SCRIPTURE ANALYSIS · BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Ancient Stones, Part 7

New Testament Period Inscriptions

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About this study

This part covers seven inscriptions from the Roman period that name people, places or institutions known from the Gospels, Acts and the letters of Paul: the Pilate Stone, the Caiaphas ossuary, the Temple Warning inscription, the Theodotus synagogue inscription, the Gallio inscription from Delphi, the Erastus inscription from Corinth and the Nazareth Inscription.

About the translations. These inscriptions are short, so each is given complete or nearly so in a fresh translation from the Latin or Greek by the author of this study, following the standard editions named in each entry. New Testament passages are cited by reference. Where the inscriptions bear on the Greek text of the New Testament, the wording of the Greek critical text (NA28) is noted.

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65. The Pilate Stone



The Pilate Stone at Caesarea Maritima. The stone shown on site is a replica; the original is in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Image: Fallaner. Licence: CC BY-SA 4.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Limestone block, 82 × 65 cm, reused as a step in a later rebuilding of the theatre
Museum	Israel Museum, Jerusalem (original); replica at Caesarea
Date	AD 26–36 (prefecture of Pontius Pilate)
Provenance	Theatre of Caesarea Maritima, Israel; excavated by Antonio Frova's Italian expedition, 1961
Language / script	Latin, capitals
Principal editions	Frova, *Rendiconti dell'Istituto Lombardo* 95 (1961); Alföldy, *Scripta Classica Israelica* 18 (1999); *CIIP* II 1277

What it is

Technical summary. The partially preserved four-line inscription records a dedication by Pontius Pilate of a building called the *Tiberieum*, probably a structure honouring the emperor Tiberius (G. Alföldy proposed a lighthouse). It gives Pilate's official title as *praefectus Iudaeae*, "prefect of Judaea." It is the only inscription contemporary with Pilate that names him.

In plain terms. A stone block from Caesarea carries the name and title of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who sentenced Jesus.

The text

Translation by the author of this study, following Alföldy's restoration.

> [To the divine Augusti (?)] this Tiberieum
>
> [… Po]ntius Pilatus,

[… pref]ect of Judaea,

[… made and dedicated (?)].

Points of contact with the New Testament

- **Pilate's title.** The Gospels call Pilate *hēgemōn*, "governor" (e.g., Matt 27:2, 11; Luke 3:1 uses the participle *hēgemoneuontos*). Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44) calls him *procurator*, the title used for governors of Judaea from Claudius onward. The inscription shows that in Pilate's time the official title was **prefect**. The Gospels' general term is accurate for either.
- Pilate also appears in Josephus (*Ant.* 18.35, 55–64, 85–89; *War* 2.169–177) and Philo (*Legatio* 299–305).

Further reading

- Alföldy, Géza. "Pontius Pilatus und das Tiberieum von Caesarea Maritima." *Scripta Classica Israelica* 18 (1999): 85–108.
- Taylor, Joan E. "Pontius Pilate and the Imperial Cult in Roman Judaea." *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006): 555–582.

66. The Caiaphas Ossuary



The ornate ossuary inscribed "Yehosef bar Qayafa," from a family tomb in Jerusalem (Israel Museum).
Image: deror_avi. Licence: CC BY-SA 3.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Decorated limestone ossuary (bone box), one of about twelve in the tomb
Museum	Israel Museum, Jerusalem
Date	Early 1st century AD
Provenance	A burial cave in the Peace Forest, south Jerusalem; discovered in 1990 during construction, excavated by Zvi Greenhut
Language / script	Aramaic, Jewish script, incised
Principal editions	Greenhut, "The 'Caiaphas' Tomb in North Talpiyot," *ʿAtiqot* 21 (1992); Reich, *ʿAtiqot* 21 (1992)

What it is

Technical summary. The most elaborately decorated ossuary in the tomb is inscribed twice: *yhwsp br qypʾ* ("Yehosef son of Qayafa") and *yhwsp br qpʾ*. It held the bones of six people, including a man of about sixty. Most scholars identify this man with the high priest Joseph Caiaphas (in office AD 18–36), whom Josephus calls "Joseph who was called Caiaphas." The identification rests on the name, the family-name form, and the quality of the ossuary. Some (e.g., É. Puech, W. Horbury) have questioned it, noting that the spelling may reflect *Qopha* rather than *Qayapha*.

In plain terms. A bone box from a Jerusalem tomb carries the name "Joseph son of Caiaphas." It very probably held the remains of the high priest who presided at the trial of Jesus.

