



The ideas of western Christians concerning the life of Jesus, including about His birth, come from the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, which depict His birthplace as a wooden structure. But was Jesus really born in a cave? The artists who created the images never went to Palestine, so they drew from their own experience in Europe. In Europe animals were kept in barns built of wood. But in Bethlehem, even today, people use caves, which are everywhere, for storage, to shelter animals and to live in. Many houses in Bethlehem are built in front of caves, just as they were in Jesus's day. In the Gnostic Gospel of James, the child Jesus was born in a cave. The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew says Mary entered the "cave below a cavern in which there was never any light" to bring forth the light of the world. Many linguists now believe there may have been a confusion between the words for "inn" and "second level." Guests paying to stay at a hostel would stay in the upper

floor. In dwelling caves in the Holy Land, families would live in the upper level while animals were sheltered below, after having been brought inside the cave for warmth against the high-altitude (2,500 feet above sea-level) climate at cooler times of year. The body heat of the animals would rise and help heat the dwelling. On the first level, mangers would have been placed along the walls for the animals. The prevailing wisdom is that "no room at the inn" meant "no room on the second (family dwelling) level." Mary and Joseph were therefore offered the lower level of the cave dwelling (where the livestock was kept) as a safe, warm place to give birth—away from the owner's dining and living areas and sleeping quarters. The above painting is by Robert Campin (painted circa 1425-1430) possibly of Tournai. The drapery style of the period was stiff and angular but detail abounds (take a look into the distant background). Artists were still uncomfortable with neo-natal anatomy; little Jesus is depicted with the proportions of a miniature adult, not a baby.

New Revelations On the Life of Jesus

AT CHRISTMASTIME THE THOUGHTS OF CHRISTIANS naturally turn to Jesus. Perhaps surprisingly, little of a hard, historically factual nature is known about Jesus the Nazarene, also known as Jesus the Galilean or Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity. Besides no “forensics” evidence, there is the “missing 17 years,” that period when reports on the goings on in His life (from ages 13 to 29) are almost non-existent. One thing we did think we knew for sure about Jesus was that he was a carpenter. But now historians are saying the profession of Jesus and his earthly father, Joseph, has been misinterpreted from ancient scripture.

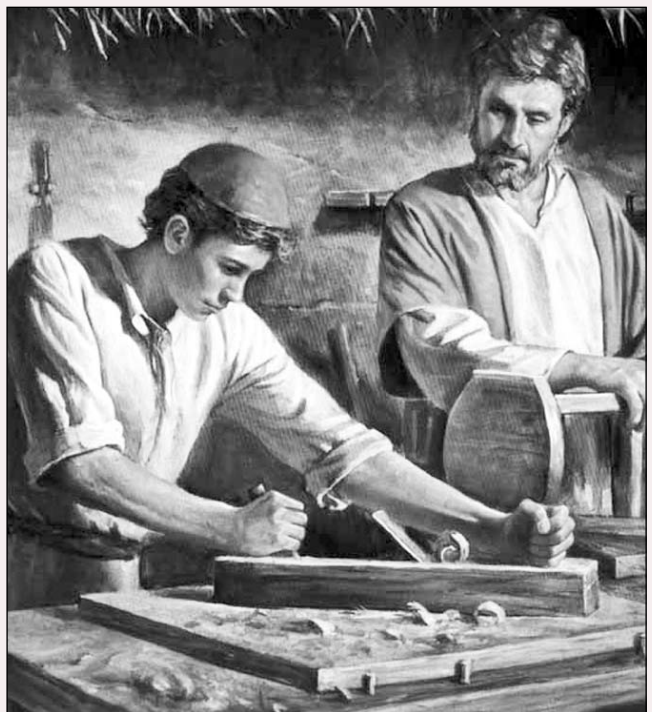
BY JOHN TIFFANY

TRADITION HAS IT THAT JESUS (Joshua, if you like—or Yehoshua, to give him the name he was probably known by in his life¹) was a carpenter. And since that is what we were taught as children, we might like to believe it. But was he really?

From a historian’s secular point of view, we might ask: Given that there is a belief that Jesus was a carpenter, on what evidence is this belief based? Revisionists tend to question everything, since they have already learned that much of what they had been taught is not so.

Most of the primary evidence, such as it is, about the life of Jesus is embodied in the Bible and the Koran. However, when it comes to being a carpenter, the only evidence on the subject seems to be the writings in the Bible. So, then, what does the Bible actually say about it? First, bear in mind the original Biblical writings are in several languages. English, of course, did not even exist when it was first written. Back then, our ancestors were speaking Anglo-Saxon, Old Irish or whatever.

