

# The Bible and Archaeology

## Sections 13-24



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## Article Reprint Series on *The Bible and Archaeology*

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## Can You Believe the Bible?

**W**illiam Ramsay didn't set out to prove the Bible's accuracy. In fact, the young Oxford graduate and budding scholar set sail in 1879 from England for Asia Minor convinced that, based on his university studies, the New Testament—and the book of Acts in particular—was largely a hoax. After all, his professors had taught him that the Bible had been written much later than it claimed to be, so its stories had been fabricated long after the fact and weren't to be taken seriously.

The focus of his work was ancient Roman culture. But the more he dug into it, literally and figuratively, the more he came to see that the myriad of tiny details in the book of Acts—place names, topography, officials' titles, administrative boundaries, customs and even specific structures—fit perfectly with newly discovered historical and archaeological finds. He was gradually convinced that, to use his own words, "in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth."

Contrary to all his earlier education, he was forced to conclude that Luke, the author of Acts, was "a historian of the first rank" and that "not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense . . . This author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."

In an outstanding academic career Ramsay was honored with doctorates from nine universities and eventually knighted for his contributions to modern scholarship. He shocked the academic world when in one of his books he announced that, because of the incontrovertible evidence he had discovered for the truthfulness of the Bible, he had become a Christian. Several of his works on New Testament history are considered classics.

When confronted with the evidence of years of travel and study, Sir William Ramsay learned what many others before him and since have been forced to acknowledge: When we objectively examine the evidence for the Bible's accuracy and veracity, the only conclusion we can reach is that the Bible is true.

The evidence from archaeology is only one proof of Scripture's accuracy, and that's the focus of this series of articles. We offer you a sampling of the evidence that's available—documentation showing that details of the people, places and events described in the Bible, many of them mentioned only in passing, have been verified by archaeologists and historians. Many excellent books have been published in recent years that verify the dependability of Scripture, and no doubt more will follow as new discoveries come to light.

What are the implications of this for you? All the evidence in the world does us no good if we are not willing to believe the Bible enough to put it to the ultimate test—that of *doing what it tells us to do*.

James, the half brother of Jesus, reminds us that mere belief is not enough, because even the demons believe. Instead he tells us we must put our beliefs *into action* if we are to please God (James 2:19-26).

In *The Good News* we regularly offer articles such as those in this issue to help build your faith. But be sure that you don't neglect the articles that show you how to put your faith and belief into action. God is interested to see how you *respond* to the truth He makes known to you. Ultimately that is the far more important test.

—Scott Ashley

# The Downfall of Judah: Exile to Babylon

by Mario Seiglie

In this series *The Good News* examines archaeological finds that confirm and clarify the historical record of the Bible. Several earlier articles discussed the time of the divided kingdom of the Israelites after they split into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah after the death of King Solomon. Two articles described the history of the northern kingdom of Israel, and the last issue portrayed the early years of the southern kingdom of Judah. We continue with an examination of the last years of Judah as a kingdom.

Around 710 B.C. Judah found itself in a dangerous position. A decade before, Judah's fellow Israelites in the kingdom of Israel had been conquered by Assyria. The Assyrians repopulated the land with others brought in from distant parts of the Assyrian Empire.

Judah's territory had been largely devastated by Assyrian armies. Only a great miracle had saved the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the same fate that had overtaken their northern cousins.

Meanwhile, more winds of change were beginning to stir in the region. A new power, Babylon, was rising in the east. Could the tiny, weakened kingdom of Judah survive its precarious position between powerful and warring Assyria, Babylon and Egypt?

The amazing story of Judah's survival is one of the themes of the Old Testament.

## Hezekiah's fateful mistake

Soon after Jerusalem's miraculous deliverance from the Assyrians, Judah's King Hezekiah fell ill. After God healed Hezekiah, a Babylonian prince sent representatives with a message and gift of congratulations for the monarch.

"At that time Berodach-Baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that Hezekiah had been sick" (2 Kings 20:12).

Hezekiah's response to what he naively interpreted as a neighborly act of kindness and reconciliation would prove costly in the end.

"And Hezekiah was attentive to them [the Babylonian ambassadors], and showed them all the house of his treasures—the silver and gold, the spices and precious ointment, and all his armory—all that was found among his treasures. There was nothing in his house or in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them. Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah, and said to him, 'What did these men say, and from where did they come to you?' So Hezekiah said, 'They came from a far country, from Babylon' . . . Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the LORD: "Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and what your fathers have accumulated until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left"' (verses 13-17).

Although Hezekiah proved righteous and faithful as king, he foolishly tried to impress his visitors by showing them the kingdom's wealth and weaponry. The Bible reveals that at this time God withdrew from Hezekiah "in order to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart" (2 Chronicles 32:31). God allowed Hezekiah to make this thoughtless decision. Thus the setting was established for the future Babylonian invasion of Judah and its rich capital, Jerusalem.

## Manasseh: vassal of the Assyrians

After Hezekiah's death his son Manasseh inherited the throne. It wasn't long before the young king departed from his father's righteous example and exposed himself as a wicked ruler. "Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. But he did evil in the sight of the LORD . . ." (2 Chronicles 33:1-2).

"So Manasseh seduced Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD had destroyed . . . And the LORD spoke to



*The mighty Assyrian king Esarhaddon is depicted as towering over captured rulers of Egypt and Tyre. Ropes pass through the lips of both prisoners as they plead for mercy. A similar fate befell Judah's King Manasseh, who was taken away "with hooks" into captivity.*



**Prisoners from Judah play their lyres while guarded by a soldier.** This scene from an Assyrian palace is reminiscent of the words of Psalm 137:1-3 describing Judah's captivity in Babylon: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors . . . said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'" (New International Version).

Manasseh and his people, but they would not listen. Therefore the LORD brought upon them the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze fetters, and carried him off to Babylon" (verses 9-11).

Two Assyrian records corroborate Manasseh's submission to the Assyrians. "The name, 'Manasseh, king of Judah' appears on the Prism of Esarhaddon . . . and on the Prism of Ashurbanipal" as among 22 rulers who paid tribute to Assyria (*The New Bible Dictionary*, 1996, p. 724).

The biblical narrative describing King Manasseh as being carried off "with hooks" (verse 11) refers to nose rings used to lead prisoners by ropes. It was a painful, humiliating and degrading punishment for those who would defy the mighty Assyrian kings.

### Mighty capital of a mighty empire

The Assyrian Empire, with Nineveh as its capital, appeared invincible at the time. James Muir graphically describes this empire at the time of the prophet Nahum (668 B.C.):

"Assyria's expansion across western Asia could be likened to an octopus whose tentacles stretched from the Persian Gulf to the

Nile, and whose head was Nineveh. At that time, Nineveh was considered one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Recently, three of its kings had adorned the city with the wealth of their conquests and had built fabulous palaces. These were made of brick, and on the walls of the palaces were exquisitely crafted bas-reliefs which depicted their great victories. The great walls which surrounded the city measured twelve miles in circumference" (*Archaeology and the Scriptures*, 1965, pp. 182-183).

In spite of Nineveh's greatness, Nahum foretold not only the city's destruction but predicted that it would never be rebuilt. "Behold, I am against you,' says the LORD of hosts; 'I will lift your skirts over your face, I will show the nations your nakedness, and the kingdoms your shame. I will cast abominable filth upon you, make you vile, and make you a spectacle. It shall come to pass that all who look upon you will flee from you, and say, "Nineveh is laid waste! . . .'" (Nahum 3:5-7).

After its destruction, in 612 B.C, this mighty metropolis of the ancient world vanished from view. "Nineveh disappeared so quickly from sight," according to one author, "that when the Greek general Xenophon and

his ten thousand soldiers passed over the site in his famous reconnaissance of the Persian Empire, he didn't realize the ruins of Nineveh were under his feet. What had happened? When Nineveh was put to the torch, everything was burnt, and gradually what was left became an artificial mound covered with grass" (Arnold Brackman, *The Luck of Nineveh*, 1978, p. 21).

Although few would have believed it at the time, Nahum's remarkable prediction came to pass just as he had foretold. Nineveh was rediscovered only in 1845 by British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard. As a result, many treasures from its ruins adorn the galleries of great museums in several countries.

### A scribe who made an impression

After Assyria fell, Babylon ascended to rule the region. With the rise of King Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 B.C), the days of the kingdom of Judah were numbered. Nevertheless, God sent faithful messengers to warn the nation's leaders to return to worship of the one true God before it was too late. Nehemiah said later, "Yet for many years You had patience with them, and testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen; therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands" (Nehemiah 9:30).

One of those prophets was Jeremiah, who lived while the Babylonians were threatening Jerusalem. His faithful scribe, Baruch, wrote down some of Jeremiah's prophecies.

"Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah; and Baruch wrote on a scroll of a book, at the instruction of Jeremiah, all the words of the LORD which He had spoken



**This impression from the seal of Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe, is dramatic proof of the existence of this biblical character. A fingerprint, possibly that of Baruch himself, appears on the left side.**

to him” (Jeremiah 36:4).

Archaeologists recently found a clay impression from Jeremiah’s time bearing not only Baruch’s name, but apparently even his fingerprint!

Tsvi Schneider, who in 1991 served as assistant librarian at Hebrew University’s Institute of Archaeology, writes about a seal with Baruch’s name on it: “The first and best-known biblical name to be identified on a bulla [a lump of clay bearing a seal impression] is Baruch son of Neriah. Baruch was the scribe, loyal friend and political ally of the prophet Jeremiah. The inscription is in three lines and reads: ‘Belonging to Berekhyahu/son of Neriyahu/the scribe.’ The bulla refers to Baruch by his full given name . . . Baruch son of Neriah, the seal impression tells us, was a scribe. Four episodes in the Book of Jeremiah mention Baruch, son of Neriah the scribe” (*Biblical Archaeological Review*, July-August 1991, p. 27).

The librarian explains that the names of three other people from Jeremiah’s day, including Baruch’s brother, appear in other clay impressions and seals. “It is interesting that chapter 36 of the Book of Jeremiah also contains the names of two other people whose seals have been impressed in surviving bullae: ‘Yerahme’el son of the king’ and ‘Gemariah son of Shaphan.’”

The seal of Seriah, Baruch’s brother, has been found as well. Seriah’s name appears several times in Jeremiah 51 (verses 59-64). “The seal reads, in two lines, ‘Belonging to Seriahu/Neriyahu’ . . . Seriah was the brother of Baruch, Jeremiah’s scribe; both Seriah and Baruch were the sons of Neriah and grandsons of Mahseiah (Jeremiah 32:12, 51:59)” (*Biblical Archaeological Review*, p. 30).

These remarkable finds confirm even some of the tiniest details of the Bible—that four people mentioned in the book of Jeremiah were real people who lived in Jerusalem at the time.

### The fall of Jerusalem

The Bible’s account of the conquest of Jerusalem is also confirmed by Babylonian records. First, let’s notice the biblical record: “And the LORD God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising

up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, till there was no remedy. Therefore He brought against them the king of the Chaldeans [Babylonians] . . .” (2 Chronicles 36:15-17).

“Then they burned the house of God [the temple], broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions. And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah . . .” (2 Chronicles 36:19-21).

Jerusalem was actually conquered twice. The city was first captured but not destroyed. Later it fell a second time, in 587 B.C., when it was destroyed as the Bible describes. The city was put to the torch, its palaces and temple burned and its walls demolished. The Bible faithfully describes both defeats but does not specify when the city was conquered the first time.

In 1887 several Babylonian tablets, which archaeologists call *The Babylon Chronicles*, were deciphered. They provided dates of the reigns of many Babylonian kings. More tablets, deciphered in 1956, give the dates of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign and activities. Regrettably, one tablet is missing that could account for the years 594-557 B.C. Other than this gap, the tablets document his reign.

*The Archaeological Commentary on the Bible* explains the significance of the 1956 find: “Until 1956, the date of the first conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was not known. But in that year, several cuneiform tablets were deciphered which gave an exact date for the first conquest—in 597 B.C.” (1979, pp. 143-144).

### Exile to Babylon

Like the Assyrians, the Babylonians deported vanquished peoples to maintain tighter control over conquered territories. As their cousins in the northern kingdom of Israel fell into captivity by Assyria more than a century earlier, Judah’s inhabitants now

were taken to Babylon.

The situation seemed hopeless. Judah was devastated, and the Babylonians forcibly removed most of its citizens. Yet, in spite of their situation, God through His prophets encouraged the people not to give up hope that they would one day return to their homeland. He not only sent prophets to Judah but to Babylon as well. Men such as Daniel and Ezekiel, who both lived in Babylon, spoke of a coming restoration of Judah.

Speaking through Jeremiah, God held out hope for His people: “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters . . . that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace . . . After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place” (Jeremiah 29:4-10).

After these encouraging words, the exiles flourished as a community in Babylon. They were so successful that after the 70 prophesied years of their exile the majority decided to stay. These circumstances nurtured the growth of two large Jewish enclaves in that part of the world, one in Babylon and the other in Jerusalem.

Archaeological evidence demonstrates the kind of favorable conditions that God promised Judah’s inhabitants in Babylon. “In 1933, E.F. Weidner, the Assyriologist, took in hand to look through the tablets and sherds in the basement rooms of the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum . . . Among this dull administrative rubbish Weidner suddenly found some priceless relics of red tape in the ancient world. On four different receipts for stores issued, among them best quality sesame oil, he came upon a familiar biblical name: ‘Ja’-u-kinu’—Jehoiachin! There was no possibility of his name being mistaken, because Jehoiachin was given his full title: ‘King of the [land of] Judah’ . . . Jehoiachin,

*Continued on page 28*

the deposed king of Judah, lived with his family and his retinue in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. We may conclude from Weidner's discovery that the biblical account in the Second Book of Kings may be thus supplemented: 'And for his diet, there was a continual diet given him of the king of Babylon, every day a portion, until the day of his death, all the days of his life' (Jeremiah 52:34)" (Werner Keller, *The Bible as History*, 1980, pp. 303-304).

### **The Bank of Murashu & Sons**

The enterprising inhabitants of Judah, who had come to Babylon as a defeated and captive people, were given considerable leeway by the equally industrious Babylonians. Historian Petra Eisele explains: "Although not much is known of the lives of the Jewish exiles in Babylon, enough is known to confirm their plight was not as harsh as their slavery had been in Egypt during Moses' time. In Babylon they did not live as prisoners or slaves, instead as a 'semi-free' people . . . After the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. and granted the Jews the right to return to their native land, only a minority of these supposedly 'poor prisoners' took advantage of this generous offer. Many did not want to sacrifice the comforts and riches they had acquired in this 'foreign' land and face the uncertainties of going back to their 'homeland.'

"As the clay tablets of commercial documents in the fifth century B.C show, even after the end of the exile, the Babylonian banks were firmly in the hands of the Jews. There was one Jewish banker whose firm, Bank of Murashu & Sons, had greatly expanded into the real estate business. It had its headquarters in nearby Nippur, and had approximately 200 branches throughout the country!" (*Babylon*, quoted in *Editorial EDAF*, 1980, p. 70).

With thriving centers in Babylon and Jerusalem, the Jewish people were better equipped to survive the conquests of the Persians, Greeks and Romans. Several centuries later, in the New Testament period, they remained firmly established in Israel. Against all apparent odds, God's promise that Judah's inhabitants would not remain in their Babylonian captivity was fulfilled.

As we will also see in future articles, archaeology has discovered much from this period to confirm the biblical record. **GN**

# THE BIBLE AND

## The Kingdom of Judah: Exile & Restoration

by Mario Seiglie

**T**he *Good News* has traced the history of the Old Testament from Genesis through the captivity of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. This series has shown that archaeological finds have confirmed and illuminated the biblical account. In this issue we pick up the story with conditions and circumstances that allowed the descendants of the kingdom of Judah to return to their homeland.

Although many of the survivors of the Babylonian invasion of Judah were exiled to Babylon for 70 years, they were not forsaken by God. In fact, some of the greatest Bible prophecies were made at that time, not just to give hope to those suffering captives but to comfort God's people throughout the ages.

### Daniel's astounding prophecies

When Judah was defeated by the Babylonians, Daniel was one of the young princes taken captive and educated in Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's court. The details of Babylonian customs and its governmental system described in the book of Daniel fit nicely with historical records and subsequent archaeological finds.

*The New Bible Dictionary* says about the book of Daniel: "The author gives evidence of having a more accurate knowledge of Neo-Babylonian and early Persian history than any known historian since the 6th century BC . . . He knew enough of 6th century customs to represent Nebuchadnezzar as being able to make and alter the laws of Babylon with absolute sovereignty (Daniel 2:12-13, 46), while depicting Darius the Mede as being helpless to change the laws of the Medes and Persians (Daniel 6:8-9). Also, he accurately represented the change from punishment by fire under the Babylonians (Daniel 3) to punishment by the lions' den under the Persians (Daniel 6), since fire was sacred to them" (1982, p. 263, "Daniel, Book of").

During the period Daniel served in Nebuchadnezzar's court, he received a series of prophecies from God. These remarkable predictions described the final years of the Old Testament era, the Intertestamental period, the days of the New Testament and up to the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

God revealed to Daniel that four kingdoms would

rule a great part of the world from Daniel's time to the coming of God's Kingdom. Although parts of these prophecies, in Daniel 2-12, are in mostly symbolic language, God does reveal the identity of the four kingdoms.

The first was Babylon, the dominant kingdom of Daniel's time (Daniel 2:37-38). Afterwards would come the kingdom of the Medes and the Persians (Daniel 8:20) followed by the Greek Empire (verse 21). Finally the Roman Empire would arise and defeat the Greeks and absorb parts of the previous empires (Daniel 2:40; 7:7, 23).

Although this final empire would experience periodic declines through the centuries, it would not permanently disappear. Rather, at successive intervals it would revive in the form of several incarnations of the "Holy Roman Empire." God revealed to Daniel that the last revival would be guided by a world dictator and a religious leader who would govern with 10 rulers under them. They would rule until the establishment of the Kingdom of God at Christ's return (Daniel 2:41-44; 8:23-26).

### Prophecy of Babylon's downfall

When Daniel received this prophecy, Babylon's power was at its peak. Nebuchadnezzar could boast of his massive building projects that had enlarged and beautified Babylon. "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?" he proudly and rhetorically asked (Daniel 4:30). The existence of Nebuchadnezzar's massive building projects is confirmed by archaeology.

