to breathe in. As we give, we receive.





**Tuesday
June 2, 2015**

Gordon's Calvary

In 1842, a German theologian named Otto Thenius proposed that a rock outcropping known at the time as "Skull Hill" could be the site of Jesus' crucifixion. Others endorsed this proposal, including Ernest Renan in 1863, Colonel Claude Conder in 1870, and Fisher Howe in 1871.

In 1883, Major-General Charles Gordon was staying at the American Colony in Jerusalem, just inside the northern city wall and east of Damascus Gate. One day he noticed this prominent rocky outcropping a few hundred feet away, which appeared to him to resemble a skull. In 1869, a number of ancient tombs had been discovered nearby; Gordon determined that one could be the tomb of Christ. He thought the site should be preserved for pilgrims to visit.

Gordon's prominence in English society led others to join this cause. The Garden Tomb Society was organized in 1893 for this purpose and purchased the property the next year.

Evidence for Gordon's Calvary

At least five arguments can be made for this hillside as the place of Jesus' execution.

The first is *geological*. The small hill known to us as "Gordon's Calvary" is geologically the northernmost part of the biblical Mt. Moriah. This was the mount where Abraham offered Isaac (Gen. 22), later purchased by David and used by Solomon for his temple. The temple stood midway on the north-south line of the hill. Sacrificial animals were slain to the north of the altar (Leviticus 1:11). Jesus' death fulfilled the sacrificial system as "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8, NIV). It would be symbolically significant if he died north of the temple, on its mountain.

The second is *historical*. The skull-like facing evident today was created by a quarry which excavated stone from this area. This has long been known as "Solomon's Quarries," based on the tradition that stone from the area was used to build his temple. It has also been called "Zedekiah's Cave," from a tradition that the Jewish king Zedekiah hid here when the Babylonians invaded in 587 B.C.

A cavern in the northeast part of the quarry is called "Jeremiah's Grotto," from the tradition that the prophet was imprisoned here by Zedekiah and wrote the book of Lamentations at this location (Jeremiah 38:6). If any of these traditions are correct, they would date the origins of the site to 600 B.C. at the latest. In addition, rock-cut tombs have been discovered west of the skull face, very close to the Garden Tomb. They date to the Israelite period, as much as eight or seven centuries before Christ.

A third argument is *archaeological*. Kathleen Kenyon excavated Damascus Gate in the early 1960s, finding evidence of Herodian stonework and a Herodian gateway and towers. These discoveries support the thesis that the walls of Jesus' day extended far enough north of Jerusalem for Jesus' death at Gordon's Calvary to be "near the city" (John 19:20).

A fourth argument is *logical*. Execution sites were ritually unclean to the Jewish people, whose priests were forbidden to touch dead bodies (Lev. 21:11). It seems likely, then, that they would have used only one location for this purpose. Gordon's Calvary meets every requirement to be this site.

The Jewish method of stoning required that the condemned prisoner be thrown from a cliff with a minimum height of 12 feet: "The place of stoning was twice the height of a man." (Remember Luke 4:29, where the residents of Nazareth "brought [Jesus] to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff.")

One of the witnesses would then "push him over from the hips" to see if he had died. If not, a second witness "would take a stone and put it on his heart." If he still did not die, he was to be stoned by the crowd: "The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people" (Deuteronomy 17:7).⁶ The hillside of Gordon's Calvary, with its sheer face (created by quarrying), would have worked for this purpose.

Remember that when Stephen preached to the Sanhedrin, "they cast him out of the city and stoned him" (Acts 7:58). St. Stephen's Church of the fifth century A.D. was situated adjacent to Gordon's Calvary, on top of the cliff immediately north of the Garden Tomb. Beginning as early as the fifth century A.D. the nearby Damascus Gate was also known as "St. Stephen's Gate." No 12-foot cliff has been located near the present-day "Stephen's Gate" (so identified in the 18th century) on the northeast side of Old Jerusalem.

A fifth argument is *biblical*. Jesus' death occurred "near the city" (John 19:20) but "outside the gate" (Heb. 13:12). While the site within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre meets both requirements, as does Gordon's Calvary, the former was perhaps too close to the city to be plausible (given the corrupted nature of execution sites in Judaism). The latter meets both biblical requirements, but stands far enough away from the city to be less contaminating to its residents.

