

The Myth of Nazareth: The Invented Town of Jesus

by

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[Approx. 4,000 words]

Did Nazareth exist when Jesus was alive? Did Jesus even live at all? These unsettling questions remind me of the proverbial mad uncle in the cellar – he’s there, but the household wants to keep it a secret, so when the guests come to dinner the hostess’s smile covers a perpetual fear and an unvoiced prayer: “Please uncle Jack, please don’t scream tonight!”

The trouble with a mad uncle in the cellar is that he can spoil the party upstairs. The same problem exists with questions like “Did Nazareth exist when Jesus was alive?” and its bigger sibling, “Did Jesus even live at all?” (being seriously asked by scholars such as Frank Zindler and Earl Dougherty). Such questions can spoil the party because if Jesus didn’t exist, then the West’s main excuse for feeling good (“I’m saved”) is suddenly gone.

Now, we can argue until the Second Coming whether Jesus actually lived in the flesh, and I suspect he might appear on the clouds before we decide the matter, because there can be no proof for his terrestrial life. Even were someone to present a document they claimed was written by Jesus (say, from the Dead Sea Scrolls), or a garment he touched (like the Shroud of Turin), anybody could simply say: “No, I think that’s someone else. That’s not him.” After all, a fact is only that which is provable.

This is what gives the Nazareth issue such great potency. Unlike aspects of the gospel story that are quite beyond verification – the miracles of Jesus, his bodily resurrection, his virgin birth, or even his human nature – the existence of Nazareth two thousand years ago can be proved or disproved by digging in the ground. Because the archaeology of any site is empirically demonstrable, “Nazareth” is in a category apart. To this day, it preserves the explosive potential to either prove or disprove the gospel accounts. It is potentially a very loud scream from the cellar.

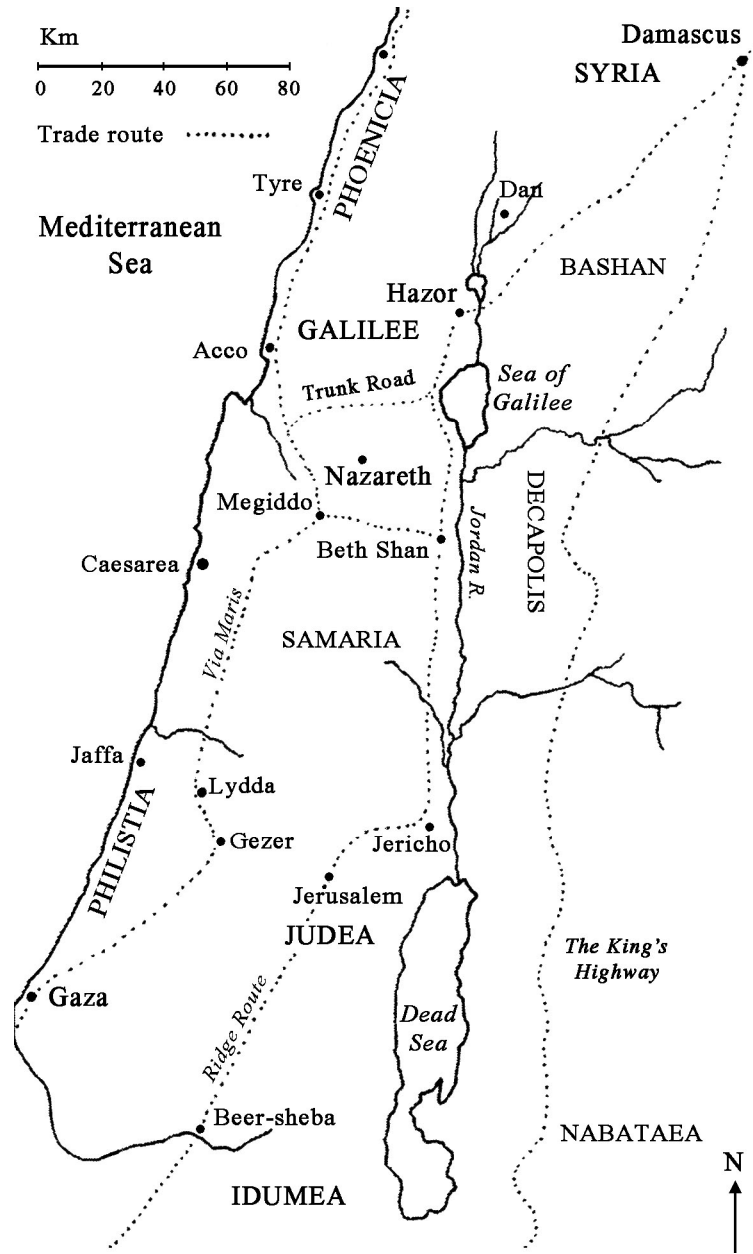
If Nazareth didn’t exist, that means the evangelists lied in a big way. The place is mentioned ten times in the canonical gospels and *Acts of the Apostles*. (The rest of the occurrences “Jesus of Nazareth” in the New Testament are better translated “Jesus the Nazarene” or “Nazorean” – whatever *that* was). In other words, this is not a one-time error, but a calculated and recurrent invention shared by all four gospels. If the evangelists were spinning a yarn, then conservatives who have been touting scriptural inerrancy for so many years all suddenly have a great deal of egg on their faces.

