

JESUS AND HIS WORLD

The Archaeological Evidence

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1

In the shadow of Sepphoris: growing up in Nazareth

Jesus grew up in Nazareth of Galilee – of that there is little doubt. He was known as ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ (Matt. 21.11; Mark 1.24; Luke 18.37; John 1.45; Acts 2.22; also Matt. 4.13; Mark 1.9; Luke 2.39) – not, for example, ‘Jesus of Capernaum’ or ‘Jesus of Bethlehem’. Nazareth was a small village with a population somewhere between 200 and 400. The Synoptic Gospels refer to a synagogue in Nazareth (Matt. 13.54; Mark 6.2; Luke 4.16). There were no pagan temples or schools. In all likelihood not a single non-Jew lived in Nazareth at this time.

Nazareth is located in the Nazareth Mountains in lower Galilee, about 500 metres above sea level. The name ‘Nazareth’ appears inscribed on a stone tablet that lists the priestly courses (1 Chron. 24.15–16). The second line reads: ‘The eighth course [is] Hapizzes of Nazareth.’ The tablet was found in the ruins of a third- or fourth-century synagogue in Caesarea Maritima.

Recent excavations in and around Nazareth – which today is a city of about 60,000 – suggest that the village in the time of Jesus may not have been a sleepy, isolated place, as many have imagined it. The old, quaint notion that the inhabitants of Nazareth had to look for work in nearby villages and cities is now quite obsolete. The economy of Nazareth was more than sufficiently active to keep her inhabitants fully occupied. There is evidence of vineyards and grape presses, of terrace farming, of olive presses and the manufacture of olive oil and even of stonemasonry. We should also assume the presence of livestock and perhaps also tanning.

The few remains of private dwellings that reach back to first-century Nazareth attest to simple, rustic construction. No public buildings have been found, nor a paved street. There is no evidence of aesthetics or artwork, such as mosaics or frescoes. Private dwellings were made of fieldstones and mud, with roofs supported by poles and overlaid with reeds and mud. These homes were small in size, often subdivided

into four small rooms. Sometimes a set of steps alongside an outer wall led to the roof, where lightweight items could be stored or dried in the sun. The story of the men who climb to the roof of the house and then lower their paralysed friend to the spot where Jesus sat teaching (Mark 3.32) provides a vivid example of this kind of private dwelling (Mark 2.1–12). It would not take a large crowd to pack a small house, so that men transporting a sick friend would have no chance to enter the door or even pass through a window. We should imagine many people trying to press forward to hear Jesus, if not to touch him. Those unable to get inside the house would be crowded at the door and struggling to peer through the windows.

The smallness of the private dwellings, along with small windows, is probably presupposed in a saying like this: ‘What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops’ (Matt. 10.27; Luke 12.3). We should imagine Jesus and his disciples seated or reclining in a small house, dimly lit, discussing the rule of God and what it will mean for Israel. Soon, Jesus tells his disciples, the things they now hear spoken quietly in the dark will be shouted from rooftops in the light of day.

The first-century village of Nazareth probably occupied no more than four hectares. Mostly buried beneath a modern city and built over throughout history, Nazareth presents a challenge to archaeologists. Thus far only small portions of the original village have been unearthed. The remains of a first-century house and other remains can be seen in the lowest levels of the Church – or Basilica – of the Annunciation. Whether any of these remains were part of the home of Mary cannot be confirmed, but they do exemplify the modest nature of these simple dwellings.¹

Nazareth was not isolated from the rest of Galilee. This was another popular myth, still held by some, who speak of Jesus growing up in a place-bound, isolated village.² Nazareth is only a few kilometres from Sepphoris, a major city, and is near a main highway that connects Caesarea Maritima (on the Mediterranean) to the southwest to Tiberias (on the Sea of Galilee) to the northwest. Sepphoris, Caesarea Maritima and Tiberias were the three largest and most influential cities in or near Galilee. Jesus grew up near one of them and not far from the highway that linked the other two. How well-travelled these roads were is shown by the pottery evidence. Pottery

produced in Kefar Hananya, some 16 kilometres from Sepphoris, has been found everywhere Jews lived in Galilee, and in fact represents some 75 per cent of the pottery used by Jews in Galilee.³ Because pottery was subject to contamination and therefore had to be replaced frequently, an uninterrupted supply was very important. That one village could serve as the principal supplier in a region the size of Galilee testifies to the network of roads and the active commerce in the time of Jesus. Not too many villages in Galilee were 'isolated' – certainly not one only a few kilometres from Sepphoris.

Although there was probably enough work in Nazareth to keep Joseph and his sons sufficiently occupied, it is possible that they took part in the expansion of nearby Sepphoris during the early years of the administration of Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee (from 4 BCE to 39 CE). Whether or not Jesus ever worked in Sepphoris, the city's close proximity to Nazareth encourages us to assume that he visited the city from time to time.

