



Biblical Archaeology

# THE SCOOP on EASTER



Have you ever noticed how everyone talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it? I've heard from several individuals much older than I am that this is one of, if not the hardest, winter they've ever seen in Chadron. That sounds a bit dramatic, but it's been a long one. You know, there are things I enjoy about every season but I don't think it's any secret to any of you that like you, I prefer spring over winter. Hey, I like gardening and that's hard to do in the winter! But I've noticed something this winter, even during this last storm, that the *hope* of spring gives me peace and joy and contentment in the storm and through the long winter season. I don't have to complain and be discontented or enter despair because I know from history that the seasons always change. It's not going to last forever. And in the middle of a blizzard, I can look at the information on my weather app and know with *confident expectation* that there are warmer days ahead. I have something to look forward to with great anticipation. Hope makes a big difference!

Now let's amplify that concept a bit. There's a lot of stormy circumstances or bitter seasons that we go through in this life and like the weather, we can't do a thing about it in our own power. We experience loss and heartache—things we just can't change. And what we need in those moments that tempt us to despair, is *hope*. Hope, defined not as an uncertain wishing but as *confident expectation*. Hope is vital for us in a fallen and sinful world. We need to know that better days are on the way. Well, Easter is a holiday of hope. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead gives us the ultimate hope. But because it is so fantastic—so amazing and so miraculous—a lot of people naturally wrestle with its

reality. Every year during this time people wrestle with the historicity of the resurrection. *Is it true? Did it really happen? Can I really have this hope?* Let's be honest—we don't want to place our hope in something that isn't true or is going to let us down, do we? I know I don't. Even the Apostle Paul said if the resurrection didn't happen, our faith would be worthless, and we are still in our sins. And, as Christians, we would be *without hope* and most to be pitied for having believed a lie (1 Cor. 15). **So, if Jesus didn't rise from the grave, we have no hope. If He did, we have infinite hope.** So that's why I want us to look at some of the hard evidence related to Easter, or Passion (Holy) Week. I want to boost your faith and thus, your hope this morning. Last fall, we looked at "the scoop" on David & Goliath—some archaeological discoveries related to them. That message is on our website if you're interested. Today we look at "the scoop" on Passion Week.

I'm guessing you've never heard an Easter message like this one before and if you are a believer already, you will find your faith being affirmed. For those who are not Christians, but maybe seeking or questioning the truth claims of the Bible and the resurrection, you may find yourself a little more challenged to believe it—at least that's one of my goals today. I do come with an agenda this morning because if the resurrection is true—and I believe it is—it has *infinite hope* for you. There will always be light and a rainbow at the other end of the storm for you. Plus, the Bible says your eternal destiny (heaven or hell) rests on your whether you have believed in Christ or not.

But I want to talk about biblical archaeology and faith for a bit. Biblical archaeology has become a subject/discipline of great interest to me. It's a hobby

horse I try not to hop on every Sunday, but I am pursuing a degree with a concentration in biblical archaeology. I've said it before but if I had 2 lives, I'd devote one to being a pastor and one to archaeology. If I had 3, I'd devote another one to farming & gardening! But mention **archaeology** around most people and what do they think of? Probably treasure-hunting grave-robbers like Indiana Jones or Lara Croft, these pseudo-archaeologists who work alone, pursuing magical artifacts. Mention **biblical archaeology** and some people think of sensational items like the Ark of the Covenant. But real archaeologists don't work alone and they typically don't work with sensational treasures. They work with a large team of specialists and volunteers, meticulously going about their work, usually uncovering everyday items like pottery, tools, buildings, graves, bones, and occasionally literature.<sup>1</sup> It's what we might call **material culture**.



