

One question I repeatedly get asked is about my opinion on whether the town of Nazareth actually existed. I was puzzled when I started getting emails on this, some years ago now. What I came to realize is that mythicists (i.e., those who think that there never was a man Jesus; he was invented, a “myth”) commonly argue that Nazareth (like Jesus) was completely made up. I still get the emails today - a couple within the past month. I tried to deal with this issue at length in my book Did Jesus Exist? But since I get asked the question still, apparently by people who haven’t read my book (!) - I thought I would repeat some of what I say there. Here is an excerpt on the issue:

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One supposedly legendary feature of the Gospels commonly discussed by mythicists is that the alleged hometown of Jesus, Nazareth did not exist but is itself a myth. The logic of this argument, which is sometimes advanced with considerable vehemence and force, appears to be that if Christians made up Jesus’ hometown, they probably made him up as well. I could dispose of this argument fairly easily by pointing out that it is irrelevant. If Jesus existed, as the evidence suggests, but Nazareth did not, as this assertion claims, then he merely came from somewhere else. Whether Barack Obama was born in the U.S. or not (for what it is worth, he was) is irrelevant to the question of whether he was born.

Since, however, this argument is so widely favored among mythicists, I want to give it a further look and deeper exploration. The most recent critic to dispute the existence of Nazareth is René Salm, who has devoted an entire book to the question, called The Myth of Nazareth. Salm sees this issue as highly significant and relevant to the question of the historicity of Jesus: “Upon that determination [i.e., the existence of Nazareth] depends a great deal, perhaps even the entire edifice of Christendom.” Like so many mythicists before him, Salm emphasizes what scholars have long known: Nazareth is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, in the writings of Josephus, or in the Talmud. It first shows up in the Gospels. Salm is also impressed by the fact that the early generations of Christians did not seek out the place, but rather ignored it and seemed not to know where it was (this is actually hard to show; how would we know this about “every” early Christian, unless all of them left us writings and told us everything they knew and did?).

Salm’s basic argument is that Nazareth did exist in more ancient times and through the Bronze Age. But then there was a hiatus. It ceased to exist and did not exist in Jesus’ day. Based on archaeological evidence, especially the tombs found in the area, Salm claims that the town came to be re-inhabited sometime between the two Jewish revolts (i.e., between 70 CE and 132 CE), as Jews who resettled following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans relocated in northern climes.

Salm himself is not an archaeologist: he is not trained in the highly technical field of archaeology and gives no indication that he has even ever been on an archaeological dig. He certainly never has worked at the site of Nazareth. Still, he bases almost his entire case on archaeological reports about the town of Nazareth. In particular he is impressed by the fact that the kind of rock-cut tombs that have been uncovered there - called kokh tombs, otherwise known as locula tombs - were not in use in Galilee the middle of the first century and thus do not date to the days of Jesus. And so the town did not exist then.

This is a highly problematic claim, to start with. It is hard to understand why tombs in Nazareth that can be dated to the days after Jesus indicate that there was no town there during the days of Jesus. That is to say, just because later habitation can be established in

Nazareth, how does that show that the town was not inhabited earlier? Moreover, Salm fails to stress one of the most important points about this special kind of rock-cut tombs: they were expensive to make, and only the most wealthy of families could afford them. There is nothing in any of our records to suggest that Nazareth had any wealthy families in the days of Jesus. And so no one in town would have been able to purchase a kokh tomb. So what does the fact that none were found from the days of Jesus indicate? Precisely nothing. The tombs that poor people used in Palestine were shallow graves, not built into rock, like kokh tombs. These poor-person graves almost never survive for archaeologists to find.

I should also point out that these kokh tombs from later times were discovered on the hillside of the traditional site of Nazareth. Salm, however, claims that the hillside would have been uninhabitable in Jesus' day, so that, in his opinion, the village that eventually came into existence (in the years after 70 CE) would have been located on the valley floor, less than a kilometer away. He also points out that archaeologists have never dug at that site.

