

## Chapter 20

# ***BURIAL GROUNDS IN JERUSALEM***

The Tomb of John Hyrcanus located just outside the Second Wall of Jerusalem in the time of Jesus was the site chosen by the emperor Hadrian to build his Temple of Venus. This area was later selected by Constantine for his Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The situation of this tomb, however, was *within* the 2000 cubits' radius from the Holy of Holies which designated the *camp of Israel*. In other words, John Hyrcanus' Tomb was *within* the camp in the time of Jesus and this prohibits the area from being considered as the site of Jesus' crucifixion since the author of the Book of Hebrews said Jesus was executed "*outside the camp*" (Hebrews 13:11-13). Indeed, Hyrcanus' Tomb was not the only tomb positioned *within* the camp, so was that of his son Alexander who died in 78 B.C. (*War* V.304). And there are the monumental tombs in the Kidron Valley (traditionally called those of Absalom, Jehoshaphat, James and Zechariah) constructed in the late second or middle first century before Jesus. These tombs were also *within* the camp which encircled Jerusalem in the time of Jesus (the latter four are within a stone's throw of the Temple itself).

But legislation concerning tombs around Jerusalem began to change by the time Jesus commenced his ministry. It then became unlawful to construct any new tombs within any district of the camp of Israel that encircled Jerusalem. Within a 2000 cubits' radius from the zodiacal center of the camp located in the Holy Place of the Temple, it was not allowed for new tombs to be constructed. Indeed, even the older ones within the limits of the camp had to be cleansed and the remains of the dead transported to other areas *outside* the camp. These older tombs were especially a problem during Jewish festival periods. With tens of thousands of Jews assembling in Jerusalem at the beginning of the first century, it was so easy within the central area for people to accidentally touch a tomb. This automatically disqualified them from entering the Temple for a seven day period (Numbers 19:11-21). So the authorities simply decided it would be best to cleanse all tombs in the "camp area" by removing the bones of the prophets and righteous people out of Jerusalem and to prohibit new tombs being built in the area.

Remember one point. It was even necessary to execute Jesus *outside the camp* (Numbers 15:35,36), and it was also considered essential in Jesus' time for his burial (which took place a short distance away) to be *outside the camp*. It was this outer limit of the camp that represented the city limits of Jerusalem. Burial was only permitted beyond 50 cubits from what was considered the outer boundaries of the city (Tosefta, *Baba Bathra* 1:11). But many old tombs and graves were located within the camp area just before the time of Jesus and they presented problems to the Jerusalem authorities. It wasn't that the tombs themselves were the difficulty, but it was the bones within the tombs or graves that made them ritualistically unclean. It was possible *to cleanse* them if the bones and other body remains could be removed. There is archaeological and historical information which reasonably shows that shortly after A.D.16 there began to be a lot of activity to remove the bones and other remains from these tombs and to place them in new tomb

areas outside the camp area. Let us notice this evidence.

### ***An Important Archaeological Discovery***

In 1953 an extensive cemetery containing more than 500 burial places was discovered at the Franciscan sanctuary of the Dominus Flevit which is located half way down the slope of the Mount of Olives and it was well *within the camp* in Jesus' time. What is interesting is the fact that the coins found in these tombs are all dated before A.D.15/16 (Finegan, *The Archaeology of the New Testament*, p.243). This suggests that no more burials were allowed in this area after A.D.16 (or somewhere soon after that date). This gives us good information that the ban against burying people within the 2000 cubits' radius surrounding the central Temple at Jerusalem only started about A.D.20 and lasted until the destruction of the Temple in A.D.70.

The reason I say "ban" is because a rule was legislated (somewhere near the time Jesus began his ministry) that no more tombs could be built so close to Jerusalem and that even the existing ones that were above ground had to have the bodily remains of the dead removed to places *outside the camp*. "In Jerusalem it was not permitted *to leave tombs* [within Jerusalem] with the exception of those of the house of David and that of the prophetess Hulda" (Tosefta, *Baba Bathra*, 1:2). By tombs, the rule meant that the bones in the tombs had to be transported to other non-sacred areas, not that the physical tombs themselves were removed (many of which were carved in solid rock). The Jewish authorities at Jerusalem simply enacted a law which made it illegal for Jews "*to leave tombs*" within the city limits of the holy city. It became custom to place the bones of those buried within the city limits in specially designed chests of wood or stone called ossuaries. These were then transported out of the sacred regions of Jerusalem and *outside the camp* into *newly built* tomb areas on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

