

# NAZARETH

**Introduction.** Nazareth was located between Mount Carmel and Mount Tabor, about fifteen miles west of the Sea of Galilee. Josephus did not mention Nazareth among forty-five towns that he named in Galilee, although he was responsible for the military operations in that area. The Talmud does not mention Nazareth either, even though it names sixty-three towns. Indeed, Nazareth was considered insignificant. The population is estimated to have been about 400 people, as it was a poor Jewish settlement. When Nathanael heard that Jesus the Messiah was from that village, he exclaimed, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (Jn. 1:45-46).

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, which had been the home of Mary and Joseph prior to their marriage (Lk. 1:26-27; 2:4, 5). After the couple had traveled to Bethlehem for the census, Mary gave birth to the Messiah—just as Micah had prophesied (Mic. 5:2). Then Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled to Egypt, escaping the wrath of Herod the Great. When Herod died, the family returned to Israel. However, they did not go back to Bethlehem in Judea, because Herod Archelaus was reigning over the region, and he had the same demeanor as his father. Instead, they returned to Nazareth in Galilee, which was ruled by Herod Antipas (Mt. 1:18—2:23; Lk. 2:39).

In the New Testament, “Nazareth” most often occurs in designations for Jesus. In Greek, he is referred to as “the one from Nazareth” (Mt. 21:11; Jn. 1:45; Acts 10:38) and “the Nazarene” (Mk. 1:24). Outside the Scriptures, “Nazareth” does appear on an inscription found near a Jewish synagogue in Caesarea Maritima. It relates to the twenty-four priestly courses, and line two has the word *ntsrth* (Finegan, 46).

Archaeological excavations in Nazareth have brought to light installations common to the period: silos for grain storage, cisterns to hold water, olive presses, millstones for grinding grain, wine presses, and *miqwaoth* for ritual cleansing. Christian graffiti has also been discovered. In one case, the Greek name for “Jesus” (*Iesous*) is abbreviated by the first two letters.

**Church of the Annunciation.** During the middle of the fourth century A.D., the Church of the Annunciation may have been commissioned by the emperor Constantine. Some suggest that it was built by a man named Joseph, a Jew who had converted to Christianity; he was commissioned to erect a number of church buildings in Galilee. Others believe that Conon, a deacon in Jerusalem, was somehow responsible for the construction in the fifth century A.D. A mosaic in the basilica has been found which reads, “Gift of Conon, deacon of Jerusalem.” This Byzantine building was later replaced in the Crusader period. Then, in 1730, a new structure was erected. It was replaced with a modern building that was dedicated in 1969.

There are two levels within the Church of the Annunciation: the upper area serves as a Roman Catholic parish, while the lower section centers around the grotto of the annunciation.



Church of the Annunciation

Top Figures: Angel Gabriel and Virgin Mary

Bottom Figures: Four Gospel Writers

According to tradition, this latter location was the home of Mary as well as the site where the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary (Lk. 1:26–38). An altar is found there with the Latin inscription *Verbum Caro Hic Factum Est* (“Here the Word was made flesh”). These words were borrowed from John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”



Altar with Inscription Reading  
*Verbum Caro Hic Factum Est*

Several archaeological excavations surround the Church of the Annunciation. These reveal evidence of the earlier basilicas and of the Roman-era village. A small cave is located underneath the north aisle, and located underneath the nave of the church building is a Jewish ritual bath (*miqweh*). A mosaic of a large cross within a wreath is also found there, where the Greek letter *rho* is connected to the equal-armed cross, forming a *chi-rho* monogram (the first two letters of “Christ” in Greek).



Archaeological  
Excavations

***The Church of St. Gabriel.*** The Greek Orthodox have a different tradition concerning where the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, announcing the coming birth of Jesus. They have built a basilica over a spring that fed Mary's well, which is located nearby. The tradition is that Gabriel appeared to Mary when she went to get some water.



Mary's Well

***The Synagogue Church.*** Arising during the Babylonian Exile and the Post-exilic period, synagogues were the religious, social, and cultural centers for Jewish communities in Israel and the Diaspora. The term "synagogue" originally referred to a gathering of people, but eventually it was used for the building where the group met. (The term "church" has undergone a similar metamorphosis; in the New Testament, it means "assembly," but many today use it to refer to the building where the assembly gathers.)

After Jesus grew up and began his ministry, he returned to his hometown of Nazareth to instruct the people. On the Sabbath, he began to teach them in their synagogue (Lk. 4:16-30). Opening the scroll of Isaiah, he read this passage: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19; see Is. 61:1-2). After he read those words from the scroll of Isaiah, he said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk. 4:21). The people were shocked; they did not believe what Jesus had said.

Today in Nazareth there is a building named “The Synagogue Church,” and many believe that this is the same place where the story of Luke 4 took place. The Synagogue Church was built in the twelfth century by the Crusaders. The church was under the control of the Franciscans until the eighteenth century, when it was passed to the Greek Orthodox.

