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Article

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Has Jesus' Nazareth Home Been Found?

Ken Dark

WHAT WAS NAZARETH LIKE WHEN Jesus lived there? The evidence is sparse but intriguing.

Surprising as it may seem, very little archaeological work has been done in Nazareth itself. However, a site within the Sisters of Nazareth Convent, across the street from the Church of the Annunciation, may contain some of the best evidence of the small town that existed here in Jesus' time. Although known since the 1880s, this had never previously been properly published or even studied by professional archaeologists—until the Nazareth Archaeological Project began work here in 2006.¹

The story begins with the chance discovery of an ancient cistern in the 1880s,

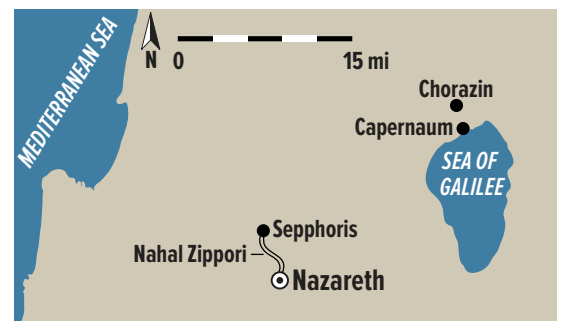
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KEN DARK

HOME OF JESUS? Pictured (previous pages) is the rock-cut doorway of the first-century house at the Sisters of Nazareth Convent. The combination of rock-cut construction and quarried-rock construction can be seen clearly. The door opens to the “Chambre Obscure,” another part of the original house structure partly cut out of the natural rock. The rock overhang in the corner is naturally occurring and was likely left in its current form to support the roof. In front of the doorway, a fragment of the original floor survives. The east side of the structure (above) originally had rock built walls, as this part of the house was built away from the naturally occurring rock cave. The visible wall was rebuilt in the Crusader period but may incorporate remains of the first-century A.D. wall.



shortly after the convent was built. Excavations were then undertaken by the nuns, their workmen and even children from their school. They exposed a complex sequence of unusually well preserved archaeological features, including Crusader-period walls and vaults, a Byzantine cave-church, Roman-period tombs and other rock-cut and built structures. The nuns made a small museum of the pottery, coins, glass and other portable artifacts that they recovered. Then construction of the new convent buildings revealed the walls of a large Byzantine church with a triple apse, polychrome mosaic floors and white marble fittings, rebuilt in the Crusader period.

Did all this ancient construction, including churches and burials, indicate that the site was

considered holy, or at least of some importance, at various periods after Jesus' time? Was this perhaps founded on a belief that the site was somehow related to Jesus' home?

In 1936, the Jesuit Father Henri Senès, who had been an architect before entering the Church, recorded the previously exposed structures in great detail and undertook some further, though limited, excavations. Unfortunately Senès never published his work (apart from a brief guide pamphlet). But he did leave a substantial archive of notes and drawings, little known outside the convent, to which the nuns have graciously given us access.

In 2006, we began to reexamine the site. It soon became clear that there was a lengthy chronological sequence of well-preserved structures and features. This included the successive Crusader and Byzantine



ROTEM HOFMAN

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WITHIN THE SISTERS OF NAZARETH CONVENT (above) is the first-century “courtyard house.” While excavation in this area was initiated in 1880, it was not until the Nazareth Archaeological Project began their investigation in 2006 that the site was studied by professional archaeologists. A modern statue of the “Holy Family” (right) is featured in the courtyard of the convent, reflecting the nuns’ belief that this was the location of the house in Nazareth where Jesus grew up.

churches, two Early Roman-period tombs, a phase of small-scale quarrying and, of particular note, a rectilinear structure with partly rock-cut and partly stone-built walls.

