



NINE

THE EARLY ROMAN (HERODIAN) PERIOD (40 B.C.E.—70 C.E.)

JESUS' BIRTH AND GALILEAN SETTING

Roman Palestine was an **agrarian**, preindustrial society. Nearly all the wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of a small percentage of the population. Most of this elite population – which included the high priestly families – lived in and around Jerusalem and Jericho. Roman Galilee was overwhelmingly rural, with a population consisting of farmers, fishermen, craftsmen, and artisans who had little disposable income and lived just above the subsistence level. The New Testament indicates that Jesus came from a lower-class Galilean family. As the New Testament scholar John Meier remarks, “He [Jesus] was in one sense poor, and a comfortable, middle-class urban American would find living conditions in ancient Nazareth appalling. But Jesus was probably no poorer or less respectable than almost anyone else in Nazareth, or for that matter in Galilee.”

Lower-class Jews populate the Gospel accounts and seem to have been Jesus' target audience. Typically they were villagers who owned houses and had a few possessions but were not destitute like the leper who begs Jesus to heal him in Mark 1:40. The agrarian nature of rural Galilee is reflected in Jesus' parables and teachings, which mention picking and sowing grain, netting fish, herding sheep, and so on. References to patched clothing (Mark 2:21), hired laborers in vineyards (Matthew 20:1–16), and debtors sold into slavery (Matthew 18:23–35) must have resonated with Jesus' audience. This chapter reviews the archaeology of Bethlehem and Galilee – which the Gospels describe as the setting for Jesus' birth and ministry – in the time of Jesus.

BETHLEHEM

Of the four canonical Gospels, only Matthew and Luke begin with Jesus' birth. Matthew opens with a genealogy that traces Jesus' lineage from King David,

THE EARLY ROMAN (HERODIAN) PERIOD (40 B.C.E.–70 C.E.)

and then describes astrologers' arrival in Bethlehem to pay homage to the infant Jesus. Luke's birth narrative opens with parallel announcements of the conception and birth of Jesus and John the Baptist. In Luke, Jesus' birth is announced to Mary in Nazareth by the angel Gabriel. Because (according to Luke) Joseph was descended from the house of David, he had to go to Bethlehem to be counted in the census of Quirinius, the governor of Syria.

Many scholars have discussed the differences between the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke. For our purposes, it is important to note that both accounts go to great lengths to connect Jesus with Bethlehem and establish his relationship to King David. The reason is simple: according to Jewish tradition, the messiah will be descended from David. Therefore, if Jesus really was the Jewish messiah, he had to be related to David, who, according to the Hebrew Bible, was born in Bethlehem. As the author of the Fourth Gospel puts it: "Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" (John 7:41–42). It is interesting that Mark, which many scholars believe is the earliest of the canonical Gospels (ca. 60–70 C.E.), does not contain a birth narrative but instead opens with Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Collectively, the canonical Gospels provide very little information about Jesus before adulthood.

None of this is surprising when we consider that Jesus was a lower-class Galilean whose life and activities would have gone unnoticed before he began his ministry and attracted a following. The efforts of Matthew and Luke to establish Jesus' connection to Bethlehem and David are understandable in light of the messianic claims made about Jesus after his death. Jesus' Galilean origins would have posed a problem to followers who believed in his messianic status, as this precluded a connection to Judea, where Bethlehem is located. This accounts for the different birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, which present scenarios connecting Jesus to Bethlehem and David, bolstered by numerous biblical allusions and quotations.

Even if we accept the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke as fictitious attempts to establish Jesus' messianic status, is it possible that Jesus was of Judean descent? In my opinion, although we cannot rule out this possibility, it is unlikely. First, had Jesus' family been Judean, there would have been no need for Matthew and Luke to construct different narratives that go to great lengths to connect Jesus' birth and lineage with Bethlehem. We might also expect Mark to mention Jesus' Judean origins rather than omit this information altogether. Second, remember that the Hasmonean kings had "Judaized" the inhabitants of Galilee. Prior to this forced conversion, Galilee's population consisted of a mixture of native non-Jewish peoples, such as the Ituraeans, together with descendants of the biblical Israelites, many of whom had intermarried with Gentiles after 722 B.C.E. Although some Judean colonists settled in Galilee after

the Hasmonean conquest, the Gospel writers do not associate Jesus' family with them and there is no other evidence supporting such a connection. In other words, Jesus likely was a native Galilean – that is, a person of mixed origins whose family had been Judaized by the Hasmoneans approximately a century before his time.

