

## A Roman Historian looks at the Crucifixion

A talk in Lent 2009 by Professor Mary Smallwood

In the overnight trial of Jesus immediately after the arrest in Gethsemane, the High Priests and their satellites decided that he was guilty of a religious offence for which the penalty was death. But since, as they argued, they did not have the power of capital punishment, they took Jesus to Pilate early in the morning, in order to ask him to carry out the sentence for them. (Actually, their statement, 'It is not lawful for us to put any man to death' (John 18:31) is very problematical. There is evidence, which I won't go into now, that the Jewish authorities did have powers of capital punishment; but on this occasion they said that they hadn't, and Pilate accepted this.)



Now, where was Pilate and where was his trial of Jesus held? It is generally, perhaps universally, assumed to have been held in the Antonia, the fortress at the north west angle of the Temple, which was built by Herod the Great and named after Mark Antony, one of his patrons, who had helped to put him on the throne. Some of Herod's troops had been stationed there, and whenever a detachment of Roman troops had to go up to Jerusalem from their headquarters in Caesarea on the coast, their quarters were the Antonia. We all know that soldiers mocked and scourged Jesus, so the trial is assumed to have been held in their quarters.

There is nothing left now of the Antonia except a section of the wall joining it to the Temple; the Roman army under Titus razed it to the ground at the end of the siege of Jerusalem in A.D.70. But the site is secure. Every Good Friday afternoon, a vast procession of pilgrims sets out from the site of the Antonia to walk to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the site of the Crucifixion. The main part of that church, a big rotunda, encircles the tomb of Jesus, and one of the side chapels is built, up steps, over a bare rock venerated as the site of the Cross. The route taken by the pilgrims is known as the Via Dolorosa, supposedly the route taken by Jesus, carrying his cross from the site of the trial to Golgotha. (Actually the pilgrims are not walking on any roads trodden at any time by Jesus, because the city was very badly damaged in A.D.70; they are walking on roads following the street plan of the city as rebuilt by Hadrian after the second big Jewish revolt of A.D. 132-5.)

What evidence is there that the trial was held in the Antonia? In popular belief, two pieces; both, I'm sorry to say, are completely bogus. First, there is the Ecce Homo arch across a road by or on the site of the Antonia. The name indicates that on the top of it (a rather inconvenient place) Pilate displayed Jesus and said 'Behold, the man'. Well, he didn't. (Actually, few people still believe that, though I did once hear a guide informing his flock, as fact, that that was where Pilate. ....'). The tradition only goes back to the thirteenth century, when a pious but misguided pilgrim saw the arch, and decided, on no evidence at all, that that was where Pilate. . The name has stuck ever since. Actually the arch is the central big arch of a triple Roman triumphal arch, quite possibly erected during Hadrian's rebuilding of the city in the late 130s. The small north side-arch forms the chancel arch of the chapel of the Convent of the Sisters of Zion, and the small south one is said to be built into a Moslem school on the opposite side of the road. (I have never seen it). So much for that piece of evidence for the trial being held in the Antonia.

The other piece of evidence is not much better. The Convent of the Sisters of Zion was built enclosing a splendid Roman pavement of large white slabs, originally open air - the sort of thing that one can see in very many Roman towns elsewhere. This has long been taken (I can't tell you for how long) as 'Gabbatha, the

pavement' (John 19:13), where the trial took place, and revered as such. Well, it wasn't. The trouble is that firm archaeological evidence proves that the pavement was laid down after the building of the arch that I've just talked about, i.e. not before the late 130s. There is literary evidence too, though giving no precise date: there is a reference in the account of the siege of Jerusalem in A.D.70 by the Jewish historian Josephus to a large cistern in that area, open to the air. This is surely the huge cistern now under the pavement. And a further point is that the pavement is too far north to have been part of the Antonia. We don't, of course, know the exact size of the Antonia, but to suppose that it stretched as far as the pavement would make it improbably, or impossibly, large. (When in Jerusalem in 1973, I talked to one of the nuns about the archaeological evidence, but she refused even to consider the possibility that the pavement was Hadrianic. But twenty years later, I found a notice saying 'Hadrianic pavement'. But beside it was another, saying. 'This is a sacred site, so please be quiet.' The nuns were having the best of both worlds.) So much for Gabbatha.

