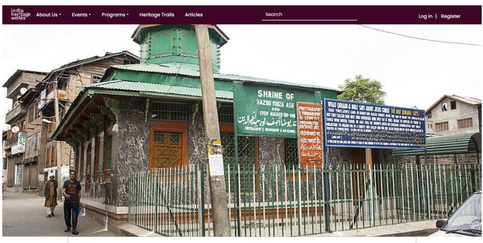

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'Tomb of Jesus' In Kashmir–Roza Bal Shrine

Did Jesus travel to India? Did Jesus sit Nazareth die and finally buried in India? Undoubtedly, one of the most fascinating structures in our country, Roza Bal shrine in the Khanyar area of Kashmir has quite interesting yet controversial claims around it. Roza in Persian means holy, and Bal in Kashmiri language means shrine. Many researchers claim that the shrine houses the graves saint and prophet Yuzasaf (Yousa Asaf or Yousa Asouph in modern local Kashmiri), who was born as a prince and of a Shia Muslim saint Mir Syed Naseer-ud-Din, as suggested by the signage outside the shrine.

A Stabat Mater depiction (1955) of Crucifixion of Jesus
Image Credits- Wikipedia Commons

Located in downtown Srinagar, the tomb received never-like-before attention in the year 1899, when Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement claimed that this tomb belongs to Jesus Christ, about which he wrote extensively in his book, *Masih Hindustan-mein (Jesus in India)*. The treatise was published in Urdu in 1908 and was translated into English in 1944. According to him, Jesus survived the crucifixion, travelled to Indian subcontinent where he lived until his death at the age of 120 and was buried in the beautiful valley of Kashmir. As opposed to the mentions in, the Holy Bible that Jesus was crucified on a hill of Golgotha (meaning 'place of the skull' in Aramaic) at the age of 33 and was buried in a new sepulchre (tomb) in a garden outside of Jerusalem and as Quran too mentions, on the third day, he ascended to heaven). One of the many reasons, these claims originated because of the presence of a rock carving in the shrine, most probably of Yuz Asaf, which shows the feet with wounds from crucifixion or some similar injuries. He identifies Yuza Asaf as Jesus and it means 'son of Joseph'. The Bible and Quran mentions Joseph and Mary as the father of Jesus and were born Jews. In Kashmiri language, Yuz Asaf means the healer or the shepherd.

Gravestone of Youza Asouph. Image Credit - Wikipedia Commons

Some researchers suggest that the buried in the tomb is laid in an east-west direction, as per Jewish traditions, not aligning with the Muslim tradition of north south, but to give it a Muslim identity, a gravestone was later laid in a north-south direction. Some experts claim that Jesus came to Kashmir during the reign of Raja Gopadatta (49-109 AD). They claim that he must have chosen Kashmir because Kashmiris are considered as one among the ten 'missing tribes' of Israel, out of 12 Jewish tribes, who later settled in the new countries, especially area in the state of Afghanistan and Kashmir, after they were driven out of Israel by the Assyrians in around 700 BC. Hence, even today, many Kashmiri tribes call themselves *Bnei Israel/ Bene or Bnai Israel* or children of Israel. Apparently, the inhabitants of Village Gutlibagh, about 50 km from Srinagar, considered themselves as a lost Jewish tribe, the original Jews from Palestine who still speak the pastor language (pastor means 'shepherd' and call themselves the lost sheep of Israel).
Some researchers believe that originally, the burial place must have been a cave or stone room in the ground, with a simple shelter built over it to hold the false-casket, which contained artefacts, associated with Yuz Asaf, which for some is not an Arabic name or Muslim name, but is Hebrew. The site was first recorded in 112 AD, ever since it attracted the pilgrims, much earlier than the advent of Islam in the region. Presently the shrine stands in front of a Muslim cemetery with a close proximity of famous Dastgeer Sahib Shrine. This single storey rectangular stone building stands on a platform, with a traditional Kashmiri multi-tiered sloping roof and has railings and three arches on the front.

Image Credit - Wikipedia Commons

For many Christians and Muslims including the caretakers of the shrine the burial of Jesus in Roza Bal is a myth and call the claims as 'blasphemy'. Having said that, it was a turning point in the history of the tomb as many devotees flock around the tomb especially during the Christmas time (25 December).
This site in Kashmir was recorded as a 'sacred' site in many Buddhist and Hindu sources before the Islamic period, hence, it attracts followers of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. In another local folklore, the name of Yuzasaf appears in the legend of Balauhar and Yuzasaf, in which Yuzasaf is the name used for Gautama Buddha. Interestingly, 'Issa' is the Tibetan name of Jesus and it is Hazrat Isa or Isa as stated in the Quran. In some of the old handwritten Buddhist manuscripts – entitled 'Life of Saint Issa', which revealed the 'lost years of Jesus Christ' from the age of 13 to 29 and that, the Bible has not recorded the life of Jesus during these years. The manuscripts stated that Jesus left Bethlehem at the age of 13 with a caravan of merchants and travelled eastwards, along the Silk route to get familiar with teachings and study the laws of the Gautama Buddha. He also visited Punjab, Rajasthan, North India, Nepal, Tibet and Ladakh before returning home. Many historical texts in Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian show that Yus Asaf is another name for Jesus Christ.

Kashmiri Style Mosque, Yusmarg. Image Credit – Ajay Saad, Sahapedia.org

Interestingly, the beautiful valley of Yusmarg, meaning 'Meadow of Jesus', the village gets its name from the belief that Jesus visited Kashmir. Some researchers mention that Kashmir's Pahalgam, meaning 'the town of the shepherd', is also named after Jesus, as Jesus referred to himself (metaphorically) as 'the shepherd for the 'lost sheep'.
The row is not just limited to the tomb of Jesus but also to the tombs of Mary, the mother of Jesus and Prophet Moses and other Biblical and Quran characters. In the North Kashmir district of Bandipora, a shrine complex of a woman saint named Hazrat Bibi Arifa, locally known as 'Ded Mouj', a section of Jews believe that the grave belongs to one of the most revered saints (mentioned in the Koran and Bible), Moses or Hazrat Musa. Some researchers have suggested that Jesus travelled to Kashmir with his mother, Mary, and on the way she passed away and a shrine was built to honour her at the same site, in a town called Murree, in present-day Pakistan. The burial site is revered as the 'Mai Mari da Asthan' meaning the resting place of Mother Mary who is known as Hazrat Mariam among the devotees. During the British period, close to the shrine they built the Convent of Jesus and Mary. There are many fascinating legends around the tombs of Aaron (Hazrat Haroon) in Horwan, and King Solomon (Hazrat Suleman) at Takht-i-Suleman in Kashmir. For many, the graves of Moses, Aaron, Solomon and Jesus are all located in Kashmir.

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Numerous books and documentaries were released on this age-old debate. 'The Unknown Life of Christ' (1894) by Russian traveller Nicolas Notovitch, Suzanne Marie Olsson's book 'Jesus in Kashmir, 'The Lost Tomb', 'The Rozabal Line' by Ashwin Sanghi, 'Christ of Kashmiris' by Anand Krishna, 'A Search for the Historical Jesus' by Prof Hassnain, a documentary titled 'The Rozabal Shrine' by the Government of India's Films Division, reminded of this recurring topic.

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