Hellenism, Sepphoris, Nazareth and the Formation of Christianity

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Arguably the foremost internationally known scholar in the area of Hellenism and the New Testament in the last forty years was Martin Hengel, Professor Emeritus of New Testament and ancient Judaism at the University of Tübingen. The story begins in 1961 when he submitted his doctoral dissertation, titled simply *Die Zeloten*, to the Tübingen faculty of Protestant Theology. He published this as a monograph in 1961,[1] and it immediately had an effect on my own professors in their understanding of the Hellenistic background to certain events in ancient Judaea up to and including the Roman era. In 1966 he submitted his habilitation treatise to the same Tübingen faculty with the title "Judaism and Hellenism".[2] His thesis, simply put, was that not only was Judaism in the Greek-speaking Diaspora comfortable with Hellenism, but so was the Judaism of ancient Palestine equally comfortable with Hellenistic culture. In fact, it was actually misleading to distinguish between Palestinian Judaism and Hellenistic Judaism in the Diaspora as though they were two interpretations of the same religion that hardly spoke to one another.

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[1] Hengel, Martin, *Die Zeloten; Untersuchungen zur jüdischen Freiheitsbewegung in der Zeit von Herodes I. bis 70 n. Chr.* Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1961. Eng. Tr. *The Zealots: investigations into the Jewish freedom movement in the period from Herod I until 70 A.D.* Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989.

[2] Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, tr. by John Bowden. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974.

Hengel turned to other subjects for ten years, but returned to the study of Hellenism again in 1969 with his book *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?*[3] That book asked whether Jesus and the Jesus movement represented Jews fully hostile to what some have called the "distortions" of Hellenism, especially to accommodations to Hellenistic culture on the part of Palestinian Jews. The answer was that Jesus was certainly a revolutionary figure in the sense of re-interpreting the texts of old, but he was not a political figure at all. He stayed within the boundaries of Judaism as they came to expression in the Greek translation of the "Old Testament", that is, the Septuagint, as they developed in what Protestants called the Apocrypha or "books between the testaments". These latter books, by the way, have Jewish authors, but used Greek language and Greek literary forms to tell their story.

What Hengel was refuting was a view of Hellenistic Judaism in which Jewish *religion* was threatened by Hellenism, while Jewish socio-economic realities, culture, and political ideas accommodated themselves to Hellenism.[4] In this view Jesus was understood to have fulfilled the expectations of Hellenistic savior figures, not the saviors of the Torah or the Prophets of Israel. Some New Testament scholars, who were sometimes busy re-affirming the Jewish roots of Christianity, understood the Christology and Soteriology of the New Testament as Hellenistic categories. They posited the existence of a *theos-aner* figure in Hellenistic thought, a god-man, whom the gospel writers knew as a category of analysis. The gospel writers then used this idea to re-present Jesus to Hellenized Jews and Philhellenes as "Savior" and "Son of God".

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[3] English translation: Hengel, Martin, *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?* Tr. William Klassen. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1971.

[4] We understand that all these categories (religion, sociological structures, economics, art, and politics) were not necessarily separated at all in the ancient world.

Rudolph Bultmann suggested that the fourth Gospel was authored by a converted Gnostic, in which Gnosticism (the religion of knowing rather than believing) was the logical outcome of the Hellenistic world view.[5]

In 2001, after more than 30 years of research, lecturing, and publishing about Hellenism in ancient Judaism and earliest Christianity, Martin Hengel returned to publish an essay on his life's work, a kind of recapitulation. His conclusion was that he saw no reason to revise the thesis of his earlier years except where he could supplement, improve, and occasionally correct details in the light of new research. Martin Hengel died July 2, 2009 at the age of 82.[6]

The work of Martin Hengel first animated me when I read his work on the Zealots as a student at Yale Divinity School. I realized then, with many other junior scholars, that his work was opening up a new avenue of research on Judaism and Hellenism that went beyond the impasse of Rudolf Bultmann or the American scholar J.M. Robinson.[7] By dissertation writing time I was involved in the field of New Testament and archaeology, where I have remained until today. It seemed obvious that I should enlarge my textual and historical training in New Testament studies in the direction of the archaeology of Hellenism and the New Testament period. That is exactly what I have done for forty years.

