

# Is Jesus' Hometown of Nazareth a Myth?

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For the past 2,000 years first-century Nazareth was unquestionably considered the historic hometown of Jesus.<sup>25</sup> The Gospels make it abundantly clear that Jesus was “of Nazareth” (John 1:45; 19:19; Mark 1:24; Luke 18:37). However, religious researcher Rene Salm has challenged the historical Nazareth in his *The Myth of Nazareth: The Invented Town of Jesus* (American Atheist Press, 2008). According to his view, ancient Nazareth did not emerge prior to AD 70, and the settlement of Nazareth did not exist earlier than the second century AD, long after Christ’s crucifixion.

To substantiate these claims, Salm appeals to, among other things, 1) late-dating Roman and Byzantine artifacts (for example, oil lamps); 2) the Gospel of Luke, which tells us that Jesus’ hometown was Capernaum, not Nazareth; 3) “problematic” biblical passages (for example, Matthew 2:23: “He went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene” [ESV]) that have no prophetic reference in the Hebrew Scriptures; and 4) the fact that Josephus and the Jewish Talmud do not mention Nazareth in their lists of Galilean cities.

However, there are several reasons why Salm’s argument against Nazareth should be rejected.

**1. Limited archaeological work has been completed in the Nazareth area** since most of the ancient city lies under the modern city of Nazareth (with a population of about 60,000). The sparseness of materials and current cumulative data should not be stretched into a theory of Nazareth’s nonexistence; the alleged absence of material data and the presence of *later* Roman and Byzantine evidence is not “contradictory” evidence that disproves Nazareth’s first-century existence. This sort of thinking displays the logical fallacy of arguing from silence. Besides, the archaeological data from excavations in the Nazareth area demonstrate that Nazareth was used up until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.\*

**2. The location of Sepphoris in relation to Nazareth is consistent with the social and economic milieu of Jesus’ day.** Sepphoris, rebuilt in 4 BC by the tetrarch of Galilee, Herod Antipas, was located about an hour’s walk from modern-day Nazareth. This is strong evidence that villages like Nazareth were set within a short distance from this major hub, implying they were not “isolated” from the rest of the Galilee. The labor force (masons and carpenters) most likely could not afford, or did not need, to live in the large, opulent cities, so they settled in nearby villages. Since Joseph and Jesus were masons/carpenters, with no indication that they were wealthy, it would make sense that they settled close by Sepphoris.

\* Nazareth archaeologist Yehudah Rapuano mentions that some Hellenistic and early Roman artifacts—sherds, a storage jar, cooking pots recovered from tombs, and lamps—found at Nazareth over past excavations “fit comfortably within the first century CE.” For example, Rapuano refers his readers to several artifacts (the Jar of Fig. 217:6; pots in Fig. 192:18,26; lamps in Fig. 192:6,15) in the record of Bellarmino Bagatti’s excavations (1969). Rapuano says, “Salm’s personal evaluation of the pottery, which he rehearses from his book *The Nazareth Myth*, reveals his lack of expertise in the area as well as his lack of serious research in the sources. By ignoring or dismissing solid ceramic, numismatic and literary evidence for Nazareth’s existence during the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman period, it would appear that the analysis which Rene Salm includes in his review, and his recent book must, in itself, be relegated to the realm of ‘myth’” (Stephen J. Pfann and Yehudah Rapuano, “On the Nazareth Village Farm Report: A Reply to Salm,” *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeology Society*, vol. 26, (2008), 107-108.

There is evidence of first-century agricultural infrastructure in Nazareth and a nearby roadway system connecting the port city of Caesarea Maritima to Tiberias.<sup>26</sup> In addition, during the summer of 2009, excavations at Nazareth revealed several first century artifacts such as a house and clay and chalk vessel remains. According to the then Israel Antiquities Authority director of excavations, Yardenna Alexandre, archaeologists have discovered the remains of a wall, a hideout, courtyard, and a water system that collected water from the roof dating to the time of Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, in 1997 and 1998, excavations at Mary's Well in Nazareth closer to the basilica, conducted by Alexandre, yielded coin evidence dating from the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods.<sup>28</sup> All of these remains imply a self-sustaining first-century community intricately connected with the rest of northern Israel.

**3. Although Salm rejects Matthew 2:23 due to its lack of specific reference among the prophetic books of the Old Testament, this conclusion is mistaken for several reasons.**

1) Matthew did not say a single prophet made the statement; rather, it was of the prophets (plural)—meaning that Matthew was not quoting any specific prophet but was instead referring to the general consensus among the prophets that Jesus would be called a “Nazarene.” The fulfillment of this title can be understood in several ways. For example, the prophets said the Messiah would be despised and rejected (Isaiah 53:3; Daniel 9:26; Zechariah 12:10) much in the way Nazareth was despised during the early first century (John 1:46; 7:41,52). 2) Though Jesus never took the vow of the Nazirite (the word is spelled differently than Nazareth), He fulfilled it by perfectly keeping the Law and separating Himself to the Lord, which was the essence of the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:2; Judges 13:5). 3) Others have indicated that the Hebrew word *netzer* (meaning “branch”) is the word from which Nazareth was named (since it sounds similar).

**4. Salm ignores the numerous independent statements in the New Testament that identify Jesus with Nazareth.** At His crucifixion Pontius Pilate placed a government-authorized sign (a *titulus*) above Jesus' head that read, “Jesus of Nazareth...” (John 19:19). It is worthy of note that the religious leaders did not dispute truthfulness of Jesus' home-town written on the placard when they petitioned Pilate to change the writing; they only challenged His claim to be “the King of the Jews” (John 19:20-22)! Also, the New Testament writers often referred to “Jesus of Nazareth” (Mark 1:24; Luke 18:37), and those among the early church were identified as the “Nazarene sect” (Acts 24:5 NIV). Moreover, even the foes of Jesus referred to His hometown as “Nazareth” (Luke 4:33-34). Never is Jesus identified with any other city; He is never called “Jesus of Caesarea,” “Jesus of Capernaum,” “Jesus of Bethlehem,” or “Jesus of Jerusalem”; only “Jesus of Nazareth.”

