Reed, Jonathan L.

Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-Examination of the Evidence


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Jonathan Reed is one of the few specialists who is thoroughly trained in both modern archaeological research in Palestine and critical research on the Gospels. Chapters two, six, and seven have already been published elsewhere, but most of the truly innovative material in this book appears in print for the first time. In contrast to other books that draw on archaeology merely to supplement what texts suggest about the historical Jesus, Reed allows archaeology to take the lead in setting research agendas and generating data. The result is a refreshing and exciting alternative to text-centered approaches to the historical Jesus.

Chapter 1 provides a survey of both the quest of the historical Jesus and recent archaeology in Galilee. Reed points out that scholars often create a portrait of Galilee that buttresses their portrait of Jesus. This poses the basic question of the book: What does the archaeology of Galilee evaluated on its own terms suggest about the historical Jesus?

Chapter 2 convincingly demonstrates that the Galilee in which Jesus lived was dominated by a Jewish population with close ties to Judea. Galilee had been depopulated by the Assyrians and was only sparsely inhabited until Hasmonean expansion initiated large-scale immigration into Galilee from Judea. Thus despite claims to the contrary, in the first century CE Galilee was neither "semi-pagan" nor dominated by descendants of the Northern tribes. Galilee's inhabitants were "Judeans" (ioudaioi) in culture and religious practice. This includes the members of the Q community, whose self-identification with northern Israelite prophetic traditions was purely ideological.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on early first-century Sepphoris and Tiberias. Reed estimates a population of 8,000-12,000 for Sepphoris and 6,000-12,000 for Tiberias. The
growth of these cities put a strain on regional agricultural production. This probably explains some of the tensions in the Q community. Sepphoris, like Tiberias, was a small regional center with a predominately Jewish population of moderate wealth. Sepphoris did not have major institutions for a Greek education. Hence theories that depict Jesus as a Cynic philosopher are implausible. Jesus had no religious, ethnic, or economic reasons to avoid Sepphoris and Tiberias, but may have done so merely to stay out of the way of Antipas.

Chapter 5 argues that in the early first century Capernaum was a small village of 600-1,500 poor Jewish peasants. It was not on a major international highway, a station for a Roman garrison, or home to a significant Gentile minority. Its proximity to Gentile areas in the north and east did, however, occasionally generate ethnic tensions that have left their mark in the Gospels.

Chapter 6 locates the Q community in Galilee. Capernaum and other sites along the north shore of the Sea of Galilee may have been home to many members of the Q community. Contact with Sepphoris and Tiberias is certain, however, and may explain the anxiety in Q over prisons and other urban institutions.

Chapter 7 argues that the Q community drew on local Galilean traditions about Jonah in its openness to Gentiles and critical stance toward Jerusalem. As in other parts of the book, specialists may quibble with minor details of Reed's argument, such as his use of Vitae Prophetarum (p. 210), which has been convincingly dated by David Satran to the Byzantine period.

Chapter 8 sums up the book, arguing for a greater role for archaeology in scholarship on the historical Jesus. Reed concludes that Jesus must be understood in the context of a predominately Jewish Galilee that was experiencing evolving economic stratification and growing tension between its small urban centers and the villages around them.

The book's discussions and footnotes summarize a wealth of secondary literature, but it is impossible to fully appreciate the significance of Reed's conclusions if one is not aware of current research on Jesus. Here it is sufficient to note that some important pieces of scholarship on Jesus may quickly be marginalized in the debates that this study will engender, especially works that rest on an image of a highly urbanized cosmopolitan Galilee filled with Gentiles and permeated with elite Hellenistic culture.

The most important contribution of this book, however, is that it represents a break with most other efforts to use archaeological sources in discussing the historical Jesus. Treatments of Galilean archaeology by New Testament scholars often are reminiscent of a museum tour that degenerates into anecdotes about selected bits of data plundered to conform to a mold constructed from textual sources. In contrast, Reed takes his cue from modern archaeological theory and creates a picture of Galilean demography, ethnicity, and inter-communal relationships based on a comprehensive base of archaeological data. Reed's emphasis on identifying the unique characteristics of definable regions and describing interregional relationships is typical of Israeli archaeology, as is demonstrated by the work of Israel Finkelstein. Reed's own approach and conclusions are most directly indebted to Eric and Carol Meyers. Reed's portrait of
Galilee benefits from the fruits of faunal analysis, studies of ceramic typology, ethnographic analogy, and other standard tools of the archaeological trade. The emphasis in this book on methods and data derived from archaeology rather than texts is long overdue because it points a way out of the impasse of redundancy and circularity that characterizes most scholarship on the historical Jesus.

The portions of the book that focus on textual issues are more traditional. This includes the bulk of chapters 6 and 7. Reed is clearly more willing to discuss the Q community than Jesus himself and concentrates on Q when discussing Jesus. This scope is limited but perhaps justified in an initial exploration.

This book should be considered required reading for New Testament scholars. Its clear style also commends it as an undergraduate textbook. Occasionally one finds an unexplained archaeological term not found in the glossary or technical jargon that may be a stumbling block to the uninitiated. But any weaknesses that one may find in this book do not detract from its importance as an installment on a potentially new methodological paradigm for the study of the historical Jesus.