Excavators at the beginning of this century unearthed some of the remains of this vast city. A historian summarizes the finds: "In 1899 the German Oriental Society equipped a large expedition under the direction of Professor Robert Koldewey, the architect, to examine the famous ruined mound of 'Babil' on the Euphrates. The excavations, as it turned out, took longer than anywhere else. In eighteen years the most famous metropolis of the ancient world, the royal seat of Nebuchadnezzar, was brought to light, and at the same time, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the 'Hanging Gardens,' loudly extolled by Greek trav-



**The Ishtar Gate, the main entrance into Babylon, built during the reign of the biblical King Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 B.C.), has been restored in Berlin. Enamelled tiles, mythical animals, lions and gods embellish the gate, which was dedicated to Ishtar, the Babylonian fertility goddess. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and took the people captive to Babylon, where they spent 70 years in exile as punishment for their disobedience to God.**

ellers of a later day, and 'E-temen-an-ki,' the legendary Tower of Babel. In the palace of Nebuchadnezzar and on the Ishtar Gate, which was situated beside it, countless inscriptions were discovered" (Werner Keller, *The Bible as History*, 1980, p. 302).

Regarding Nebuchadnezzar, the same author mentions: "Hardly any other monarch in the past was such an assiduous builder. There is scarcely any mention of warlike activities, conquests and campaigns. In the forefront there is the constant building activity of Nebuchadnezzar. Hundreds of thousands of bricks bear his name, and the plans of many of the buildings have been preserved. Babylon in fact surpassed all the cities of the ancient orient: it was greater

than Thebes, Memphis and Ur, greater even than Nineveh" (Keller, p. 316).

It seemed impossible for this great city to be suddenly conquered. Yet Daniel predicted its demise the same night it fell to the Persians. He interpreted the mysterious handwriting on the wall of the palace and told the king: "'Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians' . . . [and] that very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom . . ." (Daniel 5:28-31).

About 100 years later the Greek historian Herodotus (484-420 B.C.) confirmed Daniel's account of the fall of Babylon: "The Persians, drawing off the river [Euphrates] by a canal into the lake, which

was till now a marsh, he [Cyrus] made the stream to sink till its former channel could be forded. When this happened, the Persians who were posted with this intent made their way into Babylon by the channel of the Euphrates, which had now sunk to about the height of the middle of a man's thigh . . . The Persians thus entered the city . . . and the inhabitants who lived in the central part of Babylon were unaware of the enemies' presence due to the great size of the city and since they were celebrating a festival. They continued dancing and exchanging gifts until they were suddenly told of their sad fate. In this manner was Babylon conquered" (*History*, book 1, paragraphs 191-192).

### Cyrus's acts foretold

True to Bible prophecy, these events occurred when the 70 years of exile expired. Cyrus the Persian, allied with the Medes, conquered the Babylonian Empire and freed the descendants of the kingdom of Judah who had been taken into captivity. Several prophets foretold the fall of Babylon. Isaiah even mentioned Cyrus by name years before he rose to defeat the Babylonians.

Some 200 years before Cyrus was born, God said through Isaiah: "I am the LORD . . . who says of *Cyrus*, 'He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built," and to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid"'

"Thus says the LORD to His anointed, to *Cyrus*, whose right hand I have held—to subdue nations before him and loose the armor of kings, to open before him the double doors, so that the gates will not be shut . . . I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places, that you may know that I, the LORD, *who call you by your name*, am the God of Israel" (Isaiah 44:24, 28; 45:1-3, emphasis added).

In a day when conquerors were ruthless with their captives, Cyrus is known in history as a considerate ruler who offered relative freedom to the peoples previously conquered by the Babylonians.

About a century ago, a clay cylinder inscribed with a decree from King Cyrus was found in the ruins of Babylon. Called the Cyrus Cylinder, it is on display in the



British Museum. Its language is similar to the decree given by Cyrus in the Bible. The main difference is Cyrus's use of Babylonian wording for God. He declares that he was liberating the peoples because a particular "God" had pronounced his name and chosen him in a miraculous way.

Writing from a Babylonian perspective, Cyrus said: "Marduk [the Babylonian name for the chief god] scanned and looked through all the countries, searching for a righteous ruler willing to lead him. He pronounced the name of Cyrus, king of Anshan, and declared him to be the ruler of the world . . . and ordered him to march against his city Babylon . . . Without any battle, he made him enter his town Babylon, sparing Babylon and calamity . . . I gathered all their inhabitants and returned them to their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled . . . all the gods . . . in their former chapels" J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 1969, p. 316).

### Return from exile

The biblical version of the decree, recorded in Ezra 1, reveals the prophecy's fulfillment: "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah.

"Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem. And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:1-4).

Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, records the reactions of the Jews when Cyrus entered Babylon:

"This [prophecy] was known to Cyrus by his reading the book which Isaiah left behind

him of his prophecies; for this prophet said that God had spoken thus to him in a secret vision: 'My will is, that Cyrus, whom I have appointed to be king over many and great nations, send back my people to their own land, and build my temple.'

"This was foretold by Isaiah one hundred and forty years before the temple was demolished. Accordingly, when Cyrus read this, and admired the divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfil what was so written; so he called for the most eminent Jews that were in Babylon, and said to them, that he gave them leave to go back to their own country, and to rebuild their city Jerusalem, and the temple of God . . ." (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XI, Chapter I, Section 2).

Thus the history of the descendants of the kingdom of Judah, the Jews, continued to be recorded in what would become the Bible. However, their brethren of the other Israelitish tribes, taken into captivity earlier by the Assyrians, had by now largely lost their identity in the former Assyrian Empire, just as foretold in prophecy (1 Kings 17).

### Persian period: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

The Old Testament period ends during the era of Persian rule. Several Bible books accurately describe the Persian customs of the time. While the books of Ezra and Nehemiah relate the return of the Jews to the land of Judah, the book of Esther recounts the story of a young Jewish girl named Esther who became the queen of King Xerxes I.

Nehemiah's story begins with his service to the Persian king. "And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king . . ." (Nehemiah 2:1). While the title of cupbearer doesn't sound important today, it was one of the highest government posts of that time.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains: "[The cupbearer was] an officer of high rank at ancient oriental courts, whose duty it was to serve the wine at the king's table. On account of the constant fear of plots and intrigues, a person

must be regarded as thoroughly trustworthy to hold this position . . . His confidential relations with the king often endeared him to his sovereign and also gave him a position of great influence" (1979, Vol. I, p. 837, "Cupbearer").

Archaeologists have discovered a list of salaries paid to the highest Assyrian officials. This record reflects the general values of similar posts in the Persian administration. After the commanding general, the prime minister and the palace authority came the cupbearer, who earned the fourth-largest salary in the kingdom.

Nehemiah had enough wealth accumulated when he arrived as Jerusalem's new governor that he had no need to tax the local populace. Indeed he apparently took it on himself to personally provide for a large number of his Jewish countrymen. "And at my table," he writes, "were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. Now that which was prepared daily was one ox and six choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine. Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor's provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people" (Nehemiah 5:17-18).

### Queen Esther saves the Jews

Even though thousands of Jews successfully resettled the territory of the former kingdom of Judah, many remained dispersed throughout the chief cities of the Persian Empire. The book of Esther gives us a glimpse of the influence the Jewish community had in the empire between 500 and 450 B.C., as well as the problems that influence sometimes engendered.

One of the Persian officials, Haman, complained to the king about the Jews: "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other people's, and they do not keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain" (Esther 3:8). "And the king said to Haman, 'The money and the people are given to you, to do with them as seems good to you'" (verse 11).

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# Archaeology

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As the book that honors her name recounts, thanks to Queen Esther's courage and faith, God miraculously intervened and caused her people to be spared. The book of Esther was obviously written by someone familiar with the procedures and customs of the Persian court of the mid-fifth century B.C.

Much archaeological evidence of this Jewish influence has been found throughout the territory of the Persian Empire. Assyriologist Georges Contreau writes:

"Hundreds of clay tablets have been found dating back to the beginning of the Persian period which deal with a prosperous Jewish enterprise, Murashu and Sons. When Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 587 BC, he deported some of the noble families to Babylon, and the Murashu family was among them.

"The family of exiles prospered in the city of Nippur and reached its maximum influence and wealth under the Persian rule of Artaxerxes I (564-424 BC) and Darius II (423-405 BC). Many of the documents of the firm are written in both cuneiform and Aramaic characters so they can be more easily understood by a wider audience. Most deal with contracts, payments or rentals" (*Daily Life in Babylon and Assyria*, 1958, p. 95).

We have already seen in this article that the Persian customs and history of the account of Esther also ring true. Speaking of Esther, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* notes: "The author employs the customary formula for the beginning of an historical account . . . [and] his references to Persian customs show considerable accurate knowledge . . . More recently cuneiform evidence has been found to show that there was a Persian official named *Marduka* (Mordecai) in Susa [Shushan] at the end of the reign of Darius I or the beginning of the reign of Xerxes" (1962, Vol. II, p. 151, "Esther, Book of").

In the book of Esther, Mordecai is Esther's uncle and is a high government official who is ultimately named as prime minister to the king.

We will continue the story with a fascinating era: the Intertestamental period, the time between the testaments, when the events described in the books of the Old Testament history were completed but before the events that introduced the four Gospels. **GN**

# The Intertestamental Period: Daniel's Prophecies Come to Pass

by Mario Seiglie

**T**his series has traced the history of the Old Testament from Genesis through the captivity of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, describing archaeological finds and historical accounts that have confirmed and illuminated the biblical account. In this issue we show more evidence that confirms the accuracy of the Bible accounts by picking up the story with the Intertestamental period: the time between the testaments, when the events described in the books of the Old Testament were completed but before the events that introduced the four Gospels.

During this 420 years several crucial prophecies were fulfilled, dramatizing the authenticity of God's Word and setting the stage for another prophesied event: the appearance of the Messiah.

The Old Testament comes to a close shortly after the events in the books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. However, Daniel's prophecies continue to forecast events within the Intertestamental period.

## Alexander the Great in prophecy

In a vision, God revealed to Daniel that the kingdom to rise after the Persians would be the Greeks under Alexander the Great. Gabriel, the angelic messenger from God, explained to Daniel: "The ram which you saw, having the two horns—they are the kings of Media and Persia. And the male goat is the kingdom of Greece. The large horn that is between its eyes is the first king. As for the broken horn and the four that stood up in

its place, four kingdoms shall arise out of that nation, but not with its power" (Daniel 8:20-21).

The Persian kingdom rapidly came to an end in 333 B.C. when Alexander the Great defeated the armies of Darius III at Issus. Yet, 10 years later, true to the prophecy in Daniel 8, Alexander unexpectedly died and the Greek Empire divided into four parts, each headed by one of his four generals.

God's people were miraculously saved and liberated when, according to Josephus, Cyrus saw his name and feats prophesied in the Bible. The writings of Josephus also include an account of Alexander the Great sparing Jerusalem from destruction after he saw his exploits prophesied in Scripture.

When Alexander descended on the Middle East, it was natural that almost everyone resisted him. Those who did were mercilessly trampled before him. Neighboring

Phoenicia felt Alexander's wrath when he utterly destroyed Tyre. It seemed the same fate awaited rebellious Jerusalem, which had backed the hapless Persians crushed by Alexander at Issus.

## Surprising showdown at Jerusalem

Josephus recounts how Alexander's troops surrounded the city and readied themselves to attack. Suddenly the city gates swung open, and out came the high priest with his entourage.

Josephus writes: "... For Alexander, when he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priests stood clothed with fine linen, and



*The rise of the Grecian empire of Alexander the Great was prophesied by Daniel well before Alexander rose to conquer most of the known world of his day.*

*During this period several crucial prophecies were fulfilled, dramatizing the authenticity of God's Word and setting the stage for another prophesied event: the appearance of the Messiah.*

the high priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his mitre on his head, having the golden plate whereon the name of God was engraved, he approached by himself, and adored that name, and first saluted the high priest . . . whereupon the kings of Syria and the rest were surprised at what Alexander had done, and supposed him disordered in his mind. However, Parmenio alone went up to him, and asked him how it came to pass that, when all others adored him, he should adore the high priest of the Jews?

"To whom he replied, 'I did not adore him, but that God who hath honoured him with his high priesthood; for I saw this very person in a dream, in this very habit [clothing], when I was at Dios in Macedonia, who . . . exhorted me to make no delay, but boldly to pass over the sea thither, for that he would conduct my army, and would give me the dominion over the Persians; whence . . . now seeing this person in it, and remembering that vision . . . I believe that I bring this army under the divine conduct . . .'

". . . And when the book of Daniel shewed him, wherein Daniel declared that one of the Greeks should destroy the empire of the Persians, he supposed that himself was the person intended; and as he was then glad, he . . . bade them ask what favours they pleased of him; whereupon the high priest desired that they . . . might pay no tribute on the seventh year. He granted all they desired . . ." (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XI, viii, 5).

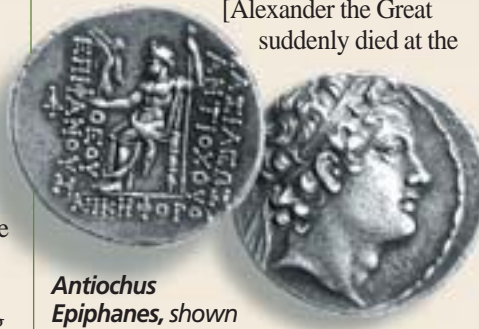
### Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the abomination of desolation

Thus began the Greek reign over Judea, which would last 150 years. In chapter 11, Daniel prophesied the changes in fortune the Jews would know under the Greeks. After Alexander died Judea became part of the realm of General Ptolemy, who governed from Egypt. By and large the period was peaceful for the Jews.

However, the intermittent wars between the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria for complete control of the Greek Empire came to a head in 198 B.C. In that year the Ptolemies saw defeat. Judea then came under the dominion of the Seleucids.

Shortly after the Seleucid line of the Greek Empire began governing Judea, a king arose who was to fulfill several dire prophecies recorded in Daniel. According to historians, Antiochus IV Epiphanes was the ruler who set up the first "abomination of desolation" mentioned in Daniel 8 and 11.

Daniel 8:8-13 describes this time: "Therefore the male goat [the Greek Empire] grew very great; but when he became strong, the large horn was broken [Alexander the Great suddenly died at the



**Antiochus Epiphanes**, shown here on a silver coin of his empire, tried to stamp out Jewish religious practices, abolished the Jerusalem temple sacrifices and desecrated the temple by sacrificing swine on the altar.

apex of his power], and in place of it four notable ones came up toward the four winds of heaven [Alexander's kingdom was divided among his four top generals]" (verse 8).

"And out of one of them came a little horn [Antiochus IV Epiphanes] which grew exceedingly great toward the south [Egypt], toward the east [Mesopotamia], and toward the Glorious Land [Judea] . . . He even exalted himself as high as the Prince of the host; and by him the daily sacrifices were taken away, and the place of His sanctuary [the temple at Jerusalem] was cast down . . . Then I heard a holy one speaking . . . 'How long will the vision be, concerning the daily sacrifices and the transgression of desolation . . .?'" (verses 9-13).

The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* says of Antiochus Epiphanes: "His career with respect to Palestine is recorded in 1 and 2 Maccabees, and remarkably predicted in [Daniel] 11:21-35" (Vol. I, p. 145, "Antiochus IV Epiphanes"). The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees

are not included in the traditional Hebrew canon of Scripture but are valuable as historical accounts. Both books were written before the birth of Christ.

### Antiochus's cruel reign

A brief history of the three years of the "abomination of desolation" under Antiochus Epiphanes is to be found in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*:

"This part of the vision anticipated the rise of a ruler in the Greek Empire who subjugated the people and land of Israel, desecrated her temple, interrupted her worship, and demanded for himself the authority and worship that belongs to God. He desecrated the temple and abolished the daily sacrifice.

"Antiochus sent his general Apollonius with 22,000 soldiers into Jerusalem on what was purported to be a peace mission. But they attacked Jerusalem on the Sabbath, killed many people, took many women and children as slaves, and plundered and burned the city. In seeking to exterminate Judaism and to Hellenize the Jews, he forbade the Jews to follow their religious practices (including their festivals and circumcision), and commanded that copies of the Law be burned. Then he set up the abomination that causes desolation.

"In this culminating act he erected on December 16, 167 BC an altar to Zeus on the altar of burnt offering outside the temple, and had a pig offered on the altar. The Jews were compelled to offer a pig on the 25th of each month to celebrate Antiochus Epiphanes' birthday. Antiochus promised apostate Jews great reward if they would set aside the God of Israel and worship Zeus, the god of Greece. Many in Israel were persuaded by his promises and worshiped the false god. However, a small remnant remained faithful to God, refusing to engage in those abominable practices. Antiochus IV died insane in Persia in 163 BC" (*Logos Library System*, 1997).

The precision of Daniel's description of events of this period (given more than 300 years earlier) have led many Bible critics to redate the book of Daniel to after these events took place. They would not

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admit that the events had been prophesied. However, thanks to the discovery in 1948 of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which include parts of every Old Testament book except Esther, the traditional date of Daniel has gained additional support.

Explains Gleason Archer, professor of Old Testament and Semitic studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School: "In order to avoid the impact of the decisive evidence of supernatural inspiration with which Daniel so notably abounds, it was necessary for rationalistic scholarship to find some later period in Jewish history when all the 'predictions' had already been fulfilled, such as the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 BC) . . . With the wealth of new data from the manuscripts of the Dead Sea caves, it is possible to settle this question once and for all" (*Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, 1982, p. 282).

Thanks to this new linguistic evidence, Dr. Archer proceeds to show the accuracy of the traditional dating of Daniel (around 530 B.C.).

## **Jews lose their independence to Rome**

In 164 B.C., with the heroic leadership of the Maccabean family, the Jews overthrew their Syrian oppressors. For a century they enjoyed their Jewish independence under the rule of the Maccabean descendants. However, in 63 B.C. the Roman general Pompey conquered Judea, making it Roman territory.

Several decades later the Jews would suffer greatly when the Romans chose Herod the Great as king of Judea. He reigned from 37 to 4 B.C. His last years bring the Intertestamental period to a close and usher in the New Testament era.

Continue reading *The Good News* for other articles in this series examining how archaeological evidence confirms the authenticity of God's Word.

If you would like to learn more about Bible prophecy, including the many prophecies of Daniel that remain to be fulfilled, be sure to request your free copies of the booklets *Is the Bible True?* and *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*. Both are free for the asking when you contact our office in your country (or the country nearest you) listed on page 2. **GN**

# Jesus Christ: The Early Years

by Mario Seiglie

**T**he Good News has traced some of the many historical and archaeological findings that confirm and clarify the biblical record of the Old Testament, a record that spans some 4,000 years. We continue that survey into the New Testament era.

