

The Holy Sepulchre

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THE HOLY SEPULCHRE.

THE most interesting question connected with the topography of Jerusalem is that of the true site of the sepulchre of Joseph of Arimathea, in which Christ was laid, and of the place called Golgotha, or Calvary, where He was crucified, and which was "nigh at hand" to the sepulchre.

The indications of position contained in the Gospels are very slight. The two sites of Golgotha and the sepulchre were near each other (John xix, 42). The place of Crucifixion was "nigh to the city" (John xix, 20); and we learn from the Epistle to the Hebrews that Jesus "suffered without the gate" (Heb. xiii, 12). There is nothing, however, further to show which side of Jerusalem these sites should be placed.

It may reasonably, however, be supposed that Golgotha ("the Skull") was the ordinary place of execution for criminals, which is mentioned in the Mishnah under the name *Beth-has-Sekilah*—the "House of Stoning:" for there is no reason to think that the Roman procurator would have made use of a different place of execution to that established by the Jewish Sanhedrin, although that assembly had been debarred by the Romans from the power of inflicting capital punishment only a little before the date of the Crucifixion. This ancient Jewish place of execution is mentioned as follows in the Mishnah (or Text of the Talmud), about 150 A.D.

"When the judgment was finished they brought him forth to stone him. The place of stoning (Beth-has-Sekilah) was outside the Judgment Hall, as it is said, 'Bring him forth that hath cursed' (Levit. xxiv, 14). One stood at the door of the Judgment Hall with a scarf in his hand, and another man rode a horse far off from him, but so that he could see him. If any said, 'I have somewhat to say for his defence,' this one waved his scarf, and the other galoped his horse and stopped the accused; and even if he himself said, 'I have somewhat to tell in my defence,' they brought him back as many as four or five times, only there must be substance in his words. If they found him clear they set him free, but if not they took him forth to stone him. . . . The Place of Stoning was the height of two men. One of the witnesses threw him down on his loins; . . . if he died with that thrust it was finished, but if not the second witness took a stone and cast it on his breast. If he died with that blow the stoning was finished, but if not he was stoned by all Israel" (Sanhed. vi, 1-4).

From this somewhat crabbed description several interesting conclusions have been drawn by commentators. The passage quoted from Leviticus (xxiv, 14), together with the arrangement for communicating by a signal-man and a mounted man between the judges and the condemned, clearly shows that the place of execution was outside the city, and at some distance from the Judgment Hall. It is also understood that a cliff, some 12 feet high, existed at the place of execution, over which the condemned was thrown by the first witness. If he was not killed by the fall, the second witness cast down a stone on him, and the crowd on the cliff, or beneath, stood ready to complete the barbarous execution. It should be noted that

the other methods of execution detailed in the tract Sanhedrin are equally barbarous, and also that it appears to have been the custom to hang on a tree, or a cross, the bodies of those who were stoned. "They sunk the beam in the ground, and a cross-beam extended from it, and they bound his hands one over another, and hung him up" (Sanhed. vi, 4). The body was, however, removed at sundown according to the negative command (Deut. xxi, 23). Thus the "House of Stoning" was also a recognised place of crucifixion.

A tradition is current amongst the Jews of Jerusalem which places this "House of Stoning" at the present knoll, north of the Damascus gate, in which is a cave, known since the fifteenth century as the "Grotto of Jeremiah," with a cliff, the maximum height of which is about 50 feet, facing southwards towards the city. This tradition was first collected by Dr. Chaplin, and I afterwards twice obtained it independently from separate individuals, both being Spanish Jews, and thus belonging to the oldest community of Jews in the city.