No one likes to be duped. What hurts more is to be duped *and* shown a fool for telling a false story to one’s children for two thousand years. And we should be clear on this – when it comes to the gospels, mega-bragging rights and total testosterone are involved. Those documents are what drove Crusaders to kill Moslems, inquisitors to burn heretics, and the Church to stand on infallibility and hurl papal bulls to the world. We’re talking about *being right, by God*, about metaphorically strutting down main street, and about having the blessing to shoot and ask questions later. Hmm... Sounds a lot like conservative Christianity.

It is the conservative wing of Christianity that has so much to lose from the scientific investigation of Christian origins. The archaeologist’s spade, at Nazareth as at other places in

Palestine, has engendered fear in that quarter because it might show that things did not happen as the scriptures say, that the Bible is *not* the word of God.

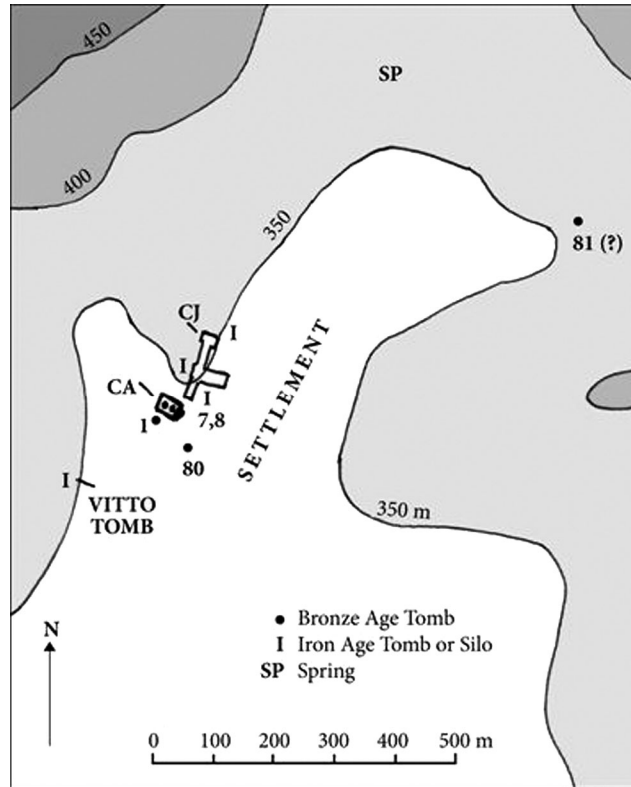
No doubt partly for this reason, centuries ago the Roman Catholic Church resolved to buy the most sacred Christian places in the Holy Land. In this way, the Church would shape the story told about those sites and manage any investigation that took place on its property – in addition, of course, to monopolizing the revenues from pilgrims. The Custodia di Terra Santa, an arm of the Franciscan Order, was formed for the purpose of acquiring and controlling the venues deemed most sacred to Christians. In 1620 CE the Custodian of the Holy Land, Fr. Tommaso Obicini, acquired the present venerated area in Nazareth from the Druse emir, Fakr ed-Din. Today, that area is the premiere destination of Christian pilgrimage outside of Jerusalem. It's not very large – only about 100m by 60m, and includes three structures: (1) the Church of the Annunciation (the largest Christian edifice in the Middle East), the Church of St. Joseph to the north, and the Franciscan convent between the two churches. The venerated area has been the venue of virtually all the Roman Catholic excavations in Nazareth, so we should not be surprised if the history of the settlement is seen through thick Roman Catholic lenses.



