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Jewish Ways of Following Jesus

Redrawing the Religious Map of Antiquity

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Archeological Evidence for Jewish Christianity

The remnants of the material culture of antiquity, composed primarily of structures, monuments, pottery, inscriptions, texts, and coins, provide important content and context for historical analysis. The absence of such material evidence may also be noteworthy. Nonetheless, it is difficult to use material culture as a primary witness, since the access to such culture is always limited and is mostly unbalanced.¹ Much of this imbalance is accidental, but it is also true that monuments and memorials are built by the victors, usually upon the foundations of prior cultures and religions.

Jewish Christianity has been defined as persons and groups in antiquity who seek to continue God's covenant with Israel by both following Jesus and maintaining Jewishness. Is there material evidence of this movement in the first four centuries? If so, does this evidence contribute to a broader understanding of Jewish Christianity?² Can archeological evidence help to locate Jewish Christianity on the religious map of antiquity?

A number of scholars think so. The most extensive reconstruction is found in the publications of two Italian scholars working within the Franciscan order – Bellarmino Bagatti and Emmanuela Testa.³ At the heart of the Bagatti-Testa thesis is a Jewish Christian community similar to that described by F. C. Baur: a

¹ For example, there is a great deal of material evidence now available on the Qumran sect, but almost nothing of the Sadducees. There is no simple equivalence between archeological evidence and historical importance. The most obvious example of this is the paucity of material evidence for Christianity prior to the fourth century. The same imbalance may be true of Jewish Christianity.

² Detailed information and acknowledgements for archeological photographs and images are found in the List of Figures. I am especially grateful to the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum; to Peter Lampe; to Birger Pearson; to C. M. Dauphin; to Shimon Gibson; to Joan Taylor and Oxford University Press; to the Israel Exploration Society; to the *Biblical Archeology Review*; to the Continuum Publishing Group.

³ Their work was presented in a series of publications, but is summarized in Bellarmino Bagatti, *The Church from the Circumcision*, trans. E. Hoade (Jerusalem, 1971) [Italian mss. first published in French in 1968]. The portrait of Jewish Christianity formulated by Bagatti and Testa is traced in J. Briand, *The Judeo-Christian Church of Nazareth*, trans. M. Deuel (Jerusalem, 1982, [French edition 1979]). A detailed summary of their work is found in the extensive refutation by Joan Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places: The Myth of Jewish-Christian Origins* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

Petrine group, later led by James, who practiced the Jewish Law and opposed the work of Paul. Drawing upon the work of Jean Daniélou, Bagatti and Testa looked for Jewish Christianity in distinctive ideas and practices: thus they typically looked for mystical, apocalyptic, and gnostic forms as signals of a distinctive Jewish Christianity. Bagatti and Testa believed this group developed a heterodox theology and venerated holy places, especially caves. Bagatti and Testa associated Jewish Christians with the *mirim* slandered by the rabbis and with the Ebionite heretics abused by the Church Fathers.

The function of this hypothesis is unique. Bagatti and Testa argued that the veneration of and pilgrimage to Christian holy sites stirred by Constantine's patronage of Christianity was not a new phenomenon. Many of these sites, said Bagatti and Testa, were venerated and preserved by Jewish Christians. In this way, they imagined a continuity of veneration for the major Christian holy places.⁴ Based on their reconstruction of Jewish Christianity from literary sources, they expected to find evidence of Jewish Christian veneration beneath numerous Christian sites. Their hypothesis is primarily about the continuity of holy places, and Bagatti and Testa showed little interest *per se* in the phenomenon of Jewish Christianity. The Bagatti-Testa hypothesis was challenged by various scholars, with the most extensive analysis and critique offered by Joan Taylor.⁵

I. Ossuaries

Bagatti and Testa argued that various ossuaries (burial boxes for bones) contained Jewish Christian inscriptions. The strongest claims were made for ossuaries found in a Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives.⁶ Bagatti interpreted the cross shapes used to designate the direction of the lid as versions of the Hebrew letter *tau* and insisted on a Jewish Christian provenance. He noted the names found there were common among Christians. Bagatti also found what appeared to be a *chi-rho* on an ossuary belonging to Judah, who is described as the son of Judah the proselyte. Bagatti interpreted this *chi-rho* in light of its later use as a Christian symbol in the time of Constantine and found here further evidence for Jewish Christianity. Joan Taylor notes a range of other options for understanding the abbreviation, she points out that the names are ordinary Jewish names, and she insists upon the primacy of the Jewish context of the inscription.⁷

⁴ Since Christianity had no official sanction, Jewish Christianity provided a necessary component for their theory of continuity.

⁵ Taylor, *Holy Places*.

⁶ The property belongs to the Franciscans and is known by the name *Dominus Flevit*.

⁷ Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 9–12.

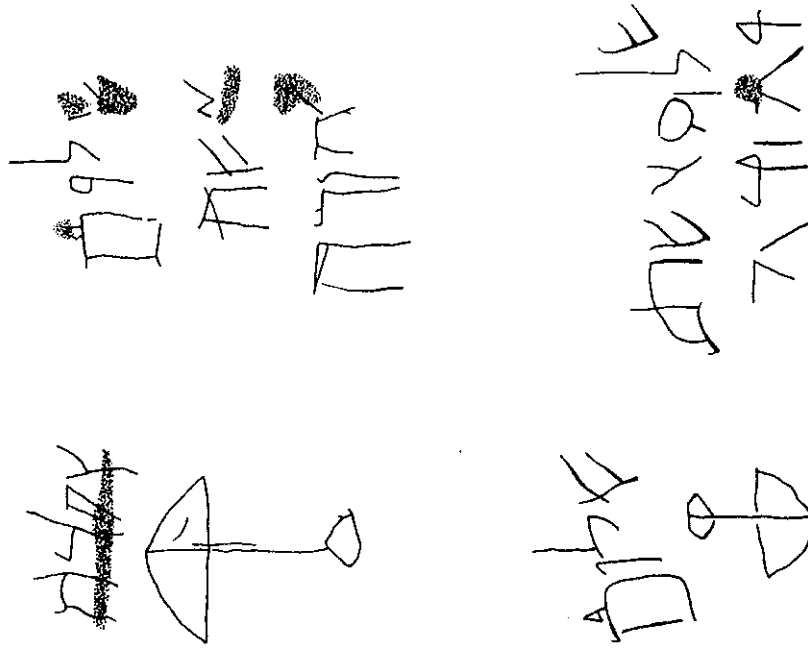


Figure 1: Ossuary graffiti from Jerusalem, Mount of Offence⁸

⁸ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 6, sketch based on C. Clermont-Ganneau, *Archeological Researches 1873–1874*, i (London, 1899).

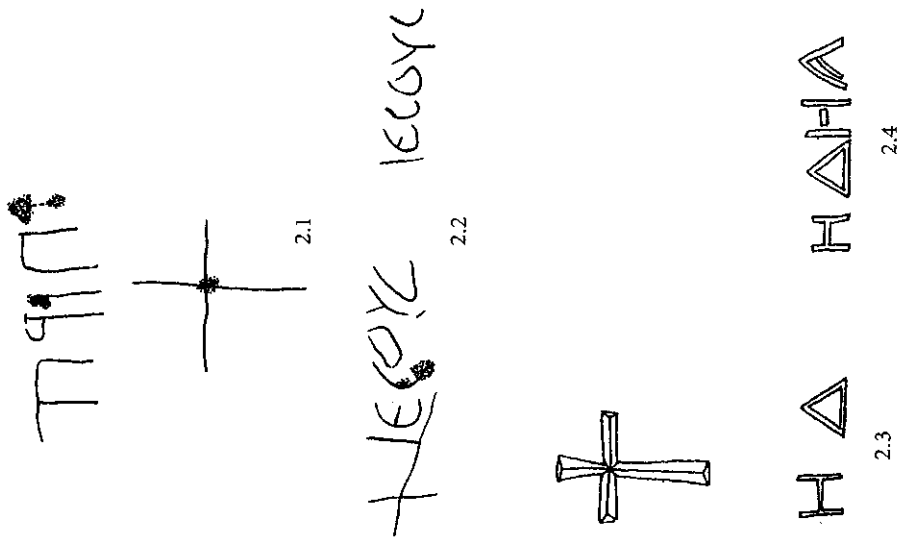


Figure 2: Ossuary graffiti from Jerusalem, Mount of Offence⁹

⁹ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 7, sketch based on Clermont-Ganneau (1899).

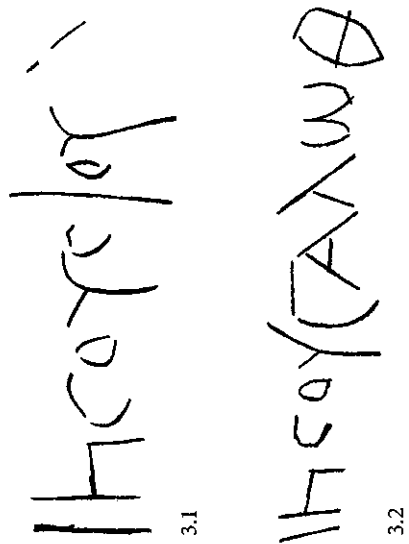


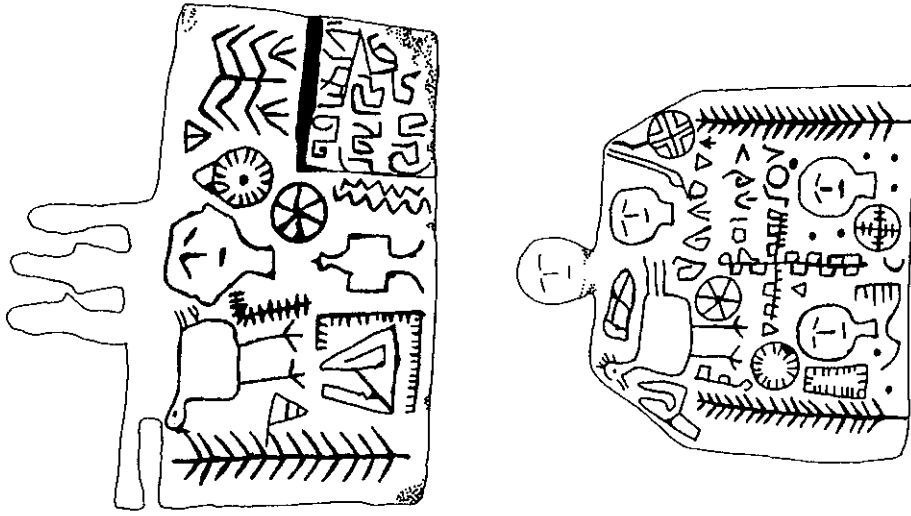
Figure 3: Ossuary graffiti from Jerusalem, Talpiot¹⁰

2. Stelai

Bagatti also identified a number of *stelai* (upright stone slabs or pillars) found near Hebron as evidence of Jewish Christianity. Bagatti identified the Archontics described in Epiphanius as a Jewish Christian sect located near Hebron. He then associated the *stelai* with the Archontics and used their ideas, taken from patristic writings against heretics, to describe the theology of Jewish Christianity. This connection is tenuous. It appears that no other writer, ancient or modern, associates Archontics with Jewish Christianity, and Taylor offers strong evidence that the *stelai* are forgeries.¹¹

¹⁰ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 8, sketch based on E. L. Sukenik, "The Earliest Records of Christianity," *American Journal of Archeology* 51 (1947), pp. 361-65.

¹¹ Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 12-16.

Figure 4: Stelai from Khirbet Kilkish¹²

¹² Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 14.

3. The Nativity Cave

Bagatti and Testa also claimed that the cave below the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was used by Jewish Christians.¹³ The earliest literary reference to a Bethlehem cave is found in Justin (150s ce), who says that Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled by the birth of Jesus in a cave near Bethlehem (*Dial.* 78.12–13). The 3rd century *Protevangelium of James* also tells of the birth of Jesus in a cave in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Origen, writing around 247 ce, says that local people in Bethlehem show a cave and a manger where Jesus was born (*Contra Celsum* 1.51). Eusebius (c. 260 to c. 340 ce) has a similar report: "It is agreed by all that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, as even a cave is shown by the local inhabitants there to those who come from elsewhere for a look" (*Dem. Evang.* 3.2.47). The Church of the Nativity was dedicated in 339 ce, some years after a visit to the site by the empress Helena. The church was located above a cave that likely served as a cultic site for the veneration of Adonis. Taylor notes that it is not clear that this is the cave referred to by Justin Martyr and the *Protevangelium of James*. She suggests the references by Origen and Eusebius show that by the end of the 3rd century a pagan cult site was identified as the birthplace of Jesus.¹⁴

The Bagatti claim that Jewish Christians venerated the cave beneath the Church of the Nativity falters on four major points. First, it is not clear that this particular cave was known to followers of Jesus. Secondly, it is not clear that Christians before the time of Constantine venerated this site, or any other site, as the place of Jesus' birth. Thirdly, even if Christians honored this particularly site by the late 3rd century, it is not at all clear that these are Jewish Christians. Fourthly, many scholars now think it more probable that Jesus was born in Nazareth. If so, the Bethlehem story is based on particular readings of the Hebrew Bible and would require some period of development; it is unlikely that the earliest followers of Jesus told of his birth in Bethlehem.

¹³ Bagatti, *The Church from the Circumcision*, pp. 133–34; Testa, "Le 'Grotte dei Misteri' giudeo-cristiane," *LA* 14 (1964), 65–144.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 96–112.

