Five Articles about Jesus from
The Ancient Near East Today

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Chapter One

What did Jesus look like?
What did Jesus look like?

By: Joan E. Taylor

Everyone knows what Jesus looks like: he is the most painted figure in all of western art, recognized everywhere as having long hair and a beard, a long robe with sleeves (often white) and a mantle (often blue).

But what did he really look like, as a man living in Judaea in the 1st century? This subject has long been of interest. I have already written on John the Baptist and his clothing, but not about Jesus. Nevertheless, over the years, numerous television documentaries have asked me for guidance on dramatizing aspects of ancient life. In order to give them clear directions, I gathered information about what Jesus looked like, or rather, what he is said to have worn. I would like to share this here.

It is worth emphasizing that images of Jesus over time give us clues on how Jesus wasimagined in different environments, but say absolutely nothing about what he really looked like. Our images of Jesus were largely created in the Byzantine era (4th-6th centuries). Byzantine images of Jesus were based on the image of a Graeco-Roman deity, for example the famous statue of Olympian Zeus by Phidias in the 4th century BCE.
This huge statue was located inside the Temple of Zeus at Olympia in Greece, and depicted a long-haired and bearded Zeus on a throne. It was so well-known that the Roman Emperor Augustus had a copy of himself made in the same style, but without the godly long hair and beard. Men in the 1st century rarely had long hair; it was considered either godly or girlie.

Byzantine artists, looking for iconography that emphasized Jesus’s heavenly rule as cosmic King, drew on such depictions of a deity sitting on a throne – representing his authority over the earth and his coming role as judge. We also then get the godly long hair and beard, because Jesus is like a younger version of Zeus/Jupiter, Neptune or Serapis, just as God as ‘Father’ would in due course be depicted as an older (white-haired) version of the same gods.

As time went on the sun god’s halo was also added to Jesus’s head to show his heavenly nature. The winged victory in the hands of Olympian Zeus was replaced with gesture of blessing, with the Bible held in Jesus’s hand instead of a spear. This iconography of Jesus with long hair, a beard and a halo comes from the 4th century onwards, with Jesus sitting on a heavenly throne, like Olympian Zeus, as cosmic judge of the world: the Alpha and Omega, beginning and end (Revelation 21:5-6, and 22:13). With this in mind we can ‘read’ the apse mosaic from Santa Pudenziana, Rome, dated to the early 5th century AD.
Everything here, from the long golden robe to the long hair and beard, has meaning. The point is not to show Jesus as a man of 1st-century Judaea, but to make theological points about Jesus as Christ (King), and divine Son. In this classic Byzantine Jesus, the ‘mini-Zeus’ version, the long robe with baggy sleeves indicates status. By the Byzantine era, royal, ecclesiastical and elite males wore such long robes, as seen in depictions of the emperor Justinian and his entourage in the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna.

But at the time of Jesus long tunics were usually worn by women, not men. There were exceptions. A man wearing a stolē, a longer garment, could also indicate high status at this time (e.g. Mark 12: 38; Luke 20: 46), or heavenly raiment (Mark 16: 5; Rev. 6: 11; 7: 9, 13, 14). But Jesus scorned men who advertised their status by wearing these (Mark 12: 38; Luke 20: 46). It is so ironic then that he is often depicted as wearing a longer garment himself.

The earliest extant images of Jesus in Roman catacomb paintings show him as a teacher/philosopher or magus (wonder-worker, with a wand), dressed in the common
clothing of the time for a man: a knee length (essentially sleeveless) tunic (chitōn) and a long mantle (himation). He is also beardless and short-haired. We see this in the depiction of Jesus healing a woman with an issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34) in the late 3rd century Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus.

Jesus was recognizable in these portrayals not because of how he looked but by what he did. The Gospel stories were so familiar to the viewers that they recognized Jesus from what was being shown. Still, for people today, this image of Jesus seems strange. When a picture of Jesus was discovered last year on a 4th/5th century glass paten (Eucharist plate) found in southern Spain, one of the things the media was most interested in was that Jesus was beardless.

Did Jesus actually have a beard? As a kind of wandering sage, I think he would have had one, simply because he did not go to barbers. This was also the common appearance of a philosopher; the Stoic philosopher Epictetus considered it appropriately natural. He did not have a beard just because he was Jew. A beard was not distinctive of Jews in antiquity. While by the time the Babylonian Talmud was written in the 5th-6th centuries beardedness might have been common for Jewish men (b.Shabbat 152a, ‘The glory of a face is its beard’), it was never identified as an indicator of Jews in the 1st century. In fact, one of the problems for oppressors of Jews in the Diaspora was identifying them when they looked like everyone else. However, the Jewish
men on Judaea Capta coins (issued by Rome after the capture of Jerusalem in 70 CE) are bearded but with short hair; this is probably how Romans imagined Jewish men in Judaea, even if in the Diaspora a Jewish man may have looked like every other guy.

So what did Jesus really look like? Jesus wore normal clothing, unlike John the Baptist; John’s clothing was sufficiently unusual and Elijah-like to be mentioned (Mark 1:6: “And John was wearing camel hair and a skin girdle around his waist.”) So what was normal for men of 1st-century Judaea?

