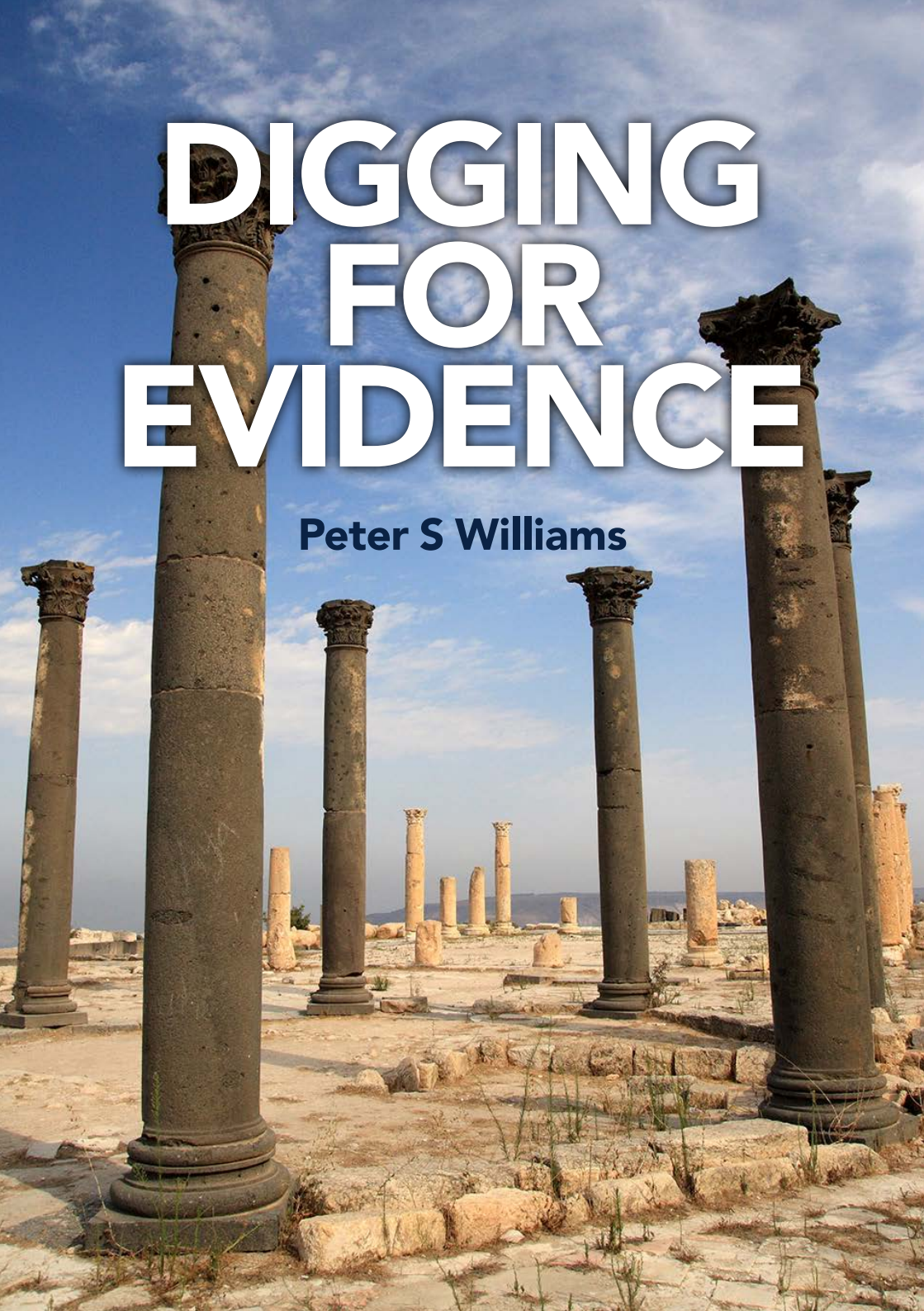
DIGGING
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Archaeology and the Historical Reliability of the New Testament

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Cover photograph of the Byzantine church in Umm Qais, Jordan, on the site of ancient Gadara: yeowatzup
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Contents

Isn't the Bible fiction?

'On the whole… archaeological work has unquestionably strengthened confidence in the reliability of the scriptural record… Archaeology has in many cases refuted the views of modern critics.' Millar Burrows, Professor of Archaeology, Yale University

We live in an era of growing, misinformed skepticism about the historical reliability of the New Testament's account of Jesus and his early followers. According to atheist Richard Dawkins:

'Ever since the nineteenth century, scholarly theologians have made an overwhelming case that the gospels are not reliable accounts of what happened in the history of the real world… reputable Bible scholars do not in general regard the New Testament… as reliable records of what actually happened in history... The only difference between The Da Vinci Code and the gospels is that the gospels are ancient fiction while The Da Vinci Code is modern fiction.'

Likewise, atheist philosopher Alex Rosenberg states that the Bible is 'fictional'. The late Christopher Hitchens concurs that 'Holy writ is probably fiction, of a grand sort, to begin with.'

While the Bible certainly contains a variety of literary genres, including some fiction (for example, the parables of Jesus), scholarly theologians would (and do) laugh at such sweeping use of the category, and especially at Dawkins' assertion that the four New Testament gospels are 'pure fiction'. Contemporary scholars recognize the New Testament gospels as works of ancient biography. Dawkins and his fellow 'sceptics' are simply some 150 years out of date when it comes to New Testament studies!

Charlotte Allen observes that in the 19th century, academic biblical scholars mostly ignored archaeology, which was then a young science. She says, '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.'

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 reports 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.'

Archaeology is but one category of evidence that supports the historical reliability of the New Testament, but as theologian Craig L Blomberg says:

'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.'

In trying to determine if a source of information is accurate, historians test those elements of the testimony in question that can be independently checked. If this checking shows the source was wrong in those details, doubt is cast on everything else the source claims. Conversely, if someone's testimony checks out in so far as it can be independently assessed, this suggests they are a reliable source that can be trusted about matters that can't be independently checked.

Archaeologist William F Albright comments that:

'The excessive scepticism shown toward the Bible by historical schools of the 18th and 19th centuries, certain phases of which still appear periodically, has been progressively discredited. Many modern archaeological discoveries have established the accuracy of details in different biblical narratives, and have brought increased recognition to the value of the Bible as a source of history.'

This booklet explores how modern archaeology illuminates and verifies the New Testament in three areas:

Culture – people's beliefs and practices: see page 9

Places – from urban centers to individual buildings: see page 30

People – people's names, titles and relationships: see page 46

Culture

A cultural practice is a way in which the people of a particular culture tend to do something. For example, if the New Testament claims that the people of a particular time and place called their town officials by a certain title, archaeology might turn up an inscription that independently bears out this point of incidental detail.

Getting such a point of detail right, especially if the information in question were not generally available to writers disconnected from the culture of the first century, would support the theory that the author of the text in question knew what they were writing about.

Again, how did people in this or that historical culture make clothes, manufacture and store wine or olive oil, build a boat, or bury their dead? Archaeology sometimes has the answers to questions such as these, and when it does, those answers can be compared to the claims made in historical texts such as the Gospels.

For example, the New Testament says that many of Jesus' disciples were fishermen and it describes their use of boats on various occasions. If we compare what archaeology can tell us about the fishing industry in 1st century Palestine with the detail of the New Testament accounts of such matters, we find that they fit together, suggesting that the New Testament knows what it's talking about on this subject. This particular conclusion tends to support the more general notion that the New Testament connects us with historically reliable sources of information.

Archaeology has no *direct* bearing on theological questions such as whether Jesus was divine as well as human. What archaeology can reveal is *what people in the past believed* about whether Jesus was divine as well as human. Such beliefs, both positive and negative, can be seen in their paintings, their mosaics and even their graffiti.

What are the archaeological finds relating to cultural practices and beliefs referenced by the New Testament?

Crucifixion victim

The heel bone discovered with a nail driven through it. The head of the nail is seen on the right of this picture.

In 1968, building contractors were working in Giv'at ha-Mivtar, a Jewish neighborhood in northeast Jerusalem, when they unexpectedly uncovered an ancient burial site containing about 35 bodies. One tomb contained the bones of two generations of a family which lived in the century before the time of Jesus.

