

DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

Providing factual information about the Bibles, beliefs, movements, institutions, events and people of historical Christianity & Judaism.

2014 • NUMBER 3

They Came Out of Their Graves

By Jim Myers

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and gave up his spirit. And, behold, the veil of the Temple was torn from above to below in two, and the earth was shaken, and the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming forth out of the tombs, after his raising, they went into the holy city and appeared to many. (Matthew 27:50-53)

My mother's parents lived close to a cemetery and my grandmother was a devoted member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. The "end of days" was a subject that was near and dear to her. They had a large front porch with a swing and many of our visits were spent sitting in the swing talking. Those conversations took place over 50 years ago, but I clearly remember one thing that she said many times.

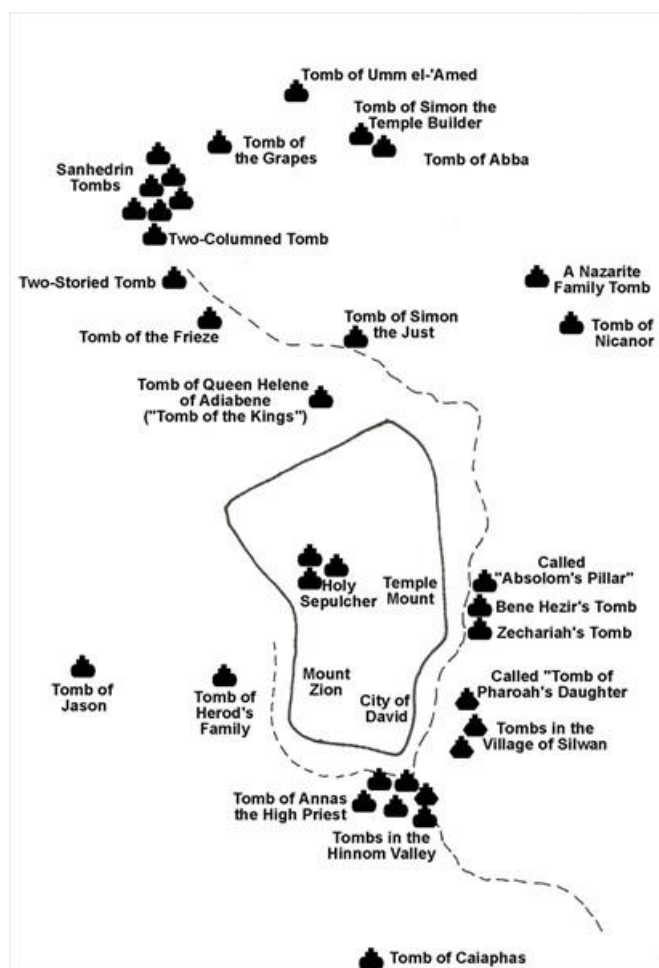
"Someday we could be sitting out here and suddenly a great trumpet will blow. When we look over there at the cemetery, we are going to see the graves open and the people who were dead rising up out of their graves and going up into the sky. We will look up to see where they are going and we will see Jesus waiting for them!"

I heard that story many times when I was a child -- *and with my imagination I could clearly see that scene in my mind.* There was a railroad track between their house and the cemetery and sometimes, when I was swinging alone, or when I spent the night with them, an approaching train would sound its loud horn and I would think it was the trumpet! I would apprehensively look towards the cemetery to see if people coming out of the graves.

This is probably one reason why the above account from Matthew has interested me for so many years. However, something else caught my attention after I became a minister. *Considering the importance of the event, why wasn't it recorded in the other Gospels, Paul's writings, other Jewish writings or Roman documents since it took place before Christianity existed, and, as we shall see below, with a group of Roman soldiers witnessing the whole thing.*

And the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!"¹

The theological ramifications of this statement must not be overlooked – *Romans recognized that Jesus was "the Son of God" first - something that the Jewish people and their highest leaders failed to see.* The positive light that Romans are portrayed in New Testament is one of the things that causes scholars to conclude that later Roman scribes edited earlier accounts to make them more "Roman friendly." If you had been a Jewish resident of Judea or Galilee at the time of Jesus, it is very doubtful that you would have described the Romans as the "good guys." They imposed heavy taxes on the people, their military occupied the land, and on trips to Jerusalem there were often crosses with bodies of Jews that were condemned by Roman judges and executed by Roman soldiers.



SOURCE: <http://www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/32-tombs-in-kidron.html>

But, regardless of the role of the Roman's, let's not forget what happened – *a whole bunch of dead people came back to life and walked into Jerusalem!* I can promise you that if anyone, much less a whole bunch of people came up out of the graves at the cemetery by my grandparent's house, everyone in Cleburne, Texas would have heard about it – *and very quickly.* Let's begin our study by learning where Jesus was crucified and where tombs were located. The traditional site of the crucifixion is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (see on map left of Temple Mount). On the south side of the altar, via the ambulatory, is a stairway to Calvary (Golgotha) -- traditionally regarded as the site of Jesus' crucifixion.² Take a moment to locate it and notice where tombs are located.

