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## JESUS IN NAZARETH

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### Abstract

Professor Carsten Peter Thiede gives a very different picture of first century Nazareth from that conveyed by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed. Which picture is the more accurate? An examination of Jesus' quotations from Old Testament scripture and reconsideration of Luke 4:16-30 suggest that Nazareth was a more cultured place in the time of Jesus than Crossan and Reed would admit.

It is always interesting to find two scholars of repute examining the same evidence and arriving at quite different conclusions.

### *Nazareth according to Thiede*

Professor Carsten Thiede in his book *The Cosmopolitan World of Jesus*<sup>1</sup> gives an impression of Nazareth in Jesus' time as a busy, bustling little village, close to the Via Maris, the most important trade route linking Syria with Egypt. The people of Nazareth were in frequent contact with international merchants. The village possessed extensive olive groves and vineyards, well-built cave-homes and simple solidly built stone houses.

Joseph, Jesus' father, was known as the 'just one', the δίκαιος, a title given to those who knew the Torah well. It is probable, therefore, that Joseph was literate and played his part as the head of a family in the activities of the local synagogue. Thiede suggests that Joseph was comparatively well off, owning property near Bethlehem, his hometown. The Roman census required that all landowners be registered in person. As Mary had to go with him, despite being pregnant, she too may have been a property owner in Bethlehem. As women could not act in legal matters without a

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<sup>1</sup> Carsten Peter Thiede, *The Cosmopolitan World of Jesus*, London: SPCK, 2004.

guardian, Joseph had to countersign Mary's documents. It may be assumed that they let their property, and as all the available hotels were full, they made do in comfortable cave accommodation in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. It was not extraordinary that they should use such accommodation. 'Some people at Nazareth', says Thiede, 'may have preferred to live in "caves"...not because they were poor...(but) because it was simply more practical' (p. 16). According to Jewish law, a woman could inherit property if the father died without male heirs. 'So we learn', writes Thiede, 'that Mary had a wealthy father but no brothers'.

Joseph, the τέκτων, (which may mean 'master-builder' rather than 'carpenter'), and his son, Jesus (who is also called τέκτων in Mark 6:3), may have found employment in the building of Herod Antipas's new city at Sepphoris, only four miles from Nazareth. It is very likely that Antipas employed local people with building skills. There, Jesus may have worked on the new theatre and become familiar with the word ὑποκριτής, an actor, for which there is no exact equivalent in Aramaic or Hebrew. (It may be noted that Jesus' knowledge of the properties of the stone-paved forestage in the theatre that reflected the sound of the actors' voices up to the farthest rows of seating, may have stood him in good stead when he chose to speak from the boat on Galilee where water provides a similar reflective surface. An area of quiet water in front of the speaker almost doubles the carrying power of the voice, and a mild swell provides multiple reflections.) Jesus' reference to 'trumpets' in Matthew 6:2 may also be connected with Greek plays, as trumpets were part of the incidental music in the theatre.

Joseph and Jesus may also have worked on the Roman baths in Nazareth, that possibly date back to the first century C.E. These lie near Mary's Well, the source of fresh water for the village. Other traces of Jesus' experience in building are found in his parables of the tower in Luke 14:28-30, and the houses built on rock and sand (Matt. 7:24 and Luke 6:48).

Nazareth, according to Thiede, was never a backwater. 'It was a village with a mixed population, with craftsmen like Joseph, landowners and farm-workers and people who sold their produce locally and to travelling international merchants who passed by on the Via Maris' (p.16f). 'The human Jesus had a privileged

childhood in a privileged environment, with or without Roman baths' (p.18).

