

## **12 Stops on a Virtual Tour through Israel to Better Understand the New Testament**

A tour of Israel helps even the most geographically challenged Bible reader see how the events of the Bible fit together in the tiny nation of Israel. As you drive from Galilee down to Jerusalem, you'll be amazed that it probably took Joseph and Mary three or more days to make this trip on foot.

Perhaps you'll stand on the Mount of Olives on a clear day, and gaze far away toward the Dead Sea to Jordan in the East, seeing the same horizon Jesus saw 2,000 years ago.

And ultimately this historically rich land of the Hebrews will inspire you like no other place on earth to love the Word of God more.

There are few events more thrilling than arriving at Jerusalem for the very first time, and setting your eyes on the Old City and the Temple Mount. This is where Jesus walked, where He died, and where He rose again...and will return soon in power and great glory.

So let's take a look at 12 "must-see" spots in the New Testament.

### **Caesarea** (Acts 9:30; 10:1, 24-33; 18:22; 21:8-16; 23:23-26:32)

Originally a very modest Phoenician port of trade from the fourth century B.C., Caesarea later grew into Rome's second busiest port because of Herod the Great's vision in 22 B.C. for a world-class trade center.

Herod spent 12 long years building the harbor to make the Roman port city surpass the port of Jaffa, even floating blocks of granite down the Nile to Aswan to be shipped to Caesarea. Eventually the harbor could handle over 100 ships and made Herod and Rome wealthy. Perhaps the most remarkable seaport in the ancient world, Herod created the first man-made harbor in the open seas, and one that is still viewed today as an engineering marvel for its use of hydraulic cement.

The tyrant Herod also built this great city, named in honor of Augustus Caesar, to give the Roman legions access to its occupied territory in Palestine, and act as an administrative hub for 600 years of Roman domination. It allowed Rome access to Judea's wealth without having to invade the city of Haifa, thus avoiding unnecessary conflict with the Jews.

Flaunting his vanity, Herod built his palace with a private pool right next to the sea. Who else but Herod the Great would dare the sea to conquer his dream home? The ruins of pool and palace, a gamble lost, can be walked over today in mere minutes.

Ironically, Herod designed this city for separation to keep peace between Jews and

Romans, but it eventually became a port of entry for the gospel and played a prominent role in the Church's early days to reach the world. Philip the evangelist (one of the seven deacons, Acts 6:5, 8:26-40, 21:8) lived and preached in Caesarea and Paul was imprisoned here for two years when he reasoned with Felix, Festus, and Agrippa. It is also where Peter saw the first gentile convert, Cornelius the centurion, after they each had God-given visions that opened up the Gentiles to the gospel.

For years, skeptics attacked Luke's account and made Pilate an easy target due to the lack of archeological proof of his existence. In 1961, that all changed when a stone was discovered here, a re-constituted step for the amphitheater, with his name on it. The Pilate Stone translates "*To the divine Augusti Tiberieum...Pontius Pilate...prefect of Judea...has dedicated (this),*" and validated the Bible's assertion that he did in fact exist. The original stone is in Jerusalem's Israel Museum, but a replica can be seen in Caesarea today. This same amphitheater was later used to kill thousands of Christians and Jews by wild beasts and gladiator games.

Rome recognized Herod's efforts in 6 A.D. when Caesarea became the Roman capital of Judea. Hellenistic pagans primarily populated the city, but by this time there was a significant Jewish segment too. The boiling tensions between the two groups flared up when the Greeks blocked the narrow roads to the main synagogue with their shops and then mocked the Jews by sacrificing birds in front of it. The rioting that ensued soon spread to the hotbed of Jerusalem and became known as the Great Revolt (66 A.D.). After many years, Rome eventually suppressed it and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem along with hundreds of thousands of Jews. Those who survived were shipped off as slaves or sent to the Egyptian mines.

In the centuries that followed the Revolt, Caesarea became a primary place of rabbinic learning and the Sanhedrin moved here permanently when Rome prevented their return to Jerusalem. This scholarly community of rabbis continued for many years until the earthquake of 363 A.D.

