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Archaeology, and the New Testament

Bethlehem – Tomb of Lazarus – Machaerus – Capernaum and Tabgha

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Introduction

It is my intention to briefly examine some NT texts that can be illustrated by archaeology. As mentioned previously (essay4), the material setting of the text of the Bible has some bearing on the interpretation. Still another aspect has to be brought into consideration. Archaeology helps us to see the meaning of biblical texts as an incarnate message, not as a dis-incarnate message.

It is worthwhile to briefly comment on this point. Christianity is a religion of incarnation. The OT is already a proclamation of Yahweh's presence in the world at the side of humanity. The name itself "Yahweh" is interpreted in the Bible by means of the verb "to be with," "to be at the side of," "to be among." - I will be with you as I was with your fathers: I will be at your side; I will be in your midst. In the OT wisdom tradition, on the other hand, the idea of presence is of paramount importance. God is present in the world through his wisdom; God meets his creatures through his wisdom incarnate in the world. The incarnation of Jesus fulfills this idea of presence both in the history of salvation and in the world through wisdom.

Archaeology and incarnation

Three kinds of God's incarnation in Jesus

- His Son
 - His Word
 - His Wisdom
-

This passionate love of God toward humanity linked to history, time and space is a characteristic of biblical tradition - both the OT and NT tradition.

These considerations help us, I think, to fully appreciate the incarnation - of the *Son* of God; of the *word* of God; of the *wisdom* of God. Jesus embodies all these three forms of incarnation.

Biblical archaeology - together with history and geography of the region, near eastern languages and cultures - are, then, means to understand God's incarnation in its different forms. Archaeology is not a mere exercise of intellectual curiosity; it is much more - an exercise of faith.

In the following presentation we shall touch upon different subjects - the grotto of Bethlehem; the tomb of Lazarus; the grotto of Gethsemane; the Machaerus fortress and John the Baptist; and especially the village of Capernaum, the center of Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

Bethlehem

•katavluma *katàlyma* "guest-room" in a private house

•manger (Luke 2:6-7)

•grotto (Justin, Dial. Tryphon 78)

•house (Mat 2:11)

The grotto of Bethlehem poses an exegetical problem because neither Matthew or Luke speak of a grotto as the birthplace of Jesus. According to Luke 2:6-7, while they already were in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to her first-born and placed him in a manger because - the text says - "there was no place for them in the hotel." This common way of translating the Greek *katàlyma* as "hotel" or

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“caravanserai” is not the best. A different translation is preferable - “cenacle” or guest-room, that is a special room in a private house equipped to receive relatives and friends in case of need, such as when they came for pilgrimage. In fact, the word *katàlyma* used in Luke 2:7 is the same used in Luke 22:11, Mark 14:24 - that is the word usually translated Cenacle, or Last Supper Room.

Now, according to Luke’s account, the birth of Jesus did not take place in the guest-room but in a different place used as stable for animals because there was a manger. On the other hand, according to Justin the Martyr, who was born in Palestine, this place was a grotto (*Dialogue with Tryphon*, 78); the same is true with the apocryphal Gospel of James 18:1. Matthew 2:11, for its part, reads that the Magi found the baby and his mother “in the house”, while the apocryphal Ascension of Isaiah places the birth itself in a house, after Joseph was there already for two months.

Thus, the literary sources show a different terminology: *katàlyma*; manger; grotto; house. Are we to see a confusion in the tradition, or is it possible to reconcile this diversity? In order to answer this question we have to consider some points. On the one hand, we know that the stable was not separate room the house, because the poor spent the night next to their animals, as is the case with Bedouins until today.

On the other hand, the excavations at Nazareth have uncovered several living installations that consisted of natural grottoes with masonry added in front of them. Some grottoes are underground and served as silos to store food; others are contiguous and served as stables. The best preserved example is the one called “the house of the capitals”, because the famous Medieval capitals were found there. It consists of a natural grotto and several rooms added in front of it in masonry. The complex also included ovens. It was linked to a network of underground silos used for storage. The grotto itself must have been used as stable since some holes have been found in the rock, most probably to bind animal. A manger has also been found, hewn in the rock. The later arrangement of the site by the Crusaders at the north-western side prevents us to determine whether or not an upper floor (first floor) was present. In general, the guest-room (*katàlyma*) was located at the first floor but it could also be one of the rooms added in masonry. In the Bible we read of an upper room where the prophets Elija and Elisha stayed as guests in 1Kg 17:19 and 2Kg 4:10.

