Jesus, Nazareth and the Identity of Catholic Schools

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Abstract

The identity of Jesus of Nazareth is the foundation of the identity of Catholic schools. Often, assertions about the identity of Jesus in relation to Catholics schools are presented without reference to the biblical record. This article seeks to provide biblical context to discussions about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. These contextual discussions about Jesus are designed to aid considerations of Catholic school identity. The specific focus of this article is a survey of contemporary literature on Jesus’ hometown—Nazareth. A focus on Nazareth does not reveal the whole story of Jesus; it offers one piece of the jigsaw revealing Jesus’ identity. The current surge in studies of biblical Nazareth and Galilee provides insights into key questions: Who was Jesus of Nazareth? What can be learned about his time and place? How do these new discoveries help us to re-create his life and teachings? Themes and issues are drawn from this survey of biblical literature on Nazareth. These themes are discussed in relation to reflections on Catholic school identity.

Introduction

Nothing is more important for understanding the identity of Catholic schools than understanding the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth is the key to the identity and mission of a Catholic school; Jesus’ identity informs and animates the identity of Catholic schools. All Catholic schools locate Jesus of Nazareth as the foundation of their reason for being: “Jesus Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school” (NCEC, 2018, p. 5). Insights about Jesus provide intellectual, religious, and pastoral resources that assist Catholic schools to pursue their goals. Despite the centrality of Jesus to the enterprise of Catholic schools, conclusions about Jesus’ identity are often asserted without regard to the biblical record. McKinney (2018, p. 224) notes that scripture is seldom employed in official discussions concerning the identity of Catholic schools, “and when used, it is often used without contextualisation”. This article seeks to provide scriptural context and meaning to support discussions about the identity of Catholic schools.

Notwithstanding the chasm that exists between us and the life and times of Jesus, some pathways to bridge this gulf exist. One is a close study of the Galilean village of Nazareth, Jesus’ hometown. The current generation of scholars who have focused on Galilee—
archaeologists, historians, social scientists, and biblical exegetes—have contributed to “an explosion of specialised information on so many different fronts” (Freyne, 2002, p. 183). Charlesworth (2006, p. 14) summarises the common intention of these studies as discovering: “Who was Jesus of Nazareth, what can be learned about his time and place, and how do these new discoveries help us to re-create his life and teachings?” Charlesworth (2006, p. 56) believes “the New Testament documents from which we reconstruct what Jesus said and did, and why, obtain clearer meaning when examined within the settings in which he lived”. Hakkinen (2016, p. 5) explains that “in order to understand the activity of Jesus and the early Jesus movement, it is essential to know the social and economic context where Jesus and his followers came from”. The focus on Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus, fits with the insight of Moxnes (2000, p. 165) who advocates a spotlight on “house, home and village as the primary locations of identity”. Moxnes (2000) says these locations provided a person in the Greco-Roman world with a social map that told them who they were, who they were related to, how to react and how to behave.

The portrait of Jesus that emerges from this modern information surge “is quite a different image of that man from Nazareth than fills the imagination of Christians around the world today, and that has been predominant throughout the centuries” (Ellens, 2014, p. 5). The intention of this discussion is to present a survey of influential, contemporary research on Nazareth as a key setting of Jesus’ life. These scholarly insights have the potential to increase our understanding of Jesus’ identity. This, in turn, will assist those concerned for the identity of Catholic schools to sharpen their perceptions and clarify their perspectives.

**Nazareth in History**
Nazareth in Galilee was a small, obscure agricultural village in Lower Galilee when Jesus was a resident there during his early years. The village in Jesus’ time “was modest and simple, and agricultural, and was confined to an area around 4 hectares” (Reed, 2002, p. 131). Nazareth was lightly settled: “excavations at Nazareth have brought to light only scanty evidence for settlement in the first century CE” (Gyllenberg, 2019, p. 119). Horsley (1995, p. 193) describes it as an “inauspicious agricultural community”. Nazareth was small by any standards, somewhere in the range of 200 to 400 residents (Reed, 2002, p. 131). Located on the side of a ridge halfway between Lake Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea, Nazareth was not a grand settlement. Archaeologists have not found any marble typically used in the construction of monumental public buildings in large cities, nor any floor mosaics or wall frescoes that might indicate wealth and status. Streets were not paved. In fact, archaeologists have found few luxury items in Nazareth: a plate, lamp, perfume, or glassware imported from afar would be an indicator of household wealth; these items have not been recovered in significant quantities in Nazareth from Jesus’ time (Dark, 2015). Nazareth has been the subject of relatively few archaeological investigations, meaning that “current knowledge concerning the settlement history of ancient Galilee is both limited and haphazard” and overly reliant on literary sources (Leibner, 2009, p. 1). Reconstruction of a realistic picture of Nazareth has been complicated and confused because it “became the center of the development of Christian pilgrimage and ‘tourism’ in late antiquity” (Horsley, 1995, p. 193).

