

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF EASTER

By Bryan Windle

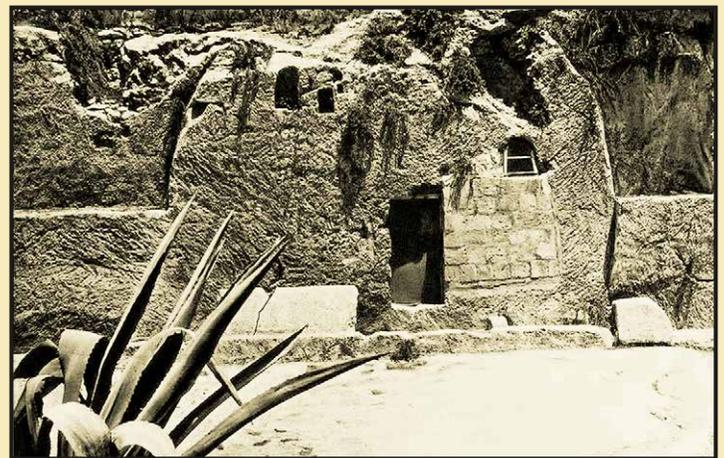
For Christians, Easter represents the most climactic event in all of human history—the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Critics contend that it is a mythical story, based more on fiction than fact. Some even go so far as to accuse Christianity of stealing the “death-and-resurrection-of-a-god” motif from other religions. However, scholars have rightly pointed out that stories of the death and resurrection of other gods, such as Dionysus and Adonis, post-date Christianity, so if anyone did the stealing, it was the pagan religions who “borrowed” the motif from Christianity.¹ Historic Christianity has always maintained that what transpired that first Easter were actual historical events: a literal crucifixion during a specific period in time and a physical resurrection leaving a real empty tomb, which forever altered the course of human history. Is there evidence for this claim?

Archaeology is one field of study that must be considered in determining whether the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, as recorded in the gospel accounts in the Bible, are actual historical events. Over the past 150 years, archaeological excavations in Israel have yielded much evidence for the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. Excavations have confirmed many elements of the Christmas story, his ministry in Galilee and Judea, particularly in the Jewish synagogues, and the fact that the world in which Jesus lived has been so accurately described in the gospels.² However, nowhere is the evidence so overwhelming as it is when one studies the details of the historical accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Many Christians travel to Israel during the Easter season to seek out the actual places where Jesus walked. Unfortunately, some of the sites shown to the faithful masses by well-meaning tour guides are of dubious authenticity. The Garden Tomb is a serene place to contemplate the resurrection of Jesus, but most archaeologists agree that it is an Iron Age tomb which was already 500 years old by the first century AD, and not the “new tomb” (Mt 27:60) in which “no one had yet been laid” (Lk 23:53) described in the Bible. Given the doubt surrounding some Easter-related sites, it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that archaeology simply doesn’t support the biblical accounts. This would be a mistake, as archaeological findings have confirmed many details of the Easter story.

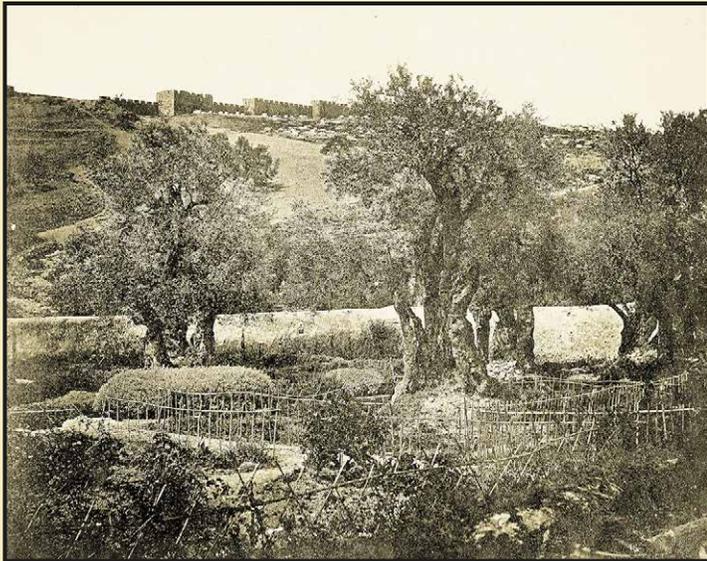
Gethsemane

It may be surprising to learn that the Bible never refers to the “Garden of Gethsemane” by that name; it simply says Jesus and his disciples went to “a place called Gethsemane” (Mt 26:36; Mk 14:32) on the Mount of Olives (Lk 22:39) where there was an “olive grove” (Jn 18:1). Gethsemane itself means “olive press” or “press of oils.” Today tourists enjoy the serenity of the Garden of Gethsemane, and some of the olive trees there are indeed ancient. Likely none of the trees in the garden were alive when Jesus prayed there, as Josephus records that the Romans cut down all of the olive trees around Jerusalem to use in their siege of the city in 70 AD. Some of the trees standing in the garden today may be the descendants of trees that Jesus walked among.



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The Garden Tomb (or Gordon’s Tomb) as it appeared in the 1920s. It was only identified as a possible site for the tomb of Jesus in the 19th century. The main advocate for this was Major-General Charles Gordon, a British officer who visited Jerusalem in 1883 and became convinced of its authenticity. The tomb itself dates to the Iron Age. It was hundreds of years old by the time of Christ. While it is a popular place for Christians to reflect on the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, it is not the actual tomb of Jesus.



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Left: Ancient olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane as photographed by British photographer James Robinson (1813–1888). The traditional site located on the Mount of Olives across from the Kidron Valley was identified as the Garden of Gethsemane by Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine who was the first Roman ruler to convert to Christianity. The fourth century AD theologian and historian Eusebius compiled a geographical directory of biblical place names called the *Onomasticon* (*On the Place-Names in Holy Scripture*) in which he wrote, “Gethsimane (Gethsimani). Place where the Christ prayed before the passion. It is located at the Mt. of Olives where even now the faithful fervently utter prayers.”