Important insights into dress and appearance are gained by studies of the Egyptian mummy portraits from the 1st century BCE to the 3rd century CE. These portraits depict a style of clothing and hair that was probably universal in the eastern Mediterranean, including in the region of Judaea. This is also clear from the archaeological discoveries of Masada and the Judaean Desert Caves. The clothing of rich people was mainly distinguished by expensive dyes and fineness of the cloth, but the actual styles were quite similar.
Most men wore a simple short tunic (chitōn), finishing around the knees, as Jesus is depicted wearing in catacomb art. Men were supposed to be ready for action – movement – so they did not usually have long robes; the high status longer garment sometimes worn by the elite advertised leisure. To be really active you would ‘gird your loins’ by tucking your chitōn up by pulling it through your legs and tying it.

A chitōn invariably had two bands of color that ran from the shoulder to the hem, front and back. These are seen in many examples from excavations in sites close to the Dead Sea, where textiles have been well preserved, especially from Nahal Hever and Masada.

On top of the tunic a man would wear a himation or mantle, a large piece of woollen material. A woman who wanted to be healed touched Jesus’s himation (Mark 5:27). There was also a type of fine linen mantle/wrap called a sindōn, but Jesus only wore one of these in death (Mark 15:46).

Jesus did not wear white. This color was distinctive, requiring bleaching, and in Judaea it was associated with the Essenes (Josephus, War 2:123), a legal school of Judaism who followed a strict interpretation of the law and a life of community and extreme purity. It is also associated with heavenly attire (Mark 16:5; Rev. 19:14). The difference between Jesus’ regular clothing and bright, white clothing is described specifically during the Transfiguration scene where we are told that Jesus’ clothing (here himatia) became ‘glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them’ (Mark 9.3). He is thus transformed into wearing the shining garb of angels.
Jesus would probably have worn undyed wool for his tunic and a dyed mantle. It is clear from clothing found in Masada and the caves by the Dead Sea that clothing was often very highly colored. The ordinary people of Jesus’ time loved color and their clothing has beautiful shades of red, green, and types of purple designed to imitate the colors favoured by the wealthy. Their cloth was durable and they did not wear earthy hues but vibrant ones, especially for their himatia.

We are told additionally about Jesus’s clothing during his execution when it is divided among soldiers (Mark 15:24; Matt. 27:35; Luke 23:34; John 19:23-24). Jesus is said in the Gospel of John (19:23-24) to have worn a chitōn (tunic) and himatia (mantles), plural. The soldiers did not want to rip his chitōn, since it was made as one piece of cloth. It could not be separated out into pieces as was sometimes the case so they cast lots for which soldier would take it. This is curious because one person described as wearing a seamless garment is the high priest (Josephus, Ant. 3:161). Was John trying to make some hidden allusion to the high priest? Or was he simply recording a peculiarity of Jesus’s tunic? I favor the latter, because in this Gospel Jesus’s clothing is very carefully described.

The Roman soldiers divided his mantles (himatia) into four shares (John 19:23), indicating that he was wearing two mantles each made of two pieces of cloth that could be separated. This is especially interesting. One of the himatia was probably a tallith or prayer shawl. This was traditionally made of undyed creamy-colored woollen material with blue-striped edges and fringes, which would be drawn over the head when praying. While there were no fringed mantles found in the Cave of Letters, there was blue wool with fringes (tzitzith), possibly used to make them.

Since talliths are defined as distinctive clothing for Jewish men, worn either singly or with another mantle for warmth, there seems no reason to doubt that Jesus wore one.
Indications that Jesus wore a regular mantle as well as the tallith mantle are found not only at the crucifixion scene but also on another occasion: Jesus takes off his mantles, himatia, when he washes the feet of his disciples (John 13:4, 12). Here there is a distinction made between the mantles he took off and the tunic he kept on. The Gospel of John, therefore, provides a specific indication of what Jesus wore which correlates with the presentation of the night of Passover eve as cold (John 18:18, 25, cf. Mark 14:24). Jesus would have worn a mantle for warmth along with a distinctively Jewish tallith, as other Jewish men would have worn in cold weather. In wearing two mantles, one of which was a tallith, Jesus’ clothing would have identified him as a Jew like any other.

On his feet? Jesus would have worn sandals. In the desert caves close to the Dead Sea and Masada sandals from the time of Jesus have come to light. They were very simple, with the soles of thick pieces of leather sewn together, and the upper parts made of straps of leather going through the toes.
And what about Jesus’ face? In the mummy portraits, the people were Greek-Egyptian, but there was a large Jewish population also in Egypt and some ethnic mixing. Their faces, so realistic, are the closest we have to photographs of the people of Jesus’ own time and place.

If we are to imagine Jesus then, as a Jew of his time, the mummy paintings provide a good clue to his appearance. However, there is one other place to look: to the synagogue Dura Europos, dating from the early 3rd century. The depiction of Moses on the walls of the synagogue of Dura-Europos is probably the closest fit, I think, since it shows how a Jewish sage was imagined in the Graeco-Roman world. Moses is shown in undyed clothing, appropriate to tastes of ascetic masculinity (eschewing color), and his one mantle is a tallith, since one can see tassels (tzitzith). This image is a far more correct as a basis for imagining the historical Jesus than the adaptations of the Byzantine Jesus that have become standard.

