

City of David: Where Was King David Buried?

By Steve Ray

Scripture tells us that King David was buried in the City of David. Since Scripture refers to both Jerusalem and Bethlehem as “the City of David” some say David was buried in Jerusalem, other suggest he was buried in Bethlehem.

In Scripture there are two cities called “The City of David.” The Old Testament (OT) uses the phrase 49 times – each time referring to Jerusalem, never to Bethlehem. The New Testament (NT) uses the phrase twice in Luke’s Gospel and each time it refers to Bethlehem.¹

So, what is “The City of David” – and where were King David and his successors buried?

In my documentary [*David and Solomon: Expanding the Kingdom*](#) (produced by Ignatius Press) I assert that David was buried in Jerusalem, actually in the area called Silwan today. However, some have suggested by some that David was buried in Bethlehem where he was born and raised. This is not because of any evidence; rather, it is because of a confusion caused by the phrase “city of David” being used of Bethlehem by Luke. And also for other reasons that arose subsequent to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD (details to follow).

So, loving a good biblical mystery, I decided to dig a bit (no pun intended) and see what I could find.

Old Testament

“In the (OT) the ‘city of David’ is Jerusalem (2 Sa. 5:7, 9; *et al.*), but in the New Testament (NT) the description is applied to Bethlehem (Lu. 2:11)... But the significance lies not in its name but in its being the place where David was brought up and where, according to Micah 5:2 the Messiah would be born. Thus the attentive reader is prepared for the birth of a child to a descendant of David in the city of David.”²

In 2 Samuel 5:7–10 we learn this about the origin of the phrase “city of David”.

“Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion, that is, **the city of David**. And David said on that day, Whoever would smite the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, who are hated by David’s soul.’ Therefore it is said, “The blind and the lame shall not come into the house.” And **David dwelt in the stronghold, and called it the city of David.**”

¹ Luke 2:4 “And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.”

Luke 2:11 “For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

² Marshall, I. H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke : A commentary on the Greek text*. The New international Greek testament commentary (105). Exeter [Eng.: Paternoster Press].

For an ancient reader familiar with the OT it would be surprising to hear St. Luke describe Bethlehem as the City of David, since in the OT that title and description was limited exclusively to Jerusalem (e.g., 2 Sam. 5:7, 9; 6:10, 12, 16, 1 Chron. 11:5–7, etc.). In the Septuagint, which Luke would have been very familiar with since he was a Greek and it was written in Greek, never mentions Bethlehem as the city of David.

To understand why St. Luke might refer to Bethlehem as the City of David, we should view it as a “descriptive phrase” to emphasize the connection between David and Bethlehem since he was born and raised there and it was the city in which his descendant, the Messiah would be born.”

In digging through the OT and ancient literature, I found a few passages which identify the tomb of David in Jerusalem, not Bethlehem. As stated above, in my documentary I conclude that David and the kings of Judah were buried in the southern tip of the original city of David (Ophal Ridge in Silwan) not far from the Pool of Siloam in the rocky caves and tombs found there.