This view creates insurmountable problems for his thesis. For one thing there is the simple question of logic. If archaeologists have not dug where Salm thinks the village was located, what is his basis for saying that it did not exist in the days of Jesus? This is a major flaw: using forceful rhetoric, almost to the point of indiscretion, Salm insists that anyone who thinks that Nazareth exists has to argue "against the available material evidence." But what material evidence can there be, if the site where the evidence would exist has never been excavated? And what evidence, exactly, is being argued against, if none has been turned up?

There is an even bigger problem however. There are numerous compelling pieces of archaeological evidence that in fact Nazareth did exist in Jesus' day, and that like other villages and towns in that part of Galilee, it was built on the hillside, near where the later rock-cut kokh tombs were built. For one thing, archaeologists have excavated a farm connected with the village, and it dates to the time of Jesus. Salm disputes the finding of the archaeologists who did the excavation (it needs to be remembered, he himself is not an archaeologist but is simply basing his views on what the real archaeologists - all of whom disagree with him - have to say). For one thing, when archaeologist Yardena Alexandre indicated that 165 coins were found in this excavation, she specified in the report that some of them were late, from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. This suits Salm's purposes just fine. But as it turns out, there were among the coins some that date to the Hellenistic, Hasmonean, and early Roman period, that is, the days of Jesus. Salm objected that this was not in Alexandre's report, but Alexandre has verbally confirmed (to me personally) that in fact it is the case: there were coins in the collection that date to the time prior to the Jewish uprising.

Salm also claims that the pottery found on the site that is dated to the time of Jesus is not really from this period, even though he is not an expert on pottery. Two archaeologists who reply to Salm's protestations say the following: "Salm's personal evaluation of the pottery ... reveals his lack of expertise in the area as well as his lack of serious research in the sources." They go on to state: "By ignoring or dismissing solid ceramic, numismatic [that is, coins], and literary evidence for Nazareth's existence during the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman period, it would appear that the analysis which René Salm includes in his review, and his recent book must, in itself, be relegated to the realm of 'myth.'"

Another archaeologist who specializes in Galilee, Ken Dark, the Director of the Nazareth

Archaeological Project, gave a thoroughly negative review of Salm's book, noting, among other things, that "there is no hint that Salm has qualifications - nor any fieldwork experience - in archaeology." Dark shows that Salm has misunderstood both the hydrology (how the water systems worked) and the topography (the lay out) of Nazareth, and points out that the town could well have been located on the hill slopes, just as other nearby towns were, such as Khirbet Kana. His concluding remarks are damning: "To conclude: despite initial appearances this is not a well-informed study and ignores much evidence and important published work of direct relevance. The basic premise is faulty, and Salm's reasoning is often weak and shaped by his preconceptions. Overall, his central argument is archaeologically unsupportable."

But there is more. As it turns out, another discovery was made in ancient Nazareth, a year after Salm's book appeared. It is a house that dates to the days of Jesus. Again the principal archaeologist was Yardena Alexandre, the excavations director at the Israel Antiquity Authority, whom I again wrote. She has confirmed the news report. The house is located on the hill slopes. Pottery remains connected to the house range from roughly 100 BCE to 100 CE (i.e., the days of Jesus). There is nothing in the house to suggest that the persons inhabiting it over this time had any wealth: there is no glass and no imported products. The vessels are made of clay and chalk.

The AP story concludes that "the dwelling and older discoveries of nearby tombs in burial caves suggest that Nazareth was an out-of-the-way hamlet of around 50 houses on a patch of about four acres... populated by Jews of modest means." No wonder this place is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, Josephus, or the Talmud. It was far too small, poor, and insignificant. Most people had never heard of it and those who had heard didn't care. Even though it existed, this is not the place someone would make up as the hometown of the messiah. Jesus really came from there, as attested in multiple sources.



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