

HIGHLIGHTS OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN BIBLE LANDS

by

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SACRED SITES IN THE HOLY LAND

BIBLE LOVERS are greatly interested in the matter of identifying the sites of sacred places connected with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Archaeology has not always been able to help in solving some of the problems involved. It is to be hoped that future discoveries will settle some of the uncertainties, but in the meantime the following information will indicate what is now known about these sacred sites of the land of the Saviour. 1

BETHLEHEM, WHERE JESUS WAS BORN

The Church of the Nativity. One of the oldest churches in the world, the Church of the Nativity, which enshrines the Grotto of the Nativity, is located in the city of Bethlehem. It was built originally by Helena, the mother of Constantine, in A.D. 330, but has been altered from time to time through the centuries since those days. An old tradition says that Jesus was born in this cave, and there is no particular reason to doubt the truth of the story. 2

Where was the manger located? It has been customary to believe that the cave where Jesus was born was used as a stable for the inn that was built over the cave. But Scripture says that “**there was no room for them in the inn.**” This would seem to indicate that there was no place for Mary and Joseph nor for the donkey they had been riding at the oriental inn of Bethlehem. It has been suggested that the manger that cradled the baby Jesus was not connected with the inn at all, but rather was inside the humble house of a Bethlehem family.

Often down to modern times have inhabitants of Bethlehem lived in a house and stabled some of their cattle in that same house. And sometimes these houses have been constructed over caves, the cattle being fed on the level of the cave, and the family living upstairs in a sort of mezzanine floor with approach to these quarters being reached by a stone stairway. If this be the correct picture of what happened, Joseph and Mary, after finding quarters for themselves and their beast at the inn crowded, sought refuge in a home, which was not any too large for the family and for guests that perhaps already occupied it. But the couple was given a welcome, and the stone manger, located within the cave over which the house had been built, served as the crib for the Christ Child. 3

NAZARETH, WHERE JESUS GREW UP AS A BOY

The Nazareth well. Through the years the little town of Nazareth has depended for its supply of water upon a well situated at the northwest end of the town. We may feel sure that Mary came to this spot with her pitcher for water for her family, and also that Jesus drank of its water many times. 4

The Nazareth synagogue. In the thirteenth century the Greek Catholics converted what had been an old Jewish synagogue into a church edifice, and it is believed that the site was the site of the old synagogue of the Nazareth of Jesus' day. It is known that the stone floor is very ancient. If this be the true site of that synagogue, then we can feel certain that here Jesus attended synagogue school and learned His letters. 5

An inscription found at Nazareth. An inscription that has bearing on the guarding of the tomb of Jesus has been discovered at the city of Nazareth. It has been called the "Tomb Robbers' Inscription." It was written in Greek, and has been dated about A.D. 10. It has been translated as follows:

By order of the emperor. I desire that all sepulchres and tombs which have been made out of respect to the dead, whether parents, children, or relations, shall remain undisturbed in perpetuity. Anyone found interfering with the dead or nefariously removing coffins or headstones will be prosecuted as an offender against divine and human law, for great respect should be paid to the dead, and no one may lawfully disturb them. Anyone found guilty of such a crime shall be liable to capital punishment as a tomb-robber. 6

Pilate must have been well acquainted with this law of the emperor when he made the arrangements to have the tomb of Jesus guarded. (See Matthew 28:11-15).

CAPERNAUM, CHRIST'S HEADQUARTERS IN GALILEE

The site of Capernaum. There has been some dispute as to the present site of the old city of Capernaum. Some scholars have favored *Khan Minveh*, which is located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. But most archaeologists today prefer *Tell Hum*, which is situated about three miles farther north, for the remains here would seem to be more ancient. 7

The synagogue of Capernaum. The most noted ruin in *Tell Hum* is the Synagogue of Capernaum. Some have maintained that this was actually the synagogue which was built by the centurion whose servant Jesus healed (Luke 7:5), and in which Jesus so often preached and healed the sick. But it is hardly possible that this is so, because the older synagogues were all destroyed by Titus in the Jewish war and by Hadrian in the rebellion of the second century. However, it is generally agreed that this synagogue of which ruins remain today was built upon a site that existed previously and where the synagogue of Jesus' day stood. And also it is quite likely that this present building was built in agreement with an architectural tradition of long standing. The ruins of this synagogue have been in the possession of Franciscans since 1925, and they have restored it partially. The building was constructed of white limestone and was richly ornamented. On the side that faced the Sea of Galilee there were three doors and a window.

The inside of the building measured 70 feet by 50 feet, and had a colonnade around three of the sides, except the entrance. The upper floor was no doubt for the women. It would seem that the building was designed for the congregation to face southward toward Jerusalem while at prayer. A double row of stone benches ran along the walls of the room for the worshipers. This synagogue ought to be of great interest to Bible students as indicating the sort of building in which Christ and His disciples so often worshiped in the long ago. 8

JERUSALEM, THE HOLY CITY

Golgotha and the tomb of Jesus. The interest in New Testament Jerusalem centers largely in the identification of sacred sites. And the chief matter of concern has been the effort to locate the spot where Jesus was crucified, and the site of the tomb where He was buried and resurrected. At the command of Emperor Constantine, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built over the site believed to be where the tomb of Jesus had been located, which was believed to be near the site of Calvary. This church was dedicated in the year A.D. 335, and through the years has been considered by many Christian people to be the most sacred place in all Palestine.