The rectilinear structure was cut through by the forecourt of a tomb dated to the first century;

therefore the rectilinear structure must have been built earlier than this time. That this structure also dated to the Roman period was confirmed by the Kefar Hananya-type pottery (standard domestic pottery of Roman-period Galilee; see photo p. 62), the date of which is otherwise known.² Probable fragments of limestone vessels indicate that the inhabitants were very likely Jewish. Limestone vessels are not subject to impurity under Jewish law and



NAZARETH. The excavation site in the cellar of the Sisters of Nazareth Convent (A) may reveal the childhood home of Jesus. Finds from this site and those in the vicinity of the Church of the Annunciation (B) and the International Marian Center (C) suggest that the town of Nazareth was somewhat larger and wealthier than often portrayed.

Ancient Nazareth was served by three to seven springs, two of which, the Apostles’ Fountain (E) and Mary’s Well (D), are still known.



KEN DARK

AMATEUR ARCHAEOLOGISTS. In the 1880s, the nuns of the Sisters of Nazareth Convent discovered an ancient cistern, and this led to a series of archaeological discoveries. The nuns, workmen and even school children undertook amateur excavations. The nuns then housed a collection of finds in a small museum. Pictured here are a spindle whorl (A), a fragment from a perfume bottle (B), a glass bead (C) and a Roman glass vase (D).

were therefore very popular in Jewish communities at this time.

What sort of building was this rectilinear structure? It had been constructed by cutting back a limestone hillside as it sloped toward the wadi (valley) below, leaving carefully smoothed freestanding rock walls, to which stone-built walls were added. The structure included a series of rooms. One, with its doorway, survived to its full height. Another had a stairway rising adjacent to one of its walls. A rock overhang had been carefully retained in one room, its upper surface worked to support part of a roof or upper story—which otherwise must have been built of another material, probably timber. Just inside the surviving doorway, earlier excavations had revealed part of its original chalk floor. Associated finds, including cooking pottery and a spindle whorl, suggested domestic occupation.

Taken together, the walls conformed to the plan of a so-called courtyard house, one of the typical architectural forms of Early Roman-period settlements in the Galilee.

The excellent preservation of this rectilinear structure or house can be explained by its later history. Great efforts had been made to encompass the remains of this building within the vaulted cellars of both the Byzantine and Crusader churches, so that it was thereafter protected.

Initially puzzling was the use of the site for Jewish burial. Although domestic occupation was of course prohibited by Jewish law on burial sites, burial on a disused domestic site was another matter. The burials were also separated from domestic occupation by a phase of quarrying. It is clear the house was already disused before the site was used for tombs. The immediate area was mostly destroyed before the tombs were constructed. Consequently, the apparent conflict between domestic occupation and burial is an illusory one. The house must date from the first century A.D. or earlier. No stratified pottery earlier or later than the Early Roman period was discovered in layers associated with the house.³

In 2009, another first-century courtyard house was discovered nearby—in a salvage (or rescue)

excavation directed by Yardenna Alexandre of the Israel Antiquities Authority prior to the construction of the International Marian Center next to the Church of the Annunciation.⁴ This reveals a structure similar to the Sisters of Nazareth house. The principal difference between the two structures is that the Marian Center structure has fewer rock-cut components as it was built on relatively flat ground farther away from the side of the hill.

Consequently, we now have two first-century courtyard houses from central Nazareth. These, together with the other earlier discoveries at the Church of the Annunciation, provide evidence for an Early Roman Jewish settlement that was larger, and perhaps slightly wealthier, than is often envisaged. Such evidence would be consistent with what archaeologists of the Roman provinces elsewhere conventionally term a “small town”: a large village, perhaps perceived by contemporaries as a small urban center, serving as a focus for smaller agricultural communities nearby.

