

The Caiaphas Ossuary

A Paper

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Construction is no easy task. There are very few places where it is more difficult to build than Israel, whose history in the land goes back thousands of years. Everywhere, underneath the land of Israel, lays ancient history and ancient artifacts. Often times both small and large construction projects must be delayed, and in some cases completely halted all together because of archaeological discoveries, especially when an ancient burial ground is discovered. Just such an accidental discovery took place in November of 1990.

In 1967, to celebrate the reunification of Jerusalem after the Six Day War, the Jerusalem Peace Forest was planted (see picture 1). However, it was not until 1990, while a water park was being built inside the peace forest that a significant archaeological artifact was unearthed. A tractor, while clearing the ground, fell through the roof of an ancient burial cave.¹ The Israeli Antiquities Authority was contacted, and subsequently a team led by archaeologist Zvi Greenhut was sent to excavate the site. Finding an ancient burial is not surprising, since over 1000 have been discovered in the past 150 years.²

Picture 2 below, is the layout of the “Caiaphas Tomb.” It has a single burial chamber with four *loculi* or *kokims*.³ In front of the tomb would have been a large stone, or mud bricks along with smaller stones. Inside the tomb itself, was an area large enough to stand, and then three burial caves (labeled *kokim* 1, 2, 3). These burial caves were approximately two meters long and half a meter wide.⁴ It became apparent that the grave had been pilfered by grave robbers. Some of the deceased family member’s bones were scattered, ossuaries broken, and smashed pottery strewn around.⁵ Greenhut found in the tomb, four limestone ossuaries in-tact, although they had been moved from their original position. Later, another eight would be located. Fortunately, the southernmost tomb (labeled *kokim* 4), where the “Caiphas Ossuary” resided, was not found by the grave robbers. Therefore it, along with one other ossuary, remained undamaged and in their original positions.

The discovery of the ossuaries was an immediate clue to date this as a second temple burial ground (see picture 3). The practice of using ossuaries inside of tombs started around the middle of Herod the Great’s rule, but ceased by AD 70.⁶ The discovery of a coin minted by Herod Agrippa I, dated around AD 42/43 was also helpful in fixing a second temple date.⁷

¹ “The Tomb of Caiaphas,” in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Sep/Oct 2001. <http://members.bib-arch.org/publication.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=27&Issue=5&ArticleID=17>, (accessed, 2/8/2014).

² Hachili, Rachel. *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period: Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism* Vol. 94 ed. John J. Collins, Boston: Brill, 2005), 1.

³ Gordon Franz, “More on Simcha Jacobovici and the Nails from Caiaphas’ Tomb,” on <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2011/04/21/More-on-Simcha-Jacobovici-and-the-Nails-from-Caiaphas-Tomb.aspx>, (accessed, 2/8/2014).

⁴ Helen Katharine Bond. *Caiaphas: Friend of Rome and Judge of Jesus?* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2004), 3.

⁵ Bond., *Caiaphas*, 3.

⁶ T. Michael Kennedy, "Caiaphas" In , in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry and Lazarus Wentz (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

Finally, the pottery discovered along with ossuaries also dated this ancient burial between 100 BC to AD 100.⁸

During the second temple period, the common practice was for two burials. The first would be immediately upon the death of the individual. There were two types of graves used in the first burial. The less common, and often more ornate burial was the *Arcosolia* tomb (see picture 4). This form of burial grave involved a flat bench cut into the tomb with an arch-shaped recess.⁹ This is similar to the one described by Jesus burial, where angels were sitting on either end of the location where Jesus' body would have been placed (cf. John 20:12). The more common burial tomb involved the *kokim* or a shaft tomb (see picture 5). The shaft was hewn out of the rock on the ground level. These are the type of graves discovered in the Caiaphas tomb.