A living complex of this kind is characteristic of hilly areas - in Nazareth as in Bethlehem. Its arrangement helps explain all the different designations used in the literary sources to indicate the birthplace of Jesus without assuming any confusion or contradiction. We can imagine, then, that Mary and Joseph lived for a certain period in the guest-room (*katàlyma*) in the house of relatives or friends. Since there was in this common no suitable place for Mary who was about to have a baby, they went to the stable connected to the house and the baby was put in the manger. This unusual place for a baby could then be a sign for the shepherds who were immediately called upon by the singing angels. We can also imagine that the Sacred Family was still in the same house when the Magi arrived, without assuming that, in the meantime, they had moved from the grotto to a house.

The tomb of Lazarus

- Perpendicular tomb (Lazarus) vs. horizontal (Jesus)
- Bethany, the House of Hananiah: Nehemiah 11:32

The arrangement of the traditional tomb of Lazarus corresponds well to the narrative of John ch. 11. The funeral chamber is perpendicular (it is a kind of shaft tomb). This detail agrees with the Gospel description: “Now, it was a cave upon which a stone was placed. Jesus said: *Take up (àrate)* the stone” John 11:38-39). On the contrary the tomb of Jesus was horizontal and therefore the round stone that blocked the entrance had to be “rolled away” (Mat 28:2 par.). Nonetheless, some scholars do not notice this difference and imagine the tomb of Lazarus in the same way as the tomb of Jesus.

The excavations by Fr. Saller have shown that Bethany was settled since the Persian period in the VI cent. BC. This finding confirms the hypothesis put forward by W.F. Albright in the '20 regarding the etymology of the name. Bethany could well derive its name from a certain Hananiah of the tribe of Benjamin who returned from the exile and settled in this area according to Nehemiah 11:32.

Gethsemane

- Luke 22:39
- Gethsemane, “Olive press”
- A cultivable field: Mat 26:36
- A garden: John 18:1

At the time of Jesus the grotto was equipped with an olive press and a cistern. It was used then as an agricultural installation, not as a burial place, and was therefore fit to be inhabited. Moreover, it





was large enough to host several persons. Thus it was well possible for Jesus to spend the night there with his disciples when he stayed in Jerusalem, as was his custom according to Luk 22:39. The agricultural destination of the grotto favors the traditional opinion that the name Gethsemane means “olive press”. Incidentally, we know that place names composed of *gat* “press” are already attested in the ugaritic literature in the fourteen-thirteenth centuries BC. Moreover *gat* meant not only a press in the strict sense but also a surrounding garden planted with grapes and olives. This agrees with the Gospel information that Gethsemane was “a small cultivable field (*chorion*)” (Mat 26:36 par.) or “a garden” (*kepos*) (John 18:1).

The fortress of Machaerus beyond the Jordan

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- Perea, beyond the Jordan: Mark 10:1; Mat 19:1
 - Josephus Flavius, *Ant.* 18:116-119
 - Mark 6:17-29
 - Triclinium, banquet-hall
 - John the Baptist’s sepulcher in Sebastieh
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The territory to the east of the Jordan can be considered the eastern side of the Holy Land. Jesus himself worked in the northern region of it, in the ancient provinces of Gaulanitis and Decapolis. He also walked through the southern zone, the Perea, during his journey toward Jerusalem according to Mark 10:1 and Matthew 19:1.

The province of Perea is particularly linked to the memory of John the Forerunner who baptized at Bethany, or Bethabara, beyond the Jordan (John 1:28). John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded at the Machaerus fortress. The name of this place, Machaerus, is not recorded in the Gospel but is recorded by Josephus Flavius (*Ant.* 18:116-119).

The end of John the Baptist is also narrated by Mark 6:17-29 and Matthew 14:3-12. Now, the account of the evangelists differs from that of Josephus in some details, that have been studied by Harold W; Hoehner in his monograph on king Herod Antipas.