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Chapter Two

Did Jesus Speak Greek?
Did Jesus and his disciples speak and teach in Greek? What languages were spoken in first century Palestine? If so, does the New Testament preserve their actual communications?

These questions have generated rich debate through the years. It has been the general consensus among scholars that to recover the real Jesus of history it is necessary to uncover the Aramaic behind the Greek. For example, the late British scholar Maurice Casey stated, “If therefore we wish to recover the Jesus of History, we must see whether we can reconstruct his sayings, and the earliest accounts of his doings, in their original Aramaic. This should help us to understand him within his own cultural background.”

Since Roman Palestine was flanked by two dominant international languages—Greek and Latin—it naturally became a “linguistic border.” The linguistic situation in Roman Palestine was particularly influenced by its geographical location as the primary passage for trade within the Fertile Crescent,
thereby (as Casey put it) “attracting merchants who spoke foreign languages to an area already populated by various ethnic groups.” Among this linguistic diversity Greek emerged as the dominant medium to disseminate the Christian message in both oral and written form.

Since the late 19th century scholars have held two basic assumptions regarding the influence of Aramaic upon the New Testament. First, scholars have assumed that Jesus spoke only in Aramaic. Second, they have also assumed that since Jesus spoke only in Aramaic his disciples preserved a record of sayings in Aramaic. Greater recognition, however, should be given to the fact that many languages were current in Palestine during the time of Jesus. While it is generally agreed that Aramaic and Hebrew were key languages of the period, I contend that Greek was widespread and that Jesus not only spoke Greek but also taught in Greek. Consequently, the Gospels may contain the very words that Jesus spoke instead of translations into Greek of Jesus’ original words in Aramaic.

Joseph Fitzmyer, noted scholar of the Dead Sea Scrolls, argues that there are three important stages in the Gospel tradition. Stage one refers to the Aramaic period of the actual ministry and teachings of Jesus (1–33 C.E.), a period before the Gospels were
written. Stage two represents the Apostolic period when the disciples and apostles taught and preached about the words and deeds of Jesus (33–66 C.E.). Stage three (66–95 C.E.) represents the canonical Gospel period reflecting a development of Greek writing. Fitzmyer’s point is to remind readers not to confuse later Greek tradition with the early Aramaic of stage one. To do so is, Fitzmyer warns, to “fall into the danger of fundamentalism.”

But I find Fitzmyer’s stages of gospel tradition unconvincing. They suggest bias toward a history-of-religions approach (in which religious beliefs are seen as shaped by their cultural milieu) by incorrectly presupposing that Aramaic was the dominant language of Palestine and that the Greek compositions of the Gospels represent an advancement (stage three) in gospel tradition. If Jesus did indeed speak Greek, then we may have, as British scholar A.W. Argyle put it, “direct access to the original utterances of our Lord and not only to a translation of them.” Consequently, much more than just a few Aramaic words and expressions can be connected to the Jesus of history.

Early in my academic studies I assumed that the dominant language in first-century CE
Palestine was Aramaic and that Jesus and his disciples, therefore, taught and spoke in Aramaic. The problem I encountered in accepting the dominance of Aramaic related to my understanding of the relationship between the Greek New Testament and the teachings of Jesus. Did the gospel accounts represent accurately what Jesus taught, or were they misrepresentations of the historical Jesus? Was the Jesus of history different from the Christ of Scripture?
The Aramaic Hypothesis is an inadequate solution for many of my questions:

(1) If Aramaic was the dominant language in first-century CE Palestine (and throughout the Roman Empire), why were all the New Testament documents written in Greek?

(2) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why was Greek the common language (koinē) of the period?

(3) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why was Greek so prevalent in the literature, the architecture, and the culture of both Galilee and Judea in the first century CE?

(4) If Aramaic was the source behind the Gospels (and the New Testament), why do the documents of the Greek New Testament show signs of being original compositions rather than translations?

(5) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why would the Jews be bilingual (some even trilingual)?

(6) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why were many cities (such as Ptolemais and Scythopolis) and regions (like Decapolis and Idumea) called by Greek names?

(7) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why did many Jews adopt Greek names (e.g., Andrew, Philip, Nicodemus, and Theophilus)?

(8) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why were Greek customs and practices adopted by the culture, for example in measurements, pottery, and Greek loanwords?

(9) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why would Jews inscribe words in Greek on funerary ossuaries?

These questions lead me to reconsider Aramaic’s dominance in the first century CE. Contrary to contemporary scholarship, I find that Greek was more widely used in both written and oral form by Jesus, his disciples, and the Jews who inhabited first-century Palestine. Interestingly, the evidence reveals that Greek became the dominant language spoken among Jews and Gentiles in Galilee in the first century CE. Fitzmyer’s statement admits more than he may have intended:

If asked what was the language commonly spoken in Palestine in the time of Jesus of Nazareth, most people with some acquaintance of that era and area would almost
spontaneously answer Aramaic. To my way of thinking, the defense of this thesis must reckon with the growing mass of evidence that both Greek and Hebrew were being used as well. I would, however, hesitate to say with M. Smith that “at least as much Greek as Aramaic was spoken in Palestine.” In any case, the evidence for the use of Aramaic has also been growing in recent years.
The “growing mass of evidence” has now become a convincing witness to the wide use of Greek in Palestine even among the members of the inner circle of disciples who followed Jesus.