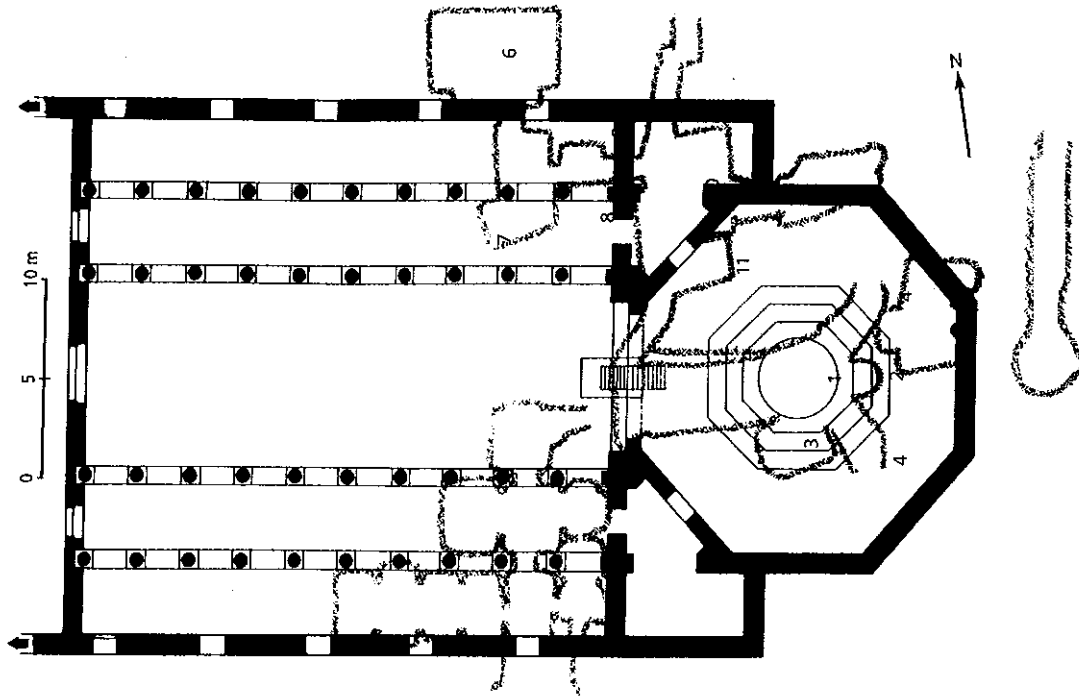


Figure 5: Church of the Nativity and underlying caves¹⁵

¹⁵ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 111, sketch based on L.-H. Vincent, "Bethléem: le sanctuaire de la Nativité," *Revue biblique* 45 (1936), 544-74.

4. The Golgotha Cave

Bagatti and Testa also argued that Jewish Christians used a constructed cave at Golgotha to venerate the tomb of Christ and that they did so prior to Hadrian's building of a temple to Venus on the site. Bagatti and Testa believed the cave was used first for divination by pagans, next was venerated by Jewish Christians, then was filled and covered with a temple to Venus by Hadrian.¹⁶

Bagatti and Testa think that Jewish Christians believed the grave of Adam lay beneath the rock of Calvary. This claim is based on a description by Origen in his *Commentary on Matthew* near the end of the 3rd century: "Concerning the place of the skull, it came to me that Hebrews hand down [the tradition that] the body of Adam has been buried there, in order that 'as in Adam all die' both Adam would be raised and 'in Christ all will be made alive.'" While the origin of this tradition cannot be determined, there appears to be no connection to the artificial cave beneath. The textual evidence for a cave beneath the rock of Calvary begins only in the 7th century ce, but even here the cave is on the Temple Mount. Taylor suggests the 6th century *Cave of the Treasures*, based on a Jewish legend that describes a different cave on the Temple Mount, may be the source for the idea of a cave beneath the rock of Calvary. She dates the artificial cave beneath the rock of Calvary some time after the Persian invasion (614 ce).¹⁷

Thus the idea that Jewish Christians venerated this cave is not based on any material evidence. Because they presume that Jewish Christians venerated caves, Bagatti and Testa transfer this presumption to the cave dug beneath the rock of Calvary. From a critical perspective, the most that can be concluded is that Origen knows a Hebraic tradition that Adam is buried beneath Golgotha. If the Adam-Christ connection is made by Origen, then he has appropriated this Hebraic legend. If the Adam-Christ connection precedes Origen, then this is likely a Jewish Christian tradition. If so, the tradition is a literary one; the material evidence is most likely created subsequent to the tradition and perhaps in support of the tradition.

¹⁶ The reconstruction of Bagatti and Testa is discussed in detail by Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 113-42.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 132.

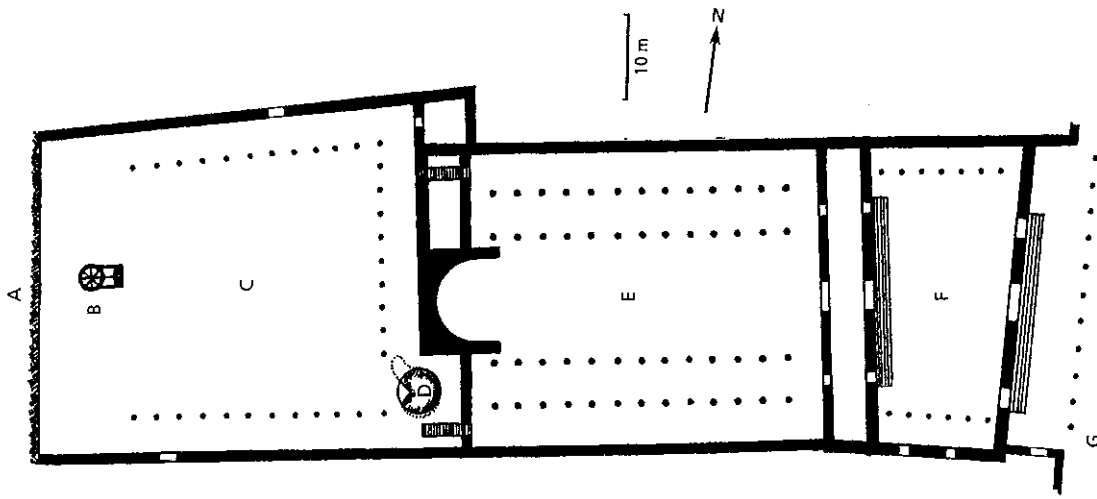


Figure 6: Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem¹⁸

¹⁸ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 115, sketch based on J. Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

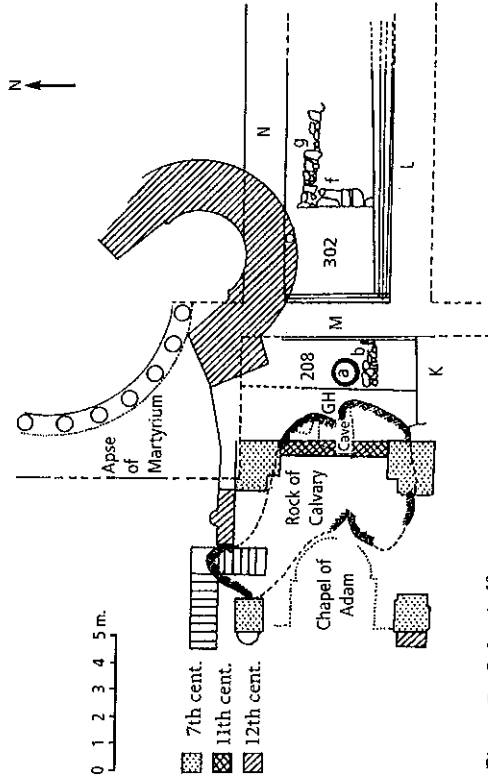


Figure 7: Golgotha¹⁹



Figure 8: Cave cut into the east side of Golgotha²⁰

¹⁹ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 125, sketch based on V. C. Corbo, *Il Santo Sepolcro di Gerusalemme*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem, 1981-82).

²⁰ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 134, photo from Studium Biblicum Franciscanum.

5. The Mount of Olives Church (Eleona)

The Constantinian basilica on the Mount of Olives is built over a cave, and Bagatti claimed this cave was used for cultic purposes from the time of the apostles.²¹ Taylor notes that the cave was excavated by L.-H. Vincent in 1910, but no evidence of Jewish Christian use was found.²² The first literary mention of such a cave is found in the *Acts of John*, a gnostic text from the early 3rd century. In this text the beloved disciple named John flees from the crucifixion of Jesus and takes refuge in a cave on the Mount of Olives. Here he experiences an appearance of the heavenly Jesus and receives the illumination of the secret of salvation. Eusebius knows the tradition of a cave in his *Demonstration Evangelica* (c. 318 ce), and he also retains gnostic images:

According to the common and received account, the feet of our Lord and Saviour, himself the Word of God, truly stood . . . upon the Mount of Olives at the cave that is shown there. On the ridge of the Mount of Olives he prayed and handed on to his disciples the mysteries of the end, and after this he made his ascension into Heaven . . . (*Dem. Evang.* 6.18).

Eusebius, in his *Life of Constantine*, connects the cave tradition to the church built by Helena:

The emperor's mother also raised up a stately edifice on the Mount of Olives, in memory of the journey into Heaven of the Saviour of all. She put up a sacred church, a temple, on the ridge beside the summit of the whole Mount. Indeed a true report holds the Saviour to have initiated his disciples into secret mysteries in this very cave. (*Vita Const.* 3.43)

None of this evidence points to a distinctly Jewish Christian veneration of the cave. Indeed, the tradition of the cave retains gnostic images.

What may be present in early traditions is a Jewish Christian connection, not to the cave, but to the Mount of Olives. Eusebius says that, before the patronage of Constantine, Christians were drawn to the Mount of Olives:

Those who believe in Christ from all over the world come and congregate, not as in the old days because of the splendour of Jerusalem, nor that they might assemble and worship in the old Temple at Jerusalem, but in order to learn together the interpretation, according to the prophets, of the capture and devastation of Jerusalem, and that they may worship at the Mount of Olives, opposite the city, where the glory of the Lord went when it left the former city. (*Dem. Evang.* 6.18).

While Eusebius speaks of believers coming from all over the world, the passage has Hebraic overtones. The description of the Mount of Olives as "opposite the city" recalls the perspective of Mark 13, where Jesus instructs his disciples about the endtime "while he was seated on the Mount of Olives over against the Temple."

²¹ Bagatti, *The Church of the Circumcision*, p. 134. The discussion by Taylor may be found in *Holy Places*, pp. 143–56.

²² Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 144.

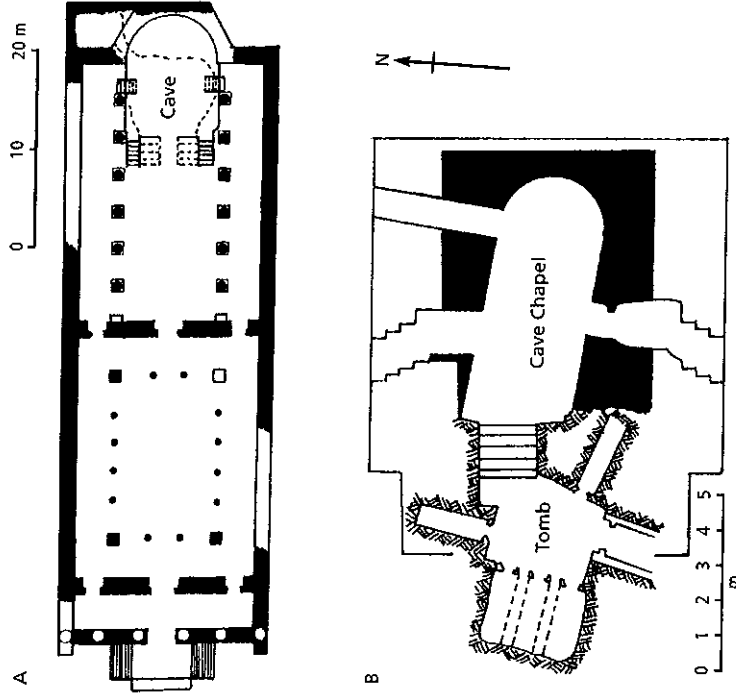


Figure 9. A: Eleona Church with underlying cave²³; B: Eleona cave with tomb²⁴

The searching of the prophets for explanations of contemporary events roots in a thoroughly Jewish practice. The influx to Jerusalem from many nations recalls the ingathering expected by the prophets and alluded to in Acts 2.9–11. The concern for the *shekinah* or glory of Yahweh is prominent in Hebrew narratives and in rabbinic debate. The obsession with the fate of Jerusalem occupies a central place in the Hebrew Bible and in rabbinic thought. Luke notes the continued connection of Jewish Christians of the first generation to various sites in Jerusalem (Acts 1.12; 1.19; 3.1; 3.9–10; 3.11; 5.12). As a consequence, it is plausible to see the association with the Mount of Olives described by Origen as rooted in a

²³ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 145, sketch based on L.-H. Vincent, *Jérusalem: recherches de topographie, d'archéologie et d'histoire, ii Jérusalem nouvelle* (Prais, 1914).

²⁴ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 145, sketch based on J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem as Jesus Knew it* (London, 1978).

Jewish Christian ethos. If such a tradition lies behind Origen's words, the evidence is wholly literary.

6. Various Caves and Tombs

Bellarmino Bagatti and Emmanuela Testa believed Jewish Christians had a general practice of using caves as "grottos of mystery" where they enacted cultic events.²⁵ They also thought Eusebius was drawing upon Jewish Christianity in his description of such caves (*Laud. Const.* 6.16-17).

Bagatti believed the grotto at Ein Karim was venerated by Jewish Christians, and this led in turn to the identification of the cave with Elizabeth and with John the Baptist. Bagatti and Testa held a similar position on the cave at Bethesda. The Jerusalem grotto between the two pools of Bethesda was accompanied by a structure with five porches in John 5.1-18, and it was known as a Jewish healing sight. The area became a site for the cult of Seraphis, then was converted in Byzantine times into a church. Taylor notes, however, that Byzantines transformed caves found in Jewish areas as well as in pagan areas. In a third example, Bagatti claimed the crosses found in the bell chamber of Khirbet el-Ain point to Jewish Christian usage, but Taylor again emphasizes the extensive Byzantine use.²⁶

None of the examples cited by Bagatti and Testa offer clear evidence of Jewish Christian use. It is only their presumption that Jewish Christians favored caves that suggests the reading of these various sites as Jewish Christian. Taylor finds a better explanation in the diverse use of caves by Byzantine Christians:

To conclude, caves of various types were used in Palestine by Byzantine Christians as holy places. Some of the caves had been significant in pagan, Jewish, and Samaritan tradition, and were provided with a Christian tradition that would supersede the former. Some of the caves had not been religiously significant before the Christians made use of them... Byzantine Christians most likely derived the idea of employing caves as zones of sacredness from pagans, but caves could have a symbolic value to the Christian mind that was new... Even caves which had formerly been used for nothing more than agricultural purposes could be utilized in the Byzantine period as holy places, because the idea of using caves in general as sites for numerous biblical events exerted such a powerful attraction.²⁷

Despite different conclusions by the first team to study the Bethany cave, Bagatti drew upon a 6th century text that spoke of Christ eating at Bethany and concluded this cave was one of three places where early Christians held cultic meals - Bethany, Gethsemane, and Zion.²⁸ Testa concluded that a Jewish practice of

²⁵ See, for example, Testa, "Le 'Grotto dei Misteri' guideo-cristiane," 14:65-144. Taylor responds to these various sites in *Holy Places*, pp. 157-79.