These ossuaries were small chests of wood or stone (about 20 to 32 inches in length, 11 to 20 inches in width, and 10 to 16 inches in depth). Ossuaries were used as secondary burials. Many of them have been found. One is most interesting because it illustrates the custom near the time of Jesus of not leaving tombs (or the bodily remains in the tombs) within the city limits of Jerusalem. Inscribed on one of these ossuaries is the following: “Hither were brought the bones of Uzziah, king of Judah—do not open” (Thompson, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, p.336). This reference is very important to our present discussion because the early king Uzziah became a leper and was buried, in the first place, *outside* Jerusalem. His original tomb was located in the field and not among the royal sepulchres in the City of David (II Chronicles 26:23). But near the time of Jesus, having a tomb “in the field” (though outside the walls of Jerusalem) was then being reckoned as still *within the camp*. This is why it was thought necessary to transfer his bones *outside the camp* of the larger Jerusalem that existed in Jesus’ time. The bones of King Uzziah were placed in a *newly made* tomb area beyond the sacred limits of Jerusalem. There must have been several of these outer tomb areas that were designed not only for the burials of important people living in the first century but also to house the bones of the early prophets and righteous people who had been buried *within the camp* of Israel inside and surrounding the city of Jerusalem.

### ***The Building of New Tombs in the Time of Jesus***

The building of these *new* tomb areas is mentioned by Jesus as occurring at the very time he was preaching the Gospel in Jerusalem. Notice what he said:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, because *you are building* [present tense] the graves of the prophets and *you are decorating* [present tense] the tombs of the righteous” (Matthew 23:29).

Since the prophets had died centuries before, it is ridiculous to think the Jewish authorities were building their tombs for the first



This is a photograph from the Israel Museum which shows the tomb slab of Uzziah the early leper king of Jerusalem. It is written in the Aramaic (the common language spoken by many of the Jews in the Jerusalem area in the first century of our era) and it says: "Hither were brought the bones of Uzziah, king of Judah -- do not open." Scholars date this tomb slab to about the first century A.D. and what we have shown in this book, the greatest activity for the removal of bones from earlier tombs located "within the camp" at Jerusalem was precisely at the time that Christ was preaching. He said: "*You are building* [present tense] the graves of the prophets and *you are decorating* [present tense] the tombs of the righteous" (Matt.23:29). The bones of the righteous were then being transported to other tomb areas located "outside the camp" encircling Jerusalem.

time. What Jesus was referring to was the making of *new* tombs for them. The tombs of all the prophets and righteous people *within the camp* of Israel that surrounded Jerusalem were (in Jesus' time) being transferred to other areas outside the city limits. Until the bones and other remains of those dead were removed, it was customary to whitewash their tombs within the sacred area of Jerusalem in order that people would be able to distinguish them so that they would not become ritualistically unclean by touching them (Matthew 23:27). But the Jewish authorities were at the very time of Jesus in the process of *building* [present tense, and the text means *presently building*] the tombs of the early prophets (this is also mentioned in Luke 11:47,48 as well as Matthew 23:29). The transferal of the bones of the righteous dead (including the early prophets) outside the camp of Jerusalem was going on right at the time of Jesus' preaching in early A.D.30.

It appears that there were two principal regions (which archaeologists are able to locate) that represent these areas for the re-burial of the early prophets and righteous. One of the main sites has become known as the Sanhedriyya Tombs located a little over a mile northwest of the Temple Mount and well outside the limits of the "camp." The contents found in those tombs were dated from the beginning of Herod's reign (36 B.C.) to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D.70. And since Jesus said that the authorities were *decorating* the memorial tombs of the righteous, it is interesting that the Sanhedriyya Tombs have at their entrance various carvings of acanthus leaves, pomegranates and citrons. These may have been the very *decorations* to which Jesus had reference. But besides that, most of the ossuaries in which the bones of the prophets and righteous were deposited were also *decorated*. And this is precisely what Jesus said they were doing in his time.

But the area of the Sanhedriyya Tombs was not the only region of re-burial. There was another to which the remains of the early Jewish dead were transferred. This was a rock-hewn chamber locat-

ed on the Mount of Offense to the southeast of Jerusalem (Finegan, *Archaeology of the New Testament*, pp.238-240). It must be reckoned that the time for depositing the remains of the dead at this location was associated with that of the Sanhedriyya Tombs.

