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“Romans, Jews and Christians at Legio, Israel: Early Evidence for Christianity in Ancient Palestine”

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According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus told his disciples to “Go and make disciples of all nations.” And, that is the story the New Testament tells.

The apostle Paul's letters are addressed to churches he founded across the northern Mediterranean lands and, although the Acts of the Apostles begins in Jerusalem, it quickly moves to stories of evangelizing gentiles in the countries beyond Galilee and Judea.

The land of Israel became important to early Christianity only under Emperor Constantine, who, in the early fourth century, made Christianity an accepted religion across the Roman Empire. He sent his mother, Queen Helena, to Israel to identify locations important to Jesus and the Bible, building churches at those sites. Within a century, the land that early Christians had left to evangelize the world became the Holy Land, and pilgrims began arriving to visit the sacred sites with their new churches.

But, what of the Christians who stayed in Israel in the first century; did they flourish? That is a good question. The historian Eusebius mentions bishops in Jerusalem, Caesarea and Maximianopolis, but we know little about the Christians they led. Did Christianity flourish and increase in Israel after Jesus' resurrection, maintain only a small presence or die out? We know surprisingly little. While archaeologists have made extensive finds and excavated churches from the time of Constantine and his successors, there have been few finds from previous centuries.

So, when archaeologists announced the excavation of a Christian prayer hall near the ancient site of Megiddo in Israel 12 years ago, initial expectations hoped that here, finally, were archaeological remains of the early Christians of Israel. In the end, however, it turned out to be something totally different. The prayer hall showed that Christians not only served in the Roman army, but they were accepted and their worship acknowledged as legitimate.

Megiddo, what the New Testament calls Armageddon, was located at the crossroads of important ancient roads for more than two millennia. After the city mound was abandoned, the area continued to be inhabited and, by the first century, a village of Jews and Samaritans known as Kefar Othnay had grown up at the crossroads.

When the Roman Empire decided to station a legion in Palestine, it settled on these crossroads as the place from which most of Palestine could be quickly reached. Ultimately, six Roman “highways” linked this location to the rest of the

province, including Jerusalem, Galilee, Ptolemais and Caesarea.

The 6th Roman Legion spent 170 years in this base, known as Legio. Situated next to Kefar Othnay, it became the site's name from the early second century to the end of the third century.

While the wall around Legio's army base separated the village from the camp, the soldiers and the villagers led intertwined lives. This is clear from the Christian prayer hall, for it was located in the village but in a building controlled by the legion.

The building in which the prayer hall was located was large, about 65 feet by 100 feet. It served primarily as living quarters for Roman officers (centurions). One part of it was set aside for a commercial bakery. The discovery of bread stamps -- bearing the names of the bakers next to the ovens -- indicates that it supplied the soldiers of the army base.

The prayer hall itself comprised a small, 15-by-30-foot room within the larger building. Paved with a mosaic, mostly laid out in geometric patterns but with a depiction of two fish (early symbols of Christianity), it contained a table-shaped podium in the center. According to an inscription, the table was offered as a memorial to the “God Jesus Christ.”

A larger inscription makes clear that the room was constructed by army officials, for it credits one Gaius, a “centurion” and a “brother,” with paying for its construction. Since the prayer hall is in a Roman building housing officers and paid for by a Roman centurion, it is clear that the hall was constructed for Christian officers and soldiers.

Whether the army men became Christians after being stationed in Palestine or they had been Christians when they arrived is unclear. But, this level of recognition indicates that at Legio, Christians were acceptable in the Roman army and could freely practice their beliefs.

If you are in Laramie April 18, come hear Matt Adams, director of the Albright Archaeological Institute in Jerusalem, speak about the army base and Christian prayer hall at Roman Legio. His talk, “Armageddon and the Roman VIth Ferrata Legion: New Excavations at Legio, Israel, and Early Jewish-Christian-Roman Relations,” will begin at 4:10 p.m. in Room 214 of the University of Wyoming's Classroom Building.