This writer, like most folks, has been taught that the New Testament was originally written in Greek (Koine). However,



Linguists are playing a key role in re-examining the life of Jesus of Nazareth. From details about the Nativity to questions about the true profession of Jesus and Joseph, new light is being shed on Biblical history. Above, a modern depiction of Joseph supervising Jesus in Joseph’s carpenter shop shows the young Jesus working with a wood plane (and wearing a yarmulke). Most all of what we know about Jesus comes from the Koran and the New Testament. The original Gospels were most likely written by Aramaic speakers whose works were translated into Greek and then into other tongues, including English later on. Experts now believe thousands of minor translation errors were made, confusing important details we have come to accept as fact. The truth is, there is just as good a chance Jesus and Joseph were stonemasons as carpenters.

there are some who claim the New Testament (NT) was originally written in Aramaic, a Semitic language. This would mean the Greek manuscripts are translations from the Aramaic originals. Then the Greek was long ago put into Latin. Of course the Bible was eventually translated into English from the Greek and Latin versions.

It would appear that the disciples and apostles, or at least some of them, were at least able to speak in Greek, although their mother tongue was probably Aramaic. The same may be true of their leader.

As is noted by the director of the Bible-studying organization called Darkness to Light, Gary F. Zeolla, for the most part, the Old Testament (OT) was originally written in Hebrew. There are a few small sections that were written in Aramaic (Ezra 4:8-6:18, 7:12-26; Daniel chapters 2-7 and one verse in Jeremiah), says Zeolla.

Aramaic, naturally, is similar but not identical to Hebrew. For example, “teacher” in Hebrew is *rabbi*, while it is *rabboni* in Aramaic. You doubtless recall that when Mary Magdalene encountered the risen Jesus (she was perhaps the first person to do so), she greeted him as “*Rabboni!*” (After figuring out much to her amazement that he was not the gardener.)

By the turn of the millennium, people living in Judea and Galilee for the most part spoke Aramaic. This is reflected in the recent Mel Gibson movie *The Passion of the Christ*, with the entire dialog being in Aramaic (with English subtitles). Due to this movie, there has been a resurgence of interest in Aramaic, a tongue that is not dead but that has very few speakers today. Most of them live in Iraq, though some have immigrated to the United States.

Half a century before this, as an aside, one notable proponent of the idea of an Aramaic original for the NT was George Lamsa. What is usually referred to as *Lamsa’s Bible* (published in 1957) was translated from the Syriac Peshitta. Syriac is a dialect

of Aramaic. In the introduction to *Lamsa’s Bible* are claimed evidences for an Aramaic original for the NT.

The Peshitta texts were discovered in Mesopotamia in the early 1930s, after being lost for more than 18 centuries. (Evidence shows Aramaic texts go all the way back to the Targums; Hebrew translated to Aramaic in the B.C. era. The Dead Sea scrolls are the oldest biblical texts we have, and they are in Aramaic.)

The language barrier has led to a number of problems in trying to understand the Bible. One example of a linguistic-based misinterpretation would be the Lord’s Prayer in the English King James Version (KJV), which of course is not based directly on Aramaic. This prayer contains a line that reads: “Lead us not into temptation.” Many thoughtful Christians have been puzzled by this rather blasphemous-sounding sentence in the KJV. Translated from the Aramaic, this reads very differently as, “Do not let us enter into temptation.” The difference, says Dr. Rocco Errico, a Near Eastern theologian and Aramaic expert, is that God does not “lead us into temptation” (which sounds more like something one would imagine the devil doing) but that one could ask for his guidance not to “enter” into temptation.

Our lack of understanding of the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic, Near Eastern biblical culture has led to thousands of misinterpretations of what was meant to be idiomatic and metaphoric (not necessarily historical) speech in the original writings—a matter that, incidentally, has inspired George Wesley Buchanan to take a new look at the books of Daniel and Revelation. (More on that in a future edition of THE BARNES REVIEW.—Ed.)

To return to our core topic, Jesus in English-language Bibles is only directly called a carpenter once, in Mark 6:3. Matthew 13:55 describes him as the son of a carpenter. Naturally, in those days, as in all ages until recently, it was customary for most boys

“Our lack of understanding of the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic, Near Eastern biblical culture has led to thousands of misinterpretations of what was meant to be idiomatic & metaphoric.”