I don't know if you've ever thought about it, but archaeology is a relatively recent discipline. It wasn't birthed but 150 years ago or less.<sup>3</sup> There have always been people interested in antiquities, but not archaeology. What seemed to spark the interest in archaeology was when Napoleon Bonaparte conquered Egypt and most of the Near East around 1800. His conquest opened up the Near East and biblical sites to westerners and his team found the trilingual inscription, the Rosetta Stone, that unlocked Egyptian hieroglyphs, fueling more interest in the field.<sup>4</sup> With that and Israel being declared a nation again in 1948, archaeologists have been able to access the land of the Bible like never before. We really are living in a golden age of biblical archaeology. But get this: Only 1% of Israel has been excavated<sup>5</sup> and maybe 5% of the Levant (the eastern Mediterranean region Israel is in).<sup>6</sup> But

they're making good progress and fresh and exciting insights being found all the time that greatly aid in our interpretation of Scripture. And that's really the **primary goal of biblical archaeology: to illuminate our understanding of the Bible.**<sup>7</sup> So many times a passage of Scripture finally makes sense or the implication of the text is fully brought to bear when we understand the ancient world of the biblical writer.<sup>8</sup> The driving force is to know God's Word better and sharpen our understanding of it.

I think you're going to notice archaeology come up more and more all the time because Christian apologists who defend the faith are increasingly realizing the value of it. **Archaeology adds another layer for a defense of the faith.** That's another reason why I want to share this message. Peter tells us to **be ready to give a reason for the hope in us** (1 Pet. 3:15). We're all apologists to a certain degree and I want to us to be familiar with some of the discoveries related to the first century world and life of Jesus so that you can help others believe. You know, I relate well with the doubting Thomas' out there. Thomas was the disciple who said he wouldn't believe the resurrection unless he *saw* Jesus alive again and *touched* His scars. He wanted hard evidence. Some of you here this morning may think the same way. You don't want to make a big decision to come to Christ based on emotional pleas. You want evidence you can see or feel. You want the facts! And that's understandable, even noble. As Christians, we shouldn't get upset with that. While our faith is the evidence of things not yet seen (Heb. 11:1, NASB), that doesn't mean that our faith isn't based on strong evidence that *is* or *has been* seen. Our faith is driven by facts. Evidence is a faith builder. We should desire hard evidence to grow our faith. One gal said, not in relation to the resurrection but miracles in general, "*There's a difference between credulity—a gullible or naïve acceptance of any claim—and belief. Reasonable belief must be grounded in evidence.*"<sup>9</sup> But let's get on with that evidence already! We'll look at **four artifacts** related to Passion Week.

### **Artifact #1 – Caiaphas Ossuary**

In His final week, Jesus stood trial several times. One of those was before **Caiaphas**, the acting Jewish high

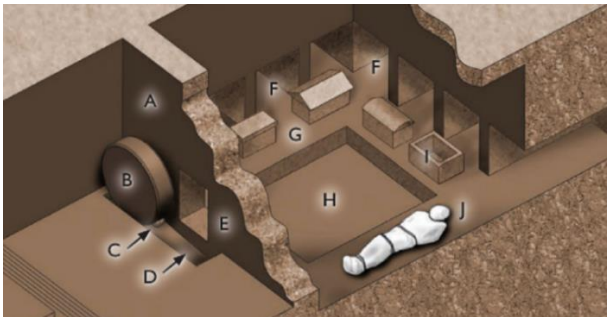


priest at the time and figure of Jewish authority. **Matthew 26:57** says, “*Those who had arrested Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together.*” According to first century Roman-Jewish historian Josephus, Caiaphas’ first name was Joseph but people called him Caiaphas.<sup>10</sup> Sources indicate he was the acting high priest from AD 18 to AD 36.<sup>11</sup> Well, many scholars and archaeologists agree that we have discovered the ossuary of Caiaphas.

What’s an ossuary? An **ossuary** is a box, often carved from stone, that was used to store the bones of the deceased. In the first century, Jews would lay their loved ones on a burial bench or a niche cut out of the walls of a tomb (*kokhim*) and approximately one year later, go in again, collect the bones, wash them, and place them in a bone box, or ossuary. How would you like to do that? Not me! But then the ossuaries could be stacked, and the niche or burial bench reused for someone else in the family.



