

When Absalom Encounters NT Zachariah, the Father of John the Baptist, Chaos ensues, all in the Valley of He who Judges

Newly unearthed epigraphic evidence, including tau crosses, has prompted a reassessment of a prominent ancient Jerusalem tomb. Archaeological and epigraphic evidence indicates that the “Tomb of Absalom” constitutes the earliest Judeo-Christian pilgrimage site in the Holy Land.

See also J. Zias, “The ‘Tomb of Absalom’: The Earliest Judeo-Christian Place of Pilgrimage in Jerusalem,” *The Ancient Near East Today* 11.3 (March, 2023). <https://anetoday.org/zias-tomb-absalom>.

By Joe Zias

Emeritus Curator of Archaeology and Anthropology, Israel Antiquities Authority
June 2025

Introduction

The purported Tomb of Absalom, son of King David, built a thousand years after his passing, marking the shared border between the Valley of He who Judges and the Kings Valley, has remained an enigma for centuries. Despite three pre-Byzantine Greek inscriptions, on the tomb entrance, proclaiming that it is *the tomb of Zachariah, the pious martyr and father of John*, and an additional six-line verse from the NT (Luke 2:25), Old World clergy quarreled. For perhaps two millennia, the People of the Book who once venerated the pillar, now, vandalized, cursed and never forgot to stone the visually impressive monument (Zias and Puech 2005).

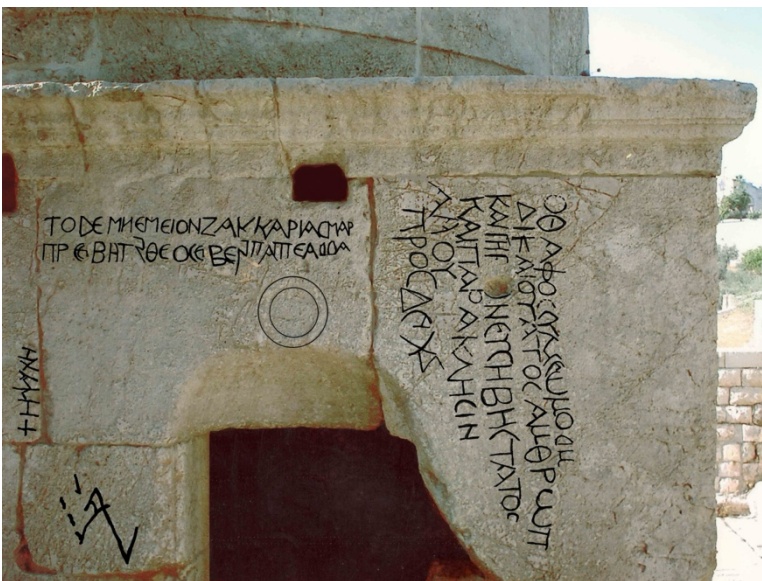


Figure 1: Entrance to the tomb showing three Greek inscriptions, partial alpha-omega and nail, after the “squeezes” deciphered by Zias and Puech. Note the rectangular slots added later for a roof over the entrance and a niche for an oil lamp. Photograph by Joe Zias.

According to the Old Testament (2 Samuel 18:18), written some five centuries after Absalom’s death, having no son to carry on his name, Absalom constructed a pillar (מצבת) for himself. While no pillar has yet been discovered, the biblical tradition till this day has remained. Whereas one biblical account stated that it was a pillar, an earlier passage reports that Absalom was believed to be buried under a pile of stones in the forest (2 Samuel 18:17-18). And to make things more

confusing, in Deuteronomy 16:22, the Bible explicitly states “and do not erect a sacred stone, for these the LORD your God hates” (thanks to Professor R. Petry for pointing this out). In addition to this confusion, the Old Testament states that “son-less” Absalom actually had three sons and a daughter Tamar who was raped by her half-brother Amnon and later killed by Absalom’s followers (2 Samuel 14:27).

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus and the anonymous Copper Scroll author both mention the monument constructed in the first century, referring to it as Absalom’s pillar. Therefore it would appear that Jerusalemites, as early as the first century CE had found the need to invent the belief that *this was the ancient pillar constructed by Absalom*, the son of David, so as to provide *congruence* between the biblical narrative and facts on the ground. Thus the monument built one thousand years after his death until the present day still accommodates the need for pilgrims/travelers wishing to “believe.” Inventing “holy places for the believers” as opposed to those wishing to know has a long tradition in the region (Di Segni 2006-2007).

