

4

The
**STUDIUM BIBLICUM
FRANCISCANUM**
is the Biblical Branch of
the Theological Faculty of the
*Pontificium Athenaeum
Antonianum*
in Rome.



series

essays SBF - jerusalem - 1998

Archaeology, New Testament, and Early Christianity

Alviero Niccacci, O.F.M.

Introduction

The NT is a branch of the biblical studies very much in need of a solid basis. Indeed, research on the NT is extremely wide and fruitful. Favorite new directions in contemporary exegesis are mainly of a literary and a theological character. These directions are of course helpful and promising. There is, however, a danger of forgetting the material culture of the time when the texts were written. Many seem to think that these *realia* are not important for the understanding of the text. What is important to them is rather the message, maybe even the beauty of the text, and the history of its formation. On the whole there seem to be a kind of neglect for the historical dimension of the NT.

NT seems rather neglected by archaeologists too! When they speak of biblical archaeology, they normally mean OT archaeology. In handbooks and surveys, NT archaeology is hardly mentioned.

Being myself not an archaeologist but an exegete, I shall offer you some considerations on the bearing of archaeological research on the interpretation of the NT. I shall base myself mainly on the work carried out by the archaeologists of the *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum* in Jerusalem. This simply because most of the NT sites have been excavated by the said centre. As one can easily understand, the Franciscans of the Holy Land are and have always been interested not only in detecting memories of the times of the OT and NT but also of the early church.

A major task for the SBF since its beginning has been to critically illustrate the traditional holy places entrusted by the Catholic Church to the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land. Research developed in two main areas: literary sources and archaeological excavations. A major challenge was, and still remains, to combine these two areas together. Until recently, literary sources normally consulted were, besides the Holy Scriptures, the descriptions of the pilgrims who visited the holy places during the centuries. A major problem arose from the fact that these descriptions were hardly older than the fourth century AD. For the first three centuries all evidence was lacking. This was at the base of a certain scepticism among scholars regarding many christian holy sites, suspected of being only devotional and a late invention for the sake of western pilgrims who wished to locate every event mentioned in the Gospels.

SBF contribution

Archaeological excavations - since about the beginning of this century but particularly since the fifties - helped fill the gap of the first three centuries of Christianity in the Holy Land. Actually, in certain holy places remains of cultic installations have been uncovered that preceded the Byzantine buildings of the IV cent. AD. These remains were markedly different from those familiar to scholars of Christian archaeology. In order to interpret these remains, Christian and Jewish literary sources were consulted. From these we come to know that Christians of Jewish origin lived in Galilee, particularly in Nazareth, Tiberias, Sefhoris and Capernaum, and in other parts of the country. Among these Jewish Christians, the relatives of Jesus had a preminent place in the community. It was only natural that these "relatives of Jesus" were deeply attached to the places and the traditions of their own family. It was around these places that Christian life and worship were organized and the first communities came into being. This has been one of the most exciting discoveries.

Studying the literary sources and the pre-Byzantine remains, a conviction arose that a certain literature had to be taken into consideration that showed a foreign mentality: the so-called apocryphal literature. This literature was of a popular nature but not heterodox. It shows the thinking process and faith of the followers of Jesus (Christians) who though they believed in him still followed the Jewish thought. This made their way of thinking clearly distinct from the Christians of the period coming from the Western world. In some cases this literature reflects the mentality and beliefs of the Mother Church of Jerusalem. A literature which contains ancient elements that are in agreement with ar-

Alviero Nicacci ofm

was born in Italy and belongs to the Franciscan province of Umbria. Qualifications: Licentiate of theology (Pontificia Università Lateranense: 1969); Licentiate in Ancient Eastern Studies (PIB: 1970); Licentiate in Holy Scriptures (PIB: 1972); Laureate in literature and Philosophy (University of Roma: 1977). Professor (Ordinary) (1988) at the SBF (1978-); exegesis of the Old Testament and biblical Hebrew language; Egyptian and Ugaritic languages. Served as: secretary of the SBF (1978-80); Vice-director of the SBF (1987-90); Director (1990-1996).

archaeological data. Over forty years of research have given us a much better picture of the history of the Christian presence in their Holy Land from the NT times down to the present. The main links in this chronological chain, going back in history from today's reality, are as follows: today's church or sanctuary, Crusader, Byzantine, and finally pre-Byzantine periods. It is obvious that those sites where this chronological chain is uninterrupted can be considered as authentic sites and beyond any reasonable doubt.