Nazareth was not a prominent village. Nazareth is not named in the Hebrew Bible, nor in the extensive writings of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus who knew the Galilee region well: he named 45 Galilean places, but Nazareth was not one of them. When the Jewish rabbis in the Mishnah and the Talmud named 63 Galilean towns and villages, Nazareth was not
included (Bruegge, 2016). From the time after the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 721 BCE (2 Kings 17:23: “So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day”), it appears that Nazareth was only lightly populated throughout that period (Weiss, 2015).

Nazareth seems to have been “re-founded” after the victory of the Maccabees in 167 BCE when the whole region was re-populated, mostly by Jews: “the people of Nazareth at the time of Jesus were Jews, very likely the descendants of Hasmonean colonizers or Jewish settlers who migrated there over a century earlier” (Crossan & Reed, 2001, p. 66). Chancey (2002) convinced most people with his observation that Galilee in the first century CE did not contain many Gentile inhabitants, nor witness high numbers of Gentile merchants, traders, or other travellers. His review of the archaeological and literary evidence supports Gospel depictions of Jesus as a Jew preaching and working primarily among other Jews in Galilee. Chancey (2002, p. 182) claims that “scholarly reconstructions that de-emphasize the Jewish character of Jesus’s ministry or the Jewish roots of early Christianity by de-Judaizing Galilee distort Jesus, the Jesus movement, and their Galilean context”.

Nazareth was a satellite village of the much larger city of Sepphoris whose population may have been 10,000 or more when Jesus lived in Nazareth. This city is not mentioned in the Gospels and no record exists of Jesus visiting there despite its proximity, some six kilometres to the north of Nazareth across the fertile farmland of the Bet Netofah valley (Dark, 2020). Herod Antipas, like his father, King Herod the Great, was a keen builder who expanded Sepphoris as his Galilean capital. The Herods knew that “grand public works were part of the repertoire of power in antiquity...the display of power went far toward maintaining order” (Fredriksen, 2018, pp. 12-13). Antipas re-made Sepphoris into “the ornament of all Galilee”
according to Josephus (Weiss, 2017). The proximity and easy access to Sepphoris encouraged many to imagine that “Jesus’ father and/or Jesus himself, since they were (perhaps) craftsmen or carpenters, would have been involved in its rebuilding” (Fredriksen, 1999, p. 161). If so, this would have exposed Jesus to Jewish urban culture. Sepphoris in Jesus’ time was essentially Jewish: “evidence for Hellenistic culture is limited...the overwhelming majority were Jewish” (Chancey & Meyers, 2000, p. 32).

Scholars divide on the prosperity of Nazareth residents. Opinion varies whether they lived in modestly prosperous conditions due to their location adjacent to public building projects or whether these same projects placed taxation burdens on residents, and forced labour made life difficult (Hakkinen, 2016). There were “some wealthy people who may have controlled the resources, and were therefore unreceptive to a radical egalitarian movement like that espoused by Jesus” (Freyne, 2006, p. 78).

John’s Gospel records a dubious Nathanael wondering whether “anything good can come out of Nazareth” (John 1:46). This retort is both insulting and surprising: who had even heard of Nazareth? From what we can tell, Jesus’ hometown was politically and religiously insignificant, its residents mostly poor, illiterate peasants observing their religious responsibilities, paying their taxes, and responding to the constant threats to their survival. Jesus was brought up in this village. He was not an urban person: “he was a local saint in rural Galilee, an advocate of the people before their God. He was dedicated to the overturn of evil. As an individual zaddik [saintly or just person] his ministry of healing, of miracle working and table fellowship was a prolonged ritual that dramatised as well as effected God’s progressive victory over forces of evil. Evil was being conquered and human barriers were being dismantled” (Crotty, 2003, p. 163). Dark (2015, p. 63) considers the archaeological “evidence
suggests that Jesus’ boyhood was spent in a conservative Jewish community that had little contact with Hellenistic or Roman culture”.

**Nazareth in the Gospels**

Nazareth is mentioned only briefly in the Gospels. The synoptic authors consider it to be Jesus’ hometown (Luke 4:16; Matthew 13:54; Mark 6.1). In John 1:45, Philip identifies Jesus as the “son of Joseph of Nazareth”. The synoptic authors say that Jesus had relatives who lived in Nazareth, but they and the townsfolk rejected Jesus and his message in a direct and forceful manner (Matthew 13:54-58; Luke 4:16-30; Mark 6:1-6). The origins of the family’s settlement in the village are contested between Gospel authors (Crawford, 2018). Matthew 2:23: “There he made his home in a town called Nazareth”, occurs after the return from the family’s sojourn in Egypt, prior to which they had lived permanently in Bethlehem. Luke identifies the family returning home to the “town of Nazareth in Galilee” (Luke 2:4) from Bethlehem after attendance at a Roman census.

