



Archaeology and the Historical Reliability of the New Testament

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“On the whole ... archaeological work has unquestionably strengthened confidence in the reliability of the Scriptural record. More than one archaeologist has found his respect for the Bible increased by the experience of excavation in Palestine. Archaeology has in many cases refuted the views of modern critics.”

– Millar Burrows, Professor of Archaeology, Yale University[1]

Charlotte Allen observes that “Archaeology, which was then a young science, was by and large ignored by the academic biblical scholars of the [nineteenth] century. For the great German exegetes of the era ... a voyage to Palestine was beside the point, as the life of the historical Jesus was for them solely a matter of interpreting texts.”[2] Today, scholars know that archaeological data can be a valuable aid to interpreting texts, as well as providing independent adjudication of a text’s historical veracity. Allen affirms that archaeological excavations in the Holy Land have “tended to support the historical value of the Gospels, at least as sources of information about the conditions of their times.”[3] As Nelson Glueck states, on the one hand “It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever contravened a biblical reference”, whereas on the other “Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible.”[4] Archaeologist William F. Albright observes:

The excessive scepticism shown toward the Bible

by important historical schools of the eighteenth- and-nineteenth centuries, certain phases of which still appear periodically, has been progressively discredited. Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details, and has brought increased recognition to the value of the Bible as a source of history.[5]

Likewise, Joseph Free confirms: “Archaeology has confirmed countless passages which had been rejected by critics as unhistorical or contrary to known facts.”[6] Theologian Craig L. Blomberg notes how:

archaeology can demonstrate that the places mentioned in the Gospels really existed and that customs, living conditions, topography, household and workplace furniture and tools, roads, coins, buildings and numerous other ‘stage props’ correspond to how the Gospels describe them. It can show that the names of certain characters in the Gospels are accurate, when we find inscriptional references to them elsewhere. Events and teachings ascribed to Jesus become intelligible and therefore plausible when read against everything we know about life in Palestine in the first third of the first century.[7]

Archaeologist Jonathan L. Reed observes that “The many archaeological discoveries relating to people, places, or titles mentioned in Acts do lend credence to its historicity at one level; many of the specific details in Acts are factual.”[8] And as Lee Strobel observes:

In trying to determine if a witness is being truthful, journalists and lawyers will test all the elements of his or her testimony that can be tested. If this investigation reveals that the person was wrong in those details, this casts considerable doubt on the veracity of his or her entire story. However, if the minutiae check out, this is some indication – not conclusive proof but some evidence – that maybe the witness is being reliable in his or her overall account.[9]

We will review archaeological evidence under the following three categories:

- Culture – Beliefs and Practices
- Places – Urban centers and individual buildings

- People – Titles, Names and Relationships

Culture

Here is a selection of finds relating to cultural practices mentioned in the New Testament.

Crucifixion Victim

In 1968 an ancient burial site was uncovered containing about 35 bodies. One named Yohanan Ben Ha'galgol had a 7 inch nail driven through both feet. Yohanan's legs were crushed by a blow consistent with the common use of Roman 'crucifragium' (John 19:31-32). This find proves that a victim of crucifixion (like Jesus) could receive a proper Jewish burial.

The Nazareth Decree

The 'Nazareth decree' is a marble slab found in Nazareth in 1878 and inscribed with a decree issued c. AD 41 by Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54) to the effect that no graves should be disturbed or bodies extracted, with offenders sentenced to death. A plausible explanation of both the decree and its location is that Claudius heard of Jesus' empty tomb whilst investigating the Roman riots of AD 49 and decided not to let such reports surface again. This makes sense in light of the Jewish argument that Jesus' body had been stolen (Matthew 28:11-15). But "even if there is no conscious connection with Jesus of Nazareth, this decree still reveals that the imperial authorities in this period saw grave robbery as an extremely serious crime – indeed as a capital offence. This only makes it yet more unlikely that the (already fearful) disciples would have risked such an act."^[10]

First-Century Fishing Boat

In the 1980s, drought exposed a well-preserved first-century fishing boat (measuring 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide and 4.5 feet high) in the mud of the Sea of Galilee:

