

King Solomon's Quarries

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Me'arat Tzedkiyahu or Cave of Zedekiah, more commonly known as the Quarries of King Solomon, is a deep cavern, opening beneath the wall of the Old City of Jerusalem, and extending for hundreds of meters below the surface of the city in the direction of the Temple Mount.

The cave's entrance, which had become lost in the course of centuries of vandalism and neglect, was rediscovered in 1854. The opening lies at the base of the wall, some 100 meters north of Damascus Gate and near King Herod's Gate. It is one of the most extensive caves in Israel, measuring about 220 meters in length and some 900 meters in circumference.

According to tradition, the cave extends all the way to the plain of Jericho. The last King of Judah, Zedekiah, is said to have fled through this cavern when Jerusalem fell into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, in the summer of 587 B.C. It was Josephus Flavius, the great Jewish historian of the first century C.E. who for the first time called it the "Royal Cavern". This later became "King Solomon's Quarries". Whatever truth there may be in that designation, the fact remains that the cave did serve as a quarry for building stones, and the half-sawn blocks of stone still in place give mute testimony to this effect.

The type of stone found in the cave is the white limestone locally known as melech, or "royal" stone. This is very good for building and, although it is not too hard, it does not flake off. Very large blocks of this stone can be quarried.

The stone at the cave opening is of a different kind, called mizzi-helou or "sweet" stone. It is easily worked though its striations prevent its being used in large blocks. In the cave there is also a third kind of stone, known as mizzi-ahmar or "red" stone.

The cave is divided into chambers, separated by broad columns left by the quarriers to support the ceiling. In the inner chambers, traces of the techniques used by the workers can be observed. Broad slits were hewn along the wall and dry wooden wedges were driven into them. Water was then poured over the wedges until eventually the expanding wood cracked the stone along the

slits. This primitive method of quarrying was quite effective and is still used in many parts of the world.

As the quarries in the cave are quite close to the Temple Mount (Mount Moriah) and to the City of David, even very large stones could have been transported there. The limestone, when exposed to natural daylight and the elements, becomes harder. Obviously, it would have been simpler to use this quarry rather than bring heavy stones up from Jaffa via the winding road up the hills to Jerusalem.

In some chambers, deep pits remain at places where stone was taken out in large quantities. These are now railed off to prevent the accidental fall of a visitor. Every few yards, niches were carved in the stone walls to place oil lamps. Traces of soot can be seen above some. Huge half-quarried rectangular slabs of stone, nearly ready to be removed, pose the intriguing question, why the workmen left so suddenly, leaving the valuable stones in place.

Another interesting point, made by Ill. Bro. William C. Blaine, 33ø,(1) is that because of the cavern's depth underground--nearly 90 meters--the sounds of tools could not have been heard at the construction site of King Solomon's Temple, on the Temple Mount. This would explain verse 6:7 in the First Book of Kings: "In building the Temple, only blocks dressed at the quarry were used, and no hammer, chisel or any other iron tool was heard at the Temple site while it was being built."

Another legend is that deep inside the cave are buried the treasures of the Temple, hidden by the Priests when the Roman armies under Titus were besieging the city.(2)

A few years after the cave's entrance had been rediscovered, in 1868, this was the place where the first recorded Masonic ceremony performed in Palestine took place, on Wednesday, May 13. The initiative came from M.W. Bro. Robert Morris, Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, who had come to the Holy Land in search of traces of Freemasonry from the time of King Solomon. Rob Morris, as he signed his name, found only a few isolated Masons living in Palestine, which was under Turkish rule. Bro. Morris had met in Jerusalem Bro. Charles Warren, the British military engineer and archeologist, who had been sent by the Palestine Exploration Fund and who became the first W.M. of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076 in London, the premier Lodge of Research in the world.

By chance, a British naval unit, I.L.M.S. Lord Clyde, arrived in Jaffa for a brief visit. The Captain and several officers were Masons. Morris invited them all to a ceremony in the degree of Secret Monitor, performed in the cavern on Wednesday, 13 May 1868. Others who took part in the ceremony were the Governor of Jaffa, Nouredin Effendi, who was a member of Lodge Amitie Clemente of Paris and held the 28ø degree in the Scottish Rite, the Consul of Prussia in Jerusalem, Henry Petermann, and the American Vice-Consul, R. Beardsley, of Elkhart, Indiana.

As Bro. Morris relates in his book *Freemasonry in the Holy Land* (New York, 1872, p. 30), after the conclusion of the ceremony, the participants separated and "endeavoring to return to the

entrance through the devious and interminable passages of that enormous cavern, lost our way, and came nigh being compelled to remain there until our friends would search for us, the next day." This incident will serve to give an idea about the size of the underground quarry.

The cave continued being used occasionally by local Masons, particularly to perform the Mark Master degree, for which the cave is remarkably well-suited. This tradition was broken in 1948, when the Old City of Jerusalem was captured by Jordan's Arab Legion. Fearing that some of the tunnels running from the main cave might lead to the Jewish part of the city, the Jordanian authorities sealed the entrance to the cave. Only in 1967 were Masonic ceremonies resumed, after the Holy City had been reunited, and after the entrance to the Quarries was cleaned of rubble and the cave itself made safe for visitors.

On July 2, 1969, a solemn ceremony was held at this place on occasion of the consecration of the Supreme Royal Arch Chapter of the State of Israel.

The cave is now an official tourist site, open to the public. Individuals and groups may visit it during daytime hours (there is a small entrance fee). For Masonic visitors, however, a particularly moving experience is the participation in one of the ceremonies organized once or twice a year by the Grand Lodge of the State of Israel or the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Israel. In those opportunities, the cave is sealed off to non-Masons, and a Masonic degree is worked, sometimes in Hebrew but more often in English, for the benefit of visiting Brethren from abroad. The degree usually worked is the Mark Master which in Israel, as in Scotland, belongs within the Royal Arch system of degrees. The legendary story forming the background to this theatrical degree takes place in King Solomon's quarries, and concerns a stone rejected as irregular, which turns out to be the capstone of the entrance to the Temple. Performing this ceremony in an actual quarry, in the very heart of Old Jerusalem, carries deep symbolic meaning and nobody who has attended this ceremony is likely to ever forget

Brethren wishing to take part in such ceremony, or to organize a group for this purpose, should contact the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Israel (P.O. Box 33206, 61331, Tel-Aviv, Israel). They can be assured of receiving all possible fraternal assistance.

(1) William C. Blaine, 33ø, "King Solomons Quarries", The Israel Scottish Rite, Vol. 3, Nø1, December, 1973, p.23.

(2) Roy Brunton, "King Solomon's Quarries", The Scottish Rite, #7, January-March, 1969, p.13.

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