



## Chapter 9

# ***WHERE AND WHAT WAS GOLGOTHA?***

Golgotha has now been located as demonstrated by the biblical and historical data which are given in the first eight chapters of this book. With this information, we are presented with some geographical keys to locate the site. In this chapter, the place will be pinpointed with greater detail. To do this, we have to remember a few points.

Recall that the word “Miphkad” designated the east gate of the Temple as well as the altar on the Mount of Olives. Simply put, the road through the Miphkad Gate led to the Miphkad Altar, and this is why the gate was designated “the Miphkad.” It is important to remember that the word “Miphkad” actually means to “Number.” It signified a place where armies or the general population would assemble to have their *heads* counted. This numbering was in matters of censuses or counting people who were to pay the poll taxes. In a word, the Miphkad area was a “Numbering Place” for counting *heads*. I have emphasized the word “*heads*” because in the section of the Old Testament where Moses conducted censuses, the actual Hebrew word that was used for “*head*” is *golgolet* from

which comes the geographical word that is rendered “Golgotha.”

### ***The Real Meaning of Golgotha***

In ordinary usage, the Miphkad (Numbering) Altar on the Mount of Olives became known in New Testament times as “Golgotha” and it denoted a place where *heads* were counted in any numbering or census of Israel. All numberings involving the totality of the Israelite people would have required the place of the counting to be “without the camp” because certain individuals who were permanently or temporarily designated as ritualistically defiled could not come inside the Camp of Israel (Numbers 5:1-4). This is why it was always necessary to have the official censuses outside the camp area. That way all individuals could be counted whether they were ritualistically defiled or not.

One can read about the first census of Israel recorded in chapter one of Numbers. See Numbers 1:2,18,20,22 3:47 and I Chronicles 23:3,24. In the Old Testament, there are two primary words that denote a census and they are very similar in meaning though in spelling they are quite different. Both words occur in one verse in Numbers 1:2 which informs us about the first grand census of the men of Israel. Let us look at that verse and notice the two Hebrew words that denote a census.

“Take ye the *sum* [Hebrew: Lift up the *rosh*] of all the congregation of the children of Israel, after their families, by the house of their fathers, with the number of their names [individual names], every male by their *polls* [Hebrew: *golgolet*]” (Numbers 1:2).

This shows that the English words *sum* and *polls* in this verse in Numbers are similar in meaning (practically synonyms), and this equally applies to the Hebrew words *rosh* and *golgolet* from which the English words derive. Indeed, in Hebrew both the words *rosh* and *golgolet* mean “head” — like a person’s head, the top part of a person’s body. The King James Version translates the Hebrew word *golgolet* by the English word “poll,” which signified the counting

of people by their polls (by their *heads*). This practice is not even foreign to us moderns because we call the place where we cast our ballots to elect our officials to government offices as “polling places.” This is where government officials “count” each of us to get our votes in an election. And so it was in Israel. The officials simply counted *heads* (*rosh*) or they also counted *heads* (*golgolet*) in their polling. The double use of the term *head* seems like a redundancy to us who speak English (and so it is), but in Hebrew this was a common way of expressing things. The use of several words that are practically synonyms to each other are often used (even in succession in one verse) to accent the meaning of the author’s intent. And so we have it in Numbers 1:2. Both *rosh* and *golgolet* mean in the basic etymology of both words what we in English signify as the word “head.”

There is a secondary meaning to the word *golgolet*. It can mean *skull* in some usages where the context demands it, or almost demands it as in Judges 9:53. In some places in the Old Testament it is even doubtful, however, that *golgolet* has the meaning of *skull* as in II Kings 9:35 where the other two parts of Jezebel’s body that the dogs did not consume were *not* referring to her bones (and the main meaning of *skull* is certainly to the bony part of the head). In this case of II Kings 9:35, the word *golgolet* could legitimately be rendered as *head* and not *skull*. Indeed, in the Hebrew and Aramaic lexicons, the grammarians state that the word *golgolet* in the majority of its biblical and post-biblical contexts indicates the word *head*. It even came to be used in a special way to mean “capitation tax,” that is, a *head* or *poll* tax.