Under the direction of the Israeli Antiquities Authority, archaeologists began a race against time to carefully extract the boat from the mud before the waters returned... Eventually it was placed in a climate-controlled environment to protect it from aging... Pots and lamps found inside the boat dated it to the first century. Carbon-14 testing further confirmed the dating. The design of the boat was typical of fishing boats used during

that period on the Sea of Galilee. In the back of the boat was a raised section like the one where Jesus could have been sleeping, as indicated in the Gospel accounts. The boat could accommodate 15 people including crew. This archaeological discovery confirms the description given in the Bible.^[11]

The Politarch Inscription

Luke recounts:

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica... Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,' he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: 'These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.' When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go. (Acts 17:1-10)

The Greek term translated here as 'city officials' is *politarchs*. Since the term doesn't appear in classical literature, "Critics of the New Testament asserted for many years that Luke was mistaken in his use of the term 'politarchs' ... for the officials of Thessalonica..."^[12] However, an inscription using this term was found on a first-century AD arch torn down in 1867. As T.C. Mitchell describes it:

The inscription lists the officials of the town in the second century AD, beginning with six Politarchs and naming the city Treasurer and the Gymnasiarch (Director of Higher Education). The inscription begins politarchounton, 'While [the following] were acting as Politarchs'... It is worth

noting that two of the names that appear in this inscription, *Sosipatros ... and Lucius ... were borne by two men at Beroea whom Paul describes as ... 'kinsmen', but in this context perhaps Jewish Christians (Romans 16:21). Equally, the names Secundus ... and Gaius ... were borne by a man from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4), and a Macedonian (Acts 19:29), who were travelling companions of Paul. These were not, of course, the same men, but simply demonstrate the currency of the personal names in the area in the century following the time of Paul.*[13]

Pompeii Palindromes

Excavated at Pompeii, the Roman city engulfed in liquid mud when Vesuvius erupted in AD 79, were two palindromic inscriptions of:

the famous SATOR or ROTAS square, one scratched on the wall of a private house, the other on a pillar in a public exercise yard. This palindrome appears at sites across the Roman Empire in later centuries... All sorts of ingenious explanations have been offered for this remarkable square. On the principle that the simplest explanation is the best, unravelling it as a Christian text gains first place. With the N at the centre, the other letters can be re-arranged in a cross shape to read PATERNOSTER ['Our Father'] horizontally and vertically, with A [alpha] and O (omega) at each end. If this is correct, there were people in Pompeii who knew at least the first words of the Lord's prayer in Latin before 79.[14]

The Alexamenos Graffito

This piece of graffiti, from near the Palatine Hill in Rome and rather roughly dated to late in the second-century AD[15], was apparently drawn by one Roman soldier to mock the faith of a fellow soldier who was a Christian. It shows a man standing by a crucifixion victim with the head of a donkey. The Greek caption reads: "Alexamenos worships [his] God".

Christian Prayer Hall near Megiddo, c. 230 AD

John Dickson reports that: "Megiddo is the site of the earliest church building yet found. This strategic trade city contains the remains of a Christian prayer hall dating to the third century. It contains three mosaic inscriptions pointing to its Christian use." [16] One Greek inscription, which refers to the table in the centre of the hall that was

probably used for communion, states: "The God-loving Akeptous has offered the table to the God Jesus Christ". The fish that adorn the centre of one of four mosaics in the hall are a Christian symbol – the word *ichthys* (Greek for fish): "is an anagram of the words *Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour*".

Places

Here is a selection of finds relating to places mentioned in the New Testament.

Nazareth

Theologian R.T. France describes Nazareth as:

so insignificant that its name occurs nowhere in Jewish literature until long after the time of Jesus. It was a small village, largely devoted to agriculture, bypassed by the main roads which ran to the near-by Hellenistic city of Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee... Its population has been estimated at between 500 and 2,000, and the remains of its buildings show no sign of wealth in the relevant period.[17]