Matthew and Luke describe contrary details about the birth of Jesus in the town of Bethlehem in Judea near Jerusalem; Mark and John are mostly silent about the circumstances of his birth and childhood. Croy (2022, p. 6) draws attention to the “stubborn fact” that “Jesus is consistently identified as being from Nazareth”. Nazareth is described as Jesus’ *patris* (hometown) in all four Gospels, explicitly in Matthew 13:53, 57, Mark 6:1-4, Luke 4:23-24 and obliquely in John 4:44. Croy (2022, p. 7) adds that “nowhere in early Christian literature is he called ‘Jesus of Bethlehem’ or ‘Jesus the Bethlehemite’”. Rowlands (2022, p. 218) explains “the notion that Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem is a *theologoumenon* fabricated to strengthen his messianic status has received near universal assent amongst Jesus historians”. Bovon (2002, p. 82) summarises this scholarly consensus: “the birth probably took place in Nazareth. By
Luke’s time, however, only Bethlehem could be considered the birthplace of the Messiah”. Meier (1991) contends “while Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem cannot be positively ruled out (one can rarely ‘prove a negative’ in ancient history), we must accept the fact that the predominant view in the Gospels and Acts is that Jesus came from Nazareth and—apart from Chapters 1-2 of Matthew and Luke—only from Nazareth” (Meier, 1991, p. 216).

The likely reason for the prominence of Bethlehem as the location of Jesus’ birth in Luke and Matthew is its significance for expectations about the Messiah in Jewish religion. Bethlehem is King David’s hometown (1 Samuel 16). The town has a long tradition of connection with David’s family, including his father Jesse (1 Samuel 16:4-5) and David’s great-grandmother Ruth (Ruth 1-4). Many Christian commentators have emphasised the link between Bethlehem and the promised Messiah in the prophecy of Micah 5:2: “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days”. These commentators have judged that Luke and Matthew were honouring this connection when identifying Jesus as the promised Messiah.

The scholarly “re-location” of the birth from Bethlehem to Nazareth undermines claims for the historical authenticity of much of the infancy accounts in the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke. Crossan (1994, p. 20) thinks “it is a little sad to have to say so, because it has always been such a captivating story, but the journey to and from Nazareth for census and taxation registration is a pure fiction, a creation of Luke’s own imagination, providing a way of getting Jesus’ parents to Bethlehem for his birth”.

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The Nazareth Synagogue

The existence of a synagogue in Nazareth is well attested in the synoptic Gospels (Mark 6:1-6; Matthew 13:54-58). But no indication is given of its location, size, mode of construction or even if it was a dedicated, public building. Luke’s account provides a more extensive focus on the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:16-30) where an actual, dedicated synagogue building is implied, though not specifically stated: Jesus causes a commotion among residents when he reads from the Isaiah scroll and interprets its meaning in terms of his own mission (“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” Luke 4:21).

Evidence of a dedicated synagogue building in Nazareth during Jesus’ time has yet to be found (Crossan & Reed, 2001, p. 65). A plausible explanation is that the Greek term synagoge “should be translated as ‘assembly’ or ‘congregation’ and that for most of the first century at least, no identifiable architectural structure called a ‘synagogue’ existed” (Kloppenborg, 2006, p. 236). These gatherings could have occurred in a town square, a household courtyard, or a room in a larger house (Kloppenborg, 2006, p. 241). Later, synagogue described the building in which gatherings occurred when buildings became more common in Roman Palestine after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. The synagogue’s “functions were secular as well as religious” (Sawicki, 2000, p. 55) which enabled the community to conduct its communal life and provide for its common welfare. Marriages could be sealed, circumcisions performed, scriptures read out loud and interpreted, judicial proceedings conducted, and punishments administered, elders consulted, and traditions discussed and debated (Levine, 2014). The synagogue was a “religio-political town hall of sorts” (Runesson, 2014, p. 9).
Whether conducted in a dedicated building or not, Gospel authors all remember Jesus as conducting his ministry of teaching, proclamation, healing and exorcism in synagogues (Matthew 4:23-25, Mark 1:38-39, Luke 4:14-15, John 18:20). The synagogue “played an essential role in the life and career of Jesus” (Ryan, 2017, p. 1) allowing him to encounter the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24) on common ground: in the Galilean synagogues “Jesus comes as both a peasant himself and a beacon of hope for a better, more egalitarian society” (Taylor, 2021, p. 11). A focus on the institutional setting of the synagogue “results in a sharper focus on the Jewish nature of the world of the text”. Jesus is shown passionately engaging Jewish society with his message which emerges “within these religio-civic institutions, as politically charged” (Runesson, 2014, p. 20).

