

Can the Cenacle on Mount Zion Really be the “Upper Room” of Jesus’s Last Supper?

Archaeology is only part of a comprehensive evaluation of an historical site. Any conclusions to be drawn must also take into account, among other things, a site’s social and literary history as well as available contemporary artistic representations. Fortunately we are blessed with a wealth of this kind of material about the Cenacle. Used in isolation, however, these too can be confusing and misleading. That is why all the data must be considered in unison in order to offer as thorough an historical explanation for the Cenacle as possible, one that accounts for all of the evidence.

See Also: [*The Upper Room and Tomb of David*](#) (McFarland, 2016).

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It has been known throughout history as the Coenaculum, the Cenacle, the Upper Room, and the Tomb of David but modern interest in this relatively small building on southern Mount Zion in Jerusalem began only around 1900. It was

then that the German Kaiser acquired a nearby parcel of land for the construction of the Church of the Dormition to honor the assumption of Jesus's mother Mary. It was important to the Catholic Church to try to pinpoint the traditional location of this event in order to locate the new sanctuary upon it. Therefore, scholars, archaeologists, and architects began reviewing the literary and archaeological history of the area which also included the Cenacle. Not only was the location of Mary's assumption at issue but questions about the Cenacle arose as well. Was the Cenacle the same, or did it stand upon the same ground, as the building in which Jesus ate his last supper with his disciples (Mark 14:12-16 and par.)? Is this where the Christian Pentecost event took place (Acts 2:1-4)? Was this the first Apostolic Church of Jerusalem and was it standing when the Roman emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 C.E.? Or, as was becoming clear to some, is the modern Cenacle nothing more than the remains of a late fourth-century Byzantine church? No consensus could be reached on any of these questions. Part of the problem was that archaeological investigation was limited to the German grounds; no digging could be performed at the actual Cenacle.

This situation existed because, until 1948, the building had been dedicated to *waqf*, that is, made holy by its Muslim overseers. The Ottomans had completely taken the Cenacle building away from the custody of the Franciscan friars in the early sixteenth century, its first floor having already been converted into a mosque

a century earlier in honor of it being the presumed burial place of the prophet (King) David. Since then, and with only a few exceptions (especially in connection with the upper chamber), Christians (and Jews) were prohibited from entering its confines. That all changed in 1948 when Israeli forces captured West Jerusalem including that portion of Mount Zion upon which the Cenacle stood. Though some Islamic decorations were left in place throughout the building, the lower chamber, still honoring the burial of David, was converted into Jewish prayer and study rooms. At the time of this transfer of control, an archaeological examination of the Cenacle building was authorized. As part of the effort to repair damage done during the recent conflict, Israeli archaeologist J. Pinkerfeld (Pinkerfeld, “David’s Tomb,” 41-3) examined the various internal characteristics of the first floor, especially its 8’ tall wall niche. He also studied the oldest (lowest) course of stones around the exterior walls and declared that the building had originally been constructed as a synagogue, probably in the late Roman period (135-325 C.E.) (I discuss at length the unlikelihood that the Cenacle was ever a synagogue: *The Upper Room*, ch. 12).

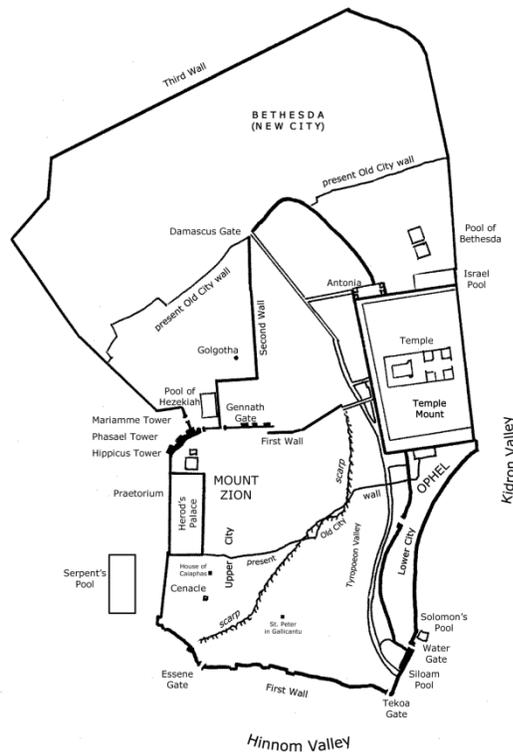
Christian scholars, among them B. Pixner, challenged Pinkerfeld’s findings and argued that the oldest construction stones, called ashlar, should be dated to the earlier Herodian period suggesting that the building had once served as the headquarters for the first Apostolic Church in Jerusalem (Pixner, *Paths*, 333). In