Lee Strobel notes that "Skeptics have been asserting for a long time that Nazareth never existed during the time when the New Testament says Jesus spent his childhood there." [18] For example, "atheist Frank Zindler noted that Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament, by the apostle Paul, by the Talmud (although sixty-three other Galilean towns are cited), or by Josephus (who listed forty-five other villages and cities of Galilee, including Japha, which was located just over a mile from present-day Nazareth. No ancient historians or geographers mention Nazareth before the beginning of the fourth century." [19] However, Paul Barnett reports that "in 1961 a mosaic dated from the third century in which Nazareth appears was unearthed in Caesarea Maritima. Nazareth ... is not mentioned in the Old Testament, nor in Josephus's work. Questions as to its genuineness were resolved by this discovery." [20] Dr James Strange notes that "when Jerusalem fell in AD 70, priests were no longer needed in the temple because it had been destroyed, so they were sent to various other locations, even up into Galilee. Archaeologists have found a list in Aramaic describing the twenty-four 'courses', or families, of priests who were relocated, and one of them was registered as

having been moved to Nazareth.”[21]

Moreover: “archaeological digs ... have uncovered first-century tombs in the vicinity of Nazareth, which would establish the village’s limits because by Jewish law burials had to take place outside the town proper. Two tombs contained objects such as pottery lamps, glass vessels, and vases from the first, third, or fourth centuries.”[22] Archaeologist Jack Finegan states that “From the tombs ... it can be concluded that Nazareth was a strongly Jewish settlement in the Roman period.”[23] As John McRay reports:

Archaeological excavations in Nazareth ... by Bellarmino Bagatti in 1955 ... revealed that Nazareth of Jesus’ day was an agricultural settlement with numerous winepresses, olive presses, caves for storing grain, and cisterns for water and wine. Situated below the Annunciation Church and the Church of Saint Joseph to the north, some of these structures are connected by ancient tradition with the habitations of Joseph and Mary. Pottery found in the village dates from Iron Age II (900-600 BC) to the Byzantine period (AD 330-640), including Roman pieces from the time of Christ.[24]

In December 2009 archaeologists from the Israeli Antiquities Authority, excavating in the grounds of a former convent, unearthed a house from first century Nazareth. According to excavation director Yardenna Alexandre: “The discovery is of the utmost importance since it reveals for the very first time a house from the Jewish village of Nazareth and thereby sheds light on the way of life at the time of Jesus. The building that we found is small and modest and it is most likely typical of the dwellings in Nazareth in that period.”[25]

Capernaum

There are sixteen references to Capernaum (Caper = ‘village’ of Nahum), by the Sea of Galilee, in the gospels: “From the period of the New Testament there has been uncovered the evidence of the fishing industry (anchors, fishhooks), which employed [the] disciples, as well as a street and houses certainly used by them on occasion.”[26] R.T. France notes that:

The houses excavated at Capernaum were one-story buildings, with an outside staircase giving

access to the flat roof. The roof was not of stone, but of wooden beams or branches thatched with rush and daubed with mud. This explains Mark’s description of how four men carried a potential patient onto the roof and, literally, ‘uncovered the roof and dug it out’ so as to let the man down in front of Jesus (Mark 2:1-4), and the size of the rooms in such houses (never more than five meters across, and often much smaller) shows how quite a modest crowd could make this the only means of access.[27]

The Synagogue in Capernaum

Jesus taught in the synagogue in Capernaum according to Mark 1:21-22 and Luke 4:31-36. Luke 7:1-10 records how Jesus healed the slave of a Roman centurion posted locally. The people encouraged Jesus to heal the slave because the Roman officer had built their synagogue. The black basalt foundations of this 1st century synagogue (a dating confirmed by pottery finds beneath the floor) can be seen today under the remains of the 4th century lime-stone synagogue in Capernaum.

The Roman Presence in Capernaum

Randall Price notes that “Recently the Roman presence was confirmed through the excavation at Capernaum of a number of Roman-style buildings, including a Roman bathhouse.”[28] As Ian Wilson reports: “In this regard, archaeologists have found evidence of Roman military presence in Capernaum in the form of a long bathhouse, of positively non-Jewish design, that almost certainly belonged to the garrison commanded by Jesus’s centurion.”[29]