**Childhood, Literacy and Schools in Nazareth**

Scholars wonder about the type of schooling Jesus might have experienced in Nazareth. Archaeologists have found “no public inscriptions whatsoever” (Reed, 2002, p. 131), which suggests literacy levels among Nazareth residents were low. Reading and writing in Roman Palestine in Jesus’ era were concentrated among aristocrats, their scribal experts and their trained retainers. Estimates of literacy among Greco-Roman communities are put at around ten percent (Harris, 2009). Many suspect that Jesus was not among those who could read: he was probably illiterate (Oakman, 2008, p. 171). They accept “as a Galilean he was best able to recognize a few letters (meaning numbers) and construe a few names and/or inscriptive signs” ( Craffert & Botha, 2005, p. 34). So, “even if the Galilean villagers would have had possession of some scrolls, which they most probably did not, they would not have understood it read to them, because they spoke a dialect of Aramaic that deviated from the Hebrew of the sacred texts” (Hakkinen, 2016, p. 8). However, some challenge this view.
Fassberg (2012) notes that Jesus would have spoken a Galilean form of Aramaic, but that, as a Jew living in Palestine “must also have spoken Hebrew” (Fassberg, 2012, p. 280).

Some challenge the presumption of Jesus’ illiteracy. Wright (2015, p. 161) argues “there was undoubtedly a spectrum of literacy, and the simple categories of ‘literate’ or ‘illiterate’, as well as the false dichotomy between ‘oral vs. written’, no longer suffice”. Miller (2022, p. 84) believes the impulse for reading sacred texts is sufficient to induce an anomalous spike in literacy rates among observant Jews: Gospel mentions of connection to a Nazareth synagogue implies “Jews would have still had access to a synagogue and either a sefer or a hazzan for teaching children and adolescents reading and writing”. This affirms instances in the Gospels showing Jesus reading texts: “He stood up to read” (Luke 4:16); “He bent down to write with his finger on the ground” (John 8:6). The evidence of the Gospels lends credibility, though not proof, to the idea that “Second Temple Judaism put a great emphasis on the study of Torah, and according to Josephus, it was expected that children should be taught to read” (Dunn, 2006, p. 221). Some concur with Dunn’s assessment of Jesus’ literacy; others disagree. The issue of Jesus’ literacy remains open (Millard, 2003): “no definitive answer can be given to the question of whether or not Jesus possessed some level of functional literacy” (Foster, 2006, p. 32).

Did Jesus attend a school, at least to a primary level of achievement? The prior question of whether Nazareth contained a school in Jesus’ time is open. Most scholars accept that evidence for school buildings in the Roman era relies on literary texts rather than archaeological finds (Bissell, 2021). Hezser (2012, p. 470) says no evidence exists for schools in Roman Palestine: “neither the Hebrew Bible, nor the New Testament, or any of the Jewish writings of the Second Temple period, including Philo and Josephus, contain any direct
references to schools for the primary education of Jewish children”. Carr (2005) does not think “ancient Israel had many ‘schools’ of the sort we would recognize as such”. It seems “most ‘schools’ if they did exist, were probably conducted in an apprenticeship model at the home of a master/teacher” (Carr, 2005, p. 12) Any schooling undertaken by Jewish children was at the initiative of Jewish parents conducted on a private basis. Jewish primary schools coincide with the emergence of synagogue buildings as centres of community life, after the time of Jesus (Carr, 2005, pp. 79-80).

Plausibly, a child brought up in Nazareth could learn Torah from parents and community elders and use this knowledge to quiz others on their own understanding of sacred scriptures: “Have you never read what David did?” (Mark 2:25). An observant Jewish child could learn to recite the shema daily—“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God” (Deuteronomy 6:4)—and encourage others to do the same (Mark 12:29). A boy from Nazareth could wear fringes (tzitzit) on his cloak (Luke 8:44: “She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes”) in accordance with instructions in Numbers 15:38-9 to show that he took his religious obligations seriously: “You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them”. The issue of Jesus’ literacy in a largely illiterate society concerns power and prestige: a person who could read and interpret sacred texts confronted the professional scribal class with an alternative source of power, which may not always have been welcomed (Keith, 2020).

Scholars debate whether Nazareth residents, and specifically Jesus, could speak Greek. The evidence for Jesus speaking Greek is sketchy, and scholars are divided about the extent of Jesus’ language abilities (Ong, 2015). Certainly, little evidence exists for a widespread use of Greek in the Galilean villages of Jesus’ day. The Gospels record two of Jesus’
disciples with Greek names—Philip and Andrew—and possibly Greek backgrounds. Greek-speaking Gentiles approach these two disciples with the request “to see Jesus” (John 12:21) and they can translate this request for him (John 12:22). Despite this smattering of evidence—or because of it—we must remain cautious when describing Jesus’ linguistic abilities. We can note in passing when Roman officials wanted to deal with Aramaic-speaking Jewish villagers, such as at the trial of Jesus in Jerusalem, they used translators (McElduff, 2015) though these court officials are not mentioned in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ Roman trial before Pontius Pilate (Mark 15:6-15, and parallels).