*Nazareth according to Crossan and Reed*

A very different account is given by Crossan and Reed in their book, *Excavating Jesus*.<sup>2</sup> (What a title for a book!) They portray Jesus as a Jewish peasant, belonging to a village that was absolutely insignificant and entirely Jewish. 'Jesus', they insist, 'was a Jewish peasant' (their italics) living in a peasant village in an agrarian society' (p.18). The village of Nazareth is not mentioned in any documents outside the gospels and early Christian texts that rely on them, until the time of Constantine. It is never referred to by Josephus, by Jewish rabbis or in the Christian Old Testament. Nazareth is absolutely insignificant. As writing in antiquity was an upper-class activity, it is assumed that the peasants in Nazareth were illiterate. The authors relate Eusebius's story about the grandsons of Jude, Jesus' brother, being brought before Domitian. These relatives of Jesus possessed nothing but the land they worked on, and they showed the emperor their calloused hands. Domitian despised them as worthless and released them. 'This was the world of Jesus the peasant'. The implication is that Jesus too was illiterate. They note, however, that in 135 C.E. after Hadrian had banned all Jews from Jerusalem, one priestly family resettled in Nazareth. The authors record that not a single built synagogue from the first century or earlier has been found in Galilee. However, it is noted that the term 'synagogue' also referred to gatherings of the village people.

They say, regarding the record of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30), that 'the incident is recorded only in Luke, although it is undoubtedly his own very creative and particular expansion of the general story in Mark 6:2-4'. These authors take the story to be a type exemplifying the situation that Paul met decades later, where an initial acceptance by the Jews was followed by ultimate rejection. That late situation, they hold, was reflected by Luke in his account.

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<sup>2</sup> John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus*, London: SPCK, 2001.

However, one cannot deny that the story of the incident in the synagogue also reflects Jesus' own experience; he had a good reception at the hands of the common people who heard him gladly, and later experienced bitter resistance. It is not reasonable to assume that the synagogue account is a retrojection of Luke's later experience.

Crossan and Reed conclude that 'Nazareth had no synagogue building, no scrolls of the Law and Prophets, no literate and learned peasants, no nearby cliff... no murderous inhabitants' (p. 39). They deny that there was a 'cliff' nearby from which a miscreant could be hurled to his death. That, they say, is 'simply false'. They argue that Luke 4:16-30 is a Lukan creation.

Regarding Crossan and Reed's assertion that the story of the 'cliff' is false, I must agree. Of course it is false, because Luke never mentions a 'cliff'; nor does he indicate murderous intention on the part of the angry group. He says that they 'led him to the "eyebrow" (ὄφρυς) of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong'. Crossan's journalistic exaggeration has replaced scholarship at this point, as there were undoubtedly several ravines below the brow of that hill. A more objective view of the incident might detect jealousy on the part of some unlettered people concerning Jesus who could read and interpret Scripture. A group may have thought that he was getting somewhat above his station in life and resolved to take him down a peg by throwing him down one of the steep ravines that lie on the northern slope of the hill. The fact that Jesus 'passed through the midst of them' may reflect a numinous presence (compare John 18:6), but alternatively it may indicate that the efforts of the group were spontaneous, ill-organised and perhaps somewhat half-hearted.

Crossan and Reed insist that all the houses in Nazareth in Jesus' time were primitive in the extreme, arguing from the absence of archaeological evidence of more sophisticated methods in the limited areas that have been excavated. It is, however, always dangerous to argue from the absence of anything. A population of two to four hundred is assumed, all being poor peasants.

### *The Historical Jesus*

At this point, I must refer to an earlier book of Crossan's—*The Historical Jesus*.<sup>3</sup> This book gives an enormous quantity of background information about life in the time of Jesus. Indeed the first two parts of the book occupying 224 pages consist of background, and the name of Jesus is hardly mentioned. Some of that background information is relevant and valuable. The third part of the book is about Jesus. In Appendix 1, Crossan provides an inventory of sources arranged chronologically according to a certain consensus, which he has accepted. This gives very late dates to many of his sources. Five hundred and twenty-two textual units are then considered, with indications of Crossan's decision as to whether the units may be traced to the historical Jesus or whether they stem from later Jesus tradition.

The book has created something of a stir, if only because so many key texts are denied to the historical Jesus. These include:

- The Lord's Prayer
- The temptations of Jesus
- The institution of the Lord's Supper
- The Golden Rule
- The apocalyptic return of Jesus
- The faith that moves mountains
- The mocking of Jesus
- The houses built on rock and sand
- The narrow door.

These and many others are considered by Crossan to be the inventions of people in the later Jesus tradition.

Of particular interest is the way in which Crossan deals with the sayings of Jesus that reflect Old Testament texts. This is of some importance if we are going to assess the situation in Nazareth with regard to the existence of a synagogue with a collection of scrolls, and the existence of literate people able to expound these texts.