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[5] Rudolph Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, Göttingen: VandenHoeck & Ruprecht, 1941; Eng. Tr. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971; idem, Bultmann, Rudolf, *Theology of the New Testament,* Volume II, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1955, Part III, "The Theology of the Gospel of John and the Johannine Epistles", 13-14.

[6] Martin Hengel, "Hellenism and Judaism Revisited" in John J. Collins & Gregory E. Sterling, Editors, *Hellenism in the land of Israel,* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001: 6-37.

[7] James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*. London: SCM, 1959.

Let me outline the challenge for you in this way. What is it that we can discover in excavations that tends to test the hypothesis that Martin Hengel articulated? Precisely which artifacts, coins, architecture, city plans, house elements, landscape alterations, tomb construction or tomb fixtures can we observe that should be interpreted either as Hellenistic or Palestinian Jewish or both? What might be the contribution of archaeology to understand the development of Judaism in a Hellenistic milieu? Is it the construction of Herod's temple? Is it the adoption of Greek as the language of public discourse and therefore the primary language of inscriptions and literature? Is it the adoption and use of more efficient Hellenistic water technology and farming techniques that changed the face of the landscape and allowed the development of human interests apart from agriculture?[8] That is, does Hellenistic technology allow for more leisure time for those between the elites and the dregs of society, and thus more time for reflection and writing? Does the Hellenistic reliance on papyrus as a cheap means of communication allow for a democratized access to writing and publishing, a revolution much like that of movable type centuries later? Is this how Paul's letters survived, namely, in the multiplicity of papyrus codices available?[9]

We know far more today about Hellenism, including Hellenism illuminated by archaeology, than we did forty years ago. Yet, in spite of our best efforts, we cannot find traces of the *gymnasium* and *ephebeion* which Jason, a predecessor of the Maccabees, successfully built in 175 BCE in Jerusalem according to 2 Maccabees 4. The significance of this accomplishment cannot be gainsaid, for the Gymnasium was a kind of Hellenistic

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[8] Örjan Wikander, editor, *Handbook of Ancient Water Technology*. Leiden & Boston, Mass: Brill, 2000.

[9] Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995:58-65. William E. Klingshirn & Linda Safran, Editors, *The Early Christian Book.* Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007.

school. Its curriculum typically included military matters for young men, and athletics were understood as part of the military curriculum. The curriculum was intimately connected with the religious and political life of the city, namely, Jerusalem. It is easy to see how one might use the curriculum of a Hellenized Jewish gymnasium to promote learning in Jewish history and traditions, and therefore in good citizenship. Since prayer and worship of the gods appears in pagan *gymnasia*, one can see how prayer and worship of God would find a ready audience in a Jewish *gymnasium* properly conceived.[10]

On the other hand there are aspects of Hellenism and Judaism that are in fact open to us now in new ways. Although it is a commonplace in New Testament scholarship to refer to the Maccabean and Hasmoneans kings of the second century BCE as those who resisted Hellenization, at least according to 1st and 2nd Maccabees, what does *archaeology* tell us about Maccabean *compliance* with advancing Hellenization? What does Flavius Josephus have to say on the subject? Furthermore, is Herod the Great to blame for being such a friend of Augustus Caesar that he actually undermined Temple Judaism as much as the promoted it? We know from Josephus and other ancient authors that Herod the Great built the Second Temple. Presumably that advanced Temple Judaism. We know from these same authors that he built the city of Caesarea in honor of Augustus and named its harbor Sebasté, also in his honor. We can excavate Caesarea and discover whether the city reflects archaeologically the existence of Hellenistic institutions in Roman dress, such as baths, waterways, a Hippodamian city plan, a hippodrome, and the like. Indeed, these investigations have been carried out at Caesarea, and these

[10]Arav, Rami, *Hellenistic Palestine: Settlement Patterns and City Planning, 337 - 31 B.C.E.* British Archaeological Reports, International Series 485; Oxford: Archaeopress, 1989; Kuhnen, H. P., *Palästina in griechisch-römischer Zeit,* Vorderasien 2.2; München: Beck, 1990; Oren, Tal *The Archaeology of Hellenistic Palestine: Between Tradition and Renewal.* Jerusalem: Bialik, 2006. [Hebrew].