In the fourth century C.E., **Constantine** erected the **Church of the Nativity** over a grotto that had come to be venerated as Jesus' birthplace (see [Chapter 16](#)). However, few archaeological remains of the first century B.C.E. and first century C.E. survive in Bethlehem, which seems to have been a small village surrounded by scattered farms. The closest major site was Herod's fortified palace, administrative center, and final resting place at Herodium (see [Chapter 8](#)), located three miles southeast of Bethlehem. We shall therefore proceed to Galilee, which was the setting for most of Jesus' life and ministry.

SEPPHORIS

Roman Galilee was overwhelmingly agrarian and rural, with a landscape of rolling hills dotted by villages, hamlets, and farmsteads. Most locals supported themselves through agriculture (cultivating wheat, barley, olives, and grapes), fishing in the Sea of Galilee (which is actually a brackish water lake), and crafts production – including Jesus' family. There were only two large towns (sometimes inaccurately described as “cities”) in Galilee in Jesus' time: Sepphoris and Tiberias. Tiberias was established on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee by Herod Antipas (ruled 4 B.C.E.–39 C.E.), the son of Herod the Great, as the capital of his tetrarchy, which consisted of Galilee and Peraea. Following his father's example, Antipas named the town in honor of his patron, the Roman emperor Tiberius.

In contrast, Sepphoris was founded long before Antipas' time. Under the Hasmoneans, it served as the administrative capital of Galilee. Josephus informs us that after Antipas inherited Sepphoris as part of his tetrarchy, he fortified it “to be the ornament of all Galilee” (*Ant.* 18:27). Antipas resided at Sepphoris until he founded Tiberias. During the First Jewish Revolt (66–70 C.E.), Sepphoris was pro-Roman and surrendered early to Vespasian. Although in the following centuries Sepphoris had a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles, it became a rabbinic center and was the seat of the **Sanhedrin** (the Jewish law court) under **Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi** (ca. 200 C.E.).

Sepphoris is not mentioned in the Gospel accounts, suggesting that Jesus' ministry focused especially on the rural, agrarian, and largely lower-class population of Roman Galilee. Nevertheless, scholars who study the historical Jesus have devoted much attention to Sepphoris because it is only four miles from Nazareth. Many scholars believe that Jesus must have visited Sepphoris, where he would have been exposed to Greco-Roman urban culture. Perhaps, some

THE EARLY ROMAN (HERODIAN) PERIOD (40 B.C.E.–70 C.E.)



9.1 Map of Roman Galilee. Ancient World Mapping Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (www.unc.edu/awmc).

scholars speculate, Jesus and his family even worked on the construction of some of the town's monuments. Scholars who identify Greco-Roman influence (such as the philosophy of the Cynics) on Jesus' teachings argue that Sepphoris is the most likely setting for such interaction.

We cannot know for sure whether Jesus ever visited Sepphoris. Even if he did, there are serious questions about the degree to which the town was Romanized in Jesus' time (under Herod Antipas). The town of Sepphoris included an upper city (acropolis) and a lower city. Despite extensive excavations by American and Israeli expeditions, nearly all the remains discovered so far post-date the time of Jesus (late first century and second century C.E. on). Most of the remains from the time of Jesus (early first century) are located on the acropolis, consisting of a residential quarter of houses, many of which are equipped with small *miqva'ot*. Scholarly interest in Jesus has been attracted especially to a theater built into the steep northern side of the acropolis. It is a Greek-style theater that could accommodate up to 4,500 spectators, with seats laid out on the natural slope of the hill. The theater has been dated differently by different teams of archaeologists. In the past, some argued that Antipas built the theater, which would have indicated that Sepphoris was Romanized in Jesus' time. However, scholarly consensus now dates the establishment of the theater to the early second century C.E., which means that it did not exist in Jesus' time—even assuming he did visit Sepphoris.

