WHY WAS JESUS NOT BORN IN NAZARETH?

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1. Jesus, “the Nazarene”

The evidence from the sources is unanimous about Jesus’ hometown: Nazareth. The sign or title placed above the cross seems to be definitive, as it is mentioned in each of the four gospels. Indeed, it was placed there on the orders of the Roman authorities. Likewise, the name “Jesus of Nazareth” is found in the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles (2:22; 3:6; 4:10; 6:14; and others). Nazareth is described as “his own country” (Mark 6:1; Matt 13:54), i.e., his city, and “their own city (that of Joseph and Mary)” (Luke 2:39), where his family lived. A Galilean, like Jesus, and a future disciple, Nathanael asks ironically “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). Similarly, the crowds that accompany Jesus at his triumphal arrival in Jerusalem, a few days before the passion, state: “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee” (Matt 21:11). The religious authorities in Jerusalem reply to Nicodemus, a Jewish leader who had dared to go and meet Jesus: “Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee” (John 7:52). Jesus’ name in the Talmud is invariably ha-notsri, “the Nazarene.” Despite their differences, the adjectives ναζαρηνός and ναζωραῖος and the nouns Ναζαρά and Ναζαρέθ, its most common names in Greek, lead us in the same direction. In the Talmud, the usual name for Christians is still ha-notsrim, “the Nazarenes.” This use is also seen in Acts 24:5. There is no doubting then the link between Jesus and Nazareth, his hometown.

Faced with this amount of incontrovertible evidence, many authors have defended the idea, and with good reason obviously, that Jesus was born in Nazareth, and thus that no distinction should be made between his place of origin and his place of birth. The opposite would seem to have little evidence to support it; the narratives of Jesus’ childhood both in Matthew (2:1) and Luke (2:4, 6–7) distinguish between the place where Jesus was born (Bethlehem of Judea: Matt 2:1; Luke 2:4, 6–7) and the place where he was brought up (Luke 4:16) and spent his childhood, adolescence, youth and a good part of adulthood, until he was,
approximately, thirty years old: Nazareth in Galilee (Matt 2:22–23; Luke 3:23). Obviously, proposing Bethlehem as Jesus’ place of birth requires explaining the reasons why Mary’s son could not have been born in Nazareth, his parents’ hometown.

2. Some Reflections on Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2

In Matthew, the report of the conception, birth and early years of Jesus the child is only associated with Bethlehem of Judea (2:1). The mention of the “house” (2:11) leads to the idea that Bethlehem is the town where Joseph and Mary are living at the time of Jesus’ birth. Indeed, implicitly, it seems to suggest that they were living there before Jesus was born. Is this a house belonging to Joseph, descendent of David and a member of the family of the great king of Israel? Or are Joseph, Mary and Jesus being accommodated by one of Joseph’s relatives, who, like him, belong to David’s dynasty?

However, according to Luke, Nazareth is the town where Mary lives and where she is visited by the angel Gabriel, announcing her pregnancy (1:31). In turn, it is not stated explicitly where Joseph comes from nor where he lives. Luke merely says that he has to go to Bethlehem of Judea to comply with the legal obligations of the census decreed by Augustus, and, for this reason, he travels with Mary “from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth” (2:4), to register in “his own city” (2:3). Likewise, shortly after Jesus’ birth, they return from Judea, “to their own city, Nazareth” (2:39). It seems then that Joseph had two hometowns: Bethlehem and Nazareth. In any case, Joseph is presented as belonging to the family of David, and, thus Bethlehem, David’s city, is where he has to go to “register” (ἀπογράψασθαι). Is this irrefutable proof that Joseph was born in Bethlehem? And, if it is not, how many generations ago did his direct ancestors leave Bethlehem and move to Galilee? In any case, according to Luke, it initially seems that Joseph did not have his own house in Bethlehem, nor anyone to put him up, given, as Luke explains, that Mary, his wife, gave birth in a stable.

In terms of the legal situation of Joseph and Mary, Matthew and Luke both state that when Jesus was conceived in Mary’s womb, she and Joseph were “betrothed,” i.e., legally they were man and wife, but they were not yet living together (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:34). The question then is when they started living together as man and wife. According to Matthew, this came about before Jesus was born. Thus, in the middle