A visit to nearby Sepphoris

The Jewish reality of Jesus' upbringing and later public ministry is not always properly appreciated in some of the books published in recent years. Most writers, of course, do acknowledge that Jesus was Jewish, but they propose strange contexts and settings in which they think Jesus should be interpreted. Some of these simply did not exist in the Galilee of Jesus' day. One of the most talked-about theories has been the proposal that Jesus was a Cynic. What encouraged this idea was Nazareth's proximity to Sepphoris, which in the time of Jesus exhibited, at least in appearance, Greco-Roman trappings.

In a popular book on the historical Jesus, one scholar argued that Jesus was a 'peasant Jewish Cynic' and that he and his followers were 'hippies in a world of Augustan yuppies'.⁴ Although this book is in places quite helpful and sometimes very insightful, most find the Cynic proposal misguided and misleading. Given the notoriety and influence of the book and the fact that at least a few other scholars support the Cynic hypothesis in one form or another, it is necessary to give some attention to it. We shall begin with a review of the most important literary evidence and then take a look at what the archaeology of Sepphoris suggests.

Jesus and the Cynics: the literary evidence

Who were the Cynics (the ancient ones, that is)? What did they believe and how did they live? Cynicism was founded by Diogenes (c.412–321 BCE). The nickname ‘Cynic’ comes from the Greek word *kynikos*, meaning doggish or dog-like. Cynics earned this dubious sobriquet because of their ragged, unkempt appearance. Attractive apparel and grooming meant nothing to them. And – like dogs – Cynics would urinate and defecate, even copulate in public.

The Cynic typically carried a cloak, a beggar’s purse, a staff, and usually went barefoot. In a letter to his father, Diogenes says: ‘Do not be upset, Father, that I am called a dog and put on a double, coarse cloak, carry a purse over my shoulders, and have a staff in my hand.’ It was this dress code of sorts that has encouraged a few scholars to see significant parallels between Jesus and Cynics. After all, so goes the argument, Jesus gave his disciples similar instructions:

He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; nor bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. (Mark 6.8–9)

‘Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, nor purse for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the labourer deserves his food.’ (Matt. 10.9–10)

‘Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics.’ (Luke 9.3)

‘Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road.’ (Luke 10.4)

Are Jesus’ instructions in step with the Cynic dress code? No – they do not agree with Cynic dress and conduct; in fact they contradict them. The very things Jesus tells his disciples not to take with them – no bag, no tunic – and no staff either, if we follow the version in Matthew and Luke – are the characteristic markers of the true Cynic, as one observer from late antiquity put it: ‘What makes a Cynic is his purse and his staff and his big mouth’ (Epictetus 3.22.50; see also Lucian, *Peregrinus* 15; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 6.13; Ps.-Diogenes 30.3). There is nothing Cynic in Jesus’ instructions to his disciples.

The only parallel with Jesus is simply in giving instructions with regard to what to wear and what to take on one's journey. The only specific agreement is taking the staff (if we follow Mark; if we do not then there is no agreement at all). The staff, however, is hardly distinctive to Cynics. On the contrary: in the Jewish context the staff has a long and distinguished association with the patriarchs, such as Jacob and Judah (Gen. 32.10; 38.18) and the great lawgiver Moses and his brother Aaron (Exod. 4.4; 7.9). Moreover the staff is also a symbol of royal authority, figuring in texts that in later interpretation take on messianic and eschatological significance (for example Gen. 49.10; Isa. 11.4; Ezek. 19.14).

Jesus and the Cynics

We may compare Jesus' instructions to the Cynic instructions.

Jesus to his disciples

Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, nor purse for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff (Matt. 10.9–10).

Crates to his students

Cynic philosophy is Diogenean, the Cynic is one who toils according to this philosophy, and to be a Cynic is to take a short cut in doing philosophy. Consequently, do not fear the name [Cynic], nor for this reason shun the cloak and purse, which are the weapons of the gods. For they are quickly displayed by those who are honoured for their character (16).

Diogenes to Hicetas

Do not be upset, Father, that I am called a dog [that is 'Cynic'] and put on a double, coarse cloak, carry a purse over my shoulders, and have a staff in my hand (7).

Diogenes to Antipater

I hear that you say I am doing nothing unusual in wearing a double, ragged cloak and carrying a purse (15).

Diogenes to Anaxilaus

For a sceptre I have my staff and for a mantle the double, ragged cloak, and by way of exchange, my leather purse is a shield (19).

The full texts of these letters, and on which these translations are based, are in A. J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* (SBL SBS 12; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977). Numerical references are Malherbe's.

Besides the question of dress, some scholars suggest that Jesus' worldview is Cynic. Instead of being caught up with materialism and vanity, the Cynic lives a life of simplicity and integrity before God. According to one ancient writer, the 'end and aim of the Cynic philosophy . . . is happiness, but happiness that consists in living according to nature' (Julian, *Orations* 6.193D). Living according to nature also means treating fellow human beings as equals. A few scholars apparently think that is more or less what Jesus taught. Was it? Here are teachings that are sometimes cited to make this point:

'And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.' (Matt. 6.28–33)

'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (Mark 12.31; Lev. 19.18)

'For if you forgive people their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive people their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.' (Matt. 6.14–15)

Superficially, Jesus' teaching is at points comparable to Cynic teaching. But Jesus' teaching is very different at other, significant points. For one, Jesus did not teach his disciples to pursue happiness

and to live according to nature. What he taught was that nature reveals important things about God, namely that he is loving, good and generous. Jesus urges his disciples to have faith and live in the light of God's goodness and care. But in the end the disciple is to seek God's kingdom (or rule) and righteousness. Then all the rest will fall into place. When the core values are understood, the profound differences between Jesus and the Cynics cannot be missed.