In other words, even if Jesus visited Sepphoris, there is little evidence of Romanization in his time, with the exception of fragments of Roman style (but non-figured) wall paintings found in one of the early Roman houses on the acropolis. On the other hand, there is a great deal of evidence of Romanization after Jesus' time, including the theater, a grid of streets, and monumental public buildings decorated with wall paintings, stucco, and mosaics, most of which date to the fourth to sixth centuries C.E. Around 200 C.E. a mansion was erected on the acropolis, just above the theater. The excavators dubbed the mansion "the **Villa of Dionysos**" because it has a Roman-style dining room (triclinium) decorated with an exquisite mosaic floor depicting the drinking contest between **Dionysos** (the god of wine) and the hero Heracles/Hercules. Although some archaeologists argue that this villa may have belonged to a prominent Jewish family, perhaps even that of Judah ha-Nasi, I agree with those who believe it belonged to a Gentile family. Mosaic floors with Dionysiac scenes are common in rooms associated with the mystery cult of Dionysos, who was worshiped in connection with expectations of life after death (as grapevines and other vegetation die and are renewed annually). The villa's location suggests an association with the cult of Dionysos, who was also the god of theater performances (as theater performances blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy, which also happens after drinking too much wine).



9.2 Aerial view of Sepphoris' theater and acropolis. Courtesy of Zev Radovan/BibleLand Pictures.com.

GALILEAN VILLAGES

Capernaum

The village of **Capernaum** by the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee was the center of Jesus' Galilean ministry. Matthew (9:1) calls Capernaum Jesus' "own town," for it was here that Jesus reportedly preached and performed many miracles, and where five of the twelve apostles – Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew – were chosen. According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus stayed many times in the house of Peter and taught in the synagogue built by the Roman centurion. No remains of a synagogue from the time of Jesus have been found, but there is a monumental late antique synagogue building (see [Chapter 14](#)).

Capernaum was a modest village about 10 to 12 acres in size. The villagers supported themselves through fishing, agriculture, and some commerce and trade. During the reign of Herod Antipas, Capernaum was a border village with a customs house, and Jesus' disciple Matthew reportedly was a customs official here (see Matthew 9:9). The village had an orthogonal layout, with streets and alleys dividing residential areas into quarters. The houses were built sturdily of local **basalt**, a hard, black volcanic rock. Each house contained small

