

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

JESUS AND SEPPHORIS

SHIRLEY JACKSON CASE

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

TODAY no one will question the propriety of interrogating the social environment of Jesus' youth for knowledge of the heritages and stimuli that shaped his later attitudes. But Nazareth has commonly been assigned the role of a secluded village, almost lost behind the surrounding hills. It is assumed to have been so cut off from the rest of the country that its inhabitants had no intimate contact with the varied interests of contemporary Galilean society in the larger centers of population. Sometimes Jesus is permitted a wider outlook as he makes imagined ascents to the top of the encircling hills where the panorama might refresh his memory of Old Testament history. Or his imagination might have been stirred by sight of the peoples and caravans moving along the busy highways of Galilee.¹ But in this portraiture he remains detached, an individual apart, contemplating the passing scene from a position of isolation. That he himself actively participated in the life of a going society which included in its maelstrom many diverse currents is rarely or never imagined. His recent Jewish biographer, Klausner, is quite in style when he says: "This Nazareth, tightly enclosed within its hills, hearing but a faint distant echo of wars and conflicts, a charming corner, hidden away and forgotten, could create only the dreamer, one who would reform the world not by revolt against the power of Rome, not by national insurrection,

¹ E. g., G. A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 4th edition (London, 1896), pp. 432-436.

but by the kingdom of heaven, by the inner reformation of the *individual*."²

That the village of Nazareth was a bare hour's walk from Galilee's largest city, Sepphoris, and but a half hour from its largest village, Japha, are facts whose import in this connection may be far greater than has ordinarily been supposed.³ With the freedom of movement characteristic of Palestinian society in the time of Jesus, it is very doubtful whether the inhabitants of even a small village so near to two comparatively large centers of population, could have maintained anything like the seclusion that has been commonly assumed for Jesus prior to his public activity. The modern traveler, approaching Nazareth from the south by way of Japha cannot imagine that there ever was any serious barrier separating the two places. And if he approaches Nazareth from the north, by way of the modern village marking the site of the ancient Sepphoris, he will realize how easily accessible it was to the people of Nazareth when travel by foot was the ordinary means of locomotion. Certainly Nazareth was not so "tightly enclosed within its hills" that the villagers were not within easy reach of both Japha and Sepphoris. Even had they not been impelled by business or curiosity to visit these neighboring communities, it is still improbable that they could have remained completely immune from urban influences. Travel between these centers would have touched at least the outskirts of Nazareth. According to Josephus, Japha⁴ lay on the shortest road from Galilee to Jerusalem, leading through

² J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Times, His Life and His Teaching*. Translated from the original Hebrew by H. Danby (New York, 1925), pp. 236 f.

³ The physical fact of Nazareth's proximity to important centers of population is recognized clearly by G. Dalman, *Orte und Wege Jesu*, 8. Aufl. (Gütersloh, 1924), pp. 68 f., but the question of its social significance for the experience of Jesus is not broached. In G. A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, the whole matter is ignored and in the Index neither Japha nor Sepphoris is listed, although the latter is mentioned at least once in a footnote (p. 414, note 4).

⁴ Data about Japha are given by Josephus, *War II*, 269 ff., 578; *Life* 168, 230, 238, 269.

Samaria. Since this was only a three-days journey, undoubtedly much of the intercourse between Sepphoris and Jerusalem would follow this route. Not every Jew, it must be remembered, would carry religious scruples to the limit of avoiding the more convenient road through Samaria, and for non-Jews it would be a matter of indifference.

The proximity of Nazareth to these two centers of population, and particularly to Sepphoris, suggests the possibility of important social contacts for Jesus during his youth and early manhood. While explicit data are lacking, it would seem quite as legitimate to theorize about the type of social experience acquired by Jesus living in what was virtually a suburb of the largest city of Galilee, as to picture in the common fashion of many of his biographers the type of person he must have been, because he lived in the imagined seclusion of a village among the hills.