Synagogues were used as a school for Jewish children. These children learned how to recite the Shema and were taught many memory Scriptures from the Hebrew Bible. If the Synagogue Church is the authentic site for the first century synagogue, then it was the place where Jesus spent a lot of time learning—what many scholars have called his “silent years.” The Nazareth synagogue that Jesus attended was probably destroyed in the Jewish War (A.D. 66-70). However, it would have been rebuilt in later times.

The Synagogue Church is located in the middle of Nazareth, near the Church of the Annunciation. It is a simple hall with no special architectural features. Christians have frequently visited this site since the sixth century.



The Synagogue Church

***The Church of St. Joseph.*** This structure was built near or over the traditional site of Joseph’s workshop. It is constructed over a Crusader church building from the thirteenth century.

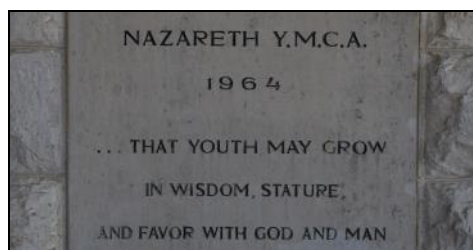
**Mount Precipice.** Mount Precipice is located just south of Nazareth in northern Israel. The word “precipice” means “a very steep cliff.” At 1,300 feet above sea level, the name is appropriate to this place for its panoramic view of the Jezreel Valley and the surrounding mountains, including Mount Tabor. From Mount Precipice, one has a marvelous view of Nazareth, which is built on a hill facing it. At the top of Mount Precipice is the Three Faiths Lookout where a path leads to a paved area with a large stone, an olive tree, and a sign that tells the story of the mountain in Hebrew, Arabic, and English.

Catholic tradition identifies Mount Precipice as the place where the angry Jews of Nazareth took Jesus in order to throw him down the cliff after he had, in essence, declared himself to be Messiah in a sermon in the synagogue (Lk. 4:16-30; see Mt. 13:54-58). The Bible says that Jesus “walked right through the crowd and went on his way” (Lk. 4:30). However, this site is questioned by many scholars because, according to Luke’s narrative, ancient Nazareth was built on the same hill from which the Jews attempted to throw Jesus (Lk. 4:29). Instead, some identify “the brow of the hill” with the northern slopes of ancient Nazareth, where several church buildings are found today.

Mount Precipice is also known as “The Leaping Mountain” because, according to tradition, Jesus jumped from the mountain at the last minute and disappeared to escape the angry Jews who wanted to kill him. The Arabic name for Mount Precipice is Jebel Qafzeh, which means “Mount of the Leaping.” One tradition says that Jesus leaped from Mount Precipice and landed on Mount Tabor, about five miles away. Such traditions are fanciful and have no grounding in Scripture.

In preparation for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Mount Precipice in 2009, an amphitheater seating 40,000 people was built on its northern slope. Just north of Mount Precipice is the Church of Our Lady of the Fright. Tradition says this is the spot where Mary stood and watched in horror as her son Jesus was led to the edge of the cliff to be killed by the angry Jews.

**Nazareth Village.** The Nazareth Village is an attempt to recreate the first-century setting of Nazareth. Stations of interest include a watchman’s tower, a wine press, a sheep pen, an olive press, a carpenter’s shop, a weaver’s shop, and a synagogue. The village is located at the Nazareth Y.M.C.A.





Watchman's Tower



Lower Vat Where Wine Was Bottled  
Channel Where Juice Flowed  
Wine Press Where Grapes Were Trodden



Threshing Sledge and Winnowing Fork for Processing Grain



A Shepherd and His Sheep





Olives were taken from the trees and then placed in a mill, which was turned by a donkey or a person. The crushed olives were put in a basket, and then they were further pressed by means of a beam with stone weights, producing olive oil.





Furniture and Farming Implements



Carpenter Operating a Drill

Hammers, Basalt Rock, and Sander





“She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. . . .  
In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle  
with her fingers” (Prov. 31:13, 19).

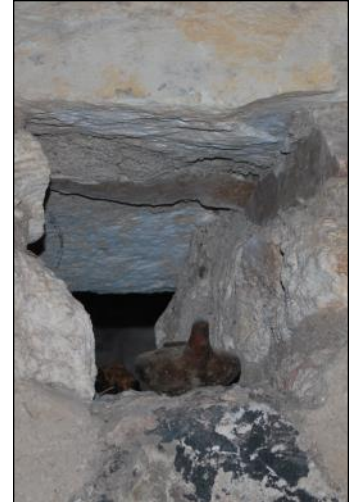


Synagogue Replica  
(with Benches Around the Outside Wall  
and Scroll with Oil Lamps)





“Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house” (Mt. 5:15).



**Modern Nazareth.** Modern Nazareth has a population of nearly 80,000. Most of the people who live there are Arabs; it is known as the “the Arab capital of Israel.” About 1/3 consider themselves Christians, whereas 2/3 are Muslims. Many Christians have left due to Muslim persecution. A Muslim sign next to Mary’s Well (below) speaks against Jesus, claiming that he was only a man like Adam. The implication is that he was not the divine Son of God. This blasphemous sign brings to mind Jesus’ statement: “Only in his hometown . . . is a prophet without honor” (Mt. 13:57).

