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The **Megiddo** **Prayer Hall:** Christianity Before **Constantine**

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Does **SCIENCE**
RULE OUT the
SUPERNATURAL?

CHRISTIANS AT THE CROSSROADS:

The Megiddo Inscription and a Third-Century Prayer Hall

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Article In Brief...

Nestled just south of the ancient tel of Megiddo,¹ along the storied Via Maris—the major international trade and military route connecting Egypt to Mesopotamia—lies the site of Kefar ‘Othnay, known in the Roman period as Legio. It was here, within the walls of a Roman military encampment, that archaeologists uncovered the remains of a Christian prayer hall dating to the early third century A.D. This remarkable discovery offers a rare and invaluable window into the rise of Christian worship in a context dominated by imperial power, mobility, and cultural exchange. Excavated in 2005 and presented in a 2006 report by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), the site comprises architectural, epigraphic, and iconographic elements that together form one of the earliest Christian communal worship spaces known to archaeology. The discovery holds valuable historical and theological significance and plays a central role in understanding the early Christian movement prior to Constantine’s legalization of Christianity.

as well as cultic, and combine private use with public ownership.”³ The architectural context—uniquely embedded within Roman military infrastructure—revealed a rectangular hall with mosaics, Greek inscriptions, and distinctive internal features characteristic of a *domus ecclesiae*, or house church, marking it as one of the earliest known Christian communal worship spaces ever discovered. In fact, pottery and coins recovered from the approximately 500-square-foot hall suggest construction around A.D. 230, with usage continuing until the end of the third century, *which would make the Legio site the earliest known Christian worship facility discovered to date*, predating the well-known *domus ecclesiae* at Dura-Europos by at least a decade.⁴

The dating of the Christian prayer hall at Legio to the early third century A.D. is of critical historical and theological significance. Prior to the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313, Christianity remained an unrecognized and often persecuted religion within the Roman Empire. Yet, the archaeological evidence from Kefar ‘Othnay offers compelling testimony to the existence of a formally organized Christian worship space decades before imperial legalization of Christianity.

ARCHITECTURE

WHILE the structure lacks the monumental basilican form that would characterize later Constantinian church architecture, its internal features—such as a central podium, richly symbolic mosaics, and Greek inscriptions—indicate intentional liturgical use and spatial designation for Christian ritual. The architectural format closely resembles that of the Syrian house churches, wherein private residences were adapted for congregational gatherings. However, the Legio complex

LOCATED in northern Israel, Legio lies adjacent to ancient Tel Megiddo, a strategic site that dominated the Jezreel Valley and served as a key crossroads for military and commercial traffic along the Via Maris²—one of the most important ancient highways connecting Egypt to Mesopotamia. During the Roman period, the site became the headquarters of the Sixth Legion Ferrata (Figure 1) and played a crucial role in the imperial defense and communication network. Today, the location falls within the grounds of the modern Megiddo Prison (Figure 2), situated southeast of Kibbutz Megiddo.

In 2005, during development work at the prison, an astonishing discovery was made when an inmate unearthed part of a 16 x 32-foot mosaic floor, soon identified as the centerpiece of a Christian prayer hall dating to the early third century A.D. The mosaic was one of 12 rooms within a large residential structure measuring approximately 6,500 square feet. Archaeological analysis revealed that this complex was not a typical private dwelling, as Yotam Tepper and Leah Di Segni explain, but “was utilized for both everyday use and military administrative purposes” and “served multiple functions: residential, military,



Excavation of Legio VI Ferrata camp near Megiddo, Israel [wikipedia.org (Oren Rozen) 2015 license cc-by-sa-3.0]

appears to have been associated with public or military ownership rather than private domestic use, suggesting a more complex model of early Christian spatial organization.⁵

SOCIOCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

THIS setting—within a building used for both administrative and religious functions—challenges the prevailing narrative that early Christian worship was exclusively hidden, domestic, or marginal prior to Constantine. Furthermore, the community in which this prayer hall was built reflects the diversity of life in the Roman provinces. As Tepper and Di Segni note, Legio was home to “soldiers and civilians, Jews and Samaritans, Christians and pagans,” each with shared and distinctive religious and cultural practices.⁶ This mirrors the religious plurality visible at Dura-Europos, where Christian, Jewish, and pagan sanctuaries—including a synagogue, Mithraeum, and the so-called Christ house—occupied the same urban quarter.⁷ Thus, the congregation at Legio stands as a powerful witness to the culturally diverse setting in which early Christianity took root—publicly visible, socially integrated, and embedded within the heart of Roman military and civic infrastructure.