2013, A. Reem of the Israeli Antiquities Authority conducted limited probings inside the Cenacle and its adjacent courtyard and concluded that the building did not originate before the fourth century (Reem, “Pierotti’s Cave,” 116; *ibid.*, “Mount Zion,” 185-6, 191). So the situation today remains unsettled. Again, this is due primarily to the fact that no thorough archaeological examination has ever been attempted at and around the Cenacle. Any effort to do so must contend with the competing religious and political claimants to the site. We have therefore had to be satisfied with limited probings and non-invasive soundings. Perhaps one day this will change.

In the meantime, it should be pointed out that archaeology alone cannot give us the answers we seek. Archaeology is only part of a comprehensive evaluation of an historical site. Any conclusions to be drawn must also take into account, among other things, a site’s social and literary history as well as available contemporary artistic representations. Fortunately we are blessed with a wealth of this kind of material about the Cenacle. Used in isolation, however, these too can be confusing and misleading. That is why all the data must be considered in unison in order to offer as thorough an historical explanation for the Cenacle as possible, one that accounts for all of the evidence.

That said, literary evidence connecting the events described in the New Testament with a location on southern Mount Zion are wanting prior to the fourth

century. The gospels give no locational information about where in Jerusalem Jesus ate his last supper nor where the disciples received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost if indeed these two events were intended to be understood as transpiring in the same building. This gulf does not negate the possibility that the Cenacle does sit on the very spot, or near to it, where these events occurred. After all, someone at some time decided that this one unique location on southern Mount Zion should be regarded, and therefore consecrated, as the actual one.



Jerusalem in the time of Jesus

In Jerusalem, as elsewhere, the ancient practice obtained of honoring a sacred site, even if one's religious convictions were incongruent with those of the previous occupants. For example, sixty years after the siege of Jerusalem by the Roman legions in 70 C.E., the emperor Hadrian rebuilt it as a pagan city with pagan shrines honoring the Roman gods. One source (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 69.12.1) reported that a shrine was built atop the ruins of the Jewish Temple Mount (although other sources claim that only statues of Hadrian and Antoninus stood there). Atop the spot where most scholars agree that Jesus was crucified and where believers claimed that he miraculously rose from the dead, Hadrian built a shrine to Aphrodite. A temple to the healing god Asclepius was constructed over the curative pool of Bethesda where Jews believed that the angels "stirred up" the healing waters (John 5:1-9). In line with this practice, Constantine, in the fourth century, ordered that the Aphrodite shrine be destroyed and that a church honoring Christ be constructed in its place. Though Constantine ignored the Temple Mount, he had churches built on other sacred ground such as over the cave in Bethlehem where Jesus was believed to have been born. Prior to its recognition as the birthplace of Jesus, the Bethlehem cave was a holy site for worshippers of Adonis.

At least in the case of Golgotha, it can be reasonably argued that Christians maintained throughout the late first century a memory of the location of Jesus's crucifixion and passed this knowledge down to succeeding generations. (It has

been argued that Hadrian knew this and purposely built his shrine on known sacred soil.) Is it any less likely that these same Christians would forget where the apostles first established their headquarters in the city and perhaps where Jesus ate his farewell dinner? Be that as it may, speculation does not replace hard evidence but neither can we ignore the fact that living religious communities can and do pass on sacred oral traditions, especially those dealing with cultic origins.