The Christian Holy Places

From this perspective we can draw a list of the main Christian holy places in the Holy Land according to their degree of authenticity. Our interest in this context is not the authenticity as such but rather the history of the different sites and the different communities that lived there. Our primary purpose is to identify the places that have preserved the memories since NT times and, secondly to illustrate how archaeology and biblical text can be brought together.

We can identify three groups of holy places: 1. sites common to the whole evangelical tradition; 2. sites particular to the Gospel of John and to the tradition of the Jewish-Christian communities of Jerusalem; 3. sites of Byzantine tradition. The sites of the first group are mentioned by all the gospels and, from the archaeological point of view, show all the links in the chronological chain as mentioned above (i.e. modern, Crusader, Byzantine and pre-Byzantine). The sites of the second group show also all the main historical levels as the first group, with the only difference being the fact that they are only mentioned in the Gospel of John or are linked to the apocryphal literature used by the Jewish-Christian communities of Jerusalem. The third group do not have, at least to date, levels which predate the Byzantine period (beginning in the IV century AD).

Nazareth, Capernaum, Bethlehem, the Holy Sepulchre and Calvary belong to the *first* group; the Samaritan Well, the tomb of Lazarus at Bethany, the grotto of Gethsemane, the tomb of the Virgin in the Kidron valley, and the Last Supper Room on Mount Sion belong to the *second* group; Ain Karem, Cana (new evidence is being gathered) the Beatitudes, the Primacy of St. Peter, the Multiplication of loaves, the Agony at Gethsemane, Emmaus and the Ascension belong to the *third* group. Worth noticing is the fact that many places of the third group are sites mentioned only in the Gospel of Luke, a gospel written for the evangelisation of the gentiles (*cathechesis ad gentes*) and was not widely used by Jewish-Christian communities of Palestine who preferred the gospels of Matthew and John, i.e. the evangelisation of the Jews (*cathechesis ad Hebraeos*).

Sites common to the whole evangelical tradition



Nazareth

The excavations at NAZARETH (1955-1960) by Bellarmino Bagatti revealed an uninterrupted sequence of cultic installations around the Grotto of the Annunciation. The present basilica is built on almost the same plan as the Crusader's. A smaller Byzantine church of the fifth century AD was also found. The main result was the discovery, beneath the Byzantine church, of an early Christian building of a special layout, similar to that of the Jewish Galilean synagogues of the second-third centuries AD. The Nazareth excavations revealed for the first time clear traces of the Jewish-Christian communities that lived and prayed in the same place before the arrival of the Byzantines in the fourth century AD. Similar traces were also found in excavations at Dominus Fleuit (The Lord wept) on the slopes of the Mount of Olives (1953-1955) and in Capernaum (1968 on).

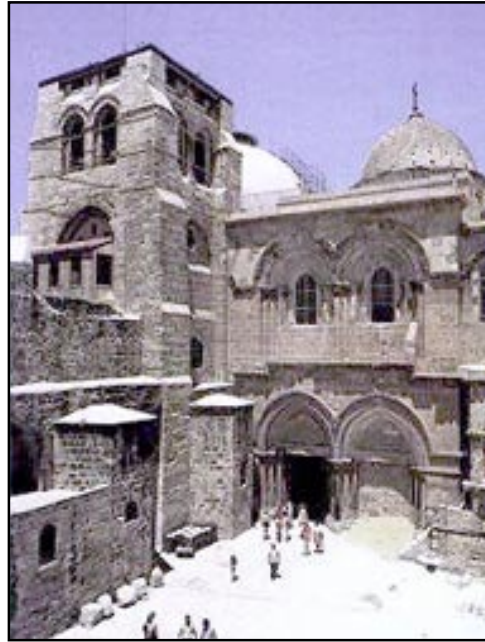
At CAPERNAUM a well-preserved village has come to light, with its magnificent synagogue, the living quarters and a special house transformed into a place of worship already in the second half of the first century AD. It is called the House of Peter. We will return to Capernaum later on.

The excavations of B. Bagatti at BETHLEHEM (1948-1951) proved that despite important transformations, the grotto of the Nativity and the manger hewn into the rock remained basically the same. There are elements to show that a veneration of the place by the local Christian community existed uninterrupted since the apostolic times. This is proved by the fact that already in the second century AD several tombs were set up in the proximity of the venerated grotto, according to the well-known custom of burying the dead around holy places. In 135 AD emperor Adrian established on the place of the nativity a sacred grove in order to supplant Christian worship on the spot that was very popular. A consequence of this substitution was that the memory of the place was preserved for future generations. Thus emperor Constantine in 333 AD could easily locate the place and then built on it a basilica





that has come down to us renewed by emperor Justinian. It is in fact the only Byzantine basilica preserved until today. The grotto of the Nativity presents us with an exegetical problem that we are going to deal with later on.