Nearby is an ancient site called the Cave of Gethsemane (or the Grotto of Betrayal), which may in fact be the actual site of the betrayal of Jesus, or at least the spot where the disciples slumbered. Given that it was a cold night (Jn 18:18), it makes sense that they would have sought shelter in one of the nearby caves. Archaeological excavations have revealed that the cave was used for pressing olives in ancient times.³ The Garden of Gethsemane and, more specifically, the Cave of Gethsemane, fits the biblical descriptions as the site of one of the most famous betrayals of all time.

House of Annas

After he was arrested in the garden, Jesus was brought “first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year” (Jn 18:13). It was here that Jesus was questioned about his teaching and Peter denied his Master three times.

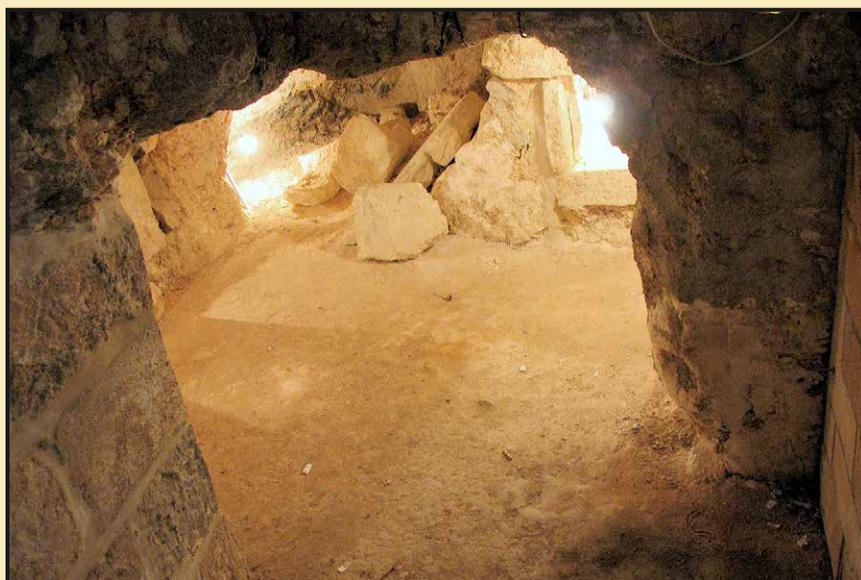
The exact location of the house of Annas is not positively known. The site traditionally identified as the High Priest’s house

is located on the eastern slope of Mount Zion, where a modern church is built over the remains of a sixth-century AD church. The remains of several mansions belonging to wealthy priests and dating to the first century have been unearthed in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. For example, the “Burnt House” of Katros, the high priest, which was destroyed during the First Jewish Revolt, was discovered in this area.

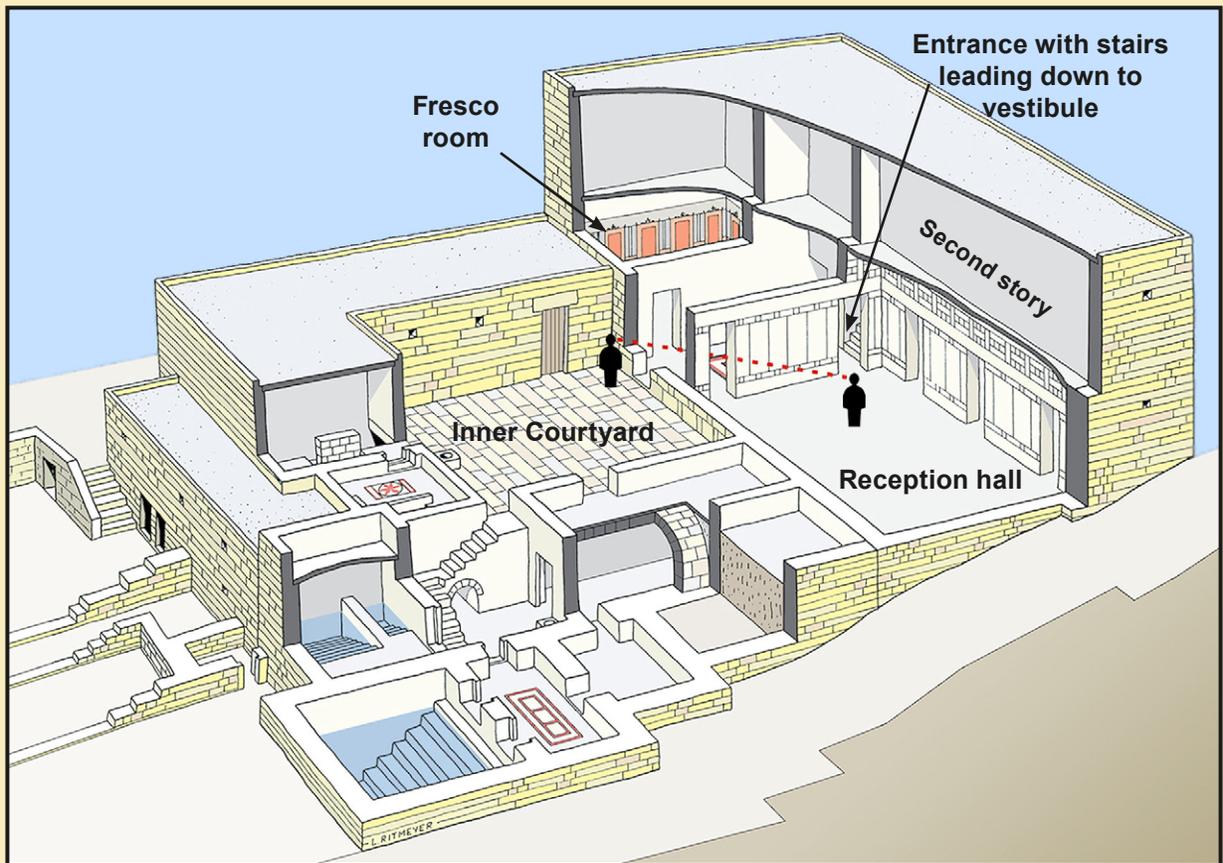
In the 1970s, renowned archaeological architect Leen Ritmeyer was part of a team that excavated a large palace near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, known as the “Palatial Mansion.” He has identified it as the palace of Annas, who ruled as high priest from 6–15 AD.⁴ After he was deposed, Annas continued to wield incredible power in Jerusalem behind the scenes while his sons and son-in-law, Caiaphas, served as High Priests, so it is not surprising that Jesus was taken first to him (Annas is even named a co-high priest in Luke 3:2). Ritmeyer has pointed out that the remains of the Palatial Mansion clearly housed priests, having four *mikva’ot* (ritual baths), the most found in any ancient dwelling in Israel. It is also near the Burnt House, which has been shown to belong to the priestly family of Katros, and is in the area where Josephus records that the palace of Annas was located. The remains of this palace display the wealth that Annas was known to have had, with mosaic floors and fresco-adorned walls. The mansion itself was arranged around a large, paved courtyard, with a reception hall just to the west of the courtyard. It is possible that Jesus was interrogated by Annas in the reception hall while