Any suggestion that a Christian house of assembly continued to exist on Mount Zion in the first century must account for the destruction of Jerusalem caused by the Roman legions in 70 C.E. in response to the Great Jewish Revolt. Josephus, our primary source and only eyewitness, seems to imply the utter destruction of the city. He claims that it was so thoroughly devastated that it appeared as if no one had ever lived there (*Jewish War* 7.1.1 §1, 3-4). Though Josephus is likely engaging in hyperbole, certainly the destruction was severe. But fourth-century bishops Eusebius of Caesarea (*Proof of the Gospel* 6.18) and Epiphanius of Salamis (*Weights and Measures* 14), both residents of Palestine, suggest that a portion of the city was left largely unmolested; Epiphanius specifically identifies Mount Zion as having been left standing by the legions. After their victory, units of the Tenth Legion were left to establish a military camp on northern Mount Zion. This left the southern portion free to eventually become inhabited by camp followers, called *canabae*, and perhaps some returning Jews. A

story recorded by both Eusebius (*Church History* 3.5.3) and Epiphanius (*Medicine Chest* 30.2.7; *Weights* 15) recounts how a portion of the Jerusalem Christians fled the city before the destruction but returned soon afterward. Later writers (e.g., Alexander, *Discourse on the Invention of the Cross*; Eutychius, *Annals*) reported that these returning disciples built a church on Mount Zion. Eusebius explained that this church was composed of, and led by, Jewish Christians and lasted until the arrival of Hadrian (*Proof* 3.5). These accounts admittedly were written centuries after the events they describe and their reliability is thus subject to doubt. But they are our only source for traditions regarding Christian events on Mount Zion prior to the fourth century. By this time we come to possess eyewitness pilgrim accounts by those who claimed to have seen an extant Christian structure on Mount Zion.

The earliest of these accounts, a passage often cited by scholars in connection with the Cenacle, is by an anonymous pilgrim from Bordeaux, France, who arrived in Jerusalem in 333 C.E. S/he admits to having seen a standing synagogue on Mount Zion at that time (*Itinerary* 592). It is possible, though unlikely, that this refers to a Christian church even if we grant that it was under the control of Christian Jews. Epiphanius also mentions this synagogue which he agrees stood until the mid-fourth century; he differentiates it, however, from “the church of God” which he believed stood nearby (*Weights* 14). At some point during the fourth century (I argue for a completion date of 379-381 C.E.) the grand

basilica known as *Hagia Sion*, “Holy Zion,” was built on the southwest hill of Jerusalem to commemorate the events of Jesus’s life and the lives of the first apostles that were believed to have occurred there.

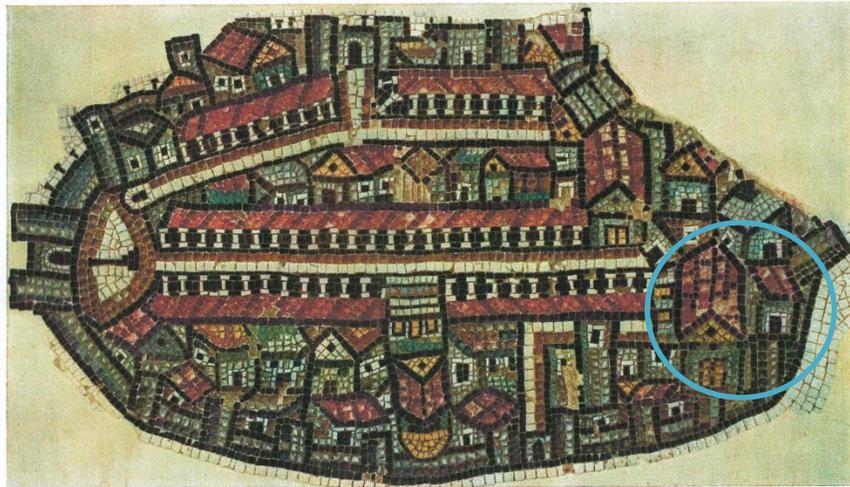
It is just after the construction of Hagia Sion that a European pilgrim named Egeria arrived in Jerusalem. In her travel diary she recorded how Mount Zion was being revered as the place of the Christian Pentecost event. However, she wrote that “another church” stands there now (*Itinerary* 43.2-3). This is the first eyewitness indication that Hagia Sion replaced or extended a previously existing church. She says in her diary that, among the events described in the gospels that were celebrated in the new church, is the appearance of the resurrected Lord to Thomas and the other disciples. The fourth-century *Liturgy of St. James* (3.34) refers to these same events and dubs Hagia Sion “the mother of all churches.” It is appropriate to surmise that the “mother church,” as many later visitors also knew it, must allude to a structure created, and a congregation formed, at a presumed origin point and cannot (exclusively) refer to the brand new basilica. (The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Eleona, and the Church of the Nativity were all constructed prior to Hagia Sion.)