There is also a nine-mile aqueduct that you should make a point to see before leaving. It brought fresh water from Mt. Carmel almost 10 miles away and lies just north of the city along some beautiful beaches. Herod's Theater is still in use today and holds 4,000 people. A short walk lands you in his two-track Hippodrome that held 20,000 citizens for chariot races and gladiator games. There are also deluxe bathhouses that demonstrate the lavish Roman lifestyle. Another stroll north along the beach brings you to the Crusader walls, a moat, and other Byzantine buildings from the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1997, Yosef Porat of the Israeli Antiquity Authority uncovered the prison where he believes Paul was held, located between the Hippodrome and Amphitheater. According to Porat there were clear indications from inscriptions there that this was the building where prisoners were kept. The New Testament cites Paul's imprisonment from 58-60 A.D. This prison was part of a large administrative complex, with the entire enclave covering 45,000 square feet of the 164-acre city.

Once inside the gate, look for the small modern theater (straight back, about 800 feet from the main entrance) to see the free film about the history of Herod's tribute city to Caesar. It was a city of immense significance then and will leave you wide-eyed and fully satisfied today. It's exactly what you'd expect to find in a trip to the Holy Land. Be sure to take your time to see all of it.

**Mount Tabor** (Matthew 17:1-8; Joshua 19:12; Judges 4:1-23; Psalm 89:12; Isaiah 46:18; Hosea 5:1)

Combining natural beauty and deep spiritual significance, this Galilean mountain has both Old and New Testament relevance, and where the famous historian Josephus fought the Romans (66 A.D.). As far as the Old Testament is concerned, there is one famous account that features the heroics of two women.

This is where Deborah, the Judge of Israel, led her victorious army with Barak against Sisera, the commander of Jabin's idolatrous chariot army of Canaan in 1125 B.C. He eventually ended his life in fear, hiding under some covers in a woman's tent, as recorded in Judges 4:21,

*"But Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and seized a hammer in her hand, and went secretly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went through into the ground; for he was sound asleep and exhausted. So he died."*

The relevance of the New Covenant on this rounded hill that commands such a lovely view of the valleys beneath is the site of Jesus' Transfiguration. Two churches commemorate the event, a Greek Orthodox and a Roman Catholic. Despite these two beautiful structures, there was some debate on the actual site.

Three total locations have been suggested for the Transfiguration, including Mount Hermon and the Mount of Olives (Eusebius and the Pilgrim of Bordeaux were unable to agree in the 4<sup>th</sup> century). Finally, in 348, Cyril of Jerusalem chose Tabor, and with Epiphanius and Jerome in agreement with him, it was settled.

This may or may not be the correct hill, but it is still a stunning vista of the Jezreel Valley and would be the perfect place to reveal the Christ in all His glory. The views alone are worth the trip up the mountain.

At the very top there are Crusader ruins from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Roman walls, and walls of an ancient city. Saladin destroyed the Christian structures here in 1183 A.D. and although they were rebuilt they were destroyed again in 1263. Today it is a popular spot for hang glider enthusiasts.

**Nazareth** (Matthew 2:23, 4:13, 21:11, 26:71; Mark 1:24; Luke 1:26; John 1:46)

The home of Jesus sits atop the Nazareth ridge where He spent most of his 33 years and is another fascinating time capsule that should be on your itinerary. In this mountainous region He announced at His synagogue the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah (Luke 4:14-21). He was promptly rejected in His own hometown and nearly thrown off a cliff. Imagine escaping Herod's attempt to kill Him in Bethlehem and then his own people doing the same thing here.

Although only 500 people lived in this tiny village in Jesus' time, a literal backwater as Nathanael confirmed in John 1:46, "*Can any good thing come out of Nazareth,*" today it is a sprawling city of 60,000. In the days of Jesus why would anyone want to live here? Like most people today, a good job usually dictates where you choose to live.

The capital of Galilee was Sepphoris and only a few miles away from Nazareth. It would have been a good reason for Joseph to return here from Egypt because Herod Antipas was re-building the city and in need of skilled workers (Matthew 2:23). Jesus probably learned His trade apprenticing with Joseph in this city of 30,000.

