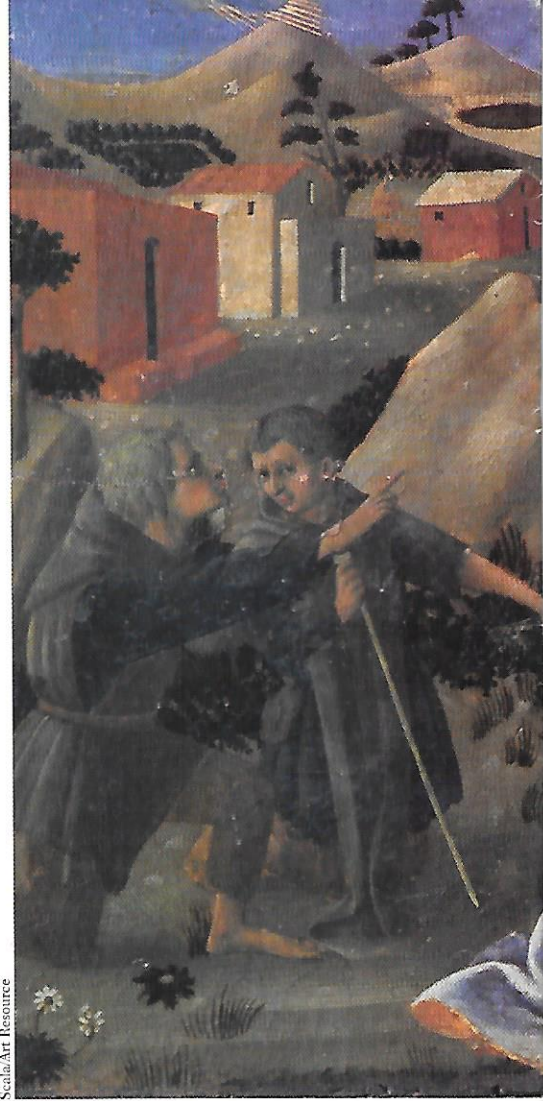


Where Was Jesus Born?

Theologians question biblical accounts of the Nativity.
Now archaeologists are doing the same.



by AVIRAM OSHRI

THE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM in the West Bank, some six miles south of Jerusalem, is revered by millions as the birthplace of Jesus. According to the New Testament account of the apostle Matthew, Joseph and Mary were living in Bethlehem in the southern region of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth and later moved to Nazareth in the northern Galilee region. In the more popular account of the apostle Luke, Joseph and a very pregnant Mary traveled more than 90 miles from their residence in Nazareth to Joseph's Judean hometown of Bethlehem to be counted in a Roman census. Regardless of the variation, both apostles agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, the city where King David had been born a thousand years earlier. The Christian Messiah could thereby be considered a descendant of the House of David—a requirement for followers of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

But while Luke and Matthew describe Bethlehem in Judea as the birthplace of Jesus, "Menorah," the vast database of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), describes Bethlehem as an "ancient site" with Iron Age material and the fourth-century Church of the Nativity and associated Byzantine and medieval buildings. But there is a complete absence of information for antiquities from the Herodian period—that is, from the time around the birth of Jesus.

During the earliest excavations of the church, carried out by the Antiquities Department of the British Mandate in Palestine in the mid-1930s, archaeologists found a mosaic floor dating to the sixth century A.D., and below that, the remains of a church from the reign of Constantine in the first half of the fourth century A.D. Artifacts from the Middle Ages were recovered from trenches six feet deep in the church courtyard. Excavations in the 1920s revealed a Late Roman lead coffin and



Byzantine Christian graves. Following the Six-Day War in 1967, surveys in Bethlehem showed plenty of Iron Age pottery, but excavations by several Israeli archaeologists revealed no artifacts at all from the Early Roman or Herodian periods. In fact, with the single exception of a 50-year-old Jordanian publication that mentions Herodian pottery sherds found in a corner of the church, there is surprisingly no archaeological evidence that ties Bethlehem in Judea to the period in which Jesus would have been born. Furthermore, in this time the aqueduct from Solomon's Pools to Jerusalem ran through the area of Bethlehem. This fact strengthens the likelihood of an absence of settlement at the site, as, according to the Roman architect Vitruvius, no aqueduct passes through the heart of a city. Only about a half-mile outside Bethlehem in Judea have some Herodian-period remains been found, and it may be possible that people had resettled elsewhere nearby during this time.

I had never before questioned the assumption that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. But in the early 1990s, as an archaeologist working for the IAA, I was contracted to perform some salvage excavations around building and infrastructure projects in a small rural community in the Galilee. When I started work, some of the people who lived around the site told me how Jesus was really born there, not in the

Many Christians accept the story of Jesus' birth in a manger in Bethlehem in Judea. But what if there was no Bethlehem in Judea at the time of Jesus' birth?

south. Intrigued, I researched the archaeological evidence for Bethlehem in Judea at the time of Jesus and found nothing. This was very surprising, as Herodian remains should be the first thing one should find. What was even more surprising is what archaeologists had already uncovered and what I was to discover over the next 11 years of excavation at the small rural site—Bethlehem of Galilee.