Arguments against Gordon's Calvary

Despite these strong arguments for the authenticity of Gordon's Calvary as the site of Jesus' execution, most scholars are not convinced.

First, the topographical resemblance of the hill to a skull is not required by Scripture. Jesus was executed at "The Place of a Skull" (John 19:17), but the site received its name because of the executions staged there, not because of its physical characteristics. The connection between the name and its appearance dates only to the 19th century.

In addition, many scholars claim that the hill did not look like a skull in the first century. They believe that a quarry or mine in recent centuries produced the caves that give the cliff its appearance. If Skull Hill had looked like a skull in ancient times, it is likely that it would have been suggested as the place of Jesus' death. Yet no ancient or medieval tradition makes such a connection.

The Garden Tomb: join the Fellowship of the Unashamed

In 1869, several ancient Jewish tombs were discovered in the area of Gordon's Calvary. In 1874, a Swiss archaeologist named Conrad Schick did the first detailed investigation of the one now called the "Garden Tomb."

In 1924, an ancient winepress was discovered, evidence that the area was once the garden of a wealthy person. Three cisterns were also discovered, one with a capacity of 200,000 gallons. Plaster around the tomb and the large cistern was determined to be from the Roman period, though the cistern itself was repaired during Byzantine times.



The Garden Tomb is oriented toward the Temple Mount. The outer "weeping chamber" leads to an inner chamber with burial niches for the dead, consistent with tombs of Jesus' day. The chiseling on the face of the cliff outside the tomb, and inside as well, resembles that found in the "family tomb of Herod" and tombs in the Kidron and Hinnom valleys, all dating between the second century B.C. and the first century A.D.

The tomb was cut into solid bedrock, with a *nephesh* ("soul") window through which, according to Jewish tradition, the soul departed the body after the third day in the tomb. The current doorway is so tall that it would require a larger rolling stone than any known from other tombs of the period. However, the original height was one-third the present doorway.

A Byzantine church was built at the site, which explains the expanded door, changed front wall, and holes for ceiling beams above the tomb entrance. Long grooves in the bedrock floor in front of the tomb may have supported a low screen, also typical of Byzantine churches. The priest would have officiated behind the screen, with the tomb at his back and the congregation on the other side of the screen.

There is a rectangular depression in the bedrock floor to the left of the tomb entrance. It could have been used for a reliquary (a box containing bones or other relics from early saints). The masonry that fills in much of the front wall is from modern times, and would have restored the tomb from its Byzantine function as a shrine.



Byzantine crosses are painted in the interior of the tomb, further evidence that this was used as a worship site. A cross is inscribed on the outer wall of the tomb, above and to the left of the doorway. It was originally an anchor, and was later extended and changed into a cross. The anchor was a very early Christian symbol and may indicate a first-century veneration of the tomb.

St. Stephen's Church is located above the tomb, including a cemetery of the Byzantine period. One of the tombs contains an inscription, "Buried near his Lord," possibly referring to proximity to Jesus' tomb. Another reads, "Onesimus, Deacon of the Church of the Witnesses of the Resurrection." "Church of the Witnesses of the Resurrection" may be the name of the Byzantine church located here.

Other arguments for the Garden Tomb:

- The tomb was cut into solid bedrock, "a tomb cut into stone" (Luke 23:53)
- Only one of the three burial niches was finished, indicating that it was a "new" tomb (Matt. 27:60).
- The only finished niche is the one in the northeast corner, which would be visible from the door. Light from the *nephesh* would allow them to see inside, and would especially illuminate this section of the tomb (see John 20:5, "and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there").
- The original height was a two-thirds lower than the present door, matching the biblical statements that John (John 20:5) and Mary (v. 11) had to "stoop" to look inside.

- The completed niche was enlarged in the area of the head (to the east), perhaps because the person buried there was taller than the owner. Scripture says that Jesus was buried in a borrowed tomb “in which no one had yet been laid” (John 19:41).
- The trough in front of the tomb is consistent with other Jewish tombs of Jesus’ day: “Herod’s Family Tomb,” “tomb of the Kings,” tomb at church at Bethphage.
- Why was a Byzantine church built by this tomb if it was not significant to early Christians?