Concerning the place of John’s execution, Hoehner maintains that neither Mark nor Matthew oblige us to locate it in Galilee - perhaps in Tiberias where king Herod had his main residence. In fact, the information in Mark 6:21 that “at the occasion of his birthday Herod gave a banquet for the great ones, the officials and the notables of Galilee” does not at all imply that the banquet took place in Galilee. To the contrary, the explicit mention of a delegation from Galilee suggests that the banquet took place outside this region. On the other hand, to suppose that the banquet took place in Galilee and the beheading in Machaerus of Perea, does not agree with Mark’s description. We read in fact: “I want you to give me *at once* the head of John the Baptist on a platter ... And *at once* the king sent a soldier of the guard ... He went and beheaded him in the prison ... and brought his head on a platter ...”

The excavations at Machaerus confirm the information of Josephus Flavius that the place was not only a fortress in the desert but had a royal palace with all comforts. It is natural, therefore, that king Herod resided there from time to time, especially in periods of crisis with his neighbours the Nabateans.

The most interesting datum for the NT is the discovery of a triclinium, or banquet-hall, at Machaerus. The triclinium is made of two rooms, contiguous but not-communicating. Probably, the larger room was used by men and the smaller room by women. Indeed, according to the ancient Jewish custom, men and women would dine in separate rooms.

Now, in the text of Mark we read some unusual detail. The girl came in to dance, went out to consult her mother, and came in again to present her request to the king. The interpreters normally think that these are simply literary means to structure the narrative. But we do not know that these details correspond to the arrangement of the two rooms of the triclinium. This surprising correspondence suggests that we should be cautious not to hastily admit a romance-like character for the Markan narrative and not to overestimate the biblical and extra-biblical parallels to the story at the expense of its historical reality.

A second result of the excavations can be interesting from the exegetical point of view. This is the discovery of the lower city mentioned by Josephus Flavius in the steep slope of the mountain on the north-eastern side. This lower city was linked to the upper city by means of a road and lived in the shade of the royal palace and in communication with it. Now, from the Gospels we know that, during his imprisonment John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him whether he was the Christ (Mat 11:2; Luk 7:18-19). Mark relates that king Herod listened to John willingly although he was disturbed by his words. Moreover, we read that after the Forerunner was beheaded, his disciples came and took his body away. These data suggest that Herod kept John relatively segregated from his disciples and from the crowds, rather than enclosed in a prison proper. It is well possible, therefore, that the contacts between the prisoner and his disciples happened precisely through the lower city of Machaerus.

To complete the picture we shall briefly discuss the sepulcher of John the Baptist. According to an ancient tradition, the body of the Baptist was taken from Machaerus to Sebastieh in Samaria, that was

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.



outside the territory of Herod Antipas. This tradition has been studied by Fr. Bagatti from both the literary and the archaeological points of view.

In literary sources a presence of the Baptist's disciples in Samaria is attested. On the other hand, it is not probable that the Forerunner was personally active in that region in any way. However, his preaching as preserved in the Gospels shows an opposition to the official Judaism of Jerusalem that finds a parallel in the ideas of other Jewish marginal groups such as the Essenes of Qumran and the Samaritans. It is therefore understandable that the disciples of the Baptist could choose to settle in Samaria bringing with them the body of their teacher.

The traditional tomb of the Forerunner in Sebastieh is an underground chamber. Despite several changes, the sepulcher dates from the Roman period in the II cent. AD or even earlier. A more precise dating would only be possible by excavating the site. In the Byzantine period a church was built upon the venerated tomb. The church visible today dates from the Crusader period but rests on a more ancient building. It seems, therefore, that the tradition of the Baptist's tomb at Sebastieh is very ancient and reliable.

Capharnaum, the town of Jesus

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- Synagogue of the IV-V cent. AD
 - Below, the synagogue of the time of Jesus: Luke 7:4-5
 - The house of Peter
 - living-room from I cent. BC to I cent. AD
 - Jewish-Christian cult-place in the second half of the I cent. AD
 - Byzantine church of the IV-V cent. AD
 - Insulae*, or living-quarters with *cardo maximus* and the *decumani*
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What is today probably the best preserved village of the Roman-Byzantine periods and one of the most beautiful archaeological sites in the Holy Land, until the years '20 was a vast spread of stones called in Arabic Tell Hum. The Franciscans of the Holy Land bought the ruins exactly a century ago, based on the name Tell Hum that seemed to preserve the ancient name Kefar Nahum, "the village of Nahum," Capharnaum in the Gospels.

