

Nazareth, the Caesarea Inscription, and the hand of God

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Abstract

On 14 August 1962, an outstanding archaeological discovery at Caesarea Maritima went to revolutionize the question about Nazareth, a village unknown to non-Christian sources. This article intends to show the remarkable series of coincidences that ensured that, from a small marble fragment containing a dozen letters, it was possible to prove the existence, from at least the second century, of the presumed native land of the Nazarene. But where there are surprising coincidences, there is also a reason to be suspicious. Is this a fraud? There is a mobile and the main suspect has a serious criminal history.

In 1962, during the excavations at Caesarea in Palestine, Christian archaeology made a signal discovery: the sands of Caesarea offered up two fragments of a Hebrew inscription concerning the twenty-four priestly families or “courses” (1 Chr 24:7-18)¹, naming the villages in Galilee where each family migrated probably after the Bar Kochba Revolt (135 CE) and after the dispersion of the Hebrew people. One of the fragments contained the word “Nazareth” (נִצְרֶת).

Dating to the third or fourth centuries of our era²—according to paleographic analysis—this discovery threatened to deliver a body blow to those scholars who, relying upon the stunning silence of the non-Christian texts, denied the existence of Nazareth in the pre-Constantinian centuries.

Charles Guignebert, an authority on Christian origins, wrote:

The scholar will certainly consider this rather unsettling possibility: no ancient text, neither pagan nor Jewish, mentions Nazareth. As regards the pagan writings, we can easily excuse their omission—for if the Galilean village played no important role in the two Jewish

¹ (1 Chr 24) The first lot fell to Jehoiarib, the second to Jedaiah, the third to Harim, the fourth to Seorim, the fifth to Malchijah, the sixth to Mijamin, the seventh to Hakkoz, the eighth to Abijah, the ninth to Jeshua, the tenth to Shecaniah, the eleventh to Eliashib, the twelfth to Jakim, the thirteenth to Huppah, the fourteenth to Jeshebeab, the fifteenth to Bilgah, the sixteenth to Immer, the seventeenth to Hezir, the eighteenth to Happizzesz, the nineteenth to Pethahiah, the twentieth to Jehezkel, the twenty-first to Jachin, the twenty-second to Gamul, the twenty-third to Delaiah, the twenty-fourth to Maaziah.

² Prof. Avigad proposed this dating, subsequently adopted also by Avi Yonah. It has been recently contested by Uzi Leibner (2009, p. 176) who dates the inscription between the fourth and the seventh centuries. Leibner writes: “*The inscription was dated by Avi Yonah to the third-fourth centuries on the basis of paleographic considerations. These parameters, however, are of doubtful value when it comes to stone engraving*” (Naveh 1978:5).

revolts, and if it did not attract Greek nor Roman inhabitants, then the obscurity of the village should not surprise us. It is different with the Jewish writings. We encounter the name of Nazareth neither in the Bible, nor in the rabbinic literature, nor in the writings of Josephus who is very interested in the Galilee and who enumerates a large number of towns and villages in the region.

Though it's effect can be somewhat mollified, this universal silence cannot be completely ignored. Of course, mythicists have made the most of this in order to claim that the existence of Nazareth at the time of Jesus' birth is nothing but a fiction. [C. Guignebert, *Jésus*, Paris, 1933.]



Fig.1: A bronze medallion coined in 1981 by the Israeli government.

The same year as the discovery, the first article was published in the Israel Exploration Journal by M. Avi Yonah, professor of archaeology at the University of Jerusalem and director of the excavation in Caesarea:³

In the course of excavations undertaken at Caesarea by the Department of Archaeology of the Hebrew University, with the assistance of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, and the Department for the Improvement of the Landscape and Restoration of Historic Sites of the Prime Minister's Office, fragments of a Hebrew inscription were found. Because of their exceptional interest it has been decided to bring them to wider notice in advance of the fuller publication.

Fragment A. Slab of dark-grey marble, 153 by 124 mm. and 24 mm. thick. It contains four lines, broken off at both ends. The letters are 23-25 mm. high in line 1-2, 16-20 mm. high in lines 3-4 (Pl. 13 A). The reading, which presents no difficulty, is ..מליה / ..צרת / ..אכלה.. / ..גדל..

The fragment was found in area D of the excavations [Avi Yonah's note 2: Prof. J. Vardaman was in charge of this section.], in a trench 5 m. wide across an elongated elevation parallel to the sea-shore and in the vicinity of the synagogue area. The material from sector D IV, where the fragment was found, was mainly Hellenistic, but included some traces of Late Roman and Byzantine.

