

## “O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM ... (OF GALILEE)”<sup>1</sup>

### I. INTRODUCTION

Composed by Phillips Brooks in 1867 and scored by Lewis H. Redner in 1868 [the “St. Louis” version], “O Little Town of Bethlehem” has become one of the most popular and familiar Christmas carols. Its subject, the city of Bethlehem (of Judea), venerated by Christians as the birthplace of Jesus, the Messiah of Christianity, is located about six miles (approximately 10 kilometers) south of Jerusalem and about 70 miles (approximately 110 kilometers) south of Nazareth. The belief that Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus has its origin in a verse from the Christian “Old Testament”, claimed to be a “messianic prophecy” that was fulfilled by Jesus, as described in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

Two distinct geographical places named בֵּית לֶחֶם (*BEIT LEHEM*), **Bethlehem**, are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible: One, the familiar city that is located in the territory of the Tribe of Judah, is referenced on 40 occasions. The other, a more obscure one referenced only once (as one of the 12 named cities in the territory of the Tribe of Zebulun), is located in the lower Galilee some four miles (approximately 7 kilometers) northwest of Nazareth.<sup>3</sup>

**Joshua 19:15 - And Kattath, and Nahallal, and Shimron, and Idalah, and Bethlehem; twelve cities with their villages.**

While the predominant belief among Christians is that Bethlehem (of Judea) is the birthplace of Jesus, the existence of these two cities that bear the same Hebrew name בֵּית לֶחֶם – the one in Judea near Jerusalem, and the other in the Galilee near Nazareth – combined with two different birth narratives in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel Luke along with a somewhat odd account in the Gospel of

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<sup>1</sup> Transliterations of Hebrew terminology into the Latin alphabet will follow these guidelines:

- Transliterated terminology is shown in ***bold italicized*** font
- The accented syllable in transliterated terminology is shown in **SMALL CAPS** font
- Latin vowel-sounds, A – E – I – O – U, are used (not the English versions thereof!)
- Distinct Hebrew letter that have ambiguous Latin letter sounds are transliterated according to the following rules:
  - A vocalized letter א is transliterated as the equivalent Latin vowel
  - A vocalized letter י is transliterated as the equivalent Latin vowel with an added underscore
  - The letter ה is transliterated as “**h**”
  - The letter ח is transliterated as “ch”
  - The letter כ is transliterated as “k”
  - The letter ק is transliterated as “q”
  - A vocalized **SHVA** (וְ נִיּוּן) is transliterated as a superscripted “e” following the consonant
  - There is no “doubling” of letters in the transliterations to reflect the **dagesh** (emphasis)

<sup>2</sup> The alleged “proof text”, Micah 5:1[2 in Christian bibles], was analyzed in the essay [Micah 5:1\[2\] - Bethlehem: The Messiah’s Birthplace?](http://thejewishhome.org/counter/Micah5_1.pdf) – [http://thejewishhome.org/counter/Micah5\\_1.pdf](http://thejewishhome.org/counter/Micah5_1.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A for a map that shows the locations of Bethlehem of Galilee, Nazareth, and Bethlehem of Judea.

John, has led several scholars, as far back as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era, to suggest the possibility that Bethlehem (of Galilee) is the more likely place where Jesus was born.<sup>4</sup> However, without the benefit of physical evidence to support this idea, such as data from archaeological excavations, this remained just a theory for well over 100 years.

The significant status of Bethlehem of Judea has motivated extensive archeological exploration of it and the surrounding area throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while its lesser known namesake, Bethlehem (of Galilee), was essentially ignored until recent times, when Aviram Oshri, a senior archaeologist with the Israeli Antiquities Authority, and his team conducted archaeological salvage excavations in and around Bethlehem (of Galilee) from 1992 to 2003. Oshri first reported on his work in late 2004 at a conference held in Israel,<sup>5</sup> and a year later published a full account of his findings in the journal *Archaeology*.<sup>6</sup>

In this essay, the available evidence from the archaeological excavations at both Bethlehem of Judea and Bethlehem of Galilee is reviewed vis-à-vis the accounts found in the New Testament.

