Christianity at the crossroads—Nazareth in the crosshairs

By Rene Salm

A few days ago I had lunch with my neighbors. Ben is a retired financial analyst, a practical, intelligent man with a dry wit and little patience for superstition. His wife Karen works as a psychiatric nurse and had the day off. As we ate, the TV was on in the background, tuned to CNN. This was Holy Week, the time of year when Christ's death and resurrection are celebrated, and when the Christian world is more than usually interested in topics religious. This year those topics were spicier than usual, for the breaking news was the Catholic Church's sex scandal. Perhaps catering to America's insatiable appetite for the salacious, the top story on CNN that day was pedophile priests. Our table talk was a commentary on the increasingly lurid revelations which now threatened to implicate even the pope. Over coffee and dessert, Ben (my neighbor, that is, not the pope) muttered in disgust, "Why does anyone still go to church?"

Karen shook her head in silence. "There are still a lot of believers," I answered with a sigh.

The three of us were raised Roman Catholic but, in a perhaps revealing statistic, not one of us remains a believer today.

"Does anybody," Ben continued, "really think that the wine turns into Jesus' blood, and the bread into his body? Isn't this the twenty-first century?"

"It is, but they're still teaching those things in catechism class," I said.

"Cannibals!" Ben retorted, taking a bite of pie.

The TV droned on: ". . . molested two hundred children. . . difficult to prove the pope's direct involvement. . . Vatican very angry with the New York times. . . thousands of cases now surfacing in Germany. . . Bavarian Catholics leaving the Church in droves. . ."

I glanced at my watch and turned to Karen. "That was a great lunch," I said, standing up to leave.

"More pie and ice cream?" she offered.

"Wish I could stay longer, Karen, but I need to write an article this afternoon. It's for American Atheist magazine."

"Maybe you can include something about these scandals," she said.

"That's a good idea. But the article is about the bogus archaeology of Nazareth a long time ago. Is there a tie-in?"

"Yes," Ben interjected, rising from the table to get my jacket. "The latest sex scandals are just the most recent form of hypocrisy, aren't they? I mean, the Church didn't become this rotten overnight. It must have gone wrong some time ago. . . A long time ago—maybe even at the very beginning. That's where Nazareth comes in."

My neighbor is absolutely right. The hypocrisy now surfacing in the Catholic church has a long and sickening pedigree. Today's pedophile priest, yesterday's holier-than-thou inquisitor, and the grand dissemblers who led western civilization astray two thousand years ago with a cock-and-bull Jesus story all have one thing in common: a pathological betrayal of trust.

A house "from the time of Jesus"?

On December 20 of last year, the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) notified major wire services as well as journalists from leading newspapers around the world of breaking news about to take place in Nazareth. I read the following notice on my computer in Eugene, Oregon:

> This morning the IAA Spokesperson circulated a notice to journalists inviting them to a Press Conference to be held tomorrow morning, December 21, at which the IAA will Reveal a New Archeological find in Nazareth. The meeting point will be behind the Church of the Annunciation, next to the upper entrance to the old school of Saint Joseph at 10:20 AM.

I found the timing predictable, even suspicious, as the Catholic Church has a penchant for announcing convenient 'news' on or about the winter solstice and just a few days before Christmas. That is peak piety season when the congregation is, presumably, at peak receptivity.

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(Excerpt from "Glimpse into Jesus' time," FOX news video, Dec. 22, 2009)

Bill Hemmer (FOX news interviewer): It's such a wonderful time of the year to have such a great discovery. . .

James Hamilton Charlesworth (noted academic at Princeton Theological Seminary, professor and Methodist minister): I almost said at the beginning, 'Let's be cynical.' You know, this is the time of year when nonsense hits because it's Christmas. But wait a minute. . . This is not nonsense. This is REAL stuff, from Jesus' Nazareth, from Jesus' time!

Bill Hemmer: Wait a minute. . . You don't need to be cynical, you can be skeptical. You don't necessarily have to be cynical!