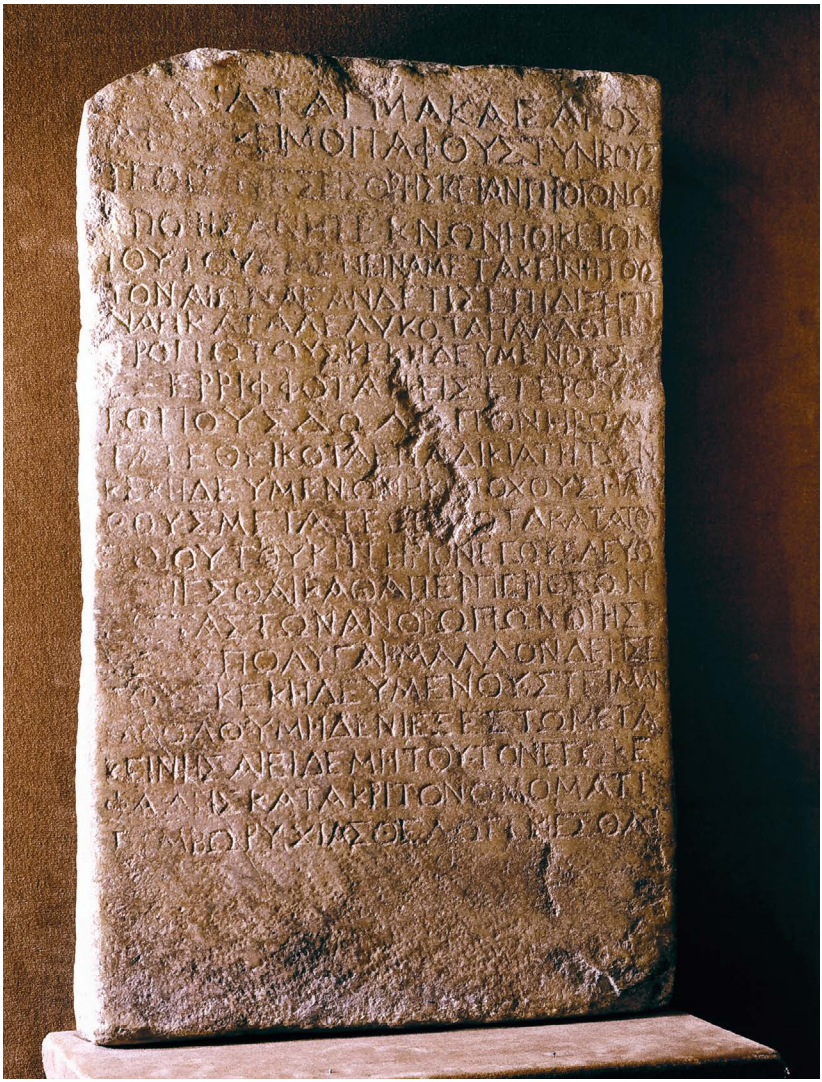
One member of that family was Yehohanan, who was between 24 and 28 years old when he died. He had been crucified. His bones were discovered in an 18 inch long limestone ossuary (or bone-box), and a 7 inch nail had been driven through the heel bone of his left foot. Fragments of olive wood were found at the point of the nail, revealing the wood of the cross on which he died. To date, this is the only archaeological discovery from Roman times

of a crucifixion victim. It has been speculated – especially by the scholar and author John Dominic Crossan – that the crucified corpse of Jesus would have been eaten by dogs, either as it hung on the cross or after it was buried in a shallow grave reserved for executed criminals. But the Giv'at discovery proves that a victim of crucifixion could receive a proper, honourable Jewish burial, as the Gospels say happened to Jesus.

- Read more about this discovery, including the archaeological report

- Read about scepticism over the burial of Jesus

The Nazareth decree



The Nazareth decree, as seen in a copy held in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris. Credit: Religious Studies Center

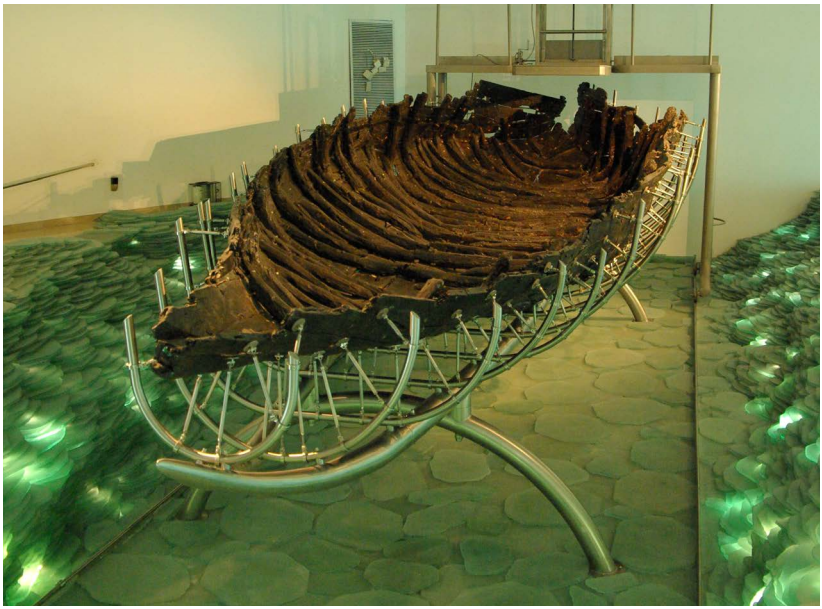
The 'Nazareth decree' is an edict of the Roman Emperor which orders that anyone caught disturbing tombs or moving bodies from them should be put to death. It was reportedly discovered in Nazareth in 1878, and the emperor in question was Claudius, who ruled between AD 41 and 54. The edict reads:

'It is my decision [concerning] graves and tombs—whoever has made them for the religious observances of parents, or children, or household members – that these remain undisturbed forever. But if anyone legally charges that another person has destroyed, or has in any manner extracted those who have been buried, or has moved with wicked intent those who have been buried to other places, committing a crime against them, or has moved sepulcher-sealing stones, against such a person... I wish that [violator] to suffer capital punishment under the title of tomb-breaker.'

From the New Testament, we know that an early story about the empty tomb of Jesus, circulated by the Jerusalem authorities, was that his body had been stolen. 'When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'"' (Matthew 28:12-13).

Some Christian authors have argued that the Nazareth inscription can be read as a response by the emperor to that rumour. Peter Walker, Professor of Biblical Studies at Trinity School for Ministry in Pennsylvania, says: '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.'

The ‘Jesus boat’



The Sea of Galilee boat in the Yigal Alon Museum in Kibbutz Ginosar, Tiberias, Israel. Credit: Berthold Werner

In 1986, Israel suffered a drought, which caused the waters of the Sea of Galilee to recede, exposing large areas of the shallow sea bed. Two local fishermen, who were keen amateur archaeologists, discovered a boat buried in the mud, which turned out to be a well-preserved fishing boat from the time of Jesus, measuring over 27 feet in length. The boat was next to the village of Migdal, which in the first century was called Magdala, the home town of Mary Magdalene.

Within a few days, the discovery was splashed on the newspaper front pages, with headlines such as ‘Boat of Jesus found in the Sea of Galilee’. Shelley Wachsmann, a professor of biblical archaeology, and a specialist in underwater archaeology, said: ‘There is no such thing as the boat of Jesus.

To the best of our knowledge, Jesus didn't own a boat, but the idea of the "Jesus boat", which is now what everybody but me calls it... is not the correct name for it.'

Wachsmann and other archaeologists raced against time to recover the boat from the mud before the waters returned. It was then placed in a climate-controlled environment to protect it. Pots and lamps found beside the boat helped to date it to the first century, which was confirmed by radiocarbon dating of the wooden planks.

The design of the boat was typical of fishing boats used during the time of Jesus in the easterm Mediterranean. Fishing boats feature frequently in the four Gospels, and are part of some of the most famous stories from the life of Jesus. He spoke to a crowd on a beach from a boat, walked on water while his disciples watched from a boat, and calmed a storm while sailing in a boat.

In the back of the boat discovered in the Sea of Galilee mud is a raised section. In the story of his calming the storm, Jesus may have been sleeping on a similar raised section. The boat could accommodate 15 people, so there would certainly have been room for Jesus and his 12 disciples in such a boat.

■ See a video lecture by Shelley Wachsmann about this discovery

Greek town politics

The Politarch inscription. Image courtesy of Holy Land Photos

A small detail about the political life of a Greek town, recorded in the Book of Acts, generated debate about the reliability of the account written by Luke (the likely author of Acts). In the narrative, Luke is following the journey of St Paul through Greece.

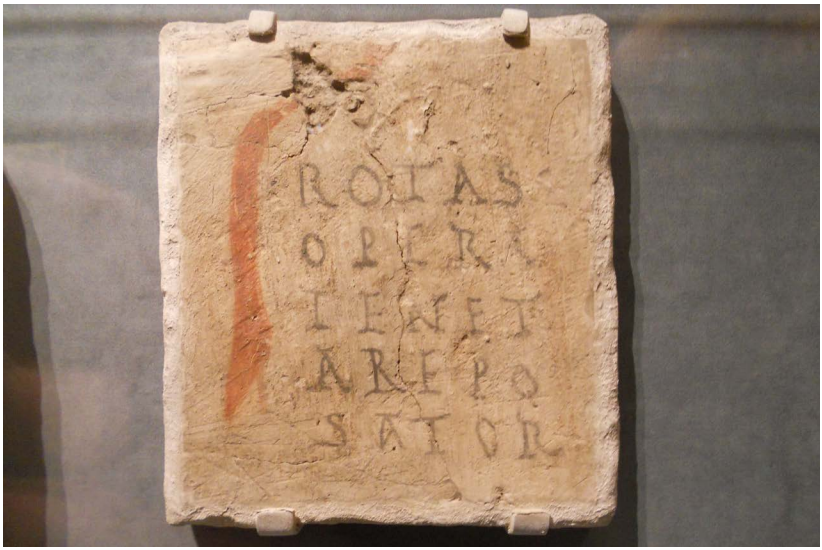
Paul arrived in Thessalonica (modern-day Salonika), where he preached in the synagogue over several weeks. Some of his listeners were persuaded by what he said and became Christians, while others 'rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city.' The people who were hosting Paul were dragged in front of the city officials and accused of stirring up trouble and defying the emperor's decrees. They were fined and then released.

The Greek term used in the Book of Acts for 'city officials' is politarch. This term does not appear in classical literature, and so it was claimed for many years that Luke had got his political terminology wrong when

describing the officials of Thessalonica. This claim fell apart when a 2nd century inscription was discovered on the Vardar Arch in Thessolonica in 1867. Terence C Mitchell, the former Keeper of Western Asiatic Antiquities at the British Museum, describes the discovery:

'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: "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.'

Pompeii palindromes



The rotas-sator square found in Dura-Europos and dating from the 3rd century AD. Credit: Simon Jenkins

The Roman town of Pompeii, Italy, was engulfed in mud during the violent eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. When the town was excavated in modern times, two palindrome inscriptions were found of the famous ROTAS-SATOR square. (A palindrome is a word or phrase which reads the same backwards or forwards – for example, 'never odd or even'.) One of the Pompeii squares was inscribed on the wall of a private house, while the other was marked on a pillar in an exercise yard.