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE HOLY LAND

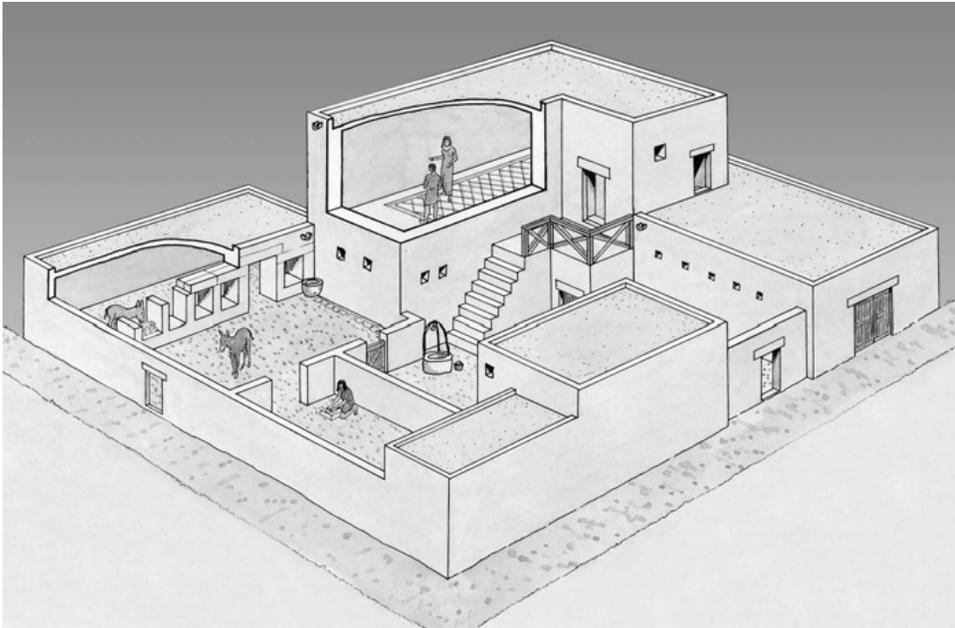


9.3 Mosaic floor in the Villa of Dionysos at Sepphoris. Courtesy of Zev Radovan/BibleLand Pictures.com.



9.4 House at Capernaum with a window wall.

THE EARLY ROMAN (HERODIAN) PERIOD (40 B.C.E.–70 C.E.)



9.5 Reconstruction of a house at Capernaum. By Leen Ritmeyer ©.

dwelling rooms arranged around a courtyard. Sometimes the dwelling rooms were separated from the courtyard by a wall pierced by a continuous row of windows. This common device in ancient houses in northern Palestine, called a **window wall**, allowed air and light to enter the interiors of rooms. Family life centered on the courtyard, where there were ovens and stoves for cooking, a staircase providing access to the roof (or sometimes a second story), and an exit to the street. The flat roofs of the houses were used for sleeping (in warm weather), drying fruits, and other activities. Typical of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, the village houses focused on the courtyard, with only one door opening to the street and few (if any) windows in the outer walls.

Chorazin

The village of **Chorazin** is contemporary with Capernaum and is located a short distance away, just 2.5 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It is one of the three towns (together with Bethsaida and Capernaum) mentioned in the Gospels as having been upbraided by Jesus for failing to accept his teachings: “Alas for you, Chorazin! Alas for you, Bethsaida! For if the wonders that have been done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago! But I tell you, Tyre and Sidon will fare better on the day of judgment than you will! And you, Capernaum! Are you to be exalted to the skies? You will go down among the dead!” (Matthew 11:21–23) A monumental synagogue that is several centuries later than the time of Jesus is located in the middle of the village (see [Chapter 14](#)).

The houses in the village follow the topography – that is, they are laid out along the natural contours of the hill on which the village is built. The houses are similar to those at Capernaum – sturdily built of basalt, with small rooms grouped around a central courtyard, and arranged in residential quarters divided by streets and alleys. *Miqva'ot* attest to the observance of purity laws by at least some of the villagers, and olive presses indicate that the production of olive oil was an important part of the local economy.

Gamla (Gamala)

Gamla is a town in the southern Golan Heights that flourished in the first century B.C.E. and first century C.E. The name Gamla/Gamala comes from the Hebrew and Aramaic word for “camel” and refers to the steep rocky ridge on which the town was built, which resembles a camel’s hump. Josephus provides a dramatic account of Gamla’s fall to the Romans in 67 C.E. during the First Jewish Revolt, when intense fighting ended with a mass suicide of inhabitants who threw themselves over the cliffs rather than surrender to the Romans.

The town was protected on all sides by deep riverbeds (*wadis*) that flow into the Sea of Galilee, with the only approach from the east, along a natural spur or ridge. A fortification wall – almost 20 feet thick! – was erected only on the eastern side of the town. The wall and other buildings in the town are constructed of basalt. Square towers projected from the wall and flanked the main gate, and a circular tower was erected at the crest of the hill.

The layout of the town followed the natural contours of the steep hills, with the structures supported on artificial terraces and arranged in quarters separated by stepped streets. Just inside and abutting the fortification wall is a Jewish public building (synagogue), consisting of a single hall surrounded by stone benches, with columns to support the roof (see [Chapter 14](#)). A *miqveh* located in a room adjacent to the synagogue apparently was used by congregants. Other *miqva'ot*, some in private dwellings and others for public use, are scattered around the town.