Nazareth Houses

The walls of most Nazareth houses were made from field stones, daubed with mud and straw to hold them somewhat unsteadily in place and covered with thatched roofs (Dark, 2020, pp. 140-143). The ground of the Nazareth Ridge comprises a thin layer of Eocene limestone over a thick layer of Senonian chalk. Both limestone and chalk “are useful as building stones when quarried” (Pfann, Voss, & Rapuano, 2007, p. 25). Field stones would allow these dwellings a measure of climate control: passive solar heating in winter and a certain level of coolness in summer (Sawicki, 2000, p. 15). Most Nazareth houses were single storey, though some may have had two levels. Many comprised a collection of rooms clustered around a common courtyard shared with neighbours, where a cooking oven/fire was located, and household activities conducted. Water for household needs was collected from roof run-off and stored in cisterns, or carried from wells or springs, of which there may have been as many as seven in the vicinity of the village (Dark, 2015). Many houses had cavities below the floor or courtyard. Here water and grain could be stored. Some Nazareth houses in Jesus’ time were built around caves hewn from the soft limestone earth, or possibly naturally occurring, and used for living space—a rustic, climate-controlled environment.
The lack of wooden frames for houses—or any frames for that matter—meant that collapsing walls were a possibility and a not uncommon cause of serious injury or death. The floors of the house were rammed earth. The roof of a Nazareth house was formed by laying reed thatching on wooden rafters and then applying a thick course of clay that would harden to provide a weather-proof cover for the dwelling. The story of the supporters of a paralysed man entering a crowded house in Capernaum by “having dug through the roof” (Mark 2:4) accords with the typical construction of Galilean houses. Luke’s recounting of the same incident where supporters let the paralysed man “down through the tiles” on the roof (Luke 5:19) betrays Luke’s awareness of housing construction in a different region beyond Galilean villages, and a comparatively more sturdy and expensive dwelling than the one Mark records.

**Jesus and the Environment**

Outside the Nazareth village, terracing enabled water retention and crop planting on the sloping hillsides. This agricultural infrastructure was a suitable platform for growing “olives, grapes, figs, almonds, wheat and barley” (Pfann et al., 2007, p. 23). Diversity of crops insured against the ill-consequences of crop failure and added variety to a restricted diet. The discovery of the remains of a vineyard tower on the edge of the village calls to mind the parable of the owner of the vineyard who built a watchtower (Mark 12:1: “A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the winepress, and built a watchtower”). The nearby cliff from which Jesus was supposedly about to be cast by irate citizens of Nazareth exists in the imagination of Luke and not in the topography of Nazareth (Luke 4:29: “They led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built so that they might hurl him off the cliff”).
As an observant Jewish man, Jesus inherited his religion’s belief that God’s presence was available to people in the plants, animals, natural environment and the agricultural and aquacultural cycles (Freyne, 2004). We do not have a clear picture from the Gospels of Jesus’ relationship with his land and how it affected his ministry. The land is mentioned incidentally and occasionally in the Gospels; descriptions of the environment are not a feature of the Gospel authors’ style. It seems Jesus’ environment contained relentless threats to life and community stability: “in antiquity, droughts, torrential rain, earthquakes, and other natural perils were a constant threat to a fruitful outcome from the fields” (Jensen, 2012, p. 323). Modern readers are left to judge the extent to which climatic instability triggered social instability. Jensen (2012, p. 323) considers locals experienced these threats as “a regular fact of life, almost a triviality...simply the brutal facts of life”.

Jesus’ parables communicate a sense of the nearness of God in the patterns and experiences of everyday life:

- the beauty of wildflowers,
- the growth of trees from tiny seeds,
- crops of grain,
- bread rising,
- a woman sweeping a floor looking for what was lost,
- children playing,
- the relationship between a shepherd and the sheep,
- the birds of the air,
- foxes and their lairs,
- rain falling,
- and the generosity of a parent to a wayward child (Edwards, 2006, pp. 50-1).

Freyne (2004, p. 59) explains that Jesus’ parables are such successful religious metaphors because they are the product of a religious imagination “deeply grounded in the world of nature and the human struggle with it, and at the same time deeply rooted in the traditions of Israel which speak of God as creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them”. Johnson (2009) argues it would be “anachronistic” to attribute to Jesus of Nazareth “the environmental concerns of 21st century people. The point rather is that his life’s ministry is filled with orientations that open to physical, earthly dimensions without strain, once the question is raised”.

Pope Francis (2015) connected the experience of Jesus of Nazareth with modern contemplation of the environment. In calling for an ecological conversion among humans, Francis
argued the resurrection of Jesus imbued all creation with divine significance: “The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence” (Francis, 2015, para. 100). Deane-Drummond explains how a revived attention to Jesus and the environment ultimately leads Christians to “an ethical demand to take an active part in the shared drama, a common history of the earth, and therefore to love God and neighbour, acting with sensitivity and responsibly towards the earth and its creatures” (Deane-Drummond, 2014, p. 50).

