

# CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHER

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is located in the Old City of Jerusalem at the traditional site of Golgotha. It is considered by some to be the most holy place on earth, where the Savior was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead.

In the time of Jesus, the place was a disused quarry located outside the city walls. This location harmonizes with the language of Hebrews 13:12: “Jesus also suffered outside the city gate.” Apparently Herod Agrippa (A.D. 41-44) extended the walls after Jesus’ time, so then the traditional site of Golgotha was actually within the confines of Jerusalem.



Hadrian  
Roman Emperor, A.D. 117-138  
(Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

After suppressing the Second Jewish Revolt (A.D. 132-135), the emperor Hadrian destroyed the hillside of the traditional tomb down to its burial bench. Then, he built a pagan temple to Venus over the site. Hadrian hated Jews and Christians, and he deliberately covered their sacred sites. He even rebuilt Jerusalem as a pagan city, Aelia Capitolina.

After the Roman Empire embraced Christianity, Constantine built an edicule and later a magnificent church building over the site (Eusebius *Life of Constantine* 3.25-40). His mother Helena was likely involved at this construction in Jerusalem about A.D. 326 (McRay, 215). The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, also known as the “Church of the Resurrection” (*Anastasis*), has been a popular pilgrim destination since the fourth century A.D.

(Helpful diagrams showing the evolution of this site from the time of Christ to Constantine appear in Clinton E. Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 1, *Matthew, Mark, Luke* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 186.)

After the rise of Islam, conflict between Muslims and Christians resulted in damage to the church building and subsequent reconstruction. Control of the building is shared today by Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and other Christian groups. The arrangement is called the “Status Quo”; sadly, fights have occasionally broken out between these groups.



Church of the Holy Sepulcher



Six religious groups have rights to various parts of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and those rights are jealously guarded. In an effort to stop the controversy and fighting, the “Status Quo” was established in 1852 stating, “The actual status quo will be maintained and the Jerusalem shrines, whether owned in common or exclusively by the Greek, Latin, and Armenian communities, will all remain forever in their present state.” This decree allows the different groups to worship beside each other in small spaces.

Sometime before 1852, a ladder was placed leaning on a window ledge above the entrance to the church building. No one remembers who or when or why the ladder was put there. Since the ladder was in place when the Status Quo began, it must remain. The current ladder is in the same position as seen in photographs and engravings from the nineteenth century.

The Status Quo has not eliminated violence from periodically breaking out among the different groups. The ladder in the window is a powerful symbol of division between religious denominations who are ironically fighting over the Prince of Peace.

There are several rooms or chapels in the building. (For more comprehensive information and numerous photos, see [www.biblewalks.com/sites/Sepulcher.html](http://www.biblewalks.com/sites/Sepulcher.html).) Some of these chapels correspond with the last stations of the cross (see the section entitled *Via Dolorosa*).

The traditional site of Golgotha, or the Rock of Calvary, is kept under glass. The traditional tomb of Christ is located in the center of the structure enclosed by a steel frame to protect it from structural damage. *Kokhim*, tombs or niches cut out of the rock, can be seen nearby the tomb. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is the site of Easter celebrations each year, and it continues to have thousands of pilgrims visit.



Image of the Crucifixion over the Rock of Golgotha



The Rock of Golgotha Under Glass



Domed Roof (Above) and Enshrined Tomb (Below)





The Traditional Enshrined Tomb of Christ



Inside the Traditional Tomb of Christ



*Kokhim* Nearby the Traditional Tomb of Christ





Model of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher  
17th-18th Century A.D.  
(Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem)

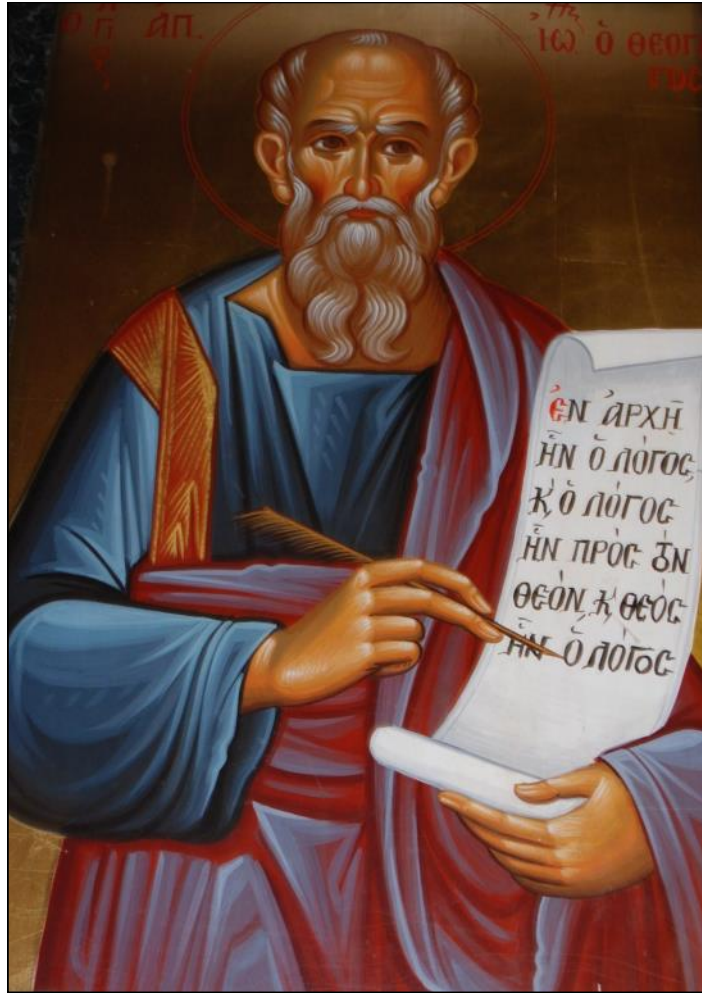
The model depicts the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in detail, without the surrounding buildings. Parts of its roof are removable, making it possible to look inside. The model was constructed according to plans presented in a book by Bernardino Amico, a priest who served in the Holy Land from 1593 to 1597. For several centuries, craftsmen in Bethlehem have specialized in the art of mother-of-pearl inlay in wood; among their most notable products are models of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, such as the one presented here.

Does the Church of the Holy Sepulcher contain the original location of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection? It would be difficult to prove one way or the other—and it is not essential for our faith to know. What is important is the biblical witness that Jesus died, was buried, and was raised the third day according to the Scriptures—and was seen alive by more than 500 witnesses (1 Cor. 15:3-8). Many of those believers were willing to suffer and die for this message of salvation, which has been preserved for us in the Spirit-inspired Word.

Those who simply follow the Scriptures are shocked—even repulsed—when visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. They witness others (who profess to be believers) selfishly cutting in line or pushing their way through to see some “holy” site. Fumes from burning candles and incense waft through the air as part of a parading ritualism that is foreign to New Testament Christianity. People bow down before rocks having some alleged significance: the site where the cross once stood, the place where Jesus was prepared for burial, or the tomb where he was laid. They touch these rocks, kiss them, and pray over them as if they had some spiritual power. They venerate the many images of Christ, using them as mediums for worship—that is, as idols.



People Bow Before the Traditional Place  
Where Jesus' Body Was Prepared for Burial



Painting of the Apostle John Writing John 1:1  
(Located Inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher)