



Chapter 8

A SIGNIFICANT GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION

There is another piece of evidence from the New Testament which shows that Jesus' crucifixion took place on the Mount of Olives. It is interesting that this information (to my knowledge) has never been used in determining the site, yet it has an important bearing in solving the geography of the crucifixion. It concerns a topographical location mentioned in the Gospel of John. He shows that Jesus was executed near an area of Jerusalem called "The Place of the City" (John 19:20). The wording of the Greek requires one to render the words as "The Place of the City" (or "The City's Place"), but many translators not realizing that a specific location in Jerusalem was intended by John, usually translate the passage: "For the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city." But this translation is not correct. The text should actually read: "Near was *The Place of the City* where Jesus was crucified" (John 19:20, translation, italics and capitalization mine). The expression in the original has appeared so odd to some scholars in its grammatical construction that many of them have been forced to modify what John wrote. But this "oddity" is the very key to its meaning.

The Place of the City

What was “The Place” that the apostle John intended? It can be found if one will transliterate the Greek that John used for the “Place.” Utilizing the actual Greek, John said that Jesus was crucified near “*The Topos* of the City.” It is that “Topos” that must be located. That particular Topos can be found if we pay attention to its use in other contexts of the New Testament. [All translations in this chapter are from the original Greek, not KJV.]

All Jewish people living in the first century knew what “The *Topos* of the City” represented. It happened to be a well-known description of the Temple at Jerusalem. The usage is found in several texts of the New Testament. Look at Acts 6:13,14 which records the activities of Stephen.

“And they brought forth false witnesses who said: This man does not stop speaking things against *The Topos*, even the Holy [*Topos*], and against the Law. For we have heard him say that Jesus the Nazarene will throw down this *Topos* and change the customs that Moses handed down to us.”

In this account “The Topos” clearly signified the Temple in the city of Jerusalem. But there is more. When the apostle Paul was being challenged by the Jews in Jerusalem, they presented some specific accusations against him.

“Men of Israel, help us. This is the man who teaches everywhere against the People, and the Law, and *The Topos*, and what is more, he has brought Greeks into the temple [enclosure] and defiled *The Holy Topos*” (Acts 21:28).

Again, in these New Testament references, it can be seen that the “Topos” signified the Temple. But let us now look at the Gospel of John itself (the Gospel which contains the statement that Jesus was crucified near *The Topos* of the City). Recall the conversation of the Samaritan women with Jesus. She called the Temple “*The Topos*.”

“Our forefathers worshipped in this mountain, but you people say that in Jerusalem is *The Topos* where it is necessary to be wor-

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shipping [*The Topos* was a common term]” (John 4:20).

Jews always considered *The Topos* as being in Jerusalem — and that the Temple could only be located in Jerusalem. Jesus himself acknowledged this to the Samaritan woman. But even more important to the issue is John 11:47,48. Here we have the authoritative and official pronouncements of the chief priests and Pharisees within the Sanhedrin (the Supreme Court of the Jews). In the clearest of terms they referred to the Temple simply by the name *The Topos*.

“The chief priests and Pharisees gathered together the Sanhedrin and began to say: What are we to do, because this man performs many signs? If we let him go his way, they will all put faith in him, and the Romans will come and take away from us both *The Topos* and *The Nation*” (emphases mine).

The Topos of the City Was the Temple

These scriptures show that the common designation for the Temple and its holy areas was “The Place” (i.e. *The Topos*). There was absolutely nothing strange to the Jews of the first century in using such a name for the Temple. There are a host of references from the Old Testament (both in Hebrew and Greek), and from other Jewish works as well as from Gentile accounts which show that the expression “*The Topos*” meant the Temple in Jerusalem. The phrase was also used to refer to Gentile sanctuaries throughout the world (see Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary*, vol.VIII, pp.187-208 for many such references). In the middle of the fourth century, Athanasius simply called the Temple at Jerusalem “The Place” (*The Topos*) without the slightest elaboration.

“Aliens had invaded the Temple at Jerusalem.... Aliens indeed had held *the Place*, but knew not the Lord of *the Place*.... What profit then is *the Place* to them? For behold they that hold *the Place* are charged by them that love God with making it [*the Place*] a den of thieves” (Letter XXIX fragment).

Thus, when the apostle John spoke about “The Place of the City” (John 19:19,20), this was a clear reference to the Temple

complex. The additional part of the phrase (“of the City”) was itself a common title in the first century that referred to Jerusalem. This term “the City” was the most used term of Josephus in his abundant references to the capital of the Jews, Jerusalem.

The fact that the phrase “The Place of the City” refers to the Temple is a powerful piece of evidence that (even standing alone) will show us where Jesus was crucified. Let us now return to John 19:19,20. When the real meaning of John is understood we will have a significant geographical indication showing the location where Jesus died. Note that Pilate made a title and placed it above the head of Jesus. John said a great number of people were able to read this title because the site of the crucifixion was near “*The Topos*” (“*The Place*”) — it happened *close* to the Temple!

“Pilate wrote a title: Jesus the Nazarene the king of Jews. Therefore many of the Jews read this title because it was near *The Topos* of the City where Jesus was crucified.”

John is telling us important information. Being near the Temple (but outside its walls) is a clue to the site of the crucifixion. Indeed, John would not have indicated it was near the Temple unless he saw some significance to this factor as it related to the Temple and its symbolism. He wanted people to know that Jesus was crucified within the environs of His Father’s House — the place where all the sacrifices for sin were offered to God.

