

SIR CHARLES WILSON'S VIEWS ON CALVARY AND
THE TOMB.

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THE general history of a famous controversy has been well told in the late Sir Charles Wilson's work entitled *Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre*, published in 1906 by the P.E.F. Society. This learned work is indispensable to all who desire to understand the principal bearings of a very obscure and difficult subject, which has engaged the close attention of many of the best scholars and most careful students of the present generation.

It is clear, from this book, that the perennial struggle between the defenders and opponents of the traditional site has recently entered on a somewhat new phase, and that the main question at issue no longer is whether that traditional site is true, but whether any of the alternative sites deserve, on their own merits, the support of reasonable persons.

The view is widely entertained by many of those who have most carefully studied the subject and have considered the arguments on both sides, that the traditional Holy Sepulchre was *not* the real place of Christ's burial, and that the famous sites of Calvary and the Tomb, which have since the fourth century been venerated by Christendom as the veritable scene of Christ's sufferings and death, are *not* reliable.

These views are powerfully confirmed by Sir Charles Wilson's exhaustive analysis of the principal literary evidence, and few persons will be disposed to question the general conclusion at which he has arrived, that "There is no decisive reason, historical, traditional, or topographical, for placing Golgotha and the Tomb where they are now shown. At the same time, there is no direct evidence that they were not so situated." (*Golgotha*, p. 120.)

But when we approach the far more difficult subject of the suggested alternatives, we are at once face to face with a number of very conflicting views which may be thus roughly summarised.

On the one side (*a*) That the real sites of Golgotha and the Tomb are utterly unknown, and beyond the reach of human knowledge; (*b*) That all recent speculations on the subject are, for any practical purpose, worthless, and that the subject of Calvary and the Tomb is too obscure and uncertain to engage the attention of reasonable persons. On the other side, it is urged that scientific research has not spoken its last word on this subject; and that further light may reasonably be expected by separating—for the purpose of this enquiry—the wholly distinct questions of the site of Calvary, and the real place of Christ's burial.

Now it is unquestionable that the first-mentioned view, (*a*), is widely held, not only by scholars and students, but by thoughtful Christians of all classes, who believe that the real place of Christ's burial has been intentionally concealed, and that Christ's Tomb, like that of Moses, will for ever remain unknown. This class of critics contends that there is no evidence that Joseph's rock-hewn sepulchre is still in existence, and that even if its existence could be presumed, it would be impossible, for obvious reasons, to verify or establish its identity. These considerations have great weight, but supporters of the newly-discovered rival tombs, commonly known as "Conder's Tomb" and "Gordon's Tomb," are well aware that their probability entirely turns on the correct identification of Calvary. If the new theory of Calvary be true, we know, at any rate, where to look for the rock-cut tomb of which so many explorers have long been in search. If this theory be not true, neither tomb is of any public importance, except as good specimens of Jewish rock-hewn sepulchres.

Now, in using the word tomb in connection with the subject of the Holy Sepulchre, we must bear in mind the general character of Jewish rock-cut tombs, and the general nature of Jewish burial. There is no question here of any artificial erection above ground which is necessarily as perishable as the materials of which it is composed. The rock-cut tombs of Jerusalem are perhaps amongst the least perishable of all the ancient monuments of the Holy City. They are, in fact, as imperishable from purely physical causes as the native rock from which they are hewn. Such tombs might, of course, be destroyed or over-built during the changes and transformations of many centuries, but Jew, Christian, and Moslem alike have generally respected these memorials of the dead; and since Jerusalem was captured by Moslems in the eighth century, the

public cemeteries and burial-grounds of the Holy City have been protected not only by religious sentiment, but by all the power of the ruling authority. It is probable, from these general considerations, that the rock-hewn tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, like those of David, Solomon, and the Kings of Judah, may be still in existence, if they were situated in some position where they were likely to be preserved. The real problem is (1) to discover the approximate position of these tombs; and (2) to identify them.

It is certain that many of the most famous rock tombs of Jerusalem have disappeared, and even their approximate position is entirely unknown. We know, for example, from St. Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost (Acts ii, 29), that David's sepulchre was in existence and was publicly known at the time he spoke: "Men and brethren let us freely speak unto you of the patriarch David that he is both dead and buried and his sepulchre is with us unto this day." If Jewish tombs (presumably rock-hewn) as famous as those of David and his successors have been entirely lost, and their approximate position undiscoverable without excavations that cannot be made, is it not obvious that the discovery and identification of other rock-hewn tombs must present similar difficulties?

