

Golgotha and The Cave of Treasures

..and so they took him to a place called Golgotha, which means, 'the place of the skull'.

All four Gospels attest to the site of Our Lord's great Sacrifice. Despite a lack of geographical precision in the inspired text, this happiest of places has been known throughout the entire history of the Church and remains the most holy site in Christianity. Upon this rough and brutal rock of Calvary is built the Holy Sepulcher which houses the place of Our Lord's Crucifixion and burial.

Golgotha has a gruesome and beautiful history. During Our Lord's life on earth, it was a wretched place visited only by the worst of criminals and frequented only by Roman executioners. Yet from all eternity, God chose it as the site for the Redemption of mankind. The "place of the skull" is the geographical apex of all creation, where, in time and space, Satan was crushed, death was defeated, our infinite debt was repaid, and Heaven was opened. The unholy hill of Calvary was made holy by the death of the Son of Man.

Throughout the entirety of the New Testament, there are many instances of slight differences between the four Gospels whether in emphasis, omission, simplification, or arrangement. Thus, when all four Evangelists record something in identical words, it is especially worthwhile to consider the point in question. This is exactly what we find regarding the ominous name of the place of Our Lord's oblation, "Golgotha". Names in Scripture are always significant and are given and changed to signify a meaningful change in the *being* of the thing named.

"Adam", for example, signifies both his nature *adam* "man" and his origin *adamah* "from the earth". Adam in turn named all animals "according to their kind", that is, according to their species, their essence, their *way of being*. Similarly, Abram's name was changed to Abraham to signify his new purpose, that is, paternity over the race of God's chosen people. Likewise, Jacob became Israel, Saul became Paul, the potter's field became the Field of Blood for having been purchased with the price of a Man...

All this to say, names in Scripture bear great significance and often have very profound implications.

Our question today is: how did Golgotha receive its name, and why?

Literally translated, the Hebrew "*Golgotha*" means "place of the skull". The Latin name for this place of execution alludes to the same, "*Calvaria*", "skull", and so does the Greek "*Kranion*", whence we derive the word "cranium".

For centuries scholars have attempted to explain the origin of this name. A prevailing modern speculation asserts that it's based on a mere physical similarity; a part of the hill bears some resemblance to a skull. Other scholars suggest that Calvary received its name by association

with a nearby cemetery, the very same one in which Our Lord was entombed. Finally, some have speculated that it was named for its function, namely, being a place of execution. While each of these explanations are possible, none of them are certain and they seem to be very superficial and lack the symbolic qualities that are typical of Semitic culture. Jewish and Christian traditions on the other hand, attribute a much more profound meaning to the name.

A Hebrew tradition widely accepted during the time of Our Lord asserted that Golgotha was named on account of a treasure that it housed within its depths. The tradition begins with Noah. Before the flooding of the earth, Noah saved his immediate relations, two of every beast, and a family treasure from the foundation of the world. Following the deluge and before his death, Noah passed on this treasure to his son, Shem. Before his own passing, Shem entrusted the family treasure to the King of Peace and Righteousness, Priest of the Most High God, and King of Salem, Melkisedek. Finally, Melkisedek entombed the treasure within a mount in his city. That city would come to be known as Jerusalem and the mount would come to be known as *The Place of the Skull* because there, Melkisedek buried the skull of Adam. The Hebrews of Our Lord's time believed that the father of our race was entombed within mount Calvary.

The early Church Fathers also believed this extraordinary tradition and they transmitted it following Our Lord's Ascension having the light of the Gospel to reveal the fullness of its beauty and splendor. They readily attested that the old and New Adam were both present at Golgotha for the redemption of mankind. The former, long dead and buried in the heart of the mount, the latter raised high upon the Cross purchasing the redemption of the former. Adam, the one who was "*of God*", was laid to rest in the very mount whereupon, the New Adam, who *is* God would raise him to life by His death.

The Fathers continue: when the earth quaked during Our Lord's Crucifixion, a fissure was formed at the foot of the cross that reached deep into the rock of Calvary. The Precious Blood of Our Lord streaming from countless wounds was said to have flowed down the Cross through this rock soaking and filling the skull of Adam symbolizing redemption and renewal for him and his progeny. The First Man, in a way of speaking, was baptized in the Precious Blood of the Savior.

While there is nothing in Scripture that speaks of this tradition, there is nothing in either Old or New Testament that contracts it. Considering what we know of Semitic culture along with the assurance we have coming from long standing support in the Church, this tradition is actually quite credible.

According to Scripture, there was roughly 100 years between the death of Adam and the birth of Noah. From the death of Adam to the death of Shem is roughly 1200 years. Thanks to the extraordinary lifespans of the early patriarchs, aside from the 100 years between the end of Adam and the beginning of Noah, at least one of the characters in this tradition is living during this 1200 year period. Noah's father Lamech or grandfather Methusala would have most likely taken possession of the remains of Adam until Noah received them some time before his 600th

year. Thus, despite the great length of time, Adam's remains would have only needed to pass through one, perhaps two generations before arriving at the point our tradition picks up.

This tradition is also very much in line with the reverence and devotion the Hebrews had for their forefathers, even their mortal remains. Proof of this is found in the book of Exodus. During the 40 years of wandering in the desert, the Jews many times abandoned the *God* of Joseph, but they never once abandoned the *bones* of Joseph. Even when they abandoned their God, they did not abandon their ancestor to oblivion, but instead carried him for decades in the desert before finally laying him to rest in the land of Shechem. Indeed, the devotion of the Hebrews to their forefathers bordered on the idolatrous. In fact, that is precisely why God willed that the body of Moses be carried away and buried secretly by an angel, lest his remains be given divine honor.

It requires no stretch of the imagination, therefore, to believe that Adam's progeny would have known the location of his burial and that Noah would have taken care to save his remains from the deluge; if not by Divine instruction, at least out of filial piety.

Both Jewish and Christian accounts attest to this marvelous tradition, but only Christianity unlocks the full glory of it. It is a kind of Divine poetry and is mentioned by such early fathers as Sts. Cyprian of Carthage, Jerome, and Ambrose.

To this day we are able to visit and honor this glorious part of our Christian heritage. At the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, just beneath the site of Our Lord's victory lies the Chapel of Adam. It's a small apse with a simple altar dedicated to Melkisedek surrounded by rough stone walls. Cut out of the simple 11th century facade is a window that allows visitors to see the very rock of Calvary. Visible through the glass is the cruel rock rent asunder during the earthquake in Our Lord's final hours and it is by this fissure that Our Lord's blood was allowed to flow into the ground and cleanse the skull of Adam. Near the window is an icon that depicts the scene that's been immortalized in Christian art symbolized by a skull and crossbones at the foot of the Cross.

We often take for granted the exquisite riches of our Faith. While not all of the relics of salvation history have come down to us, it is by the goodness of God that we learn of our fathers in the Faith through divinely preserved tradition. The hill of Calvary offers us an extraordinary meditation. It is the beginning and the end, death and life, defeat and victory, justice and mercy, captivity and redemption... Golgotha, *The Place of the Skull* is a place where time and eternity intermingle and is the geographical summit of the Redemptive work.