Peter’s House in Capernaum

Capernaum contains the remains of an octagonal 5th century church. In 1968, archaeologists discovered the remains of an earlier church underneath it. This had been built around what was originally a private house, which was apparently used by Christians as a meeting-place during the second half of the first century. The walls had been plastered, and bore scratched writing interpreted by some scholars as prayers in ancient Aramaic (as well as Syriac and Hebrew) saying such things as “Lord Jesus Christ help” and “Christ have mercy”.[30] As often seems to be the case with ancient scratched markings, these readings are disputed. Some scholars think they “are better read as Greek than as Aramaic ... and do

not necessarily have religious significance. [31] In the fourth century this 'house church' was enlarged and enclosed within the walls of its own compound. It was pointed out to early pilgrims such as Egeria, the mother of emperor Constantine, who recorded c. AD 380 that: *"In Capernaum the house of the prince of the apostles has been made into a church with its original walls still standing. It is where the Lord cured the paralytic."* Peter Walker affirms: *"graffiti that referred to Jesus as Lord and Messiah ... provides strong evidence that the room was used as a place of Christian worship – almost certainly because it was believed to be the room used by Jesus, perhaps the home of Simon Peter (Luke 4:38)... Given that the early tradition goes back to the first century, this is almost certainly the very place where Jesus stayed – the home of his chief apostle, Peter."* [32]

Jerusalem and The Pool of Bethesda

John 5:1-15 describes a pool in Jerusalem, near the Sheep Gate, called Bethesda, surrounded by five covered colonnades. Until the 19th century, there was no evidence outside of John for the existence of this pool and John's unusual description *"caused bible scholars to doubt the reliability of John's account, but the pool was duly uncovered in the 1930s – with four colonnades around its edges and one across its middle."* [33] Ian Wilson reports: *"Exhaustive excavations by Israeli archaeologist Professor Joachim Jeremias have brought to light precisely such a building, still including two huge, deep-cut cisterns, in the environs of Jerusalem's Crusader Church of St Anne."* [34]

Jerusalem and The Pool of Siloam

In the 400s AD, a church was built above a pool attached to Hezekiah's water tunnel to commemorate the healing of a blind man reported in John 9:1-7. Until recently, this was considered to be the Pool of Siloam from the time of Christ. However, during sewerage works in June 2004 engineers stumbled upon a 1st century ritual pool when they uncovered some ancient steps during pipe maintenance near the mouth of Hezekiah's tunnel. By the summer of 2005, archaeologists had revealed what was *"without doubt the missing pool of Siloam."* [35] Mark D. Roberts reports that: *"In the plaster of this pool were found coins that establish the date of the pool to the years before and after Jesus. There is little question that this is*

in fact the pool of Siloam, to which Jesus sent the blind man in John 9." [36]

The Tomb of the Gadarene Demoniac

Angela Tilby reports that: *"Umm Keiss contains the remains of the ancient town of Gadera ... noted for its hot, natural pools that were thought to have healing qualities. The town is on the south side of the Sea of Galilee in an area known as the Decapolis. This is the region to the south and east of the Jordan in which there were ten independent cities founded originally by Alexander the Great. At the time of Jesus these remained cosmopolitan communities where temples and synagogues would be found alongside each other. Jew and pagan would trade and mix ... under the wider cultural umbrella of whatever colonial power was in the ascendancy. Recent excavations have uncovered the remains of a fourth-century church, which is so large that it must have been connected to a site of major importance. The church has no less than five aisles, which suggests that it was visited by large numbers of pilgrims. Digging down beneath the foundations, archaeologists have discovered a Roman tomb that has been dated to the year AD 25... The strange thing is that the church has a hole in the floor that looks right down on to the tomb. The tomb itself is in an easily identified spot; it is just under an archway that marks the western city boundary. The Christians who built the church have done nothing to 'christianize' the tomb. They have neither destroyed it, replaced it, nor attempted to mark it with crosses or symbols of resurrection. For some reason, they wanted to preserve it as it was. It is a serious possibility that this was one of the tombs that provided a home for the Gadarene demoniac. It has been preserved under the church to mark the place of his exorcism."* [37]

Bethany and The Tomb of Lazarus

Peter Walker writes: *"There is no doubting the general location of Bethany. The Arabic village of El-Azarieh preserves in its name the way the Byzantines referred to it – as the 'Lazarium', that is, 'the place of Lazarus'. Until recently this was a tiny village... There is a strong likelihood that Lazarus' tomb has been correctly identified and preserved. Certainly the traditional tomb that is now known as his tomb was in a cemetery in the first century (other first-century tombs have been found just to the north). And there are references to the tomb*

going back to the third century AD (in Eusebius' Onomastikon).^[38]

People

Here is a selection of finds relating to people mentioned in the New Testament.