When I first read the account, I pictured the bodies coming up out of graves like those in the cemetery by my grandparent's house. I have no doubt most Bible readers do that too. We just assume that the things we read about in the Bible are like they are in our world - like a cemetery being a place with neat rows of graves all lined up. Jesus's world was different and that makes this miracle even greater than we realized. A body



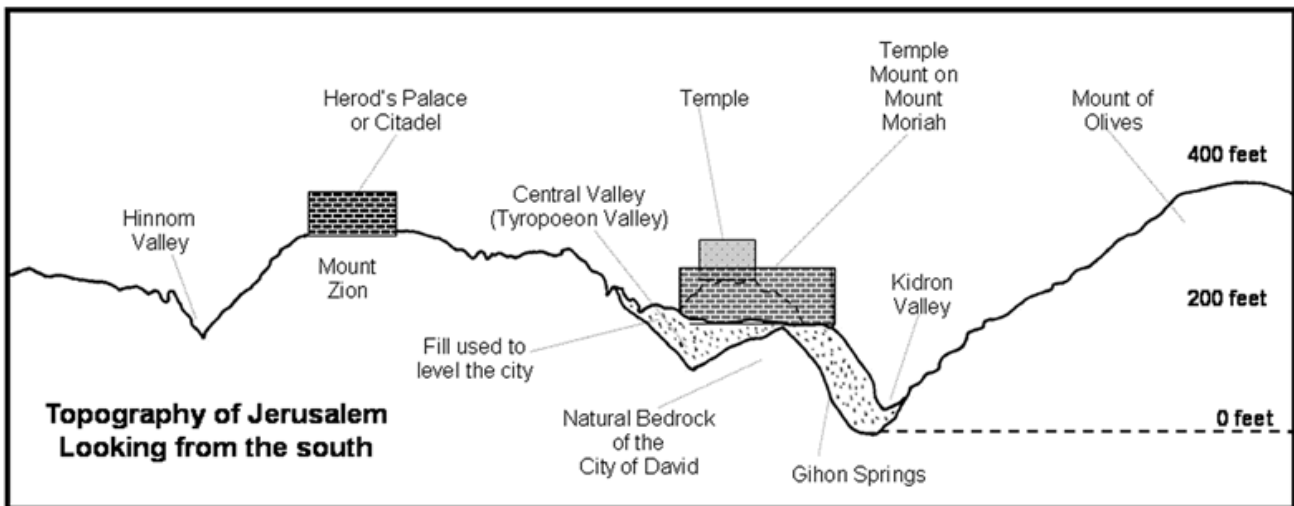
SOURCE³

was laid in a shallow pit or on a shelf for the first year, during which the flesh decayed, while the soul underwent the purifying process. Relatives laid tree branches on the corpse and it was customary to leave perfume tools in the tomb or pour perfume directly on the corpse. A year after the burial, relatives returned to the tomb, collected the bones and put them in stone boxes: *ossuaries*. It was a celebration: the relatives were assured that the deceased

finally arrived at his or her proper place. The ossuary was then placed in a niche that had been carved into the tomb wall for the final burial.⁴

Jewish law prohibited the burying of the dead inside the city walls of Jerusalem, so it is surrounded by tombs. There are tombs to the west in the **Hinnom Valley**, tombs to the south where the **Hinnom and Kidron Valleys** meet, and tombs to the north of today's **Old City walls**. But, of special interest is the area to the east in the **Kidron Valley**, because that is where the Messiah is to appear, raise the dead, judge mankind and enter the Temple on Mount Moriah. Eight hundred tombs from the time of Herod have been discovered within a three mile radius around the city. Jesus was buried in a tomb that was being cut for a Sanhedrin member outside the city walls to the west.⁵

The topography below⁶ provides additional information that will help us understand Matthew words better. Locate the Temple first.



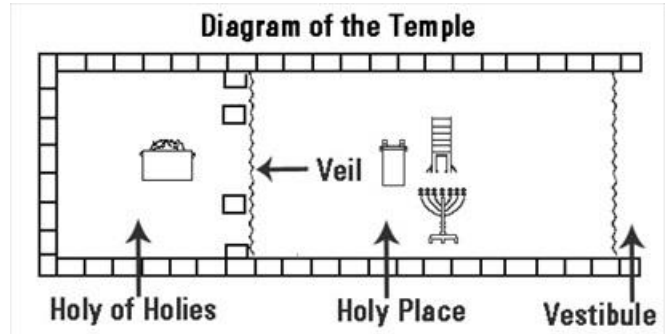
Jesus was crucified on the hill between the Temple and Herod's Palace. Now, look at the map above with the tombs and locate **Zechariah's Tomb**. When we look at the topography, we understand the sharp drop from the **Temple Mount** to the floor of the **Kidron Valley** on which the tombs were located. The picture below is of tomb on that sharp drop. The one on the far left with the columns is the tomb of a priestly family.