James Hamilton Charlesworth: [Somewhat taken aback.] That's a good correction. Yeah. . .

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On winter solstice morning a veritable gaggle of international media representatives were assembled on Franciscan property in Nazareth, Israel, for the promised news. They stood outside the Church of the Annunciation, a few yards from the fabled spot where the fourteen-year old Virgin Mary received the assignation from the archangel Gabriel that she would be bearing God, or the Son of God, or God with Us ("Emmanuel," Mt 1:23) Christian theologians have long

debated the exact nature of this interruption in the young maiden's life by the LORD. The hardest information we have of this history-changing event remains the contradictory reports in the first chapters of Matthew, Luke, and (for more intrepid readers) the once popular Protevangelium of James.

AP, UPI, Reuters, and Agence France Presse were all present (I mean, at last year's press conference, not at the fabled Annunciation for which there were no witnesses). By nightfall the news had circled the globe. HOUSE FROM THE TIME OF JESUS FOUND IN NAZARETH screamed the FOX headline. A plethora of print, video, audio, and digital reports eventuated in succeeding weeks, all basically saying the same thing since they ultimately all go back to the same news conference. Instantly, the Internet was buzzing with the story. Google returns for 'nazareth archeology' soared from 50 to 1350 hits overnight. Newspapers from the New York Times to the Jerusalem Post carried the story on Dec. 22nd, and it made all the network TV newscasts that evening.

Personally, I was impressed not with the content of this story as with the awesome speed of its dissemination. Everything about this 'discovery' betrayed a coordinated, first-class publicity effort which, in our day, only a mountain of money can buy. Firstly, there was that pre-announcement which instantly reached far beyond the media to the general public and people like myself. In other words, there was not merely a story here there was also massive preparation for the story.

Secondly, there was coordination between the Israeli government and the Christian establishment. After all, the announcement was by the IAA, a staid arm of the Israeli government and one which does not routinely hold press conferences. On the other hand, the venue (both of the excavation and of the press conference) was Franciscan church property, and the headliner was none other than "Jesus." This rather small Nazareth house excavation had, evidently, enlisted the vast publicity efforts of both the Jewish and Christian mega-establishments a breathtakingly broad base.

Thirdly, the post-conference publicity across all the world's major media and at warp speed was a public relations accomplishment worthy of Madison Avenue's finest. Similar excavations in Israel (which occur almost daily) routinely garner only a paragraph or two summary in an austere archaeological journal. They lack a scintilla of media attention and, from a publicity standpoint, die an instant death. Obviously, this Nazareth house excavation was quite different.

Fourthly, big name Christian scholars instantly jumped on board. Within twenty-four hours James Charlesworth (see above) discussed the excavation on FOX news in an extended interview, and the matter was important enough to find him on a plane to Nazareth within days. Other prominent Christian scholars, such as James Tabor, also voiced their interest, support, and pleasure at the new "Nazareth house" finds which, finally, offered "proof" of the town's existence at the time of Jesus. One could almost hear a collective sigh of relief from the Christian world.

Alexandre's ragtime band

At the center of this story is a name suddenly catapulted from virtual obscurity onto the global stage: Yardenna Alexandre. Hers is the smiling face of a sixtyish woman that appeared last Christmas on so many TV screens and computers,

almost apologetically explaining: "I don't think I really appreciated the extent of interest that [this excavation] would generate in the world. . . " Ms. Alexandre has been active for several decades as an archaeologist for the IAA, either assisting or directing a number of smaller excavations in Israel, some in the vicinity of Nazareth. I corresponded with her a few years ago during the lengthy research for my book, The Myth of Nazareth. She first surprised me with the claim of having found "Hellenistic" evidence at Mary's Well in Nazareth, a small excavation she directed. Such evidence was entirely inconsistent with the rest of the data from the Nazareth basin that I'd collected. If true, it would effectively scuttle my case against Nazareth's existence at the time of Jesus. However, Alexandre's claim proved to be unfounded, for when I challenged her on this point, she was either unwilling or unable to produce documentation or even a description of her "Hellenistic" evidence. I was surprised.

