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Golgotha: Where Is It?

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While Catholic, Orthodox and some other religious communities place the location of Jesus Christ's death within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, most Protestant churches opt instead for an outcrop of rock near the Garden Tomb. But other ideas have been put forward over the years, one of which is worthy of further consideration in light of first-century Jewish practices and New Testament accounts of the event.

As the 19th century began to unfold, a number of events worked together to spark a renewed European (and in particular British) interest in the Levant, or the Middle East as we know it today. The British defeated Napoleon in Egypt before his ultimate demise at Waterloo. India lay beyond Egypt, and ease of access to that fabulous colony was very much on the imperial British mind. As the century progressed, Britain's foreign policy increasingly focused on protecting the newly established route to India through the Suez Canal. In the British view of things, the Levant had to be protected from Russian or other European encroachments, and especially from the emerging German colossus.

Concurrent with this foreign policy concern, newfound scientific knowledge prompted Protestant groups to develop an interest in physical aspects of the Bible lands in hopes of proving the Bible's accuracy at a time when it was increasingly being called into question. To that end, the Archbishop of York founded the Palestine Exploration Society in 1865 to study that land (in large part modern-day Israel) from a scientific standpoint. The society sponsored two military engineers to act as surveyors and proto-archaeologists: Sir Charles Wilson and Sir Charles Warren spent a considerable period of time both in Jerusalem and in the surrounding territory, mapping and recording information in exacting detail and producing results that are still prized today.

Because of the considerable public interest generated, the Society founded the *Palestine Exploration Quarterly (PEQ)* in 1869. The journal's aim was to shed light on the Bible by providing those interested with scholarly information about biblical places.

There, in an 1870 article, Scottish doctor R.F. Hutchinson wrote about the nature and location of Christ's tomb. At the time of his writing, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which was revered by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, stood alone as the traditional site of Christ's crucifixion and burial. Protestant groups had no alternate site to call their own, yet they insisted that Christ could not have died where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre now stood; it was within the walls of the city and thus ran counter to a New Testament passage indicating that the crucifixion took place outside the city. That argument eventually melted away, however, because archaeologists determined that the site was in fact outside the city's first-century walls.

But Hutchinson pointed out additional problems in light of New Testament scriptures and on that basis challenged readers to reconsider traditional teaching on the subject. He proposed instead that the location must have been on the slope of the Mount of Olives, to the east of Jerusalem and the temple.

Three years later, armed with more evidence, he prepared another article for *PEQ*. He had further analyzed various verses from New Testament accounts relating to Jesus' crucifixion and burial, adding weight to his thesis. The article was duly published, though there is no record in the journal of any response to his proposal.

More than a decade passed without Hutchinson's ideas gaining much notoriety. Then in 1884 British general Charles G. Gordon, having spent a year in the Holy Land during a hiatus in his celebrated military career, wrote *Reflections on Palestine*. In it he argued that a skull-like outcrop and a nearby tomb now known as the Garden Tomb, discovered a few years earlier

just outside the Damascus Gate, were Jesus Christ's true death and burial sites. Already a public hero in Britain, Gordon enjoyed quick acceptance of this Protestant alternative to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. And so, despite one more attempt by Hutchinson (*PEQ*, 1893) to promote the Mount of Olives site, his thesis was relegated to dusty library shelves.

GRAVE ERRORS RECONSIDERED

Gordon's certitude notwithstanding, it has since been established that the Garden Tomb was carved out of the rock some 700 years before the time of Jesus and on that basis alone could not have been Joseph of Arimathea's "own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock" (Matthew 27:60), "where no one had ever yet been laid" (Luke 23:53). For the late-19th-century Protestant world, however, it was enough that they could now share an equal claim in holy sites relating to Jesus Christ's death and resurrection with Roman Catholic and other Orthodox Christians.

So did either of the two main contenders get it right? Consider that both claims are based on a total misunderstanding of some of the criteria and regulations that prevailed in Jerusalem at the time of Christ; it was some of those misunderstandings that Hutchinson had tried to bring to light. Inherent in both the Roman Catholic/Orthodox and the Protestant choice of locations was a failure to consider factors that have far-reaching implications—evidence from both the New Testament and Jewish sources regarding not only first-century practices but the temple in particular.