Apart, however, from these considerations affecting the *Tomb of Christ*, the identification of Golgotha or Calvary is a question which stands on a wholly different footing, and, as Sir Charles Wilson points out: "the rejection of the traditional sites led naturally to speculation with regard to the true position of Golgotha" (p. 105).

The difficulty which everyone must feel regarding the real place of Christ's burial does not apply to the identification of a site like Golgotha, regarding which there is a remarkable amount of literary evidence both in the writings of the early Fathers, and in the pilgrim literature of Palestine. Some of this is quoted by Sir Charles Wilson. Other evidence bearing on the same point is ignored. Everyone instinctively perceives that if Golgotha can be identified, we get very near the heart of a burning problem. We cannot indeed ever know (and it may be well for the peace of the world that we cannot) the exact place where Christ's sacred body was laid, but if Golgotha can be reasonably identified, the approximate position of the tomb will at once be made clear, and on this secure foundation a rational theory of the position and general character of the tomb can readily be constructed.

It is plain from these considerations that the *crux* of the whole problem is the identification of Golgotha, and those who can read between the lines will have no difficulty in perceiving that Sir Charles Wilson's main argument in *Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre* practically resolves itself into an elaborate criticism of those writers who claim to have thrown light on this aspect of the question. "Golgotha," says Sir Charles Wilson, "derived its name "from a local legend which connected it with a skull, possibly that "of Adam, as all the early Christian Fathers who mention the "subject attest. The theories which identify 'the place of a skull' "with a public place of execution, or with a spot whether on an "eminence or not which resembled a skull, are of later growth, and "probably of Western origin." (*Golgotha*, p. 17.) Sir Charles Wilson takes extraordinary pains to show that Golgotha was, in his opinion, not a "mount" or "hill" as popularly supposed. He remarks: "There is no indication in the Bible that Golgotha was skull-like in "form, or that Christ was crucified on a knoll, a hillock, or a hill." The Gospel narrative does indeed imply, he admits, that the crucifixion was visible to many spectators; but this visibility, he thinks, might equally well have been secured had the crosses been erected in one of the surrounding valleys, and the lookers-on had stood on its slopes.

But why, it may be asked, is it necessary to call in question the popular view which has been universally accepted since the early days of Christianity by all sections of the Christian Church? The answer appears to be that this popular view of "Mount" Calvary is opposed to anything that can now be seen at the traditional Holy Sepulchre, and the argument is obviously intended to explain the discrepancy between the popular view and the present appearance of the traditional site. This discrepancy appears to have been noticed from a very early period, for it was observed by Epiphanius (A.D. 312-403) that there was nothing to be seen in Golgotha which suggested the idea of being situated upon a height.

It needs no expert knowledge to see that the traditional Golgotha, situated not only within the modern City, but literally *within a few feet* from the traditional tomb can by no possibility be reconciled with any reasonable view of the Gospel narrative, or even with the facts of common sense. This traditional Golgotha is plainly, in outward appearance, a mere imitation, intended for artistic effect, and palpably contrived for the purpose of combining:

under one roof two memorable shrines. The Tomb is one thing. The site of the historic Calvary is another. If the Calvary of tradition is plainly fictitious, doubts will inevitably be entertained (as for many centuries they have, in fact, been entertained) regarding the truth of the tomb as well.

Sir Charles Wilson has spent great learning and labour in discussing various questions connected with the site of Calvary. Was it the place of public execution as declared by Jerome and many other writers? Was it identical with the Jewish *Place of Stoning*—the Beth-ha-Sekêlah of the Mishnah? Is the tradition of St. Stephen's martyrdom near the small hillock above Jeremiah's grotto reliable? Has this hillock entirely changed in appearance since the time of Christ? etc. All these questions are of great interest, but they do not assist enquirers to discriminate between the rival sites, and are plainly introduced to throw discredit on the alternative theories which are discussed in Chapter X of Sir Charles Wilson's book, and which contains the real gist and point of his whole work. It is evident, from the tenor of this chapter, and from all that leads up to it, that Sir Charles Wilson entertained a strong opinion that all modern speculations on the subject of Calvary are unworthy of rational belief. He has summarised in p. 115 the common arguments employed in favour of the Skull Hill site, and he has disposed of them all in a very summary and almost contemptuous fashion. But he has ignored, with or without intention, some of the most striking evidence on the subject, and he shows very scanty appreciation of the cumulative weight of expert opinion opposed to his own views. The evidence of ancient maps and the opinion of medieval geographers on which they are founded is entirely ignored; and the references to current literature on the subject, though fairly numerous, show that the author was little acquainted with the remarkable weight of testimony in support of the disputed sites. The Maps of Christian van Adrichem (1584) and of Thomas Fuller (1650), together with all the earlier authorities on which they are founded, cannot reasonably be ignored by anyone who desires to present fairly both sides of a great question.

