

Who Were the Galileans in the Days of Jesus?

Jesus was a Galilean. That much we know. The question of who exactly the Galileans were during biblical times is a much more complicated matter. The origins and identity of the people dwelling in this northernmost part of Israel at the time of the Second Temple remains an unsolved and fascinating riddle of history—made even more interesting by the fact that the Galilee was the venue for most of Jesus' ministry.

Easton's Biblical Dictionary tells us: In the time of our Lord, Galilee embraced more than one-third of Western Palestine, extending "from Dan on the north, at the base of Mount Hermon, to the ridges of Carmel and Gilboa on the south, and from the Jordan valley on the east away across the splendid plains of Jezreel and Acre to the shores of the Mediterranean on the west."

Palestine was divided into three provinces, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, which comprehended the whole northern section of the country (see Acts 9:31), and was the largest of the three.

It was the scene of some of the most memorable events of Jewish history. Galilee also was the home of our Lord during at least 30 years of His life. The first three Gospels are chiefly taken up with our Lord's public ministry in this province. The entire province is encircled with a halo of holy associations connected with the life, works, and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is noteworthy that of His 32 beautiful parables, no less than 19 were spoken in Galilee. And it is no less remarkable that of his entire 33 great miracles, 25 were wrought in this province.

His first miracle was wrought at the wedding in Cana of

Galilee, and His last, after His resurrection, on the shore of Galilee's sea. In Galilee our Lord delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and the discourses on The Bread of Life, on 'Purity, on Forgiveness,' and on Humility. In Galilee He called His first disciples.

Among the most interesting debates in the field of biblical studies is the question of who-or rather, of what-those disciples were. That the debate continues with undiminished interest is due to the fact that the more we look into the background and nature of Jesus' Galileans, the less we can say about them with absolute certainty.

One major question is exactly how "Jewish" the Jews of Galilee really were in the Post-Exile period. For most laymen, the question itself is somewhat surprising. They would ask, "Hasn't Galilee been Jewish since the Twelve Tribes conquered Israel in the 13 century BCE?" The best answer to this question is, yes and no.

The problem can be traced back to historical developments in Ancient Israel, long before the time of Jesus. The tribes of Zebulun, Naphtali, Issachar and Asher settled Galilee. The region later belonged to David's kingdom and then to the northern nation of Israel. The situation was straightforward enough until the Assyrians under Emperor Tiglath-Pileser III conquered Israel in 733 BCE, and obliterated the kingdom entirely under his successor Shalmaneser V in 722.

Most historians believe that the victorious Assyrians, as was their custom, evacuated and relocated the entire population out of the Galilee and replaced them with other peoples from their far-flung empire.

Out of Jewish sovereignty for the next 600 years, the Galilee returned to Jewish political control when the Hasmonean rulers conquered the region and added it to their short-lived kingdom—along with Idumea, the ancient kingdom of Edom, east

of the Dead Sea.

One school of scholarship says that John Hyrcanus forced the Gentile Galileans and Idumeans to convert to Judaism more or less at sword-point, marking the one and only forced mass conversion to Judaism's in its 4,000-year history. Thus, in Jesus' time, the Galilee contained many Jews whose ancestors had only been Jewish for about a century.

Another school of thought, however, says that when the Assyrians conquered Israel and evacuated the Galilee, they left the land virtually empty. Says Religion Today contributor Paul Flesher: "At this moment, Galilee drops out of history for the next 600 years. To be sure, 2 Kings 17 tells of the resettlement of Samaria, but Galilee is not mentioned."

Archaeological research now reveals this was not just an oversight of the Biblical writers. Surface surveys indicate no human occupation of the Galilee during the sixth and seventh centuries BCE. A few scattered, small settlements began to appear in following centuries, mostly military outposts and a few small farming communities which sent their harvests to the coastal cities. The same conclusions can be drawn from the excavations of major sites as well. So Galilee remains essentially empty for more than half a millennium following the Assyrian invasions.

The archaeological evidence reveals a sudden change about the start of the first century BC. Over a period of a couple decades, dozens of new villages appear. This indicates that a new, rather large, population comes into Galilee. The trend continues for the next half-century or so, with many new settlements appearing and then growing larger.

Who were these new inhabitants? These new archaeological findings indicate that they were transplanted Judeans. The ancient historian Josephus relates how Alexander Jannaeus, the

King of Israel from 102 to 76 BC, extended the northern boundary of his Judean-centered country into Galilee during his reign using military means.

The archaeology reveals that the new inhabitants were Judeans. First, the currency of the region is now that of the Judean Janneaus and his successors; it is not that of the coastal cities or of Damascus further north in Syria. Second, excavated village areas reveal the same interest in religious purity common among Judeans, with ritual baths cut out of the bedrock and houses that contained stone bowls, cups and plates that were impervious to impurity. Third, the Galileans followed a Judean diet in that they did not eat pork; no pig bones are found in the garbage dumps.

So the archaeological research of recent decades now shows that the Galilean population of Jesus' time were descendants of Judean immigrants of a century or so earlier.

Whether it had been Jewish migrants from Judea or a Galilean peasantry forcibly converted to Judaism that ultimately became the "Galileans" of Jesus' day, one thing seems reasonably clear: they were considered different in many respects from Jews living farther to the south, closer to Jerusalem.

According to L. Michael White, Professor of Classics, and Director of Religious Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, the term Galilean seems to have been used in a variety of ways in this period. To some, it just means an outsider, or someone who's not really an old Jew of the traditional sort. Precisely because the Galilee had traditionally been Jewish at the time of the Maccabean Revolt a hundred or 150 years before Jesus.

A lot of the problem was apparently due to religion. Says theologian Frederick Bruner:

"Galilee was not just geographically far from Jerusalem; it was considered spiritually and politically far, too. Galilee

was the most pagan of the Jewish provinces, located as it was at the northernmost tier of Palestine. This distance from Zion was not only geographic; Galileans were considered by Judaeans to sit rather loosely to the law and to be less biblically pure than those in or near Jerusalem."

Judean Pharisees, in particular, were less than impressed with Galilean observance of the fine points of Jewish religious observance. While praised for their passionate identification with Judaism and the Jewish people, their ignorance in law and disinterest in study was an almost never ending source of fuel for Judean snobbery. The Jerusalem Talmud records the despair of the great First Century sage, Yohanan ben Zakkai, at having been asked no more than two questions about Jewish law during his 18-year posting in the Galilee: "O Galilee, O Galilee, in the end you shall be filled with wrongdoers!" (Shabbat 16:7, 15d).

Finally, the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* informs us:

"The population of Galilee was composed of strangely mingled elements-Aramaeans, Itureans, Phoenician and Greek. In the circumstances, they could not be expected to prove such sticklers for high orthodoxy as the Judeans. Their mixed origin explains the differences in speech, which distinguished them from their brethren in the South, who regarded Galilee and the Galileans with a certain proud contempt."

Regardless of their origins, however, the points about Galileans on which virtually everyone could agree was their fierce attachment to what they regarded as Judaism, their uncompromising patriotism, and their unstinting courage. Perhaps no sector of the Jewish population fought the Romans with more valor, refusing to surrender even when Judeans were ready to come to terms.

As the great contemporary Josephus recorded, Galileans were

“always able to make a strong resistance on all occasions of war; for the Galileans are inured to war from their infancy ... nor has the country ever been destitute of men of courage.”

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