institutions have come to light. More than that, the steps to the Temple of Augustus built by Herod in the center of the Caesarea have been exposed by archaeologists. The inscription of Pontius Pilate found at Caesarea mentions an edifice in honor of the next emperor Tiberius.[11] Furthermore in the far north at the boundary of Galilee with the Golan Heights, near the ancient city of Caesarea Philippi, a third temple to Augustus has been found by archaeologists, which is not mentioned in extant ancient literature.[12] It is archaeology that has clinched the argument, found in Elias Beckerman[13] and in Martin Hengel, that it was the Maccabeee brothers, their successors called the Hasmoneans, and Herod the Great who were in fact promoters of Hellenistic institutions, art, military science, architecture, and ideals; the findings of archaeologists tend to confirm this thesis.

But I am ahead of myself. What we can demonstrate about the process of Hellenization in Palestine is that Hellenization developed with the successes of the Maccabees and their successors in spite of their alleged resistance. To be sure they warred successfully against the Eastern Greeks and refounded Israel as a monarchy more or less independent of Greek hegemony. They also repaired the Temple in Jerusalem, enlarged its precincts, and refounded its cult. Yet they and their followers apparently consulted Hellenistic sources for advice on Hellenistic warfare, arming, tactics, war machines, and fortifications. They may have done the very same thing to promote their dependence on and imitation of Greek money systems and the introduction of the large

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[11] K. C. Hanson, and Douglas E. Oakman. *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, chapter 3.

[12] Andrew Overman, Jack Olive, and Michael Nelson "A Newly Discovered Herodian Temple at Khirbet Omrit in Northern Israel," pp. 177-95 in N. Kokkinos, Editor, *The World of the Herods. Volume 1 of the International Conference on The World of the Herods and the Nabataeans held at the British Museum, 17-19 April 2001. Oriens et Occidens, 14*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007.

[13] Elias Bickerman *The Maccabees; an account of their history from the beginnings to the fall of the House of the Hasmoneans.*, New York: Schocken Books, 1947.

estate economy, well attested in inscriptions of the period from Israel.[14] It is interesting to note that in the main the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees are modeled more specifically after Hellenistic histories than after the models provided by 1st and 2nd Kings in the Hebrew Bible or in the LXX. Some scholars have noticed that the Chronicler, that is, the writer of 1 and 2 Chronicles (3rd and 4th Kings in the LXX) and of Ezra and Nehemiah, seems to owe his treatment to Hellenistic models. For instance, the Chronicler is less interested in the political events of Samuel, David, and Solomon than he is in the Temple and its services. Even the genealogies serve a Temple interest.[15] Finally, one of the sons of Herod the Great, namely Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, decorated his palace in Tiberias with statues of living beings, which violates Jewish law (Josephus, *Life* 65). On the other hand he left such images off his coins as though he was unwilling to confront the Jewish population with coins of his realm with banned images.[16]

The Case of Sepphoris

In the light of the foregoing analysis, it is fascinating to learn from our archaeology in the leading city of Galilee, namely Sepphoris, that it was founded near the end of the second century BCE under the Hasmoneans (the Maccabees).[17] If this is so, then the city was most likely founded during the reign of John Hyrcanus I, the third son of Simon Maccabaeus and the nephew of the more famous Judas Maccabaeus. He ruled

[14] Y.H. Landau, "A Greek Inscription found near Hefzibah, Israel", *IEJ* 16 (1966):54-70; Th. Fischer, "Zur Seleukideninschrift von Hefzibah," *ZPE* 33 (1979): 131-138.
[15] Isaac Kalimi, *An Ancient Israelite Historian: Studies in the Chronicler, his Time, Place, and Writing*, Studia Semitica Neerlandica - SSN 46, Assen: Van Gorcum, 2005.
[16] Morten Hørning Jensen, "Message and Minting: The Coins of Herod Antipas in their Second Temple Context as a Source for Understanding the Religio-Political and Socio-Economic Dynamics of Early First Century Galilee", pp. 277-313 in J. Zangenberg, H. Attridge, and D.B. Martin, Editors, *Religion, Ethnicity, and Identity in Ancient Galilee*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007.
[17] For a full discussion see James F. Strange, T.R.W. Longstaff, and D.E. Groh, *Excavations at Sepphoris, Vol. I: The University of South Florida Excavations 1983-1989*, A. Avery-Peck and S. Green, Series Editors. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006.