Sir Charles Wilson concludes his review of the principal literary evidence by summing up in a final chapter the views of rival experts regarding the position and direction of the ancient City Walls (Chap. XI, p. 121). This subject has for many years been

involved in great obscurity by the fact that it has been habitually discussed, *not* on its own merits as an ordinary question of Jerusalem archaeology, but almost entirely with an eye to its bearing on the question of the Holy Sepulchre. Apart from this controversy, few critics would have troubled themselves to contest very seriously the views of Dr. Robinson as expressed in *Biblical Researches* (1841), confirmed and amplified fifteen years later in a subsequent edition published in 1856. Dr. Robinson's views regarding the course of the Second and Third Walls are discussed in some detail by Sir Charles Wilson in *Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre* (1906); and everyone who has carefully studied the literature of the subject, and examined the ground with map in hand, can readily form a fair opinion for himself regarding the merits of the rival lines. The general character of these lines is very clearly shown on the map that accompanies Vol. I of Robinson's *Biblical Researches*, and Sir Charles Wilson's "Plan of the ancient Walls on the north side of Jerusalem" (Fig. 8, p. 125, of Wilson's *Golgotha*). Excellent maps are also published in Prof. G. Adam Smith's *Jerusalem* (1907), Vols. I and II, and in the late Selah Merrill's *Ancient Jerusalem* (Revell, 1908). The essential difference between Robinson's and Wilson's view is, that Robinson regards the line of the *Second Wall* to be practically identical with the line of the existing City Wall from its commencement near Psephinus, as shown in Wilson's Plan, to the conspicuous rocky cliff that adjoins the Damascus Gate opposite the so-called Grotto of Jeremiah. This line Wilson regards as the *Third Wall* of Agrippa, and his reasons in support of this view, in opposition to Robinson, are fully stated in pp. 137-142 of *Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre*.

Everyone must form his own opinion between the rival views, but no one can fail to see that Wilson's theory involves at least one formidable objection, which Robinson's entirely meets. If Wilson's conclusion be correct, "that the third wall in the time of the siege " followed approximately the same lines as the existing North Wall " of Jerusalem " (p. 142), it is obvious that this line was dominated throughout this important section of its course by the higher ground now occupied by the buildings of the Russian Hospice, and by numerous elevated points in the square half mile of country lying between the Damascus Gate and the TOMBS OF THE KINGS. These points are clearly shown in the trigonometrical survey, and are well known to all who are familiar with the ground. The well-

known spur above Jeremiah's Grotto faces the steep scarp on which the present City Wall is built, and is only separated from it by a narrow cutting, of which Sir Charles Wilson has given a full description. It is incredible that this important section of the city defences, from Psephinus to Jeremiah's Grotto, could ever have been left altogether undefended against attack from all these elevated and (in a military sense) most dangerous points. If Wilson's line was really the Third and Outer Wall of Agrippa, it is obvious to anyone that the defences of Jerusalem at this point were singularly weak, being visibly dominated by any active foe who could obtain possession of the spurs and higher ground immediately facing, and even overlooking, the walls.

Col. Conder, Canon Tristram, Dr. Merrill, and many other writers, appear to have clearly appreciated the great importance of this point. Col. Conder, in fact, maintains that the nature of the ground admits of no other line than one which started near the Tower of David, and followed the natural contour of the hills. Sir Charles Wilson remarks that when the wall was first built, *command* was a secondary consideration, and the occupation of the higher ground was not necessary for defence. (*Golgotha*, p. 136.) These sharply contrasted views, both by Royal Engineers of great distinction, may be left to speak for themselves. Dr. Robinson notices, in note 5, p. 219, of his *Later Researches* (1856), that he submitted his own theory of the course of the Second Wall to "a distinguished Military Engineer" acquainted with Jerusalem. He expressed the opinion that Robinson's suggested line for the Second Wall would be a good line, in a military point of view, for a City Wall, though not so good as that of the Third Wall suggested.

