

TOMBS & OSSUARIES

Tombs and Inscriptions. Numerous ancient tombs have been discovered in the vicinity of Jerusalem. In some cases, inscriptions indicate who was buried in a particular location. Only a few tombs and inscriptions will be discussed in this section.

King David's Tomb. A stone sarcophagus allegedly belonging to King David is located on Mount Zion (the southwestern hill of Jerusalem). It is considered a holy site by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike—one of the few places in the world honored by all three religions. Nevertheless, it is most highly regarded by the Jewish people. The sarcophagus is located at what was once the Hagia Zion, a Byzantine church building.

The identification of the tomb with David is problematic, for the Bible says that the king was buried within the City of David (1 Kings 2:10). The City of David refers to the southeastern hill (Mount Ophel), not the southwestern hill (Mount Zion). The exact location of David's tomb was well known in the first century. In Peter's Pentecost sermon, he contrasted the occupied tomb of David with the empty tomb of Christ. The apostle said that David's "tomb is here to this day" (Acts 2:29). Josephus reported that Herod the Great entered the tomb of David in order to loot its treasures (*Antiquities* 16.7.1).

The tradition of identifying the stone sarcophagus as David's Tomb is late, perhaps only going back to the twelfth century A.D. The people of that era apparently believed that the southwestern hill was the City of David; in that case, they were simply wrong. Some suggest that the contents of the sarcophagus were moved there from the original tomb of David. Its contents have not been examined; we do not even know if there are any remains in it.





Traditional Tomb of King David



Located near the entrance to the Tomb of David is a modern sculpture of the king playing the harp. Ultra-Orthodox Jews, who were offended by this image (see Ex. 20:4), broke off its nose. They have periodically vandalized it in other ways, such as spraying it with red paint.

The second floor above the Tomb of David is the traditional site of the “Last Supper.” It commemorates the large upper room where Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples and instituted the Lord’s Supper (Mk. 14:12-15; Lk. 22:7-13). The present room, with its Gothic arches, dates to about the twelfth century A.D. Pavements below the building date back to the second century A.D. Like the Tomb of David, the authenticity of this site is also doubtful.



Statue of King David



The Traditional Upper Room



Uzziah Inscription (Israel Museum)

Uzziah Inscription. This Aramaic funerary inscription of King Uzziah was discovered in the collection of the Russian Convent of St. Mary Magdalene on the Mount of Olives. No one knows where it was originally found. The inscription is approximately 14 inches square and dates to the latter part of the Second Temple period. It apparently tells of the reburial of the remains of Uzziah, king of Judah (8th century B.C.). Since Jerusalem had expanded, it seems that his tomb had to be relocated outside the new city limits. The inscription reads: "Hither were brought the bones of Uzziah, king of Judah. Do not open!" Originally, he was buried near the kings in a field because he had leprosy (2 Chron. 26:23).



The Tomb of Absalom

The Tomb of Absalom. The so-called “Tomb of Absalom” is one of many tombs in the Kidron Valley. It is 47 feet high and faces the temple mount. The lower part is nearly a 20 feet cube, being cut out of the rock (monolithic). The upper part is built out of stone with a conical, hollow roof. Inside the monument is a room used for burial along with two burial benches. One theory is that the whole structure was originally designed as a *nephesh* (funeral monument) for the tomb behind it but was later adapted into a tomb itself.

The traditional assignment to Absalom is based on 2 Samuel 18:18, which says that “Absalom had taken a pillar and erected it in the King’s Valley as a monument to himself” and that it was called “Absalom’s Monument.” This identification, however, is doubtful. Modern scholarship dates the monument to the first century B.C. or A.D. because of its Greek features, including Ionic columns and a Doric frieze. Interestingly, Absalom’s actual monument was still known in the first century A.D., having been referred to by Josephus (*Antiquities* 7.10.3).

In 2003, an inscription was discovered on the monument dating to the fourth century A.D. Byzantine Christians associated this tomb with Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Their inscription reads: “This is the tomb of Zechariah, martyr, very pious priest, father of John.”



The Tomb of the Sons of Hezir

The Tomb of the Sons of Hezir. Another tomb in the Kidron Valley is associated with the sons of Hezir. They were from a priestly family, the seventeenth priestly watch of the twenty-four courses (1 Chron. 24:15). An inscription over the tomb was discovered in 1864. It gives the names of six brothers who were the descendants of Hezir, as well as two sons of one of the brothers: “This is the grave and the *nepshesh* [burial monument] of Eliezer, Hania, Yoazar, Yehuda, Shimon, Yohanan, sons of Yosef Ben-Oved, [and] Yosef and Elazar, sons of Hania, priests of the Hezir family.”