After approximately a year's time, when the body would decompose and the flesh is decayed, a second burial was performed utilizing an ossuary. An ossuary was simply a rectangular box made from soft limestone (some simple, others carved with ornate decorations) which was used to contain the bones of the deceased. This is referred to as the second burial. The family would return to the burial site, they would gather and place the larger bones in the ossuary first, followed by the smaller bones, then the skull would be placed on top. The final step was to take an iron nail, and scratch the name of the dead loved one onto the side of the ossuary.¹⁰ It was common to have more than one body in an ossuary. Once the bones were collected, and placed in the ossuary, the grave could be used for the next family member who would need a burial.

At this ancient burial site there were a total of twelve ossuaries discovered. Six of those had been broken, four were initially in *kokim* 1-3, but were removed by the workers who stumbled upon the site. The final two (ossuaries 5 & 6) were found in *kokim* 4.¹¹ Five of these ossuaries had inscriptions on them, one of which is of special interest to the biblical archaeologist. This one, ossuary six, discovered in *kokim* 4, was also the largest and most ornate of the twelve discovered (see picture 4). It was 14.6 inches high and 29.6 long. The elaborate design indicated that the individual(s) was wealthy and/or an important figure. The design involved two large circles, with a flower design in-between. The two large circle patterns included six smaller circles in the shape of rosettes, five evenly distributed, with one in the center of the five. Some of these rosettes were painted orange. The lid was vaulted, decorated in a similar fashion and painted orange as well.¹² Certainly, the remains of someone important would be found within.

⁷ At this time there was a pagan custom of placing coins over the eyes or mouth of the dead corpse. This coin was believed to serve as payment for the ferryman, Charon, who would take their soul across the River Styx.

⁸ Bond, 4.

⁹ Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out: What Archaeology Reveals about the Truth of the Bible*. (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1997), 314.

¹⁰ Bond, 3.

¹¹ Franz, "More on Simcha Jacobovici and the Nails from Caiaphas' Tomb," <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2011/04/21/More-on-Simcha-Jacobovici-and-the-Nails-from-Caiaphas-Tomb.aspx>, (accessed, 2/8/2014).

¹² Bond. *Caiaphas*, 5.

The contents of this ossuary included the partial remains of six different individuals: two babies, an adolescent, a teenage boy, an adult woman, and a man approximately sixty years old. The decorative ossuary was not the only thing that was of interest to archaeologists. On either side of the ossuary was an inscription in Aramaic. The Israel Museum states, “The name inscribed upon it in Aramaic appears twice, once in the form of “Yehosef son of Capha” and once as “Yehosef son of Caiapha.” Scholars believe that this ossuary may indeed belong to the High Priest Joseph Caiaphas, who is chiefly known for his involvement in the arrest and trial of Jesus, described in detail in the New Testament.”¹³ The Bible does mention an important figure by the name of Caiaphas, but the Caiaphas of the Bible is not referred to as Joseph. Bond explains the ancient usage of “nicknames” when speaking of the name Caiaphas (Qapha), “Qapha was not a proper name at all but a nickname. First century Jews tended to restrict themselves to a small number of names, often those reminiscent of great figures from the past, particularly the Maccabean freedom fighters of the second century B.C.E. Simon, John, and Judas were particularly popular for men... To avoid confusion, it was common to use nicknames to distinguish between them... Sometimes these nicknames (even the derogatory ones) stuck and became attached to the names of sons and daughters, eventually becoming family names. ‘Qapha,’ then, was probably a family nickname belonging to all the occupants of this ossuary.”¹⁴

The writings of Flavius Josephus confirm this practice described by Bond. Flavius goes further to identify who this “Joseph Son of Caiaphas” is. When speaking of the High Priest who was deposed, Josephus calls him, “Joseph, who was called Caiaphas, of the high priesthood.”¹⁵ The ornate decorations, the dating of the tomb and the ossuaries, the inscribed name (twice), and the family tomb, all point to the powerful and wealthy, New Testament High Priest, Caiaphas.

