

1st Century Nazareth



The Bible tells us that both Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth before Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. When God warned them in a dream that King Herod was seeking to kill Jesus, they fled to Egypt (where they probably stayed in one of the Jewish communities located in Egypt at that time). When they learned that Herod was dead, they returned to Israel, but when Joseph "heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene." (Matthew 6:22 NIV)

There is some debate over where the Biblical city of Nazareth actually is located. One traditional location of Nazareth is in the hills of southern Galilee, about 100 miles north of Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The Bible says Jesus' family traveled to Jerusalem yearly for the Passover...from this location by foot or donkey, that trip would have taken 8-10 days.

During the time of Jesus, the traditional site of Nazareth was a Jewish community of less than 400 people. Archaeologists found terraced farmland there, a wine press, and watch-towers like the ones which Jesus describes in the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers in Matthew 21 and Mark 12. They also found a house with a cistern and stone and chalk vessels that Jews typically used at that period to preserve purity of food. No glass, mosaics, frescoes, paved roads, or imported materials were found in Nazareth from the first century, suggesting that this was a simple, rural village at that time.

Bread was the main staple of families at that time, and women from rural families like Nazareth would wake up before dawn to grind their own grain (wheat or barley) on grinding stones. Common foods eaten in Nazareth would be wheat or barley flatbread and lentil soup, along with some cheese, olives, dried fruit (apricots, figs, pomegranates) or fresh fruit in season (melon, grapes) and vegetables (cucumbers and plants gathered wild like dandelion, spinach, and carrot). Meat was only usually eaten only on special occasions.

The average life expectancy was around 30 years. This doesn't mean that most people died at 30, but that dying young was common...many did not reach adulthood.

A recreation of and synagogue and a carpenter's shop in Nazareth Village.



The Greek word translated "carpenter" used to describe Joseph in our Bible was a very broad term that could also be translated "building-tradesman." It could describe someone who worked with wood, stone, plaster, or tin and could even be used to describe an unskilled building worker. But whether he was a carpenter in a traditional sense, or a builder, it's unlikely he would have found enough work in Nazareth alone, and probably often traveled to nearby towns to get work.



Pictures from Nazareth Village are by Andrew Dowsett, Seetheholyland.net and Wikimedia Commons - Isreal PikiWiki Project.

SOURCES:

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