Judaea from 135–104 BCE. His title in Greek was "Ethnarch" (ἐθναρχός) or "Head of a People", though he was also High Priest in Jerusalem. Hyrcanus was very active in the campaigns to annex former Israelite territories using mercenaries, a custom he learned from Hellenistic culture. He annexed the territory of the Idumeans (Edomites) south of Jerusalem (forcing the Idumeans to convert to Judaism) and the territory of the Samaritans north of Jerusalem. He drove out or converted forcibly the Itureans of Galilee and apparently imported Jews from the south to live there. He finally annexed territories across the Jordan, the old tribal lands of Reuben and the Joseph tribes.

In the archaeology of Sepphoris we can show that the first people to build extensively were there during his reign. They lived in ordinary stone houses with unroofed courtyards, a type of house found everywhere in the Levant. Those who lived in the houses built ritual baths for themselves, a marker of Jewish identity. They also used soft chalk-stone vessels, which were not subject to impurity, according to the rabbis. This is now a second marker of Jewish ethnicity. By the reign of Herod the Great (37 – 4 BCE) there were changes which included streets in a grid pattern, more like the Eastern Greek cities of Syria and Cilicia than like the traditional Israelite cities. These streets relied on drains to control runoff from the high winter rains. They built these drains left and right of the crushed limestone paving. This, too, they learned from Hellenistic models. They paid for goods with Seleucid Greek coinage until the coming of Rome in 63 BCE. When the city states of Israel began to mint coins in earnest in the Roman period, they used as models Greek coinage of the east, complete with inscriptions in Greek. Thus, for instance, ancient Gaza issued coins from 61 BCE with the abbreviation

of the city in Greek: ΓΑ.[18] Shekels and half-shekels of Tyre—but actually minted in Jerusalem after 18/17 BCE bear the name and title of the city in Greek: "Tyre the Holy and Inviolable" (TYPOY IERAI KAI AY.YAOY). These coins also bore the portrait of the Tyrian god Melqarth on the obverse and a standing eagle on the reverse with a KP (=KAISAP or Caesar?) to the right.[19] This would be the standard silver coinage for Jews to pay the Temple Tax. Apparently Jews had no difficulty paying the Temple tax with this coin.

In our archaeology we have excavated a common bath of the 2nd century CE, a villa first built in the first century BCE, and one large building (40 x 60 yards) which was founded near the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, which is presumably before the death of Herod the Great. This building has elements of Hellenistic architecture within it. For example, there are columns in rows forming two rectangular spaces in the floor, in effect organizing the space. The floor in the first century CE was a simple white mosaic. The columns do not appear to have been topped by arches in Roman style, but more likely by horizontal beams in Greek or Hellenistic style. Formal inscriptions in Greek may have been built into this structure, but so far we have found in the floor only "EYTYXOC" or "Good luck" in Greek, not monumental Greek inscriptions.

This building appeared very close to the death of Herod the Great. We know from Josephus that the Sepphoreans revolted at the death of Herod, which earned the destruction of the city at the hands of Varus, Legate of Syria. He killed and enslaved the inhabitants, a Roman method of punishment, and left the ruins for repair by Herod

[18] David Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 3rd Ed., New York: Amphora, 1996, pp. 253-256.
[19] David Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins, "The 30 Pieces of Silver,* 288-294, see especially Tyrian shekels nos. 917 and 918 on pp. 293-4 ("Struck in Tyre") and Tyrian half shekels no. 919 and 920 "'Tyre' Shekels Struck in Jerusalem", p. 294.

Antipas, the youngest son of Herod the Great and the new Ethnarch. Surely this event was quite traumatic for the population of Galilee outside its walls.

At the intersection of two major streets of the city, mentioned above, were found traces of four columns, a tetrapylon, that enhanced the intersection. A monumental Greek inscription from a later period speaks of repairing the basilica, perhaps this very building or another nearby, and of restoring the imperial statues that stood there. Statues are a hallmark of a Greco-Roman city, at least in its public appearance.

