

The Archaeology of Nazareth: A History of Pious Fraud?

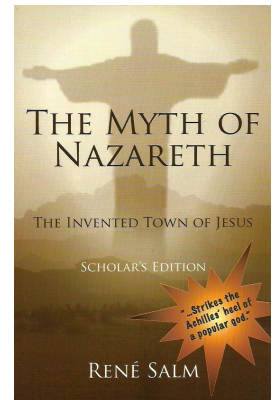
René Salm / SBL: November 17, 2012

Good morning. This presentation will be divided into two parts. The first part will consist of a brief survey of the most significant material finds from the Nazareth basin as they relate to the possible existence of a settlement there at the turn of the era. The second part will briefly discuss the question of “pious fraud” as this may relate to the history of Nazareth archaeology.

First, however, I would like to preface these remarks with a little background on myself and on some false assumptions regarding my work.

You may be aware that I wrote a book called *The Myth of Nazareth: The Invented Town of Jesus*. It was published in 2008 by American Atheist Press. The book required eight years of research and has over 800 footnotes, seven appendices, and a bibliography that extends to hundreds of works. It’s major thesis has since met violent and sustained opposition from scholars of virtually every stripe. The evidence in the book, however, has not yet been contradicted.

Not being an archaeologist myself, I am often asked: “How can you date evidence, Mr. Salm?” or: “How can you presume to correct professional archaeologists?” or: “How can you have any opinion on these matters?” However, there is a misunderstanding inherent in these questions, for I have never dated anything at all. I have simply identified the relevant archaeological experts and quoted *their* published datings: Hans-Peter Kuhnen on kokhim tombs, Varda Sussman on bow-spouted oil lamps, Roland Deines on Jewish stone vessels, Amos Kloner on circular blocking stones, and so on. The case regarding Nazareth does not rest on my opinion at all. Anyone who disagrees with *The Myth of Nazareth* is not disagreeing with me but is taking issue with the leading archaeological experts in the world. As we shall see, this is fatal for traditional conclusions regarding Nazareth.



I.

A brief survey of the most significant material finds from the Nazareth basin as they relate to the existence of a settlement there at the turn of the era

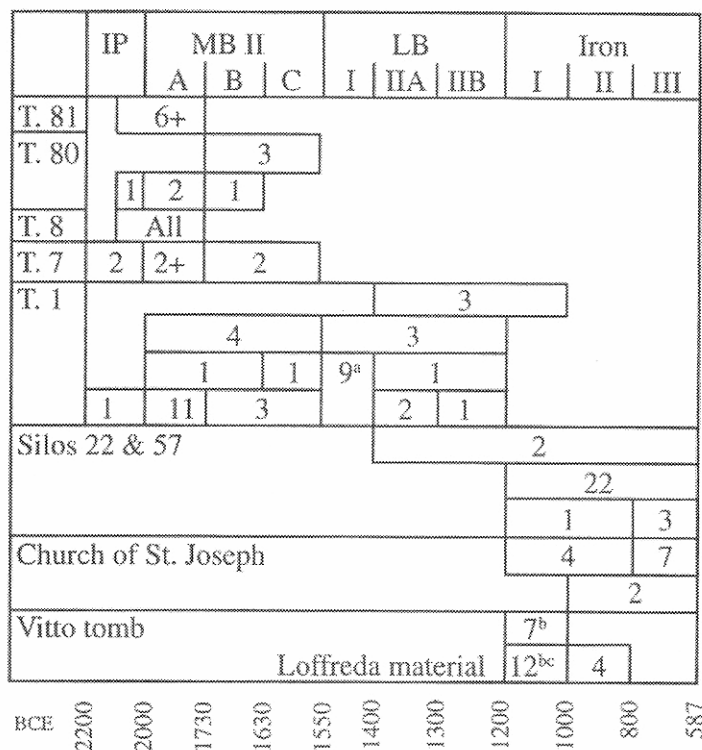
The demonstrable material record shows that the settlement that eventually came to be called Nazareth did not come into existence until after the First Jewish War, that is, after 70 CE. We should first agree on what constitutes the “demonstrable material record.” All can agree that it is found in scholarly publications. Note my inclusion here of the word “scholarly.” Many opinions are now current on the Internet and in the popular press which claim, for example, the existence of a house in Nazareth from the time of Jesus, the existence of coins dating to Hasmonaean times, and even that a bath-house in Nazareth existed at the turn of the era—one in which Jesus himself may have bathed. However, these popular claims do not meet scholarly standards of publication, description, context, itemization, parallels, etc. That is, they do not allow other scholars to verify the nature of the evidence and hence to weigh the claims themselves. These non-academic press reports—quite frequent these days—are not what one can term “diagnostic.”

