The strong documentary evidence offers formidable support for the existence, life, death, and ministry of Jesus. However, direct archaeological corroboration for Jesus is admittedly rare. Despite this, recent finds have added valuable confirmation of Christ in various ways.

The Megiddo Mosaic Inscription

In 2005, inmates at the maximum security prison located at Megiddo, Israel, accidentally unearthed an ancient church-floor mosaic measuring 16 x 32 feet. Its inscription
describes a table offered to Christ by a female worshipper named “Akeptous.” The ornate Greek inscription, laid out in small mosaic tiles, makes reference “to the God Jesus Christ” and that the table was offered to Jesus “as a memorial.” The phrase “God Jesus Christ” has been over-lined (instead of the traditional underlining) for emphasis, and confirms the notion that early Christians affirmed the deity of Christ. This find has also attested to the spread and acceptance of Christianity within the borders of Israel and the surrounding Mediterranean regions. Astonishingly, the mosaic floor with its inscription has been dated to the third century AD, making it part of what many believe to be the oldest church yet discovered in the Holy Land.

The Alexamenos Graffito

A carving depicting the manner in which early Romans viewed Christianity and its Jewish savior, Jesus, was found in 1857 on Palatine Hill in Rome.* An instance of graffiti (known as a graffito) depicting a Christian worshipper of Jesus on the cross was discovered, though its original exact location is somewhat uncertain. Everett Ferguson in his *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, says it was “scratched on a stone in a guard room on Palatine Hill near the Circus Maximus in Rome.”1 Orazio Marucchi, in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, says, “On a beam in the *Pædagogioum* on the Palatine there was discovered a *graffito* on the plaster, showing a man with an ass’s head, and clad in a *perizoma* (or short loin-cloth) and fastened to a *crux immissa* (regular Latin cross).”2 Last of all, Graydon Snyder, in *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine*, places the location of discovery “in the servants’ quarters of the Imperial Palace.”3 The exact location is thus uncertain, though the original guardroom may have been used later for a school; thus the individual authors may be referring to the same location.

This graffito, which is now located in the Kircherian Museum in Rome, depicts an early Christian named Alexamenos worshipping at the feet of a man on a cross who has the head of a donkey. There is what appears to be the Greek letter Υ (upsilon). At the left of the drawing is a young man who apparently is Alexamenos; his name is scrawled on the plaster. His hand is raised in an act of worship, it is assumed. The reading of the graffito is as follows:

* This discussion of the Alexamenos Graffito is adapted from material provided by Dr. H. Wayne House. Used by permission.
A literal translation is problematic if \( \sigma \varepsilon \beta \varepsilon \tau \varepsilon \) (sebete) is understood as a second-person imperative, because it would need to be translated “Alexamenos, worship God!” though it could be a second-person indicative, therefore “Alexamenos, you are worshipping (your) God.” If the word is spelled incorrectly, and should read \( \sigma \varepsilon \beta \varepsilon \tau \varepsilon \), it could be a third-person middle indicative and be translated “Alexamenos is worshipping (his) God.” Why the word for worship is written as a plural rather than a singular is uncertain, but most agree that the text should read “Alexamenos worships God” or “Alexamenos worships (his) God.”

That Christians were accused of worshipping an ass’s head may be seen in the words of the late second-century apologist Tertullian. He indicates that both Christians and Jews were accused of worshipping a god with a donkey’s head, and even mentions that a certain Jew carried a caricature around Carthage that had a Christian with a donkey’s ears and hooves, entitled Deos Christianorum Onocoetes (“the God of the Christians begotten of a donkey”).

This graffito is an important attestation to the fact that early Christians worshipped Jesus as God, were the targets of slander and ridicule, and used the crucifix in their worship, at least by the third century. This latter, crucial aspect supports the Gospel statements describing crucifixion as the manner by which Christ died, a method of capital punishment that has been previously disputed. As Marucchi rightly says, “It would not have been possible for Alexamenos’s companion to trace [draw] the graffito of a crucified person clad in the perizoma (which was contrary to Roman usage) if he had not seen some such figure made use of by the Christians.”