³ Israel Exploration Journal, n.12 : "A List of Priestly Courses from Caesarea", pp. 137-139, 1962.

Fragment B. Greyish marble, 145 by 140 mm. 24 mm. thick. Three beginnings of lines at the left, each 20 mm. high; margin 120 mm. wide to the right (Pl 13 B). The three lines begin with the same letters: *מש / מש / מש*

Fragment B was found in area F, 70 m. south of area D. It was found reused in the marble pavement of a Late Byzantine room; among the other paving stones was part of a synagogue chancel screen, showing an *ethrog* and a *lulab*⁴.

A third fragment, picked up on the surface at Caesarea⁵, reads:

[משמר]ת חמש ע[שרה] / [מש] מרת שש עש [רה] / [מש] מרת שב [עשרה]

It seems that the three fragments formed part of one and the same marble slab, inscribed with a list of the priestly courses (1 Chron. 25:7-18) in their order, together with their surnames and the name of the locality to which they had moved after the destruction of the Second Temple. A fragment of a similar inscription was found at Ascalon: *משמר / משמר ש / משמר א*, proving the prevalence of this custom of commemorating the courses in the Palestinian synagogues. We can therefore complete the Caesarea fragments thus:

משמרת שבע עשרה חזיר ממליח
משמרת שמונה עשרה הפיצץ נצרת
משמרת תשע עשרה פתחיה אכלה ערב
משמרת עשרים יחזקאל מגדל נוניא

The 17th course Hezir MAJMLIAH

The 18th course Hapizzez NAZARETH

The 19th course Pethahia AKHLAH Arab

The 20th course Ezekiel MIJGDAL Nunaiya

Eleazar ha-Kalir

To understand the significance of Avi Yonah's reconstruction, we must briefly consider the previously oldest mention of Nazareth in the literature. This was the *Lamentation for the 9th of Ab*⁶ by the poet Eleazar ha-Kalir.

Eleazar ha-Kalir is one of the most ancient and celebrated Jewish liturgical poets. He lived in Israel at an undetermined date in Byzantine times (VIII-IX CE) and authored over two hundred hymns serving as ritual synagogal prayers.

⁴ The *ethrog* is a variety of citron. The *lulab* is the branch of the date palm. These make up two of the four "wise species" which also include the myrtle and willow used in the Jewish feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot).

⁵ A photo of this fragment was published by S. Talmon in "The Calendar-Reckoning of the Sect from the Judean Desert," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 4 (1958), p.171. The fragment was already lost by the time Avi-Yonah published his first article in 1962!

⁶ Anniversary of the Jerusalem temple's destruction in the year 70 CE.

The *piyyoutim*⁷, especially those of Kalir, frequently refer to numerous *midrashim* and were often written in an allusive and even cryptic style.



Fig.2: The fragment A, containing the word “Nazareth” (נְצָרֶת) in the second line.



Fig.3: The fragment B.

In the mid-19th century, Rabbi Yehouda Shelomoh Rapoport (1790-1867), a learned Jew, made an significant discovery. Samuel Klein writes:

⁷ A *piyyout* (pl. *piyyoutim*) is a Jewish liturgical poem intended for chanting or reciting during the service.

In 1841, the brilliant researcher S.J.L. Rapoport noted that Eleazar ha-Kalir[...] provided a residence-list for the priestly courses [families] of the Second Temple Period in one of his poems for the 9th of Ab, making use of halachic and haggadic literature, and that ha-Kalir had used a collection of now lost *baraitoth* as its source [...][S. Klein, *Barajta der vierundzwanzig Priesterabteilungen: Beiträge zur Geographie und Geschichte Galiläas*, Kirchhain, 1909.]

Ha-Kalir's *Lamentation* has twenty-four stanzas, and the last line of each stanza contains the name of the village where each priestly family resided.

This is the key to understanding Avi Yonah's reconstruction of the Caesarea inscription [see Fig. 4] for, with this knowledge, it is theoretically possible to determine the village in Galilee where each priestly family was stationed.

Here, then, is what one reads at the end of the 18th stanza of ha-Kalir's *Lamentation*, the stanza corresponding to the priestly family of Hapizzez:

ובקצוי ארץ נזרת משמרת נצרת

And to the ends of the earth was dispersed, the priestly class of Natsareth.

This is why Avi Yonah reconstructed the eighteenth line of the inscription as follows:

The 18th course Hapizzez NAZARETH

Proceeding in an analogous manner it is possible to reconstruct the other lines, by analogy between the four stanzas of Kalir (17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th) and the four corresponding lines of Fragment A (photo Fig. 2; reconstruction Fig. 4).

