

Tracing The Footsteps of Jesus Film Trip Update

November 11 - December 4, 2009

Report #3 - Recounting the Crucifixion of Jesus



Church of the Holy Sepulchre

Dear Friends and Supporters of The Biblical World:

Scripture says that Pilate sent Jesus out to Golgotha to be crucified. This is an Aramaic word meaning “place of the skull” and is Calvary in the Latin. There are two different Golgotha’s in Jerusalem that pilgrims and tourists visit today. The traditional site is inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which can be identified from the Mount of Olives by the two domed roofs.

The small dome is over Calvary and the larger dome over the tomb of Jesus. In the 5th century BC this site was used as a rock quarry and then abandoned. As the centuries past, dust and dirt blew into the quarry and plants took hold. Since it was outside of the city, it was used as a cemetery in the second temple period (first centuries BC and AD). Herod the Great transformed it into a park like atmosphere.



Model of Jerusalem showing the Place of the Skull outside the gate

A section of poor quality rock that was left in place and rose about 36 feet above the surrounding area. Since it was near the gate, the Romans used this as a place of execution.

When Hadrian razed Jerusalem in response to the Bar Kochba rebellion in 135 AD, he built a temple to Venus over the abandoned rock quarry. (He built a temple to Jupiter upon the former site of the Jewish temple and placed a statue of himself inside). In the fourth century Constantine wanted to build a church to commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus and Christians pointed to this location as the place of the skull. This was unusual because it was now inside the walls of the city of Jerusalem.

So the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built here. It is a huge rambling structure filled with small chapels. Much of the current design goes back to the 5th century when Justinian rebuilt the church. Six different Christian groups maintain the church, which explains why there is not a lot of proper maintenance going on—they can’t agree on what should be done.



Chapel of Calvary Church of Holy Sepulchre (observe rock behind plexiglass)

Protestants have a difficult time imagining this as the place of the skull. They are not use to the incense, icons, and blackened roofs from centuries of soot from oil lamps. So they generally prefer to visit the Garden Tomb to recall the wondrous event.

Charles Gordon was a British Army officer in Jerusalem in the 1870’s. He noticed this unusual rock formation that resembled a skull. If you look closely you can still make out two eye sockets, a nose and with a little imagination the mouth. When he went to explore the area he discovered tombs nearby and assumed this must be Golgotha described in Scripture.



Place of the Skull at Gordon’s Calvary

The rock formation is very dramatic so we wanted to film a section of episode 25 “The True Passion of the Messiah” here. The problem is the rock is right above the bustling Arab bus station. So we received permission from the Garden Tomb to film from 8 until 9 in the morning. Unfortunately, the light was a challenge at that hour, so we later went into the parking lot of the bus station and filmed the scene you will see in the episode. Our small crew created a bit of a scene as the curious stood around watching.

