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The Garden Tomb

THE REV. M. L. LOANE, M.A.,

Vice-Principal, Moore Theological College, Sydney.

IT is perhaps impossible to locate with final certainty the actual sepulchre or even the burial ground where the body of Christ was laid after its removal from the Cross. For centuries many people throughout Christendom have venerated the Church of The Holy Sepulchre as the site. To this day, most churches—the Roman and the Russian, the Greeks and the Copts, the Armenian and the Ethiopian—cling to the traditional belief and rank this spot first among the Holy Places. Few indeed save members of the Reformed Churches would dare to think otherwise. But despite every endeavour to remove it, one insuperable objection remains. It is impossible to see how the site occupied by The Church of The Holy Sepulchre could ever have been outside the city walls. The most recent excavations in 1938 severely diminish any likelihood of a satisfactory answer to this problem. It has been found that exactly underneath the Damascus Gate there stood the gate of an older wall, possibly that of Nehemiah's wall. At all events, this discovery means that almost beyond doubt the walls of the city in Gospel days enclosed the traditional site of the Tomb of Christ. That fact destroys the value of the tradition.

However, within the last sixty years there has been a growing body of opinion among Evangelical believers in favour of another site known as The Garden Tomb. Its discovery was due to General Gordon, who was stationed in Palestine for two or three years prior to his fatal expedition to the Sudan. He acted upon various hints gleaned from the New Testament and conducted the excavations which revealed its existence. His first clue for the location of the Sepulchre lay in the statement that when Christ was led forth to die, He "suffered without the gate" (Heb. 13. 12). That was in accordance with Hebrew Law. The Jews did not bury their dead within the precincts of the city neither were criminals put to death inside the walls. And the execution of Christ was no exception to the rule. Thus that fact took Gordon outside the city. His next clue lay in the description of the scene of His death as "a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull" (Matt. 27. 33). This skull-shaped hill has been identified almost beyond question on the north side of the city just opposite the Damascus Gate. On the green summit of that memorable hill, He was crucified. Thus that fact took Gordon to the place of His death. His third clue lay in the declaration that the place where He was buried was not far distant: "For the sepulchre was nigh at hand" (John 19. 42). It was easy of access from the Cross. The full force of this fact is brought to light by a glance at the previous verse: "Now in the place where He was crucified, there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre" (19. 41). Thus the place of burial was so close to the scene of death that the Cross and the Tomb were not merely "nigh" each other, they were in the same garden on the same

plot of ground. That fact led General Gordon to excavate along the cliff-face of Golgotha. The digging had not proceeded very far before the spades broke through into the empty space of a tomb. The adjacent land was then excavated and the discovery of an ancient wine-press proved that in Roman days it had been a garden. Here then was a tomb outside the city wall, close to the scene of the Cross, and in a place where there was a Garden, and many believe with Gordon that this is the Sepulchre where they laid Him.

We may trace the hints in the Gospel records which confirm this belief by a study of the kind of tomb they depict. There are three definite marks mentioned by the Gospels. First it was a rock tomb. Each of the Synoptic Gospels speaks of the fact that the sepulchre was hewn out of the rock (Matt. 27. 60 ; Mark 15. 46 ; Luke 23. 53). Caves were often turned into vaults and used as tombs. But Joseph of Arimathea had hewn his sepulchre out of the living rock. And this fact corresponds with the Garden Tomb for it was cut out of the virgin rock in the face of the cliff. Then it was a new tomb. Matthew describes it as "his own new tomb" (Matt. 27. 60). Luke and John both enlarge the description to say that it was a tomb wherein never man before was laid (Luke 23. 53 ; John 19. 41). No corruption had ever defiled that sepulchre. And this fact corresponds with the Garden Tomb for it bears the marks of a sepulchre, not only unused but not quite finished. And it was a sealed tomb. Matthew and Mark both describe how Joseph, before he departed, "rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre" (Matt. 27. 60 ; Mark 15. 46). Mark also mentions the query of the women among themselves "Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?" (Mark 16. 3). All the Gospels note that they found that the stone had been moved, but Matthew alone tells us how, after the earthquake, it was an angel who rolled it back and sat upon it (Matt. 28. 2). And this fact corresponds with the Garden Tomb, for outside there is a groove for a rolling stone to be moved to or from the entrance to the sepulchre. The Crusaders, who did not understand the significance of these facts, used the stone ridge of the groove for tethering their horses. Thus the Garden Tomb has the true credentials of the Gospel sepulchre, for it is characterised by the three marks there denoted. It is a rock tomb : it is a new tomb : it is a sealed tomb.

