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Jesus and Sepphoris:

Missing Link or Negative Evidence?[1]

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The archaeological investigation of ancient Sepphoris[2] has revealed spectacular finds and generated heated controversy. The finds include large well preserved mosaics which have been featured on the front covers of several issues of *Biblical Archaeologist* and *Biblical Archaeologist Review* [*BA* 50.4 (Dec 1987); *BAR* 14.1 (Jan/Feb 1988), 18.6 (Nov/Dec 1992)] while the most heated controversy centers around the relationship between Jesus and Sepphoris. This controversy is witnessed by the late cancellation of an article on "Jesus and Sepphoris" by Richard Batey, which had been due to be published in the Christmas 1989 issue of *National Geographic* (Batey 1991: 24-28).[3]

This paper will explore anew the possible connections between Jesus and Sepphoris, together with the contributions that Sepphoris makes to our understanding of the historical Jesus. It will do so by first considering the *prima facie* case for linking Jesus with Sepphoris despite the fact that Sepphoris is nowhere mentioned in the New Testament, it will then examine what archaeologists have discovered about first century AD Sepphoris, after which it will take opportunity to evaluate the implications the discoveries at Sepphoris have for our understanding of Jesus.

The *Prima Facie* Case for Suggesting that Jesus had Close Links with Sepphoris

All four Gospels inform us that Jesus came from Nazareth, and Matthew and Luke give the further information that He lived in Nazareth from soon after His birth till the time He embarked on His public ministry (Matt 2:23; 4:13; Mark 1:9; Luke 2:39; 4:16; John 1:45, 46). Aside from the incident at

Jerusalem when He was twelve years of age, recounted in Luke 2:41-52, no information is provided by any of the canonical Gospels about this part of His life, so anything that we can find out about it must be by way of inference, but despite the lack of any reference to Sepphoris in the New Testament, there are two things that make it almost certain that Jesus visited Sepphoris during the period He lived at Nazareth and make it highly likely that He actually worked there.

First, for most of Jesus' time at Nazareth, Sepphoris was the capital of Galilee. Of itself this would not necessarily have meant that He visited it, but its geographic proximity to Nazareth almost certainly does. There is but 6 kilometres between Nazareth and Sepphoris. In fact, in Jesus' day, Nazareth lay on the far side of a ridge which looks down over Sepphoris. The distance could be walked in less than an hour, and "... his presence in the city on various occasions can scarcely be doubted" (Case 1976: 14-22).[4]

Second, the rebuilding of Sepphoris which took place during this period makes it more than likely that Jesus worked on at least some of the building projects of the city. That Sepphoris needed rebuilding was a direct consequence of its destruction by Quintilius Varus, Governor of Syria, as he joined forces with King Aretas of Arabia to suppress a revolt which arose soon after the death of Herod the Great. On his return from Rome to take up his Tetrarchy over Galilee, Herod Antipas made Sepphoris the capital of his kingdom, and immediately embarked on an ambitious construction program.[5]

It is here that the information on Jesus' occupation found in Mark 6:2, 3 becomes pertinent. That passages records the reason given by the people of Nazareth for their rejection of Jesus:

> Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? (*NRSV*).

Those who have known Jesus and His family during His childhood and early manhood identify Him as a carpenter. The Greek word translated carpenter in Mark 6:3 is τέκτων (*tektōn*). This word means anybody working in wood or construction (Liddel and Scott 1961: 1969; Lampe 1961: 1379; Batey 1991: 76). It would therefore correspond with either of the English words "builder" or "carpenter." Due to the rebuilding of Sepphoris, Herod Antipas's engineers and architects would have needed to call on all the available resources of the countryside around them as well as importing skilled laborers from elsewhere in the country. Amongst these resources would be the builder or carpenter Joseph (Matt 13:55). and later his son Jesus. Nazareth was but a very small and economically depressed village, so while there would be work there for a carpenter, no doubt the family welcomed the extra income

bought in by the employment opportunities provided by the extensive construction program undertaken by Herod Antipas.

How long the reconstruction at Sepphoris took is unclear. In any event it was nearly finished by the time Jesus started His public ministry. Whenever the work was finished, by that time the capital of Galilee had been moved to Tiberias, and most of the new construction would have been taking place there.[6]

What is Known of First Century Sepphoris?