## II. RELEVANT ACCOUNTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

As noted above, the New Testament includes two accounts of the birth of Jesus – one in the Gospel of Matthew and the other in the Gospel of Luke – both of which place this event in Bethlehem of Judea, which, according to Christian belief, is a prerequisite for being the Messiah. The Gospel of John contains a passage that describes a division of opinions among the people of the land at the time of Jesus concerning his place of birth.

### A. The Nativity (& related events) according to the Gospel of Matthew

According to the account in the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph and Mary lived in Bethlehem of Judea when Jesus was born:

**Matthew 2:1-6(KJV) - Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, (2) Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. (3) When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. (4) And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. (5) And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by**

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus – An Intimate Biography*, pp. 7-9, 294, An Image Book by Doubleday (2002). Another view, prevalent among academics, exemplified by John P. Meier of the University of Notre Dame., questions the belief that Bethlehem of Judea is the birthplace of Jesus, and holds that Nazareth is his birthplace. This latter theory is not addressed in the present essay.

<sup>5</sup> The original article (in Hebrew) appears on the web-site of the Israeli Antiquities Authority at - [http://www.antiquities.org.il/article\\_item\\_ido.asp?sec\\_id=17&sub\\_subj\\_id=184&id=273#as](http://www.antiquities.org.il/article_item_ido.asp?sec_id=17&sub_subj_id=184&id=273#as)

<sup>6</sup> Aviram Oshri, "Where Was Jesus Born?", *Archaeology*, Volume 58, No. 6, Nov/Dec 2005, pp. 42-45. [Abstract of article is available at - <http://www.archaeology.org/0511/abstracts/jesus.html>]

**the prophet, (6) And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.**  
[See Footnote 2 for a link to an analysis of v. 6]

Later on in the story, after an unsuccessful attempt to find and bring to him this child, an enraged Herod, intent on mitigating the realization of what he was told, ordered the killing of Bethlehem's children who were two years old and younger. During this time, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and instructed him to flee with his family to Egypt and stay there till he is told to return. Joseph did as he was told:

**Matthew 2:13(KJV) – When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt:**

Following Herod's death, while Joseph and his family were still in Egypt, an angel again appeared to Joseph in a dream and instructed him to take his family back to the Land of Israel. However, rather than return to Bethlehem of Judea, where Herod's son Herod Archelaus, a very cruel individual, was the ruler, Joseph decided to settle in Nazareth, in the Galilee, which was under the rule of Herod Antipas, the brother of Herod Archelaus, who was apparently a more reasonable regional leader than his brother:

**Matthew 2:21-23(KJV) - And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. (22) But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee: (23) And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.**

**Summary:** The account in the Gospel of Matthew starts with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea, includes a sojourn in Egypt, and ends with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus settling in Nazareth, which is where Jesus grew up and which became his hometown.

## **B. The Nativity (& related events) according to the Gospel of Luke**

The author of the Gospel of Luke also identifies Bethlehem of Judea as the birthplace of Jesus, but he paints a rather different scenario of the Nativity and the circumstances and events around it.

Joseph and his very pregnant wife, Mary, left Nazareth and traveled to Bethlehem of Judea, Joseph's hometown, to be counted in a census that was ordered by the ruling Roman authorities for the purpose of taxation:

**Luke 2:4-5(KJV) – (4) And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) (5) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.**

Soon after the couple's arrival in Bethlehem of Judea, Mary gave birth to Jesus:

**Luke 2:6-7(KJV)** – (6) And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. (7) And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

A group of shepherds, who were tending to their flocks in the fields of Judea, rushed to Bethlehem to see this special and holy child about whom they heard from a host of angels:

**Luke 2:15-16(KJV)** – (15) And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. (16) And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

After all required rituals were completed, Joseph and Mary returned to their residence in Nazareth, bringing their newborn son with them:

**Luke 2:39-40(KJV)** – (39) And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth. (40) And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.