The Holy Sepulchre

Since 1961 archaeological soundings, excavations and restorations went on in the Basilica of the HOLY SEPULCHRE. The works were done by the three main Communities - the Greeks, the Armenians and the Franciscans. Fr. Virgilio Corbo acted as a supervisor and the archaeologist of the three communities. In 1981-1982 he published a three-volume illustration on the history of the Holy Sepulchre. By combining the Gospel traditions with the archaeological data Fr. Corbo showed that the area of Golgotha was a quarry of malaky stone since the seventh century BC. The quarry was abandoned in the first century BC and all the area was levelled and transformed into a garden. In this garden two kinds of tombs were carved. One is a single burial with an arcosolium arch. It was cut by Joseph of Arimathea, according to the Gospels and eventually became the tomb of Jesus. The other, lying at a small distance, has many burial places, known as *kochim*. The place remained a garden until 135 AD when, after curbing the second Jewish revolt, emperor

Adrian founded a completely new city under the name of Aelia Capitolina. The area of Golgotha was covered under the basement of the Capitolium, a sacred pagan building. In the new layout the Golgotha found itself inside the city while before it was located outside. From Eusebius of Caesarea we learn that Adrian covered with earth the tomb of Christ in order to conceal it. St Jerome tells us that a statue of Jupiter was erected upon the tomb of Jesus and a statue of Venus on the top of the Golgotha. Archaeological excavations revealed sparse remains of these installations. Again, the pagan transformation helped keep the memory of the site. In the fourth century emperor Constantine dismantled the Capitolium and erected a splendid mausoleum on the tomb of Jesus, or Anastasis (resurrection), a basilica called Martyrium (testimony), while the rock of the Calvary remained on open air, having a cross on its top. Around the Calvary Christian legends flourished, especially two of them called "The cave of the treasures" and "The combat of Adam and Eve". These legends have a strong Jewish background. Theologically they aim to link the first Adam to the second, sin to redemption for all humanity. This first group of holy places is authentic beyond reasonable doubt because we witness a large convergence of data - biblical, archaeological and literary both of ancient authors (such as apocrypha) and of pilgrims during the centuries (different itineraries to the Holy Land).

Sites particular to the Gospel of John and to the tradition of the Jewish-Christian communities of Jerusalem

In the second group of holy places we find the WELL OF THE SAMARITAN mentioned in a magnificent passage from the Gospel of John. From his examination of the objects found in the filling of the well and in the surrounding area, Fr. Bagatti was able to show that the well was in use several centuries before Christ. The place has then a good probability of being authentic, being old and having an uninterrupted tradition. In fact, before the building of a Byzantine church, the local Samaritan-Christian community had already established a baptistry near the well. Finally, the Crusaders erected a new church upon the ruins of the Byzantine building.

Extensive excavations by Fr. Sylvester Saller at BETHANY (modern el-Azarieh) (1949-1953) showed that the traditional tomb of Lazarus lied outside the village - not inside as many thought and therefore denied the authenticity of the tomb. The tomb was included in a burial area. Around this area in the fourth century AD a Byzantine sanctuary was built, renewed in the sixth century. On it a modern Franciscan church has been erected.

An ancient tradition indicates the GROTTO OF GETHSEMANE in Kidron valley, not far away from today's basilica of the agony, as the place where Jesus went with his disciples at the eve of his passion and where he was betrayed. A flooding in 1956 was the occasion for Fr. Virgilio Corbo to excavate the venerated grotto. There resulted that at the time of Jesus the grotto was equipped with an olive press and a cistern. In the fourth century AD the grotto was converted into a rock church. In the fifth century and until the Medieval period several tombs were excavated according the same praxis at-

The SBF is today a Roman Catholic Faculty of biblical and archaeological studies in the Holy Land sponsored by the Franciscan Custody of Terrasanta. It is located in the Old City of Jerusalem, in the Flagellation friary at the IInd Station of the Via Dolorosa.

As a research center, the SBF has been actively involved in rediscovering the sacred sites of the NT and early Christianity. Thus it expands and updates the histories of various Christian shrines. There is a special focus on the primitive Church in the Holy Land by making use of Jewish and Christian literary sources as well as the diaries and travel journals of pilgrims down through the centuries.

The SBF is also responsible for the courses of theological formation at the "Studium Theologicum Jerosolymitanum" in the Franciscan Monastery of St. Saviour.

tested to in Bethlehem—the praxis of burying the dead near a venerated place. According to literary sources Jewish-Christian communities also visited the grotto and held there a sacred supper in memory of the Lord.