The ROTAS-SATOR square is known from sites all across the Roman Empire in later centuries, in places as far apart as Cirencester, Rome and Dura Europos, a frontier town on the edge of the Roman Empire in what is now Syria. The Pompeii palindromes are the earliest examples discovered.

The five words of the square can be roughly translated as 'The farmer Arepo holds and works the wheels' – which might refer to a farmer

ploughing. However, the 25 letters can be rearranged into a large cross, reading PATERNOSTER (Latin for 'our father') vertically and horizontally. The four remaining letters provide an A and O at each end. These letters, alpha and omega, are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and had strong resonance for Christians who believed in God as the beginning and the end of all things.

Various explanations have been offered for this fascinating square. Some believe it shows that there were believers in Pompeii even at this early date, while others have argued that the square is Jewish in origin, or else come from one of the Roman mystery religions, such as Mithraism.

Terence C Mitchell, the former Keeper of Western Asiatic Antiquities at the British Museum, says: 'On the principle that the simplest explanation is the best, unravelling it as a Christian text gains first place... 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.'

Early Christian house church

Jesus heals a paralysed man, in this 3rd century wall painting from the house church in Dura-Europos. Credit: Simon Jenkins

Dura-Europos was a thriving garrison town on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire in the 3rd century AD. It fell to the Persian army in the AD 250s and was abandoned and forgotten until it was accidentally rediscovered in the 1920s. Successive archaeological digs have unearthed spectacular finds of military equipment, buildings and wall paintings. As a result, Dura-Europos has been called the Pompeii of the Syrian Desert.

One of the buildings uncovered was an early 3rd century house which served as a church for the local Christians. It contains a baptistery with several significant wall paintings dated to around the year AD 240. They include the earliest known images of Jesus. In this room, Christians confessed their faith in Jesus and were baptised in a small pool next to the

wall paintings. The images show various scenes from the life of Jesus as told in the Gospels. Each scene tells us something about the early Christians' belief in the divinity of Jesus.

Jesus heals a paralysed man – in the Gospel story of this event, Jesus tells the man he heals that his sins are forgiven, which prompts some of the religious leaders at the scene to accuse him of blasphemy. 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?' they say. Jesus's indirect claim to divinity could be the reason why this image was included in the baptistery.

A woman drawing water from a well – This is probably a depiction of the Samaritan women at Jacob's well to whom Jesus talks in John's gospel. The crux of their conversation is Jesus' claim to be the Messiah and the source of eternal life. The conversation between Jesus and the woman concludes in

Jesus and Simon Peter walk on water, in this 3rd century wall painting from the house church in Dura-Europos. Credit: Simon Jenkins

Jesus as the good shepherd carrying a lamb, in this 3rd century wall painting from the house church in Dura-Europos. Credit: Marsyas

this way: 'The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you – I am he"' (John 4:25-26).

Jesus walks on water – in this image, Jesus is seen walking on the water with his disciple Peter. Again, this picture expresses the early Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus. A verse in the Old Testament, speaking about God, says, 'He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea' (Job 9:8).

Jesus the good shepherd – Jesus is pictured as the good shepherd, carrying a lamb on his shoulders, which was a very popular way of depicting him in

Women approach the tomb of Jesus at night, in this 3rd century wall painting from the house church in Dura-Europos. Credit: Simon Jenkins

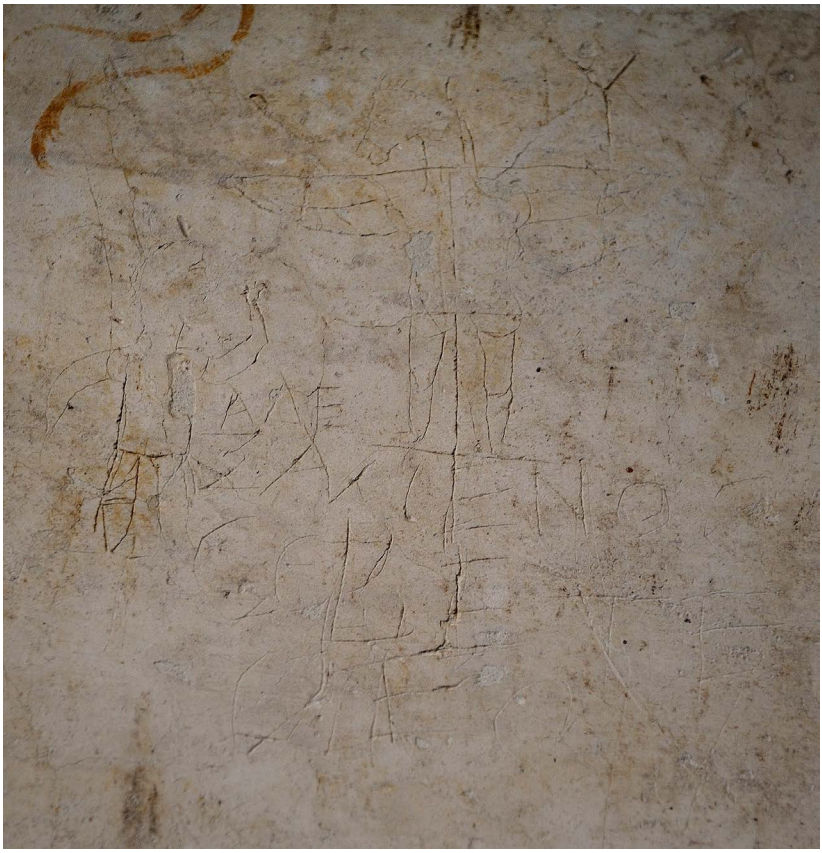
early Christian art. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, 'I am the good shepherd (John 10:11), which links with Psalm 23, which opens with the words, 'The Lord is my shepherd'. This again is a picture that speaks of Jesus as God.

The resurrection – the fourth painting shows three women holding lighted candles approaching the tomb of Jesus. The women are also carrying bowls, probably indicating the spices the gospels portray them as bringing for the purpose of anointing the body of Jesus. The artist has depicted the inside of the tomb as being decorated with vine patterns painted onto the walls. An example of just such tomb decoration can be seen in a tomb excavated for the Jordanian Department of Antiquities in 1959 by Hassan Awad Qutshan, known as tomb Q-4. In the gospels, the significant point of the event here depicted is of course that the women discover that Jesus' tomb was empty,

bearing indirect witness to his resurrection from the dead, and thus to his divinity.

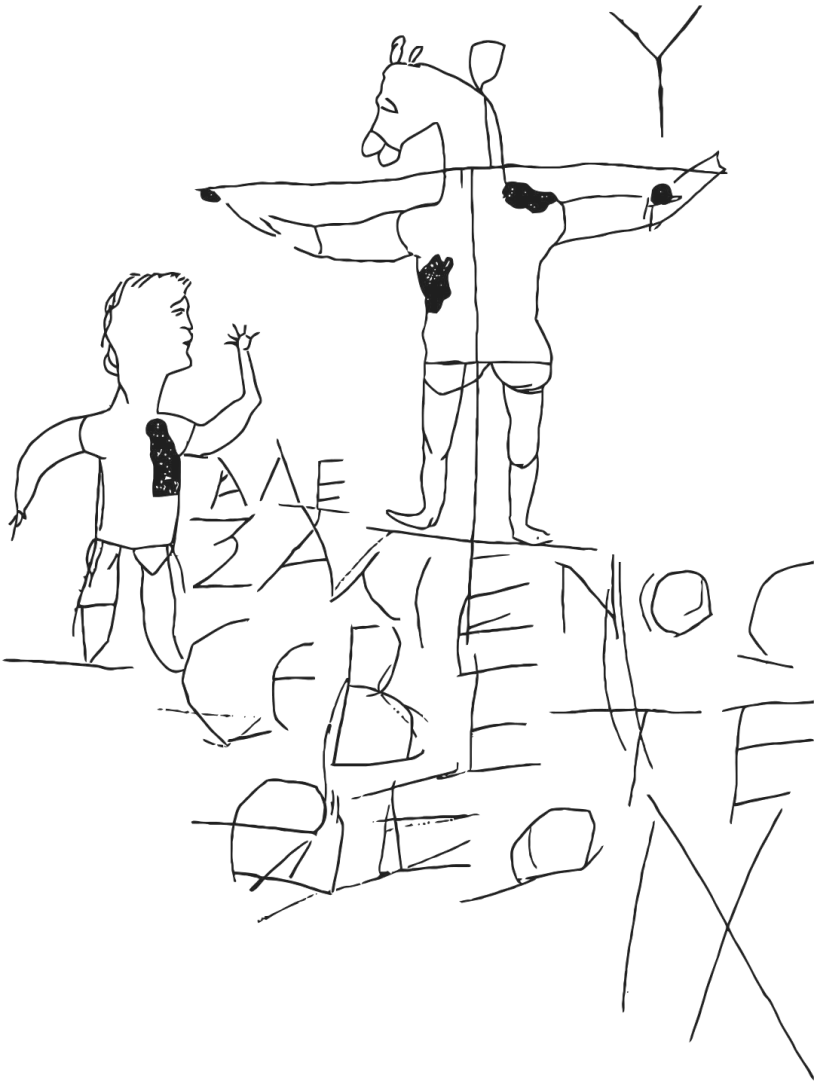
These painting demonstrate that just under a century before the Council of Nicea, Christians believed that Jesus did and said things which indirectly laid claim to divinity; and that they believed Jesus did miracles which confirmed the truth of his claims. Against the background of his crucifixion for blasphemy, Jesus' resurrection, indirectly referenced by the fourth painting, is the most important miracle supporting belief in Jesus as God.

