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Exploring the Past: In Quest of the Future

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Exploring THE PAST

In Quest of the Future



Photo by F. Gerald Kroll

Jerusalem's Golden Gate is built above an earlier gate that could be the eastern entrance through which Jesus passed into the Holy City.

by Harold L. Willmington and Ray Pritz

Archaeology—A Pastime. Archaeology is often considered Israel's pastime. Thousands of Israelis on a regular basis probe and dig at the almost uncounted hills, caves, and valleys that dot the land, each one a possible hiding place for some priceless historical treasure. There are 3,500 registered archaeological sites in this little country and 22 archaeological museums.

Since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, a number of exciting Holy Land archaeological discoveries have been reported in newspapers around the world. Only a sampling of these discoveries can be discussed here.

Synagogue in Capernaum. In Capernaum, a synagogue has been discovered where, it is believed, Jesus probably preached. Jesus ministered in the synagogue often and worked at least one miracle there, the healing of a demon-possessed man (Mark 1:21-25). Virgilio Corbo, the archaeologist who headed up the excavations in 1981,

suggested that this may have been the synagogue built by the centurion whose servant Jesus healed (Luke 7:1-10). The synagogue walls were nearly 4 feet thick, and the building was 60 feet wide and 80 feet long.

Sodom and Gomorrah. Have Sodom and Gomorrah been found? Walter E. Rast, of Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana, and R. Thomas Schaub, of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, excavated two sites near the eastern shore of the Dead Sea in Jordan that they strongly believe are the biblical cities destroyed by fire because of their citizens' wickedness, as reported in *Biblical Archaeological Review* (Sept./Oct. 1980).

The principal site, Bab edh-Dhra, lies less than one mile east of the Lissan, a tongue-like peninsula that protrudes into the Dead Sea on the eastern shore. It was occupied during the Early Bronze Age (third millennium B.C.). Overlooking the Dead Sea from a height of 550 feet, Bab edh-Dhra was no doubt built on a bluff for defense purposes. The site consists of a town and a large cemetery. One scholar estimated that

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the cemetery is composed of more than 20,000 tombs in which more than 500,000 people were buried along with over 3 million pottery vessels. A large rectangular structure found inside the town is thought to be a temple. The archaeologists also uncovered the remains of what they believe was the altar associated with the temple.

Saint Peter's Home in Capernaum. Italian archaeologists believe they have uncovered Saint Peter's home in Capernaum, according to an article in *Biblical Archaeological Review* (Nov./Dec. 1982). When Jesus left Nazareth and settled in Capernaum (Matt. 4:13), it is speculated that he moved in with Simon Peter, who owned a home there (Mark 1:29). It is theorized that Peter's original house was later turned into a Christian house-church during the fourth century A.D. and an octagonal church was built over both during the fifth century. According to the excavators, the original house was located 84 feet south of the ancient synagogue in Capernaum.

Jerusalem Gate. In April 1969 archaeologist James Fleming was standing in front of the Jerusalem Golden Gate. Suddenly the rain-soaked earth gave way and he fell into a hole 8 feet deep. Disoriented but uninjured, Fleming surveyed his surroundings in the dim light that came through the hole above his head.

As reported in *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Jan./Feb. 1983), he saw an ancient wall below the Golden Gate. "The gate itself," he said, "is built into a turret that protrudes about 6 feet from the wall. The underground stones of the wall south of the turret were large and imposing. . . . 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."

Could the Lower Gate have been the gate through which Jesus entered the Holy City? Unfortunately, it is difficult to date this underground gate precisely. According to the *Biblical Archaeology Review* the best archaeological evidence for dating the Lower Gate seems to be the masonry to the right of the straight joint. Most scholars date this masonry to sometime before the Herodian period, based on archaeological and



The Dome of the Rock is a Muslim shrine erected on what is believed to be the site of the first and second temples.

historical grounds. The Lower Gate would, therefore, also date to a period earlier than the Herodian, and a date as early as the reign of King Solomon is possible.

Perhaps the most important implication of the presence of the Lower Gate below the threshold of the Golden Gate is that this area has long been identified as a location for the eastern entrance into the Temple Mount. Many Jerusalem maps show a Temple gate due east of the Dome of the Rock in the Haram esh-Sharif. The Golden Gate, however, is located about 350 feet north of this point. We now know that the location of the present Golden Gate was determined by an earlier gate.

Site of First and Second Temples.

Dr. Asher Kaufman, faculty member in physics at Hebrew University, disputes the traditional view that both first and second temples once stood on the present Temple Mount area now occupied by the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim shrine. Although not an archaeologist, Kaufman claims to have explored the Temple Mount platform more than 100 times.

It is his conclusion that both ancient Jewish temples were located some 30 feet northwest of the Muslim shrine at a place now marked by a small cupola that for centuries was known by the

Arabs as the Dome of the Spirits and the Dome of the Tablets. In part, Kaufman's reasons for advocating this new location are as follows:

1. Because of the ancient names for this small cupola. He suggests the title "Dome of the Spirits" may be associated with Numbers 16:22 and 27:16 where the Creator is described as the God of human spirits. To carry the assumption a step further, the Shekinah (the Glory of God) once resided in the Jewish Holy of Holies. Kaufman concludes that the second name for the cupola, Dome of the Tablets, may be even more significant, serving as a reminder that the Ark of the Covenant once contained two tablets upon which were written the Ten Commandments.