And as mentioned already, Cynics were known for flouting social custom and etiquette, such as urinating, defecating and engaging in sexual intercourse in public (Cicero, *De officiis* 1.128; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 6.69; Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.20.10: Cynics 'eat and drink and copulate and defecate and snore'). Cynics could be very coarse and very rude. In fact one was remembered to have retorted: 'What difference does it make to me, from which end the noise comes?' (Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 91.19). There simply is no parallel to this kind of thinking or behaviour in the teaching and lifestyle of Jesus and his disciples.

Jesus did indeed criticize some of his contemporaries for their religiosity, hypocrisy and mean-spiritedness towards the poor and marginalized:

'Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by people.'
(Matt. 6.2)

'And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by people.'
(Matt. 6.5)

'And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by people.'
(Matt. 6.16)

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.'
(Matt. 23.23)

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous,

saying, “If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.”
(Matt. 23.29–30)

‘You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of people.’
(Mark 7.8)

Admittedly, all of this criticism could well have been uttered by a Cynic. But this represents only one aspect of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus criticized some of his critics, but he was not crude, nor did he suggest that religious faith was pointless. Herein lies a telling difference between the worldview of Jesus and the worldview of Cynics. Whereas the latter railed against religion because the gods, they thought, were indifferent, Jesus urged his followers to believe in God because he does take notice and cares deeply. Indeed, some of the utterances above go on to assure that ‘your Father who sees in secret will reward you’ (Matt. 6.6, 18). Accordingly, Jesus urges his disciples to pray, ‘for your Father knows what you need before you ask him’ (Matt. 6.8). This is not the teaching of the Cynics.

Furthermore, Jesus proclaimed God’s rule and urged his disciples to look to God for deliverance. Jesus longed for the redemption of his people and believed deeply that the God of Israel would fulfil the prophecies and promises of old. These hopes and beliefs are not consistent with Cynic ideology.

Accordingly, I remain completely unpersuaded by the Cynic thesis, and I am not alone: most scholars concerned with the historical Jesus also find it very unlikely.⁵ This should occasion no surprise, given what has been said in the last few pages. So why do some scholars compare Jesus with the Cynics? Good question – let’s consider it next.

Jesus and the Cynics: the archaeological evidence

Comparison with Cynic thought was encouraged in part by a number of parallels, mostly general and mostly reflecting the wisdom and social criticism of the eastern Mediterranean world of late antiquity.⁶ But a major impetus for the exploration of the Cynic model came, I believe, from archaeological discoveries in the 1970s and 1980s. Boiled down, these discoveries comprise two things related to our concerns. First, archaeology has shown how widespread the Greek language was in the time and place of Jesus. Second, it has

shown how urbanized, in Greco-Roman fashion, some parts of Galilee were in the time of Jesus. As it turns out, Galilee was far more integrated into the larger Roman Empire than at one time imagined. Galilee, Samaria and Judea were no backwater.

From these two discoveries some scholars infer the presence of Greco-Roman philosophy in Galilee. The logic goes something like this: where there were Greco-Roman style urban centres, and where Greek was spoken, it follows that there were Greco-Roman philosophers and philosophies; and that means, of course, the presence of Cynics. And then, when Sepphoris, some 6.5 kilometres north of Nazareth, was excavated and found to have possessed a paved main street and several large buildings in Greco-Roman style, it was further concluded that Cynics must have been present in this city as well. And if Cynics were present in Sepphoris, then surely Jewish youths – like Jesus – living in nearby villages like Nazareth would have come under the influence of these itinerant philosophers. This all makes sense, doesn't it? We aren't missing something, are we? Alas, I'm afraid we are indeed missing something – something very important, namely the rest of the evidence.

The impressive discoveries in Galilee in general and in Sepphoris in particular have forced New Testament interpreters to re-evaluate several things. For one, it is no longer tenable to think of Jesus as having grown up in rustic isolation, as was fashionable for so long. No: Jesus grew up in a village within reasonable walking distance from a large urban centre, part of which was perched on top of a hill and would have been visible to the inhabitants of Nazareth. 'A city set on a hill cannot be hid,' as Jesus himself once said (Matt. 5.14).

Furthermore, the great number of Greek inscriptions, as well as Greek literary finds in the Dead Sea region, has led many scholars to conclude that Greek was spoken by many Jews living in Galilee. This does not mean that Greek was their first language – that was Aramaic. But it does mean that Greek was spoken in the time and place of Jesus (and a few scholars think that Jesus himself spoke some Greek).

But the facts that many Jewish Galileans spoke Greek and that there were urban centres in Galilee, such as Sepphoris near Nazareth and Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee just a few kilometres southwest of Capernaum, do not mean that the Jewish people were soft on

their historic faith and ready to absorb Greek philosophy, whether Cynicism or something else. Recent Jewish history suggests just the opposite.