Mockery by graffiti



The Alexamenos graffito. Credit: ckOrange

In 1857, a piece of ancient Roman graffiti mocking the crucifixion of Christ was discovered on a wall in Rome. The graffito, which was found in what was once a training school for imperial guards, was scratched into the wall some 150 years after the death of Jesus. It was apparently drawn by a Roman soldier to mock the faith of Alexamenos, a fellow soldier who was a Christian.



A drawing of the graffito. Credit: Scewing

The graffito shows a man standing by a crucifixion victim who has the head of a donkey, and the Greek caption reads: 'Alexamenos worships his God'. The only known crucifixion victim Alexamenos might have worshipped is, of course, Jesus. Culturally speaking, you only worship a deity, and you do

not worship a dead-and-buried victim of crucifixion – at least, not if you believe he remains dead and buried.

Alexamenos had apparently been the target of mockery before. Another piece of graffiti found in a neighbouring building in the training school reads: 'Alexamenos believes'. Larry L Welborn, Professor of Ancient History, says:

'It is not difficult to reconstruct a plausible relationship between the two graffiti: a pagan guard in the imperial palace first sought to denounce a Christian comrade by writing on the wall "Alexamenos is a Christian"; when this did not produce the desire result, he sketched a caricature of Alexamenos as the devotee of a crucified god.'

The graffito was highly dangerous for Alexamenos. Christians were frequently persecuted by the Roman state at the time, so the accusation and mockery may have been intended not only to produce laughter, but also arrest and punishment.

The parody of the Christian god by using the head of an ass was also known to the late 2nd century Christian writer, Tertullian. He tells us a story about an arena worker he had seen in Carthage who carried round a placard ridiculing the Christian God by showing him with the head and ears of a donkey, and with a scatological slogan: *Deus Christianornum Onocoetes*. One translation of this is: 'The God of the Christians, born from sex with a donkey' (the precise meaning of the slogan is disputed). Parodies of the crucifixion were popular at the time in the Roman theatre.

The graffito against Alexamenos is testimony to how Christians of the 2nd century worshipped the crucified Jesus, and how they were mocked and persecuted for their faith.

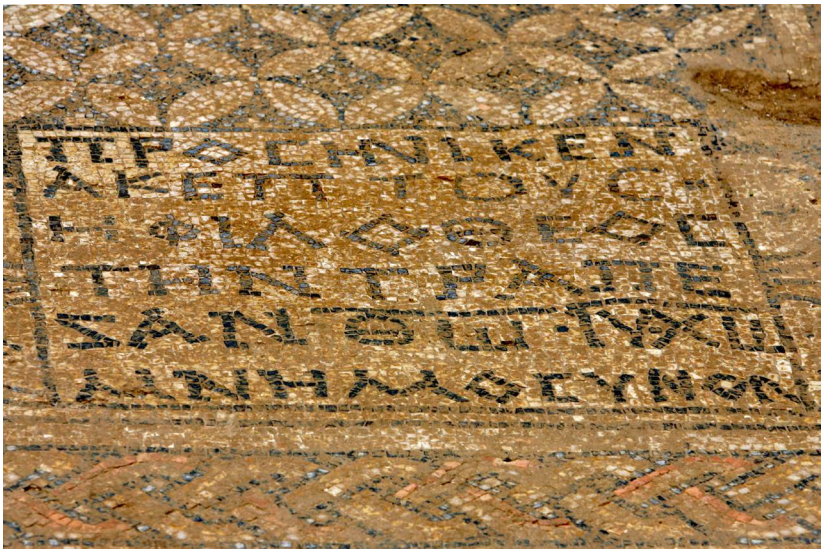
Mosaic confession at Megiddo

The mosaic fish. Credit: unknown

A modern prison is an unlikely place to conduct an archaeological dig. But when the Megiddo Prison in northern Israel wanted to build an extension in 2005, they put their prisoners to work digging inside the grounds. When one prisoner, Ramil Razilo, found the edge of an ancient mosaic with his shovel, the archaeologists were called in.

What they unearthed were the ruins of a Christian prayer hall from the 3rd century AD. The discovery generated huge interest, as no church of this date had been found before in Israel – or indeeed, anywhere in the world. The Christian character of the building, which is dated to about AD 230, can be identified by the surviving mosaics.

One of the mosaics has the Christian fish symbol at its centre. The letters in the Greek word for 'fish', ichthys, can be used to spell out the message, Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter – 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour'.



The Akeptous mosaic at Megiddo. Credit: unknown

Another mosaic inscription refers to the table in the centre of the hall, which was probably used for communion. The Greek lettering reads: 'The God-loving Akeptous has offered the table to the God Jesus Christ.' The phrase 'God Jesus Christ' has been overlined for emphasis (overlining, not underlining, was how they did things in those days).

Both these mosiacs provides on-the-ground evidence for how the early Christians before the time of the Emperor Constantine confessed their faith in the deity of Christ.

■ See a video of these finds

Places

The New Testament documents display the sort of detailed local knowledge that is unlikely to have been available to ancient writers much removed in time and space from their subject matter. As Andy Bannister observes:

'If I asked you to start naming minor villages a hundred miles from Paris, you'd probably struggle unless you'd actually visited the region. Yet that's precisely the level of detail the Gospels get right, managing to know not just major cities such as Jerusalem but minor villages like Cana and Chorazin, one-goat towns in their day.'

Here's a selection of finds relating to places mentioned in the New Testament, from urban centers large and small, to individual buildings and structures.

Bethlehem

The Bethlehem bulla. Credit: Israel antiquities authority

In May 2012, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced the discovery of a bulla (a small clay seal) which mentions Bethlehem, the city of David and the birthplace of Jesus. The press release read:

'The first ancient artifact constituting tangible evidence of the existence of the city of Bethlehem, which is mentioned in the Bible, was recently discovered in Jerusalem.

A bulla measuring c.1.5 cm was found during the sifting of soil removed from archaeological excavations the Israel Antiquities Authority is carrying out in the City of David...

A bulla is a piece of clay that was used for sealing a document or object. The bulla was impressed with the seal of the person who sent the document or object, and its integrity was evidence the document or object was not opened by anyone unauthorized to do so. Three lines of ancient Hebrew script appear on the bulla:

Bishv'at
Bat Lechem
[Lemel]ekh'

According to Eli Shukron, director of the excavation on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority: 'This is the first time the name Bethlehem appears outside the Bible, in an inscription from the First Temple period, which proves that Bethlehem was indeed a city in the Kingdom of Judah, and possibly also in earlier periods.'

The first temple period refers to the time the temple of King Solomon stood in Jerusalem, dating from about 1000 to 586 BC. Shukron said:

'It seems that in the seventh year of the reign of a king (it is unclear if the king referred to here is Hezekiah, Manasseh or Josiah), a shipment was dispatched from Bethlehem to the king in Jerusalem. The bulla we found belongs to the group of "fiscal" bullae – administrative bullae used to seal tax shipments remitted to the taxation system of the Kingdom of Judah in the late eighth and seventh centuries BCE. The tax could have been paid in the form of silver or agricultural produce such as wine or wheat.'

Nazareth

A 1st century house is discovered in Nazareth in 2009. Credit: Israel Antiquities Authority

Despite its fame today in the phrase 'Jesus of Nazareth', the town where Jesus was brought up was so insigificant in biblical times that it isn't mentioned in any surviving literature until after the time of Jesus. One theologian, RT France, describes Nazareth as:

'A small village, largely devoted to agriculture, bypassed by the main roads which ran to the near-by Hellenistic city of Sepphoris, the capitol of Gaililee... 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.'

Because of the lack of mention of Nazareth in the historical record, some commentators have argued that the village didn't exist until after the time of Jesus. For example, in an article entitled 'Where Jesus Never Walked' the atheist writer Frank Zindler correctly notes 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.'

That said, indirect mention of Nazareth is contained in Jewish sources from the end of the 1st century AD, with reference being made to the Jewish-Christian community who believed in Jeshua Hannozrî (Jesus of Nazareth). Also, direct extra-biblical reference comes in the work of historian and travel writer Sextus Julius Africanus (about AD 180-250), who calls the town 'Nazara'.

Archaeology has added to this literary evidence. Writing about the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans, Dr James Strange, Professor of Religious Studies, says:

'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.'

This list, pieced together from marble fragments discovered in Caesarea Maritima in 1962, has been dated to about AD 300.

The evidence on the ground in Nazareth gives a good indication of the ancient date of the village. For example, archaeological digs in the vicinity of Nazareth have discovered tombs dating from the 1st century AD. These

are important, according to James Strange, as they '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.'

Archaeologist Jack Finegan says that from the existence of the tombs, 'it can be concluded that Nazareth was a strongly Jewish settlement in the Roman period.' Archaeologist John McRay fills in the picture:

'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.'

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.'

■ See a video of this discovery

Capernaum

The modern church built over the site of Peter's house in Capernaum, Galilee. Credit: Berthold Werner

Capernaum is significant in the life of Jesus as the fishing village where he called the first disciples: Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, and the two brothers James and John. The village, which lies on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, is mentioned 16 times in the Gospels.

Archaeology has uncovered evidence of a 1st century fishing industry, for example, in the form of anchors and fish hooks, and other finds support details found in the stories of Jesus in Capernaum. Here are just four of those details: house construction, Peter's house, the synagogue, and the presence of Roman soldiers in the town.

House construction – The New Testament scholar RT France notes:

'The houses excavated at Capernaum were one-storey 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.'

Peter's house – Capernaum contains the remains of a church from the 5th century AD which is octagonal in shape. 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 1st century.

The ruins of the octagonal Byzantine church, built over the site of Peter's house in Capernaum in the 5th century. Credit: Greg Sass

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'. As often seems to be the case with ancient scratched markings, these readings are disputed. Some scholars think they are Greek rather than Aramaic, and do not relate to faith in Jesus.