John also wanted his readers to understand why there were so many people able to view the crucifixion of Jesus. This was because his execution was near an entrance to the Temple. Recall that it was the Passover season and that Jesus was being killed while throngs of people were carrying their Passover lambs into the Temple to have them killed.

Jesus Was Crucified Near the Temple

How *near* the Temple was Jesus? On what side of the Temple was he? One thing for certain, Jesus was not crucified inside the

Temple complex because the Jewish people considered the execution of criminals as in no way appropriate *inside* the sanctuary of God. As a matter of fact, the author of the Book of Hebrews gives us information that not only was Jesus crucified “outside the gate” of the city, but more than that, he was crucified even “outside the camp” (Hebrews 13:12,13). There is not the slightest doubt that Jesus’ execution took place outside the city of Jerusalem, yet it was near the environs of the holy Temple. These biblical indications tell us a lot about the location of the crucifixion if we will pay close attention to the texts.

Let us now use the argument of elimination in locating the proper site. If Jesus would have been put to death on the southern flank of the Temple (to satisfy being *near* the Temple as John says), it would violate the statement in the Book of Hebrews that he was crucified outside the city because the whole southern region of Jerusalem abutting to the Temple was *within* the city. This same restriction applies to the entirety of the western *area* near the Temple because it was also *within* the walls of the city. Even if one went further westward to include the present site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (which was so far *west* of the Temple mount that it was even located beyond the “Second Wall” of Jerusalem in the time of Jesus), this location could not be considered near the Temple. This one factor alone prohibits the region of the present Holy Sepulchre Church as being the area of Jesus’ crucifixion. This also applies to the spot where the present Garden Tomb is situated. Indeed, that site is even further away from the Temple and could in no way fulfill the description of the apostle John that Jesus was executed *near* the Temple. Actually, the whole northwestern area adjacent to the Temple was occupied by the fortress called the Antonia. It was not possible for Jesus to have been crucified inside this fortress, which (by the way) was technically *inside* the city as well.

Where Was “Near the Temple”?

It might have been possible (in a geographical sense) to be *near*

the holy Temple and *within* the northeast sector of Jerusalem which had no walls around it. This region had within it the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:2) and a little further to the north on a nearby hill was the extension of the city limits called Bezetha. It was quite a populous area. Jesus, however, was crucified in a garden (really, an orchard of trees) and in a region where rock-hewn tombs could be built. But both gardens and parks were prohibited in the city limits because of the odor produced by the cut weeds which came from gardens and from the dung used for fertilizer in such areas (*Baba Kamma* 82b). All parts of Jerusalem were thought to be “holy” and this included the areas adjacent to the Temple, including Bezetha. Making new tombs within the city was not allowed for such tombs were considered ritualistically impure. In the time of Jesus tombs were only being permitted outside the city (and even outside the “camp”) of Jerusalem. [This will be explained more fully in a succeeding chapter.]

The simple fact is, the region of Bezetha on the northeast side of the Temple was an active part of the city of Jerusalem. It was a populated area and it would have been a most unlikely region for any crucifixion. In any event, the Book of Hebrews precludes Jesus’ crucifixion *anywhere* within the built-up areas of Jerusalem (whether inside or outside the walls) because the crucifixion occurred even “outside the camp” (Hebrews 13:11). But the area of Bezetha was within the camp. And besides that, it would not have been possible to see the curtain of the Temple from the region of Bezetha (certainly not the whole of the curtain) because the northern exterior and interior walls of the Temple would have prevented it. But, as it has been shown in the last chapter, the centurion and the people at the crucifixion site were able to see the curtain from its top to bottom. Only on the upper slopes of the Mount of Olives was this possible.

But why did the apostle John want his readers to know that Jesus was crucified *near* “*The Topos* [The Place] of the City” which

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meant the Temple complex itself? Note that he did not simply say “near the City” (as almost all mistranslate John today). John was showing, for symbolic reasons, that Jesus' sacrifice took place *near* the Temple itself. John wanted to show his readers that the crucifixion was connected with the Temple ceremonies in numerous ways. This allowed Jesus to fulfill many typical features indicated in the Old Testament rituals of the Temple.

Now look at an important fact that I have pointed out in chapters two and three of this book. Though there was only one Temple apparatus at Jerusalem, there were actually TWO main divisions to that sacred complex. There was what the prophet Ezekiel called “the *OUTWARD* sanctuary” (Ezekiel 44:1, the KJV has the proper translation of the Hebrew) which was located outside the main Sanctuary and also outside the *eastern* gate. This “Outward Sanctuary” had one altar associated with it (the Third Altar of the Temple) called the *Miphkad* Altar at the Beth ha-Deshen (the House of the Ashes), which the Targum for Ezekiel 43:21 called “the Temple outside the Sanctuary.” The main Sanctuary, however, (which in contrast could be called “the Inward Sanctuary”) was located west of the Kidron Valley and it had two altars with it (the Altar of Burnt Offering and the Altar of Incense).

The single Sanctuary at Jerusalem was thus made up of both divisions of the Temple (the *INWARD* and the *OUTWARD*). It was by combining them together that one witnessed the complete Sanctuary that the apostle John called “the *Topos* of the City.” So, “the *Topos* of the City” was located both on the traditional Mount Moriah (which was the *INWARD* Sanctuary), along with its second division situated at the summit of Olivet called the Beth ha-Deshen in which was the *Miphkad* Altar (this place was the *OUTWARD* Sanctuary that the Targum called “the outer Temple”). Jesus was crucified a mere stone's throw away from this “Outward Sanctuary” which was part of “the *Topos* of the City.” That is why the John said Jesus was executed *near* the “*Topos* of the City.”