The two centers of Jesus' activity in the village have been uncovered - the synagogue and the house of Peter. The synagogue visible today is dated to the IV-V cent. AD. However, after long years of research (1969-1981), also the synagogue of the time of Jesus has been uncovered at a lower level on the same spot. According to Luke 7:4-5 the I cent. synagogue was built by a Roman centurion.

Under the octagon of the Byzantine church that was known since 1921, a house of the village came to light that was the object of a careful study of the different archaeological levels. It resulted that in the first decades of the I cent. AD it was a private house - one among many in the village. But on the second half of the same century its destination changed. It became a cult-place and such remained until about the 400 AD. About this year, a lady pilgrim called Egeria saw the house more or less in the original state. She writes: "At Capharnaum the house of the Prince of the apostles has become a church but the walls of the house are still preserved." At that time, then, the house had already become a cult-place but the original structure was still visible.

A few years later the Byzantines covered the venerated house and built the octagon of the church exactly upon the walls of the house. From the remains of the wall plaster, 131 graffitoes were recovered; written in different languages - Greek, Aramaic, Syriac and Latin. Among the inscriptions there are invocations to the "Lord Jesus Christ" and Peter is also mentioned. Several symbols are found, such as crosses of different forms and a ship, as well as monograms of the names of Jesus and Peter, and several decorative patterns - flower crosses, pomegranates, figs, trefoil, stylised flowers and geometric drawings.

Between the synagogue and the house of Peter on the eastern side, the *cardo maximus*, or the main road of the village, has been discovered, running north-south. On its two sides about 10 *insulae*, or living quarters, have been exposed. The *insulae* are delimited by the intersection of the *cardo maximus* and the *decumani*, or transversal roads running east-west. Each *insula* normally had one entrance from the road. The entrance to the house of Peter as on the *cardo maximus* to the east. There was a door whose threshold of stone is preserved *in situ*. In front of the door there was a free space that extended into the main road. To this detail we shall come back in a minute.

Thus, the Capharnaum excavations have brought spectacular result. First, they have settled the question of the identification of Capharnaum that was a matter of debate. Second and foremost, the excavations have brought back to life the ancient village of Jesus. By looking at it we can, as it were, follow the footsteps of Jesus and his movement inside the village.

Despite all the evidence, modern interpreters are somehow reluctant to relate the archaeological results to the text of the Gospels. For instance, two recent commentaries on the gospel of Mark by Gnlika and by Pesch take no note the excavations and still consider the identification of Capharnaum as "umstritten," debated. They seem only interested in literary and theological problems. It is neces-

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sary to go back to the last century or the beginning of the present in order to find commentaries interested in material details of places and events, even though they still lacked archaeological evidence.

Tabgha

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- Tabgha, *Heptapegon*, or Seven springs; 3 Kms from Capharnaum
 - *Via Maris*, the road from Egypt to Mesopotamia via Acre-Tiberias-Capharnaum
 - In this area: the Beatitudes; the Miracle of loaves and fishes; the Primacy of Peter
-

Capharnaum was located on the main road that linked the Mediterranean coast to Damascus - the so-called *Via Maris*, “the Way of the Sea” that ran from Egypt to Mesopotamia. This is confirmed by the discovery in Capharnaum of a milestone inscribed with the name of the emperor Adrian. Although the inscription is broken in the lower part, it is probable that the emperor restored the road following the same layout of the time of Jesus. This is a rather important element for the topography of the Gospels.

Along this road, 3 Kms to the west of Capharnaum, we find Tabgha (*Heptapegon*, “the Seven springs”), a place rich in springs renowned since antiquity. In this region a Christian tradition of the IV cent. located three sanctuaries commemorating three Gospel events: the Beatitudes, the Miracle of the loaves and fishes, and the Primacy of Peter (or *Mensa Domini*).

