In the footsteps of Jesus

How one teacher's experience impacted students' learning

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As a teacher, I have always believed that learning on site is a valuable experience, so I enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to join a study tour that took me to the Holy Land. This, I believed, would give me first hand experience that would enable me to bring my lessons alive. In addition, as a religious studies teacher, I have often encountered misconceptions about biblical places and events among my students, and decided to use this opportunity to do some 'myth-busting' of my own.

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By conducting an informal survey of students from years 7–12 regarding their perceptions of archaeological issues and the Bible, I was able to confirm that there were some misconceptions. I was particularly interested in my students' perceptions of events relating to the life of Jesus Christ. Their responses revealed the following:

- there were a number of misconceptions about events in the life of Jesus;
- students were, in some cases, quite ignorant of the culture and environment of the stories we teach in Religious Studies; and
- most students were genuinely interested in the events of the Bible.

This led me to the following conclusion: In order for students to engage with the content of a Religious Studies class in a potentially life changing manner, more attention needs to be paid to facilitating an understanding of the culture, environment and people of the Bible, so as to ensure the greatest opportunity for a heart understanding of the principles of the event. For this reason, when given the chance to participate in the study tour of Bible lands, I grasped it, keen to learn how to bridge the gap between perceptions and reality that my students demonstrated. While student responses to the survey questions demonstrated a disparity in views, knowledge and understanding in each of the areas covered in the survey, the locations of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Messiah were of particular interest to me, and were included on my study itinerary.

Very few of my students actually understood what the term 'Biblical archaeology' meant when they were first confronted with it. When told that Biblical archaeology is the "science of excavation, decipherment, and critical evaluation of ancient material records related to the Bible,"[1] there was only more confusion. Consequently, I defined it as, "Digging up ancient places where it is believed that events from the Bible occurred, for the purpose of understanding the culture, people, climate, events, etc. of the past." Students expressed a variety of views as to the relevance of archaeology, with one Year 12 student stating that, "If I wanted to do a Bible study, it would be handy to know the context in which the book was written and how the surroundings and the people who it was intended for behaved, so we could interpret a meaning that is relevant to us today."[2]

Before leaving on my study tour, I asked my students, "What do you know about the location of the death and burial of Jesus?" About 60% of students gave accurate responses, including facts (sealed tomb in a garden outside the city walls), names (Joseph of Arimathea, Golgotha) and the most important fact of all; "He is not buried! He is in heaven!"[3] The other 40% of students held misconceptions which included place (crucified on Mount of Olives, buried in Gethsemane), time (died during the time of tax payment) and fallacies about the geography and nature of the tomb.

The majority of students were vague about the details but knew some of the basic information surrounding the event. The misconceptions about the place of Jesus' death and burial held by 40% of students appeared to be generally inconsequential in the big picture. That being said, when I visited the two popular proposed sites of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, I was confronted by the idea of 'Does it even matter?' There were quite a few students who strongly felt the same when asked how important it is to them to know the actual location. One student declared, "The fact is that the event occurred, and that we are saved. If we were meant to know the exact location, we would have been told in the Bible."[4]

What does the Bible tells us?

While the exact location of the crucifixion of Jesus is a matter of conjecture, the Bible tells us that Jesus 'suffered outside the city gates' (Jn 19:20, Heb 13:12), it was accessible to passers-by (Mt 27:39, Mk 15:21,29–30), and that it was observable from a distance (Mk 15:40). The location of Jesus' burial is also debated, with Scripture showing us that Jesus was buried by someone/s He knew who was probably wealthy, namely Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (Mt 27:57–60; Mk 15:43–46; Lk 23:50–55; Jn 19:38–40), that the site was in a garden near the place of crucifixion (Jn 19:41), that He was laid in a 'new tomb', 'cut out of rock' (Mt 27:60; Mk 15:46; Lk 23:53; Jn 19:41), and a large stone was 'rolled' in front of the tomb (Mt 27:60; Mk 15:46; 16:4; Lk 24:2; Jn 20:1).

Our group's visit to the two main proposed sites of Jesus' death and burial raised as many questions as it answered, but it was still an amazing experience to 'walk where Jesus walked'. Since the 4th century, the traditional site is where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre now stands, which is located in the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. The Garden Tomb, which is located further north of the Old City, has been popularised predominantly by the Protestant arm of Christianity, since the 19th century. It is argued that both sites meet the criteria for the location of the tomb of Jesus.

What did I see?

Church of the Holy Sepulchre (CHS)

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is difficult to visualise as the possible location of the death of the Saviour of the world. It is sited in "a crowded sector of the Old City of Jerusalem"[5], but despite this, is a site held sacred by many, and is the preferred site of biblical scholars for the tomb of Jesus. Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Syrian, Coptic and Ethiopian faith traditions each hold and maintain a portion of the structure. Within the church, pilgrims can visit the alleged location of Jesus' death, the stone where he was laid in preparation for burial, and the tomb where he was laid. Questions of authenticity mixed with general bewilderment as I moved through the clutter of candles, incense, altars and shrines of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. According to Robert Ousterhout, it is no wonder "General Charles R. Gordon proposed an alternative site for the Tomb of Jesus, the so-called Garden Tomb, located in a tranquil spot outside the wall of Jerusalem's Old City."[6]

