

For SBL, November 19, 2005, from Marianne Sawicki

Comments on *Crossing Galilee: Architectures of Contact in the Occupied Land of Jesus*

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Thanks to the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature for arranging this conversation, and to Professor Sean Freyne for graciously agreeing to be my first conversation partner this morning.

It is awkward to be invited to assess the impact of one's own book. The invitation, by its nature, underscores the failure of the book to evoke much discussion at all during the five and one-half years since its publication. Had *Crossing Galilee* turned out to be an "important" book, others would have been standing in line for this job.

I will show you why I think that the book has had some "important" readers who have been provoked and troubled by it. The three most troubling areas of inquiry that are opened up by *Crossing Galilee* are:

- (1) the deployment of "Jewishness" from south to north, as constitutive of what "Jewish" means;
- (2) the need to criticize the authority of archaeological reports; and
- (3) what happened to Jesus' momma.

I see some indications that my work has helped others to develop their own thoughts in those areas, responding to my proposals and questions, and offering their own. I'm not the most objective observer, but I find an odd disjunction between discussions and citations of my work. That is, usually when I see *Crossing Galilee* cited in a footnote, there is no engagement with my work; and when I see my proposals entering into someone else's argument, I don't find my name in the footnotes. Sometimes this happens within the same book or article, which is what makes me suspect that there might be a kind of stealth impact.

### **(1) "Jewishness"**

One cannot overstate the importance of establishing the social context in which Jesus was born and raised. Was that context "Jewish"? First we have to sort out the equivocations. "Jewish"

can be geographical: Judean or expatriate Judean. It can refer to lineage, kinship, caste. It can refer to ritual observance (sabbath, diet), and hence to architectures for rituals (synagogue hall, miqveh, tombs), and hence to the typical decorative enhancements of those functional designs. It can refer to personal or cultural or national identity. These senses are mutually implicating, more or less. Jewishness was constructed rhetorically and architecturally. It evolved over time and is still contested today.

I argued that Galilee was occupied by two successive waves of outsiders, so that there were three identifiable groups in the land by the time Jesus was born. That is, an indigenous population in the second century BCE was invaded by the Hasmoneans and a period of “development” ensued. Hasmoneans built administrative defensive centers along roads and around a perimeter. They brought Judean customs north, they accumulated land and built up lakeshore businesses, and they furnished their villas in a civilized Hellenistic manner. This produced the first uneasy “contact” situation between indigenous Galileans and Judean expatriates.

Several generations passed, and the Herodian administration moved in and took over from the Hasmoneans in the late first century BCE. Herod the Great and his son Antipas built true imperial cities, including the romanesque maritime cities of Caesarea and Tiberias. “Contact,” in an anthropological sense, now was three-way: Herodian-Romans, Hasmonean Judeans, and indigenous Galileans. This is my hypothesis. It predicts three distinct archaeological signatures in terms of the material culture and other remains left behind by the three respective habitation styles. None of them, obviously, is simply “Jewish.” This hypothesis is meant for testing in future excavations and in re-examination of materials already excavated.

There is a contradictory hypothesis in the literature. I am happy to say that it is losing ground. It is the thesis that first century Galilee in general, and the city of Sepphoris in particular, were “Jewish,” period. The main proponents of this view have been Professor Eric Meyers and his

students, though many other working archeologists concur. In early reports from Sepphoris, this thesis was supported by pointing to two purported markers of Jewishness found among materials excavated at Sepphoris: the presence of stepped pools in domestic contexts, and the placement of tombs outside city walls. In a widely cited 1994 article, I called for more precision. It was forthcoming. Jonathan Reed now lists four indicators of Jewishness: stepped pools, implements for secondary burial (ossuaries or loculi tombs), cups or jars carved from stone, and bone profiles that lack pork. Sometimes he adds a fifth: decoration when present is aniconic, without human or animal figures. (Three are positive: things that must be present for “Jewishness.” Two are negative: things whose presence would rule out “Jewishness.”)

It's helpful to have these criteria spelled out, because now we can see that they can hardly support the thesis of a pure “Jewish,” “Torah true,” population throughout first century Galilee. The indicators occur together only in a handful of places, and this evidence is entirely consistent with my hypothesis of pockets of expatriate Judean families concentrated in the former Hasmonean outposts.

## **(2) Mystique of archaeology**

Scientific practices in anthropology and archaeology were seldom part of the training of those who engage in historical-Jesus research. Indeed, even our acknowledged experts in biblical archaeology have not done graduate-level study in field methods, materials analysis, critical social theory, or other components of anthropological training. The theories and practices that they invoke are hand-me-down from random reading and are decades out of date. This is no secret. By a quirk of fate, I had the rare opportunity to return to graduate school at mid-life and mid-career, to earn a second Ph.D. in philosophy. My interests included philosophy of science and social theory, and so I had the chance for doctoral seminars in gender anthropology and in geography as well as in history and philosophy of science. I learned how to read the professional literature in archaeology, anthropology, and critical science studies. I passed the comps, paid the dues, and published work that

was peer-reviewed by those standards.