Illus. 1. Nazareth and the ancient trade routes of Palestine.

The Bronze-Iron Age settlement

The Nazareth basin lies in southern Galilee roughly equidistant from the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee – about an easy day’s walk from either. It is surrounded by hills, and thus is both accessible and off the beaten path. The story of human habitation there begins at the dawn of history. It became clear in the 1920s that a substantial settlement existed in the basin already in the Bronze and Iron Ages. My research has clarified prior proposals that the settlement started about 3000 BCE. In fact, it began a millennium later. But the name “Nazareth,” does not appear in Jewish scripture, nor in any ancient records before the Christian gospels. This has always struck scholars as curious, but I am now able to offer one possible explanation.



Illus. 2. The Nazareth basin with Bronze-Iron Age sites. The present venerated area is marked by the Church of the Annunciation (CA) and the Church of St. Joseph (CJ).

There was an ancient settlement in the neighborhood of Nazareth called Japhia. It is mentioned in the Bible (Jos 19:12), as well as in the Egyptian Amarna letters of XIV BCE. Today, archaeologists know of Japhia only from the Roman ruins of the town 3km SW of Nazareth. Japhia was destroyed in 67 CE, during the First Jewish Revolt. Curiously, there are no Bronze-Iron Age remains of Japhia under the Roman ruins. So, the early town mentioned in the Bible was somewhere nearby. There was indeed a considerable settlement in the Nazareth basin during those eras, one beginning about 2000 BCE and continuing for about thirteen centuries (from the Middle Bronze Age to the Middle Iron Age). Thus, by synoptically viewing the evidence from Japhia together with that from the neighboring Nazareth basin, one arrives at the very likely solution: “Japhia” was located in the Nazareth basin in the Bronze and Iron Ages, and it moved in the course of centuries to the eventual Roman location three kilometers away. Such village movement over time was not unusual, and occurred for a variety of reasons. In the case of Japhia we have a good reason: Assyria conquered Israel in 732 BCE and destroyed all the major towns in northern Palestine. It is likely that Japhia was also a casualty of the general destruction at that time. Thus, the earliest town of Nazareth was not “Nazareth” at all, but Japhia.

The Great Hiatus

The first stage of “Nazareth” history comes to an end with the eighth century destruction of Japhia. Thereafter, according to surveys conducted by the Israeli archaeologist Zvi Gal, there was a general depopulation of Galilee. Japhia was abandoned along with many other sites, and the Nazareth basin lay empty of human settlement for many centuries. This is the beginning of

what I call a “Great Hiatus” in habitation. There is no evidence at all in the ground at Nazareth from the ensuing Babylonian and Persian Periods (c. 612 - c. 330 BCE), and the Church itself has never claimed any.

It’s curious, then, that the Catholic Church maintains the doctrine of continuous habitation, namely, that Nazareth was inhabited from the Bronze Age all the way until the present. Thus Father B. Bagatti, the principal archaeologist at the site: “...life did not begin in the place in a recent epoch, but already existed in the Bronze Period, to continue down to our own days” (*Exc.* 319). This is tantamount to a denial of empirical fact, but the reason is clear: Christian doctrine requires that Nazareth existed in Jesus’ time. This in turn requires that the settlement *already* existed for some time. Only two possibilities fulfill this requirement. Either (1) Nazareth has existed continuously since the Bronze Age; or (2) there was a hiatus in settlement, but the town was reestablished before Jesus’ time (for example, in the Hellenistic Age). The Church has officially embraced the simpler solution: Nazareth has existed continuously since 2000 BCE.