In the 4th century, this 'house church' was enlarged and enclosed within the walls of its own compound. It was pointed out to early Christian pilgrims such as Egeria, who recorded in about 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.' The 'prince of the apostles' was Peter, the disciple of Jesus, so Egeria's claim is that the church in Capernaum was once Peter's house. Peter Walker says:

'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.'

In 1990, a modern church was built over the 5th century octagonal church. The modern church is suspended over the ancient ruins, which can be seen through a glass floor in the new church.

Capernaum synagogue – Jesus taught in the synagogue in Capernaum, according to Mark's Gospel. 'They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law' (Mark 1:21-22).

Luke's Gospel says that Jesus healed the slave of a Roman centurion who had been posted locally. 'When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come

The ruins of the 4th century synagogue in Capernaum, with the black basalt foundations of the 1st century synagogue beneath. Credit: Greg Sass

and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them' (Luke 7:1-6).

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 limestone synagogue in Capernaum.

Romans in Capernaum – The presence of Romans in the town has been confirmed in archaeological digs which uncovered a number of Roman-style buildings, including a bathhouse. Ian Wilson, who is famous as the writer of many historical books, says: '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.'

Jerusalem

The model of 1st century Jerusalem. Berthold Werner

The model seen in the photo above is at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. It shows a reconstruction of Jerusalem in Jesus' lifetime, including the massive temple complex, which was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

Pool of Siloam – In John's Gospel, Jesus encounters a man who was born blind. According to the story, Jesus 'spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing' (John 9:6-7).

The location of the Pool of Siloam was lost for many years, and many critics argued that it simply did not exist. However, during work on Jerusalem's sewers in June 2004, engineers uncovered some ancient steps, which led them to a 1st century ritual pool. By the summer of 2005, archaeologists had revealed what they described as the missing pool of Siloam. Mark D Roberts reported: 'In the plaster of this pool were found coins that establish the date

The discovered remains of the Pool of Siloam, Jerusalem. Credit: Ian W Scott

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.'

■ See a video of this discovery

Pool of Bethesda – The opening story in the fifth chapter of John's Gospel describes another pool in Jerusalem, near the Sheep Gate, called Bethesda, surrounded by five covered colonnades. Jesus found a man there who had been ill for many years, lying on a mat. 'Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked' (John 5:8-9). Until the 19th century, there was no evidence outside of John's Gospel for the existence of this pool, and John's unusual description, says Peter Walker, 'caused Bible scholars to doubt the reliability of John's

The remains of the Pool of Bethesda, Jerusalem. Credit: hoyasmeg

account, but the pool was duly uncovered in the 1930s – with four colonnades around its edges and one across its middle.' 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.'

Bethany and the tomb of Lazarus – John's Gospel includes the famous story of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was the brother of two sisters – Mary and Martha – who were followers of Jesus, and had died four days before Jesus came to his tomb. John tells the story:

'They took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said

The site thought to be the tomb of Lazarus in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. Credit: Daniel Weber

this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go"' (John 11:41-44).

Peter Walker believes that the site still signposted as 'Lazarus's tomb', in a town just outside Jerusalem, is the authentic location. He 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).'

Gadara's tomb church

The 4th century church, standing on a terrace with the Sea of Galilee in the distance. Credit: http://bit.ly/1nefnV6

Umm Qais is a windswept hilltop village in Jordan (378 metres above sea level), overlooking the Sea of Galilee to the north. In the 1st century, it was known as Gadara and was one of a cluster of independent Greek towns called the Decapolis (Greek for '10 towns'). The towns were cosmopolitan, with Greek temples and Jewish synagogues existing alongside each other.

While most of Jesus's ministry took place within Galilee, he made a rare excursion outside the region to visit Gadara which is recorded in the Gospels. When Jesus and the disciples arrived there, a disturbed man living among the tombs came out to meet them. 'This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet' (Mark 5:3-4).

The story ended with Jesus expelling the man's evil spirits into a herd of pigs, which rushed down into the water and drowned, while the man, 'dressed and in his right mind', became a follower of Jesus. Angela Tilby, the author and Anglican priest, says:

'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... 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 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… preserved under the church to mark the place of his exorcism.'

People

Another way in which the New Testament displays detailed local knowledge unlikely to be available to ancient writers removed in time and space from their subject matter is its accurate knowledge of people's names and family relationships, as born out by archaeological discoveries.

For example, a recent in-depth study of personal names in Israel at the time of Jesus shows that the Gospel writers had just the kind of intimate and detailed knowledge of life in that time and place which you would expect of authors living then and there.

In 2002, the Israeli scholar Tal Ilan:

'sorted through documents, engravings, scraps of papyrus, ossuaries and the like from the time period surrounding Jesus and the apostles in order to make a list of over 3,000 personal names – along with whatever bits of information she could find about those names. It was as if she were compiling a phone book from ancient trash heaps. Because of her work, it became possible for the first time to find out what personal names were the most popular during the time of Jesus and how those names were used.'

If the Gospel writers lacked reliable contact with the culture depicted in their stories then they would be very unlikely to get that culture's use of names right: 'It would be as if a person who had never set foot out of California were attempting to write a story about people living in Portugal 60 years ago and the writer perfectly captured all the details of the personal names of the day without traveling, without the Internet, without encyclopedias or libraries.'

Yet, as Craig Hazen explains: 'the Gospel writers were "spot on" in regard to the popularity, frequency, proportion and usage of personal names in the text of Scripture, indicating very deep familiarity with life in the exact area and timeframe of Jesus and his earliest followers.'

Professor Richard Bauckham has built upon Ilan's work, correlating New Testament names with names compiled from the extra-biblical sources to show that:

■ The New Testament accurately captures the frequency of names among Palestinian Jews of the time. For instance, Ilan's list of the 10 most popular names matched rank for rank the list of the most frequent names in the Gospels and Acts. This is an extraordinary confirmatory correlation.

■ By contrast, if you examine the most popular Jewish names in a different region (such as Egypt) at the time, the list is dramatically different.

■ Also by contrast, if you examine the names that appear in the Apocryphal Gospels (such as the Gospels of Thomas, Mary, Judas), you discover that the frequency and proportion of names in these writings don't match what we know to be true of names from the land and time of Jesus. Hence the Apocryphal Gospels don't have the ring of authenticity with regard to personal names and are rightly called into question as historical sources.

The accuracy of the New Testament when it comes to names extends from this general familiarity with the right names to accuracy regarding specific historical figures, and even their family relationships.

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

Herod the Great

The Herodium, seen from the air. Credit: Deror avi

Herod the Great was the ruler of Judea in the decades leading up to the birth of Christ. Judea was then a province of the Roman Empire, and Herod was unexpectedly appointed its king in 40 BC by the Roman senate. He ruled until his death in 4 BC. His reign was marked by ambitious building projects, including Masada, the desert fortress overlooking the Dead Sea, and a colossal expansion of the Temple of Jerusalem. One of the retaining walls of the temple is today known as the Western Wall, the holiest site of Judaism, where people come to pray.

King Herod is probably most famous as the ruler who is said to have massacred young children in Bethlehem in his attempt to murder the infant Jesus. This story is told in an early chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Herod's jealous rage is stirred when he is asked, 'Where is the one who has

Herod's tomb in the Herodium. Credit: Deror avi

been born king of the Jews?' This chimes with historical accounts which show that Herod was a ruthless ruler, executing his wife and three of his sons when he felt they threatened his position.

In 1996, Israeli Professor of Archaeology Ehud Netzer discovered in Masada a piece of broken pottery – an ostracon – with an inscription. The fragment had Herod's name on it and was part of a large jar, or amphora, which was probably used to carry wine. Archaeologists dated it to about the year 19 BC. The inscription is in Latin and reads, 'Herod the Great King of the Jews'. The fragment is the only inscription found to date which mentions the full title of King Herod.

We also have a bronze coin minted by Herod the Great. On the obverse side is a tripod and ceremonial bowl with the inscription 'Herod King'. The inscription also gives the year the coin was struck, 'Year 3' (of Herod's reign), or 37 BC.

■ See a video of these discoveries: http://youtu.be/V_WeAsSzNf0

Another of Herod's building projects, the Herodium, is a man-made hill in the Judean wilderness rising over 2,487 feet above sea level. In 23 BC, Herod the Great built a palace fortress on top of the 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 the Herodium by the archaeologist Ehud Netzer in 2007.

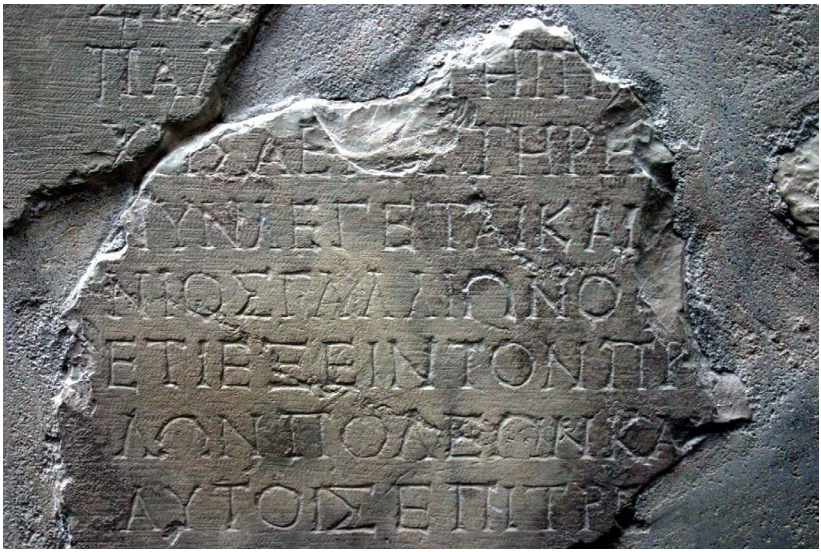
■ See a video of the Herodium and Herod's Tomb

Gallio, Proconsul of Achaia

The Gallio inscription. Credit: Holy Land Photos

The Book of Acts has an episode in which the apostle Paul was accused by people from the Jewish community in Corinth of 'persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law' (Acts 18:13).

