

## **Introduction**

In the canonical accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus, the region of Galilee features heavily. It is not only the location of the vast majority of Jesus' recorded ministry,<sup>1</sup> but also the region of his home town Nazareth in which he grew up after his family returned to Israel. As such an understanding of this region in Jesus' time should give a fuller appreciation of his ministry, especially the elements which took place in Galilee. Given this, the topic of this essay is:

*What aspects of the Galilean context of Jesus' life and ministry help us to understand significant issues in the portrayal of Jesus in Galilee in the canonical gospels?*

As such several passages concerning Jesus ministry in Galilee will be investigated and the relevant context behind them examined.

## **Discussion**

The Gospel accounts place the starting point of Jesus adult ministry in Galilee after his baptism and subsequent 40 days in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-13) and this movement of Jesus to Galilee is seen as being a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (Matthew 4:13-14). For the Jewish people, the area of Galilee is considered part of the land promised to Abraham (Isaiah 9:1) yet it had suffered under Roman rule and in the lifetime of Jesus it had suffered under Antipas. Given this it is understandable that the Jewish people in Galilee would

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<sup>1</sup> L.E. Elliott-Binns, *Galilean Christianity* (Chicago: Allenson, 1956), 28.

seek to be free of foreign rule,<sup>2</sup> which would help to explain references to Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37) leading an uprising in this region. In Matthew, Jesus is seen to be light coming to God's people in a region suffering in darkness (Matthew 5:15) so that it can be understood that "Deliverance from Rome is being offered through Jesus".<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the political climate within Galilee at this time it is also important to consider the resultant economic and social situation. The people had suffered significant hardship under Roman rule, with the situation being made worse under Antipas.<sup>4</sup> It can be suggested that Jesus was familiar with the economic and social struggles of the common people through his use of parables like "The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant" (Matt. 18:23-35), as well as his ministry and miraculous works amongst the poor.<sup>5</sup> Jesus is nowhere seen to endorse these social divisions and is devoting considerable care and attention to those who were granted very little by those in power.

One of the important aspects of the Galilean context of Jesus' ministry relates to the towns of Sepphoris and Tiberias which were rebuilt by Antipas and were key economic and government centres.<sup>6</sup> The lack of any mention of Jesus visiting these locations is quite telling given that he would have spent much of his life

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<sup>2</sup> John K. Riches, "The Social World of Jesus," *Interpretation* 50, no. 4 (1996): 388.

<sup>3</sup> *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1753.

<sup>4</sup> Richard A. Batey, "Sepphoris and the Jesus Movement," *New Testament Studies* 46 (2001): 406.

<sup>5</sup> Riches, "The Social World of Jesus," 391.

<sup>6</sup> Sean Freyne, "A Galilean Messiah?," *Studia Theologica* 55 (2001): 212.

within walking distance of the major centre of Sepphoris<sup>7</sup> and would have therefore been very familiar with it. When it is understood that these centres were seen by the common people as centres of those in power that were responsible for their exploitation,<sup>8</sup> and representative of everything against which Jesus was teaching, it is understandable that no visits or mentions of them are recorded, and they may even have been deliberately avoided. An understanding of these factors should heighten the reader's awareness of Jesus concern for the poor throughout his ministry in Galilee.

Turning to some specific language that Jesus adopted, the backdrop of Roman control and influence in the region is also important. Early in his ministry in Galilee it is recorded that "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news" (Matt 4:23) and the language used here is important. In using the term "good news" Jesus is making use of a term which had been previously used by the Roman Empire concerning celebrating the emperor and would have been familiar with the people in Roman controlled Galilee.<sup>9</sup> Here though it is being used by Jesus to describe the message he is bringing, which hints at the impact of what it was that Jesus was bringing about. So unlike the results of the rule of the Roman Empire, which could be considered to have brought suffering to the common people,<sup>10</sup> Jesus, through his teaching and action brings blessings for all, not just the rich.<sup>11</sup> This language is significant because while those who heard it would have understood its use

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<sup>7</sup> Batey, "Sepphoris and the Jesus Movement," 402.

<sup>8</sup> Riches, "The Social World of Jesus," 389.

<sup>9</sup> *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, 1753.

<sup>10</sup> *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, 1754.

<sup>11</sup> Freyne, "A Galilean Messiah?," 212.

by the Roman Empire, in that context it would have been coming from an empire which they viewed as bringing them suffering and oppression as opposed to from a teacher who was bringing them blessings and hope.

In addition to this, throughout his ministry Jesus made use of language referring to the impending establishment of God's kingdom and would have been well aware of some of the kingship expectations of the Jewish people.<sup>12</sup> In addition to this the Galilean Jews, being dissatisfied with foreign rule, were in a position where they were ready to be incited to revolt against Rome, and previously had been by people such as Judas the Galilean.<sup>13</sup> So while many Jews had expectations of the messianic figure as a revolutionary and military leader, we see that throughout all of the gospels we see Jesus ministry being portrayed in such a way as to distance himself and his followers from other rival groups and messianic figures who were promoting a distinctly war-like means to establish God's Kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

What is important here is that the reader understands some of significance in how this relates to what we find in Jesus ministry. While Jesus ministry was very much promising delivery from Rome and proclaiming the establishment of the Kingdom of God, his language suggests that he was both aware of this climate of unrest and the kingship expectation while teaching against using violence as a means to establish this promised Kingdom. We see examples of this in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:38-48) that strongly suggest that

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<sup>12</sup> Riches, "The Social World of Jesus," 391.