Caiaphas was appointed as High Priest around AD 18 by Valerius Gratus, the Roman procurator before Pontius Pilate.¹⁶ He was delegated power to rule over the Jewish people. He did so until he was deposed in AD 36. Caiaphas was the second most powerful person in all of Judea, next to the Roman Governor. During the ministry of Jesus, his raising of Lazarus (John 11) caused a great commotion among the people. There was a growing interest in Jesus as the Messiah who would liberate the Jewish people from the oppression of the Romans. This caused great concern for Caiaphas, who was worried that the Romans might intervene (John 11:48-50). In John 11 he declares, “it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.”¹⁷ (John 11:50). Unknowingly, he was speaking prophetically of the substitutionary atonement. Caiaphas was the one who had Jesus arrested and plotted his death (Matt 26:3). He is also the one who questioned Jesus. When Jesus proclaimed to be “the Christ, the Son of God,” Caiaphas tore his robes and said that Jesus had committed blasphemy (Matt 26:65). Because he did not have the authority under Roman law to execute Jesus, Caiaphas handed Jesus over to Pilate to be judge for what, in his view, was a capital offense. Peter and

¹³ Israel Museum website, <http://www.english.imjnet.org.il/popup?c0=13136>, (accessed, 2/9/2014).

¹⁴ Bond, 4.

¹⁵ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), Ant 18:95.

¹⁶ Flavius, *Antiquities*, 18:33-35.

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

John also stood before Caiaphas. Caiaphas, along with other Jewish leaders unsuccessfully tried to persuade Peter and John to stop proclaiming their message about Jesus (Acts 4:5-6).

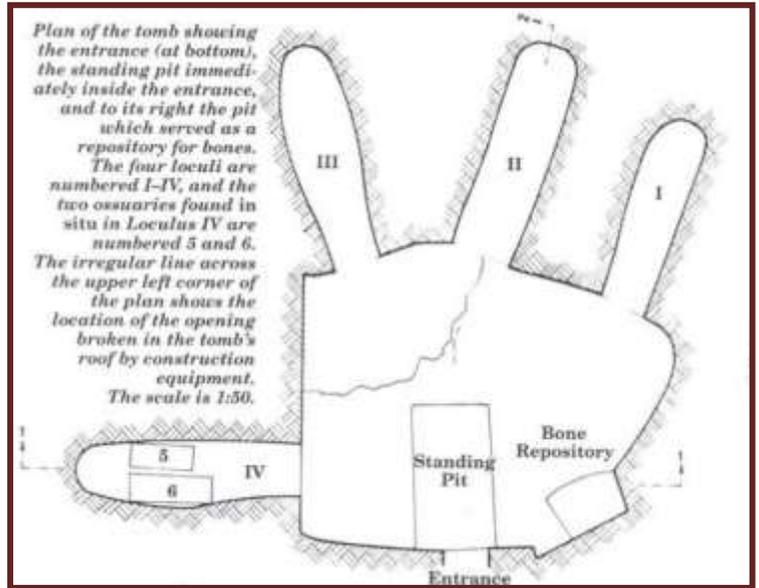
How important was this discovery? Some have labeled this among the top ten archaeological discoveries.¹⁸ Others have called it “the most significant New Testament-related archaeological discoveries ever made.”¹⁹ For Christians, this is a huge discovery. The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, is the foundation of the Christian faith. Apart from it, we are the most pitied of people (1 Cor 15:19). The discovery of Joseph, Son of Caiaphas’ ossuary, confirms one more historical fact, and one more key participant, in the trial and subsequent crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. It also confirms and gives greater support to the historicity of the biblical record.

¹⁸ Reclaiming the Mind website, <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2010/07/top-ten-biblical-discoveries-in-archaeology-%E2%80%938-caiaphas-ossuary/>, (accessed, 2/9/2014).

