



Chapter 14

***CHRISTIAN  
BELIEFS AND  
THE MOUNT  
OF OLIVES***

One of the main reasons why scholars today are willing to allow the possibility that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre located on the west side of Jerusalem could be the site of the crucifixion is because it seems sensible that a succession of traditions about its location would have been continually available among the Christian population of Jerusalem. Would not Christians have wanted to remember where the site was and have retained its memory in Constantine's time?

While this supposition appears reasonable, it must be recalled that Jerusalem and its surroundings underwent two devastating destructions (A.D.70 and A.D.135) which drastically altered its geographical features. There were also major political upheavals within those two and a half centuries. Indeed, there is almost nothing known about the Christian bishops of Jerusalem for a hundred years after the emperor Hadrian destroyed the city in A.D.135 nor are Christian activities precisely documented for the Jerusalem area during that time. In spite of these "unknowns," most scholars feel the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is "probably" the proper site for

Jesus' crucifixion. But when the biblical and historical data given in this book are considered, the area of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has no credentials whatever. Only Olivet is proper.

This is supported by a further fact. During those two and a half centuries of obscurity, there is only one tradition of any "holy place" which Christians esteemed in the Jerusalem area. And that place was located on the Mount of Olives. Their attention was drawn to a *cave* that Christians were accustomed to visit and to assemble at the site for worship. Indeed, people came from around the world to see that *cave*. And amazingly, there was no other site in the Jerusalem area that attracted the attention of visitors and those in Jerusalem but that *cave* on the Mount of Olives. I will have more to say on this geographical site in a moment.

Interestingly, when it was finally determined in the time of Constantine (A.D.326) that the sepulchre of Jesus was situated under a Shrine of Venus which became the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Eusebius (the great historian who lived in Palestine and one who was well acquainted with the early traditions of the Christians) expressed surprise that Jesus' tomb was found at the pagan shrine. In his written work called the *Life of Constantine*, he candidly stated that the discovery at that site was "contrary to expectation" (3:28). That's right, neither Eusebius nor others in the Jerusalem area of which we have records expected the tomb to be discovered at the Shrine of Venus. Even Constantine, when he was exulting over the discovery, wrote the governors of the eastern provinces that the site had "remained unknown for so many cycles of years" (*ibid.*, 3:30).

Such statements as these coming from the top authorities of the time do not give the impression that Christians in Jerusalem (or anywhere else) thought that Jesus' tomb was located at the site of the Venus Shrine which had been built by the emperor Hadrian at the end of the Jewish/Roman war of A.D.132 to 135. In fact, they show that it was totally *unexpected* to find the tomb of Jesus in that

area of Jerusalem. It was “contrary to expectation.”

### ***Constantine and Supernatural Signs***

Actually, the “discovery” in the time of Constantine came about through the intervention of a miracle, various visionary experiences and information supplied by a non-Christian man that convinced Helena, the mother of Constantine, that the Shrine of Venus was the precise spot to find Jesus’ tomb. Constantine himself acknowledged that the “discovery” was prompted *by divine direction* — through a “wonder” (*ibid.*). To people of the fourth century, miraculous events were of profound importance in revealing the “authentic” locations of Christian holy places. In the vast majority of circumstances this was the medium through which the early sites associated with Jesus, the apostles and prophets were determined. Indeed, the historian Sozomen, writing about a hundred years after the “discovery” of the so-called tomb of Jesus, said:

“The place was discovered... *by means of signs and dreams; for I do not think that human information is required* when God thinks it best to make manifest the same” (*Hist.II.1 italics mine*).