SOURCE⁷

The tomb in the middle is **Zechariah's Tomb** (there were about 30 people in the Bible with that name). On the right is an unfinished tomb. You can also see smaller tombs carved in the rock wall below the larger tombs. Now picture the occupants of those tombs crawling out, climbing up the mountain, and walking into Jerusalem.

Matthew's account also contains information that Jews would understand, but wouldn't have meant anything to a Gentile audience. According to synoptic Gospels,⁸ the *parochet* (veil) was torn in half at the moment Jesus died. The *parochet* separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. Only the High Priest was allowed to pass beyond it into the Holy of Holies once each year during Yom Kippur.⁹ According to Matthew, the veil was torn from the top to the bottom and the magnitude of that act is often missed by most readers.



Accounts indicate that the veil was between 60 and 80 feet high.¹⁰ In today's terms, it means that the veil was between three and four-stories high.¹¹ It was said to be four-fingers thick. Look at you hand and see how thick that was. Imagine what you would have heard if a veil that tall and thick began to rip apart from the top to the bottom. Keep in mind that the seat of YAHWEH was behind that veil. Picturing a god that tall would not have been a problem for Gentiles because some of the statues of their gods, for example Zeus, were over two-stories high.¹² The image created by Matthew's account is YAHWEH standing, ripping apart the veil and walking through the thing that had separated him from the people.

Matthew added a clue that only Jews would understand. Look at the map above and locate Zechariah's Tomb. After the veil was ripped apart, the earth was shaken and rocks split. Matthew's description would have brought to mind the words of the prophet Zechariah:

Then YAHWEH will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. (Zechariah 14:3-4)

The words recorded in Matthew hint at the fulfillment of the above prophecy and connect it to the ripping of the veil – *after YAHWEH walked out of the Temple he stood on the Mount of Olives* – and based on the structure of Matthew’s Gospel, this is another clue to prove that Jesus was the Anointed One.

Interestingly, the account shows that Jesus and the Pharisees agree on resurrection, even though they disagree about other things. It also shows that Jesus and the Pharisees disagreed with two sects on this subject:

- **Pharisees** taught a physical resurrection of the body and immortal soul.
- **Hellenist Judaism** taught a resurrection of the immortal soul, but not the physical body.
- **Sadducees** taught that there no resurrection.

Interestingly, it is difficult to understand why this account is not found in Mark and Luke, which were both influenced by Paul, because his claim of apostolic authority completely rests on the validity of belief in “the” resurrection.

- *Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection.*
- *Jesus called him to be an apostle after the resurrection.*
- *Jesus gave him a unique gospel after the resurrection.*
- *His gospel revealed that Jesus did not become the Son of God until after the resurrection.*

Belief in “the” resurrection is the cornerstone of Paul’s movement and salvation message. Some groups declare that one cannot be saved unless they believe it. Interestingly, belief in “any” resurrection was not a requirement for salvation in the decree of the Jerusalem Council or the teachings of Jesus:

Jerusalem Council – The question the council met to decide was whether circumcision was required for Gentiles to be saved. Its ruling was that Gentiles are required to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, from blood and be required to keep the Shabbat¹³ -- in order to be saved.

Jesus – He taught that those who do acts of TZEDAQAH (righteousness) i.e., feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, etc. -- will enter life eternal and those who don’t do them will not be saved.¹⁴

There is more revealed in Matthew’s account than just a group of resurrected people walking into Jerusalem. But, what I would like to know is what they said to the people they encountered? *Did they tell them to believe Paul’s “other” gospel or “go and do what Jesus taught?”* What do you think?

BHC

March Memorials

In Loving Memory

**DOVA
IDA
GREGORY**

March 14, 1907
March 7, 1997

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**MINNIE
KRAUTH**

March 22, 1998

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to
seek those qualities of mind and
heart which we shared as we walked
life's journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and
noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our
loyalty to those things which we
valued -- kindness, faith,
love and peace.*

*As long as we live, they too will live;
for they are now part of us.
It is an honor to speak their names
and remember their lives again.*

(Inspired from prayers found in
Yitzhor Reflections - The New
Mahzor - The Prayer Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**ROBERT
DEAN**

March 22, 1996

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**JOHN W.
"JACK"
NELSON**

October 25, 1932
March 21, 2008

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

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¹ Matthew 27:54

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Holy_Sepulchre

³ http://en.academic.ru/pictures/enwiki/79/Ossuary_Hecht_Museum.jpg

⁴ <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/burial357907.shtml>

⁵ <http://www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/32-tombs-in-kidron.html>

⁶ http://www.generationword.com/framework_images/136_topography_of_jerusalem.gif

⁷ <http://www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/32-tombs-in-kidron.html>

⁸ Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38 & Luke 23:45

⁹ <http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Parochet/parochet.html>

¹⁰ http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/49/49-1/JETS_49-1_97-114_Gurtner.pdf

¹¹ http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_many_feet_tall_is_a_2-story_building

¹² <http://www.unmuseum.org/ztemp.htm>

¹³ Acts 15:20-21

¹⁴ Matthew 25:31-46