

Double take: Christian artifacts in a Jewish museum

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [July 25, 2006](#) issue

In the fourth century, a Spanish monastic named Egeria made an arduous pilgrimage to the Holy Land and left behind a diary that is the chief source of what historians know about early Christianity in the Middle East. The monk Valerius praised Sister Egeria's fortitude: "Nothing could hold her back, whether it was the labor of traveling the whole world, the perils of seas and rivers, the dread crags and fearsome mountains, or the savage menace of heathen tribes, until, with God's help and her own unconquerable bravery, she fulfilled all her faithful desires."

Those who want tangible contact with early Christianity these days have a much easier task: they can just make a pilgrimage to Cleveland. That's the site of "The Cradle of Christianity," an exhibit of some of the treasures of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Most of the items are being displayed for the first time in the U.S. The exhibit is at the beautiful new Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage in Beachwood, a Cleveland suburb, until October 22. The exhibit will then move to the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale (December 7, 2006, to April 15, 2007) and then to the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University in Atlanta (June 16, 2007, to October 14, 2007).

Mounting an exhibit on early Christianity at a Jewish museum is apparently unprecedented in the U.S. The Maltz Museum is "dedicated to serving the entire community," explained executive director Carole Zawatsky. "We have faith in the idea of building bridges between and within communities, and this exhibit speaks to that clearly."

The original exhibit by this name was prepared at the turn of the millennium, partly with an eye to Pope John Paul II's planned visit to the Holy Land. The curators of the Israel museum gathered many of their best Christian antiquities for viewing by the pope and other Christian pilgrims.

The Maltz exhibit adds a special touch: it displays the Christian antiquities alongside Jewish artifacts of the same era. The result is a powerful demonstration of the

fact—too easily taken for granted—that Christianity and Judaism share common roots.

The entry to the exhibit features twin chancel screens with almost identical designs. They are the same size and the same material (marble), and they feature the same wreaths and vines as decoration. They could have been carved in the same shop. If you didn't look hard you would miss this detail: one wreath frames a cross, the other borders a menorah.

This religious double vision is repeated throughout the exhibit. Christian and Jewish versions of oil lamps, bread stamps and mosaics are virtually identical. Of course, some of the images are part of both traditions—as in the case of a mosaic from a synagogue showing David after his conquest of Goliath.

"Cradle of Christianity" displays the greatest archaeological treasures that exist from the time of Jesus. Several stone ossuaries bear the names of Jesus, Joseph or Mary. One is marked "Jesus, son of Joseph." The inscriptions make it plain how common these names were in first-century Judaism.

A pile of coins from the era illustrates the exorbitant 8 percent that was sometimes charged by the temple's money changers—less than what Visa charges, but still enough to make anyone want to turn over tables. Six enormous stone water jars from the first century suggest that when Jesus turned the water to wine (as described in John 2) he supplied the party with a veritable ocean of it. A table is set with 13 settings of goblets and dishes from that time, with a pitcher at the head. Serving portions were a bit smaller then, largely because human beings were smaller. Perhaps Baptist shot-style communion glasses are more historically accurate than previously assumed.

The exhibit includes the only archaeological evidence of a crucifixion. The nail that pierced the ankle of a certain Yehohanan, son of Hagkol, is displayed with a fake bone built around it. The nail, found in an ossuary, was so bent after being driven through a knot in the wood that it could not be removed from the bone, and so it was buried with Yehohanan.

The only extraliterary evidence regarding Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas is also on display. An inscription bearing the name of the prefect and the ossuary that likely held the bones of the high priest make up a mini-wall of shame.

The highlight of the exhibit for me was the display of two artifacts from the Second Temple. One is a fragment of an inscription in Greek forbidding gentiles from entering the temple. That rule is referred to in Acts 21:27-29, where Paul is wrongly accused of violating it. The other artifact contains an inscription in Hebrew saying, “to the place of trumpeting to . . .” (to *declare* perhaps?).

I had read beforehand about this reference to trumpeting and was at first disappointed. That’s all it says? But when I read the exhibit’s accompanying quotation from Josephus about the trumpet blasts that would resound throughout Jerusalem as the priests announced the beginning and end of the Sabbath, I realized that this was no minor find.