EPIGRAPHS

THE epigraphic evidence embedded within the Megiddo Mosaic offers some of the most illuminating insights into the character and social dynamics of third-century Christian communities in Roman Palestine. Three Greek inscriptions, meticulously laid in black limestone against a white background in the mosaic floor, identify both the donors who sponsored elements of the prayer hall and their respective offerings, revealing a structured and participatory congregational setting.

Gaianus Inscription

The most prominent of the epigraphs is the northern inscription, commonly referred to as the Gaianus Inscription. Measuring over 11 square feet, it reads: “Gaianus, also called Porphyrius, centurion, our brother, has made the pavement at his own expense as an act of liberality. Brutius has carried out the work.”⁸ This text not only names the donor—Gaianus, a Roman centurion—but also emphasizes his Christian identity through the designation “our brother,” a term of spiritual kinship frequently found in New Testament usage.⁹ Such kinship terminology functioned to reinforce a sense of belonging and mutual obligation within early Christian communities, irrespective of social or military status. The mention of Brutius as the artisan suggests that

the mosaic was likely executed by a single craftsman, whose Roman name further connects the project to the broader cultural landscape of the Roman Empire. The use of Greek rather than Latin in the inscription, coupled with Gaianus’s choice to employ his *signum* or nickname, “Porphyrius,” rather than a formal Roman title, suggests that the dedication was offered in a private religious capacity rather than as an official act of imperial representation.¹⁰

Intriguingly, the term for “centurion” (ἐκατόνταρχος) in this context is abbreviated with the Greek letters Chi and Rho (XP)—a standard shorthand for the word in epigraphic tradition, yet one that would soon take on deeply Christological significance. After Constantine’s self-reported “vision” at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in A.D. 312, the Chi-Rho would become a universal Christian symbol, representing the first two letters of the Greek word *Christos*.¹¹ Although its use at Megiddo likely predates this development and does not carry the same imperial connotation, it nonetheless hints at the growing confluence between Christian identity and symbolic language even before Constantine.

The Gaianus inscription, along with associated archaeological data, provides compelling evidence that the Christian community at third-century Legio included a diverse demographic drawn from the Roman military and its surround-



Modern Megiddo Prison [wikipedia.org (James Emery) 2007 license cc-by-sa-3.0]

ing environs. This community likely consisted of soldiers, high-ranking officers, administrative personnel, their families and dependents, as well as members of the local civilian population. The presence of such a group in a prayer hall housed within a Roman military complex suggests the integration of Christianity into a traditionally pagan and hierarchical institution. While domestic shrines (*lararia*) dedicated to Greco-Roman deities are a common feature of Roman military installations, the prayer hall at Megiddo constitutes the earliest known chapel exclusively dedicated to Christian worship within a military context. Its significance is further underscored by the eventual ecclesiastical development of the region. The attendance of Bishop Paulus of nearby Maximianopolis at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 indicates that Christianity had taken firm root in Legio in the decades following the military camp's abandonment.

The Gaianus inscription adds yet another name to the growing list of Roman centurions in ancient Palestine who embraced the Christian faith. The New Testament references the office of the centurion—*hekatontarchos* or *kenturiōn*—24 times, depicting these figures as military commanders typically responsible for 60 to 80 soldiers.¹² Several of these figures play significant roles in the Gospel accounts and early church history. One centurion in Capernaum, approximately 30 miles northeast of Megiddo, is described as a benefactor of a local synagogue and is notable for possessing a faith so profound that it astonished Jesus Himself (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10). Another centurion stands beneath the cross and, moved by Jesus' suffering, confesses, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:39, NRSV; cf. Matthew 27:54; Luke 23:47). The most pivotal figure, however, is Corne-

lius of Caesarea, situated less than 18 miles west of Legio. Cornelius's conversion—together with that of his household—has long been recognized as the "Gentile Pentecost,"¹³ marking a turning point in the Church's understanding that the Gospel message extended to Gentiles as well as Jews (Acts 10:1-11:18). The presence of Gaianus at Legio thus situates him within this notable tradition of Roman military officials who not only converted to Christianity but also served as significant patrons and exemplars of the faith.

One particularly revealing observation from the archaeological report is that the Legio congregation was composed predominantly "of pagan rather than Jewish origin."¹⁴ This finding highlights the cultural pluralism of the early Christian movement and its capacity to thrive within and across diverse religious and ethnic settings. In this way, the Megiddo prayer hall stands as a powerful testament to the dynamic expansion of early Christianity within the Roman military world—an expansion that defied both geographical and ideological boundaries.