2. Because of the cupola's location in regard to the Eastern Gate. A straight line connects these two objects, from east to west. As the Eastern Gate served as the main entrance from the Kidron Valley and the Mount of Olives to the temple area itself, logic suggests the gate would probably have been built to provide the easiest and shortest route to the temple itself.

3. Because the cupola area alone stands upon a flat bedrock that protrudes from the platform surrounding the Dome of the Rock. The remaining platform area in the vicinity is paved with rough, some-



Israel's pastime of archaeology continues to uncover priceless historical treasures.

television and dropped a bombshell. He announced dramatically that the rediscovered tunnel might lead to the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, and other Temple treasures.

Archaeologist Yigal Yadin said no one could know this, but Goren told *Newsview* (Nov. 10, 1981) that he had good reason to believe that the tunnel led to the Holy of Holies, and that he had found some way to find the Ark but didn't know how long it would take. He also said he wouldn't reveal anything more because of "secret and mystical reasons and also archaeological, historic and religious reasons." When asked if there were political reasons, he replied no.

It is against Jewish belief to reveal the real story of where the Ark is hidden. "The secret will be revealed just prior to building the Third Temple," Goren said. "The Ark will reveal the truth of accepting the Ten Commandments from heaven. This is the evidence of what Moses brought to the Jews. It will be the greatest testimony of what we have followed because it contains both the broken tablets and the complete second tablets." (Moses broke the first set when he saw the Israelites worshipping the "golden calf." He went back up Mount Sinai for the replacement.)

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, Israel's great Talmudic scholar, tried to interpret "what Goren meant to say," *Newsview* reported. "The Holy of Holies was part of the Temple and no longer exists. There may be a tunnel that leads to the area. We know the Temple Mount was tunneled and cross-tunneled. Even in the Second Temple times, in the first century C.E. we have information that the Ark was buried in one of the tunnels."

Rabbi Moshe Hirsch, spokesman for the ultra-orthodox Neturei Karta sect, believes he can predict when the Ark will be discovered: "The world was created to last 6,000 years. Now it is 5,742, so we're not far. The Messianic era starts prior to the end of 6,000 years." He believes that the Ark will appear "when the Messiah rules and the Temple is rebuilt."

The rabbi of the Western Wall, Neir Yehuda Getz, who often prays in the tunnel, told *Newsview*: "The tunnel is a hint that the Ark may be hidden near there. Who can know? But at present, we don't want to make problems [with the Muslims]. There's no need. We'll know when the time comes. Then there won't be any problems." ■

what uneven flagstones. The Mishnah, an ancient Jewish historical and theological source, states the Ark of the Covenant rested on a foundation stone just inside the Holy of Holies. The Mishnah also describes a nearby pit in which the libation (liquid) offerings were gathered. In 1896 Sir Charles Wilson, a British archaeologist, discovered a cistern just southeast of the cupola.

Shiloh. According to the scriptural account, after invading and subjecting the land of Canaan, Joshua set up the tabernacle of Moses at a place called Shiloh, north of Jerusalem in the tribal allotment of Ephraim (Josh. 18:1). Here it would remain until destroyed by the Philistines (Judg. 4). Centuries later, the prophet Jeremiah used its utter destruction as an example of God's judgment upon Israel's sin (Jer. 7:12).

Archaeologists working in Shiloh believe they have discovered the site of the Holy Sanctuary, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept for 369 years until the Philistines stole it and destroyed the sanctuary in 1050 B.C. This discovery came at the end of a five-week dig led by Dr. Israel Finkelstein of Bar-Ilan University, involving more than 400 volunteers, including university students.

Ark of the Covenant. There have been numerous attempts to find the lost Ark of the Covenant.

In 1981 an archaeological dig adjoining the Temple Mount, Jerusalem's holiest site, caused a clash between Muslims and Jews.

A mysterious tunnel under the Temple Mount in an area north of the Western Wall, near the foundations of the ancient Temple, had been opened up in late summer by Religious Affairs Ministry workmen. The discovery of the secret subterranean tunnel, which was first uncovered 100 years earlier, then sealed up again, was kept secret for a month. Secrecy was maintained so as not to exacerbate relations with the Muslim authorities, who are in control of the Temple Mount.

The tunnel adjoined an enormous Crusader-built cistern that extended 75 feet under the mount. Archaeologists say it is one of perhaps dozens of such tunnels or cavities that honeycomb the depths of "God's House"—Mount Moriah of the Bible—where Adam was created, Abraham was called to sacrifice Isaac, the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, and the Second Temple destroyed by the Romans. For the Muslims it is the site of the Mosque of Omar, from where Muhammad ascended to heaven.

At the height of the furor over the archaeological dig, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Green was interviewed on Israeli