Site of the Tomb of Mary



Site of Christian Sion

A second lucky flooding of Kidron valley in 1972 presented Fr. Bagatti with the opportunity of examining archaeologically a place in the same valley, not far from the grotto of Gethsemane, traditionally called the **TOMB OF THE VIRGIN**. The tomb was part of a necropolis of the first century AD which included both *arcosolium* and *kochim* burials as is the case with the Tomb of Jesus. As in other cases, one witnesses a lucky agreement of archaeology and literary sources. On the burial of Mary we read in an apocryphal writing called "Transitus Mariae" or "Dormitio Virginis" (The passing away of the Virgin). This was originally a popular account of the passing away of the Virgin Mary in use by the Jewish-Christian community of Jerusalem. It was read at the occasion of the annual commemoration of the Assumption of the Virgin. The tomb was kept in its original state by the local Jewish-Christians. It was then taken over by the gentile-Christians who isolated the tomb from the rest of the necropolis. An edicula was built on the tomb, a situation quite similar to that of the tomb of Jesus. Two churches, one upon the other, were built on the place by the Byzantines.

The **LAST SUPPER ROOM** as we see it today, is a Medieval two-floor building. A room at the ground floor, containing a cenotaph, is called the Tomb of David. The Last Supper Room is at the first floor. From literary sources we know that the Jewish-Christians had their headquarters at Mount Sion. A synagogue of theirs escaped destruction in seventy AD when the whole city was overthrown by the Romans. As Fr. Bagatti has shown, this synagogue is still preserved, under a Medieval restoration, in the room called the Tomb of David. This is suggested by Greek graffiti found on the walls, containing invocations to Jesus.

The second group of places is equally well documented as the first. Some places are particular to the Gospel of John, such as the Samaritan's well and the tomb of Lazarus. Others are referred to in all the Gospels, as the grotto at Gethsemane and the Last Supper Room. Some are strictly related to the local Jewish-Christian community, such as Mount Sion and the Tomb of the Virgin.

Sites of Byzantine tradition

A third group of places are not attested as yet prior to the Byzantine period. At **AIN KAREM** two holy places are venerated, the site of the Visitation and the birthplace of St. John the Baptist. Both have been excavated by the Franciscan archaeologists Fr. Bagatti and Fr. Saller. For Ain Karem there are elements that might suggest that the place had a pre-Byzantine history. The apocryphal "Gospel of James" in the second century AD states that the killing of the Innocents was extended to the Ain Karem territory - in Bethlehem and its territory, says Mt 2:16. Elizabeth managed to hide her baby in a grotto in the mountain. Fr. Bagatti has shown that this grotto and a well found in it were in use at least since the Roman period. This venerated grotto was included in a Byzantine church in the fifth-sixth centuries. A second church was built upon it and other rooms were added as living quarters and for defence.

The area where the church of St. John has been built was also inhabited during the 1st century AD. Since the Byzantine period a sanctuary existed there to commemorate the birthplace of the Forerunner, restored in Medieval times. In front of the church two Byzantine chapels have been uncovered. One is dedicated to the "Martyrs of God", as a Greek inscription reads. It is possible that they were the innocent children of the village murdered by king Herod.

The identification of **CANA** of the gospels is debated. Two candidates that preserve the ancient name - Khirbet Kana and Kafr Kenna, both along the Nazareth-Tiberias road. No complete excavation has been carried out in either places. Kafr Kenna has been partially excavated by Fr. Stanislawo



SBF

*Councils and Officers
1997-98*

- **Director Pro-Dean**
Manns Frédéric
- **Senatorial Deputation:**
Frédéric Manns, D. Chrupcala,
A. Marcello Buscemi
- **Faculty Council:**
Bissoli Giovanni, Bottini
Giovanni Claudio, Buscemi
Alfio Marcello, Chrupca a
Daniel, Cignelli Lino, Ianniello
Vincenzo, Kraj Jerzy (Mod.
STJ), Loffreda Stanislaw,
Manns Frédéric, Niccacci
Alviero, Pappalardo Carmelo
(stud. rep.), Piccirillo Michele
- **Secretary of SBF:**
Massimo Pazzini
- **Director's Council:**
Frédéric Manns, A. M.
Buscemi, Massimo Pazzini
- **Librarian:**
Plácido Robaert
- **Council of the librarian:**
P. Robaert, A. Niccacci, E.
Alliata, G.C. Bottini
- **Bursar:**
Giovanni Bissoli
- **Board of directors:**
G. Bissoli, A.M. Buscemi, M.
Pazzini, P. Robaert
- **Editorial Secretary:**
G. Claudio Bottini
- **Assistant editorial secretary:**
Eugenio Alliata
- **Editorial council:**
F. Manns, G. C. Bottini, E.
Alliata, D. Chrupca a.
- **Museum Director:**
Michele Piccirillo
- **Council of the Museum**
- Director:**
Michele Piccirillo, Vincenzo
Ianniello, Pietro Kaswalder
- **Secretary of the Technical
office:**
Eugenio Alliata