Akeptous Inscription

The southern mosaic panel also contains two smaller inscriptions that further enhance our understanding of this congregation. Of particular significance is the Akeptous Inscription, which reads: "The God-loving Akeptous has offered the table to God Jesus Christ as a memorial."¹⁵ Here, the donor is a woman, identified by the honorific *philotheos* ("God-loving"), a title that evokes Luke's address to his own patron, Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1).¹⁶ The table she donates, referred to as a *trapeza*, is the same word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 10:21 to describe the Eucharist as "the table of the Lord" (cf. Luke

22:21,30). Such terminology, coupled with architectural parallels at sites like Dura-Europos, underscores the centrality of the Lord's Supper in early Christian worship and highlights the theological significance of Akeptous's gift.¹⁷ The term used for her "offering" (*prospherō*) echoes sacrificial language from Hebrews, where Christ's death is portrayed as the supreme offering once for all (Hebrews 9:23-10:18). Its dedication "to God Jesus Christ" affirms the liturgical use of the space, and the accompanying term *mnēmosynon* ("memorial") links the offering explicitly to the Eucharistic remembrance of Christ's death, echoing Pauline tradition (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:24-26; Acts 10:4).

The Akeptous Inscription has attracted considerable scholarly interest for multiple reasons. Most notably, it explicitly dedicates the central podium of the prayer hall as a *Eucharistic table*, thereby affirming the hall's function as a Christian liturgical space. Like the other women named in the mosaic, Akeptous seeks to be memorialized through the Church's commemorative act of the Lord's Supper—an observance grounded in Christ's own command to "do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:24-26).

Another striking aspect of the Akeptous Inscription is that it identifies her as a financial benefactress of the Christian congregation at Legio, joining the ranks of early Christian female patrons whose generosity and faith shaped the development of the nascent Church. This epigraphic evidence aligns with longstanding scholarly observations that Jesus' inclusion of women as disciples was radically countercultural compared to other Jewish teachers of His time.¹⁸ The Gospel accounts attest that some of His earliest followers were women of means who actively supported His

ministry, “helping to support them out of their own means” (Luke 8:3, NIV).¹⁹ Their prominence continues in Acts, which highlights women such as Tabitha (Acts 9:36-43), Damaris (17:34), and unnamed “leading women” of social stature (17:4,12). The most notable example, Lydia of Thyatira, hosted the fledgling Philippian house church and became a key patron of Paul’s missionary endeavors (Acts 16:14–15, 40; Philippians 2:25-30; 4:2,17).²⁰

Romans 16 expands this portrait, naming Phoebe as a “benefactor” (Romans 16:2) and the likely courier of Paul’s most theological letter. Paul also praises Priscilla, a co-teacher and church leader, and Junia (Romans 16:7, NRSV).²¹ In this rich tradition of empowered female disciples, Akeptous stands as a testament to the prominent roles and spiritual value women held within early Christian assemblies—roles that frequently exceeded what was socially normative in Greco-Roman society.²²

Even more remarkable is the theological affirmation embedded within Akeptous’s offering. Her inscription names “God Jesus Christ” (Θῷ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ), offering unequivocal evidence of a strong belief in Jesus’ deity among early third-century believers. This contradicts the modern myth—popularized by works such as *The Da Vinci Code*—that belief in Jesus’ divinity was a fourth-century innovation of the Council of Nicaea.²³ In fact, mounting archaeological and textual data reveal robust pre-Constantinian confessions of Christ’s divine status. A recently deciphered silver amulet found in a third-century Roman burial at Nida (modern Frankfurt) supports this. Using high-resolution tomography, scholars uncovered a Latin inscription invoking “Jesus Christ, Son of God! The Lord of the world,” followed by a paraphrase of the so-

called Christ hymn in Philippians 2:10-11: “...before whom bend all knees: the heavenly ones, the earthly and the subterranean, and every tongue confess.”²⁴ The Frankfurt Silver Inscription, dated between A.D. 230-270, is the earliest known Christian text from north of the Alps and further corroborates widespread devotion to Jesus as divine well before the Constantinian era.²⁵

Both this artifact and the Akeptous Inscription exhibit the early Christian scribal convention of *nomina sacra*, where sacred names such as God (ΘΕΟΣ), Jesus (ΙΗΣΟΥΣ), and Christ (ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ) are abbreviated with overlines. In Akeptous’s case, all three terms are abbreviated (Θῷ Ἰῷ Χῷ), visually affirming their sacred character.²⁶ Notably, the Frankfurt amulet also contains the CHI-RHO (XP) Christogram three times, a symbol that would later become synonymous with imperial Christianity after Constantine’s “vision” at the Milvian Bridge. Thus, these artifacts not only preserve early Christian confessions but also trace the gradual crystallization of Christian iconography and theological identity in both text and symbol.