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Well, in 1990, two ossuaries with the Caiaphas family name on them were accidentally discovered during construction just south of the Old City of Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> One ossuary was ornately decorated,

indicating it belonged to a wealthy or prominent citizen.<sup>15</sup> A rough Aramaic inscription (the language Jesus probably spoke the most) reads “*Yehosef bar Qayafa*” (“Joseph, son of Caiaphas”) fitting the New Testament’s spelling of Caiaphas perfectly.<sup>16</sup> And the remains were a man about 60 years old. The name, location, decorative quality, and remains highly suggest this is Caiaphas. The dating of it also fits well. Since ossuaries ceased after AD 70, we know it was made before that. A coin found in the ossuary from Herod Agrippa I (who appears in Acts) places the date after AD 43, fitting Caiaphas’ time frame.<sup>17</sup> There is no other person in first-century Israel known as Caiaphas who would satisfy the requirements for this ossuary.<sup>18</sup> Archaeologists believe they have also found his daughter’s ossuary and the tomb of **Annas**, the previous high priest whom Jesus stood trial before as well.<sup>19</sup>

### Artifact #2 – The Pilate Stone

After the trial with Caiaphas, Jesus was sent to **Pontius Pilate**. **Matthew 27:2** says, “*they bound Him and led Him away, and handed Him over to Pilate the governor.*” Pilate is no doubt the most famous Roman governor since he gave the final sentence for Jesus. He governed the Judea Province from AD 26-36.<sup>20</sup> He is mentioned in all four gospels, as well as several extra-biblical writings outside the Bible. However, it wasn’t until recently that we found tangible evidence for his existence beyond writings and coins.



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Really, two artifacts have been discovered directly related to Pilate. One of them is **The Pilate Stone**, an inscription found in 1961 on a staircase at Caesarea

Maritima, a city northwest of Jerusalem on the coast (mentioned multiple times in Acts). The inscription includes his name, title, and a dedication to Emperor Tiberius.<sup>22</sup> It reads, “*Tiberium, Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judaea... dedicated.*” Archaeologist Dr. Randall Price writes, “*Although Pilate’s historical existence has never been seriously challenged, the discovery of this inscription removes all doubt and proves the existence of Pontius Pilate as an historical figure.*”<sup>23</sup> More recently, a **copper ring** bearing his name (“PILATO”) was also found in excavations at Herodium (near Bethlehem) in another first century layer with the same spelling as the Greek NT. The ring likely would have been used by Roman officials performing tasks in Pilate’s name.

### Artifact #3 – The Crucifixion Heel Bone

There are a handful of Christian and secular (non-religious) historians who wrote about crucifixion, but until 1968 no direct evidence had been found for the practice of crucifixion in Israel.<sup>24</sup> Various forms of crucifixion were used by ancient cultures such as the Assyrians, Persians, Carthaginians, and Greeks.<sup>25</sup> Someone could be impaled, hanged, or executed on any cross, tree, pole, or stake (Esther 5:14). The Romans though, made crucifixion a science, perfecting it into one of the most excruciating forms of death imaginable and an effective political tool as well, as criminals were crucified publicly. It was so shameful that it was typically illegal for Roman citizens to be crucified.

The records of Jesus’ crucifixion in the Scriptures are in accord with the protocols and sequences known from other extrabiblical sources (e.g. Plautus, *Miles Gloriosus*; Clodius, *History*; Seneca, *Dialogue*). Individuals would be flogged with flagellum whips or beat with rods and sometimes placed in a yoke (*furca*). Sometimes the torture was so brutal that individuals would expire before they even made it to the cross. After the flogging, they would be forced to carry their crossbeam (*patibulum*) to the place of execution, usually outside the city gates or camp. They were then stripped, and their hands were **nailed** or tied to the crossbeam with ropes and then it was typically attached to a vertical pole that was used repeatedly (Josephus notes that wood was scarce in the Roman era).<sup>26</sup> Their feet were also nailed to the

vertical pole. Early sources such as Philo and Horus suggest that many crucified individuals were not lifted very high off the ground, as animals could still reach their legs. Sometimes their legs were broken to speed up their death. By not being able to lift themselves up with their feet due to the broken legs, they would expire due to the inability to breathe properly.<sup>27</sup> The criminals beside Jesus had their legs broken, but Jesus had already died. His side was pierced instead, fulfilling a prophecy dating back to the first Passover (Ex. 12:46). Like Jesus, sometimes a placard (*titulus*) was placed above the head with the name and title of the accused (“Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews”; John 19:19). The placard was probably a wooden board, whitened with gypsum, with red or black letters to be clearly read.<sup>28</sup>