How much has archaeology confirmed about the New Testament period? Are the many names mentioned in the New Testament real people? Can their existence be verified by credible historical evidence other than the Bible?

Although the time in question is much briefer—less than a century—archaeology has much to tell us about the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth and His apostles. As we examine this period, the physical evidence supporting the biblical record multiplies. Let's begin this fascinating archaeological journey into the New Testament world.

Appropriately, the Old Testament ends with God's promise to send a messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah. In Malachi, apparently the last prophetic book of the Old Testament to be written, the final two chapters record a dramatic prophecy: "'Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,' says the LORD of Hosts" (Malachi 3:1).

It should come as no surprise that the story flow of the New Testament begins where the last of the Old Testament prophets leaves off—with the arrival of the messenger foretold by Malachi. This shows a continuation from the Old to the New Testament, bearing in mind that a few hundred years had passed in the interim.

At the beginning of Luke's gospel, an angel tells Zacharias the priest about the fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi. The messenger prophesied by God in the Old Testament would be his son John (the Baptist), who would prepare the way for the Christ. The angel told him: "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John . . . He will also go before Him in the

spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:13, 17).

Thus, at the start of Luke's gospel, the stage is set for the first coming of the Messiah.

## Herod the mighty king

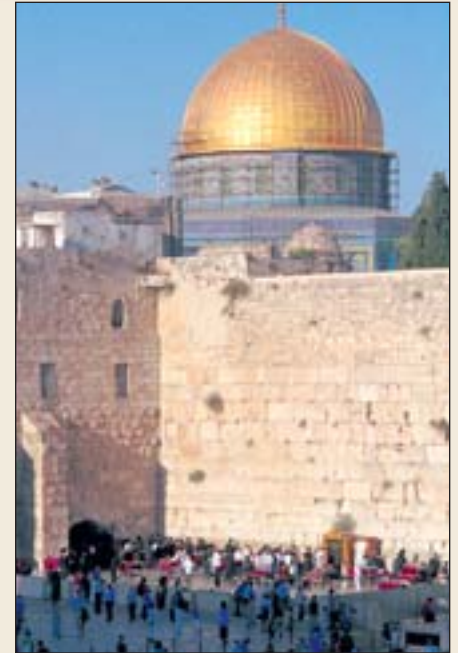
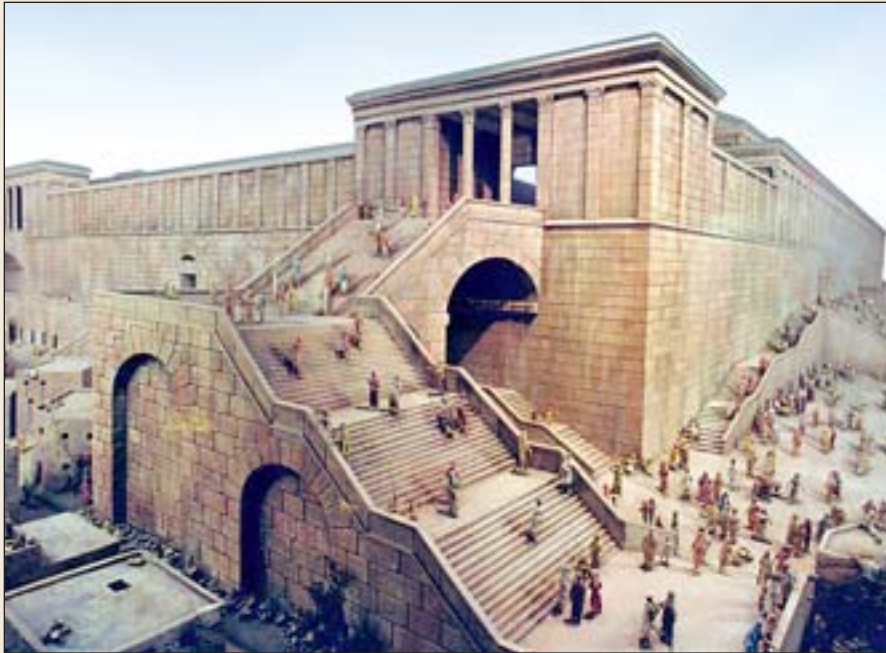
One of the first people to appear in the New Testament account is King Herod. Matthew takes us to the court of Herod the Great: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him . . .

"Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also'" (Matthew 2:1-3, 7-8).

Was Herod a real figure, and was he the king at this time? Yes. Secular history and archaeology have confirmed his existence and reign beyond a doubt. He is known in history as Herod the Great. Under the Romans this non-Israelite king had ruled the province of Judea (most of the area of the former kingdoms of Israel and Judah) for almost 40 years when Jesus Christ appeared on the scene. Herod was a great builder and left his name on many monuments. He was a famous figure in Jewish and Roman history.

John McRay, archaeologist and Wheaton College professor of New Testament, summarizes Herod's reign: "Archaeological excavations have uncovered a surprisingly large amount of evidence pertaining to Herod the Great . . . Herod the Great was an Idumean who, in 41 B.C., was granted provisional rule of Galilee by Mark Antony [the friend

*Although the time frame is much briefer—less than a century—archaeology has much to tell us about the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth and His apostles.*



**The Jerusalem temple** was but one of the enormous construction projects of Herod the Great. The partial model above, from Jerusalem's Tower of David Museum, shows how the southwest corner of the temple platform and the magnificent staircase that provided access to the

temple from the lower city likely appeared in Jesus Christ's day. Large areas of the platform's massive retaining walls are still visible today, most notably at the Western Wall, right, now dominated by the Dome of the Rock, built by Muslims on the former temple platform.

of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra's last lover] . . . In 30 B.C. Octavian (Caesar Augustus) affirmed Herod's rule over Judea, Samaria, and Galilee . . . Herod remained in power until his death in 4 B.C.; thus Christ was born in Bethlehem prior to that date" (*Archaeology and the New Testament*, 1997, p. 91).

One of the main reasons Herod is referred to as Herod the Great has to do with his extensive and exquisite building projects. F.F. Bruce, former professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester in England, says, "Had Herod done nothing else, he would have made a secure niche in history for himself as a great builder" (*New Testament History*, 1972, p. 20).

He is known to have initiated construction projects in at least 20 cities or towns in Israel and more than 10 in foreign cities. Two inscriptions pertaining to Herod have been found in Athens. One reads: "The people [erect this monument to] King Herod, lover of the Romans, because of his beneficence and good will [shown] by him." The other said: "The people [erect

this monument to] King Herod, devout and lover of Caesar, because of his virtue and beneficence" (*ibid.*, p. 92).

Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, confirms Herod's great construction projects outside Israel: "And when he had built so much, he shewed the greatness of his soul to no small number of foreign cities . . . And are not the Athenians . . . full of donations that Herod presented them withal!" (*Wars of the Jews*, Book I, Chapter XXI, Section 11).

Of his notable building achievements inside Israel, six are generally acclaimed as the most notable: (1) his renovation of the temple and expansion of the temple platform in Jerusalem; (2) Herodium, his palace-fortress near Bethlehem, encased in a manmade mountain; (3) his magnificent palace at Jericho, equipped with a swimming pool more than 100 feet long; (4) Masada, a mountain fortress where he built two palaces (the site was later immortalized as the last holdout of the Jews in defense of their country against the Romans); (5) Caesarea, a manmade port city built under his supervision that became the official head-

quarters of the Romans; and (6) Samaria, the capital of the former kingdom of Israel, which he rebuilt and renamed Sebaste.

Of the six, all except Herodium and Masada are mentioned in Scripture.

From studying the remains of Herod's vast building programs, archaeologists and architects have nothing but praise for the beauty, massiveness, ingenuity and practicality of his projects. For instance, at the base of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem archaeologists discovered, among other massive foundation stones, one block that weighed 415 tons. In comparison, the largest blocks in the Great Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt weigh only 15 tons, and the megaliths in Stonehenge, England, weigh only up to 40 tons.

### Herod the cruel king

Herod was known not just for his great building, political and military skills but for his great cruelty. The Bible gives us an indication of his utter disregard for human life in its record of his reaction to hearing of the birth of Jesus.

Having heard that a "King of the Jews"

had been born, Herod was greatly disturbed by this potential threat to his power and throne (Matthew 2:1-3). When his scheme to identify the newborn Messiah failed (verses 7-8, 12), Herod lashed out violently.

“Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under [the approximate age of Jesus], according to the time which he had determined from the wise men” (verse 16).

The massacre in Bethlehem was not out of character for Herod. A.T. Robertson, chairman of New Testament interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, shows us Herod’s savagery. Dr. Robertson describes Herod’s cruelty even toward those in his own family:

“Those familiar with the story of Herod the Great in Josephus can well understand the meaning of these words. Herod in his rage over his family rivalries and jealousies put to death the two sons of Mariamne [his wife] (Aristobulus and Alexander), Mariamne herself, and Antipater, another son and once his heir, besides the brother and mother of Mariamne (Aristobulus, Alexandra) and her grandfather John Hyrcanus. He had made will after will and was now in a fatal illness and fury over the question of the Magi. He showed his excitement and the whole city was upset because the people knew only too well what he could do when in a rage over the disturbance of his plans” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Bible Explorer Software, 1997).

The New Testament description of Herod the Great is thus confirmed by what historians and archaeologists have found concerning his rulership, building projects, political strength and uncontrollable wrath toward anyone threatening his kingship.

### Caesar Augustus’s census

Luke, the meticulous historian, introduces other famous personages in his account of the birth of Christ. “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.

So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city” (Luke 2:1-3).

Caesar Augustus, or Octavian, was Julius Caesar’s adopted son. He ruled the Roman Empire for 57 years (43 B.C. to A.D. 14) and established an era of peace and stability that would facilitate the growth of Christianity.

Archaeologists have made great progress in discovering how and when a Roman census was taken. Ancient papyrus census decrees have been found for the years 20, 34, 48, 62 and 104. These show they normally took place every 14 years, although local counts at times were taken more frequently.

A papyrus in the British Museum describes a census similar to Luke’s account, taken in 104, in which people were ordered to return to their birthplaces. It reads: “Gaius Vibius Mazimus, Prefect of Egypt: Seeing that the time has come for the house to house census, it is necessary to compel all those who for any cause whatsoever are residing out of their provinces to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census and may also attend diligently to the cultivation of their allotments” (Frederick G. Kenyon, *Greek Papyri in the British Museum*, 1907, plate 30).

For many years some scholars had doubted the Bible’s accuracy since they thought Luke had erroneously referred to another Quirinius who ruled a decade after Christ’s birth. But now the biblical account has been confirmed by further evidence.

Researcher Randall Price writes: “Some recent archaeological evidence has provided new insights into the time and place of the birth of Jesus. The Gospel of Luke gives the time of birth with a specific reference to a census decreed by Quirinius, the governor of Syria (Luke 2:2). While inscriptional evidence reveals that there was more than one ruler with this name, a Quirinius within the time frame of Jesus’ birth has been found on a coin placing him as proconsul of Syria and Cilicia from 11 B.C. until after 4 B.C.” (*The Stones Cry Out*, 1997, p. 299).

### Joseph’s occupation in Nazareth

Once Herod died, Joseph and Mary

brought Jesus back to Israel and returned to their home in Nazareth. Joseph was a skilled craftsman who worked not only with wood but with stone masonry.

“The Greek word *tekton*, translated ‘carpenter’ in Mark 6:3, has the root meaning of ‘artisan,’ that is, a skilled worker who works on some hard material such as wood or stone or even horn or ivory . . . In Jesus’ day construction workers were not as highly specialized as in today’s work force. For example, the tasks performed by carpenters and masons could easily overlap” (Richard A. Batey, *Jesus & the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus*, 1991, p. 76).

Jesus learned the trade from Joseph and lived in the area of Nazareth most of His life. Although Nazareth was a small Galilean village of no more than a few hundred inhabitants, Joseph and Jesus likely found steady work in the city of Sepphoris four miles away.

About the time of Jesus’ birth, Herod Antipas—son of Herod the Great and ruler over Galilee who would later order the execution of John the Baptist—chose Sepphoris as his capital. “For more than three decades while Jesus grows up in nearby Nazareth a huge construction project continues, as Sepphoris rapidly becomes the largest and most influential city in the region . . . Joseph and Jesus knew of the construction of the new capital and would have been acquainted with artisans and other workers employed on the site” (Batey, p. 70).

Recent archaeological excavations in Sepphoris show it to have been a bustling, prosperous city during the years Jesus grew up in nearby Nazareth. This historical record helps us better understand the background of Christ’s teachings, which included illustrations drawn not just from farming and animal husbandry, but also construction, rulers and nobility, the theater, government, finance and other aspects of city life.

In the next article in this series we will continue with important background information that helps us better understand the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. **GN**



# Jesus Christ's Early Ministry

by Mario Seiglie

**I**n the September-October *Good News* we examined historical and archaeological evidence that helps us better understand the time in Judea when Jesus Christ was born and grew up in the household of Joseph and Mary. We continue with the beginning of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

After briefly discussing Jesus' childhood, the Gospels go right into His ministry. According to Luke, "Jesus . . . began His ministry at about thirty years of age . . ." (Luke 3:23).

Archaeologists generally date the start of Christ's ministry to the year A.D. 27. "The beginning of Jesus' public ministry," writes archaeology professor John McRay, "is dated by synchronisms [chronological arrangements of events and people] in the Gospel of Luke (3:1-2). A date of A.D. 27 seems likely . . . The dates mentioned by Luke are rather well established . . ." (*Archaeology and the New Testament*, 1997, p. 160).

## Nazareth, Jesus' hometown

At first Jesus Christ's ministry centered on the hill country of Galilee and Nazareth, His hometown. "So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read" (Luke 4:16).

During the last century archaeological excavations have confirmed the New Testament description of Nazareth as a small, insignificant village. The Gospels record that one of the disciples, Nathanael of nearby Cana, quipped, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). So far archaeologists have found it to have been an agricultural village with wine and olive presses, caves for storing grains and cisterns for water and wine.

However, Jesus' ministry in Nazareth was short-lived. When Jesus entered the synagogue and revealed He was the Messiah, the townspeople rejected His message and tried to kill Him. "So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the

brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way. Then He went down to Capernaum . . ." (Luke 4:28-31).

The Bible reveals that some members of Jesus' own family did not believe in Him and were embarrassed when He cast out demons. At one point they thought He had lost His mind. "Then the multitude came together again [seeking healing], so that they could not so much as eat bread. But when His own people heard about this, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, 'He is out of His mind' . . . Then His brothers and His mother came, and standing outside they sent to Him, calling Him. And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, 'Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You.' But He answered them, saying, 'Who is My mother, or My brothers?' And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, 'Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother'" (Mark 3:20-21, 31-35).

Jesus ended His ministry in Nazareth with the words, "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country" (Luke 4:24).

## Relocation to Capernaum

Having been rejected in His hometown of Nazareth, Christ moved to Capernaum, one of the towns around the harp-shaped Sea of Galilee. This region had a large population sustained by a thriving agricultural and fishing industry.

"Their soil," wrote the Jewish historian Josephus, "is universally rich and fruitful, and full of the plantations of trees of all sorts, insomuch that it invites, by its fruitfulness, the most slothful to take pains in its cultivation. Accordingly it is all cultivated by its inhabitants, and no part lies idle" (*Wars of the Jews*, Book III, Chapter III, Section 2). Jesus drew many of His parables and illustrations from daily life and activities around the lake.

The site of Capernaum, which means "village

*Although the time frame is brief—less than a century—archaeology has much to tell us about the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth and His apostles.*



**This beautiful limestone synagogue in Capernaum was built in the fourth or fifth century on the foundation of an earlier first-century structure. The earlier structure was likely the very synagogue in which Jesus Christ taught.**

which closely follows the plan of the later limestone synagogue, must also be a synagogue, and very likely the one in which Jesus preached” (*Biblical Archaeological Review*, November-December 1983, p. 27).

### **Peter’s house discovered?**

Between this synagogue and the nearby lake, excavators discovered what many believe to be the remains of the house of the apostle Peter. Along with his brother Andrew, Peter made his living as a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:18). Matthew records that Peter had a house in Capernaum in which Jesus healed his mother-in-law (Matthew 8:5, 14-15).

In 1968 the excavators of the synagogue investigated the remains of a nearby octagonal structure with mosaic floors. During the Byzantine period such structures often were constructed over what were thought to be significant religious sites.

Archaeologists dated the structure to the fifth century. Beneath it they found an earlier church that they dated to the fourth century based on writings and inscriptions on the walls. The central hall of this church “was part of an earlier house built, according to the excavators, in the mid-first century A.D.” (McRay, p. 164).

“The first century house was built around two courtyards with the outside entrance opening directly into one of the courtyards. A *taboun* (round oven) was found in this courtyard, which indicates it was used as the main family room. The southern courtyard may have been used for animals or as a working area. In either size or building material, the house is not unlike all the other houses found in Capernaum” (McRay, pp. 164-165).

In other ways, however, the house was distinctly different. At some point early in its history the house’s large center room had been plastered, making it the only house in Capernaum yet discovered to have plastered walls. The walls and floor were later replastered twice.

“During the mid-first century the pottery used in the room ceased to be of the typical domestic variety. Only storage jars and oil lamps were found after this point. Thus the use of the room must have changed from normal residential living. More than one

of Nahum,” was identified in 1838 and was extensively excavated during this century. What have archaeologists found?

John Laughlin, professor of religion at Averett College, Danville, Va., participated in excavations at Capernaum. He comments: “What is known indicates that at this time Capernaum was a small village located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee with a population of probably no more than 1,000 people. The few architectural remains indicate the buildings were spacious and well constructed of dressed stones and large amounts of plaster. This suggests that the village flourished economically during Jesus’ time. Its location on the crossroads of important trade routes, the fertile lands surrounding it and the rich fishing available all contributed to its economic development” (*Biblical Archaeological Review*, September-October 1993, p. 59).

### **The synagogue at Capernaum**

“Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbaths . . . Now He arose from the synagogue and . . . when the sun was setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them” (Luke 4:31, 38, 40).

Archaeologists have found at Capernaum the remains of a beautiful limestone synagogue dated to the fourth or fifth century. Yet what caused more excitement was the discovery in the 1960s that beneath this building was the foundation of an earlier synagogue built of basalt, which is common to that area, that apparently dates to Christ’s time.