Inscription of Four Women

Alongside Akeptous, other women are also commemorated in an adjacent inscription: “Remember Primilla and Cyriaca and Dorothea,

and moreover also Chreste.”²⁷ This invocation for remembrance again employs the term *mnēmosynon*, reinforcing the continuity of early Christian liturgical and memorial practices. The inclusion of these women’s names in a sacred space underlines their active participation and social prominence within the Christian assembly. Their presence, along with Akeptous, reflects the egalitarian ethos that marked many early Christian communities and recalls Paul’s commendation of female co-laborers in Romans 16. While Primilla is a Latin name, the other three women’s names are Greek. It is reminiscent of the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet before His passion, concerning whom He promised, “wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory (*mnēmosunon*) of her” (Mark 14:9, NIV; see also Matthew 26:6-13; John 12:1-8). Intriguingly, after nearly 1,800 years, the memory of these four women at Legio is now commemorated around the world.

Tepper and Di Segni suggest the male names in the north panel and female on the south side are evidence of the widespread early Christian practice of men and women standing separately in worship gatherings.²⁸ Moreover, there is an interesting parallel with Dura-Euro-

(cont. on p. 8)

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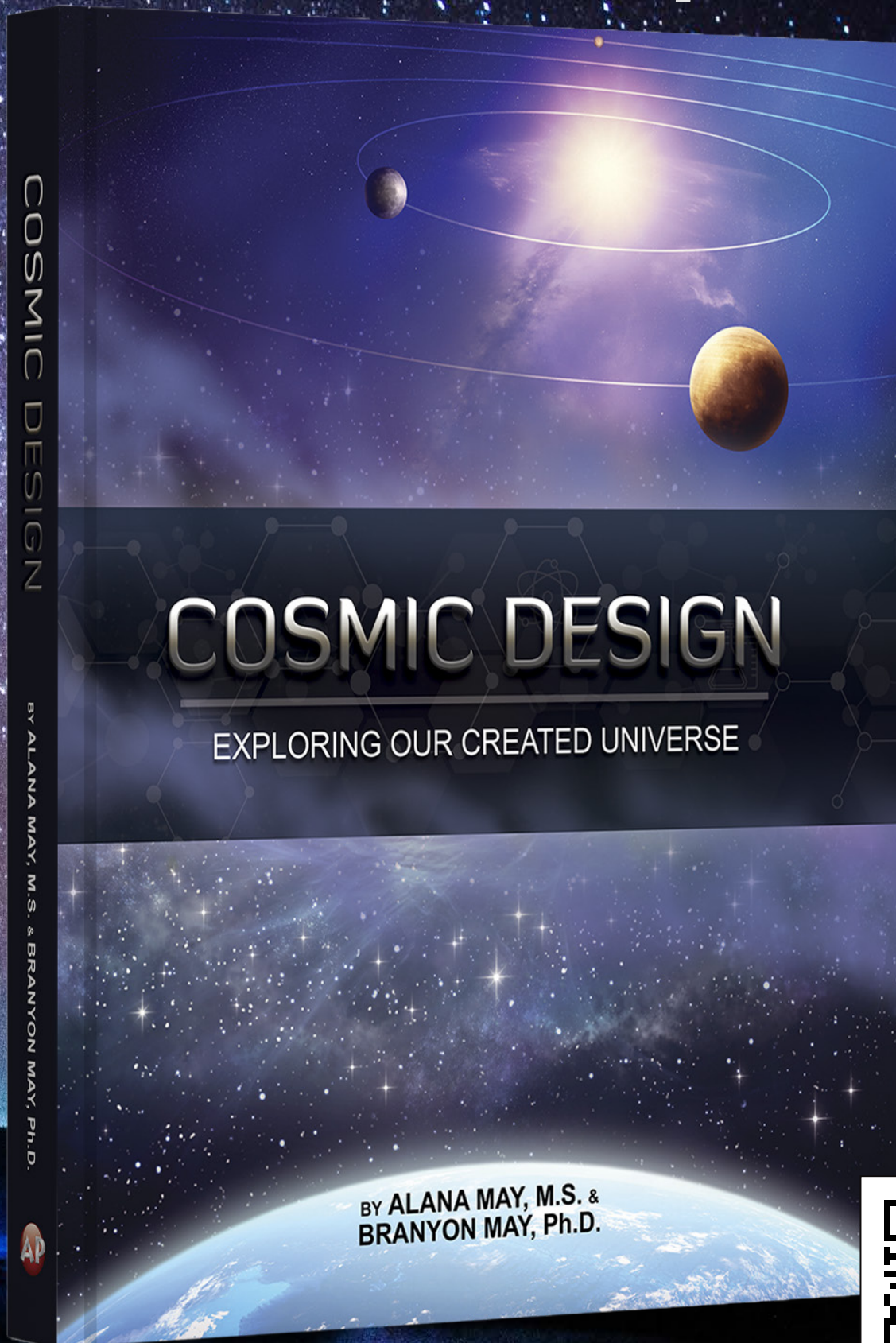
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pos as the dominant visual image of the baptistry that is a fresco depicting five women, presumably those who visited the empty tomb, with the name of one woman, Hera, inscribed as a graffito on the wall.²⁹