Until the evidence is itemized and described in a scientific way, such claims are the equivalent of unfounded opinion, hearsay, and innuendo.

The Bronze and Iron Age settlement

The Myth of Nazareth surveys the material from the Stone Age to Later Roman times. It shows that there was indeed a settlement of considerable size in that locality in the Bronze and Iron ages. The material evidence is congruent with the thesis, presented in my book, that this settlement was in fact Biblical “Japhia” and, furthermore, that the Assyrians destroyed this important town in the later eight century BCE. A complete and total lack of material evidence in the Nazareth basin for the ensuing 800 years (from roughly 700 BCE to 100 CE) is systematically demonstrated in *The Myth of Nazareth*. I term those eight centuries the “Great Hiatus.”

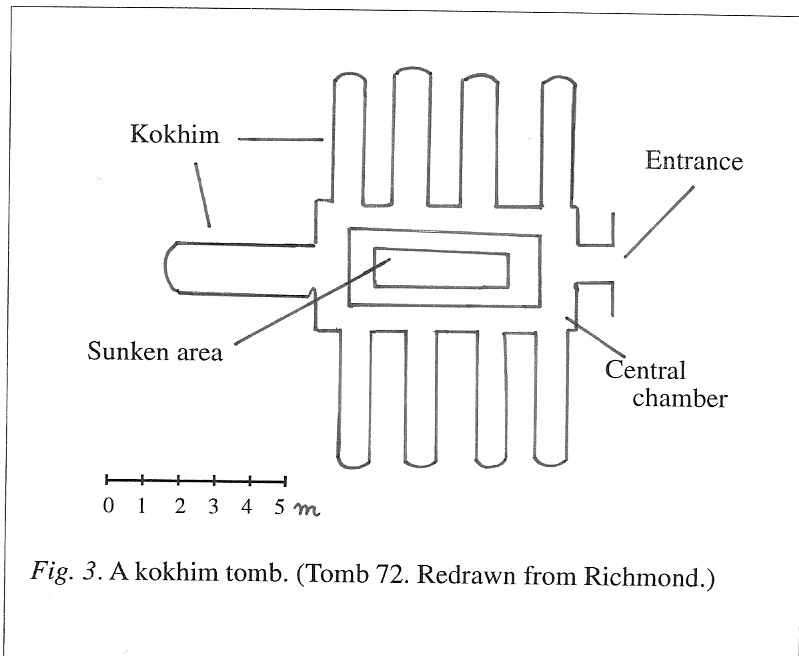
Chronology of the Bronze and Iron Age artifacts from Nazareth (MoN illus. 1.5):



Alleged evidence from the Hellenistic era

The traditional Catholic view is that Nazareth has existed in continuity since the Bronze Age. However, this view has become increasingly untenable, partly as a result of the appearance of my book. An alternate view, now gaining currency, is that Nazareth came into existence in Hellenistic times. However, the critical evidence to substantiate this view cannot be found in the published scientific literature. I show that all the specific evidence *relative to the Hellenistic era* claimed by Bagatti and other archaeologists to date simply does not exist. Those Hellenistic

claims reduce to eleven pieces of movable evidence, including pottery and some oil lamps. In every case the evidence has been *redated* by specialists to later times, and in one case to the Iron Age (MoN:135). In short, there is no Hellenistic material evidence from the Nazareth basin at all.