Prof. G. Adam Smith criticises Robinson's theory of the Third Wall in p. 246, Vol. I, of his recently published work, *Jerusalem* (1907). He notices, in note 3, that a similar extended line has been advocated by Schultz, Fergusson, Thrupp, Tobler, and recently, with still more forcible arguments, by Merrill. When this was published in 1907, *Ancient Jerusalem* (Revell, 1908), by the late Dr. Merrill, had not been issued. This learned and elaborate work furnishes the latest and by far the fullest information on the subject. It appears to supersede, by later and more accurate information, much of Wilson's argument based on earlier research. Dr. Robinson, and all the writers who have supported him, appear to have recognised the great importance of the military aspect of

the Second and Third Walls. They all repudiate the idea that the existing line could ever have been the exterior outer wall built by Agrippa. The military difficulty could, in their opinion, only be met by the construction of an outer wall, following the general lines first pointed out by Robinson in 1838, traces of which were then, in his opinion, clearly visible.

Both Robinson and Wilson have discussed fully the bearing of all the literary evidence on the subject, and the fact that they both take different views of the well-known description of Josephus, shows clearly that the literary evidence is not altogether to be depended upon, more especially as none of the landmarks, including the Gate Gennath and the so-called Royal Caves, have ever really been identified.

A further point, unnoticed by Sir Charles Wilson but strongly urged by Dr. Robinson, is the evidence afforded by the remains discovered near the Damascus Gate in 1838. Dr. Robinson notices (*Biblical Researches*, I, 476), that all Christian writers, from Adamnanus to Rudolf de Sichein (A.D. 1336-50) speak of this gate as the Gate of St. Stephen, and the place of St. Stephen's martyrdom as upon the north side of the city. A Memorial Church in honour of the first martyr has, in fact, existed since the fourth century in close proximity to this gate, which has been called by various names. Arabic writers called it the Bab el-Amud, or Gate of the Pillar. The existence of this gate is shown in the Madeba Mosaic, a relic of the fifth century, and one of the most ancient plans yet discovered of old Jerusalem. That the site of this gate is one of extreme antiquity is certain. The great northern highway from Samaria enters Jerusalem by this gate, and those who contend that the City Wall at this point was the Third Wall of Agrippa, and *not in existence in the time of Christ*, must suppose a prolongation of this ancient highway within the present walls, and the existence of some interior city gate clearly distinguishable from the Pillar Gate. No evidence on these points has ever yet been produced or even suggested; and, therefore, Dr. Robinson's view, first published in 1841, that "this gate could have belonged only to the Second Wall" (p. 464), seems, on the face of it, highly probable. Writing fifteen years later, Dr. Robinson noticed that, amongst many diversities of opinion, this point had not even been disputed. (*Later Researches*, 1856, p. 206.) If the site of this famous gate marks the real line of the Second Wall at this point, it is clear that Sir Charles Wilson's theory is quite untenable, apart from the military objections already referred to.

Sir Charles Wilson admits "that no certain traces of the Second Wall has yet been found" (p. 137). This admission is supported by Prof. G. Adam Smith. (*Jerusalem*, I, p. 249, 1907.) Until it can be shown that Robinson's view of the Second Wall is plainly untenable, it is obviously futile to seek for traces of that wall *south* of the present City Wall, and within the crowded limits of the modern city.

Sir Charles Wilson suggests that Robinson's views regarding the existence of the Third Wall are out of date, and that the researches of explorers during the past sixty years have given no support to his theory on the subject. Those who are acquainted with the conditions of modern Jerusalem, and the extraordinary way in which the city has extended northwards during recent years, can hardly feel any wonder that the search for buried remains of this wall should have proved unsuccessful. It is very doubtful whether there ever has been any real desire to trace the course of Robinson's Third Wall, which many powerful interests are for obvious reasons anxious to conceal. Under these conditions, no one can feel at all sanguine that the question of the walls will ever be cleared up by modern research. Jerusalem, it may be observed, is rapidly becoming, for all practical purposes, inaccessible to those who depend entirely on the spade. Excavation inside and outside the present walls is becoming every year less possible, as official permission to dig is closely restricted by the growth of private interests; and powerful public bodies, opposed to any new light, are constantly on the watch to conceal, or, if necessary, to destroy, any new and inconvenient evidence that may accidentally come to light. Powerful churches, backed by all the material resources and political prestige of their own Governments, are little likely to promote any *bona-fide* research, the object of which is plainly calculated, if not intended, to discredit a world-famous shrine in the supposed interests of scientific exploration. Many persons will probably consider that far too much importance has been attached by disputants on both sides to this question of the Walls. Those who have already made up their minds on the subject of the Holy Sepulchre are little likely to be influenced by any possible demonstration of the course of the ancient City Walls. Supporters of that famous site will, of course, continue to uphold it, regardless of all theories on the subject. Opponents are already well aware that whether the Holy Sepulchre was inside or outside the disputed Second Wall, its improbable, if not impossible, *position*

