



©2003 Timothy Ministries. Reproduction of any part of this document in works for which readers will be charged is strictly prohibited without the explicit permission of Timothy Ministries. PERMISSION IS HEREBY GRANTED to quote from this document in noncommercial works so long as the following notice is included with the quoted material: ©2002 Timothy Ministries, www.tmin.org, used by permission.

**The relatives
of Jesus
remained in
Nazareth
at least until
the beginning
of the second
century.**

Nazareth

Historical and Archaeological Perspective on the Biblical City

By Roderick A. Graciano
Director, Timothy Ministries

The Early Existence Of Nazareth



Ian Wilson, in his *Jesus: The Evidence*, reports that “according to one school of thought, Nazareth may not even have existed in the first century AD.” Skeptics base this theory on the absence of the name

Nazareth in Josephus’ list of Galilean towns and the lack of references to Nazareth in other first century documents and inscriptions. The earliest known non-canonical reference to

Nazareth appears on a fragment from a 3rd to 4th century marble tablet discovered in Caesarea in 1962, and which probably listed places where priestly families had settled. Nevertheless, Finegan reports that excavations in the vicinity of the modern Church of the Annunciation have demonstrated beyond doubt that an agricultural village did exist at the site of present day Nazareth in the time of Jesus. In fact, Hoade reports that the village was inhabited during Iron Age II, i.e. before the Babylonian Captivity. (Sources: Finegan; Hoade, p. 685; Wilson, pp. 67, 68.)

Nazareth And Sepphoris

Few documents mentioned Nazareth in the early centuries because it was a small village hidden in the cultural and political shadow of Sepphoris. Sepphoris was the Galilean capital only an hour's walk away and visible from Nazareth. In 4-3 BC, the Roman legate of Syria, Quintilius Varus crushed a rebellion in Galilee and left Sepphoris in rubble. Shortly thereafter, Herod Antipas arrived in Galilee to assume authority over the region and chose the smoldering ruins of Sepphoris as the location for his new capital. Josephus says (Ant. 18.02.27) that "Herod also built a wall about Sepphoris (which is the security of all Galilee), and made it the metropolis of the country." Elsewhere, Josephus speaks of Sepphoris as "the strongest city of Galilee," (*Wars* 2.18.511), one of "the greatest cities of Galilee" (*Life* 346), and mentions the "strength of their walls" (*Life* 373). Since Sepphoris was Herod's capital and the strongest and greatest metropolis in the region, it is no surprise that Josephus would anonymously lump a small village of farmers and artisans like Nazareth among the "many villages [that Sepphoris had] about it" (*Life* 346).

Artisans For Sepphoris

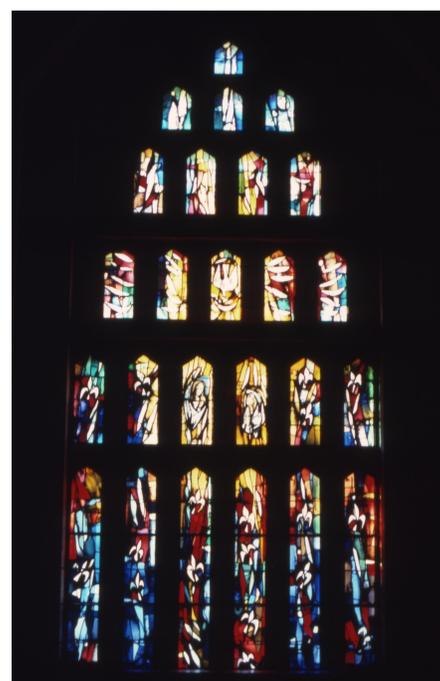
To Josephus, writing a political history of Galilee, Sepphoris was vastly more important than Nazareth. For us however, Sepphoris is important precisely because of its proximity to Nazareth, the home of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. We know that Herod Antipas launched a vast construction project in Sepphoris that lasted *throughout the lifetime of Jesus*. There is little doubt that it was the construction in this Galilean capital that kept Jesus employed as a "carpenter" (Mark 06.03) during his early life. Importantly for our understanding of Jesus,

"the construction of an influential Roman capital city near Jesus' home in Nazareth redefines the carpenter's occupation in central Galilee....The Greek word *tekton*, translated 'carpenter' in Mark 6:3, has the root meaning of 'artisan,' that is, a skilled worker who works on some hard material such as wood or stone or even horn or ivory. A metal smith also might be described as a *tekton*. The preferred translation of *tekton* in Mark 6:3 is 'carpenter.' In Jesus' day construction workers were not as highly specialized as in today's work force. For example, the tasks performed by carpenters and masons could easily overlap. When a *tekton*, or artisan, from a village near Sepphoris, visited the construction site, he would be introduced to another world—an urban world." (Source: Batey)

In other words, while we have traditionally pictured Jesus as building tables and chairs out of wood in a tiny shop, or at the most, helping a farmer mount the wooden beams for the roof of his small barn, the excavation of Sepphoris informs us that Jesus more probably helped build a spectacular theater and beautiful basilicas out of finely dressed limestone and marble!