Other monumental inscriptions in Greek are known at Sepphoris, all found accidentally before our first season of digging in 1988 in this building. The very fact that Greek appears at all suggests that in some official sense Greek was the public language of government and likely the arts. Van der Horst has concluded that roughly 50% of all inscriptions found of this period in Israel are in Greek. In some areas Greek dominates, especially in the cities.[20]

A theater also beautified ancient Sepphoris, built into the ground Greek style with two ranks of seats. In the second century CE a third rank of seats was added above ground in the Roman style. The content of art and architecture was mainly drawn from Jewish tradition, but the forms were mainly Greek. This also applies to literature. If we wish to find tragedies to perform at Sepphoris or at the newly found theater in Tiberias, we should know that a Jewish tragedian named Ezekiel, usually dated to the 2nd century BCE, composed a tragedy under the name of the ἐξαγωγή ('The Exodus'). His main character was Moses. This Ezekiel was called 'The poet of Jewish tragedies' by Christian

[20] Pieter van der Horst, "Greek in Jewish Palestine in the Light of Jewish Epigraphy", in J.J. Collins and Gregory Sterling, Editors, *Hellenism in the land of Israel,* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001: 154-176.

authors such as Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea (Clemens, *Strom*. i. 23. 155: ὅ Εζεκιήλος ὅ τῶν Ιουδαικων τραγωδιων ποιητης. Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel Book IX.28 "Εζεκιήλος ὅ τῶν τραγωδιῶν ποιητής", "Ezekiel, who was a tragic poet").

In sum, the archaeology of Sepphoris supports the idea that this was a walled city in the center of lower Galilee, halfway between the Mediterranean coast and the Sea of Galilee. It provided an economic, cultural, and intellectual center of the Galilee for centuries, even after Tiberias was founded between 18-21 CE, or within the lifetime of Jesus of Nazareth. Sepphoris had its own government of elders, called the *boulé*. It had a Jewish and eventually a Roman court system. It served as the central market for the villages of Lower Galilee. Nazareth, to be sure, stood only five miles south of Sepphoris, and was included in that market and trade network.

The Case of Nazareth

Nazareth figures prominently in the gospels as the home of Joseph and Mary, though he was born in Bethlehem of Judea, according to Matthew and Luke. Despite this prominence, some have argued that there was no Nazareth at all the first century CE, since the name does not appear in Josephus or Philo or in the pagan authors. Yet archaeological remains in the city reveal a similar pattern to that of Sepphoris. Although people lived in this small locality as early as what archaeologists call the Middle Bronze II period, or 2200-1570 BCE, its first appearance as a village is also apparently within the reign of John Hyrcanus I, the Hasmonean king (135-106 BCE). Two topographical features made the area attractive for agriculture, and that is water from a perennial spring

and good soil that had steadily eroded down the slopes of the bowl-shaped valley to form deep deposits in the valley floor.

Archaeology has been carried out in Nazareth since the 19th century. As a result we can estimate the land area by the location of tombs of the time of Herod and his sons. A map of their placement betrays an occupied area of about 200 x 800 yards in the first century, which will include some tilled fields and orchards. Beneath and (recently) next to the Latin Church of the Annunciation, beneath the Church of St. Joseph and les Dames de Nazareth, many underground rooms and traces of walls and courtyards show that there was a steady increase in population and use of the land from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE. When the Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem in 70 CE, twenty-four priestly "courses" from the Temple fled northward to resettle in Galilee. One course settled in Nazareth. Apparently Nazareth was attractive to the fleeing priests.[21]

Archaeology near the English hospital has revealed three watchtowers, a wine press, stone quarries, agricultural terraces and a spring-fed irrigation system carved from bedrock. An agricultural cave was suggestive of an oil press, and indeed a modern reconstruction of an ancient oil press has been built in it for tourist consumption. Remains of agricultural terraces show that intensive family-oriented farming took place. Nazareth was not part of an estate in any period.[22]

There is one possible piece of evidence that might call this purely agricultural picture into question. In 1878 a marble slab with a Greek inscription was sent from

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[21] Bagatti, Bellarmino, O.F.M., "Nazareth" in vol. 3 of Ephraim Stern et al., Editors, *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Carta, 1993: 1103-5. On the priestly courses fleeing northward see Jack Finegan, "Inscription from Caesarea mentioning Nazareth" in idem, *The Archaeology of the New Testament: The Life of Jesus and the Beginning of the Early Church*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, page 29.