One should remember that a century and a half before Jesus was born, the Jewish people, led by the Hasmonean family (Judas Maccabeus and his brothers), fought a bitter war against Antiochus IV and the Greeks in order to preserve Jewish faith and life. Galilean Jews in the time of Jesus were no doubt influenced by Greek thought and customs to some extent, but not to that of embracing ideologies that seriously conflicted with Jewish faith.

And this is just what the archaeological evidence shows: the Jewish faith and lifestyle were taken seriously. So how Jewish or Greek was Sepphoris, the city near the village of Nazareth, in the time of Jesus? This is a very important question. Much of the archaeological work in the 1970s and 1980s revealed the extent of building. Besides paved, colonnaded streets (Figure 1.1) and large buildings, a public



Figure 1.1 Sepphoris street walk

On the right is a mosaic floor and, on the left, a paved, colonnaded street. The colonnaded street reflects Greco-Roman influence.

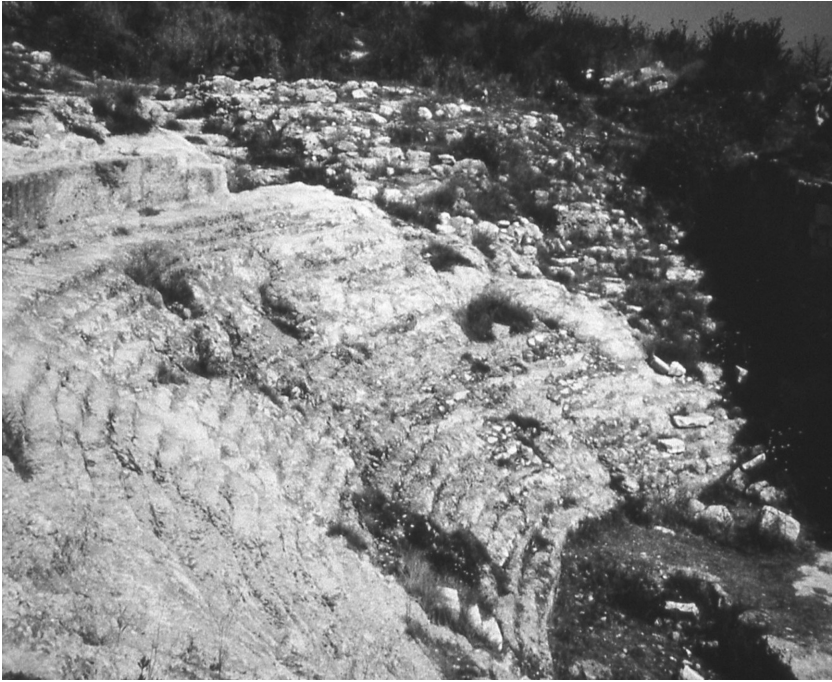


Figure 1.2 Sepphoris theatre

Although badly weathered, the outline of the lower portion of the Sepphoris theatre, carved in the bedrock, is readily discernible.

theatre (Figure 1.2) was also excavated. Although it is disputed, it is likely that the first phase of the theatre was built in the 20s and that later expansion and renovation took place towards the end of the century. But it was the further archaeological work in the 1990s, which included the discovery of the city dump, that led to the conclusion that Sepphoris was a thoroughly Jewish city in the days of Jesus after all.

Archaeologists are usually able to date the various layers of ancient cities. One might think of an ancient city as a layered cake – the top layer is the most recent, the bottom the most ancient. Therefore the deeper one digs the older the material one finds. For excavations in Israel dating to the approximate time of Jesus and the early Church, find the layer that separates the time before from the time after 70 CE.

Archaeologists and scholars usually assume that most things that existed prior to 70 CE probably have relevance for understanding the world of Jesus, while most things that came into existence thereafter probably do not. Accordingly, it is important to date the remains of Sepphoris that existed prior to 70 CE before drawing conclusions about what this city might tell us about Jesus and his world.

Archaeologists of the land of Israel can usually find the 70 CE layer in the excavation cake because of the devastation that resulted from the Jewish revolt against Rome (66–70 CE). Many cities and villages were badly damaged if not destroyed altogether, and damaged and destroyed buildings often became the fill and foundations on which the new structures were built.

So archaeologists of Sepphoris have found the 70 CE layer, and have found the city dump. The dump is a great find because what is thrown there includes garbage, and garbage reveals a lot about the people who lived at that time, especially when we are interested in knowing if Jews lived in the city and if these Jews lived according to Jewish laws and customs. What archaeologists discovered turned out to be very revealing.

Among the animal remains that date before 70 CE they found no pig bones, which is hard to explain if we are to imagine the presence of a significant non-Jewish population in Sepphoris. In stark contrast to this finding, after 70 CE (that is, after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army and the beginning of rebuilding throughout Israel), and after a sizeable growth in the non-Jewish population, pig bones come to represent 30 per cent of the animal remains. What this suggests is that prior to the Jewish revolt the population of Sepphoris was Jewish and observed Jewish laws and customs. It was only after the revolt that support for Jewish law and practice began to erode. This means that in the time of Jesus – a generation or more before the revolt – there was little and possibly no non-Jewish presence in Sepphoris. And this means no Cynics either.