Returning to historical-Jesus studies, I applied this expertise both critically and constructively. This has backfired, or at least it has not worked out as I expected. My constructive proposals get reviewed as “speculative” -- but that’s okay; at least they get mentioned. My critical discussion of logical and material weaknesses in theses such as the “pure Jewishness” of Galilee has earned me scoldings from reviewers in the *JBL* and in *Interpretation*. I am taken to task for not keeping up with the latest findings of the archaeologists, such as Jonathan Reed. This is factually incorrect. But more important, it completely misses the point, for it begs the question that my book raised: how do the “findings” of the excavators turn dust into data? How are the data constructed, and what assumptions are ingredients in that construction? My plea to Jesus scholars remains: Do not just take the word of “experts” about the “Jewishness” of Jesus’s social milieu. Look at their evidence. It is threadbare.

By the same token, do not ignore archaeology, either. Material remains offer evidence that is essential for Jesus studies. I argue in *Crossing Galilee* that “status” is a concept foreign to the culture of first-century Galilee. You distort the data if you force it into categories derived from modern western experience such as “honor and shame.” I propose an alternative logic (or idiom) of circulation, movement, directionality, and grounding. I see this logic reflected in the built environment, the indigenous architecture, the kinship system, and religious practices, as well as in the legal thinking of the Mishnah (which arguably is a better reflector of first-century Galilean sensibilities than are the practices of 20th-century Mediterranean peasants).

My proposal or modeling of the kinship system is further developed with reference to African traditional practices for the betrothal, inheritance, and labor of women. I call for use of African and Asian analogues to interpret the racial identity of Jesus -- instead of insisting he was a “Mediterranean peasant” or a “Jewish man.”

### **(3) Jesus's momma**

I hoped and expected that my use of African indigenous analogues would attract the interest of African-American biblical scholars. I was looking forward to this conversation, but it has not happened.

My proposal started with the obvious fact that the maintenance of a priestly caste required a source of eligible brides, that is, girls of pure Israelite lineage. Just as obvious, caste is ultimately a matter of rhetoric. It must be plausibly asserted and effectively defended. It was imagined as a direction or trajectory of descent, whose proper flow needed to be carefully guarded.

To identify the caste of the mother of Jesus, I called upon circumstantial evidence. The mother of Jesus has the same name as the last Hasmonean princess, Mariamme, who was married to Herod the Great and then murdered by him along with her sons. A recent study of the frequency of names (by Margaret Williams) found that this name was not common until just that point in time -- when it suddenly was given to many newborns in Palestine but almost disappeared elsewhere. This is plausibly interpreted as a sign of nationalistic sentiment in the Land of Israel that was not shared by Jews in the Diaspora. Mary is a pro-Hasmonean name. It is political. It signals a family's alliance with the last indigenous ruling dynasty in Judea, the dynasty that sent administrators into Galilee to settle in outposts like Sepphoris, the dynasty that was ended by Herod on behalf of the Romans. Then there are the legends that the parents of Mary lived in Sepphoris, and the story that she was kin to Elizabeth, a woman of priestly caste married into another priestly lineage (Luke 1:5).

My name is Mary (Marianne) because my parents were pious working-class Catholics in mid 20th-century Baltimore. Why was this name given to the girl who would become mother of Jesus? Plausibly, because her family were expatriate Judeans, of the third or fourth generation, living in Sepphoris, proud of their Judean connections. They intended her for a high-caste marriage. For this, Mary needed impeccable caste credentials. Caste is a fragile rhetorical achievement. I argue that

Mary could lose eligibility for such a marriage through merely being present in the city of Sepphoris when it fell to siege in the year 4 BCE. (Ketubot 2:9 ) She did not even have to be touched, much less raped, though I think that's quite possible.

Subsequent events fall into place around this sudden loss of eligibility for high-caste marriage for Mary. She is given into a low-caste marriage, to Joseph. No Hasmonean he. But she still has access to the home of her father, as African brides do. Mary's son can learn carpentry from Joseph, and how to talk among peasants. But in the home of his maternal grandparents and cousins, he can learn manners and how to recline at table and how to address crowds and how to speak Greek. My hypothesis is that Jesus grew up in two milieus: peasant village, and city villa. I further suggested that he came within the orbit of Herodian women at Tiberias and the Lakeshore, launching his career as a healer.

Yes, this is speculative. But it fits the evidence of texts and material culture better than the alternatives, I believe.

My proposal has an additional theological attraction with respect to the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary. I align the Greek cultural meaning of *parthenos*, a girl making a transition from father's house to husband's house, with the African cultural analog of the birthright of every bride to the wealth of her family of origin no matter how badly her husband's family may treat her. In short, Mary is the prodigal daughter who returns to her father's house in Sepphoris whenever she likes or needs to. The perpetual virginity of Mary, an element of my own Roman Catholic faith, can be affirmed in terms of her unbroken entitlement and belonging to the father's household. I hoped that theological conversation would develop with orthodox believers around this proposal. The reviewer for the *CBQ* called it "creative and inspiring," though of course "speculative." As far as I can tell, no theologians have taken me up on this.

