

Jewish Galilee

Aspects of Ethnicity, Society, and Economy

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Any general discussion of the Great Revolt must include the events in the Galilee. The area was the scene of some of the first battles against the Romans, early clashes against neighboring Gentile communities, and the first major Roman campaign to repress the revolt. Moreover, the Jewish community of the Galilee is inextricably tied to the developments that are considered to underlie the outbreak of the revolt: the Fourth Philosophy of Galilean origin, the hostility between Jewish and Gentile neighbors, and the inability of the Roman procurator (Prefect) to effectively control his province (Rappaport 2007: 33–54 [Hebrew]).

Furthermore, Jewish Galilee is of great significance to the history both of Judaism and of Christianity. With regard to Judaism, the Galilee is the cradle of the Mishnah, the Palestinian Talmud, and much of the historical development of Rabbinic Judaism, the Patriarch, and the Sanhedrin. Concerning Christianity, the site of Jesus' first activities and the starting place of his earliest disciples make the relevance of the Galilee self-evident.

In keeping with the importance of the Galilee to an understanding of all these events and developments, one is obliged to understand the social and economic fabric of the Galilean society. Perhaps predictably, the intense interest in the Galilee has led to an extensive body of research, much of it contradictory. There is a picture of Galilean society that suits perhaps every historical reconstruction.

Research on the ethnicity of the Galilean Jews has posited a range of interpretations, beginning with the theory that they were basically pagans who had converted only a few generations prior to the Great Revolt (Horsley 1996: 2) to a view that asserts that Galilean Jews were the descendants of the ancient kingdom of Israel who had not been deported by the Assyrians, and on to a contention that most, if not all, Galilean Jews were simply relocated Judeans (Chancy 2002: 1–27; Aviam 2004a: 7–15).

The views about Galilean Judaism parallel in many respects opinions on Jewish ethnic identity. On the one hand, there is the proposition that Galilean Judaism was particular, that it did not have much in common with Judean Judaism (Horsley 1996: 28). In contrast, some believe that Galilean Judaism was part and parcel of normative Jewish practice and belief in the late Second Temple era, that it differed in no significant way from the Jewish world of Jerusalem (Chancy 2002: 54).

The polarity of positions and the wide range of possibilities open to the researcher are particularly apparent when trying to understand the make-up of Galilean Jewish society. Since many interpretations of the Great Revolt justifiably seek the reasons for the revolt, advance explanations for both victories and defeats, and attempt to map the political and religious stances of the population based on the socio-economic complexion of the country's Jewish society in that period, an accurate picture of this society is mandatory.

The array of perceptions runs the gamut of possibilities. One view suggests that Jewish Galilee was composed of a rich absentee-landlord class exploiting the vast majority of the Jewish inhabitants, who were either rural poor or indigent city dwellers (Schwartz 1994: 291, 294). Another sees a polarity between rural and urban Galilee (Freyne 1992). In a similar vein, there are those who present an urban poor vs. an urban rich scenario (Horsley 2002: 93). Alternatively there are those who put forth a more nuanced position. In their view, most of Jewish Galilee was held by small free-holders who maintained their economic independence, while only some of the land was owned by the royal family (Herodian). Additionally there was, as always, a disenfranchised, exploited agrarian class along with the urban poor.

The description of Galilean Jewish society as a landscape of polarities seems appropriate to those who attempt to categorize attitudes toward Rome and a commitment to the revolt as corresponding to or stemming from social and economic status. Those who adopt a polarized view of Jewish society often describe the various groups as being either pro-Roman or pro-Revolt, depending on their relative position on the socio-economic scale (Rappaport 2007: 41–43) [Hebrew]. According to this view, the poor resented the exploitive rich and favored a revolt because they viewed Roman rule as the ultimate cause of their downtrodden state. By the same reasoning, the rich were all pro-Roman, since Roman rule made their privileged position possible. Ultimately their wealth rested on their power, and their power was maintained by Roman swords.

Yet, there is another, more pluralistic view (Berlin & Overman 2002: 13), which recognizes that one cannot draw any immediate or direct conclusion from a person's economic or social class regarding support for or opposition to the Revolt. At best, one can state that the wealthy may have been less prone to join the revolt than were the rural poor.

To help comprehend the Jewish society in the Galilee despite the confusing and contradictory points of view regarding it, we present below a description based on the four major sources of knowledge of pre-Revolt Jewish Galilee: Josephus, the New Testament, Rabbinic Literature, and Archaeology.

Ethnically the Galilean Jews were an integral part of the Jewish population that lived throughout the Land of Israel. Although the sources do not provide clear-cut answers to the origins of the Jewish population in the Galilee, the hostile relations with Gentiles, the strong tie to Jerusalem and other parts of Judea and the evidence of this society's religious practice all indicate a complete identification with the rest of the Jewish population and mutual acceptance (Rappaport 2007: 1–26 [Hebrew]).