For my third piece of de-bunking we move to Rome and another Antonia myth. Near the Lateran Church there is a staircase all on its own in the middle of a piazza, 30 -40 steps leading up to nothing - well, a tiny shrine. This is the Scala Santa, the Holy Stair. All day pilgrims crawl up it on hands and knees to the shrine, and then walk down unholy stairs on either side. The story is that St Helena, mother of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, found it in Jerusalem when she was there as a pilgrim in the early fourth century, and had it transported to Rome in the belief that it came from the Antonia and that Jesus had walked down it on the start of the walk to Calvary. (It was the same visit on which she discovered the three crosses.) Well, I think that you can see through that piece of misdirected piety yourselves. There was nothing of the Antonia left by the time Helena got to Jerusalem. What the staircase really was that she had carted to Rome, nobody knows.

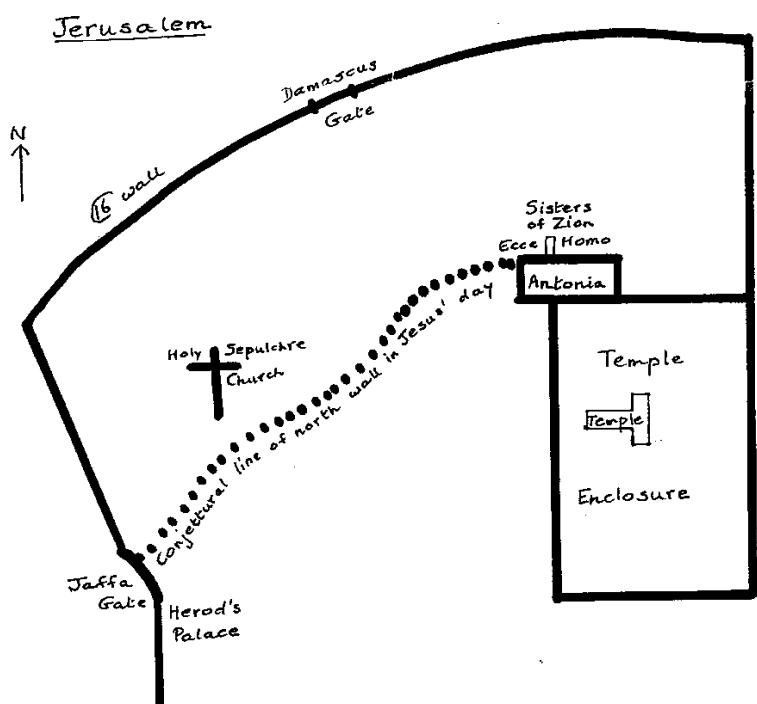
There is, then, no evidence for the common belief that Pilate's trial of Jesus was held in the Antonia. The absence of evidence does not, of course, mean that it wasn't held there. But I don't believe it was. When Pilate, or any other procurator, had to come up to Jerusalem from his headquarters in Caesarea, he did not reside in the Antonia, but in Herod the Great's palace, built on to the inside of the west wall of the city, just south of the present Jaffa Gate. It was much more comfortable than the Antonia, positively luxurious in fact. And it would have been only prudent for him to keep a small detachment of soldiers there on the premises with him for security. So it seems to me extremely likely (though I can't say certain) that when the High Priests came along to get Pilate out of bed at 6a.m or so to deal with this inconvenient prisoner, it was to Herod's palace that they went. And then, of course, Pilate would have held his trial of Jesus there and the route to Calvary, the Via Dolorosa, would have run from there and not from the Antonia. And as for Gabbatha, the pavement - archaeologists have unearthed a lovely big open-air paved courtyard in Herod's palace!