The Church Of The Annunciation

Where the southern end of the ancient village of Nazareth once existed, there now stands the majestic Latin Church of the Annunciation. This gorgeous basilica is built over and incorporates the ruins of (1) the supposed grotto where the angel announced to Mary that she would give birth to the Savior; (2) Mary's house which the deacon Conon of Jerusalem converted to a Byzantine church around AD 427; (3) a Judaeo-Christian Church-Synagogue, the first building erected near the grotto; and (4) a Crusader basilica erected by Tancred. According to Hoade, "Remains of the Judaeo-Christian



period include seven steps, inscriptions and other symbols...” One inscription, the oldest of its kind and dated before the council of Ephesus (AD 431), reads XE MAPIA, “Hail Mary.” Another reads, “Christ, Son of God.” (Source: Hoade, pp. 690-697.) Today, a beautiful entrance facade of stained glass windows (photo on previous page) greets the visitor to this amazing building. Inside the upper sanctuary, a dozen or so mosaics of Madonna and Child, each donated by a different country and made with materials reflecting the culture of origin, deepen one’s awe. I was particularly struck by the Japanese mosaic with its Madonna of slanted eyes and done in pearls and mother of pearl.

Relatives of Jesus

We should note that the relatives of Jesus remained in Nazareth at least until the beginning of the second century, and probably much longer. Africanus, quoted by Eusebius (*Church Hist.* 1.7.14), mentions people of Nazareth who called themselves “The Master’s People,” (δεσπόσωνοι) because of their relationship to the Savior’s family. Two grandsons of Jude, the brother of Jesus, were farmers and probably from Nazareth (ibid. 3.20). Also, a martyr named Conon who died in the persecution of Decius (AD 250-251), testified before his accusers, “I am of the city of Nazareth in Galilee, I am of the family of Christ, whose worship I have inherited from my ancestors.” (Sources: Finegan, p. 30; Bauckham.) It is possible, then, that the sites associated with Mary and enclosed by the Church of the Annunciation *were* remembered by generations of Christ’s relatives in Nazareth, who correctly identified them for later Christian worshippers and pilgrims.

Mary’s Well

While the Church of the Annunciation *may* enclose sites associated with Mary and her family, we are confident that Mary *did* regularly draw water from the spring in Nazareth, accessible today from “Mary’s Well” on the road to Tiberias. Our confidence arises from the fact that this spring has always been the only source of water for the town. However, the spring actually emerges from the hillside nearly 500 feet away from the present well. Since the present well was not erected until 1862, Mary probably drew her water at a different spot, though clearly in the same *vicinity* as “Mary’s Well.” Furthermore, the young Jesus likely accompanied his mother on many of her frequent trips to this spring, learning in His childhood the water imagery He would use so powerfully in His later ministry (John 4.5-14; 7.37,39).

Cliffs In Nazareth?

The little boy who drew water with his mother, grew up to be the rejected prophet of the same town. The people of Nazareth once tried to throw him off a cliff (Luke 04. 28-30)! While modern Nazareth still rests upon an elevation above the Plain of Esdraelon, Hoade describes the ancient village as “situated on a hill bounded to the E and W by valleys, which although 10-15 m. deep, are today in great part filled in.” It would have been to one of these brows of the hill of Nazareth that the inhabitants drove Jesus with the intent of throwing him “down the cliff”. (Source: Hoade, p. 685.)

Nazarene Epithet

How ironic that though rejected by the denizens of Nazareth, Jesus bore His identity with them as an epithet from others. Matthew said that the return of the Holy Family to Nazareth brought the fulfillment of the prophets’ prediction that Jesus “would be called a Nazarene” (Mat. 2.23). However, since Matthew specified no *particular* “Nazarene” prophecy but pointed generally to the words of the prophets, he may well have used the term “Nazarene” as an example of the slurs that the prophets predicted would be hurled at Messiah (Psalm 22.06,08; 69.11,19; Isaiah 53.02-04). The question of Nathanael, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” alerts us to the contempt with which some would have spoken the word *Nazarene* (John 01.46).

The Gleaming Flower

Though people once despised Nazareth, or overlooked it completely, they do so no longer. Every lover of Jesus throughout the world would visit Nazareth if he or she could. No Holy Land tour is complete without a stop at the hometown of the Christ. In the hearts of millions, the city has fulfilled its name from the root *NSR*, which means “to blossom or gleam.”

Sources

Batey, Richard A. *Jesus & the Forgotten City* (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1991).

Bauckham, Richard J. “All in the Family: Identifying Jesus’ Relatives,” *Bible Review*, April 2000.

Finegan, Jack. *The Archaeology Of The New Testament: The Life of Jesus and the Beginning of the Early Church* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1969).

Hoade, Eugene. *Guide to the Holy Land* (Franciscan Printing Press, Jerusalem, 1984).

Whiston, William. *The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus* (John C. Winston Co., Philadelphia).

Williamson, G. A. (Translator). *Eusebius: The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (Dorset Press, New York, 1965).

Wilson, Ian. *Jesus: The Evidence* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1984).

Photos by Harold Crisman and Roderick Graciano.