Arguments against:

- Chisel marks in the trough seem to be Crusader in origin, perhaps indicating that it was used to feed animals. However, they may have adapted the first-century trough rather than building the trough as it now exists.
- The trough would not hold the stone slab, as its outside edge is diagonal rather than vertical. However, this could be the result of Crusader modifications as well.
- Some historians claim that the Garden Tomb was originally created seven or eight centuries before Christ. They base this conclusion on the plan and characteristics of the rooms as well as the types of chisels used and the artifacts found. More specifically, in the time of Christ the burial chamber was behind the vestibule in a straight line, not to the side, and was set beneath an arch. If correct, this assessment means that it could not be a “new tomb in which no one had yet been laid” from the time of Christ (John 19:41). However, other scholars dispute this conclusion. In addition, “new” (*kainos*) can be translated “previously unknown” or “unused,” which could mean that the tomb was new to Joseph and had not been used, not that it was newly created.
- The benches inside the tomb were altered in the Byzantine period, which may indicate that they did not consider it to be the tomb of Christ. However, this action may have been intended to open the larger tomb to more pilgrims without changing the actual burial place of Jesus.

We will never know for certain whether Gordon’s Calvary and the Garden Tomb were the place of Jesus’ execution and burial. However, for more than a century they have served as a place of meditation and worship for pilgrims. They are my favorite site in Jerusalem; the guides who lead groups always share the gospel, using the grounds to advance the Kingdom around the world. As a Roman Catholic priest has said, “If the Garden Tomb is not the right place, it should be.”⁷

We worshipped here, shared the Lord’s Supper together, and gave thanks for Jesus’ death and resurrection for us. This is my favorite place in all of Israel. And it points to the most important event in all of history, the means by which God purchased our eternal salvation. When the empty tomb is closed to visitors, its door has a sign which reads: “He is not here—for he is risen.”

We closed with my favorite confession of faith, which was written by an African Christian, a man later martyred for his faith. I invite you to make its commitment your own:

I am part of the ‘Fellowship of the Unashamed.’ I have Holy Spirit power. The dye has been cast. I’ve stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I am a disciple of His. I won’t look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, and my future is secure. I am finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tame visions, mundane talking, chintzy giving, and dwarfed goals.

I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity. I don’t have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded, or rewarded. I now live by his presence, lean by faith, love by patience, live by prayer, and labor by power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal in heaven, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions few, my guide reliable, my mission clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, diluted, or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of compromise, pander at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

I won't give up, shut up, let up, or slow up until I've preached up, prayed up, paid up, stored up, and stayed up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus. I must go until he comes, give until I drop, preach until all know, and work until he stops. And when he comes to get his own, he'll have no problems recognizing me—my colors will be clear.

Joppa: serve our global God

At Jaffa (spelled Joppa in many English Bibles) we stopped for a brief service. Peter was here, staying in the home of Simon the Tanner, when he received the heavenly vision and human messengers that took him to Caesarea Maritima (Acts 10). Looking at remains of the first-century port, we considered those who had sailed from this place over the centuries.

And we remembered Jonah, the prophet who sailed from here in his desire to avoid God's call to Nineveh. As his story proves, when we run from God we run into him. He is the great and global God.



Here we heard the words of Dr. S. M. Lockridge, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in San Diego from 1953 to 1993 and one of the greatest preachers in Christian history. He described the greatness of our God in this way:

God is greater than all the superlative statements of supremacy ever shared. No far-reaching telescope can bring into focus the shoreline of his unlimited supply. No deep-digging dredge can discover the depth of his determination to deliver you. He stands alone on the solitary pinnacle of his omnipotence. He is unparalleled and unprecedented, unique and inescapable. He is the cornerstone of all civilization. He is God's Son, our Savior.