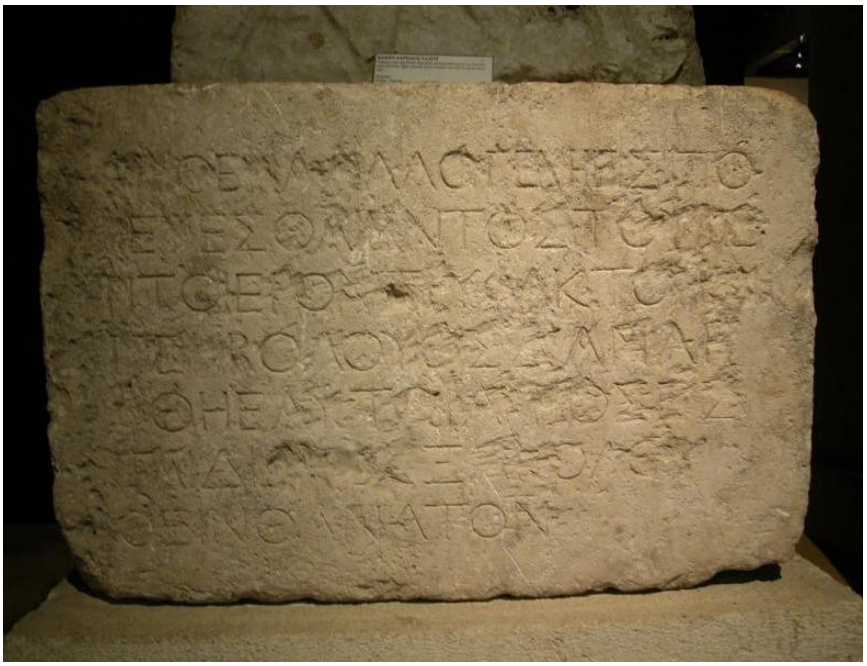
Points of contact with the New Testament

- **Matt 26:3, 57; John 11:49–53; 18:13–14, 24, 28; Luke 3:2; Acts 4:6.** Caiaphas the high priest, son-in-law of Annas, presides over the council that hands Jesus to Pilate.
- **Josephus,* Ant. *18.35, 95** names him "Joseph who was called Caiaphas," the form that matches the ossuary.
- **NA28 text.** The Greek of the New Testament spells the name Καϊάφας in all occurrences, consistent with the Aramaic *Qayyāpā*.

Further reading

- Greenhut, Zvi. "Burial Cave of the Caiaphas Family." *Biblical Archaeology Review* 18.5 (1992): 28–36, 76.
- Evans, Craig A. *Jesus and the Ossuaries*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003.

67. The Temple Warning Inscription



The complete Temple Warning inscription, found in 1871 (Istanbul Archaeology Museums).
Image: Yong Woo Park. Licence: CC0. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Limestone blocks; one complete example and one fragment
Museum	Istanbul Archaeology Museums (complete stone); Israel Museum (fragment found 1935)
Date	Late 1st century BC to AD 70 (Herod's temple)
Provenance	Jerusalem, near the Temple Mount; complete stone found by Charles Clermont-Ganneau in 1871
Language / script	Greek, capitals (the fragment retains traces of red paint)
Principal editions	Clermont-Ganneau (1872); *OGIS* 598; *CIIP* I.1 2

What it is

Technical summary. The inscription was one of the notices set at intervals along the stone balustrade (*soreg*) that separated the outer Court of the Gentiles from the inner courts of Herod's temple. Josephus describes these notices, in Greek and Latin, warning foreigners not to enter on pain of death (*War* 5.193–194; 6.124–126; *Ant.* 15.417).

In plain terms. A warning sign from the temple in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus: no non-Jew may go beyond this barrier, and anyone who does will be responsible for his own death.

The text (complete)

Translation by the author of this study from the Greek.

No foreigner is to enter within the balustrade and enclosure around the temple. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for the death that follows.