In a bizarre twist, Christian excavators a year or so later independently alleged that Alexandre had discovered "Hellenistic coins" at Mary's Well. Since she herself had said nothing about such coins, I wondered how these Christian excavators (working at the other end of the basin, at the Nazareth Village Farm resort) could know more about her discoveries than Alexandre did herself. If valid, this "Hellenistic coins" claim could similarly undermine the skeptical case against Nazareth. However, to date Ms. Alexandre has not substantiated this claim with any verifiable data, and has refused to address it. (On the NVF shenanigans see American Atheist, Jan. 2010, pp. 10–13). This was a second surprise.

Thus, Ms. Alexandre has been at the center of several pro-tradition claims at Nazareth, yet her inability to support them with demonstrable evidence telling silences which amount to a default in the science of archaeology alert us to the questionable character of those past claims which have invariably bolstered the traditional Christian view of Nazareth. Given this track record, I was not surprised to see Ms. Alexandre chosen by the church to direct this latest dig, at the behest of the "Association Mary of Nazareth," a Catholic association with plans to incorporate the ancient house Alexandre excavated into a tourist destination called the "International Marian Center of Nazareth."

The excavator described the dig as "a rescue excavation in a very small area adjacent to the Church of the Annunciation." In the winter solstice press conference she concluded the following:

> The discovery is of the utmost importance since it reveals for the very first time a house from the Jewish village of Nazareth and thereby sheds light on the way of life at the time of Jesus.
> *["Residential building at the time of Jesus of Nazareth," IMFA release, Dec. 21, 2009]*

Alexandre's claim is based on a few pieces of pottery dating (in her words) "from the Early Roman Period. We're talking about the first century BCE ('before the common era') and the first century CE, which is really the time of Jesus Christ" (FOX news video, "A Christmas Discovery," Dec. 27, 2009).

For the record, let me state that this claim is highly improbable. First of all, the presence of Nazareth pottery from "the time of Jesus" (the turn of the era) flies in the face of the rest of the evidence from the area, evidence gathered in over a century of digging which clearly shows the beginning of settlement several generations after Jesus' time (see The Myth of Nazareth, Chapter Four). Secondly, we have yet to "see" any such pottery in the documented, published literature. As discussed above, Alexandre has a track record of making pro-tradition claims and not backing them up with evidence that can be properly itemized, drawn, and described, as is normal in academic literature dealing with archaeology.
I'm by no means the only skeptic. An American archaeologist (who shall remain nameless) has eloquently observed:

> ...What I find most notable is that to date the excavators [of the 'Nazareth house'] have yet to report even one shred of evidence that places this structure in the first century CE as opposed to the second century. People can trust all they wish, but it is precisely this type of trust that leads the gullible to pay no heed to the requirements of evidence. Instead, they buy into the spurious idea that the traces of farms, Roman bath houses, garrison works, vineyards, caravanseries, synagogues, etc., have been discovered from a turn of the era Nazareth. These edifices do not exist in the factual record, but they widely populate apologists fiction.

The same archaeologist contacted a colleague in Israel and continues:

> After reading the MFA [Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs] press release, which states that the ceramics found at the site were perhaps second century CE, I contacted a friend of mine who is a director at the Albright [W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research]. He confirmed for me that the typology is first-second century CE, and presently the ceramic finds are so sparse and disjointed that it is still too early to rule out stratigraphic intrusion. So, judging from the finds themselves, the Jesus era is apparently first-second century CE or perhaps even later. Obviously, this dig adds little if anything to our previous body of knowledge at this time, as we already have scarce first-second century ceramic remains at Nazareth and an evidentiary profile that confirms occupation of the site in the second century CE.
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> . . . I find it highly revealing that an IAA [Israel Antiquities Authority] representative would state that we have a few written sources that [let us] know that Nazareth was a small, Jewish village in the first century CE. Anyone care to venture a guess as to what these written sources might be? Nazareth is a cash/political cow and professional/confessional bulwark that they will never allow to crumble, no matter what the evidence might be.

