

THE ELUSIVE MOUNT ZION

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Any schoolchild (well, almost any) who is asked where Mount Zion is will point toward the big round church south of the walls, down from Jaffa Gate, on the western side of the Old City of Jerusalem. The identification of this particular name, Zion, with that particular part of the city is universally accepted.

PANORAMIC VIEW OF MOUNT ZION



It was not always thus. The name "Zion" first appears when Jerusalem comes into the history of Israel; that is, with the capture of the city by King David about 1000 BCE: *Nevertheless, David took the stronghold of Zion, that is, the city of David* (II Sam. 5:7). The reference is clear – provided we think we know precisely what is meant by "the City of David," which we do not. Leaving that problem aside, it seems safe to assume that the author of II Samuel meant that "Zion" to be the area we now know as the City of David;

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the **southeastern** hill of Jerusalem, outside the walls of the Old City. And, it is clearly meant that this was the entire city, such as it was, not just a part of it.

Throughout the Bible, the name Zion means all of Jerusalem. As David, Solomon and subsequent kings of Judah built new areas of the city, the name stretched to encompass the expanded whole. The prophet Micah added a new element, by referring to Zion as a mountain: *The Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion* (4:7). Still, the understanding of "Zion" as the city itself remained intact. For centuries, "Zion" and "Jerusalem" were synonymous, especially in the Books of Isaiah (36 references) and Psalms (35 references).

As the prophetic vision grew, the definition of Zion grew with it. Often, it meant the whole of the land of Judah: *'O My people who dwell in Zion'* (Isa. 10:24). It even came to mean the people of Israel, rather than any specific place: . . . *and saying to Zion 'You are My people'* (51:16).

Then a curious thing happened. Jerusalem got bigger but "Zion" got smaller. By the end of the biblical period, Zion meant the Temple area rather than the city as a whole: *'I am the Lord your God, who dwells in Zion, My holy mountain'*

(Joel 4:17). This passage in Joel can be read as referring to the city, but the use of "Zion" in the Apocrypha is unambiguous: "After these events, Nicanor went up to Mount Zion. Some of the priests came out of the sanctuary" (I Macc. 7:33).

One final change was yet to come. By the First Century CE, "Zion" had moved across town. It was now the **southwestern** hill of Jerusalem. Josephus was probably to blame for this, as he called this hill "the stronghold of David."¹ That did it. By making the connection of that particular hill with David, Josephus fixed forever this one part of town as the real "Zion."

Christian tradition made this the site of David's tomb and also of several episodes in the Gospels' account of the ministry of Jesus, and Christian churches are built on it. Thus, the name was frozen, just where the school-children of Jerusalem today know Mount Zion to be.

To visit this quarter, just south of the Old City and near Zion Gate, is to wander through one of the most complicated archaeological sites in Jerusalem, at least as far as the geography is concerned. The entry to the "Tomb of David," the oldest tradition about Zion,² is a low hall with large square col-

umns holding up a vaulted ceiling. This room is from the Crusader period. The next room is barrel-vaulted and divided into two parts. The southern part is a mosque (the prayer niche is still in the south wall, although now concealed by a bookshelf) and the northern part the supposed Tomb of David.

The tomb is not Davidic but Crusader, alas! But one is not to feel deceived, for the room is, by 1,000 years, the oldest extant synagogue in Jerusalem. The evidence is circumstantial but convincing. We deduce the fact from the dead-space of a niche behind the tomb-marker that is clearly older than the marker and irrelevant to it. Excavations at the site³ determined that the masonry of the niche is of Late Roman style, and the original plaster floor, discovered some 24 inches below the present floor, fills the entire room including the niche. An ancient hall facing north – clearly a public rather than a private building – cannot have been a church, which always faced east, and is therefore universally assumed to be a synagogue.⁴

The first Christian tradition connected with Mount Zion is that the Last Supper was held there.⁵ The room of the Last Supper⁶ is upstairs; you have to walk out and around to get there. We have seen the square pillars built to hold it up on our way downstairs into David's tomb. Since the Gospels say that meal took place in an Upper Room, the Crusaders, finding only rubble there when they arrived, proceeded to build a room on pillars – vaults to support the room upstairs – to make it an Upper Room again. It is an elegant groin-vaulted Gothic structure, with a Muslim prayer niche set awkwardly in one of the original Crusader windows by Suleiman the Magnificent, and a very interesting Crusader cupola (note the pelican feeding its young from its breast) covering the stairs leading down.

Outside and around the corner is the church of the Dormition, built by the German Kaiser Wilhelm II at the beginning of the 20th Century. In addition to being a great and famous landmark of Jerusalem, it is a restful and quiet place. And it has a magnificent organ. An enormous mosaic which includes a zodiac (rare in churches) is set in the middle of the floor.

Wander around outside with a good guidebook. You can find the worthy Herr Baurath Conrad von Schick, dour old Ludwig Schneller and Sir Flinders Petrie (minus his head) buried in the old cemetery behind the Institute of Holyland Studies.

NOTES

1. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, V:137.
2. The tradition of Mount Zion as the location of David's tomb is very old, but not conclusively tied to one hill or the other. The reference to "David's tombs" (sic) in Nehemiah 3:16 refers to a site on the eastern hill, the one nowadays called The City of David. The Church Fathers, starting with Eusebius, and later Christian traditional until the 14th Century, believed the tomb of David to be, indeed, in "the City of David" as stated in I Kings 2:10, but thought this to be Bethlehem.
3. Jacob Pinkerfeld, *Bulletin of the Louis M. Rabinowitz Fund*, 3 (1960) pp. 42-43, and Yigael Yadin (ed.), *Jerusalem Revealed* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1975) pp. 115-117.
4. Bargil Pixner has argued that the synagogue is in fact a Jewish-Christian place of worship. Several pieces of plaster with Christian graffiti were found on the original floor. Also, many scholars have noted that the niche does not, in fact, face Temple Mount, to the northeast of Mount Zion, as would have been possible had the builders wished it to be that way. to do it. Instead, it faces near north to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. His exhaustive article on the subject is in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May-June 1990, Vol. 16 (3):16-35, "Church of the Apostles Found on Mt. Zion."
5. See Mark 14:15 and Acts 1:3.
6. Called "*coenaculum*" in most Christian literature, of which there is a great deal on the subject.

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