Tau Cross

While I had initially observed the tau cross (a major symbol of early Christians recalling the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross) in 1999, engraved on bedrock opposite the pillar, I was unaware of its rarity in the archaeological and historical records of the Holy Land and thus failed to bring it to the public’s attention until recently (Zias 2023). There are a number of reasons why this prominent 33 letter, 8-12 cm in height, 10x10 cm tau cross, has gone unnoticed for centuries, in an area long visited by pilgrims, photographed, and studied by scholars.



Figure 2: Prominent tau cross incised in the bedrock opposite the tomb. Additional tau crosses are visible when the late summer sun is setting in the West. Photograph by Joe Zias.

Alpha-Omega Ashlar

Trying to visualize what originally appeared on the ancient ashlar block measuring (47x 56 cm) in the entrance, vandalized over the centuries, can be a challenging task necessitating our re-

employing the widely used 19th century low-tech “squeeze,” which years earlier we employed to read the three Greek inscriptions surrounding the entrance.



Figure 3: The ashlar block, left of the original entrance showing an alpha, partial omega, and a nail. Photograph by Joe Zias.

By embedding wet filter paper into a fiberglass cast taken from the original and passing a soft chalk-dusted cloth over the now dry filter paper to highlight the raised letters/symbols, one could now see an alpha in the middle of the ashlar block which had been only faintly visible beforehand. Along with the alpha an incomplete omega (both images/symbols were appropriated from the Old Testament (Isaiah 44:6; 48:12; and Ezekiel 9:4) and a nail/spike suddenly appeared. The tau cross and the Greek alpha-omega (“I am the first...and the last”) constitute several of the best-known symbols of early Christianity.



Figure 4: The “squeeze” method, a 19th-century technique for replicating ancient inscriptions and symbols, involved pressing damp filter paper onto the ashlar block adjacent to the entrance. Upon drying, the paper was removed, revealing an embossed reproduction of the symbols. On the filter paper are remnants of the partially effaced alpha-omega and nail, major symbols of early Christianity.

Stoning: The Ancient Death Penalty

Stoning people, monuments, trees for vengeance, has a long tradition in the ancient world which under certain circumstances was actually not only tolerated but encouraged.



Figure 5: Stoning of the monument was a long-held tradition, as demonstrated by this seventeenth-century book illustration. Flemish artist Olfert Doppe, was a reputable geographer and artist, but never traveled to the Near East. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

For example beginning with the Old Testament, 2 Chronicles 24:20-21, one reads:

“Then the Spirit of God came on Zechariah [‘God remembered’ in Hebrew] ... ‘Thus God has said, “Why do you transgress the commandments of the LORD and do not prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, He has also forsaken you.”’ So they conspired against him and at the command of the king they stoned him to death in the court of the house of the LORD.”

Elsewhere one reads the dire Biblical warning that “Rebellion” against one’s parents, (i.e. Absalom) after repeated warnings is an example whereby stoning to death is not only acceptable but justifiable. In Deuteronomy 21:19–21, composed five centuries after the death of Absalom, one reads:

“Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; And they shall say unto the elders of his city, this son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones that he dies: so shalt thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.”

When the three Greek inscriptions and other Christian symbols surrounding the entrance and on the bedrock opposite the entrance are deliberately obliterated, the tomb now mistakenly reverts to the tomb of Absalom, the third and most favored biblical son of King David. Harsh as it sounds and unpleasant as it seems, death by stoning can, under certain circumstances, be theologically/biblically justifiable within and outside the family, be it Absalom or any other rebellious individual. King David however rejected this theological belief, asking his men (in vain), to capture, not to kill his son fleeing Jerusalem, ending with his death, hair caught in a tree in the forest of Ephraim, hence the grief-stricken lament of King David when he received the news: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:33).

Centuries later, the purported tomb of Absalom, King David’s favorite son, would be stoned in perpetuity by pilgrims in the Valley of He Who Judges. Few if any pilgrims would be aware that from the third century on (perhaps earlier) till the eventual near debasement of all Christian symbols, the monument was an important place of veneration for Christian pilgrims and not stoning. The two fonts for holy water at the entrance, which modern scholars had failed to recognize, attest to this new finding. That is, remove the Christian symbols, three inscriptions, and the fonts for Holy Water, and the tomb could be attributed to any wealthy personality at the end of the Second Temple period.