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* Tertullian’s text reads, “But lately a new edition of our god has been given to the world in that great city: it originated with a certain vile man who was wont to hire himself out to cheat the wild beasts, and who exhibited a picture with this inscription: The God of the Christians, born of an ass. He had the ears of an ass, was hoofed in one foot, carried a book, and wore a toga. Both the name and the figure gave us amusement. But our opponents ought straightforwardly to have done homage to this biformed divinity, for they have acknowledged gods dog-headed and lion-headed, with horn of buck and ram, with goat-like loins, with serpent legs, with wings sprouting from back or foot” (Alexander Roberts et al., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III: “Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325” [Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997], 31).
The Yehohanan Ossuary

That Christ died by crucifixion, and that the Romans practiced this form of capital punishment in the first century AD during the life of Christ, is now well-attested. This is supported by our understanding of history spanning from the sixth century BC to fourth century AD; namely, that this type of punishment was used by the Persians, Carthaginians, and the Romans, only to be abolished in the fourth century by Emperor Constantine.

Moreover, a limestone ossuary (an 18-inch-long stone box for the storing of bones of the deceased) was discovered in Jerusalem in 1968 that contained the bones of a first-century AD crucifixion victim named Yehohanan ben Hagkol. Upon examination, the right heel and wrist bone still contained the Roman seven-inch spikes intact, thus attesting the Roman practice during the first century when Christ was reported to have been crucified (Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19; see also Psalm 22).

The James Ossuary

One of the earliest and most important discoveries relating to the historicity of Jesus and members of his family is the limestone bone box (called an ossuary) made known to the public in October 2002.9 Ossuaries were used in Israel from about the second
century BC until the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Over 10,000 such ossuaries have been discovered, but only about 100 contain inscriptions. Of these, only two have an identification similar to the one etched in the now famous and somewhat controversial “James Ossuary.” The entire Aramaic inscription reads, “Jacob (James), son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” (Ya’akov bar Yosef’akhdi Yeshua).

If, in fact, the inscription in its entirety is recognized as authentic (which we believe to be the case), we have clear first-century AD testimony of Jesus, His father, Joseph, and brother James. James (Ya’akov) is given in the Gospel accounts as a brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55), but he is also one of the most important figures in the New Testament. The book of Acts reveals that he was the leader of the Jerusalem church and the moderator of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15; he also penned the epistle of James. He is also spoken of a number of times in the writings of Josephus. He was put to death by certain Jewish leaders in AD 62, so if the James Ossuary is the one in which his bones were placed, then the dating of the bone box would be approximately AD 62 or 63, allowing time for the reburial of the bones after the decomposition of the flesh, according to Jewish practices.

In December 2004, the Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA) and the State of Israel brought an indictment against Oded Golan, an antiquities dealer and owner of the James Ossuary, claiming that the second part of the inscription, the portion which reads “brother of Jesus,” was a forgery. This indictment seems to have come to nothing after five years of court proceedings, which concluded in March 2010 after 116 hearings involving 138 witnesses, 52 expert witnesses, over 400 exhibits, and more than 12,000 pages of court transcripts!* According to Golan’s written summary of the trial (supported by the 474-page Hebrew-language opinion handed down by Jerusalem District Court Judge Aharon Farkash cleared the defendants (Oded Golan, Robert Deutsch, et al.) of all forgery charges (see Judge Farkash’s 474-page opinion in the case). The clearing of the forgery charges shows that the prosecution failed to demonstrate that the inscription was a forgery. As a result, there is no reason to doubt that the inscription in its entirety is an authentic description of Jesus and His family. This conclusion is supported by dozens of expert witnesses and the script analysis offered by Andre Lemaire (Sorbonne) and Ada Yardeni (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), which gave them no reason to doubt the authenticity of the inscription (see appendix C for a summary of the expert witness testimony). There is yet to be offered a reputable paleographical challenge to their conclusions on the matter. See Hershel Shanks, ed., James Brother of Jesus: The Forgery Trial of the Century (Washington DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2012).