This tradition is of course not in accord with that of the Christians, but it has several points in its favour. First, the site is outside ancient Jerusalem, as restored by the latest authorities, the third wall coinciding east of the Damascus gate with the present wall of the city. Second, the existence of an ancient Jewish tomb immediately to the west of the knoll, and of another, possibly Jewish, a little further south, would seem to indicate that the ancient city did not extend so far as to include the vicinity of the knoll: for we learn from the Talmud (Baba Bathra ii, 9; Tosiphta Baba Bathra i; cf. Yoma iii, 3) that all tombs were at least 50 cubits outside the walls, saving those of David and Huldah. Third, a Christian tradition, as early as the fifth century, also pointed to the vicinity of this site as the place of the stoning of Stephen, the proto-martyr. Fourth, the vicinity has apparently been always considered unlucky. In the fifteenth century we find Mejr ed Dîn speaking of the tract immediately east of the knoll, under the name *Es Sahrah*, "the desert," and pronouncing it to be accursed and haunted, so that the traveller should not pass it at night. This idea is no doubt connected with that of fixing the Valley of Judgment (or Jehosaphat) in the Kedron, which is still called by the Arabs Wâdy Jehennum (the Valley of Hell), an identification which is not supported by any very clear reference in the Bible, although the tradition is ancient and common to Jew, Christian, and Moslem (cf. Joel iii, 12). The valley passes not far east of the knoll, and has its head north of it, where the name Jehosaphat probably still survives in the Arabic name of the village of *Sha'fat*. The name of the knoll, according to Mejr ed Dîn, was *El Heidemîneh* or *El Heidemîyeh*, and the latter is still the name given to the place by Moslems. It would mean "broken," or "destroyed," perhaps on account of the cliff; the Moslems, however, consider that it is a corruption of *Heirimîyeh*, in which case it is derived from the traditional Christian name of Jeremiah's Grotto.

The site is one well fitted for a place of public execution. The top of the knoll is 2,550 feet above the sea, or 110 above the top of the Sakhrah rock in the Haram. It commands a view over the city walls to the Temple

enclosure and the Holy Sepulchre Church. A sort of amphitheatre is formed by the gentle slopes on the west; and the whole population of the city might easily witness from the vicinity anything taking place on the top of the cliff. The knoll is just beside the main north road. It is occupied by a cemetery of Moslem tombs, which existed as early as the fifteenth century at least; and the modern slaughter-house of Jerusalem is on the north slope. The hill is quite bare, with scanty grass covering the rocky soil, and a few irises and wild flowers growing among the graves. Not a tree or shrub exists on it, though fine olive groves stretch northward from its vicinity; a few hungry dogs are generally prowling about, and an evil odour from the slaughter-house always offends the senses in climbing the slope. The hillock is rounded on all sides but the south, where the yellow cliff is pierced by two small caves high up in the sides. Some of the Jews appear to consider that the Beth-has-Sekilah was actually *in* one of these caves, which would accord better with the height of the cliff as mentioned in the Mishnah. Visitors of late years have sometimes thought that the hill with its caves resembles a skull with eye-sockets; but this is perhaps rather a fanciful idea, and the best evidence lies in the Jewish tradition.

The proposal of identifying this hill with Calvary was first published in "Tent Work in Palestine;" but in 1881 it was found that a Jewish tomb existed on a smaller knoll west of the north road, about 200 yards from the top of the first-mentioned knoll. It was apparently laid bare during building operations in the vicinity, and had not been previously described. This discovery led to the suggestion that the tomb thus standing alone might be the actual sepulchre of Joseph of Arimathea, and the idea excited considerable interest in England at the time.

Having thus noticed the sites to which Jewish tradition seems to point as representing the Holy Sepulchre and the place called Golgotha, we may pause for a moment to notice the Christian tradition as to these sites.

The first writer who speaks of these holy places after the Christian era is the Bordeaux pilgrim, who visited Jerusalem in 333 A.D., when Constantine's basilica was being built. He says, "On the left (of a pilgrim going to the Neapolitan or Nablus Gate) is the little hill Golgotha, where the Lord was crucified. Thence about a stone's throw is the cave where His body was placed." He thus apparently describes the present traditional sites in the Holy Sepulchre Church.

