The extraordinary story begins in 1999, with an ordinary salvage excavation of the building to allow the museum to open the space for children’s activities, and ends with the remarkable discovery of actual remains of Herod’s palace. Israeli archaeologists and the museum worked together to open these important findings to the public at the end of last year.

The archaeologists dug through dozens of meters of dirt, carefully sifting through the layers of earth and rubble by hand for two years, through levels and eras of Jerusalem’s history, including a British Mandate and Ottoman period jail, the Crusader era remains of a fabric dyeing factory as described by 1169 pilgrim Benjamin of Tudela, on to the remains of massive walls dating back to the period of Herod the Great and the Second Temple Period, which were part of Herod’s imposing palace, expanding some 300 meters by 100 meters. They also discovered the impressive main sewage system of the palace, as well as parts of the Hasmonean city wall dating to the end of the Second Century B.C. and even remains from the First Temple Period from the 8th Century B.C. at the time of King Hezekiah.

It was under Eilat Leiber, Director and Chief Curator of the Tower of David Museum, that the Kishle excavations were recently opened to the general public. Lieber relates that as she followed the excavation unfold, she quickly understood they would be able to touch Jerusalem’s very history.

"Although my original dream had been to have extra space for museum activities, we quickly realized what treasures had been found. This is another piece in the big puzzle of King Herod in Jerusalem and of the urban development of the city in general," Lieber said.

The Gospels do not tell us the location of the Praetorium, the Roman governor’s residence.
while he was in Jerusalem. However, when they relate the story of Jesus’ trial, sentencing and crucifixion, a centuries-old tradition dating back to the Crusader period identified it as being north of the Temple Mount, at the Antonia Fortress, a military barracks built by Herod the Great, near the Lion’s Gate in the northern eastern side of the city where pilgrims today begin the Via Dolorosa. But an older Byzantine tradition of the Via Dolorosa followed a path beginning on Mt. Zion and moving northward, past what now is the Tower of David Museum, where Herod’s palace once stood.

Indeed, many scholars and historians are now coming to believe that the site of the Judgment Place may have actually been Herod’s sumptuous palace. It would have been a more logical choice for the Roman governor to stay at in comfort and luxury when in Jerusalem than in a more rustic military barracks.

“Though we don’t have any clear archaeological evidence pointing to the existence of the Praetorium, it is only logical to assume that when Pilate came to Jerusalem, he stayed in Herod’s palace, as he did in Caesarea, the capital of the Roman province,” noted Amit Re’em, Israel Antiquities Authority Jerusalem District Archaeologist, who headed the excavations as a young archaeologist.

Herod’s palace, as described by first century Jewish-Roman historian Josephus Flavius, was a place of opulence, decorated in lavish amounts of silver and gold, with numerous rooms, beautiful fountains, ornamental pools, luxurious swimming pools and expansive gardens.

“We can say for sure that what we have excavated are the remains of Herod’s palace. Here people can touch the stones that actually date to the time of Jesus and Herod and truly identify with these Biblical events,” noted Re’em. “There are many other parts of Herod’s palace still hidden under the buildings of the Old City and waiting to be discovered.”

“In this small place, we have excavated the entire archaeological and historical sequence of Jerusalem. This is the story of Jerusalem, everything is here—including the story of the beginning of Christianity,” Re’em added.

Though Re’em admits that the finds were not a complete surprise to him, he was nevertheless amazed at the importance of their discoveries. “I expected to find something dramatic,” he related. “In the Old City of Jerusalem you always find something. Treasures are buried everywhere.”

Entrance to the Kishle is from the Tower of David Museum, housed in the magnificently restored citadel at the Jaffa Gate entrance to the Old City. The museum itself allows visitors to walk through the guardrooms of the citadel, learning about the history of the city in its permanent exhibition. From the stone bridge that links the entrance gate to the citadel, visitors can enter the dry moat and walk down the impressive Herodian steps, leading into what would have been the lavish pool connected to King Herod’s palace, before heading up into the Kishle.

Finally able to make the finds partially accessible with much-needed funding, Lieber said the museum was happy to invite people to touch and see history. But, she said, “This is just the first stage.”

The museum has plans to expand their offerings at the site. The hope is to use...
multimedia technology in the future to allow people to experience the history of the magnificent period of Herod more vividly. Already, a 3D screen at the Herodian pool allows visitors to see the grandeur of the palace complex 2,000 years ago.

Over the past years, Rev. David Pileggi, whose Anglican church is close to the museum, has witnessed a growing number of pilgrims coming to visit the site. Because of its location and architectural integrity, the site makes it easier for pilgrims to envision the events of Jesus’ life taking place there, he said. It gives a "sense of Roman power," he noted.

“It helps put the Gospels into proper historical context of what life was like for Jewish people in the First Century and how they suffered under Roman imperial domination. The Via Dolorosa will continue to be popular...but for those pilgrims who want a little bit to connect with the actual history and geography of the life of Jesus, these findings are a very positive development,” said Pileggi. “For us, it is very special and sobering to realize that on a daily basis, we are sitting across from the beginning and almost the end of the Gospel’s story. Of course, the end of the story is Jesus’ resurrection. The museum is a treasure for Jerusalem.”

Lieber said the museum wants to expand the discussion about Jerusalem of the Second Temple period through research and archaeology.

“Pilgrims and tourists can visit the Tower of David Museum to see the remains, understand the topography and geography of the place, and rethink and try to understand what happened here 2,000 years ago,” she said. “For me, Jerusalem is a huge mystery. There’s still a lot to discover. Everywhere you turn in Jerusalem, you can find a jewel, and it’s my job to polish these jewels and allow people to enjoy them. I love this city, and it belongs to everybody who loves it. People can come here and learn more about its very deep roots.”