**Summary:** The account in the Gospel of Luke has Jesus being born in Bethlehem of Judea and growing up in Nazareth. However, it starts out with Joseph and Mary, late in her pregnancy, traveling to Bethlehem, where she gives birth to Jesus, and where a group of shepherds who heard about the birth came to see the child. The account ends with the three of them returning to live in Nazareth after all required rituals following the birth were completed.

**Sidebar Note:** It is interesting to note how the author of the Gospel of Luke carefully points out that the relevant commandments in the Law of Moses were being followed:

- **Circumcision of a male child on the eighth day following his birth,**

**Luke 2:21(KJV)** – And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb. [See Genesis 17:12; Leviticus 12:3]

- **Ritual purification of the birthing mother, her sacrificial offering, and dedication of the firstborn to God:**

**Luke 2:22-24(KJV)** – And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; (23) (As it is written in the law of the LORD, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) (24) And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons. [See Leviticus 12:6-8 in relation to verses 22&24; Exodus 13:2,12; Numbers 3:13, 8:17 in relation to verse 23]

This account, in which the author makes note of how carefully “the Law of the LORD” [a common reference to Torah, the Mosaic Law, in Christian bibles] was observed by people, is not unique in the Gospel of Luke. About Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth [Mary’s cousin], he wrote:

**Luke 1:6(KJV)** - And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the

### C. The account in the Gospel of John

The author of the Gospel of John does not provide an account of the Nativity. Instead, he describes a situation in which the legitimacy of the claim that Jesus is the Messiah was put into question:

**John 7:41-43(KJV) – (40) Many of the people therefore, when they heard this saying, said, Of a truth this is the Prophet. (41) Others said, This is the Christ. But some said, Shall Christ come out of Galilee? (42) Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was? (43) So there was a division among the people because of him. [See Footnote 2 with regard to v. 42]**

It seems that a group of people believed that Jesus was born in the Galilee, not in Bethlehem. Consequently, they questioned his legitimacy as Messiah by referring to the verse Micah 5:2 in the Christian “Old Testament” [Micah 5:1 in the Hebrew Bible] which, according to the Christian interpretation, prophesies that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem, King David’s place of birth, and also that he will be of King David’s seed.

This difference of opinions still exists today among New Testament scholars, many of whom believe that Jesus was born in Nazareth and not in Bethlehem.<sup>7</sup>

### D. What about the Gospel of Mark?

Although the Gospel of Mark is the second book in the New Testament, most scholars agree that it predates the Gospel of Matthew – the first book in the New Testament – the former being dated in the 65-80 C.E. range. Yet, the author of the Gospel of Mark does not provide to his readers with an account of the birth of Jesus, such as are found in the Gospels of Matthew (Matthew 1:18-2:12) and Luke (Luke 2:1-20).

An account of the Nativity is not the only element in the life of Jesus that is missing from the Gospel of Mark. There is also no mention of other events relating to Jesus from the time preceding his ministry. For example, there is no account of the Herod’s massacre of infants (Matthew 2:16), no childhood stories (Luke 2:41-52), no genealogy is given (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38), nor is there even a single reference to Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1,5,6,8,16; Luke 2:1,4,15; John 7:42).

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the leading proponents of this view are: Dr. Marcus Borg, Hunderer Distinguished Professor of Religion & Culture, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR, the late Dr. Robert W. Funk, who was Chairman, Graduate Department of Religion, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, Fr. John P. Meier, Professor of New Testament, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, and Dr. Steve Mason, Professor of Humanities & Ancient History, York University, Toronto, Canada.