Thankfully, most archaeologists today do not rely on “signs and dreams” to tell them where ancient historical sites are to be located. But in the fourth century, this was the accepted way (and even authorized by the imperial authorities) for discovering important holy places whose locations had been lost to knowledge. Indeed, about 25 years after Helena supposedly rediscovered the new “Golgotha” at the Venus Shrine, Cyril (the bishop of Jerusalem) reminded Constantine’s son that it was by “divine grace” (not by historical or archaeological data) that Christians were able to locate “*the long hidden holy places*” (*Letter to Constantius 3, italics and underlining mine*). In fact, when Cyril tried to convince some of his doubting parishioners as to the truthfulness of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre being the correct site for Jesus’ tomb, all that Cyril could provide them for proof was a discourse on the Song of Solomon which he said had the mystical clue as to the whereabouts

of Jesus' crucifixion and burial (see Parrot's *Golgotha and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre*, pp.56,57 for more information on this interesting point).

### ***The Significance of the Mount of Olives***

As far as real traditional and historical records go (written at least 100 years before the "discoveries" of Helena and reconfirmed by Eusebius about 25 years before Helena came to Jerusalem), there was only *one spot* in the Jerusalem region which Christians held in esteem as a "holy place." And that *one spot* of all things, was a *cave* on the Mount of Olives. Dr. Wilkinson has some excellent comments about this site.

"Since before the early third century, when it is mentioned in the apocryphal Acts of John, *one particular cave* on the Mount of Olives had been regarded by Christians as the place where Jesus imparted his teaching to his inner group" (*The Jerusalem Jesus Knew*, p.119).

There is another reference about this *cave* on the Mount of Olives before Constantine began to build the Church of the Holy Sepulchre west of the Temple mount. This is from Eusebius himself in his *Demonstratio Evangelica* (*Proof of the Gospel*) written in A.D.303. Eusebius gave a powerful confirmation that there was *only one site* at Jerusalem [at least he mentioned no other] to which Christians from around the world came to visit and it was to the *cave* on the summit of Olivet.

"And *this Mount of Olives* is said to be over against Jerusalem, instead of the old earthly Jerusalem and its worship. For as Scripture has said with reference to Jerusalem: The city shall be taken, and the nations that are her enemies and foes shall be gathered together against her, and her spoils shall be divided, it could not say that the feet of the Lord should stand upon Jerusalem. How could that be, once it was destroyed? But it says that they will stand with them that depart from it, to the mount opposite the city called *the Mount of Olives*...since *believers in Jesus all congregate from all parts of the world*, not of old time because of the glory of

Jerusalem, but they rest *there* [on the Mount of Olives] that they may learn both about the city being taken and devastated as the prophets foretold, and that they *may worship at the Mount of Olives* opposite to the city...*TO THE CAVE* that is shown there” (Bk. VI. ch.18 all emphases mine).

It is interesting that Eusebius tells us (about 25 years before “signs and dreams” supposedly discovered the “lost” tomb of Jesus by Helena) that Christians were coming to Jerusalem from all over the world to congregate at a *cave* near the summit of the Mount of Olives. There was no other area in the region of Jerusalem that Christian pilgrims were coming to see or at which they wanted to worship God. And note this point. Eusebius in this early period said nothing about Christians coming to Jerusalem to give homage to God at the Shrine of Venus on the west side of the city. This oversight is most conspicuous. Only two places in Palestine were important to people who came from around the world. Eusebius said in this early work that one place was the *cave* on the Mount of Olives and the other was where Jesus was born.

“Bethlehem the place of his birth, which is today so famous *that men still hasten from the ends of the earth to see it*” (Bk. I. ch.1).

In actual fact, the place of the Venus Shrine (which after the time of Constantine became the most revered spot in all Christendom) was not even remotely discussed as important by Eusebius in his early work called the *Demonstratio Evangelica*. This helps to show that the “Golgotha” of Constantine was of no significance whatever to Eusebius in the period before Helena “discovered” the site by the use of “signs and dreams.”