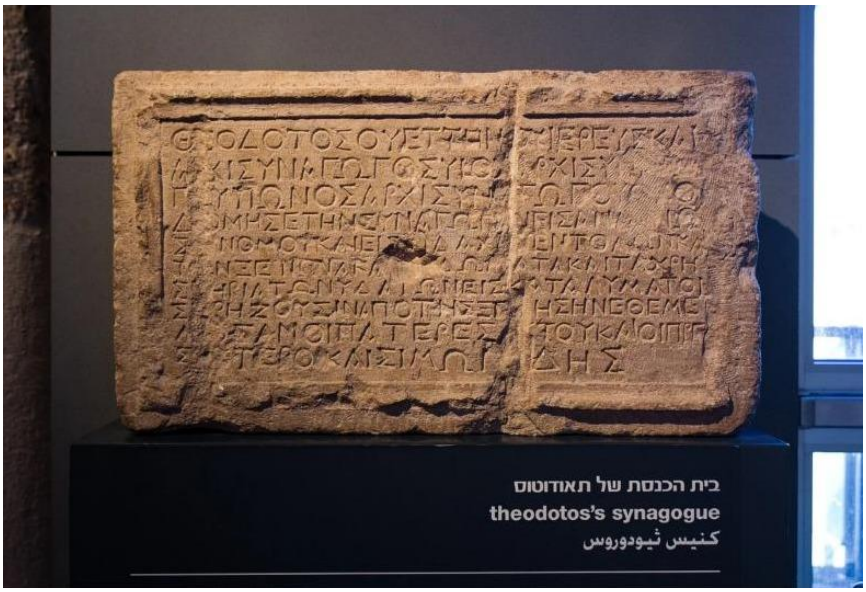
Points of contact with the New Testament

- **Acts 21:27–36.** Paul is seized in the temple on the accusation that he had brought Greeks, including Trophimus the Ephesian, into the inner courts and "defiled this holy place." The inscription shows why the charge was so dangerous.
- **Ephesians 2:14.** Christ "has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (Greek τὸ μεσότοιχον τοῦ φραγμοῦ). Many commentators see an allusion to the temple balustrade, although the vocabulary differs from the inscription's τρύφακτος.

Further reading

- Bickerman, Elias J. "The Warning Inscriptions of Herod's Temple." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 37 (1946–1947): 387–405.
- Cotton, Hannah M., et al., eds. *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*. Vol. I.1. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010, no. 2.

68. The Theodotus Synagogue Inscription



The Theodotus inscription in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.
Image: Oren Rozen. Licence: CC BY-SA 4.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Limestone plaque, ten lines of Greek
Museum	Israel Museum, Jerusalem (Rockefeller collection)
Date	Before AD 70 (most date it to the early 1st century AD)
Provenance	Ophel (City of David), Jerusalem, in a cistern; excavated by Raymond Weill, 1913–1914
Language / script	Greek, capitals
Principal editions	Clermont-Ganneau, *Syria* 1 (1920); *CIJ* II 1404; *CIIP* I.1 9; Kloppenborg, *JJS* 51 (2000)

What it is

Technical summary. The inscription commemorates the building of a synagogue in Jerusalem by Theodotus son of Vettenus, a priest and *archisynagōgos* (synagogue leader), the third generation of his family to hold the office. It describes the synagogue's purpose as reading the Law and teaching the commandments, and it mentions a guest house with rooms and water installations for visitors from abroad. Its date before AD 70 was challenged in the 1990s but has been defended on archaeological and palaeographic grounds (J. Kloppenborg, 2000).

In plain terms. A building plaque from a synagogue in Jerusalem from the time of Jesus. It says the synagogue was built for reading the Torah and had a hostel for Jewish pilgrims from other lands.

The text (complete)

Translation by the author of this study from the Greek.

> Theodotus son of Vettenus, priest and synagogue-leader, son of a synagogue-leader, grandson of a synagogue-leader, built the synagogue for the reading of the Law and for the teaching of the

commandments, and the guest house and the rooms and the water installations, as lodging for those in need from abroad. Its foundations were laid by his fathers and the elders and Simonides.

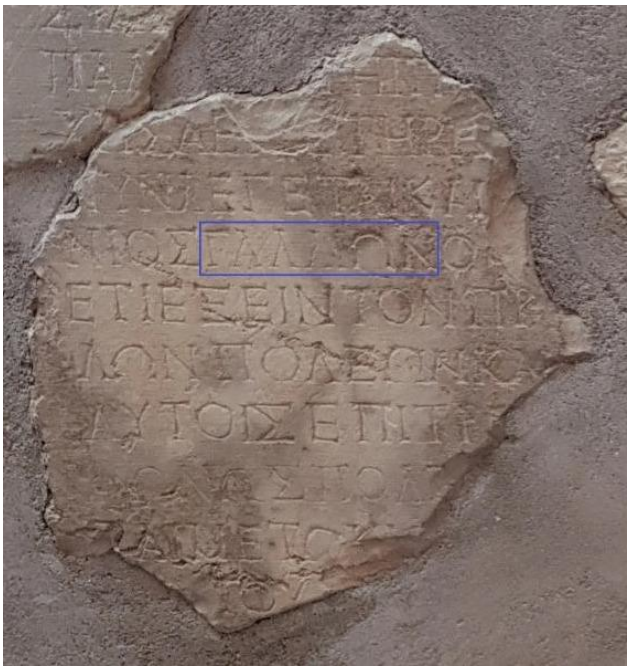
Points of contact with the New Testament