But there are three other notes which characterise the Gospel sepulchre. They are not expressly mentioned, but they are tacitly implied. The fourth Gospel describes how John outran Peter and arrived first at the Tomb : "And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying ; yet went he not in" (John 20. 5). From the mouth of the Tomb he was able to see what it contained without the aid of artificial light. Therefore, it must have been a light tomb. That agrees with the tomb Gordon found. High up to the right of the doorway, there is a deep shaft cut through the rock as a window. The light streams in so clearly that a good photograph can be taken inside without a time exposure. This is very remarkable, because no other light tomb has ever been discovered near Jerusalem. The Tombs of the Kings are shrouded in darkness, and the so-called Tomb of Lazarus at Bethany is like the disused shaft of an ancient mine. But the Garden Tomb admits the light of day so freely that everything can

be seen at a glance. Then Luke's account describes how the women assembled inside the tomb (Luke 24. 3, 10). Three are mentioned by name, and "other women with them" are also denoted. These women all entered the tomb where they beheld "two men . . . in shining garments." There were then at least six people inside the sepulchre at the same time, and therefore it must have been a large tomb. That also agrees with the tomb Gordon found. There is a porch inside the doorway where mourners could stand, and it was large enough to receive at least six people without discomfort. Again two of the Gospels describe how the women came to the Tomb laden with spices in order to embalm the body (Mark 16. 1; Luke 24. 1). When Christ was taken down from the Cross His body had been wound in linen clothes and spices had been wrapped up in them. No decay would take place within three days at that season of the year. But to undo the winding sheet and embalm the body would require space. And that also agrees with the tomb that Gordon found. There is a large flat stone on the floor between the shelves for the bodies which would provide ample room for the embalmment. Thus in every point the Garden Tomb tallies with what we are told of the Gospel Sepulchre.

The Sepulchre has the appearance of a family vault. Provision was made for three bodies, evidently for a man and his wife on either side with a smaller shelf for a child at the back. Each tomb has two ledges; one projects from the wall above and one runs along the outside edge of the actual shelf. Two slabs would fit into these ledges in order to cover the body. The perpendicular slab would rest in the lower ledge and the horizontal slab would rest on the upper ledge. Only one tomb, that opposite the doorway, was actually finished. The head would lie towards the west and the rock is chiselled into a slope for the shoulders. This would explain why there was a separate napkin for the head apart from the winding sheet for the body. A man who stood at the door and looked in could see the whole length of the grave except the head which was hidden behind a stone seat. That would explain why John did not see the napkin as well as the linen clothes until he had followed Peter into the Tomb. There is a stone at either end of the grave which would provide a comfortable seat. That would explain the reference in the fourth Gospel to Mary who saw two angels sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet of the place where His body had lain (John 20. 12).

There need be no surprise that the scene was not regarded as sacred by those who must have known the site. Archæology shows that it was. There are two early Christian tombs in the neighbouring garden. One bears the Latin inscription "Buried near his Lord", the other "Onesimus, Deacon of the Church of the Resurrection". Thus we have a two-fold hint as to the accuracy of Gordon's discovery. But, further still, archæology shows that an early church was in fact built over the very site. In front of the tomb are the remains of an ancient Church floor. Over the entrance to the tomb is an ecclesiastical arch. A long cut to the left indicates the site of ancient cloisters, and a deep basin with a drain indicates the site of a font for immersion. It is known that Herod Antipas erected a wall that encircled this site for a brief period between 43-70 A.D. This is conclusive that the tomb must have been built before that time. Sir Flinders Petrie

at Christmas 1937 examined the site, but declined to date it unless complete excavations were carried out. However, he said that the Tomb itself undoubtedly belonged to Herodian times. The Church was probably built between 43-70 A.D. and was destroyed after the fall of Jerusalem. Holy Places were consistently desecrated by the erection of Temples to Venus on the Sacred sites. The doves cotes over the tomb and the Tree of Life of Adonis traced in the wall show that such a heathen shrine was raised in place of the Church.

Thus the site was desecrated and then forgotten. Tradition grew up eventually round the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as the result of Queen Helena's dream in the 4th century. No one thought of looking elsewhere. The Crusaders were so ignorant of the character of the place that they used it as a stable for their horses. It remained for General Gordon to reveal the Garden Tomb. After his death the plot of ground was bought by subscription and the ownership is now vested in the hands of Evangelical Trustees. No Church or building has been raised on the site since then, but the ground is preserved in its original character as a garden where the visitor may muse and read. Those who believe that this tomb is the Sepulchre of the Gospels have met with virulent opposition from advocates of the traditional site. But the positive evidence in its favour from Scripture alone is far more convincing than the legends about Queen Helena and The Church of the Holy Sepulchre.