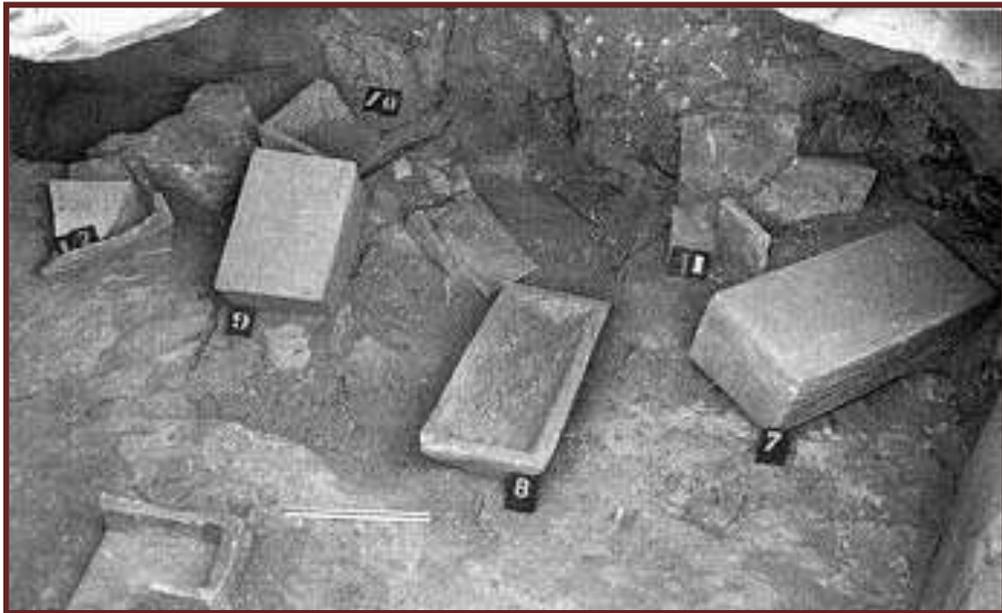
¹⁹ David N. Bivin, “Perspective on the Caiaphas Tomb, in *Jerusalem Perspective*, <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/2590/>, (accessed, 2/9/2014).



(Picture 1) Pictured here is the Peace Forest in relation to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, Israel.



(Picture 2) This is a map of the Caiaphas Tomb. The Caiaphas Ossuary was discovered in kokim 4, labeled 6 on this plan.

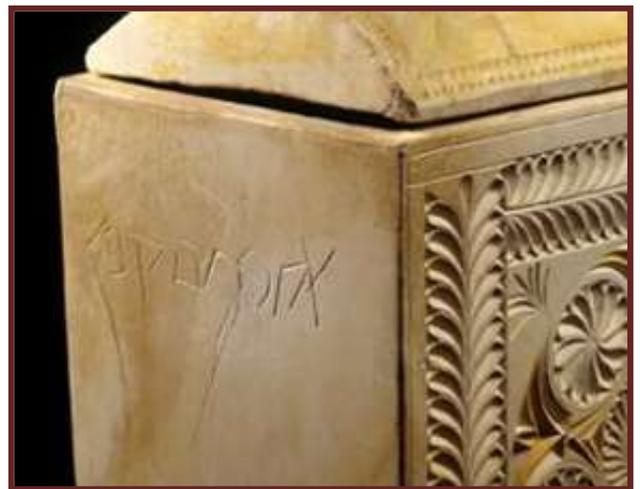


(Picture 3) This is a picture of the Caiaphas tomb and the initial ossuaries identified and labeled by Zvi Greenhut, who was sent out by the Israeli Antiquities Authority to inspect the site.

(Picture 4) This is an artist rendition of an *Arcosolia* tomb. This form of burial grave involved a flat bench cut into the tomb with an arch-shaped recess.



(Picture 5) This is a *kokim* or shaft tomb, at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. It is the most commonly used grave in the 1st century. The shaft was hewn out of the rock on the ground level.



(Pictures 6 & 7) This is the discovered "Caiaphas Ossuary." The ornate design pictured on the left and a close-up of the inscription on the right.

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