Nepshesh is the word for “soul,” but here it is used to denote a notable structure built next to a tomb. The Doric columns and architecture are apparently in the Greek style, which would indicate that the tomb monument was built in the Hellenistic period. The tomb is carved out of solid rock, and the lintel above features the inscription. The Tomb of the Sons of Hezir is considered the oldest of the four rock-cut tombs found in the Kidron Valley.

A mistaken tradition from the fourth century A.D. identifies this tomb with James, the half-brother of Jesus. James was a great leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13-21; 21:18; Gal. 2:9) and, according to Josephus, died in the holy city (*Antiquities* 20.9.1).



The Tomb of Zechariah

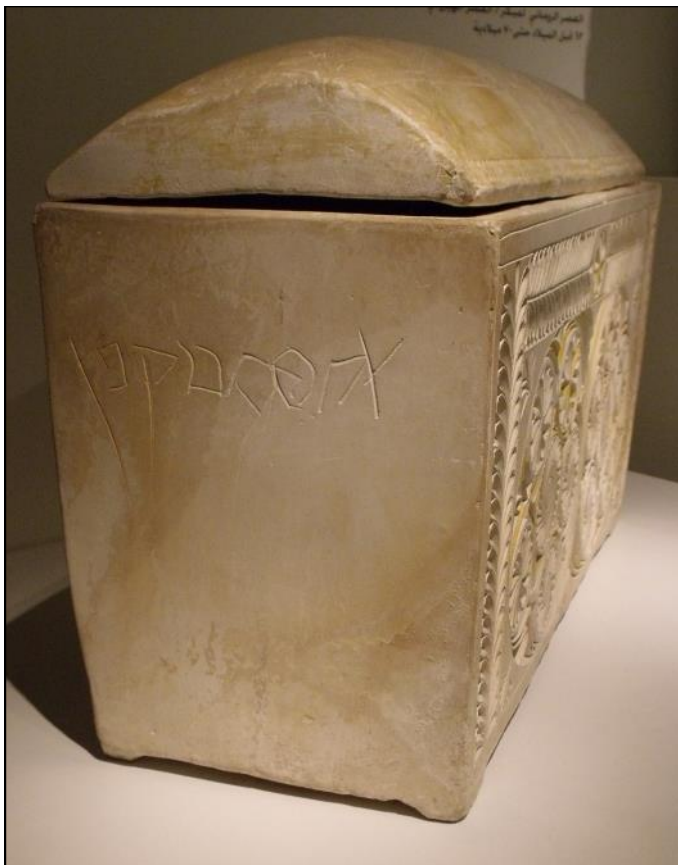
The Tomb of Zechariah. This tomb is located just south of the Tomb of the Sons of Hezir. The base of this monument is a 16-foot cube cut out of the rock, being adorned with Ionic columns. On top of the base, there is a pyramid-shaped roof. These adornments reflect a Greek influence and an Egyptian influence respectively. Some suggest that this monument was intended to be a *nephesh* for unfinished tombs further south. The entrance underneath indicates that it was used for a tomb instead. Some think that the monument dates to the Hellenistic period.

According to Jewish tradition, this is the Tomb of Zechariah, the son of Jehoida the priest, although no inscription has been found to verify this identification. Zechariah spoke against the people who had forsaken the Lord, and they stoned him by order of King Joash in the temple courtyard (2 Chron. 24:20-21). Apparently, Jesus mentioned this Zechariah alongside Abel—reflecting the first to the last books of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis to Chronicles—when he was discussing the bloodguilt of the Pharisees (Mt. 23:35).

Jesus had structures like these tomb monuments in mind when he spoke against the Pharisees: “You hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets” (Mt. 23:29-31).

Ossuaries. One ancient custom of burial involved a two-stage process. (1) The corpse was to be buried the same day the person died (outside the holy city of Jerusalem). The body was washed, anointed with oil, and wrapped with linen bands and spices (Jn. 19:40). Then it was carried on a bier to the place of burial (Lk. 7:14). Dirge singers and flute players were hired as professional mourners; they participated in the funeral procession (Mt. 9:23; 11:17; Mishnah *Ketuboth* 4.4). The body was often buried in a cave or a tomb cut from the rock, being laid on a burial bench (*arcosolium*). The cave or tomb entrance was frequently sealed with a stone (Mt. 27:60), protecting the corpse from being eaten by wild animals. Family and friends mourned for seven days (1 Sam. 31:13; 1 Chron. 10:12).