Your visit here should include a stop at Nazareth Village, a fascinating recreation of the terraced village as it was in the days of Jesus with a guided tour and re-enactors. There you will see an authentic synagogue built with the same materials available then, complete with a mud/reed roof, an actual carpenter and weaver at work, shepherds, a working olive oil press, and an excavated wine press on the side of the hill from the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

Several churches mark the supposed hot spots where Gabriel announced to Mary her pregnancy (the Byzantine Church of the Annunciation) and another where Joseph's carpentry shop stood (St. Joseph's). Despite the busyness of the town now, and the clutter of churches commemorating His life events, it is an interesting stop worthy of your time.

**The Sea of Galilee** (Matthew 4:18-22, 8:14-17; 11:20-30, 14:22-33; Mark 1:29-31, 6:30-44, 8:22-26; Luke 4:38-39, 5:1-11; John 1:43-46, 12:20-21)

Fed by the Jordan River, this 13-mile lake is Israel's largest fresh body of water and best viewed initially from the surrounding vista of Mount Arbel on the western side. A lot of Jesus' ministry took place around this lake, the site of an extinct volcanic crater, including the Sermon on the Mount, where He walked on water, and also the feeding of the 5,000 most likely took place on the green Plain of Bethsaida.

Dotted along the lake are many harbors that would have held fleets of small fishing boats like Peter's 15-man boat, and you can actually see one of them from the 1<sup>st</sup> century. It's the only one ever found and was discovered in 1986 on the northwestern shore by two brothers. Ironically, they're both fisherman!

During a drought, it was revealed in the mud on the shoreline and it took a team 12 days,

working night and day, to safely move it. The real challenge was to keep the wood from drying out and cracking as they carefully dug it out of the mud, constantly spraying the ribs down while they scraped away. An oil lamp, arrowhead, and a clay cooking pot were also found in the process, further confirming its Jesus-era time period.

But how to safely transport such a delicate artifact that was 27 feet long and almost 8 feet wide? It was decided to coat it in a fiberglass insulation and then safely float it away to then be soaked in a chemical preservative for seven years.

Today the Ancient Galilee Boat is on display in the Yigal Alon Center (Kibbutz Ginosar) on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It's really a remarkable experience to see this boat in person. Exiting to the rear of the building allows you to take a boat ride on the lake and experience a New Testament moment. Seeing in your mind's eye the Apostles straining at their nets with their miracle catch will forever seal the moment He called Peter to be His disciple. It is truly a magical place where your mind can run wild.

While near the lake, you can also visit the nearby Ministry Triangle of towns where Jesus did most of His work—Bethsaida (Peter, Andrew, and Philip's hometown), Chorazin (no real 1<sup>st</sup> century remains are left on the site), and Capernaum (Jesus' home base)—and all cursed for their unbelief.

**Capernaum** (Matthew 4:13, 8:5-17, 9:1; Mark 1:21-28, 2:1-12, 8:14; Luke 7:1-10, 17:2; John 2:12, 4:46-54, 6:22-25, 35-59)

Of the three “Jesus towns” (Bethsaida and Chorazin being the other two), Capernaum was the most important as a Roman crossroads for soldiers, a collection center for tax gatherers like Matthew, and a convenient stop for foreign travelers on the Via Maris (“the Road of the Sea”). It was also known as Jesus' home, called His “own town” in Matthew 9:1 and Mark 2:1.

Capernaum was considered to be Jesus' base for His ministry from which He healed the Centurion's slave, Peter's mother-in-law, the paralytic, the demon-possessed, and also where He taught in the now excavated synagogue (John 6:59). It was probably the very one built by the centurion who owned the slave that Jesus healed (Luke 7:5).

As it was then, the synagogue is the centerpiece of the ruins today, perhaps rivaled only by Peter's home across the street where Jesus stayed (a Franciscan church has been built over the top of it where one can see the Apostle's ruins through a glass floor, but most of Peter's dwelling can be seen from ground level too). The synagogue is just stunning! The reed roof is gone, but the walls and columns are still standing. When you enter this beautiful structure it's hard to know what picture to take first. More amazing than the ruins, however, is what is underneath them.