The Gospels even include the detail of who built the synagogue in Capernaum. “Now when [Jesus] concluded all His sayings in the hearing of the people, He entered Capernaum. And a certain centurion’s servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die. So when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to Him, pleading with Him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, ‘for he loves our nation, and *has built us a synagogue*’” (Luke 7:1-5, emphasis added throughout).

It was a tradition among the Jews to build a new synagogue on the foundation of the older one. “Pottery found in and under this basalt floor,” explains archaeologist Hershel Shanks, “clearly dates the basalt structure to the first century A.D. or earlier. Since the site of a synagogue rarely changed in antiquity, this basalt building,

hundred fifty inscriptions were scratched on its walls in Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin from this time until the fourth century . . .

“Sometime after the first century two pillars were erected to raise the roof of the large central room, creating an impressively high ceiling. The fifth-century octagonal chapel was built with the center of its concentric walls directly over this room. Evidence now available suggests that this chapel was built over a first-century house which was set apart in the middle of that century as a public area. It was made into a church and at some point came to be venerated as the house of Peter. It would not be

lake. Why did dangerous storms sometimes arise on what normally should have been a large, placid inland lake?

“We do not realize,” explains biblical geographer George Adam Smith, “that the greater part of our Lord’s ministry was accomplished at what may be truly called the bottom of a trench, 680 feet below sea level . . . The cold currents, as they pass from the west, are sucked down in vortices of air, or by the narrow gorges that break upon the Lake. Hence sudden storms arise [for] which the region is notorious” (*The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 1931, p. 286).

Some who have doubted the biblical

than half an hour the placid sunshine had become a raging storm. This is what happened to Jesus and His disciples on certain occasions” (*Daily Bible Study Commentary*, Bible Explorer Software).

### Discovery of a fishing boat of Jesus’s time

A few years ago archaeologists excavated a fishing boat dating to around the time of Christ.

“An example of the sort of boat Jesus and the disciples used was found buried in mud on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee in January 1986,” notes archaeologist John McRay. “It is the first work boat found on an inland lake in the entire Mediterranean area. The boat, dating between the first century B.C. and the end of the first century A.D., was excavated that February and found to measure 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide and 4.5 feet high. It would have accommodated about fifteen average-size men of Jesus’ Galilee . . . Originally it had a mast for sailing and two oars on each side. Jesus and his disciples could easily fit into such a boat and their use is mentioned or inferred often in the Gospels” (McRay, p. 170).

Many details in the Gospels, such as fishing methods and the use of different nets, reflect an accurate description of Jesus’ time. When Christ said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea” (Matthew 13:47), He was referring to the most common method of commercial fishing in His day—using a seine.

Historian and Jewish fisherman Mendel Nun, who in 1993 had lived near the Sea of Galilee for 50 years, writes: “The seine, or dragnet, is the oldest type of net. Until recently, it was the most important fishing method on the lake . . . [The parable of the dragnet] exactly fits the function of the seine. It is spread into the sea, then dragged to the shore; in the process all kinds of fish are caught, which the fishermen sitting on the shore sort out. The ‘bad’ ones refer to the scaleless catfish, forbidden by Jewish law and not even offered for sale” (*Biblical Archaeology Review*, November-December 1993, p. 52).



*Jesus Christ spent much of the time of His ministry in Galilee. This view, from the traditional site of the Mount of the Beatitudes near Capernaum, looks south over the Sea of Galilee.*

prudent to apply the data beyond that” (McRay, pp. 165-166).

### Around the Sea of Galilee

The Gospels record even such detail as meteorological conditions around the Sea of Galilee. “Now when they had left the multitude, [the disciples] took [Jesus] along in the boat as He was. And other little boats were also with Him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling” (Mark 4:36-37).

Since most of Christ’s disciples lived around the Sea of Galilee, it is not surprising many of them were fishermen. The Gospels faithfully describe the life, work and occasional dangers of fishing in the

accounts of sudden storms on the lake have been caught by surprise. William Barclay notes: “Dr. W.M. Christie, who spent many years in Galilee, mentioned a company of visitors who were standing on the shore of Lake Galilee, and, noting the glassy surface of the water and the smallness of the lake, expressed doubts as to the possibility of such storms as those described in the gospels. Almost immediately the wind sprang up. In twenty minutes the sea was white with foam-crested waves. Great billows broke over the towers at the corners of the city walls, and the visitors were compelled to seek shelter from the blinding spray, though now two hundred yards from the lakeside. In less



**This ancient fishing boat, found in the mud of the Sea of Galilee in 1986, dates to the time of Christ. The boat is apparently typical of the fishing boats commonly used at the time and mentioned often in the Gospels. Several of the disciples were fishermen.**

Matthew 4:18 describes a different type of net. “And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen.” This refers to a cast net, which is used by a single fisherman. It is circular, some 20 feet in diameter, with lead sinkers attached to the edge.

“Like the seine,” comments Mendel Nun, “the cast net is an ancient device. Complete cast nets have been found in Egyptian tombs dating to the second millennium B.C. Two kinds were used in the Sea of Galilee, one for large fish and the other for sardines” (ibid., p. 53).

No wonder this Jewish fishing expert concludes about the Gospel accounts,

“I am continually surprised at how accurately the New Testament writers reflect natural phenomena on the lake” (ibid., p. 47).

### **The wedding in Cana**

“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding . . . There were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece” (John 2:1-2, 6).

One of the curious parts of the wedding account is the mention of large stone waterpots. In the ancient world such large containers were normally made of pottery or wood. It was an enormous and expensive effort to carve large pots from stone. Was this a period when the purity laws were enforced to the point that these pots were common in Israel?

“Until recently this

question plagued historians of the era called the late second Temple period,” writes Israeli archaeologist Yitzhak Magen.

“Indeed, recent excavations have confirmed that Jews of all social and economic levels were deeply concerned with ritual purity in this period . . . Stone vessels were considered immune from impurity, and their popularity during this short period provides strong evidence of heightened interest in ritual purity among all Jews . . .

“Large vessels—sometimes made from stone blocks weighing almost 800 pounds—were manufactured on massive heavy-duty lathes. Some of these vessels . . . may have been used to store ritually clean water for washing hands, as illustrated in the New Testament story of Jesus’

transformation of water into wine at Cana, in Galilee . . . Stone vessels have been unearthed at more than 60 sites” (*Biblical Archaeological Review*, September-October 1998, pp. 49-50).

Even such incidental details as the large waterpots mentioned in the Gospels have been explained by archaeological findings and discovered to have been in common use at the time.

### **Jacob’s well and Mount Gerizim**

“So he came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Now Jacob’s well was there” (John 4:5-6).

“Jacob’s well,” explains Professor McRay, “is one of the few sites whose identity is agreed upon by Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Samaritans alike.” It is still in use. “During annual visits over the past twenty years,” he adds, “I have always found cold, refreshing water in the well” (McRay, p. 181).

Nearby, on the northern top of Mount Gerizim, archaeologists have found what appears to be the remains of the temple of Mount Gerizim mentioned in John 4:20. The building was 66 feet long by 66 feet wide by 30 feet high and was in the center of a large courtyard.

“The discovery of this monumental structure dating from the Hellenistic period on Mount Gerizim above Shechem, the chief city of the Samaritans,” comments *The International Bible Dictionary*, “has led the excavator to call the complex the Samaritan temple and the unhewn stone half cube the Samaritan altar of sacrifice [which present-day Samaritans still revere]. The remains of this altar would have been visible to Jesus and the Samaritan woman from Jacob’s well, as it is today” (*Supplement Volume*, 1976, p. 361).

So the scene from John 4 of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, with Jacob’s well and the temple of Gerizim as the backdrop, also reflects a historical setting.

Through these archaeological finds we have covered some areas of Jesus’ early ministry. In the next installment we will continue our study of His life and times. **GN**

# Jesus Christ's Later Ministry

by Mario Seiglie

**I**n the September-October and November-December 1999 issues of *The Good News*, we considered some of the many archaeological findings that shed light on Judea in the early first century, when Jesus Christ grew to manhood and began His ministry. We continue in this issue with other findings that shed light on and confirm the accuracy of historical details recorded for us in the Gospels.

While Christ's early ministry took place primarily in Galilee, His later ministry centered on Jerusalem. In Galilee, in spite of His many miracles and inspired preaching, He was eventually rejected by most of the townspeople.

"Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty

works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day'" (Matthew 11:20-23).

## An unusual pool

The Gospels often note that Jesus and His disciples traveled to Jerusalem for the biblical festivals God commanded in Leviticus 23 (Luke 2:41-42; 22:7-20; John 2:13, 23; 7:1-2, 8, 10, 14, 37-38). John 5 records an event that took place during one of these feasts, although it doesn't specify which (to learn more about these biblical feasts, be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*).

"After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water . . .

"Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, 'Do you want

*Archaeological findings shed light on and confirm the accuracy of historical details recorded for us in the Gospels.*



**A pool with five porches?** For years critics of the Bible thought the apostle John's description of the Bethesda Pool to be a fabrication—until the area was excavated a century ago. There excavators found the remains of a large double pool, left, with



a central colonnaded causeway dividing the two parts, as shown on a model of the pool, right, based on the ruins uncovered there. After almost 2,000 years, John's description of a pool "having five porches" was proven to be accurate.

to be made well?' The sick man answered Him, 'Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me.' Jesus said to him, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk.' And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked . . ." (John 5:1-9).

For years critics questioned John's description of a pool "having five porches," because such an architectural design would be highly unusual. But that changed when excavators began digging in the area about a century ago.

" . . . When Bethesda was cleared of the rubble of centuries and brought once more to the light of day, [archaeologists discovered] a vast double pool covering 5,000 square yards to the north of the Temple area. It in fact had five colonnades. Four of these surrounded the whole place, but the fifth porch, in which the sick folk lay waiting to be healed, stood on a ridge of rock which divided the two pools" (Werner Keller, *The Bible as History*, 1982, p. 423).

The fifth "porch," which had led some to question or even dismiss John's account, was this columned walkway separating the two pools. John's description was proven accurate.

John McRay, archaeologist and professor of New Testament at Wheaton College Graduate School in Illinois, adds that in the excavations "many fragments of column bases, capitals and drums [column sections] were found, which probably belonged to the five porches (i.e., porticoes or colonnaded walkways) of the pool John mentions" (*Archaeology & the New Testament*, 1991, p. 187).

## The Pool of Siloam

The apostle John mentioned another pool in connection with another of Jesus Christ's miracles of healing. "Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth . . . He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing" (John 9:1, 6-7).

This pool, too, has been discovered, and

thousands of visitors to Jerusalem visit it each year. Professor McRay explains: "[The pool] was built by King Hezekiah in the eighth century B.C. at the southern end of a long tunnel he cut through solid rock to bring water from Gihon Spring to the pool inside the city walls (2 Kings 20:20) . . .

"The appearance of the pool has changed through the centuries; it has become considerably smaller (50 feet long by 15 feet wide) than originally. In 1897 F.J. Bliss and A.C. Dickie uncovered a court about 75 feet square, in the center of which was the pool. It was probably surrounded by a colonnaded portico . . . After the 1897 excavations, the people of the village of Silwan (an Arabic rendering of Siloam) built a mosque with a minaret over the northwest corner of the pool, and it still stands above the pool" (ibid., p. 188).

Professor McRay notes that "discoveries of the Well of Jacob (John 4:12), the Pool of Bethesda (5:2) [and] the Pool of Siloam (9:7) . . . have lent historical credibility to the text of John . . . These are but a few of the examples that could be produced which put New Testament contexts squarely in the stream of history and geography" (pp. 18-19).

## Conflicts with Pharisaic practices

Of all the human adversaries during His ministry, the Pharisees caused Jesus the most trouble. They had imposed tedious religious regulations on the practicing Jewish population. Jesus described their effect: "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men" (Matthew 23:4-5).

Christ denounced the Pharisees' hypocrisy of enacting many religious laws that

obscured or even contradicted the intent of the laws God had revealed to Israel. He compared them to "whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly,



*The Pool of Siloam is mentioned in connection with one of Jesus Christ's miraculous healings. Although the remains of the pool have since greatly changed, it can still be visited. The pool, in the area of the original City of David, is fed by the Gihon Spring.*

but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (verses 27-28).

Whitewashed tombs were a common sight in Israel. The practice of whitewashing grave sites was based on a ritual established by the Pharisees.

Archaeologists have uncovered many ancient tombs and other burial places in Israel. They range from a simple hole in the ground with a stone covering to elaborate burial chambers for the rich. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* says: "For groups without a settled abode, interment must have taken the form of roadside burials . . . Under Greco-Roman influence, Palestine tombs took on the exterior forms and ornamentation of classic architecture . . . Exposed areas were whitewashed to obviate uncleanness through accidental contact at night (Matthew 23:27)" (1979, Vol. 1, pp. 557, 559, "Burial").

William Barclay gives further information that helps us understand burial practices of the time: "Here again is a picture which any Jew would understand. One of the commonest places for tombs was by the

wayside. We have already seen that anyone who touched a dead body became unclean (Numbers 19:16). Therefore, anyone who came into contact with a tomb automatically became unclean. At one time in particular the roads of Palestine were crowded with pilgrims—at the time of the Passover Feast. For a man to become unclean on his way to the Passover Feast would be a disaster, for that meant he would be debarred from sharing in it. It was then Jewish practice in the month of Adar to whitewash all wayside tombs, so that no pilgrims might accidentally come into contact with one of them and be rendered unclean.

“So, as a man journeyed the roads of Palestine on a spring day, these tombs would glint white, and almost lovely, in the sunshine; but within they were full of bones and bodies whose touch would defile. That, said Jesus, was a precise picture of what the Pharisees were. Their outward actions were the actions of intensely religious men; their inward hearts were foul and putrid with sin” (*Daily Bible Study Commentary*, Bible Explorer Software).

Christ used this commonly seen feature of the Israelite countryside to drive home a spiritual point.

### The Corban vow

Another conflict Jesus had with the Pharisees was over their laws and regulations that at times directly negated the Ten Commandments. One such example was the Corban vow.

In a stinging rebuke, Jesus told the Pharisees: “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban’—(that is, a gift to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do” (Mark 7:9-13).

In the 20th century archaeologists have found dramatic confirmation of this kind of vow. In the 1950s they discovered a stone coffin inside a Jewish tomb in the Kidron Valley southeast of Jerusalem. The lid bore an inscription stating the contents were “corban.” The inscription reads, “All that

a man may find to his profit in this ossuary [is] an offering (corban) to God from him who is within it” (McRay, p. 194).

The vow was inscribed in the hope that it would dissuade any potential thief from taking any valuable contents, such as jewelry, by declaring all had been consecrated to God and that the robber would be committing sacrilege to take it and use it for any other purpose.

But why would Jesus condemn this kind of vow? The passage in Mark points out the kinds of problems that arose. Jesus was condemning a man-made vow that could break God’s commandments. In the example He used, some, He said, were declaring part or all of their possessions “corban,” or dedicated to God. In such circumstances a needy father or mother could not inherit a deceased son’s goods because they had been declared “corban” and thus were consecrated to God.

This vow was based on a nonbiblical belief that a person would receive extra favor from God for such a vow. As time went along, this kind of vow was also used as an excuse to avoid helping a parent in need. As Jesus pointed out, such practices broke the Fifth Commandment, which tells us to honor our parents.

The *Bible Knowledge Commentary* explains: “Jesus showed how these religious leaders had in effect nullified this commandment. They could simply affirm that a particular item had been a gift devoted to God. Then the item could not be used by an individual but was kept separate. This was simply a clever way of keeping things from passing to one’s parents. The person would of course continue to keep those things in his own home where they had been supposedly set aside for God.

“Such action was condemned by Jesus as being hypocritical, for while it appeared to be spiritual, it actually was done to keep one’s possessions for himself. Thus this failure to help one’s parents deliberately violated the fifth commandment . . . Such action had been described by Isaiah centuries before (Isaiah 29:13). Their [the Pharisees’] religion had become a matter of action and man-made rules. Their hearts were far from God and consequently their worship was in vain” (Logos Software).

We will continue this series with the climactic events surrounding Jesus Christ’s arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection. **GN**

# Jesus Christ's Arrest, Trial and Crucifixion

by Mario Seiglie

In recent issues of *The Good News* we have examined archaeological findings that shed light on the period of Jesus Christ's ministry in Judea in the early first century.

In the four Gospels no period of Christ's ministry is more detailed than the last few days when He was arrested, tried and crucified as a common criminal. What have archaeologists found that confirm and illuminate many of the details of Jesus' last days on earth?

## Evidence of Caiaphas's tomb

Events rushed to a crescendo as Jesus and His disciples came to Jerusalem for that final Passover feast. The chief priests began to panic after hearing that in nearby Bethany Jesus had resurrected His friend Lazarus from the dead (John 11).

How did they react to news of this miracle? "Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together a council and said, 'What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.' And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all, nor do you

consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.' Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation . . . Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death" (verses 47-53).

Amazingly, the tomb of this priest was discovered in 1990. Israeli archaeologist Zvi Greenhut, who confirmed the finding, describes the event:

"It was a cold day at the end of November when I received word at the Antiquities Authority that an old cave had been discovered . . . When I arrived I observed that the roof of the cave had collapsed. But even while standing outside, I could see four ossuaries, or bone boxes, in the central chamber of the cave. To an archaeologist, this was a clear indication that this was a Jewish burial cave . . . So it was that we discovered the final resting place of the Caiaphas family, one of whose priestly members presided at the trial of Jesus" ("Burial Cave of the Caiaphas Family," *Biblical Archaeological Review*, September-October 1992, pp. 29-30).

Two of the 12 stone boxes found had the name Caiaphas written on the side, and one contained the entire name, "Joseph, son of Caiaphas." Inside this box were the remains of a 60-year-old man, along with the bones of a woman and four younger people, probably those of his own family.