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<sup>3</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

*Jesus' references to Old Testament texts*

Table 1 shows the distribution of 241 sayings of Jesus that may refer to Old Testament texts. There is, of course, some duplication in the list, as some sayings occur in more than one Gospel. In Tables 2 and 3 I have shown where most of these occur<sup>4</sup>. When I trace these through Crossan's index and his list of 522 textual units I find only nine sayings that Crossan attributes to Jesus and only four that he attributes to later writers. The rest of these sayings of Jesus are completely ignored.

Crossan has deemed Jesus to be illiterate, living in a community of illiterate peasants, with no synagogue, no scrolls and no educated people, but he has given no thought to the numerous sayings of Jesus behind which may lie knowledge of the Old Testament texts. Is it likely that Jesus would be able to quote from Isaiah, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Exodus, Leviticus, Genesis, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, 2 Chronicles, 1 Samuel, 1 Kings, Micah, Job, Numbers, Hosea, Zechariah, Proverbs, Malachi, Jonah, Joel, 2 Kings, Amos, Habakkuk and Zephaniah if his experience was limited to a synagogue-less, scroll-less Nazareth with a totally illiterate population?

Crossan refers to only 5.4% of the sayings that appear to reflect Old Testament texts. Of those he mentions, he agrees that nine out of the thirteen do go back to the historical Jesus. What of the remaining 228 instances? If a similar proportion of these are attributable to the historical Jesus, that points to another 158 sayings that are authentic. How can one write a comprehensive account of the life of Jesus without referring to his use of Scripture? In view of Crossan's acceptance that the majority of the few instances that he examines do go back to the historical Jesus, it seems unlikely that any substantial proportion of those unexamined are the invention of later Christians, who must not only have put words into the mouth of Jesus, but also invented the Old Testament associations.

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<sup>4</sup> In Tables 2 and 3 I have noted only the first occurrence of each reference; in some cases more than one reference is made in a Gospel. This gives a reduced total of 221 occurrences.

<b>BOOK</b>	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>	<b>John</b>
Isaiah	18	6	10	10
Deuteronomy	17	7	8	2
Psalms	11	4	6	6
Exodus	7	5	4	1
Leviticus	8	2	6	1
Genesis	5	1	5	3
Jeremiah	5	2	5	1
Daniel	5	3	2	2
Ezekiel	3	-	2	5
2 Chronicles	4	-	2	-
1 Samuel	1	1	4	-
1 Kings	2	-	4	-
Micah	2	-	2	2
Job	2	-	1	1
Numbers	2	-	-	2
Hosea	2	-	1	1
Zechariah	2	1	-	-
Proverbs	1	-	2	-
Malachi	3	-	-	-
Jonah	2	-	-	-
Joel	2	-	-	-
2 Kings	-	-	1	-
Amos	-	-	1	-
Habakkuk	-	-	1	-
Zephaniah	1	-	-	-
Joshua	-	-	-	-
Judges	-	-	-	-
Ruth	-	-	-	-
2 Samuel	-	-	-	-
1 Chronicles	-	-	-	-
Ezra	-	-	-	-
Nehemiah	-	-	-	-
Esther	-	-	-	-
Ecclesiastes	-	-	-	-
Song of Sol.	-	-	-	-
Lamentations	-	-	-	-
Obadiah	-	-	-	-
Nahum	-	-	-	-
Haggai	-	-	-	-



Deut.	Mt.	Mk	Lk.	Jn
5.14		2.27		
5.16	15.4	7.10		
5.16-20	19.18	10.19	18.20	
5.17	5.21			
5.18	5.27			
6.4		12.29		
6.5	22.37		10.27	
6.8	23.5			
6.13	4.10		4.8	
6.16	4.7		4.12	
8.3	4.4		4.4	
15.11	26.11	14.7		
19.15	18.16			8.17
19.21	5.38			
23.21	5.33			
23.25	12.3	2.23		
24.1-4	5.31	10.4		
24.5			14.20	
24.15			10.7	
25.2-3			12.47	
30.19	7.13			
32.6				8.42
<b>Isaiah</b>				
5.1-7	21.33		20.9	
6.9-10	13.14	4.12	8.9	
13.8				16.21
13.10	24.29		21.25	
19.2			21.10	
27.13	24.31			
29.3			19.43	
29.13	15.8	7.6		
35.5-6	11.5		7.22	
40.11				10.11
42.1-4	12.18			
53.12			22.37	
54.13				6.45
55.1-2	5.6			7.37
56.7	21.13	11.17		
56.8				10.16
58.5	6.16			
58.7	25.35			
58.11				7.38
60.21	15.13			
61.1-2	11.5		4.18	
63.18			21.24	
64.8				8.42
66.1	5.35			
66.24		9.48		