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Chapter Three
What Do We Know about the Scourging of Jesus?
By Andrea Nicolotti

The Gospels say that Jesus suffered flagellation before his crucifixion but the texts do not describe the scourge. Modern commentators have speculated about the scourge on the basis of the Greco-Roman literary evidence and later relics. But do these bring us closer to the scourging of Jesus, or not?

Romans carried out many corporal punishments including flagellation, which were a part of criminal law and used in domestic, military, and public domains. Sources attest to different types of beating instruments, including the lorum (whip), habena (strap), scutica (lash), stimulus (goad), fustis (staff) virga (rod), catenae (chains) and, finally, the flagrum and flagellum (scourge). Milder punishments also existed such as the ferula (stick) that schoolteachers used. At home, the master could choose between the stick, lash, and scourge to beat his slaves.

Some punishments were inflicted on the naked body and were more painful and humiliating than others. In one of his Satires, Horace called for “a rule to assign fair penalties to offences, lest you flay with the terrible scourge (horribili flagello) those who are only deserving of the lash (scutica),” precisely because the scourge caused deeper wounds and could even lacerate the flesh. As early as the fifth century BCE sources show that traitors, magicians and people who committed unique crimes, such as patricide, treason, and the violation of Vestal virgins, were flogged to death.

By Jesus’ times, there was a longstanding rule that free Roman citizens were exempt from scourges and rods, which were only to be used on foreigners, slaves and gladiators. Even in the military the rod could be used only when the soldiers did not hold citizenship. In 70 BCE, Cicero accused the former governor of Sicily of having beaten Roman citizens with rods illegally. This rule also applied to Judea. When Paul was order bound with straps by the tribune in Jerusalem for the apostle to be interrogated under the scourge, Paul objected on the grounds of his Roman citizenship
and was freed. There were exceptions: in 68 CE the Roman Senate proposed that Nero be beaten to death with rods.

Because of its brutality flagellation was feared: it produced deep wounds and could even lead to death. Unlike Jewish law, which had a maximum of forty lashes, Roman law did not provide for limits. Flavius Josephus offers accounts of flagellations carried out in Palestine where the strokes were delivered with such strength that they exposed the victim’s innards. He also confirms that scourging was a prelude to crucifixion.

But intensity of the scourging of Jesus is unknown. The gospels dedicate almost nothing to this event and some claim it was not even significant enough to be described. And yet despite the scarcity of information, modern commentaries on the Passion and Biblical dictionaries provide a detailed description of the scourge, and

Abb. 45: Römische Geißeln, mit Knochenstücken durchsetzt (a) und mit Bleikugeln versehen (b, c).

Scourges from Herbert Haag and Adrian van dem Born, Bibel-Lexikon (Einsiedeln, Benziger, 1956), p. 527.
even drawings. Or so it seems.

In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, the Greek verb φραγελλόω is used to describe the Jesus’ scourging, a loan translation of the Latin flagellum, while in John’s Gospel μαστιγόω is used. So did Pilate’s soldiers use a scourge of cords, leather, chains, wood, or something else?

Unfortunately there is no information about the scourge, only a passage where John states that when Jesus “had made a scourge of cords, he drove them all out of the temple.” There is much more information about the flagellation that Jews carried out in synagogues, using a strap of calf leather divided into thongs. But interest in the scourge itself has not abated.

Sixteenth century Jesuit Juan de Maldonado believed that, since the Gospels were silent, identifying Jesus’ scourge was an “inane curiosity.” Others, however, developed conjectures. In 1416 Vincent Ferrer suggested Jesus was scourged with switches of thorns and brambles, then by whips with spiked tips, and finally by chains with hooks at the ends. The belief that these three types of scourges were used became widespread but there is no evidence that these really existed in ancient Rome at the time of Jesus.

The Shroud of Turin was critical. It bears the image of a tortured man whose lacerations clearly resemble those the crucified Jesus would have had. From the sixteenth century onward various authors sharing the belief that the Shroud belonged to Jesus of Nazareth have tried to identify the shape of the scourge from the shape of those marks. This gave rise to a search for an artifact that could have caused wounds.

The first printed book dedicated to the marks on the Shroud of Turin dates to 1598 and was written by Alfonso Paleotti, archbishop of Bologna. Daniele Mallonio later translated Paleotti into Latin and provided a description of the scourge, deduced from the marks on the Shroud. He was also familiar with the Revelations of St. Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373 CE), who described a corded scourge with spikes. Mallonio’s book included a picture of a flagellum aculeatum and he concluded “the countless wounds that the Shroud received from the body of Christ show that scourges of that type were used for the flagellation of Christ.”

