

The Early Church on Fire

*Reigniting the Passion of the
First Followers of Jesus*

DR. STEVEN L. SMITH
with **JOHN A. GROOTERS**

Foreword by Dr. Robert Mawire

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ISBN: 978-0-578-57150-8

Special Thanks to our team: Barry Wallis, Judy Grooters, Brett Marshall.

Cover Image by John Grooters.

Front Cover Design by Aaron Jones.

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Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

FOREWORD.....	5
PREFACE.....	7
INTRODUCTION.....	9
CHAPTER 1: Truth.....	11
CHAPTER 2: Words.....	28
CHAPTER 3: Icons.....	43
CHAPTER 4: The Gold Tablets.....	58
CHAPTER 5: Archaeology.....	88
CHAPTER 6: The Ground Floor.....	112
CHAPTER 7: The Early Fathers.....	137
CHAPTER 8: Nicaea and Beyond.....	157
CHAPTER 9: Sacrament, Holidays & the Law.....	174
CHAPTER 10: The New Covenant.....	193
CHAPTER 11: The New Temple.....	213
CHAPTER 12: Epilogue.....	225

FOREWORD



This book is a paradigm shift from the historical theological dispensational blueprint that has shaped the church since the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. It presents succinct, provocative and factual insights. It gives an accurate, clear, and digestible fresh perspective on evangelical conventional theology. It covers unfamiliar ground ignored by most theologians and offers archaeological evidences that demand a verdict.

I must admit, I usually do not accept writing a foreword for other people's books. But I must do so here. A word of preparation is needed for such incredible revelation and ominous facts about our church history. There are monumental challenges perpetuated by the Refuseniks in academia who claim there is no evidence of the existence of the apostolic church in Israel in the first century. This book presents explicitly and implicitly irrefutable, verifiable answers, galvanized by archaeological evidences to authenticate the Biblical account. These unearthed impeccable and incisive remarkable artifacts dating back to the apostolic age silence the skeptics. The Bible narrative is true and accurate. The church was alive and well in Israel in the first century.

The book further makes groundbreaking and alarming exposé of the Councils like Nicaea and Laodicea as they influenced theological diversions from apostolic doctrine. The Councils canonized certain heresies, which the church still largely holds true. These false dogmas have no Biblical basis. The pages of this book offer a framework for rethinking and reorienting the church back towards a more Biblical theology.

FOREWORD

Sadly, these Councils canonized *Replacement Theology*, which basically Satanized the Jews and claimed that the church had replaced the Jews as God's chosen, claiming there is no atonement for the Jews for killing Jesus. This heresy shaped the Western worldview for centuries. It precipitated the pogroms, deportations, persecutions, and the holocaust of the Jewish people. There is no Biblical basis to this evil heresy. The church was forbidden to preach the gospel to the Jews in contradiction to apostolic imperative. The Apostle Paul said: "*I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation: to the Jew first...*" Romans 1:16. The Councils also canonized Easter instead of Passover and canonized against the Feasts of the Lord.

This book casts a spotlight on a wide scope of issues; no one is going to agree with everything in any book, including this one. The content of this book deserves a careful prayerful study, meditation on scriptural passages, and reflection on the doctrine of the church. I encourage you to approach this book not just with the mind, but also your heart.

It is indeed a pleasure to write this foreword to a masterpiece on the historicity of the church. It is a clarion call to return to apostolic Christianity. May God richly bless you as you read the pages of this book.

—**DR. ROBERT MAWIRE**

President, WRNO Worldwide Shortwave Radio



Icons

WORDS IN PICTURES

In a multilinguistic culture with very high illiteracy rates, the use of commonly understood icons was vital. A picture speaks a thousand words. But what were some of those icons, where did they come from, and what did they mean? Icons are prevalent in nearly everything that has been uncovered in the Holy Land, so it will suit us well to examine the most common of them.

Remember, as we examine, that we are looking for clues. We can find rocks, locations, rare inscriptions, and preserved writings. We obviously have no photographs, eyewitnesses, or audio recordings to use for reference. But because the craft of carving stone is so laborious, we can assume that images crafted in stone carry significance. And because of the confluence of languages: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Aramaic and a host of others, the importance of symbols is hard to overstate.