The accusation was made to a Roman official who is named as Gallio, Proconsul of Achaia, which was the southern extremity of mainland Greece. Gallio told the accusers that the complaint involved issues which were about Jewish law, and therefore had nothing to do with him, and that they should settle the matter themselves.



The Gallio inscription. Credit: Holy Land Photos

Some experts used to doubt the very existence of Gallio, because there was no mention of him outside the Bible. Moreover, according to Norman L Geisler and Ronald M Brooks, Gallio's 'designation in Acts 18:12-17 was thought to be impossible.' However, an inscription from Delphi, which was discovered in 1905, 'notes this exact title for the man, and it dates him to the time Paul was in Corinth (in AD 51).'

In the inscription, which was carved into a stone that was probably attached to the Temple of Apollo, the Emperor Claudius refers to 'Gallio, my friend and Proconsul'. Gallio was in fact the brother of Seneca, who was a philosopher and the tutor of Emperor Nero.

Erastus, Treasurer of Corinth

The Erastus inscription in Corinth, Greece. Source: Holy Land Photos

The apostle Paul frequently concludes his letters with a series of personal greetings from the people who are with him. At the end of his letter to the Christians in Rome, he passes on several greetings from people living in Corinth, where he was staying at the time. They include this one: 'Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you' (Romans 16:23).

In 1929, an inscription which may refer to the same Erastus was unearthed at the theatre in Corinth. John McRay reports:

'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"… 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.'

This claim has been disputed, as it has been doubted that *oikonomos* and *aedile* were equivalent terms, or that someone who served as an *oikonomos* could later be promoted to become an *aedile*. The latter office was only held by men of high social rank. However, the issues are still debated, and it remains an intriguing possibility that the inscription refers to the same person mentioned by Paul.

Ian Wilson comments: '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.'

Tiberius Caesar

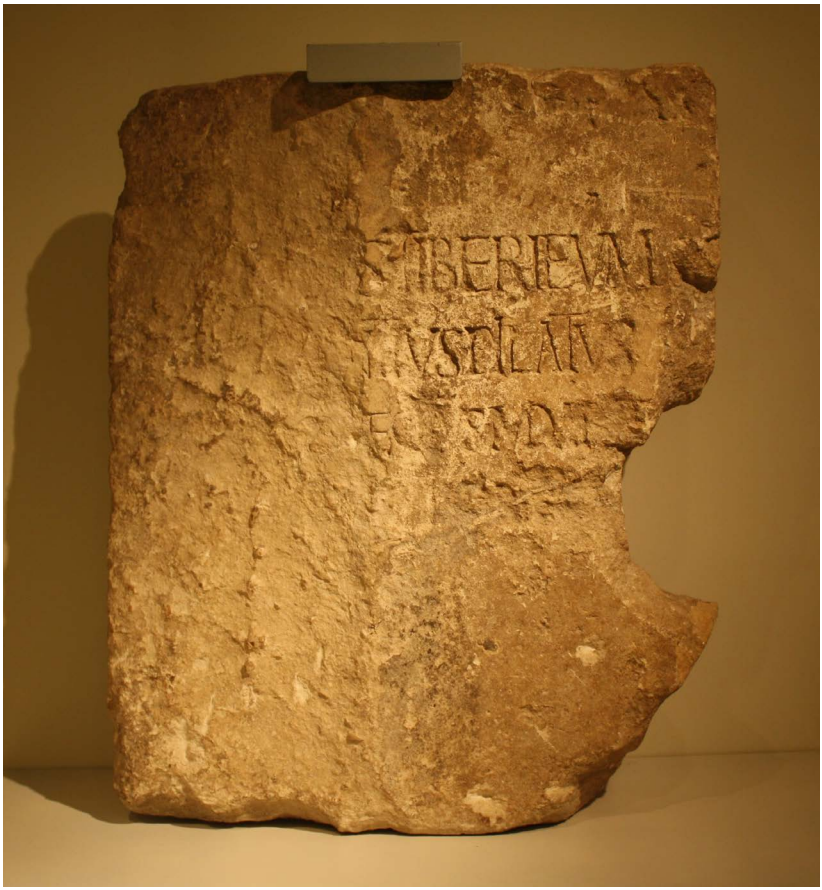
A denarius coin, showing the head of Tiberius Caesar.
Credit: Heinz-Joachim Krenzer

Tiberius Caesar is one of a number of people mentioned in an early chapter of Luke's Gospel. The verse in question reads: 'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee…' (Luke 3:1).

A portrait of Tiberius Caesar appears on Roman coins from the time of Jesus. The denarius coin, which was minted in AD 14-37, features in an episode in the Gospels where Jesus was asked whether it was right to pay taxes to the Romans: 'He said to them, 'Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?' 'Caesar's,' they replied. He said to them, 'Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's' (Luke 20:23-25)

Craig L Blomberg comments: 'Jesus' famous saying about giving to Caesar what was his and to God what his… makes even more sense when one discovers that most of the Roman coins in use at the time had images of Caesar on them.'

Pontius Pilate



The Pontius Pilate inscription discovered in Caesarea Maritima, Israel. Credit: BRBurton

Pontius Pilate was the Prefect of Judea from AD 26-36. 'Prefect is a Roman term for the governor of a minor province of the Roman Empire. The Jewish writers Philo and Josephus, who both lived in the 1st century, describe incidents in Judea under Pilate's administration, which was characterised by

gross insensitivity to Jewish religion and culture. Philo says that Pilate was inflexible, willful and vindictive, with a furious temper.

He is best known through the accounts of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus in the four Gospels. In the accounts, Pilate questions Jesus, but finds no fault in him. He agrees to his crucifixion under pressure from the Jewish leaders.

Until 1961, there was no archaeological evidence for the existence of Pilate. Mark D Roberts reports that: '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.'

It is likely that the inscription, which has been dated to about AD 26-37, was originally placed on a temple dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius. The surviving Latin letters read:

S TIBERIEUM
IUS PILATUS
ECTUS IUDA
E

Archaeologists have conjectured that the original wording would have been as follows:

DIS AUGUSTUS TIBERIUM
PONTIUS PILATUS
PRAEFECTUS IDUAEA
FECIT DEDICAVIT

Translated, this would read: 'To the honorable gods, this Tiberium Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea, has dedicated.'

Herod Antipas

Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee. Credit: Emmanuel Dyan

Herod Antipas was a son of Herod the Great who ruled Galilee and the eastern side of the Jordan valley until some time after AD 39. He plays an important role in the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, appearing twice: first to order the execution of John the Baptist; and later to question and then mock Jesus during the process of his trial before Pontius Pilate. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus referred to Herod Antipas as 'that fox' (Luke 13:32).

According to a 2005 report in the Haaretz newspaper:

'In 2005, a marble floor dating from the 1st century AD was discovered during excavations on the site of the ancient city of Tiberias, which was the capital of Herod Antipas. Professor Yizhar Hirschfeld, the archaeologist who directed the dig, said that the floor appeared to be part of a pavement in the king's palace.'

Hirschfeld said: 'Marble from the first century CE was very rare in this area and is found only in royal palaces. Who knows, perhaps Salome danced for the king on this very floor.' Salome was the daughter of Herodias, Herod's second wife, who demanded the head of John the Baptist on a plate in exchange for the dance. The reason for this was John the Baptist's public criticism of the king's divorce and remarriage to Herodias.

Caiaphas the High Priest

The Caiaphas ossuary. Credit: BRBurton

Caiaphas was the Jewish high priest at the time of Jesus's death, and during the persecution of the early church. He plays a prominent role in the Gospels, during the interrogation and trial of Jesus before the sanhedrin, or Jewish council. The Jewish writer Josephus tells us that he was high priest from AD 18 to 36.

In 1990, workers widening a road to the south of Jerusalem discovered a large, ancient burial cave. Several ossuaries (or bone boxes) were discovered, one of which was highly decorated and containing the bones of a 60 year-old man. Many scholars believe them to be the bones of Caiaphas. On the side and back of the ossuary is the inscription: Yosef bar Caifa, or 'Joseph, son of Caiaphas'. Some scholars dispute the interpretation of this find.

Six years before the 1990 discovery, another ossuary was acquired by the Israel Antiquities Authority, bearing the inscription, 'Yehohanah, daughter

of Yehohanan, son of Theophilus the high priest'. Theophilus was the brother-in-law of Caiaphas and succeeded him as high priest in AD 37.

In June 2011, another ossuary came to light relating to the family of Caiaphas. The Israel Antiquities Authority announced the recovery of a looted ossuary bearing the inscription: 'Miriam, daughter of Yeshua, son of Qayapha, priest of Ma'aziah, from Beth 'Imri.'

Craig A Evans observes: 'If the name of this priest is vocalized 'Qayapha (instead of Qopha or Qupha), then we could have a match with Caiaphas. Indeed, we may have the ossuary of the granddaughter of the high priest who condemned Jesus.'

Ossuries 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.

John the Baptist

The island of Sveti Ivan (St John), Bulgaria. Credit: Blogoevgrad

On 28 July 2010, a team of Bulgarian archaeologists excavated a small alabaster box containing several pieces of bone from under the altar of a 4th century monastery church on Sveti Ivan, a Black Sea island off the Bulgarian coast. The monastery and church were dedicated to St Ivan the Forerunner, or as he is better known in Europe, St John the Baptist.

'We knew we would find a reliquary there and our expectations came true,' lead archaeologist Professor Kazimir Popkonstantinov wrote in an email to CNN. 'It seems rather logical to suggest the founders of the monastery did their best to bring relics of its patron saint.'