The gospels don’t explicitly say that nails were used. They just say that He was crucified. But **John 20:24-27** says, “*But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were saying to him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.”*” Thomas assumes or maybe even witnessed Jesus’ hands being nailed (by the way, the Greek word used for *hands* could be used for the wrists as well). Paul also speaks of Jesus “nailing” our debts to the cross (Col. 2:14).



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Well, skeletal remains of two first century individuals in Judea have been uncovered, revealing the use of nails in crucifixion. The remains of one man was identified as “**Yehohanan the son of Hagkol**” according the inscription on his ossuary. Dr. Titus Kennedy writes, “*An iron nail about 4.5 inches long (11.5 cm) with remnants of wood was still present in the heel bone.*”<sup>30</sup> Scarred up wrist



bones may also indicate nails in the wrists between the radius and ulna bones.<sup>31</sup> His leg bones were broken as well. This tells us that at least the one individual in Judea had his heels nailed (probably to the side of the vertical pole rather than one foot on top of the other like you sometime see in crucifixes). The second individual was found with nails driven between the wrist bones.

But here's another reason why these individuals like Yehohanan are important: After crucifixion, most criminals were cast into mass graves. They didn't get a proper burial. But because Jesus's body was placed carefully in a tomb, some scholars used to think His burial was a work of fiction. Yehohanan's remains proved that theory wrong since even he was given a proper burial in a family tomb. It proved that Rome did allow Jews to still practice their burial customs like Joseph of Arimathea did with Jesus' body.<sup>32</sup>

#### Artifact #4 – The Burial Tomb

**Matthew 27:57-60** says, *“When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away.”* As you may know, burial practices differed throughout time and from culture to culture. Burial practices common in Judea during the Roman era involved preparing the corpse for burial, washing and anointing them with oils, then wrapping them in a linen shroud before placing them in a tomb as soon as possible. Because limestone is easy to cut and it was readily available throughout the region, people often carved tombs into the rocky hillsides. These kinds of tombs usually included a narrow entryway that would be open and closed with a large stone, a central chamber where ossuaries were stored, and multiple extension chambers or burial benches on which to lay people. Again, interestingly, rather than being tossed into a mass grave like most criminals, Jesus was buried in a **brand new tomb** belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, in which no one had been laid. The interesting aspect of the tomb of the Holy

Sepulchre, traditionally claimed to be Jesus' tomb, it doesn't have extension chambers (Mt. 27:57-60). That might tell us it was set apart as Jesus' tomb and wasn't allowed to be reused.<sup>33</sup>



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But according to the text, Jesus's tomb appears to have a **rolling stone door**. This is noteworthy because rolling doors were rare. Within the vicinity of Jerusalem there are 1000 or more rock-cut tombs and only 4 are known to have rolling stones for doors. The average Jewish family would have square-blocks or rocks shaped like a cork.<sup>36</sup> Tombs with rolling stone doors were typically reserved for royalty or the wealthy—men like Joseph who was a member of the Council. That He was buried in a royal family tomb is also ironic because after all, He does claim to be the Son of God and King of kings who will one day come again to judge the living and the dead!