### ***Helena Transfers Site to the Western Part of Jerusalem***

But with the “discoveries” of Helena at the Shrine of Venus, it was the *western* side of Jerusalem that became all important to Christians around the world. The location of the *cave* on the Mount of Olives, however, had been so ingrained as significant to Christians at Jerusalem that Helena was forced to erect a church

over the Olivet *cave*. She called her structure the Eleona Church which indicated that it was situated on the Mount of Olives. As soon as this church was built, people in Jerusalem then began to associate it with the site of Jesus' ascension to heaven.

The actual ascension, on the other hand, took place near Bethany about a mile *east* of the cave (Luke 24:50). On this Dr. Wilkinson comments:

“Where did the Apostles experience this final parting? Though Luke says at the end of his Gospel that it was at Bethany no later pilgrims or Jerusalem Christians ever seemed to remember it there. Nor indeed was it in the place where the Jerusalemites first commemorated it, for this was none other than the Eleona Cave, and Acts 1:10 demands that the place of the Ascension should be in some open place from which it was possible to look up into the sky. The unsuitability of *the cave* as a scene for the Ascension no doubt led to plans to build a sanctuary for the Ascension elsewhere” (*ibid.*, p.173 italics mine).

The fact is, the *cave* on the Mount of Olives in the early references was not connected with the Ascension. However, near the end of the fourth century, the *monticulus* [the Imbomon] mentioned by the Bordeaux Pilgrim was erroneously selected as the Ascension site though it was actually much farther *east* near Bethany (Luke 24:50). The *cave*, however, finally came to be called *the Cave of Christ's Teaching*. It was considered a spot where Jesus did a considerable amount of speaking to his disciples when he was in the area of Jerusalem. What is not usually recognized even by many Christian people today is the fact that the area of the Mount of Olives was where Jesus actually *lived* when he was in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Not only was the region his “habitual” place for meeting with his apostles (Luke 22:39), and “where he many times met there with his disciples” (John 18:2), but “by day he was teaching in the Temple, but by night he would go out and lodge on the Mount of Olives” (Luke 21:37). Even the village of Bethany where he sometimes resided was on the eastern slopes of this same Mount

of Olives (Mark 11:1). Jesus' home in Jerusalem was on Olivet.

It could be rightly said that the district of the Mount of Olives was the "home" of Jesus when he was in Jerusalem. Other than the time he taught in the Temple or the occasion of the Last Supper (which took place within the city of Jerusalem), *all* the other teachings of Jesus near Jerusalem were conducted on the Mount of Olives.

### ***The Messiah and the Mount of Olives***

And what a fit place for the expected Messiah (the Anointed One) to teach. It was customary in Jewish circles to call the Mount of Olives by the name "the Mount of the Anointing" (*Parah* 3:6). If one use the Greek language to translate this Hebrew rendering, it is quite a significant sign of identification. Through the Greek the Mount of Olives would be called "the Mount of the Christ." Christians were well aware of this significance. When Jesus was in the Jerusalem area it was on the Mount of Olives that he made his abode (Mark 11:1; Luke 21:37; 22:39; John 18:2). Olivet was truly "his" mount.

There were other things that made it "the Mount of the Anointing (Christ)." The Mount of Olives was also the holiest area around Jerusalem other than the Temple itself. I have explained the reason for this in previous chapters. We should recall that the Mount of Olives had its special sanctification because it housed the Miphkad Altar (where the Red Heifer and the other sin offerings were burnt *outside* the camp). But to Christians it had even a greater anointing. More significant than anything else, it was the area where Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected from the dead. It was also near the place of Jesus' ascension, and the site to which he will return from heaven (Acts 1:9-11; Zechariah 14:1-4). Besides this, Christians saw another importance to the Mount of Olives. Rabbi Jonathan (a few years after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D.70) reported that the Shekinah glory of God left the inner

Temple in A.D.66. For three and a half years, he said the Shekinah...