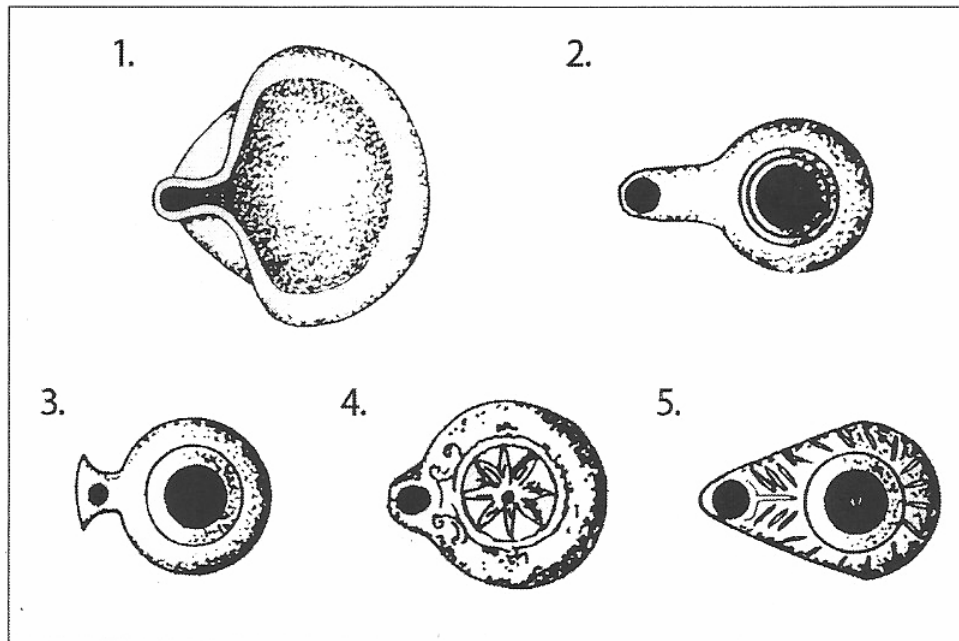


Alleged evidence from the turn of the era

The evidence relative to the turn of the era ("Early Roman Period") is equally problematic and results from a compounding of errors both in dating and in nomenclature. *The Myth of Nazareth* attempts to set the record straight. Firstly, according to the work of Hans-Peter Kuhnen—arguably the world's leading expert on **kokhim tombs** in the Galilee¹—those tombs first spread to the areas north of Jerusalem from the south, and they did so not before c. 50 CE.² This means that not only do all the two dozen kokhim tombs in the Nazareth basin date well after the time of Christ, but also that the panoply of movable evidence found inside them dates to Middle and Later Roman times. This fact alone removes approximately 90% of the Nazareth evidence to well after the turn of the era, for the vast preponderance of recovered evidence from the basin has been excavated in connection with kokhim tombs.

¹ *Kokh* (pl. *Kokhim*) means "grave, cave for burial" in Mishnaic Hebrew. Each shaft is generally referred to as a kokh or, occasionally by the Latin *loculus* (pl. *loculi*).

² MoN 158-59. H.P. Kuhnen, *Palästina in Griechisch-Römischer Zeit* (1990), pp. 253ff.



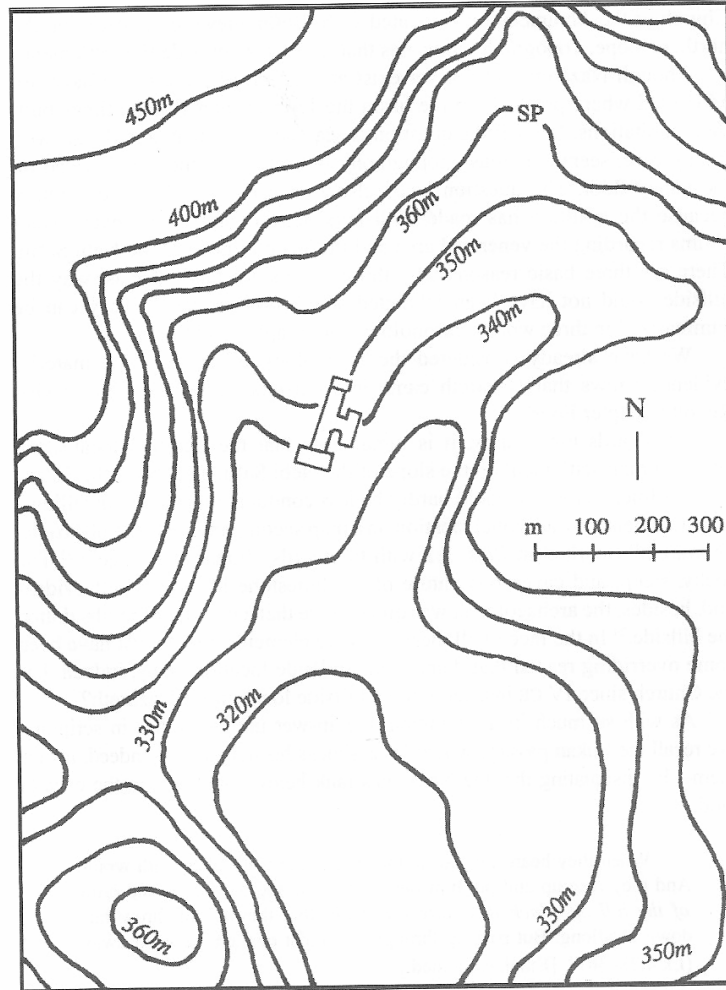
Typical Palestinian oil lamps (MoN illus. 3.3)

1. Late Iron Age 2. Hellenistic 3. Bow-spouted ("Herodian")
4. Roman 5. Byzantine

Secondly, the so-called "Herodian" **oil lamps** are a critical component traditionally used to date the settlement to the time of Christ. This is the earliest oil lamp type found at Nazareth. However, a careful examination of the specialist literature shows that the name "Herodian" is a misnomer, and that these lamps first appeared in the Galilee in CE times—this according to the work of oil lamp specialist Varda Sussman and others.³ In my book I adopt the term (first used by Paul Lapp) "bow-spouted lamps." Until *The Myth of Nazareth* appeared such oil lamps were assumed to date to the time of Herod the Great or even before, however we can now say that, in the Galilee, they postdate the time of Herod the Great and certainly do not constitute evidence for the existence of a settlement at the turn of the era. Simply put: like the kokhim tombs, the earliest Nazareth oil lamps categorically postdate the time of Jesus.

In fact, my book reaches the remarkable conclusion that *not a single artefact, tomb or structure at Nazareth can be dated with certainty before 100 CE*—that is, unless we go back to the Iron Age (MoN:205).

³ For an extended discussion of the types and dating of "bow-spouted oil lamps" see MoN 167-72 (with relevant bibliography).

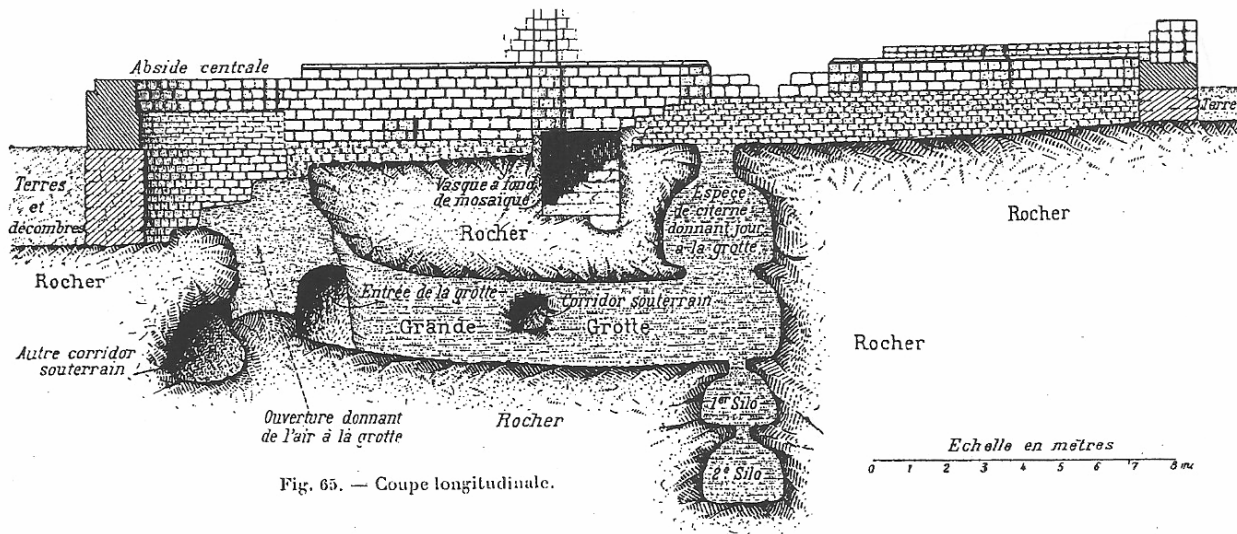


Illus. 5.1. The topography of the Nazareth basin.

Nazareth could not have existed on the hill

The Tradition has insisted since ancient times that Nazareth existed on the hillside, as we read in Luke 4:29: “And they led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw [Jesus] down headlong.” The Venerated Area with the Churches of the Annunciation and of St. Joseph are on the steep flank of the so-called Nebi Sa’in.

However, the hillside location of Roman Nazareth is hardly tenable. Firstly, the Nazareth basin lacks any satisfactory cliff which would accommodate the Lukan scene. Secondly, the incline of the hill is steep and reaches a grade of 20% in places. This is not steep enough to throw someone off a cliff, but it is certainly too steep for ancient Galilean villagers to build homes. It is true that—with the use of terracing—some Galilean settlements existed on hillsides. But there is no evidence of terracing at all in or around the Venerated Area of Nazareth, where the tradition has long claimed the existence of the ancient village.