Nazareth was served by at least three, and possibly as many as seven, springs or wells. St. Mary's

Well is perhaps the best known of these. Another is the so-called Apostles' Fountain near the modern Mensa Church. We found another spring in the course of our fieldwork at the Sisters of Nazareth Convent; it remains accessible through its Crusader-period wellhead. Another water source is implied by an unpublished plan of about 1900 in the convent archive, where a water channel is shown leading from the so-called Synagogue Church, north of the convent. According to Gottfried Schumacher, in the 19th century local people knew of another spring located to the south.⁵ The Palestine Exploration

ROLLING TOMB STONE. The forecourt of this tomb cuts through the courtyard house that may have once been Jesus' home. Initially this was confusing, as Jewish law would not permit burials to take place near habitations, but the courtyard house had been abandoned prior to the installation of the tombs as evidenced by a period of quarrying. Both structures date to the first century A.D. The rock “door” would be similar to the stone that covered the entrance to the tomb of Jesus, which was rolled away at the resurrection (Mark 16:3; Matthew 28:2; Luke 24:2; John 20:1).



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A RESCUE EXCAVATION done in 2009 prior to the construction of the International Marian Center, pictured here, revealed the remains of another first-century courtyard house from the time of Jesus. Featured in the photo is the dome of the center's chapel.

Fund's famous *Survey of Western Palestine* in the 1870s recorded a well within the Franciscan precinct of the Church of the Annunciation. Finally, in his 1923 *Das Land Der Bibel*, Paul Range says he saw another spring west of the Old City of Nazareth.

The hinterland of Nazareth is oriented to the north. To the south a high rocky ridge cuts off easy movement by foot or animal-drawn cart. To the north, however, a relatively gentle walk leads to the Nahal Zippori, the broad valley between Nazareth and the Roman town of Sepphoris (Zippori in Hebrew). This valley is well watered by the stream that flows along its center and by numerous springs and a few rivulets on its slopes. The part of Nahal Zippori closest to Nazareth was probably the agricultural hinterland of the settlement.

Between 2004 and 2010, the Nazareth Archaeological Project surveyed a wide transect across Nahal Zippori. We identified a series of previously unknown Early Roman-period sites, probably farms and small villages, which (with just two exceptions) had no pre-Roman material. At a few sites we also found evidence of quarrying.

It may be possible to say something of the cultural identity of those living in the Nahal Zippori at this time. All the sites on the south side of the valley, nearer to Nazareth, featured Kefar Hananya-type pottery. Some also had the type of limestone vessels associated elsewhere with Jewish settlements. However, all of those on the north side of the valley, nearer Sepphoris, had a much wider range of artifacts, including red-slipped imported Eastern Terra Sigillata pottery and imported amphora. Communities closer to Sepphoris apparently embraced the cultural world of the Roman provinces; those closer to Nazareth chose a strictly Jewish material culture, perhaps denoting a more conservative attitude to religious belief and concepts of purity and rejecting "Roman" culture as a whole.*

Nowhere else in the Roman Empire is there such a seemingly clear-cut boundary between people accepting and those rejecting Roman culture, even along the imperial Roman frontiers. This suggests that the Nazareth area was unusual for the strength of its anti-Roman sentiment and/or the strength of its Jewish identity. It also suggests that there was no close connection between Nazareth and Sepphoris in

*Eric M. Meyers, "The Pools of Sepphoris: Ritual Baths or Bathtubs? Yes, They Are," *BAR*, July/August 2000; Mark Chancey and Eric M. Meyers, "Spotlight on Sepphoris: How Jewish Was Sepphoris in Jesus' Time?" *BAR*, July/August 2000; Zeev Weiss, "The Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic," *BAR*, September/October 2000.

the Early Roman period. Perhaps these places occupied focal roles in separate “settlement systems” on either side of the valley.

Some recent scholarship has argued that the Roman culture of Sepphoris, closer than 5 miles from Nazareth, would have played an important part in Jesus’ youth. Sepphoris, with its shop-lined streets, mosaic-floored townhouses and monumental public buildings, might initially appear to support this contention. But the Sepphoris seen by visitors today is largely a later construction. Very little of what is known of Sepphoris may be assigned with certainty to the early first century.

