

# The Gospels - The Evidence of Archaeology

THE GOSPELS DESCRIBE many people places and events. By their nature many of these cannot now be traced, but some have left evidence in the archaeological record. Among the evidence we can find the names of people mentioned in the Gospels, descriptions of details of living from the time and place, and detailed descriptions of places. These match finds from archaeology, which is good evidence of the accuracy of the Gospels.

The area of the Gospels was totally destroyed about 40 years after the resurrection in a war with the Romans. The towns were destroyed, the people deported as slaves and other people settled in their place. The details of the cities, people and even languages from the time of Jesus disappeared. It would have been impossible for anyone to have made them up accurately much after this war. The detailed accuracy of the Gospels shows that they depend on eyewitnesses with good memories.

## Details of Life

The New Testament sometimes contains snippets of detail about the way that life was lived in New Testament times, and these details match the picture found by archaeology. Here are some examples:-

- **John 2:6** This is a miracle in Cana. The Gospel refers to the use of water-jars made from stone instead of the much more common earthenware. Stone jars were common in Judea and Galilee at the time of Jesus because of Jewish ritual.
- **Luke 5:19** Jesus heals a man who is let down through the roof of a house. Most houses in the period were constructed with roofs of brushwood and clay, but in this case the roof had tiles. Roofs like this were found on houses in Gamla.
- The Last Supper took place in a guest room which was upstairs (Luke 22:11,12). The examination of Jesus by the priests also took place in an upper room (Peter was *below* in the courtyard Mark 14:66). The existence in Jerusalem of well-to-do houses with large upstairs guest rooms has been confirmed by archaeology.

The presence of so many tiny, but accurate, details in the Gospels demonstrates their accuracy even in trivial areas.

## Gospel People

Some of the people who appear in the Gospels have left their names in the archaeological record. These included the following:-

- **Herod the Great:** Herod was king of Judea at the birth of Jesus. He is mentioned by the historian Josephus as a completely ruthless ruler. His tomb has been discovered at Herodium, although there was no body in it.
- **Caiaphas the Priest:** Caiaphas was the high priest at the time of Jesus' ministry and presided over one of the trials of Jesus (John 18:24,28). An ossuary bearing his name and probably containing his bones was discovered in a tomb in Jerusalem.
- **Pontius Pilate:** Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Jerusalem during Jesus' ministry. He appears in various Roman histories. An inscription bearing the name of Pontius Pilate was discovered in Caesarea, the seat of the Roman government of Judea.

## The Jewish War

This began in 66AD and rapidly became a major conflict. The Romans were initially defeated but then retook the area over a period of four years using three Legions.

The climax of the war came in 70AD when Jerusalem was sacked and almost completely destroyed. The Temple was burned and completely destroyed by the garrison of the city afterwards. Fighting continued in small pockets until 73AD.

The Jewish war completely changed the area. Towns and cities were destroyed, the Jewish population was enslaved and deported and the new settlers who followed did not even speak the same language. The fact that the Gospels give a detailed picture of the time before it shows the accuracy of the memory of the writers.

## What it Means

The archaeological record shows that the Gospels are an accurate record of a time that really existed. They are not merely fiction. Indeed, they are an accurate record of the things that happened and of the things that Jesus said. We can be confident in the Gospels and particularly in the teachings of Jesus that they contain.

## Capernaum

This is the town in which Jesus spent most time during his ministry and from which he set off to proclaim the Kingdom of God in surrounding villages.

Capernaum has been excavated and remains from the time of Jesus have been discovered. Among these is the foundation of a first century synagogue (underneath the a fourth century synagogue) in which Jesus taught and healed (Mark 1:21; John 6:59), and a house which was venerated as the house of Peter from the second century (and possibly earlier). The site is on the Via Maris, a major ancient trade route and close to the border with the kingdom of Philip, which would require a customs office (as in Matthew 9:9). The harbour has also been excavated.

The Gospels show detailed knowledge of the area around Capernaum. As matters changed completely after the Jewish war of 70AD this would only have been possible for someone with an accurate recollection of the time of Jesus.