Together, these inscriptions form a cohesive epigraphic narrative that not only affirms the communal, sacramental, and Christocentric identity of the Legio congregation, but also provides a rare glimpse into the integration of Roman military officials and women into early Christian patronage and liturgical life. The mosaic at Megiddo, with its precise artistry and theological symbolism, thus emerges not merely as an architectural relic but as a deeply textured historical witness to the faith, organization, and social diversity of Christianity prior to the Constantinian shift.

ICONOGRAPHY

THE iconography of the Megiddo mosaic provides further confirmation of the space's liturgical and theological function as an early Christian prayer hall. Most notably, the northern mosaic panel contains a medallion featuring two fish—identified as a tuna and a bass—enclosed within an ornate octagonal pattern and surrounded by geometric motifs. Though modest in artistic execution, the image is rich in symbolic resonance. The depiction of the two fish likely alludes to the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, a narrative preserved in all four Gospel accounts (Matthew 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16; John 6:9), and thus evokes themes of divine provision, communal fellowship, and Eucharistic overtones.

More significantly, the presence of the fish iconography connects the mosaic to one of the earliest and most pervasive visual symbols of Christian identity. Prior to the widespread adoption of the cross as the

primary emblem of Christian faith, the fish functioned as a cryptic yet universally recognized sign among believers. The Greek word for fish, *ICHTHYS* (ΙΧΘΥΣ),³⁰ was used as an acronym for *Iēsous Christos, Theou Huios, Sōtēr*—“Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”³¹ This acronym encapsulated core elements of Christian confession and served as both a theological affirmation and a practical marker of faith in times of persecution. Fish symbols frequently appeared in early Christian funerary art, baptismal settings, and Eucharistic scenes, further attesting to their liturgical and doctrinal importance.³² The inclusion of this iconography in the Megiddo mosaic, then, not only reinforces the religious character of the hall but also reflects the convergence of visual theology and communal devotion in the worship practices of this early third-century Christian community.

CONCLUSION

COMPARATIVELY, this prayer hall predates or aligns closely with similar Christian sites, such as the house church at Dura-Europos in Syria (ca. A.D. 240s) and the possible Christian assembly space in Capernaum associated with “Peter’s House.” Unlike Dura-Europos, which was located in a private home modified for baptisms and meetings, the Legio site appears to have been partially communal and partially military, embedded in a larger building used by Roman officers. This distinction marks it as potentially the earliest known Christian prayer hall within a military context, a detail of profound significance for the study of Christianity’s spread within imperial structures.

The canonical context is equally revealing. Scholars generally affirm that by the early third century, at least 22 of the 27 books now considered canonical were widely

recognized among Christian communities, with five or six (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation) still debated in some regions.³³ This further dispels common myths about Constantine’s supposed role in “deciding the Bible’s contents” at the Council of Nicaea—a claim unsupported by any patristic source. Rather, the Legio inscriptions affirm that Christian theology, practice, and even vocabulary were well-established before imperial patronage.

This archaeological find, therefore, contributes significantly to our understanding of early Christian architecture, liturgy, and identity. It shows that Christianity was not a marginal, invisible movement waiting for imperial validation, but a faith already embedded in Roman infrastructure and practiced by men and women of diverse social ranks. That Roman officers and soldiers would fund and participate in such worship highlights the breadth of Christian influence by the early third century.

In summary, the prayer hall at Kefar ‘Othnay represents one of the earliest material witnesses to Christian communal worship. Purposefully designed, theologically rich, and reflective of a diverse community, it offers an invaluable window into the lived faith of Christians prior to the Constantinian era. Far from being a product of political expediency, Christianity, as seen at Legio, was a grassroots movement shaped by conviction, shared memory, and sacrificial generosity. As such, the site deserves continued scholarly attention and preservation as part of the heritage of early Christianity and the broader history of religion in the Roman world.