Egeria’s testimony is only the first in a long series of pilgrim accounts that seem to suggest that Hagia Sion stood next to a pre-existing church or sacred building, that is, in all likelihood the Cenacle. For example, Bishop Eucherius of

Lyons in the mid-fifth century describes seeing a church on Mount Zion purportedly built by the apostles (*City of Jerusalem* 1). It is unlikely he or anyone else believed the massive Hagia Sion was that church. Others describe this additional structure as being a house and variously attribute its construction to St. John the apostle, St. Mark the evangelist, or St. James the brother of Jesus. But all confirm that this structure commemorated the Last Supper, the resurrection appearance of Jesus, and for perhaps the first time, the place of the assumption of Mary (Hippolytus, *Chronicle* 1.4-5; Theodosius, *The Holy Places*; Piacenza Pilgrim, *Itinerary* 22).



Mosaic, Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome

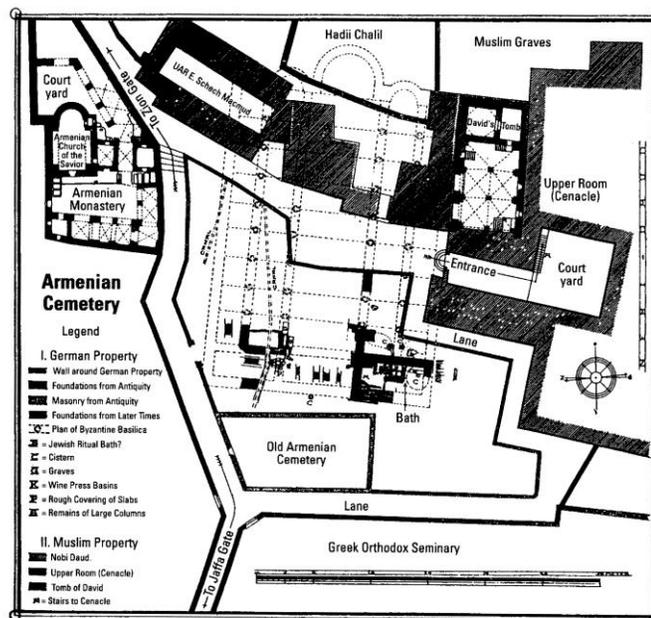


Mosaic, Church of St. George, Madaba, Jordan

Two sixth-century artworks confirm the presence of a smaller sacred structure standing adjacent to Hagia Sion. A mosaic in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and another in the Church of St. George in Madaba, Jordan, show the large basilica on southern Mount Zion flanked by a small building with a slanted roof situated just as the modern Cenacle has been proposed by some to have stood next to Hagia Sion. In both mosaics, the smaller building is depicted as a significant, and therefore sacred, structure. It is unlikely, as some have suggested, that this smaller building is a Byzantine-built, re-imagining of the original Apostolic Church or that it is an asymmetrical flanking chapel or one side of a transept.

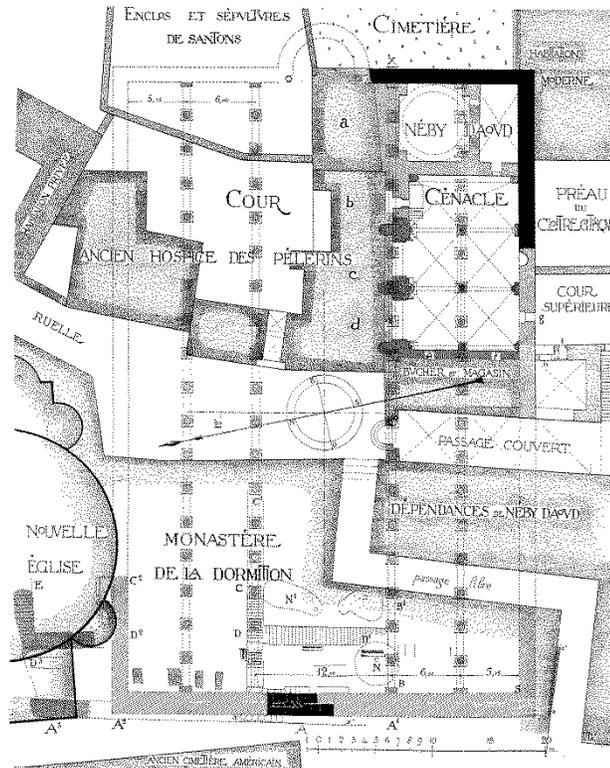
Yet a number of scholars remain unconvinced that the Cenacle's oldest elements date from before the Byzantine period. It was first suggested by Pixner (Pixner, *Paths*, 333) that the lower course of ashlar are Herodian in the style of