The Garden Tomb

Due to scholarly dispute in the 19th century over the validity of the claim that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was the actual site of Jesus' death, Otto Thenius suggested an alternate site for Calvary (Golgotha) in 1842, a cliff face with the apparent eyes and mouth orifices of a skull visible for the discerning eye. It was not until 1867 that a tomb was located within what was perceived to be a garden









1 Crowds outside Angel Chapel, CHS

2 Place where Jesus' body was laid, CHS

3 Place of Jesus' death, CHS

4 Garden Tomb

[Julie-Anne Truscott collection]

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setting, and was labelled, 'The Garden Tomb' of Jesus. This site has become a popular site claimed by Protestant Christians. There is now a bus station at the base of this cliff. It is clearly outside of the city walls, and was evidently within a garden of a rich landowner, with a cliff with a skull configuration[7]. For all appearances sake, it conforms to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and burial. What's more, in the peaceful garden just north of the Damascus Gate, pilgrims pray and contemplate with more ease than the crowded Church of the Holy Sepulchre[8]. Despite these recommendations, the age of the alleged tomb of Jesus is under question, as it does not fit the 'new tomb' concept of the Gospel accounts.

The interesting thing is that when I visited the Garden Tomb in July 2009, the guide did not state emphatically that it *was* the site. In fact, Reverend William White, who is the Honorary Secretary of The Garden Tomb Association, asserts that "We [the association] should want to emphasise that our ministry in this place is more concerned with the theology of Christ's resurrection than with the archaeology of Arimathea's Tomb."[9] The mission of the Garden Tomb Association, since 1893, has been that the "Garden Tomb be kept sacred as a quiet spot, and preserved on the one hand from desecration and on the other hand from superstitious uses".[10]

While I was there, I was deeply moved by the atmosphere of the setting and the lengths the caretakers had gone to ensure a deep spiritual experience for all who enter. Most poignant was participating in the service of Communion while within eyesight of the potential tomb of Jesus. The peace and solitude were overwhelming, in contrast to the mad hustle and bustle of the streets of Jerusalem just a few metres away.

It was difficult not to make comparisons between the two locations we had visited on the same day; however, my heart connected with the Garden Tomb on a deep level, while my head could see the logic of the location of the Holy Sepulchre. Jeffry Chadwick sums up my reaction to the challenge I faced on this day.

> The most remarkable thing about the tomb is that it is empty. He is arisen! We need no shrine to know of the reality of the resurrection.[11]

Conclusion

Walking in the footsteps of Jesus was an amazing experience that has enhanced my ability to bring the Bible alive in the classroom. I would recommend that all teachers participate in a study tour relevant to their own discipline. For me, this experience has highlighted that, as a teacher, I need to take into account the various stages of faith development of my students, their various learning styles and unique interests and personalities. It is with this in mind that I endeavour to ensure that students are provided with a more complete picture of the stories of the Bible, including any relevant archaeological information. By building a solid foundation of the culture of biblical times, students are in a better position to understand the principles of Scripture. That being said, it is more important to bring students to a heart understanding of Christ's redemptive love for them, than it is to argue the particulars of an actual physical location of an event in time.

What of my quest to find the authentic burial site of Jesus? It was impossible to draw one solid, black and white conclusion from my visit to the 'tombs' of Jesus. The danger with knowing the exact location of various holy events in the Bible was articulately raised by a Year 11 student in the survey, "People may even start worshipping the ground at the place the event happened. People may start to care only about when and where and not the significant symbolism."[12] Visiting the Holy Land was a life changing experience for me, one that will always be with me. I can now better understand Pixner's statement, "Five gospels record the life of Jesus. Four you will find in books, and one you will find in the land they call holy. Read the fifth gospel and the world of the four will open to you."[13] TEACH

Endnotes

[1] Price, R. *The stones cry out*. (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997), 25–26.

[2] *Do I care about biblical archaeology?* 2009. This is the survey I wrote for students to complete online.

[3] It is important to note at the outset that while all students at Avondale School study the life of Jesus in detail in Years 7 and 9, there are students who are new to the school, and the current curriculum does not address the specifics of location and archaeology of the last days of Jesus.

[4] *Do I care about biblical archaeology?* Student Survey.

[5] Ross, J. The Evolution of a Church—Jerusalem's Holy Sepulchre. *Biblical Archaeology Review* 2/03 (Sep 1976).

[6] Ousterhout, R. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre (in Bologna, Italy), *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 26/06, (Nov / Dec 2000).

[7] Sacred Destinations, 'Garden Tomb, Jerusalem'.

[8] Barkay, G. The Garden Tomb: Was Jesus Buried Here? *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 12/02 (Mar / Apr 1986).

[9] White, W. Queries & Comments, Garden Tomb Article a 'Real Shocker', *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 12/04, (Jul / Aug 1986).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Chadwick, J., & Lomon, B. Queries & Comments, Garden Tomb Article a 'Real Shocker', *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 12/04, (Jul / Aug 1986).

[12] *Do I care about biblical archaeology?* Student Survey.

[13] Pixner, B. 'With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel', trans. C. Botha and D. Foster (Rosh Pina, Galilee: Corazin Publishing, 1992). In R. Price. *The stones cry out*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997.