And, as we see, the last line of ha-Kalir's 17th stanza (for the family Hezir) has the village Mamliah (ממליה); the last line of the 19th stanza (for the family Pethahiah) has the village Arav (ערב); and the last line of the 20th stanza (for the family Ezekiel) has the village Migdal Nunaiya (מגדל נוניא).

Kalir's *Lamentation* is not a simple list of the priestly courses. It consists of 24 stanzas corresponding to the 24 priestly courses and describes the calamities that befell them, not hesitating to use derogatory descriptions and to criticize the priests for their failure as the religious leaders of the Jewish People. Ha-Kalir sometimes includes internal allusions to the appellation of the priestly family in the respective verses. We may ask: Is it natural to encounter such accompanying words in the Caesarea inscription? This is the case with *achlah*, the word accompanying the priestly family of Pethachiah which we find in Fragment A. In other words, is it natural to encounter this "poetic" word engraved in the third line of fragment A, which is supposedly merely a list of priestly courses, their order, names, and residences? We shall try to answer these questions.⁸

⁸ Another consideration concerns Mamliah—the Galilean village and residence of the priestly family Hezir. In the *Lamentation* we find it written as ממליה and this was the normal form of the village's name in rabbinic literature. Yet we find the word in fragment A with a *i*od between the *lamed* and the *heth* (ממלייה). Is this reading admissible? Yes, according to Uzi Leibner (2009:175, n. 44)—but his chief evidence is the now controversial Caesarea inscription.

משמרת ראשונה יהויריב מסרביי כרזן
 משמרת שניה ידעיה עמוק צפורים
 משמרת שלישי תחרים מפשטה
 משמרת רביעיית שערים עיתהלו
 משמרת חמישית מלכיה בית לחם
 משמרת ששית בימיין יודפת
 משמרת שביעית הקוצ עלבו
 משמרת שמינית אביה כפר עוזיה
 משמרת תשיעית ישוע ארבל
 משמרת עשירית שכניה חבורת כבול
 משמרת אחת עשרה אלישיב כהן קנה
 משמרת שתים עשרה יקים פשחור צפת
 משמרת שלוש עשרה חופה בית מעון
 משמרת ארבע עשרה ישבאב חצפת שיזון
 משמרת חמש עשרה מעדיה בלגה יונת
 משמרת שש עשרה אברכ פרנמרה
 משמרת שבע עשרה חזיר מליר
 משמרת שמונה עשרה הפיצן עררת
 משמרת תשע עשרה פתחה כלת עוב
 משמרת עשרים יחזקאל כירל גוניה
 משמרת עשרים ואחת כין כפר יחנה
 משמרת עשרים ושתיים גמול בית חכיה
 משמרת עשרים ושלוש דליה גנתון צלמין
 משמרת עשרים וארבע מעויה חמת אריז

Fig.4 : Reconstruction of the Caesarea inscription by Avi Yonah

Samuel Klein

Based on Rapoport's study of the *piyyoutim*, the Jewish scholar Samuel Klein (d. 1940) developed an interesting theory regarding the sense and origin of the liturgical poems, including the *Lamentation for the 9th of Ab* by Eleazar ha-Kalir. According to Klein, the lists of priestly families with their villages of residence could have been formulated only after the destruction of the second

temple, and more likely following the final defeat of Bar Kochba (135 CE), since the Jews continued to live in Judea after the year 70 CE.

At the end of the persecution (towards 140 CE) the Jews reorganized in the Galilee and the survivors of each displaced priestly family installed themselves in the entire region, from the north to the south. The purpose of composing this list was to keep in living memory the identities and traditions of each priestly family. The belief of the Jewish people rested in the confidence that the Temple would be quickly rebuilt, and that each family would then leave its village in Galilee and return to Jerusalem.

Klein believed that, beginning in the sixth century, the poets who composed these *qeroboths* were directly inspired by the inscriptions which they read on the walls of the synagogues, particularly the list of the priestly families. Liturgical poets, such as Kalir, composed their verses with sophisticated alterations and allusions to the names of the villages in the Galilee, to the names of the priestly families, to their appellations and even to associated zodiacal signs, modeling their work after the plaques which they found on the synagogue walls. According to Klein, every *sabbath* during recital of the *piyyoutim*, it was customary in Palestine to recall the name of the priestly course which officiated during that week. Such mention evoked the hope of return to Jerusalem and reconstruction of the Temple. We can see the customary formula used in an ancient Hebrew manuscript⁹:

Today is the holy Sabbath, the Sabbath holy to the Lord - which is the course?
[Appropriate name] is the course. May the Merciful One return the course to its place soon,
in our days. Amen.