ANOTHER COURTYARD HOUSE, although with a few differences from the courtyard house found underneath the Sisters of Nazareth Convent, was excavated near the International Marian Center by Yardenna Alexandre of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Across the street from the courtyard house is the Church of the Annunciation (top of photo).

CISTERNS built into the courtyard of the house allow the occupants regular, easy access to water. The opening to the cistern (below) is one of two that would have served the courtyard house. The watercolor reconstruction shows the cisterns in relation to the house.



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The first-century evidence that we do have from Sepphoris suggests an urban center with an administrative function, domestic occupation and public buildings. It may have been relatively cosmopolitan, in the sense that it was open to Roman provincial culture, but it remained a Jewish community.

By contrast, Nazareth was a local center without the trappings of Roman culture, perhaps analogous to nearby Capernaum or Chorazin in its facilities and scale, rather than to Sepphoris (which, incidentally, is not mentioned in the New Testament). The

EVERYDAY DISHES. Known as Kefar Hananya pottery, it is associated with Jewish settlements in the Galilee and is common in the area surrounding Nazareth. It is characterized by its warm orange-brown color and smooth thin walls. It gives a clink when bumped due to the hard firing process used to create it. The clay is dense and homogeneous with rare inclusions of black or white.

MARY'S WELL. Modern construction covers the ancient water source known as Mary's Well. It is one of three to seven wells that served the ancient town.

description in the Gospels of the Nazareth synagogue (Mark 6:1-6; Matthew 13:54-58; Luke 4:16-30) is exactly the sort of building we would expect in an Early Roman provincial "small town." Such a small town was also exactly the sort of place where one might expect to find a rural craftsman—a *tekton* (Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55)—like Joseph.

HIGH CLASS. Eastern Terra Sigillata ware is smooth and shiny as well as elegantly designed. These elements made it appeal to the higher classes of society, which could afford to buy imported goods. As its name suggests, Eastern Terra Sigillata ware began to be produced in the eastern Mediterranean region around 200 B.C. On this vessel, the light-colored areas are modern plaster reconstructions.



ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY



ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY/PHOTO BY YOLOVITCH YAEV

ROMAN CULTURE becomes dominant in the later development of Sepphoris. Fourth- and fifth-century A.D. remains reveal elaborate architecture and mosaics with a distinctly Roman influence. Yet even at this stage Sepphoris still has a strong Jewish presence, as demonstrated in a zodiac mosaic, recovered in the fifth-century A.D. synagogue. Here (right), Scorpio is identified by its Hebrew name, *Akrab*, reflecting the adaptation of the signs of the zodiac to Jewish culture.

This evidence suggests that Jesus' boyhood was spent in a conservative Jewish community that had little contact with Hellenistic or Roman culture. (It is extremely unlikely to be the sort of place where, as some have argued, one would have encountered "cynic" philosophy.)

None of this, of course, has any explicit connection with Jesus. There is one possible connection, however. A seventh-century pilgrim account known as *De Locis Sanctis*, written by Adomnán of Iona, describes two large churches in the center of Nazareth. One is identifiable as the Church of the Annunciation, located just across the modern street from the Sisters of Nazareth Convent. The other stood nearby and was built over vaults that also contained a spring and the remains of two tombs, *tumuli* in Adomnán's "Insular Latin." Between these two tombs, Adomnán tells us, was the house in which Jesus was raised. From this is derived the more recent name for the church that Adomnán describes: the Church of the Nutrition, that is, "the church of the upbringing of Christ," the location of which has been lost.⁶

At the Sisters of Nazareth Convent there was

STAYING PURE. Limestone vessels were common in first-century Israel because they were not subject to impurity according to Jewish law; thus a stone cup like the one pictured here could be continually reused rather than destroyed, unlike vessels of pottery that had contracted impurity.