(2) One year later, after the body had decomposed, a family member (usually a son) returned to the tomb and put the deceased person's bones in an ossuary, a small stone coffin. Ossuaries were primarily used from 30 B.C. to A.D. 70. The Mishnah says, "When the flesh had wasted away they gathered together the bones and buried them in their own place" (Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 6.6). Several burial niches (*kokhim*) with ossuaries were often present in the same tomb, which could hold a whole family. This serves as the background for Jesus saying "let the dead bury their own dead" (Mt. 8:22). By this statement, Jesus was emphasizing the precedence that the kingdom of God must take in a disciple's life.



The Ossuary of Caiaphas
1st Century A.D.
(Israel Museum, Jerusalem)



The Ossuary of Caiaphas
(Israel Museum)

The Ossuary of Caiaphas. This ossuary was discovered in 1990 inside a family burial cave. The cave, located in southeastern Jerusalem, was found when a new park was being built in the Peace Forest. The limestone ossuary is ornately decorated and measures about 15 by 30 inches. The inscriptions on its end and back side read “Joseph son of Caiaphas.” This name, plus the ornate designs, seems to indicate that the ossuary belonged to the Caiaphas we read about in the Gospels. Further confirmation comes from the fact that this high priest was also known as Joseph Caiaphas or simply Caiaphas (Josephus *Antiquities* 18.2.2; 18.4.3). The Ossuary of Caiaphas contained the remains of six people: two infants, a child, a teenage boy, an adult woman, and a man who was approximately 60 years old.

Caiaphas the high priest is best known for his role in interrogating Jesus (Mt. 26:57-68). He thought it was more expedient for one man to die for the nation—a kind of scapegoat—than for the whole nation to perish (Jn. 11:49-52). Caiaphas was appointed high priest by the Roman prefect Valerius Gratus in A.D. 18, and he was deposed by Vitellius, the Roman legate of Syria, in A.D. 36 (Josephus *Antiquities* 18.2.2; 18.4.3). Caiaphas’ long reign of 18 years shows that he was politically shrewd. After he was deposed, at least 25 priests held office prior to the time of Jerusalem’s destruction in A.D. 70.



Another Ossuary of Caiaphas
(Israel Museum)

Another Ossuary of Caiaphas. This ossuary, found in the burial cave of the priestly family of Caiaphas, is inscribed with the name “Caiaphas.” It is smaller and more simply decorated, featuring a pair of rosettes and a staircase leading up to a tomb monument.



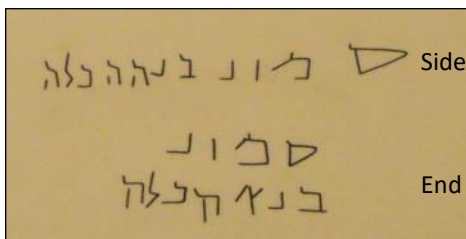
Sarcophagus from the Tomb of the Nazirite
(Israel Museum)

Sarcophagus from the Tomb of the Nazirite. This limestone coffin, which dates to the first century A.D., is perhaps the most elaborate one ever found in Jerusalem. It was discovered in a hewn tomb that contained many ossuaries, one of which bore the name “Hananiah son of Jonathan the Nazirite.” The sarcophagus is decorated with grape clusters and vine scrolls, common motifs in that period.



The Ossuary of Simon, Builder of the Temple
(Israel Museum)

The Ossuary of Simon, Builder of the Temple. This ossuary, which dates to the first century A.D., is made of limestone. It was discovered in a large tomb that has twelve burial niches (*kokhim*). Perhaps many of those buried there died in the troubled times preceding the First Jewish Revolt, since one was crucified, one was burned, and one had a blow to the head. Simon was involved in the building of Herod's temple. This extensive project began in 20 B.C. and continued to about A.D. 64, just prior to the Jewish War (A.D. 66-73). Not only was the temple itself rebuilt, the temple mount was also doubled in size. Herod employed ten thousand skilled workers, including a thousand priests to work on the inner sanctuary (Josephus *Antiquities* 15.11.2). Since Simon's ossuary is not as elegant as that of Caiaphas, it is thought that he did not hold a high position. Perhaps he was a skilled craftsman or an engineer. Some speculate that "Builder of the Temple" was a nickname given to Simon by his family members.



smn bnh hklh = Simon, Builder of the Temple



Ossuary of Yehohanan Ben Hagqol
1st Century A.D.
(Israel Museum)