Another piece of evidence supporting the hypothesis that the relics belonged to John the Baptist was found 1.2 meters from the reliquary, where a small tuff box (made of hardened volcanic ash) bore an inscription

in ancient Greek. 'The inscription makes it clear that a man named Thomas, who is described as God's servant, "brought a particle of St John here on the 24th." Even though some of the end letters are missing, the inscription in Greek makes it clear that the date refers to the [traditional] birthday of St John the Baptist, June 24.'

An Oxford University Press release explained:

'The tuff box bears inscriptions in ancient Greek that directly mention John the Baptist and his feast day, and text asking God to 'help your servant Thomas'. One theory is that the person referred to as Thomas had been given the task of bringing the relics to the island. An analysis of the box has shown that the tuff box has a high waterproof quality and is likely to have originated from Cappadocia, a region of modern-day Turkey. The Bulgarian researchers believe that the bones probably came to Bulgaria via Antioch, an ancient Turkish city, where the right hand of St John was kept until the 10th century.

In a separate study, another Oxford researcher, Dr Georges Kazan of the Oxford Institute of Archaeology, used historical documents to show that in the latter part of the 4th century (about AD 370), monks had taken relics of John the Baptist out of Jerusalem and these included portions of skull. These relics were soon summoned to Constantinople by the Roman Emperor, who built a church to house them there. Further research by Dr Kazan suggests that the reliquary used to contain them may have resembled the sarcophagus-shaped casket discovered at Sveti Ivan. Archaeological and written records suggest that these reliquaries were first developed and used at Constantinople by the city's ruling elite at around the time that the relics of John the Baptist are said to have arrived there.

Dr Kazan said, "My research suggests that during the fifth or early sixth century, the monastery of Sveti Ivan may well have received a significant portion of St John the Baptist's relics, as well as a prestige reliquary in the shape of a sarcophagus, from a member of Constantinople's elite. This gift could have been to dedicate or rededicate the church and the monastery to St John, which the patron or patrons may have supported financially."'

Professor Popkonstantinov said: 'It is important to understand one thing – this is the first time ever in the world of archaeological practice that relics of

St John are found together with an inscription which just literally nails the conclusion and leaves no doubts. There are no speculations here.'

The reliquary contained three animal bones (from a sheep, a cow and a horse) along with a human tooth, the right hand edge of an upper jaw (which chimes with Dr Kazan's research), a right collarbone, a rib, an ulna (an arm bone) and a knucklebone. The results of three different scientific tests conducted on the human bones were consistent with the identification of the reliquary as being that of the historical John the Baptist.

First, Oxford scientists were able to carbon date the knucklebone:

'Oxford professors Thomas Higham and Christopher Ramsey attempted to radiocarbon date four human bones, but only one of them contained a sufficient amount of collagen to be dated successfully. Professor Higham said: "We were surprised when the radiocarbon dating produced this very early age. We had suspected that the bones may have been more recent than this, perhaps from the third or fourth centuries. However, the result from the metacarpal hand bone is clearly consistent with someone who lived in the early first century AD."'

Second, Dr Hannes Schroeder and Professor Eske Willerslev from the University of Copenhagen reconstructed the complete mitochondrial DNA genome sequence from three of the human bones to establish that they were all from the same individual. Significantly, they identified a family group of genes (mtDNA haplotype) as being a group most commonly found in the Middle East, the region from where John the Baptist originated. They also established that the bones were probably of a male individual, after an analysis of the nuclear DNA from samples. Dr Schroeder said:

'Our worry was that the remains might have been contaminated with modern DNA. However, the DNA we found in the samples showed damage patterns that are characteristic of ancient DNA, which gave us confidence in the results. Further, it seems somewhat unlikely that all three samples would yield the same sequence considering that they had probably been handled by different people. Both of these facts suggest that the DNA we sequenced was actually authentic. Of course, this

does not prove that these were the remains of John the Baptist but nor does it refute that theory as the sequences we got fit with a Near Eastern origin.'

Third, Dr Lachezar Savov used modern medical scanners to make 3D images of the relics. This 'confirmed conclusions made earlier by other methods – that the bones belong to a man of Mediterranean type, between 30 and 40 years of age, who used vegetarian food.'

This last detail chimes with the description of John the Baptist in the Gospels: 'John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey' (Mark 1:6). Whether these were literal locusts, or the 'locust' carob tree pod, it is plausible to think that John's diet was predominantly vegetarian. According to Tsonya Drazheva, director of the Burgas History Museum and Deputy Head of the excavations on St Ivan island: 'One could see at first glance that the bones don't have good density, which suggests that the person in question led a difficult life.'

That the human remains in the Sveti Ivan reliquary are those of John the Baptist is not beyond reasonable doubt. Nevertheless, the accumulation of circumstantial evidence does appear to render the theory plausible.

■ See a video news report of this discovery

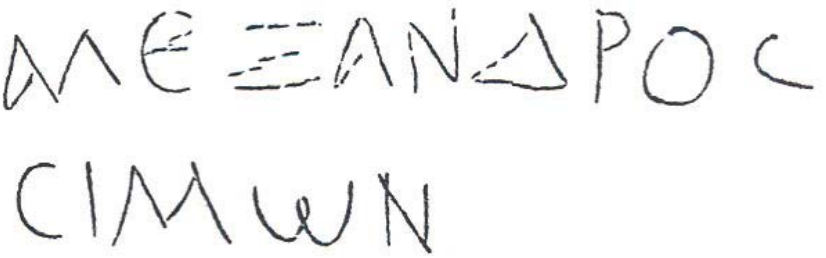
Alexander of Cyrene

The Alexandros ossuary. Credit: Hebrew University Institute of Archaeology

When Jesus was on the way to be crucified, the Roman soldiers escorting him forced a man called Simon from Cyrene (a Greek city in modern-day Libya) to carry his cross-beam. Mark's Gospel contains this episode, and reveals two of Simon's family members: 'A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross' (Mark 15:21).

In 1941, Israeli archaeologist Eleazar Sukenik discovered a tomb in the Kidron valley in eastern Jerusalem. Pottery also found in the tomb enabled him to date it to the 1st century AD. The tomb contained a collection of ossuaries (or bone boxes) bearing the names of 12 individuals. Some of the names were particularly common in Cyrenaica, the area around Cyrene.

The inscriptions on one of the ossuaries name a man called Alexandros. An inscriptions on the body of the ossuary reads: 'Alexandros (son of) Simon'. On the lid is 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:



A drawing of the inscription, 'Alexandros son of Simon', taken from the body of the ossuary.

'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.'

The Barsabbas family

Ancient tombs, with modern Jewish graves above them, in the Kidron Valley, Jerusalem. Credit: Oren Rozen

Early in the book of Acts, Luke, the author of the book, describes how the remaining 11 disciples of Jesus chose a new 12th disciple after the suicide of Judas. '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).

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." Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.' (Acts 1:24-25).

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).

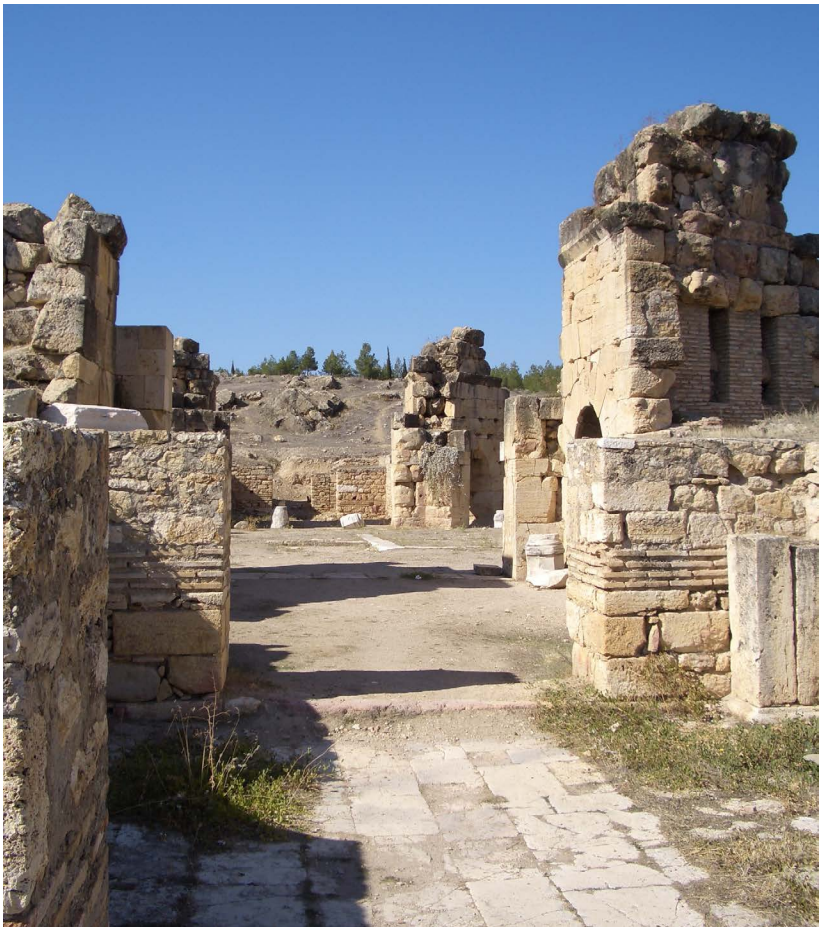
Modern archaeological findings cast light upon these references to Jospeh and Judas Barsabbas. As reported by *Jerusalem Christian Review* (December 2000), Israeli archaeologists uncovered a 1st century tomb in the mountainside off the Kidron Valley, containing ossuaries (or bone boxes) bearing signs of the cross. The inscriptions identify the cave as the tomb of the Barsabas family. Historian Ory N Mazar states that 'at least some members of this family were among the very first disciples of Christ'. The ossuaries include:

- Simon Bar-Saba, the Hebrew version of Simon Barsabas
- Mary, daughter of Simon, who may be one of the several Marys in the New Testament
- Joseph Barsabas
- 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 Hebrew name for Matthias
- Another Son of Saba was Judah (the Hebrew form of the Greek Judas) Barsabas

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.'