At this stage it is important to note that, if Klein's theory is correct, then we would be able to certify that a village called Nazareth existed since the middle of the second century CE.

But Klein went much farther still.

The Jewish savant attempted a theoretical reconstruction of the inscription which he believed was affixed to the walls of synagogues. He did this based on a panoply of indications which we will consider later.

1. The Ascalon fragment

Around 1920, the fragment of a marble plaque was discovered in Ascalon. It reads very similarly to the second fragment ("B") found at Caesarea in 1962, only more complete:

משמר
...משמר ש
...משמר א

The fragment attests to the presence of priestly lists engraved on stone plaques and perhaps mounted to the walls of the synagogue.

⁹ Oxford Ms. Heb. 2738/6, fol. 899 in Vardaman and Garrett, *The Teacher's Yoke*.

2. A passage from the Jerusalem Talmud (Taanit 4.6.68d)

This is the most ancient witness to include a passage from the list of priestly families. We read of two *amoraim* who lived in the fourth century (Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Berakhiya). While explaining each word, they comment on the first two lines of a list belonging to an ancient *baraita* which no longer survives. The first line is as follows:

יהויריב מםרביי מירון
Jehoiarib Mesarbai Meiron

Rabbi Levi explains: “*Jehoiarib* is a man. *Meiron* is a town. *Mesarbai*: he gave the house to the enemy.” The meaning is that the Temple (“the house”) was destroyed while the priestly family of *Jehoiarib* was officiating.

We see here that the name *Jehoiarib*, the appellation *Mesarbai*, and the town *Meiron* are linked. The second line reads as follows:

ידעיה עמוק ציפורים
Jedaia Amok Zipporim

Rabbi Berakhiya notes: “God knew the deep conspiracy that was in their hearts and he exiled them to *Zipporim*.”

The name (*Jedaia*), the appellation (*Amok*), and the town (*Zipporim*) are associated in the second line of the list.

3. Two poems by Eleazar ha-Kalir

We have noted that the *Lamentation for the 9th of Ab* is the most important source by Eleazar ha Kalir when it comes to the reconstruction of the “*Hapizzez*” verse regarding Nazareth. This comes from a composition entitled *Ekha yashebah habaselteh hasharon*. It contains 24 stanzas, each associated with a priestly family. In the last line of each stanza appears the name of the associated Galilean village and, occasionally, an allusion linked to the family.

The second composition by Kalir is entitled *Zekhor ekha anu sharahnu*. It also contains references to the priestly families and to the towns in the Galilee, as well as references to zodiacal signs. However, this composition is less systematic than the first one.

4. Manuscripts recovered from the Cairo geniza

Among the numerous Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts discovered in the nineteenth century in a Cairo geniza, some liturgical poems were also found, *piyyoutim* containing references to priestly families, with explanatory marginal notes in Hebrew. Here is a translation of the pertinent verses from the eleventh century concerning the four priestly classes which we also encounter in the Caesarea inscription:

חזיר ממליה משמ שבע עשרה
Hezir Mamliah seventeenth priestly course

הפ נצרת משמ שמונה עשרה
Hap[pitsets] Nazareth eighteenth priestly course

פתחיה אכ ער משמ תשע עשרה
Pethachia Akh[lah] Ar[ab], nineteenth priestly course

יהז מגדל נוניה משמ העשרים
Eze[kiel] Migdal Nunaiya twentieth priestly course

In 1939 Samuel Klein published a book in Hebrew entitled *Sefer ha-Yishouv* (The book of Settlement). On the basis of the various texts noted above, he attempted the theoretical reconstruction of the ancient synagogal inscriptions with their priestly classes and places of residence. Here, then, is the reconstruction of the four verses according to Klein:

	Name of the priestly course	Appellation (if existent) and village
17	משמר חזיר	ממליה
18	משמר הפצץ	נצרת
19	משמר פתחיה	אכלה ערב
20	משמר יהזקאל	מגדל נוניה

Comparing the four lines with the three fragments from Caesarea, reconstituted, we have :

משמרת שבע עשרה חזיר ממליה
משמרת שמונה עשרה הפיצץ נצרת
משמרת תשע עשרה פתחיה אכלה ערב
משמרת עשרים יהזקאל מגדל נוניא

The fragment A of the Caesarea inscription touch on four lines of text. When we compare that text with the four lines above we find an absolute identity as regards the letters appearing on the fragment. This shows that Avi Yonah did not take any liberties in interpreting the inscription, simply because the reconstruction is not his at all—it is that of Samuel Klein set forth more than twenty years before the discovery of the Caesarea inscription.