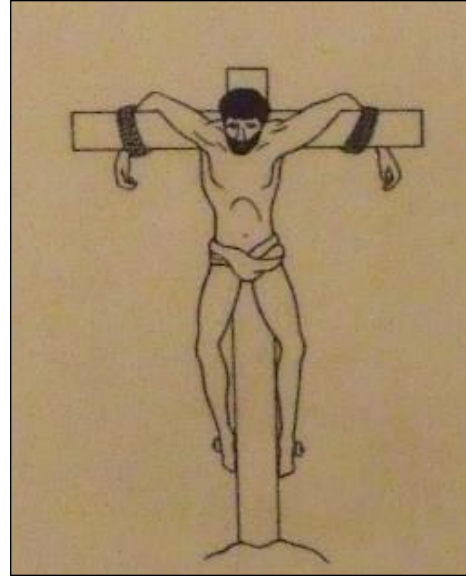
Ossuary and Remains of Yehohanan Ben Hagqol. In 1968, Vassilios Tzaferis was called to investigate some tombs that had been accidentally exposed by a construction crew in northeastern Jerusalem. In one of the tombs, he found an ossuary containing a heel bone with a nail through it. (This was the same tomb where the ossuary inscribed “Simon, Builder of the Temple” was found.) While references abound to crucifixion in ancient literary works, this is the first physical evidence of the gruesome practice that has been discovered. The remains were dated to the first century, prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The crucified man’s ossuary contained this inscription: “Yehohanan Ben Hagqol.”

Early reports determined that the one nail had pierced both heel bones, that the legs had been broken, and that the forearms had been pierced. However, all of these claims have been disputed by later examiners. The drawing on the next page reflects a later assessment—that each heel was nailed to opposite sides of the vertical beam and that the man’s arms were tied to the horizontal beam. The iron nail found in the ossuary had fastened the crucified man’s right heel to his cross. Further, a piece of wood was placed over the ankle like a washer, so the nail did not pull through the bone. The nail was preserved only because it hit a hard knot when it was pounded into the vertical beam of the cross, which caused its end to bend and curl. When the man was removed from the cross, a piece of the wood broke off because the nail could not easily be removed. (For more information, see McRay, 204-6.)

Jesus’ hands and feet were all pierced with nails, not simply tied to the cross (Jn. 19:37; 20:25; see Ps. 22:16; Is. 53:5). The Jews did not want for the bodies of Jesus and the two crimi-



Replica of the Heel Bone with the Nail
(Israel Museum)



Reconstruction of the Man's Crucifixion
(Israel Museum)

nals to be left on their crosses overnight (Jn. 19:31; see Deut. 21:22-23). Therefore, the Romans broke the legs of the two criminals (Jn. 19:32-33), preventing them from pushing up for air; this hastened their deaths. Since Jesus had already died before the soldiers came around to break his legs, they thrust a spear into his side instead (Jn. 19:34). John used Jesus' unbroken bones to demonstrate that he is our Passover Lamb (Jn. 19:36; see 1 Cor. 5:7).

The Nicanor Ossuary. The Nicanor Tomb is located at the Mount Scopus Archaeological Garden (Hebrew University) in northeast Jerusalem. The Nicanor Ossuary that was found in the tomb is on display at the British Museum. It has a Greek inscription which says, "The bones of Nicanor of Alexandria who made the gates," and a Hebrew inscription that reads, "Nicanor Alexa." Nicanor was a Jewish benefactor who provided two bronze doors for a gate in Herod's temple. The Nicanor Gate is mentioned in several Jewish sources (Mishnah *Middoth* 1.4; *Yoma* 3.10; Talmud *Yoma* 38a). While the gate's location in the temple is uncertain, it was most likely on the west side of the Court of the Women.

The James Ossuary. The James Ossuary appeared in the possession of a collector with the inscription "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." It was heralded as the burial box of Jesus' half-brother James, who was a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13-21; 21:18; Gal. 2:9) and the author of the book of James (Jas. 1:1). It was concluded by many experts, however, that the inscription was a forgery; they argued that the phrase "brother of Jesus" had been added in modern times. However, even after a trial in court, others still believe that the full inscription is genuine.



יהודה בן יושע

Ossuary of Judah Son of Jesus
1st Century A.D.
(Israel Museum)



Other Ossuaries
(Israel Museum)





Modern Tombs on the Side of the Mount of Olives





Today, it is a Jewish custom for visitors to place a stone on top of a grave. While the precise origin of the custom is uncertain, the purpose is to honor the deceased person. It is as if the visitor is helping to build the tomb monument. When additional stones are placed upon a person's tomb, he or she receives additional honor. It is a sign to other visitors to the grave that they are not the only ones who were touched by the person's life.

A prime example of the stone custom is the grave of Oskar Schindler (1908-1974), which is located in a Catholic cemetery on the southern slope of Mount Zion. Many Jews visit his grave and place a stone on top of it. The German industrialist saved approximately 1,100 Jewish lives during the Holocaust. This story is told in the dramatic 1993 film *Schindler's List*.