The existing synagogue is made of “white” blocks of stone from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, but they are built on top of a “black” foundation of local basalt stones that date to the time of

Jesus. The white synagogue re-build was right on top of the very structure of Christ's synagogue and on the outside you can see it stretch along the full length of the building. Excavations on the synagogue show the walls were made of worked stone and four feet thick. The earlier walls are three feet high and the full western wall still stands.

Be sure to see the millstones made from the basalt rock indigenous to the area (Mark 9:42) and the olive press, as well as the Roman Garrison's ruins, probably where the Centurion whose faith Jesus commended stayed with his troops.

It is a chilling sensation to walk on the very shores of this noted village where Jesus first met with Peter, Andrew, James, and Matthew. Just think of it...you are standing where He stood with His disciples!

Eventually condemned by Jesus in Mathew 11:20-24, "to go down to the depths," you can see the remains of His hometown instead of just reading about it. This is a top five stop on your journey, so allow plenty of time to wander the humble neighborhood ruins around the synagogue. There is a lot to see in a small area.

**Mount Hermon – Banias** (Deuteronomy 3:8-13, 4:47-48; Joshua 12:1-6; Judges 3:3; Psalm 89:12, 133:3, Song of Solomon 4:8; Matthew 16:13-20, 17:1-8)

Situated north of Caesarea Philippi in northern Israel, Mount Hermon (meaning "*sacred*" or "*abrupt*") rises almost 10,000 feet into the air with three distinct peaks visible from 60 miles away, and as the highest point inside Israel it even allows for snow skiing!

Thorough excavations have revealed over 20 ancient temples on her slopes, considered sacred to the worshippers of the Canaanite god Baal (Hermon can also mean "*forbidden place*"), and also rumored to be the residence of the Nephilim giants that Moses and Joshua defeated in the Old Testament (Genesis 6:1-8).

These "high places" in Scripture where Baal was worshipped are very significant—the higher the better meant the holier they were to Canaanite worshipers—and therefore Mount Hermon was the holiest of them all.

According to Matthew 16, at the foot of Mount Hermon, Jesus traveled with His disciples to Caesarea Philippi for a significant event. In the midst of all of these Baal worship shrines in Caesarea Philippi, where there were mini-temples built into the side of Mount Hermon to worship Pan, Peter proclaimed Jesus to be the Christ...a testament and declaration that was not missed by those in earshot amongst all this pagan worship!

Her real significance, however, is the traditional site of the Transfiguration of Jesus (one of three possible spots, including the Mount of Olives and Mount Tabor). Interesting to note that He chose "Satan's worship ground" to proclaim His glory to His disciples, a not too obvious declaration that He was the Supreme One Who should be worshipped.

Today you can see these same caves of Baal shrines that were carved into the cliffs where Jesus acknowledged Peter's revelation (today called Baniyas, most likely an Arab corruption of Pan, Pania). Pagans believed water to symbolize the abyss and the spring that flowed out of the largest cave, known as the Gate of Hades, made Jesus' promise about His Church's supremacy in Matthew 16 all the more significant.

The New Testament really comes alive when you realize the connection for each site you see to its relevance on the printed page of your Bible!

**Bethlehem** (Genesis 35:16-19; Judges 12:8-10; 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1ff; Luke 2:8-20)

Although the town was made famous by the very first Christmas, Bethlehem is initially mentioned in Genesis when Rachel died en route to it.

Situated just four miles from Jerusalem among neatly terraced fields of 22,000 residents are the same fields where Ruth and Boaz met and gave birth to David's father, Jesse. Later on, Samuel would visit Jesse to find the shepherd boy and make him the new King of Israel. Centuries later, however, the birthplace of the Messiah would become its crowning moment.

The area to the east of Bethlehem is the traditional region where the shepherds were notified of Jesus' birth, and shepherds still "keep watch over their flocks" in this same region, even on Christmas!

Before Constantine, the Roman Hadrian tried to bury the fact by building a shrine dedicated to the pagan god Adonis here, lover of Venus, and established his cult in the Christmas cave. In 395 A.D., Jerome recorded the attempt to wipe out its memory saying, "*The earth's most sacred spot was overshadowed by the grave of Adonis, and the cave where the infant Christ once wept was where the paramour of Venus was bewailed.*"

In 327 A.D., Helena, the mother of Constantine, began the construction of a church over the site of the manger where Jesus was born, which is an actual cave, and one of the holiest places in Israel. In total, she would build three churches in Israel, the other two being on the Mount of Olives (where Jesus ascended into Heaven) and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (where Jesus was crucified, buried, and rose again).