their cut and this has not been disputed so far as I am aware. However, this does not automatically mean that the ashlar were cut in the time of Herod the Great, only that the style is consistent with that originating in Jerusalem in the late 1st century B.C.E. In 1922, L. H. Vincent noted that the lower courses of ashlar are irregular in shape suggesting that this was due to secondary usage (Vincent, *Jérusalem*, 435). In other words, the stones were not cut for this building but were taken from other (demolished?) structures and used to fashion this one. This fact is consistent with the story of returning Jewish Christians arriving in Jerusalem in the mid-70s after the city's (partial?) destruction by the Romans and finding that they had to make do with what materials were available in order to construct their building.



H. Renard, location of the Cenacle (“David’s Tomb”) to the right (south) of Hagia Sion

Vincent determined from the various visible archaeological remains, and from the notes of the architect of the Dormition Church, that Hagia Sion encompassed the site of the Cenacle (Vincent, *Jérusalem*, 436). He concluded that the modern Cenacle is simply the surviving southeast corner of the basilica. His suggestion directly contradicted the earlier findings of H. Renard, architect and archaeologist of the site upon which the Dormition Church was built. Renard's excavation caused him to locate Hagia Sion north of the Cenacle leaving it freestanding against the basilica's southeastern flank (Renard, "Die Marienkirche," 20). He was later supported in this by M. Gisler who conducted a further excavation of the church in 1935. In 1997, a number of scholars gained access to the rarely visited eastern wing of the upper chamber of the Cenacle and reported seeing the outer north wall of the former Hagia Sion from the interior of the Cenacle confirming for them that the Cenacle was originally freestanding (Riesner, "What Does Archaeology Teach," 179). A photograph taken by Pinkerfeld of a probe trench that he dug at the exterior northeast corner of the Cenacle seems to confirm that the wall did not extend further north.



L. H. Vincent, location of the Cenacle within Hagia Sion

Is it possible that Hagia Sion was constructed to *surround* a previously existing structure such as the Cenacle? While the archaeology might support this possibility, the earliest artistic representations do not. The pilgrim accounts are also mixed in this regard. Though most describe dual structures, their descriptions often make it difficult to ascertain where one building ends and the other begins. Perhaps this very fact indicates one building within the perimeter of another? However, other accounts (e.g., *Armenian Guidebook* 4-5) are quite specific with regard to the number of supporting columns within Hagia Sion making it virtually impossible for a building the size of the Cenacle to have stood in its southeast corner.

Consideration should also be given to the centuries-long existence of this small building despite the fact that Hagia Sion was all but completely demolished in 1009 C.E. by the Fatimid caliph Abu ‘Ali Mansur. Why would his forces leave the Cenacle (at least partially) intact? It was likely the standing Cenacle that inspired the European Crusaders to build on upon the ruins of Hagia Sion the Church of St. Mary in the 12th century. Yet that church, too, was soon destroyed, possibly by Saladin. Yet, through it all, through numerous natural disasters and several manmade ones, through changes of religious possession, the Cenacle has been left standing. Coveted by Christians, Muslims, and Jews, the Cenacle remains as a testimony to a long history of shared sacrality and a joint religious claim as rare as it is contentious.

It is certain that the Cenacle continues to hide within its confines clues to its mysterious origins. For example, traces of a mosaic floor have been recovered lying beneath the present foundation, a crypt extending beneath the niche have been reported, and the construction date of the building’s original ashlar has yet to be determined. Science has the tools; only the permissions are lacking.

Whether we can trace the origins of the Cenacle back to the time of Jesus or his first followers is a secondary issue and one not likely to ever be determined. As we have seen, evidence suggests that shrines were located based on a belief that an irruption of the sacred had occurred at their specific locations. Therefore, we

should not dismiss out of hand the possibility that the siting of the Cenacle was based on longstanding tradition handed down from a time long preceding the fourth-century but that is, in the end, all that can probably be said. The investigation remains ongoing and only further archaeological work and a more comprehensive evaluation of the totality of the evidence will ever offer us better answers.

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