<sup>13</sup> Riches, "The Social World of Jesus," 388.

<sup>14</sup> Freyne, "A Galilean Messiah?," 210.

Jesus was teaching against a military solution, as opposed to previous leaders such as Judas the Galilean, but that the Kingdom would instead be established by an act of God.<sup>15</sup> So while throughout his Galilean ministry Jesus is recorded as having preached a message of the coming Kingdom of God, an understanding of the situation of unrest into which he was speaking should further sharpen our understanding that the option of violent uprising to achieve this had no place whatsoever within his teaching.

One of the other aspects of Jesus' ministry in Galilee that needs to be investigated is the religious climate in the area and how this impacts on his portrayal. Going back prior to when Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, it should be noted that in the accounts of the teaching of John the Baptist are taking place in Judah. It is recorded that "all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem" (Mark 1:5) went out to see him, however nowhere mentioned that anyone from Galilee was going out to see him and receive his message, with the only representative mentioned from the Galilean region being Jesus.<sup>16</sup> As opposed to John the Baptist however, Jesus did not require that the people came out into the wilderness to see him but instead went to be amongst the people in the Galilee.<sup>17</sup> The significance of the bulk of Jesus recorded ministry taking place in Galilee should not be understated. The inhabitants of Galilee, who were at this time very much looked down upon by Jews in Jerusalem,<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Riches, "The Social World of Jesus," 391.

<sup>16</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 50.

<sup>17</sup> Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Elliott-Binns, *Galilean Christianity*, 25.

were viewed as distinct and easily identifiable.<sup>19</sup> Jesus would have been aware of this view and this is hinted at his use of the language “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel“(Matt 15:24), again reinforcing his ministry to the Jews in Galilee. Furthermore if we examine the language of Jesus’ teaching used in the canonical Gospels it would seem that this distinction is often used in such a way as to contrast between “The Jews”, representing a narrow view of Judaism and “The Crowd”, representing the people of Galilee in Jesus teaching.<sup>20</sup>

Given this it is important then to consider how groups such as the Pharisees, which are mentioned throughout the Gospels, would have fitted into this situation. Jews in Galilee were not as strictly orthodox as those in Jerusalem,<sup>21</sup> a point which can be inferred in passages such as in Matthew 15 where, despite the objection of the Pharisees, other Jews are not mentioned as objecting to Jesus’ lack of observing the Pharisaic cleansing customs.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that it is often mentioned that the Scribes and Pharisees were coming as representatives from Jerusalem, likely sent to discredit false teachers.<sup>23</sup>

Because of this, and the Jewish perceptions of Galilee it is unlikely that people in these groups would have found much sympathy amongst the locals in Galilee when Jesus was teaching against them, nor been in a position to quickly take significant action against Jesus. Jesus would thus have had significant freedom

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<sup>19</sup> J.D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenny, "Galilee," in *The Niv Compact Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 213.

<sup>20</sup> Elliott-Binns, *Galilean Christianity*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Elliott-Binns, *Galilean Christianity*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Elliott-Binns, *Galilean Christianity*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Sene Freyne, "The Geography of Restoration: Galilee-Jerusalem Relations in Early Jewish and Christian Experience," *New Testament Studies* 47 (2001): 300.

to minister in Galilee without having to be as concerned about significant resistance from the local religious officials as he would have been in Jerusalem.

Finally, in considering the portrayal of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and the context surrounding this, mention must be given to post resurrection elements recorded in the Gospels. As he did at the beginning of his ministry Jesus is returning to Galilee after being rejected in Judea.<sup>24</sup> The disciples had been told to go to Galilee, where Jesus would be waiting, (Mark 16:7) which would lead to Galilee being the place where their understanding of the nature of God's Kingdom and how it was to come about would be most fully realised. The peaceful resistance unto death and the resurrected Christ present after being crucified by the Romans, would have been a very powerful image to the people in Galilee, especially in the light of their context and Jesus previous ministry there. After seemingly falling victim to and being put to death by Rome, this would be a very powerful message for those messianic expectations in Galilee and a powerful illustration of the Kingdom that Jesus was ushering in.

## **Conclusion**

So it can be seen that there are many significant elements of Jesus' life and ministry in Galilee that benefit from insight into the Galilean context of Jesus' life. An example of this would be the increased emphasis on the ministry of Jesus being directed towards the poor as well as an awareness of their struggles, even where their plight is not being explicitly mentioned. Furthermore

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<sup>24</sup> Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, 50.

the emphasis of Jesus coming to deliver all Israel, not just the elite and making use of language and ideas which they would have been familiar with, can help the reader understand their desired impact more fully. An awareness of these issues helps us to better understand the significance in the language used, parables told and also at the same time, an awareness of things that would have been influential at that time, yet receive no mention at all. All of these things should come together to enhance the readers understanding of the unique nature of the teaching and Kingdom that Jesus was preaching and how he went about proclaiming this message in a way that would be very powerful to his hearers but at the same time not at all what many of them would have expected.

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