“abode on the Mount of Olives hoping that Israel would repent, but they did not; while a *Bet Kol* [a supernatural voice from heaven] issued forth announcing, *Return, O backsliding children* [Jeremiah 3:14]. *Return unto Me, and I will return unto you* [Malachi 3:7], when they did not repent, it said, *I will return to my place* [Hosea 5:15]” (Midrash *Rabbah*, Lamentations 2:11).

Early Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would have known about this event mentioned by Rabbi Jonathan which both Jewish Christians and ordinary Jews reckoned as a miraculous sign concerning the holiness of the Mount of Olives. Christians in particular would no doubt have seen in this miraculous event much more significance than may meet the eye today. And indeed they did! Eusebius mentioned the importance of this removal of the Shekinah glory from the Temple mount to the Mount of Olives in his *Proof of the Gospel* (Bk. VI. ch.18).

“Believers in Christ congregate from all parts of the world, not as of old time because of the glory of Jerusalem, nor that they may worship in the ancient Temple at Jerusalem, but...that they may worship at the Mount of Olives opposite the city, *whither the glory* [the Shekinah Glory] *of the Lord migrated when it left the former city.*”

To Eusebius, it was a sign that God had departed from the Temple on the western hill and had retreated to the Mount of Olives on the *east* as the *new* place of his divine residence. This event of the Shekinah glory leaving the Temple and abiding on the Mount of Olives became highly significant to Christians because this was the mountain where Jesus did most of his teachings in Jerusalem (and telling the Jews to repent in his day). It was also understood by Christians that this will be the exact area to which Jesus returns to earth at his second advent. These matters alone show how symbolically important the Mount of Olives was to Christians in the first century.

In the period before Constantine it is not difficult to see why Christians from around the world would pay attention to the Mount of Olives as a place of special holiness. What may be surprising to some of us is the fact that they paid particular attention to the *cave* very near the summit of Olivet and located about a hundred yards to the south and a little west of the *monticulus* “the little hill on the mountain” that the Bordeaux Pilgrim described. But why a *cave*? This may at first seem puzzling because there is not the slightest mention of such a *cave* in the Gospels nor in any place in the New Testament. That’s right, there is no attention attached to any *cave*, but there is considerable importance shown to a *TOMB* — the *tomb* of Jesus from whence he came forth from the dead!

### ***What was the Cave on the Mount of Olives?***

Could the *cave* on the Mount of Olives have been the *tomb* of Jesus? There is every reason to believe that it was! Look at it this way. We are told by Josephus that the Tenth Legion of the Romans occupied the whole area of Olivet for the 3 and ½ years’ war with the Jews (*War* V.70,135). The legion bivouacked in all areas of the mountain and this would have decimated most of the buildings, gardens and grave areas in the region. This was especially so in the last stages of the war when the Romans stripped the whole landscape of trees (for almost a 10 miles’ radius from Jerusalem) in order to build armaments and bulwarks against the Jews. Listen to Josephus’ lament about the countryside surrounding Jerusalem at the end of the war.

“The Romans though struggling terribly in collecting the timber...stripped the whole area around the town to a distance of 90 stadia [about 10 miles]. The countryside like the city was a pitiful sight, for where once there had been a multitude of trees and parks, there was now an utter wilderness stripped bare of timber; and no stranger who had seen the old Judaea and the glorious suburbs of her capital, and now beheld utter desolation, could refrain from tears or suppress a groan at so terrible a change. The war had blotted out every trace of beauty, and no one who had known it in the

past and came upon it suddenly would have recognized the place, for though he was already there, he would still be looking for the city" (*War* VI.5-8 Cornfeld trans.).

This eyewitness description tells us much about the terrible circumstances that came to the Mount of Olives and the city of Jerusalem after the war was over. The area was left in sheer desolation! What was no doubt a beautifully decorated tomb made by Joseph of Arimathea in which Jesus was buried would certainly have been left in shambles (as well as all other buildings, tombs, etc. on Olivet) at the conclusion of the war in A.D.70. Stripped of its ornaments and interior decorations and serving as a shelter for Roman troops of the Tenth Legion for 3 and ½ years would have left the *tomb* looking more like a *cave* rather than a resplendent *tomb* of a rich man. Indeed, when the *tomb* of Jesus is described by Jewish Christians in the early second century, they were then calling it a *cave*.