²⁶ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 169.

²⁷ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 179.

²⁸ Bagatti, "Espessionin bibliche nelle antiche iscrizioni cristiane della Palestina," LA 3

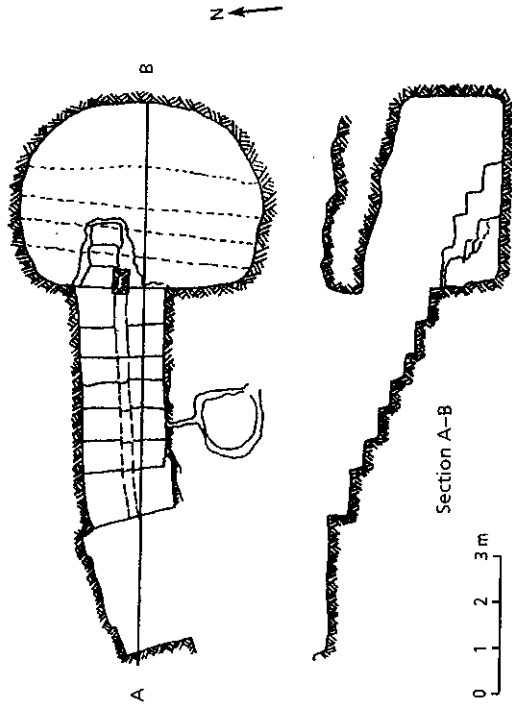


Figure 10: The cave at Bethany.²⁹

cultic meals was continued by Jewish Christians in the cave at Bethany. Most scholars, however, agree with the initial assessment that all evidence points to a religious use of the cave from the 4th to the 7th century. Nothing distinguishes this usage as Jewish Christian.

Testa, based on his reading of the 6th century text of Eutychius of Constantinople, also described the cave at Gethsemane as a site for Jewish Christian messianic banquets.³⁰ Testa interpreted the description of a rock on the Mount of Olives, mentioned by the Bordeaux Pilgrim in 333 ce, to refer to a cave. Actual mention of a cave is later, and even then it is infrequent.³¹

The cave appears to have served as the site of an oil press in Roman times, which may account for the name Gethsemane - likely a transliteration of a Hebrew term for oil press. John 18.2 notes that Jesus met often with his disciples in this place. Taylor finds here the most authentic of the cave sites: "It should not seem at all strange if Jesus and his disciples decided to use this cave as a place to sleep."³² It appears, however, that religious use of the site is a Constantian innovation:

(1953), 111-48. Testa developed the idea in "Le 'Grotte dei Misteri' guideo-cristiane," 128-31. Taylor discusses this claim in *Holy Places*, pp. 180-92.

²⁹ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 181, sketch based on P. Benoit and M. E. Boismard, "Un ancien sanctuaire chrétien à Bethanie," *Revue biblique* 58, pp. 200-51.

³⁰ Testa, "Le 'Grotte dei Misteri' guideo-cristiane," 123. This claim is discussed by Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 192-201.

³¹ These are listed by Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 198.

³² Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 201.

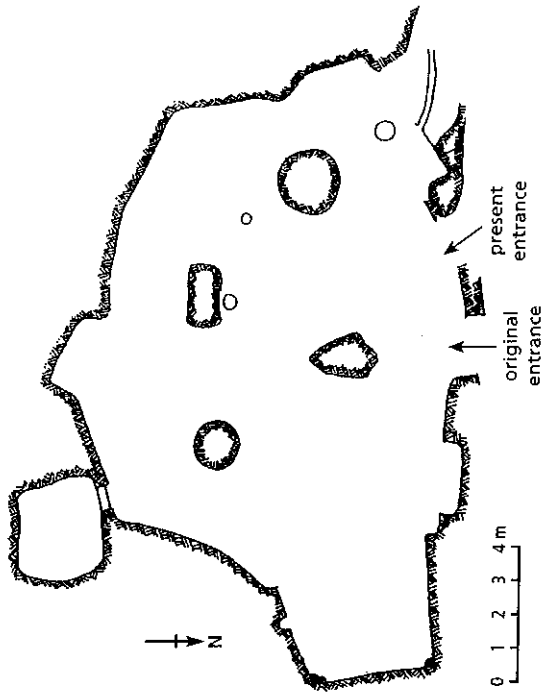


Figure 11: The cave at Gethsemane³³

the site was appropriated by the Church, along with an adjacent site, and these were determined to commemorate two important actions in the course of Jesus' Passion: the Cave of Gethsemane was understood to be where Jesus was arrested, and a nearby mass of rock was believed to be where he went to pray alone. The hypothesis that Jewish-Christians used the cave for their supposed suppers, however, is an idea unsupported by any evidence at all.³⁴

A similar conclusion may be reached on the Tomb of Mary located adjacent to the Cave of Gethsemane. While the tomb may be early, there is no indication of its authenticity as the tomb of Mary. The earliest datable evidence of usage shows that it continued to be used as a burial tomb in the 5th and 6th centuries. The earliest literary mention of a tomb of Mary likely dates from the Byzantine era, with mention by patristic writers or pilgrims dating from the 6th century. Bagatti's claim that Jewish Christians venerated the unadorned tomb is supported by no material evidence.

³³ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 199, sketch based on V. C. Corbo, *Ricerche archeologiche al Monte degli Ulivi, Gerusalemme* (Jerusalem, 1965).

³⁴ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 201.

7. Zion

The presence of an apostolic church on Mount Zion has been supported by Bagatti and Testa, but more recently by Bargil Pixner.³⁵ Pixner's argument is built on three claims: 1) the structure on Mount Zion identified to visitors as the tomb of David is actually a synagogue from the Roman period; 2) this was a Jewish Christian synagogue; 3) this synagogue was later known as the Church of the Apostles.

Pixner's argument is largely dependent on literary traditions. The basic identity of the site – the place to which disciples returned after the resurrection, the traditional site of the Last Supper, the location of Peter's Pentecost sermon – is drawn from the first two chapters of Acts. Few scholars would argue with his contention that the site was wrongly revered, from the 10th century on, as the site of David's tomb. Most would concur that Crusaders arriving in 1099 ce found the ruins of the Byzantine church and the remnants of tombs ascribed to David and to Stephen.

Disagreement arises over the results of a 1951 study of the site by Jacob Pinkerfeld.³⁶ Behind the Crusader memorial to David, Pinkerfeld identified a niche belonging to an older structure. Beneath the marble floors of the present struc-

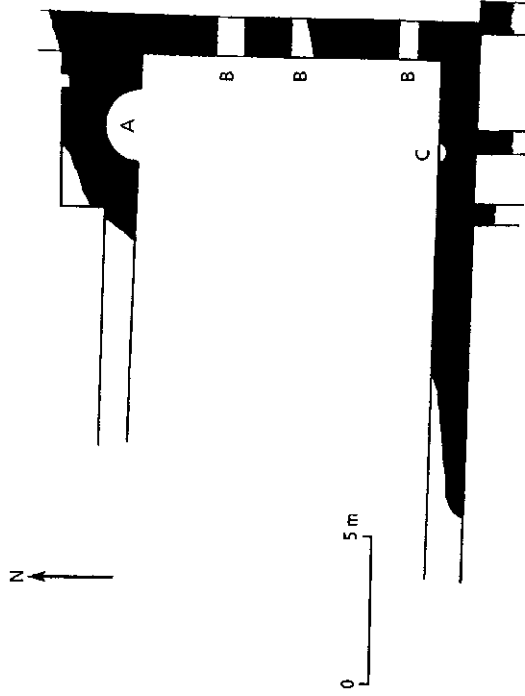


Figure 12: Earlier remains in the tomb of David, Mount Zion³⁷

³⁵ See, for example, Bagatti, *The Church of the Circumcision*, pp. 117–18. Pixner's argument may be found in "Church of the Apostles found on Mount Zion?" *BAR* 16/3 (1990), 16–35, 60.

³⁶ Pinkerfeld's results were not published, but they were accessible to Pixner.

³⁷ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 214, sketch adapted from B. Bagatti, "Ritrovamento archeologico sul Sion," *Liber Annuus* 31 (1981), pp. 249–56.

ture, Pinkerfeld found three earlier levels. The first of these (at 12 cm) was the Crusader floor, and the second (60 cm) belonged to a Byzantine structure. At 70 cm Pinkerfeld found another plaster floor and what appeared to be remains of a stone pavement. Pinkerfeld concluded that this floor belonged to the original building, together with the northern wall and its niche.

Controversy arises over the conclusions reached by Pinkerfeld and taken over by Pixner. Pinkerfeld concluded the niche and the deepest floor belonged to the same original structure, and he claimed that the niche was designed to hold a Torah scroll. On this basis, Pinkerfeld concluded the structure was a Roman era synagogue.

Pixner takes the matter a step further, arguing that this is a Jewish Christian synagogue. He contends that the synagogue is not directed toward the Temple Mount, as Pinkerfeld claimed, but is slightly askew and points toward the traditional site of Golgotha – now the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.³⁸ Inscriptions recovered from the wall plaster were handed on to Bagatti and Testa, who saw one (figure 13) as an abbreviation for “Conquer, Saviour, mercy” and another inscriptions as “O Jesus, that I may live, O Lord of the autocrat.”³⁹ On the basis of this reconstruction, Bagatti, Testa, and Pixner conclude that the building was originally a Jewish Christian synagogue.



Figure 13: Mt. Zion inscription⁴⁰

Pixner then attempts to reconstruct the history of this synagogue. He argues that it was built by Jewish Christians returning to Jerusalem in the post 70 ce era. They found ample space and convenient supplies in the ruins of Mount Zion to build upon the spot they considered the site of the Last Supper – the Upper Room later used by James as the center of the Jerusalem church. Pixner finds confirmation of his theory in the writings of Eusebius and various patristic works. The first literary identification is found in Epiphanius (315–403 ce), who says that in the time of Hadrian (c. 130 ce), there was a small church of God standing on the site of the Upper Room. Pixner claims that no Christian church could be built before Constantine, so the structure must be Jewish Christian. Pixner draws upon the 10th century work of Euthycius, who says the Pella community returned

³⁸ Pixner cites the Constantinian orientation of the Martyrion toward the tomb of Jesus. Pixner also cites the conclusion of Bagatti that the church in front of Mary's tomb, considered by Bagatti to be Jewish Christian, is oriented toward the tomb of Jesus.

³⁹ What is actually present are Greek letters (which Bagatti and Testa see as an abbreviation of “Conquer, Saviour, mercy”) and one clear word (autocrat).

⁴⁰ Bargil Pixner, “Church of the Apostles Found on Mount Zion,” *BAR* 16/3 (1990), p. 23.

to Jerusalem in the early 70s ce and built there their church. Pixner suggests this event is also remembered in the Odes of Solomon (Ode 4).

Judeo-Christian Synagogue



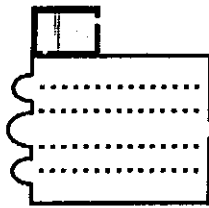
The Judeo-Christian synagogue, later known as the Church of the Apostles (late first century A.D.).

Octagonal Church & Church of the Apostles



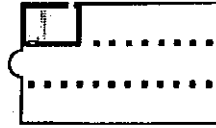
The Judeo-Christian synagogue, now known as the Church of the Apostles, next to an octagonal memorial church built by Theodosius I (ca. 382 A.D.). Seen here as portrayed in the Pudentiana mosaic.

Hagia Sion Basilica



The Church of the Apostles is now an extension to the Hagia Sion basilica (415–1009 A.D.). They are seen here in plan, at left, and as portrayed in the Madaba mosaic map.

Crusader Church of St. Mary



The Church of the Apostles (c. 1110–1219 A.D.), now incorporated within the Crusader Church.

Figure 14: Pixner's Reconstruction of the Church of the Apostles⁴¹

⁴¹ Pixner, “Church of the Apostles,” p. 25.

Pixner also notes the mention of a synagogue on Mount Zion by the Bordeaux Pilgrim of 333 ce. Reference to the church is also noted from Cyril in 348 ce and from Eucherius in 440 ce. Finally, Pixner claims that the Madaba map (6th century) indicates that the Byzantine Hagia Sion was built alongside the Church of the Apostles, not over it.

A key problem in the theory of Bagatti, Testa, Pinkerfeld, and Pixner is the sequence of layers. If the walls identified by Pinkerfeld are Roman era, one is left with a Crusader structure built directly on top of Roman walls. This would require that no part of the Byzantine structure remained or was used, but that the Roman walls were "remarkably well preserved."⁴² Taylor notes several other problems.⁴³ The walls identified as a Roman era synagogue are aligned with the foundations of surrounding Byzantine structures excavated by a variety of other archaeologists. The extraordinary size of the earliest wall blocks, which were likely recycled from Hadrian's time, suggests a much larger building than the synagogue proposed by Pixner. In the 6th century Madaba mosaic, the basilica of Holy Zion is the largest building in Jerusalem. Based on the area that was excavated in 1899, H. Renard estimated that Holy Zion basilica was 60 meters by 40 meters. This suggests the wall is designed to support the basilica rather than a small synagogue.