* Oded Golan, “The Authenticity of the James Ossuary and the Jehoash Tablet Inscriptions—Summary of Expert Trial Witnesses” (March 2011), 1. The trial was brought to an end on March 14, 2012, when Jerusalem District Court Judge Aharon Farkash cleared the defendants (Oded Golan, Robert Deutsch, et al.) of all forgery charges (see Judge Farkash’s 474-page opinion in the case). The clearing of the forgery charges shows that the prosecution failed to demonstrate that the inscription was a forgery. As a result, there is no reason to doubt that the inscription in its entirety is an authentic description of Jesus and His family. This conclusion is supported by dozens of expert witnesses and the script analysis offered by Andre Lemaire (Sorbonne) and Ada Yardeni (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), which gave them no reason to doubt the authenticity of the inscription (see appendix C for a summary of the expert witness testimony). There is yet to be offered a reputable paleographical challenge to their conclusions on the matter. See Hershel Shanks, ed., James Brother of Jesus: The Forgery Trial of the Century (Washington DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2012).
Aharon Farkash on March 14, 2012), many high-level scholars with expertise in ancient epigraphy, paleography, biogeology, and other crucial disciplines relating to examining the inscription have testified that there is no reason to doubt that the phrase “brother of Jesus” was engraved in the first century AD by the same hand that engrafted the rest of it. In view of this, it is very likely that we may have a very early and important historical witness to Jesus and His family.* A summary of the arguments for and against the authenticity of the inscription is given below.

**Arguments Against the Authenticity of the James Ossuary**

1. The ossuary was not discovered in situ, within a secure archaeological context, but rather obtained through the antiquities trade.

2. Though the bone box itself and the first half of the inscription are not contested, arguments that the second half of the inscription (“brother of Jesus”) was recently engraved (forged) and was not completed by the same hand have been posited due to the absence of natural occurring patina.†

   (Patina is a thin layer of biogenic material expected to be present on most, if not all, ancient artifacts to some degree. It is caused by the continuous secretions and activities of microorganisms such as bacteria, fungi, algae, and yeast on the stone and inside some of its grooves. If the same consistency of patina is equally distributed on the ossuary and found within the engraved grooves, it would suggest the authenticity of the inscription. The absence of patina within the disputed portion of the inscription would suggest a forgery or modern engraving of letters.)

3. The foundation of the IAA’s case against Oded Golan was based on an eyewitness (Joe Zias, an anthropologist formerly employed by the IAA) who claimed to have previously seen the ossuary without the “brother of Jesus” portion of the inscription.

**Arguments for the Authenticity of the James Ossuary**

1. The size of the ossuary indicates that the bones belonged to an adult male, thus being consistent with James.

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* Only Protestants would consider James to be the half-brother of Jesus through Joseph and Mary, since both the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Churches believe that Mary remained a perpetual virgin. Roman Catholics consider James and the other brothers and sisters of Jesus in the Gospels to be cousins of Jesus through a supposed brother of Joseph. On the other hand, the Eastern Church believes that James and the other siblings were stepbrothers and stepsisters of Jesus born to Joseph from a former wife.

† After testing the ossuary, clay specialist Professor Yuval Goren of Tel Aviv University initially championed the idea that ancient patina was missing from the second half of the inscription and that the forger must have used some other bonding substance or else this was a result of cleaning the inscription. However, subsequent examination of the inscription by Orna Cohen of the prosecution team revealed ancient patina in the word Jesus, thus discrediting Goren’s testimony; this led Goren to reverse his initial conclusions.
2. In 2004, while the ossuary was in IAA possession, the forensics department of the Israel police (Mazap) made a silicon impression (cast) of the inscription that contaminated and mutilated it. When the silicon was removed it also removed the naturally occurring patina, but despite this action, traces of the patina were still present in several of the letter grooves, indicating that the inscription is indeed ancient.

3. The name on the ossuary (James) reveals that the person was a male.

4. Ossuaries were used by Jews only in the area of Jerusalem and from the end of the first century BC until AD 70, the same time period that Josephus tells of the death of James at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders.

5. Of those ossuaries bearing an inscription, almost all speak of the deceased occupant’s father, and occasionally of the person’s brother, sister, or other close relative if that person was well-known. The rare presence of a sibling’s name (Jesus) would indicate that Jesus was a very prominent figure.

6. Specialist and archaeologist Professor Amos Kloner dates the ossuary to between AD 45 and 70, thus consistent with the death of James in AD 62 according to Josephus.

7. Though the names Joseph, James, and Jesus are common names in the first century, the combination “James, son of Joseph” is rare and unique to this ossuary, meaning that it is highly probable that the bone box belongs to James, Jesus’ brother, even without the second half of the inscription mentioning this.