But objection has been raised to this traditional site on the grounds that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre stands inside the walls of old Jerusalem as it is today, whereas we know that in the days of Jesus, Calvary and the garden tomb were outside the city walls. Certain men have found what they have thought was evidence that the old walls surrounded a much smaller area of the city and therefore the church site was formerly outside the walls as then constituted. Others have argued that this would make the old city too small in territory to accommodate the masses that came there for the Jewish Feasts.

About seventy-five years ago General (“Chinese”) C. E. Gordon called the little hill located north of the Damascus Gate, Golgotha, or “The Place of the Skull.” The view of it gives this impression, and an old Jewish tradition says this “Skull Hill” was the “Place of Execution.” For years now this site has been called Gordon’s Calvary. Underneath this hill is a rock-hewn sepulchre, which General Gordon believed to be the garden tomb in which Jesus was buried. In recent years Protestants have come to believe more and more in these sites, whereas Catholics continue to pin their faith to the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Actually, there is no very positive proof for the identity of either site. Future archaeological discoveries may change the situation, but in the meanwhile the best that can be said is that one or the other site may have been the real site of Calvary and the garden tomb. At least Protestants who worship at the garden tomb may feel that here is the kind of a tomb in which Jesus was buried and from which He rose on the third day. 9

The Synagogue Inscription of Theodotus. When Raimond Weill was carrying on excavations in the city of David in the years 1913 and 1914, he found remains of baths which were clearly dated before the destruction of Jerusalem. He discovered in a cistern connected with the place an inscription written in Greek. It has been called the Synagogue Inscription of Theodotus, and it gives us a picture of Jewish life in the time of Jesus.

Of special interest is the part the synagogue as an institution played in entertaining Jewish pilgrims from outside Palestine at the Jewish festivals such as Passover or Pentecost. The inscription reads as follows:

Theodotus, son of Vettenus, priest and ruler of the synagogue, son of a ruler of the synagogue, built this synagogue for reading of the Law and for teaching of the Commandments. Also the stranger's lodging and apartments, and the conveniences of waters for an inn for them that need it from abroad, of which synagogue his fathers and the elders and Simonides did lay the foundation. 10

Some have suggested that this inscription was connected with the synagogue of the Libertines referred to in Acts 6:9, but there is no proof that this is so.

Finding of placard from Herod's Temple. In 1871 the French explorer Clermont-Ganneau discovered a stone tablet built into a house that was close to the Tower of Antonia. It has been placed in the museum at Constantinople. We can be certain that this was at one time fastened to the barrier outside the court of Israel in Herod's temple in order to warn Gentiles not to venture further into the sacred area of the temple. We may surmise that the eyes of both Jesus and Paul rested upon it perhaps many times. It was inscribed in the Greek language and read:

No stranger is to enter within the balustrade round the Temple and enclosure. Whosoever is caught will be responsible for his death which will ensue. 11

The odd way in which the penalty for disobeying the warning is expressed is an indication that the Jews could not themselves legally bring upon offenders the death penalty, but it was a warning that the populace must not be outraged by trespassers, or serious consequences might follow. The strong feeling of the people about this is illustrated in Acts 21:26f., where Paul was accused of taking the Greek Trophimus beyond the balustrade into the court of Israel, where Gentiles were forbidden by the placard to go. Paul would have been lynched, no doubt, but for the power of the Roman authorities.

The apostle Paul was evidently referring to this balustrade where the stone placard was fastened when he wrote in Ephesians 2:14: "**He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us.**" In Christ there is no separation of privileges between Jew and Gentile. 12

1. For a complete study of the whole problem, see Gustaf Dalman, *Sacred Sites and Ways*.
2. S. L. Caiger, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, pp. 77-81; T. W. Fawthrop, *The Stones Cry Out*, pp. 170, 172.
3. For description of Bethlehem house and manger, see, Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands*, p. 34. Also John D. Whiting, "Village Life in the Holy Land," *The National Geographic Magazine*, March, 1914, pp. 249-253. For description of oriental inn, see Wight, *ibid.*, pp. 272-274. For picture of the kind of a house in which Jesus was probably born, see John D. Whiting, "Bethlehem and the Christmas Story," *The National Geographic Magazine*, Dec. 1929, p. 719.
4. Wight, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

5. Caiger, *op. cit.*, pp. 96, 97; Fawthrop, *op. cit.*, p. 232.
6. Stephen L. Caiger, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1939), p. 144.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 83f.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-89; Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, pp. 226-228; W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, p. 175.
9. For writers more or less favoring the traditional site at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, see Robinson, *The Bearing of Archaeology on the Old Testament*, pp. 193-197; also Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, pp. 433-436; for writers favoring Gordon's Calvary and tomb, see, Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. II, pp. 585, 586; also T. W. Fawthrop, *The Stones Cry Out*, pp. 212-219; also T. A. Lambie, *A Bruised Reed*, pp. 179-186.
10. Stephen L. Caiger, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1939), p. 145; cf. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, pp. 439, 440.
11. *Ibid.*, Caiger, pp. 73, 74.
12. *Loc. cit.*; Fawthrop, *op. cit.*, pp. 186, 187; Deissmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-81; W. H. Boulton, *Archaeology Explains*, pp. 85, 86.

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