He can meet all your needs, and he can do it simultaneously. He gives you hope when you're hopeless, help when you're helpless, peace when you're in pain, strength when you struggle, rest when you're restless and courage when you cry. He sees and sympathizes. He guards and he guides. He heals the sick, cleanses the leper, sets the captive free and forgives sinners.

He is the key to knowledge, the wellspring of wisdom, the doorway of deliverance, and the pathway to peace. He's the roadway to righteousness, the highway to holiness, and the gateway to glory. He is the master of masters, the captain of the conquerors, the head of the heroes, and the leader of the legislators. He is the governor of governors, the prince of peace, the prince of princes. He is the Lord of all lords, the king of all kings.

I wish I could describe him to you. He is indescribable, irresistible, irreplaceable, indisputable, invincible. His word is all you need. He is love, and it never ends. His grace is sufficient, and his mercy never fails. His yoke is easy; his burden is light.

I tell you, you can't outlive him, and you can't live without him. Pilate couldn't stop him, Herod couldn't kill him, death couldn't handle him, and praise God, the grave couldn't hold him.

Will you serve him as your King today?



Conclusion

Thank you for the privilege of sharing this tour of the Holy Land together. If I or our ministry can ever be helpful to you, please let us know. I invite you to receive the Cultural Commentary, my daily email essay which applies biblical truth to the day's news, by subscribing at www.denisonforum.org. If you would like to know of future study tours, please contact our office at mike@mikefanning.com and we'll add you to our mailing list.

It was a great privilege to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, visiting the land where he came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17). He called us to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). When he returns at the end of history, "On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (Revelation 19:16).

How do we make him our King today? A review of our Holy Land pilgrimage can guide us:

- At Caesarea Maritima we trusted him as our Savior.
- At Mt. Carmel we made him our only Lord.
- At Sepphoris we resolved to engage our culture with his word.
- At Mt. Arbel we chose to tell the world of his love and grace.
- On the Sea of Galilee we made him King of our storms.
- At Caesarea Philippi we resolved to attack the "gates of hell."
- At Capernaum we followed his call to become "fishers of men."
- At the Mt. of Beatitudes we chose to live biblically.
- At Megiddo we chose to be ready to meet our King.
- At the Jordan River we gave him every "key" in our lives.
- At the Springs of Harod we chose to trust him even when we do not understand his ways.
- In the Garden of Gethsemane we learned to serve in gratitude for his grace.
- At Masada we learned to present our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2).
- At the Southern Steps we chose to live a life of worship.

- At Gordon's Calvary and the Garden Tomb we chose to love our living Lord.
- At Joppa, we learned that when we run from God we run into him.

How can we make Jesus our King every day?

First, be sure he is your Savior. If you have not asked Jesus to forgive your sins and become your Savior and Lord, please make this commitment to him today. For more on this life-changing decision, including answers to frequent questions about Christian faith, I invite you to consider my essay, "Why Jesus?" at <http://www.denisonforum.org/why-jesus>. For short answers to the most common questions people ask about Christianity, please visit <http://www.denisonforum.org/faith-questions>.

Second, begin your day by submitting it to the Holy Spirit. The Bible calls us to "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18); "filled" means "controlled." Begin each day by surrendering it to God as your King. I suggest the ACTS model for daily worship:

- *Adoration*: spend a few minutes praising your Father. Read a psalm to him, or sing a hymn or chorus; find a way to worship and honor him as your Creator and Lord.
- *Confession*: ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind anything in your life which displeases the Lord, and confess with a repentant spirit all that comes to your thoughts. Claim the biblical promise that your Father will forgive all you confess to him and forget all he forgives.
- *Thanksgiving*: spend a few moments reflecting on God's goodness to you. Thank him specifically for his blessings and gifts this day.
- *Supplication*: give him your needs and problems. Ask the Holy Spirit to take control of your life and day. Pray through all that is ahead, submitting each event, decision, and problem to him. Invite him to lead and empower you.

Third, walk through your day in the Spirit. Pray about each opportunity, temptation, and challenge you experience. Practice the presence of Jesus, communing with him.

As you make Christ your King, you will experience his transforming power and grace in your life as he uses you for his glory. Then you can pray with all your heart, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth and with me as it is in heaven."

Have you made Jesus your King yet today?

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