ZEV RADOVAN/BIBLEANDPICTURES.COM

evidence of a large Byzantine church with a spring and two tombs in its crypt. The first-century house described at the beginning of this article, probably a courtyard house, stands between the two tombs. Both the tombs and the house were decorated with mosaics in the Byzantine period, suggesting that they were of special importance, and possibly venerated. Only here have we evidence for all the characteristics that *De Locis Sanctis* ascribes to the Church of the Nutrition, including the house.

Was this the house where Jesus grew up? It is impossible to say on archaeological grounds. On the other hand, there is no good archaeological reason why such an identification should be discounted. What we can say is that this building was probably where the Byzantine church builders believed Jesus had spent his childhood in Nazareth. 📖

¹ The Nazareth Archaeological Project is a British archaeological project, sponsored by the Palestine Exploration Fund and the Late Antiquity Research Group. The project is directed by the author.

² D. Adan-Bayewitz, "On the Chronology of the Common Pottery of Northern Roman Judaea/Palestine," in G.C. Bottini,

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ISRAEL MUSEUM, JERUSALEM

causing this reader to raise his eyebrows in some surprise at what beliefs about Genesis 1–2 are being maintained. What does he mean by a “young earth” (p. 290)? Does Isaiah 40:22 really imply that the earth was spherical (p. 297)? To disparage millennia of evolutionary development by arguing that you could not envisage a dog developing wings (p. 306) is an astonishing argument. And he seems to imply that Genesis 1 and 2 requires belief in specific acts of creation—of sun, animals, etc. (pp. 307–308).

The title is rather misleading (in what sense is Jesus “on trial”?), and the subtitle (“... affirms the truth of the gospel”) seems to imply a very loose definition of “gospel.” The jacket blurb, “How the critics’ arguments against Christianity are infected with ideological bias,” seems to imply that the author has no “ideological bias.” And outside the USA many will be surprised at the relatively narrow range

of literature encompassed in the many notes. But it is good to read this genuine attempt to explain why the Bible speaks with such power and truth.

James D.G. Dunn is Emeritus Lightfoot Professor of Divinity formerly in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University in England. His latest book is The Oral Gospel Tradition (2013).

Jesus’ House

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L. di Segni and L.D. Chrupcala, eds., *One Land—Many Cultures: Archaeological Studies in Honour of Stanislaw Loffreda OFM* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 2003).

³ For further details, see Ken Dark, “Early Roman-Period Nazareth and the Sisters of Nazareth Convent,” *The Antiquaries Journal* 92 (2012), p. 1.

⁴ Y. Alexandre, *Mary’s Well, Nazareth: The Late Hellenistic to the Ottoman Periods* (Jerusalem:

Israel Antiquities Authority Report 49, 2012).

⁵ G. Schumacher, “Recent Discoveries in Galilee,” *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* 21 (1889), p. 68.

⁶ The present Franciscan Church of St. Joseph (the “Church of St. Joseph’s Workshop”) within the Church of the Annunciation compound is a Crusader foundation with no evidence of an earlier church on its site.

Biblical Views

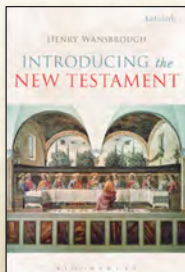
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a combination of *ap’* (meaning “away”) and ... yes, *kulio* (meaning “to roll”).

According to Matthew 27:60, we read that, after the death of Jesus, “he [Joseph of Arimathea] placed it [the body] in his new tomb that he hewed in the rock and, having rolled a large rock up to the door of the tomb, he went away.”

The verb here is the same as the one in Mark, *proskulio*. The text further reads

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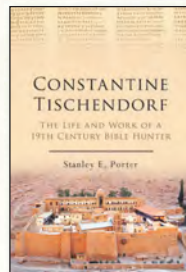
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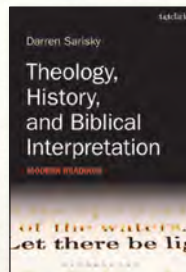
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