Symbols could be instantly recognized and could communicate across a host of divisions and classes. So, when we find symbols carved in stone that appear over and over again, it is critical to uncover their origins and their meanings. One of the most basic and common icons of Israel is the six-leaf rosette.

THE SIX-LEAF ROSETTE



Six-leaf rosette found in the Synagogue at Corazin

The six-leaf rosette is found in many places. Many consider it to be a popular form of Jewish artwork or decoration because it appears in so many mosaics, carvings, and lintels. But contrary to popular belief it is not artwork or decoration—it is an icon. The six-leaf rosette is an iconic symbol denoting great significance. Let's trace its origin.

THE CROCUS FLOWER

There is a small six-leafed flower that is a distinguishing foliage of a little town in Judea. The flower is called the crocus. It is violet in color with a yellow stigma, and it has six thin petals.



A crocus flower that grows naturally in Israel

The place known for this particular flower is Bethlehem Ephrata. Bethlehem Ephrata is connected to, but distinguished from, the more well-known city of Bethlehem. Bethlehem Ephrata is the farm community that relates to the bigger city of Bethlehem. *Ephrata* means “fruit,” and *bethlehem* means “house of bread.” So, Bethlehem Ephrata is a place of both bread and fruit, a place of fields and olive trees—a fertile place, rich with natural resources.

BETHLEHEM EPHRATA

There are many stories in the Bible that take us to Bethlehem Ephrata, but for now let's begin with the story of Ruth and Boaz.

Boaz lived in the city of Bethlehem. Naomi and Ruth return to there after having lived in Moab. Naomi is immediately recognized in Bethlehem, for she and her deceased husband Elimelech were both born there. But Naomi is now in mourning, and she asks to be called "Mara"—or *bitter*—for her life has turned to sorrow. Accompanying Naomi is her daughter-in-law Ruth, a native Moabite. Ruth was not a Jew. Once Ruth arrives in town, she asks if she might be able to go out into the fields.

"Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side named Boaz. He was a prominent man of noble character from Elimelech's family. Ruth the Moabitess asked Naomi, 'Will you let me go into the fields and gather fallen grain behind someone who allows me to?' Naomi answered her, 'Go ahead, my daughter.' So Ruth left and entered the field to gather grain behind the harvesters. She happened to be in the portion of land belonging to Boaz, who was from Elimelech's family. Later, when Boaz arrived from Bethlehem, he said to the harvesters, 'The Lord be with you.' 'The Lord bless you,' they replied."

Ruth 2:1-4 (HCSB)

So where were these fields that Ruth visited? It was clear that Boaz left Bethlehem in order to get there. As the story unfolds, we find that Boaz slept at his threshing floor, for it was the season of the barley harvest (spring) and there was much work to do. He didn't waste time going back and forth to his home in Bethlehem. Ruth sneaked onto the threshing floor one night and lay down at his feet. The next morning, according to Ruth 3:15, Boaz went back into the city.

(Note: Ruth 3:15 was mistranslated in some of the King James Bibles, but the original text says that *he* went into town and *she* returned to her mother-in-law).

“Also he said, Bring the vail that thou hast upon thee, and hold it. And when she held it, he measured six measures of barley, and laid it on her: and she went into the city.”

Ruth 3:15—King James Version (KJV)

“He also said, ‘Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out.’ When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her. Then he went back to town.”

Ruth 3:15 (NIV)

So what does all this have to do with the six-leafed rosette icon? Let the story unfold.

RUTH AND BOAZ

Ruth and Boaz remained in Bethlehem, they married and had a son. His name was Obed. Obed remained in Bethlehem and has a son—his son’s name was Jesse.

Jesse married a woman named Nitzevet. They had seven sons together, but according to the ancient Jewish historian Yalkut HaMachiri, Jesse decided to send Nitzevet away. He relocated her to the Tower of the Flock in Beth-lechem Ephrata, down the hill from the city of Bethlehem.

One night, Jesse became lonely and went to visit his estranged wife. She became pregnant. Jesse didn’t stay with her or bring her back to the city with him—he left her in Bethlehem Ephrata, and he returned to his life in the city.

