

GOING DEEPER

ACTS Israel Tour 2018

TRADITIONAL SITES: WHAT DOES THAT MEAN

Many sites are said to be the “traditional site” where an event occurred. Or you might hear “tradition holds that _____ even happened here.” What does that mean?

Sites Known with Certainty

Many of the sites on our tour are known with certainty. An easy example is the site of the Temple in Jerusalem about which there is no doubt. To be even more specific, when we visit the southern steps of the Temple, there is no doubt that these were the steps Jesus climbed and on which Peter, James, and John preached.

We will visit many ancient villages whose location is known with certainty, for example, Capernaum, Chorazin, Megiddo, and Caesarea. Modern Nazareth is on the site of the ancient village of Nazareth and the same is true of Bethlehem. The Herodion fortress and palace is authentic. So is Masada.

Sites With Uncertain Locations

In some cases, the location of an ancient village is uncertain. The ancient world did not have precision in its maps as we do today and not many maps survive. Rivers can change course. The shorelines of lakes can shift as water flows change.

The situation is even more complex sometimes because the same site may have had different names in different periods. A site in the same period may have had different names in different languages.

Ancient towns can disappear. The town dwindles and is abandoned. Over time, nature takes over. The town site may be hidden by trees and brush. It may be covered over by

silt. We will visit the ancient site of Magdala, lost for nearly 2,000 years until it was discovered only recently.

Sites Where the Area is Known but Not the Exact Location

It can be very difficult to determine with precision where an ancient event occurred. In addition to the difficulties considered previously, the New Testament is typically far more interested in the meaning of the event than its exact location. After the generation of eye witnesses passes away, no one is left who knows with certainty where a particular event occurred.

In some cases, we can be very sure about the approximate area where an event occurred even if we don't know the exact location. For example, various locations are proposed for the feeding of the 5,000 or the Sermon on the Mount. There is simply not enough detail in the gospels for us to know with certainty where these things happened.

However, we do know that these events occurred somewhere on the hills and plains surrounding the Sea of Galilee. It did not happen 10 km south or north. It actually happened on one of the hills we see. Perhaps the event occurred on the very hill we are standing upon, but if not, it was on one very much like it and in the general area.

For example, we will visit the site tradition holds is where the Sermon on the Mount occurred. We don't know if this is the exact site. The event could have occurred on this mountain side or perhaps another one nearby. For our purposes, it makes little difference. As you stand on the slope of a mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee, you are seeing very much what the people saw in those days. In other words, the exact location may be uncertain, but your experience of the location where you are standing is the same as it was for the people who gathered with Jesus back then.

Sites Where Not Even the General Area Is Known

In some cases the gospels record an event with so little detail about the place that we don't even know the general area. This is the case with the transfiguration of Jesus. We know that he took Peter, James, and John up on a mountain to see the vision of His

glory. But which mountain was it? Some people hold that it occurred on top of Mount Tabor in the Jezreel Valley, and there is a Church of the Transfiguration there to mark the spot. Others who have studied the gospels, however, believe it happened far to north on the slopes of Mt Hermon.

In a case like this we have to accept that if the location of the event were important, the Holy Spirit could have given us enough information to be certain, but He did not. That should be a sign to us that we are to pay attention to the importance and meaning of the event and not to its location. The fact of Jesus's transfiguration matters. Where it occurred does not.

Sites with Strong Traditional Evidence

In some other cases, there is good archaeological, geographical or historical evidence that the site claimed for the event is very likely the actual site. As an example of this kind, we will visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which is considered the "traditional site" of Golgotha where Jesus was crucified and also of the cave in which he was buried.

In this case "traditional" means far more than "wild guess." The site fits well with the descriptions in the gospels and there is good archeological evidence to suggest that it is likely location. There is also evidence that in the early years of the church the site was honoured as the place of the crucifixion. These traditions go back far enough that it is not unreasonable to suspect that they may reflect memories passed on from eye witnesses.

However, we will also visit a site called the Garden Tomb, not far away from the Holy Sepulchre and is considered by some to be an alternate possible location for the death and burial of Jesus. Is the Garden Tomb the real location? Perhaps, but most scholars suspect the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is the most likely location.

Most visitors to the Garden Tomb say that they felt closer to the real events there. Jesus tomb was apparently in a garden area. Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is a huge building, hung with lanterns and arrays of multiple altars being served by dark-robed priests. The Garden Tomb site has been

developed with beautiful plantings and is preserved in a natural state with an old rock-hewn tomb. There is a sense of peace and prayer about the place, much different from the crowds at the Holy Sepulchre.

Here is where the experience you have is more important than the specific archeological details. God did not trouble us with the precise location, so neither should we trouble ourselves. Instead, we know that we are in the city of Jerusalem over which Jesus wept and where he suffered and died. At both the Holy Sepulchre and the Garden Tomb we are without doubt within some hundreds of meters of the actual sites. So with that in mind we are best to fill our minds with thoughts about what happened and let the archeological specifics fade into the background.

Sites Where We can Make a Good Guess

On the last day of our tour we will visit the seaport of Caesarea. There is no doubt that the site we visit is the site of that ancient town, and it was to Caesarea that Paul was taken under Roman arrest for trial before being sent to Rome after he appealed to Caesar. At Caesarea we will visit the actual site of King Herod's palace.

Now, where was Paul held in prison and where did his trial take place. Very likely, his trial took place at the palace. This is a most reasonable guess. We can guess even a bit more that the trial would have taken place in an audience room of the palace, a room designed for the king to sit in judgment. As it happens, the archeologists have identified for us the exact area where the audience room of that palace stood. Today, as we stand in that place, we can make a very reasonable guess that we are standing in the same place as the Apostle Paul when he went to trial before Felix and Agrippa.

Conclusion

So I encourage you not to be troubled by the issue of precise location of sure and certain authenticity of a particular location. We are in the land, the regions, and the cities and towns where Jesus lived and had his ministry. Absorb the locations we visit and enjoy them. There are experiences to have and things to learn at all of them. Our faith, however, is not tied to places but to the Lord Himself, and He said, "I am always with you."