is only one of numerous difficulties which surround the subject of the traditional "holy places." Sir Charles Wilson notices, at some length, the well-known story of the discovery of the "Sacred Cave" related by Eusebius, and he furnishes a plausible explanation of the alleged miraculous character of that discovery; but he says very little about the "Invention of the Cross" and the real significance of that famous miracle. He notices, indeed, that Eusebius, the chief literary witness of the first miracle, is utterly silent regarding the second; but he has omitted to notice the material facts (1) That the Cross was discovered *several years after* the site of Constantine's Churches had been chosen; (2) That this miracle occurred *on the very day* that the Church of the Anastasis was dedicated. Whatever may be thought about the miraculous discovery of the Tomb, there can be no two opinions about the real character of the second miracle, on which the truth of the traditional sites mainly depends. The view expressed by Sir Charles Wilson that the points involved are "purely archaeological" will seem to most persons singularly unconvincing. No one can fail to see that questions of Romish dogma and of doctrine are closely bound up with the whole subject, and this, of course, is the reason why the question of the traditional sites has always aroused on both sides such intense and even bitter feeling.

The great majority of travellers and students who visit Jerusalem for the first time instinctively perceive that these sites, hallowed though they are by the prayers of countless pilgrims since the days of Constantine, are inherently incredible. This feeling, which is very widely shared, has naturally led to speculation regarding the true position of Golgotha and the real Tomb. Sir Charles Wilson regarded all the modern speculations on the subject with invincible distrust, and was resolutely orthodox and conservative in preferring the traditional sites, however unworthy of belief on their own merits, to all the alternatives. This attitude is quite consistent and intelligible. It appeals strongly to the minds of those who have always been taught to regard ancient Catholic tradition as something sacrosanct, and not to be judged by the ordinary canons of evidence and common sense. This class is little likely to be influenced, or even disturbed, by any archaeological arguments whatever, or by any possible demonstration of the falsity and transparent imposture of the traditional sites. The more incredible and absurd these sites are shown to be, the more

resolutely will their professional supporters uphold them on the well-known maxim of Tertullian, *Credo quia absurdum*, "I believe them because they are incredible." The arguments in this paper are addressed, *not* to those who have already made up their minds on the subject, but to that large and influential class which is not yet committed to an opinion on either side. Sir Charles Wilson is by far the ablest modern critic of the new sites, and has done more than anyone else to bolster up the claims of the traditional "holy places" by saying everything that was possible in their favour, and dismissing very summarily all the evidence that tells against them. His work, viewed as a whole, amounts, in fact, to a very able and skilful argument in support of one side of the question. Those who prefer to lean on expert authority rather than think out a difficult subject for themselves, will find in Sir Charles Wilson's book much that will help them. His views will be likely always to carry great weight; but those who are not partizans may well be reminded that many Palestine scholars of great distinction differ altogether from Sir Charles Wilson regarding the disputed sites. The late Canon Tristram, of Durham, Col. Conder, R.E., Dr. Ederheim—the learned author of *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*—in England, and Drs. Fisher-Howe, Schaff, and Selah Merrill in America, are amongst the best-known supporters of the modern view of Calvary. These are only a few of the well-known Palestine scholars and public writers (between thirty and forty in number) who have publicly supported this modern view. Many of these writers are unmentioned by Sir Charles Wilson, and their views are altogether ignored; but the names quoted are amply sufficient to show that the views expressed in *Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre* are far from being generally accepted, and that this interesting work, able as it undoubtedly is, has by no means exhausted a subject which deeply interests every Christian nation in the world, both on religious and antiquarian grounds.

NOTE.—Sir Charles Wilson was most impartially disposed on this question. He gave, in his book, all the *ancient* evidence he could collect, and referred to some opinions on both sides. He recognised that some sanctity attached to a site that had been the object of pilgrimage for fifteen centuries, apart from proof of its original authenticity: but he demurred to the advertising as the "true tomb of Christ" a place as to which there can be no proof and which has no claim to reverence—a spot empirically selected within the last few decades.

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