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Journal: Bible and Spade Volume: BSPADE 14: 2 (Spring 2001) Article: A Sacred Place Author: Sorina Kulberg A Sacred Place Sorina Kulberg A shaft of white light illuminates the hazy, heavy air in the dusky sanctuary. Little motes glint in the sunbeam. It is good to sit still in this holy place. Here in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem (a long tradition and many Biblical historians and archaeologists claim) was Calvary. Here, on this mount, Jesus' hands and feet were nailed to a cross, and He died. Here, on this very rock, His cold body was laid. Here, where I now sit cross-legged on the cool floor. He rose to new life! Christians have come here for centuries—the First Apostles, Queen Helena and her son Constantine, the crusaders, modern tourist –seeking to be closer to God. I breathe deeply the incense-laden air. Without prelude, the air swells with the sonorous voice of a powerful pipe organ. A dozen quiet priests file in to stand in a brown-robed row and chant. Music flows and rises, blending into a heavenly chorus. Chords from the organ, the ancient monophony of the priests, the tangy smoke, and the glittering light roll through my body, bringing climatic joy. To us who believe the events recounted in the Bible are historically accurate, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is sacred. However, it is not proven beyond question that this is the historical site of Calvary. Some scholars point to the Garden Tomb or the Mount of Olives. The Garden Tomb has the advantage of position (just outside the walls) and poetic appeal (lush flowers, preservation of first-century aesthetics, and looming skull-faced rock). The Mount of Olives claims a good view of the Temple and has long been a site for burial. If the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is not the actual place where Christ died, does this render my experience (and that of thousands of other Christians) irrelevant?

No, it does not. Christ's walking on the dirt and rocks of Israel did not cause any mystical power to cling to them. The true meaning of a place with religious significance is revealed in a worshiper's response. When I was in the Church that commemorates Christ's suffering and glory, my emotions and thoughts intensified and focused. During normal, daily life at home in America, I often pray to God and try to think about Jesus. While taking communion, I strive to imagine Christ on the cross and understand His sacrifice. But I easily get distracted; my mind wanders. In the church over Golgotha, my brain was forced to concentrate. As some congregations kneel to pray, raise hands in praise, or stand to read Scripture, so I go to a physical place for embodied worship. Pilgrimage can have the same result on a worshiper as liturgy and ritual focus. When I am in a holy place, I find my thoughts and emotions strongly tending towards God and His attributes as revealed in the events that occurred there. C. S. Lewis understood the value and effect of liturgy on our emotional spirituality: Church of the Holy Sepulcher. BSpade 1 4: 2 (Spring 2001) p. 59 [Ritual] is a pattern imposed on the mere flux of our feelings by reason and will, which renders pleasures less fugitive and griefs more enduring, which hands over to the power of wise custom the task (to which the individual and his moods are so inadequate) of being festive or sober, gay or reverent, when we choose to be, and not at the bidding of chance (1959: 21). The form and physicality of both liturgy and location work upon emotions and sensibilities to focus the mind on spiritual realities. By walking into that church (or sailing on the " Jesus Boat, " or climbing a tell, or touching the wall of the Herodian temple), I am putting myself in a certain mood. I am forcing my mind to reflect on an event of

immense importance to my faith. I am brought to a clearer sense of God's holiness, whether or not the site is historically accurate. However, researching the location of an account can affect our scholarly approach to Scripture. Belief in the Bible is a matter of faith, not evidence, but the mind likes to have concrete proofs to grasp. Knowing (for example) that Joshua really did march around Jericho and the walls "came tumblin' down," because we have found those tumbled walls that fell at just that time, can strengthen our faith in the Bible's reliability. That is why we do archaeology, study Biblical history, and learn ancient languages. We are not attempting to prove the Bible, but (as we here at ABR like to say) to "validate its veracity in the face of scholarly criticism." Sticking our picks through the occupational layers of Israel, we dig up corroboration for what the Holy Spirit has already told our hearts. Then we publish it in the prayerful hope that others will be drawn to investigate the truths of the Scriptures. For the Bible is true. Jesus did die on a cross. Was that cross here, where the Church of the Holy Sepulcher now dominates the scene with pomp and grandeur? Was it over there on the Mount of Olives, now littered with thousands of graves? Was it in that little garden, its only beauty lent by flowers and an empty tomb? Does it matter? As I worship God in this place or that, I find truth in a pair of paradoxical answers. Yes, my brain insists, I want to know where the Romans placed the cross. Give me proof, let me read the inscriptions and handle the pottery. At the same moment, my soul replies, No, I rest in faith. I know Christ died—here, over there, or somewhere else. I am glad to come to this spot to remember Him, whether it is the real site or only very near. The place is important, but not paramount. Christ is preeminent. I can live and

worship Him anywhere, for He is Lord of all places. In the same prayerful breath, I affirm that standing in a sacred location serves to focus my emotions, imagination, and thoughts all on one point, and that point is Christ. Bibliography Lewis, C. S. 1959 A Preface to Paradise Lost . London: Oxford University Press. BSpade 1 4: 2 (Spring 2001) p. 60 current : : uid: 852 (institution)