

Archaeology and the Historical Jesus: Recent Developments

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A major driving force behind biblical archaeology in its early days were apologetics. In recent years these interests have been eclipsed by the new quest for context and meaning. By and large, this new quest has seen major advances on many fronts, especially where it concerns the historical Jesus.

In some cases discoveries touch directly on the story of Jesus as presented in the New Testament Gospels, such as in the 1961 discovery at Caesarea Maritima of the inscription that mentions Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea, and perhaps (much more doubtfully) in the 1990 discovery in the vicinity of Jerusalem of an ossuary, whose inscription may contain the name of Caiaphas the high priest. One also thinks of the 1986 discovery of the first-century (B.C.E. or C.E.) Galilee boat, which has answered some important general questions about this occupation and perhaps one or two very specific questions relating to Jesus and his disciples.

These discoveries are of great interest, to be sure, but of much greater significance are discoveries relating to travel, commerce, economy, social activities, and religious loyalties of the people of first-century Palestine, especially as these things relate to the inhabitants of Galilee.

Here might be mentioned three important areas of archaeological findings in recent years that shed light on aspects of the life of Jesus and the world in which he was active: (1) the Jewishness of Galilee, (2) the existence of pre-70 synagogue buildings, and (3) Jewish burial traditions.

The Jewishness of Galilee

One of the most important questions for studying Jesus in his environment asks how Jewish Galilee was in the early first century. Several books in the last decade or so have appeared that address this question in one way or another. Books by Mark Chancey, Sean Freyne, Richard Horsley, Eric Meyers, and Marianne Sawicki, and James Strange, among others, immediately come to mind.

The discovery of numerous Greek inscriptions (and a few Latin inscriptions as well), along with a network of roads (for example, linking Caesarea on the Mediterranean and Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee) and major Greco-Roman style buildings and city layouts, has led scholars to reassess the old, quaint notion of Galilee as a cultural and commercial backwater. The significance of the proximity of Sepphoris to Nazareth was immediately appreciated by scholars. It has become apparent that Jesus did not grow up place-bound, in a rustic, unsophisticated environment.

But in the excitement of assessing the implications of a Galilee now seen in a new light, in some circles there was a lack of recognition of just how Jewish much of Galilee was in the pre-70 period. Greco-Roman style urbanization and loyalty to the Torah were not mutually exclusive. The excavations of Sepphoris in the 1980s showed us how urban and wealthy the city of Sepphoris was, but the ongoing excavations of the 1990s and on into the twenty-first century have also shown us how Jewish the inhabitants of this city were.

The discovery of a number of *miqva'oth* (ritual immersion pools) and stone water pots (which resist ritual impurity; cf. John 2:6) points unmistakably to the Jewish presence. The absence of pork bones, pagan cultic buildings, and coin imprints and other icons offensive to Jewish sensibilities argue not only for a Jewish presence, but the near absence of a non-Jewish population. In short, the evidence thus far uncovered suggests that the people of Sepphoris were either Jewish or at least lived in a manner unobjectionable to Torah-observant Jews.

The upshot of these discoveries is that the intriguing hypothesis that Jesus was influenced by Cynic philosophers resident in Sepphoris is greatly weakened. It is not altogether ruled out, but its plausibility is seriously diminished. Moreover, recent excavations in Nazareth itself suggest that the assumption that Jesus and members of his family would in all probability (and perhaps of necessity) have worked in nearby Sepphoris is no longer so obvious. It appears that Nazareth had its own thriving economy — including building, if the evidence of the stone quarries tells us anything. The commercial and economic activities of Nazareth were more than adequate to keep the local residents fully occupied, with little need to seek out-of-town employment.

Pre-70 Synagogue Buildings

The New Testament Gospels and book of Acts leave us with the impression that Jesus frequented Jewish synagogues and that these synagogues seem to have met in buildings designated for this purpose. There are more than fifty references to synagogues. Admittedly, some of these references could be simply gatherings of Jewish people (which is what the Greek word *synagogue* actually means) and not necessarily to buildings themselves called synagogues. Howard Kee has argued this view in a series of studies. He suggests that the Gospel writers, especially the author of Luke-Acts, has anachronistically retrojected a post-70 reality into the earlier time of Jesus. Kee's interpretation not only requires him to interpret the references to synagogue buildings in Josephus in the same manner (cf. *J.W.* 2.285-89; 7.44; *Ant.* 19.305) and ignore a clear reference in Philo (cf. *Prob.* 81-82), it also requires him to date the Theodotos Inscription (*CIJ* 1404), which thanks various persons for donating money for the building of the synagogue, to a time much later than the pre-70 period.

Archaeology offers this interpretation no support. Not only does the style of incising in the Theodotos Inscription suggest a Herodian date (probably early first century), but its location beneath the rubble of the 70-destruction of Jerusalem argues strongly for a pre-70 date. Moreover, the Berenike synagogue inscription from Cyrene (*SEG* XVII 823) dates to the year 56 C.E. and Ehud Netzer has recently reported the discovery of a synagogue at Jericho, which was damaged by the earthquake of 31 B.C.E. Kee's hypothesis has been convincingly rebutted by studies by Richard Oster and John Kloppenborg, who have reviewed the mentioned summarized above.