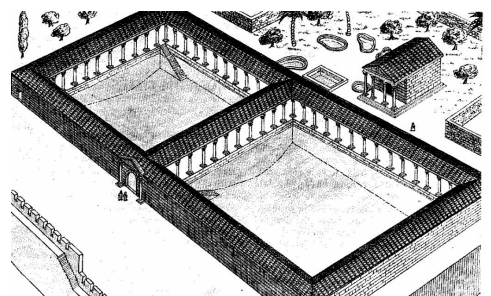
## Nazareth

Until 2010 there were no archaeological traces of Nazareth other than a few tombs and cisterns. Some critics claimed that this was a major error in the Gospels.

However, in 2010 a house from the first century AD was found, along with some stones from a synagogue from the Herodian period. There is also a mention in an inscription found in Caesarea. Nazareth's existence is certain.

## The Pool of Bethesda

John 5:2 describes a healing sanctuary in Jerusalem with a pool and five porticoes. Critics denied its existence but it has now been found and fits the Gospels exactly. Its name is in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Below is an archaeologist's reconstruction of it.



# Gospel Archaeology

## Capernaum

The centre of Jesus' work in Galilee. Remains of the synagogue and harbour have been found and the location of the town indicates that there would be a tax office there. The existence of baths outside the town indicate a Roman presence.

The details in the Gospels exactly match the details of Capernaum found by Archaeologists.

## Nazareth

The village where Jesus grew up. Until recently the remains of Nazareth had not been found and some believed that it did not exist. In 2009 the first of the remains of houses from New Testament Nazareth were discovered by Archaeologists and other evidence also shows its existence.

## Caesarea

This was the provincial capital of Judea, where the Roman governor normally lived.

There is no record of Jesus visiting Caesarea but Paul was imprisoned there 58-59AD. The city has been extensively excavated.

## Jericho

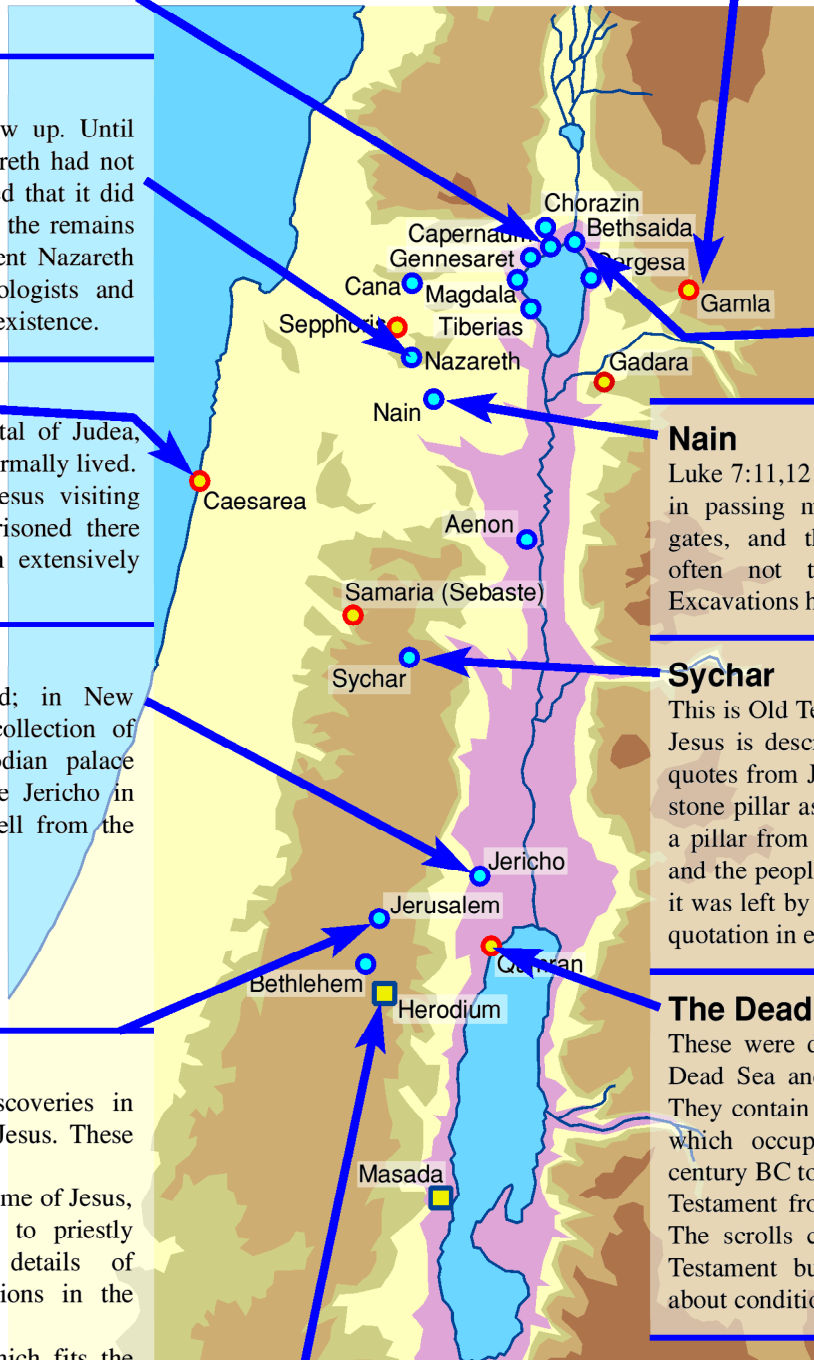
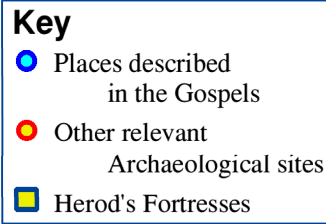
Jericho has been excavated; in New Testament times it was a collection of small villages with a Herodian palace nearby. The Gospels describe Jericho in general terms but one can tell from the text that it had several centres.