Avi Yonah writes:

The key to the understanding of the inscription is to be found in fragment 1 [=Fragment A]. If we compare the text with the list of the priestly courses, as established theoretically by Prof. Samuel Klein - together with their appellations and the names of the villages in which they lived in Galilee, the identity is astonishing. [Vardaman, J. and Garrett, J.L., *The Teacher's Yoke*, Waco, Texas, 1964.]

Thus, the Caesarea inscription, fragment A, discovered in 1962 apparently irrefutably demonstrates the correctness of Samuel Klein's reconstruction, and implies the existence of a Galilean village with the name Nazareth at least from the second half of the second century CE.



Fig.5: Prof. Avi-Yonah in Caesarea, 1962
[M. Govaars, *Photographs of Caesarea Maritima*, Israel, 2008, p.11]

It is superfluous to emphasize the importance of this evidence regarding the existence of Nazareth, a question which has been much debated by specialists and which (as we saw in the citation from Guignebert) constitutes a “pebble in the shoe” of the tradition.

Without other proofs, that of Klein—although plausible—remained a misunderstood hypothesis.

But on August 14, 1962, everything changed. On that day a marble fragment in Caesarea was discovered which mentions N-Ts-R-Th (Nazareth). It appeared to be a fragment of one of those lists of priestly courses about which Klein had written so much.

Only two non-Christian witnesses attest to the existence of Nazareth in ancient times: the *Lamentation* of ha-Kalir and the Caesarean inscription.

By an extraordinary coincidence, these perfectly complement one another.

Moreover, Klein's conjectural reconstruction of the priestly classes, theoretically established on the basis of clues, was revealed to be absolutely exact, at least for the letters from four lines reconstructed through the fragment A found in Caesarea.

To understand the importance of the foregoing observation, it is sufficient to compare Avi Yonah's reconstruction (Fig. 4) with the inscription discovered in Bayt al-Hadir (Figs. 6 and 7) in the early 70s. The differences are many and, sometimes, substantial. On the other hand, between the

Caesarea inscription and the theoretical reconstruction by Klein, the identity is amazing. So amazing that it must arouse suspicion.



Fig.6 : The Bayt al Hadir inscription.



Fig.7 : Reconstruction of the Bayt al Hadir inscription.

Enter Jerry Vardaman

The discovery and interpretation of the Caesarea inscription are attributed to professor of archaeology at the Hebrew University and excavation director Dr. M. Avi Yonah. Avi Yonah's name is a guarantee of seriousness and, above all, of neutrality since the Judaism of the author, as also of the inscription, cannot be doubted.

But is this in fact how events took place?

The first surprise the researcher encounters is that Avi Yonah's complete article regarding the Caesarea inscription, in the English language, did not appear in an international journal specializing in archeology but in an obscure memorial edition, *The Teacher's Yoke*, edited in 1964 by Professor E. Jerry Vardaman for the press of Baylor University, a private Christian school in Waco, Texas.

Why relegate the most extensive article on an important Israeli archaeological find to an obscure edition from a Texas university?

Jerry Vardaman supplied an Introduction to Avi Yonah's article in *The Teacher's Yoke*. There, we find the answer to the above question: **Vardaman was himself the discoverer of the Caesarea fragment A (the all-important fragment which contains the word 'Nazareth')**. At that time, Vardaman was professor of biblical archeology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas. Why was he even in the Caesarea Maritima excavation?



Fig.9: Prof. Jerry Vardaman (on the left) in Caesarea, 1962.
[M. Govaars, Photographs of Caesarea Maritima, p.18]

The Albright connection

Jerry Vardaman probably first became interested in biblical archaeology in the 1950s when he came under the tutelage of the great American archaeologist William Foxwell Albright, an evangelical-Methodist scholar. During his life, Albright was interested in problems associated with the existence of Nazareth. [W. F. Albright, “The names Nazareth and Nazoraean,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1946.] He was familiar with the theories of Samuel Klein regarding ha-Kalir’s liturgical poems, including their references to villages in Palestine. [W.F. Albright, *The Archaeology of the Palestine and the Bible*, New-York, 1932:72.] Albright had himself met the Jewish scholar and greatly admired his extraordinary talmudic learning. [S. Rosenblatt, *The Days of my Years: An Autobiography*, New York, 1976:12.]