8. Professor Camil Fuchs, head of the statistics department at Tel Aviv University, researched deceased males in Jerusalem in the first century AD. He concluded (based on conservative estimates of a growing Jerusalem population between AD 6 and 70, minus all women, minus children who would not have reached manhood by the time of James’s death, minus non-Jews, and considering the fame of Jesus as a brother to warrant the inscription, time of death, and literacy) that with 95 percent assurance there existed at the time in Jerusalem 1.71 people named James who had a father named Joseph and brother named Jesus.11

9. Golan affirms that he purchased the ossuary from an antiquities dealer who said it was found in the Silwan (Kidron Valley area) in Jerusalem. James the Just, leader of the Jerusalem church and half-brother of Jesus,* was

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* The evidence appears clear that James was truly the half-brother of Jesus and son of Mary. The perpetual virginity of Mary was not taught at the earlier periods of the church and even was rejected by Augustine. The word for brother in Greek is ἀδελφός (adelphos), while the word for cousin is ἄνεψσιός (anebios) (Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 78). Louw and Nida say, “The interpretation of ἀδελφός in such passages as Mr 12.46; Mk 3.31; and John 2.12 as meaning ‘cousins’ (on the basis of a corresponding Hebrew term, which is used in certain cases to designate masculine relative of various degrees) is not attested in Greek nor affirmed in the Greek-English lexicon edited by Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker. Such an interpretation depends primarily on ecclesiastical tradition” (J.P. Louw and Eugene
stoned and thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple, according to Josephus. According to Christian tradition, he was buried in a rock-cut tomb in the Kidron Valley, and one year later, in accordance with Jewish tradition, his bones were interned in an ossuary.  

10. Expert witnesses have confirmed that the inscription in its totality was inscribed by the same hand in the first century, though this was a much disputed item (especially by Yuval Goren and Avner Ayalon) until experts were put under oath at trial.  

11. Experts have confirmed the presence of microbial patina on the ossuary and on both parts of the inscription: “James, the son of Joseph,” and “brother of Jesus,” demonstrating the unity and antiquity of the inscription. In addition, this patina is generally deemed ancient, without the possibility of it occurring naturally in less than 50 to 100 years, making a recent forgery impossible. The world’s leading expert in biogeology and the patination process, Wolfgang Krumbein of Oldenburg University in Germany, affirmed that the patina on the ossuary and inscription most likely reflects a development process of thousands of years. He added that there is no known process of accelerating the development of patina. In addition, he concluded that the patina covering the inscription letters is no less authentic than the patina covering the surface of the ossuary (which the IAA says is authentic). Other researchers from the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto confirmed that the patina within the letter grooves is consistent with the patina on the surface of the ossuary, thus legitimizing the entire inscription’s antiquity.  

12. According to expert paleographers Andre Lemaire and Ada Yardeni, who authenticated (and dated) the inscription based on the shape and stance of the letters, the Aramaic is fully consistent with first-century style and practice. No credible challenge to their findings has yet to be published.  

13. The addition of the words “brother of Jesus” is exceptional among the ossuaries found in Jerusalem. During the trial, it was revealed that what eyewitness Joe Zias, who does not read Aramaic, thought he saw (the James Ossuary) was actually a different but similar ossuary with three Aramaic inscribed names (Joseph, Judah, Hadas), known as the “Joseph Ossuary.” Prior to the pronouncement of the final verdict by Judge Farkash, apparently Zias said to Hershel Shanks, editor of Biblical Archaeology Review, that

Albert Nida, eds., Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament [New York: United Bible Societies, 1999], 118). The relationship is confirmed by the second-century Church Father Hegesippus when he distinguishes James and Jude as brothers. Moreover, Jude in his letter says that he is the brother (ἀδελφός) of James. Matthew 1:25 is plain that the abstention from sexual relations between Joseph and Mary was only until the birth of Jesus. It was morally proper for Jewish husbands and wives to have sexual relations and bear children, in contrast to some of the extreme ideas of celibacy practiced in some segments of the patristic period. The church historian Eusebius says that James was the head of the Jerusalem church and was brother of Jesus.
he was “joking” when he said that the “brother of Jesus” portion of the inscription was missing from the ossuary.16

So extensive and strong is the support for the authenticity of the ossuary and its inscription that, according to Golan, the prosecutor said in his closing arguments that the state would probably dismiss the charges that the ossuary inscription is a forgery.17 In fact, many of the IAA witnesses who initially claimed that the inscription was a forgery appeared to have changed their minds after closer analysis and scientific testing.18 What is more, many prosecution witnesses (witnesses for the IAA/state, who argued that the inscription is a forgery) confirmed the authenticity of the inscription based upon careful analysis of the patina and the engraving. (See appendix C for a survey of numerous expert witnesses and their conclusions about the ossuary inscription.)