Peter warmed himself by the fire in the courtyard. Josephus records that the palace of Annas was burned in 70 AD (*War* 2.426). When the Palatial Mansion was excavated, there was evidence that the building had indeed been destroyed by fire.⁵ Ritmeyer believes the evidence suggests this may be the place where Jesus was first interrogated before his sham trial with the Jewish leaders.

The entrance to the Grotto of Gethsemane, an ancient cave near the foot of the Mount of Olives. It was excavated in 1955 following some flooding. This investigation revealed the original cave had several cisterns that collected water via a channel system, as well as an olive press on the east side of the cave. Sometime in the fourth century AD, the cave was transformed into a church and used for funerary purposes. The remains of 42 tombs from the Byzantine and Crusader periods were also found.



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Leen Ritmeyer

The Palatial Mansion, Jerusalem: Tentatively identified as the House of Annas the High Priest, it is a 6500 sq ft dwelling dating to the Second Temple period, between the mid-sixth century BC and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD. The mansion is located in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem and is now part of the Wohl Archaeological Museum. Excavated in the early 1970s under the late Prof. Nahman Avigad, it was later restored and is the largest of six residences that likely belonged to wealthy priestly families. Inside the dwelling was a large reception hall, as well as a courtyard. Interestingly, at the southwest corner of the courtyard near the exit, there is a direct line of vision to the center of the reception hall. In the below photo, Ritmeyer's daughter-in-law, Claire, stands where Peter may have stood in the corner of the courtyard, as viewed from the center of the Reception Room.



Leen Ritmeyer

“Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The LORD turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the LORD had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly.”

Luke 22:60–62

In a 2012 interview with The Gospel Coalition (TGC), renowned archaeological architect Leen Ritmeyer discussed his work reconstructing the large palace not far from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. He noted that no other private residence of this size has been excavated anywhere in Israel. “There is no doubt that this Mansion was occupied by priests that served in the Temple, especially as it was located on the eastern slope of the Upper City just opposite the southwest corner of the Temple Mount.” It was only a short walk to the Royal Bridge whereby the priests crossed directly to the Temple platform. Ritmeyer points out, “These dwellings are the finest examples of Herodian architecture, with mosaic floors and walls decorated either with fresco or stucco. Its overall plan is centered round a paved courtyard.” The entrance was from the west, with steps down into a vestibule. The mosaic

floor, with a central rosette pattern, was found almost completely intact with the charred beams of the ceiling lying on top of it. From the vestibule a fresco room is on one side, with panels painted in red and yellow in the style of Pompeian frescoes. On the other side was the magnificent Reception Room. Proceeding straight, the visitor entered the courtyard, from where the rooms of the eastern wing could be reached. There were two mikvehs (ritual baths) that lay beneath the courtyard and a basement level which had two additional mikvehs (pictured above). Ritmeyer notes, “The second mikveh was much larger and had a vaulted ceiling. This mikveh is exceptional in that it had a double doorway and an entrance porch paved with mosaic. The mansion stands out in that it had four mikva’ which is quite unusual and has no parallel in any building in Jerusalem or in all of the Land of Israel.”



The Tower of David Museum

Near the Tower of David Museum in Jerusalem one can see the remains of Herod's palace, underneath an Ottoman-era prison called the "Kishle." Excavations have revealed massive walls from the Herodian period (the lowest part of the left wall in the photo), as well as an ancient drainage system that transported sewage from King Herod's palace outside the city walls. Scholars believe that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, used King Herod's former palace as the Praetorium and that it is where Jesus of Nazareth was interrogated. Praetorium is derived from the Latin word *praetor* (leader) and originally signified the general's tent within a Roman military encampment but also came to refer to the official residence of the Roman governor.



Ferrell Jenkins

Remains of the Hidden Gate in Jerusalem National Park: Excavations revealed that it was a monumental gateway with a paved courtyard and a raised platform. This gateway matches the description as the place in John 19:13 where Pontius Pilate likely presented Jesus to the crowd.

“From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, ‘If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.’

When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge’s seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour.”