According to Josephus, from early in the first century B. C. Sepphoris figured conspicuously in Jewish history. In the time of Alexander Jannaeus it had been so strong a fortress that his enemy, Ptolemy, was unable to take it.⁵ A generation later, when the Romans divided Palestine into five administrative regions, Sepphoris was chosen as the capital of Galilee.⁶ When Herod the Great was struggling for possession of his kingdom, this city offered him no resistance, but he found here much-needed supplies for his army.⁷ Evidently it remained under Herod an important military post where arms and provisions were stored, for after his death the revolutionary leader Judas equipped his followers with weapons from the royal palace in Sepphoris, and made this region the center of his operations.⁸ Presently its citizens were to pay dearly for their seditious inclinations. When the Romans, assisted by Aretas of Arabia, fell upon the city they burned it and made slaves of its inhabitants.⁹ But

⁵ *Ant.* XIII, 338.

⁶ *War* I, 170; *Ant.* XIV, 91.

⁷ *War* I, 304; *Ant.* XIV, 414.

⁸ *War* II, 56; *Ant.* XVII, 271.

⁹ *War* II, 68; *Ant.* XVII, 289.

afterwards a new and more brilliant city arose from the ruins. It was so splendidly restored by Herod Antipas that it became the "ornament of all Galilee" and was called *αὐτοκρατορίς*,¹⁰ whatever that may mean. Until the founding of Tiberias shortly before the year 30 A. D., Sepphoris was the royal residence, but not even the loss of this distinction seriously impaired its standing. Its prominence in the time of the revolution of 66 A. D.,¹¹ and in still later Jewish history,¹² is further testimony to its prestige.

It cannot have been without significance that Jesus grew to manhood in the neighborhood of Sepphoris. In Jesus' day its population included both Jews and foreigners, although it passed for a Jewish rather than a Greek city. It was not reckoned among the cities of the Decapolis. In its neighborhood there were, according to Josephus, also many villages.¹³ Had he listed them by name likely enough Nazareth would have been included in the group. It would not be from lack of opportunity if the young men of these adjacent villages did not become familiar with the many-sided life in a commercial and political center ranking in importance second only to Jerusalem. All the varied interests characteristic of Galilean society in the early Imperial Age were present in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Sepphoris.

Jesus was a lad perhaps five years old when the Romans wreaked on Sepphoris their vengeance for its connection with the revolution of Judas. Apparently Antipas began the work of reconstruction about ten years later, but at what date it was completed is unknown. A heap of ruins could not be converted into the "ornament of all Galilee" in a single day.

¹⁰ *Ant.* XVIII, 27.

¹¹ This is much stressed by Josephus. See *War* II, 511, 574, 639, 645 f.; III, 30 ff., 59, 61, 129; *Life* 30, 37 ff., 64, 82, 103, 123 f., 188, 203, 292 f., 346, 373 f., 379 f., 384, 394—396, 411.

¹² Talmudic references may be found in literature cited by E. Schürer, *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes*, 4. Aufl. (Leipzig, 1907), II, 209, note 489.

¹³ *Life* 348. The *επι αυτήν κώμας ἔχουσα πολλὰς* may mean no more than "its many neighboring villages," or it may signify villages lying within the city's jurisdiction, like the *κώμας Καισαρίας τῆς Φαλιστεῶν* of Mark 8:17.

One may surmise that the task was not finished until about the year 25 A. D. and that its completion, and the accomplishment of a similar rebuilding program at Betharamatha,¹⁴ released laborers who could now be employed upon the new foundation at Tiberias.¹⁵

That a vigorous building enterprise was in progress at Sepphoris while Jesus was still a youth, and at the same time the main support of a family of at least six younger children and a widowed mother, compels one to ask whether Jesus himself may not have sought an opportunity to ply his carpenter's trade in the city. It has been maintained with a high degree of probability that "carpenter" as applied to Jesus meant not simply a worker in wood but one who worked at the building trade in general,¹⁶ and it requires no very daring flight of the imagination to picture the youthful Jesus seeking and finding employment in Sepphoris. But whether or not he actually labored there, his presence in the city on various occasions can scarcely be doubted, and the fact of such contacts during the formative years of his young manhood may account for attitudes and opinions that show themselves conspicuously during his public ministry. Had his earlier experience