An understanding of the social fabric is more difficult to reach. There is certainly evidence of social stratification in the Galilee, with the Herodian royal family at the very top. At the time of the Great Revolt, the Herodian prince Agrippa II sat on the throne of the areas once controlled by his uncle, Philip. Eastern Galilee was added to his domain in 54 C.E., but other areas of the Galilee were also controlled by him or by other members of his family. A salient example of this situation is the ownership of Beth Shearim by Agrippa II's sister, Berenice.

Further down the social scale from the Herodians themselves were the retainers in the Herodian court, such as Ptolemy, the procurator serving Agrippa II (*Life of Josephus* 126, hereafter, *Vita*). In some cases, such as Crispus son of Compus (*Vita* 33), they were also owners of large estates. Based on the usual practice of the Hellenistic monarchs, and Herod the Great in particular, we can assume that all major Herodian retainers had obtained some land from their royal patron (Pastor 1997: 101–103).

Below the stratum of Herodian retainers, one finds successful agriculturalists, manufacturers and merchants. These included names we are familiar with from Josephus, the most evident personage being John son of Levi, better known as John of Gischala (Rappaport 2007 [Hebrew]). John was a property owner, a dealer in olive oil, and a major local political figure with connections to the social and political elite in Jerusalem (*Vita* 192). Two other figures of this sort, less well known but mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud and the NT, are Nakdimon b. Guryon and Simeon of Sikhnin (Safrai 2005).

Although it does not provide any specific names, archaeology offers evidence of wealthy families residing in locations other than the cities of Tzippori and Tiberias. The presence of a well-to-do class in Gamla and Yodefata is attested to by the remains of houses that were obviously the habitations of an economic elite. These homes had frescoed walls and floors (Aviam 2004a: 17).

Indications that a manufacturing sector also existed in a number of Galilean locations is demonstrated by the common incidence of GCW (Galilean Coarse Ware), which was produced in Kfar Hananyah and other Galilean sites (Avshalom-Gorni & Getzov 2002; Berlin 2002, 63); pottery production, for example, is known to have taken place in Yodefata and Yavor (Aviam 2004a: 18).

Yet lower on the social scale were the small landowners, craftsmen, poor farmers owning small landholdings, fishermen, and finally the urban poor, who may have worked for rich farmers, manufacturers, and merchants (Downing 2004: 18).

Josephus mentions the sailors of Tiberias and Tarichaeae, whom he describes both as poor and as willing revolutionaries (*Vita* 32, 66). In the same light, he refers to the “Galileans,” who are apparently the rural poor (Horsely 2002: 96).

This latter class is sometimes thought to be the source of the bandits who apparently infested the Galilee and other parts of Judaea (Horsley 1996: 123–125). Although banditry might have stemmed from the social and economic frustrations of the region, it has also been pointed out that some of the bandits had no class loyalty whatsoever and may simply have been nothing more than plain criminals (Horsley 2002: 99).

There were only two major urban centers in the Galilee before the Revolt: Tiberias and Tzippori. Tiberias was by far the more developed of the two at that time. It had the institutions and the monumental construction appropriate to a major urban center, whereas Tzippori, despite its glowing descriptions as the “ornament of the Galilee,” was apparently not well developed (Weiss 2006: 30–32 [Hebrew]).

However, there were other settlements that could qualify as “towns” because of the

size of their population and the diversity of their economic activity. For example, Yodefat may have had a population of about 2,000 inhabitants. Furthermore, evidence indicates that the industries of weaving, olive-oil production and pottery existed there (Aviam 2004a: 17–19).

The very complicated social and economic mosaic of the Galilee leads us to the conclusion that the view of the Galilee as a world of polarities that formed the basis of the attitude toward Roman rule is too simplistic (Miller 2001). There were rich people who were for the war, and poor people who were willing to accept Roman rule. There were rural agriculturalists who accommodated themselves to the political realities while, at the same time, there were urban aristocrats who refused to yield to Rome.

In summary, although an intrinsic value adheres to understanding the social and economic structure of the Galilee's Jewish population in and of itself, it does not provide a consistent guide to the attitudes and actions of the people with regard to the Revolt against Rome. As Freyne states (2002), there is both a connection and a separation between social and economic factors and the reasons for the Great Revolt. On the one hand, there were many rebels who, motivated by social and economic complaints, saw Rome as the ultimate author of their afflictions. On the other hand, there were rebels whose rebellion had nothing to do with the region's social and economic problems; there were even those whose rebellion was contrary to their own socio-economic welfare, but they still joined the revolt for a complex of religious and national motivations.