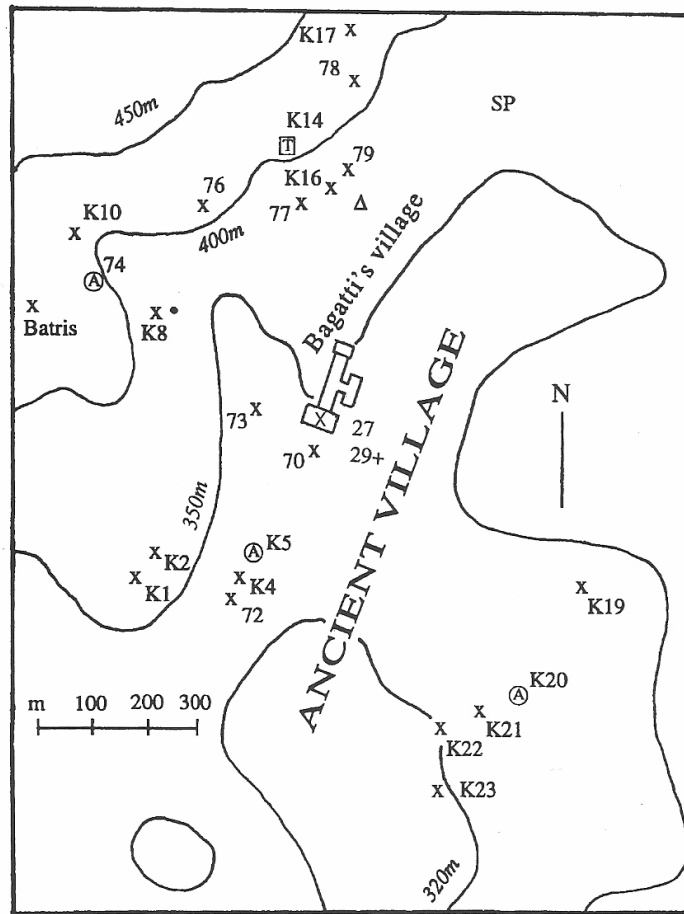


Section under the Church of St. Joseph, Nazareth (MoN illus. 5.5)

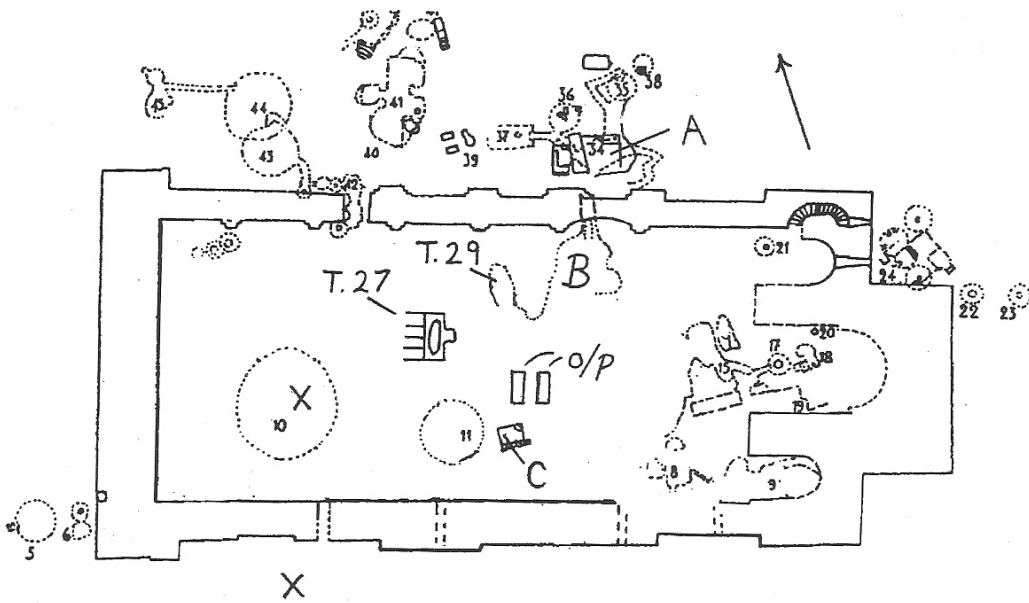
The view is from the North (East is to the left). Note the marked slope of the hill with several meters of foundation infill under the church to the East. The large grotto is not flat and shows no signs of having ever been an habitation.

Then again, the hillside is pockmarked with hollows, caves, and silos—some extending to several superimposed chambers within the earth. The Franciscan area—where most of the excavations have taken place—is literally honeycombed with cavities and has over 68 silos once used for the storage of food. This could not have been an area of habitations. The material record clearly shows that it was an area used for agricultural activity and associated food storage.

Finally, the presence of literally dozens of kokhim tombs shows that the hillside was not the locus of settlement. It is well known that the Jews consider contact with the dead to be a grave source of ritual impurity. Jews buried their dead outside the village, as explicitly stipulated in the Talmud (Bava Bathra 2:9). The Venerated Area is located in the middle of a Roman era cemetery, and this inconvenient fact is fatal to the traditional siting of the Nazareth settlement on the hillside. Indeed, there are up to five kokhim tombs under the Church of the Annunciation itself. Three have been proven in the published scientific literature and two more may well have existed. Of course, the modern tourist to Nazareth does not read about all these tombs in any guidebook. Yet their existence in later Roman times—authenticated in several scholarly publications—renders ludicrous the traditional view that this was a Jewish domicile when the Virgin Mary received the annunciation from the Archangel Gabriel.