Psalm	Mt.	Mk	Lk.	Jn
8.2	21.16			
22.1	27.46	15.34		
24.6	5.8			
31.5			23.46	
35.19				15.25
37.11	5.5			
39.5	6.27			
41.9	26.24	14.17	22.21	13.18
69.4				15.25
69.21				19.28
78.2	13.35			
82.6				10.34
91.11	4.6		4.10	
110.1	22.44	12.36	20.42	
118.22	21.42	12.10	20.17	
118.26	23.39		13.35	
<b>Proverbs</b>				
21.2			16.15	
25.6-7			14.8	
25.21	5.43f			
<b>Jeremiah</b>				
5.21	13.14	8.17	8.9	
6.6			19.43	
6.16	11.29			
7.11	21.13	11.17		
17.11			12.20	
21.8	7.13			
22.5	23.38		13.35	
23.1				10.8
32.17			18.27	
<b>Ezekiel</b>				
4.2			19.43	
12.2			8.9	
19.10				15.1
22.27	7.15			
32.7	24.29			
34.2				10.8
34.11				10.11
34.17	25.32			
36.25				3.5
37.9				3.8
<b>Daniel</b>				
4.2				4.48
7.13	24.30	13.26	21.27	
9.27	24.15	13.14		
12.1	24.21			
12.1			10.20	
12.2	25.46			5.29

**Table 2** OT refs. in Jesus' words

Gen	Mt.	Mk	Lk.	Jn
1.27	19.4	10.6		
2.24		10.7		
4.24	18.22			
6.5-8	24.37		17.26	
9.6	26.52			
17.10				7.22
18.14	19.26		18.27	
18.20			17.29	
19.24			10.12	
19.26			17.32	
21.4				7.22
28.12				1.51
<b>Exodus</b>				
3.6	22.32	12.26	20.37	
16.4				6.32
20.9-10			13.14	
20.12	15.4	7.10		
20.12-16	19.18	10.19	18.20	
20.13	5.21			
20.14	5.27			
21.24	5.38			
23.12		2.27		
24.6-8	26.28	14.24		
32.32			10.20	
<b>Leviticus</b>				
12.3				7.22
13.49		1.44	5.14	
14.2f	8.4		5.14	
18.5			10.28	
19.2	5.48			
19.12	5.33			
19.18	5.43	12.31	10.27	
24.9	12.3			
24.20	5.38			
27.30			11.42	
<b>Numbers</b>				
11.7f				6.31
21.9				3.14
27.17	9.36			
30.2	5.33			
<b>1 Samuel</b>				
14.45			21.18	
16.7			16.15	
21.1-6	12.3	2.26	6.3f	
25.6			10.5	

1 Kng	Mt.	Mk	Lk.	Jn
10.1f	12.42		11.31	
17.8f			4.25	
19.20			9.61	
<b>2 Kings</b>				
5.14			4.27	
<b>2 Chronicles</b>				
9.1-12	12.42		11.31	
15.6			21.10	
24.22	23.35			
36.16	5.12			
<b>Job</b>				
31.8				4.37
39.30	24.28			
42.2	19.26		18.27	
<b>Hosea</b>				
6.2			24.46	
6.6	9.13			
13.13				16.21
<b>Joel</b>				
2.2	24.21			
2.10f	24.29			
<b>Amos</b>				
9.9			22.31	
<b>Jonah</b>				
1.17	12.40			
3.5	12.41			
<b>Micah</b>				
4.9				16.21
6.8	23.23		11.42	
6.15				4.37
7.6	10.34		12.51	
<b>Habakkuk</b>				
2.11			19.40	
<b>Zephaniah</b>				
1.15	24.29			
<b>Zechariah</b>				
9.14	24.31			
13.7	26.31	14.27		
<b>Malachi</b>				
3.1	11.10			
4.5	11.14			