A number of other scholars have challenged the proposal that beneath the site of Hagia Zion is a Jewish Christian structure that was the "mother of all the churches."⁴⁴ Pinkerfeld identified the structure not as Jewish Christian, but as a Jewish synagogue. His claim was based on the size of the foundation stones, on the supposed orientation toward the Temple, and on his interpretation of the niche as a place for the Torah. Even this identification has been challenged. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor notes that

the architectural parallel to the niche that Pinkerfeld offers is that of the synagogue at Eshmosa, which is dated to the fourth century AD. A synagogue on Mount Zion in that period is inconceivable and orienting niches are not attested in first-century synagogues (e.g., Gamla, Masada).⁴⁵

While O'Connor challenged the idea that this was a synagogue, others have challenged the claim that any part of the structure is Roman era. The missing Byzantine layer would require clarification, and the presence of Greek inscriptions at the earliest layers of a Jerusalem synagogue would need to be explained. Beyond

⁴² Taylor's language, *Holy Places*, p. 217. Bagatti claimed the Byzantine church was beside the synagogue, not over it.

⁴³ Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 205–20.

⁴⁴ The language of Theodoret, *Hist. Eccles.* 5.9.17.

⁴⁵ Jerome, Murphy-O'Connor, "The Cenacle and Community: The Background of Acts 2:44–45" in *Scriptures and other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, J. Cheryl Exum, and Lawrence Stager (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 306.

this, the unusual height of the niche from the original floor (1.92 meters) and its large size (2.48 meters across, 2.44 meters high, 1.2 meters deep) suggest a different usage.⁴⁶ In addition, the presence of Jews or Jewish Christians on Mount Zion in the years following the destruction of Jerusalem (70 ce) cannot be presumed. Hillel Gava argues that

there was no Jewish Christian community on Mt. Zion during the Roman period. The entire hill was an encampment for the Tenth Roman Legion. With the legion's removal from Jerusalem at the end of the third century C.E., civilian settlement began in the area. By the fourth century C.E., the locations of the holy sites on Mt. Zion became established and the large Hagia Zion church was constructed there.⁴⁷

The literary evidence presents a mixed portrait. There are numerous references to the idea that the Holy Zion basilica occupies the site of an apostolic church identified with the Upper Room. This tradition is traced back to the visit of Hadrian in 133 ce.⁴⁸ On the other hand, all who speak of this tradition do so after the construction of the basilica of Holy Zion (likely between 333 and 348 ce). The Bordeaux Pilgrim reports in 333 ce that seven synagogues once stood on Mount Zion, but that only one remains. Cyril of Jerusalem is the first to speak of the Church of the Apostles on Mount Zion (c. 348 ce in *Cat.* 16.4). Near the end of the 4th century, Epiphanius reports that Hadrian (in 133 ce) found Mount Zion in ruins, but that "the little house of the community of God alone remained, where the disciples went up to the upper room after their return from the Ascension of the Saviour from the Mount of Olives" (*De Mens. et Pond.* 14). It is not clear how Epiphanius purports to know of this some 160 years later, but it is clear that he knows the tradition that the basilica of Holy Zion is built on the site of the Upper Room. Epiphanius also reports that the last of the seven synagogues stood until the time of Bishop Maximus of Jerusalem (335–49 ce). Thus, the literature reports one surviving synagogue (333 ce, but gone by 349 ce), one surviving apostolic church (purportedly 133 ce, but reported later by Cyril and by Epiphanius). It is significant that Eusebius never mentions the survival of an early house church in Jerusalem.

The merging of the two traditions – a surviving synagogue and the Church of the Apostles – seems to be found nowhere in antiquity; it was first suggested by Bagatti and Pixner. Their argument that the lowest layers of what is now venerated as the tomb of David are remains of the Church of the Apostles requires a number of presumptions.

⁴⁶ Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 215–217, 219, believes this was the first shrine for the purported bones of Stephen.

⁴⁷ Hillel Geva, "Queries & Comments," *BAR* 24.2 (March/April 1998), 14. Pixner believes the structure is not Jewish because it is oriented toward the tomb of Jesus, but that Romans, prior to Constantine, would never allow Christians to build churches. Because of this and because of the niche, Pixner concludes the structure must be Jewish Christian.

⁴⁸ Epiphanius in *De Mens. et Pond.* 14.

1. That the Crusader shrine (after 1099 ce) was built directly upon walls and foundations from the Roman era, with no intervening Byzantine materials.
2. That this Roman era structure, because of its niche, was a synagogue.
3. That this synagogue was not Jewish because it was oriented toward the tomb of Jesus.
4. That this structure was not Christian because they could not build before 325 ce.
5. That this structure was therefore a Jewish Christian synagogue.
6. That this Jewish Christian synagogue contained graffiti in Greek.
7. That this Jewish Christian synagogue is the church seen by Hadrian in 133 ce.
8. That this Jewish Christian structure is the surviving synagogue mentioned by the Bordeaux Pilgrim in 333 ce.
9. That Byzantine remains are absent from this site because the Holy Zion basilica was beside it, not over it.
10. That this Jewish Christian synagogue is the Church of the Apostles described by patristic writers after the building of the Holy Zion basilica (333–348 ce).
11. That this Jewish Christian synagogue is portrayed in a mosaic from c. 400 ce in the basilica of St. Pudentiana in Rome and in a 6th century mosaic from Modaba.

Despite the fervor generated by this site, critical analysis allows only modest and tentative conclusions. From a literary standpoint:

1. There was a tradition that the basilica of Holy Zion was built over the Upper Room.
2. There was a tradition that one synagogue survived on Mount Zion until the time of Maximus (335–349 ce).
3. There was a tradition that the Church of the Apostles survived at least until the time of Hadrian (133 ce).
4. All reports of these traditions appear after the construction of the Holy Zion basilica (333–348 ce).
5. The association of the Church of the Apostles with the surviving synagogue is likely a modern phenomenon.

Archeological conclusions are equally meager.

1. The present “tomb of David” and “Upper Room” on Mount Zion are mostly Crusader constructions.
2. The Crusader construction is built upon earlier walls and foundations.
3. The earlier walls are made of recycled stones of large dimension.
4. Like some nearby Byzantine structures, the earlier layers are oriented toward the supposed tomb of Jesus.
5. One of the earliest walls contains a niche of unusual height and size.
6. The plaster scraped from the walls by Pinkerfeld contains Greek graffiti.
7. There are four floor levels within the earliest walls: the present floor level is a marble slab, 12 centimeters below that is a plaster floor from Crusader times; at 60 centimeters is a Byzantine mosaic floor; at 70 centimeters is the earliest floor containing both plaster and stones.

Nothing in the archeological evidence requires the conclusion that this structure was a synagogue. While it is likely the earliest walls were built from recycled Roman era stones, no archeological evidence requires a conclusion that the walls themselves are built in the Roman era. If the second floor level is Byzantine, it is

reasonable to expect some remnants of Byzantine walls. The original floor is older than the Byzantine mosaic, but no one can say how much older. Joan Taylor and other scholars amply demonstrate that the literary and archeological evidence does not sustain the thesis of Bagatti and Pixner. It is difficult, however, to prove a negative, and Taylor’s work does not prove that Bagatti and Pixner are wrong; she only proves their conclusions are unsubstantiated. No absolute verdict is allowed in either direction.

How then should the total body of the evidence be evaluated? Here again it is necessary to speak in terms of possibility, plausibility, and probability. It is plausible that the first meeting place of the Jerusalem community was remembered by subsequent generations and that some remnant of this site endured into the 4th century. If this was the worship center of the first generation of Jesus’ followers, then it is a Jewish Christian site. It is also plausible that Jewish Christians referred to their places of worship as synagogues.⁴⁹ It is possible, then, that the basilica of Holy Zion was built on the site of the Church of the Apostles. If that is true, any archeological remains of the Church of the Apostles would likely be limited to the lowest floor level. Nothing in these remains provides meaningful information about the nature and extent of Jewish Christianity.

8. Nazareth

Nazareth provides an important component of the Bagatti-Testa hypothesis.⁵⁰ They argued that Nazareth was a Jewish Christian stronghold well into the 5th century and that Byzantine Christian shrines are a continuation of Jewish Christian veneration of holy sites in Nazareth. The most important of these Jewish Christian shrines, said Bagatti and Testa, was the Jewish Christian synagogue at Nazareth.

8.1 Literary Data

The Bagatti-Testa reconstruction of Nazareth is heavily dependent on their interpretation of literary data. In his publication on the sites, Bagatti treated the literature first, then the archeological data. He acknowledged that the literary texts concerning Nazareth “are the basis for an understanding of the monuments.”⁵¹

New Testament scholars have long suggested that Luke tells the birth story from the perspective of Mary (1.26–56), while Matthew emphasizes the experi-

⁴⁹ James 2.2; Epphanianus (*Pen.* 30.18.12).

⁵⁰ Bellarmino Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, trans. E. Horde (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1969). The Italian original, *Gli scavi di Nazaret*, appeared in 1967. See the summary and analysis of Bagatti’s position in Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 221–67.

⁵¹ Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, p. 9.

ences of Joseph (1.1–25; 2.13–15). Although a long history of scholarship sees this as an indication of diverse sources, traditions, and redactions behind the two gospels, Bagatti offered a novel explanation.⁵² He insisted that the gospel writers knew of two monuments in Nazareth – a house of Mary and a house of Joseph – and that these 1st century shrines gave rise to the differing nativity stories.

Bagatti also argued that Matthew's reference in 13.54 to "their synagogue" implies a contrast to "our synagogue."⁵³ Bagatti failed to note the New Testament presents no hint of any positive reception of Jesus in Nazareth. If any connection is to be drawn from the literary accounts, Nazareth is the last place one should look for Jewish Christianity.

Bagatti argued that the 3rd century *Protevangelium of James* is designed to promote Jewish Christianity in Palestine.⁵⁴ He extrapolated from the 4th century *History of Joseph* that early Christians venerated the tomb of Joseph in a cave at Nazareth.⁵⁵ Bagatti also believed the literary references to the family of Jesus⁵⁶ confirm that Jewish Christian relatives of Jesus lived in Nazareth throughout the first centuries of the common era. He believed that the curses against the *minim* point to Jewish Christians in the Galilee. Bagatti argued that the Nazareth shrines were not mentioned by Christians until the 6th century precisely because these sites were in the hands of Jewish Christians.⁵⁷ He read into the passing re-

⁵² Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, p. 10.

⁵³ Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, p. 10. Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 222–23, correctly notes that Mark uses "their synagogues" to refer to the synagogue of a particular town (Mk. 1.39) and that his usage is taken up by both the Gospel of Luke (4.15) and by the Gospel of Matthew (4.23; 9.35; 13.54). Mt. 13.54 does say "their synagogue" over against "the synagogue" in Mk. 6.2 and Lk. 4.16. It is perhaps too much to construct a second synagogue on the foundation of a shifting pronoun.

⁵⁴ Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, p. 11. The majority opinion is that the *Protevangelium* was written outside of Palestine by someone who knew little of Jewish life or Palestinian geography. In the *Protevangelium of James*, the annunciation to Mary occurs not in Nazareth, but in Judea.

⁵⁵ Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, p. 12. This runs contrary to the nature of the *Protevangelium* text, which locates Nazareth in Judea not far from the Temple. Bagatti argues that the motif of burial in a cave sealed with a rock places the story in the 1st century and that the cosmic ladder imagery places it within Jewish Christianity. Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 223–24, correctly notes that both elements are found in various religious traditions and have no intrinsic connection to any known form of Jewish Christianity.

⁵⁶ Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, p. 10, draws upon New Testament references (Mt. 10.3; 13.55–56; 27.56; Jn. 19.25; and a literal reading of "brothers of the Lord" in 1 Cor. 9.5). He also refers to Eusebius' report on the family of Jesus (*HE* 3.36.3) and to Eusebius' description of the letter to Aristides in which Julius Africanus describes relatives of Jesus in Nazareth and Kochaba (*HE* 1.7). Taylor's insistence that these relatives are Jewish rather than Jewish Christian is strained (*Holy Places*, pp. 31–36, 225).

⁵⁷ Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, p. 18. Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 226, correctly notes that patristic writers generally did not ignore their opponents. In the case of Jewish Christians, they expounded at length upon their errors.

ference to Nazarenes by Eusebius (*Onomasticon* 138.24 through 140.2) a distinction between Nazarenes of the patristic era and the first generation of Christians.

It is apparent that Bagatti reached the end of the literary analysis with the clear expectation of finding in Nazareth a continuing Jewish Christianity centered around shrines from the earliest periods of Christianity. It is also clear that his reading of the literary evidence is forced and that it shaped his understanding of the archeological data.

8.2 Archeological Data

The area around the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth contains a dizzying array of archeological sites (caves, agricultural sites, mosaics, cisterns, a church, and a basilica) and layers (Middle Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman, Byzantine, Crusader, modern). Archeological work began as early as 1892. An 18th century church was demolished, and the area was explored by Bagatti in the 1950s. The modern basilica of the Annunciation was dedicated in 1968.



Figure 15: Agricultural sites at Nazareth⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 232, courtesy of Studium Biblicum Franciscanum.

The area around the Church of the Annunciation is marked by a number of rock cuts. Bagatti identified tombs from the Middle Bronze Age, silos from the Iron Age, wine and olive processing areas, storage compartments, and bell-shaped cisterns.⁵⁹ Surrounding areas have caves that suggest agricultural use in the Roman period.