While we've only scratched the surface of archaeological evidence available, it is substantial. It shows us that the Gospel writers knew what they

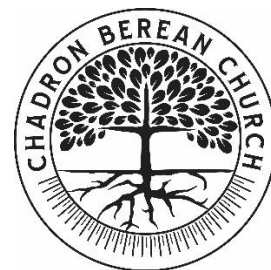
were talking about. They were there. Like Thomas, they *saw* the death, burial, and resurrection with their own eyes, along with several hundred other eyewitnesses (1 Cor. 15:6). Although the Gospel accounts about Jesus are frequently attacked by critics and skeptics for being mythical and unreliable, you need to know they are **the most reliable ancient documents** in existence for many reasons.<sup>37</sup> The archaeological discoveries demonstrate the accuracy and historical reliability of the Gospels, giving us an exceptionally clear window into the world and life of Jesus Christ. The Gospels are not myths or stories. They involved real people in real places seeing real, historical events. Prior to the discoveries made in archaeology, many critical scholars used to promote the Gospels as virtually devoid of history and even denied the very existence of Jesus. Yet there has been so much evidence discovered (the people, the places, the structures, the artifacts) that many have had to reevaluate their perspective.<sup>38</sup> Time and time again critics must retract claims leveled against the Bible and that trend will continue. It's just like the creation vs. evolution debate. The more we look through the telescope and microscope, the more we understand how complex everything is, the more the natural world speaks of a Creator and Sustainer of the universe, something Charles Darwin could not see or understand in his day. But we can.

If you have not accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, my prayer is that you would reevaluate your perspective. Consider the evidence. Faith is not a blind leap in the dark. But it is critical because the Bible says that Jesus is God who came into this world as a man to die for our sins so that through believing in Him we might have eternal life (John 3:16). **Acts 4:12** says, "*And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" The resurrection proved that to be true. It proved He is who He said He is and He is able to save us from sin and death. Hey, there's no ossuary with Jesus' bones in it! His body was glorified! Because of that, *He changed the world, and He can change your life too. He can give you hope and meaning and purpose that lasts forever.* And we're talking *real hope* here. Not a naïve, cross-your-fingers type of hope based on feelings and wishes, but a *certain expectation* of good things to come, including your own physical resurrection and restoration to life with Him on a

New Heaven and New Earth in a New Jerusalem—but you have to believe (Rev. 21-22). You have to trust Him as your Savior. I invite you to do that today. In your heart say, "*Lord, I know I'm a sinner. I know I need a Savior. I believe that Savior is Jesus Christ who rose from the dead.*" If you have received Christ today or have questions, let me know. I'd love to help you with the next steps in your faith journey.

If you are interested in learning more about biblical archaeology and discoveries related to Scripture, here is a list of easily digestible resources:

- *The Bible Unearthed* by Dr. Titus Kennedy
- *Zondervan Handbook of Biblical Archaeology* by Dr. Randall Price
- *Associates for Biblical Research* (television or YouTube channel); also consider their quarterly publication, *The Bible and Spade* magazine
- *Bible Expedition* YouTube channel by Joel Kramer
- *The Trowel and the Truth* by Dr. Scott Stripling
- *Bible Unearthed: Adventures Edition* is an entertaining and educating 12-part youth documentary series with Dr. Titus Kennedy & Dave Stotts (available on RightNow Media or [www.drivethruadventures.com/bible-unearthed](http://www.drivethruadventures.com/bible-unearthed))



Pastor Justin Schefcik  
*Sermon Series: The Scoop*  
Chadron Berean Church  
April 9, 2023

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<sup>1</sup> Joel P. Kramer, *Where God Came Down: The Archaeological Evidence* (Brigham City, UT: 2020), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Photo credit: PID000126. ASOR Image Collection. CC BY-ND 4.0

<sup>3</sup> “Even though archaeology deals with age-old things that have been covered over by soil and debris for centuries it has only been in recent times that methods have been developed for retrieving this valuable information. Archaeology is a very young field of investigation, but in its brief existence it has transformed our thinking about peoples and cultures in most parts of the world. So young is it that it is possible to say that the birth of modern Palestinian archaeology occurred little more than 100 years ago.” (Walter E. Rast, *Through the Ages in Palestinian Archaeology: An Introductory Handbook* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1992), 1.)

<sup>4</sup> Scott Stripling, *The Trowel and the Truth: A Guide to Archaeology in the Holy Land* (2d ed.; Ramona, CA: Vision Publishing, 2017), 38-39.

<sup>5</sup> Kramer, *Down*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Stripling, *Trowel*, 165.