The early fathers and pilgrims (as, for instance, St. Willibald in 722 A.D.) also agree that the holy sites were outside Jerusalem in the time of Christ. Willibald says that St. Helena included them within the city walls; Sæwulf (1103 A.D.) says that Hadrian did so; but none deny that the wording of the Gospel and Epistle is clear on this point.

According to Eusebius, the Holy Sepulchre was concealed under a mound, on which stood a Temple of Venus, and on removing this the Holy Tomb was discovered quite unexpectedly by Macarius, "beyond all hope" and by "a miracle" ("Vita Const.," iii, 28-30). Constantine's letter to Macarius after this discovery, ordering the building of a basilica, does

not mention the finding of the Cross, said to have been dug up near this site by his mother Helena, in 326 A.D., but the story of this miraculous discovery is noticed by St. Cyril in 347 A.D. The Cross was apparently also seen by Sta Paula in 383 A.D., and the story is repeated by Theodoret in 440 A.D. It appears clear from these accounts that there was no extant tradition as to the site of the sepulchre, but that it was found unexpectedly, and even supposed to have been miraculously indicated to Helena (cf. Robinson, "Later Bib. Res.," pp. 256-8).

It has been argued that the site was known by the existence of the Venus temple, but there is nothing in the account of Eusebius to favour such a view. Considering how uncritical an age the fourth century is known to have been, it is more probable that Macarius, when he found an ancient tomb under the temple on its destruction, jumped to the conclusion that it was the Holy Sepulchre: even if it be not really more probable that an ancient Mithræum was reconsecrated as a holy Christian site by the Patriarch,—just as St. Clement's at Rome stands over a Mithræum, and as the cave of the Nativity at Bethlehem is stated by Jerome to have been long used as a Mithraic cavern. Instances innumerable might be quoted in which pagan sites were thus reconsecrated. Pope Gregory, in his famous letter to his clergy (Bede, p. 141), recommends such reconsecration of pagan shrines to Christian uses, as the people would more readily gather in accustomed places of worship. The annual ceremony of the Holy Fire, which is supposed to issue from the Holy Sepulchre, is clearly of pagan origin, and is traced back at least to the ninth century (Bernard the Wise). This fact also lends some support to the idea that the cave may have already existed beneath the temple of Venus, or Ashtoreth, and may have been reconsecrated by Macarius, under the name of the Sepulchre of Christ.

It has also been argued that remains of the ancient city must have existed, and that Constantine and Macarius would not have sought the Holy Sepulchre within its bounds. As regards the first part of this question, Eusebius does speak of such remains ("Theophania," p. 242), and also of New Jerusalem opposite the ruins of the old ("Vita Const.," iii, 33); but nearly three centuries had then elapsed since the great siege, and Jerusalem had been rebuilt by Hadrian, so that considerable archæological knowledge (such as was certainly not characteristic of the age) would have been required to determine the extent of the ancient town. As regards the second part of the contention, we must never forget that men did not argue in the fourth and fifth centuries in the manner which is distinctive of scientific research in the nineteenth; they were ready rather to adore the sites indicated by their priests, and to accept the authoritative assertion of patriarchs and preachers with humility. No one can read the homilies of Cyril, the letters of Jerome, or the itineraries of the early pilgrims, without seeing that this was the case. Jerome and Eusebius had curious ideas as to the waters of Bethesda; the Bordeaux pilgrim found the blood of Zacharias, son of Barachias, still visible on the marble before the altar: he even believed the Transfiguration to have occurred on Olivet, confusing it with the Ascension. Sta Paula found Samaria full of demons, who