**Trade and Commerce**

Nazareth was not a market town. No evidence has been discovered of a place for conducting trade. Buying and selling of goods and services were possibly done by barter and personal contracts—a feasible possibility in a small settlement. Nazareth did not have a public square for community gatherings, nor public buildings for use by community officials. Unlike Sepphoris which boasted a workable sewerage system, no similar provision has been found in Nazareth. As archaeologist Jonathan Reed has noted: the village would have been dusty and smelly in summer and muddy and smelly in winter!

Somewhat paradoxically, scholars have detected evidence for lively commercial interactions between Jewish villages throughout the region. One village that specialised in a particular product—pottery from the Galilean village of Kefar Hananya is a strong example—distributed those products to other villages (Ben David, 2014). Commercial, trade and family connections may have been active between Galilean villages (Mattila, 2010). Wandering charismatic preachers, teachers, and healers might also have been active in these interchanges “through the towns and villages” of Galilee (Luke 8:1). Sometimes these shifts of location were long-term, even permanent. Jesus, himself, was one who moved away from
his childhood home (Matthew 4:13: “He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea”). Some of his followers did likewise (John 1:44: “Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter”). Why he might have transferred to this location is open to speculation.

**Jesus the “Carpenter”**

Matthew’s claim that Jesus “left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum”—a larger town at the northern end of Lake Galilee (Matthew 4:13) may have been related to his employment. Matthew says that this move occurred at the beginning of his public ministry when Jesus heard about the arrest of John the Baptist. Mark also indicates Capernaum as Jesus’ new home (Mark 2:1) and John offers some recognition of the tradition about Capernaum (John 2:12). Jesus seems to have visited Nazareth infrequently during his adult life but was not received amiably there. On one visit to his ‘hometown’ [*patris*], Nazareth, many locals were astounded by his teaching and puzzled by the source of his learning and works of power. They remembered him, somewhat dismissively, as the local carpenter—or more accurately in Greek, a *tekton*, a worker in hard materials such as timber, stone and ivory (Mark 6:3: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary”).

This slender identification in Mark 6:3 of Jesus as a *tekton* is the sole mention of this aspect of his biography in all four Gospels. The Gospels highlight his role as preacher, teacher, healer, and wonderworker and mostly ignore any craft skills he may have possessed. While Mark identifies him as a *tekton*, Matthew, Luke and John avoid this description and any association between Jesus and manual labour. Even in Mark, the idea of Jesus the carpenter is unexplored: we only see Jesus toiling away in his Nazareth carpenter’s shop in children’s bible story books, but never in the Gospels. Scholars have questioned what Mark might have
meant by his use of the term *tekton*. Robinson (2021, p. 443) suggests that, given the inherent ambiguity of the term “the best translation of *tekton* in Mark 6:3 is likely ‘builder-craftsman’”.

If he was a *tekton* in Nazareth, Jesus would likely have enjoyed more independence, status, and income than his fellow villagers, most of whom worked as farmers on small plots of land growing fruits, grains and vegetables. The life of a *tekton* in a small Galilean village would have placed Jesus on a more solid economic and social foundation than many of his peers. Meier (1991, p. 282) says that Jesus was indeed in one sense poor:

and a comfortable, middle-class urban American would find living conditions in ancient Nazareth appalling. But Jesus was probably no poorer or less respectable than almost anyone else in Nazareth, or for that matter in most of Galilee. His was not the grinding, degrading poverty of the day laborer or the rural slave.

We may need to re-visit pious allusions to Jesus as the poor, illiterate peasant of Galilee. Jesus is remembered as an artisan. He was not a tenant farmer or an agricultural labourer, tied to the land. He travelled independently of family from Nazareth and supported himself without personal recourse to agricultural production.

**Health and Wellbeing**

With most residents living in cramped and unsanitary conditions, possessing rudimentary health knowledge, and undertaking demanding physical work, residents of Nazareth were vulnerable to illness, disease, and early death. The three great killers of the Greco-Roman world—tuberculosis, malaria, and typhoid fever—were common in the Galilee. August and September were especially deadly months as the hot weather agitated fevers and diseases: “chronic and seasonal disease especially malaria, cut down significant segments of the population and left even the healthy quite often ill” (Reed, 2010, p. 345). Gospel authors record two instances of people suffering “fevers”: Simon’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:30) and the
royal official’s son who was cured of a fever (John 4:52). The nature of these “fevers” is not disclosed in the Gospels, though in both cases the illnesses are debilitating and life-threatening: malaria is a prime candidate.

Excavations by Reed (2010) in burial grounds confirm the health consequences of living conditions for Galilean villagers. Iron deficiencies were common. Related conditions such as osteoporosis have also been witnessed: (“There appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years....She was bent over and unable to stand up straight” Luke 13:11). Gum disease, a common occurrence, could be fatal in a pre-modern society. Residents would have been susceptible to gastro-intestinal diseases, cardio-vascular disease which caused heart attacks and stroke, as well as diseases such as dysentery and plague. While skin diseases were common—eczema, psoriasis, melanoma—leprosy, as such, was unknown in Galilee. Leprosy is officially known as Hansen’s Disease. Jesus’ encounter with “a leper who came to him and knelt before him” (Matthew 8:2) was with a man suffering a skin ailment, but not leprosy. Mental illness and distress figures prominently in the Gospels: (“A man of the city who had demons met him” Luke 8:27). The need for a healer would have been acute. A person with a reputation for healing would have attracted attention among locals and beyond.