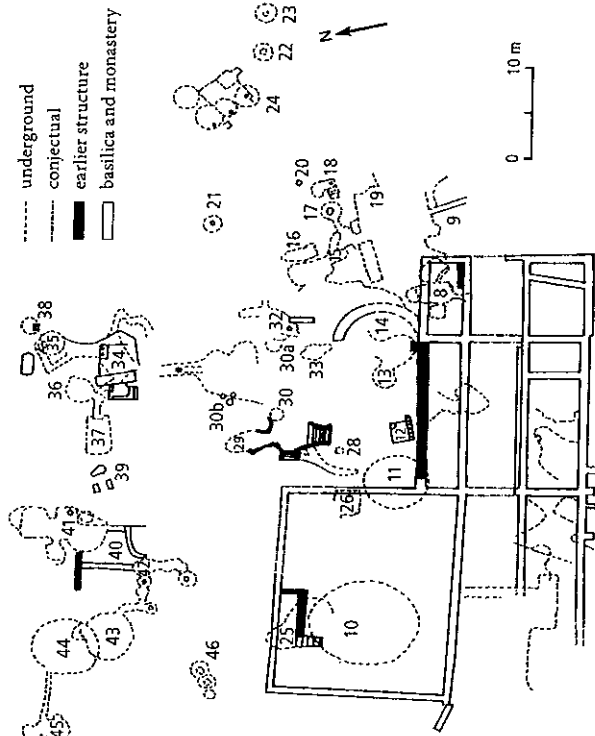


Figure 16: Agricultural sites beneath the Church of the Annunciation, Nazareth.⁶⁰

Bagatti believed he has found evidence of early Jewish Christianity in a number of these sites. He saw in drawings from a nearby collection of Roman and Byzantine tombs an incorrect spelling of $\varphi\omega\sigma$ (light) and argued that this term has a special connection to Jewish Christians.

Bagatti established that a Byzantine basilica stood alongside of a shrine to the Annunciation. There was a monastery connected to this basilica and a cave complex beneath it. Nine mosaics are associated with this complex, seven of which

⁵⁹ See Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, pp. 2, 27–37, 245. Taylor discusses this material in *Holy Places*, pp. 230–67.

⁶⁰ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 231, sketch based on B. Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1969).

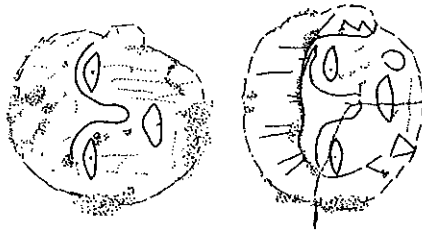


Figure 17: Bagatti's $\varphi\omega\sigma$ drawings.⁶¹

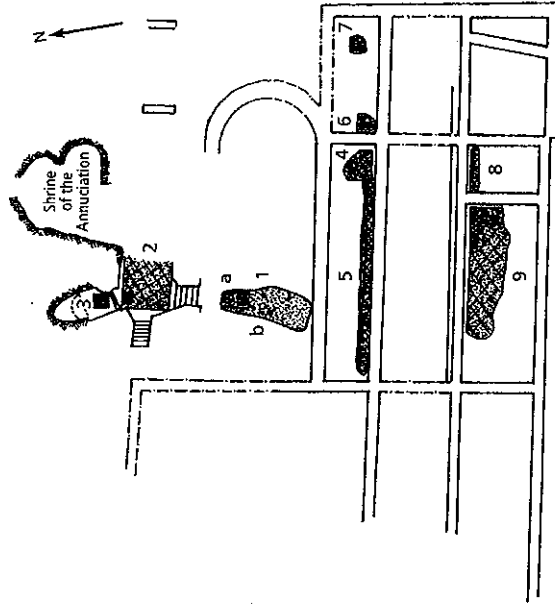


Figure 18: Mosaics at the Church of the Annunciation, Nazareth.⁶²

⁶¹ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 234, sketch based on B. Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, p. 245, figures 197 and 198.

⁶² Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 236, sketch based on B. Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*.

likely are from the 5th to 7th century. The mosaic in the central nave and the mosaic in a small cave near the Grotto of the Annunciation both appear to be earlier.

The mosaic in the central nave is not oriented with the basilica, but with the steps leading into the complex of caves where the shrine of the Annunciation is located. The remnant of this mosaic is 89 cm wide and 169 cm long. At the southern end is a frame containing two crosses and some six small rectangles. Intersecting lines create three triangles on the east side of this block, with another triangle on the west side. Bagatti reads these geometric patterns as a Greek *delta* and *chi*, which he interprets as Jewish Christian symbols rooted in Pythagorean thought and gnosticism.⁶³ Moving to the north, the center of the mosaic contains a field with some six small crosses in the shape of a Greek *chi*. The center of this field is dominated by a wreathlike circle enclosing a symbol that combines a cross and a Greek *rho*. The northern section of the mosaic is mostly lost, but it appears to contain an oblong symbol similar to a table. A few tiles in the center of this section have been conjectured to contain a large Greek *mu*, perhaps in reference to Mary.

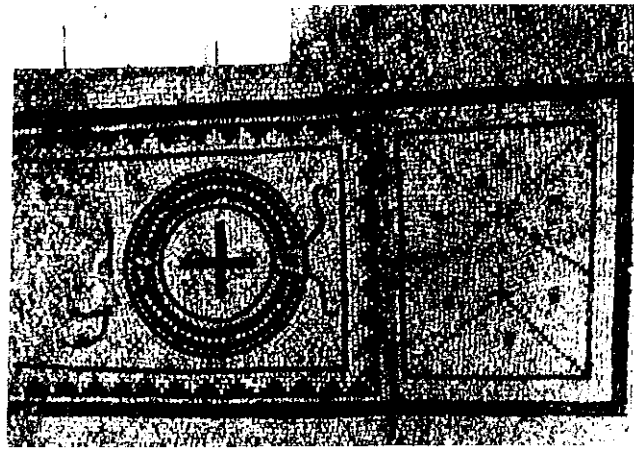


Figure 19. Mosaic 1 in the central nave⁶⁴

⁶³ Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, p. 99.

⁶⁴ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 238, courtesy of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum.

The mosaic in the small cave to the north measures 107 cm square and contains similar images, including the cross-*rho* and a variation of intersecting lines.⁶⁵

Taken together, the nine mosaics present three stages. The two cross-*rho* mosaics are the oldest, and there is some evidence that a third mosaic from this era once covered the floor of the shrine of the Annunciation. The second stage is represented by six mosaics in the basilica, the monastery, and the Chapel of the Angel. A later mosaic of high quality has been placed over one of these second stage mosaics. It is clear that the cross-*rho* mosaics are earlier, but how much earlier? Bagatti argues that there is no good reason why these mosaics should not be dated prior to 427 ce, when Theodosius II banned the use of crosses in floor mosaics. Taylor counters this claim with examples in which this edict was ignored.⁶⁶ A similar cross-*rho* inside a wreath is found in a basilica nearby in the Galilee at Evron and can be dated from 415 ce. On this basis, Taylor assigns the oldest mosaics to the early 5th century.

Neither case can be proven. The cross-*rho* mosaics at Nazareth are earlier than the second stage Byzantine mosaics, but it is impossible to say how much earlier. There is no material evidence to support the claim by Bagatti and Testa that these mosaics are specifically Jewish Christian.

More intriguing is the basin that lies under the southern end of the cross-*rho* mosaic in the central nave. Taylor describes this area:

The basin . . . under mosaic 1b measures 1.95 by 2 metres, and is entered by a flight of five rock-cut steps on the southern side. The basin (2 m. deep) and the steps are coated with lime plaster. In the north-east corner there is a further basin (70 x 60 cm.) with a smaller one inside, and on the northern wall there is a recess . . . measuring 63 by 61 centimetres. On the north and west walls graffiti have been incised into the plaster whilst it was still wet . . . it should be noted that an oxidized curved knife of a type used for grape harvesting, as Bagatti himself noted, was discovered in the recess.⁶⁷

A similar basin is found under the nearby Church of Joseph:

The rock-cut and partly built basin underneath the Church of St. Joseph . . . measures 2.05 by 2.20 metres, and is 2 metres deep. It is entered by a flight of seven steps. Both the floor, the steps, and part of the surrounding area were covered with mosaic, of which most still remains. The mosaic has a design of black rectangles on a white background. The sides of the basin are plastered. Sherds fixed into this plaster were identified by Bagatti as Byzantine, but he also noted that they could just as easily be late Roman. There is a small basin in the north-west corner, a narrow channel between the steps and the main part of the floor and a basalt rock inserted into the floor east of the basin.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Testa, *Nazaret guideo-cristiana* (Jerusalem, 1969), pp. 129–132, argues for Jewish Christian symbolism in this mosaic.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 242–43.

⁶⁷ Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 244–45. She provides photographs and discussion of these Greek inscriptions.

⁶⁸ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 246.

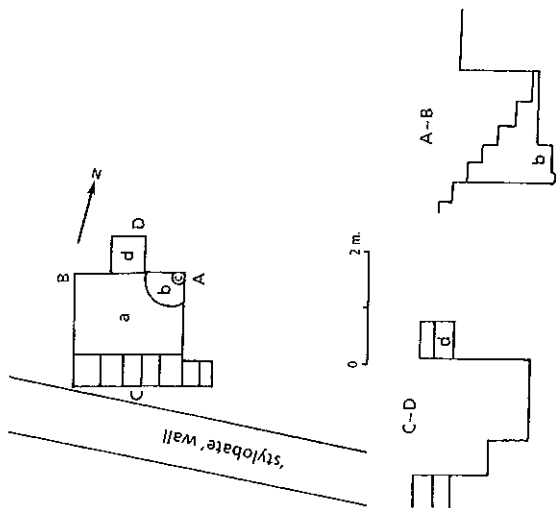


Figure 20: Basin under the central nave mosaic⁶⁹



Figure 21: Basin beneath the Church of Joseph⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 245.

⁷⁰ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 249, courtesy of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum.

Testa interpreted random and informal scratchings low on the first basin as clear signs of Jewish Christianity; Taylor reads them as the scratchings of children before the plaster dried and the vat was filled. For the second basin, Bagatti believed it is a Jewish Christian baptistry, while Testa believed the seven steps re-

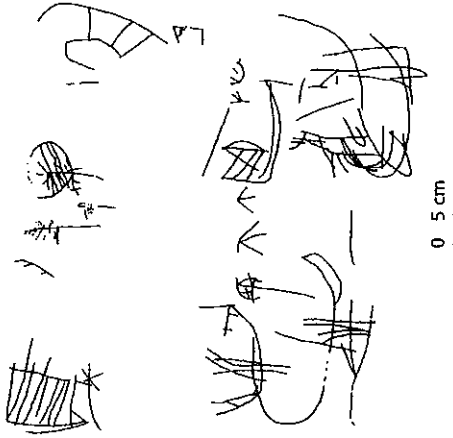


Figure 22a: Graffiti on the wall of the central nave basin⁷¹

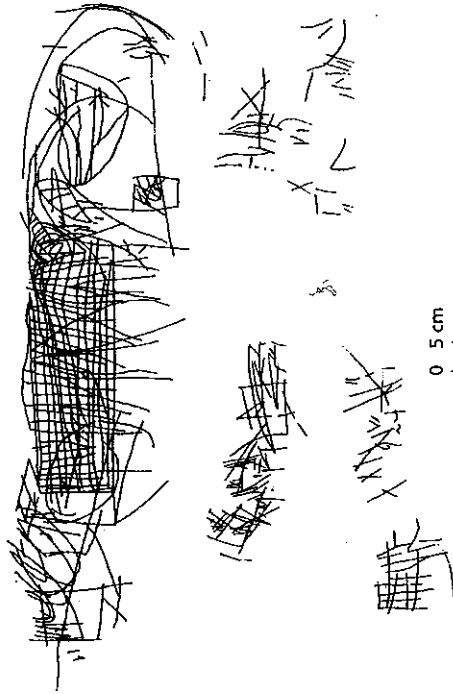


Figure 22b: Graffiti on the wall of the central nave basin⁷²

⁷¹ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 247, sketch based on B. Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*.

⁷² Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 247, sketch based on B. Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*.

present the heavenly descent/ascent of Jesus, the channel represents the Jordan, the basalt stone is Christ, and the mosaic rectangles are angels.⁷³ Taylor concludes that both basins were agricultural, probably used in wine making. This is consistent with the surrounding area and with agricultural areas under the

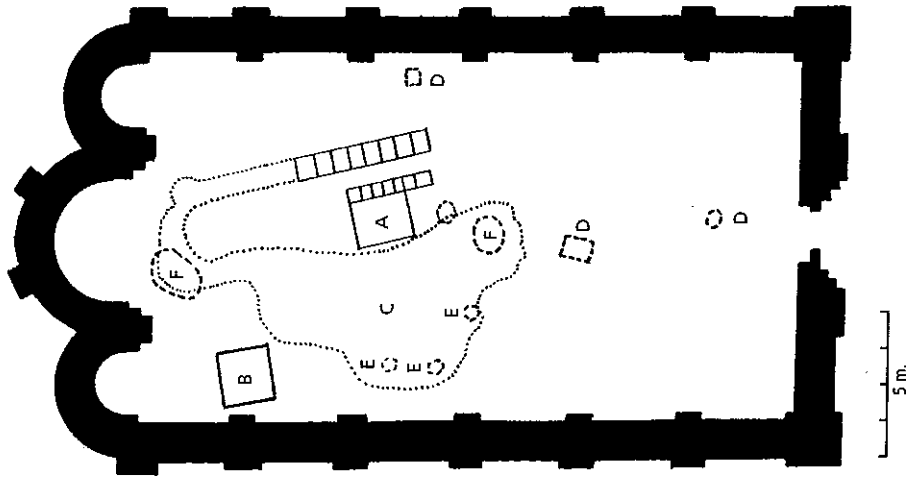


Figure 23: Agricultural sites and the basin beneath the Church of Joseph⁷⁴

⁷³ Testa, *Nazareth guideo-cristiana*, pp. 42–44.

⁷⁴ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 248, sketch adapted from P. Viaud, *Nazareth et ses deux Églises de l'Annonciation et de Saint-Joseph d'après les fouilles récentes* (Paris, 1910).

Church of Joseph. The infill of the Annunciation basin contained Roman redware that likely dates from the latter half of the 4th century.