"howled like wolves, hissed like serpents, bellowed like bulls," according to Jerome's account ("Peregrinatio S. Paulæ"). It was not only Antony of Piacenza who was credulous and superstitious. Traces of ignorance concerning Scripture, and of superstitious beliefs, are found in the earliest and best itineraries of the fourth century. It was an age when men did not very clearly distinguish between Christ and Serapis, when they mixed together the language of the Gospels and the jargon of solar worship. It was an age of belief in sacred footmarks on rocks, and similar wonders, and in no sense of critical or scientific reasoning. The idea that Constantine and Macarius must have taken pains to prove the truth of their new theory, is one which would not be put forward by a student of the fourth century literature as a whole, and it cannot for a moment bear the test of modern research. The notes I have made as to the course of the Tyropœon Valley show clearly that it sinks very rapidly from the narrow saddle near the citadel, and so-called Tower of David; and no military man could for a moment admit that the second wall ran down into this deep valley, instead of occupying the saddle to the west (see "Tent Work in Palestine," vol. i, p. 369). The second wall has not only been shown by Robinson to have started near the Tower of David, but the nature of the ground admits of no other line, and if Josephus is right in saying that it went thence "in a curve" to Antonia (5 Wars, iv, 2) it is quite impossible that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre should have been in the time of Christ outside this wall.

But even if this argument could be shown to be fallacious, there remains the fact that the traditional sites were certainly within Agrippa's wall, which was built only eleven years after the Crucifixion, to defend the suburb which had grown up outside the second wall. Such a suburb would probably have taken in those days more than eleven years to attain the extent necessitating a new line of fortification. In this case, whether within or without, the Holy Sepulchre (as fixed by Constantine) was so close to the second wall that it is impossible to suppose its site not to have been surrounded by houses in the time of Christ, a fact which would be fatal to the authenticity of the site.

The result of ten years of study of this question has been to convince me of the following facts:—

1st. That the tomb of Nicodemus, immediately west of the traditional Holy Sepulchre, is the monument of the Kings of Judah, including the tombs of David and Solomon (see Conder's "Handbook to the Bible," p. 341, 3rd edition), and existed as such at the time of the Crucifixion.

2nd. That a temple of Venus or of Ashtoreth stood in Constantine's time over the supposed Holy Sepulchre. That it was seen by Eusebius, and is the same shown on a coin of Antoninus Pius, which has the legend C.A.C. (Colonia Ælia Capitolina), with figures of Venus and Cupid. That the tomb was either covered up and not known to exist, or else that it was a crypt used for the mysteries which we know to have been connected with the worship of Venus (as, for instance, at Apheka on Lebanon, where the temple of the mourning Venus was destroyed, by Constantine's orders, like that at Jerusalem). Jerome tells us that the Bethlehem crypt, over

which Constantine also built a basilica, was long used as a Mithræum, where the birth of Tammuz was celebrated. It must also be remembered that Constantine built a basilica on the summit of Olivet, where the foot-mark of Christ on the rock is still shown and supposed to have been imprinted at the Ascension; and this traditional site, which St. Helena visited before the Holy Sepulchre had been found, is not to be reconciled with the statement that Christ ascended near Bethany (Luke xxiv, 50; cf. Acts i, 12). It is quite possible that an old temple of Ashtoreth was restored in the second century on the spot now shown in the Holy Sepulchre Church, and reconsecrated to Christian use by Macarius as the Sepulchre of Christ.

3rd. That there is not a single allusion in any Christian writer earlier than Eusebius (fourth century) to the site of the Holy Sepulchre or of Calvary, and that we have a complete break in tradition of three centuries. The Christians left Jerusalem for Pella before the siege of Titus, and we do not know when they came back. Thus, even if they had preserved at first a feeling of veneration for the sepulchre, there is nothing to show that any tradition of its site was handed down by the Apostles to their successors; and had the site been considered very sacred by the Evangelists, they would probably have been more careful to describe its position. We know, however, that the Jews considered that a man became unclean if he stepped over a hidden tomb (Yoma, iii, 3), although the facts that the Holy Sepulchre was a new tomb never as yet used (Luke xxiii, 53), and that the body of Christ was raised again, may have modified this belief in respect to the particular tomb we are considering.