Rumors of Jesus in Tibet

It may well have been that Jesus ran into Buddhist missionaries in his native Palestine. But did he ever travel to their homelands? Even to this day, ancient scrolls are claimed to reveal that Jesus spent 17 years in the Himalayas. From age 13 to age 29, he was allegedly both a student and teacher of Buddhist and Hindu holy men. The tale of Jesus’s journey from Jerusalem to Benares was, we are told, recorded by Brahman historians. In 1894 Nicolas Notovitch, a Russian doctor (who had converted from Judaism), who journeyed throughout Afghanistan, India and Tibet, published a book called *The Unknown Life of Christ*. Notovitch said he learned at Leh, the capital of Ladak, that there existed ancient records locally of the life of Jesus Christ. In the course of his visit at a great local convent, he supposedly locat-

ed a Tibetan translation of these records and carefully copied over 200 verses from a curious document known as “The Life of St. Issa.” (“Iss,” as it happens, is the Arabic for “Jesus.”)

The great German Orientalist (Friedrich) Max Mueller, editor of the epoch-making *Sacred Books of the East* series of translated Eastern scriptures, took an interest in Notovitch’s claims. He pointed out that such an honored work as Notovitch described would surely have been included in the great canonical lists of Tibetan books, the *Kanjur* and the *Tanjur*—but it wasn’t. It seems possible now that Notovitch’s *Unknown Life of Jesus* was a hoax. It is proof enough of this that Notovitch, intimidated by Mueller’s scholarly attack, backed down and changed his story, pulling the rug out from under his subsequent defenders, who were apparently ignorant of his revisionism. It is believed by many that Apollonia of Tyana, a Jesus-like figure, did travel to Tibet in his lifetime.

Origins of the New Testament

THE BIBLICAL GOSPELS WERE ORIGINALLY ANONYMOUS—the names now attached to them were added speculatively by oral tradition half a century after they were actually written. They belong to the genre of literature called “hagiography”—sacred accounts of a person regarded as representing a moral ideal, in this case Jesus. The canonical Gospels appear to be propaganda designed to combat various forms of Gnosticism. Being aware of this bias is sensible for the student of history.

Were the Gospels deliberately slanted to minimize the role of the Romans in killing Christ? It seems logical to think so. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment. But the early Christians had to get along with the Romans, and especially when the Roman empire decided to make Christianity its official religion it would not make sense for the Christian scriptures to portray the Romans in a bad light.

As estimated by William Harris, author of *Ancient Literacy* (1989), only 20% of the population in early church days could read anything at all, fewer than 10% could read well, and far fewer still had any access to books. He found that in comparative terms, even a single page of blank papyrus cost the equivalent of \$30—ink, and the labor to hand copy every word, cost many times more. We find that books could run to the tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars each. Consequently, only the rich had books.

Paul never mentions or quotes any of the Gospels, so it seems clear to some scholars they were unwritten in his lifetime.

We do not know when any of the Gospels were written. However, we can infer their chronological order. It is clear Mark came first.

to follow in their father’s footsteps.

It has been suggested, without much evidence, that Jesus and Joseph built or repaired boats by the Sea of Galilee, or made and repaired plows and yokes for farmers. The early church writer Justin² says: “He was considered to be the son of Joseph the carpenter; and He appeared without comeliness, as the Scriptures declared; and He was deemed a carpenter (for He was in the habit of working as a carpenter when among men, making plows and yokes; by which He taught the symbols of righteousness and an active life).”

But the term in the Greek Bible is *tektone* or *tektion* (in Mark’s gospel). “Artisan” would perhaps be a better translation than “carpenter.” The term means a skilled craftsman and could involve metal, stone or wood.

The Greek word *tektion* was translated by English speakers into “carpenter” because European building focused more on woodwork and carpentry, Page said. But in the Middle East in the time of Jesus, almost all building required stonework, not carpentry. In view of the scarcity of wood in the area and the ample supply of stone, Joseph and Jesus may actually have been practicing stonemasons.

In the Aramaic language, the corresponding term (*nagggar*) can also be used to metaphorically describe a “scholar” or “learned man.” Could it be that Joseph and/or Jesus were scholars who did not work with their hands? They were, after all, of

Scholars dispute whether Luke preceded Matthew or the other way around, but it seems that, since they show no apparent awareness of each other, they were probably written around the same time. John presents the most elaborate of the accounts, suggesting a late development. Early Christian tradition held that this Gospel was the last to be written, and scholars generally agree on that.