Figure 6: Entrance to the tomb showing a “stoop” for holy water alongside a large basin for the baptism of infants. Photograph by Joe Zias.

Discussion

As to the question of who bore ultimate responsibility for the chaotic events in the Kidron Valley, the answer, in my opinion, is not that difficult. The Herodian dynasty, appointed in 41 BCE and supported by Rome, was hated by the majority of Judeans. Their attitude toward Herod the Great was best summed up by the Roman ruler Augustus, who sarcastically remarked that “It is better to be Herod’s pig than his son” (Macrobius, Saturnalia, 2:4:11).

Herod had three sons, by two separate wives, two of them murdered by strangulation (Alexander, Aristobulus). The third son, Antipater, was ordered killed five days before Herod’s own death. Herod had his favorite wife Miriam (one of ten wives) executed in 29 BCE. When Herod wasn’t killing family members, he had people beheaded on a whim, as in the case of John the Baptist, beheaded at the request of Salome.

Prior to Herod’s death in 4 BCE, he was fully aware that the population would celebrate his passing. Josephus tells us that Herod ordered his sons to round up important people in Judea and have them executed in Jericho at the time of his passing, so that people would mourn the death of one and all. The sons, fully aware that they were in line to become rulers, ignored the request.

In 4 BCE Herod was entombed in an elaborate ceremony, in what is known as Herodian. For decades archaeologists sought to find the actual tomb; however, it wasn't discovered until a rainy day in 2007, when a colleague of the famed archaeologist/architect Ehud Netzer accidentally discovered the elaborate Herodian resting place described by Josephus. Two decorative stone sarcophagi smashed into hundreds of pieces in situ support the anonymous remark that "once he closed his eyes, the tomb was trashed" by the local population. Such was the hatred of the Judeans towards the Herodian dynasty.

Both Josephus and the anonymous author of the Copper Scroll undoubtedly would have been aware that Absalom's tomb/pillar had no connection to Absalom, since it was built in their lifetime; however, they certainly would have known that it belonged to one of the Herodian grandsons, Antipas I Herod Antipas (Tetrarch of Galilee), 4 BCE – 39 CE. Such was the opinion of Gabi Barkai.

By falsely attributing the tomb to Absalom who, according to Jewish law, would have been stoned to death for his rebellion against his father, revenge would now be exacted against the Herodians, down to one of the last ruler of their dynasty. Deceitfully attributing the tomb to Absalom only served to intensify the violence and vandalism directed against a monument which, in fact, was totally Herodian, venerated centuries later by pilgrims as the martyrdom of Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist. Josephus was following the will of the people.

Evidence of this animosity toward the Herodian dynasty appears not only in NT sources, but in name changes over the centuries. Herod's last resting place in Herodian now becomes Furadis in Arabic, and later the site is known as The Mountain of the Franks or Bethulia. In the late Roman period, lower Herodium with its monumental architecture and swimming pool became a settlement/colony for those suffering from leprosy (Zias 1986).

In support of the argument that there was a deliberate misnaming/misattribution of the pillar in the Kidron Valley as an attempt at revenge towards both Absalom and his grandson Antipas, one should note that none of the additional three monumental tombs to the south were recycled or destroyed, including prominent inscriptions on the nearby tomb of Beni Hezer, aside from the first Temple inscription on the tomb of Pharaoh's daughter that was widened for easier access.

Summary

The silence in the ancient literary record regarding the exact date and tradition of pilgrims stoning the monument for centuries until today is unknown, despite the fact that the Greek inscription once clearly stated, in bold lettering, that it is the tomb of Zachariah, the father of John. This suggests that for the People of the Book, oral tradition in the Holy Land has long taken precedence over the written word, monumental inscriptions, and historical evidence proclaiming the opposite. And as Wilkinson (1977: 37) has alluded to, "the authenticity of the Holy Places for the early Christians was to be measured by a standard of faith and prayer rather than logical proof."

Wherever the answer lay, Josephus, long known, in the words of J. D. Cohen as one who distorts, lies, embellishes and occasionally tells the truth, bears a heavy responsibility for the events

occurring here. Josephus, like Pliny the Elder and other prominent authors in the ancient world, brings to mind a quote I once saw in the US which read “God said it, I believe it and that settles it.” For centuries, Josephus was one of the literary/historical Gods of antiquity despite his plagiarizing, inventing, embellishing and occasionally telling the truth. Absalom’s tomb narrative like the contrived Masada mass suicide allegation was the myth of Jerusalem; both myths having lasted for two millennia. The deceitful narratives in both make the adrenalin flow, and so they achieved their purpose.