These discrepancies and inconsistencies, coupled with yet another anomaly, the references to **Jesus of Nazareth** in the Four Gospels (Matthew 26:71; Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34, 18:37; John 1:45), have fuelled the speculations by many scholars about the real birthplace of Jesus. It is, therefore, prudent to assess the existing verifiable tangible evidence for possible clues to help resolve the issue of his birthplace.

### III. CURRENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Whereas places such as Bethlehem of Judea, Capernaum, Jerusalem, and Nazareth, due to their significance to Christianity, have been extensively investigated by archaeologists for well over 100 years, the more obscure Bethlehem of Galilee, however, was not thoroughly explored until the 1990s. Yet, the archaeological evidence unearthed in the exploration of the Galilean Bethlehem may have a significant impact on some aspects of the story of Christianity.

#### A. The archaeological record from excavations in Bethlehem of Judea and its vicinity

Archaeological excavations in and around Bethlehem of Judea in the 1920s and 1930s, while the region was under the jurisdiction of the British Mandate, and following the Six-Day War in 1967, when the region was under the rule of Israel, yielded the following significant findings:

##### ☆ Archaeological evidence of Jewish origin

- **Iron Age pottery** (Near Eastern Iron Age: ~1000 – 586 B.C.E.)

These shards of clay vessels were collected from the yards of excavated houses located in the area of a hill to the east of the Church of the Nativity.

##### ✝ Archaeological evidence of Christian origin

- **The fourth century C.E. Church of the Nativity and associated buildings from the Byzantine and Medieval [Middle Ages] periods** (Byzantine period: 324 – 638 C.E.; Medieval period: ~500 – ~1450 C.E.)

The original structure was built by Emperor Constantine's mother in the 4th century C.E., and the present structure was rebuilt by Emperor Justinian during the 4th decade of the 6th century C.E.

As important as real evidence is in any research endeavor, it is possible that the absence of evidence could also provide significant insight into a study. This is the case with the archaeological record for Bethlehem of Judea, from which the following evidence is conspicuously absent:

##### ☆ “Missing” archaeological evidence of Jewish origin

- **Antiquities from the Herodian period** (37 B.C.E. – 70 C.E.)

Other than the single exception of a Jordanian publication from the 1950s, which mentions pottery shards from the Herodian period found in a corner of the Church of the Nativity, the whereabouts of which are unknown, there are no



reported findings of antiquities from that period – positive evidence that would connect Bethlehem of Judea to the time during which Jesus was born.

- **A water tower at the point where a Herodian aqueduct reaches Bethlehem of Judea**

An aqueduct, designed by the Roman architect Viturvius (90 – 20 B.C.E.) and believed to have been built by Herod the Great (37 – 4 B.C.E.) for supplying Jerusalem with water from Solomon’s Pools, passes by Bethlehem of Judea.<sup>8</sup> According to the specifications of Viturvius, at any point along an aqueduct where it reaches a city, a water tower had to be built, and it had to be connected to a reservoir that consisted of three pools.<sup>9</sup> The Herodian aqueduct, which connected Jerusalem with Solomon’s Pools, does not have such a tower and reservoir at the location where it reaches Bethlehem of Judea.

The existing archaeological evidence indicates that Bethlehem of Judea was populated (by Jews) in Biblical times through the end of the (Near Eastern) Iron Age and, then, (by Christians) during the Byzantine period. No archaeological evidence exists that would tie Bethlehem of Judea to the time span between these two eras, and in particular to the Herodian period during which Jesus lived.

