

# Nazareth

Last year's article for December was on Bethlehem – an obvious topic for the month when we celebrate Christmas. Nazareth is of course the other town associated with the Nativity, far to the north in Galilee which, under Roman occupation as organised at the time of Jesus' birth, was in a different administrative sub-division from Judaea, in which Bethlehem is found.

Nazareth, unlike Bethlehem, is not named in the Old Testament. But Matthew and Luke, the only two gospels which give us any information about Jesus' birth and early life, refer to Nazareth in this context, although in rather different ways. It is only Luke who tells of the Annunciation to Mary (chapter 1), which is said to have taken place in Nazareth. The obvious inference is that this was Mary's home town, since she was as yet only betrothed to Joseph. He is identified not by place, but by the statement that he is 'of the house of David'. Luke's next reference to Nazareth is in Chapter 2 where he explains that Mary and Joseph subsequently travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the purpose of the Roman taxation census because Joseph was 'of the house and lineage of David' (Bethlehem being the city of David). Later in Chapter 2 Luke describes how Mary and Joseph made an offering in the Temple in Jerusalem, and then 'returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth'. Matthew, by contrast, says that Mary, betrothed to Joseph, was 'found with child of the Holy Ghost', but no narrative is provided and no place is named. Instead, this gospel gives us an account of how an unnamed angel came to Joseph in a prophetic and reassuring dream. Matthew then moves directly to the birth in Bethlehem, with no suggestion at all that Mary and Joseph had to travel there from anywhere else (a journey that would not, in any case, have been required by Roman census rules). Afterwards, according to Matthew, the Holy Family flees to Egypt (a different Roman province) to escape the persecution of Herod. Later, Joseph hears in a dream that Herod is dead and that it is safe to return. But then he finds out that Herod's son Archelaus had succeeded him and fears that Judaea is consequently still risky, so they decide to go to Galilee and settle in Nazareth – the clear implication being that this was not their original intention. Subsequently, when Jesus is identified in terms of his 'home town', he is associated with Nazareth, or at least the distinctive region of Galilee, where much of his ministry takes place. If one were to read Matthew's gospel alone, then, one would imagine that Mary and Joseph had lived in Bethlehem all along, until their flight into Egypt, and that they only took up residence in Nazareth after their return from exile.

The differing implications of these two gospel narratives, which clearly emerge when we look closely at the role that Nazareth plays, points yet again, as do many other problematic details about the Nativity story, to the impossibility of reading the two gospel-narratives at face-value as straightforward factual rapportage. But there is nothing odd about this: we cannot and do not read narrative histories from this period as 'simple fact' because that is not how texts of this type were composed or how they were intended to function, regardless of whether they were secular or religious 'histories'. We need to think, rather, about the purposes of what is written and the often inconsistent oral traditions that lie behind it.

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*Professor Joyce Hill is Emeritus Professor of Medieval Literature at the University of Leeds*