References

Di Segni, L. 2006-2007. “On the Development of Christian Cult Sites on Tombs of the Second Temple Period.” *Aram* 18-19, pp. 381-401.

Wilkinson, J. 1977. *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*. Warminster: Aris & Phillips.

Zias, J. 1986. “Was Byzantine Herodian a Leprosarium?” *Biblical Archaeologist* 49, pp. 182-186.

Zias, J. 2023. “The ‘Tomb of Absalom’: The Earliest Judeo-Christian Place of Pilgrimage in Jerusalem.” *The Ancient Near East Today* 11.3 (March). <https://anetoday.org/zias-tomb-absalom>.

Zias, J. and É. Puech. 2005. “The Tomb of Absalom Reconsidered.” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 68.4, pp. 148-165.

Side Bar 1: Absalom Lotus

For centuries, countless pilgrims, scholars, and historians visiting Jerusalem have noted the Absalom Pillar—one of the city’s most famous landmarks—yet the lotus adorning its top receives little more than a passing mention. The significance of this lotus as a Jewish ornament is rarely discussed, and when it is, it is often in connection with the local belief that a mortar from Napoleon’s 1799 campaign damaged it. However, Napoleon, who fought along the western coast, never reached or captured Jerusalem from the Ottoman Empire. After a brief siege of Acre—where French forces suffered heavy losses, including men who were beheaded and displayed on the city walls—Napoleon retreated to Egypt.

Avigad’s drawings reveal that the lotus, heavily damaged due to stoning, was crafted separately from the tomb and affixed with a peg at its base, allowing it to be inserted into the tholos.

The lotus has long symbolized resurrection across both the Old and New World, much like freshwater fish (Zias 2012), yet it is seldom explored in Jewish literature. When it does appear, it is usually as a decorative motif in religious or burial contexts, such as Jewish ossuaries (Rahmani 1994), without reference to any deeper symbolic meaning.

Ecologically, the lotus is unique in horticulture, thriving in pools of still, fresh water. Each morning at sunrise, it emerges from the murky depths, appearing immaculately clean to begin photosynthesis, only to descend again at dusk—an evocative cycle that suggests rebirth.

In the Old World, particularly in neighboring Egypt, the lotus was a powerful symbol of renewal, often linked to hallucinogenic substances and religious beliefs because of its toxicity. Though rarely mentioned in Jewish texts—aside from a brief reference in Job (40:21)—it is evident why the lotus, when depicted, frequently appears in a burial context.



Figure 7: Modern reproduction of ancient Egyptian art, showing Osiris, God of the afterlife, resurrection, with his wife Isis, smelling the Lotus flower. Possible translation of the glyphs accompanying the image: “Osiris, lord of the afterlife, Isis, lady of magic, united in eternity.” Source: Wall of a modern building in Paris, France.

References

Rahmani, L.Y. 1994. *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries: In the Collections of the State of Israel*. Jerusalem: The Israel Antiquities Authority / The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

Zias, J. 2012. “Fish-A Religious Symbol.” *The Bible and Interpretation* (April). <https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/opeds/zia368004>.

Side Bar 2: Black Wedding in Jerusalem

Many Hasidic traditions remain hidden from the general public, known only to a select group of devout followers. One such custom, known as the “black wedding,” was performed at the Tomb of Absalom in an effort to ward off plagues and epidemics. In the winter of 1909, as meningitis spread through Jerusalem’s poorer communities, this ritual was carried out hoping to halt the disease.

A historical photograph captures men, women, and children gathered along the path leading to the Tomb of Absalom, where two Yemenite orphans were to be wed. Ironically, the groom, promised a sum of money for the marriage, attempted to flee when the full amount had not been paid.

However, the celebrants caught him, the transaction was settled, and the wedding proceeded as planned.

The black wedding tradition traces its origins to 19th- and 20th-century Europe, where it was common among Ashkenazi Jewish communities. However, in Jerusalem, it was a rare occurrence. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the father of modern day Hebrew, opposed the practice, believing it brought shame and ridicule upon the Jewish community. It was last performed in Bnei Brak, a suburb of Tel Aviv in 2020 during the Covid-19 crisis.



Figure 8: Black Wedding in Jerusalem.
Source: Segula Magazine.
<https://segulamag.com/en/articles/black-canopy>.