This is a truly remarkable position. According to the doctrine of continuous habitation, the hamlet of Nazareth has been settled uninterruptedly since the time of Abraham. Presumably, Nazareth joins Jerusalem and a select handful of the world’s settlements to have enjoyed such outstanding longevity. Hardly any Canaanite towns can make a similar claim. Many ancient and venerable Biblical towns do not go back to patriarchal times (Gerasa, Hebron). Others ceased long ago (Gezer, Shechem). Yet others were abandoned or destroyed in the course of time, and then re-established at a different location (Gaza, Jericho, Japhia). In short, the tradition’s shrill assertion that people continuously lived in the Nazareth basin for the last four thousand years would be, if true, quite amazing. Apart from any Christian considerations, it would raise the site inestimably in archaeological value. The stratigraphy of the venerated area (for that is where habitation is claimed) would be of the greatest general interest. Archaeologists would be able to systematically follow the levels of habitation downwards – as they can at the well-excavated site of Megiddo 17 km away – beginning with the upper stratum and progressively exposing older and older settlements. Megiddo offers thirty strata encompassing approximately three millennia, a treasure trove for archaeologists.

And Nazareth? No strata have been discovered there at all. In 1955 Bagatti had a special trench cut a few meters to the East of the Church of the Annunciation. Its purpose was to determine the stratigraphic profile of the venerated area, to once and for all find evidence of settlement in the various periods, and to provide some much-needed vindication of Church doctrine. The trench was dug 5.6 meters (18.4 ft.) down to solid bedrock, and was continued for a length of 12.9 meters (42.3 ft.). But the results disappointed the archaeologist. He writes: “at least where excavated, there were no habitations.” He found a few Byzantine sherds, similar to many others in the vicinity. Otherwise, no evidence of human presence was revealed. “All the fill,” Bagatti admits simply, “follows normally the declivity of the hill.” That is to say, no man-made strata were revealed at all – only virgin earth and rock.

The Hellenistic period

The mid-twentieth century witnessed the birth of the State of Israel and a great advance in technology, largely as a result of World War II. With the passing decades archaeological data and methods became even more precise, and older theories regarding many Palestinian sites had to be discarded. As regards Nazareth, some non-Catholic scholars realized that a hiatus in settlement could not be denied – there simply was no evidence for settlement there after the Assyrian conquest in 732 BCE. However, the doctrinal requirement for a village at and before

the time of Jesus was as real for Protestant scholars as for Catholic. To solve the evidentiary dilemma, they proposed that Nazareth was resettled in Hellenistic times (330-63 BCE). I call this the “Hellenistic renaissance” hypothesis.

This hypothesis, however, is no more consistent with the evidence in the ground than is the doctrine of continuous habitation. *There is no Hellenistic evidence from Nazareth.* My careful examination of the literature shows that the tiny bit of evidence claimed as “Hellenistic” is bogus. For example, below is a photo of six oil lamps discovered in a Nazareth tomb and curtly labeled “Hellenistic” in the original 1931 report, signed by E. Richmond (*Illus. 3*). A few years later a Catholic writer, Father C. Kopp, wrote a series of articles on Nazareth in which he further characterizes the lamps: “R. classifies the era very generally as ‘Hellenistic’ based on 6 lamps; according to the accompanying photos of the finds [they] must surely go back at least as far as 200 BC.”¹ In fact, the six lamps date from the Middle to Late Roman periods (70-330 CE), long after the turn of the era. Incredibly, misdatings of the primary evidence, sometimes involving discrepancies of up to 500 years (as in this case), are often encountered in the scholarly Nazareth literature.

Fr. Bagatti corrected the above misdating in his 1969 book, *Excavations in Nazareth* (p. 242) and accepted that these lamps were II-III CE rather than II-III BCE. A similar error is made in an influential article entitled “Nazareth” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992), today the premiere American biblical encyclopedia. There, we read the astonishing statement that “The general archaeological picture is of a small village, devoted wholly to agriculture, that came into being in the course of the 3d century B.C.” I did a double-take when I first read this many years ago, assuming a misprint. *Surely*, I thought, *the author means “A.D.” instead of “B.C.”* But no, he is in earnest, and is simply describing the Hellenistic renaissance doctrine.

