

NOT FOR CIRCULATION

THE AKELDAMA “TOMB OF THE SHROUD” AND THE BURIAL OF JESUS

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The surrounding areas immediately outside the Old City of Jerusalem are rich with tombs from the late Hellenistic and early Roman period. Archaeologists estimate that there are over 1000 such burial caves, cut into the bedrock upon which Jerusalem is built. The Kidron Valley and Mt. of Olives to the east, and the Hinnom Valley and Akeldama to the south, are particularly rich with tombs, many of them quite monumental and impressive. It is clear that those of wealth and status, particularly the aristocrats and priests, were able to afford such final resting places.

The tombs themselves are of various sizes and styles. Some contain large interior rooms with multiple chambers and levels, and even decorated ceilings. The number of chambers, loculi, and arcosilia reflect the size and influence of the family that owns the tomb. It is common for the outside of the tombs, both doorways and forecourts, to be elaborate and impressive. There is an interesting reference in the Gospels in this regard. Jesus berates the scribes and Pharisees of his own day who “build the tombs of the prophets and garnish the monuments of the righteous” (Matt 23:29//Luke 11:47-48).¹ Josephus also describes some of the more monumental tombs such as that of Alexander Jannaeus, John Hyrcanus, and the high priest Annas.

The Gospels also record that Jesus himself was hastily placed in such a tomb late Thursday afternoon, as the Passover began, in the year 30 CE. All four Gospels record that one Joseph of Arimathea, who was both wealthy and politically influential as a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, went to the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate, obtained the body of Jesus, and placed it in his own newly hewn tomb (Mark 15:43; Matt 27:57; Luke 23:50; John 19:38). Although the family was involved in the burial, including Jesus mother Mary, his disciple Mary Magdalene, and his sister Salome, the burial was an emergency measure and intended to be temporary.

¹ It should be noted that this is from what scholars term the “Q” Source, used by both Matthew and Luke, but containing the very earliest tradition of the sayings of Jesus.

Once the Passover was over the corpse would clearly be turned over to the family for deposit in a final resting place, perhaps in Galilee, but possibly also in Jerusalem where the family evidently has important connections. Indeed, firm traditions place the subsequent burial of both Jesus' brother James and his mother Mary in Jerusalem rather than Galilee with different conflicting and competing Christian traditions claiming until this day to have the authentic tombs under their churches. Also, our only ancient source on this matter, Luke's book of Acts, clearly implies that both James and the other brothers, as well as his mother Mary, took up permanent residence in Jerusalem after the death of Jesus (Acts 1:14; 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; cf. Gal 1:19; 2:9-12). This raises the question as to whether there might have been a "Jesus Family" tomb, whether paid for by the family or donated by a wealthy patron or follower.

In the Synoptics and the Gospel of Peter, Joseph of Arimathea either ties up or wraps up the corpse of Jesus in a linen cloth called a *sindon*. This is apparently parallel to the Hebrew term *takrik* and the rabbinic term *sadin*. The body was then placed in a newly hewn rock "chamber" tomb (*mnema* or *taphos*). Whether the body was placed into a *kokim* or *loculi*, or placed on a bench or on the shelf of an *arcosolium*, is not entirely clear from the accounts, but the evidence seems to favor the latter. The entrance to the tomb appears to have been horizontal, sealed with a stone that was either rolled or laid into the opening. In the Gospel of Peter the body is washed and then tied in the shroud. The Gospel of John reports the body being bound with "cloths" (*othonioi*), as well as with spices of myrrh and aloes. He also mentions a kind of head-cloth (*soudarion*), which appears to be separate from the main shroud. In reporting the raising of Lazarus, the author of John had previously described the deceased as bound with strips of cloth (*keiria*), and his face wrapped in a cloth (*spoudarion*). The indication is that the burial described in these texts is *secondary*, that is the corpse is laid out and covered, with spices to control the odor, until it decomposes or desiccates. Approximately one year after death the bones are collected and placed in an ossuary or "bone box" as a final storage place. The ossuary was then labeled with the name of the deceased and in some cases an additional identifying tag.²

In June, 2000 Dr. Shimon Gibson of the British School of Archaeology and Dr. James Tabor, of the University of North Carolina at

² For a catalogue of ossuaries and their inscriptions see L. Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: IAA and The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994).