Herodian Coins

For example, we have a bronze coin minted by Herod the Great. On the obverse side (i.e. the bottom) is a tripod and ceremonial bowl with the inscription 'Herod king' and the year the coin was struck, 'year 3' (of Herod's reign), or 37 BC.

Herodian Pottery

In 1996 Israeli Professor of Archaeology Ehud Netzer discovered in Masada a piece of broken pottery with an inscription, called an ostrakon. This piece had Herod's name on it and was part of an amphora used for transportation (probably wine), dated to c. 19 BC. The inscription is in Latin and reads, "*Herod the Great King of the Jews (or Judea)*", the first such that mentions the full title of King Herod.

Herodium

Herodium is a man-made mountain in the Judean wilderness rising over 2,475 feet above sea level. In 23 BC Herod the Great built a palace fortress here on top of a natural hill. Seven stories of living rooms, storage areas, cisterns, a bathhouse, and a courtyard filled with bushes and flowering plants were constructed. The whole complex was surrounded and partly buried by a sloping fill of earth and gravel. Herod's tomb and sarcophagus were discovered at the base of Herodium by archaeologist Ehud Netzer in 2007.

Erastus, Treasurer of Corinth

John McRay reports that:

Before AD 50, an area 62 feet square was paved with stone at the northeast corner of the theatre in Corinth, Greece. Excavations there revealed part of a Latin inscription carved into the pavement which reads, 'Erastus in return for his aedilship laid [the pavement] at his own expense.' The Erastus of this inscription is identified in the excavation publication as the Erastus mentioned by Paul in Romans, a letter written from Corinth, in which Erastus is referred to as 'the city treasurer' [Romans 16:23]... the particular Greek

word used by Paul for 'treasurer' (oikonomos) is an appropriate term to describe the work of a Corinthian aedile or magistrate supervising public works.^[39]

Ian Wilson comments that "*there is a general recognition that this may well have been an earlier stage in Erastus the treasurer's career in local government. At the very least, there is a reasonable case for Paul's Erastus and the Erastus of the Corinth inscription being one and the same.*"^[40]

Gallio, Proconsul of Achaia

"This designation in Acts 18:12-17 was thought to be impossible. But an inscription at Delphi notes this exact title for the man, and it dates him to the time Paul was in Corinth (AD 51)."^[41] In the inscription the emperor Claudius refers to "*Gallio, my friend and Proconsul*".^[42]

Historical Figures Named in Luke 3:1-2

In Luke 3:1-2 we see references to eight historical figures:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of [1] Tiberius Caesar – when [2] Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, [3] Herod tetrarch [a governor of a quarter of a province] of Galilee, his brother [4] Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis [cf. Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.106-108], and [5] Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – during the high priesthood of [6] Annas and [7] Caiaphas, the word of God came to [8] John son of Zechariah in the desert. (Luke 3:1-2) [cf. Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18:5.2]

The historicity of all eight figures is assured, and archaeological evidence plays its role here, as the following examples demonstrate:

[1] Tiberius Caesar

The Denarius coin, 14-37 AD, is commonly referred to as the 'Tribute Penny' from the Bible. The coin shows a portrait of Tiberius Caesar. Craig L. Blomberg comments: "*Jesus' famous saying about giving to Caesar what was his and to God what his (Mark 12:17 and parallels) makes even more sense when one discovers that most of the Roman coins in use at the time had images of Caesar on them.*"^[43]

[2] Pontius Pilate

"In 1961, in Caesarea Maritima, where Pontius Pilate lived, an inscription was found which, among other things, confirms not only the rule of Pilate in Judea but also his preference for the title 'Prefect'. The inscription isn't complete anymore, but there's little question about what it once said."[44] In Latin the inscription reads:

TIBERIEUM
IUS PILATUS
ECTUS IUDA

The original wording was thus:

TIBERIEUM
[PONT]IUS PILATUS
[PRAEF]ECTUS IDUA[EA]

Translated, this reads: *"To Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea."*

[5] Lysanias, Tetrach of Abilene

Scholars used to say that Luke didn't know what he was talking about, because everybody knew that Lysanias was the ruler of Chalcis, who was killed in 36 BC. But then an inscription was found at Albia near Damascus from the time of Tiberius (AD 14-37) which names Lysanias as Tetrarch – just as Luke had written. It turned out there had been two government officials named Lysanias!

