

Holy Gethsemane

The name Gethsemane stems from the Hebrew Gat-Semen which means olive press factory. The kidron at the far end of Gethsemane is called "Brook Kidron" and according to the Christian tradition it is the place of God's last judgment. Another name of the kidron is "Josaphat's valley". The name Josaphat comes from the Hebrew words Jahve-Sophot, meaning "God judges"; this was a name given from Prophet Joel (3:2).

According to the New Testament, the path of the Christ's martyrdom began from Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36, Mark 14:32, Luke 22:39, John 18). There, Christ prayed before His Passion, received the kiss of betrayal from Judas, was seized by Pilatus' soldiers the crowd and the Pharisee's servants. From the 4th century onwards the mapped relation of the place with the above mentioned events made it a holy Christian shrine.

Gethsemane is not only related to Christ's Passion but also to Theotokos' burial. The designation of Theotokos' tomb was made in the mid 11th century. Almost at the same period the first church of the Dormition was built, possibly at the time of Emperor Markinianos (450-457 A.D.) and the Patriarch of Jerusalem Iouvenalios.

The Holy Shrine of the Mother of God in Gethsemane

The hearts of the faithful Orthodox Christians are filled with reverence and appropriate devotion towards the most pure Mother of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Consequently from the time of Christian antiquity the Church has been honouring Theotokos accordingly, while the mother of Churches (Jerusalem), hosts as a most precious pearl her Holy and Sacred Tomb and guards it like the pupil of an eye. The Apostles carried the sacred body of Theotokos from Zion to this Tomb for the burial after her Dormition, and from the first Christian years a cross-shaped Church was built around

it with a modest and unsophisticated cubicle surrounding the Holy Tomb.

The most venerable Church of Theotokos is in Gethsemane, in Josaphat's valley or Brook Kidron, between Moria hill and the Mount of Olives. Nearby is the stoning place of the first-martyr Stephen as well as the site of the Lord's prayer in Gethsemane, where He was captured after Judas' betrayal. It is an underground cross-shaped Church reminding a catacomb, with forty-eight wide steps leading down to the Tomb of the Mother of God. The Tomb is carved inside a monolith rock, surrounded by a two-entranced cubicle which enables the pilgrims to enter the Tomb from the west entrance and exit from the north. The most sacred and venerable holy shrine which reminds us of the catacombs of the persecuted Church of the martyrs of our faith, has been preserved throughout the centuries with only minor refurbishment by the Crusaders in 1130. The holy shrine is under the authority of the Greek Orthodox Hagiotaphite Brotherhood and the Holy Liturgy is celebrated there on a daily basis. On the Eve of the Dormition (14th August) with the prevailing presence of our Greek Orthodox Patriarch, the Epitaph of Theotokos is celebrated with the chanting of the Lamentations in memory of her burial by the Apostles.

As far as the owner of the initial building of the church is concerned, there are contradictory assumptions among the Christian antiquity history writers. This has been reflected on the inconsistency of the contemporary archaeologists' opinions regarding the origins of the first church. Some of them favour the sources from the Vatican registry up until the time of Nikephoros Kallistos by which the Church is attributed to the time of Constantine the Great, while others assign it to the years after his reign, to the time of Emperor Markinianos (450-457). Subsequently we quote some historical facts which will enable us to draw some conclusions regarding this matter.

There is total agreement between the history writer of the 14th century Nikephoros Kallistos-Xanthopoulos with the Vatican manuscript of the 11th century according to which the founder of the church is Constantine the Great and for this matter he writes; "He erects another splendid church of Theotokos in the village of Gethsemane...as the place was underground he made forty eight marble steps leading to the sacred tomb which was set towards the east of the holy city". And in another source he writes, "Having built many other churches in the holy land, which exceed the number of thirty, the God-honouring Queen Helen returned to her beloved son..."

Nevertheless it is noteworthy that the contemporary Palestineologists as well as the church history writers of the 4th century, Eusevios, Socrates and Sozomenos do not in the least mention the Church in Gethsemane over the Tomb of Theotokos. Therefore, we should not look for the foundation of the Church of Theotokos in the years before 339, when historian Eusevios died, and whose account would be of grave importance for that period of antiquity for the confirmation of such a significant event in relation to the epoch and achievements of Constantine the Great. Moreover, Eusevios' notable silence on the matter should not be considered as indifference, because he writes about other works of the King's mother Helen in Palestine, despite the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and that of the Nativity Cave in Bethlehem. From the above Constantine the Great is ruled out as the founder of the Church of Theotokos in Gethsemane.

Other than the above, there are additional historical facts which could shed light over the search for the founder of the Church in Gethsemane. The first and oldest information for this is found in the Second Sermon on the Dormition by Saint John of Damascus, which can relatively define the time and the founder of the Church. In his Sermon, Saint John writes about the burial and Metastasis of Theotokos deriving information

from the so-called "Euthymian history"; "The Emperor Markinianos and Pulcheria, having had invited the Patriarch of Jerusalem Iouvenalios and the Palestine Bishops to the Capital city for the Chalcedon Council, says to them: We hear that there is the first and most marvellous Church of Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary in Jerusalem, in the village of Gethsemane where her body was placed for burial. We would therefore like to offer you this remnant to be placed there as a token of protection of the reigning city". Receiving the token, Iouvenalios replied: "There is no mention of Theotokos burial-related issues in the God-inspired Holy Bible. However, old tradition has it, that at the time of her dormition the Apostles were transferred to her by the Holy Spirit in the blink of an eye from different parts of the earth; they gathered in Jerusalem – apart from Thomas, and in the presence of unceasing angelic hymns proceeded for the burial. On the third day they came and opened the tomb to venerate her, but having done that, they did not find her honourable body inside, only her burial garments were there...and they sealed the tomb again". It stems from the above that the founder of the Church is somebody who lived before the time of the Emperor Markinianos and Pulcheria, otherwise he wouldn't have said "we hear there is in Jerusalem". This brings us to the years 339-450, between Eusevios' death and before Markinianos' reign.

A final historical fact contributing to the chronological determination of the church is in the Sermon on the Dormition of Saint Ieronymos, given in 386 at the presence of Saint Paula, revealing that Theotokos' Tomb is placed in Josaphat's valley between Zion and the Mount of Olives. "You Paula have seen the place where they built a Church in Her honour with beautiful stones. All people (in Jerusalem) proclaim that Mary was buried there, but her Tomb is empty".