[22] As of this writing the only report is "Nazareth Village Project" reporting the excavations of Stephen Pfann, http://www.nazarethvillage.com/research/content/archaeology (26 Feb 2010).

Nazareth to some intermediate site, and then on to Paris for a collector. The text is a "Decree of Caesar" in Greek. It eventually stood in the Cabinet de Medailles or "Coin Room" at the Paris National Library, where it was noticed somewhere between 1925 and 1929. Franz Cumont published it at that time, and his interpretation generated a great hue and cry, for it was understood to be Caesar's response to tales of the Resurrection of Christ.[23] Soon this thesis claimed few followers, and some even thought the inscription was a fraud. Take not that this is unlikely, even if the name of the Caesar in question is not cited, for no one in 1870 had enough diachronic knowledge of lapidary Greek of the period to forge it. The text is as follows:

> Decree of Caesar
> It is my pleasure that graves and tombs for those who made them for the cult of their ancestors or children or members of their house remain undisturbed in perpetuity. If, however, anyone accuse another that he has either demolished them or has in any other way extracted those buried or has maliciously transferred them to other places in order to wrong them, or has displaced the sealing or other stones, against such a one I order a trial be instituted as in respect of the gods, so in regard to the cult of mortals. For it shall be much more obligatory to disturb them. In case of contravention I desire that the offender be sentenced to capital punishment on charge of violation of sepulture.
>
> Διάταγμα καίσαρους.
> Ἀρέσκει μοι τάφους τύνβους τε, οἵτινες εἰς θρησκείαν προγόνων εποίησαν ἢ τέκνων ἢ οικείων, τούτους μένειν ἀμετακεινήτους τὸν αἰῶνα. ἐὰν δέ τις ἐπιδίξῃ τινὰ ἢ καταλελυκότα ἢ ἄλλῳ τινὶ τρόπῳ τοὺς κεκηδευμένους ἐξερριφφότα ἢ εἰς ἑτέρους τόπους δώλῳ πονηρῷ μετατεθεικότα ἐπ' ἀδικίᾳ τῇ τῶν κεκδηδευμένων ἢ κατόχους ἢ λίθους μετατεθεικότα, κατὰ τοῦ τοιούτου κριτήριον ἐγὼ κελεύω 15 γενέσθαι

[23] Franz Cumont, "Un réscrit impérial sur la violation de sépulture", *Revue Historique* 163 (1930): 341-66. Bruce M. Metzger, "The Nazareth inscription once again", chapter 5 in idem. *New Testament Studies: Philological, Versional, and Patristic*, Leiden: Brill, 1980:77ff.

καθάπερ περὶ θεῶν εἰς τὰς τῶν ἀνθρώπων θρησκείας. Πολὺ γὰρ μᾶλλον δεήσει τοὺς κεκηδευμένους τειμᾶν. καθόλου μηδενὶ ἐξέστω μετακεινῆσαι. Εἰ δὲ μή, τοῦτον ἐγὼ κεφᾳλῆς καράκριτον ὀνόματι τυμβωρυχίας θέλω γενέσθαι.

If in fact this decree was indeed of the first century (as the shape of the letters seem to suggest), and if indeed it was posted at Nazareth, then it shows dramatically that Nazareth took part in the Hellenistic culture with its governmental decrees posted in Greek. That it was posted at all would tend to support the content that at least some of the population would be able to read it.

Apart from this inscription, there is nothing archaeological to distinguish Nazareth from any other of the dozens—perhaps hundreds—of villages in the Galilee. There are also stone vessels and ritual baths, the marks of a Jewish population. The coins found are common to all localities. The locals certainly participated in the larger culture of Roman Judea, complete with its Hellenistic overlay.[25]

Conclusions

In 1927 the New Testament scholar Shirley Jackson Case published a book, *Jesus, a New Biography.* Chase represented a view of history that deleted "supernatural" elements from the story, and his desire was to show that Jesus was so close to Sepphoris all his life that he could not help but be influenced by the culture of Sepphoris. This was particularly true in that the city was being built at or near his year of birth, and therefore (Case reasoned); Jesus' doctrine of the "brotherhood of man" could not have originated in rural Nazareth, but in the more open discussions in the nearest Hellenistic city, namely,

[24] For the text, translation, and commentary see de Zulueta, F., "Violation of Sepulture in Palestine at the Beginning of the Christian Era", *Journal of Roman Studies* vol. 22/2 (1932), pp. 184-187.
[25] James F. Strange, "Nazareth" in E.M. Meyers, Editor, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, vol. 4, pp. 113-4.