Mallonio consulted the famous 1593 treatise De Cruce by Justus Lipsius for historical
information. Drawing on Athenaeus of Naucratis (second century CE) and Eustathius of Thessalonica (twelfth century CE), he described, among others, a scourge used in the East “made of astragalus bones.” Due to their near-cube shape, the astragalus bones of sheep have various uses, most famously as dice. But it strung on the cords of a scourge, these small bones rendered terrible blows on a victim. Apuleius’ Metamorphoses (second century CE) provides the best description of this astragalus-scourge, that the author calls tesseratum (strung with tesserae, or small cubes).

But when Lipsius translated into Latin the Greek passages containing the descriptions of that kind of scourge, he used the recent word taxillatum (from taxillus, i.e. small die, little cube). Unfortunately, many later authors thus circulated the false idea that the Romans actually had something called flagrum taxillatum, a scourge of little cubes.

So what was then the exact shape of the flagrum of Jesus? Mallonio reported the

existence of a fragment preserved in Rome in the church of Santa Maria in Via Lata. I went looking for this fragment: it is only a tiny piece of thin chain with a twisted nail attached, encased in a cross-reliquary together with other strange relics.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Shroud scholar Paul Vignon reinvestigated the scourge. He also felt the need to confirm the circular shape of the whip marks on the Shroud and searched for a very specific scourge with blunt spherical objects at the ends of its lashes.

Unlike Mallonio, Vignon was able to consult designs for Roman scourges in books such as the Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines by Charles Daremberg and Edmond Saglio and the Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities by Anthony Rich. The most striking was a flagrum talis tesseratum based on a marble bas-relief from the second century, with three strings dangling from a handle and twenty-four astragalus bones. But this is the ceremonial flagrum of Cybele’s priests, not a scourge used to carry out corporal punishment. Furthermore, it does not match the Shroud marks.

What about the archaeological evidence? Vignon had to trust the drawings he found in the books, unaware that these
misleading. Rich and Darenberg-Saglio’s illustrators had incorrectly reproduced what is only a whip, with nothing visible attached to its ends. In fact, all the designs that Vignon consulted were unreliable.

Where can we find a parallel that matches the Shroud? Some scholars suggest the so-called plumbatae, a fourth century CE instrument of torture. But this was not in use in first-century Palestine. Another example is the pendant with a spiral engraving and three chains with charms drawn in Rich’s dictionary, allegedly “copied from an original
found at Herculaneum.” However, nothing similar has ever been found at Pompeii and Herculaneum or at the Naples Archaeological Museum.

Rich’s object was actually copied from an eighteenth-century drawing belonging to a collector, the Count of Caylus (1692–1765). Caylus reports having bought the scourge along with other items from a seller in Rome, but erroneously identifies them as scourges dating to the Roman period. Fortunately, the Caylus collection has survived and I was able to track down all of the objects. The supposed scourge of Herculaneum is a “piece of tack” dating to the Iron Age, while the alleged “chain scourge” dates to the ninth-eighth century BCE.

Modern archeology is far more cautious. It is extremely difficult to find and identify actual scourges because of the perishable materials. Archaeologists must also take great care in accepting older classifications, especially when the artifact was subject
to arbitrary additions and restoration attempts by diggers and private collectors.

The only object I have been able to identify that might be a scourge, from Rome but undated, has a handle and 29 bronze balls strung onto two cords. <INSERT FIGURE 10> But the numerous spheres are much larger than those on the Shroud.

None of the numerous ancient images proposed depict a shape similar to the hypothetical scourge of the Shroud. Vignon was not able to locate a single one, either in real life, drawn or carved, that would leave marks matching those visible on the Shroud.

But medieval artistic representations often show soldiers striking Jesus with two different scourges, one of cords with knots or spherical weights, sometimes spiked, the other a cluster of switches. These can already be found from the first half of the ninth century; both types can be seen in the thirteenth century.

These two different scourges are documented in medieval art, not in Roman practices. Moreover, precisely in the middle of the fourteenth century the Flagellants movement began to spread widely. The marks on the man

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British Museum, Greek and Roman Antiquities, Bronze 2694.

Stuttgarter Psalter, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Cod.bibl. fol.23, f. 43v.
wrapped in the Shroud therefore coincide with wounds familiar to artists of the Middle Ages. Everything is compatible with when the Shroud was created, the first half of the fourteenth century.

Bible dictionaries and studies on the passion of Christ should remove references to a Roman scourge with pendants or circular weights. This is the product of medieval beliefs, erroneous archaeological identifications, and twentieth century Shroud-related conjectures.

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Chapter Four

The Face of the Baptized Jesus at Shivta
The Face of the Baptized Jesus at Shivta

By Emma Maayan-Fanar, Ravit Linn, Yotam Tepper and Guy Bar-Oz

“There is nothing grander than Aujeh and Abdeh, except Esbeita (Shivta)” (E.H. Palmer, The desert of the Exodus. Journeys on foot in the wilderness of the forty years’ wanderings, 1871).