## **B. The Archaeological record from excavations in Bethlehem of Galilee and its vicinity**

As noted above, Bethlehem of Galilee is mentioned once in the Hebrew Bible. Other references to it, albeit post biblical, are found on a list of priestly guards who moved to the Galilee following the destruction of the Second Temple, in the Jerusalem Talmud,<sup>10</sup> and in the Onomasticon of Eusebius of Caesarea.<sup>11</sup>

A mid-19<sup>th</sup> century survey of the Galilee by the French archaeologist Victor Gran identified two ruins at the site of Bethlehem of Galilee – a synagogue and a church.<sup>12</sup> The synagogue has not yet been positively identified, but is believed to

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<sup>8</sup> Three large water reservoirs located approximately three miles (~5 kilometers) southwest of Bethlehem, which are fed by several springs and rainwater. These water storage facilities appear to be partly excavated from the existing rock and partly constructed, and are believed to have been built by Herod the Great for supplying water to Herodium [also known as Herodion], the fortress that housed his palace, and to Jerusalem.

<sup>9</sup> Ronny Reich, *Viturvius*, Dvir Publishers (1997).

<sup>10</sup> The Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Megillah, Folio 2b, contains a reference to “Bethlehem of Tyre” [בֵּית לְחֵם הַצּוֹרִיָּה] (*BEIT LEhem ha’tsoriyah*), an indication that the territory was under the rule of Tyre at some time in history.

<sup>11</sup> The *Onomasticon* - [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius\\_onomasticon\\_02\\_trans.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius_onomasticon_02_trans.htm) - a late 4th-early-5th century C.E. list of settled places, includes a “Bethleem”, which Eusebius describes this way: “**Bethleem**<sup>248</sup>. [In] lot of [tribe of] Zabulon. There is another one of Juda. (Distinct from the other named Bethleem of Juda.)”. Note #248 in the appendix provides additional information: “**Bethleem. Joshua 19:15; K. 52:16; L. 249:37. A simple tribal listing plus a note to distinguish it from the more renowned Bethleem of Iouda (K. 42:10). The note may be an addition. This other Bethleem according to Jerome Commentary on Matthew 2:5 is in Galilaea.**” [L. and K. are references to Paul de Lagarde’s publication of the Onomasticon in 1870 and to Erich Klostermann’s republication of it in 1904, respectively.]

<sup>12</sup> Other than in Oshri’s original report (Footnote 5), no information is available on this work.

be located in a specific area that has not yet been excavated. The church, later dated to be from the Byzantine period, was originally exposed in 1965 during the construction of a highway from Nazareth to Bethlehem of Galilee, in the process of which its main hall was, unfortunately, destroyed.

The 11-year long archaeological excavation project by Aviram Oshri's team in and around Bethlehem of Galilee has, thus far, yielded the following significant findings:<sup>13</sup>

#### ✧ Archaeological evidence of Jewish origin

- **A Jewish workshop from the Herodian period**

In this production facility, which had mosaic floors, stone vessels used for Jewish purification rituals were manufactured. In a nearby pit remnants of such vessels were found. Oshri describes this as "a very rare find in the Galilee in this period."

- **A Herodian period residential area**

The residential area, located in an adjacent area to where the workshop was found, contained shards of ceramic and stone vessels that would have been in use by a Jewish population.

#### ✝ Archaeological evidence of Christian origin

- **A sixth century C.E. church**

As the main hall of the church was destroyed, mosaic floors were revealed, which were decorated with medallions of vines, with figures of animals, and with plant motifs. The baptismal font was also discovered.

- **A sixth century C.E. monastery**

This structure, located near the church, contained an oil press, an underground vault that contained candles with cross decorations, and a large amount of pig bones.

- **A hotel/inn from the Byzantine period**

This is a large two-story public building with feeding troughs for horses on the ground floor and with fully furnished accommodations and facilities on the upper story, including a lavish mosaic floor.

- **A Byzantine period protective wall around the city**

This fortification wall is three feet thick and has ramparts and towers along its perimeter. It has been dated to the sixth-seventh century C.E., prior to the Persian invasion of 614 C.E.

All three buildings noted above show signs of being violently destroyed during the Persian invasion of the region in 614 C.E.

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<sup>13</sup> Although Oshri's article in *Archaeology* (see Footnote 6) is his final report on the project he was commissioned to carry out, he makes the following comment: "**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.**" (p. 45). In other words, there is still much work to be done there.