Sepphoris. Case did not follow up on this suggestion by locating another such influence in the building and founding of Tiberias 18-21 CE, or during the lifetime of Jesus.

Likely today we would not articulate the thesis in this manner. Rather we might propose that Jesus' interests in something resembling *philanthropia* (kindness) and *theosebēs* (Godliness) were elaborations of ideas found both in Hellenism and in ancient Judaism, though to be sure in different kinds of texts.[26] We might reason that his occupation as builder or carpenter (or even stone mason) placed him around the elites who hired him, and those elites might have speculated aloud about these and similar ideas, providing him with material to reflect upon and to synthesize with Jewish ideas or to change in the direction of traditional Jewish piety.

Such speculations have been very much alive in the last generation. We might think of Burton L. Mack*, Who Wrote the New Testament?* [27](1996). Mack thought that Jesus was like the Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, who challenged the thinking of comfortable, even rich people and appealed to the poor. We also might think of John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (1993).[28] Crossan believes that Jesus is much more like a Cynic sage than he is like a Hebrew prophet. Since the ancient city of Gadara is about 24 miles east of Nazareth, and since Gadara was known as an intellectual center for Cynic and other philosophers, Jesus picked up the counter-cultural ideas of certain

[26] The word *philanthropia* does not appear in the gospels, though some have argued that the idea does. The word *philanthropia* appears in Acts 28:2, where it is translated "kindness" in the *NRSV*. The man healed of blindness in John 9:30 uses the word *theosebēs referring* to Jesus, where it is translated in the *NRSV* "worships (God)".
[27] Burton L. Mack*, Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth.* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996.
[28] John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1993.

cynics.[29] On the other hand scholars like Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest* (1996), point out that the comparison cherry picks texts from the gospels to compose a portrait of Jesus as teacher, but the selection of texts leaves out Jesus dealing with uniquely Jewish issues such as Corban, Sabbath, marriage, divorce, the End of the Age, resurrection, and Messiah.[30]

What appears to have been resolved is the debate whether Hellenism was an effective influence across Galilee. That influence appears in the elements enumerated above particularly in Sepphoris, though a similar list might be produced for ancient Tiberias. It is Nazareth whose material culture cannot disclose to what degree Hellenism was ascendant. Only the Nazareth Inscription calls attention to the Roman overlay that included Nazareth and Sepphoris in its billows. Yet Nazareth lay in the area administrated by Sepphoris, and it seems simplest to hypothesize that it stayed under the aegis of Hellenism as long as it lay within the markets and networks of Sepphoris and of Roman Galilee. What we still cannot do though, is to resolve by the methods of history alone the puzzle of the meteoric advance of Christianity from a small movement of a

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[29] Cynic Philosophers of Gadara include Menippus of the 3rd century B.C.E., Meleager of Gadara of the 1st century B.C.E., and Oenomaus of the 2nd century A.D., a critic of religion and a nihilist. Philodemus of Gadara (110-43/45 B.C.), the Epicurean, is the most famous philosopher of Gadara. Note that none of these Cynics are known for wandering Galilee, and indeed none of them are of the first century CE. For all these names see Peitho's Web: Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/diogenes (25 Feb. 2010). See also M. Luz, "Ancient Gadara, City of Philosophers", http://research.haifa.ac.il/~mluz/gadara.folder/gadara2.html#intro (25 Feb. 2010).

[30] Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Quest for the Jew of Nazareth,* Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996.

handful of more or less Hellenized Mediterranean Jews into a phenomenon that reached westward to Great Britain and eastward to China by the 3rd century CE or earlier.[31]

[31] Perhaps during the Han Dynasty 25-220 CE. See "Christianity in China" http://www.christianityinchina.org/Common/Admin/showNews_auto.jsp?Nid=304&Charset=big5 (25 Feb 2010).

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