In recent times, the site of ancient Sepphoris has been actively excavated by separate groups.[7] To date, the major discoveries at Sepphoris which relate specifically to the first century AD are the residential areas on the western summit and perhaps the theatre. The earliest structures so far discovered on the western summit are stone quarries of the Hellenistic period (third-second century BC), which in turn became incorporated into housing structures as the city spread. This area was continuously rebuilt until the Late Roman period (mid-fourth century AD). Associated with these houses are a large number of cisterns and storage pits. The cisterns are hydraulically sealed with a grey plaster made of lime, ash and sand, a method of hydraulic sealing which is particularly associated with Herodian and later installations.

Perhaps the most significant structures for our purposes, though, were the large number of small stepped pools which were discovered on the site, over 20 of them in the western summitt area alone. These are understood to be *miqva'ot*. *Miqva'ot*, often translated "ritual baths," are associated with the concern for purity, and are well known from later Rabbinic sources. Many of these *miqva'ot* have been discovered in Palestine archaeological sites dating from Herodian times onwards (for a survey of *miqva'ot*, see La Sor 1987: 52-57). Some are large elaborate installations. Others, such as these associated with living quarters an Sepphoris, are quite simple, small structures. The ones at Sepphoris were used from either the second or first century BC to the end of the Roman period (fourth century AD). At the very least, the large number of these *miqva'ot* shows that this residential area was made up of families that took the purity laws seriously enough to invest significant resources into incorporating the necessary structures into their homes.

The theater was one of the major discoveries of the Waterman excavations (Waterman 1937: 6-12). Today, even though the seats have been robbed out, the size of the theater can clearly be ascertained, as the seating rows were first carved into bedrock before being covered with stone seats. The auditorium contained 30-32 rows, which could accommodate 4,200-4,600 individuals. If the seating capacity of the orchestra is added, then the total seating capacity would be close to 5,000 (Meyers, Netzer, and Meyers 1992: 33).

The dating of this theater has emerged as a crucial element in the discussion of the character of first century Sepphoris. The University of

Michigan team had dated this structure to the rebuilding program of Herod Antipas, on the grounds that "There is no other period in the history of the town when the erection of a similar building was likely" (Yelven 1937: 29). More recently, the University of South Florida excavation team have taken the dating of this theater as one of the goals of their excavations, and the result of their work is as summed up by James F. Strange in the following manner:

> We were able to determine with certainty that the founding of the main internal wall [of the theater] took place in the first half of the Early Roman period, however there is nothing in our evidence that would require a date later than Herod Antipas (Strange 1992: 342).[8]

The theater was rebuilt on two occasions, and then in the mid-fourth century AD a large wall was built across the cavea. Strange presumes the wall was built to contain the debris fill which enabled useable area of the summit to be extended (Strange 1992: 342).

Meyers, Netzer, and Meyers, on the other hand, while conceding a date under Antipas is possible, consider a later date more likely (1992: 33); and Eric M. Meyers, has pointed out that "the theater and other so-called pagan or Roman aspects of Sepphoris cannot be positively dated to the first century" (1992a: 88). To some degree, Meyers late-dates the theater on the basis of his wider interpretation of the character of Sepphoris in the first century. He points to the "enormous number of miqva'ot" and the many burials which accord with the strict interpretation of Jewish burial practices (*ibid.*), as well as the absence of any depictions of humans or any statuary which can be dated to this time period (Meyers 1993: 8). In addition, several important priestly families are associated with Sepphoris (Miller 1984: 63-132). Meyer's conclusion that "Antipas largely respected the religious sensibilities of his Jewish subjects," and that the city was largely made up of "torah observant" Jews appears to be well founded (1993: 8).

The city did take on a more cosmopolitan face to some extent after AD 70, and more particularly after the Bar Kochba revolt. Written sources inform us that some of the ancient privileges of self government were removed, and it is to this period that the sumptuous villas found in several places on the tell are to be dated. While it has yet to be found by archaeologists, coins from the mid-second century AD depict a Capitoline temple, which also appears to date to this period (Meyers, Netzer, and Meyers 1992:13). Thus, in the Late Roman period, the governing elite of Sepphoris became Roman, and lived in a style familiar from the wider Greco-Roman world, furthermore, the locus of political power had changed as well. The region no longer looked to Sepphoris for its political and economic focus, but to the larger city of Legio, the garrison of the sixth legion.

From the time of Hadrian (117-139 BC), the city took on a more

cosmopolitan flavor, but this should not be taken to mean that the city ceased to have a strong Jewish component. In fact, it is in its most cosmopolitan period that Sepphoris was to play a pivotal role as one of the most important centers of Rabbinic Judaism. Yehuda ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince) lived in the city for the last seventeen years of his life (*ca.* 200-217). It was at this time that under his leadership the *Mishnah* was finalized, an event of importance for Rabbinic Judaism not dissimilar from the writing down and collection of the New Testament for Christianity. Thus, Judaism did not retreat before this "paganization" of the city, but rather it flourished. Its mode of thought remained Semitic, and it preserved its cultural heritage in a way which has shown remarkable resilience over time.