In the year 1959, before engaging in a series of archaeological excavations, Vardaman studied for a time with Albright at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Letters between the two archaeologists attest to warm relations between them several years later, namely, at the time of the Caesarea excavation in 1962. [M. Govaars and J. Vardaman, *Photographs of Caesarea Maritima*, Israel, Indianapolis, 2008.]

More coincidences

Maria Luisa Rigato, a Catholic scholar, writes:

Avi Yonah reports: During the excavation campaign of 1954-58 in Israel, “in the excavations at Caesarea conducted by the Department of Archaeology of the Hebrew University [...], fragments of a Jewish inscription [...] of exceptional interest were found.”

This discovery occurred in 1958, and in 1962 Avi Yonah published his conclusions on the nature of the three fragments, assigning them a date of the third / fourth century. [M. Rigato, *Il Titolo della Croce di Gesù*, Rome 2005, p.54.]

The scholar has Avi Yonah’s text in front of her, but she ‘embellishes’ it with elements which are not present in the article, most particularly regarding dates. She notes that the discovery by Avi Yonah was in 1958. However, the date is false. The first archaeological excavation in Caesarea was in 1956, but the fragments of the inscription were not found in that campaign. The two and only fragments which the excavation director, Avi Yonah, found were uncovered in 1962. These are Avi Yonah’s fragments “A” and “B.”

It should also be noted that Prof. Vardaman and his colleagues at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) did not participate in the earlier excavation, but only in the second one of 1962. Ms. Rigato omits to state that—together with the the Dept. of Archaeology of the Hebrew University—these excavations were financed by the SBTS, which furnished Avi Yonah with his excavation collaborators, including Prof. Vardaman and student volunteers from the SBTS.

This point has some importance—for Vardaman, as we have noted, was the actual discoverer of fragment A of the Caesarea inscription.

Ms. Rigato dated the discovery of the Caesarea inscription to 1958, as we have seen. In that year, S. Talmon published the photo of a fragment C which indubitably refers to the list of priestly families—as inscribed on marble tablets mounted to the walls of the synagogues, according to Klein. Strangely, fragment C was soon lost. It has never been recovered. However, publication of the 1958 photograph proved critical to subsequent developments.

We can conjecture that the discovery of fragment C was crucial to the decision of the SBTS to subsidize the 1962 excavations in Caesarea. The reason is plain: fragment C clearly demonstrates that a list of priestly courses was affixed to the wall of the Caesarea synagogue, a list similar to that elucidated by Klein. Now, Klein had shown that the list included—in its eighteenth line—the name of the town “Nazareth” (Natsrath). For all the Jewish savant’s erudition, however, this was still a theoretical reconstruction. There was still no hard evidence that Klein was correct in all particulars, most especially regarding “Nazareth.”

What was required—from the point of view of a conservative Christian seeking evidence—was the actual word “Nazareth” found on a fragment of the Caesarea inscription. Only this would show that Klein was correct. Given such a ‘discovery,’ it would be possible to establish, once and for all, the existence of Nazareth at least from the second century CE onwards.

A small fragment of marble—yet one containing the critical letters— was enough. On the basis of fragment C—that is, on the basis of the photo published by Talmon in 1958—it was already possible for Avi Yonah to theoretically reconstruct the entire inscription as we find in his Fig. 1 (Fig. 4, above), based on the studies of Samuel Klein.

It is even more interesting to note that Samuel Klein himself was the first to localize the site of the Caesarea synagogue—later systematically excavated by Avi Yonah in 1956 and 1962. [Letter of S. Klein, dated June 10, 1930. Department of Antiquities ATQ/226. Cf. Govaars and Vardaman, 2008.]

In effect, Klein both (a) reconstructed the list of priestly courses with their towns of residence, and (b) discovered the site which would validate that reconstruction post-mortem.

As mentioned above, the SBTS furnished Avi Yonah with his principal collaborators—most notably Jerry Vardaman, whose role in the excavation was hardly marginal. Marylinda Govaars published some notes and photos taken by Vardaman in the course of the Caesarea excavations. She writes:

Vardaman, supervisor of area D, was instrumental in finding the fragment with the word ‘Nazareth’ on it. [...] By virtue of being an assistant director, Vardaman had access to all the areas undergoing excavation during his two months at Caesarea [...] [M. Govaars and J. Vardaman, *Photographs of Caesarea Maritima*, Israel, Indianapolis, 2008.]