**Table 3** OT refs. in Jesus' words

*How are we to choose between two contradictory viewpoints?*

In fact, Crossan is not consistent, and he seems to have had a change of mind regarding Nazareth. On page 19 of *The Historical Jesus*, he notes that ‘in the words of Eric Meyers, “the isolation that is often associated with the Galilean personality is...quite inappropriate when we speak of Jesus of Nazareth, who is growing up along one of the busiest trade routes in ancient Palestine at the very administrative centre of the Roman provincial government”. He also quotes Thomas Longstaff saying, “It is no longer possible to think of Jesus as a simple peasant from Nazareth nor to describe the disciples as “hillbillies from Galilee”. Crossan concludes, ‘Their lives, and those of many who followed them, were certainly affected by the all-pervasive presence of the Roman city’ (p. 19).

In the later book, *Excavating Jesus*, this has been forgotten and Jesus is portrayed as an illiterate peasant, living in a poor village of illiterate peasants.

My view is that Jesus could probably read and write. The passage in John 7:53–8:11 appears at various places in ancient manuscripts; nevertheless it does describe Jesus writing with his finger on the ground. He probably spoke Greek as well as Aramaic; that is the implication of his conversation in Mark 7:25-30 with the Syrophenician woman.

We must also presume that the words of Jesus were recorded by some of his followers, and thus came to be preserved in the earliest house-churches in small collections that described his sayings and doings. Through time and through sharing, these collections tended towards a common form, without becoming identical. Some of the remaining differences are reflected in the Gospels. It is unlikely that one definitive ‘Q’ document ever existed; such a concept is the invention of modern scholarship.

Jesus’ sayings often quoted Old Testament scriptures. In the occurrences listed in Table 1, I have included instances where it may be reasonably assumed that Jesus had an Old Testament text in mind as he was speaking. In identifying these references, I have distinguished between words attributed to Jesus, and quotations made by the Gospel compilers.

He apparently had a wide knowledge of Isaiah, Deuteronomy Psalms, Exodus, Leviticus, Genesis, Jeremiah and Daniel, and was acquainted with the writings of many of the prophets; this goes far beyond the knowledge that he might have possessed through sharing oral traditions known to illiterate peasants. If scrolls indeed existed, it is probable that they were kept in a synagogue, however humble the building might have been.

It seems more likely that Jesus' father, Joseph the Just, the δίκαιος, the one who was known to be conversant with the Torah, was himself literate and took part in synagogue worship. Naturally, he would teach his son to read and write, and introduce him to the scrolls.

It is also interesting to find that when Hadrian banned Jews from Jerusalem in 135 C.E. one priestly family resettled in Nazareth. Why Nazareth if it were only a village of poor peasants? The most likely explanation is that Nazareth was their ancestral homeground, and that they were descended from a priestly family that had their roots in the village in Jesus' time. Jesus learned to read and write, became familiar with Scripture in the synagogue and probably knew members of the priestly family. It is unlikely that a boy of twelve would enter into discussion with the teachers in the Temple courts unless priests who knew him had first introduced him to those teachers.

I believe that Luke 4:16-30 is based on the memory of a real incident, and that the sayings contained in vv. 23-29 reflect Jesus' wide view of his calling. Luke was not particularly prone to putting words into the mouth of Jesus. Matthew, whose Gospel is shorter than Luke's, provides 57% more references to O.T. texts in Jesus' words than Luke does in his Gospel.

On the whole, I think that Thiede's representation is likely to be the more accurate. As well as speaking in Aramaic, Jesus probably spoke and wrote in Greek. He was the 'master-builder' in Nazareth. The Gospel of the Holy Twelve (of dubious origin) indicates that he made 'wheels, yokes and tables also, with great skill'. He may indeed have made such articles, but as the master-builder his skills went far beyond that. He may have had building experience in the new city of Sepphoris, and may have worked on the Roman baths in Nazareth, if these are indeed traceable to the first century CE. The

many references to Old Testament texts suggest that there was indeed a built synagogue in Nazareth that possessed a collection of scrolls. In a village of fewer than four hundred people it may, however, have been a modest building, scarcely detectable by excavation among other domestic buildings – all of which have been overlaid by modern Nazareth, and some of which remain unexcavated.