ENDNOTES

¹ A tel is a manmade mound formed by successive layers of human habitation over hundreds or thousands of years. Tel

- Megiddo is one of the most strategically significant tells in the ancient Near East.
- ² Legio (modern-day Lajjun) is located just south of Tel Megiddo in northern Israel. It controlled a major transportation corridor connecting the coast to the interior of the Levant and lay at the convergence of imperial roads linking Caesarea, Scythopolis (Bet She'an), and Jerusalem.
- ³ Yotam Tepper and Leah Di Segni (2006), *A Christian Prayer Hall of the Third Century CE at Kefar 'Othnay (Legio): Excavations at the Megiddo Prison 2005* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority), pp. 42, 45.
- ⁴ L. Michael White (1996), *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture: Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* in *Harvard Theological Studies* 42 (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity), 1:140-148.
- ⁵ Tepper and Di Segni, pp. 50-51.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ⁷ John D. Doss (2023), "The Expansion of Associations and Christianity in the Book of Acts: A Comparative Study," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism*, 19:145-146.
- ⁸ Tepper and Di Segni, p. 34.
- ⁹ Doss, 19:139-140.
- ¹⁰ Tepper and Di Segni, p. 35.
- ¹¹ The abbreviation **Chi-Rho (XP)** appears in some inscriptions as a shorthand for "centurion," but it later developed into one of the earliest **Christograms**, symbolizing Christ. In this context, its use may function more as a **linguistic abbreviation** than an explicit Christian symbol—yet the **double meaning** carries theological significance.
- ¹² Craig S. Keener (2013), *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 3:1-14:28* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), vol. 2.
- ¹³ Frederic H. Chase (1902), *The Credibility of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles: Being the Hulsean Lectures for 1900-1901* (London: Macmillan), p. 79.
- ¹⁴ Tepper and Di Segni, p. 54.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ¹⁶ Craig S. Keener (2012), *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Introduction and 1:1-2:47* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 1:653-668.
- ¹⁷ Edward Adams (2008), "The Ancient Church at Megiddo: The Discovery and an Assessment of Its Significance," *The Expository Times*, 120[2]:68.
- ¹⁸ Ben Witherington III (1984), *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus'*

Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life in *Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series*, no. 51 (Cambridge: Cambridge University), pp. 80-124.

- ¹⁹ Craig S. Keener (2014), *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), p. 200.

²⁰ Richard S. Ascough (2009), *Lydia: Paul's Cosmopolitan Hostess in Paul's Social Network: Brothers and Sisters in Faith* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical), pp. 52-57.

²¹ Andrea Hartmann (2023), "Junia, Also Called Joanna? An Exploration of the Historical Possibilities Regarding the Life and Ministry of the Woman Greeted in Romans 16:7," Ph.D. diss. (Middlesex University: London School of Theology).

²² Doss, 19:156-157.

²³ Dan Brown (2003), *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday), p. 233.

²⁴ See *Aktuelles aus der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt* (2024), "Frankfurt silver inscription"—Oldest Christian testimony found north of the Alps," December 12, <https://aktuelles.uni-frankfurt.de/en/english/frankfurt-silver-inscription-oldest-christian-testimony-found-north-of-the-alps/>.

²⁵ See *Frankfurt.de-das offizielle Stadtportal* (2024), "Frankfurter Silberinschrift"—ältestes christliches Zeugnis

nördlich der Alpen gefunden," December 11, <https://frankfurt.de/de-de/aktuelle-meldung/meldungen/frankfurter-silberinschrift/>.

²⁶ Tepper and Di Segni, p. 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁹ Michael Peppard (2016), *The World's Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria* (New Haven, CT: Yale), pp. 111-154; L. Michael White (1996), *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture: Texts and Monuments for the Christian Domus Ecclesiae in Its Environment* in *Harvard Theological Studies* 42 (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity): 2:130-131.

³⁰ The acronym ICHTHYS appears in various early Christian inscriptions and was commonly used as a symbol or secret sign among believers. It conveyed core Christological beliefs and often served as both a visual identifier and a statement of faith in Christian iconography.

³¹ Tepper and Di Segni, p. 36.

³² Doss, 19:143-144.

³³ Bruce M. Metzger (1987), *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 171-175. Early lists, such as the Muratorian Fragment (ca. A.D. 170), reflect the core canon with some variation.

SPEAKING SCHEDULES

Kyle Butt

February 15	Lewisburg, TN	(931) 359-3597
February 21	Pigeon Forge, TN	(865) 429-7432
February 22	Columbia, TN	(931) 388-7334

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February 1	Sheffield, AL	(256) 383-1618
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February 21	Pigeon Forge, TN	(865) 429-7432

Dave Miller

February 1	Montgomery, AL	(334) 264-2985
March 1	Montgomery, AL	(334) 264-2985
March 13-15	Mechanicsville, VA	(804) 746-8224

Jeff Miller

February 8	Wetumpka, AL	(334) 414-8204
February 26-28	Williamstown, KY	(334) 272-8558
March 27-29	Benton, AR	(501) 315-3303

Does *Methodological Naturalism* Nullify Evidence for Christianity?



by practically all concerned.⁵ The premise that the Universe began to exist supplies a step in an argument to the conclusion that God exists.⁶

- The behavior of electrodes is not a directly theological question, but why there *are* electrodes, oxygen, or water, or any matter or energy at all, is a question that introduces a supernatural explanation.
- The statement, “Dead bodies do not rise naturally from the dead,” is confirmed by natural science, and also is a necessary premise (even if taken for granted and left implicit) in any argument for the resurrection of Jesus as a miraculous event.⁷

Whatever the professional standards of any academic discipline may be, each person still is faced with the question of whether it is reasonable to believe the supernatural claims of Christianity. What a historian or scientist is allowed to publish or discuss in a professional society is one thing; what he believes on the basis of the evidence provided by his discipline is another.