It is little known among ordinary people, but in fact the end section of Mark (everything after verse 16:8) does not exist in the earliest surviving versions of that Gospel. It was added sometime late in the 2nd century or even later.

We know of some very early books that simply did not survive at all (such as Paul’s earlier Epistle to the Colossians, cf. Col. 4:16), and have recently discovered the very ancient fragments of others that we never knew existed, because no one had even mentioned them.

Contrary to common belief, there was never a one-time, universal decision as to which books should be included in the Bible. Each church had its favorite books.

The churches that came out on top preserved texts in their favor and destroyed opposing documents.

The Catholic church never had any control over the Eastern churches, which were divided among themselves, Ethiopian and Coptic and Syrian and Byzantine and Armenian canons all existing side-by-side with one another and with the Catholic canon, which itself was never fully settled until the 15th century at the earliest, although it was essentially established by the middle of the 4th century. ❖

royal descent, being of the House of David.

The Talmud refers to Jesus as “*nagggar bar nagggar*,” which some have rendered as “the carpenter son of a carpenter,” apparently meant to express contempt for a workingman. Interestingly, it also refers to him as “*ben charsch etaim*,” “the son of a woodworker.” However, we cannot consider the Talmud to be a reliable source of information as it is more a propaganda document against the Christians, against whom the Talmud makes many horrible, obscene and totally absurd allegations.

We do know that Joseph and his family were well off. It is a myth that they were poor.

True, there was no room at the inn, but that just means it was overcrowded, not that they were not middle class. The fact that they even asked for a room at the inn proves that they were not peasants. A peasant family would probably have pitched camp under a bridge or the equivalent.

The family had numerous well-to-do friends and benefactors, of their own class, including some who apparently showered upon them precious gifts long before Jesus began his ministry. An aristocratic bloodline would explain why, at his birth, Jesus was showered with gold and precious gifts: “And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshiped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.” (Matthew 2) Incidentally, Jesus had at

least two sisters, whose names are unknown, and four brothers: James, Joseph or Joseph, Simon and Judas. (Matthew 13:55)

Could Jesus and Joseph have been successful builders, architects or perhaps even scholars? If they were scholars, this might help to explain the story that young Jesus taught the rabbis in the temple.

Archeologist Charles Page, for one, says Jesus was almost certainly a stonemason. As a professor of Bible studies at the Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies in Jerusalem and associate director of the Bethsaida excavation in Galilee, people approach Page for insight on the life of Christ. Page finds the best way to bring the Bible to life is to go where Jesus went and study the way people lived during Jesus's lifetime. "I thought it would help me understand the context of biblical stories," he said.

Page believes 90% of Jesus's ministry was done in a region at the north end of the Sea of Galilee that spanned between three and five miles and focused on the towns of Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida. Page asserts that Jesus and his father, Joseph, worked as masons in Zippori (Sepphoris), a town three miles from Nazareth. At the time Jesus was old enough to accompany Joseph, Zippori was undergoing a massive building campaign to turn the town into a major center of government, commerce, finance and culture. There would have been plenty of masonry work for them.

Nazareth was probably too small to support fulltime *tektons*, so Jesus and Joseph may have traveled to the nearby larger town of Zippori to find work. However, some might argue against this

possibility, in view of the fact that during his ministry Jesus seems to have studiously avoided large towns, until his fatal involvement at the end with Jerusalem. Perhaps Jesus (and Joseph) were "country boys" at heart.

The early 3rd-century church writer Origen³ writes against Celsus's assertion that Jesus was a carpenter. Origen remarks that "[I]n none of the gospels current in the churches is Jesus

himself ever described as being a carpenter." This is puzzling, since Mark is considered to be the oldest of the four canonical gospels, unless Origen is saying that the word *tekton* or *naggar* is not to be construed, in the gospel context, as "carpenter."

While there does remain a possibility that Jesus was a woodworker, we must be cognizant of the fact that the words used to describe him do have a broader meaning than any one particular vocation. Despite tradition, a translation as "stonemason," "builder," "architect" or even "scholar"

may have more evidence to back it up.

Then there is the question of Jesus as a Nazarene. Was he from Nazareth, as we have been told all our lives, or just what is a Nazarene anyway? We do not know what the word "Nazarene" means. It may not mean "of Nazareth," since the town of Nazareth does not seem to have been flourishing circa 1 B.C., when he is thought to have been born. Why do some people say Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene? What was his real relationship with John the Baptist? To Apollonia of Tyana? There are many other questions that could be explored about Jesus and his contemporaries. But those are stories for another day. ❖

"While there does remain a possibility that Jesus was a woodworker, we must be cognizant of the fact that the words used to describe him do have a broader meaning than any one particular vocation."