The complete exploration of the Church of the Primacy and the surrounding area by Fr. Loffreda, produced some elements important for the history of the site at the time of the Gospels. One result was that, contrary to the opinion of the last century explorers, the area of Tabgha at the time of Jesus was a stone-quarry: in fact, until today the rock is visible at the surface everywhere. It was then an area uninhabited and un-cultivable at the base of hill called today the hill of the Beatitudes and along the lake. As we shall see in a moment, these data correspond to the description of the Gospel. It is, then, possible to suppose that the identification in the IV cent. AD of the three Gospel events was based on a tradition more ancient than the Byzantines. The bearers of this tradition are likely to be the Judeo-Christians of the area, that were present in Capharnaum, Sepphoris, Tiberias and possibly also Magdala.

The contacts between Capharnaum and Tabgha were frequent both by lake and by road. The excavations have proved that Tabgha could not possibly be neither an industrial suburb of Capharnaum, nor the site of Bethsaida of Galilee. However, the waters of Tabgha certainly attracted many people. These waters also fertilised the fields of Capharnaum, that probably extended to the west of the village. Moreover, this zone was certainly rich on fishes as is today.

The house of Peter

House: Mark 1:29; 2:1; 3:20; 7:17; 7:24; 9:28; 9:33; 10:10

We now wish to compare the archaeological data with the data of the Gospels, especially the Gospel of Mark. We try to see how far is it possible to combine them together.

In Mark chs. 1-10, eight times we find the mention of a house visited by Jesus. This house is also mentioned five times by Matthew and only once by Luke. All the three Synoptics agree in the first mention: Jesus went in “the house of Simon and Andrew” (Mk 1:29); or “in the house of Peter” (Mt 8:14); or “in the house of Simon” (Lk 4:38).

A further mention is common to Mark and Matthew: “He went home” (in Capharnaum: Mk 3:20); and “Jesus went out of the house” (at the end of the same episode, the arrival of Jesus’ mother and brothers: Mt 13:1).

Six other mentions are only found in Mark: 2:11; 7:17; :24; 9:28; 9:33; 10:10.

In these mentions both the Greek term *oikos* and *oikia* are used. In the first instance the house is fully identified as “the house of Simon and Andrew”; in the other instances it is specified by a particular article (*he oikia*). According to the Greek usage, both classical and Koine, *oikos* without any article can designate one’s personal house.

These philological data need to be controlled from the exegetical point of view with the aim at establishing which house, or whose house, is intended in each case. After the excavations at Capharnaum this problem poses itself in an acute way in relationship to the special house that has been brought to light. Without going into details, I would say that the following instances in Mark refer *with certainty* to the house of Peter in Capharnaum: 1:29; 2:1; 9:33. Other instances *probably* also refer to the same house: 7:17; 9:28; 10:10, while one instance (situated outside Capharnaum, at Tyre and Sidon) certainly refers to a different house visited by our Lord: 7:24.

Thus we find in Mark a very interesting situation. After the first time the house is identified with

The SBF has been involved in Archaeological excavations in various areas of the Holy Land: Bethany, Bethlehem (Church of the Nativity and Shepherd's Field), Beth-phage, Cana, Capharnaum, Ein Karem, Emmaus (el-Qubeibeh), Jerusalem (Ascension, Dominus Flevit, Gethsemane, Holy Sepulchre, Tomb of Mary), Herodion, Machaerus, Magdala, Nazareth, Nebo, Tabgha and Tabor. Reports on the excavations are published annually in the review *Liber Annuus*, and in the *Collectio Maior* and *Collectio Minor* series; biblical and patristic studies are published in the *Analecta* series; collections of the museum are illustrated in the *Museum* series.

the name of the owners Simon and Andrew, in other instances the text simply tells that Jesus went home or that was at home (in Greek *eis oikon* or *en oiko(i)*, that is in *his* house) because Jesus has become a guest in the oriental sense, even a member of the family and of the clan. The house of Simon and Andrew has become *his* house just as Capharnaum has become "*his* city."

This finding is very much in agreement with a couple of sayings of Jesus himself. First, the saying that "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58) permits us to conclude that Jesus had in Capharnaum no house belonging to him or to his parents. Second, the rule imposed on the disciples to remain in the house that received them (Mt 10:11; Lk 9:4) and not to go from one house to another (Lk 10:7) must have reflected the attitude of Jesus himself, especially in Capharnaum.