Now we turn to a more serious matter - why did Pilate eventually give in to the insistent demand of the High Priests and their party that he should execute Jesus? The High Priests had decided that Jesus was a dangerous religious fanatic, a trouble-maker guilty of religious offences for which the inevitable penalty was death. But Pilate had to become their agent, carrying out the death penalty on their behalf. Pilate's interrogation of Jesus had convinced him that Jesus was not guilty of any capital offence under Roman law, but that he was just a tiresome agitator, who simply deserved to be scourged, to teach him a lesson and warn him not to go on stirring up trouble. We all know how when Pilate wanted to acquit Jesus, the High Priests and their minions tipped the balance and made Pilate condemn him to death by saying 'If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend' (John 19: 12), i.e., you will be guilty of treason. It would be treason to acquit a person who was said (however untruthfully) to be trying to set himself up as a king, an act of rebellion against Rome. And this was quite true. Treason is a very serious offence, carrying heavy penalties in any country. But there was a bit more to it than that in the early 30s, in the second half of the reign of Tiberius. During that period, a scandal developed. People were using, misusing, the law of treason as a tool to get rid of rivals, social, political, or matrimonial, by trumping up false charges of treason against them - groundless, imaginary charges - and no one among the upper classes felt safe. In the early days some of these cases may have been test cases, charges brought in order to get clearly defined what exactly was or was not treasonable. And some were just frivolous, notably the case of a man accused of treason because he had gone into a public lavatory carrying a coin with the emperor's head on it! Tiberius very properly dismissed that one with a joke. But many

other cases were more serious, and far too many led to exile or death. Communications throughout the empire were good, and Pilate must have been aware of what was going on in Rome. Even if the High Priests were not aware of it, treason was a serious accusation, and Pilate knew that in the current climate in Rome he would not be able to justify himself if charged, and he was terrified. He was on the horns of a dilemma, facing an appalling choice: he could acquit a man whom he regarded as innocent of any capital offence, and so lay himself open to a possible or probable charge of treason, leading to exile or death; or he could condemn a man whom he regarded as innocent of any capital offence to a horrifying death, and so save his own life. We know Pilate's choice. What would you, or I, have done in the circumstances? Don't be too hard on Pilate.

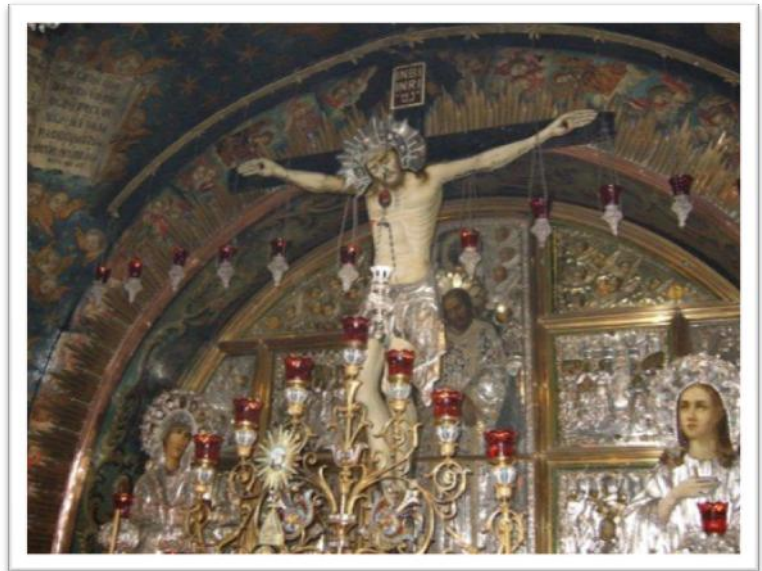
'Not this man, but Barabbas'. 'Now Barabbas was a robber'. That doesn't mean a burglar, but a brigand, a terrorist, a freedom-fighter. There was anti-Roman feeling in the province of Judaea right from its annexation in A.D.6, which was to culminate in the revolt of A.D.66-70, but it didn't become a real problem until the 50s. Barabbas had been involved in some minor trouble, and the two brigands (the same Greek word) crucified with Jesus probably belonged to his gang. But the practice of releasing a prisoner each year at the Passover is a mystery, especially since there is no evidence for it outside the Gospels. It sounds like lunacy to release known trouble-makers annually at a time of religious excitement. We can't explain it. But Barabbas benefited.