The word “Hellenistic” is peppered throughout Bagatti’s 325-page book, occurring about a dozen times. But those claims are always tentative and vague. The archaeologist never shows us any complete Hellenistic artefacts, like an oil lamp or a pot, but a few ludicrously small shards each less than one inch square. Such tiny pieces of pottery could be almost anything, even to a specialist. Bagatti’s ultimate summation (p. 319) is: “We have met with only few traces of the Hellenistic period, but there are many elements of the Roman period...” I set about finding those “few traces of the Hellenistic period,” and came up against a brick wall, except for a few other similar claims, such as “some sherds belong to the Hellenistic period” (p. 272) and the following gem of imprecision: “The black varnish given to No. 8 reminds us of the custom in such products during Hellenistic-Roman times” (p. 185). Now, Hellenistic-Roman times span a period of seven centuries, while black varnish is found on objects of many eras. So, Bagatti’s statement does not tell us much, but it does allow the author to use the word “Hellenistic.”



Illus. 3. Middle to Late Roman oil lamps found in a Nazareth tomb. These lamps have all been labeled “Hellenistic” in the scholarly literature.

On two pages of his book (*Exc.* 136-37), Bagatti offers us the rare treat of concrete evidence from “Hellenic times.” Or does he? Again, they are tiny pieces of pottery, less than an inch square. But according to Bagatti’s own descriptions, they are not certainly Hellenistic. One shard is from “Hellenic times *or earlier*” (my italics. They are probably Bronze-Iron Age shards). Another example: “Well known as appertaining to the Hellenistic period is the foot of the little vase, like a spindle (No. 15) *although these little vases remain in use until the 3rd cent. A.D., as we can see from Jerash.*” (Emphasis added.) Well, the shard looks to me from the diagrams like the foot of a Roman-period vase, of which several similar examples survive from Nazareth.

The infamous Hellenistic nozzle

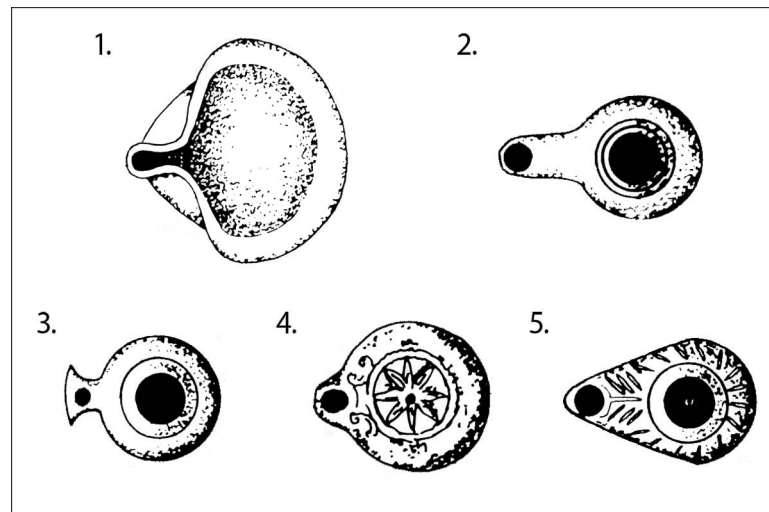
The search for Hellenistic evidence enters a veritable quagmire of deception with Bagatti’s following statement:

The only pieces which seem to indicate the Hellenistic period is the nozzle No. 26 of fig. 233 and 2 of fig. 235, a bit short for the ordinary lamps, but not completely unusual. [*Exc.* 309-310]

One would suppose that the archaeologist is describing two specimens, for he uses the plural “pieces” and gives two examples. Crosschecking, however, shows that both examples refer to the same nozzle: once in a photo (Fig. 233 no. 26), and once in a diagram (Fig. 235 no. 2). The caption to the diagram proclaims: “Pottery lamps of the Bronze, Hellenistic and Roman periods found in various places.”

So, by eliminating all evidence that could be from other periods, it seems that the sum total of Hellenistic evidence from Nazareth finally devolves upon a single broken oil lamp nozzle, about one inch long and the same in width, that is, about the size of the extremity of an adult person’s thumb. But is this nozzle really Hellenistic? We’re speaking here of the protruding front part of all oil lamps, the part which is pierced at the end by the wick-hole. The typical Greek oil lamp had a long nozzle (*Illus. 4*, no. 2), considerably longer than Bagatti’s example which the Italian, as we see in the above citation, freely admits is “a bit short for the ordinary lamps, but not completely unusual.” Well, perhaps we are dealing with an *atypical* Hellenistic oil lamp. (Like

the disappearing Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, the Hellenistic evidence gets smaller and smaller...) In a footnote, Bagatti offers several “Hellenistic” parallels to this example. I dutifully looked them up, and with them we finally come to the end of this path leading into the brambles: the parallels do not resemble Bagatti’s example at all. They are longer and exhibit an entirely different profile, with sloping as opposed to parallel sides. We have reached a dead end, and can be assured that there is no Hellenistic evidence at all from Nazareth.² We can also be assured that considerable effort has been expended to produce such evidence out of thin air.