These observations have taken us far from the date of Jesus' possible association with the city, but are instructive for the issue before us. Even if impressive "Greco-Roman" edifices are to be dated to the time of Jesus, this does not necessarily mean that "Greco-Roman" ideas were current current in the circles in which He would have found Himself.

This, however, is not the only interpretation which can be placed on the archaeological and literary evidence. The alternate view has been most clearly articulated by Richard Batey. In Batey's reconstruction, the Sepphoris that Jesus knew was already a cosmopolitan meeting place of ideas, dominated by Greco-Roman architecture. In particular, Jesus would have been familiar with the work of actors from His exposure to them in the theater at Sepphoris (Batey 1984b). This has important implications for our understanding of Jesus and His message. As Batey says,

> The realization that Jesus grew up in the shadow of Sepphoris, a burgeoning Roman capital city, casts new light on the man and his message—light that changes the perception of Jesus as a rustic from the remote hills of Galilee. The people to whom Jesus proclaimed his message of hope and salvation, whether Jews, Greeks, Romans, or other Gentiles, where struggling with life's meaning in a culture where Jewish traditions and Greco-Roman urban values collided. Jesus' teachings reflect a shared awareness of city life with his cosmopolitan audience (1991: 209).

In his portrayal of the principle city of Galilee, Batey finds himself in company with much that has been written about Galilee and Jesus in recent times. Burton Mack, for example, describes a Galilee which had always held itself independent of Jerusalem, and in which "the hellenization programs of the Ptolemies and Seleucids dotted the landscape on all sides ... with newly founded cities on the Greek model" (1993: 54). This Galilee was the product of "three hundred years of hellenistic influence" (Mack 1993: 57), its southern district was largely Greek speaking, though bilingual. In particular, "Sepphoris, an hour's walk from Nazareth, was a thoroughly hellenized city" (Mack 1993: 58).

After setting this background, against which the sayings of Jesus should be interpreted, Mack examines the document Q, and discovers that its earliest "layer" shows that Jesus' "followers thought of him as a Cynic-like sage"(1993: 115).[9] In other words, according to Mack, Jesus should be understood in terms of Greco-Roman categories: He is best understood as a Palestinian Cynic teacher. Mack is but one of several writers that draw on Cynicism as the primary background against which to understand the teachings of the historical Jesus or His immediate followers (see Downing 1992: *passim*, especially 115-142, and Crossan 1991: 421 who calls Jesus a "peasant Jewish cynic").

But how fair is it to characterize first century AD Galilee as "thoroughly hellenized," especially in comparison with Judea? Seán Freyne's standard work on Galilee provides detailed evidence that this is probably untrue of rural Galilee. Galilee had deep religious ties to Jerusalem going back centuries. These ties had been strongly felt even during the crises bought on by Antiochus Epiphanes' systematic attempt at the Hellinization of Palestine (Freyne 1980: 37-41), and continued right into the first century AD. Furthermore, it may not be possible even to characterize Sepphoris as strongly Hellenized during the first century. The archaeological evidence from Sepphoris thus far available tends to support Meyer's assertion that first century Sepphoris was a predominantly Jewish city (*e.g.* Meyers 1992a: 87, 88). This should not be overstated, of course. After all, Antipas had spent significant time in Rome, and the urban and administrative elite that gather around the court would have had an education that exposed them to a wide range of ideas. The question that remains, though, is how widely these ideas were adopted by the general population of Sepphoris, especially in the light of the fact that the archaeological remains reveal households which took seriously Jewish purity laws. Not only this, Freyne documents the deep divide that often existed between the Hellenistic cities and the Galilean countryside (1980: 101-150). It is this last observation which bring us back to the primary focus of this paper, the relationship between Jesus and Sepphoris.

What does this Data Reveal about the Historical Jesus? or "The Dog that did not Bark"

Sherlock Holmes was able to solve the mystery of the apparent murder in "The Adventure of Silver Blaze" because, amongst other things, a dog did not bark. As in fiction, so in real life absences can be significant. Sepphoris is absent from the New Testament and there is no reference to Jesus visiting Tiberias.[10] The significance of this is unclear, although significant it undoubtedly is.[11] There are many possible explanations that might lie behind this absence. In this chapter, we will investigate two: the sociological and the pragmatic.