Summary and Conclusion

Oded Golan summarizes the outcome of extensive scientific tests performed on the ossuary and its inscription when he writes,

Neither the prosecution nor the IAA presented even a single witness who was an expert on ancient stone items or patina on antiquities and who ruled out the authenticity of the inscription or any part of it. On the contrary, the findings of all the tests, including those of prosecution witnesses Goren and Ayalon, support the argument that the entire inscription is ancient, the inscription was engraved by a single person, and that several letter grooves contain traces of detergent/s that cover the natural varnish patina that developed there over centuries, and was partially cleaned (mainly the first section), many years ago.19

The apologetic and historical implications following from this ossuary are far-reaching. It informs us that 1) James, Joseph, and Jesus have historical corroboration as individuals and a family in the first century; 2) early Christians, like James, may have been buried according to Jewish custom; 3) Aramaic was used by early Christians; and that 4) early Christianity emerged from its Jewish roots, making it extremely difficult to divorce Christianity from its Jewishness. As such, the inscription’s primary apologetic value rests in this: After the most intense interdisciplinary expert scrutiny according to the rules of law, the James Ossuary can be considered the most authenticated and most scrutinized artifact in history. We now can appreciate the ossuary as an authentic artifact that provides the earliest direct archaeological link to Jesus and His family.

The Tomb of Jesus

Two sites are in competition as the burial place of Jesus of Nazareth—the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Garden Tomb, which is located near the Damascus Gate. The former site has ancient tradition supporting it but lies within the confines of a church that obscures a place of crucifixion and burial; the latter has a more visible tomb near what is alleged to be the location of the crucifixion. Determining which of
these two is, in fact, where Jesus rose from the dead is important for the Christian faith, since Christianity is tied to history. Regarding the resurrection of Jesus, Paul said that if He has not risen (“in the flesh” is understood), then we are yet in our sins and the apostles are liars (1 Corinthians 15:13-17).

**The Garden Tomb**

In the late nineteenth century British general Charles Gordon discovered a site outside the Damascus Gate that is now called Gordon’s Calvary, or Skull Hill, where he believed that Jesus was crucified. Near this site was also a tomb within a garden that he believed to be the tomb of Jesus. Unlike the traditional site located in an ancient church and surrounded by ornate crosses and incense thuribles, which obscure a former location of garden and rock quarry from which tombs were carved, the Garden Tomb is in the open, easily recognized as a place of burial, and in a beautiful garden.

The Garden Tomb resides in a beautiful, quiet setting and is frequented generally by Protestant Christians who find the surroundings of an ancient church too steeped in ritual. The Garden Tomb satisfies many of the requirements of the place of Jesus’ burial and resurrection, including its situation in a garden, outside the city walls, and near what is arguably a place of crucifixion. The mystical manner in which Gordon sought to connect the place of crucifixion and burial with the Temple Mount and Pool of Siloam has been a point of criticism. He placed a skeleton with its head at Skull Hill, its backside on the Temple Mount, and the feet at the Pool of Siloam, viewing this as a confirmation of its identification. This notion is highly speculative, and is not argued by staff at the Garden Tomb.

**The Church of the Holy Sepulchre**

The ancient and traditional site of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus has many points of support also, but there is no tomb to observe. The tomb there, which early had been separated from other tombs in the stone quarry and made into a place of homage, was destroyed in the early eleventh century AD by order of Muslim caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah.

In spite of there being no tomb—a structure called an edicule stands where the tomb once stood—the tradition for this site is very strong, going back to the second century AD. When the Emperor Hadrian had defeated the Jews after the Bar Kokhba revolt (AD 132–135) and banished them from Jerusalem, in his attempt to replace Judaism and
Christianity he built a temple to Venus over the site where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre now stands, a temple to Jupiter over where the Temple once stood, and a shrine to the god Adonis at the location of the Church of the Nativity. This was a standard practice to emphasize the triumph of one religion over another in the ancient world (a practice that has continued in Islam through the centuries). The Church of the Holy Sepulchre (known as the Church of the Resurrection by the Greek Orthodox) satisfies many requirements defined in Scripture for Jesus’ tomb—outside the city wall, near a place of crucifixion, and within a garden. This was the place that early Christians took Queen Helena when she came to Jerusalem and requested to know the location of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