We are on firmer ground when we consider the crucifixion. Despite countless statements in popular books on Roman history and on television programmes, Rome was not crucifying enemies and malefactors left, right and centre, all the time and in huge numbers. Yes, we all know about Spartacus, and how when his slave revolt in the early first century B.C. was crushed, 6,000 of the captured slaves were crucified along the Appian Way. But was it really 6,000? The numbers of casualties in atrocities and national disasters surely tended to be exaggerated in times and circumstances when accurate figures could not be obtained. Anyhow, it was an isolated event. And crucifixion was not primarily a method of execution. It was a form of torture. And it was quite a complicated business. It needed two good strong pieces of timber, firmly fastened together, with a footrest bolted on; and it needed a deep narrow pit in firm ground to fit the cross into, well packed to prevent the cross from wobbling or falling as the victim struggled. A good clean sword thrust would have been a much cheaper quicker and more efficient form of execution. Or, of course, the populace could be entertained by seeing criminals fed to the lions! Incidentally, there is no record of any Christian being martyred by crucifixion - which is surely evidence that it was rare. If it had been a common practice, it would surely have seemed appropriate to make a Christian suffer his Master's punishment.



Crucifixion was a form of torture and very gruesome. If a man is suspended by his wrists (not his hands: the Holy Shroud shows the true position), the weight of his body compresses his chest so that he cannot breathe and quickly suffocates. To prevent this, and prolong the agony, the feet of a crucified man were nailed to a footrest, so that he could press upwards to expand his chest and to be able to breathe. Some men are recorded as having lived for two days. If the legs were broken, the crucified man could no longer press upwards and died quickly of suffocation. In a way it was an act of mercy. That was the point of breaking the legs of Jesus' two companions - they died at once, as the Jews wanted.

Now to go back for a brief footnote on the nails through the wrists - Christian art right from the earliest days puts the nails through the palms of the hands. Why, if it is incorrect? My guess is that early artists took the two references by Jesus to his 'hands and feet' literally (having no anatomical knowledge of crucifixion) and put the nails in the hands; and once this tradition was established, everyone followed suit. Then the stigmata, first experienced, I believe, by St Francis in the thirteenth century, inevitably followed suit also.



How did the Jews know that crucifixion existed? They clearly did know, as they asked for it, apparently as an accepted, routine punishment. There is no record that it had ever been used in their country previously, and as far as our almost non-existent records go, there had been no call for it. They must somehow have heard of its use elsewhere, although, as I've said, our evidence doesn't make it frequent or ubiquitous.

Has it ever occurred to you to wonder why the soldiers had a sponge handy, on the top of a hill outside the city in the middle of the afternoon? Sponges belonged then, as now, in the bathroom. I can make a suggestion. It is an accepted fact, (although I have no idea what the evidence, literary or archaeological, is) that the Romans used pieces of sponge as toilet paper. You and I when travelling carry our own toothbrushes with us. Surely any prudent Roman would carry his little bit of sponge around with him, in whatever did duty as a pocket in those days (and don't ask me what that was). Jesus said he was thirsty. The soldiers felt sorry for him - he was clearly in a different category from his brigand companions. 'Come on, let's give him a drink' - 'Oh dear, we can't reach up high enough' - 'I know what' (fishing in his pocket) 'here's my sponge; stick it on a twig and dip it in the vinegar'. Was the improvised use of a toilet sponge an act of genuine compassion or a further insult? if my suggestion is right; but it is only a suggestion.