[7] Caiaphas the High Priest

In a tomb located to the south of Jerusalem were discovered several ossuaries, one of which contained the bones of the former high priest Caiaphas and his family. On the side and back of the ossuary is inscribed Caiaphas' name: *"Yosef bar [son of] Caifa"*.

Ossurries are particularly fascinating examples of archaeological evidence because they are witness not only to a cultural practice, but they can document the existence of named individuals, their familial relationships and even their religious beliefs.

Alexander of Cyrene

When Jesus was on the way to be crucified, the Roman soldiers forced a man called Simon from

Cyrene to carry his cross-beam (cf. Matthew 27:32; Luke 23:26). Simon had sons called Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21; Romans 16:13). In 1941, Israeli archaeologist Eleazar Sukenik discovered a tomb in the Kidron valley in eastern Jerusalem. Pottery dated it to the 1st century AD. The tomb contained eleven ossuaries bearing twelve names in fifteen inscriptions. Some were particularly common in Cyrenaica. The inscriptions on one of these ossuaries says: *"Alexandros (son of) Simon"*. On the lid of the ossuary, there's an inscription bearing the name Alexandros in Greek, and then the Hebrew QRNYT. The meaning of this isn't clear, but one possibility is that the person making the inscription meant to write QRNYH – the Hebrew for 'Cyrenian'. Tom Powers comments:

When we consider how uncommon the name Alexander was, and note that the ossuary inscription lists him in the same relationship to Simon as the New Testament does and recall that the burial cave contains the remains of people from Cyrenaica, the chance that the Simon on the ossuary refers to the Simon of Cyrene mentioned in the Gospels seems very likely.[45]

The Barsabbas Family

Early in the book of Acts, Luke describes how Jesus' eleven remaining disciples went about replacing Judas after his suicide: *"Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."* (Acts 1:21-22) Two men were proposed for the position – Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. The disciples prayed: *"Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs."* (Acts 1:24-25) Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias. On a later occasion: *"the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers."* (Acts 15:22) Modern archaeological findings cast light upon these references to Joseph and Judas Barsabbas. As reported by *Jerusalem Christian Review*

(December 2000 online edition), Israeli archaeologists have uncovered a 1st century tomb in the mountainside off the Kidron Valley, containing ossuaries bearing signs of the cross. The inscriptions identify the cave as the tomb of the Barsabbas family. Historian Ory N. Mazar states that *“at least some members of this family were among the very first disciples of Christ.”* The ossuaries included:

- **Simon Bar-Saba**, the Hebrew version of ‘Simon Barsabbas’
- **Mary, daughter of Simon** maybe one of the several Marys in the NT (eg. Matthew 28:1)
- **Joseph Barsabbas**
 - The other candidate from Acts, **Matthias**, may have belonged to the same family, as one of the other coffins in the same cave carries the name M'T'I', Hebrew for ‘Matthias’.
 - Another Son of Saba was **Judah** (the Hebrew form of the Greek **Judas**) **Barsabbas**

Professor Mazar comments:

the impact of these fascinating discoveries is multiplied when we consider the additional evidence found in the tomb such as coins and artifacts, that clearly show the tomb was hermetically sealed less than a decade after the crucifixion of Christ. This is years before any part of the New Testament was written, proving that the Scriptures are consistent with the archaeological evidence.

The ‘James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus’ Ossuary

James, the brother of Jesus, was martyred in AD 62. A mid-1st century AD chalk ossuary discovered in 2002 bears the inscription *“James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus”* (‘Ya’akov bar Yosef akhui di Yeshua’). Historian Paul L. Maier states that *“there is strong (though not absolutely conclusive) evidence that, yes, the ossuary and its inscription are not only authentic, but that the inscribed names are the New Testament personalities.”*[46] New Testament scholar Ben Witherington states that: *“If, as seems probable, the ossuary found in the vicinity of Jerusalem and dated to about AD 63 is indeed the burial box of*