Life expectancy was much lower than today, especially for men. Nearly one-third of all children in the Greco-Roman world were fatherless by fifteen: “men were often older than their wives; almost no children ever knew their grandfathers; and few adults had fathers who were alive” (Reed, 2010, p. 365). When Jesus returned to Nazareth as an adult during his public ministry, he was greeted by members of his immediate family. Joseph was not present (Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55; Luke 4:22). Gospel authors are mostly silent about Joseph, his
background and subsequent career, after he figures prominently in the stories of Jesus’ birth and infancy in the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke. Many speculate that Joseph died at some time during Jesus’ childhood—a view that matches demographic evidence. Some suspect if he lived, his non-appearance during Jesus’ public ministry was because he was a non-supporter of—or at best neutral about—his son’s choice of a public career (Glessner, 2022). This would fit Mark’s account of Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth, recording the immortal line: “Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house” (Mark 6:4). John adds the observation that “not even his brothers believed in him” (John 7:5) which may have been an authentic historical observation.

Hard work, poor health and low incomes ensured life for the residents of Nazareth involved many challenges. Nazareth residents could easily notice discrepancies in the lives of those in their region: the wretched work arrangements of day labourers (Matthew 20:1-16); the easeful lifestyles of aristocrats and wealthy estate owners on the rich-soil plains and in the big cities (Luke 16:19-31); the exploitative practices of managers employed by absentee landlords (Luke 16:1-13); family disputes over inheritance of farming plots (Luke 15:11-32); and challenges involved in raising crops in difficult farming country (Mark 4:3-9). Someone with a creative imagination could spin meaningful, heartfelt stories from such material.

**Jesus of Nazareth and the Identity of Catholic Schools**

A focus on Nazareth locates Jesus firmly within his Jewish religious milieu, enabling glimpses of the connections between “Jesus and the land, the groups, the traditions and the mentalities of the Judaism of that time” (Theissen, & Merz, 1998, p. 117). Modern scholars describe Jesus in terms of what he shares with his Jewish co-religionists, not in terms of his divergence from them, as was common up until recent decades (Heschel, 2008, pp. 58-66).
Biblical scholars previously “insisted upon the spiritual and existential uniqueness of Jesus...and could only do so by thoroughly denigrating first-century Judaism” (Kelley, 2002, p. 201). The separation of Jesus from the Jewish world of first-century Roman Palestine promoted “the a-historical and theological view that Jesus was...uniquely spiritual because he stood in opposition to his shallow, hypocritical, unspiritual, literal, Jewish opponents” (Kelley, 2002, p. 71). Modern scholarship has reversed these perspectives. It “remains the case that Hebrew language and literature, as well as Aramaic and Jewish culture, dominated the region at this time. And it is there that we must search for the historical Jesus” (Chancey & Meyers, 2000, p. 33). As Sawicki (2000, p. 7) expresses it, “anyone who wants to know about Jesus must seek him on his native turf, in his own land and landscape”.

Catholic educators are challenged to refute misrepresentations and misinterpretations of Judaism proposed by twentieth century Christian scholars. Judaism in Jesus’ time was not a decrepit and dying religion displaced by a budding Christianity. Jesus of Nazareth was a committed, observant Jew of the first century of the Common Era. In support of the need for reversal in traditional Catholic understanding of relations between Jews and Christians, Levine (2006, pp. 210-211) quotes the words of Pope Benedict XVI who taught that:

the faith witnessed to by the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament for Christians) is not merely another religion to us, but its foundation of our own faith. Therefore, Christians—and today increasingly in collaboration with their Jewish sisters and brothers—read and attentively study these books of Sacred Scripture as a part of their common heritage.

Nazareth provides one context for the study of Jesus, avoiding the risk students might “explore ideas as if they were floating in the air...they are to be firmly rooted precisely in the social and cultural realities” (Raisenan, 2010, p. 2). According to Reinhartz (2015, p. 209), even
“the most skeptical readers of the Gospels and the most minimalist of historians recognize that Jesus lived within an almost entirely Jewish ethnic, social and cultural milieu”. A focus on Jesus’ Jewish heritage reflects Pope Francis’ attentiveness to the intimate connection between Jewish tradition and Catholic identity: “the Church, which shares with Jews an important part of the sacred Scriptures, looks upon the people of the covenant and their faith as one of the sacred roots of her own Christian identity….With them, we believe in the one God who acts in history, and with them we accept his revealed word” (Francis, 2013, paragraph 247).