<sup>7</sup> “*Illumination of the Bible serves as the primary goal of ancient Near Eastern Archaeology. By drawing out the cultural clues that are embedded in the remains of material culture, the text is set in its proper context.*” *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Scott Stripling, “Associates for Biblical Research: Four Examples Which Illuminate the Background of the Biblical Text,” n.p. [cited 5 April 2023] Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-JjxKPxJR0>

<sup>9</sup> Holly Pivec, “‘Show Me the Toes:’ Two Lessons Learned from John Lindell and Bill Johnson’s Stunning Miracle Claim,” n.p. [cited 6 April 2023] Online: <https://www.hollypivec.com/blog/showmethetoes>

<sup>10</sup> Titus Kennedy, *Excavating the Evidence for Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2022), 225.

<sup>11</sup> Titus Kennedy, *Unearthing the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2020), 188.

<sup>12</sup> Photo credit: "Limestone Ossuary of 'Joseph Son of Caiaphas' Jerusalem, 1st Century AD" by Gary Lee Todd, Ph.D. is marked with CC0 1.0.

<sup>13</sup> Photo credit: *Zondervan Handbook of Biblical Archaeology*, Glenn Klecker

<sup>14</sup> Kennedy, *Excavating*, 225.

<sup>15</sup> They also believe they’ve discovered the ossuary of Miriam, the daughter of Caiaphas, in the Elah Valley west of Jerusalem. An inscription on the box demonstrates that the Caiaphas family was of the priestly lineage of Ma’aziah, of the tribe of Levi.

<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, *Unearthing*, 189.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Randall Price, *Zondervan Handbook of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2017), 292.

<sup>19</sup> They also believe they’ve discovered the ossuary of Miriam, the daughter of Caiaphas. It was found in the Elah Valley, just west of Jerusalem. An inscription on the box demonstrates that the Caiaphas family was of the priestly lineage of Ma’aziah, of the tribe of Levi.

<sup>20</sup> Kennedy, *Excavating*, 219.

<sup>21</sup> Photo credit: "Israel Museum - stone with the original Pontius Pilate inscription (2)" by larrywkoester is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

<sup>22</sup> Stripling, *Trowel*, 132.

<sup>23</sup> Price, *Handbook*, 275.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>25</sup> Kennedy, *Excavating*, 228.

<sup>26</sup> Biblical Archaeology Society Staff, “Roman Crucifixion Methods Reveal the History of Crucifixion,” n.p. [cited 5 April 2023]. Online: <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/crucifixion/roman-crucifixion-methods-reveal-the-history-of-crucifixion/>

<sup>27</sup> “Death by crucifixion was the result of the manner in which the condemned man hung from the cross and not the traumatic injury caused by nailing. Hanging from the cross resulted in a painful process of asphyxiation, in which the two sets of muscles used for breathing, the intercostal [chest] muscles and the diaphragm, became progressively weakened. In time, the condemned man expired, due to the inability to continue breathing properly.” *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Kennedy, *Excavating*, 232.

<sup>29</sup> Photo credit: "crucifixion Heel bone with nail-" by larrywkoester is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

<sup>30</sup> Kennedy, *Unearthing*, 195.

<sup>31</sup> Kennedy, *Excavating*, 230.

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<sup>32</sup> Price, *Handbook*, 257

<sup>33</sup> See Joel Kramer's book *Where God Came Down* for more info; also, Bryant Windle's article: *Three Tombs of Jesus: Which is the Real One?* (Bible Archaeology Report)

<sup>34</sup> A tomb near Nazareth. Photo credit: "Nazareth Village" by Seetheholyland.net is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

<sup>35</sup> A tomb near Jerusalem hewn into a stone hillside with a rolling stone door. Photo credit: "File:Old tomb entrance (4160525370).jpg" by Alistair from Montreal, Canada is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

<sup>36</sup> Price, *Handbook*, 256-257.

<sup>37</sup> William D. Mounce, *Why I Trust the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021); Sean and Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017); David Limbaugh, *Jesus on Trial: A Lawyer Affirms the Truth of the Gospel* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2014).

<sup>38</sup> Kennedy, *Excavating*, 228.