But there was another reason for calling it a *cave*. In the work called "The Gospel of the Nazaraeans" (written in the second century) it was said that a guard of armed soldiers sent to the tomb of Jesus were set "over against *THE CAVE*" (Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *The New Testament Apocrypha*, vol.I,p.150). This record shows that even the tomb itself was already reckoned as a *cave* at the time that Jesus was placed in it. But there is more. In the late second or early third century work called "The Acts of Pilate," Jesus' burial place was called both a *tomb* and a *cave* in the same context. That work has Joseph of Arimathea saying: "See, I have placed it [the body of Jesus] in my *NEW TOMB*, having wrapped it in clean linen, and I rolled a stone before the door *OF THE CAVE*" (Acts of Pilate,Bk.XII). The sepulchre for Jesus was both a "new tomb" and a "cave" at the same time. And there is more that shows this. In "The Acts of Pilate," the *tomb* of Jesus is called a *cave*. "And we saw an angel descend from heaven, and he rolled away the stone from the mouth of *THE CAVE*" (*ibid.*, Bk.XIII).

### *The Tomb of Jesus*

Could it be that the tomb in which Jesus was placed was itself a *cave* that had been fashioned anew into a tomb area by Joseph of Arimathea? The historical records that we have been reading above would suggest that this is true. But there is even more important information to suggest this than the second and third century works mentioned above. This comes from the New Testament itself. Note that when Lazarus (the brother of Mary and Martha) died, the Gospel of John states that they placed him in a memorial tomb. The Greek word to denote that memorial tomb of Lazarus was precisely the same one that described the sepulchre (or memorial tomb) of Jesus. But with Lazarus, the New Testament gives us a further bit of information about his memorial tomb. It says it was also A CAVE. Notice what the New Testament states; “Jesus therefore again, groaning in himself, cometh *to the GRAVE* [memorial tomb]. It was A CAVE, and a stone lay upon it” (John 11:38). Interestingly, the same type of memorial tomb (or sepulchre) of Jesus also had a stone which covered its entrance. And even more to the point, the tomb/cave of Lazarus was located on the same Mount of Olives as was the tomb of Jesus, only Lazarus was laid to rest on the east side of the mountain while Jesus was entombed on its west side.

This is excellent New Testament evidence that Jesus’ tomb could also have been a cave or a type of grotto that Joseph of Arimathea had newly enlarged to make it a memorial tomb (Luke 23:53). He could have carved out the tomb of Jesus from a grotto type of entombment area which was made for several bodies in certain parts of the sepulchre (see Luke 23:53). There are many such examples in and around the Jerusalem area of these grotto/cave tomb areas that have been enlarged by hewing. It is no wonder that the Jewish Christians who wrote “The Gospel of the Nazaraeans” and when “The Acts of Pilate” was written, stated that the *tomb* of Jesus was indeed a *cave*. They must be right. With the strong evidence from the New Testament itself that the tomb of Lazarus was

a cave (or grotto), this is powerful information that the tomb of Jesus was probably the same type. At least, in later literature it is described as being a cave. This means that the *tomb* of Joseph of Arimathea had been a cave or grotto that had been enlarged.