But there is more evidence that supports this conclusion. Over 100 fragments of stone vessels dating from before 70 CE have been unearthed thus far, again pointing to a Jewish population at Sepphoris concerned with ritual purity (because stone, unlike ceramic vessels,

cannot easily be made unclean; see John 2.6). Non-Jews usually didn't bother with expensive, heavy and hard-to-move stone vessels. For them, ceramic vessels for drinking and cooking were quite acceptable. The large number of stone vessels found at Sepphoris is consistent with the absence of pork bones – that is, the people who lived in Sepphoris prior to 70 CE were Jewish and observed Jewish laws and customs. And consistent with concern over personal purity is the presence in Sepphoris of many *miqva'ot* – ritual bathing pools; singular: *miqveh* (see Figure 1.3). Furthermore, a Hebrew pottery fragment and several lamp fragments bearing the image of the menorah – the seven-branched candelabra – have also been found, dating from the early period.

But there is still more. Coins minted at Sepphoris during the pre-70 CE period do not depict the image of the Roman emperor or pagan deities, as was common in the coinage of this time. In contrast,



Figure 1.3 *Miqveh*, Sepphoris

This plastered, stepped immersion pool was uncovered in the basement of a large home at Sepphoris, probably dating to the first century. Many immersion pools have been discovered at Sepphoris, attesting to the Jewish concern with ritual purity.

in the second century CE, long after the Jewish revolt had ended and the population had begun to change, coins were minted at Sepphoris bearing the images of the emperors Trajan (98–117 CE) and Antoninus Pius (138–61 CE), and the deities Tyche and the Capitoline triad (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva). Indeed, in the reign of Antoninus Pius the city adopted the name Diocaesarea, in honour of Zeus (Dio) and the Roman emperor (Caesar).

The contrast in the findings at Sepphoris

Before 70 CE

What was found:

immersion pools (*miqva'ot*)
menorah
fragments of stone vessels

What was not found:

pig bones
coins with image of Caesar
pagan idols and images
pagan buildings

After 70 CE

What was found:

pig bones
coins with image of Caesar
pagan idols and images
mosaics with pagan themes

What has not been found in pre-70 CE Sepphoris is just as important as what has been found. Excavations have not uncovered any structures typically present in a Greco-Roman city, such as pagan temples, gymnasium, odeum, nymphaeum or shrines and statues, all of which were offensive to Jewish sensibilities. One way of looking at it is that devout Jews were not advocates of multi-culturalism. It is only in the post-70 CE period that pagan art and architecture begin to make their appearance, such as the beautiful mosaic in the mansion depicting pagan themes (Figure 1.4).

All this evidence leads to the firm conclusion that Sepphoris in Jesus' day was a thoroughly Jewish city.⁷ There is absolutely no reason whatsoever to think there may have been Cynics loitering



Figure 1.4 Sepphoris Mona Lisa

This beautiful floor mosaic graces the *triclinium* ('reclining on three sides') of the dining room of an impressive mansion, dating to the third century. The face of the lady of the manor, dubbed by some the 'Mona Lisa of Galilee', is prominently depicted (lower centre).

in the streets of Sepphoris on the lookout for Jewish youths from nearby Nazareth.

Commitment to the Jewish laws and customs is in fact seen throughout Galilee; it is not limited to Sepphoris. Throughout Galilee the distribution of Jewish and non-Jewish pottery is very suggestive of this conclusion. Whereas non-Jews purchased Jewish pottery, the Jews of Galilee did not purchase and make use of pottery manufactured by non-Jews. The point here is that because non-Jews had no purity issues in the use of ceramic and pottery, they were happy to buy ceramic from any source – Jewish or non-Jewish. But not so in the case of Jews. Because, in their view, ceramic was susceptible to impurity, Jews therefore purchased pottery only from Jews, never

from non-Jews. Accordingly, Jewish pottery that dates prior to 70 CE is found in Jewish and non-Jewish sectors in and around Galilee, while non-Jewish pottery is found only in the non-Jewish sectors. These patterns of distribution strongly suggest that the Jewish people of Galilee were scrupulous in their observance of Jewish purity laws.

Given the evidence that Galilee in Jesus' time was populated with a Jewish people committed to their biblical heritage, and given the complete absence of evidence of any kind of Cynic presence in nearby Sepphoris (or anywhere else in Galilee for that matter), the Cynic hypothesis strikes me as completely lacking in foundation. Moreover it is quite unnecessary – much better parallels for Jesus' teaching can be found in the early literature of the Rabbis and the even earlier Dead Sea Scrolls.