The final area of interest is a small grotto about 2 meters across found near the shrine of the Annunciation and behind the second cross-*rho* mosaic. The east wall contains six layers of plaster with extensive graffiti, all in Greek. Bagatti believed he found the Greek letter *kappa* in the inscriptions and concludes the cave was a monument to the martyr Conon, deemed by Bagatti to be a Jewish Christian. Further inscriptions were read, with a great deal of creativity, in support of this theory. The most dramatic find in this cave was an inscribed figure holding aloft what looks like a cross. Bagatti interpreted the headaddress as Jewish and concluded that this was John the Baptist. A closer look suggests a helmeted Roman soldier with a shield and an emblem. Taylor notes the stance of the figure is familiar on Byzantine coins.⁷⁵

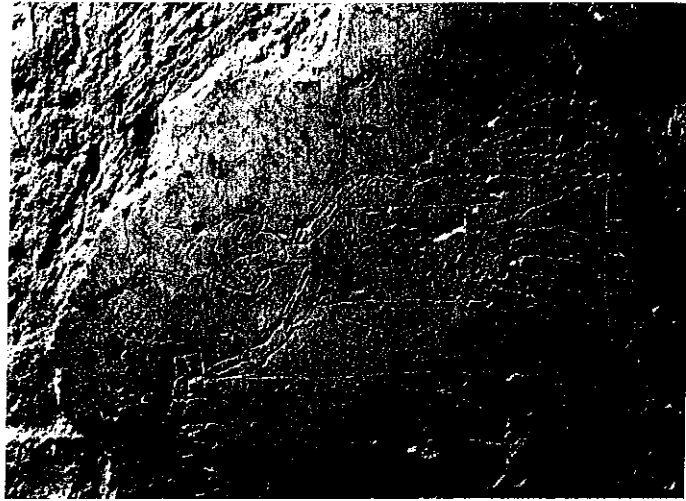


Figure 24: Drawing near the Shrine of the Annunciation⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 262–63.

⁷⁶ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 263, courtesy of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum.

The fate of the synagogue at Nazareth is also worth noting.⁷⁷ At the end of the 7th century, Peter the Deacon says the Nazareth synagogue became a place of Christian worship, and this story is repeated by a 13th century pilgrim named Buchard. It is Peter who recorded the first reference to a shrine to Mary at Nazareth by Egeria (c. 383). In 570 the Piacenza Pilgrim tells of visiting the synagogue and seeing there a book and a bench used by the child Jesus. He noted that Mary's house was by then a basilica. Four column bases from the synagogue were reported by Bagatti.⁷⁸ Mason's marks on the bases are present in the form of four Hebrew letters: *lamed, dalet, mem, tet*.

When the larger framework of the data is considered, there is no material evidence of the presence of Jewish Christianity in Nazareth. The Christian evidence at Nazareth, including mosaics, graffiti, and an early shrine, most likely dates from the third century forward. The underlying basins and fills do not show evidence of early veneration; they appear to be agricultural areas later turned into shrines. Even if two mosaics are from the Roman era, they offer no evidence of Jewish Christianity. The presence of two competing synagogues is unlikely, and the transition of the Nazareth synagogue to a Christian church is probably the result of Hadrian's punishment of Nazareth for supporting the Persian invasion of 614 ce. The absence of Jewish Christians in Nazareth seems to be confirmed in the literary evidence.⁷⁹ Despite the efforts of Bagatti and Testa, the archeological evidence suggests that Jewish Christians were no more welcome in Nazareth than was the Jewish prophet Jesus.

9. Capernaum

Two sites at Capernaum are of archeological interest for primitive Christianity and may bear evidence of Jewish Christianity. These are the synagogue and the house of Peter.

9.1 The House of Peter

In the western half of Capernaum an octagonal structure made of basalt was excavated in the years before and after World War I.⁸⁰ This structure consists of three concentric octagons that are 8 meters wide, 16.5 meters wide, and 23 me-

⁷⁷ See the discussion by Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 227–30; 264–65.

⁷⁸ Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth*, pp. 233–34.

⁷⁹ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 36, notes that: "There is no mention of *minim* or *Noiserrim* living in Nazareth in any surviving Jewish literature."

⁸⁰ Descriptions may be found in G. Orfali, *Capernaum et ses ruines* (Paris: A. Picard, 1922), pp. 103–09; V. C. Corbo, *Capernaum. I. Gli edifici della città* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1975); S. Loffreda, *Capernaum II. La ceramica* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing

ters wide. Octagonal church plans are found elsewhere as early as 326 ce and continue into the 6th century. A peacock mosaic is at the center of this structure, and coins from the early 5th century were found under the mosaic. The 6th century Piacenza Pilgrim says there was a basilica in Capernaum where the house of Peter was once located.



Figure 25: Octagonal Church (left) and Synagogue (right) at Capernaum⁸¹

In 1968 V. C. Corbo identified two major strata beneath the octagonal structure.⁸² At the fourth century level there is an enclosure wall that runs 27 meters on each of the north, west, and south sides and some 30 meters on the east side. This enclosure is partially divided by an inner wall that runs some 16 meters from the southern wall into the enclosure. At the center of the enclosure is a 10 by 11 meter structure that created three small rooms and one larger room (5.8 by 6.4 meters). This larger room was divided by an arch into eastern and western sections. There is evidence of rebuilding in some walls and in the roof, where a

Press, 1974); A. Spijkerman, *Capernaum*, iii. *Catalogo della moneta della città* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1975); E. Testa, *Capernaum*, iv. *I Graffiti della Casa di S. Pietro* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1972); Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 268–90.

⁸¹ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 269, courtesy of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum.

⁸² The description is given by Corbo, *Capernaum*, pp. 59–74. I am dependent in large part on the description, photographs, charts, and drawings provided by Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 268–88.

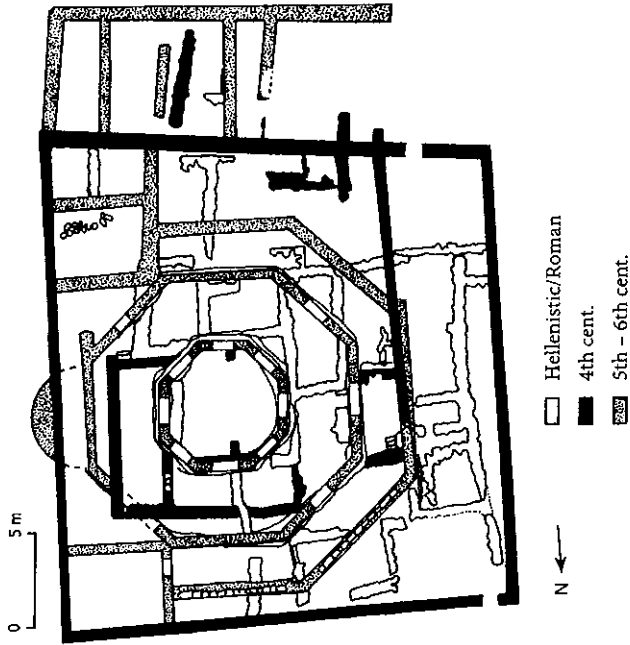


Figure 26: Strata in the Octagonal Church⁸³

roof of branches, earth, and straw has been replaced with a mortar roof. Plastered walls have been painted with plant motifs and geometric designs, and Christian graffiti is scratched upon the plaster. Two fish hooks were found in the destruction level of the fourth century ruins. The area within the larger enclosure walls contains extensive foundation lines from the Hellenistic/Roman era. It is not clear how many of these structures may have stood alongside or within the fourth century enclosure. The central structure itself seems to have been formed from parts of previous dwellings. Literary testimony to this 4th century structure is probably found in the report, recorded by Peter the Deacon, that Egeria visited Capernaum (c. 383 ce) and wrote that the "house of the prince of the apostles has been made into a church, with its original walls still standing."⁸⁴

The graffiti of the fourth-century structure was extensive. Of these, some 151 are Greek, 13 are Syriac, and 2 may be Latin. Testa claimed that about 10 of the graffiti were Aramaic and believed these to be evidence of Jewish Christian pil-

⁸³ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 271, sketch based on V. C. Corbo, *Capernaum, i. Gli edifici della città* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1975).

⁸⁴ The reports may be found in J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, rev. edition (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1981), p. 194. See the discussion by Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 276.

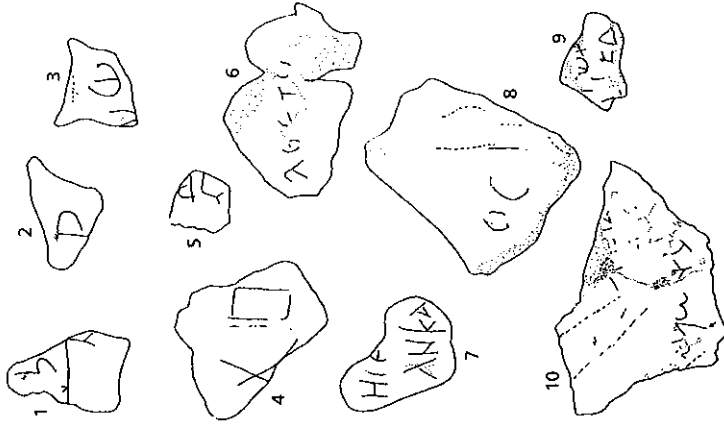


Figure 27: Fragments claimed by Testa to contain Aramaic⁸⁵

grims.⁸⁶ Taylor reproduces these fragments and offers convincing evidence that five of these are Greek and three or four others are debatable.⁸⁷ A reasonable case for Aramaic can only be made for two of the fragments.

Below the fourth century strata are extensive remains from the Hellenistic/Roman period. The compound containing the octagonal church is one of eight known housing compounds on the poorer west side of Capernaum. V. C. Corbo excavated four trenches within the central area of the octagonal church.⁸⁸ Six stages were identified, some with multiple layers. From top to bottom, the first

⁸⁵ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 286, sketch based on Emmanuela Testa, *Capernaum, iv. I Graffiti della Casa di S. Pietro* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1972).

⁸⁶ Testa, *Capernaum*, p. 183.

⁸⁷ Several were clarified by simply inverting them. Taylor also suggests that one of the fragments that is not Greek may be Nabatean rather than Aramaic. The full discussion of the ten purported Aramaic fragments is found in *Holy Places*, pp. 284-88.

⁸⁸ Corbo, *Capernaum*, pp. 79-98.

stage is the peacock mosaic of the 5th century octagonal church. The second stage contains two layers: a fill layer of red soil and the destruction layer of the 4th century house church or shrine. Below that was a third stage with some five layers, though this varies from one trench to the next. All trenches at this third stage contain a polychrome floor made of beaten lime, then the remnants of another pavement that has fragments of red plaster on a bed of stones, below which is another bed of large stones. From here the layers of the third stage vary across the room, suggesting that it once was two rooms or areas. In the westernmost trench are two more layers of basalt stone, each with a floor of beaten earth. Moving east, the next trench has the same two basalt layers, but the top one stops at a 4th century pilaster. The eastern section of this trench has, in the place of the two basalt layers, a layer of dark brown earth that extends into the two western trenches. In these two western trenches the dark brown layer has under it a very black layer of earth. Under these in the western trenches is a fourth stage, composed of three successive beaten lime pavements, each on a thin bed of black earth, then a limited bed of basalt stones. Near the 4th century pilaster is a fifth stage composed of four floors of beaten black earth, then a sixth stage composed of the initial fill. In

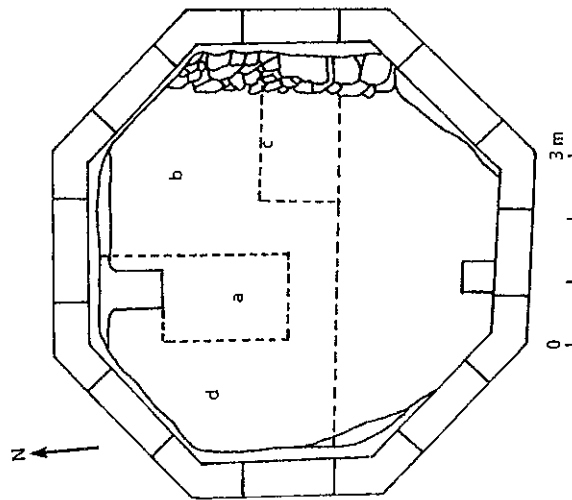


Figure 28: Excavation trenches within the central area.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 279, sketch based on V. C. Corbo, *Cafarnao*, i. *Gli edifici della città*.

the easternmost trench there was only fill below the levels of the beaten lime floors. The initial fill contained pottery from the 2nd and 1st centuries bce.

It is clear that the trenches represent different sequences of development and likely are part of different rooms or areas. It is also clear that the small area that served as the central octagon (8 meters across) and as the central room of the 4th century church (5.8 by 6.4 meters) exhibits a history of extensive use. The debate over the details of that history is intense.

Corbo believes that the sequence of three successive beaten lime floors found as the fourth stage in the western trenches provides the key to the structure. Beaten lime floors would represent a more expensive and elaborate adornment. They are prevalent in the wealthier eastern section of town, but found nowhere else in the poorer western settlements. Corbo dates the floors from the first century. He believes the fact that these distinct floors are found in the unusual room at the center of the 4th century church and in the center of the later octagonal church support two conclusions: this was, for an extended period, a holy site for Jewish Christians, and it was in fact the house of Peter.⁹⁰ Corbo accepts that the 4th century church may have been constructed by Joseph of Tiberias, whom he

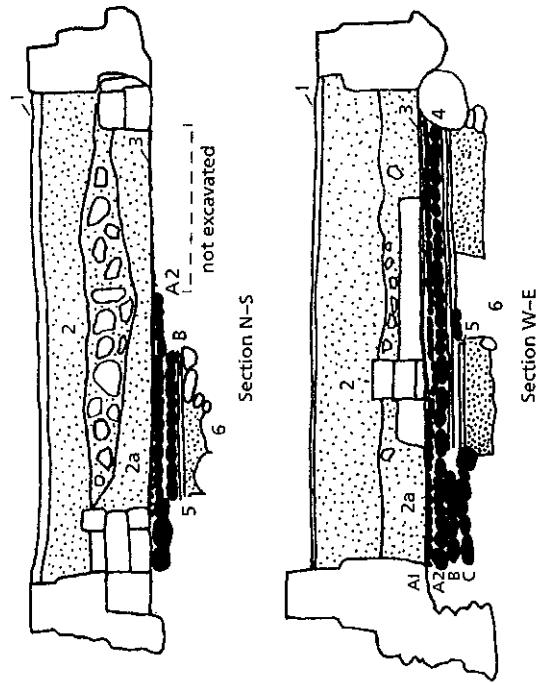


Figure 29: Cross section of the central area excavation.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Corbo, *Cafarnao*, pp. 97–98. The certainty that these are Jewish Christians seems based in part on the rabbinic stories of *minim* at Capernaum. This position is discussed in Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 24–31.