Although Hutchinson did not openly refer to Jewish sources in setting out his ideas, he does appear to have reached an unexpected degree of harmony with them. He started by considering the location of gardens in Jerusalem, based on historical references to them in the final days of Christ's life. He noted that Gethsemane (Matthew 26:30, 36; John 18:1) and the gardens of kings David and Solomon were located near the Mount of Olives. He also considered the statement about Jesus' death in the last chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews: "For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin *are burned outside the camp*. So Jesus also suffered *outside the gate* in order to sanctify the people through his own blood" (Hebrews 13:11–12, emphasis added). These scriptures are very important in understanding Jesus' death.

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews built much of his message to the Church around the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in relation to one particular festival in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, or as it is referred to in most English Bibles, the Day of Atonement.

The day was rich in ritual, with the high priest officiating in events unique to that particular annual holy day. Yom Kippur was the only day on which the high priest entered the innermost sanctuary of the temple, the Holy of Holies, taking with him blood from sacrifices that he had overseen earlier in the day. Events in the temple culminated with the dispatch of the Azazel goat—commonly referred to as “the scapegoat” but better translated from the Hebrew as “the goat that was taken away”—taken into the wilderness. The remains of the carcasses of the sin offerings of that day had to be taken outside the temple precincts to another altar, on which they were burned (based on instructions given in Leviticus 16:27–28).

A LOOK INSIDE AN ANCIENT TOME

In our information age it is difficult to comprehend a society in which knowledge was largely preserved in an oral format, but such was the case in the Judea of Christ’s time. The Mishnah is a lengthy collection of rules and regulations of Jewish law compiled in the second century from oral traditions that had been passed from one generation to the next for hundreds of years. It is sometimes referred to as the Oral Law.

One of the sections of the Mishnah deals with the temple and its functions, and it also refers to an altar on the Mount of Olives. This is the altar that was to be “outside the camp,” in a clean place away from the area where the temple stood and where people lived. The foundation for instructions relating to this altar dates from the 40-year period when the ancient Israelites wandered in the wilderness, moving their camp—including the portable tabernacle, the precursor to the first temple—from place to place (Leviticus 4:12; Numbers 19:1–7). The specifications for this altar were later adapted for the temple in Jerusalem, following instructions given in Ezekiel 43:21.

The altar on the Mount of Olives, mentioned in the Mishnah, was for the red-heifer offering—a complex offering for purification—as well as for burning the carcasses of sin offerings, including those offered on the Day of Atonement. That altar was in direct line of sight with the entrance to the temple, so that the high priest had visual contact with the priests at the altar: “The priest who burns the red cow stands at the top of the Mount of Olives and takes his direction, looking directly at the door of the *heikhal* [the temple],” from the high priest during the sacrificial ceremony (*m. Middot* 2:4). It is to this altar “outside the camp” that the epistle to the Hebrews refers. The Mishnah also records that the Temple Mount was connected to the place of offering by a viaduct, across which the priests could take the offerings such as the red heifer

to avoid conveying any impurity to the participants: “And they would make a causeway from the Temple mount to the Mount of Olives, ... on which the priest who burns the cow, and the cow, and all those that assist it go forth to the Mount of Olives” (*m. Parah* 3:6).

It should be noted that no archaeological evidence of this viaduct has been identified to date. With or without such a viaduct, however, this reinforces the aforementioned statements in the last chapter of Hebrews, which speak of Jesus’ crucifixion in terms of those offerings. The author of the epistle was writing before the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. and would have had firsthand knowledge of that altar, as would the first-century recipients of his letter. By contrast, those who eventually declared Christ’s crucifixion and burial to have occurred where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre now stands could depend on nothing more reliable than the word of non-Jewish residents of Jerusalem almost three centuries later (see “[Groundless Claims \(http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-christ-death/607.aspx\)](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-christ-death/607.aspx)”).

TRADITIONAL SITES LAID TO REST

In determining the location of Jesus’ death and burial, consideration of Jewish tradition and Mishnaic writings is vital. Without it, one probably wouldn’t know, for instance, that Jewish burial practices in the first century were very specific with regard to the location of tombs.

This is borne out by the placement of rock-cut tombs in the area, such as the one used for the body of Jesus. Many first-century tombs have been examined in recent decades; they form an arc running from the area of the Sanhedra to the north of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley along the slopes of the Mount of Olives on the east, and ending to the south where Akeldama, the “field of blood” (see Matthew 27:3–10), is located in the Hinnom Valley. A few tombs, such as those relating to Herod’s family, are to the west of the city. The idea of burying the dead within the city or in a church building or a churchyard (as became the habit in later times) was contrary to regulations governing the temple and its operation. In order not to compromise the temple’s purity, all tombs had to be located outside the city walls as they stood at that time.