**5. The absence of historical notation among early literature (Josephus and the Talmud) does not prove that Nazareth is a myth.** Lack of identification does not mean lack of *existence*; it's a logical fallacy to argue from silence. There are plausible reasons why Nazareth is not found in Josephus and the Talmud's list of Galilean locations: 1) It is possible that Josephus and the Talmud omit it because the lists are not intended to be exhaustive; 2) it may be because Nazareth (due to its despised reputation and size) was such an insignificant village at the time it warranted no mention; and 3) by the time Josephus wrote his list of Galilean cities in the late first century, Nazareth may have been known by another name or may not have been occupied. What is more, Jewish religious leaders may have refrained from listing Nazareth out of disdain for Jesus and His claims to be the Messiah. None of these reasons preclude Nazareth from being the historic village of Jesus.

**6. Salm's theory forgets the fact that Old and New Testament writers always layered their narratives over real geographical locations.** Never have we discovered otherwise. It is strange hermeneutical practice to accept the historicity of the Galilee region (as Salm apparently does) but reject the existence of Nazareth, which is located within it. Nazareth and Galilee are often mentioned coupled together, in a nonmythical tone. Salm often asserts that instead of Nazareth being Jesus' hometown, the Scriptures place the home of Jesus in Capernaum. However, this notion is fraught with problems, the most crucial of them is that Salm is either unaware or simply ignores that the same grammatical coupling is associated with Capernaum as well: "Capernaum, a city of Galilee" (Luke 4:31).

**7. Several of Salm's criticisms of the pottery report of the Nazareth Village Farm excavations (for example, "double dating") have been shown to be in error** and based on misnumbered exhibits within the published report. Stephen Pfann and Yehudah Rapuano explain Salm's confusion:

The errors pointed out by Salm in the pottery report of the Nazareth Village Farm excavations were not the result of "double dating" as he supposed, but rather of misnumbering. Originally, the part of the article dealing with the pottery was prepared in a different layout. At some point before the article was sent to the editors, it underwent a change in the format, presumably for reasons of spacing and for the reader's greater convenience. The plates were reorganized and the drawings were given new numbers. In the process, some of the connections between the drawings and the text were lost or changed. In a few cases the same figure number was erroneously repeated. It is to these occurrences that Salm referred.<sup>29</sup>

Regarding the pottery and dating they maintain,

The numbering errors in the article do not, however, change the date of the pottery.<sup>30</sup>

In the "Nazareth Village Farm Report" are examples that belong to the Hellenistic period (for example, figures 40:5-8) and to the subsequent early Roman period (for example, figures 37:5 and 7). The dates for parallels of the pottery of Roman period Galilee are usually expressed according to a range reflecting the time period that the forms were in production and use. The early Roman period is usually considered to date from the mid first century BC to the first half of the second century AD. Pfann and Rapuano conclude, notably,

While early Roman sherds were found in different parts of the site, we noted that the pottery forms in Area 1, Locus/Layer 2, as a group fit comfortably within the first century CE.<sup>31</sup>

**8. Salm's theory favors the interpretations of liberal biblical scholarship without questioning their philosophical assumptions or methodology;** nor does his theory seriously interact with conservative evangelical scholarship on the matter. Most notable is his unwarranted rejection of the reliability of the biblical text. There is simply no reason to reject the integrity of the Gospel records, which, as seen throughout this book, are supported by credible eyewitnesses and thousands of early manuscripts.<sup>32</sup>

## NOTES:

25. This section is adapted from Joseph M. Holden, "Is Jesus' Hometown (Nazareth) a Myth?" (© Joseph M. Holden, 2012. All rights reserved), <http://normangeisler.net/articles/Bible/Reliability/2012-IsNazarethAMyth.htm>, accessed June 20, 2012.
26. Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 13-14. See also Bellarmino Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth: Vol. 1, From the Beginning till the XII Century*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1969), 174-218.
27. "First Jesus-era house discovered in Nazareth," CBC News (Technology & Science), December 22, 2009, [www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2009/12/22/tech-archeology-nazareth.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2009/12/22/tech-archeology-nazareth.html), accessed on September 5, 2012.
28. Stephen J. Pfann and Yehudah Rapuano, "On the Nazareth Village Farm Report: A Reply to Salm," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeology Society*, vol. 26 (2008), 106.
29. Pfann and Rapuano, "On the Nazareth Village Farm Report."
30. Pfann and Rapuano, "On the Nazareth Village Farm Report."
31. Pfann and Rapuano, "On the Nazareth Village Farm Report," 107-108. Salm has charged that there are "substantial different claims" between a surface survey report (1997) and Pfann and Rapuano's report. However, these charges have been answered in the above cited work (see pages 105-106). Also see criticisms of Salm's work in Ken Dark, "Nazareth Village Farm: A Reply to Salm" in *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeology Society*, vol. 26 (2008), 109-111.
32. For an archaeological refutation of several of Salm's ideas present in liberal scholarship, including the notion that there were no synagogues in Israel (or in particular Galilee) prior to AD 70, see Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012). For textual reliability see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Transmission of the New Testament Text: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1992); Norman Geisler and William E. Nix, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2012); and Joseph Holden and Norman Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013); Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).