BETHLEHEM OF GALILEE is mentioned for the first time in Joshua 19:14, as one of the towns allotted to the tribe of Zebulun. Its name is recorded again in a list of priest guardians who moved to the Galilee after the destruction of the Second Temple, and again by Eusebius, who notes there are two Bethlehems: one in "the Zebulun region" and one in Judea. Today, the 200-household community, some four miles west of Nazareth, is a quiet agricultural center that also attracts tourists with its bed-and-breakfasts and holistic spas.

Religious scholars had long questioned whether the Bible's only Nativity narratives set in Bethlehem in Judea were a deliberate attempt by Matthew and Luke to associate Jesus with the House of David and reinforce his status as Messiah among the early Jewish convert communities. Indeed, there is a passage in John (7:41–43) in which Jesus' legitimacy is questioned because he is from the Galilee and not Judea. But the generally accepted alternative to Bethlehem of Judea was the town in which Jesus grew up—Nazareth. Scholars only began to write about the possibility of Bethlehem of Galilee being the birthplace of Jesus in the late nineteenth century (see further reading at www.archaeology.org).



Between 1992 and 2003, I carried out five salvage excavations in Bethlehem of Galilee. The ancient ruins cover 37 acres immediately west of the modern settlement, and a small portion still contains standing remains. A nineteenth-century survey of the Galilee describes two ruins at this site, a synagogue and church. The synagogue has not been identified, but it has been tentatively located in an unexcavated area. The church was first exposed in 1965, when a road from Nazareth to Bethlehem was built, destroying the main hall and revealing sixth-century mosaic floors decorated with medallions of vines with figures of animals and plant motifs.

We know that Bethlehem of Galilee was a bustling center of Jewish life around the time of Jesus' birth. Among the archaeological evidence we have for this is a workshop that made stone vessels used for Jewish purification rituals, which are otherwise a very rare find in the Galilee in this period. There are also the remains of a Herodian-period residential area with ceramic and stone vessels that would have been used by a Jewish population.

When I first arrived at Bethlehem of Galilee in 1992 and saw the ruins, I didn't think that there was much left to find. But soon I discovered the church's baptismal font as well as more mosaic floor remains from the church, indicating a structure 145 feet long and between 80 and 100 feet wide. This makes it among the largest Byzantine churches in Israel and raises the question of why such a huge house of Christian worship was built in the heart of a Jewish area.

Floor mosaics from the church in Bethlehem of Galilee—one of the largest Byzantine churches in Israel—feature animals entwined with vines.

During that same year, my team found another building from the same period just northeast of the church containing an oil press, an underground vault with candles bearing cross decorations, and an abundance of pig bones. On the basis of these and many other findings, we identified the building as a monastery. Five years later, excavations near the monastery revealed the remains of a large public building, possibly a hotel or inn, with horse troughs on the ground floor and well-appointed facilities on the second floor, which included a lavish mosaic floor. All three buildings—the church, monastery, and inn—appear to have been violently destroyed during the Persian invasion of the Holy Land in the early seventh century A.D.

Over the years, segments of a three-foot-thick fortification wall with ramparts and towers have been discovered by myself and others around Bethlehem of Galilee. Ceramic evidence dates the wall to the sixth–seventh century A.D., before the Persian invasion. If this is a Byzantine-era fortification, its



meaning is significant. At this time, Bethlehem of Galilee was not a large or significant city, and the fact that it was fortified shows that its existence was in danger. Jews had been expelled from Jerusalem from the second century A.D. to the end of the Byzantine period, but we know from contemporary accounts that the population in the Galilee during this time was overwhelmingly Jewish. Is it possible that, because of the hostility the Jews had toward Christians in this period, the residents of Bethlehem of Galilee fortified the site which they held to be the birthplace of the Christian Messiah?

Texts from the Middle Ages describe an Eastern Christian community living in Bethlehem of Galilee, and we have archaeological evidence that agrees with this. It is unclear what, if any, Christian population resided in Bethlehem of Galilee during the Ottoman period, but at the beginning of the twentieth century, a group of missionaries from a German organization known as the Temple Society settled in Bethlehem of Galilee. Although there is no recorded reason for their settlement, it is widely believed that the religious order chose this Bethlehem because they identified it with the site of the birth of Jesus. They were eventually exiled to Australia because they supported the Nazis in World War II.

Today, the residents of Bethlehem of Galilee make a comfortable living through agriculture and tourism and are quite happy to leave the crowds of religious pilgrims to Bethlehem in Judea. One man in town grows Christmas trees for Christians living in nearby Nazareth. My government-funded salvage excavations are over, but I am trying to find support to continue the project, as there is still so much left at the site to discover and understand.

If the historical Jesus were truly born in Bethlehem, it was most likely the Bethlehem of Galilee, not that in Judea. The archaeological evidence certainly seems to favor the former, a busy center a few miles from the home of Joseph and Mary, as opposed to an unpopulated spot almost a hundred miles from home. At the very least, it is an improbable trip for a pregnant woman to have made on a donkey. ■

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While the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in Judea, above, is venerated by millions of faithful, the once-enormous church in Bethlehem of Galilee is today a forgotten ruin. Both were first built during the reign of Constantine (early 4th century A.D.)