The ruins of Byzantine Shivta in the Negev desert have always been breathtaking and its three monumental churches dominate the landscape. The churches were lavishly decorated, and the scene of The Transfiguration of Christ in the southern apse of the South Church, of which only shreds are visible today, is a clear testimony of paintings that once covered their walls.
This scene, identified in 1914 by pioneering explorers Leonard Wooley and T.E. Lawrence, was further studied only a century later by Pau Figuera. In 2016-17 our team managed to reconstruct precisely the details, postures and movements of the apostles in the scene and to recover one of its most important iconographic elements: the rays of light, unseen by naked eye.

It was generally assumed that no other wall painting at Shivta can be identified with certainty, despite observations made by scholars from the École Biblique in Jerusalem, who visited Shivta in 1926. They discerned two figures on the apse of the Baptistery next to the North Church and even proposed to identify the scene as the Baptism of Christ.

Only in 2017 could the iconography of the scene of the Baptism of Christ be confirmed. Only under special angle of the sunlight could we make out traces of a youth’s face emerging from the stones of the apse’s upper part. Close study reveals that it is a frontally positioned youth with short curly hair, prolonged face, big eyes and long nose. His neck and the upper part of his body are also traceable. The outlines of a face, possibly surrounded by a halo, on the upper left side of the apse belong to another, much bigger figure.
The location of the scene just above the crucifix-shaped Baptist font suggests that it depicts the Baptism of Christ (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-23). The scene’s popularity in Early Christian art facilitates its identification. It appears in the catacombs in Rome (e.g., the Peter and Marcelinus catacomb); in illuminated manuscripts (e.g., the 6th-century Rabulla Gospels, Florence, Biblioteca Mediceo Laurenziana, cod. Plut. I, 56, fol. 4v); in numerous small objects; and in churches, monasteries and baptisteries, the most notable examples being the Arian and Neonian baptisteries in Ravenna, c. 500 CE.

The scene usually consists of the two main figures: John the Baptist, standing on the bank of the Jordan River, his right hand placed on the head of Christ, who stands in the water. Consistent with the early Christian iconographic convention, the figure of John the Baptist is proportionally enlarged as compared with that of Christ; he is much smaller and younger, in keeping with the symbolic notion of Baptism as rebirth.

In Shivta this proportional distinction is clearly evident as John the Baptist’s head is much larger than Christ’s. A...
red half-circle above Christ’s head may refer to the River Jordan, an element that appears in several 6th-century scenes (e.g., Fragment of ivory panel, Egypt or Syria, British Museum, 1896,0618.1). Other known iconographic elements, such as a dove descending from the sky, sometimes complemented by the hand of God, fish in the River Jordan, personification of the river, and angels on the river’s opposite bank holding Christ’s garments, are not visible at Shivta. Nevertheless, the compositional arrangement of the two remaining figures as well as traces of paint elsewhere on the apse, suggest that they constituted part of a wider scene, which might have contained additional figures and motifs.

The facial details of the young Christ, the best surviving part of the Shivta wall painting, can readily be placed in the local iconographic tradition corresponding to the 6th–7th-century images in Egypt and Syro-Palestine. His short curly hair also points in that direction. As Michele Bacci argues, in the 6th century the short-haired image of Christ gradually became replaced by a long-haired image, believed to be more authentic. In the East, Syria, Egypt and Palestine, the short-haired iconography seems to have been longer lasting. This is also attested in the Baptism scenes: while the young Christ in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna has long hair, images from the East retain short-haired scheme (e.g., the 6th-7th century pilgrim tokens from Qal’at Sem’an (British Museum,
1973,0501.29 and 1973,0501.30); the 6th-century ivory plaque from Syria or Egypt (British Museum, 1896,0618.1), or the Armenian Gospels, (Erevan, Matenadaran, MS 2374, fol. 229v).

Because little left of the painting, it is very important to continue the detailed research and documentation before any measures can be taken. Its poor state of preservation makes this scheme highly vulnerable. Our goal is to study the painting’s techniques, the materials used, the conservation’s main issues and the best ways to protect the painting. We would like also to compare it with the techniques of other important painted scheme of the Transfiguration in the South Church at Shivta.

The exact date of Shivta’s churches, the North Church in particular, is uncertain. Built first as a mono-apsidal basilica, it was modified into a tri-apsidal basilica in the early 6th century. Built at the northern edge of the settlement bordering on the desert, it is the richest of three churches, with intensive use of marble to clad the walls, floors, inscriptions, columns and pilaster headings. The earliest inscription from the graves in the western part of the Baptistery dates to 612 CE, while the latest inscription is from 679 CE, well after the Islamic conquest of the area. These data, however, do not help us in any way to date the Baptistery or its wall painting.

The importance of the find of the wall painting in the Baptistery of the North Church at Shivta is enormous: it is a rare survival of early Byzantine iconography and an original
wall painting in its architectural setting. This finding enriches our knowledge of subjects and techniques used to decorate early Byzantine churches, providing insight into the religious and the cultural life of Byzantine Shivta, and bringing us closer to early Christian representations of the Christ.