Remarkably, another work called the “Acts of John” referred to earlier by Dr. Wilkinson (and probably written in the late second century) has Jesus talking to the apostle John at *this CAVE* on the Mount of Olives at the exact time of the crucifixion — and even with the *real* crucifixion of Jesus as occurring on the Mount of Olives. As stated by Hennecke-Schneemelcher in their work *The New Testament Apocrypha*, we find that Jesus gave to the apostle John some last minute instructions: “Jesus said to John on the Mount of Olives at the moment of the crucifixion: ‘John, someone must hear this from me; for I have need of one who will hear it’” (Vol.I, p.301). And with this statement, what is interesting is the fact that this gnostic work actually places the apostle John (whom the New Testament puts in eyeshot of Jesus’ crucifixion) standing opposite the *cave* on the Mount of Olives at the exact time Jesus was crucified. This gnostic account describing the apostle John being on Olivet when Jesus was crucified can only be considered a further indication that Jesus was executed on the Mount of Olives.

But this is not all the important information about this *cave* on the Mount of Olives. It should be recalled that the church historian Eusebius (who was himself a native Palestinian and well versed in the history of Jerusalem as well as an astute observer of what was happening in Christian circles at the end of the third century) said that Christians were coming to Jerusalem from all over the world to assemble at the *cave* on the Mount of Olives in order to worship God.

“Believers in Jesus all congregate from all parts of the world...that they may worship at the Mount of Olives opposite the city...*TO THE CAVE* that is shown there” (*Proof of the Gospel*, Bk. VI. ch.18).

***The Tomb of Jesus was Formerly a Cave***

What we find from this historical information is that there are good credentials that the *cave/tomb* on the Mount of Olives is indeed the very *tomb* (carved out of an existing grotto) which belonged to Joseph of Arimathea and in which Jesus was placed after his crucifixion. There is not *any other place than this CAVE* in the Jerusalem area that the historical records reveal Christians as accepting as a “holy place” before the time of Constantine. Even Eusebius is completely silent about any other site, and especially he says *nothing* about the region of the Temple of Venus on the west side of Jerusalem as having the slightest significance.

In closing this chapter, it would be profitable to see the summation of Dr. Wilkinson on this matter of the *cave* before the time of Constantine. He says:

“Besides the places where events mentioned in the New Testament had actually taken place there were evidently places set aside for prayer. *Such was THE CAVE on the Mount of Olives*, which is first mentioned about a century before Constantine erected a church over it.... Perhaps there were other places being used before Christianity finally came out in the open under Constantine. If there were, we have no firm evidence about them” (*ibid.*, p.177 emphases mine).

This means that the *only place* recognized in history as being “holy” to the Christians around Jerusalem before A.D.326 was the *cave/tomb* on the Mount of Olives. Remarkably, it was somewhere near this *cave* that the early bishops of Jerusalem were buried. When the cave is examined today (or what is left of it), there can be seen a newer tomb built in the second century directly adjacent to the *cave* with spaces for five bodies. The fact that more burials were made at the cave suggests that it was indeed a grotto type of cave that could be enlarged by later people. And there can be seen this newer extension for five more bodies to be placed in the cave. Dr. Wilkinson does not think that this newer tomb was built for some of the bishops because it is too crudely constructed (*ibid.*,

p.122), yet the bishops were certainly buried not far away. It was normal for high ecclesiastical authorities to be entombed in prominent burial grounds and this *cave/tomb* must have been reckoned important to the early Jerusalem bishops. Did they not want to be buried near the place where their Lord was buried and resurrected from the dead? From what has been shown in this book, this may be the reason the bishops chose this *cave/tomb* region.

What is most significant is that the early bishops of Jerusalem expressed not the slightest interest in being buried *near* or *at* the Venus Shrine in the western part of Jerusalem that Helena and Constantine eventually called the holiest place on earth. The bishops, on the other hand, were very concerned in being interred around the *cave/tomb* on the Mount of Olives. This procedure of the many bishops in itself ought to tell us that something of importance was recognized as applying to the *cave/tomb*. It appears to me that we should also be as interested in that spot as were the early bishops, and consign the area of the Venus Shrine to irrelevance in matters dealing with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

The next chapter has an abundance of *new* evidence which helps to substantiate this proposition.