The Origins of Christianity Tour: Part 3 **[1]**

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Our travel in Israel took place in October; just past the peak of summer, so that we would be spared the highest of the temperatures (and it still got plenty hot). Israel, like the Cape Town area, gets its rain in winter, as so we were right at the very end of the dry season. And, like Cape Town, Israel is a water scarce region. But, driving north, the landscape changed. We were not in the desert of the area around Masada, Qumran and the Dead Sea; neither did our surroundings look like the dry, but habitable, Jerusalem. No; despite not having tasted rain in months, what we saw outside the windows of our bus were green trees and lush shrubbery. It was not a succulent jungle, to be sure, but here was life and abundance. We were in what the gospels refer to as the land of Galilee.

In Old Testament terms, Galilee was the northern part of the land settled by Israel, and which was allotted to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. The area of Galilee borders the Sea of Galilee (which is a lake, not a sea). Much of the gospel story took place on and around this lake; indeed Jesus spent more time preaching in Galilee than in Judea, where Jerusalem is.

> But when Herod [the Great] was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Arise and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel, for those who sought the young child's life are dead." He arose and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that [Herod] Archelaus was reigning over Judea in the place of his father, Herod [the Great], he was afraid to go there. Being warned in a dream, he withdrew into the region of Galilee, and came and lived in a city called Nazareth; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."
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> Matthew 2:19–23

> But there shall be no more gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time, he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali; but in the latter time he has made it glorious, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in the land of the shadow of death, on them the light has shined. You have multiplied the nation. You have increased their joy.
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> They rejoice before you according to the joy in harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the plunder.
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> For the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have

> broken as in the day of Midian. For all the armour of the armed man in the noisy battle, and the garments rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born. To us a son is given; and the government will be on his shoulders. His name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end, on the throne of David, and on his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from that time on, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of Armies will perform this.
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> Isaiah 9:1–7

During the time of Jesus, the area around Jerusalem was ruled by Herod *Archelaus*. Galilee was ruled by Herod *Antipas*, who features most in the gospel stories (Matthew 14:1–12; Luke 13:31–33; Luke 23:6–12). It is this area, Galilee, where Jesus grew up, and also did most of His teaching. Our journey took us next to this region to explore the years of Jesus's life.

Understanding the geography of a place is difficult, especially when only reading about it and seeing it on simple maps. That was one of my motivations for wanting to see Israel in the first place. It is also difficult to reconcile the different areas with different names. Geographic names and borders changed from the time of the judges, to the time of David, to the time of the divided kingdoms, and was again radically different by the time Jesus lived. An explanation of how the borders changed, even at a most basic level, would take too much time. Instead it is sufficient to know that, in the first century, what we think of the "Israel" had borders very similar to the time of David, but it was divided into various parts and ruled by different sons of Herod the Great as separate little kingdoms[1].

Galilee is fertile land. The sandstone from which Jerusalem is built lay behind us: here the buildings have a dark tint. This is from basalt: a volcanic rock, which also makes the soil incredibly fertile. When we think of the Middle East, we tend to think of deserts. We may be tempted to wonder whether all the Bible's talk of "a land of milk and honey" is exaggerated. Here it is not. The region could produce food in abundance. Between this fact and the abundance of work which was likely available to Joseph and his family (see below), it is unlikely that Jesus grew up impoverished. Instead they, by the standards of that day, likely had a comfortable "middle class" existence.

Day 4: Zippori, Nazareth

Christians are very familiar with Nazareth from the Bible, at it is where Jesus grew up, and was rejected as a prophet (Luke 4:14–30). While some translations (as in the passage above) refer to Nazareth as a "city", that is a bit misleading: it was a small town of only a few hundred families living there.

Our first stop for the day (after checking in at our hotel in Tiberias), was not Nazareth, however. Instead it was the metropolis which no-one has heard of: Zippori (a.k.a. Sepphoris). Zippori, less that 10km from Nazareth, was a large city with thousands of inhabitants. At times it also served as a regional capital. But it is never mentioned in the Bible. We don't know why, but Jesus definitely would have known about this city and travelled there growing up. It is similar to growing up in a town such as Stellenbosch: it exits a short drive from Cape Town and it is inescapable going to that neighbouring metropolis.