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For Further Reading


Chapter Five

Jesus as a Security Risk: Intelligence and Repression in the Roman Empire
Intelligence personnel tend to have a view of events that differs from historians, even other people in government, and certainly from the general public. They are often accused of being realpolitikers or just plain cynical. Although crude jokes are made about the lack of morality in the intel game (the world’s second oldest profession — with far fewer morals than the first, etc.), the fact is that these are men and women serving their country. Their goal is to keep their own country safe, or in a colonial situation, to keep control of their country’s possessions. Insurgencies are their worst nightmare. They have to provide intelligence to decision-makers in a timely manner in what may turn out to be life and death situations. Like historians they never have as much evidence as they would like, but unlike historians they don’t get to ruminate on issues for a long time with 20-20 hindsight.
The story of Passion Week is one Christians all think they know, but when looked at through the eyes of a fictional chief of station in Jerusalem, it takes on very different characteristics. The scene is Jerusalem in the first century of our era. Rome had taken over Judaea and turned it into a province under the direction of a procurator in 6 CE after a fierce nationalistic resistance led by Judas of Gamala. Rome put down the revolt, but Judaea remained an unhappy place. It contained many clandestine groups fighting Roman oppression including a group of assassins called sicarii who struck at Roman collaborators. The general Roman practice was to strike back at any Jewish terrorist activity, no matter how minor, with sharply oppressive military violence. In fact, they retaliated even against non-violent protestors.

Into this political maelstrom came a carpenter from Galilee. If you were Pontius Pilate’s intelligence chief, you would have started a file on Jesus immediately, and here’s why: Stories had started to arrive from Galilee in the north about a street preacher, a miracle worker and healer, named Jesus.

He drew large crowds, and the Romans did not like crowds because they could get
out of hand and lead to civil disturbance. Had there been an agent in the crowd at the Sermon on the Mount he would have heard messages like “The meek shall inherit the earth” and “The first will come last and the last will come first,” which to Roman ears sounded highly subversive. He was called to his preaching by John the Baptist, another troublemaker who was later put to death by Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, who knew a little something about security. Jesus caused so much trouble in Galilee that Herod had him expelled from the province, and now he was heading for Jerusalem. Had there been GPS systems back then, there might be a flashing dot on a map moving south.

Jesus was not alone. The men who accompanied

Giotto di Bondone, Entry into Jerusalem, fresco, created between 1304-06, Arena Chapel (Cappella Scrovegni), Padua, Italy.
Jesus had names that suggested revolutionary leanings: Simon the Zealot, Judas the Sicarius, Simon the Freedom Fighter, James and John, the Sons of Thunder. And now they were heading towards Jerusalem at the most politically volatile time of year, Passover — a time when the Romans reinforced their garrison there lest the crowds become unruly. The governor himself came to Jerusalem, soldiers patrolled the roofs of the porticoes of the Temple so they could be on the look-out for troublemakers. Known agitators were watched.

Did Jesus walk into Jerusalem quietly as most pilgrims did? No, he made a public entrance, re-enacting a passage from the Old Testament, Zechariah 9:9, describing the Messiah who would ride in on a donkey with people shouting “Hosanna!” Palms leaves were thrown before him, and he was called “son of David” and “King.” The problem with this staged scenario was that the Romans did not recognize any king but their own emperor. To call yourself Messiah, (meshiach in Hebrew) meant you were claiming the title of the rightfully anointed King of the Jews. Publicly claiming this title was an act of sedition all by itself. If the crowd had been prepped ahead of time for his arrival, and if they were well aware of the symbolism, then this was a conscious political act, not a misinterpretation or sheer coincidence. There would most certainly be consequences.

With tens of thousands of pilgrims in the city for the holiday, any kind of demonstration could cause civil unrest and possibly a major riot in the city. Both Jewish and Roman
authorities would now be watching Jesus’ movements. Did he lie low after his grand entrance? No, he did anything but. He went to the Temple, overturned the moneychangers’ tables sending coins flying and people running. He made statements about the destruction of the Temple. An attack on the Temple, be it verbal or physical, could not be ignored. He now had the attention of the Temple police and the nearby Roman garrison. Why they did not seize him immediately is unclear; perhaps he was spirited away by sympathizers.

Jesus went underground. He had to arrange for a place that he and his followers could have their Passover meal, but it had to be done at a safe house. Rather than tell all the disciples the place, he made special arrangements by himself and then told only two of his followers. The rest did not know until the very day, on a “need to know” basis. He gave two men very round-about directions on how to find the place. They were told to find a man carrying a pitcher of water — a rather unusual sight since carrying water was usually a woman’s job.

They were instructed to follow this man, and when he turned into a house they were to ask him “where the master’s room was reserved.” Then they were to tell the rest only later in the evening of the location of the meal. Jesus had to avoid arrest before holding his last supper. The meal was for men only. Perhaps he expected violence and did not want his mother or the other female followers to be put in harm’s way.

As we all know, there was a double agent in the room. Judas left the meal to betray Jesus to the Romans. Perhaps he was working for them all along. What he betrayed to the Romans was the route Jesus would take to leave the city after the meal, through
the Garden of Gethsemane. And since Jesus was from Galilee and not well known in Jerusalem, the Romans would need someone to identify him by sight to the Roman authorities. Judas accomplished this by kissing Jesus to mark him as the one. Then the authorities put Jesus under arrest, but not without some violence. At least some of Jesus’ followers were armed, but in the end they fled and Jesus was led off to the elder judges, known as the Sanhedrin.