According to Aviram Oshri, the protective wall around the city has special significance – it indicates that the residents of the small city felt threatened by the predominantly Jewish population in the Galilee of the time. Following the failed Bar-Kochba revolt against Rome, the Emperor Hadrian expelled the Jews from Jerusalem in 135 C.E., a situation that remained unchanged through the end of the Byzantine period (638 C.E.), when the Muslims, led by Caliph Omar, captured Jerusalem and allowed the Jews to return. Many of Jerusalem’s expelled residents wound up in the Galilee, and, as Oshri posits in the form of a question:

“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?”<sup>14</sup>

## E. More recent history of Bethlehem of Galilee

Oshri makes mention of available archaeological evidence that confirms the description, in some unreferenced Medieval texts, of an Eastern Christian community that was living in Bethlehem of Galilee. He also states that it is not clear at this time whether a Christian community existed there during the bulk of the Ottoman period (1517 – 1917).

This situation changed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when, in 1906, a group of German missionaries from the Temple Society, known as the Templars – who considered themselves as the chosen people whose mission was to build the Kingdom of God in the Holy Land - founded the modern village of **בֵּית לְחֶם הַגְּלִילִית** (*BEIT LEhem ha'GLILIT*), Bethlehem of (the) Galilee.<sup>15</sup>

The Templars resided there until 1939, when the police authorities of the British Mandate of Palestine rounded them up for their open support of the Third Reich – they even operated a Nazi youth movement in Bethlehem of Galilee – and interned them there for a time, then gave them the choice of returning to Germany or being deported most to Australia. Most decided on Australia, while those who were returned to Germany were exchanged for 500 Jewish prisoners.

Bethlehem of Galilee was captured by the **Haganah** on April 17, 1947, at which time the remaining Templar settlers were deported to Australia, and Israeli farmers moved in.<sup>16</sup> The Templars left no visible Christian presence when they departed – not even church buildings – and the only sign of their presence is a distinctive architectural style, which is still reflected in the attractive modern stone

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<sup>14</sup> Taken from p. 45 of Oshri’s article in *Archaeology* referenced in Footnote 6.

<sup>15</sup> The Templars first arrived in the Ottoman-controlled land of Palestine in the mid-1880s, and started to build communities within close proximity to the seaport of Haifa, in Jaffa, in an area that eventually was included in Tel Aviv, and in Jerusalem. Their total population in the land never exceeded 2,000.

<sup>16</sup> The **Haganah** (the Hebrew term for **defense**), was a Jewish paramilitary organization that operated in Palestine during the British Mandate of Palestine from 1920 until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, at which time it was transformed into the Israel Defense Forces.

houses of the village. In the 1990s, the modern Bethlehem of Galilee became a popular tourist attraction.

#### IV. ANALYSIS OF THE EVIDENCE

The salient issues raised by the evidence presented above can be summarized as follows:

- **Two of the four Gospels, Matthew and Luke, provide significantly different birth narratives, which share Bethlehem of Judea as the birthplace of Jesus**
- **Birth narratives are absent from the other two Gospels, Mark and John**
- **Archaeological evidence suggests that Bethlehem of Judea was uninhabited for several hundred years, including the Herodian period during which time Jesus is believed to have been born, lived, and died**
- **Archaeological evidence indicates that a Jewish population existed in Bethlehem of Galilee during the period that covers the days of Jesus**
- **Archaeological evidence points to a significant Christian presence in Bethlehem of Galilee during the Byzantine period, which continued to modern times**

These issues cast a shadow of doubt on the validity of the belief held by most Christians that Bethlehem of Judea is the birthplace of Jesus. In fact, if the two Gospel authors used the correct name for the city of birth but, for some reason, specified the wrong geographical region, then it is likely that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Galilee and not in Bethlehem of Judea.