### ***No New Tombs Allowed within the Camp at Jerusalem***

This information is important in relation to the execution and burial of Jesus. Obviously, if old tombs were then being relocated *outside the camp*, it cannot be imagined that new ones could be placed *inside the camp*. In fact, we have information that major tombs (that is, *new ones*) which were constructed within twenty or so years after Jesus were built a little distance *outside the camp* which surrounded Jerusalem. One such tomb was that of Queen Helena of Adiabene. She was a convert to Judaism and died about thirty years after Jesus. It is significant that her royal tomb area was located north of Jerusalem about 300 yards from the boundary of the "camp." It is important to note that archaeologists have *not* found *one tomb* which was built from the time of Herod to the fall of Jerusalem *north* of the wall of Jerusalem up to the tomb area of Helena (*Biblical Archaeology Review*, March/April, 1986, pp.51,52).

Had tombs been permitted inside the camp at that time, one would imagine that Queen Helena would surely have been granted a site near the Temple or somewhere near the City of David. But, since we know that even the prophets, as well as other righteous people, were having *new* tombs built for them outside the city limits in the time of Jesus, we can understand why Queen Helena had her own tomb area constructed well to the north and "outside the camp."

This rule also applied to the Herodian family tomb located westward of the Temple. These tombs were situated almost the same distance away from the Sanctuary as was the tomb area of Queen Helena. These Herodian tombs which were referred to by the

Jewish historian Josephus (*War* V.507) were not those associated with Herod the Great because he was buried at the Herodian located about 10 miles south of Jerusalem. This tomb complex no doubt belongs to Herod Agrippa the First (Acts 12:1) and he lived near the same period as Queen Helena of Adiabene. If this is the case, and it seems to be so, then this also shows that the royal tombs of even Herod Agrippa had to be located outside the limits of the camp which were reckoned at the time to be 2000 cubits from the central part of the Temple. The tomb of the High Priest Ananus was located about the same distance southwest of the Sanctuary as Herod's tomb (*War* V.506), and even the tomb of the High Priest Caiaphas, whose name is associated with the trial of Jesus, was just recently found in the southern part of Jerusalem and it is also located just outside the 2000 cubits limit of the camp. This shows that even royal and sacerdotal authorities at Jerusalem (no matter how high in power they were) were not allowed a burial within the 2000 cubits' limit of the camp. If this is the case with royal and priestly authorities, one can be assured that no criminal (as Jesus was convicted of being) would find a burial with that 2000 radius. Interestingly, however, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Garden Tomb area are well within the 2000 cubits' zone.

The summit of the Mount of Olives, on the other hand, was different. Joseph of Arimathea, in whose tomb Jesus was placed, though a rich man and a member of the Sanhedrin, also had to have his *newly hewn tomb* (the enlargement of an already existing *cave*) located outside the 2000 cubits' zone. And, of course, the area just south of the southern summit of the Mount of Olives fits the requirements precisely. This region was situated not far south of where the Red Heifer was burnt to ashes (which had to be offered just *outside the camp*). Thus, the summit of Olivet was just outside the city limits of Jerusalem. Remember, the 2000 cubits' radius was figured with a measure at ground level and not as a bird would fly in a direct path. This brought the camp limits closer to the Temple.

### ***Executions were Not Allowed in the City of Jerusalem***

What is certain is that no one could officially be executed or buried “in the middle” of the city of Jerusalem during the time of Jesus. This must be emphasized because there is a second century account by Melito of Sardis that Jesus was crucified “in the middle” of Jerusalem (*On Pascha* 72,94), even “in the middle of the Broadway and in the middle of the city” (para.94). Since Melito made his journey to Jerusalem (then called Aelia) about A.D.160, some scholars have believed that this indication may show that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre could have some credentials because the Temple of Venus which Constantine and his mother selected as the site of Jesus’ passion was clearly, in the time of Melito, “in the middle” of Jerusalem. See the article “Melito and Jerusalem” by A.E.Harvey in *JTS*, n.s. 17 (1966), 401-404.

While this suggestion may appear a reasonable proposition on the surface, there are major difficulties with such an appraisal. Actually, there was no city called “Jerusalem” in Melito’s time. On its site was a thoroughly pagan city called “Aelia” and no Jews in Melito’s period were permitted to step foot within its boundaries (or even to approach sight of it). Melito’s reference to “Jerusalem” was not to “Aelia” (the city in Melito’s time). Melito was referring to the middle of Jerusalem that existed in Jesus’ time. Melito even called *his Jerusalem* “the city of the Hebrews” and it is certain that the Aelia of Melito’s time was clearly *no city* of the Hebrews. Indeed, it can easily be seen what Melito meant by his statement that Jesus was killed in the middle of Jerusalem. Melito was criticizing the Jews in his work *On Pascha* in the same context that Jesus himself gave his rebuke to them in Luke 13:33-35. Jesus said that it was not possible for prophets to be killed *outside* Jerusalem. Notice what Jesus said.