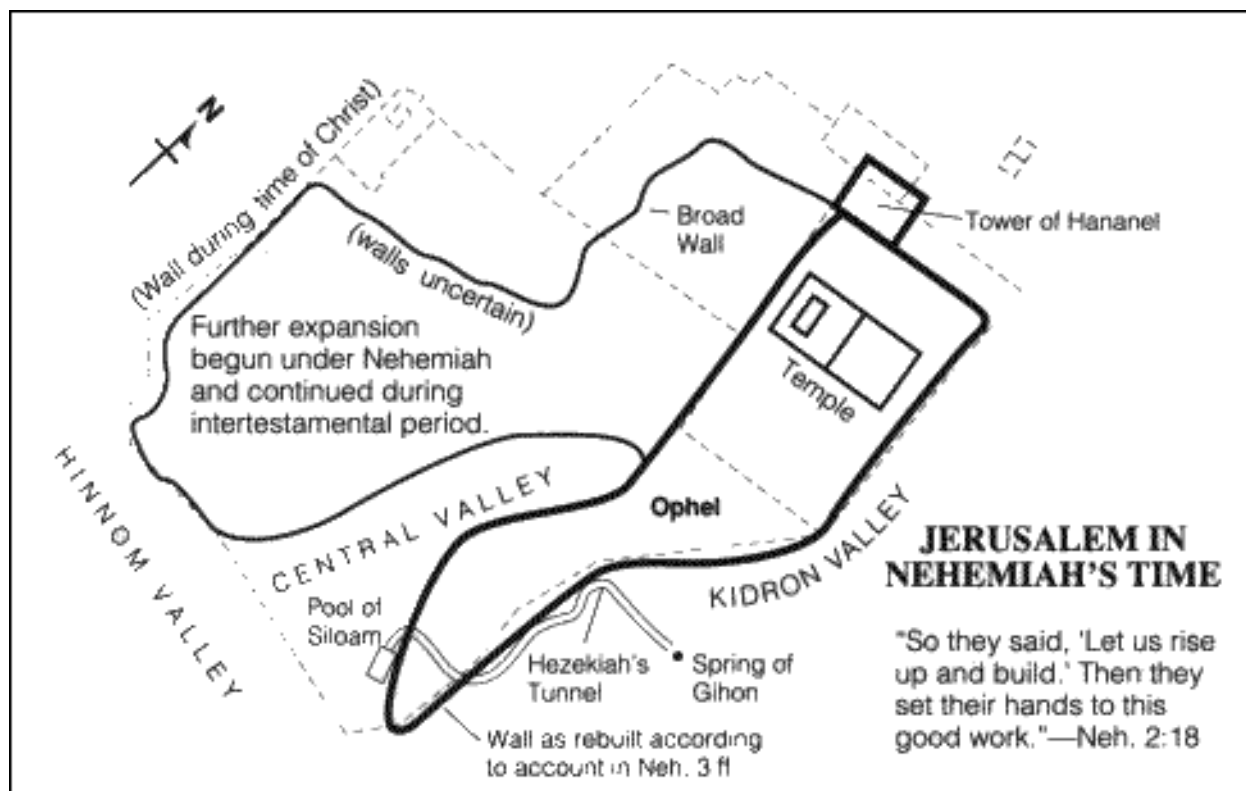
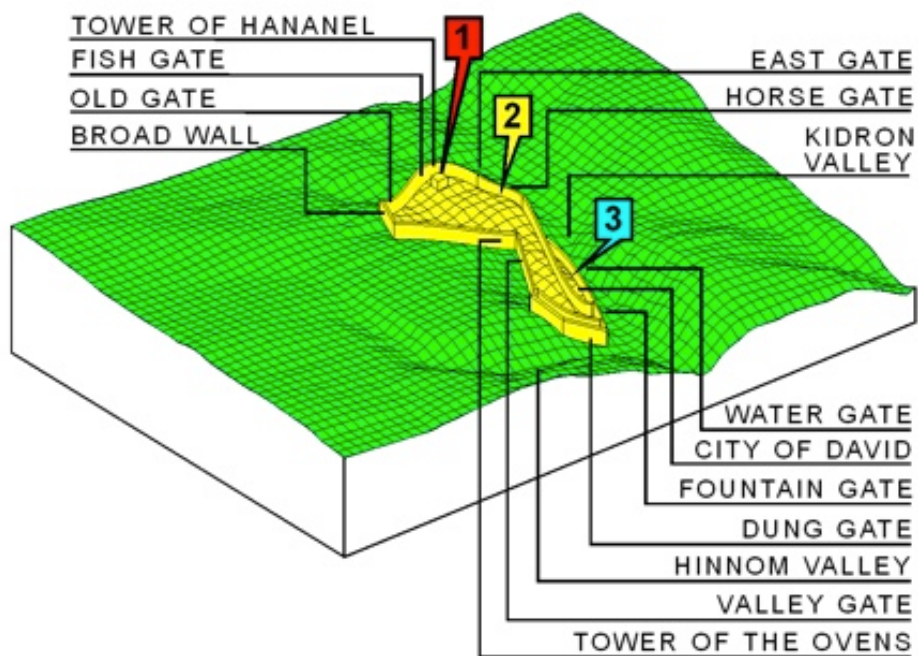
David was buried in the city David and all subsequent good kings were also buried in the tombs of the kings in the City of David (2 Chron 32:33). It is highly unlikely that they were all taken down to Bethlehem, especially when in the OT it was Jerusalem exclusively that was given this title. No precedent for or indication of any other location.