Before leaving Sepphoris, something should be said about its theatre. Archaeologists are divided over the question of its date. All agree that it was enlarged some time in the second half of the first century to accommodate an audience of 4,000. The dispute concerns the date of the earliest phase of the theatre, which may have seated about 2,500. Some archaeologists claim that the theatre was built during the city's expansion under Antipas. If a smaller version of the theatre existed in the time of Jesus, we may have a number of allusions to it in Jesus' teaching. One immediately thinks of the mocking references to the 'hypocrites'. The word itself was originally neutral, meaning 'actor' or 'play-actor' (Diodorus Siculus 37.12.1), though by the first century CE, 'hypocrisy' had also come to mean sanctimonious pretence. This is how Jesus used the word in criticizing those who acted out their piety in an ostentatious or insincere manner. But his use of 'hypocrite' in Matthew 6, and perhaps elsewhere, such as in Matthew 23, probably also reflected the presence and function of the theatre in nearby Sepphoris. There are a number of specific parallels with theatre and acting, beyond the word hypocrite itself.⁸

Jesus warns his disciples not to practise their piety 'before people, in order to be seen by them' (Matt. 6.1). To be 'seen' – or 'watched', from *theathenai*, which is from the root that gives us 'theatre' – may envisage a public performance, something done before an audience. This word by itself would not bring to mind the theatre, but Jesus

piles up other terms and activities. These include making a show of charitable donations: ‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do’ (6.2). In the theatre of late antiquity, trumpets often announced an action or a new scene. There are also traditions about trumpets sounding for prayer or worship – in for example the Cairo Damascus document (CD) 11.21–22; *m. Ta’anit* 2.5 – but no Jewish traditions sounding trumpets in connection with almsgiving. The sounding of the trumpet comes from the Greek theatre, not the Jewish temple or synagogue.

Jesus also instructs, ‘When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret’ (6.3–4). Again we may have an allusion to the theatre, in which actors skilfully coordinated the motions of their hands to complement their words and make more vivid in the minds of the audience what they were to imagine. The hands of the actors were supposed to be synchronized and meaningful, drawing attention to what was being said or done (on this, see Marcus Fabian Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* (on stage and orations) 11.2.42; 11.3.66; 11.3.70, 85–121; esp. 114: ‘The left hand never properly performs a gesture alone, but it frequently acts in agreement with the right’). Against such well-orchestrated and polished performances, Jesus says, ‘Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.’

Jesus warns his disciples not to ‘be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others’ (Matt. 6.5). Standing and praying in public may once again allude to the performance of the actor (or ‘hypocrite’), who in the theatre stands and gives a soliloquy. It has been observed that the word *plateia*, meaning ‘street’ (one of the words in the translation ‘street corners’; literally ‘corners of streets’, *en tais goniais ton plateion*), was used of the colonnaded street in nearby Sepphoris. The image may be that of a actor standing in a busy thoroughfare speaking loudly, hoping to attract an audience to the theatre.⁹

Finally, when Jesus enjoins his disciples not to ‘look dismal’ when they fast so that they will not be ‘like the hypocrites’ who ‘disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by people’ (Matt. 6.16), he once again may be alluding to the actors or street-corner mimes who paint their faces in order to play their part.

The coherence between Jesus' mockery of the religious hypocrites of his day and the actors and theatre of the time, whether at Sepphoris or elsewhere, suggests that Jesus probably shaped his criticisms and sarcasm to reflect the theatre. The archaeological work at nearby Sepphoris may have relevance for understanding better this aspect of Jesus' teaching.

There is no evidence that during his ministry Jesus visited Sepphoris. It has been suggested that he may have alluded to actors and theatrics, which could further suggest that he may have visited the theatre of Sepphoris at an earlier time in his life. But the absence of any mention of a visit to Sepphoris during his public travels and activities is curious. Indeed, there is no evidence that Jesus visited any of the great cities of Galilee and nearby territories, such as Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee and Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean Sea. In fact the only major Galilean city he approached was Caesarea Philippi, near the northern border. Yet even in this case we are told that he only went 'to the villages of Caesarea Philippi' (Mark 8.27) or 'into the district of Caesarea Philippi' (Matt. 16.13), not into the city itself. The avoidance of the cities is curious. In Judea, Jesus visited Jericho and Jerusalem but in Galilee he apparently entered no city. If the Gospels do not narrate any visits to Galilean cities, are there hints, nevertheless, that during his Galilean ministry Jesus was familiar with urban centres? There are such hints.

Jesus and the cities

There are indications in his teaching and activities that Jesus was familiar with urban life. We are in a position to see these indications more clearly because of the excavations that have taken place in Galilee.

While the Gospels say nothing of a visit to Sepphoris, Jesus may have alluded to the prominent, elevated city in a well-known saying, 'A city set on a hill cannot be hid' (Matt. 5.14). The saying that immediately follows, 'Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand' (Matt. 5.15; Mark 4.21; Luke 8.16; 11.33), suggests that the reason a city on a hill cannot be hid is that its light, especially at night, is seen from a distance. A well-lit Sepphoris would have been visible to the people of nearby Nazareth.



Figure 1.5 First-century Capernaum

Excavations of first-century Capernaum have uncovered floors, foundations and lower portions of the walls of various buildings and private homes. The dark stone is volcanic basalt. The limestone synagogue in the background dates to a later time.