“For it cannot be that a prophet perish *outside* of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth those sent unto her. How oft would I have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathereth her own brood under her wings, and

you would not.” [Jesus was referring to the whole of Jerusalem.]

Melito’s castigations and his reference to Jerusalem were so similar to those of Jesus. Certainly, it is not to be imagined that Jesus in Luke 13:33 intended to be geographically specific in his statement that it was impossible for righteous persons or prophets to be killed “outside Jerusalem” (for many of them were, and even Jesus was crucified “outside the camp”). Jesus simply meant that his own death would occur in the heart of Israel’s society (at the very capital itself). Jesus did not mean, of course, that his death would occur inside the city of Jerusalem itself (which, of course, was prohibited in the first place).

Melito meant the same thing. He did not literally mean (nor did he intend his readers to understand) that Jesus was actually killed in the middle of the new city called Aelia. This has to be the case because Melito also said that Jesus’ death occurred “in the middle of the day” (para.94) and it would be absurd to think he meant that Jesus died precisely at noontime, and this is especially so since he stated in paragraph 71 that Jesus died in the Hebrew evening (which was understood as our afternoon). What Melito meant was that Jesus was crucified in broad daylight and in view of all the people gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover season.

The reference of Melito was not the Aelia which existed in his time (A.D.160). He meant the Jerusalem before its destruction in A.D.70 — “the city of the Hebrews” (which Aelia never was). This fact is even reinforced by his reference to his Jerusalem as the “city of the law, the city accounted righteous” (para.94). In no way could Aelia of the second century (a thoroughly pagan city in every facet of its existence) have met these descriptions of Melito. What Melito had in mind was the Jerusalem in the time of Jesus. And his reference that Jesus was crucified “in the middle” of Jerusalem was not to be understood literally. He was simply referring to Luke 13:33 and not that Jesus was executed at the site of the Temple of Venus which in his day was “in the middle” of Aelia.

### ***Crucifixions Could Occur on the Main Road into Jerusalem***

Melito, however, did mention a point that should be noticed. He said Jesus was crucified “in the middle *of the Broadway*” (para.94). This is interesting because the two witnesses referred to by the apostle John in Revelation are also prophesied to be crucified where their Lord was killed. Many have not noticed this significant point but Revelation 11:8 says that these future witnesses would be killed “*where* their Lord was *ALSO* crucified.” Note the word “also.” It shows that the two witnesses will *also* be crucified, but Revelation 11:8 states as well that their bodies would be exposed to view for three days and a half “*where* their Lord was *also* crucified.” This was *on* or *beside* “the Broadway of the Great City.”

The word “Broadway” in the Greek is *plateia* and it means a wide thoroughfare associated with Jerusalem, not simply the streets and lanes of the city. Could it be that the apostle John is describing a main “Broadway” into the city or into the Temple beside which Jesus himself was earlier crucified? Remember that it was Roman custom to crucify people in prominent places, especially alongside major roads. Quintilian said: “the most crowded roads are chosen [for crucifixions]” (*Declamationes*, 274). In *Alexander Severus*, 23:8 we read: “as a deterrent to others he had them crucified on the street which his slaves used most frequently.” And we are told that Pilate placed the title above the head of Jesus because many Jews were passing that area. The apostle John said “the place where Jesus was crucified was near The Place [the Temple] of the City” (John 19:20, Greek). This means the site of Jesus’ crucifixion was in a well-traveled place where many people could witness his execution.

As we have shown in the earlier chapters of this book, Jesus was crucified near the southern summit of the Mount of Olives and beside a major thoroughfare leading into Jerusalem and the Temple. The apostle John in the Book of Revelation refers to this by saying that the two witnesses will have their dead bodies displayed “*where*

their Lord was *also* crucified.” This location was *on* (or better, *beside*) “The Broadway” (one of the principal boulevards which was a part of the city of Jerusalem).

The only thoroughfare that fits the evidence we have been presenting in this book is the “Broadway” which came from the east over the summit of the Mount of Olives (going beside the village of Bethphage and near the place of the Miphkad Altar). The roadway descended down the western slopes of the mountain, across the Kidron Valley by the two-tiered arched bridge and through the Gate Beautiful (also called the Miphkad Gate) into the eastern precincts of the Temple. From the summit of Olivet into Jerusalem, Luke called it “The Descent of the Mount of Olives” (Luke 19:37).