Illus. 4. Typical Palestinian oil lamps.

(1) Bronze Age (2) Hellenistic (3) “Herodian” (4) Roman (5) Byzantine

The Roman period

When the Hellenistic period is added to the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian periods, then the hiatus in settlement at Nazareth extends from four to almost seven centuries (732 BCE-63 BCE). Yet we have still not reached the epoch when people reentered the basin. The first evidence of human presence begins in the first century CE, and consists of several oil lamps of the “Herodian” type. This name is a misnomer, for the Herodian lamp was made and used until c. 150 CE, long after the time of Herod the Great and even after the death of his last reigning descendant (c. 100 CE). Thus, like “Roman,” “Herodian” is a word which has been misused by the tradition to characterize later evidence as earlier, namely, to the time of Herod the Great (37-4 BCE). In such subtle ways, the Nazareth literature is full of pitfalls for the unwary reader.

Oil lamps are particularly valuable for dating purposes because the many varieties have been on the whole well studied. An expert considers the composition, color, form, method of manufacture (by hand or wheel), decoration, and other features of the lamp. All these data can furnish a very good approximation of the date (and sometimes the place) of manufacture. In the case of Palestinian oil lamps of Greco-Roman times, a lamp can in certain instances be pinpointed to the quarter century.

Herodian oil lamps were characterized by a spatulate nozzle, as seen in the lamps at the lower left and lower right of Illustration 3. The Herodian lamp on the lower left is earlier, having very little decoration, no handle, and no volutes (collars at the neck), while the lamp on the lower right possesses all these features. Herodian oil lamps accompany the earliest Roman evidence we

have from Nazareth. We have seen that they can be quite late, as late as 150 CE. The more burning question is: how early can they be? That determination tells us how early people could have started coming into the basin.

A number of Herodian oil lamps were found in a complex of tombs excavated in 1981 by Ms. Nurit Feig.³ The tombs are 2.6 km east of the Church of the Annunciation. The oil lamps are identical or similar to those discovered by Bagatti in the venerated area, which makes Feig's observations very pertinent to our study. Feig dates the Herodian lamps c. 50 CE - c. 150 CE, and concludes: "From these facts and from the findings it is possible to relate the use of these tombs to a period of time between the middle of the first century [CE] to the third century CE. It is also possible to assume that the other tombs on the ridge are from the same time as well" (p.79).

This dating is confirmed by F. Fernandez, who has published a study on Roman Galilean pottery.⁴ He redates a good deal of evidence first reviewed by Bagatti and others. Regarding artefacts from the most important tomb, that which furnished the lion's share of Roman evidence at Nazareth (including a number of Herodian lamps), Fernandez concludes that the tomb is "certainly not before the second third of the first century after Christ" (p.63).

From the above discussion, understandably simplified due to the brevity of this article, it is evident that people started to come into the Nazareth basin in the generations between the First and Second Jewish Revolts (70 CE-130 CE). This stands to reason: Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE, and a number of Jews fled northwards. Nazareth was very Jewish and did not have anything to do with a Hebrew word for "heretics" (*minim* in Hebrew), including Jewish-Christians. We know this because there is evidence that after 135 CE a family of Jewish priests moved to Nazareth. They would not have moved to a town of mixed religious character.

Chronologically, then, it is evident that the village of Nazareth did not yet exist in the time of Jesus, that is, at the turn of the era. It came into existence about the time that the evangelists were writing their gospels. Perhaps they heard of the new village, and decided to make it the hometown of Jesus. I can't affirm this for sure, but note that scholars have long known that the Greek name for the village does not perfectly correspond with the Semitic name.⁵ Thus, the Greek name is artificial and not linked to any known place.