The original church was damaged by fire, but that mosaic floor can still be seen today beneath a wooden floor...extremely impressive! In 427 A.D. a rule was made that no crosses could be in the ground, and since this beautiful mosaic had crosses in it, rather than destroy it, a wooden floor was built 80 centimeters over the tiled mosaics to circumvent the rule. Today you can lift large trap doors to see the original mosaic floor below, safe and sound.

This Church of the Nativity has fallen into some disrepair, but it is still an impressive church, one of the oldest ones in Israel. Today a multi-million dollar refurbishing of the building is underway, and although some parts are covered in scaffolding and protective wraps to fix the leaky roof, it is still open to tours.

The large square at the entrance to the church, where Christmas celebrations occur three times a year (Christian, Armenian, and Orthodox dates differ on the event), is no longer open to bus traffic for visitors. Today a parking garage for buses and tourists means a short walk past bustling Arab shops to see the church. Be sure to enjoy some “Arab Fried Chicken,” known in America as the famous *KFC* franchise.

Unlike most Christian sites, the Church of the Nativity was spared destruction during the Persian invasion in the seventh century, probably because the mosaic walls were decorated with the Magi in Persian clothing. Like most of Israel, changing hands so much over the centuries has also changed the structures in Bethlehem. This is true for the famous entrance to the church that became the “Crusader Doorway” when it was lowered in 1500 A.D. to prevent Muslims from riding their horses inside the church. Visitors must now bow (stoop) in humility to gain entrance.

In the second century, Justin Martyr mentions the birth of Jesus in a cave, which is marked now by a 14-point star on the floor of the Byzantine church. There is a lot of traditional religious pomp in the building itself, and it’s somewhat disturbing, but it is still very compelling to see His actual birthplace...and one you should not dismiss as “too religious.” You will certainly be moved by it.

**The Temple Mount** (2 Samuel 7:1-17; 1 Kings 5-9; Psalm 48:12-14; Zechariah 14:4-5; Matthew 21:23; Mark 11:15, 13:1; Luke 4:9, 21:5; John 10:23; Acts 3:1)

Perhaps the highlight of your trip, with so much to see around these 35 acres, above and below ground, it can be an overwhelming area to sort out chronologically since this ancient city was conquered and rebuilt so many times.

Originally, this is where Abraham offered up his son Isaac on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22) and where David chose to build his first Temple (until God told him that his son Solomon would build it instead).

Jerusalem today, the hottest piece of real estate on the planet, has spread out from its original moorings quite a bit and the true “City of David” is a much smaller hill south of main Temple Mount. The Muslim shrine for where Muslims think Muhammad ascended, the Dome of the Rock, dominates the heights now. Once open to visitors, it is no longer accessible to non-Muslims (although you can sometimes get up to see the outside area in the mornings via the Western Wall plaza detour bridge).

Inhabited since 3000 B.C. for the fresh water from the Gihon Spring and the defensible position of a raised area, Herod the Great began the 80-plus year Temple build in 20 B.C.



and enlarged this Second Temple to hold more worshippers, and thereby make more money from them. It was this last Herod Temple that Titus destroyed in 70 A.D. to squash the Great Revolt of the Jews. It has “stood” in rubble piles ever since, as Jesus predicted 40 years beforehand (Matthew 24).

Solomon’s Temple, the first temple on the site, stood for 410 years until the Babylonians destroyed it in 586 B.C. This was when Daniel and his friends were taken into captivity in the first Diaspora, technically beginning in 597 B.C. (not counting the Assyrian’s 722 B.C. invasion).

Today, Muslims control the site and their Dome of the Rock shrine occupies the Temple area, thus preventing archaeologists from determining the exact Temple location. Most assume the Temple sat on or near the Dome making a Third Temple, already being planned by some, extremely tempestuous.

Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent built the present day walls around the city in 1537 after the Ottoman conquest of Israel, and the ancient walls were reduced to rubble. They were rebuilt on the foundations of walls during the Second Temple and the Roman expansion. You can even see an excavated wall in the Old City that Nehemiah built upon the return from Babylon...truly remarkable!

There are several Gates to the city of Jerusalem, with the Golden Gate (the East Gate) being the most important and impressive because the Messiah will return and walk through it (Ezekiel 44:1-3). The stones date to the time of Nehemiah and the only gate Suleiman did not rebuild. The Arabs walled it up in 810 A.D. and it remains so today. Just in case the walled up Gate failed to stop the Messiah, they added a Muslim cemetery in front of the gate to thwart His approach.

In 1969, archaeologist James Fleming was poking around this East Gate after a heavy rain. To his astonishment, the soggy ground gave way and dropped him eight feet into a burial chamber. When he regained his senses, “knee-deep in bones,” he realized there was an ancient archway, probably built by King Solomon, and most likely part of the Gate that Jesus Himself would have used 2000 years ago.

His incredible underground account made real headlines:

*"Then I noticed with astonishment that on the eastern face of the turret wall, directly beneath the Golden Gate itself, were five wedge-shaped stones neatly set in a massive arch spanning the turret wall. Here were the remains of an earlier gate to Jerusalem, below the Golden Gate, one that apparently had never been fully documented."*

Historically, these gates were a place of judgment and this particular Gate is expected to be critical to the Final Judgment when Christ enters through it in the Last Days (Matthew 24:27, Ezekiel 44:1-3).

Perhaps the most vivid image for all tourists is the Western Wall, or The Wailing Wall; it

is now a 185-foot retaining wall that surrounded the Temple (not actually part of the Temple proper). It was built by Herod the Great to enlarge the worship area with more buildings and supported the platform that the Temple was built upon. When the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 A.D. they brazenly left this retaining wall as a testament to their utter destruction.

Roughly 50 percent of the Wall is below ground where the famous “Rabbinical Tunnel” runs through the north end of the room formed by the arch closet to the Western Wall. The underground areas are the most fascinating features of the whole area archaeologically, as one can get within meters of the Holy of Holies underneath the Second Temple location!

These Western Wall Tunnels reveal the massive lower Wall stones on the bedrock, the most impressive being the Western Stone that weighs 517 tons and is 40 feet long—the largest stone ever quarried! The skill in their construction is evidenced by how tightly they fit together, barely permitting a sheet of paper to fit between them.

Standing in these ancient and holy ruins where the Temple sacrifices centered the Jewish people is an emotional experience you will never, ever forget.

### **The Church of the Holy Sepulchre** (Matthew 27:33; Mark 15:22; John 19:17, 41-42)

This is one of two possible locations for the death and burial/resurrection of Jesus Christ. Most scholars agree that this is probably the “general location” of Golgotha, but no one is absolutely certain where “outside the gate” is exactly (John 19:20, Hebrews 13:12). The best estimate of the gate is that it was the Garden Gate (*Gennath*) for several reasons.

Crucifixions were public events to promote the fear of Rome and keep the peace, so He would have been near a main road for maximum effect where Passover pilgrims could hurl insults at Him (Matthew 27:39, Mark 15:29). The Garden Gate had two main roads nearby, going north and west, doubling the Roman impact on the public.

Golgotha was an abandoned limestone quarry, probably west of the second wall, but north of the first wall. If Jesus was crucified in the southern section, just outside the Garden Gate, He would have been near the western road, and yet still able to be seen from the northern road to read His inscription “King of the Jews (John 19:20).”

No one can be sure of the spot, especially when Hadrian built a temple to Venus on the same area after squashing a revolt in 135 A.D. and demolishing Jerusalem. Later he filled in the quarry and leveled the site for his new city, Aelia Capitolina, which certainly enclosed the original Golgotha site.

