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The Netherlands

Editorial: Galilee in the Hellenistic and Roman periods: new perspectives on a dynamic region

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Citation

Zangenberg, J. K., & Schröter, J. (2019). Editorial: Galilee in the Hellenistic and Roman periods: new perspectives on a dynamic region. *Early Christianity*, 10(3), 261-263.
doi:10.1628/ec-2019-0017

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3199057>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Editorial

Galilee in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods: New Perspectives on a Dynamic Region

The Galilee deserves to be examined and interpreted as one particular region of the vastly diverse eastern Mediterranean which saw many variants of blending indigenous cultures with Hellenism. In fact, it is exactly this dynamic and often extremely fragile symbiosis of “indigenous” and “foreign” cultures that makes the Galilee so crucial for scholars studying ancient Judaism and early Christianity.

The Galilee has also become a major issue in historical Jesus research. The “third quest of the historical Jesus” has emphasized that Jesus’s activity and teaching must be studied against the background of first-century Galilee, that is, the Galilee of Antipas’s reign. Thus, the Galilee is an exciting area of crossover studies for historians, archaeologists and biblical scholars. Places like Hippos, Sepphoris, Magdala or Yodfat have become major sites of interest, shedding light on the Galilee in Hellenistic and Roman times, the Hasmonean period, and the formation of the early Jesus movement and Rabbinic Judaism. Against this background, the current issue of *Early Christianity* is devoted to the ongoing research on the Galilee in historical and archaeological perspectives.

In the opening article, Jürgen Zangenberg, Professor for the History and Culture of Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity at Leiden University and co-director of the Kinneret Regional Project at Horvat Kur, develops a new, more “Mediterranean” perspective on ancient Galilee. Whereas in previous research the Jewish character of the Galilee in the Hellenistic-Roman period (especially since the first century BCE) has rightly been emphasized, Zangenberg points out that the Galilee was not a “Jewish island” surrounded by non-Jewish regions. Instead, despite its Jewish character, the Galilee was a “transitory area,” connecting the coastal area with the regions in the east (especially the Decapolis and Syria). The article concentrates on the ancient sites of Philoteria, et-Tell and Magdala to demonstrate the economic activities in the Galilee and its connection with

adjacent regions. Of particular importance is the new perspective on the Sea of Galilee (or Lake Tiberias) which according to this view did not serve as a border in the first place, but as a connector between the cities alongside the Mediterranean coast, as, for example, Tyre, Sidon and Ptolemais, with cities in the east, as, for example, Hippos, Gadara and Damascus.

Mordechai Aviam, Professor of Archaeology at Kinneret College on the Sea of Galilee and a well-known expert in Galilean archaeology, provides a new, very helpful view on the typology of ancient Galilean synagogues. Starting with a review of archaeological research since the late nineteenth century, Aviam uses the latest material to develop an innovative synagogue typology that is now based on regions instead of chronology and layout as previously. The suggested groups are called “Mountainous Galilee Group,” consisting of synagogues mainly in the Lower and Upper Galilee, and “Synagogues of the Northern Valleys,” including inter alia Beit Alpha and Hammat Tiberias. These groups have different characteristics, for example with regard to architectural elements and decoration. Aviam also provides insights into the development of Galilean synagogues after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

The following contribution is by Daniel Schowalter, Professor of Religion and Classics at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and long-time administrative director of the Omrit Temple Excavations in the Upper Galilee, southwest of Banias (Caesarea Philippi). Having started in 1999, the project has only very recently been concluded. After reviewing the history and results of the various excavation seasons, Schowalter continues with the much-debated question whether the temple was “Herod’s northern temple to Augustus.” On the basis of the different inscriptions, dedicated to the emperor or to various deities, the question cannot be decided with certainty. In any case, the temple is an important site in northern Galilee. Because of its prominent location at a junction at the northeast corner of the Hula valley, travelers would have to pass it on their way between the coast and the Syrian high plateau and up and down the Rift Valley. Moreover, having probably started as a tribal sanctuary for the region, the temple soon became a sign of Roman control over the area.

The article of Jacob Ashkenazi, Senior Lecturer at Kinneret College on the Sea of Galilee, is of a different character. It challenges the majority view in Jesus research, developed in the last decades, by pointing to the theological interest of the gospel writers in depicting the Galilee as a region of Jesus’s activity. He reminds us of the “old” approach of Karl Ludwig Schmidt who regarded the spatial and temporal framework of the Gospels as a kerygmatic construct, developed for theological purposes. Ashkenazi

does not deny that the gospel writers were aware of the political and religious circumstances of Jesus's activity. However, he emphasizes that the primary focus of their narratives, and therefore also of their depiction of the Galilee, was the proclamation of the gospel.

In the "New Discoveries" section, Michael Eisenberg from the Institute of Archaeology at the University of Haifa informs about recent results from the excavations at Hippos (Sussita). The article provides an overview on the history of the Decapolis town which was founded by the Seleucids in the first half of the second century BCE. It describes its main buildings that mostly date to the Roman period when Hippos was one of the most important centers of the Decapolis. The article also describes connections of Hippos to the neighboring regions, especially its integration into the Decapolis, and compares its status to Galilean sites, as, for example, Magdala.

Finally, Irina Levinskaya discusses an inscription found in 2007 in Panticapaeum (modern Kerch) at the Black Sea mentioning Jews (Ἰουδαῖοι) and Godfearers (θεοσεβεῖς). The inscription was discovered and published in 2007 in Russian. Eleven years later an extensive commentary in Russian was published. Now it is made accessible to a wider readership. It is a manumission inscription which for the first time testifies "that Godfearers could have been full members of the Jewish communities."

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