**Which Is the Tomb of Jesus?**

In order for a site to be the historical location of the burial and resurrection site of Jesus, certain factors must be present. Both of the two competing sites fulfill conditions, but only one fulfills them all. The conditions for the correct tomb are as follows:

1. It had to be near the site of the crucifixion.
2. It had to be located in a garden.
3. It had to be outside the city walls of Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified in the early AD 30s.
4. It had to be hewed out of a stone quarry.
5. It had to be an exceptional tomb since it was a rich man’s tomb.
6. It had to have a rolling stone.
7. It had to have an outer chamber and inner chamber, in view of the biblical accounts regarding the women, apostles, and angels at the tomb.
8. It had to be a new tomb, thus hewed in the first century AD.

The Garden Tomb satisfies items 1 through and 7. Item 5 is questionable since there are larger tombs than the small Garden Tomb. Item 6 is uncertain since a rolling stone was not found at the site, and the trough in front of the Garden Tomb is not a groove for a rolling stone but is rather a water trough going all the way across the front of the tomb. Item 8 is the most significant since there is no doubt that the Garden Tomb is a First Temple tomb, created hundreds of years before Jesus and part of a quarry containing eighth-century BC tombs; consequently, it cannot be the correct tomb, since Jesus was placed in a newly created tomb.
The Church of the Holy Sepulchre satisfies items 1 through 4. The tomb resided near a place of crucifixion, and evidence of a garden has been found. The city walls at the time of Christ did not extend beyond the site of the tomb, and there are several other tombs found near where the tomb of Christ stood before the Muslim caliph destroyed it. Since there is no tomb to investigate, there is no way to substantiate items 5, 6, or 7, but one would expect that the tomb of Jesus would have the features of other first-century AD tombs. An outer chamber of a tomb is found just a few feet away from the current commemorative site of the tomb, which was built on the place of the former tomb. The tombs in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre are first-century AD tombs, so this would satisfy number 8.

The varying burial practices of the Jewish people make it very easy to determine whether a tomb is from the first century BC and AD (Second Temple) or the eighth century BC (First Temple).

Burial practices of the First Temple Period are as follows. The deceased was placed in the tomb, after preparation, on a raised slab or narrow platform, with a stone headrest. Generally each burial chamber had three such slabs. Under these raised slabs there was a compartment in which bones of the deceased were placed after approximately a year, when the flesh had all decayed. Thus they were “gathered to their fathers.” The caves in which the deceased were placed had an outer room for preparation and visitation by relatives and an inner room or rooms with three stone platforms.

During the first century BC and first century AD, until the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, deceased persons were wrapped from head to toe, and their bodies were then placed in niches in the wall and on the floor. Often there were several burial niches in the same room. After the body had decayed, there was a second burial, with the bones broken and placed in a bone box called an ossuary. The length of the box would be based on the length of the longest bone, the femur. Sometimes another person might be placed in a person’s ossuary at a later time if insufficient ossuaries were available. These boxes were then kept in the tomb for times of commemoration of the dead.

We cannot know for certain the location of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, but most of the evidence, including Hadrian’s early marking of the spot, points to the traditional site as the correct location. It was long remembered in the minds and hearts of the Christians of the first century and afterward, and it is the place that has been accepted by Christians of all faiths for nearly 2,000 years.
Is Jesus’ Hometown of Nazareth a Myth?

For the past 2,000 years first-century Nazareth was unquestionably considered the historic hometown of Jesus.25 The Gospels make it abundantly clear that Jesus was “of Nazareth” (John 1:45; 19:19; Mark 1:24; Luke 18:37). However, religious researcher Rene Salm has challenged the historical Nazareth in his *The Myth of Nazareth: The Invented Town of Jesus* (American Atheist Press, 2008). According to his view, ancient Nazareth did not emerge prior to AD 70, and the settlement of Nazareth did not exist earlier than the second century AD, long after Christ’s crucifixion.