James, the brother of Jesus, this inscription is the most important extra-biblical evidence of its kind.”[47] According to Hershel Shanks, editor in chief of the *Biblical Archaeological Review*: *“this box is [more] likely the ossuary of James, the brother of Jesus of Nazareth, than not. In my opinion ... it is likely that this inscription does mention the James and Joseph and Jesus of the New Testament.”*

The Empty Tomb of Jesus

According to John McRay: *“Although absolute proof of the location of Jesus’ tomb remains beyond our reach, the archaeological and early literary evidence argues strongly for those who associate it with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.”*[48] Dan Bahat, former City Archaeologist of Jerusalem, likewise states that: *“We may not be absolutely certain that the site of the Holy Sepulchre Church is the site of Jesus’ burial, but we certainly have no other site that can lay a claim nearly as weighty, and we really have no reason to reject the authenticity of the site.”*[49] Martin Biddle adds that: *“What is clear is that the kind of tomb suggested by the Gospel accounts is consistent with what is now known of contemporary practice in the Jerusalem area: i.e. a rock-cut tomb, a low entrance closed by a moveable stone, and a raised burial couch within.”*[50]

The Empty Shroud

The intensively studied ‘Shroud of Turin’ – which bears a superficial, photographically negative image of a flogged and crucified man (an image that also contains three dimensional information) – was formerly dismissed by many on the basis of 1988 carbon dating tests giving the Shroud a medieval date. However, recent peer-reviewed scientific findings show that this carbon dating is unreliable because the dated samples were taken from a medieval patch.[51] On the other hand, a mass of historical and forensic evidence points towards an earlier and even first-century date for the Shroud. For example, forensic evidence ties the Shroud to a bloody headcloth known as the ‘Sudarium of Oviedo’, an artifact with a provenance that can be traced back as far as the seventh century.[52] Moreover, the evidence is against the hypothesis that the image on the Shroud is an artistic fake.

A statistical comparison between data from the

Shroud and the New Testament's description of various irregular details of Jesus' punishment establishes that *if* the Shroud is a genuine 1st century artifact *then* it probably was Jesus' actual burial cloth. Hence the Shroud provides archaeological evidence for the Gospel accounts of Jesus' flogging and crucifixion and for the claim that after Jesus died as a result of his crucifixion he was given an honorable burial. The Shroud thus provides evidence against the once popular 'swoon' theory (according to which Jesus didn't really die on the cross). Moreover, that the Shroud a) no longer contains a body and b) bears undisturbed blood clots, constitutes additional evidence in the cumulative case for the reality of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Conclusion

Archaeology adds to the cumulative case for the historical reliability of the New Testament by empirically verifying references to specific cultural practices, beliefs, places and people. As Paul Barnett concludes:

archaeology neither proves nor disproves the New Testament. It does, however, endorse the narratives at many points, especially in the case of inscriptions, which by their nature are specific. Here we meet characters secondary to the main story – the Herods, the high priest and several Roman governors. Moreover, through archaeology we are able to fill in background details that enhance the narratives in both the Gospels and in the book of Acts. Archaeological findings have confirmed that the texts of the New Testament are from first to last historical and geographical in character.[53]

Recommended Resources

Video

Capernaum: City of Skeptics,
www.dod.org/Products/Capernaum--City-of-Skeptics__DOD2135.aspx

Jesus & The Gospels: Answers to Tough Questions – Part 2,
www.dod.org/Products/DOD2117.aspx

Reformed Seminary Videos of Israel Trip 2000,

www.youtube.com/user/ReformedSeminary

1st Century Nazareth House,
www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34511072/ns/technology_and_science-science/#34523421

Audio

Gary R. Habermas *et al*, 'The Talpiot Tomb',
www.reclaimingthemind.org/content/files/CWS/cwstalpiot.mp3

Peter S. Williams, 'New Testament Archaeology',
www.damaris.org/cm/podcasts/215

Websites

Biblical Archaeological Review, www.bib-arch.org/

The Shroud of Turin Education Project,
www.shroud2000.com/

Shroud Story, www.shroudstory.com/

Shroud of Turin Website,
www.shroud.com/menu.htm

On-Line Papers

Clyde E. Billington, 'The Nazareth Inscription'
www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2009/07/22/The-Nazareth-Inscription-Proof-of-the-Resurrection-of-Christ.aspx

Kyle Butt, 'Archaeology and the New Testament',
www.apologeticspress.org/articles/2591