4th. All the evidence as yet collected points clearly to the fact that the present traditional sites were not outside Jerusalem at the date of the Crucifixion, and it is admitted by all writers, ancient and modern, that this objection is fatal to the authenticity of these sites.

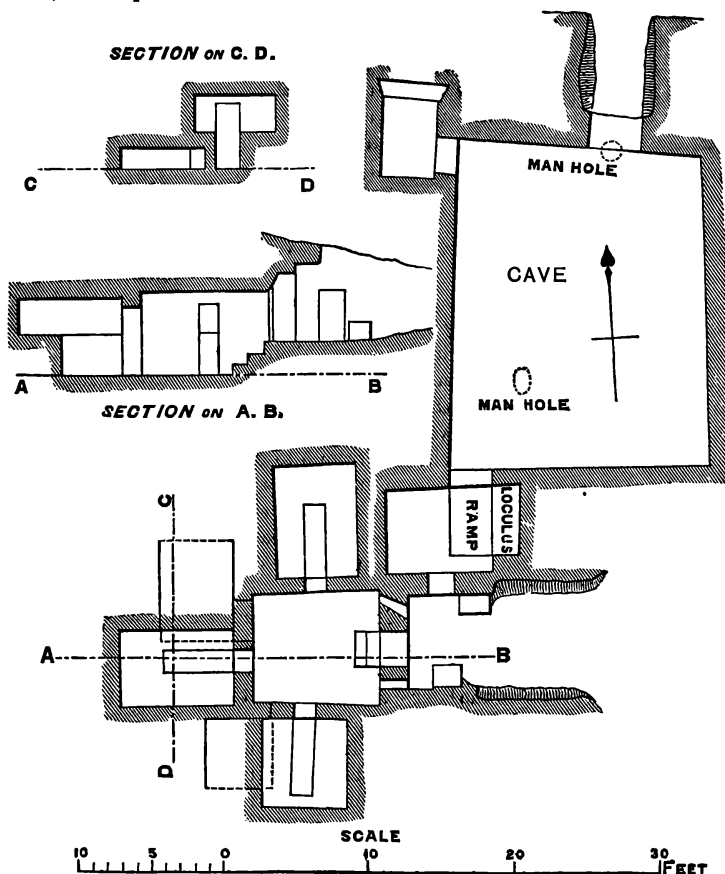
5th. The tradition of the Jews is more reliable, perhaps, than any Byzantine tradition, and the site which is indicated by the Jews appears to agree in a remarkable manner with the Gospel narrative.

6th. That a Jewish tomb exists nigh to the knoll, which Jewish tradition identifies as a place of execution, and even of crucifixion; and that this sepulchre would seem to have stood by itself in the gardens which we know existed north of Jerusalem (5 Wars, ii, 2), the principal Jewish cemetery of the period being further north in Wâdy el Joz.

7th. That this tomb is of the kind mentioned in the New Testament. Not a sepulchre with *kokim*, or tunnels, but one with a *loculus*, so that angels could have been seen seated at the head and at the feet (John xx, 12), which would be impossible in a *Koka* tomb, and that the *loculus* tomb is shown by dated monuments (as, for instance, the tomb of Helena, Queen of Adiabene) to have been the kind of sepulchre used by the Jews about the time of Christ.

Finally that, although certainty is impossible in face of the very scanty nature of the evidence, the sites now proposed have in their favour better arguments than any others.

The following is the description of the tomb in question sent home in 1881, here reprinted for convenience of reference :—



NEWLY DISCOVERED JEWISH TOMB NEAR THE CITY, 200 YARDS WEST OF JEREMIAH'S GROTTTO.