The memory of Jesus residing in his house must have remained alive - and how alive - in Peter's memory and soul. It is not by chance that this memory is a favourite item in the Gospel of Mark, a gospel that according to the ancient tradition preserves the preaching and the memories of the Prince of the apostles.



A personal touch is well discernible in a couple of details of the Markan narrative regarding the door of the Peter's house. The excavator of Capharnaum Fr. Corbo was moved to the tears every time he had the opportunity of showing the stone threshold of the house to visitors and pilgrims. "On this threshold, he said, our Lord walked many times. This is one of the most genuine testimonies of his life in Capharnaum. Come and see the place where our Lord lived as the guest of St. Peter."

Looking at the ruins, we can experience the life inside the so-called *insula sacra*, the house of St. Peter, with its living-rooms, its open-air courtyards, its ovens in the courtyards. No doors were present to close one room from the other. Therefore the members of the clan lived as one large family. The life of the family developed inside the courtyards. The women remained inside, while the children were free of playing outside in the road, much as is today's life in Arab Jerusalem and in Palestinian villages around the country.

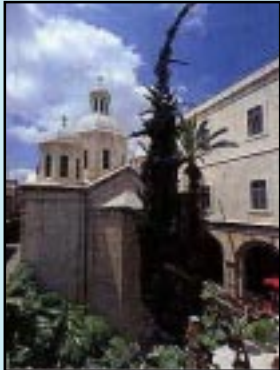
Let us examine some other passages from the Gospel of Mark that receive new light from the excavations. One is Mk 1:33 that reads: "The whole city was gathered together in front of the door (*pros ten thyran*). The second is 2:2: "Many were gathered together, so that even the place in front of the door (*ta pros ten thyran*) could not contain them." Actually, in front of the Peter's house there was a rather large space free from buildings. The excavator Fr. Corbo writes as follows: "To the south, the *insula sacra* extended toward the shore of the lake. To the east ran the main road, the *cardo*. Together with the space available in front of the two entrances 15 and 16, the *cardo* formed a surface of about 500 square meters. With reference to the Mark's passages 1:33 and 2:1-2, this free space becomes the best archaeological commentary that one could desire" (*Liber Annuus* 33, 1983, 374).

We should then imagine that, according to Mark 2:2, the crowd had filled not only the complex of the *insula sacra* but also the large space of about 500 square meters in front of the door. Thus Mark's description reveals the precision of the eye-witness - of someone who knew the place directly. The absence of this detail in the other two Synoptics is, therefore, particularly meaningful.

A small exegetical note can be added at this point. According to Gnilk's commentary, verse 2:2 of Mark is "redactional." It is difficult for me to understand in which sense this verse is redactional. According to the commonly held view, the label "redactional" is opposed to "historical." In other words, one maintains what is redactional has no historical value; that when an evangelist gives a certain circumstance or event a theological interpretation, this means that this circumstance or event has been invented in order to convey a theological message. This common view is, however, rather arbitrary. First, in the Bible and in the ancient world in general, history is interpreted theologically but is not invented. Falsity cannot be a base for theology. Second, one should leave the possibility open that one evangelist knew a certain detail that was not known to the others. In the case of the Peter's house this possibility is most likely because, on the one hand, Mark may well be the echo of Peter himself and, on the other hand, because the literary detail perfectly agrees with the archaeological results.

Other details of Mk 2:1-12 (the healing of the paralytic) that were not easily understood before the excavations are now perfectly clear. The problems felt when reading the Markan narrative are discussed in old commentaries, such as the *Expositor's Greek Testament* (ad Mk 2:4), not in recent commentaries that are literary and theologically oriented. One problem is: Where stood Jesus - at the first floor of the house or at the ground floor? In fact, some authors, based on classical and Jewish





*The Flagellation Friary
Jerusalem*

sources, imagined that Jesus stood at the first floor of the house; see S. Krauss, in *ZNW* 25 (1926), and the commentary by Taylor. A further problem is: How are we to understand the opening of the roof?

The archaeological research has provided data to solve these problems. Already in 1971 Fr. Corbo wrote as follows: “The type of houses (attested at Capharnaum) had always to be limited to the ground floor because the walls were made of dry stones (without any mortar) or only connected with mud, and were about 70 Cms thick only. These walls could never support the burden of a first floor” (*Liber Annuus* 21, 280).