Jewish History, Jewish Religion *The Weight of Three Thousand Years*

BY ISRAEL SHAHAK

FOREWORD BY GORE VIDAL

AFTER DECADES OF OFFICIALLY-SANCTIONED SILENCE, many mainstream academics, both Jewish and non-Jewish, are talking more openly about Israel's ideology, society and domestic policy. To the Jewish author, a former professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a former inmate of Bergen-Belsen, the ideology of Israeli racial separatism and supremacy is unacceptable. He briefly describes the history of the Jewish people, the power of their rabbis etc. His brief quotations from the *Talmud* are enough to disturb any right-thinking person. An important part of Shahak's book is his exposé of and attack on the views on non-Jews held by the main proponents of Judaism, especially in its traditional orthodox form. It will come as a surprise to many readers that the attitude of traditional orthodox Judaism toward non-Jews is one of unrelenting and offensive hostility. Softcover, #246, 120 pages, \$19.95 minus 10% for TBR subscribers. Order by calling TBR toll free at 1-877-773-9077 and charging to Visa or MasterCard. Add \$3 S&H inside the U.S. Add \$6 S&H outside the U.S. See order form, page 64.

ENDNOTES:

¹When English speakers rendered the Latin *Iesus* from the Greeks who translated the Semitic name *Yeshua*, they came up with *Jesus* (*Yehoshua* became *Yeshua* became *Iesus* became *Jesus*), and that name stuck.

²Justin Martyr, a 2nd-century Christian writer, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, 88.

³Origen, *Against Celsus*, 6.36.

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When Boston Banned Christmas

Yuletide revelry hasn't always been condoned in America

BY JOHN TIFFANY

The Grinch and the Communists are not the only ones who have stolen Christmas. Actually the widespread celebration of Christmas in America did not emerge in its present form until well into the 19th century.

It all started with the Puritans back in old England. In the 17th century, English Puritan Oliver Cromwell, the genocider of the Irish, banned Christmas as people knew it: a holiday of celebration and enjoyment. Cromwell wanted it returned to a strictly religious celebration wherein people would think about the birth of Jesus rather than eat and drink too much. Soldiers were ordered to go around London's streets and seize foods such as goose being cooked for a Christmas celebration. Traditional Christmas decorations like holly were also banned—evidently as too pagan.

Carrying this hostility to the traditional Christmas with them to the New World, the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony opposed any public celebration of the holiday. To them, the celebration represented a “popish” practice lacking any foundation in scripture. Opposition took legal form in 1659 (their second Yule in the New World) when the colony made the observance of Christmas Day, “by abstinence from labor, feasting or any other way,” an offense punishable by fine.

The ban was revoked in 1681 by royal governor Sir Edmund Andros, who also revoked a Puritan ban against festivities on Saturday night. But even after the ban was lifted, a majority of colonists still abstained from Yuletide celebrations. The Puritan objection remained unchanged.

The Massachusetts Puritans had several reasons for disliking the traditional Christmas. Firstly, it reminded them of the Church of England, which they were trying to escape. Secondly, they did not consider the holiday a truly religious day, partly because December 25 was not selected as the birth date of Christ until several centuries after his death.

Thirdly, the holiday celebration usually included drinking, over-eating and playing games—things the Puritans frowned upon. One tradition, “wassailing” (which has pretty much fallen by the wayside in modern America), occasionally turned violent. The older custom entailed people of the

lower economic classes visiting wealthier community members and begging food and drink in return for toasts to their hosts' health. If a host refused, there was the threat of retribution—rather like trick-or-treating, which still survives in the Halloween holiday. There were some cases, though rarely, of wassail violence in early New England.

Finally, the British had been applying pressure on the



Above, the custom of “wassailing” involved groups of down-trodden and hungry citizens going door-to-door at Christmastime asking for food and trinkets from wealthy citizens. Much like our Halloween, if food and gifts were not given, the “injured parties” could play a prank on those refusing to give to the needy. Sometimes these pranks involved destruction of personal property, making the custom one frowned upon by the civil authorities.

Puritans for a while to conform to English customs (Puritanism having died out in England), and the ban was probably as much a political choice as it was a religious one for many objectors.

The culture and ways of thinking that led to the Christmas ban constituted an important, as well as controversial, part of life in 17th- and 18th-century Massachusetts. It was not until the mid-1800s that celebrating Christmas became fashionable in the Boston region. ❖