Jesus set up his headquarters, as it were, in the large village – or small city? – of Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Excavations at this site have uncovered the volcanic basalt footings of a public building (Figure 1.5), probably the original synagogue (the partly reconstructed limestone synagogue that now rests on the footings dates no earlier than the third century CE).¹⁰ A private home, converted into a public meeting place and still later expanded into an octagonal church, has also been excavated. Although not certain, this may well have been the home of Peter or his mother-in-law in which Jesus taught and in which he was sought out by crowds (Mark 1.21–34).¹¹ Not too far from the synagogue are ruins that have been tentatively identified as those belonging to a military official and a number of soldiers. Although the Gospels call this man a ‘centurion’ (Matt. 8.5; Luke 7.2; John 4.46, 49 – where

he is a 'royal official'), he probably was not a Roman but an officer under the authority of the tetrarch Antipas, who employed Roman terminology. The Roman bath and remains of other structures that may have been Roman date to the second century.¹²

In relocating to Capernaum, Jesus placed himself in the vicinity of important trade routes and lines of communication, so it isn't surprising that word of what Jesus does in Capernaum becomes known throughout Galilee (Mark 1.28, 32–33, 37, 45; Luke 4.23: 'what we have heard you did at Capernaum'). Before long Jesus is hard-pressed by large crowds (Mark 3.20; 4.1; 6.53–56); he even seeks solitary places where he can be alone (Mark 3.7–10; 6.30–33, 45–46).

Given its location it isn't surprising that there was a customs office in Capernaum. It was here that Jesus called Levi the tax collector (Mark 2.14; Luke 5.27), also known as Matthew (Matt. 9.9; 10.3), who hosted a reception at which a number of other tax collectors and 'sinners' were present (Mark 2.15–17; Luke 5.29–32; Matt. 9.10–13). Jesus becomes known for associating with tax collectors (Luke 7.29; 15.1; 19.2) and he often refers to tax collectors in his teaching (Matt. 11.19; 18.17; 21.31–32; Luke 18.10–14). Associations with and references to tax collectors reflect an urban element.

Jesus warns his disciples to come to terms with those who threaten legal action, lest they be dragged into court and perhaps thrown into prison (Matt. 5.25–26). Courts and prisons are located in cities, not small villages. In this connection one thinks of Jesus' parable of the Indifferent Judge who gives in to the nagging widow (Luke 18.1–8).

Jesus exhorts his disciples to enter the 'narrow gate', not the 'broad gate', which leads to death (Matt. 7.13–14). Although the saying is metaphorical and moral, the image is that of city gates, which in turn implies walled cities, not rural villages. Jesus' lament that his generation is like the children piping and singing in the 'market places' (Matt. 11.16–19; Luke 7.31–35) makes better sense in reference to a city rather than a village setting.¹³

Some of Jesus' parables reflect urban life and the commercial realities that go with it. The parable of the labourers (Matt. 20.1–16) imagines a number of unemployed men loitering in the 'market

place'. First-century readers would likely assume that these day labourers have lost their land to wealthy landholders and commercial farmers. Many of these owners of large farms would have lived in nearby cities. The same probably applies in the case of the parable of the Wicked Vineyard Tenants (Mark 12.1–12). The tenant vine-dressers are under contract with an absentee owner and, as the story in the parable shows, they are resentful and desire to acquire the vineyard for themselves. And finally one thinks of the parable of the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16.1–9) whose accounts with his master's debtors reflect a substantial business the transactions and records of which would have been imagined as taking place in an urban rather than a rural setting.¹⁴

Return to Nazareth

If Sepphoris, the largest city in the vicinity of Nazareth, was thoroughly Jewish in the time of Jesus, as the archaeology of the last 20 years suggests, then what may we conclude with respect to Nazareth itself? It is very probable that a small Jewish village like Nazareth would have been very devout.

As it happens, what little the New Testament Gospels tell us about Nazareth suggests that the villagers were both devout and quite conservative. When Jesus preached in Nazareth, his hometown, his reception was anything but cordial. The Markan evangelist simply says, 'And on the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue' (Mark 6.2).¹⁵ Nothing is said about what he taught. Luke tells us that Jesus recited part of Isaiah 61 ('The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news') and then declared that 'this scripture is fulfilled' (Luke 4.18–21). Luke's expanded version likely captures the essence of Jesus' teaching, namely the good news of the rule of God (Mark 1.15). Although the reaction is initially and briefly positive, at least as Luke tells the story (Luke 4.22), the mood of the villagers sours quickly.

The villagers apparently had no objection to sabbath sermons devoted to the good news of God's rule, but they evidently didn't think Jesus possessed the credentials to make such an announcement; either that or they didn't like the way Jesus understood and applied this good news. The first option appears to be the understanding of

the evangelists Matthew and Mark. According to them the people of Nazareth ask:

Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?

(Mark 6.2–3; see also Matt. 13.54–55)

The last question, which refers to Jesus' trade ('carpenter'), his personal identification ('son of Mary') and his brothers and sisters, borders on contempt. In fact it is too offensive for the evangelist Matthew, who revises part of the question to read, 'Is not his mother called Mary?' (Matt. 13.55). Mark's simpler 'son of Mary' (instead of the more conventional 'son of Joseph') could well have alluded to uncertainty about Jesus' conception; that is, who his father was. Matthew will have none of that (and, of course, in his infancy narrative has explained that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and was raised by Joseph as his son). These rhetorical questions imply that Jesus lacked the qualifications to make weighty pronouncements, such as the arrival of the rule of God and the fulfilment of scriptural prophecies. Because Jesus is one of them, so the villagers reason, there is nothing special about him. In response to this scepticism Jesus declares, 'A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house' (Mark 6.4).