⁹¹ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 280, sketch based on *Cafarnao*, i. *Gli edifici della città*.

understands to be a Jewish Christian. These conclusions fit neatly into the larger Bagatti-Testa hypothesis.

Joan Taylor reads the evidence in a different way.⁹² It is evident that one section of the room – that with three successive layers of beaten lime flooring – was treated differently. Taylor conjectures that the builders were simply maintaining the outline of the previous rooms to designate one area as special. She conjectures further that the less attractive side of the room was designated for pilgrims and that only clergy could walk on the beaten lime floors.⁹³ This impacts the date she assigns to the three beaten lime floors; she places them in a range between the beginning of the 3rd century and the middle of the 4th century. She agrees that this was a pilgrimage site. Taylor believes that, beginning with the 4th century house church⁹⁴ with its peacock mosaic, Christian pilgrims traveled from various regions to visit what was described to them as the site of Peter's house – which it may have been.

When the Capernaum site identified as the house of Peter is viewed apart from this debate over holy places, does it offer any useful information about Jewish Christianity? From a historical perspective, Capernaum is one of the few sites where the activity of Jesus and his first followers can be located with some precision and certainty. The synoptic gospels present Capernaum as the centerpoint of Jesus' ministry.⁹⁵ It is highly probable that Jesus and his first followers had their primary residence in this small village and were active in its synagogue. It is plausible that the memory of Peter's house was maintained through subsequent generations, and it is possible that the site of this house is beneath the octagonal church.

Does this provide an example of Jewish Christian activity? Yes and no. If the earliest followers of Jesus are understood as Jewish Christians,⁹⁶ then Capernaum is probably a primary site for their activity. This is likely true both before and after the death of Jesus,⁹⁷ and this presence and activity probably did not end

⁹² Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 278–84.

⁹³ Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 283–84.

⁹⁴ Likely constructed, Taylor thinks, by the Christian convert Joseph of Tiberias. Since he was a Jew converted to Christianity, the Franciscan archaeologists generally take him to be a Jewish Christian. Taylor does not.

⁹⁵ The Gospel of Mark creates a paradigmatic account for the first day of Jesus' ministry (1.21–39). After the calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, Jesus goes on the Sabbath to the synagogue in Capernaum. There he teaches with amazing authority, demonstrated by three miracle stories. Two of these occur at the house where Peter's mother-in-law is living. On the following day, Jesus and the disciples depart to carry this ministry to the synagogues of the Galilee. In the Gospel of Mark, central teaching units are set in "the house."

⁹⁶ They are certainly Jewish; the question is whether this generation should be called Christians, particularly before the death of Jesus.

⁹⁷ In the Gospel of Mark the risen Christ sends word to his followers that he will "go be-

with the first generation.⁹⁸ But this does not demonstrate an unbroken line of Jewish Christian presence and influence in Capernaum up to the time of Constantine. It does not tell us who first treated the house of Peter as a holy site and began the sequence of distinctive architecture, nor does it tell us when this happened.

9.2 The Synagogue at Capernaum

Some ninety meters from the octagonal church stands the site of the Capernaum synagogue. Excavations were carried out at this site in 1857, 1866, 1894, and from 1969 forward.⁹⁹

Most scholars now agree that the partially reconstructed white limestone synagogue should be dated to the 4th century ce.¹⁰⁰ The controversy lies in the dating of the black basalt structures that underlie the white synagogue. Stanislas Loffredo traces the evidence from the latest to the earliest.¹⁰¹ First, he notes that the white synagogue of the 4th century was built upon an artificial podium that places it well above the level of the rest of the town.¹⁰² Secondly, Loffredo says this raised platform was built up over an area of the village that was once inhabited; evidence of this is found in Hellenistic and Roman structures and a Late Bronze Age site (13th century ce). He notes that private houses were found beneath the side aisle, the porch, and the east court. Thirdly, Laffredo notes that the area beneath the central nave of the prayer hall exhibits a different history. Here only the stone basalt pavement is found, and he dates this to the first century ce. This pavement is said to cover an older layer of occupation that contained pottery and coins of the Hellenistic period. This means that the central area has a separate – and presumably older – history from the aisle, porch, and east court. Loffredo agrees with the assessment of Corbo that the pavement is from the first century and belongs to the synagogue where Jesus was reported to have worked.¹⁰³

fore them into the Galilee" (16.7). In the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples meet the risen Christ on a mountain in Galilee, and from there they are sent to the nations (28.16–20).

⁹⁸ See, for example, the traditions of the Sayings Tradition (Q).

⁹⁹ See the discussion by Herschel Shanks, *Judaism in Stone: the Archeology of Ancient Synagogues* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); M. J. S. Chiat, *Handbook of Synagogue Architecture*, Brown University Judaic Studies 29 (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1982); Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 290–94.

¹⁰⁰ There was some debate over whether such a grand Jewish structure would be allowed after the patronage of Christianity by Constantine. The archeological evidence suggests the synagogue is 4th century, with 5th century additions.

¹⁰¹ Loffredo has summarized this evidence and provided photographs in "Capernaum" on the *Franciscan Cyberspot*: <http://198.62.75.4/www1/ofm/sites/TScpmenu.html>

¹⁰² James Strange, "The Capernaum and Herodium Publications (Part 1)," BASOR 226:70, says that the mortar used for the 4th century pavement is not secondary. This should mean that the late 4th and early 5th century coins and pottery found there provide an accurate date.

¹⁰³ Loffredo, "Capernaum."

This evidence shows, obviously, that the black basalt walls and pavement are older than the white limestone synagogue that sits upon them. But the evidence does not say how much older. Even a 1st century dating does not prove this to be the synagogue from the time of Jesus, who lived in the first third of the century. Only literary data and logical links sustain this connection.

Since there is no evidence of an earlier synagogue beneath the central basalt pavement of the 4th century synagogue, the basalt layer seems to represent the first public structure on the site. Since the gospels say that Jesus used a synagogue in Capernaum built by a Roman centurion (Lk. 7:5), logic and literature suggest the basalt pavement and walls are the remains of that synagogue. But the archeological evidence does not demand this conclusion. If there was a third synagogue – one from the time of Jesus – it likely existed in an unexcavated section of town. Thus far, no archeological evidence for another synagogue has emerged.

Seen in its larger framework, what is the significance of this data? The literary evidence suggests there was a synagogue in Capernaum in the time of Jesus. Archeological data makes its probable, though not certain, that the black basalt structure beneath the limestone synagogue was in fact the synagogue in which Jesus worked. This structure was visited by pilgrims such as Egeria, and, after Constantine's patronage, the white synagogue likely became a popular pilgrimage site.

What does this tell us about Jewish Christianity? The literature makes a strong case that the Jewish Jesus and his followers used Capernaum and its synagogue as the primary base for his ministry of healing and proclamation of the coming reign of God.¹⁰⁴ Rabbinic sources suggest that Capernaum continued to be a place where a heterodox form of Judaism was practiced.¹⁰⁵ But archeology only tells us that there was a sequence of synagogues at Capernaum, concluded by one of the most extraordinary examples known. Any suggestion that one of these synagogues may have given birth to and have continued to host a vibrant stream of Jewish Christianity must be demonstrated through other means.

¹⁰⁴ The curse against Capernaum (Mt. 11:23; Lk. 10:15) may emerge from the traditions of the Sayings Tradition (Q).

¹⁰⁵ The people of Capernaum are called *minim* by the rabbis in *EcdR* 7.3. In a second century story in *EcdR* 1.4, Hanina has a cursed placed on him by the *minim* of Capernaum, causing him to ride an ass on the Sabbath. There appears to be a veiled reference to Jesus as the cause of the curse.

10. The House of Leontis

Zeev Safrai believes the 4th to 5th century house of Leontis at Beth Shean (ancient Scythopolis, not far from Pella), is a Jewish Christian place of worship.¹⁰⁶ The house is a private dwelling in which a large courtyard has been created. At the center of this room is an extraordinary mosaic composed of three panels.

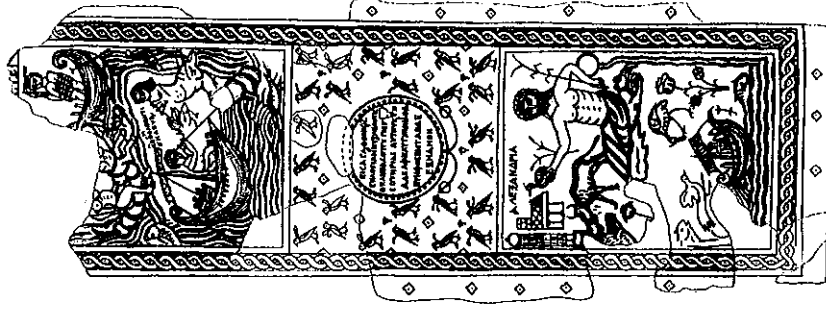


Figure 30:
The Leontis mosaic¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Zeev Safrai, "The house of Leontis 'Kaloubas' – a Judaean-Christian?" in *The Image of the Judaean-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature*, ed. Peter J. Tomson and Doris Lambers-Petry, WUNT 158 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 245–66. The report on the excavation of the site may be found in N. Zori, "The House of Kyrios Leontis at Beth Shean," *IEJ* 16 (1966), 123–34.

¹⁰⁷ Zeev Safrai, "The house of Leontis 'Kaloubas' – a Judaean-Christian?" Safrai's sketch (p. 265) and plan (p. 264) courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society.

The uppermost panel shows Odysseus lashed to the mast of his ship to avoid the seduction of a nude Siren, who is riding a sea creature. Included in this panel is another sailor doing battle with a nude Siren and a sea creature. The inscription in this panel probably reads "Lord, help Leontis Kloubas." The second panel contains some 26 doves around an inscription that reads: "A dedicatory inscription that remembers for good Lord Leontis Kloubas, who contributed for his own salvation and that of the members of his family." The lower panel has a scene of the Nile that includes a ship, fish, fowl, plants, various animals, the Nile god, the post for measuring the flood depth, and an inscription labeling the city of Alexandria. Though it is damaged extensively, there appears to be a five-branched candlestick or *menorah* incorporated into the mosaic.

Safrai believes this room is part of a Jewish worship site, but with numerous elements not found in any other Jewish archeological site. Safrai concludes, on the basis of the following elements and conjectures, that the site is a Jewish Christian worship center.

1. The presence of the *menorah*
2. Leontis' brother has a Jewish name (Jonathan)
3. The adjective *Kaloubas* should be identified with the Ebionite leader named by Epiphanius as *Kleobios* or *Kleoboulos*
4. The greater acceptance of Roman culture and pagan motifs
5. The lack of orientation of the room or the mosaic toward Jerusalem
6. The twenty-six doves, which may represent:
 - a. the name of God (the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton)
 - b. the Ebionite idea that Jesus became the Christ at his baptism
 - c. the tradition of twenty-six generations until the giving of the Torah
7. Elxai, presumed to be Jewish Christian, associated water with divinity

Based on these elements and conjectures, Safrai concludes that

If our hypothesis that this house of Leontis was a place of worship for a group of Judaean Christians is correct, then it is the first archeological testimony regarding the practices of this sect. The earlier evidence surveyed by Bagatti is much more doubtful.¹⁰⁸

From a critical perspective, these connections and conjectures are tenuous at best. Perhaps the greatest problem is that there is nothing explicitly Christian in the house or the mosaic.¹⁰⁹ It is not absolutely clear that a *menorah* is present, and the orientation of the mosaic and its connecting wall are puzzling. The closest parallel to the room and its mosaic is found in the Roman villa at Sepphoris, with its beautiful woman, floral and fauna, and the measuring of the Nile for the city of Alexandria. Both sites may demonstrate the eclectic collection of motifs and

¹⁰⁸ Safrai, "Leontis," p. 255.

¹⁰⁹ The two ships and masts are suggested as allusions to the church and the cross. It is not certain there are twenty-six birds, and it is not apparent they are doves.

images that adorned wealthy Roman sites, though there is some religious purpose for the Leontis mosaic. It is not, however, demonstrably Jewish Christian.

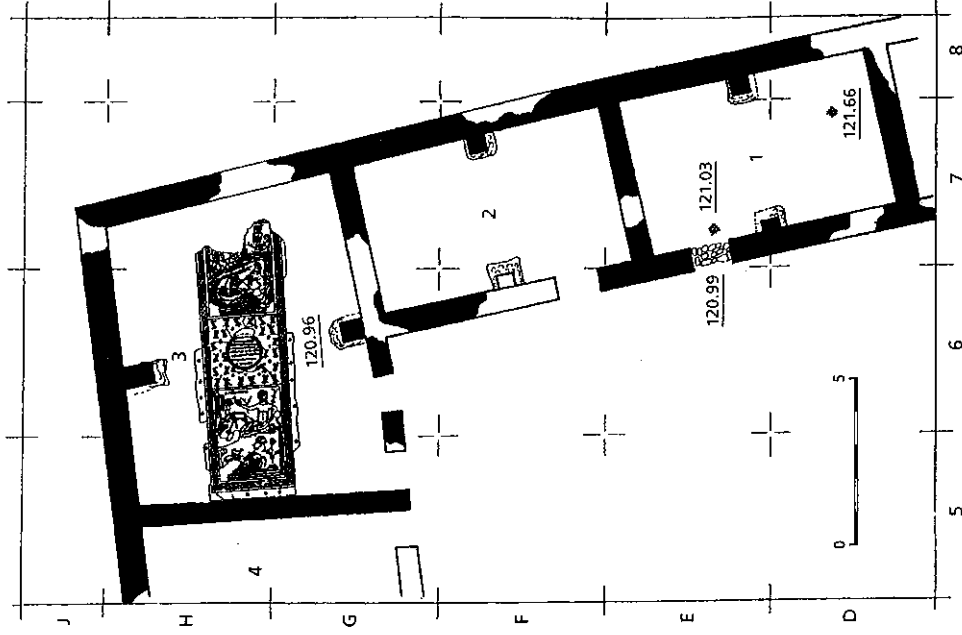


Figure 31: Orientation of the Leontis mosaic.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Zeev Safrai, "The house of Leontis," p. 264, courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society.

