

EXPLORATION: BIBLE

The Archeology of Mamre points to Jesus By Chip Thompson

In John chapter 8, Jesus engaged in a heated discussion with the religious Jews. Jesus said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:56-58). These claims made by Jesus were so radical that the Jewish rulers wanted to stone Jesus to death.

The above statements raise the following questions: When was Abraham glad to see Jesus? And what did Jesus mean when he said, “Before Abraham was, I AM”? To answer these questions, we need to go back in time to 2,000 B.C. and visit Abraham’s camp site at Mamre. The Bible says, “Abram moved his tent, and... dwelt by the terebinth trees of Mamre, which are near Hebron” (Genesis 13:8).



These are the ruins of Mamre, where Abraham pitched his tent in 2,000 B.C. [Photo by Chip Thompson, 2015]

First, how do we know this is Mamre? This site is near Hebron, and it was at one time shaded by huge terebinth trees. These trees grew here because there was an abundant water source. This site, therefore, matches both the biblical geography and the basic needs of a shepherd’s camp – shade and a reliable water source.

Second, biblical Holy Sites were marked throughout the centuries. When archeologists find multiple layers of archeology, one layer stacked on top of the other, this identifies an authentic Holy Site. Excavations conducted at Mamre, uncovered evidence of Middle Bronze Age archeology from the time of Abraham. In the Kingdom period of Israel, the Iron Age, this site became a Jewish Holy place with a fortress and royal buildings. Then in the first century B.C., King Herod

commemorated this spot by enclosing it with a magnificent wall structure identical to the massive structure he had built at Hebron to commemorate Abraham’s tomb.

In 135 A.D. Emperor Hadrian desecrated all the Holy Sites of Israel. Within Herod’s walls, at Mamre, he installed a temple to all gods where wildly immoral festivals were conducted beneath the huge Terebinth trees. This leaves no doubt that Mamre was a Jewish Holy site that had been marked throughout the centuries.



Matching monuments at Mamre and Hebron (above) were built by King Herod to commemorate events associated with Abraham. These massive wall structures enclosed places that were considered holy to the Jews. [photo by Chip Thompson, 2016]

So, how does the archeology of Mamre connect with the statements made by Jesus in John chapter 8? In about 330 A.D. Roman Emperor Constantine removed the pagan shrines at Mamre and built a Byzantine Church on this site, it was called Terebinthus – named after the ancient Terebinth trees that were still in existence from the time of Abraham. Why was a Christian Church built on this site? It was built to commemorate the fact that Jesus had said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” So, when did Abraham meet Jesus and how did Jesus make him glad?

In Genesis chapter 17, when Abraham was 99 years old, God told him, “Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him... then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

Then, Genesis chapter 18 says this, “Yahweh [God of Israel] appeared to Abraham near the great Terebinth trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.” In this chapter God made the same promises to both Abraham and Sarah and this time it was Sarah who laughed. One year later, in Genesis chapter 21, Sarah gave birth to a son and they named their son Isaac, which means “laughter.” This all important event ushered in the beginning of the Israelite nation. In John chapter 8, Jesus was claiming that he himself had visited Abraham and Sarah in 2,000 B.C. and his visit to them made them glad.



In this photo, the Solid Rock Café Tour group is examining one of Mamre’s ancient tree rings (the round patch of grass is the tree ring). These massive Terebinth trees grew right up out of the bedrock. [photo by Chip Thompson, 2016]

When the Jews asked Jesus, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” Jesus responded, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:56-58). By saying this, Jesus was claiming to be the God who had appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:13-15) and the God who had appeared to Abraham at Mamre (Genesis 18). The reason the Jewish rulers wanted to stone Jesus was because he was claiming, in no uncertain terms, to be Yahweh God, the God of Israel. In the minds of the Jewish leaders, this was blasphemy and deserving of death.

The ruins at Mamre commemorate the all-important events found in Genesis chapters 17, 18 & 21. These chapters mark the earliest beginnings of the nation of Israel, through the birth of the promised son Isaac. The Old Testament, Iron Age ruins commemorated God’s visit to Abraham in 2,000 B.C. The New Testament Byzantine Church ruins highlighted the fact that Jesus himself was Yahweh God, who had made these promises to Abraham and Sarah in 2,000 B.C.