Despite its greatness in its hay day, Zippori likely was not impressive during Jesus's lifetime. The reason is that the city participated in a rebellion against Rome and was destroyed when Jesus was a small boy. However, this city was immediately ordered to be rebuilt by Herod Antipas, and so there would have been much work for a skilled tradesman such as Joseph (and his sons) living a short distance away. Being a large city, it was also multicultural, and Jesus would have encountered Greek being spoken there.

Today the city lies in ruins, and there was not much for us to see. There were some interesting Roman mosaics (dating from a time period after Jesus), a marketplace, an amphitheatre[2], some

houses (Roman and Jewish) and a synagogue[3].

Next we travelled to Nazareth. There has been a change in fortunes: because of the fame which the town got from being in the Bible, today Nazareth is a thriving modern city. There is almost nothing left of the small town where Jesus grew up—except for a remarkable little farmstead. Situated just 500m from where the ancient town likely would have been, and surrounded by modern buildings and busy streets, is a little farm which has been made up to look authentically first century. And it is done really well. It is staffed by volunteers who wear period clothing, and the work which they do there (baking, farming, woodwork, stone masonry, olive pressing, weaving) is done with tools made on premises in the same manner it would have been done two thousand years ago. While some might fear that a place like this could be kitsch, it is in fact very immersive and comes across as authentic. We first had a meal which may well have been authentic in the first century (bread, olives, yoghurt, herbs, lentil soup and water; I'm not sure how authentic the roast chicken was, though!), and then toured the premises, meeting all the various "tradesmen". When the area was being prepared for this project, ancient vineyard terraces were discovered and restored; these may well be the same ones Jesus would have walked through as a local. There was also a tower and wine press as well, and suddenly I could see the description in the parable of Matthew 21:33 before my eyes!

Far more powerful than a large, ornately decorated cathedral, here one could have an "authentic" experience in seeing the boy Jesus grow up and be a real person in time and space.

Day 5: Lake Galilee, Magdala, Capernaum, Bet Shean

This day was a bumper day, with many different stops. But it started in a most tranquil way: after watching a glorious sunrise while eating breakfast at our hotel in Tiberias, we boarded a wooden boat and sailed out on Lake Galilee. The waters were calm; far removed from the threatening waves which drove the disciples to despair and call out to the sleeping Jesus to save them (Matthew 8:23–27). It was so quiet that one could almost hear and see the many generations of simple fishermen who earned a living on those waters: among them the simple, pious, prideful, but not brave Simon, Andrew, James and John.

On the lake John Dickson gave a lecture *Jesus Among the Healers of His Day*. The question of Jesus' miracles and healings are a conundrum for modern secular historians. They cannot doubt that Jesus existed, and they cannot doubt that He did "great deeds". He has often been compared to other great healers from that time in history. Indeed, other people also carried this reputation, but there are marked differences between them and Jesus. The lecture discussed three:

1. Honi the Circle Drawer
2. Hanina ben Dosa
3. Appollonius of Tyana

All three of these had their histories recorder further from the actual events than the stories of Jesus. They also appeared to be limited in power; for example, Rabbi Hanina could only perform a miracle if he could recite a prayer flawlessly. If he stumbled over words, then the healing did not take place. As for Apollonius, there are eerie parallels to Jesus, but the historicity is far more suspect than those of Jesus. Indeed, as his miracles are only recorded after Christianity had taken hold, it may have been a pagan embellishment to come up with their own teacher-healer to compete with the figure of Jesus. As such, in the person of Jesus we are left with a singular and remarkable example whose historicity of miracles is well attested and cannot be ignored by any serious scholar, and whose reputation causes some pause even for those who do not believe that miracles are possible.

At the end of our boat trip we stopped at the Yigal Alon Museum to go see the famous remains of a fishing boat from the first century. The extraction and preservation of this boat was a remarkable archaeological feat, as the boat was fragile and started to disintegrate as soon as the wood, after two millennia , for the first time came into contact with air.

Perhaps the boat was sank during a tempestuous storm; or due to the neglect of its occupants; or

when many Jews, fleeing the Romans during a rebellion, in desperation of getting away from Roman soldiers, sailed on to the lake, only to be caught and massacred. Even this tranquil place could not escape the violent history of the land or was spared Jewish blood.

After the museum we stopped at Magdala, which is possibly from where Mary Magdalene came. We stopped by the ruins of the old city, where a synagogue has been excavated and where Mary may well have listened to Jesus teach.