11. The Transjordan¹¹¹

The most plausible evidence for Jewish Christianity lies outside the realm of Palestine and outside the debate over the continuity of Christian holy sites. In the Bashan region west of the Jordan, four separate villages have produced inscriptions that include both Jewish and Christian symbolism. In each case a *menorah* is found alongside or conjoined with Christian symbols.¹¹²

The inscriptions at the village of Farj were noted by Claudine Dauphin,¹¹³ who concluded that Jews, Jewish Christians, and Monophysite Christians were able to live together in Farj in the Roman and Byzantine periods. One inscription contains four or five variations on the menorah image, combined in one instance with a fish and perhaps a cross, in another with a palm branch. A second inscription contains a cross, a menorah, a cross with a fish, a cross inside a circle, possibly a fishing net, and four Greek letters. A third inscription contains a cross, a menorah joined with a palm branch, and what appears to be an incomplete menorah. A fourth inscription contains three menorahs, each incorporating a bar to form a type of cross. The assertion by Taylor that these inscriptions were produced "for a Christian building at more or less the same time" in the later 4th to early 5th century is less than convincing, as is her insistence that "the possibility that the Jews of Farj were converted to orthodox Christianity is equally as likely as their being Nazoreans."¹¹⁴ For Taylor, even the presence of Nazoreans would require a process of conversion from Judaism: "in the absence of further material that would absolutely confirm the situation one way or another, the Farj material is just possibly the work of converts to the Nazorean sect."¹¹⁵

Similar evidence was found in the same region at Khan Bandak and at But-miyeh by Schumacher almost one hundred years earlier.¹¹⁶ In 1925, W. F. Albright found the same type of inscriptions at the village of Nawa, ten kilometers north of Farj.¹¹⁷

Here at last in the Transjordan the literary and material evidence appear to cohere. Farj is less than 20 kilometers from the sight identified by Michael Avioh as Kokaba (or Chochoaba in Hebrew). Epiphanius, who is writing to priests from Coele Syria, designates the town by both its Greek (Kokaba) and Hebrew

¹¹¹ I am using the term Transjordan not in reference to any specific political entity, but as a general geographical designation for areas lying east of the Jordan River and its sources.

¹¹² See the discussion and analysis in Taylor, *Holy Places*, pp. 39–41.

¹¹³ C. M. Dauphin, "Farj en Gaulanitide: refuge judéo-chrétien?" *Proche-Orient chrétien*, 34 (1984), 233–45.

¹¹⁴ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 40. Recent conversations with Taylor suggest she now holds the Transjordanian evidence for Jewish Christianity in higher regard.

¹¹⁵ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 41.

¹¹⁶ G. Schumacher, *The Jaulan* (London: Richard Bentley, 1888).

¹¹⁷ W. F. Albright, "Bronze Age Mounds of Northern Palestine and the Hauran: The Spring Trip of the School in Jerusalem," *BASOR* 19 (1925), 5–19.

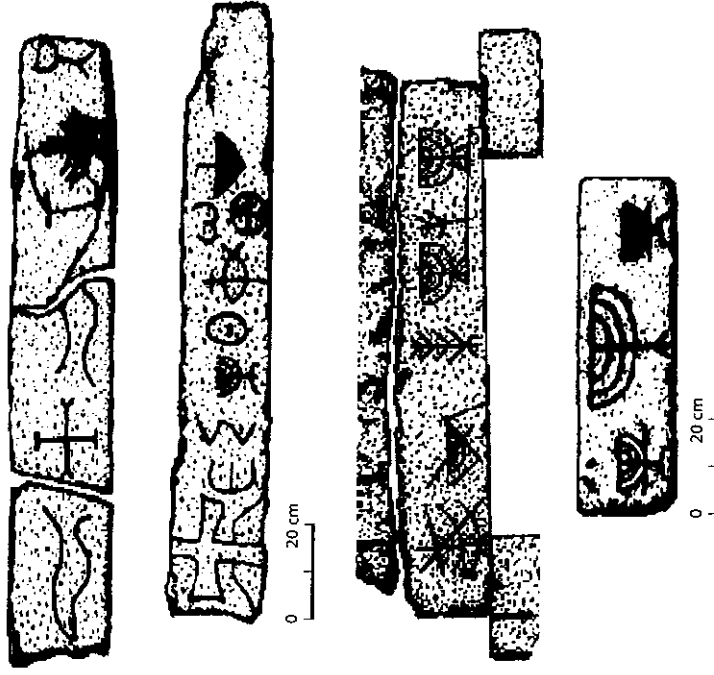


Figure 32: Inscriptions from the Golan¹¹⁸

name (Chochoaba), and he is quite specific about its location. This, says Epiphanius, is the home of the Nazoreans.¹¹⁹

A second literary line coheres with the material evidence of Jewish Christianity in the Transjordan. Eusebius says that members of the Jerusalem church in the 60s ce were warned in a dream to flee the coming war with Rome. Eusebius says that they fled to Pella in the Transjordan region of Decapolis (*HE* 3.5.3). Epiphanius says that these refugees are the source of two Jewish Christian groups: Ebionites and Nazoreans (*Pan.* 29.7.7–8; 30.2.7; *De Mens. et Pond.* 15). Epiphanius also tells of the return of some of the Pella refugees and the continuation of the Jerusalem church (*De Mens. et Pond.* 15).

¹¹⁸ C. M. Dauphin, "Farj en Gaulanitide: refuge judéo-chrétien?" *Proche-Orient chrétien*, 34 (1984), 233–45; DE L'ÉGLISE DE LA CIRCONCISION A L'ÉGLISE DE LA GENTILITÉ: Sur une nouvelle voie hors de l'impassé, *Liber Annus* 43 (1993), 223–42. Drawings to scale by Shimon Gibson, used by permission of C. M. Dauphin and Shimon Gibson.

¹¹⁹ Epiphanius gives this description in the *Panarion* (29.7.7; see also 30.2.8–9).

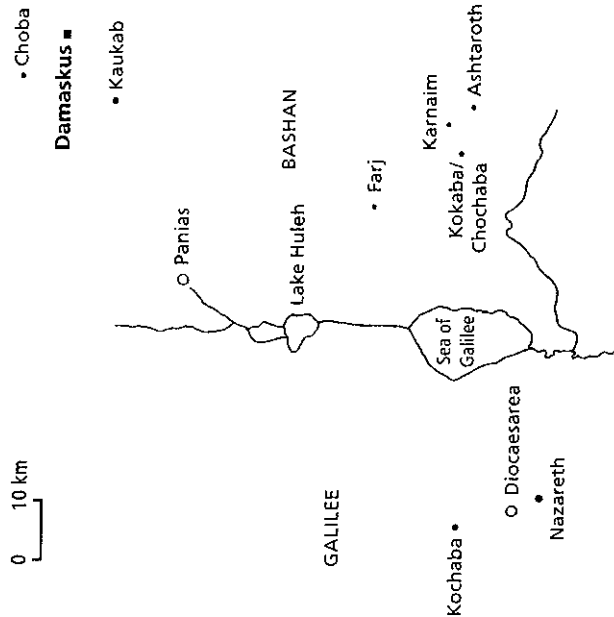


Figure 33: Transjordan sites, possible sites of Kochaba¹²⁰

It is not at all clear that the flight to Pella is a historical event, but there is probably some connection between the Pella story and the tradition of the Jewish Christians in the Transjordan. It may be that the Pella story was created to account for the presence of Jewish followers of Jesus in the Transjordan. It is also possible that Epiphanius created the Transjordan sects because he knew of the Pella tradition, though he would have difficulty convincing his local audience of a created sect. One tradition may have been invented to explain the other, but it is very unlikely that both traditions are fictional.

One further trait is noteworthy. Two synagogues have been excavated at Farj, one of which later became a Christian church. This may or may not be evidence of competing streams of Judaism within the village.

Taken as a whole, the evidence for Jewish Christianity in the area of Bashan in the Transjordan is noteworthy. The excavation and recognition of Jewish Christian inscriptions at four different villages by different archaeologists working across the span of a century provides multiple, independent attestation. It is also significant that these findings form no part of the quest to show the continuity of

¹²⁰ Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 37.

holy sites. The coherence of this material evidence with two lines of literary traditions is noteworthy, and there is a strong degree of historical plausibility to the claim that Epiphanius knows of Jewish Christians in this region.¹²¹

The material evidence points to the presence of Jewish Christians in the Transjordan as late as the 4th and 5th century. These findings neither prove nor exclude the possibility of an earlier presence. Consequently, the Jewish Christian inscriptions of the Transjordan represent the most significant material evidence for the presence of Jewish Christianity.

12. Conclusion

The search for archeological evidence for Jewish Christianity has generated more heat than light. The work of the Bagatti-Testa group was carried out within the context of the Franciscan mission to serve as guardians of the Christian holy places. Working frequently on sites protected by the Franciscan order, Bagatti, Testa, and their followers sought to establish the continuity of Christian veneration of holy sites from the apostolic era forward. Such continuity is unthinkable in terms of orthodox Christianity, since Christianity was outlawed until Constantine. Prior to Constantine one might hope to find Christian texts and inscriptions, but not monuments, public buildings, or shrines. The only reasonable expectation of such continuity would lie in the hope that Jewish Christian groups, ignored by secular authorities as Jews, maintained sacred sites of worship and veneration. Such sites could be expected to be small and somewhat secretive. Bagatti and Testa presumed that caves provided the optimal sites for Jewish Christian worship.

Bagatti and Testa were not interested in Jewish Christianity *per se*. They borrowed from Jean Daniélou the approach of defining Jewish Christianity by distinctive doctrines. Bagatti and Testa took mysticism, gnosticism, apocalypticism, and Pythagorean ideas for the defining traits of a heterodox Jewish Christian theology. Their interest in Jewish Christianity was primarily utilitarian: it provides the line of continuity for Christian holy sites.

Various details of the archeological work of Bagatti and Testa have been questioned, and numerous scholars have challenged their larger model of Jewish Christianity. Joan Taylor gathered this evidence and added to it her own persistent critique of the work and the conclusions of the Bagatti-Testa school.¹²² Her rejection of the Bagatti-Testa hypothesis of cultic continuity through heterodox Jewish Christianity is thorough and decisive.

¹²¹ See the chapters above on the patristic representation of the Nazarenes and the Ebionites.

¹²² The initial work served as the basis for her doctoral dissertation at Edinburgh.

But Taylor sometimes overdraws her evidence. She seems to presume, at the time of *Christians and the Holy Places*, that her dismissal of the Bagatti-Testa claims meant that Jewish Christians played no important role in Palestine in the two centuries preceding Constantine.¹²³ She too quickly divides the landscape between easily definable groups of Christians and Jews, minimizing the complexity of such terms before the emergence of rabbinic Judaism and orthodox Christianity. Taylor has convincingly demonstrated that the Bagatti-Testa hypothesis is not sustained by the evidence. But it is hard to prove a negative, and Taylor has not thereby proven that Jewish Christianity did not endure in Palestine, nor even that Jewish Christians did not honor certain sites. Nonetheless, what Taylor has accomplished in *Christians and the Holy Places* is significant. She has demonstrated that decisive material evidence for Jewish Christian veneration of holy sites has not been found.

Apart from this holy war over holy sites, can archeology confirm or inform the existence of Jewish Christianity in the early centuries? Because rabbinic Judaism and orthodox Christianity emerged as definable entities, it is presumed that there is reason to look for material evidence of their development. Such expectations are brought to bear upon, and sometimes imposed upon, archeological data.¹²⁴ What is known or presumed to be known about orthodox Christianity or rabbinic Judaism provides one grid for analyzing archeological finds such as mosaics, pottery, structural layers. This same process must be valid for Jewish Christianity. If various forms of Jewish Christianity can be identified from the 3rd and 4th centuries, it is not unreasonable to look for material evidence of its development. This is particularly true since the first followers of Jesus were Jewish. In the case of Jewish Christianity, however, such expectations should be minimal. No type of Christianity seems to have left significant material traces of its formative years, and this is particularly true of groups that were eventually marginalized.

The evidence in the Transjordan seems to provide the one clear strata of material evidence for Jewish Christianity, and this coheres with what is known from the literary evidence. While the evidence from the Transjordan may be earlier, it is also possible that it begins in the 4th century *cc.* If there is any plausible ma-

¹²³ "There is, in fact, no literary evidence whatsoever for Jewish-Christians existing in Galilee, Samaria, or Judea past the beginning of the second century ..." says Taylor, *Holy Places*, p. 24. She does, however, acknowledge that "There may well have been Jewish-Christian pockets in villages and cities, as there may well have been such pockets all over the Empire ..." p. 46. Again, the negative is difficult to prove.

¹²⁴ So, for example, the persistent query of whether two perpendicular lines represent a *tav*, a *chi*, or a cross. Fish, birds, boats, and masts are also closely examined, though they are frequent pagan motifs. Numbers are open to various interpretations, some of which are Christian. The St. Sabina image of the church of the circumcision may be a projection based on Acts, the *chi-rho* found in a Roman era synagogue inscription in Sepphoris may be later, and the *chi-rho* may not be an exclusively Christian symbol.

terial evidence of Jewish Christianity at its earlier stages, it is meager: a floor beneath the house of Peter, the foundational pavement of a Capernaum synagogue, the lowest strata of the Church of the Apostles. These are possible remnants of a primitive Jewish Christianity, but they are certainly not conclusive. Even if authentic, their preservation and veneration is likely a Constantinian innovation.

These remnants, at best, might confirm that Jewish Christianity existed. But the path is circular: the early evidence confirms that Jewish Christianity existed. But only if we already know that it existed. While the Transjordanian inscriptions present strong evidence for the later stages of Jewish Christianity, at present there is no extant archeological data that adds intrinsically to our understanding of the formative years of Jewish Christianity.