

NAZARETH (Ναζαρέτ, *Nazaret*; Ναζαρά, *Nazara*, Ναζαρέθ, *Nazareth*). A village in Lower Galilee that was Jesus' childhood home; situated on a ridge 500 meters above sea level.

History of Settlement

Archaeology evidence shows that Nazareth was settled as early as the Middle Bronze Age and continued to be settled through the Iron Age. However, the city is not mentioned in literature prior to the New Testament; likewise, Josephus doesn't mention it, even though it was located near Japha/Yaphia, a city he fortified during the First Revolt (Josephus, *Vita*, 230). The site appears to have been uninhabited in the centuries following the Assyrian conquest. Extensive remains have been uncovered from the second century BC, suggesting a significant population increase (possibly resettlement) under the Hasmonean rule. It is unlikely that there was any genealogical continuity between the inhabitants of the Hasmonean period and those of the Iron Age (Reed, *Archaeology*, 28–31).

The village had a predominantly Jewish population until at least the fourth century AD, and probably until the early seventh century. There is no evidence of any permanent Roman military presence. Inscriptional evidence from Caesarea attests that priests were present in Nazareth following the First Revolt, suggesting that the site was regarded as ritually pure.

It is unclear whether Nazareth held a Christian population in the first three centuries AD. The Jewish movement may have been pushed outside of Palestine in the wake of the First Revolt. Fourth-century sources, Eusebius, Jerome, and Epiphanius depict Nazareth as thoroughly Jewish until the Count Joseph of Tiberius, under the auspices of Constantine, constructed its first church (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.11.10). Recent scholars, however, acknowledging the fluidity of the terms "Jewish" and "Christian" as they pertain to the early centuries following Jesus, have critiqued this account.

In the 1960s, Bagatti combined archaeological discoveries with a critical reading of the ancient sources and argued that a Jewish-Christian community was present immediately following the Christ event. Bagatti claimed that Epiphanius' report carries the bias common to late ancient (predominantly) Gentile Christianity, that "Nazarenes," "Ebionites," or any other Christ-believing group which maintained loyalty to Judaism were not properly "Christians." Bagatti highlighted Eusebius' quotations of Julius Africanus (*Ecclesiastical History* 1.7.14) and Hegesippus (*Ecclesiastical History* 4.22.4) as evidence that Jesus' relatives (Bagatti, *Excavations*, 17–18):

- became Christ-believers while retaining their identity as Jews;
- maintained a family base in Nazareth;
- enjoyed esteemed positions in the Jewish-Christian community in Nazareth.

Bagatti's Jewish-Christian theory remains influential, though not without criticism (compare Taylor, *Christians*, 224–65). Marian devotion may have been a characteristic practice of the village's early Christian population.

From at least the late fourth century AD onward, Nazareth became a site for Christian pilgrimage (see Bagatti, *Excavations*, 20–25; Taylor, *Christians*, 226–30). Jewish-Christian relations seem to have been amicable until the seventh century, possibly due to the economic

benefits of the pilgrim/tourist trade. However, according to Eutychius (*Annales* 22), Nazareth's Jewish population during the Persian conquest of Palestine in AD 614 participated in a persecution of the Christians, for which they were punished with expulsion in AD 629 by the emperor Heraclius.

Islam became the dominant power throughout Palestine in AD 638, but Christian presence was permitted in Nazareth, as is attested by the late-seventh century French Pilgrim, Arculf, who reports about two churches (Adomnan, *De Locis Sanctis* 2.26). During the period of the Crusades, Nazareth experienced several shifts in control between Christian and Muslim forces. Subsequently, Islamic presence has dominated, though the continued veneration of the Christian holy sites has been tolerated. Today, Nazareth is the largest Arab city in Israel. Islam is the primary religion, but the city has a significant Christian population (approximately 1/3) representing several traditions.