- **Synagogues in Jerusalem.** Acts 6:9 mentions the "synagogue of the Freedmen" and of Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and people from Cilicia and Asia. The Latin name Vettenus suggests that Theodotus's family may have been freedmen of a Roman family named Vettenus. Some have connected the building with the Synagogue of the Freedmen, though this cannot be proved.
- **Synagogue-leaders and reading.** The office of *archisynagōgos* appears in Mark 5:22; Luke 8:49; 13:14; Acts 13:15; 18:8, 17. The reading of the Law in the synagogue is described in Luke 4:16–21 and Acts 13:15; 15:21.

Further reading

- Kloppenborg, John S. "Dating Theodotos (CIJ II 1404)." *Journal of Jewish Studies* 51 (2000): 243–280.
- Levine, Lee I. *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

69. The Gallio Inscription (Delphi)



Fragment of the Delphi inscription with the name of Gallio, Delphi Archaeological Museum.
Image: Gérard. Licence: CC BY-SA 4.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Nine fragments of a letter of the emperor Claudius inscribed on the wall of the temple of Apollo
Museum	Delphi Archaeological Museum, Greece
Date	First half of AD 52 (Claudius's 26th acclamation as *imperator*)
Provenance	Delphi; fragments published from 1905, fully reconstructed by A. Plassart (1970)
Language / script	Greek, capitals
Principal editions	Plassart, *Fouilles de Delphes* III.4 (1970), no. 286; *SIG*³ 801

What it is

Technical summary. The emperor Claudius writes to the city of Delphi (or to Gallio's successor) about repopulating the declining city. He refers to a recent report from "Lucius Junius Gallio, my friend and [pro]consul [of Achaia]." Claudius's titulature dates the letter between January and August AD 52. Senatorial proconsuls governed for a year, usually from early summer, so Gallio's proconsulship is placed in AD 51–52 (some argue 52–53).

In plain terms. A letter from the emperor Claudius, carved at Delphi, mentions Gallio as governor of Achaia. That lets historians date Paul's stay in Corinth to about AD 50–52, the most secure date in Paul's life.

Key lines

Translation by the author of this study (Plassart 1970).

> Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, holder of the tribunician power for the 12th time, acclaimed imperator for the 26th time, father of the fatherland … sends greetings … as Lucius Junius Gallio, my friend and [pro]consul, recently reported to me …

Points of contact with the New Testament

- **Acts 18:12–17.** "When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia," the Jews of Corinth brought Paul before his tribunal, and Gallio dismissed the case. Paul had already been in Corinth for some time (Acts 18:11 says eighteen months in all). The inscription therefore dates Paul's founding mission in Corinth to about AD 50–52. It is the anchor for the whole chronology of Paul's letters and journeys.
- **NA28 text.** Acts 18:12 uses the precise title ἀνθυπάτου ὄντος τῆς Ἀχαΐας, "being proconsul of Achaia," which matches the inscription and the status of Achaia as a senatorial province after AD 44.

Further reading

- Murphy-O'Connor, Jerome. *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*. 3rd ed. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002.
- Riesner, Rainer. *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

70. The Erastus Inscription (Corinth)



The Erastus inscription in situ near the theatre of Corinth; the letters were originally filled with bronze.
Image: Rduncan2. Licence: CC BY-SA 4.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Limestone paving slab with letters once inlaid with bronze (the bronze is lost)
Museum	In situ, Corinth, northeast of the theatre
Date	Mid-1st century AD (most); some scholars argue for the 2nd century AD
Provenance	Corinth, Greece; found by the American School of Classical Studies, 1929
Language / script	Latin, capitals
Principal editions	Kent, *Corinth* VIII.3: *The Inscriptions 1926–1950* (1966), no. 232

What it is

Technical summary. The inscription reads [...] *ERASTVS PRO AEDILITATE S(VA) P(ECVNIA) STRAVIT*: "Erastus, in return for his aedileship, laid (this pavement) at his own expense." The aedile was one of the elected magistrates of the Roman colony of Corinth, responsible for public works and markets. Whether this Erastus is the Erastus of Romans 16:23 is debated. S. J. Friesen (2010) argued for a later date and a different man. Others (e.g., A. D. Clarke; J. K. Goodrich) defend the identification.