Archaeologist Ronny Reich provides further details of the find: "The most elaborately decorated ossuary found in this cave contains two inscriptions relating to Caiaphas . . . The elderly man buried in the highly decorated ossuary was apparently Joseph. It was probably a forefather who had acquired this nickname [Caiaphas was apparently a nickname that meant "basket," probably from "basketmaker:"]

"A person named Joseph with the nickname Caiaphas was the high priest in Jerusalem between 18 and 36 A.D. The New Testament provides only his nickname in the Greek form: Caiaphas (see Matthew 26:3, 57; Luke 3:2; John 11:49, 18:13-14, 24, 28; Acts 4:6). Josephus [the first-century Jewish

*What have archaeologists found that confirm and illuminate many of the details of Jesus' last days on earth?*



*The Gospels tell us the high priest who plotted Christ's death was named Caiaphas. In 1990 archaeologists found the priest's family tomb and this ossuary bearing his name.*





**The Roman governor Pontius Pilate** figures prominently in the accounts of Jesus Christ's trial and execution. In 1961 a stone plaque bearing his name and official title was discovered in Caesarea, Israel. Pilate's name (Latin

"[PON]TIVS PILATVS") is visible on the second line. In 1968 archaeologists found sobering evidence of the cruel practice of crucifixion—a human heel bone pierced by a large iron nail, with a fragment of olive wood attached.

historian] gives his proper name as well: Joseph Caiaphas, or elsewhere, 'Joseph who was called Caiaphas of the high priesthood.' In short, we are explicitly told by Josephus that Caiaphas was indeed a nickname" ("Caiaphas Name Inscribed on Bone Boxes," *Biblical Archaeological Review*, September-October 1992, p. 41).

Archaeologists have thus confirmed the existence of this important New Testament figure. They have also proven the existence of another leading character instrumental in the events surrounding Jesus' arrest, trial and execution.

### The Pilate inscription

Once Jesus was arrested, on Caiaphas's orders, He was tried before Caiaphas and later sent to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. The New Testament portrayal of Pilate agrees with other historical accounts. "Philo and Josephus unite in attributing dire and evil practices to Pilate, so that a dark character is ascribed to him" (*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1989, Vol. 3, p. 813).

Philo, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher (20 B.C.–A.D. 50), described Pilate as "a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate." He says Pilate's rule was characterized by "corruption, . . . insolence, . . . cruelty, . . . continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity" (*The*

*Works of Philo*, translated by C.D. Yonge, "On the Embassy to Gaius," pp. 301-302).

Years after Christ's crucifixion Pilate was sent to Rome to undergo a humiliating trial after ordering the massacre of some Samaritan pilgrims. Eusebius, the fourth-century historian, notes that Pilate was found guilty and exiled. In his shame he later committed suicide. Such was the end of this proud and corrupt governor.

For centuries Pilate was known only from scant historical records and the Gospels. No direct physical evidence had been found. Then, in 1961, a stone plaque engraved with Pilate's name and title was discovered in Caesarea, the Roman port and capital of Judea in Christ's day. "The two-foot by three-foot slab, now known as the Pilate Inscription, was . . . apparently written to commemorate Pilate's erection and dedication of a Tiberium, a temple for the worship of Tiberias Caesar, the Roman emperor during Pilate's term over Judea.

"The Latin inscription of four lines gives his title as 'Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea,' a title very similar to that used of him in the Gospels (see Luke 3:1). This was the first archaeological find to mention Pilate, and again testified to the accuracy of the Gospel writers. Their understanding of such official terms indicates they lived during the time of their use and not a century or two thereafter, when such terms would have been forgotten" (Randall Price,

*The Stones Cry Out*, 1997, pp. 307-308).

### Gruesome evidence of crucifixion

Until recently some scholars considered the description of Christ's crucifixion to be false. They thought it was impossible for a human body to be held up by nails driven into the hands and feet since the flesh would eventually tear away. Instead they thought the victims must have been bound by ropes.

Yet, in 1968, the body of a crucified man dating to the first century was found in Jerusalem. Here the true method of crucifixion was discovered: His ankles, not his feet, had been nailed and could easily support his weight.

Archaeologist Randall Price explains: "This rare find has proved to be one of the most important archaeological witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion as recorded in the Gospels. First, it reveals afresh the horrors of the Roman punishment . . . This method of execution forced the weight of the body to be placed on the nails, causing terribly painful muscle spasms and eventually death by the excruciating process of asphyxiation . . . Second, it was once claimed that the Gospel's description of the method of crucifixion was historically inaccurate . . . The discovery of the nail-pierced ankle bone refutes those who say nails could not have been used" (Price, pp. 309-310).

The Roman law of the time prescribed crucifixion as punishment for the most

serious offenses, such as rebellion, treason and robbery. A famous example of mass crucifixions took place in 71 B.C. when Spartacus led a slave rebellion against Rome. He ultimately failed, and the 6,000 captured slaves were crucified.

The Jews knew of crucifixions even before Roman rule, for around 87 B.C. the Jewish king Alexander Janneus had 800 rebellious Pharisees crucified. Josephus, who witnessed the crucifixion of his fellow Jews during the siege of Jerusalem (A.D. 66-70), called it “the most wretched of deaths.” It continued to be the punishment for high crimes until the time of Emperor Constantine, when it was finally abolished.

### Was Jesus crucified on a cross?

The exact shape of the stake or cross used to crucify Jesus is not known, since the Romans used several styles.

The Greek word translated “cross” is *stauros*. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* gives background information on the word. “*Stauros* . . . denotes, primarily, ‘an upright pale or stake.’ On such malefactors were nailed for execution. Both the noun and the verb *staroo*, ‘to fasten to a stake or pale,’ are originally to be distinguished from the ecclesiastical form of a two beamed ‘cross.’ The shape of the latter had its origin in ancient Chaldea [Babylonia], and was used as the symbol of the god Tammuz (being in the shape of the mystic Tau, the initial of his name) in that country and in adjacent lands, including Egypt.

“By the middle of the 3rd cent. A.D. the churches had either departed from, or had travestied, certain doctrines of the Christian faith. In order to increase the prestige of the apostate ecclesiastical system pagans were received into the churches apart from regeneration by faith, and were permitted largely to retain their pagan signs and symbols. Hence the Tau or T, in its most frequent form, with the cross-piece lowered, was adopted to stand for the ‘cross’ of Christ.

“As for the Chi, or X, which Constantine declared he had seen in a vision leading him to champion the Christian faith, that letter was the initial of the word ‘Christ’ and had nothing to do with ‘the Cross’ (for *xulon*, ‘a timber beam,

a tree’ . . .).” (1985, “Cross, Crucify”).

### The empty tomb

The Gospel writers give many details of Jesus’ burial and tomb. “Now when evening had come, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be given to him. When Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed . . .

“On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, ‘Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, “After three days I will rise.” Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day’ . . . So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard” (Matthew 27:57-66).

How do the Gospel accounts match up with archaeologists’ discoveries about first-century burial practices? Several tombs have been found around Jerusalem that perfectly fit the description given by the Gospel writers. “In Roman times the entrance was often closed with a large circular stone, set up on edge and rolled in its groove to the mouth of the tomb so as to close it securely. This stone could then be further secured by a strap, or by sealing. Pilate thus directed that the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, in which the body of Jesus was laid, should be carefully sealed and made as inviolable as possible (Mt. 27:66)” (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1979, Vol. 1, p. 559, “Burial”).

When the Romans wanted to secure a tomb, they attached a cord across the circular stone. They secured this strap with wax and stamped it with the seal of imperial Rome. To tamper with the seal was to defy Roman authority and risk the death penalty. Guards were then placed around the tomb with orders to defend it at all costs; if any fell asleep they would pay with their lives. With all these safeguards in place, a tomb was considered to be completely secured and untouchable.

Yet, when Jesus was resurrected and an angel opened the tomb, the Bible records that the guards “shook for fear of [the angel] and became like dead men” (Matthew 28:4). When the guards revived and saw the empty tomb, they immediately sought help from the chief priests, for they knew they faced the death penalty.

“Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, ‘Tell them [the Roman authorities], “His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.” And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.’ So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day” (verses 11-15).

True to the historical description of Pilate, we see that even the chief priests understood that the Roman governor was corrupt and subject to being bribed.

### Conclusion on the Gospels

Through archaeology many details of the descriptions of Jesus’ trial, crucifixion and burial have been confirmed. Archaeologist Price considers the all-important implications: “. . . Archaeology has shown us that the facts that support faith [in the resurrection of Jesus] are accurate—an identifiable tomb attesting to literal events—faith in the Christ of history *does* depend upon a historically empty tomb for its reality. While archaeology can only reveal the tomb, the persons and events attending to its historic purpose (Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas, crucifixion, and so on), the resurrection is interwoven with these facts so as to command the same consideration” (Price, pp. 315, 318).

We can summarize the purpose of this series on the Gospels with an appropriate quote: “Five gospels record the life of Jesus. Four you will find in books and one you will find in the Land they call holy. Read the fifth gospel and the world of the four will open to you” (Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel*, 1992, back cover). **GN**

# The Book of Acts: The Church Begins

by Mario Seiglie

**A**s discussed in recent issues of *The Good News*, archaeologists have made many discoveries that verify and illuminate our understanding of the four Gospels. After the Gospels, the next section in the New Testament we will survey is the books of the Acts of the Apostles, or simply Acts.

The book of Acts is simply a continuation of one of the Gospel accounts. Luke compiled his Gospel about Jesus Christ as the first volume of a two-part work. In his first manuscript he covered the life of Jesus; in the second he described the early history of the Church Jesus founded.

*The Expositor's Bible Commentary* notes: "The Acts of the Apostles is the name given to the second part of a two-volume work traditionally identified as having been written by Luke, a companion of the apostle Paul. Originally the two volumes circulated together as two parts of one complete writing" (Richard Longenecker, 1981, Vol. 9, p. 207).

Luke explains to Theophilus, to whom he dedicated this work, the purpose of his first tome: "The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up . . ." (Acts 1:1-2). The phrase *former account* in this first verse is *proton logos* in Greek. It refers to the first papyrus roll of a larger work, called in Greek *tomos*, from which we get our English word *tome*.

In the second scroll Luke relates events that took place after Jesus "was parted from them [the disciples] and carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:51). It covers about the first 30 years of Church history.

## A scholar attacks Acts

About a century ago British scholar William Ramsay focused on the book of Acts to try to show it was rife with geographical and archaeological errors. After all, many scholars of his day, equipped with the tools of textual criticism and archaeology, had exposed many errors in other classic writings. This eminent humanity professor diligently prepared himself by studying archaeology and geography

before departing for the Middle East and Asia Minor in his quest to prove Luke's history of the early Church was mostly myth.

His quest didn't turn out as he expected. After a quarter century of research in what is today Israel and Turkey, where he carefully retraced the steps of the apostles as described in the book of Acts, this famous unbeliever shook the intellectual world when he announced he had converted to Christianity. He confessed this radical change of mind and heart was thanks in great part to his surprise at the accuracy he found in Luke's narrative in Acts.

After decades of examining the historical and geographical details mentioned in the book, Ramsay concluded: "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy, he is possessed of the true historic sense . . . In short this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians" (*The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, 1953, p. 80).

He went on to write many books about Acts and the epistles of Paul. Ultimately Ramsay was knighted for his contributions to the study of archaeology and geography.

## The tomb of King David

When the Christian Church began on the Day of Pentecost, when its first 120 members received God's Spirit, thousands of Jewish pilgrims were visiting Jerusalem worshipping at the time of that holy festival (Acts 2:1-5).

That day the apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, delivered an inspired sermon to the Jewish crowd. Thousands heard and repented of their sins. Speaking of the recent resurrection of Jesus, he quoted from one of King David's prophetic psalms: "For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption" (Acts 2:27; Psalm 16:10).

Peter continued: "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and *his tomb is with us to*

*After decades of examining the details mentioned in Acts, Sir William Ramsay concluded: "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy, he is possessed of the true historic sense . . . In short this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."*



**Some archaeologists think this area at the southern end of the City of David contains the remains of the tombs of the kings of Judah who reigned in Jerusalem. The tomb at the top center may be the remains of King David's tomb mentioned by Peter in Acts 2:29. Regrettably, much of the area has been hacked away over the centuries from quarrying the limestone there.**

this day” (Acts 2:29, emphasis added). Peter, speaking in the temple area in Jerusalem, could point to the nearby tombs of the kings of Israel—specifically David’s burial site.

Although it was not an Israelite or Jewish custom to bury the dead in towns or cities, royalty was an exception. The Bible records that “David rested with his fathers, and was buried in the City of David” (1 Kings 2:10). Many later Israelite kings were also buried in Jerusalem, although not all in the designated tombs of the kings. For instance, evil King Jehoram was buried “in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings” (2 Chronicles 21:20).

Several hundred years later, during the restoration of Jerusalem under Nehemiah, the area around the tombs of the kings was repaired. “After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk . . . made repairs as far as the place in front of the tombs of David . . .” (Nehemiah 3:16).

Josephus, a Jewish historian born shortly after Peter gave his Pentecost sermon, wrote that a few decades earlier Herod the Great had broken into David’s tomb at night to plunder its riches, only to discover a previous king had already looted it (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XVI, Chapter VII, Section 1). David’s

tomb was widely known even when Josephus wrote his account decades after Peter’s sermon.

A.T. Robertson notes: “His [David’s] tomb was on Mt. Zion where most of the kings were buried. The tomb was said to have fallen into ruins in the reign of the Emperor Hadrian [A.D. 117-138]” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Bible Explorer software).

Although archaeologists don’t agree on whether the extensive tomb area discovered almost a century ago in the southern end of Jerusalem is the location of the tombs of the kings of Israel, the location agrees with accounts mentioned in the Bible and does have the backing of some prominent scholars.

Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, writes: “The proposed site of David’s tomb, and of others adjacent to it, is precisely where one would expect to find the burial site mentioned in the Bible—in the southern part of the City of David, an area that would normally be forbidden to burials.

“In 1913 to 1914 a Frenchman named Raymond Weill excavated this area and found several tombs that he numbered T1 to T8 . . . The most magnificent of these tombs is T1. It is a kind of long tunnel or

artificially excavated cave 52½ feet long, over 8 feet wide and over 13 feet high . . . The fact that some extravagant, even ostentatious tombs were located precisely where the Bible says the kings of Judah, including King David, were buried certainly suggests to a reasonable mind that the fanciest of these tombs (T1) may well have belonged to King David” (*Biblical Archaeological Review*, January-February, 1995, p. 64).

Precise identification is difficult because the area was heavily quarried in later centuries and only portions of the tombs remain. Whether more research can confirm this site as David’s tomb or not, we can be confident that during Peter’s sermon given on the Day of Pentecost, when the New Testament Church began, he could point to an area in Jerusalem where everyone knew David’s tomb was located and could attest that his remains were still there.

David obviously had not risen from the dead, but now Peter and many other witnesses could confirm that it had been Jesus’ tomb, not David’s, that had opened and from which Jesus had come back to life, confirming He was the Messiah. Thousands of Jewish listeners could not refute the evidence. This proof, among others, led many to accept Jesus as the Messiah immediately (Acts 2:41).

### **Gamaliel the wise**

During the days and weeks after Peter’s sermon, the apostles faced violent opposition, including being thrown in jail.

During their trial before their incarceration, many Jewish authorities plotted to kill them, but one of the chief religious leaders spoke up in their defense:

“Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people . . . And he said to them: ‘Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men . . . I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God.’ And they agreed with him, and when they had called

for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go” (Acts 5:34-40).

This Gamaliel, who opposed the apostles’ execution, was a teacher of Paul (Acts 22:3). He was the grandson of Hillel, the founder of a dominant school of the Pharisees, a major branch of Judaism.

Gamaliel’s family name has been confirmed by archaeological findings. In a tomb in the catacombs of Beth-Shearim, near the Sea of Galilee, in a section called the Tomb of the Patriarchs, one of the graves has an inscription in Hebrew and Greek: “This [tomb] is of the Rabbi Gamaliel.” The Gamaliel of Bible fame was the first of an illustrious rabbinic family bearing his name. This tomb was that of one of his descendants.

The historian Josephus and some Talmudic works also mention Gamaliel, describing him as a benevolent and brilliant man. William Barclay adds: “He was a kindly man with a far wider tolerance than his fellows. He was, for instance, one of the very few Pharisees who did not regard Greek culture as sinful. He was one of the very few to whom the title ‘Rabban’ had been given. Men called him ‘The Beauty of the Law.’ When he died it was said, ‘Since Rabban Gamaliel died there has been no more reverence for the Law; and purity and abstinence died out at the same time’” (*The Daily Study Bible Commentary*, Bible Explorer software). So we see another biblical figure mentioned in the Scriptures confirmed by sources outside the Bible.

### **History confirms still another biblical character**

As the gospel spread to the outlying areas of Israel, Peter arrived in Samaria to preach the Word of God. There he met a magician named Simon, who was baptized but was later rejected by Peter and John for trying to bribe his way into a position of power and influence in the Church (Acts 8:18-24).

Nothing else is directly mentioned in the Scriptures about this shady character, known in history as Simon Magus.

However, about a century after Simon’s death, writings appear that describe his activities after the apostles rejected him.

Writing to the Romans, Justin Martyr comments: “There was a Samaritan, Simon, a native of the village called Gitto, who in the reign of Claudius Caesar [A.D. 41-54], and in your royal city of Rome, did mighty acts of magic, by virtue of the art of the devil’s operating in him. He was considered a god, and as a god was honored by you with a statue, which statue was erected on the river Tiber, between two bridges, and bore this inscription, in the language of Rome: ‘Simoni Deo Sancto’ [To Simon the holy God]. And almost all the Samaritans, and a few even of other nations, worship him . . .” (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, “The First Apology of Justin,” p. 171).

In 1574 excavators found a fragment of marble on an island in the Tiber River with the inscription “Semoni Sanco Deu Fidio.” Some interpret this as referring to a Sabine deity, Semo Sancus, but most likely it was part of the statue Justin Martyr described as having been dedicated to Simon Magus.

The editors of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* make this point: “It is very generally supposed that Justin was mistaken in understanding this to have been a statue erected to Simon Magus. This supposition rests on the fact that in the year 1574 there was dug up in the island of the Tiber a fragment of marble, with the inscription ‘Semoni Sanco Deo,’ etc., being probably the base of a statue erected to the Sabine deity Semo Sancus. This inscription Justin is supposed to have mistaken for the one he gives above.

“This has always seemed to us very slight evidence on which to reject so precise a statement as Justin here makes; a statement which he would scarcely have hazarded in an apology addressed to Rome, where every person had the means of ascertaining its accuracy. If, as is supposed, he made a mistake, it must have been at once exposed, and other writers would not have so frequently repeated the story as they have done” (*ibid.*, footnote, p. 171).

Whether the base of the statue was dedicated to Simon Magus or not, the historicity of this biblical personage is also

confirmed in literature of the second and third centuries.

### **Paul in Damascus**

After the gospel went to Samaria, it spread northward to Damascus, where a dramatic conversion took place—that of Saul, who became the apostle Paul. After his conversion God told him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do” (Acts 9:6).

After Paul arrived in Damascus, Jesus spoke in a vision to Ananias, one of the Christians living there: “So the Lord said to him, ‘Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying’” (Acts 9:11).