### ***Golgotha and Censuses at Jerusalem***

Censuses in Israel were not always to count people as each person passed by a census taker. Other ways were also used. An actual counting was taken annually by summing up the offering of money that each Israelite contributed (such as the half-shekel poll tax). This was the “capitation tax.” From the amount of money or

items collected, it was possible for the authorities to arrive at the actual number of people involved. Since it was a requirement that *EVERY Israelite male* of adult age pay the half-shekel poll (head) tax (whether the person was defiled or undefiled), the giving and counting of such moneys in the Jerusalem area was always conducted “without the camp.” The place for such countings (which was done in the presence of God who looked eastward from his Temple) was “without the camp” on the Mount of Olives at the designated Polling Place near the Miphkad (Numbering) Altar. Thus, the word “Golgotha” came to signify that Polling Place which was the area where polling for the poll (head) tax was conducted. This was called “the capitation tax” in Jewish society at the time.

This Hebrew and Aramaic usage for “golgolet” is important because if such a term were used for a geographical area in Palestine, it is the early Hebrew meaning that must predominate in determining its original significance and not some definition derived from a foreign Greek word of later origin. In the New Testament, which was written in Greek, the writers gave the later definition of “Golgotha” by the Greek word *kranion*. Our English translators of the New Testament almost always translate the Greek *kranion* by our English word “skull.” However, even the primary use of the Greek word *kranion*, in classical Greek writings, also means *head* and only if the context shows that the word is referring anatomically to the bony part of the head (without the flesh attached) is it proper to render *kranion* as “skull.” So, even the New Testament writers in their usage of the Greek *kranion* could easily have meant “head” rather than “skull.” In the Hebrew, it is always preferred to use the word “head” unless the context demands the use of “skull.” And in the verses in the Old Testament which speak of the censuses of all Israel, the people conducting the *rosh* (census) were always counting the *golgolet* (heads) of men who were alive, not the *skulls* of dead men.

### ***The Words Golgotha and Kranion Mean “Head” in the New Testament***

Let us be clear about this important matter. The primary and ordinary biblical meaning of the Hebrew word “Golgotha” is *head* or, in the old English, *poll* and the Greek *kranion* can also mean *head*. The New Testament writers were NOT actually stating that the place of Jesus’ crucifixion was the “Place of the Skull.” They were referring to its original Hebrew and Aramaic usage (not the later Greek term), which means the “Place of the Head or the Poll.” This was the polling area associated with the Miphkad Altar at the summit of the Mount of Olives. This is why the “outside” altar was properly designated the “Numbering Altar.”

### ***Golgotha Was the Eastern Census Area***

There is Old Testament evidence that makes this clear. Censuses conducted by Moses in which he polled the people were held at a spot *east* of the Tabernacle and just “without the camp” so that even the ritualistically defiled could be counted since they were not permitted to enter into the precincts of the Camp. Note how this is shown in Numbers 31. By reading Numbers 31:1-54, we see that after the final eastern war with the Midianites, the Israelite army returned to Moses and Eleazar the high priest and met them on the *east side* of the Camp. This meeting was just “without the camp.” See verse 13. But before these men of war could re-enter the Camp, since they had touched dead bodies and were accounted as being “defiled,” they were required to wash themselves with the ashen waters of the Red Heifer to be cleansed after a seven day period of purification (verse 24). And before they re-entered the Camp, Moses conducted a numbering (a census) of the men in the Israelite army. The text says: “Thy servants have taken the *sum* [*rosh*] of the men of war.” It was found from this census that Israel lost no men in the battle (verse 49). Moses also took a census of the men and beasts that the Israelites had captured. The text says: “Take the *sum* [*rosh*] of the prey, both of man and of beast” (verse 26). These two

“numberings” were by the counting of *heads*. Simply put, the men were polled. And from this polling, Moses levied a tribute (a tax) from each man of war (Numbers 31:28,37,41).

This polling of each man was like the first two censuses of the Israelites recorded in chapters one and twenty-six of Numbers, where both the defiled and the purified of the people were counted. “Take ye *the sum* [*rosh*] of ALL the congregation of the children of Israel...every male by their *polls* [*golgolet*]” (Numbers 1:2). This was also done “without the camp” because both the defiled and the purified of Israel were numbered. This was accomplished near the Miphkad (or Numbering) Altar at the *east* gate to the Camp. And recall, the word for “head” or “poll” in this section of the Book of Numbers is *golgolet* from which the New Testament writers obtained the word “Golgotha.” But note also the word “*sum*” in Numbers 1:2 is *rosh*. Interestingly, the Hebrew word “*rosh*” in many contexts also means “*head*.” But it also came to signify a “summit” or the “top of a mountain.” The Septuagint Version in Second Samuel 15:32 and 16:1 states that at the summit of the Mount of Olives was a place that was specifically named “the Rosh” (that is, the *Head*) where David stopped to worship God at the time he was fleeing from his son Absalom (I will have more to say on this important incident in chapter twelve). This was the summit area of Olivet, but it was also the place where *heads* were counted in censuses.