John 19:12–16

The Praetorium

After his trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus was taken before Pontius Pilate at the “palace of the Roman governor” (Jn 18:28), which was one and the same as the Praetorium (Mk 15:16). A tradition stretching back to the medieval era has the Praetorium in the Antonia Fortress. Archaeologist Shimon Gibson has measured the base of the Antonia Fortress and argues that it is too small to have functioned as anything more than a Roman outpost and observation tower. It certainly wasn’t big enough to house the palace and administrative center of the Roman governor.⁶ Today many scholars believe that Pontius Pilate resided in Herod’s old palace complex when he was in Jerusalem. Gibson states: “Today, a consensus of opinion exists among scholars that Herod’s palace on the west side of the city was the same as the Praetorium and that in its immediate vicinity Jesus was tried and condemned to death.”⁷

In 6 AD, King Herod’s son Archelaus was deposed by the Romans, who confiscated his possessions. Herod the Great’s palace then became the residence for the Roman governor whenever he visited Jerusalem. Evidence for this is found in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, who describes Herod’s palace as “the house of the governor,” and Josephus, who identifies the residence of Roman governors Cumanus (48–52 AD) and Florus (64–66 AD) with Herod’s palace.⁸ John 18:33 tells us that Pilate’s private interrogation of Jesus occurred inside the palace: “Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’”

Pontius Pilate also conducted a public hearing for Jesus’ case nearby. John 19:5, 9 describes Pilate going in and out of the Praetorium. John 19:13 further describes the place of this public hearing as an elevated platform (*gabbatha*) also called the stone pavement (*lithostrotos*) in which there was a judgment seat (*bema*) on which Pilate sat. In his book, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Archaeological Evidence*, Shimon Gibson describes the discovery of a monumental gateway with a large courtyard between the two fortification walls located along the western Old City wall which led directly into Herod’s palace. Known today as the “Hidden Gate,” at one time it likely functioned as Herod’s private



Carl Rasmussen, HolyLandPhotos.org

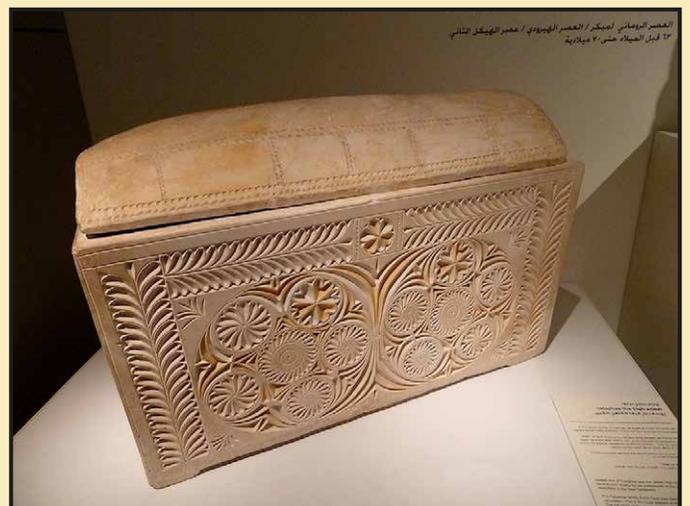


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Top Right: Tomb of Annas. Located south of Jerusalem is a place called Akeldama, where numerous first-century tombs have been carved from the rocks. The most magnificent one is the purported tomb of Annas the High Priest. It displays a large, ornate rosette pattern on the ceiling, one of the biggest ever discovered in Israel.

Middle: A replica of the Pilate Stone, on display at Caesarea Maritima (the original is in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem). It is inscribed with the phrase, “Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea.” While simply given the general term “governor” in the New Testament, scholars used to debate Pilate’s exact title, whether he was a prefect or a procurator. The Pilate Stone confirmed that he held the Roman title of prefect. This important archaeological artifact dates to the time Pilate lived, and confirms both his historicity and the fact that Caesarea Maritima was the administrative capital of the province at that time.

Bottom Right: The ossuary of “Joseph, son of Caiaphas” likely the Joseph Caiaphas who was the High Priest when Jesus was crucified. It was one of twelve ossuaries discovered in a first-century tomb in 1990, and is currently housed in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.



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entrance into the city and his residence. On the northern end of the courtyard there was a rocky outcrop, on top of which were the remains of a platform with stairs leading up to it.⁹ The southern end of the courtyard had been paved at one time, with most of the paving stones robbed in the Byzantine period. The archaeological findings match the biblical description, and it is not difficult to imagine Pilate sitting on the judgment seat presenting Jesus to the crowd saying, “Behold, the man,” and hearing them cry in response, “Crucify him.”

The Prosecutors

Further archaeological evidence has confirmed the historicity of key people who interrogated and prosecuted Jesus in the Passion Week narrative of the gospels. Leaving aside the plentiful historical evidence for Jesus of Nazareth outside of the Bible,¹⁰ not only are Annas, Caiaphas, and Pilate known from other ancient writings, there is actual archaeological evidence for each as well.

Annas – Annas served as High Priest from 6–15 AD, and was later succeeded by his sons and son-in-law Caiaphas. As the patriarch of the family he continued to wield considerable power in the background, so it is not surprising that after his arrest, Jesus was led first to Annas to be interrogated (Jn 18:13). He is mentioned in the New Testament in other places as well (Lk 3:2; Jn 18:24; Acts 4:6). In addition to the Palatial Mansion that has been identified as the residence of Annas, the tomb of Annas the High Priest has been discovered and is further testimony to his wealth, as it is one of the most richly decorated tombs of the Second Temple period.¹¹

Caiaphas – In 1990, a construction team that was building a water park in the Peace Forest near Jerusalem stumbled upon a first-century cave when their bulldozer plowed through the tomb’s roof. Archaeologists discovered a variety of ossuaries (bone boxes used in the first century), including an ornate one that was inscribed with the name “Joseph son of Caiaphas.” The ancient historian, Josephus, records that Caiaphas’ full name was Joseph Caiaphas. Inside were the bones of a 60-year-old man. Scholars are convinced that this is the ossuary of the high priest who played a prominent role in the trial of Jesus.¹²