Here’s what Eusebius wrote about the new city that buried the tomb:

*“Accordingly, they brought a quantity of dirt from a distance with much labor, and covered the entire spot; then, having raised this to a moderate height, they paved it with stone, concealing the holy cave beneath this massive mound. Then, as though their purpose had been effectively accomplished, they prepared on this foundation a truly dreadful sepulchre of souls, by building a gloomy shrine of lifeless idols to the impure spirit whom they call Venus, and offering detestable oblations therein on profane and accursed altars. For they supposed that their object could not otherwise be fully attained, than by thus burying the sacred cave beneath these foul pollutions.”*

Years later, when Constantine asked for the famous site to commemorate, native Christians steered him to the Temple of Venus, which he destroyed and began excavations. Eusebius records that the tomb was found, but doesn't say how it was confirmed to be authentic only saying, “...*contrary to all expectation, the venerable and hollowed monument of our Savior's resurrection was discovered.*” With the site verified, it was time to build a church.

Built in 325 A.D. by Constantine's mother, this church memorializes the site of the crucifixion and the tomb of Jesus. The Persians destroyed the church in 614, but it was rebuilt, then destroyed again in 1009 by the Egyptian caliph al-Hakim who unfortunately had the tomb decimated, chiseled down to the very bedrock. What we see here today is from the Crusader efforts to rebuild the church, now a Greek Orthodox Church shared by six other Christian groups.

Inside the church is an impressive architectural marvel that is shadowy, filled with chanting echoes, incense, and supposedly the rock outcropping where tradition says the cross of Christ stood. You can access the crucifixion site by going up a short flight of 18 steps (to the immediate right after entering through the main doors). When you get to the top you'll approach a gaudy altar and crucifix, but look down at the base of it. Below the glass flooring is actual rocky ground where Jesus died.

Another good evidence that this is the correct “area” for the supposed location of Jesus' tomb (the two spots must have been close to get him buried before sundown) is the fact that there are several other tombs inside the church area. One of these incredible grave caves is the “Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea” and all are clearly burial sites from the first century, helping to confirm this is the right region when coupled with early Church tradition (Luke 23:50-53).

Impossible to prove, it most likely is “generally” where Jesus died and was buried, venerated until 66 A.D. by the local Jerusalem Christians. So despite the “warring religious” noises, crowds, and chants it is a definite must see when you are in Jerusalem. If the crowds and religiosity bother you, remember what the angel said, “*He is not here. He has risen*” (Luke 24:6).

**The Mount of Olives** (2 Samuel 15:30-32; Zechariah 14:4-9; Matthew 21:1, Matthew 24:3, 26:30; Mark 11:1, 13:3, 14:26; Luke 19:37, 22:39; John 8:1; Acts 1:9-12)

The Kidron Valley separates the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives where three towers stand guard amongst the main burial ground of Jerusalem Jews. These 150,000 Jews are buried here in hopes of being the first resurrected when the Messiah arrives and walks through the East Gate (Ezekiel 44:1-3). Directly in front of the East Gate are Muslim tombs that were purposely chosen to block His arrival.

This mountain is almost 3,000 feet high, with a spectacular view of Jerusalem (though the best vista may be through the window of the Dominus Flevit Church), and served as the refuge for David when he fled from Absalom.

Jesus also gave His Olivet Discourse here (Matthew 24-25) and descended into Jerusalem to the shouts of “Hosanna!” on the first Palm Sunday. The palms were a traditional symbol of rebellion against Roman rule by the conquered Jews, who did not understand Jesus’ peaceful mission.

The Garden of Gethsemane is on the lower slope, famous for His post Passover prayer wrestles and eventual arrest. Today the Garden is fenced off to protect the ancient Olive trees that appear to be thousands of years old. Despite being where Jesus traveled to and over many times, the Mount is most renowned today for being the purported spot where He ascended into Heaven.

There are three spots that claim this Ascension distinction. The first is the Dome of the Ascension, now a mosque, then the church under the modern Paternoster Church, and lastly a Russian Orthodox Church. The only thing we know from Scripture is that it was near Bethany (Matthew 26:6), which would probably rule out all three claims geographically.

Despite this, it is a majestic place to ponder all that happened when Jesus was here and provides an excellent view of the Temple Mount.

**The Wadi Quit - Road from Jericho to Jerusalem** (2 Samuel 15:23-16:14; Luke 1:26-38, 2:39-50, 10:25-37, 9:52-53 and John 4:1ff; Mark 10:46-11:1)

This will be the most memorable hike of your life because you will see what Jesus and His disciples saw so many times in the heart of the Judean desert...the real wilderness and the rocky terrain of the “interstate” so often used by them.