Illus. 2. Middle and Late Roman tombs of Nazareth.
 x kokhim tomb SP Mary's Spring
 A arcosolium • "New Spring" (seasonal)
 T trough grave Δ Greek Bishop/s residence



Tombs and winemaking installations under the Church of the Annunciation (MoN illus 5.4)

o/p = Two graves at lowest stratum T. 27 = Roman tomb with 5 kokhim
 T. 29 = Remains of one grave X = Additional possible tombs

To summarize the material evidence from Nazareth, the following conclusions must be noted:

- (a) there is no published material evidence at Nazareth dating c. 700 BCE – c. 100 CE
- (b) all the oil lamps at Nazareth date after 25 CE
- (c) all the (post-Iron Age) tombs at Nazareth date after 50 CE
- (d) Middle Roman tombs exist directly under the Church of the Annunciation.

II.

The question of “pious fraud” as this relates to the history of Nazareth archaeology

Looseness in archaeological training

In biblical archaeology, there is a considerable looseness of terminology regarding what constitutes an “archaeologist.” Regarding those who have actually dug at Nazareth we may ask: How extensive was their scientific training? How rigorous was that training? These are not idle questions for, over and over, we find that the excavators on Catholic Church property have failed to observe standard guidelines of stratigraphy, documentation, publication, and preservation.⁴

Amnon ben Tor, a respected Israeli archaeologist and the author of the well-known reference work, *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, notes the pervasive need in some circles to validate scripture, a desire which he finds corrosive of archaeological integrity. He observes that many archaeologists active in the Land of Israel “received a large part of their education at various theological seminaries, while their archaeological training was often deficient.” Ben Tor adds: “This is particularly evident among American archaeologists.” He notes that “This state of affairs has given biblical archaeology a reputation for amateurism in some archaeological circles. Modern scientific excavation is so complex that those who have not received adequate training (which is the case with most of those educated at theological seminaries) cannot conduct” an excavation properly (MoN p. 9).

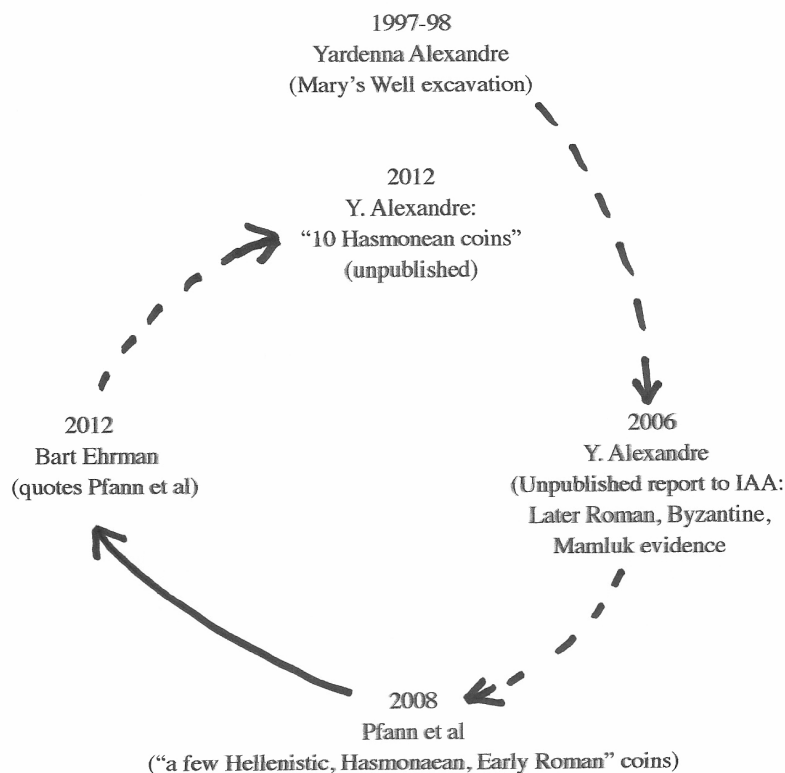
The excavators digging in the ground at Nazareth have by-and-large been seminary-trained priests, pastors, and ministers intent on seeking out “evidence” that corroborates the gospel accounts. On this basis, their work must be characterized as tendentious. “Tendentious” means that they present data lacking adequate foundation in the material evidence and conforming to preconceived conclusions. I call this “pious fraud.”

Hearsay replaces “evidence”?

Accompanying a broadening in the definition of what constitutes an “archaeologist,” there has been a concomitant loosening in what constitutes “evidence” in the field of Christian studies. A major problem with Nazareth archaeology (as also with Biblical archaeology in general) is that mere assertions have often replaced verifiability, including proper publication, itemization, and so forth. Sometimes, scholars consider claims valid merely because one or another of their peers “said it is so.” Thus, reputation has often replaced evidence.