Charlotte were hiking in the Hinnom Valley/Akeldama area one late afternoon with a group of Dr. Tabor's students. They were at that time involved in the excavation of a monumental cave/reservoir in the Suba area outside Ein Kerem. Dr. Gibson wanted to show the students the magnificent style and architecture of some of the tombs, now abandoned, that had been uncovered over the centuries. After a couple of hours, when they were ready to return to the British School in east Jerusalem one of the students noticed on the slope of the hillside where they were walking what looked like the entrance of a mostly buried tomb, but with fresh dirt and several pieces of broken ossuaries strewn outside. Dr. Gibson immediately recognized the tell tale signs of a recently robbed tomb. Gibson and a couple of the students went inside to survey the damage while Tabor and the others waited guard outside. It was not even clear if the thieves might be in the area, watching at that very moment, frighten temporarily away by the presence of Gibson's team. The tomb had three levels. Broken ossuaries were scattered about with their bones strewn helter skelter. The modus operandi of such tomb invasions is to break off the parts of the ossuary with inscriptions, since they can be sold, leaving the bones and other pieces behind. It did turn out there was one intact ossuary still left in the tomb, possibly too heavy to be easily transported.

At one point a shout went up from those in the tomb. Those outside could sense some incredible excitement echoing up through the levels and passages of the tomb. In one loculi in the lower chamber the sharp-eyed Dr. Gibson saw what he realized was the remains of an adult skeleton with a relatively well-preserved burial shroud covering it. He knew that such a find was extraordinary, seemingly impossible, if the deceased was from the early Roman period, as cloth would not survive the climate in the highlands of Jerusalem. The team became quite excited and contacted the proper IAA authorities who showed up that every evening to investigate the robbery, but most important, to determine how best to remove and preserve the shroud. When Boaz Zissu arrived he informed Gibson and the others that in fact this very tomb had first been opened illegally in 1998, that some ossuaries had been removed, and after an initial investigation it had been resealed, out of respect for the dead, according to Israeli legal requirements. The Gibson team had clearly happened upon the tomb shortly after it had been reopened by thieves. Both times the thieves, interested only in the inscriptions on the ossuaries, and anything else that might be sold in the illegal antiquities market, had missed what turns out to be one of the most incredible finds of the new century—a 1st century CE Jewish burial shroud!

Appendix I

Radiocarbon Age of Material from the Shroud of Akeldama

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Material from the Shroud from Akeldama in Jerusalem was received at the Accelerator Mass Spectrometer laboratory at the University of Arizona on 11 July, 2000. It was assigned an identification number AA38765. A total of four measurements were made of the radiocarbon age of the sample. The results of these measurements are shown in Table 1.

For the first three measurements listed in the table, a piece of material from the cloth was treated chemically in a standard manner. It was washed successively in hexane, ethanol, and methanol, and then washed thoroughly in distilled water. After these treatments with solvents, the material was subjected to treatments, successively, with acid (HCl), base (weak NaOH) and acid, with water washes interspersed. After chemical treatment, the material was combusted at 900 degrees C in an oxygen atmosphere. The carbon dioxide produced was then converted, by catalytic reduction, to graphite, and the graphite was pressed into three targets. The radiocarbon age of each was measured in the accelerator, and the results of these measurements are the first listed in Table 1.

For the fourth result listed in the table, material from the shroud sample was treated the same as the first three, with the exception of an additional solvent treatment with acetone.

The results quoted are the fraction of modern. This quantity is the ratio of the radiocarbon content of the sample to the radiocarbon content of the

atmosphere in AD1950. Details of the analysis of results and their conversion to a radiocarbon age are given in Donahue, Linick, and Jull.¹

Table 1

Sample #	delta 13C	Fraction modern, F
AA 38765A	-22.4	0.7722 +/- 0.0043
AA 38765B	-22.4	0.7778 +/- 0.0062
AA 38765C	-22.4	0.7814 +/- 0.0041
AA 38765R	-22.0	0.7647 +/- 0.0050

The weighted average² of the four results is $F = 0.7744 \pm 0.0037$. This weighted average gives a radiocarbon age of material from the Shroud of Akeldama of

Radiocarbon age = 2054 +/- 38 years BP.

The definition and calculation of radiocarbon age are given in reference 1. It is the age that is used in conjunction with a tree-ring calibration curve to obtain a calendrical age for the sample. The error is a standard deviation. Its interpretation is that if the entire experiment were repeated many times, two thirds of the results should fall within one standard deviation (one sigma) of the quoted value. Ninety five percent of the results should be within two standard deviations.

When combined with the calibration curve of Stuiver, et al,³ the measured radiocarbon age yields possible calendar-age ranges for the shroud of:

One sigma: BC113-AD1

Two sigma: BC170-AD24.

References:

1.) D. J. Donahue, T. W. Linick, and A. J. T. Jull, *Radiocarbon*, 32, 135, 1990

- 2.) Philip R. Bevington and D. Kieth Robinson, *Data Reduction and Error Analysis for the Physical Sciences*, Second Edition, McGraw-Hill, 1992
- 3.) M. Stuiver et al, *Radiocarbon*, 40, 1041, 1998.