Even without the more problematic dating of the older, black basalt foundation beneath the ruins of the fourth-century synagogue at Capernaum and the synagogue ruins at Gamla, it seems clear from the archaeological evidence that synagogue buildings did indeed exist in the time of Jesus. Confident of this fact, we can study these early buildings for clarification of aspects of Jesus' activity (such as seating arrangements, auxiliary rooms, furnishings, and the like).

Jewish Burial Traditions

Jewish burial traditions can potentially tell us much about the world of Jesus, and perhaps even clarify at one or two points his teaching and, even more significantly, clarify aspects of his death and burial. The discovery and analysis of hundreds of skeletons and skeletal remains have told us much about the health and longevity of the people. It gives us pause to discover that in a typical two or three generation burial crypt more than one half of the skeletons are of children. Indeed, in some cases two-thirds of the remains are of children. From data such as these, some historical anthropologists have speculated that as many as one fourth of the population in Jesus' time was ill, injured, and in need of medical help on any given day. This grim possibility gives no meaning to the Gospels' notice that crowds were attracted to Jesus, because he was known as a healer (e.g., Mark 3:10; 4:1; 5:27-28).

The Jewish practice of ossilegium, that is, the reburial of the bones of the deceased (see the books by E. M. Meyers and C. A. Evans), may explain Jesus' cryptic remark to the would-be follower who requested that he first be allowed to "bury his father." Jesus replies: "Let the dead bury their own dead" (Matt 8:22 = Luke 9:60). Byron McCane plausibly suggests that the man has requested delaying discipleship until he has reburied his father's bones. Jesus has not urged the man to ignore his dying father. Rather, Jesus urges him to allow the dead (i.e., the dead relatives in the family crypt) to see to the final burial of the man's dead father. Proclaiming the rule of God to the living takes precedence.

Jewish burial practices, including Jewish sensitivities regarding corpse impurity and the sacred duty to bury the dead, argue strongly against the novel theory proposed a decade ago that Jesus' corpse may well have been unburied, either left hanging on the cross or perhaps was thrown in a ditch, exposed to animals as carrion. It has been pointed out that hundreds, if not thousands, of Jews who were crucified during war time or insurrection were left unburied. This is true, but Jesus was crucified during peace time. It is inconceivable that the bodies of Jesus and the other men would have been left unburied just outside the walls of Jerusalem, during Passover season. The grim discovery in an ossuary of the remains of Yehohanan, in whose right heel bone an iron spike was found, dated to the late 20s of the first century, is graphic evidence that Pontius Pilate permitted the crucified to be buried and sometime later the bones to be gathered and placed in an ossuary in the family crypt — all according to Jewish burial customs.

Jewish burial practice may also shed light on the reasons why the women returned to Jesus' tomb early Sunday morning. Evidently their motivation was to perfume Jesus' body, so that the seven days of mourning could take place. Making note of which tomb contained Jesus' body (for he was in a tomb reserved for criminals — not in his family's tomb) they hoped to gather the bones of Jesus. Accordingly, the women took special interest in the tomb. Finding the body removed would, therefore, have occasioned great consternation.

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Recent archaeological digging, however, has vindicated the biblical record, as we now have a wealth of evidence that indicates a Jewish presence at the site in the 1st century. Archaeological excavations have uncovered storage pits and cisterns from the time of Jesus, as well as two first-century "courtyard houses," one with doors and windows still intact. In a recent examination of the manuscripts of Josephus from the British Library and the Library of Congress, all 29 manuscripts dating before 1544 put Herod's death in 1 BC. The biblical description of the Nativity is surrounded by historical corroboration. While none of these connections definitively prove the events of the first Christmas, they demonstrate that the Bible is historically reliable. Worshipers on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter, celebrate the Miracle of the Holy Fire at Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre. A flame is said to spontaneously emanate from the stone slab inside the chapel, or Edicule, marking the site of Christ's burial and Resurrection. PHOTO GALLERY. Click to explore portrayals of Jesus, which range from Roman-era frescoes to a modern forensic reconstruction. This story appears in the December 2017 issue of National Geographic magazine. Watch on National Geographic: Modern scientists investigate ancient traditions in Secrets of Christ's Archaeologists say Jesus could have preached in the temple as he is said in the Gospels to have preached at synagogues in the Galilee and no other synagogue from his lifetime has been found. Six years ago Juan Solana, a Catholic priest, bought some property in the ancient town of Magdala and was required to do exploratory excavations under Israeli law. By chance he found the ruins of a 1st century AD synagogue. In Fra Angelico's painting, Mary the Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene are the foot of the cross, per the New Testament. (Wikimedia Commons). By bringing together top experts and authors, this archaeology website explores lost civilizations, examines sacred writings, tours ancient places, investigates ancient discoveries and questions mysterious happenings.