To substantiate these claims, Salm appeals to, among other things, 1) late-dating Roman and Byzantine artifacts (for example, oil lamps); 2) the Gospel of Luke, which tells us that Jesus’ hometown was Capernaum, not Nazareth; 3) “problematic” biblical passages (for example, Matthew 2:23: “He went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene” [esv]) that have no prophetic reference in the Hebrew Scriptures; and 4) the fact that Josephus and the Jewish Talmud do not mention Nazareth in their lists of Galilean cities.

However, there are several reasons why Salm’s argument against Nazareth should be rejected.

1. **Limited archaeological work has been completed in the Nazareth area** since most of the ancient city lies under the modern city of Nazareth (with a population of about 60,000). The sparseness of materials and current cumulative data should not be stretched into a theory of Nazareth’s nonexistence; the alleged absence of material data and the presence of *later* Roman and Byzantine evidence is not “contradictory” evidence that disproves Nazareth’s first-century existence. This sort of thinking displays the logical fallacy of arguing from silence. Besides, the archaeological data from excavations in the Nazareth area demonstrate that Nazareth was used up until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.*

2. **The location of Sepphoris in relation to Nazareth is consistent with the social and economic milieu of Jesus’ day.** Sepphoris, rebuilt in 4 BC by the tetrarch of Galilee, Herod Antipas, was located about an hour’s walk from modern-day Nazareth. This is strong evidence that villages like Nazareth were set within a short distance from this major hub, implying they were not “isolated” from the rest of the Galilee. The labor

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*Nazareth archaeologist Yehudah Rapuano mentions that some Hellenistic and early Roman artifacts—sherd, a storage jar, cooking pots recovered from tombs, and lamps—found at Nazareth over past excavations “fit comfortably within the first century CE.” For example, Rapuano refers his readers to several artifacts (the Jar of Fig. 217:6; pots in Fig. 192:18,26; lamps in Fig. 192:6,15) in the record of Bellarmino Bagatti’s excavations (1969). Rapuano says, “Salm’s personal evaluation of the pottery, which he rehearses from his book *The Nazareth Myth*, reveals his lack of expertise in the area as well as his lack of serious research in the sources. By ignoring or dismissing solid ceramic, numismatic and literary evidence for Nazareth’s existence during the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman period, it would appear that the analysis which Rene Salm includes in his review, and his recent book must, in itself, be relegated to the realm of ‘myth’ ” (Stephen J. Pfann and Yehudah Rapuano, “On the Nazareth Village Farm Report: A Reply to Salm,” *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeology Society*, vol. 26, (2008), 107-108.
force (masons and carpenters) most likely could not afford, or did not need, to live in the large, opulent cities, so they settled in nearby villages. Since Joseph and Jesus were masons/carpenters, with no indication that they were wealthy, it would make sense that they settled close by Sepphoris.

There is evidence of first-century agricultural infrastructure in Nazareth and a nearby roadway system connecting the port city of Caesarea Maritima to Tiberias. In addition, during the summer of 2009, excavations at Nazareth revealed several first-century artifacts such as a house and clay and chalk vessel remains. According to the then Israel Antiquities Authority director of excavations, Yardenna Alexandre, archaeologists have discovered the remains of a wall, a hideout, courtyard, and a water system that collected water from the roof dating to the time of Jesus. Moreover, in 1997 and 1998, excavations at Mary’s Well in Nazareth closer to the basilica, conducted by Alexandre, yielded coin evidence dating from the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods. All of these remains imply a self-sustaining first-century community intricately connected with the rest of northern Israel.

3. Although Salm rejects Matthew 2:23 due to its lack of specific reference among the prophetic books of the Old Testament, this conclusion is mistaken for several reasons: 1) Matthew did not say a single prophet made the statement; rather, it was of the prophets (plural)—meaning that Matthew was not quoting any specific prophet but was instead referring to the general consensus among the prophets that Jesus would be called a “Nazarene.” The fulfillment of this title can be understood in several ways. For example, the prophets said the Messiah would be despised and rejected (Isaiah 53:3; Daniel 9:26; Zechariah 12:10) much in the way Nazareth was despised during the early first century (John 1:46; 7:41,52). 2) Though Jesus never took the vow of the Nazirite (the word is spelled differently than Nazareth), He fulfilled it by perfectly keeping the Law and separating Himself to the Lord, which was the essence of the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:2; Judges 13:5). 3) Others have indicated that the Hebrew word netzer (meaning “branch”) is the word from which Nazareth was named (since it sounds similar).