After the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 the Jews were deported to Babylon. Upon their return about seventy years later they began to rebuild the city. In chapter 2 of Nehemiah the prophet laments: “Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ sepulchres, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

Then in Nehemiah 3:15 and 12:37 the “city of David” again refers exclusively to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 3:15–16 informs us where David was buried, near the Fountain Gate in Jerusalem. “And Shallum the son of Colhozeh, ruler of the district of Mizpah, repaired the Fountain Gate; he rebuilt it and covered it and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars; and he built the wall of the Pool of Shelah of the king’s garden, as far as the stairs that go down from the City of David. After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, ruler of half the district of Beth-zur, repaired to a point opposite the sepulchres of David, to the artificial pool, and to the house of the mighty men.”

The maps below show the places mentioned and the area of the wall repaired by Nehemiah at the lower point of the ancient city of David found today in Silwan. You can see the comment at the bottom of the map pointing to a section of wall very near the Pool of Siloam. This is located near the ancient tombs discovered there and which I show in my documentary on David and Solomon.



New Testament

About four hundred years later, St. Peter on the day of Pentecost reports in Acts 2:29 “Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.” Now he could have been implying “We know where it is somewhere in our land of Judea” but it would seem more likely that as he was leaving the Upper Room and standing near the Temple, speaking from Jerusalem, that the tomb was there in the city and everyone knew the nearby location very well.

Josephus

Josephus, the Jewish writer, confirms this location for David’s tomb in Jerusalem in the 1st century AD. Here are several quotes,

Josephus: 3. (392) He was buried by his son Solomon, in Jerusalem, with great magnificence, and with all the other funeral pomp which kings use to be buried with; moreover, he had great and immense wealth buried with him, the vastness of which may be easily conjectured at by what I shall now say; (393) for a thousand and three hundred years afterwards, Hyrcanus the high priest, when he was besieged by Antiochus, that was called the Pious, the son of Demetrius, and was desirous of giving him money to get him to raise the siege, and draw off his army; and having no other method of compassing the money, opened one room of David’s sepulchre, and took out three thousand talents, and gave part of that sum to Antiochus, and by this means caused the siege to be raised, as we have informed the reader elsewhere. (394) Nay, after him, and that many years, Herod the king opened another room, and took away a great deal of money, and yet neither of them came at the coffins of the kings themselves, for their bodies were buried under the earth so artfully, that they did not appear even to those that entered into their monuments;—but so much shall suffice us to have said concerning these matters.

Josephus 5. (61) And now Antiochus was so angry at what he had suffered from Simeon, that he made an expedition into Judea, and sat down before Jerusalem, and besieged Hyrcanus; but Hyrcanus opened the sepulchre of David, who was the richest of all kings, and took thence about three thousand talents in money, and induced Antiochus, by the promise of three thousand talents, to raise the siege. ³

According to Josephus, Herod’s attempt was thwarted when two of his men were killed by a sudden burst of flame upon entering the tomb. Having second thoughts, Herod abandoned the project and built a white marble portico over the tomb.⁴ This would have been the monument referred to by St. Peter.

³ Josephus, F., & Whiston, W. (1996). *The works of Josephus : Complete and unabridged*. Peabody: Hendrickson.

⁴ Polhill, J. B. (2001). *Vol. 26: Acts* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (114). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

We learn from Fr. Eugene Hoade, OFM that, “Non-biblical narratives speak of a monument to David well known to Jerusalem and situated on the eastern hill. Josephus Flavius says the Tomb was opened by the High Priest Hyrcanus and by Herod the Great who built a monument of white stone at the mouth of the Tomb (Antiq. 7, 15, 3; 16,7,1). We can understand St. Peter when he says to the people of Jerusalem ‘and his sepulchre is with us even to this day’ (Acts, 2,29). Tombs were forbidden within the city, but Tosefta Baba Bathra (1,2, p. 399) says: ‘In Jerusalem it was not permitted to leave tombs with the exception of those of the house of David and that of the prophetess Hulda’. St. Epiphanius (c.315–403, Bp. of Salamis, native of Palestine) says that Isaiah was buried at the fountain of Siloe ‘near to the tomb of King David’.

“The Tomb of David fell into ruin in 133, as Dion Cassius says (Hist. Rom. 69,14), and after that information is vague. The memory was venerated in different places by Jews, Christians and Moslems.”⁵

Early Church

In the 4th century St. Jerome wrote, “We shall see Lazarus come forth bound with grave clothes, we shall look upon the waters of Jordan purified for the washing of the Lord. Thence we shall pass to the folds of the shepherds, we shall pray together in the mausoleum of David.”⁶ This obviously was not referring to Bethlehem, rather the area near Bethany, the Jordan and SE Jerusalem.