In his 1994 article on "The Geography, Politics, and Economics of Galilee and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," Seán Freyne systematically addresses the question of why Sepphoris and Tiberias are absent from the Gospel accounts. To answer this question he draws on insights from sociology and economic history. His conclusion is that "the Jesus movement shared the alienation of the peasant world towards those centeres" (Freyne 1994: 120). Sepphoris and Tiberias represented the recent intrusion of a strongly money-based economy into the market based economy of rural Galilee. So, while there was extensive trade and interaction between the two cities and the villages around them, there remained a deep hostility between the two, based not only on economic realities, but on different and competing world-views.

There is much to recommend Freyne's thesis. Indeed, the archaeological investigation of Sepphoris and other sites in Galilee enable us to nuance Freyne's suggestion is a couple of important ways. First, there is the significance of the demographics of lower Galilee. It is estimated that during New Testament times the total population of Galilee was between 150-170,000 (E. Meyers 1993; Reed 1993; Broshi 1980). The two cities of substance in this region in the first century were Sepphoris and Tiberias.[12] Sepphoris, flourishing during the youth of Jesus, covered an area of about 60 hectares, and had a population of about 18,000. Tiberias, eventually covered an area about 80 hectares, at which time it would have had a population of about 24,000. As well as these two cities, there were approximately 200 villages in all Galilee, whose populations ranged from less than 100 to 3,000, with an average about 500.[13] As these figures show, the majority of population lived in villages. Thus, one would have to say that village life was typical of Galilee.

Herein lies the significance of the absence of Sepphoris from the New Testament accounts. There was a large difference between the population of the two large cities and the type of population to which Jesus ministered. As has been already noted, Sepphoris retained an essentially Jewish flavor. So the significant question then remains: what elements of Jewish population inhabited Sepphoris? Like all cities, it represented all classes of society, but the ethos of the place was set by the Jewish elite—political and religious. In the religious sphere, the city was the home of a prominent Sadducean priestly family (Longstaff 1990: 12, 13; *cf.* Miller 1984: 62, 102). That such a place would be receptive to the message of Jesus is quite unlikely. Nor should it be forgotten, that the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees so prominent in all the Gospel accounts shows that Jesus had more in common with them than with the Sadducees. It is only in the second and third centuries AD, when it became a prominant center of rabbinic Judaism, that Pharisaic influences became dominant in the Jewish households at Sepphoris.

Instead of the two cities available to Him, Jesus' ministry was largely conducted in the villages. These Galilean villages were relatively prosperous,

although their economies were somewhat fragile. The economic base varied, some villages relying on an agricultural base, others on manufacturing,[14] yet others on fishing, yet others on combinations of these and other elements. It was in these communities, with their local synagogues, that the Pharisees also had a large following. The communities were stable and close knit. These were the people amongst whom Jesus found His first followers, and who formed the basis from which the Christian church eventually developed. They have different expectations and attitudes than those of the religious and political elite, as found at Sepphoris and Tiberias.

A second possible explanation is more pragmatic, and is that these cities may have been dangerous to Jesus (Miller 1992: 79). After all, it was Herod Antipas who beheaded John. When Jesus eventually confronted the religious and political elite in Jerusalem it resulted in His death.

Neither are these explanations mutually exclusive. Perhaps the truth of the matter is that both these reasons combined to keep Jesus out of these cities during His ministry.

Conclusion

The archaeological investigation of Sepphoris, interesting and worthwhile as it is in its own right, has important contributions to make to our understanding of both Christianity and Judaism, although this paper has restricted itself almost entirely to the implications for Christianity.

That Jesus visited Sepphoris is highly probable. Yet as far as the Gospel record is concerned, His public ministry did not include preaching and healing in either of Sepphoris or Tiberius. This seemingly insignificant datum reveals important information about Jesus, and is particularly useful in revealing how His teaching and ministry should be interpreted. Jesus should be understood against a backdrop of the relatively stable Jewish villages of Galilee. If any segment of Galilee was Hellenized, it was not the people amongst whom Jesus worked. They were inherently conservative and the teachings of the Pharisaic party had wide appeal amongst them. This was the context which Jesus formulated His own ideas and gained His first followers. Furthermore, while the imagery of Jesus' teaching sometimes deals with kings and courts, it is largely drawn from scenes and events that would be familiar to His village audiences. These villages also make the natural backdrop against which we can understand the methods urged on His disciples as they travel from town to town in such texts as Matt 10:5-15 and Luke 9:1-6.

Yet hidden behind this visible backdrop to Jesus ministry, as portrayed in the Gospels, there is Sepphoris, the magnificent Jewish city in close proximity to where Jesus grew up and worked as a carpenter. Indeed, for anybody familiar with first century Galilee, this city, set as it was on a hill, could not be hidden (Matt 5:14).