John L. Brown, 'Microscopical Investigation of Selected Raes Threads from the Shroud of Turin',
www.shroud.com/pdfs/brown1.pdf

Craig A. Evans, 'Archaeology and the Historical Jesus: Recent Developments',
<http://216.12.134.73/publications/article.aspx?articleid=335>

Gary R. Habermas, 'The Lost Tomb of Jesus: A Response',
http://garyhabermas.com/articles/The_Lost_Tomb_of_Jesus/losttombofjesus_response.htm

Gary R. Habermas, 'Historical Epistemology, Jesus' Resurrection, and the Shroud of Turin', *Proceedings of the 1999 Shroud of Turin International Conference* (1999), http://works.bepress.com/gary_habermas/40

Gary R. Habermas, 'The Shroud of Turin and its Significance for Biblical Studies', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 24:1 (1981), www.garyhabermas.com/articles/J_Evangelical_Theological_Soc/habermas_shroud_turin_significance_1981.htm

Gary R. Habermas, 'The Shroud of Turin: A Rejoinder to Basinger and Basinger' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25:2 (1982), www.garyhabermas.com/articles/J_Evangelical_Theological_Soc/habermas_JETS_Shroud_Rejoinder_Basinger.htm

Paul L. Maier, 'The James Ossuary', www.mtio.com/articles/bissar95.htm

John McRay, 'Archaeology and the Bible', www.4truth.net/site/c.hiKXLbPNLrF/b.2903877/k.7280/Archaeology_and_the_Bible.htm

John McRay, 'Archaeology and the Book of Acts', http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/NTeSources/NTArticles/CTR-NT/McRay-ArchaeologyActs-CTR.pdf

Raymond N. Rogers & Anna Arnoldi, 'The Shroud of Turin: An Amino-Carbonyl Reaction (Maillard Reaction) May Explain The Image Formation', *Melanoidins* Vol. 4, Ames J.M. (ed.), Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 2003, pp.106-113.

Hershel Shanks, 'Supporters of James Ossuary Inscription's Authenticity Vindicated', www.bib-arch.org/news/forgery-trial-news.asp

Peter S. Williams, 'The Shroud of Turin: A Cumulative Case for Authenticity', www.case.edu.au/images/uploads/03_pdfs/williams-shroud-turin.pdf

Ben Witherington III, 'Top Ten New Testament Archaeological Finds of the Past 150 Years', www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/septemberweb-only/9-22-21.0.html

Books

New International Version Archaeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture (Zondervan, 2005)

Paul Barnett, *Is The New Testament Reliable?*, second edition (IVP, 2003)

Jack Finegan, *The Archaeology of the New Testament: The Life of Jesus and the Beginning of the Early Church*, revised edition (Princeton University Press, 1992)

Gary R. Habermas, *The Secret of the Talpiot Tomb: Unravelling the Mystery of the Jesus Family Tomb* (Holman Reference, 2007)

John C. Iannone, *The Mystery of the Shroud of Turin: New Scientific Evidence* (St Pauls, 1998)

John McRay, *Archaeology & the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 1991)

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Alan Millard, *Discoveries From The Time Of Jesus* (Lion, 1990)

Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out: What Archaeology Reveals About the Truth of the Bible* (Harvest House, 1997)

Charles L. Quarles, *Buried Hope or Risen Savior? The Search for the Jesus Tomb* (B&H Academic, 2008)

Hershel Shanks & Ben Witherington, *The Brother of Jesus: The Dramatic Story & Meaning of the First Archaeological Link to Jesus & His Family* (Continuum, 2003)

Jeffery L. Sheler, *Is The Bible True? How Modern Debates & Discoveries Affirm The Essence Of The Scriptures* (HarperCollins, 2000)

Kenneth E. Stevenson, *Image of the Risen Christ. Remarkable New Evidence About The Shroud*

(Frontier Research, 1999)

Carsten Peter Thiede, *The Emmaus Mystery* (Continuum, 2005)

Peter Walker, *The Weekend that Changed the World: The Mystery of Jerusalem's Empty Tomb* (Marshall Pickering, 1999)

Peter Walker, *In The Footsteps of Jesus: An Illustrated Guide to the Places of the Holy Land* (Lion, 2009)

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