Jesus’ spectacles and acts of obvious provocation certainly spelled trouble for the Jewish authorities. The Sanhedrin were responsible for handing over any troublemakers to the Roman authorities. As collaborators with the Romans, they were in a precarious position. They did not like betraying Jews to the occupiers, but on the other hand, if they did nothing and left the Romans to take action, the army might strike back against the entire population of the city. There was no religious charge against Jesus; claiming to be Messiah was not heresy. Had there been a charge of heresy, the Sanhedrin could have had Jesus stoned, but that body had no jurisdiction in criminal cases. Only the Romans, as military occupiers, had the authority to execute. So whether or not there was an actual “trial” before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leaders immediately turned Jesus over to the Roman authorities to avoid trouble. <IMAGE 6>

The trial on the charge of sedition was short and pretty much followed the standard form for Roman provincial trials. It was held in the morning, the prisoner was softened up with a beating, he appeared before the governor, Pontius Pilate, and was found guilty. He was sentenced to death — the same punishment given to all insurgents. He was crucified with a sign on top of the cross saying “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” as a warning to anyone else with similar aspirations. The message would have been clear to any passerby: recognize the Roman emperor as the only king, or die trying to replace him with someone else.

The Roman reaction to these situations was typical, swift and decisive. Josephus mentions 40 different men who claimed to be the Jewish messiah around the time of Jesus. Every single one of them was killed either in a military action or by crucifixion. Writers have been trying ever since to “soften” our view of Pilate and his actions, but this is a man who was fired from his position 10 years later for excessive cruelty. One must ask how cruel you have to be to get this distinction from the Roman administration! If Pilate’s superiors found any fault in his administration of Judaea, it
was not weakness or lack of patriotism. If anything, he may have played a much more aggressive role in the trial of Jesus than the Gospels suggest.

So was there an insurrection? Care was taken in the writing of the Gospels to edit out any suggestion that Jesus was a revolutionary, or that there was an insurrection going on, but there are hints. In Mark 15:7, it is revealed that a man named Barabbas had been guilty of a murder in “the uprising” as had the other two men crucified on either side of Jesus. Perhaps Jesus was taken in during the same sweep of “the usual suspects.” Some scholars have pushed the evidence to an extreme. They see Jesus as a political opponent to the Roman regime, who used armed force to raise an abortive insurrection. To them, the Gospels are nothing other than a huge cover-up of a perfectly simple story. The feeding of the 5,000 becomes an abortive insurrection. Jesus’ counsel to “render unto Caesar” was a disguised call not to pay tribute. The

Rembrandt van Rijn, The Three Crosses, 1653.
Cleansing of the Temple was, in reality, a violent occupation by Jesus and his men, perhaps the very civil discord for which Barabbas had been arrested. Fortunately, we need not stretch the evidence this far to justify the Roman reaction in our version of the story.

Roman intelligence had done its job correctly. They had detected a public figure stirring up the people; they had watched him create public disturbances and preach things contrary to Rome’s interests. He was rounded up and eliminated. They did not wait to see how things would play out if they left him on the streets. Scholars will continue to argue on the precise nature and meaning of the Triumphal Entry, the Cleansing of the Temple, the disciple’s swords and the arrest of Jesus, the Barabbas episode, and the trial or trials. No consensus is ever likely to be reached based on the available evidence. But the attitude of Jesus to the Temple, as well as his sayings concerning social injustice would have had to bring him, sooner or later, into conflict with the authorities whose task it was to maintain order and to whom every national movement appeared suspicious. Witnesses may have included individuals willing to sell information to the Romans. In a poverty stricken province like Judaea, it would not have been hard to find what local sources called “a mouth willing to talk.” Reports from various agents may have been confused or contradicting as happens with all such reports. Agents may have exaggerated the accounts to make themselves seem more important. Some of the intelligence may have been useful, some not. Whether or not Jesus actually claimed to be king, intelligence may have reported only that people were saying he did. What matters in this case is not the literal truth, but rather how the situation appeared to the Roman administration based on the intelligence it had at hand at the time.

From the point of view of Rome’s immediate security needs, Pilate had Jesus crucified for a justifiable reason: He was a security risk. Pilate was acting in Rome’s self-interest. In the context of the first century occupation of Palestine, this meant nipping any revolutionary action in the bud. Like many decision-makers, Pilate made a judgment on the basis of the intelligence he had, even if that intelligence was fragmentary. Whether the threat to Roman security was real or imagined is, in some ways, irrelevant. There may have been an ongoing intelligence operation gathering information on a planned revolt (by Barabbas?) running concurrent with Jesus’ actions, and Jesus simply got caught in the net. The governor of Judaea made a political and military decision for the protection of his province. Like many modern decision-makers, Pilate has since
become the victim of Monday morning quarterbacks who second guess his judgment. He was not in an enviable position becoming known as the administrator who had crucified the man who would become the mythologized center of a new world religion. Neither Pilate, not any other Roman administrator, even with the best intelligence, could have known that their decision would have such worldwide repercussions, starting with the Roman Empire.

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