The street called Straight was one of the main avenues in Damascus. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* explains: “The street called Straight was an east-west street that is still one of the main thoroughfares of Damascus, the *Derb el-Mustaqim*. It had colonnaded halls on either side and imposing gates at each end . . . and presumably was as well known in antiquity as Regent Street in London or Michigan Avenue in Chicago today. The directions included not only the name of the street but also the house where Saul could be found” (Longenecker, p. 373).

When the Jews persecuted Paul in Damascus, his friends lowered him from the city’s walls in a basket (Acts 9:25). Archaeologists have discovered sections of this ancient wall, which the Romans built. John McRay writes: “Part of the Roman wall has been found about 1000 feet south of the East Gate (Bab Sharqi) beneath Saint Paul’s Chapel and Window. Under the present Ottoman gateway, this small chapel was built by Greek Catholics over a gate from the Roman period. Tradition associates the spot with Paul’s escape by a basket that was lowered from a window in the wall (2 Cor. 11:33)” (*Archaeology and the New Testament*, 1991, p. 234).

### **Magnificent Caesarea**

Meanwhile in Jerusalem Peter had been arrested again and this time was sentenced to death by Herod Agrippa, grandson of



**The port city of Caesarea Maritima is mentioned several times in the book of Acts. Built by Herod the Great, it was the major port in the region and a Roman administrative center. Its magnificent amphitheater, left, over-**

**looks the Mediterranean Sea. Partially restored, today it serves as a popular venue for concerts. An equally impressive twin aqueduct, right, supplied the city with fresh drinking water from the nearby hills.**

Herod the Great. A few decades ago this ruler, too, was confirmed as a historical figure when Israeli archaeologist Benjamin Mazar found scale weights with Herod Agrippa's name and title that date to the fifth year of his reign.

When Herod Agrippa heard of Peter's miraculous escape (Acts 12:5-9), he flew into a rage. "But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there" (verse 19).

Caesarea was an impressive artificial port built by Herod the Great. Named in honor of Augustus Caesar, it became the Roman headquarters of Judea. Herod also had a magnificent palace there where he would court Roman officials.

"The city included buildings typical of a Hellenistic city, such as a theater, amphitheater, hippodrome, aqueduct, colonnaded street, and an impressive temple dedicated to Caesar" (*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962, Vol. 1, p. 480). Most of the remains of these buildings have recently been found by archaeologists, including a stone plaque that mentions Pontius Pilate [see *The Good News*, May-June 2000, p. 25].

"I was on the supervisory staff at Caesarea from the beginning of full-scale excavations in 1972 until 1982," writes John McKay. "Our work has largely confirmed the impression given by Josephus in both his *Wars* and *Antiquities*, of the grand scale on which Herod built to satisfy his own vanity and that of the emperor Augustus" (*Archaeology and the New Testament*, 1991, pp. 139-140).

### Herod Agrippa's death

The Bible also records Herod Agrippa's unexpected death at Caesarea. "Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country. So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, 'The voice of a god and not of a man!' Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died" (Acts 12:20-23).

Josephus offers additional details in his independent account of Herod Agrippa's death: "On the second day of which shows

he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner . . . and presently his flatterers cried out . . . 'Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.' Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery . . . A severe pain also arose in his belly . . . And when he had been quite worn by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life . . ." (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XIX, viii, 2).

The two accounts, the Bible and Josephus, in this complement each other. Josephus does not mention the origin of the stomach pain, but the Bible mentions it was because of "worms." Luke, the physician, used the Greek word *skolekobrotos* in reference to Herod Agrippa's terminal condition. The word refers to tapeworms or other intestinal worms, which can block the intestinal tract and cause great pain and sometimes lead to death, as was the case here.

We will continue our survey through the book of Acts in the next installment. **GN**

# THE BIBLE AND

## The Book of Acts: The Message Spreads

by Mario Seiglie

**I**n this issue of *The Good News* we proceed with our survey of archaeological and historical findings that verify and illuminate the accounts recorded in the Bible. In our last issue we surveyed the first 12 chapters of Acts, in which the focus is on the exploits of the original apostles.

We pick up the story as the emphasis shifts to the travels of the apostle Paul. How accurate are these accounts? Thanks to the modern tools of archaeology, researchers have found much cultural, historical and geographical background material that supports the biblical account of Paul's trips through the Mediterranean world.

### Sergius Paulus, governor of Cyprus

"So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they [the apostles Paul and Barnabas] went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to *Cyprus* . . . Now when they had gone through the island to *Paphos*, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the *proconsul, Sergius Paulus*, an intelligent man" (Acts 13:4-7, emphasis added throughout).

From Antioch Paul and Barnabas first went to Cyprus, Barnabas's birthplace (Acts 4:36). Historians have confirmed several background details about this account. For example, the Roman orator Cicero mentions in one of his books that Paphos was indeed the Roman headquarters of Cyprus during Roman rule (*Ad Familiares*, XIII.48).

Also, Luke is correct in mentioning that Cyprus was governed by a proconsul when Paul and Barnabas visited the island. Before A.D. 22 Cyprus had been administered by a direct representative of the emperor, called a *propraetor*. But after 22 the island's rule was turned over to the Roman senate, whose representatives were called proconsuls. "Annexed by the Romans in 55 B.C.," notes *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, "Cyprus became a senatorial province in 22 B.C., with a governor bearing the title of *proconsul*, as Acts 13:7 correctly names *Sergius Paulus*, who received Barnabas and Paul" (1962, Vol. 3, p. 648).

*The Expositor's Bible Commentary* adds: "That Luke distinguishes correctly between senatorial and imperial provinces and has the former governed by a proconsul on behalf of the senate and the latter governed by a *propraetor* representing the emperor says much for his accuracy, for the status of provinces changed with the times" (Richard Longenecker, Vol. 9, 1981, notes on Acts 18:12-13, p. 485).

Archaeologists have also found evidence indicating *Sergius Paulus* was indeed a Roman governor of Cyprus. In 1877 an inscription was uncovered a short distance north of Paphos bearing *Sergius Paulus's* name and title of proconsul.

In addition, in 1887 his name was found on a memorial stone in Rome. "On a boundary stone of [Emperor] Claudius, his name [*Sergius Paulus*] is found among others, as having been appointed (A.D. 47) one of the curators of the banks and the channel of the river Tiber. After serving his three years as proconsul at Cyprus, he returned to Rome, where he held the office referred to" ("*Sergius Paulus*," *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, Bible Explorer software).

It is also true that in those days proconsuls used seers for advice. "These were intensely superstitious times," writes William Barclay, "and most great men, even an intelligent man like *Sergius Paulus*, kept private wizards, fortune tellers who dealt in magic and spells" (*Daily Study Bible*, 1975, Bible Explorer software).

### To the Unknown God in Athens

From Cyprus Paul eventually made his way to Athens, the capital of Greek philosophy. "Now while Paul waited for them at *Athens*, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols . . . Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the

Thanks to the modern tools of archaeology, researchers have found much cultural, historical and geographical background material that supports the biblical account of Paul's trips through the Mediterranean world.



**The apostle Paul, struck by the rampant idolatry of the Athenians, confronted them on Mars Hill. Nearby stood the Parthenon, above, dedicated to the goddess Athena, and a much smaller temple built to honor the goddess Nike.**



One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:16, 22-23).

Why was Paul so incensed with the idols in Athens? Is this an accurate description of the place? A.T. Robertson notes: "Pliny [the Roman writer] states that in the time of Nero [A.D. 54-68], Athens had over 30,000 public statues besides countless private ones in the homes. Petronius [a Roman satirist] sneers that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens. Every gateway or porch had its protecting god" (*Word Pictures of the New Testament*, notes on Acts 17:16).

What about the altar "to the unknown god"? Has there been any confirmation that such altars existed? Archaeologist John McRay mentions: "Pausanias [the Greek historian], who visited Athens between 143 and 159 A.D. saw such altars. In describing his trip from the harbor to Athens he wrote: 'The Temple of Athene Skiras is also here, and one of Zeus further off, and altars of the 'Unknown gods' . . . Apollonius of Tyana, who died in A.D. 98, spoke of Athens as the place 'where altars are set up in honor even of unknown gods' . . ." (*Archaeology & the New Testament*, 1991, p. 304).

In 1909 an archaeological expedition uncovered an altar with the inscription "To unknown gods" in Pergamum, a Roman province. McRay comments that the idolatry in Athens was so widespread that Athenians built altars to unknown

gods so they would leave no one out. "The adherents of ancient polytheistic religions," he says, "characterized as they were by superstitious ignorance, may have simply erected altars to unknown gods 'so that no deity might be offended by human neglect'" (*ibid.*).

### **Jews expelled from Rome**

From Athens Paul traveled a short way to another Greek city, Corinth. "After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (*because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome*), and he came to them" (Acts 18:2).

Were Jews expelled from Rome during the reign of Emperor Claudius? The Roman historian Suetonius records such an order: "As the Jews were indulging in constant riots at the instigation of *Chrestus*, he banished them from Rome" (*Life of Claudius*, 25.4). It is estimated some 20,000 Jews eventually were expelled, among them Aquila and Priscilla.

It is worthwhile to note this expulsion decree is a key date for fixing Pauline chronology. "One example of how archaeology has contributed to establishing a Pauline chronology," writes Professor McRay, "is that now we can set the approximate beginning of Paul's work in Corinth on his second journey. The key is

found in Acts 18:2 where we learn that when Paul arrived in Corinth he found Priscilla and Aquila, who had lately come from Italy, having been banished from Rome in a general expulsion of Jews under Claudius, who reigned from 41-54. This event is referred to by Suetonius and others and can be dated to A.D. 49" (McRay, pp. 225-226).

Who was this Chrestus who was responsible for the Jewish riots? The subject has been intensely debated. Since the name Chrestus and Christus are pronounced alike, it is likely that it had to do with the dissension in the Jewish community over the newly established Christianity and the teachings of Christ.

F.F. Bruce mentions that Chrestus could have simply been a Jewish troublemaker, but he adds: "It is more likely that [Suetonius] had *the Founder of Christianity in mind*, but that, writing some seventy years after the event and not being particularly interested in Christian origins, he consulted some record of the riots and imagined wrongly that Chrestus, who was mentioned as the leader of one of the parties concerned, was actually in Rome at the time, taking a prominent part in the strife. In fact, what we have in this statement of Suetonius is the dissension and disorder in the Jewish community at Rome resulting from the introduction of Christianity into one or more of the synagogues of the city" (*The International Commentary of the*





**The Roman emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. This action is recorded in Acts 18:2.**

*New Testament*, 1974, p. 368, “Acts”).

Later Aquila and Priscilla were to become instrumental in Paul’s ministry. They gave him a job in Corinth (Acts 18:3) and traveled with him to Ephesus (verse 19). They then served as hosts for a church group in their home and sent their greetings to their Corinthian friends in one of Paul’s letters (1 Corinthians 16:19). Sometime after Claudius’s death in 54, they returned to Rome and were included in Paul’s greetings to the church members there (Romans 16:3).

### Gallio, proconsul of Corinth

During Paul’s long stay in Corinth his preaching eventually led to conflict with the Jews there. “And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. *When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia*, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat” (Acts 18:11-12).

Here Luke mentions another Roman governor of the time. Has any evidence been found to corroborate the existence of Gallio?

It turns out Gallio was prominent in Roman history. He was the brother of the great Stoic writer Seneca, who was

Emperor Nero’s tutor. Gallio came from an illustrious family in Spain that eventually moved to Rome. His real name was Marcus Annaeus Novatus, but he was adopted by the orator Lucius Junius Gallio and afterwards bore his adoptive father’s last name. His brother Seneca, who mentions him in his writings, said, “No mortal is so pleasant to any one person as Gallio is to everybody.”

It is striking that Luke also describes Gallio’s stable and affable personality. After Paul’s persecutors trumped up charges against Paul, Gallio quickly saw through their lies and dismissed the false accusations. To prevent such incidents from occurring again, he had the Jewish leaders punished for filing false charges (Acts 18:14-17). This set a legal precedent throughout the Roman Empire concerning Paul’s mission and the Christian religion.

“If Gallio had accepted the Jewish charge,” adds *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, “and found Paul guilty of the alleged offense, provincial governors everywhere would have had a precedent, and Paul’s ministry would have been severely restricted. As it was, Gallio’s refusal to act in the matter was tantamount to the recognition of Christianity as a *religio licita* [an authorized religion]; and the decision of so eminent a Roman proconsul would carry weight wherever the issue arose again and give pause to those who might want to oppose the Christian movement . . . For the coming decade or so, the Christian message could be proclaimed in the provinces of the empire without fear of coming into conflict with Roman law, thanks largely to Gallio’s decision” (Longenecker, p. 486, notes on Acts 18:14-16).

It is remarkable that archaeological evidence has also been found confirming Gallio was the proconsul of Achaia, just as Luke had recorded.

“At Delphi,” writes Professor McRay, “archaeologists found a stone which probably was once attached to the outer wall of the Temple of Apollo. Inscribed in it is a copy of a letter from Claudius to the city of Delphi, naming *Gallio* as the friend of Claudius and *proconsul of Achaia*” (McRay, p. 226).

What happened to Gallio after his encounter with Paul? Regrettably, after Claudius died in 54, Nero became the emperor. For a while Nero governed wisely under the tutorship of Gallio’s brother Seneca. But five years later Nero did an about-face and gave himself to his passions and lusts. He expelled his mentor from his sight. His debauchery eventually caused Nero to become insane, and soon Nero was feeling tormented by Seneca’s and Gallio’s integrity and presence, so he had them both executed in 65.



**The emperor Nero greatly persecuted early Christians. Paul was executed during his reign.**

F.F. Bruce says about Gallio: “He left Achaia because of a fever and went on a cruise for his health (Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, 14.1) . . . In 65, along with Seneca and other members of his family, he fell victim to Nero’s suspicions” (*The International Commentary of the New Testament*, 1974, p. 374, “Acts”).

Such were the times in Rome. During this same period Nero began his murderous rampage of Christians in Rome after he falsely blamed them for having set the city on fire, which historians generally blame Nero as having started.

We will continue with our survey of Acts in the next article in this series. **GN**

# THE BIBLE AND

## The Book of Acts: Paul's Later Travels

by Mario Seiglie

In the last two installments in this series we covered events from the start of the Christian Church to Paul's first travels through the Mediterranean world. In this article we conclude our discussion of the book of Acts by covering Paul's trips to Ephesus, Jerusalem and Rome.

### The Ephesian scripts

After visiting Corinth Paul began his return journey to Jerusalem by way of Ephesus, an important city of Asia Minor.

"And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to *Ephesus* . . . And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their *books* together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (Acts 19:1, 18-20, emphasis added throughout).

The Greek word used here for "books" is *biblos*.

The word originally referred to "the inner part . . . of the stem of the papyrus [plant]" and later "came to denote the paper made from this bark in Egypt, and then a written 'book,' roll, or volume" (W.E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1985, "Book").

Since the 1870s

archaeologists have made intensive efforts to find ancient papyrus scrolls, especially in Egypt, where

the desert climate can preserve such fragile treasures. They have realized remarkable success, finding scrolls dating back to New Testament times. Among the papyrus scrolls discovered are some containing the wording of magical spells; these scrolls were used as amulets (charms).

"A number of such magical scrolls have survived to our day," notes F.F. Bruce. "There are especially famous examples in the London, Paris and Leyden collections. The special connection of Ephesus with magic is reflected in the use of the term 'Ephesian scripts' for such magical scrolls. The spells which they contain are the merest gibberish, a rigmarole of words and names considered to be unusually potent, arranged sometimes in patterns which were part of the essence of the spell, but they fetched high prices . . . The closest parallel to the Ephesian exorcists' misuse of the name of Jesus appears in the Paris magical papyrus, No. 574, where we find an adjuration beginning on line 3018, 'I adjure thee by Jesus the God of the Hebrews'" (*The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Acts*, 1974, pp. 390-391).

The value of such scrolls that were destroyed is given in the Bible as "fifty thousand pieces of silver" (Acts 19:19), a sum scholars say would be worth around \$48,000 in modern currency.

### One of the seven wonders of the ancient world

Paul's preaching in Ephesus caused many to turn away from their idols and pagan practices. This led to an uprising among the craftsmen who made their living making statuettes of the goddess Diana and her temple.

"And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana, brought no small profit to the craftsmen. He called them together with the workers of similar occupation, and said, 'Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade. Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost

*Luke provides us with a detailed and accurate account of Paul's apostolic missions during the first decades of the Church.*



*The temple of Diana in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Paul's preaching brought him into conflict with those who made a living from activities associated with idolatrous worship of the goddess.*



**Elaborate statues of Diana** graced temples dedicated to her worship in many areas of the Roman Empire. Such statues typically depict her with multiple breasts or eggs, emphasizing her attributes as the primary fertility goddess. The coin at right depicts her statue in a temple.

all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands.

“So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship. Now when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians.’ So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into *the theater* with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s travel companions” (Acts 19:23-29).

The temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was *four times* the size of the Parthenon in Athens, Greece. Its ruins were brought to light by the British

archaeologist John T. Wood in 1869. Later he found, in remarkably good condition, the huge theater mentioned in Acts 19:29, which could seat more than 24,000 people.

William Barclay comments about the temple of Diana: “It was 425 feet long by 220 feet wide by 60 feet high. There were 127 pillars, each the gift of a king. They were all of glittering marble and 36 were marvelously gilt and inlaid. The great altar had been carved by Praxiteles, the greatest of all Greek sculptors. The image of Diana was not beautiful. It was a black, squat, many-breasted figure, signifying fertility; it was so old that no one knew where it had come from or even of what material it was made.

The story was that it had fallen from heaven” (*Daily Study Bible*, 1975, comment on Acts 19:1-7).

Another reference work adds: “Thousands of pilgrims and tourists came to it from far and near; around it swarmed all sorts of trades-

men and hucksters who made their living by supplying visitors with food and lodging, dedicatory offerings, and souvenirs. The Temple of Artemis [Diana] was also a major treasury and bank of the ancient world, where merchants, kings, and even cities made deposits, and where their money could be kept safe under the protection of deity” (Richard Longenecker, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9, 1981, p. 503).

It is not surprising that a lucrative trade of small statues of Diana and her temple existed in Ephesus. Commenting on verses 24 and 27, A.T. Robertson explains: “These small models of the temple with the statue of Artemis [Diana] inside would be set up in the houses or even worn as amulets . . . Temples of Artemis [Diana] have been found in Spain and Gaul [France]” (Online Bible software, 1995, *Word Pictures of the New Testament*).