**(4) Need for an archaeology of village life**

To those three major areas of impact, let me briefly add four more little ones that might be worthy of some discussion this morning. These are proposals that I made in *Crossing Galilee* and that subsequently were made by others. I would like to be able to say that my proposals evoked approval and endorsement in these cases, but I cannot say that, because my work was not mentioned. Still, I am glad to find that others agree with me, even if they don't know it.

My proposal of three distinct demographic groups in Galilee -- indigenous villagers, expatriate Judeans, and Herodians -- was presented along with a hypothetical description of the expected signature of each group in the archaeological record. The *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* saw fit to review this book, sympathetically, in 2001. In 2003 I workshopped this material in a session for the Catholic Biblical Association, of which I am an active member. Thus I was astonished when the *CBQ* in 2004 published a paper titled "In Quest of First-century C.E. Galilee" which complained that "there seems to be scarce if any interest in the material culture informing the daily life of Galilean villagers." The author laid out a series of research proposals that closely paralleled the work I had published four years earlier, reviewed in the same journal. I wrote to the author, and he said in effect, "Oops, sorry I missed your book."

I blame *CBQ*'s editor and peer reviewers for this lapse. One important function of the editorial review process is to spread the word about current work. If historical Jesus research has slowed to crawl, or has entered "its doldrums decade," as Mark Allan Powell suggests, then maybe we need to re-examine the apparatus of journal publication as well as selection of speakers for SBL sessions like this one.

**(5) Kinship issues as formative influences on the adolescent Jesus**

My reconstruction of caste issues with respect to Mary has direct bearing on her son's understanding of his own identity, which I developed at some length in *Crossing Galilee*. Her caste defect is passed on to him, affecting his own decision whether to marry and, of course, his stance toward the system of caste as such. I corresponded with Bruce Chilton about this while he was finalizing the manuscript for his book *Rabbi Jesus*, which came out in 2000. In fact, we exchanged manuscripts. Thus I am happy to see that Professor Chilton continues to explore the significance of caste for Jesus, in an online publication last month titled "The *Mamzer* Jesus and His Birth," though of course I reject his implication that he is the only scholar who has done so. (This is asserted just above the heading "conclusion.").

**(6) Resistance through ritual observance and architecture**

I argued in *Crossing Galilee* that Roman oppression was applied in part through architecture, and that it was met with resistive responses in the same medium. For example, I interpret the miqveh with its dedicated water supply as a resistive response to Roman secularized aqueduct water. The village house itself is designed both to express and to protect the patriline. When houses are compromised in Galilee, the urban rabbinic study house performs an analogous function by enclosing, regulating, authorizing what had been "oral Torah." This line of interpretation is supported by my theoretical discussion of the "recursive" functions of material culture, including architecture. I first posted this work online about 1994, and there was a flurry of discussion of it online afterwards.

I was pleased to see a similar proposal in Crossan and Reed's 2001 collaborative volume, *Excavating Jesus*. They discuss ritual aspects of Judaism as modes of resistance to the "twin imperialisms" of Hellenistic culture and Roman military domination. But they do so without engaging any critical theoretical account of the efficacy of architecture. So I hope that in future they

might take my work into account explicitly.

### **(7) Housing and gender identity**

In my discussion of architectural design of common houses, particularly their doors, I argued that gender and kinship were produced and maintained through this architecture. I also argued that the maleness of Jesus was constructed as anomalous and defective.

Halvor Moxnes puts these two ideas together in his extended examination of the anomalous status of Jesus as an unmarried man, in his 2003 book *Putting Jesus in his Place*. Professor Moxnes focuses on ancient texts about space and spaces, rather than concrete architectural examples. He uses queer theory to examine what they say about Jesus's uses of places, especially houses. I welcome this theoretical discussion, and I hope it can soon be brought to bear upon real places in Galilee, especially in archaeology.

[Added Jan 2007: I have also found my comments on the architectural features of the ordinary house echoed by Katharina Galor in "Domestic Architecture in Roman and Byzantine Galilee and Golan," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66 (2003) 44-57.]

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So I welcome comments from Professor Freyne and from the audience on any topic in *Crossing Galilee*, though I have suggested that we might focus on one or more of the seven that I listed:

1. "Jewishness" -- how it was constructed, how it is detected (or not) in the archaeological record
2. The mystique of archaeology and archaeologists among historical-Jesus scholars
3. Jesus's mother -- the construction and loss of caste and kinship
4. Need for an archaeology of village life
5. Influences of caste defect on the young Jesus -- psychologically, intellectually, religiously
6. Political resistance expressed in ritual and architecture
7. Houses, space, and gender construction

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