⁴ In the last decade Dr. Ken Dark is the first fully trained archaeologist to publish routinely on Nazareth (see the LARG bulletins). Ms. Y. Alexandre’s recent excavations remain unpublished.

A good example occurred just this year with regards to alleged Hellenistic coin evidence supposedly discovered at Nazareth. The discovery of such coins would, if valid, powerfully impact the question of Nazareth's existence at the turn of the era. However, I have found reasons to consider this coin claim suspicious. Firstly, no coins from Nazareth have previously been found dating before the mid-fourth century CE. Thus this new Hellenistic coin claim conflicts with the panoply of evidence from the rest of the Nazareth basin. Secondly, I possess an official pre-publication report to the Israel Antiquities Authority signed by the excavator herself (dated May, 2006) in which she makes no mention at all of such early coins. Did the excavator (Ms. Yardenna Alexandre) change her mind? Thirdly, verification of these coins has never appeared in the scientific literature even though fifteen years have now elapsed since the excavation in question. Hence, the coin claim in question lacks the critical elements of verifiability, publication, and correspondence with the demonstrated material environment. We are entirely dependent upon the unfounded assertion of the archaeologist.



The burgeoning circle of hearsay that has obtained with regard to early Nazareth "evidence," leading to the recent claim of ten Hellenistic coins from Y. Alexandre's 1997-98 Mary's Well excavation. No publication has ever attended any of the alleged finds.

Nevertheless, a scholar of the stature of Bart D. Ehrman (University of North Carolina) has written that this claim is "compelling evidence" for the presence of such Hellenistic coins. He does so in his recent book entitled *Did Jesus Exist?* There he includes a discussion of the

archaeology of Nazareth and of my work. Ehrman voices complete satisfaction regarding the existence and dating of the pre-Jesus coins mentioned above. Upon examination, however, we find that he bases his opinion on the mere fact that he read a passage claiming their existence.⁵ In fact, the passage Ehrman saw⁶ was itself hearsay. Stephen Pfann and Yehuda Rapuano of the University of the Holy Land in Israel claimed to have received a private communication from Ms. Alexandre alleging the discovery of such early coins at Mary's Well in Nazareth. That *allegation* is the basis for Ehrman's statement: "Alexandre has verbally confirmed [to Pfann and Rapuano] that in fact it is the case: there were coins in the collection that date to the time prior to the Jewish uprising" (*DJE?* 196). Obviously, the standards for "evidence" in biblical studies have fallen to a very low threshold, indeed, when no more is required than the assertion of an archaeologist—no matter how astonishing that assertion may be.

In this case, Ehrman's "compelling evidence" is no more than hearsay at third hand. We have a three stage imputation of evidence, a round-robin where one scholar alleges that another scholar claims that yet another scholar—and so on... The actual evidence in the ground (the only basis for any argument) is nowhere to be seen.

The monopoly exercised in Nazareth by the Catholic Church

A further corrosive problem as regards the archaeology of Nazareth is that until very recently the Catholic Church has exercised a virtual monopoly on excavation, evaluation, and publication. In other words, the Church has controlled the Nazareth results by limiting access to both the terrain and the material evidence. This monopoly has been accompanied by a persistent history of (a) error, (b) internal contradiction, and (c) outright fraud, each of which continues to mar critical claims from Nazareth. I shall give one or two brief examples of each category.

"Error"

In 1930 six oil lamps were discovered in a Nazareth tomb, lamps which have been used in the scholarly literature as proof of a village in Hellenistic times (as early as the third century BCE). In fact, all six lamps date from the Middle Roman to the Late Roman periods, in some cases long after the time of Christ. The two lamps in the upper row [see photo on next page] have been specifically dated by Israeli specialists to Middle-Late Roman times. The two lamps at lower left and lower right are of the bow-spouted type (mistermed "Herodian," as noted above). They date in the Galilee from ca. 25 CE to ca. 135 CE. Finally, the remaining two lamps are typical Late Roman examples. The error, in other words, amounts to about 500 years in the case of some of these lamps.

⁵ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 196 and his note 15 p. 357.

⁶ S. Pfann and Y. Rapuano, "The Nazareth Village Farm Report: A Reply to Salm," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 2008:106.



Six oil lamps of the Roman period found in Nazareth tomb 72 (MoN illus 3.1).
These lamps have been characterized as “Hellenistic” several times in the scholarly literature.
None is earlier than the turn of the era.

Nor can all these oil lamps be lumped together into the same category—an elementary error that no archaeologist would conscientiously make. Nor does any one of these lamps date as far back as Hellenistic times. Nevertheless, this complex of errors has allowed the word “Hellenistic” to be falsely used in connection with Nazareth evidence for many decades. My book shows that this gross misdating is neither unique nor unusual in the Nazareth literature.

