

---

# The search for the real Bethlehem

By Jonathan Cook in Bethlehem HaGalilit

Monday 20 December 2004

For centuries Christians around the world have accepted the Nativity story at face value - that Jesus was born in a stable in the little town of Bethlehem.

But a growing number of Bible scholars and archaeologists are rocking the foundations of Christian faith by suggesting they have identified a different birthplace for Jesus.

They claim to have amassed a considerable body of evidence for their theory but say Church leaders are in no mood to listen.

The traditional account of the Nativity, contained in Matthew's Gospel, is that Joseph and a pregnant Mary travelled 150km south from their home in Nazareth in the Galilee to the town of Bethlehem, close to Jerusalem, to participate in a census ordered by the Romans. It was there that Jesus was born.

That is the Nativity story that will be read out in churches, acted out in school plays and sung in hymns - and which will attract crowds of pilgrims to celebrations in the Church of the Nativity in the Palestinian town of Bethlehem later in the week.

## **Matthew's gospel**

For some time, however, critics have observed that Matthew's account of the Nativity is far from plausible.

"Basic medical knowledge tells you that a heavily pregnant woman could not ride a donkey that kind of distance without losing her baby," Aviram Oshri, a senior archaeologist with the Israeli Antiquities Authority, says.

Unconvinced by the Nativity story, several Biblical scholars have suggested that a more probable story is that Jesus was born in Nazareth, the city in which he spent most of his life.

But Oshri and others are proposing an alternative place for Jesus' birth. They say the evidence points to a village a few miles west of Nazareth which also goes by the name of Bethlehem.

To distinguish it from its more famous namesake, the village in northern Israel is usually referred to as Bethlehem of the Galilee, or in Hebrew as Bethlehem HaGalilit.

## **Archaeological finds**

Today Bethlehem HaGalilit is without any visible Christian presence: No churches are in evidence and its old stone homes are all occupied by Jews, mainly descendants of those who fled or died in the Holocaust.

Bethlehem's only Christmas connection, says Yosef Yeger, the owner of a local hotel and restaurant, is a small private forest of Christmas trees he grows for sale to Christian Arabs in towns such as neighbouring Nazareth.

But according to a leading American scholar and priest, Bruce Chilton, the appearance of the Galilean Bethlehem is deceptive: It has had an intimate connection to Christianity since the time of Jesus' birth.

## **Roman remains**

In his book *Rabbi Jesus*, he suggests that Matthew did not entirely fabricate the Nativity story - he simply chose to switch Bethlehems.

On this view, Joseph - originally from the Galilean Bethlehem - met Mary while working on construction sites in Nazareth or at the nearby Roman palace of Sephoris, where it is often suggested Mary grew up.

As the date of the birth approached, the couple made a far easier journey than the one recounted in the Bible - they rode the few miles from their Nazareth home to Joseph's family in Bethlehem in time for the birth.

But why did Matthew, writing several decades after Jesus' death, confuse the Bethlehems?

The reason, surmises Chilton, is that Matthew wanted to create an early piece of Christian propoganda to win Jewish converts.

Bethlehem near Jerusalem is mentioned as the hometown of King David. Matthew, knowing that the Old Testament says the Messiah will come from the House of David, hoped to establish a credible link between Jesus and King David through the figure of Joseph.

## **Quest for debate**

Chilton is scathing about the lack of serious academic debate on this issue. "Rather than take sides in this stark controversy, modern scholarship has left the circumstances of Jesus' birth in a haze of doubt," he says.

Chilton's theory, however, has started to gain increasing support from recent archaeological finds in Bethlehem HaGalilit.

Excavations finished only last year have unearthed the remains of a large church and monastery from the Byzantine period, built about 500 years after Jesus' death.

"There is no doubt in my mind that these are impressive and important evidence of a strong Christian community established in Bethlehem a short time after Jesus' death," Oshri, of the Israeli Antiquities Authority, says.

An ancient mosaic floor he dug up several years ago in Bethlehem HaGalilit is now on show in Israel's new international airport terminal near Tel Aviv, but otherwise his findings have gone largely unnoticed both inside and outside Israel.

## **Deaf ears**

Oshri is in no doubt that the sites he has revealed are Christian: At the one he believes to be a monastery, he found oil lamps with crosses on them and many pig bones.

He also excavated a large fortified wall surrounding the village of a kind more commonly found around cities, suggesting that its inhabitants regarded the protection of their community as an unusually high priority.

"To put it simply, this community did not want to budge," said Oshri. "For a village, they were investing lots of money in public and religious buildings and in fortifications."

Oshri believes there are other important finds to be made which will reveal more about the story of the "other Bethlehem" but for the moment he has run out of funds to dig.

Instead the site has been filled in with earth to protect it.

### **Loose ends**

Oshri finds the idea that the Bethlehem near Jerusalem was the birthplace of Jesus entirely unconvincing. "There is a complete lack of evidence - archaeological or otherwise.

"How did Joseph and Mary meet if he was from Bethlehem and she was from Sephoris? The living patterns of the time make it almost impossible that they could ever have come across each other."

He also points out that several major excavations were conducted in the Bethlehem near Jerusalem but no evidence was found there of habitation at the time of Jesus. All the remains were from many centuries earlier or several centuries later.

"In contrast there is lots of evidence from excavations in Bethlehem HaGalilit that a community was well-established there at the time of Jesus."

## **Economic pressures**

But he warns that, whatever the evidence in the Galilee, a revolution in common perceptions of the Nativity is still a long way off. "Business interests are too important. After all this time, the churches do not have a strong interest in changing the nativity story."

Yeger, who privately admits that he too believes Bethlehem HaGalilit is the birthplace of Jesus, says nonetheless it is not worth making it an issue.

"Do we really need need a fight on our hands with the Vatican? Let the other Bethlehem have the glory."