Throughout Europe archaeologists have found many statues of the many-breasted goddess Diana (or Artemis, as she was called by the Romans). In 1956 an impressive statue of Diana was discovered in Ephesus; it stands prominently in the museum there.

Into this scene of popular paganism entered the apostle Paul. Demetrius had

accused him of teaching that “man-made gods are no gods at all” (Acts 19:26, New International Version). In other words, Paul had fearlessly taught keeping the Second Commandment and avoiding worship of religious images. Thanks to the help of friendly government officials in Ephesus, Paul was protected and the crowd was finally dispersed.

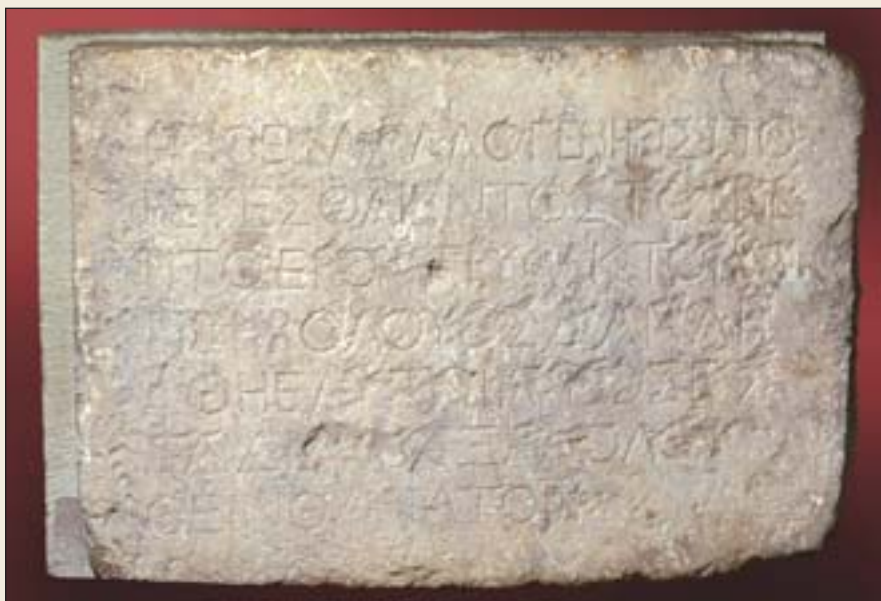
It is a bit ironic that, although the cult of the goddess Diana gradually died down, another cult eventually replaced her in Ephesus. “Christianity,” says historian Marina Warner, “fastened on her [Diana] and added such typical feminine Christian virtues as modesty and shame to her personality . . .” (*Alone of All Her Sex*, 1976, p. 47). Diana, continues Warner, “was associated with the moon . . . as the Virgin Mary is identified with the moon and the stars’ influence as well as with the forces of fertility and generation” (p. 224).

At the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431 the veneration of Mary became an official element of the Roman church. Warner says about Diana: “Memories of her emblem, the girdle, survived in the city [Ephesus] where the Virgin Mary was proclaimed *Theotokos* [Mother of God], three hundred and fifty years after the silversmiths, who lived by making statuettes of Diana, rebelled against the preaching of Paul and shouted, ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians’ (Acts 19:23-40). There could be, therefore, a chain of descent from . . . Diana to the Virgin, for one tradition also holds that Mary was assumed into heaven from Ephesus . . .” (*ibid.*, p. 280).

### Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem

From Ephesus Paul hurried to Jerusalem to stay there “if possible, on the Day of Pentecost” (Acts 20:16). When he arrived he soon went to the temple to worship and fulfill a vow along with four other Jewish Christians.

“Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, ‘Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.’ (For they had previously seen



**This Greek inscription from the temple in Jerusalem warns that only Israelites are allowed to pass this point and enter the inner courts of the temple.**

Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they had supposed that Paul had brought into the temple” (Acts 21:27-29).

Paul was arrested on a false charge of having taken a gentile (a non-Israelite) inside the temple. Next to each temple entrance was an inscription warning everyone that only Israelites were permitted to enter.

Bruce explains: “That no Gentile might unwittingly enter into the forbidden areas, notices in Greek and Latin were fixed to the barrier at the foot of the steps leading up to the inner precincts, warning them that death was the penalty for further ingress. Two of these notices (both in Greek) have been found—one in 1871 and one in 1935—the text of which runs: ‘No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death’” (*The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Acts*, 1974, p. 434).

### Paul’s journey to Rome

After Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem, the Roman authorities discovered a plot to kill him and hurriedly sent him to nearby Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea. Since he was a Roman citizen, a rare and prestigious designation in those days, he was entitled to full military protection. In Caesarea he

submitted to several preliminary hearings that left him unsatisfied, so he exercised his right as a Roman to appeal his case to the emperor in Rome.

The voyage to Rome, on a cargo ship, was harrowing. Luke accompanied Paul on the trip. His narrative is a masterpiece of accuracy down to tiniest details. “Luke’s account of Paul’s voyage to Rome,” explains *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, “stands out as one of the most vivid pieces of descriptive writing in the whole Bible. Its details regarding first-century seamanship are so precise and its portrayal of conditions on the eastern Mediterranean so accurate . . . that even the most skeptical have conceded that it probably rests on a journal of some such voyage as Luke describes” (Longenecker, p. 556).

The remains of several ships similar to the one described by Luke have been found on the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. They corroborate the precision of Luke’s account. “These grain ships were not small,” notes Barclay. “They could be as large as 140 feet long and 36 feet wide. But in a storm they had certain grave disadvantages. They were the same at the bow as at the stern, except that the stern was swept up like a goose’s neck. They had no rudder like a modern ship, but were steered with two great paddles coming out from the stern on each

side. They were, therefore, hard to manage. Further, they had only one mast and on that mast one great square sail, made sometimes of linen and sometimes of stitched hides. With a sail like that they could not sail into the wind” (*Daily Study Bible*, comment on Acts 27:21).

On the voyage to Rome, Paul and his company were shipwrecked near the island of Malta and barely made it to the beach without drowning. There they waited several months until another ship took them to Rome.

### The Appian Way

Luke’s account continues: “And so we went toward Rome. And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum and Three Inns” (Acts 28:14-15).

According to archaeological and literary evidence, Luke accurately recounts the way stations to enter Rome from the west, the shortest route from the nearest seaport. “At Neapolis, Paul and his contingent turned northwest to travel to Rome on the Via Appia—the oldest, straightest, and most perfectly made of all the Roman roads, named after the censor Appius Claudius who started its construction in 312 B.C. During the seven-day stopover at Puteoli, news of Paul’s arrival in Italy reached Rome. So a number of Christians there set out to meet him and escort him back to Rome. Some of them got as far as the Forum of Appius (Appii Forum), one of the ‘halting stations’ built every ten to fifteen miles along the entire length of the Roman road system . . . Others only got as far as the Three Taverns Inn, another halting station about thirty-three miles from Rome” (ibid., comment on Acts 28:15).

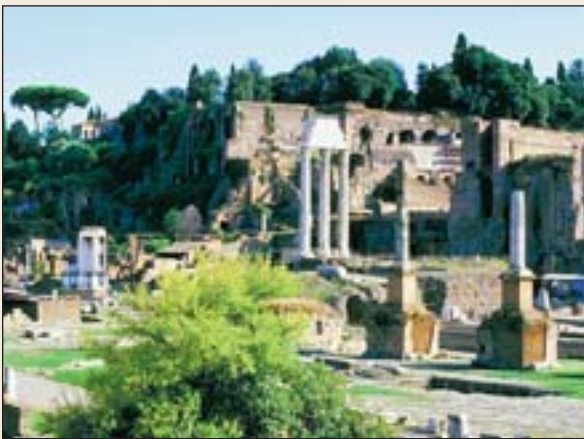
Luke thus provides us with a detailed and accurate account of Paul’s apostolic missions during the first decades of the Church. The book of Acts ends with Paul waiting for his case to be heard by the emperor. From later historians we learn that he was set free and continued his apostolic journeys for several years until he was again arrested, imprisoned and ultimately beheaded in Rome.

We will continue this series with a look at archaeological evidence that illuminates details of some of Paul’s many letters to congregations and members of the early Church. **GN**

# Archaeology and the Epistles

by Mario Seiglie

*How accurate are the epistles from an archaeological and historical point of view? We can be thankful that much background information is available about these writings that confirms their authenticity.*



*Paul wrote to Christians in Rome, heart of a mighty empire, well before he set foot there. Little did he know he would die in Rome several years later. Palatine Hill and the Roman Forum, ruins of which are shown here, were the heart of the city.*

In the previous three installments of this series we covered events described in the book of Acts. We now turn our attention to the apostolic writings, better known as the epistles, addressed to specific individuals or congregations or larger groups of people.

How accurate are the epistles from an archaeological and historical point of view? We can be thankful that much background information is available about these writings that confirms their authenticity.

## The apostolic letters

One of the first questions that comes to mind when examining the epistles is how they compare with the style and composition of other writings of the same era.

In the 20th century archaeologists discovered many private letters dating from the apostles' time that show the prevailing style of writing and correspondence. Written on papyrus, they corroborate

that the apostles' letters are written in the style common in those days.

Scholar William Barclay notes about Paul's writings: "It is a great pity that Paul's letters were ever called epistles. They are in the most literal sense letters. One of the great lights shed on the interpretation of the New Testament has been the discovery and the publica-

tion of papyri. In the ancient world, papyrus was the substance on which most documents were written

... The sands of the Egyptian desert were ideal for their preservation, for papyrus, although very brittle, will last for ever so long as moisture does not get at it.

"As a result, from the Egyptian rubbish heaps, archaeologists have rescued hundreds of documents, marriage contracts, legal agreements, government forms, and, most interesting of all, private letters. When we read these private letters we find that there was a pattern to which nearly all conformed; and *we find that Paul's letters reproduce exactly that pattern*" (Daily Study Bible, Bible Explorer software, notes on Romans 1:1, emphasis added throughout).

So far some 15,000 papyrus documents have been documented that date from 2700 B.C. to New Testament times and well beyond. From the biblical point of view the most important papyrus scrolls include:

- The 87 papyri containing parts of the Greek New Testament.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered some 50 years ago, which include books and commentaries about the Old Testament.
- The Septuagint version of the Old Testament (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was in common use in the time of the apostles).

The New Testament papyrus scrolls date from the late first to the seventh century and vary in size from scraps containing a few words to almost complete books of a Gospel, Acts or the Pauline epistles.

Grant Jeffrey compares the number of biblical writings discovered to other works found: "Modern scholars now possess more than five thousand manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament in the Greek language. In addition, there are an additional fifteen thousand manuscripts in other languages from the first few centuries of this era. No other important text, whether historical or religious, has more than a few dozen copies that have survived until our generation" (*The Signature of God*, 1996, p. 88).

From the private letters of the apostles' time we find their introduction typically included the

identity of the author, the name of the recipient, a prayer for the recipient and a greeting. The conclusion of such letters reflects the apostles' similar style of identifying the recipients, offering thanks and ending with a blessing.

"The power of the Epistles," says *The Bible Through the Ages*, "especially those of Paul, lay partly in their adherence to a structure recognized by educated people throughout the Greek-speaking world" (1996, p. 148).

Let's see a few specific examples of how these letters fit into the context of those days.

## Paul's letter to the Romans

Throughout his letter to the Romans we see Paul urging gentile and Jewish Christians in Rome to reconcile their differences. What historical event could have led to disunity that would prompt this kind of admonition?

Paul mentions in this letter that he would send it from one of the ports of Corinth, called Cenchrea, by way of a member named Phoebe (Romans 16:1).

In his first visit to Corinth a few years earlier, Paul had met the married couple Priscilla and Aquila, converted Jews who had been among those expelled from Rome. We read in Acts 18:2 that the Jews at Rome had been exiled by Emperor Claudius around 49 B.C. After Claudius died, Priscilla and Aquila returned to Rome (Romans 16:3).

The content of the epistle to the Romans reflects the new situation of the return of the Jewish Christians to the Roman church and the need for the gentile Christians again to accept their leadership.

Another indication of the authenticity of the epistle is the mention by Paul of 26 people in Romans 16. Scholars note these names were quite common during that period. Surprisingly, 13 of them have been found in inscriptions or documents connected with the emperor's palace in Rome.

William Barclay notes that, "although many are common names, this fact [their relationship with Caesar's palace] is nonetheless suggestive. In Philippians 4:22, Paul speaks of the saints of Caesar's household. It may be that they were for the most part slaves, but it is still important that Christianity seems to have penetrated early

into the imperial palace" (*Daily Study Bible*, comments on Romans 16:5-11, Bible Explorer software).

Thus this mention of Roman, Greek and Hebrew names common in those days and the historical evidence of a Christian presence even in Caesar's household give credence to what Paul writes in Romans.

## The letters to the Corinthians

Paul's two epistles to the Corinthians also fit well with archaeologists' discoveries about Corinth and what we learn from classical Greek literature.

Unlike Paul's letters to people in other areas, in both

of the letters to Corinth he refers to sins involving sexual immorality.

Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 that the brethren were openly tolerating a member involved in a sexual relationship with his stepmother. Paul instructs the members there to put that person out of the church until he repents and then warns them not to become corrupted by this bad example or allow themselves to return to their former sins.

He admonishes: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Of all the Greek cities, Corinth was the one most known for sexual immorality. "The ancient city had a reputation for vulgar materialism," notes *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. "In the earliest Greek literature it was linked with wealth and immorality. When Plato referred to a prostitute, he used the expression 'Corinthian girl.' According to Strabo, the Greek geog-

rapher, much of the wealth and vice in Corinth centered around the temple of Aphrodite and its thousand temple prostitutes. For this reason a proverb warned, 'Not for every man is the voyage to



*Paul "continued there [in Corinth] a year and six months," according to Acts 18:11. He later wrote two epistles to Church members in that Greek city, some of the ruins of which are clearly visible today.*

Corinth!" (Logos Library System software, 1985, introduction to 1 Corinthians).

Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and other temples dedicated to fertility cults that contributed to the city's rampant immorality. They have also found ruins of the marketplace that indicate that wine was a popular product. "Around the market were a good many shops, numbers of which had individual wells, suggesting that much wine was made and drunk in the city. [Paul warned] in 1 Cor[inthians] 6:10 that drunkards will not 'inherit' the kingdom of God" (Harold Mare, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 1979, p. 177).

The incident of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church appears to have a positive ending. After the members there repented of their moral laxity, they obeyed Paul and put the guilty party out of the congregation. But in 2 Corinthians 2:3-11 Paul tells them he heard of the sinner's repentance and urged them to forgive and restore him as a member.

Paul's other epistles and those the other apostles wrote all reflect the aspects of everyday life in the Greco-Roman world of that age. Although critical scholars

have focussed intensely on the apostolic epistles to try to find any discrepancy or anachronism, none has been forthcoming.

### The epistle of James

Of all the epistles, James' is the most practical and picturesque. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* calls it "a literary masterpiece . . . that combines the rhythmic beauty of Greek with the stern intensity of Hebrew" and says that, "in fact, the Book of James probably has more figures of speech, analogies, and imagery from nature than all Paul's epistles together" (Logos Library System software, 1985, introduction to James).

How could Jesus' half brother (Matthew 13:55) have developed such a polished literary style? One commentary says about him: "The author had been from fifteen to twenty years a member, and for a number of years, the official head, of the Jerusalem Church, which very early in its history had more Hellenists than Hebrews in its membership. In daily contact with such Hellenists, James could, in the course of the years, have attained to considerable proficiency the use of the Greek tongue" (*The New International Commentary of the New Testament: James*, 1974, p. 19).

Another evidence of the authenticity of the letter is the mention of Christians still meeting in synagogues. James writes of different classes of people coming "into your assembly" (James 2:2). The Greek word translated "assembly" here is *sunagoge*, an assembly of people. It was natural for James, as leader of the church in Jerusalem, to refer to the meeting places where Christians gathered as *synagogues*, since the term did not have the negative connotation it later took among anti-Jewish groups.

"There is evidence that early Jewish Christians sometimes met in synagogues," says archaeologist John McRay. "The New Testament letter of James refers to Christians (undoubtedly Jewish) meeting in a synagogue (2:2), but bear in mind that at this time Jews probably met most often in homes and rented halls" (*Archaeology and the New Testament*, 1997, p. 72).

### Peter's epistles

Peter's writing style and the background

of his two epistles also conform to the norm for those times. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* states, "First Peter is an epistle or letter written in the normal letter form of the [New Testament] world" (Edwin Blum, 1981, p. 213).

But how could Peter, a Galilean fisherman, write in the fine Greek style of these epistles?

"The parallels between this first letter and Peter's sermons recorded in Acts are significant," answers *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. "Peter's public ministry spanned more than 30 years . . . He lived and preached in a multicultural world. It is reasonable to believe that after three decades Peter could have mastered the language of the majority of those to whom he ministered. Certainly Peter had the time and talent to become an outstanding communicator of the gospel via the Greek language" (Logos Library System software, introduction to 1 Peter).

Peter ends his first epistle with a reference to his location: "She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son" (1 Peter 5:13).

Some commentators regard the mention of Babylon as a cryptic way of referring to Rome, but the historical evidence shows that the actual city of Babylon had a thriving Jewish community during those days.

The Scriptures indicate most of Peter's mission dealt not with gentiles but with Jews. Paul mentioned that "the gospel for the uncircumcised [gentiles] had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised [Jews] was to Peter" (Galatians 2:7).

"Many have wondered," writes historian William McBirmie, "if this [reference to Babylon] did not mean Rome, which was frequently called 'Babylon' by the early Christians. The actual city of Babylon, however, still was of importance. It was a great center of Jewish colonists and was a powerful center when Peter ministered there for a time. The Eastern churches trace their lineage to Babylon, and hence to Peter, to this day" (*The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, 1973, p. 57).

### John's writings

John's Gospel and epistles have an

unusual style and are among the most respected by scholars.

"No two works in the whole range of literature," wrote Sir William Ramsay, "show clearer signs of the genius of one writer, and no other pair of works are so completely in a class by themselves, apart from the work of their own and every other time" (Alexander Ross, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Epistles of James and John*, 1974, p. 110).

John penned his epistles toward the end of the New Testament period. They reflect the later struggles of the remaining apostles against gnostic groups and other opponents of God's law (antinomians) who were influencing Church members and seducing many away from the truth. Archaeology has helped us better understand some of the issues that John faced.

"The extensive Gnostic library that was found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945," states John McRay, "has provided us with new information regarding heresy in the early church and about the nature of the canon of the New Testament at this time" (p. 18).