Now on to Jesus' tomb. The tradition of the location of the tomb in what is now the Church of the Holy Sepulchre seems to go right back to the beginning. A fourth century Christian writer speaks of Hadrian desecrating the site of the Resurrection with a pagan temple - which suggests that it was known and venerated as early as the 130s. Certainly it was well established by the early fourth century, when St Helena found (as well as the bogus staircase already dealt with) three crosses in an area which is now one of the many side-chapels of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. One must admit that now the tomb, sunk in the middle of the floor of the rotunda of the church and encased in modern multi-coloured marble, is unconvincing visually; but it would be utterly foolish to try to deny the authenticity of the site, venerated apparently ever since the event. That long established tradition must surely be respected and accepted. But.....

Just outside the Damascus Gate in the present north wall of Jerusalem there is 'the Garden Tomb'. It is a Jewish tomb, of a type found elsewhere and probably of first century B.C to first century A.D date. It is on an attractive site, a piece of open ground, with trees and bushes. The tomb consists of a small cave, with the back wall carved away to make a shelf in a recess for holding a body. Across the mouth of the cave, on the outside, there is a slot about nine inches wide cut in the stone, with a flat circular stone (like a mill stone on edge) at one side, ready to be rolled across. It fits very well the evidence about Jesus' tomb in the Gospels. It was discovered in the nineteenth century by, of all people, General Gordon of Khartoum! He jumped to the conclusion, on no evidence at all, that it, and not the tomb in the church, was Jesus' burial place. (Now when I tell you that General Gordon also discovered the Garden of Eden, in the Seychelles, you will realize what his standing as an archaeologist was!)

Not only did this tomb look right to the General, but it was outside the city wall. We all know that the 'green hill' was 'without/outside a city wall'. So, argued General Gordon, the traditional site in the church cannot be right, because it is inside the city wall. His newly discovered tomb must therefore be the genuine article. Yes, but..

What General Gordon didn't know, and nor do all the modern devotees' of the Garden Tomb, was that the present north wall is sixteenth century and did not exist in Jesus' day. Ten years or so after the crucifixion a new north wall was built to enclose the large suburb growing up outside the existing north wall. It may or may not have been on more or less the line of the present north wall, but that is irrelevant. There was no wall in that area in the 30s AD. Admittedly, the line of the north wall in Jesus' day is not known, but it must have been well south of the present north wall, and there is no evidence at all to put the Church of the Holy Sepulchre inside that wall. The site of the crucifixion and of Jesus' tomb lay outside the north city wall. Granted, the Garden Tomb does give a much better idea of the Resurrection site than the marble-encrusted shrine in the centre of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but that does not make it Jesus' tomb. It is simply an anonymous archaeological site. Go and see it by all means, if you ever go to Jerusalem, to get an idea of what the Resurrection site was like. But don't be taken in the misdirected piety surrounding what is nothing more than a museum exhibit - or by the projecting rock which General Gordon spotted there and thought resembled a skull - Ah 'Golgotha, the place of a skull!' He had forgotten about a little matter known as erosion. What looks like a skull today (to the eyes of faith, looking at it from the right direction) almost certainly looked quite different 2,000 years ago. And vice versa.

You may have noticed that I have said nothing about the year of the crucifixion, often taken to be A.D.33, and I am not going to. The question is, in which years in the early 30s did the Passover, at the full moon, fall on a Friday (the Synoptics) or a Saturday (St John). That depends on when the priests watching on the temple enclosure walls saw the new moon and blew on their rams' horn trumpets to announce the start of a new month; and that depends on whether it was cloudy or not. It is all much too complicated for before lunch on a Sunday!



Jerusalem viewed from the Mount of Olives