It is cut in the east face of a very curious rock platform, measuring about 70 paces either way—as shown on the Ordnance Survey, about 200 yards west of the grotto. The platform is roughly scarped on all sides, in an apparently artificial manner, and on the west is a higher piece of rock, also with sides rudely scarped. The rest of the space is fairly level, but there seem to be traces of the foundations of a surrounding wall in some low mounds near the edge of the platform. I have long been aware of the existence of a curious cistern in the north-east corner of this scarp. It has a domed roof with a man-hole, and also a door with a passage 10 ft. long and 3 ft. wide, leading out eastwards. The cistern is about 8 paces in

diameter, and three steps lead down from the door to the level of the cistern floor. This excavation seems originally to have been a chamber afterwards converted into a cistern, and there are sockets for the door-hinges and for bolts in the passage entrance.

The ancient tomb is some 30 paces further south, and the entrance is also from the east. The whole is very rudely cut in rock, which is of inferior quality. The doorway is much broken, and there is a loophole or window, 4 ft. wide, either side of the door. The outer court, cut in the rock, is 7 ft. square, and two stones are so placed in this as to give the idea that they may have held in place a rolling-stone before the door. On the right (or north) is a side entrance, leading into a chamber with a single loculus, and thence into a cave, some 8 paces square and 10 ft. high, with a well-mouth in the roof.

The chamber within the tomb entrance is reached by a descent of two steps, and measures 6 ft. by 9 ft. From either side wall, and from the back wall is an entrance 20 ins. wide and about $5\frac{1}{2}$ ft. high, leading into a side chamber. A passage runs in continuation of each entrance for $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft., and on each side is a bench about $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. wide and $2\frac{1}{4}$ ft. high. A similar bench occurs at the end, the whole width of each chamber being thus $5\frac{1}{2}$ ft. ; its length 7 ft. 2 ins., and its height from 5 to 6 ft. Each would contain two bodies lying beside the passage, but there would scarcely be room for three. In addition to these three chambers, there are two excavations on the floor-level, in the further corner of the central chamber. They are about 5 ft. square, with narrow entrances, and were scattered with human bones at the time of my visit.

The discovery of this tomb is of no little importance in connection with Jerusalem topography. If it be compared with the great cemetery at Sheikh (Ibreik Sheet V), and with the monument of Helena at Jerusalem, it will be seen to belong to the later Jewish period—the centuries immediately preceding the Christian era. It is not a Christian tomb, so far as can be judged, for the Christians in Palestine seem mainly to have used the "rock-sunk" tomb. A cemetery of tombs, of the form commonly used by the Crusaders, was found in 1870 near the north-east angle of the Jerusalem city walls, but no Jewish tomb has ever been found before so close to the ramparts of the modern city on the north.

It would be bold to hazard the suggestion that the single Jewish sepulchre thus found is indeed the tomb in the garden, nigh unto the place called Golgotha, which belonged to the rich Joseph of Arimathea ; yet its appearance so near the old place of execution, and so far from the other tombs in the old cemeteries of the city, is extremely remarkable. I am sorry to say that a group of Jewish houses is growing up round the spot. The rock is being blasted for building-stone, and the tomb, unless preserved, may perhaps soon be entirely destroyed. It is now in a disgusting condition of filth, which shows that the oriental Jews have little reverence for the old sepulchres of their ancestors. Perhaps some of our readers might feel willing to redeem this most interesting monument from its present state of desecration, and to purchase and enclose the little plot of rocky

ground in which it stands. Without such preservation the sepulchre is doomed to destruction sooner or later.

The platform of rock in which the tomb is cut seems possibly to have been the base of a group of towers with a scarped foundation.

The distance from the monument of Helena, and the position with respect to the Cotton Grotto, agrees with the description given by Josephus (5 Wars, ii, 2) of the position of the "Women's Towers" (see Conder's "Handbook to the Bible," p. 352). If the third wall actually extended over this line, it is easy to explain why no other tombs of the same period exist so close to the present city. The extension of the fortifications rendered it necessary to remove the cemetery further off, since the Jews did not allow sepulture within the walls. The cisterns may have belonged to the period when the great towers were here erected, and the passage with steps may even have been a postern from the towers.