This “Broadway” must have been very beautiful to behold. In no way could it have been a dirt or a gravel track leading into the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. It was especially holy and constructed in such a manner so that no ritualistic impurities could possibly be allowed on or near it. The one responsible for building this roadway and the bridge was no doubt Herod called the Great (though it was priestly funds that paid for it, *Shekalim* 4:2). He was responsible for constructing the Temple and its adjacent buildings and this certainly included the roads into Jerusalem and the Sanctuary. The fact is, Jerusalem was one of the most beautiful cities on earth in the first century. Josephus took considerable pains to describe the sumptuousness of the kingdom of Herod (the many cities, aqueducts, gymnasiums, theaters, etc. that he constructed) (*War* I.401-428). And this grandeur especially applied to his capital city of Jerusalem. So rich had Jerusalem become in the time of Jesus that Josephus said it was the envy of the world (*War* VI.408).

But Jerusalem and Judaea were not the only areas made glorious by Herod. His generosity spread even to foreign lands. The same type of “Broadway” leading into the city of Antioch was once in need of massive repair, so Herod had two and a half miles of it paved “with polished marble, and as a protection from the rain,

adorned it with a colonnade of equal length” (*War* I.425).

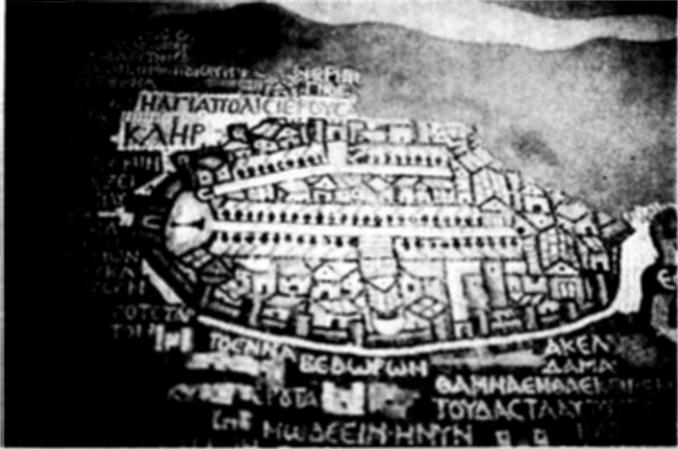
If Herod was so generous with Syrian Antioch in providing them with such a beautiful “Broadway” leading up to their city, it can hardly be imagined that he did less for his own capital city which was considered one of the most majestic urban areas in the Roman Empire. With this in mind, let us recall that the dead bodies of the two witnesses were prophesied by the apostle John to be displayed beside “The Broadway of the Great City” (Jerusalem) “*WHERE ALSO their Lord was crucified*”(Revelation 11:8).

### ***Where was the Broadway of Jerusalem Located?***

If one reads the text strictly, the apostle John is telling his readers that this main street of Jerusalem was “the Broadway” of the city itself. The use of the definite article by John suggests that *this* “Broadway” was either the *only one* leading into Jerusalem or at least one of the principal boulevards. And since the two witnesses are prophesied to have their dead bodies displayed after their crucifixions *on* or *beside* “The Broadway of the Great City (Jerusalem),” it had to be “outside the camp.” We should ask “*Where* was this *Broadway* located that led into Jerusalem?” The apostle John said it was “*where* their Lord was *also* crucified.” From the evidence in this book, it can reasonably be shown that “The Descent of the Mount of Olives” was that “Broadway.”

What we find is that the summit region of the Mount of Olives fits perfectly with all the requirements of the Jews regarding the place of execution for criminals. When the evidence of the New Testament and history are brought together (as I have tried to provide in this book), we can show that Jesus was crucified *east* of Jerusalem (just “outside the camp”) and alongside the principal “Broadway” called “The Descent of the Mount of Olives” which led into the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. This was the area most crowded in Jerusalem at Passover time. And then, after his death, he was buried in the newly-hewn tomb of Joseph of

Arimathea just south of the southern summit of the Mount of Olives.



This is a photograph of the Madaba Mosaic constructed in the sixth century found in a church near the traditional area of Mount Nebo in Jordan. The view is looking eastward and it shows how the city of Jerusalem appeared (in outline form) at the time. Note the immediate center of the photograph (but below the columned street running north to south). There is a rectangular shaped area (with a rounded aspect on its west). This represents the site of the Holy Sepulchre. As mentioned in the text, it gives the appearance of an area a little larger than a football field. It is not orientated directly east and west, but is a little north of east. This region fits precisely with the description of the Monument to John Hyrcanus that Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century, described in his history. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is not the place of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, but it is the memorial tomb area of John Hyrcanus. (Photo: Prof. William S. LaSor)