Excavations inside the town have concentrated on several areas. The western area seems to have been a wealthy residential quarter consisting of houses built of ashlar masonry and evidence of Roman style (but non-figured) wall paintings. A large olive press was found nearby, installed in a room with a column supporting two stone arches that were roofed with basalt slabs. A *miqveh* adjacent to the press suggests that the inhabitants produced olive oil according to biblical law, which dictated that the first fruits must be donated to priests, who were required to consume these offerings in a state of ritual purity. The eastern area contained two blocks of densely packed rooms and dwellings



9.6 View of Gamla looking west. Photo by Jim Haberman.

separated by a narrow street. Midway between the western and eastern areas, a mansion was uncovered that was built on three different levels. The mansion had a beautifully cut stone façade, with columns from the second story level that had fallen to the ground.

Nazareth

Few archaeological remains from Jesus' time have survived in Nazareth, although farms have been discovered in its vicinity. In December 2009, Israeli archaeologists announced the discovery of the first dwelling in Nazareth dating to Jesus' time. The dwelling is described as a modest house belonging to a "simple Jewish family." Based on this evidence, the archaeologists conclude that Nazareth was "an out-of-the-way hamlet of around 50 houses on a patch of about four acres . . . populated by Jews of modest means."

CONCLUSION

The picture of Roman Galilee provided by archaeology is consistent with that presented in the New Testament and other ancient sources. Most of the population consisted of lower-class Jews who lived in simple but sturdy houses in farms and small villages, and supported themselves through farming, fishing, and craft production. A small number of more prosperous Jews lived in



9.7 The Sea of Galilee boat. Courtesy of Zev Radovan/BibleLandPictures.com.

the largest settlements – towns such as Sepphoris, Tiberias, and Gamla. They emulated the lifestyle of the Jerusalem elite by building spacious houses decorated with Roman-style wall paintings, and acquired small quantities of fine imported pottery and cooking wares. The “trickle-down” effect of Romanization on these local elites is evident in the much less impressive quality and quantity of interior decoration and imported goods compared to Jerusalem. At the same time, the discovery of *miqva’ot* and stone vessels in Galilean towns and villages attests to the observance of Jewish purity laws among much of the local population.

Sidebar: The Sea of Galilee Boat (the “Jesus boat”)

The Sea of Galilee boat is a modest fishing boat dating to the Herodian period that came to light in 1986, when a drought caused the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee to recede. Two members of a local kibbutz (communal farm) noticed ancient pieces of wood sticking out of the mud and alerted archaeologists. The lack of oxygen in the mud preserved the wood for 2,000 years – the same type of **anaerobic** conditions that preserved the so-called Bog People in northern Europe. The excavation of the boat involved treating the wood with special chemicals to prevent it from disintegrating upon exposure to air. The boat is now on permanent display at Kibbutz Ginnosar on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Measuring 27 feet long and 7.5 feet wide, the boat is a shallow vessel with a flat bottom, a design that facilitated fishing close to the shoreline. Radiocarbon dating of the wood and pottery found inside the boat indicate that it was in use some time between 50 B.C.E. and 50 C.E. The boat was manufactured from scraps of wood of different types, and had been repaired many times. When it could no longer be repaired, the useful parts were removed and the hull sank to the bottom of the lake.

Despite the popular moniker, there is no evidence that this boat has any direct connection to Jesus and his disciples. Nonetheless, it provides valuable information about fishing boats used on the Sea of Galilee in Jesus’ time.

Recommended Reading

- Mark A. Chancey, *Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus* (New York: Cambridge, 2005).
- Sean Freyne, *Jesus, A Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus-Story* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004).
- John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vols. 1–3* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).
- Rebecca Martin Nagy et al., *Sepphoris in Galilee, Crosscurrents of Culture* (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1996).
- Jonathan L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-examination of the Evidence* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000).
- Shelley Wachsmann, *The Sea of Galilee Boat* (College Station: Texas A & M University, 2000).