¹⁴ Josephus, *War* II, 59, 168; *Ant.* XVIII, 27; but written *Ἀμυδα* in the usual text of *Ant.* XVII, 277. Elsewhere in Josephus it is called *Julias* (*War* IV, 438, 454). This Perea city had perished also in the seditions following the death of Herod the Great. Its reconstruction would seem to have gone on contemporaneously with that of Sepphoris (*Ant.* XVIII, 27). The parallel reference in *War* II, 168, which mentions *Julias* after *Tiberias*, probably is in the nature of an afterthought and should not be taken to imply chronological sequence. That the city had first been rechristened *Livias*—it is so called by Eusebius and Jerome—in honor of the empress shows that it was rebuilt before the death of *Augustus* (14 A. D.), after which his widow acquired the right to membership in the *gens Julia* (Ovid, *Fasti* I, 536; Tacitus, *Annals* I, 8; Cassius Dio LVI, 46). From the order of events listed in Josephus, *Ant.* XVIII, 26—28 it would appear that the work on Sepphoris and Betharamatha was not begun before the year 7 A. D.

¹⁵ One infers from the context in Josephus, *Ant.* XVIII, 35 f. that this work was begun early in the procuratorship of Pilate (26—36 A. D.), and certainly not before *Tiberius* became emperor.

¹⁶ See O. Holtzmann, *Das Leben Jesu* (Tübingen, 1901), p. 8.

been confined within the narrow limits of a secluded village, certain traits of his character are exceedingly difficult to explain. They become more readily understandable when we assume that in his youth and early manhood his outlook had been shaped by wider contacts with a more varied environment.

The unconventionality of Jesus in mingling freely with the common people, his generosity toward the stranger and the outcast, and his conviction of the equality of all classes before God, perhaps owe their origin in no slight degree to the proximity of Nazareth to Sepphoris. Had Jesus spent his youth in a remote village amid strictly Jewish surroundings, he would have been less likely to acquire these generous attitudes which later characterized his public career. But if in Sepphoris he had come in contact not only with Jewish fellow-laborers but also with artisans of other nationalities, or if only on brief but numerous visits to the city he frequently encountered a mixed population on the streets and in the shops, and thus grew accustomed to freedom of intercourse, one can a little better understand the genesis of that spirit of toleration which caused him to be called the friend of publicans and sinners.

Still another distinctive feature about the career of Jesus was his method of effecting reform. He quite reversed the program of the contemporary Jewish reformer, such as one meets in the Zadokite sectary, the Essene, a Bannus, or a John the Baptist. The representatives of these movements summoned people to separate themselves from their customary pursuits as a condition for realizing a better righteousness. In order to be especially pleasing to God one must withdraw from the ordinary contacts of daily life. Jesus, on the other hand, did not call upon his followers to sever relations with their fellows, nor did he perpetuate in his own practice even the distinguishing mark of the Johannine baptismal rite. In his view religion was something that could function to the full while people were engaged in their normal activities. His ideals of righteousness were realizable and to be realized in close contact with society in the actual process of everyday living. Had he arrived at his ideals in the seclusion of a small village, from which occasionally he withdrew to the quiet of the sur-

rounding hills to perfect his meditations, probably he would have demanded of his disciples a similar isolation as the condition necessary for attaining true righteousness. If, on the contrary, Jesus' own deepest religious experiences had been evolved amid the multifarious contacts of a complex society, such as residence in the neighborhood of Sepphoris provided, one can the more readily understand why he was no voice crying in the wilderness, but was the companionable teacher equally at home in the crowded streets of Capernaum, among the fishermen on the shore of the lake, among the laborers in the fields, or with the travelers on the highways. They had all been a part of his earlier experiences and nothing about these relations seemed strange or unnatural to him now, or inconsistent with genuine piety.