METHODOLOGICAL NATURALISM DOES NOT IMPLY METAPHYSICAL NATURALISM

UNFORTUNATELY, some have taken the fact that methodological naturalism governs certain disciplines as evidence that *metaphysical* naturalism (sometimes called philosophical or ontological naturalism) is true. Metaphysical naturalism is the view that nature, meaning “physical reality” or “spatiotemporal reality,” is all that exists (thus God, angels, demons, heaven, hell, and human spirits do not exist).⁸ For example, the agnostic New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman cited methodological naturalism in the current practice of history as evidence that historical data cannot support Jesus’ resur-

SKEPTICS of the Bible sometimes suggest that the supernatural claims of Christianity (e.g., the creation of the Universe, the resurrection of Jesus) cannot be supported by any facts from the historical record or by any scientific data, because these disciplines operate on the basis of methodological naturalism.¹ Allegedly, any scholarly discipline that is methodologically naturalistic can provide *no* support for a claim that a miracle occurred. Is this the case?

DEFINING METHODOLOGICAL NATURALISM

METHODOLOGICAL naturalism is the practice of seeking only natural causes of scientific phenomena.² Admittedly, some disciplines typically are defined by the quest to provide and understand explanations in terms of natural regularities. In this regard they are religiously neutral. And, in certain circumstances, it is reasonable to suggest that “[w]ithin science, we should adopt methodological naturalism, according to which answers to questions are sought within nature, within the contingent created order. For example, in describing how two charged electrodes separate hydro-

gen and oxygen gas when placed in water, the ‘God hypothesis’ is both unnecessary and out of place.”³

The degree to which methodological naturalism is used varies from field to field and from one practitioner to another. Many scientists allow the possibility of supernatural explanations and even operate professionally as theists or “Creation scientists.” And, many historians publicly support the historical fact of Jesus’ resurrection. But insofar as miracles are not currently observed, many natural scientists in their professional capacity do not engage with the possibility that there is a supernatural realm.⁴ Similarly, many historians operate in the context of professional standards that restrict them from reaching conclusions that any supernatural event is a fact of history.

That said, the religiously neutral data of the natural sciences can be marshaled to support premises in an argument that leads to a theological conclusion, such as the historical event of a miracle. Consider some examples:

- Natural science has provided rich evidence to support the premise that the Universe began to exist, to the degree that the beginning of the Universe is taken as a datum

rection in any way.⁹ The claim that metaphysical naturalism is true begs the question: What evidence is there that naturalism is true? In the discipline of philosophy, for example, the non-existence of God is not merely assumed *prima facie*, but rather the question of God's existence has been one of the major topics of philosophy ever since Socrates.¹⁰ (Thankfully, the last 60 years or so have seen a blossoming of theism in many philosophy departments.¹¹)

METHODOLOGICAL NATURALISM DOES NOT IMPLY EPISTEMOLOGICAL NATURALISM

UNFORTUNATELY, some have taken the fact that methodological naturalism governs certain disciplines as evidence that *epistemological* naturalism is true. Epistemological naturalism (or "scientism") is the view that science is the only source of knowledge. As an example of epistemological naturalism, consider the words of Jerry A. Coyne, the biologist from the University of Chicago who has published widely in support of organic evolution:

[T]ruth is simply what is: what exists in reality and can be verified by rational and independent observers. It is true that DNA is a double helix, that the continents move, and that the Earth revolves around the Sun. It is not true, at least in the dictionary sense, that somebody had a revelation from God. The scientific claims can be corroborated by anyone with the right tools, while a revelation, though perhaps reflecting someone's real perception, says nothing about reality, for unless that revelation has empirical content, it cannot be verified.¹²

Yet it is easy to see that epistemological naturalism is incorrect, for at least two reasons:¹³

First, because epistemological naturalism is self-refuting: The claim that science is the only source

of knowledge is itself non-scientific, unverifiable by observation. Second, because epistemological naturalism is overly restrictive. It would lead to the abandonment of vast tracts of knowledge, including science itself. For science is based on non-scientific—but entirely reasonable—presuppositions: We believe in the reality of the past, the external world, and the laws of logic, but there is no observational "proof" for the reality of these things. As John C. Lennox observed, scientism leads people to think that "scientific" means the same as "rational," but clearly such an equation is false!¹⁴ Finally, it should be noted that even the epistemological naturalist should believe in God, because the scientific evidence overwhelmingly points to a Creator and Designer of the Universe.