Pontius Pilate – Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea and the man who eventually condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion (Jn 19:16). In 1961, Italian archaeologists discovered a stone inscription while excavating an amphitheater near Caesarea Maritima. The limestone block was part of a dedication to Tiberius Caesar from “Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea.” Though Pilate is named in numerous literary sources outside of the Bible (i.e. Josephus, Philo, and Tacitus) the “Pilate Stone” is the only known ancient archaeological evidence of Pontius Pilate.¹³

Crucifixion

Crucifixion as a method of execution is well attested in the ancient world. It likely originated with the Assyrian practice of impaling, but was used systematically by the Persians in the sixth century BC, before being perfected by the Romans and used for 500 years.¹⁴ Ancient historians such as Herodotus and Josephus both testify to the practice. Archaeologically, the most important



Carl Rasmussen, HolyLandPhotos.org

A replica of the heel bone of Jehohanan, the crucified man, on display in the Israel Museum. The heel bone dates to the first century AD. A 4.3 in nail can still be seen where it pierced the right heel bone of the victim. No nail marks were found on Jehohanan’s wrists or hands, indicating his arms were likely tied to the cross, as Romans sometimes did. This is in contrast to the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, whose hands/wrists were nailed to the cross (Jn 20:25, 27), another method that Romans used.

piece of evidence for Roman crucifixion is the heel bone of a crucified man. In 1968, a construction crew with the Israel Ministry of Housing was working at an area in northeast Jerusalem when they accidentally dug up several tombs. Archaeologists who were called discovered numerous ossuaries, including one that contained the bones of an adult male who had been crucified. His name, Jehohanan (Yehohanan), was inscribed on the outside of the bone box, and his right heel bone still contained the rusted spike from his crucifixion. It seems the nail must have hit a knot in the wood of the cross and bent. It probably couldn’t be removed from the victim by his family without doing considerable damage to his foot, and so it was left in place. An analysis of the heel bone and nail reveal that Jehohanan had been crucified with a leg on either side of the cross and the nail driven in sideways through his heel.¹⁵

Another important piece of evidence for Roman crucifixion may be the famous and controversial Shroud of Turin. The Shroud is a linen burial cloth that bears the negative image of a crucified man. Some have suggested it is merely a medieval forgery; however, the Shroud continues to defy all explanations for how the image was made. For example, the body image is only located on a few of the top surface fibers, not on the whole threads, as would be expected if it had been painted.¹⁶ Moreover, the infamous 1988 radiocarbon dating of a sample of the Shroud, which dated it to the Middle Ages, has been shown to have been taken from an area of the cloth that was repaired in the Middle Ages and contained cotton fibers found nowhere else on the Shroud, invalidating the results.¹⁷ Other scientific studies on the Shroud of Turin suggest that it is an authentic burial cloth of a crucified victim. The absence of lignin, a chemical substance that disappears over time from linen, suggests the cloth is of ancient origin.¹⁸ Residue from a rare type of limestone called aragonite, which is common around Jerusalem,

was discovered near the foot area of the image.¹⁹ A recent study published in the scientific journal *PLOS One* analyzed the Shroud of Turin and discovered nanoparticles of blood, which are found in the blood of torture victims but are not typically found in a normal person.²⁰ The blood stains on the cloth match what we know about Roman crucifixion from the account of Jesus in the Bible: evidence of torture, nail holes in the hands and feet, and blood from a significant wound in the side. When all of the evidence is taken into consideration, it appears that the Shroud of Turin is an authentic burial shroud from a man who was crucified sometime in the Roman era.

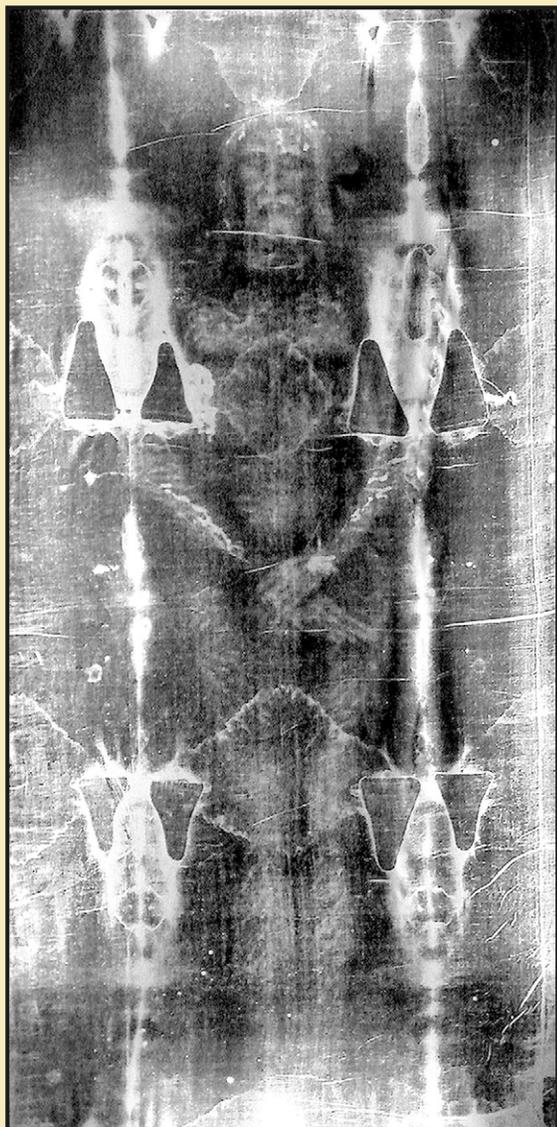
The gospel writers are unanimous that Jesus of Nazareth was executed by crucifixion (Mt 27:35; Mk 15:25; Lk 23:33; Jn 19:18). This fact is attested to by numerous ancient authors outside of the Bible, most notably by the Roman historian Tacitus (55–120 AD), who wrote: “Christus, from whom the name [Christians] had its

origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate.”²¹ The Alexamenos graffito is further archaeological evidence for the early belief in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In 1857, a structure called the *domus Gelotiana* was uncovered near the Palatine Hill in Rome, which had a piece of graffiti inscribed in the plaster on the wall in one of the rooms. It has been dated to 200 AD, and includes an image of a man with a donkey’s head on a cross and a person in front raising a hand. The inscription that accompanies it reads, “Alexamenos worships [his] god”²² It appears to be a piece of graffiti intended to mock a Christian named Alexamenos. It may be the earliest depiction of Jesus on the cross, albeit a blasphemous one. It should be noted that both the Tacitus inscription and the Alexamenos graffito provide evidence from “hostile witnesses” for the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

Golgotha

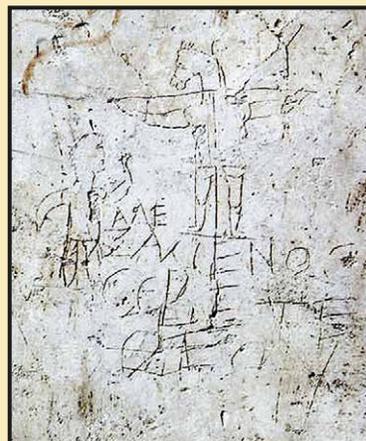
All four biographies of Jesus in the Bible record that Jesus was crucified at a place called Golgotha, which means “the place of the skull” (Mk 15:22; 27:33; Lk 23:33; Jn 19:17–18). John’s Gospel records that “At the place where Jesus was crucified (ie. Golgotha), there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid” (19:41). This means that Golgotha was a large area that contained the execution site, the tomb, and a garden. Scripture describes the place of crucifixion as being near the city, where many read the charge that he was “Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews” (Jn 19:19–20), and that it was “outside the city gate” (Heb 13:12). This makes sense historically, as Roman executions were intended to be a public exhibition to deter others. Thus, the place of execution was near a road, outside the city wall, near a gate, and in an area that included tombs and a garden.

Archaeologists generally agree that the real site of Golgotha is in the vicinity of the “Rock of Calvary” in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (though probably not right on that spot, it being too small). Excavations in the area surrounding the Church of the Holy Sepulchre have revealed that it was an Iron Age quarry that had been carved out of the sloping hill (its jagged rock formations possibly resembling the shape of a skull to those in the first century). Furthermore, the area was outside of the ancient (first) city wall of Jerusalem nearby a road that led westward towards Emmaus. Remains of a city gate, likely the “Gennath” (Gardens) Gate referred to by Josephus, were also discovered nearby.²³



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The Shroud of Turin’s provenance is unknown, although it is first mentioned in 1390 AD. Aside from a flawed C14 test on the cloth which has since been discredited, studies have shown that it is an ancient burial cloth from a tortured/crucified man which was exposed to elements (limestone residue and pollen) from the Jerusalem area.



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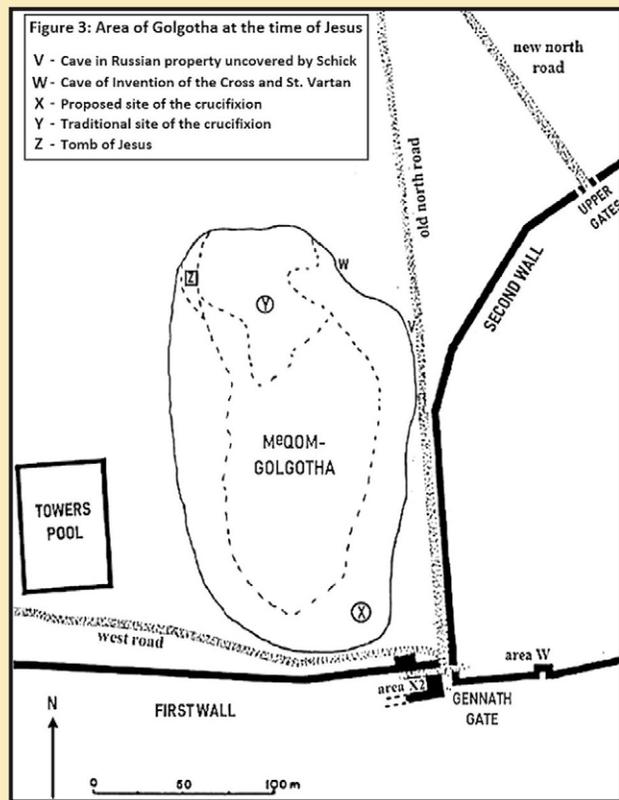
The Alexamenos Graffito, discovered carved in the wall plaster of one of the houses of Emperor Caligula’s palace. The date and location have led scholars to conclude it is likely a blasphemous caricature intended to mock a Christian Roman soldier whose name was Alexamenos. Tertullian (ca. 155–240 AD) records that Christians in his day were accused of worshipping an ass’s head.

The Tomb of Jesus

Unlike the Garden Tomb, which has no ancient testimony to its authenticity and was only proposed in the 19th century, the tomb of Jesus in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has an abundance of evidence that leads many to believe that it is the actual location of the empty tomb. Both Jerome (395 AD)²⁴ and Eusebius (337–340 AD)²⁵ record that the Roman emperor Hadrian built a large platform over the tomb of Jesus and then placed a statue of Jupiter over the spot. When Constantine and his mother, Helena, dismantled the pagan shrine, a tomb was indeed found beneath it. They then built the original church on the site in 330 AD. Other first-century tombs are found within the church, confirming that the area was an ancient cemetery.²⁶ The tomb of Jesus and the burial bed are surrounded by a shrine, known as the Edicule. It was recently uncovered for the first time in almost 500 years for restoration and cleaning. The renovations to the Edicule included

“People walking past would have almost unavoidably looked down into the area of Golgotha at the execution of the three men. It would have been a gruesome sight and a miserable shock to thousands of Passover pilgrims, who were streaming into the city.”