The baby she gave birth to was named David. David was never accepted by his brothers, for they assumed his mother had become pregnant by another man than their father. To them, David was a bastard child. David was not raised with his brothers in the city, he spent time in the fields. When the prophet Samuel came one day to select a new king for Israel, Jesse and his seven sons didn't even consider the bastard child, David. But God had other plans.

David would grow to become the greatest king Israel ever knew. Despite his flaws and indiscretions, he was known as a man after God's own heart.

"...He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.'"

Acts 13:22

The little village of Bethlehem Ephrata would become known and honored as the "Town of David," or sometimes the "City of David." Of course, this was also the place where Mary and Joseph returned to, and where Mary also gave birth to a "bastard" child of her own—Jesus.

"And Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant."

Luke 2:4-5 (HCSB)

So, back to the icon discussion. One of the distinguishing features of Bethlehem Ephrata is the small six-leafed purple flower with the yellow stigma. This flower shape, the six-leaf rosette as it is known, will become the icon for the House of David.



The six-leaf rosette.

The House of David symbol became synonymous with the symbol for the entire nation. Even today, the Israeli flag contains what is known as the “Star of David.” The six-pointed star is a direct descendent of the six-leafed crocus flower symbol. The name David is spelled Delta Delta. The star of David is made up of two Deltas; one right side up, the other upside down. The six-leaf rosette is the root from which comes the six-sided Star of David.



The Star of David⁸

⁸ Ner.picvec / Shutterstock.com.



The six-leafed rosette found inside a star of David on a lintel at Tel Es-Simad

Today the Star of David is recognized as the symbol of Jewish identity. In ancient times that symbol was the six-leaf rosette. The six-leaf crocus flower is an important symbol, important to understanding the history of the Early Church.

**THE FOUR-LEAF ROSETTE—ICON
OF THE EARLY CHURCH**



A four-leaf rosette time mosaic from the Byzantine Church in Shoham

The icon of the Early Church is a four-leaf rosette, normally found inside a circle. This is much like the six-leaf rosette that is the icon of the House of David. The Icon of the Early Church is commonly found in ancient artwork as well as modern artwork in Israel. It is even used today by organizations who recognize it as a Christian symbol, but who do not understand its origin or meaning. To properly understand the significance of the four-leaf rosette we must look at its history, origin, and connection to the six-leaf rosette.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a young woman who was raised in a synagogue in Zippori. The city of Zippori lies in the region of Nazareth.



Road signs to Nazareth and Zippori.

Mary was dedicated by her parents, Anne and Joachim, to spend her life serving in the Temple in Jerusalem. She was being trained for Temple service in her hometown of Zippori. When she was 14 years of age the priests of the Synagogue saw that the future of the Temple might be in jeopardy, so they committed her to a bachelor of the synagogue who was of advanced age. His name was Joseph.

Mary's mother, Anne, was from a priestly family. Her family's priestly inheritance, or work, was to provide the saffron for the Temple sacrifices. The saffron was used in preparing the sheared lambs for sacrificial offering. The saffron required for Temple sacrifice had to be supplied from the designated priestly family. Anne's family

owned the exclusive business of selling saffron for all of the Temple sacrifices. This saffron came from the stigma of the small crocus flower that grew in Bethlehem Ephrata. It was rare and very expensive.

Mary came from a wealthy family of priests. Anne's brother, also named Joseph, owned a plot of land in the most prestigious garden just outside the city walls of Jerusalem: The Garden of Gethsemane. In fact, he had the tomb in which Jesus would one day be buried.

Mary's family was identified by the six-leaf rosette that represented the crocus flower and the House of David. When Caesar Augustus ordered the census to be taken, Mary had to go back to her family's ancestral hometown: Bethlehem Ephrata. After the seventy plus mile journey, she and Joseph arrived and she went into labor. The guest house was full, so she went to the holiest place of all in that city—the stable of the Tower of the Flock where the Passover lambs and scapegoats were raised. So, the six-leaf rosette not only represents Jesus' priestly heritage (Mary's family), it also represents Bethlehem Ephrata, the birthplace of David, and the place where Jesus entered this earth in a human body, born of the virgin Mary.