Here we had another lecture: *The Women in Jesus's Life*. Jesus likely travelled with an entourage of around 50–100 people, including disciples and patrons. Some of these patrons were women, who may have provided for the group through cooking and such, but also supporting Jesus's ministry financially. We know, for example, that Joanna was the wife of a man of stature and prominence (Luke 8:1–3). While such a large entourage would not have been strange from a travelling teacher of that time, Jesus's close association with women and Him counting them among His disciples and teaching them would have stood out. Women did not enjoy prestige—or even much dignity—in that time and culture. Jesus's association with them shattered some social norms and may even have been scandalous. But He treated them as equals to the men: they too were created in the image of God, they too were broken and in need of having their sins forgiven, they too had gifts and roles which God gave them to further His Kingdom here on earth. And there is evidence that women remained influential within the Christian movement for centuries after Jesus.

The last official stop of the day was Capernaum. After Jesus was rejected in Nazareth, He made Capernaum His base of operations. It was on one of the surrounding hills that He taught His sermon on the mount. There is a wealth of archeology and ruins there. Again there is a synagogue where Jesus would have taught, and clashed with Pharisees. Fewer than a hundred metres from the synagogue is a strange flying-saucer shaped building hovering over the ruins. It is a Roman Catholic church. Beneath the church is the remains of a house and, even though there is no hard evidence for it, there is a strong and ancient tradition that it was the house of Simon Peter. Here Jesus would have visited and perhaps stayed; perhaps here he would have healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law.

A couple of hundred metres from this site is the shore of Lake Galilee, on which we had sailed that evening. I walked to the shore, and here I had my strongest emotional experience of the trip. He is where Simon and Andrew would have gone out in the mornings to their boat to go fish. Perhaps Jesus watched them doing so. Perhaps He stood, looking at His beloved disciples, and thinking about their future. Perhaps here is where the Man Jesus had to exercise faith: to commit them to His Father—because He, as a single Man, had to entrust His mission to the world to these twelve (eleven, actually). After Jesus's ministry was confined to really a tiny part of the world, these disciples had to go and carry this mission into the rest of the world. And they did not even understand what that mission was, what Jesus was teaching, who God really was most of the time! Perhaps here Jesus may have almost felt despair; perhaps here, looking out over the calm waters of the lake, He was comforted by His Father and encouraged. Perhaps here Jesus, being at that time the same age that I am now, was thinking about His death to which He would travel soon. It seemed like an impossible task for the mustard seed of His message to germinate in these men and grow as it should. But these are the odds with which God is most satisfied. And so Jesus, strengthened by hope and faith, planned His question to His disciples: "who do you say I am?".

The last part of the day was optional. Some people chose to return to the hotel, while the rest of us travelled to Beit Shean. This city has no special connection with the origins of Christianity, but is a remarkable example of an ancient Roman city. Beit Shean was part of the Decapolis and a large and powerful city. The ruins of this city was the most impressive of all that we had seen; far more than Zippori. We could walk alongside columns, imagine the marketplaces, and look at awe at the massive amphitheatre. This was also where some of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was filmed, and the cross used in that film still stands on the hill overlooking the ruins of the city.

Day 6: Gamla, Mount Arbel

The next morning we set off for the Golan Heights. That name may sound familiar: yes, we were now close to the Syrian border! Our destination was another extrabiblical site, and one which few people

with whom I have spoken subsequently have heard: Gamla. Gamla means "camel", and is in reference to the hump of a camel. This camel hump like hill was the location of an ancient city which, during Jesus's time, was very much thriving. Located north east of Capernaum, it produced olive oil on an industrial scale. Its location also made it highly defensible. During the Jewish revolt against the Romans, this site was a thorn in the side of Herod Agrippa II (who was loyal to the Romans) and the Romans. That is what brought us to this site.