Jewish Christian commentator David Stern writes, “Today the Jews pray at a ceremonial tomb on Mount Zion. However, it is very unlikely that this is the actual tomb and according to Nehemiah it is impossible. The Encyclopedia Judaica informs us, “The tomb of David was probably destroyed at the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt (135 c.e.). However, various sites were suggested by popular traditions over the ages and the one which became generally accepted was the place now called Mt. Zion. This tradition is about 1,000 years old, first being recorded in Crusader times” (*Encyclopedia Judaica* 5:1330). In other words, the site now called King David’s Tomb isn’t.”⁷

Biblical scholar F. F. Bruce writes, “It was a matter of public knowledge in and around Jerusalem that David—the “patriarch,” as Peter calls him (because he was the founder of a dynasty)—died and was buried and had never been raised from the tomb where he lay to the south of the city, near Siloam. His tomb is mentioned in Neh. 3:16 (the site having been remembered from preexilic times). It was entered and robbed by John Hyrcanus during the siege of Jerusalem in 135/4 B.C.; over a century later Herod,

⁵ Eugene Hoade, *Guide to the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press).

⁶ Schaff, P. (1997). *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. VI* (65). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

⁷ Stern, D. H. (1996). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 2:29). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

having been halted (by divine action, it was believed) in an attempt to follow Hyrcanus's example, made amends for his impiety by building a monument of white marble at the entrance to the tomb. Like David, Jesus had died and been buried, but even if his tomb could be pointed out, there was no need to do so because, unlike David, he was risen; he was no longer there.⁸

Why Some Thought David was Buried in Bethlehem

Catholic biblical scholar J. A. Fitzmyer, S.J. writes, "According to 1 Kgs 2:10, the king 'was buried in the city of David,' usually identified with Zion, the southeastern hill of Jerusalem, south of the Temple area (2 Sam 5:7, 9; 6:10, 12, 16; 2 Kgs 9:28; 12:22; 1 Chr 11:5, 7). A later Christian tradition transferred the name Zion to the western hill of Jerusalem sometime in the fourth century, probably on the basis of Mic 3:12 ("Zion shall be plowed as a field, Jerusalem shall be reduced to ruins, and the mount of the Temple to a wooded hill"), when the fourth-century Bordeaux Pilgrim, the earliest known Christian pilgrim to the Holy Land from western Europe, understood it of the two hills of Jerusalem: since the mount of the Temple was the eastern, Zion had to be the western. Later, about the tenth century, possibly on the basis of Acts 2, David's tomb was located in the vicinity of where the Cenacle was thought to have been in western Jerusalem. Modern Jews also recognize this tradition (Z. Vilnay, *The Guide to Israel* [16th ed.; Jerusalem: Ahiever, 1973], 94–96).

Fitzmyer also mentions that the later tradition suggesting David was buried in Bethlehem probably arose due to the fact that David had been born in Bethlehem. "Josephus too records that King David was buried "in Jerusalem" (*Ant.* 7.15.3 §392), but Bethlehem was also called "the city of David" (Luke 2:4, 11), because it was the city of his boyhood and youth. In addition, David is known in the OT as the son of "an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah" (1 Sam 17:12) or of "Jesse the Bethlehemite" (1 Sam 17:58; cf. 20:6), whence grew up another tradition, traceable to Eusebius at least, that locates David's tomb in Bethlehem (*ELS*, §§91, 108.4, 110.4, 113.2, 129.2)."⁹

Modern Scholars

Archaeologist and Missionary priest Fr. Bargil Pixner, OSB comes to the same conclusions in his book *Paths of the Messiah*. In his section *The Wandering of David's Tomb* he writes, "[Referring to the horizontal gallery graves in Silwan] However, even if that was not the genuine location for David's burial, his tomb must be somewhere *on the eastern hill*, within the City of David. ... This tomb must therefore have been within

⁸ Bruce, F. F. (1988). *The Book of the Acts*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (65–66). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

⁹ Fitzmyer, J. A., S.J. (2008). *The Acts of the Apostles: A new translation with introduction and commentary* (257). New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

the city, not far from the pool of Siloam but some distance from the Temple Mount exactly where Weill found the [horizontal gallery graves].”¹⁰

On the following pages Pixner then explains why some Jews and later Christians began to claim that David’s tomb was in Bethlehem. See Appendix 1.