Thanks to the discovery of material documenting some of the gnostic beliefs, the issues John mentioned have been confirmed to be historical.

### Conclusion

This concludes the brief overview of what archaeology and history tell us about the apostolic epistles.

Grant Jeffrey sums up the historical findings: "The tremendous advances in historical research and biblical archaeology in the last century have convinced most scholars in the last two decades that the Gospels and Epistles were written within thirty-five years or less of the events which they describe . . . In an article for *Christianity Today*, Jan. 18, 1963, W.F. Albright [the so-called dean of modern archaeology] wrote: 'In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and eighties of the first century A.D.'" (pp. 86-87).

In the next installment we will conclude this archaeological survey by covering the last book of the Bible, Revelation. **GN**

# The Book of Revelation: History and Prophecy

by Mario Seiglie

**I**n our long-running series “The Bible and Archaeology,” we have gone through the Scriptures from Genesis through the Epistles reviewing many of the surprising archaeological finds that confirm and illuminate the biblical record. We conclude the series with a look at archaeological and historical evidence relating to the last book of the Bible, Revelation.

Many people view Revelation, sometimes called the Apocalypse, as a mysterious book of strange symbols and images. Yet it has a clear and definite historical background. The apostle John, who wrote it under the inspiration of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:1), mentions where it was written and that it was addressed to congregations in seven cities in Asia Minor.

How do the descriptions of these places compare with discoveries about them from history and archaeology?

## Exiled to Patmos

We learn from John that he wrote Revelation from the island of Patmos (verse 9), in the Aegean Sea 40 miles off the coast of Asia Minor (modern-

day Turkey). Patmos is a small island of only 24 square miles (62 square kilometers), with a coastline in the shape of a horseshoe.

Was it customary in the Roman Empire for convicts to be exiled to an island? The Roman historian Tacitus (A.D. 56-120), in his book *Annals*, mentions the policy of banishing political prisoners to small islands (Sections 3:68; 4:30; 15:71).

Patmos, a rocky, volcanic and sparsely populated isle, was an appropriate place to send captives. Banishment was a terrible punishment that often involved whippings and being bound in chains before the prisoner was sent off for years of hard labor in rock quarries. At John’s advanced age it would have been a harrowing ordeal. Yet he mentions it as an honor to participate “in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ” (verse 9).

During the time of John’s exile, traditionally 94-96, history records violent persecution against Christians under the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96). This despot declared himself a god and demanded the worship of his subjects—with the exception of Jews. This meant that once a year each head of household had to appear before authorities, burn incense to the emperor and declare, “Caesar is lord.” Those who refused were branded as traitors and either sentenced to death or exiled.

Since Christians confessed they had only one Lord, Jesus Christ, they were mercilessly hounded. John, the last living apostle of the original 12, apparently was banished for this reason.

## A message to seven churches

While on Patmos, John received a long and complicated vision from Jesus Christ (verses 1-2, 10-20) with the instructions: “. . . What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea” (verse 11).

How accurate are the descriptions of these seven cities mentioned in the book of Revelation according to archaeology and history? Interestingly, Jesus

*Many people view Revelation, sometimes called the Apocalypse, as a mysterious book of strange symbols and images. Yet it has a clear and definite historical background.*



*Seven cities mentioned in Revelation apparently formed an ancient postal route connected by Roman roads stretching from the port city of Ephesus to Laodicea. John received his visions while exiled on the island of Patmos off the coast of modern-day Turkey.*





**The port city of Ephesus** played a prominent role in apostolic times and is mentioned in six New Testament books. Although it was home to a large Christian congregation addressed by the apostle John in the book of Revelation, Ephesus was also a center of idolatrous worship of the goddess Diana, whose temple (right) was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It also boasted temples for the worship of several Roman emperors, including Hadrian (above), Augustus and Domitian.

used some of the characteristics of each city to spiritually evaluate its congregation and to prophesy the history of His Church up to His second coming.

### The first church: Ephesus

The port city of Ephesus was a short voyage from Patmos. Therefore one could logically send a letter there and then on to the remaining six cities Christ mentioned.

Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of the Roman roads that stretched from Ephesus to Laodicea. “It is no accident,” notes John McRay, “that the letters in Revelation 1-3 are arranged in this same sequence. Beginning with Ephesus, the roads follow a geographic semicircle, extending northward, turning to the east, and continuing southward to Laodicea—thus connecting the cities on what must have functioned as an ancient postal route” (*Archaeology and the New Testament*, 1997, p. 242).

The apostle Paul had founded a large church in Ephesus, and now Jesus addressed the members there with a prophetic message that applied to them and was predictive of the Church’s future. Jesus had told John: “Write the things which you have seen, and *the things which are* [at the present time], and *the things which will take place after this*

[in the future]” (verse 19, emphasis added throughout). Hence part of the message of Revelation would apply to John’s time, and part would be for future generations.

Christ recognizes the effort of the Ephesian brethren, in spite of many obstacles, to keep the faith and carry out the commission He had given them. “I know your works, your labor, your patience,” He told them, “and that you cannot bear those who are evil” (Revelation 2:2).

In Ephesus was much evil to avoid—within and without the congregation. It was there that Paul had warned the “elders of the church” (Acts 20:17): “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (verses 29-30).

Moreover, the Ephesian brethren had to resist the many temptations the immensely popular pagan temple worship offered them. Archaeologists have found at Ephesus the ruins of one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple of Diana, or Artemis, also mentioned in the Bible (Acts 19:27). Thousands of priests and priestesses served the temple; many of the priestesses were dedicated to cultic prostitution.

Centuries earlier Heracleitus, an Ephesian philosopher, described the inhabitants there as “fit only to be drowned[,] and the reason why [they] could never laugh or smile was because [they] lived amidst such terrible uncleanness.” Such was the reputation of ancient Ephesus. It would have been difficult to live as a Christian in the midst of such an immoral city.

Knowing this, Christ gives the brethren the hope that if they persevere in the faith they will receive something that all the temple worship of Diana could never give them—the gift of eternal life. “To him who overcomes,” He promised, “I will give to eat from the tree of life [symbolizing eternal life], which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7).

### Smyrna: Center of emperor worship

The next city on the ancient postal circuit was Smyrna, about 40 miles north of Ephesus. It was a flourishing city and the main center of emperor worship.

Jesus tells the church in Smyrna: “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days” (verse 10).

These words had not only a prophetic sense but a literal fulfillment in John's day as well. The brethren in Smyrna knew they were special targets of the persecution under Domitian, for the city's history had shown an unwavering loyalty to Rome. It was proud that it had been declared a "free city," which meant its residents had the right to govern their own affairs.

"Long before Rome was undisputed mistress of the world," comments William Barclay, "Smyrna had cast in its lot with her, never to waver in its fidelity. Cicero [the Roman orator] called Smyrna 'one of our most faithful and most ancient allies' . . . Such was the reverence of Smyrna for Rome that as far back as 195 B.C. it was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess Roma" (*Letters to the Seven Churches*, 1957, p. 29).

The only way Church members could go about peacefully in this place was to carry a certificate showing they had offered incense to the emperor and proclaimed him lord. Among the ancient papyri letters that archaeologists have found is one with such a request and another with an accompanying certificate declaring: "We, the representatives of the Emperor, Serenos and Hermas, have seen you sacrificing."

Many of the Christians in Smyrna would die because of fierce persecutions. So Christ encourages and reminds them that He is offering them something Caesar worship could never provide—the chance to live forever. He exhorts them: "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (verse 11).

### **Pergamos: "Where Satan's throne is"**

Next on the Roman mail route was Pergamos, the Roman capital of Asia Minor. This city would never reach the commercial greatness of Ephesus or Smyrna, but it was the indisputable center of religious, medical and artistic culture of the region. The city's famous library, with 200,000 parchment rolls, was rivaled only by the library in Alexandria, Egypt.

Christ tells the church at Pergamos: "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is" (verse 13). Again, this prophecy had a literal fulfillment as well

as serving as a description of a future time for the Church.

The mention of Satan's throne in Pergamos likely refers to the famous worship of its most popular deity, the serpent god Asklepios Soter, whose Latin equivalent means "the man-instructing serpent and savior." The serpent god was none other than Satan, whom Revelation describes as "that serpent of old, called the Devil" (Revelation 12:9).

Pergamos was so renowned for the worship of this god, who supposedly healed the sick, that this deity was called "the Pergamene god." Many of the coins discovered in Pergamos have the serpent as part of their design.

The remains of the shrine to Asklepios have been uncovered by archaeologists. "A 450-foot segment of the widest section was excavated and reconstructed so visitors to the site can experience a beautiful approach to the Asklepieion," notes John McRay. "Dedicated to Asklepios Soter, the god of healing, the Asklepieion was a kind of Mayo Clinic of the ancient world . . . Numerous treatment rooms, sleeping rooms (for incubation and autosuggestion in psychiatric treatment), meeting rooms, and temples were located here . . . Patients coming to the shrine believed that Asklepios would heal them. There was no perceived dissonance between science and religion in the ancient world" (McRay, pp. 271-272).

"From all over the world," adds William Barclay, "people flocked to Pergamos for relief of their sicknesses. R.H. Charles has called Pergamos 'the Lourdes of the ancient world' . . . Thus, pagan religion had its center in Pergamos. There was the worship of Athene and Zeus, with its magnificent altar dominating the city [now partially reconstructed in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin]. There was the worship of Asklepios, bringing sick people from far and near, and above all there were the demands of Caesar worship, hanging forever like a poised sword above the heads of the Christians" (*The Daily Study Bible*, notes on Revelation 2:12-17, Bible Explorer Software).

### **Origin of serpent worship in Pergamos**

How did serpent worship begin in

Pergamos? Some historians trace it to the collapse of the Babylonian Empire, when some Chaldean priests established their religious center in Pergamos. "The defeated Chaldeans fled to Asia Minor, and fixed their central college at Pergamos," notes historian William Barker in his book *Lares and Penates of Cilicia* (1853, p. 232).

Certainly the Old Testament identifies Satan's chief seat of activity as being in ancient Babylon, where the doctrines of its mystery religion "made all the earth drunk" (Jeremiah 51:7). This would make its religious successor, Pergamos, the temporary new "Satan's seat" of the Babylonian mystery religion.

"That seat," comments Alexander Hislop, "after the death of Belshazzar [the last Babylonian king], and the expulsion of the Chaldean priesthood from Babylon by the Medo-Persian kings, was at Pergamos, where afterwards was one of the seven churches of Asia. There, in consequence, for many centuries was 'Satan's seat.'"

"There, under favor of the deified kings of Pergamos, was his favorite abode and was the worship of Asklepios, under the form of the serpent . . . Pergamos itself became part and parcel of the Roman Empire, when Attalus III, the last of its kings, at his death, left by will all his dominions to the Roman people in 133 BC" (*The Two Babylons*, 1959, p. 240).

In this way, the Roman emperors had become the heirs of "Satan's seat" during John's day. Later, when the Roman Empire collapsed, its successor, the Holy Roman Empire, would inherit the role. It is noteworthy that Revelation 17:4-5, 18 reveals that in the end time a powerful religious system from the ancient past will again reign over the nations and be identified as "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth."

### **Pressure to compromise in Thyatira**

Some 40 miles east of Pergamos lay Thyatira, a city important for its commerce in wool and textiles.

When the city was excavated from 1968 to 1971, its architectural remains showed it had the typical Roman style of colonnades and public buildings and a temple to the



**Pergamos, Roman capital of Asia Minor,** was the center for worship of the serpent god Asklepios Soter, which supposedly had great healing powers. This god's massive shrine, the Asklepieion (left), attracted visitors from all

over the known world. Such corrupt worship led John to refer to Pergamos as the city "where Satan's throne is." Like other major Roman cities, it erected temples for emperor worship, including the Trajaneum (right).

goddess Artemis. The city was especially famous for its fine woolen cloth, usually dyed in a shade that came to be called Thyatiran purple. It was from Thyatira that Lydia, a seller of purple and convert to Christianity, had come (Acts 16:14). Inscriptions at the site reveal the existence of trade guilds, many of them associated with the powerful textile industry.

Christ says about this congregation: "I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first. Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols" (Revelation 2:19-20).

Since Thyatira was a religious center, and the home of powerful guilds demanding religious participation of their workers in their banquets, it was difficult for Christians to resist falling into idolatry.

"The strong trade guilds in this city," says Leon Morris, "would have made it very difficult for any Christian to earn his living without belonging to a guild. But membership involved attendance at guild banquets, and this in turn meant eating meat which had first been sacrificed to an idol. What was a Christian to do? If he did not conform he was out of a job . . .

"The teaching of Jezebel [probably a

symbolic name] apparently reasoned that an idol is of no consequence, and advised Christians to eat such meals. That these meals all too readily degenerated into sexual looseness made matters worse. But we can understand that some Christians would welcome a heresy of this type. It enabled them to maintain a Christian profession while countenancing and even engaging in immoral heathen revels" (*Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, 1975, p. 71).

Christ reminds the Thyatiran brethren they must come out of that worldly society, no matter how enticing it appeared, and not compromise with the truth. He promises to those of Thyatira who remain faithful that they will be arrayed, not in Thyatiran purple, a cloth used mainly by Roman royalty, but at His coming with the spiritual mantle of rulership over the nations.

He tells them that "he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—'He shall rule them with a rod of iron; they shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels'—as I also have received from My Father" (Revelation 2:26-27).

#### **Sardis: Warning to watch**

Poised above the rich Hermus Valley, Sardis was 30 miles south of Thyatira. The city appeared as a gigantic watchtower and was considered impregnable. Five roads converged below it and contributed to

Sardis's status as a great commercial center. The wealth of the city—which had been the capital of the Lydian Empire under the opulent King Croesus—was legendary.

Christ exhorts this church, "*Be watchful*, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God" (Revelation 3:2).

The Sardian brethren could readily identify with a warning to be watchful. The only two times Sardis had been conquered were when its citizens had become overconfident and failed to watch.

Once, when King Cyrus of Persia besieged the city, the Sardians, nestled in their fortress high above, paid little attention to the invader. Cyrus could not find a way to get up to the citadel and even offered a reward to the soldier who discovered a pathway. Sometime later a vigilant Persian soldier spied a defender who had accidentally dropped his helmet from above. The careless soldier climbed down a secret pathway to retrieve it, and that night the Persians led their troops up the same pathway and to the top. To their surprise, the site was completely unguarded. The watchmen had gone home to sleep, thinking there was no need to keep guard at night—and so Sardis fell.

Incredibly, several centuries later the same sequence of events occurred when a Greek general besieged the city. After a year's siege the Greeks appeared to lose all

hope of conquering the city. Then one of the Sardinian soldiers dropped a helmet and retrieved it. That night the Greeks led some men up the steep cliff. When they reached the top, the place was again unguarded. Sardis's inhabitants had forgotten their lesson, and their city fell again.

Christ uses this lesson to drive home a powerful spiritual point to His Church: "Therefore *if you will not watch*, I will come upon you *as a thief*, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you" (verse 3).

### Faithfulness in Philadelphia

About 25 miles southeast of Sardis lay the city of Philadelphia, newest of the seven cities. An imperial road passed through it from Rome to the east, so it became known as "the gateway to the East."

Christ says to this church: "These things says He who is holy, He who is true . . . Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more" (Revelation 3:7, 11-12).

Christ emphasizes His loyalty to His true followers and reminds them to be equally faithful to Him. If they persevere in His Word, He will give them a crown that they may rule with Him in His Kingdom.

We find a definite theme of brotherly fidelity in this section. The Philadelphian brethren could well identify with this admonition.

*Philadelphia* means "brotherly love." The city was named after the love the king who founded the city held for his brother. The city was established by Attalus II (159-138 B.C.), who was called Philadelphus ("brother lover") in honor of his loyal affection toward his brother, King Eumenes II of Pergamos. During his brother's lifetime Attalus II was his most loyal assistant. He successfully commanded his brother's forces in several wars and later became the trusted ambassador to their ally, Rome. There he won respect and admiration from the Romans for his brotherly fidelity.

*The New Bible Dictionary* comments: "As Philadelphus was renowned for his loyalty to his brother, so the church, the true Philadelphia, inherits and fulfills his character by its steadfast loyalty to

Christ" (1982, "Philadelphia," p. 926).

### Laodicea: Warning to repent

The last city on the route was Laodicea, 45 miles southeast of Philadelphia. With three main roads crossing it, the city was one of the richest commercial centers in the world. The Laodiceans were famous for producing shiny, black wool clothing and boasted of an outstanding medical center that specialized in eye ointments. With the wealth amassed, it had also become the banking center of the region.

Christ says to this church: "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see" (verses 15-18).

Archaeologists have discovered the main aqueduct going to Laodicea, and several miles of it can still be traced. The water piped in from the south had so many minerals that the Roman engineers had covers installed so they could remove the mineral deposits before the pipes clogged.

"For all its wealth, the city had poor water," says *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. "The water either came from the nearby hot springs and was cooled to lukewarm or came from a cooler source and warmed up in the aqueduct on the way" (notes on Revelation 3, Zondervan software).

Christ uses the Laodiceans' lukewarm and distasteful water to point out that their poor spiritual state is equally offensive to Him. He warns them that, if they do not rapidly improve their spiritual condition, He will reject them. He detests the Laodicean attitude of compromising with God's laws. By contrast, He later describes those who are faithful to Him as "those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12).

Further, even if their clothing were

world renowned, Christ tells them their "spiritual garments" were in pitiful condition. He recommends they focus instead on buying from Him the spiritual clothing of true righteousness that He later describes as "fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" (Revelation 19:8).

Jesus next tells those brethren, who were blind to their true spiritual condition, that the "Phrygian powder" concocted in their medical center as an eye ointment was useless. Instead, He advised them to use His true spiritual eye salve so they can clearly see and repent of their compromising attitudes.

Lastly, Christ warns them not to put their trust in their physical wealth but in Him, who can develop the true gold that comes from overcoming trials and building righteous spiritual character. This solid advice is of lasting value to the entirety of the Church at any time in its history.

### Conclusion

This concludes our archaeological review of the last book of the Bible. We hope this series has been a satisfying journey through the Bible and that it has strengthened your faith.

Throughout this series we have confirmed what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." **GN**

### Recommended Reading

To learn more about the book of Revelation and what it reveals about the past, present and future, be sure to request your free copy of *The*



*Book of Revelation Unveiled*. Contact any of our offices listed on page 2, or request or download it from our Web site at [www.gnmagazine.org](http://www.gnmagazine.org).