Nazareth in the First Century AD

In the first century AD, Nazareth occupied only the ridge and did not extend into the Jezreel Valley 350 meters below (Reed, *Archaeology*, 115–16). The village's 40,000 square meters could have accommodated a population as high as 2,000 (Meyers and Strange, *Archaeology*, 56), but current estimates allow a population of only 200–500 at the time of Jesus. All evidence supports the view that Nazareth's primary industry was agriculture, including the production of wine and olive oil. The slopes supported the growing of wheat and barley. The soil to the south permitted the cultivating of vegetables. The village, like many throughout the ancient Mediterranean, was likely self-sufficient, though poor. The lack of remains from the period suggests that houses were constructed of local uncut stones and mud with thatch roofing. The town receives no mention in non-Christian sources from the Roman Period. It likely was known only at the local level, and perhaps enjoyed little esteem even there (John 1:46).

Throughout much of the 20th century, it was believed that Galilee was to a great extent isolated until the time of Hadrian. Improved archaeology of the region, however, has revealed an extensive network of pre-Hadrian trade routes, of which Sepphoris was a hub (Strange, "First Century Galilee," 40). Nazareth lay only 5 kilometers south of Sepphoris, and though the ascent of the Nazareth ridge was significant, it was not insurmountable (Reed, *Archaeology*, 115). Nazareth would not have been far from major trade routes (Meyers and Strange, *Archaeology*, 27, 43). Since the 1920s, Nazareth's proximity to Sepphoris has inspired much discussion, especially concerning the possibility that Jesus spent much time in that city (see Reed, *Archaeology*, 103–14). Archaeology demonstrates that Sepphoris was built into an impressive city under Antipas early in Jesus' life (Reed, *Archaeology*, 117).

Archaeological Finds

Franciscan archaeologists began excavations of the Church of St. Joseph and the Church of the Annunciation around the turn of the 20th century. In the 1950s and 60s, Bagatti's team discovered pottery dating back to the Middle Bronze Age, and grottos, cisterns, silos and tombs dating back as far as the Iron Age in the vicinity of the Church of the Annunciation. The Church of the Annunciation itself venerates an underground grotto presumed to be site of Mary's visitation by the archangel Gabriel. In the 12th century, crusaders removed the existing church, along with a convent on the south side, and constructed a basilica, preserving the grotto in the

northern end. Remains of the Byzantine church were also discovered, revealing a rectangular structure oriented east to west with three naves. Also found were the remains of some 11 mosaic pavements, including one ascribed to Conon, perhaps to be identified with the third-century Nazorean martyr, a relative of Jesus. Under the mosaic pavements, Bagatti found remains of a walled structure with columns 55 cm in diameter, fitting the description of an ancient Galilean synagogue. The presence of Christian graffiti in Syriac and Greek led Bagatti to suggest that the synagogue belonged to Jewish-Christians. A basin directly below the Byzantine church's central nave is believed to have been a *mikveh* transformed into a baptismal vessel. Under the remains of a convent on the south end of the church, Bagatti found more Christian graffiti in Greek, Aramaic, and possibly Armenian, including an image of John the Baptist holding something aloft, possibly a cross or his own head.

The Church of St. Joseph is supposed to have venerated the home of Joseph, the father of Jesus. The remains of the Byzantine structure include a pillar, and seven steps leading down to a baptismal basin. Bagatti proposed that the remains of four calcite columns were that of the non-Christian synagogue known to have existed until the seventh century. The area also produced extensive remains of ancient *kokhim*-style (i.e. Jewish "oven-shaped") tombs, the ornaments of which locate some in the Herodian period. A white marble inscription from the Cabinet des Medailles in Paris preserves an imperial decree prohibiting grave violation, likely from the reign of Claudius or Tiberius. Measuring 60 cm x 37.5 cm, containing 22 lines of Greek, the inscription is purported to have been recovered during an excursion to Nazareth in 1878.¹

¹ Koiter, I. W. K. (2016). [Nazareth](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Kloppenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.