One last expert will be invoked. Jerome Murphy-O’Conner in his monumental “*The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide* states matter-of-factly, “David, of course, was buried in his city on the eastern hill (1 Kgs 2:10).” He also explains the erroneous reasons some thought the tomb of David to be elsewhere.¹¹

Conclusion

It seems obvious from the above — from Scripture and early historical references — that the tomb of David was not in Bethlehem or on Mount Zion, but near the Pool of Siloam and the Ophel Ridge in the ancient city conquered by David and called “the City of David” which was in Jerusalem.

This is precisely where we ended our story of King David. After mentioning the false tombs of David (cenotaphs) I am standing on the eastern slopes on David’s old city in Silwan saying that we don’t know exactly where David was buried but it was probably right here.

The evidence seems to confirm my conclusions that the tomb of David was in the city of Jerusalem.

Appendix 1

From *Paths of the Messiah* by Pixner, pages 323-325

After the Roman emperor Hadrian had put down the second Jewish rebellion, the Jews were banished from the city. Once again Jerusalem was rebuilt, as the Gentile Roman colony *Aelia Capitolina*. For this reason, the area in which Weill found the royal graves was used as a quarry. It is the opinion of some researchers that the destruction of the graves and the exclusion from the Holy City led many Jews to venerate David's tomb in his birth city of Bethlehem (p. 8).¹⁰ This new location for David's tomb was soon taken over by the Christians, who found support for it in Luke's Gospel, which also calls Bethlehem, Jesus' place of birth, "the city of David" (Lk 2:4, II), although this name had been originally used only for the eastern hill of Jerusalem.

Eusebius was the first Christian witness to support David's burial place in Bethlehem. In his famous work about the biblical place names, he wrote (ca. A.D. 330) that both David

¹⁰ Pixner, Bargil. *Paths of the Messiah* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011). Pg. 322.

¹¹ Oxford University Press, page 118.

and his father Jesse were buried in Bethlehem. II In A.D. 333 a man whom we know only as a pilgrim from the French city of Bordeaux visited the Holy Land, and he left a very interesting and reliable report from his journey. In this report, he writes that not far from the Church of the Nativity¹² in Bethlehem is a tomb cave that contains not only the mortal remains of David but also those of Solomon and other members of Jesse's family.¹³ Another anonymous pilgrim, from the Italian city Piacenza, came to the Holy Land around the year 570. This pilgrim wrote that "a mile from Bet Wehem, in the suburbs, David's body lies buried beside that of his son Solomon." ¹⁴

The Muslims venerated the tombs of David and Solomon in Bethlehem until the fourteenth century, ¹⁵ although a new Christian tradition began to develop in the tenth century that located David's tomb on the western hill of Jerusalem, which had been considered for a long time erroneously as Mount Zion. We find the first reference to this relocation in a very confusing document from the tenth century, the *Vita S. Helenae et Constantini*, written for the glorification of the emperor Constantine and his mother Helen by an unknown Greek author. ¹⁶

When the Crusaders conquered Jerusalem in the year 1099, they found the Byzantine basilica Hagia Sion destroyed on Mount Zion (southwest hill, Zion III). They discovered an extension that was in a better condition, where they found not only the alleged David's tomb but also that of his son Solomon and that of the martyr Stephen. Both burial places were connected to that of David.¹⁷ The Crusaders did not continue to recognize the tradition of Stephen's tomb at this location, because a Byzantine church with a reliquary of the martyr already stood north of the Damascus Gate (p. 352). Some parts of this basilica, including the mosaic floor, remained and in the nineteenth century became the church Saint Etienne of the French Ecole Biblique. The Crusaders directed their attention instead to the tradition of David's tomb, toward Mount Zion, and established a large cenotaph (empty memorial coffin) in order to mark this location. However, for the Crusaders, the Tomb of David was of substantially less significance than the much older tradition that connected this holy shrine with the place of the Last Supper of Jesus, the Jerusalem Resurrection appearances, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles at Pentecost, and the dormition (i.e., the sleep [assumption]) of Mary.

Gradually the false Tomb of David from this newly created Christian tradition was accepted, first by the Jewish community and afterward also by the Muslims. In the years between 1948 and 1967, when the remaining Old City of Jerusalem was in Jordanian control, the site became a special place of interest for the Jews. At that time, the most revered Jewish place, the so-called Wailing Wall or Western Wall (a part of the Herodian west surrounding wall of the temple square), was inaccessible to Jews, while Mount Zion has, since the War of Independence, been under Israeli control.