



Faith & Values: 'CRADLE OF CHRISTIANITY: TREASURES FROM THE HOLY LAND'

An interfaith moment: Exhibit traces shared, divergent history of Judaism and Christianity

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"**Cradle of Christianity**," which opens today at the Michael C. Carlos Museum, traces the life of Jesus and the evolution and growth of Christianity in the Holy Land. Like bagels, however, this fascinating archaeological exhibition should appeal to everyone.

It is, in fact, an interfaith moment. The larger goal of the Israel Museum, which organized the exhibition, is to demonstrate the shared history of Judaism and Christianity. Jesus and his disciples were Jews, after all. At the outset, they were among many sects under one umbrella. Israel Museum director James Snyder sees the two religions as fellow travelers on the road of monotheism whose routes begin together, run parallel and diverge. The Carlos will elaborate on that perspective with a complement of programs during "Cradle of Christianity's" run, through Oct. 14.

The exhibit's ecumenical aims notwithstanding, the objects on view are interesting, even thrilling, in their own right. The yellowed parchment from a Dead Sea Scroll dating to the first century B.C. and a fragment from the Second Temple (destroyed in A.D. 70) are among the rare artifacts on display.

So are the only three known objects that correlate with people and events during Jesus' life, and they are here. Two confirm the existence of Pontius Pilate and Joseph Caiaphas, the priest said to have helped engineer Jesus' crucifixion. The third, an anklebone with an embedded nail, is evidence of the use of crucifixion.

Their presentation is both elegant and rigorous. The curators are appropriately hard-nosed about making literal connections between artifact and biography. No pieces of the cross show up here, for instance. Instead, curators use objects of a type consistent with Jesus' time to suggest important events: stone water jugs for the miracle at Cana, for example, or the ceramic and glass dinnerware that could have set a Last Supper table.

Jesus' followers quite naturally adapted aspects of their rituals and iconography from Judaism. Curator David Mevorah says that archaeologists excavating worship sites that date before the fourth century are hard-pressed to know whether they were Jewish or Christian. The architecture began to differentiate and multiply at that time, when Constantine decreed Christianity as the official religion of the Byzantine Empire. The chancel of a Christian church, one of the exhibit's showstoppers, is a re-creation using finds gathered from 17 largely sixth century sites across Israel.

The artifacts and wall texts are complemented by photographic blowups, maps and some lively imaginative touches. One example: To show the explosive growth of Christianity and its impact on the area's economy as it became a pilgrimage destination, the museum commissioned the re-creation of a mosaic map of the Holy Land still on the floor of a sixth century church in Jordan, created as a tourist itinerary. A spotlight trained on the mosaic traces the journey.

Thanks to "Cradle of Christianity," we need only go as far as Emory University for an illuminating experience.

"CRADLE OF CHRISTIANITY: TREASURES FROM THE HOLY LAND"

Through Oct. 14. 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays; 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Sundays. \$15. Michael C. Carlos Museum. 571 S. Kilgo Circle, Atlanta. 404-727-4282, www.carlos.emory.edu. (Advance reservations suggested via Web site or by calling 404-727-4280.)

Verdict: Excellent.

Photo

Israel Museum, Jerusalem

A rare artifact, a Latin dedicatory inscription from the Roman theater at Caesarea, contains the name of Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator who condemned Jesus to be crucified.

Photo

JOHN SPINK / Staff

Andrei Vainer of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem mortars the base of a stone altar, part of a full-scale reconstruction of a sixth-century chancel of a Byzantine church.

Photo

JOHN SPINK / Staff

Ron Barnhart and Nancy Roberts of the Michael C. Carlos Museum display souvenirs and mementos from early Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land.