CONCLUSION

METHODOLOGICAL naturalism is a practical reality in our world today, but it should not be taken to imply that the disciplines operating on this basis provide no usable data for developing apologetical arguments. And, methodological naturalism does not imply the truth of metaphysical naturalism or epistemological naturalism. Each position must be judged on its own merits, based on the evidence.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Cf. S. Joshua Swamidass (2021), "Why Methodological Naturalism?," <https://peacefulscience.org/articles/methodological-naturalism/>.
- ² Alvin Plantinga (1997), "Methodological Naturalism?," *Origins and Design*, 18[1]:18; Lok-Chi Chan (2021), "On Characterizing Metaphysical Naturalism," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Mind*, 1:222.
- ³ J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig (2003), *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), p. 358.
- ⁴ On the definition of miracles and their

cessation, see David L. Lipe (2022), "Miracles in the Church," *Equipping the Saints* (Searcy, AR: Stewart), pp. 336-344.

- ⁵ Alexander Vilenkin (2007), *Many Worlds in One* (New York: Hill and Wang), p. 176.
- ⁶ E.g., Jeff Miller (2016), "The Cosmological Argument for the Existence of God," Apologetics Press, <https://apologeticspress.org/the-cosmological-argument-for-the-existence-of-god-5300/>.
- ⁷ Cf. William Lane Craig and James Crossley (2007), "Was Jesus Bodily Raised from the Dead?," <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/was-jesus-bodily-raised-from-the-dead-debate>.
- ⁸ Chan, "On Characterizing Metaphysical Naturalism."
- ⁹ Bart Ehrman and William Lane Craig (2006), "Is There Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus? The Craig-Ehrman Debate," <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehrmann>.
- ¹⁰ Plato (1997), *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett), note the dialogues *Euthyphro*; *Apology*; *Republic*.
- ¹¹ William Wood (2021), "Philosophy and Christian Theology," Stanford University, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/christiantheology-philosophy/>.
- ¹² Jerry A. Coyne (2015), *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible* (New York: Penguin), p. 29.
- ¹³ These are adapted from William Lane Craig and Alex Rosenberg (2013), "Is Faith in God Reasonable?," <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-faith-in-god-reasonable>.
- ¹⁴ John C. Lennox (2019), *Can Science Explain Everything?* (Oxford: The Good Book), p. 23.



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NOTE FROM *The Editor*



AP Staff Spotlight: Tonna Johnson, Executive Secretary

If you've ever called Apologetics Press, there's a good chance the friendly, helpful voice that greeted you on the other end of the line belonged to Tonna Johnson. For the past 13 years, Tonna has faithfully served as a secretary at AP—a role that, in reality, involves far more than the word secretary could ever capture. For several years, Tonna worked as the only AP secretary, and in recent years has served as Executive Secretary.



Tonna's day-to-day responsibilities are extensive and essential. She answers phone calls and emails from customers and inquiring minds around the globe, helps visitors to AP in person, takes orders, fills and ships packages daily, manages inventory, tracks payments, and maintains multiple databases for *Reason & Revelation* and *Discovery* subscribers. Every subscription that arrives on time and every question that's promptly answered reflects her quiet diligence and commitment.

Somehow, amid all of that, she still manages to make every caller and visitor feel genuinely valued and appreciated. Whether she's assisting someone in navigating the AP website for the first time or greeting a visitor to the AP booth at Polishing the

Pulpit or a Lads to Leaders convention, Tonna brings warmth, patience, and Christlike kindness through her work and interactions with others.

Her influence, however, extends far beyond the AP office. Tonna is a faithful member of the Eastern Meadows church of Christ and a dedicated Bible class teacher—especially gifted at teaching ladies' classes. She is also a loving mother and grandmother who radiates the joy of her faith among family, friends, and co-workers.

In a world that often measures success by how visible a role may be, Tonna reminds us that some of the most vital Kingdom work happens quietly—through consistency, humility, and a servant's heart. For over a decade, she has helped keep AP's daily operations running smoothly and efficiently, with a smile that reflects the love of Christ.

Apologetics Press is deeply thankful for Tonna Johnson—a tireless worker behind the scenes and a shining example of what it means to "[s]erve the Lord with gladness" (Psalm 100:2).

Eric Lyons
Executive Director