Philip the Apostle



The ancient martyrium of the Apostle Philip in Hierapolis, Turkey. Credit: iriskh

Philip was one of the 12 disciples of Jesus. He is said to have preached the message of Jesus in Greece and Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) and one Christian writer of the 2nd century, Polycrates of Ephesus, says he died of natural causes in Hierapolis.

In July 2011, the Biblical Archaeological Society announced a discovery: 'During the course of excavating a Byzantine-era church in the ancient Greek city of Hierapolis (in modern southwest Turkey), Professor Francesco D'Andria and his archaeological team have discovered the tomb of St Philip, one of the twelve apostles.'

D'Andria told Fox News: 'We have been looking for St Philip's tomb for years. We finally found it in the ruins of a church which we excavated a month ago.'

An examiner.com article explained the find as follows:

'Excavations at Hierapolis revealed a Martyrium believed to belong to Saint Philip. It was believed when the Martyrium was fully excavated the archeologist would find the tomb of Philip. Unfortunately, there was no tomb. Francesco D'Andria, director of the excavations, was surprised and disappointed, but continued the work in surrounding areas. Approximately 40 yards from the Martyrium, D'Andria discovered a small church. Inside the church they found a first century Roman tomb. Evidence indicates the tomb was built in the first century and the church was built around the tomb sometime around the beginning of the fifth century. D'Andria believes the evidence indicates Saint Philip's remains were originally placed in this tomb in the first century and remained there for over 400 years before being moved to Constantinople.'

James, the brother of Jesus

The 'James Ossuary' was on display at the Royal Ontario Museum from November 2002 to January 2003. Credit: Paradiso

James, the brother of Jesus, was leader of the church in Jerusalem, alongside the apostle Peter, immediately after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He was put to death by the sanhedrin, the Jewish council, in AD 62, according to the 1st century writer, Josephus.

In November 2002, the *Biblical Archaeology Review* reported that an ossuary had come to light bearing the inscription: 'James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus' (Ya'akov bar Yosef akhui di Yeshua). The excitement of the discovery was tempered by the fact that the box had not been discovered en situe in an archaeological dig, but noticed in the collection of an antiquities collector called Oded Golan, who was later put on trial for the forgery of ancient artefacts. However, Golan was acquitted of this charge in 2012, with the

trial judge stating: 'there is no evidence that any of the major artefacts were forged, and that the prosecution failed to prove their accusations beyond a reasonable doubt'.

Joseph M Holden and Norman L Geisler explain the context of ancient ossuaries: 'Of those ossuaries bearing an inscription, almost all speak of the deceased occupant's father, and occasionally of the person's brother, sister, or other close relative if that person is well-known. The rare presence of the sibling's name (Jesus) would indicate that Jesus was a very prominent figure.'

New Testament scholar Ben Witherington says: '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 extrabiblical evidence of its kind.'

Holden and Geisler report:

'Experts have confirmed the presence of microbial patina on the ossuary and on both parts of the inscription: 'James, the son of Jospeh' and 'brother of Jesus,' demonstrating the unity and antiquity of the inscription. In addition, this patina is generally deemed ancient, without the possibility of it occurring naturally in less than 50 to 100 years, making a recent forgery impossible. The world's leading expert in biogeology and the patination process, Wolfgang Krumbein of Oldenburg University in Germany, affirmed that the patina on the ossuary and inscription most likely reflects a development process of thousands of years. He added that there is no known process of accelerating the development of patina… Other researchers from the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto confirmed that the patina within the letter grooves is consistent with the patina on the surface of the ossurary; thus legitimizing the entire inscription's antiquity. According to expert paleographers Andre Lemaire and Ada Yardeni, who authenticitacted (and dated) the inscription based on the shape and stance of the letters, the Aramaic is fully consistent with first-century style and practice.'

In 2014, a peer-reviewed paper in the *Open Journal of Geology* validated the authenticity of the James ossuary inscription. According to the paper's abstract:

'An archaeometric analysis of the James Ossuary inscription, "James Son of Joseph Brother of Jesus" strengthens the contention that the ossuary and its engravings are authentic. The beige patina can be observed on the surface of the ossuary, continuing gradationally into the engraved inscription. Fine long striations made by the friction of falling roof rocks continuously crosscut the letters. Many dissolution pits are superimposed on several of the letters of the inscription. In addition to calcite and quartz, the patina contains the following minerals: apatite, whewellite and weddelite (calcium oxalate). These minerals result from the biogenic activity of microorganisms that require a long period of time to form a bio-patina. Moreover, the heterogeneous existence of wind-blown microfossils (nannofossils and foraminifers) and quartz within the patina of the ossuary, including the lettering zone, reinforces the authenticity of the inscription.'

Historian Paul L Maier says: '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.'

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.'

■ See a video of this discovery

Other archaeological evidence relating to Jesus

The chapel-like structure inside Jeruslem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is said to enclose the 1st century tomb of Jesus. Credit: Jlascar

Archaeological evidence relating directly to Jesus himself is rare, but in addition to the 'brother of Jesus' ossuary, a site in Jerusalem and a world-famous length of linen are both worth considering.

The 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.'

The church is in the northwest corner of the walled, Old City of Jerusalem, and has been a place of pilgrimage for Christians from at least

the 4th century AD. According to early traditions, it contains the site where Jesus was crucified, and also where he was buried.

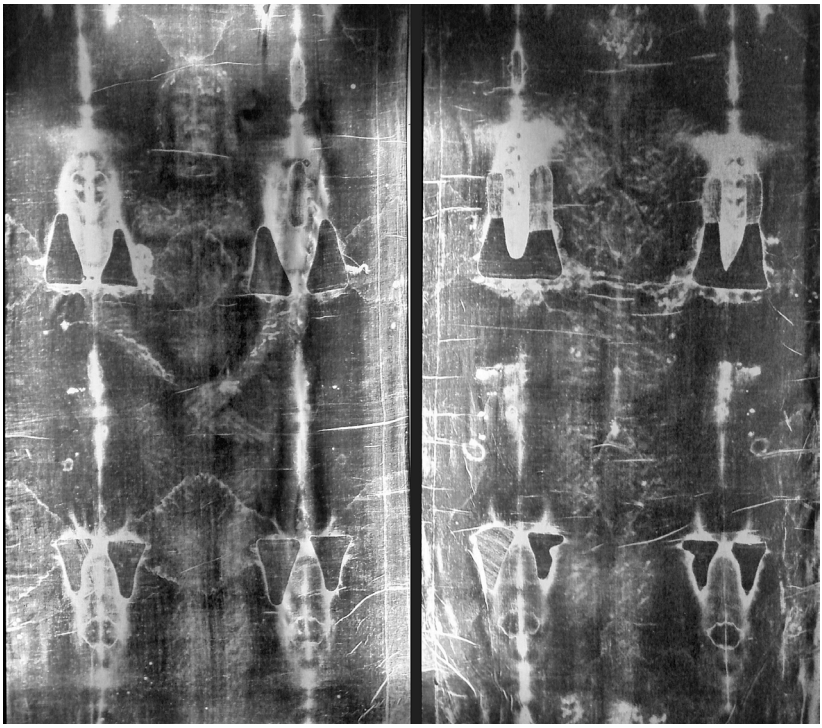
Dan Bahat, former City Archaeologist of Jerusalem, says: 'We may not be absolutely certain that the site of the Holy Sepulchre Church is the site of Jesus' burial, but we certainly have no other site that can lay a claim nearly as weighty, and we really have no reason to reject the authenticity of the site.'

Martin Biddle adds: '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.'

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 a medieval date. However, on the one hand, recent peer-reviewed scientific findings show that this carbon dating was unreliable because the dated samples were all taken from a medieval patch. On the other hand, a mass of historical and forensic evidence points towards an earlier and even 1st century date for the shroud.

For example, forensic evidence ties the shroud to a bloody head-cloth known as the Sudarium of Oviedo, an artefact with a provenance that can be traced back as far as the 7th century. Indeed, 'Radio carbon dating tests conducted in early 2013 by Padua University scientists established that the Shroud was likely made somewhere between 280 BC and AD 220.' 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 artefact, then it was probably Jesus's 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 Turin Shroud, seen here in negative, with the front-facing image of the human figure seen on the left, and the back view on the right.

The shroud thus provides evidence against the once popular 'swoon' theory, according to which Jesus didn't really die on the cross, but instead fainted and later revived in the tomb. Also, because the shroud no longer contains a body, and because it bears undisturbed blood clots, it constitutes additional evidence in the cumulative case for the reality of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

- See videos about the Shroud of Turin

- See videos on the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus

Truthful witness?

'The material data unearthed to date has shown a remarkable consistency with the New Testament, corroborating people, places, structures, customs, ruling figures, and their official titles.' Joseph M Holden and Norman L Geisler

Archaeology adds to the cumulative case for the historical reliability of the New Testament by empirically verifying specific references to various cultural practices, beliefs, places and people. As historian 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.'

Where the New Testament – most especially the Gospels and the book of Acts – is open to empirical assessment by the science of archaeology, it has repeatedly been shown to contain accurate information about the 1st century. This discovery warrants the inference that the New Testament probably presents us with accurate information regarding things that we either have not as yet, or could not, check in this way. 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.'

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Evidence for the Resurrection John Austin Baker
Evidence for the Holy Spirit William Purcell
Evidence for the Love of God Richard Harries
Evidence for Life after Death David Winter
Evidence for Power of Prayer Pauline Webb
Evidence for the Virgin Birth Keith Ward

CHRISTIAN Evidence
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