Two months may seem like a short period, yet in that span of time Vardaman's contribution proved decisive. In his introduction to Avi Yonah's article, Vardaman himself described the discovery:

This fragment of the inscription was found August, 14, 1962, at a depth of 90 cm. below the surface of the sands of Caesarea. It was registered with pottery basket D.V.9. It was found near the end of the season of excavation, and due to fatigue, the men who were working with picks and hoes were becoming careless about spotting some of the objects which were turning up in this area of work. For this reason, as the excavator I gave strict instructions to the workman on the wheelbarrow (whose name was Shalom Attiah) to pay close attention to the debris which was being emptied there by the basket men. This proved to be most fortunate, for the particular fragment mentioned above (no.1) [=Fragment A] was found by Mr. Attiah as he searched through his wheelbarrow before carting the debris away to the dump. The Fragment was quickly washed and at first proved difficult to read intelligibly. The second line I immediately read as N Z R T ('Nazareth'), even though others read it as B Z R T ('drought'). The first letter of line 2 was only partially preserved of course. It must be realized that Professor Avi Yonah has done a brilliant job of epigraphical interpretation, having as he did so few clues as to the nature of the documents which Eleazar Oren and I found and reconstructing the whole so masterfully. Full credit for recognizing the significance and relationship of the various fragments to each other and to older sources must be given to his ingenuity as an epigraphist. [Vardaman, J. and Garrett, J.L., *The Teacher's Yoke: studies in memory of Henry Trantham*, Waco, Texas, 1964.]

Thus, Vardaman recognized the importance of the discovery (confirmed by Avi Yonah in his article) and he also ascribed full credit for the reconstruction of the text to Professor Avi Yonah. But in a note published in a 1998 article, he augmented the narrative with a number of interesting details:

I have not yet called attention to my discovery of the critical section of a Caesarean inscription of the twenty-four priestly courses, with its mention of a Nazareth as one of the villages settled in the late first century A.D. or early second century A.D. by the Jewish temple priesthood (the line of Hapizezzez, the eighteenth family, settled at Nazareth). Although the text was found in 1962, I was back in Jerusalem in the summer of 1963, studying in the first class organized by President Nelson Glueck of the new Hebrew Union College Archaeological and Biblical School. Professor Avi Yonah, indicative of his generous spirit, insisted that summer that I, as the one who came up with the text, should sit by his side in the King David Hotel when honors were bestowed upon him at a banquet (for those who had recently made outstanding discoveries in Israel). He confided to me privately that our joint discovery of this inscription resulted in his recent promotion from associate professor to full professor at the Hebrew University. Properly understood, the inscription shatters the theories of those who deny the existence of Nazareth in Jesus' time or earlier. ["Progress in the study of the sabbatical/jubilee cycle since Siloam" Vardaman, J., *Chronos Kairos Christos II*, Macon, 1998.]

In this last sentence, Vardaman is referring to those who, like Guignebert, pointed to the troubling silence of the literary sources and who thus dared to deny the existence of Nazareth in the time of Jesus.

Vardaman and the microletters

Jerry Vardaman, who passed away in November 2000, was a respected archaeologist for many years. However, his reputation today is indelibly sullied by a most remarkable affair which has nothing to do with Nazareth but, rather, which concerns the date of Jesus' birth.

Apparent errors and contradictions in the canonical birth stories have produced more than one enigma relating to the birth of Jesus. Scholars have long been aware that the Gospel of Luke (2:2) places the birth after a census by Quirinus, which historians tell us took place in 6 CE. On the other hand, the Gospel of Matthew (2:1) has Jesus being born while Herod the Great is still alive. Herod died in 4 BCE, and thus a chronological conflict exists between these two accounts.

Jerry Vardaman hypothesized that Jesus was born in 12 BCE, after a prior census effected by the same Quirinus. This thesis was not his invention. The problem, however, was that Vardaman offered the scholarly community "proofs" that were extraordinary in the extreme. As Richard R. Racy relates:

Unfortunately, there have been attempts by modern apologists to defend Luke's account and reconcile the two that have crossed over from even sincere amateurishness to outright foolishness and fraud. Probably the worst of these is the case of the coins of Vardaman. Dr. E. Jerry Vardaman was a respected scholar and archaeologist, an expert in New Testament chronology, author of six books or dissertations and many other academic articles, and a lecturer. He was an ordained Baptist minister with a Th. D from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and a Ph. D from Baylor University. He was a field archaeologist in more than half a dozen biblical sites, a professor of religion at Tarleton state College in Stephenville, Texas, and an instructor at two Baptist seminaries teaching biblical archaeology before he became the founding director of the Cobb Institute of Archaeology at Mississippi State University in 1973 where he served also as Professor of Religion until his retirement in 1994. He died in November 2000 still active as a speaker on biblical archaeology.