Now, Mk 2:1 says that Jesus was “at home” - in Greek *en oiko(i)*, meaning “in *his* house; at home” not “in *a* house”. If we look at the layout of the Peter’s house, we understand that Jesus stood in the so-called “venerated room.” this was the largest room of the *insula sacra*, being a square of 7.5 Mts. every side. Moreover, it was the only room that was transformed in a house-church (*domus ecclesiae*) already in the second half of the first cent. AD while the domestic life continued in the other rooms.

How can we explain this unusual situation? The answer seems evident. Peter, the members of his family, and the Judeo-Christians of the village knew well that Jesus had been a permanent guest in the house, specifically in the largest room of the complex where he taught and performed miracles. The archaeological data are, therefore, unequivocal. They permit us to exactly locate the Markan narrative in the layout of the house of Peter.

A second problem is: How were the roofs of the houses in Capharnaum? again, Fr. Corbo in 1971 wrote as follows; “since we never found remains of tiles in all the houses excavated, we are inclined to conclude that the roofs were made of a mixture of mud and straw sustained by wooden bars.” Some scholars had reached a similar conclusion by comparing the description of Mk 2:4 with the old Palestinian houses. Still others preferred the text of Lk 5:19 that speaks of tiles (*dia ton kerámon*). Now, according to Mark, the four bearers of the paralytic “undid the roof,” that is they took away the layer of mud. Then, having made a hole in the wooden trellis, they lowered the sick person in the room where Jesus stood.

Luke 5:19 has a further detail that is implied in Mark: “They went up on the roof.” This detail agrees with the discovery of outside staircases leading to the roof in the courtyard of many houses in Capharnaum. These staircases were used to repair the layer of mud every year before the beginning of the rainy season. This detail does not necessarily imply a direct knowledge of the place by Luke since outside staircases leading to the first floor were common in the Greek-Roman houses, too. It is precisely for his Greek-Roman audience that Luke spoke of a roof made of tiles, while Mark preserves the exact situation of Capharnaum.

In conclusion, this correspondence between the Markan narrative and the archaeological data is striking. This is all the more so since the correspondence concerns minor details of no theological significance - details that are not recorded or are transformed by the other Synoptics. This fact helps us appreciate the solidity of the tradition underlying the Gospel of Mark. Again, this agrees well with the ancient tradition that Mark was the secretary and the interpreter of St. Peter.

The house-church

In another passage (Mk 3:20-35) the house of Peter is of a central importance and plays a clear theological role. In order to show this point, we have to look at the context for a moment. The episode begins in 3:20: “He went *home* (‘his house’) and *again* a large crowd gathered around him so that he could not even take food.” Note that in 3:1 we read that Jesus entered the synagogue again (as already had in 1:21). Afterwards Jesus went outside the village to a place next to the lake (3:7) and healed many sick and possessed persons. Soon after he went up to the mountain (3:13) and chose the twelve apostles. Our episode follows this passage. Note that the region along the lake and the mountain were situated just outside Capharnaum. They belonged to the same scenery.

We understand, then, in 3:20 that Jesus entered not an unidentified house but *his house*, that is the house of Peter that had become his own house. (Note, however, that some interpreters think differently and translate: “he went in a house.”) Therefore the scene of the episode is the Peter’s house at Capharnaum.

Mark 3:21 goes on to tell us that Jesus’ relatives heard some people say that Jesus was out of his mind. In order to interpret this verse correctly we have to consider that Jesus’ relatives did not live in Capharnaum but in Nazareth. So, the verb in 3:21 “they went out (*exelthon*)” cannot to be understood: out of the house where Jesus stood at Capharnaum, but: out of Nazareth; that is they began their journey toward Capharnaum. The reason was that they were preoccupied because some people were saying: “He is out of his mind, or he is mad.” The subject of the verb “were saying (*elegon*)” is impersonal; Jesus’ relatives are not its subject. We find a further instance of this usage in 3:30 - “because they were saying: He is possessed by an impure spirit”, while in 3:22 the subject is named - “The scribes who came from Jerusalem were saying: This man is possessed by Beelzebul.” Notice that the three “were saying” (*elegon*) and notice the equivalence of the three accusation raised against Jesus: “He is out of his mind; He is possessed by an impure spirit; This man is possessed by Beelzebul.”