Excerpt from Joan Taylor’s article, *“Golgotha: A Reconsideration of the Evidence for the Sites of Jesus’ Crucifixion and Burial”*. Available at www.biblearchaeology.org



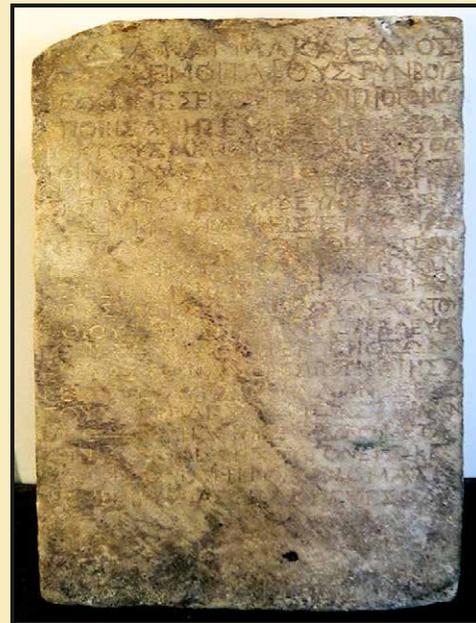
Joan Taylor, ABR

An illustration of the area of Golgotha, or Calvary, at the time of Jesus. Note that the location marked X satisfies all of the biblical criteria; being near a road, outside the city wall, near a gate, and in an area that included tombs and a garden. It is currently covered by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

the installation of a window that allows visitors to see the original stone walls of the tomb. In December 2017, results from tests done on mortar samples taken during the renovations were announced. They confirm the history of the site, with the mortar taken from between the limestone burial bed and the marble slab dating to the time of Constantine’s construction of the original shrine at the tomb.²⁷ The evidence clearly points to this being the likely location of the empty tomb of Jesus.

The Nazareth Inscription

The Nazareth Inscription is a Greek inscription on a marble tablet measuring 24 in (61 cm) by 15 in (38 cm), which was first published in 1930. It is a decree of Caesar (known as an imperial rescript) dating to the reign of Claudius (41–54 AD), shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In it a death penalty is imposed in Israel for anyone caught robbing bodies from tombs, and specifically “sepulcher sealing tombs,” such as the one Jesus was buried in. It is interesting that Caesar would feel the need to make such a pronouncement, since it was normal practice in antiquity for grave robbers to plunder tombs to steal the valuables, but rarely, if ever, the bodies. However, the Bible records that the Jewish leaders concocted and then deliberately spread the lie that Jesus’ disciples stole the body (Mt 28:13–15). This report no doubt reached the ears of the Roman emperor, who likely would have seen the new Christian sect as a dangerous, anti-Roman movement. Dr. Clyde Billington, associate professor of ancient history at Northwestern College, has studied the inscription and concludes: “The context of the Nazareth Inscription clearly proves that it was written for Jews and not Gentiles, and that it was almost certainly issued by Claudius in response to the story of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”²⁸



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The Nazareth Inscription is a marble slab engraved with an edict outlawing the stealing of bodies from Jewish tombs. It dates from the reign of Claudius (42–54 AD). Many scholars believe its contents are best explained by the historical setting described in the Bible in response to the Jewish leaders who concocted a story that Jesus’ disciples had stolen his body. (Mt 28:13–15).



Carl Rasmussen, HolyLandPhotos.org

The Edicule or Aedicula (a small shrine usually in the shape of an architectural monument) surrounds the limestone remains of the purported tomb of Jesus. Ancient testimonies of this being the actual empty tomb stretch back almost two millennia. Recent tests have confirmed the written history of the location and the different periods of building on the site. Built in 1810, the Edicule has undergone recent restoration to prevent it from collapsing. In 2017 the steel girders which had surrounded it since 1947 were finally removed. The delicate renovation used the modern technology of laser scanners, drones and radar, and included cutting a small window for people to glimpse the ancient stone of the burial cave. While it does not look much like a tomb today, it is the best candidate as the actual tomb of Jesus.



The cupola of the rotunda was covered in scaffolding for decades as church custodians were at an impasse of how to restore it. The newly designed and restored dome was unveiled in 1997.



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The Rock of Cavalry, Latin for “calva,” bald head or skull, is encased in glass inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Archaeologists generally agree that Golgotha, the site of Jesus’ crucifixion, is in this vicinity but probably not this exact spot.