It was also made famous as the setting for the parable of The Good Samaritan as a well-known route watched by bandits. When you take the twisting path, and see the ambush points, you’ll understand how Jesus’ hearers appreciated the robbery tale’s accuracy.

A deep gorge that cuts into the rocks, with spring water running all year in the valley below you, the trail is extremely narrow. Definitely not for the faint of heart, you should be in good shape as some of the route is difficult, if not dangerous, and can be 18 miles

long depending on where you start.

This magnificent hike is the same route hundreds of thousands of worshippers made to Jerusalem three times a year on feast days, the escape path David made from Absalom, and according to Josephus the route the 10<sup>th</sup> Roman Legion took in 69 A.D. to destroy Jerusalem.

About halfway into the hike you can stop at the St George's Monastery, a Greek Orthodox monastery famous for their Good Samaritan hospitality. Their home is built right into the cliff side and may be the most striking building you'll ever see in Israel. Almost defying gravity, it began simply enough when some 4<sup>th</sup> century hermits from Syria wanted to imitate the prophet Elijah's cave experiences with the ravens (1 Kings 17:5-6). The eventual structure was destroyed by the Persians in 614 A.D., and then rebuilt again in 1901.

Today's hiker will appreciate the narrow gorge's desert beauty too, pocked with caves and grottoes that help explain the fascination these monks felt in the story of Elijah's barren stay.

**The Garden Tomb** (Matthew 27:60, 28:8; Mark 15:46, 16:1-8; Luke 23:50-24:12; John 19:41-42)

This is one of two sites that could be where Jesus died, was buried, and rose again. Although this may not be the authentic tomb of Christ, it is still an awesome site to see that seems to fit our mind's eye for Easter! How did it become the main challenge to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre?

In 1841, Dr. Robinson (of Robinson's Arch fame, and the accepted expert on Jerusalem's topography) began the debate when he wrote, "*Golgotha and the Tomb shown in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre are not upon the real places of the Crucifixion and Resurrection.*" He concluded this because the traditional location was now within the city walls and contradicted the biblical account, although Hadrian constructed these walls 100 years later.

In 1883, British General Charles Gordon identified the rocky cliff area as the "place of the Skull" mentioned in the Gospels and then found a nearby empty tomb. This skull face image in the cliff convinced him that he had found the death and burial site of Jesus on Mount Moriah, famous for Abraham's prophetic reply to Isaac, "*The Lord will provide Himself a Lamb* (Genesis 22:1-14)."

Studying the rocky cliff, you can see the obvious image of a skull face in the boulders, which today towers over a bus station parking lot. How strange to see the Skull face staring out at a fleet of parked buses! Although he was probably mistaken, it is an interesting skull face image in the rocky crag, and older images (taken with camels walking past in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) are even more convincing because they were taken

before the nose bridge broke off. But even more interesting is the pristine Garden Tomb.

It looks like what we would envision the tomb to be, and locals point out the garden mentioned in Scripture would need a water source...and the cistern nearby meets that criteria. There is also a wine press that was excavated right by the tomb confirming that it was indeed a working garden-farm area.

Looking inside at the resting place is chilling, but actually going inside is even more so! The small room is a two-chambered tomb, chiseled for the burial of three people on ledges, head to foot (the benches for the bodies have long been removed).

Whether it is or is not His tomb, the carved out sepulcher is quietly spectacular, and gives you a good idea of what the grave of the Messiah may have looked like. There is even a rutted ramp alongside its exterior for a stone to roll down! Perhaps it actually is His tomb. Who knows?

The important fact remains, and all of Christianity stands or falls on this resurrection event, that it isn't where it happened...it's that it did happen!

One thing that we do know is that when you are in Israel, you are in the very vicinity of where all of these amazing stories took place, perhaps shuffling through the very dust that Jesus and his disciples tread.

After visiting Israel, when you open your Bible you'll see these stories afresh, where the miracles of God actually happened! Instead of just imagining them, your soul will be forever tattooed with the reality of God's Word because you were there too.

And they are not just stories in a book. They *really* happened...right where you stood!