Again, the basis for this lies in the Hebrew Scriptures. Regulations established for the tabernacle in the wilderness defined a specific area “outside the camp” for burial and for the burning of sacrificial remains.

The Mishnah alludes to this demarcated area and establishes a radius of 2,000 cubits (about 3,000 feet or just over 900 meters) from a courtyard in Jerusalem known as the Bet Yazeq (*m. Rosh HaShanah* 2:5). This passage deals specifically with individuals who came to

the temple to report sightings of the new moon, which was critical to the observance of certain holy days. The ceremonial law required ritual purity of anyone who would observe those holy days, and that included staying well away from the bodies of the dead for a specified period of time beforehand. The witnesses were often so numerous that they had to wait their turn outside the Bet Yazeq. Accordingly, the Mishnah established a waiting area that was guaranteed to be free of graves. Archaeological excavations in Jerusalem support the fact that executions and burials would normally be conducted outside this area. All known first-century tombs are not only outside the city wall but are well beyond the specified 2,000-cubit distance from the temple (following the topography of the land), hence reinforcing the concept of holy space as it applied to the city and the temple. Given the demands for purity because of the holy days, it is most unlikely that such provisions would have been flaunted.

And this brings us to the issue at hand. Based on these stipulations, neither the Church of the Holy Sepulchre nor Gordon's Garden Tomb could have been the burial place of Jesus Christ. Both sites, though outside the city wall, would have been too close to the temple. The graves that line the slopes of the Kidron Valley below the Temple Mount today are the sites of later burials. By contrast, the well-known monuments at the base of the Kidron Valley were established in much earlier times; their contents, if any, have likely been re-interred at other locations. In any case, neither location popularly identified as the place of Jesus Christ's death and burial was established with any consideration of the Jewish custom or regulations of the day. In fact, church historians have until recent times dismissed Jewish literature as having nothing to offer on the subject.

Unlike many of today's theologians, however, Hutchinson came from a position of reading the Gospels as accurate portrayals of the life of Jesus Christ, without skepticism. He and others like him became involved with the Holy Land to prove the skeptic wrong. To Hutchinson, the location of Golgotha on the slopes of the Mount of Olives provided a wonderful harmony of all the statements about the place and event of Christ's crucifixion, which no other location could provide.

If we go a step further and combine Hutchinson's points with the information gleaned from Jewish sources, we find that the Mount of Olives clearly meets various spatial requirements set out by the scriptural accounts:

1 It was near a public approach to the city: the Jericho road came past Bethany to enter the east of the city. Proximity to a significant road is implied by the Gospel reference to Simon of

Cyrene, “who was coming in from the country” and was forced to join them on their way to “the place that is called The Skull, [where] they crucified him” (Luke 23:26, 33). It is further implied by the fact that multiple passersby mocked and derided Jesus as He hung on the cross (Matthew 27:39; Mark 15:29).

- 2 The Mount of Olives was in the vicinity of gardens, satisfying the statement in John 19:41.
- 3 The mountainside could obviously be seen by observers “from a distance” (Matthew 27:55; Mark 15:40; Luke 23:49). John’s reference (John 19:25–26) to some of the same observers likely recalls a later point in the day, when a number of women went to the crucifixion site itself.
- 4 The mountainside would also have been clearly visible to the priests and leaders who didn’t want to be defiled, or contaminated, by leaving the temple precincts or the area of the altar on the Mount of Olives just prior to celebrating the annual Passover; they are recorded as having been near enough to watch and to mock Him among themselves as he was dying (John 18:28; Matthew 27:41–43; Mark 15:31–32).
- 5 A crucifixion site on the Mount of Olives makes sense of Matthew’s account of a centurion who was “keeping watch over Jesus,” yet who apparently could also see the large curtain at the entrance of the temple being torn in two immediately following Jesus’ death (Matthew 27:50–54).
- 6 Crucifixion on the mount harmonizes with the epistle to the Hebrews and the association of Christ’s death with the altar of purification located on the Mount of Olives (Hebrews 13:11–12; *m. Middot* 2:4).

If only Hutchinson had known that a larger body of evidence existed within Judaism to reinforce his presentation, we might witness a very different scenario in Jerusalem today with regard to the so-called holy sites. We might also see a greater level of respect for Jewish sources that have so long been neglected.

With this in mind, perhaps we need to return to Hutchinson’s nonskeptical approach. Despite centuries of vested interest in sites, we today, using not only the record of the New Testament but also of Jewish sources, have a much better chance of understanding the circumstances and location of Jesus Christ’s death and burial—and so much more as well.