A re-born understanding of the relationship between Catholics and Jews was established in the Second Vatican Council’s document Nostra Aetate and amplified in post-conciliar documents. These official statements consistently emphasised the educational implications of this renewed relationship. The Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (2015, paragraph 45) states:

it is important that Catholic educational institutions, particularly in the training of priests, integrate into their curricula both Nostra Aetate and the subsequent documents of the Holy See regarding the implementation of the Conciliar declaration...The fundamental changes in relations between Christians and Jews initiated by Nostra Aetate (No.4) must also be made known to the coming generations and be received and disseminated by them.

Shifts in official Catholic teachings mirror the growing awareness that encounters with Jews and Judaism are “indispensable to understanding the Christian faith” (Boys, 2013, p. 259).

A study of Nazareth does not reveal the full story of Jesus’ identity but does provide one significant piece in a complex jigsaw. Nazareth is one place that moulded Jesus’ identity and agenda. Sawicki (2000, p. 12) reminds us that “whatever timeless significance the words and deeds of Jesus may have achieved, their meaning first took flesh in and still depends upon
the cultural idiom of the time and place in which they were framed”. Recovering this cultural idiom is not a straightforward task. Sanders (2016, p. 418) identifies challenges involved in arriving at a complete understanding of Jesus’ cultural idiom since “few tasks in the humanities are more complicated and uncertain than sorting out the historical figure of Jesus behind the varying accounts in the Gospels”. Nevertheless, it may be comforting for teachers to acknowledge that “even a partial understanding is surely worth securing” (Sawicki, 2000, p. 12).

Any overview of scholarly literature concerning Nazareth quickly reveals a distinct lack of a consensus on most issues and questions: “the current study of Galilee is fraught with conflicting conclusions” (Fiensy & Strange, 2014, p. 1). Crossley (2015) recommends caution since many images of Jesus have been conjured by historical Jesus scholars and tend to reflect each scholar’s personal beliefs and values: “historical Jesus scholars will invariably see their reflection at the bottom of the deep well” (Crossley, 2015, p. 69). While a lack of scholarly consensus poses challenges for those dedicated to their disciplines, it should be taken as a sign of a lively and active area of study that raises contested conclusions from available evidence.

It also provides opportunities for Catholic educators. Moran (2016) explains that understanding requires comparison: “to understand religion is to step back and compare one religion with another, even if the comparison is between two versions of the same religion” (Moran, 2016, p. 225). Teachers can present material on the historical Jesus that allows for exploration, debate, and scrutiny of texts in a way that provokes disciplined understanding. This educational rhythm echoes the experience of Jesus of Nazareth who lived in a “polyphonic world of Judaism” in which “the distinctive voice of Jesus” (Freyne, 2004, p. 12)
was often in conflict with other voices. Students can engage in an authentic dialogical examination of evidence and rival interpretations, as they operate in the guise of archaeologists, historians, literary and art critics to sort and sift evidence and reach conclusions that satisfy their own curiosities.

A consideration of Jesus’ geographic, economic, religious, political, and cultural context provides insights into the identity of Jesus—"Jesus as an actual historical person who lived and died in a concrete human existence" (Siker, 2007, p. 26)—not just the idea of Jesus: efforts to apply to Jesus’ identity the interests and concerns of scholars. Attention to Jesus’ identity is foundational for Catholic educators:

Catholic educators need clarity about the foundational principles that underpin their enterprise. Without these, they are floundering in the dark, they are deprived of any adequate orientation or sense of direction, they lack a necessary compass that will help them to steer an appropriate path through the ups and downs of teaching (Sullivan, 2011, p. 92).

Rossiter (2018, p. 121) has reflected on what the “work of New Testament and historical Jesus scholars” has meant for the Catholic identity of schools. He considers that:

Jesus would be likely to see contemporary questions about culture and personal identity as of vital concern and in need of redress...He would be expected to be more action-oriented, concerned about what can be done to enhance the personal and spiritual lives of people.

Scott (2021, p. 39) echoed these reflections in observing Catholic tradition “at its best, offers an embodied spirituality rooted in the concrete, and imbedded in the particularities of human experience. It is radically incarnational and profoundly historical as it directs people in justice to repair the world”. McKinney (2023, p. 86) provides an historical perspective on the experiences of Catholic schools that reach out to poor and marginalised people. They are often met with opposition from the Church and outside it: “as disciples, they have followed
the example of Jesus in the mission or option for the poor, and they too have experienced the misunderstanding, opposition and even, in some cases, the rejection that he experienced”.

Nazareth, as the childhood home of Jesus “must be considered one of the most historically significant places in the world” (Dark, 2020, p. 1). This global significance includes the contemporary understanding and appreciation of the identity of Catholic education. The National Catholic Education Commission affirms that “formation for mission in Catholic education is explicitly Christological, scripturally rich and ecclesially grounded” (NCEC, 2017, p. 14). Understanding Nazareth provides an entry point to understanding Jesus. Understanding Jesus is essential to understanding the Catholic identity of Catholic schools. The foundations of Catholic identity begin in Nazareth.

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