In plain terms. A paving stone in Corinth records that a man named Erastus paid for the pavement in thanks for being elected a city official. He may be the Erastus whom Paul mentions as Corinth's city treasurer.

The text (complete as preserved)

Translation by the author of this study from the Latin.

> … Erastus, in return for his aedileship, laid (this pavement) at his own expense.

Points of contact with the New Testament

- **Romans 16:23.** Paul, writing from Corinth, sends greetings from "Erastus, the city treasurer" (NA28: Ἔραστος ὁ οἰκονόμος τῆς πόλεως). Whether *oikonomos tēs poleōs* is the Greek equivalent of the Latin *aedilis*, or a lower office held before it, is part of the debate.
- **Acts 19:22; 2 Timothy 4:20.** An Erastus is among Paul's co-workers who "remained at Corinth."

Further reading

- Friesen, Steven J. "The Wrong Erastus: Ideology, Archaeology, and Exegesis." In *Corinth in Context*, ed. S. J. Friesen, D. N. Schowalter and J. C. Walters, 231–256. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Goodrich, John K. "Erastus, Quaestor of Corinth: The Administrative Rank of ὁ οἰκονόμος τῆς πόλεως (Rom 16.23) in an Achaean Colony." *New Testament Studies* 56 (2010): 90–115.

71. The Nazareth Inscription



The Nazareth Inscription, a Greek imperial edict against the violation of tombs (photograph from F. Cumont's 1930 publication).

Image: F. Cumont (photograph, 1930). Public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Marble slab, 22 lines
Museum	Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (Froehner collection)
Date	Early 1st century AD (from Augustus to Claudius; the emperor is not named)
Provenance	Sent from Nazareth to Paris in 1878, according to Wilhelm Froehner's inventory note; its original location is uncertain
Language / script	Greek, capitals
Principal editions	Cumont, "Un rescrit impérial sur la violation de sépulture," *Revue historique* 163 (1930); *SEG* 8.13

What it is

Technical summary. The text is a Greek translation of an imperial decision (*diatagma Kaisaros*, "ordinance of Caesar"). It orders that tombs remain undisturbed forever and that anyone who destroys them, removes the dead, or transfers the bodies "with wicked intent" be tried as for offences against the gods, with capital punishment for violation of a tomb. Because it was reportedly sent from Nazareth, it was long connected with the resurrection of Jesus. In 2020, a geochemical study of the marble by K. Harper and colleagues (*Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 30) traced the stone to the island of Kos. The study suggests the edict may have been set up there and reached Nazareth only later, if at all.

In plain terms. A Roman emperor's edict carved in marble threatens the death penalty for anyone who robs a grave or moves a body. It was long thought to come from Nazareth and to be connected to the story of Jesus' empty tomb, but recent tests suggest the stone came from the Greek island of Kos.

The text (complete)

Translation by the author of this study from the Greek (Cumont 1930).

> Ordinance of Caesar. It is my decision that graves and tombs, which people have made for the worship of their ancestors or children or members of their household, remain undisturbed forever. But if anyone lays information that another has either destroyed them, or in any other way cast out the buried, or with wicked intent transferred them to other places to the injury of the buried, or removed the sealing or other stones, against such a person I order that a trial be held, as in respect of the gods, so also in regard to the honours paid to mortals. For it shall be much more obligatory to honour the buried. Let it be absolutely forbidden for anyone to disturb them. In the case of violation, I wish the offender to suffer capital punishment on the charge of tomb-robbery.

Points of contact with the New Testament

- **Matthew 27:62–66; 28:11–15.** The chief priests seal the tomb and later spread the claim that the disciples stole Jesus' body. Earlier scholars (e.g., F. de Zulueta) suggested the edict was a Roman reaction to that claim. Since the inscription can be dated anywhere from Augustus to Claudius, and its place of display is now uncertain, most scholars regard such a direct link as unprovable. It remains valuable evidence for the seriousness of tomb violation in Roman law at the time.

Further reading

- Cumont, Franz. "Un rescrit impérial sur la violation de sépulture." *Revue historique* 163 (1930): 241–266.
- Harper, Kyle, et al. "The Nazareth Inscription: A Stable Isotope Analysis of the Marble." *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 30 (2020): 102228.
- Metzger, Bruce M. "The Nazareth Inscription Once Again." In *New Testament Studies: Philological, Versional, and Patristic*, 75–92. Leiden: Brill, 1980.