Upon our arrival, while overlooking Gamla from a neighbouring hill, John Dickson gave a dramatic retelling of the fall of Gamla. After Herod Agrippa II gave up trying to capture the city after more than seven months, he asked for help from the Romans. Vespasian (before he became emperor) arrived with three legions (V, X and XV). After a couple of months, the Romans breached the wall of the city; the breach can still be seen today. Romans poured in, but abandoning their discipline, they were thrown into chaos and eventually repelled. Vespasian himself was nearly killed in the battle after being cut off from his troops. The Romans retreated and regrouped. After a rousing speech by Vespasian, the Roman spent a couple more weeks trying to figure out how to take the city. Eventually two Roman engineers snuck up to the guard tower, sapped it, and when it collapse at dawn, the Romans again set upon the city. This time they fought disciplined, methodically, and ruthlessly. Eventually the remaining Jews were driven to the peak of the hill, from where they hurled spears and rocks at the Romans and inflicted a great number of casualties. But, finally, a strong wind rose, which blew against the Jews, halting their projectiles while carrying those of the Romans. As in Masada, many Jews chose suicide and, after killing their wives and children, jumped from the precipice. Josephus tells us that the Romans killed 4000 Jews, while 5000 chose suicide. The final moments of the siege were again read to us by Buff after a few of us had climbed to the apex of the hill.

Gamla was never resettled. It became abandoned, and lost to time (until it was rediscovered in 1968). As such, Gamla is rare for being a Roman battlefield frozen in time. Thousands of projectiles, coins, debris and potsherds tell us the tale of life, and death, in Gamla, and largely verifies account of Josephus (which was under suspicion when the existence of Gamla could not even be established).

Our reason for being there was not so much the battle, but the cause of the battle: the Jewish Zealots. Gamla was the home of a man named Judas of Galilee. This man, together with Zadok—a Pharisee—started the Zealot movement. In Gamla there is one of the few examples of a first century synagogue of which we know today. Jesus's preaching took Him *throughout Galilee* (Mark 1:39, Matthew 4:23), and Gamla is not far from Capernaum, which was a sort of base of operations for Jesus. It it likely that in this same synagogue, Judas of Galilee and Zadok preached their war-hungry theology; and, after them, Judas's sons, and his grandsons. It is equally as likely that Jesus preached there, going straight to the home of this murderous theology, and preaching of a better Kingdom: one which starts out as big as a mustard seed, and is full of people who obey their oppressors and love their enemies.

For years after the time of Jesus, there was evidence of Gamla cooperating with Roman and not being seditious. This changed, eventually. But maybe, just maybe, the words of Jesus of Nazareth resonated with the citizens of Gamla for a while. And maybe, just maybe, there were still people trapped in the siege of Gamla, watching the encamped Roman legions who surrounded them, who were eye witnesses to Jesus's preaching, lamenting the way that things had turned out.

The time spent at Gamla was breathtaking. After we finished, we left for a location called Mount Arbel. At this point I sincerely hoped that we were done with Jewish refugees hiding in precarious heights to escape from Romans, then murdering wives and children before committing suicide when found. I was wrong.

Mount Arbel is a mountain which offers a majestic view of Galilee. It also has large caves in its steep cliff face. This was where the Zealots based themselves. After striking the Romans, the Zealots would disappear, and the Romans would be unable to find them. That is because they did not disappear to towns or forts, but to a steep cliff which is inaccessible; unless you use an ancient elevator system. Once they Romans discovered this hiding place, they needed to formulate an attack plan which may well have been unique in ancient warfare: lowering their soldiers in "elevators" and fighting a "vertical battle". But the Zealots were trapped: the Romans could take

their time in formulating a strategy which would minimise their losses. When the assault took place, again, many Jews killed their families and threw them down the cliff, before taking their own lives.

Our purpose for visiting Mount Arbel, though, was not its gory history, but for its vista. From here we had a panoramic view of Galilee and John Dickson could summarise what we had learned over the past three days and trace Jesus's life and ministry in Galilee. The following day, like Jesus two thousand years ago, we would resolutely set out to return to Jerusalem.

> He took the twelve aside, and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all the things that are written through the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be completed. For he will be delivered up to the Gentiles, will be mocked, treated shamefully, and spit on. They will scourge and kill him. On the third day, he will rise again." They understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they didn't understand the things that were said.
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> Luke 18:31–34

- 1. There were also Roman prefects and governors; sufficed to say that the politics in this region in the first century were complex.
- 2. Here John Dickson told us the story of Josephus—A Jewish historian who gained the favour of Emperor Vespasian after he predicted that Vespasian would gain control of the Roman Empire—who is a vital source for much of our knowledge of this part of the world in the first century.
- 3. This synagogue, bizarrely, had a mosaic of the zodiac on its floor.

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