Zawatsky said the trumpeting fragment was also her favorite item in the exhibit. She pulled out a worn Hebrew and English prayer book and flipped to a psalm that calls for blowing the trumpet on a holy day. She noted another psalm that commands praise of God with the sound of trumpets. “To think that there was a temple, that a trumpet sounded, that people stood to pray in ways that have long been familiar to those with basic Hebrew or who go to synagogue . . .” Her voice trailed off. Administrative work has clearly not jaded this museum director.

The exhibition roughly follows the course of Christianity’s development. The items from the temple and Jesus’ life are quite famous, showing up in standard archaeological texts, introductions to the New Testament, and the *Biblical Archaeology Review*. The second half of the exhibit, focusing on the parallel development of Byzantine Christianity (the forerunner of today’s Eastern Orthodoxy) and rabbinic Judaism, is drawn from a much greater pool of archaeological finds. The items here are less rare but are still extraordinary.

The exhibit reconstructs a chancel space from a typical sixth- or seventh-century church. Taken from ten different sites in the Middle East, materials include a baptismal font designed for full immersion. To be dunked in this font, one would have to curl up, fetal-style, in a claustrophobically small space. The priest would be in a position to drown you easily with his hand. A dedicatory plaque names the donor of the font and prays “for the salvation of Zechariah and his son Stephen.” The altar table itself is inscribed to “Alaphaeos the Deacon and Aias the Monk.” No theological message here, just the name of patrons and priests (the more things change . . .). I found myself wishing that this reconstruction had included some pews (of course, churches of the time did not have them) so I could sit in its presence a good deal

longer.

Some Protestant visitors to the Holy Land feel a sense of disconnection between the biblical places they cherish and the style of the Orthodox faith that developed in those very places. They feel their biblical literalism confirmed as they traipse around places with familiar names, but they are challenged by the faith of Orthodox Christians who read the same Bible (and have for millennia) and live out their faith by venerating icons and saints' bones. A reliquary sits in plain view beneath the altar of the reconstructed chancel, for from beneath the altar the voices of the martyrs cry out (a literal reading of Revelation 6:9-11). Commemorative jewelry bearing intricate representations of the annunciation, the adoration of the Magi, and the ascension constituted souvenirs for ancient and medieval pilgrims. Vials for oil or holy water and stamps for eucharistic wafers allowed for a portable piece of the Holy Land to be taken home. One museumgoer wrote in the Maltz exhibition's registry that he wished "for a more biblical Christianity"—presumably like that of evangelicals in the 21st century. "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there" (L. P. Hartley).

Elsewhere, the museum makes an effort to accommodate contemporary sensibilities. Above a display of first-century tableware flash PowerPoint images of Salvador Dali's *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*; a painting of television's Sopranos communing, with Tony presiding; and of course Leonardo da Vinci's famous image of the Last Supper. A loop of clips from films—from *The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ* (1905) to the recent critical (but not popular) success *The Gospel of John*—shows the events of the passion. Even Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* makes a brief appearance (but Mel Gibson's *Passion* film does not). I suspect that our ancient forebears would find our beloved imagery as puzzling as we do theirs.

The Madaba map of Jerusalem, from Jordan, is here in replica form. The Madaba is like the caricature-type maps one finds these days at tourist sites and on T-shirts and place mats. The original is a mosaic that covers the floor. The replica covers a large wall, accompanied by a slide show about early Christian pilgrimages. The scale is all wrong, the mapmakers make a hash of the directions they offer, and scripture verses and devotional imagery take precedence over cartographical precision. You simply could not use this map without the help of other people or an unusual moment of divine intervention in response to prayer—which is precisely the point.

The past is different, and in this disconcertingly odd past, Christians and Jews were cousins—squabbling cousins who at times used venomous rhetoric and even violence. “Cradle of Christianity” displays that kinship in dramatic ways, and also shows the distance between early Christianity and our own faith. Exploring that experience of estrangement and attraction may be a key to one of the church’s most pressing tasks: rapprochement with our Jewish elder siblings in the faith.