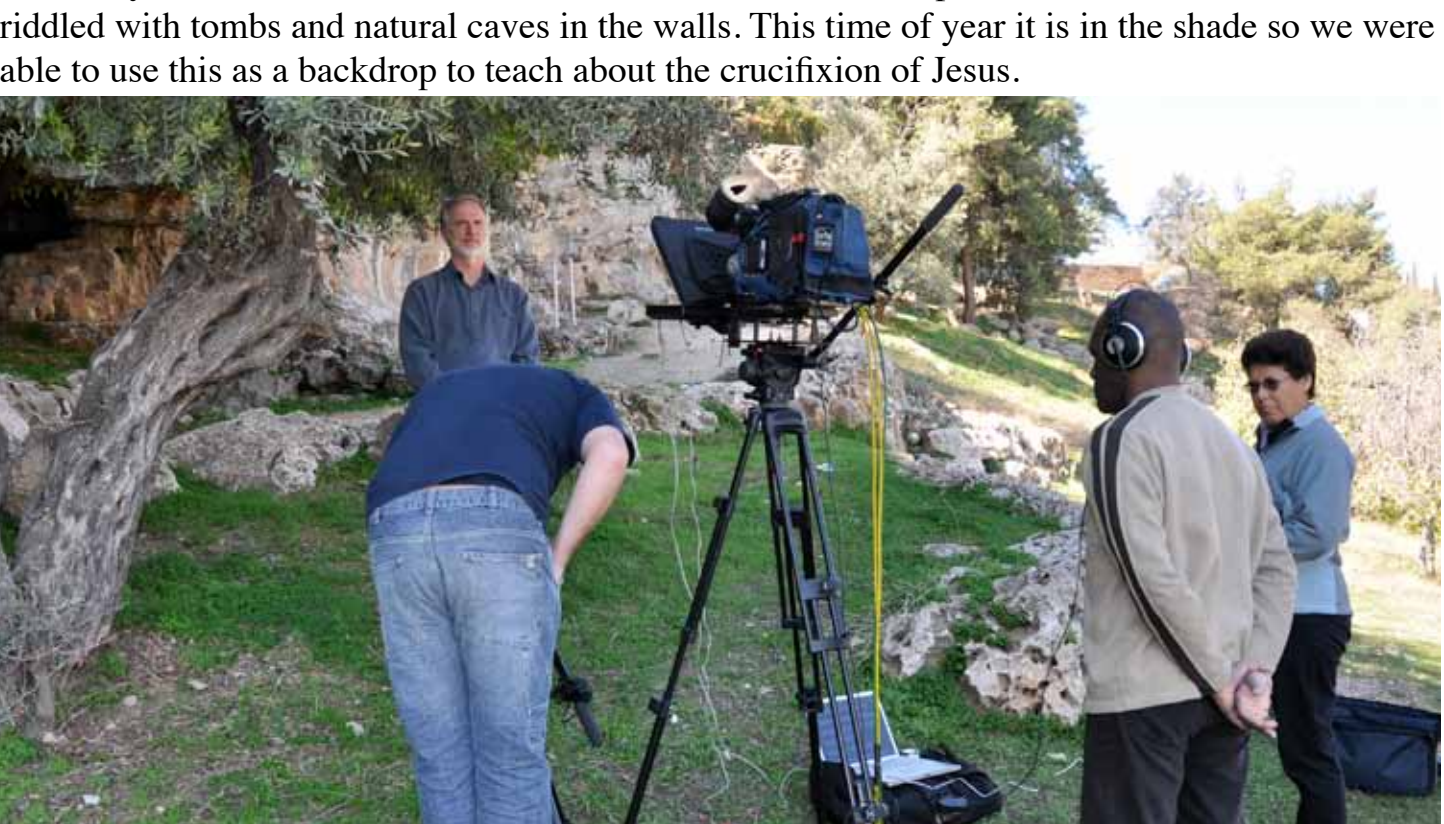


Filming Gordon’s Calvary from the Arab Bus Station in Jerusalem

So the questions is: “Was it called the place of the skull because it looked like a skull? Or was it because the area was a place of execution littered with skulls?”

As I said, Protestants tend to gravitate to the visually appealing Gordon’s Calvary and the Orthodox and Latins to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In the next update I will share more information about the tombs and perhaps you will be able to decide which candidate is more authentic.

For our purposes, both locations were very difficult for filming the teaching portion of episode 25, so we retreated to the Hinnom Valley on the southern side of Jerusalem. This is Gehenna (valley of Hinnom) where the debris and trash from the temple was taken to be burned. It is riddled with tombs and natural caves in the walls. This time of year it is in the shade so we were able to use this as a backdrop to teach about the crucifixion of Jesus.



Hinnom Valley Film Shoot

While the rocks and green grass made for an attractive set, the challenge was the valley. It is a short cut around Jerusalem so lots of buses, taxis, and ordinary cars pass through the valley. But with a lot of patience we were able to describe the incredible scenes that happened that day at the place of the skull.

As I edit this episode my heart is racing with anticipation as I think of how the Holy Spirit will use it to lead people to know Jesus around the globe. Thank you Lord for the incredible privilege of lifting You up in this unique way.

P.S. This episode is still available for sponsorship. For more information please contact me at tony@biblicalworld.org or by phone at 909-418-0160.