The version presented in Luke offers a different explanation for the rejection of Jesus. Although happy enough to hear that the prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled, even as it was spoken (Luke 4.21, literally: 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your ears'), the congregation is deeply offended by the suggestion that the good news of the rule of God will benefit Gentiles, even enemies of Israel, as exemplified in the activities of the famous prophets of old, Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4.25–27). Reference to these prophets would have been especially arresting given that they were from the northern kingdom of Israel, what in the time of Jesus is Galilee. Moreover these prophets were famous for their deeds, not their writings. They healed people (2 Kings 5.8–14), raised the dead (1 Kings 17.17–24; 2 Kings 4.29–37; 13.20–21) and even multiplied loaves (2 Kings 4.42–44). Elijah was

even associated with the coming day of the Lord (Mal. 4.5: 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes'; see also Sir. 48.10). In many ways these famous prophets, 'local heroes' in the eyes of the Galileans, were models for Jesus himself. As they had done, so Jesus healed people and, like Elijah, proclaimed the eschatological hour.

The conviction that the prophecy of Isaiah 61 was for the righteous of Israel alone is not a guess; it is documented thanks to a fragmentary scroll found near Qumran. According to 11Q13, also called the Melchizedek Scroll, the mysterious figure Melchizedek (see Gen. 14.17–20; Ps. 110.4) will come in fulfilment of Isaiah 61.1–3 ('the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives'). He will not only liberate Israel and forgive Israel her sins, he will destroy Satan (or Belial) and those allied with him; that is, Israel's enemies. If the interpretation of Isaiah 61 in 11Q13 is anything to go by, we should assume that the people of Nazareth believed that the anointed of the Lord, foretold in the prophecy, would bring blessings to Israel and judgement upon Israel's enemies. If Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfilment of Isaiah 61 (that is, the messenger anointed of God to bring the good news of the day of the Lord's favour), then surely this means blessing for the people of Nazareth and payback for their enemies. But Jesus' interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy, in which he appealed to the examples of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, hinted at something else.

Outraged at Jesus for suggesting that the good news was as much for Israel's enemies as for Israel, the men of the synagogue thrust him out of the village and 'led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong' (Luke 4.29). Although no one knows which 'brow of the hill' the evangelist had in mind (only modern tour guides seem to know!), the description fits the topography of Nazareth and its immediate environs.

Both Gospel versions of the unhappy Nazareth visit are consistent with what we know of this village, from the little archaeology that has been done and from what we can infer from the larger context of Galilee itself. We have in this story a reflection of the mindset of the inhabitants of a small Galilean village, in an environment

that takes seriously its Jewish heritage and longs for the fulfilment of the prophecies found in sacred Scripture. To the extent that local prophets of old, such as Elijah and Elisha, forecast things to come and so had any relevance for contemporary Galilean Jews, it was believed that they augured future blessings. But these blessings are for God's people – for Israel, not for outsiders, Gentiles and certainly not Israel's enemies. And no local man – and that includes a carpenter whose family is well known to all in the village – is in any position to say otherwise.

What we have observed in the two accounts of Jesus' visit to his hometown is not the first hint of tension between Jesus and the people of Nazareth. At the very beginning of his ministry we are told that Jesus left Nazareth and 'went and dwelt in Capernaum by the sea' (Matt. 4.13). Why did Jesus relocate to Capernaum? Were the dynamics seen in his visit to the synagogue already in play, even at the outset of his public ministry? There is yet another and more obvious incident in which we see tension between Jesus and his family. It is not clear where precisely this story takes place; perhaps we should assume Capernaum. In any case, we are told that when Jesus learned that his mother and brothers were seeking him, he replied: 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother' (Mark 3.34–35; Matt. 12.48–50; Luke 8.21). No matter how this story is nuanced, it clearly testifies to some tension between Jesus and his family.

We cannot be precisely sure of the cause of this tension, but the accounts of the preaching at the synagogue may provide us with an important clue. Jesus' family, along with most of the inhabitants of Nazareth, did not think that he – one of their own – was qualified to announce the good news of the rule of God, and certainly not to challenge their understanding of the implications of the rule of God for themselves and others. After all, one of Jesus' first followers was remembered to have asked, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' (John 1.45). Perhaps it's no surprise that the people of Nazareth had doubts about Jesus and that even his own brothers didn't believe in him, at least initially (John 7.5).

In this chapter we have touched on Jesus in the synagogue. I've suggested that the synagogue is the context in which Jesus' development and religious thought should be understood, not in

In the shadow of Sepphoris

an imagined urban setting – nearby Sepphoris for example – where Jesus might have come under the influence of Greek philosophy. In the next chapter the synagogue will be explored further. What archaeological evidence is there for synagogues in the time of Jesus? And if they existed, what did they look like and what was their function?