Thus our episode begins in Capharnaum; then it shifts to Nazareth to narrate the departure of

As an academic center, the SBF confers the pontifical academic degrees of Licentiate/ Master's (2 years) and Doctorate (2 additional years) in Biblical Theology. It also offers a higher Diploma in Oriental Biblical Studies (1 year) and a Diploma of Biblical Formation (1 year). Finally, courses of biblical and archaeological updating are organized for Holy Land guides. In its academic activities, the SBF puts particular emphasis on the student's in-depth, direct, personal and prolonged contact of the student with the oriental biblical world.

Jesus' relatives toward Capharnaum. Soon after, it shifts again to Capharnaum to relate a discussion between the scribes from Jerusalem and Jesus concerning his power against the impure spirits - whether it came from Beelzebul, as the scribes affirmed, or from the Holy Spirit, has Jesus claimed.

Then we read in 3:31: "His mother and his brothers arrived." This verse is not to be read separate from the previous context. On the contrary, it seems clear that the arrival of Jesus' relatives is related here, after their departure had been related in 3:21. Now, the small text 3:31-35 is highly significant from the ecclesiological point of view. Two phrases are worth noticing: those *outside* - that is outside the Peter's house; and those *around Jesus* inside. Outside are his mother and his brother; around Jesus inside are the crowd and his disciples.

These two phrases identify two groups; the outsiders and the listeners. The discriminating point is the house. Those who are inside, are seated around Jesus and listen to his word, while those outside do not share this attitude. The opposition between the two groups is all the more striking since it concerns Jesus' relatives - even his beloved mother. Still, it is evident that the crowd inside is preferred to the relatives outside. Why? The text itself gives the answer. We read as follows: "They said to him: Behold your mother, your brothers and sisters are outside and are looking for you. He replied to them: Who is my mother and who are my brothers? Looking around at those seated around him he said: Behold my mother and my brothers. The one who does the will of God, he is my brother, my sister and my mother."



Clearly, this text implies no contempt or underestimate of Jesus' mother and family. The opposition concerns the human family and the spiritual family of Jesus. It means a shift from the first to the second. What is important is not the blood relationship but doing the will of God; and the will of God is to stay seated around Jesus and listen to his word inside the house.

This shift from human to a spiritual family has profound implications both for the crowd and for Jesus himself. The crowd, just as the members of his family, need to become Jesus' spiritual family by gathering in a house and listening together to his word. It is implied that his mother is an eminent member of his Son's spiritual family because she does the will of God in an eminent way.

For Jesus, choosing his new family means a profound change in life. He has left his native Nazareth, placed in the hills, almost apart from the world, and has chosen Capharnaum, situated on an imperial road where it was possible to meet people. This choice places Jesus in a totally new situation. It makes him a guest, an alien in a new city. It takes him out of his house and family. He has embarked in a new existence totally devoted to the will of his Father in heaven.

The house of Peter has become not only his house in a physical sense, but also the home of his new family - a large family capable of including all those ready to do the will of his Father in heaven. Thus, the Peter's house has become a church - the house where the family of God gathers and is formed and nurtured. The Peter's house is the most ancient and most venerable house-church (*domus ecclesiae*) of Christianity.

Notice how well the ecclesiological significance builds upon the historical reality. Again, theology is not opposed to history; on the contrary, theology builds on history.

What we are speaking about is exactly not the whole complex of the Peter's house but the so-called "venerated room" only. In fact, as already mentioned, this room, and only this room, shows signs of transformations into a cult place. It remained the center of all the successive transformations. It became a house-church for the local Jewish-Christian community and also a sanctuary for pilgrims around the world since the second half of the I cent. AD. Later on it was enlarged and surrounded by an enclosing wall in the IV cent. Finally, it served as the basis for the octagon of the Byzantine church in the V cent. In this period a radical change occurred. Upon a Jewish-Christian house-church that left the original walls visible, a church was built that covered the house though exactly preserving its location. It seems evident that the Byzantines, though belonging to a different culture, accepted the Jewish-Christian tradition.