### ***Golgotha Was a Mountain***

That Golgotha was on a mountain was also recognized by the early Jews. Professor James Tabor of the University of North Carolina in his review of my first edition of “Secrets of Golgotha” (in the Society of Biblical Literature’s *Critical Review of Books in Religion*, 1991, pp.213-215) gives new information to sustain my thesis that the summit of the Mount of Olives was the location of Golgotha. Dr. Tabor writes: “An interesting support of Martin’s thesis, which he does not note, is that the Hebrew text of Matthew

known as *Even Bohan* refers to the place of crucifixion as Mount (*har*) of the Skull (see G. Howard, *The Gospel of Matthew according to a Primitive Hebrew Text* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988]).” This reference may well support a reasonable belief that the Jewish authorities were well aware that the crucifixion of Jesus occurred on a “mountain” (that word perfectly fits the description of the Mount of Olives) rather than on a small outcropping of rock that appears to have been at the original site where the later Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built. In no way could this latter area be called a “mountain.”

And speaking of the word “mountain,” there are some interesting usages of the word “rosh” (meaning “head or mountain top”) for the counting of heads or conducting censuses. A census was called by the phrase “Lift up the *head*.” In the Bible the phrase was used in both a positive and a negative way. One type of census that was conducted in a positive manner was “to lift up the head” in order to honor the person(s) and to grant favors. But the other type was in a negative manner—“to lift up [or, off] the head” in order to execute a person by beheading him (see the use of this double-entendre by Joseph in regard to the butler and baker in Genesis 40:13,19). In the latter (negative) sense, the “Rosh” area at the summit of Olivet indicated an area for execution, which, according to Moses, had to be similarly located “outside the camp” (Numbers 15:35). The “Rosh” or “Golgotha” (both synonyms in certain contexts) indicated the proper type of judgment area that was selected in the time of Moses as the polling place where both the defiled and the purified Israelites could be counted or could be judged, and in some cases (as with Jesus) where people were executed for heinous crimes.

Such numberings or censuses were reckoned as having to be counted in the presence of God (which meant *east* of the Sanctuary) around the Miphkad (Numbering) Altar. The numbering had to be done “outside the camp” in order to include the unclean or unpuri-

fied (and there were always multitudes of such people who were temporarily in the unpurified state). This is an important point because God always, in a symbolic sense, looked eastward from his residence in the Tabernacle and the later Temples. In the ritual of the Red Heifer which was to be sacrificed “without the camp, and ...before his face” (Numbers 19:3), the phrase “before his [God’s]” face was synonymous with the word *east*. God always faced eastward from His Temple. And, as shown in Numbers 31, this designated area for *numbering* in a census was located on the east side of the encampment and just “without the camp” (see example, Numbers 31:1-54). In the time of Jesus, this *eastern* area for polling (so that God could witness it from his throne in the Temple) was near the Miphkad (Numbering) Altar [the Altar named for those numberings] on the Mount of Olives where the areas called either “the Rosh” or “Golgotha” were located.

In simple terms, “Golgotha” was NOT “the Place of the Skull” as the Greek word *kranion* can mean, but it means “the Place of the Head” (which the Greek word *kranion* can also mean). Or, in contemporary terms of the first century, Golgotha among the Jewish people in Jerusalem meant “the Polling Place” and synonymously it was called “the Rosh” (the mountain summit of Olivet as the LXX translation has it).

On the Mount of Olives was the specific area of “Golgotha” where the *sum* [*rosh*] in the censuses of the people of Israel were determined. Golgotha was thus situated next to the Beth ha-Deshen (the House of the Ashes) which was a holy place called “the *OUTWARD* Sanctuary” (Ezekiel 44:1) where the Red Heifer was sacrificed. These historical indications in the Bible are important in locating the “Golgotha” of the New Testament.