## Jerusalem

There have been many discoveries in Jerusalem from the time of Jesus. These include the following:-

- A row of houses from the time of Jesus, some of which belonged to priestly families. These share details of architecture with descriptions in the Gospels.
- The Pool of Bethesda, which fits the description in the Gospels exactly.
- The Pool of Siloam, which is also mentioned in the Gospels.
- Gabbatha/Lithostraton, the place where Jesus was condemned to death. This also was recently discovered and fits the Gospel description.
- Remains of the Temple: these confirm one of the prophecies of Jesus in Matthew 24.

The New Testament is very accurate.



## Gamla

Abandoned after a seige in 68AD. Not mentioned in the Bible, but a good example of a first century village. Details of building construction match the Gospel accounts.

## Bethsaida

This was a major town in New Testament times, and is mentioned 7 times in the Gospels (eg Mark 8:22). Archaeologists have found houses, a commercial centre and a factory where fishing equipment was made.

The site also gives a picture of a major town in New Testament times.

## Nain

Luke 7:11,12 describes a miracle here and in passing mentions that the town had gates, and therefore walls (which was often not the case in those days). Excavations have found the walls of Nain.

## Sychar

This is Old Testament Shechem. A visit by Jesus is described in John 4 where Jesus quotes from Joshua 24:14. Joshua raised a stone pillar as a monument to this speech; a pillar from roughly this time still exists and the people of Jesus' time believed that it was left by Joshua. Jesus thus makes the quotation in exactly the best place.

## The Dead Sea Scrolls

These were discovered in caves near the Dead Sea and close to Khirbet Qumran. They contain the writings of a Jewish sect which occupied Qumran from the 3rd century BC to 68AD and copies of the Old Testament from before the time of Jesus. The scrolls confirm the text of the Old Testament but are not very informative about conditions at the time of Jesus.

## Herodium

The tomb of Herod the Great was discovered here in 2007. Herod was the founder of a dynasty of Herods and the king at the time of the birth of Jesus. He was responsible for many atrocities, among which the death of the children of Bethlehem would be minor.

The fact that the Gospels describe so many places in first century Palestine so accurately and in such detail shows that they contain a reliable record of the events and teachings they contain.