“Internal contradiction”

The cases of internal contradiction in the Nazareth literature are many and varied. One example occurred in relation to the Nazareth Village Farm excavation directed by Stephan Pfann and under the auspices of the University of the Holy Land. The “Final Report” of this excavation was published in the *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* (2007 issue). It claimed to find pottery at Nazareth dating to the time of Jesus and even to before that time. However, I discovered that the pottery in question was repeatedly misdated. In at least four cases, a piece of pottery was dated to one period on one page and to a different period on another page. Such outstandingly sloppy work is an example of internal contradiction. Incidentally, Bagatti too was guilty of the same error when he dated a cooking pot on one page to the Iron Age and on another page to Roman times (MoN 176).

“Outright fraud”

I shall now finally consider the question of outright fraud in connection with Nazareth archaeology. Fraud includes the element of intentional deception. We must ask: Has there been intentional deception in connection with the archaeology of Nazareth? I have already noted several suspicious and significant errors, including (1) the egregious misdating of Roman oil

lamps to the Hellenistic era; (2) the overlooking of tombs situated immediately under the Church of the Annunciation; (3) “compelling evidence” based upon third-hand hearsay; (4) the double dating of Early Roman evidence; and (5) the recent claim of Hellenistic coins from Nazareth, contrary to the archaeologist’s own prior communication to myself. *Only upon the basis of such errors and oversights, as well as upon the inclusion of entirely unverifiable data, is it possible to postulate a settlement of Nazareth at the turn of the era.* This statement cannot be overemphasized and must be carefully taken into account.

The principal archaeologist of Nazareth, Father Bellarmino Bagatti, is also hardly beyond suspicion. In his 325 page book, *Excavations in Nazareth*, Bagatti repeatedly asserts the all-important presence of Hellenistic evidence at Nazareth. When I carefully examined his tome I discovered that his alleged Hellenistic evidence boils down to no more than a single shard. That’s right—a single shard. If this were not surprising enough, I then discovered that the shard in question is in fact the nozzle of a Roman oil lamp, as verified through studies by Nurit Feig and others (MoN 111-19). In other words, Bagatti’s claim of Hellenistic evidence at Nazareth is totally fraudulent.

Another example involves the so-called and much touted “House from the time of Jesus” excavated by Israeli archaeologist Yardenna Alexandre in the Fall of 2009. The excavation site was immediately covered over by the construction of a tourist attraction, preventing further digging and verification of Ms. Alexandre’s astonishing claims. Furthermore, the official summary of the excavation, as published by the Israel Antiquities Authority, dated the ceramics found at the site to the second century CE onwards. Not a shred of evidence from the excavation dates the structures Alexandre found to the time of “Jesus.” Finally, no report on that excavation has been published to date. Given all these untoward elements, the much-publicized claim for a house from the time of Jesus at Nazareth is entirely unsubstantiated and, as such, entirely fraudulent.

Conclusion

The foregoing shows that Nazareth archaeology presents a persistent pattern of error, internal contradiction, and outright fraud—from the mischaracterization of evidence, to the misdating of structural and movable finds to the time of Jesus (and to prior centuries), now to the possible “planting” of Hellenistic coins into an excavation at Mary’s Well. All this error and subterfuge has produced a false history of the site and is totally unacceptable to those of us seeking an understanding of Christian origins.

The only reasonable conclusion is that drawn from the published material record, and it is entirely clear: Nazareth certainly did not exist at the turn of the era.

In closing, I would like to quote from one of my articles which appeared in the January 2009 issue of *American Atheist* magazine:

We should all look with great suspicion on new evidence ‘coming to light’ which conflicts with the evidentiary profile of the last hundred years, new evidence which astonishingly reopens the case for settlement in the time of Christ. Given the revelations documented in my book, and the lengthy history of duplicity associated with Nazareth archaeology, we have every right to insist that any new evidence be rigorously documented as to findspot, circumstances of

discovery, and description (preferably accompanied by photo or diagram). Any claim of new, pre-70 CE evidence, should raise an alarum red flag. Such a claim tells us more about the persons making it than about Nazareth...

Archaeologists have been digging at Nazareth for over a hundred years and, as my book attempts to show, all the recovered finds include not a single artefact that can with certainty be dated before 100 CE. In other words, no demonstrable evidence dating either to the time of Jesus or to earlier Hellenistic times has been found. This is quite sufficient to decide the issue against the traditional view of Nazareth. The case is closed! No one, of course, is opposed to ongoing research at Nazareth, but that research will inform us about the nature of the Later Roman-Byzantine village, not about a mythical settlement at the turn of the era. That question has already been answered, and answered convincingly.

— René Salm