4. Salm ignores the numerous independent statements in the New Testament that identify Jesus with Nazareth. At His crucifixion Pontius Pilate placed a government-authorized sign (a titulus) above Jesus’ head that read, “Jesus of Nazareth…” (John 19:19). It is worthy of note that the religious leaders did not dispute truthfulness of Jesus’ hometown written on the placard when they petitioned Pilate to change the writing; they only challenged His claim to be “the King of the Jews” (John 19:20-22)! Also, the New Testament writers often referred to “Jesus of Nazareth” (Mark 1:24; Luke 18:37), and those among the early church were identified as the “Nazarene sect” (Acts 24:5 NIV). Moreover, even the foes of Jesus referred to His hometown as “Nazareth” (Luke 4:33-34). Never is Jesus identified with any other city; He is never called “Jesus of Caesarea,” “Jesus of Capernaum,” “Jesus of Bethlehem,” or “Jesus of Jerusalem”; only “Jesus of Nazareth.”
5. The absence of historical notation among early literature (Josephus and the Talmud) does not prove that Nazareth is a myth. Lack of identification does not mean lack of existence; it’s a logical fallacy to argue from silence. There are plausible reasons why Nazareth is not found in Josephus and the Talmud’s list of Galilean locations: 1) It is possible that Josephus and the Talmud omit it because the lists are not intended to be exhaustive; 2) it may be because Nazareth (due to its despised reputation and size) was such an insignificant village at the time it warranted no mention; and 3) by the time Josephus wrote his list of Galilean cities in the late first century, Nazareth may have been known by another name or may not have been occupied. What is more, Jewish religious leaders may have refrained from listing Nazareth out of disdain for Jesus and His claims to be the Messiah. None of these reasons preclude Nazareth from being the historic village of Jesus.

6. Salm’s theory forgets the fact that Old and New Testament writers always layered their narratives over real geographical locations. Never have we discovered otherwise. It is strange hermeneutical practice to accept the historicity of the Galilee region (as Salm apparently does) but reject the existence of Nazareth, which is located within it. Nazareth and Galilee are often mentioned coupled together, in a nonmythical tone. Salm often asserts that instead of Nazareth being Jesus’ hometown, the Scriptures place the home of Jesus in Capernaum. However, this notion is fraught with problems, the most crucial of them is that Salm is either unaware or simply ignores that the same grammatical coupling is associated with Capernaum as well: “Capernaum, a city of Galilee” (Luke 4:31).

7. Several of Salm’s criticisms of the pottery report of the Nazareth Village Farm excavations (for example, “double dating”) have been shown to be in error and based on misnumbered exhibits within the published report. Stephen Pfann and Yehudah Rapuano explain Salm’s confusion:

The errors pointed out by Salm in the pottery report of the Nazareth Village Farm excavations were not the result of “double dating” as he supposed, but rather of misnumbering. Originally, the part of the article dealing with the pottery was prepared in a different layout. At some point before the article was sent to the editors, it underwent a change in the format, presumably for reasons of spacing and for the reader’s greater convenience. The plates were reorganized and the drawings were given new numbers. In the process, some of the connections between the drawings and the text were lost or changed. In a few cases the same figure number was erroneously repeated. It is to these occurrences that Salm referred.29

Regarding the pottery and dating they maintain,
The numbering errors in the article do not, however, change the date of the pottery.\textsuperscript{30}

In the “Nazareth Village Farm Report” are examples that belong to the Hellenistic period (for example, figures 40:5-8) and to the subsequent early Roman period (for example, figures 37:5 and 7). The dates for parallels of the pottery of Roman period Galilee are usually expressed according to a range reflecting the time period that the forms were in production and use. The early Roman period is usually considered to date from the mid first century BC to the first half of the second century AD. Pfann and Rapuano conclude, notably,

\begin{quote}
While early Roman sherds were found in different parts of the site, we noted that the pottery forms in Area 1, Locus/Layer 2, as a group fit comfortably within the first century CE.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

8. Salm’s theory favors the interpretations of liberal biblical scholarship without questioning their philosophical assumptions or methodology; nor does his theory seriously interact with conservative evangelical scholarship on the matter. Most notable is his unwarranted rejection of the reliability of the biblical text. There is simply no reason to reject the integrity of the Gospel records, which, as seen throughout this book, are supported by credible eyewitnesses and thousands of early manuscripts.\textsuperscript{32}