Moreover, the following observations, drawn from the information found in the New Testament, require consideration as well:

- **According to the narrative in the Gospel of Luke, Mary, in an advanced stage of pregnancy, traveled 70 miles over a rough terrain, during the winter, on the back of a donkey, in order to reach Bethlehem of Judea for the census of Quirinius**

At least the following two significant problems plague this account. First, with the census of Quirinius having been accurately dated to 6 C.E.,<sup>17</sup> which means that Jesus was born in that year. Second, the journey to Bethlehem of Judea is unlikely to have taken place, given the alternative of Bethlehem of Galilee being located only 4 miles away over a relatively constant terrain.<sup>18</sup> These difficulties give rise to the likelihood that the Nativity account in the Gospel of Luke is inaccurate at best, if not fictitious altogether.

- **According to the narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, Herod slaughtered all infants and toddlers in Bethlehem of Judea who were under the age of two years**

There are two major problems with this account. First, the date of Herod's death is accurately known to be 4 B.C.E.,<sup>19</sup> which means that Jesus had to be born during the 4 – 6 B.C.E. time span, thus showing a 10-year discrepancy with the year of birth deduced from the account in the

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<sup>17</sup> James F. McGrath, *The Census of Quirinius and the Birth of Jesus of Nazareth* - <http://blue.butler.edu/~jfmcgrat/jesus/quirinius.htm> - where additional issues regarding the birth narratives are addressed.

<sup>18</sup> It is common medical knowledge (today) that a woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy, as attributed to Mary in the Gospel account, who would undertake this kind of journey under such conditions would almost certainly suffer a miscarriage along the way.

<sup>19</sup> See Footnote 17.

Gospel of Luke. Second, the archaeological evidence indicates that Bethlehem of Judea was not populated during the Herodian period, and that no viable record of such a massacre has been found outside of the New Testament. These difficulties give rise to the likelihood that the Nativity account in the Gospel of Matthew is inaccurate at best, if not fictitious altogether.

- **According to the New Testament, the adult life of Jesus was centered on the lower Galilee and the area around the Sea of Galilee**

This fact supports the notion that Jesus was an itinerant preacher in that region, which was heavily populated by “Galilean Jews” who were looked down upon by the “Judean Jews” from Jerusalem and its vicinity.

- **The protective wall around the Christian Bethlehem of Galilee could indicate that the residents were trying to protect something very sacred to Christianity**

Could this sacred thing be the birthplace of Jesus? Although no recorded reason has been found for the choice by the Templars of the site of Bethlehem of Galilee as their settlement, it is believed that they, too, considered it to be the birthplace of Jesus.

So, if Bethlehem of Galilee was the actual birthplace of Jesus, a key question is: *What would motivate the authors of the birth narratives in the New Testament to place the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea?*

The answer is: *The need to establish the link with King David via his place of birth, Bethlehem of Judea, and (falsely) stating that it was the prophesied place of birth of the Messiah.*

This was accomplished by using a verse in the Hebrew Bible – Micah 5:1[2 in Christian Bibles], part of which was utilized by the author of the Gospel of Matthew in fashioning his birth narrative. Table IV-1 displays side-by-side English renditions of the verse Micah 5:1[2], as well as the verse Matthew 2:6 in the New Testament since it contains the alleged quote from Micah 5:1[2]. A detailed analysis of this verse appears elsewhere (see the essay referenced in Footnote 2).

**Table IV-1 – Comparing Matthew 2:6 with Micah 5:1[2]**

Source	Passage Citation	Text
Jewish Translation from the Hebrew	Micah 5:1	And you, [of] Bethlehem [of] Ephrat, who were to be insignificant among the thousands of Judah, from you [he] shall emerge for Me, to be a ruler over Israel; and his origin is from old, from ancient days.
King James Version “Old Testament”	Micah 5:2	But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.
King James Version New Testament	Matthew 2:6	And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

The highlighted portion in the respective renditions contains the reason that Bethlehem of Judea was selected as the birthplace of Jesus. This is King David’s hometown where he was born a millennium before the birth of Jesus. Since the

promised Jewish King/Messiah was to come from the House of David, having Jesus born there would create the desired link to King David via Joseph, whose genealogy leads to King David. Once this link was established, each of the two Gospels authors created his own account that led to the birth of Jesus and all that transpired afterward.