Notes

1. I was delighted when asked to contribute to this festschrift to Bill Shea. My warm memories of Bill and his wife date back to the friendship they offered my family while I was a PhD student, and one of the highlights of my study program was an archaeology seminar I took with Bill. In that seminar we did such diverse things as struggle through the paleo Hebrew of the Izbet Sarta abcdary to discover a possible reference to Hophni and Phinchas, to restudying Egyptian history for possible links to the Exodus, to looking at the first and second temples. It was stimulating, exciting research, and typical of the kind of creative things that Bill was continuously investigating. Bill, I want to thank you for your enthusiasm, your scholarship, your creativity and your commitment to your Lord. I respectully dedicate this article to you. Robert K. McIver, Cooranbong, October 10, 1995.

2. In ancient times Sepphoris was renamed "Autokratis" by Herod Antipas, and as "Diocaesarea" after the Bar Kochba War.

3. Eric M. Meyers, then editor-in-chief of *Biblical Archaeologist* gives an alternate version of events, Meyers 1992b.

4. Longstaff 1990:9 estimates the walking time to be slightly longer, but points out that because Nazareth fell within the jurisdiction of Sepphoris, "The citizens of Nazareth undoubtedly would have turned to Sepphoris for such governmental services as thy required."

5. Surveys of the relevant historical sources and the information they reveal may be found in several places, *e.g.* Miller 1984: 1-4; Meyers, Netzer and Meyers 1992: 10-18.

6. This point is forcefully made by Miller 1992: 79, and appears to be supported by the different dates suggested in the secondary sources: Meyers, Netzer, and Meyers 1986: 155, suggest AD 19, while Batey 1984a: 252, suggests AD 26. Sepphoris again became the administrative center of Galilee during the administration of the Procurator Felix (52-60) despite the strong protests of Tiberius; Longstaff 1990: 11.

7. The joint project led by Eric and Carol Meyers of Duke University, North Carolina, and Ehud Netzer of Hebrew University, Jerusalem (Meyers, Netzer, and Meyers 1985-1990; Meyers, Meyers, and Guglund, 1995). The University of South Florida excavations are led by James F. Strange of the University of South Florida; associated with Thomas R. W. Longstaff of Colby College; Richard Batey of Rhodes College; and D. E. Groh of Garret-Evangelical Theological Seminary (Strange & Longstaff 1987-89; 1986, 1985; Strange, Groh, and Longstaff 1984-1985). The other major excavation of the site was conducted in 1931 by a team from the University of Michigan under the leadership of Leroy Waterman (Waterman 1937).

8. *Cf.* the similar dates in Strange and Longstaff 1987: 280.

9. All reconstruction of Gospel backgrounds involves an element of circularity, but because Mack distinguishes this layer by means of its wisdom perspective, his reconstruction of the earliest "layer" of Q is more vulnerable to this difficulty than many others.

10. The name Tiberias is known in John. It is mentioned peripherally in John 6:23, and Galilee is called the Sea of Tiberias in John 6:1 and 21:1. Jesus is never said to have entered the city.

11. "The suggestion of some scholars, therefore, that the failure of the New Testament to mention either Sepphoris or Tiberias is without significance must be questioned." See Meyers, "Roman Sepphoris in Light of New Archaeological Evidence and Recent Research," in Levine 1992: 325; *cf.* Freyne 1994: 84. Tiberias as a city is mentioned only peripherally in John 6:23, while Galilee is called the Sea of Tiberias in John 6:1 and 21:1. Jesus is never said to have entered the city.

12. After the bar Kochba revolt the sixth legion was located at Legio, which became one of the larger cities of the region, and larger than either Sepphoris or Tiberias; so Broshi 1980: 4.

13. Tarichaeae and Gaba were the two next largest towns to Sepphoris and Tiberius. They both covered less than 20 hectares, and would have had populations of about 3,000. Capernaum, the base of Jesus' Galilean ministry (Matt 4:13), had a population of something between 1,000 and 1,500; so Loffreda 1986: 18.

14. From their analysis of pottery using the technique of neutron activation, David Adan-Bayewitz and Isadore Perlman were able to establish that the common household pottery used in Roman Sepphoris were manufactured at two towns, Kefar Hananya in Northern Galilee, and Shikham, a town in very close proximity to Sepphoris (Adan-Ayewitz and Perlman 1990: 153-172). If nothing else, this research shows the close trade links that existed between the towns and cities of the region.

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