With such an impressive set of credentials, we would expect exacting care and full evidence for any claims he made regarding any biblical controversy. Whatever else he may have done well, his contribution to this issue of the conflict between Matthew's and Luke's accounts stands out as stark delusional nonsense. Vardaman claimed that he and another scholar, Nikos Kokkinos, discovered certain ancient Roman bronze coins in the British Museum that were covered with what he called 'microletters'; or 'micrographic letters'; letters supposedly hand-inscribed into either the coin itself or the mold from which it was made that are so small that they can only be read with a magnifying glass. According to Vardaman, the letters refer to Jesus by several of His biblical titles such as 'King of the

Jews’, ‘Messiah’, ‘Righteous One’, etc. By using ‘microletters’ dates of AD 16, which contradict the date on the coin, LHKT DAMASKWN or ‘328th year of the Damascenes’ in English and which he never explained how he arrived at, he concluded that Jesus was born in 12 BC and goes on from there to generate a New Testament chronology all the way to the conversion of Paul. Vardaman even claimed to have found other microletters on stone monuments, but the stone monuments of that era were never polished, so the rough surfaces would never have received such micro lettering to begin with.

The defectiveness of these outrageous claims are too numerous to list here, but a few will make the point. First, the coins exist in the British Museum and have no such markings. Second, such tiny lettering (about 1/50 of an inch high as Vardaman represented them in his drawings and on coins smaller than a quarter) would have been impossible in the first century because the technology to have inscribed them didn’t exist until the late Industrial Age, maybe the 1700’s. Third, the coins are so worn that the original bold image has lost all its detail, so such tiny lettering would have disappeared centuries ago. Fourth, the letters are all in Latin but appear on a coin cast in an area of the world that only used Greek letters, and Vardaman also sees such Latin letters as ‘J’ and ‘W’ that were non-existent in ancient Latin and did not appear in Latin until the Middle Ages. Further without going into detail, he even misinterprets the dates in a way that contradicts himself. Vardaman never produced any hard evidence for his claims, never invited technical examination of the coins, only produced drawings (not even a photograph) and never published a paper on them, but only expounded on them in lectures—mostly in China to a seminary. We can only imagine that a man of such respected scholarly achievements in his previous history must have succumbed to the temptation to produce some startling evidence to prove his academic position and simultaneously provide confirmation of the basic tenets of his faith, an act of frustrated desperation, like that of a preacher who so desperately wants people to believe in divine healing that he has people lie about their healings to get others to believe. [R. RACY, *Nativity: The Christmas Story, Which You Have Never Heard Before*, Bloomington, 2007.]

On one of the first century coins, Vardaman proposed to find the following inscription incised in microletters: “First year of Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee.” [Vardaman, J., *Chronos Kairos Christos I*, Winona Lake, 1989:72.] Of course, this alone supplies all required proof of the existence of Nazareth in the first century!

Furthermore, Vardaman claimed to have found a microinscription on a funeral stone known as the Lapis Venetus. He concluded that the inscription showed beyond any doubt that Quirinus conducted a census in the year 12 BCE. On May 18, 2000, Vardaman sent an email on this subject to Ronald L. Conte Jr.:

The microletters (but these are clear and definite as far as I am concerned) LA CONS P.S.QVIRINI are on the line referring to the census which A. Secundus took of Apamea, being sent by Quirinius for that purpose on the Lapis Venetus (Inscription of Venice - still there in Arch. Museum). Quirinius was only consul one time—in 12 B.C. For some it will

be a problem since here Greek is mixed with Latin, but such critics will have to blame the original writer of the microletters—I am confident of my reading [...]

I believe that the Lapis Tiburtinus is also connected with Quirinius, contra almost all modern scholars. Is my “Yes” better than their “No?” [Notes on the Unpublished Research of Dr. E. J. Vardaman.]

Until his death only a few months after this email was sent, Vardaman never admitted the fraud of the microinscriptions. Our present concern is that this was not the only secret which he took to the grave.

To what lengths did Vardaman go in order to substantiate his thesis regarding the birthdate of Jesus? *Answer:* He invented archaeological artefacts—the microinscriptions.

What was necessary for him to validate, in an irrefutable manner, the ‘ancient’ existence of Nazareth? *Answer:* He ‘discovered’ a small piece of stone containing the word “Nazareth” apparently confirming the thesis of Samuel Klein relative to the list of priestly families.

... an act of frustrated desperation, like that of a preacher who so desperately wants people to believe in divine healing that he has people lie about their healings to get others to believe.

For these reasons we believe that the Caesarea inscription is the illegitimate offspring of the ha-Kalir’s *Lamentation*, and that its real father is Jerry Vardaman.

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