Thus, there are prominent archaeologists both in Israel and the U.S. who doubt Alexandre's early dating regarding this 'house from the time of Jesus.' Perhaps even more telling is that the official IAA report of this excavation also does not support Ms. Alexandre's claim. It took me only fifteen minutes online to track down the terse one paragraph report, which gives a very different picture from Alexandre's words to the press and reads as follows:

The excavation in the Church of the Annunciation was expanded to include two squares. Remains of a building from the Roman period were exposed in which there were two rock-cuttings in the bedrock: one a silo and the other, in the excavator's opinion, a refuge pit. There were also the remains of a large building there that dates to the Mamluk period, of which a vault and a number of walls were exposed. The excavation has ended.

Remarkably, the above IAA report merely mentions structural remains from the Roman period, which lasted into the fourth century CE. The only other dating divulged is the Mamluk period (13th–19th centuries). It makes no mention of first-century remains, much less of evidence from the turn of the era ("time of Jesus"). Once again, Ms. Alexandre appears to be making early claims that are not backed up by the evidence. As for the "refuge pit," this would point to a hiding place at the time of the Second Jewish Revolt (132-135 CE), consistent with much other material from Nazareth, not to the time of the First Revolt (c. 70 CE).

In other words, the official statement from the Israel Antiquities Authority, though very brief, does not support Alexandre's stunning remarks which have been trumpeted across the globe since Christmas. There really is no story here at all! This is the dirty little secret known to myself, to a few others—and now to you too. This pattern of deception repeats over and over again in so-called "Christian archaeology." Against the encroaching work of science, the church makes claims which support the fantastic gospel story of Jesus. Upon investigation, however, those claims invariably turn out to be bogus.

In the case of this recent Nazareth house excavation, an Israeli archaeologist is the mouthpiece for the church. Nevertheless, her interpretive remarks to the press (which go beyond the official IAA report) must be supported by the presentation of verifiable evidence if they are to be taken seriously. Until the archaeologist decides to do that, we have absolutely nothing to go on except her word. So it is in science—when someone makes a claim, s/he must support it with facts. Will Alexandre choose to publish a report with diagrams, description, and discussion, so that the rest of the world can verify what she says? Who knows. But until she does, her statements which contradict the official IAA report must be viewed with skepticism. As the American archaeologist cited above aptly concludes: "It really looks like our Israeli and Franciscan friends are merely up to their old tricks."

I could not agree more.

A time of change and challenge

Our generation is one of transformation and change, when the Catholic Church is embattled on several fronts, and when the axiomatic religious assumptions of the past two thousand years may be finally giving way. For an Atheist, this is an exciting time.

The Nazareth issue is a small but critical element in the multivalent demise of Christianity, in the dismemberment of an entitled, corrupt, and power-hungry organization which will probably endure continuing torture by a thousand stings. We must be patient, for the beast has been around for an awfully long time and is exceptionally well rooted in our culture. No one need look for the "death" of Christianity anytime soon, however. I would not be surprised if, five hundred years from now, there still are popes, the Vatican, priestly pedophilia, and belief in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (among a bullheaded segment of the population). Nevertheless, that real possibility should not deter us. Given man's penchant for wishing, occasionally dissembling, and often dreaming, Atheists and reasoning people need not set their sights on utterly destroying Christianity in the near term. Rather, we need to make sure that religious unreason never gains the ascendancy in human affairs, now and in the future.

Our generation is especially empowered in this regard. If we persevere in our mandate for reason at this critical juncture, we will finally succeed in giving a post-mortem voice to the myriad victims of Christianity's bloody past, and we will ensure that future generations live forever free from mind-numbing religious tyranny.

N*ote: The author has started an online forum, "Mythicist Discussion," for those who may wish to further explore the issues introduced in this article. For more information, please visit http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mythicist_discussion/.*