Perhaps the influence of Sepphoris is to be seen in an even more pronounced degree in shaping Jesus' attitude toward the Roman government. The people of Sepphoris and its vicinity were three-quarters of a century earlier than the people of Jerusalem in learning by sad experience the utter futility of a revolution against Rome. When at the time of his first insurrection Judas had taken possession of the royal treasures and arms at Sepphoris, evidently the citizens were not unsympathetic with his action, for when the Romans suppressed the revolution they burned the city and enslaved the inhabitants. But the residents of the new city were distinctly opposed to all revolutionary movements. Not even its Jewish population could be persuaded to take up arms against Rome. When at the time of the census Judas instigated a fresh revolt he had to find a new center for his operations.¹⁷ Again, during the early stages of the uprising of 66 A. D., when

¹⁷ That this Judas, "a Galilean from the city of Gamala" (Josephus, *Ant.* XVIII, 4), was the same Judas "son of Hezekiah" who had got Sepphoris into trouble a decade earlier is not to be doubted. The family had a very persistent revolution-complex, if Josephus is to be trusted. The father himself had been an "arch-robber," Judas' sons, James and Simon, were crucified for sedition during the procuratorship of Tiberius Alexander, their brother, Manahem, was a martyr-leader in the revolt of 66 A. D., and still another relative, Eleazar, was commander of the Sicarii (*Ant.* XVII, 27; XX, 102; *War* II, 56, 438 ff.; VII, 253).

Josephus was busy fortifying Galilee to resist the Roman armies, he found the citizens of Sepphoris entirely out of sympathy with his enterprise, although the city was recognized by all concerned as quite properly a part of the Jewish domains. Notwithstanding the fact that it was strategically situated and could have offered formidable resistance, when the Romans appeared upon the scene, Sepphoris, with its surrounding villages, immediately declared itself opposed to the policy of revolution.¹⁸ The citizens pledged fidelity to the Romans and were given a Roman garrison for their protection.¹⁹

That shortly before the year 30 A. D. a carpenter from the neighboring village of Nazareth should have had his own attitude toward the Roman government influenced by this characteristic psychology of the people of Sepphoris is, of course, only a conjecture. But the attitude which this city and its outlying villages took in the year 66 A. D. had been in force for three quarters of a century. After the restoration by Antipas the inhabitants realized how futile had been the attempt of their predecessors to wrest independence from the Romans by force of arms. Those persons who participated in the work of restoration, whether laborers, merchants or residents in general, had no desire that history should repeat itself. It required no very extraordinary powers of foresight on their part to perceive that further revolution would issue only in a new disaster to life and property. But in holding to this attitude, they were entirely out of harmony with other sections of Galilee, where Judas and his kinsmen continued the agitation that issued in the uprising of 66 A. D.

On the other hand, Jesus, living in the environment of Sepphoris and facing life's problems in the light of its experiences, shared the conviction that the kingdom of God was not to be established by use of the sword. Deliverance for the chosen people was to come in some other way. Throughout his career Jesus maintained this attitude of non-resistance toward Rome. But this was not the characteristic psychology

¹⁸ See significant remarks in Josephus, *War* II, 511; III, 30 ff.; *Life* 37 ff., 103 ff., 124, 232, 346.

¹⁹ Josephus, *War* III, 31; *Life* 346.

of other parts of Galilee. When his enemies induced him to admit the propriety of paying tribute to Caesar they executed a skilful manoeuver for undermining the loyalty of his followers from Galilee.²⁰ His state of mind was hard even for his most devoted followers to comprehend. Up to the very end they were expecting him to restore the kingdom of David and give them positions of honor in his cabinet. The hope that Jesus would ultimately effect Israel's deliverance by assuming the role of a new and more successful revolutionist clung to his disciples until the crucifixion. When this took place they fled from Jerusalem with the conviction that God had forsaken him. But Peter, James and John were from that region of Galilee where the psychology of revolution still flourished. As yet they had not learned the lesson that had been taught Sephoris and its neighborhood a generation earlier, and had not appreciated the full measure of Jesus' inherited conviction that God had no intention of asking his people to initiate their own desired redemption by a revolt against Rome.

²⁰ Mark 12 13 ff. and parallels.