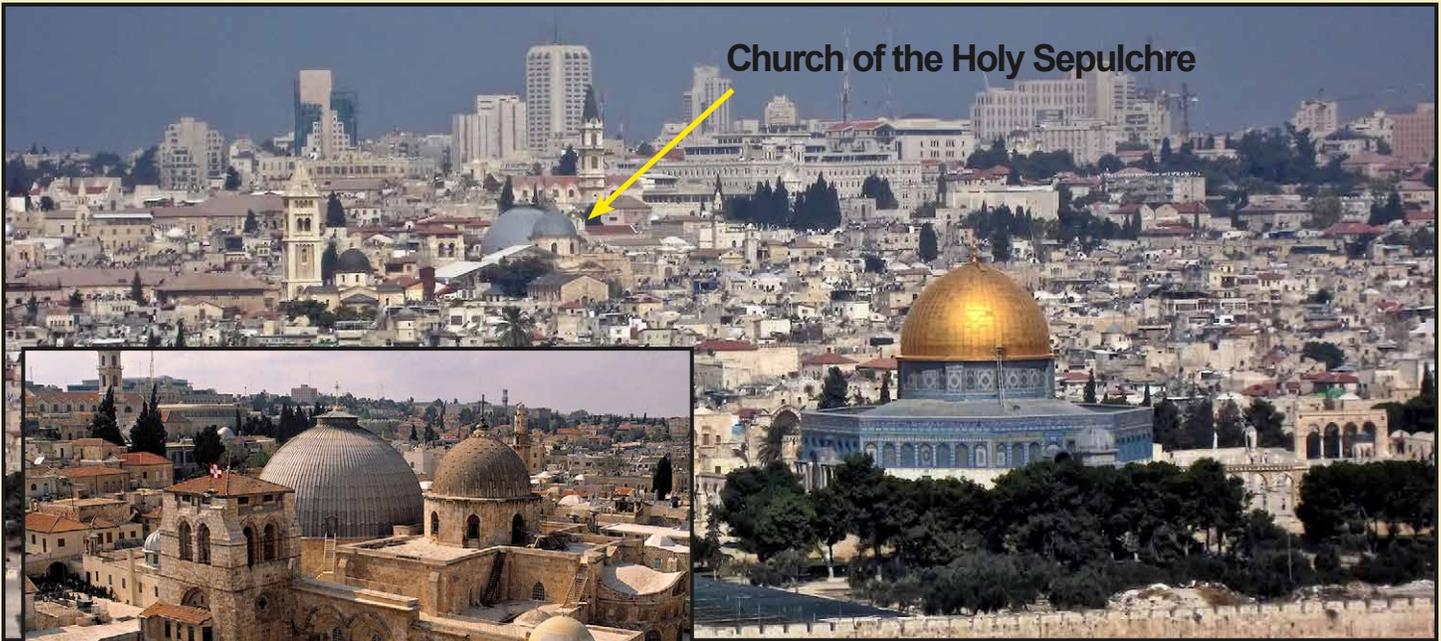
Conclusion

Of course, none of this *proves* that the tomb was empty (though I believe it was), or that Jesus of Nazareth actually rose from the dead (though I believe He did), or that the Bible is true (though I believe it is). Ultimately, those are matters of faith. My purpose has been to demonstrate that many details of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ described in Scripture have been confirmed by archaeology. This leads me to conclude that the Bible is historically accurate when it describes the events of what Christians call Passion Week. The early disciples, many of whom witnessed the death of Jesus of Nazareth firsthand, claimed to have seen him alive after his burial, and then, in many cases, paid for this belief with their lives. Yet they could not be swayed from their belief that Jesus had risen from the dead. They went throughout the world preaching the good news that forgiveness of sins was available in Jesus’ name (Acts 13:38), and that anyone who confessed Jesus as Lord and believed in his heart that God had raised Jesus from the dead would be saved (Rom 10:9). I believe the tomb is empty and that Jesus is alive...that is good news indeed!

Endnotes for this article can be found at www.BibleArchaeology.org. Type “Endnotes” in the search box; next, click the “Bible and Spade Bibliographies and Endnotes” link; then page down to the article.



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Church of the Holy Sepulchre



Gary Bembridge/Wikimedia Commons

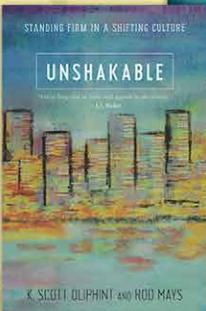
The Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The background image shows the church in relation to the gold plated Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount, a distance of less than 600 meters as the crow flies. In the first century AD the area of the church was a rocky rise just outside the city walls with a nearby stone quarry where tombs had been cut. The Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD and church historians record that Emperor Hadrian built a pagan temple over Jesus' tomb around 135 AD. When Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity he and his mother, Helena, pursued projects to venerate important sites. The pagan temple was dug out and an empty tomb was, indeed, found beneath it. Constantine erected church structures over the tomb and crucifixion site in 336 AD. The church was burned in 614 AD when Persians invaded Jerusalem, repaired again but then destroyed

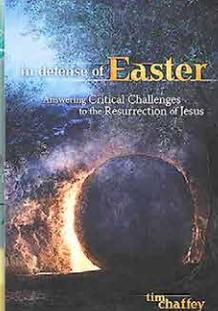
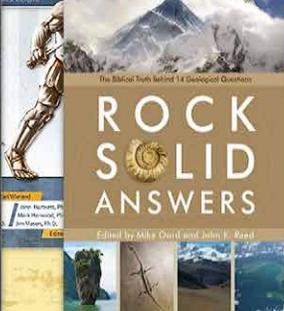
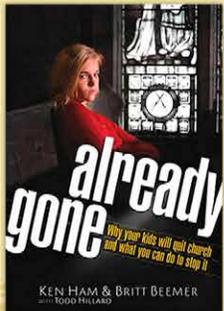
by the Fatimid Caliphate in 1009. Forty years later, under an agreement with the caliph, Byzantine Emperor Monomachos funded a restoration. During the First Crusade (1095–1099), a siege recaptured Jerusalem and Crusaders built up the church with the lavish architectural elements of the Western cathedrals. In 1187 Sultan Saladin defeated the Crusaders and turned it into a mosque. It was returned to Christians and renovated by 1390. Throughout all of this, much of the Constantine era external masonry survived. In 1555, with Jerusalem under Ottoman rule, renovations were allowed and included a more substantial enshrinement of the tomb itself. The church has undergone a variety of expansions in different styles reflecting the communities which sponsored them. It is a fascinating complex of structures, including 30 chapels, mosaics, caves, a 13th-century bell tower, and underground tombs. Many features continue to change over time including damage and repair after a major fire in 1808, the 1927 earthquake and recent renovations to save the Edicule from collapsing. Throughout the centuries, no matter the condition or politics, Christians have continued their pilgrimage to this site in great numbers.

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