Many Jews accepted Jesus as the Messiah. There were many Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah and chose, rather, to follow their traditions. Jesus never denounced His heritage as a priest. He kept the Law and practiced Biblical Judaism. The Bible is clear on this matter.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

Matthew 5:17-18 (NIV)

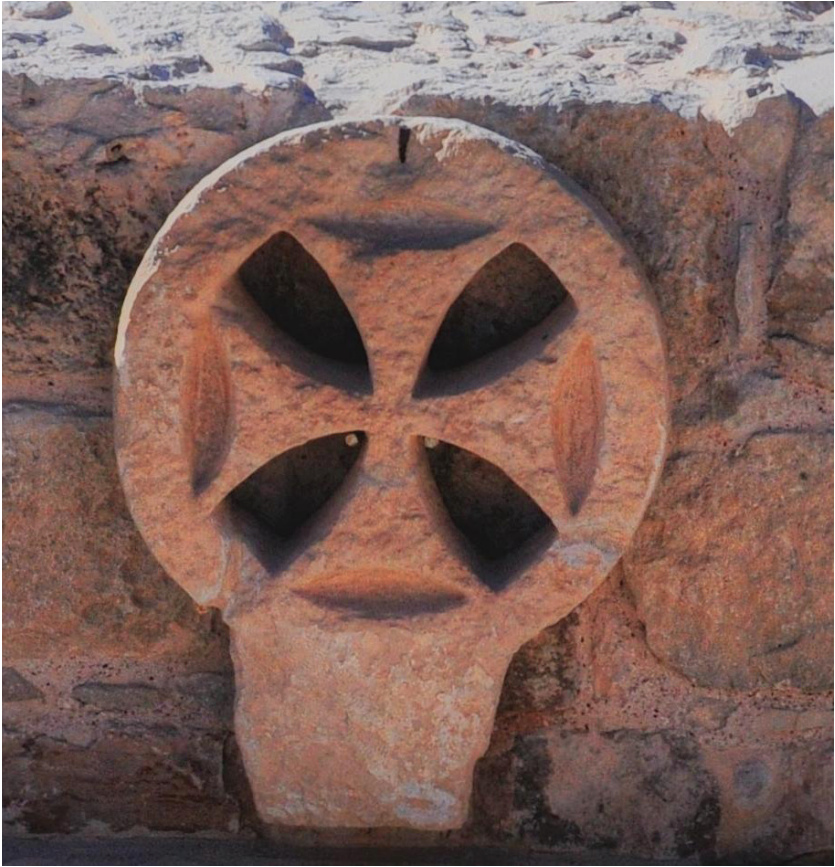
Matthew 5:17-18 is clear about Jesus' relationship to the Old Testament and to the Law. In verse 17, He says that he did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets, but to do the Law. The Greek word *πληρωσαι* (*fulfill*) means to "do completely" or "accomplish." It never has any connotation of destroying or ending. In context this has to mean that Jesus came to completely keep the Law—not put an end to it.

Jesus had many confrontations with religious leaders while He ministered on this earth. Those confrontations were most often about the keeping of traditions that had accumulated in the religious community. In themselves, traditions are not bad, but they can be wrong when they conflict with, or take the place of, God's Law. Jesus lived to show His followers how to keep the Law, as opposed to keeping religious traditions. Jesus never renounced the Law or stopped it. In verse 18 of Matthew 5, Jesus emphatically proclaims that not one jot or tittle of the Law will become invalid or go away until all the prophecies in it are completed. Jesus kept the Law, the feasts, and Shabbat.

After Jesus died, His followers were distinct from the previous followers of God in one aspect—they followed Jesus as the Messiah. The former followers of God were marked by the icon of the six-leaf rosette. They aligned themselves with the heritage of the House of David. The new followers of Christ kept the same heritage, except Jesus became their High Priest. He became their completed sacrifice. In order to identify these new believers as distinct from the former believers, the Early Church morphed the icon of the six-leaf rosette with the new symbol of the cross upon which Jesus died.

THE FIRST IMAGE OF THE CROSS

The earliest forms of the cross were not shaped like a "t" as is the modern symbol of the Roman cross. The earliest forms of the cross were symmetrical, like a plus sign, often with flares at the end of the stems.



An Early Church cross symbol

This icon of the Early Church can be found in numerous archaeological sites in Israel. It appears on mosaic floors, chancel screens, lintels, even windows. The four-pronged cross, when combined with the six-leaf rosette resulted in a new symbol—the Four-Leaf Rosette.