Aside from the Christian manipulation and mistranslation of the verse, it is also misinterpreted as prophesying that Bethlehem will be the birthplace of the promised future Jewish King/Messiah, a prophecy claimed in the New Testament to have been fulfilled by Jesus. As the detailed analysis presented in the essay referenced in Footnote 2 shows, this is not what the Prophet Micah said in this verse.

## V. CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

The analysis presented above leaves little doubt that the stories about the birth of Jesus and the descriptions of circumstances surrounding this foundational event for Christianity are inaccurate. Not only are the two accounts of the Nativity inconsistent with each other, they are also shown to be inconsistent with the archaeological evidence obtained from the respective regions, as well as with verifiably accurate historical dates of relevant events.

The archaeological evidence alone rules out Bethlehem of Judea as the birthplace of Jesus by virtue of the fact that Bethlehem of Judea was a desolate location for many years before, during, and many years after the days of Jesus.

The dating of historical events, such as the year in which Herod died, 4 B.C.E., and the year of the census by Quirinius, 6 C.E., prove that both Nativity accounts – in the Gospel of Matthew and in the Gospel of Luke – are separated by some 10 years, which shows they cannot both be true.

*What are the ramifications of these discoveries for Christianity?* According to most Christian scholars, issues such as where Jesus was born are not critical elements to the survival of Christianity. Some, while accepting Bethlehem of Judea as the birthplace of Jesus, recognize that the Nativity stories were not written to strictly reflect history. Others hold that the precise birthplace of Jesus carries little to no importance relative to the essence of Christianity, which, for the Christian, is its focus on the essentials, such as Jesus himself and what he has done for humanity. They maintain that the “vast majority of churchgoers will continue to believe in Bethlehem.”<sup>20</sup> Although this posture is troubling, it is not surprising, given that there are some two billion Christians in the world today, most of whom will never even be exposed to these findings, let alone be made aware, in an objective fashion, of all the other existing issues within the New Testament relative to the Hebrew Bible.

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<sup>20</sup> *Searching for Bethlehem: Was it in Galilee or Judea?*, Richard N. Ostling, Associated Press - <http://12.100.23.254:8080/bj/news/2000/December/23/docs/009531.htm> & <http://www.fuller.edu/news/html/carolers-hagner.asp>

On the other hand, those who need to be aware of these problems and understand their impact are relatively few in numbers – Jews and Noahides. The Jews include both those who are still Jewish and are targets of Christian missionaries, as well as those unfortunate individuals who were deceived by Christian missionaries and have converted to Christianity. The Noahides include mostly those who left Christianity, as well as those of other faiths and beliefs that are consistent with the Seven Laws of Noah<sup>21</sup> and who formally declare themselves as being Noahides – they, too, have become prime targets for conversion to Christianity by Christian missionaries.

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, *The Noah's Covenant Website* - <http://www.noahide.com/>, *Chavurath B'nei Noach* - <http://www.noahide.com/7laws.htm>, *The Seven Noahide Laws* - <http://www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/noahide.html>, and the various links therein.

## Appendix A

This map was taken from [http://www.bible-history.com/maps/palestine\\_nt\\_times.html](http://www.bible-history.com/maps/palestine_nt_times.html) and slightly modified by adding the location of Bethlehem of Galilee and color-coding the three places of interest in this analysis. According to the Christian source of this map, Bible History Online (<http://www.bible-history.com>), this map shows the (Christian perspective of the) Land of Israel at the time during which Jesus is said to have lived.