The tomb in Mary's bedroom

In a good year, over a million pilgrims come to Nazareth to visit where the archangel Gabriel announced to the Blessed Virgin, "Hail Mary, full of grace..." Supposedly, this occurred in the virgin's dwelling, which the Church claims was at the site of the present Church of the Annunciation. However, that church is located in the middle of an ancient Roman cemetery. This fact is quite overlooked in the scholarly Nazareth literature. For Jews, contact with the dead was a source of ritual impurity (Lev 21:11), and for this reason graves had to be located outside the town or village perimeter. The Talmud (m. Bava Bathra 2:9) specifies the required minimum distance ("fifty ells") from the nearest habitation. Of course, this is fatal to the traditional conception of the venerated area.

This Jewish prohibition was not generally appreciated until the 1950s, and so earlier Catholic archaeologists innocently pointed out tombs in the venerated area, charted them, described them, and even opined that some of Jesus' family may have been buried in one or another of them. As a result, a careful review of the literature shows that Roman tombs existed directly under the Church of the Annunciation, and close by in all directions. In the 1950s it was realized that the Jewish prohibition against living in proximity to tombs could have a dire impact on the

traditional view of the venerated sites, and we read no more of the presence of all these tombs there. But it was too late. The earlier data tells us that a number of tombs surround the Chapel of the Angel (the precise spot where the archangel spoke to Mary). One grave adjoins the northern edge of the Chapel – perhaps it was in her bedroom? This tomb is completely ignored in Bagatti’s compendious book *Excavations in Nazareth*. A few meters in another direction is a Roman tomb complex which contained four to twelve graves. The lame explanations for these interments are almost comical. Bagatti suggests (*Exc.*:50) that these graves are from Crusader times. Were he correct, we should wonder at this sacrilegious (and otherwise unknown) Crusader custom of burying their dead in the house of the Virgin Mother. Besides, the design of the tombs is clearly Roman.

There are other reasons why the so-called venerated area in Nazareth could not have been what tradition claims. Located on the side of a steep and rocky hill called the Nebi Sa’in, it is inconceivable that the ancient peasantry would have wished (or would have had the engineering skills) to construct dwellings in that area. The grade of the slope is 14%, with the result that today one end of the Church of the Annunciation is about ten meters higher than the other. This fact is, of course, masked by the architecture of the present mammoth structure, which includes internal stairs and two churches one on top of the other. When the village of Nazareth became a reality in the second century CE, it was located on the valley floor, not on the steep and rocky hillside where the Church property lies. That slope was used as a necropolis and for agriculture: storage of grain, wine, and oil in silos and cisterns; the pressing of oil and wine; and the threshing of wheat, barley, etc.

From this brief review of the data, we are now able to reconstruct the true history of

c. 2000 - c. 730 BCE	Bronze-Iron Age settlement of “Japhia”
c. 730 BCE – c. 70 CE	Great Hiatus (no settlement)
c. 100 CE	Founding of Nazareth (70 CE – 135 CE)
To present	Continued existence of settlement

settlement in the Nazareth basin:

For those readers who may be interested, the information in this article is set forth in greater detail, together with a wealth of factual information, in a series of chapbooks being published by Kevalin Press over the period of one year. For further information, please visit www.kevalin.org. A popular edition of these findings, in book form, is planned for 2008. The author invites readers to email comments to kevalin@kevalin.org or to write him at: Kevalin Press, POB 50201, Eugene OR 97405.

¹ E.T. Richmond, “A Rock-Cut Tomb at Nazareth,” in *The Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine*, vol. I, No. 2, 1931, pl. xxxiv, no.2; and C. Kopp, “Beiträge zur Geschichte Nazareths,” *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, vol. XVIII (1938) nos. 1-2, p. 194.

² Bagatti’s “Hellenistic” nozzle is probably the product of a local pottery tradition dating 50 CE – 150 CE, similar to other oil lamps found in the Nazareth area. See N. Feig 1990:74 (Fig.9:11); also Fernandez Type L1.

³ N. Feig, "Burial Caves at Nazareth," *Atiqot* 10 (1990) pp. 67-79 (Hebrew).

⁴ F. Fernandez, *Ceramica Comun Romana de la Galilea*. Madrid, 1983.

⁵ The Greek name has a zeta (a voiced sibilant) where the Semitic name has a tsade (unvoiced). Linguistically, these letters are not compatible. It is most unlikely that the Greek "Nazareth" derived from the Semitic "Natsareth," at least by any natural phonetic process.