If we could feel any reasonable certitude that in this single Jewish tomb (dating about the time of Christ) we have recovered the actual sepulchre in which He lay, an easy explanation of the loss of the site is afforded at once; for the construction, some ten years later, of the "Women's Towers" by Agrippa, upon the rock over the tomb, would have caused the monument to be hidden beneath, or within the new buildings; and thus the sepulchre could no longer be visited, and in course of time its existence was forgotten, until the zealous Helena destroyed the Venus Temple on the present site of the Holy Sepulchre Church, and "beyond all hope" (as Eusebius words it) discovered the rock-cut Jewish tomb, which the faithful accepted as the tomb of Christ.

A careful plan of the site, and of the tomb, was made by Lieutenant Mantell, as the alterations in this part of Jerusalem are proceeding so rapidly, that on our next visit rock and tomb may alike have disappeared.

This tomb has since been visited by their Royal Highnesses Prince Edward and Prince George of Wales, and by many travellers, to one of whom we owe an excellent photograph of the entrance. I am also informed by Herr Schick that a slab of stone was found lying in the tomb, when it was excavated, with a cross and Greek inscription. The slab measured 3 feet 11 inches in length by 2 feet 7 inches in breadth. The lettering is 2½ inches high, the top line being 6 inches from the top of the slab. The inscription runs thus:—

+ ΘΗΚΗ ΔΙΑΦΕΡΩΣ

This is evidently a funerary tablet of the fifth or sixth century at earliest, and has no necessary connection with the original tomb.

As regards the door of the tomb in question, it is doubtful whether it was intended to be closed by a rolling stone, or by some other means; but it is also doubtful whether the expressions in the Gospel refer to a rolling cylindrical stone door or merely to the temporary closing of a new, and perhaps half finished, tomb by a large rough mass of stone as generally depicted. Sepulchres are often so closed in Palestine at the present time;

and when an old tomb door is thus stopped by stones it generally shows that bodies have recently been buried there by the fellahin.

The passages in the Gospels referring to the closing of the Holy Sepulchre are as follows :—

“And he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre” (Matt. xxvii, 60).

“Made the sepulchre sure sealing the stone” (Matt. xxvii, 66). “Rolled back the stone from the door” (Matt. xxviii, 2).

“And rolled a stone unto the door of the sepulchre” (Mark xv, 46).

“Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre. And when they looked they saw that the stone was rolled away, for it was very great” (Mark xvi, 3-4).

“And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre” (Luke xxiv, 2).

“And seeth the stone taken away” (John xx, 1).

The Greek word *Lithos* used in all these passages is the ordinary word for a stone; and there is nothing to show that a cylindrical stone door is intended; so that, although such doors were in use in the time of Christ, it is not necessary that the Holy Sepulchre should be supposed to have been so closed, for there are many other methods which were used by the Jews in closing their tombs.

The plan shows a tomb with two chambers, the main one intended to hold at least six bodies, while the side chamber has only one loculus. We know from the Talmud that it was customary in excavating a Jewish tomb to begin with a chamber for nine bodies (Mishnah, Baba Bathra, vi, 8), the sepulchre being hewn as a family vault. Perhaps the single loculus in the side chamber may have been the veritable new tomb, “wherein never man before was laid” (Luke xxiii, 53). The cave opening out of the chamber northwards is probably a late excavation, and has no connection with the original tomb.

Such then is a simple statement of the existing evidence as to the Holy Sepulchre and Calvary. The rude tomb, perhaps unfinished, is hewn in friable rock, and is thus—as is generally the case—less carefully cut than the sepulchres, which were excavated in harder material. It is defiled and ruinous, crumbling and desecrated, but it still stands in a garden by itself. If the result of the discovery, and of what has now been written on the subject, should be the redemption of the site from its present condition of pollution, and its preservation in a simple enclosure—even if the rock be never crowned by any Christian monument, chapel, or cross, the writer of these pages will feel fully rewarded for the time and labour which he has devoted to the question of the true Sepulchre of Christ.

C. R. CONDER, *Capt. R.E.*

24th February, 1883.