*Recent (1997) excavations
at Cana of Galilee*

against the authenticity of the place. A definite proof is, however, lacking for the moment even though recent excavations seem to confirm the antiquity of the site (see our web site for the latest regarding the dig carried out at Cana of Galilee).

The BEATITUDES in the Byzantine period were localized at the base of a hill on the top of which lies today's church. Excavations by Fr. Bagatti in 1935 brought to light a small church and monastery of the fourth century. The topography of the site at the hillside along the see of Galilee corresponds to the indications of the Gospels. In Mat 5,1 we read: "On the mountain", while in Luk 6:12.17: "in a plain place". This also corresponds to the description of pilgrims.

In this area along the lake in the place called ET-TABGHA (Seven springs) two more sanctuaries are localized - one called "the Primacy of St. Peter" or "Mensa Domini", the other "the Multiplication of the loaves". Both places have been studied by Fr. Loffreda in 1968 and 1970, respectively. The main results came from the complete excavation of the church of the Primacy and the surrounding area. Contrary to common belief, the et-Tabgha region was at the time of Jesus a quarry, not an inhabited area. Today we know that during the fourth century three churches were built in this area: the Primacy or "Mensa Domini" linked to the manifestation of the risen Lord mentioned in John 21, the Multiplication of the loaves, and the Beatitudes. There are good reasons to believe that these traditions are sound despite the fact that, for the time being, the literary witness is not traceable beyond the Byzantine period. First, the et-Tabgha area corresponds to the data of the gospels, as we shall see later. Second, we know that Jewish-Christian communities were present in Capernaum, Tiberias and probably also in Magdala. They are known from literary sources and their traces have been discovered by the archaeologists. We can easily presume that these communities were interested in preserving the memory of the gospel events especially those found in Matthew and John.

In the fourth century AD a church was built at Gethsemane commemorating the AGONY of the Lord. According to Luk 22:41 the agony happened at the distance of a stone's throw from the grotto of the arrest. The Crusaders built a basilica on this site. Today's basilica is based on the plan of the Byzantine building.

The identification of Evangelical EMMAUS is problematic on both textual and topographical levels. These problems come from afar and show up in the textual tradition of the NT. Actually, beside reading "sixty stadia" (11.500 km; seven miles) that is normally preferred by the scholars, another reading has "160 stadia". This textual variant is rooted in the different identification of the site. Two main hypothesis can be mentioned: Amwas-Nikopolis and el-Qubeibeh. Neither has definite arguments for itself. From the literary point of view, Amwas-Nikopolis is better attested (Byzantine vs. Medieval tradition) but from the archaeological point of view el-Qubeibeh seems preferable. From the excavations of Fr. Bagatti we know that a village existed in the place of el-Qubeibeh at least since the third century BC. Moreover, the village was connected to Jerusalem by a Roman road.

The last site belonging to the third group is the ASCENSION. According to Lk 24:50 the Ascension took place "near Bethany", and according to Acts 1:12 "on the Mount of Olives". In the fourth century the Ascension was localized in the central hill of the Mount of Olives. Fr. Corbo excavated, in 1959-1960, the Franciscan property at the site. The Byzantines had built a circular edicule as we read in the description of the pilgrim Arculf in 670. The octagon visible today is the work of the Crusaders. The central chapel was transformed into a mosque in the twelfth century.

It is noteworthy that some of these places are particular to the Gospel of Luke, as Ain Karem with the Visitation and the birthplace of John the Baptist, the agony at Gethsemane at a stone's throw from the grotto of the arrest, Emmaus, the Ascension of the Mount of Olives. The Jewish-Christian communities of Palestine mostly read Matthew and John, while the gospel of Luke became popular in Palestine with the arrival of the gentile-Christians. These took over the venerated places from the hands of the Jewish-Christians and built basilicas and churches on them. They also localized the events particular to the gospel of John. This is what we can say at the present state of our knowledge but of course fresh information can oblige us to modify this picture.

