

In recent years scholars have come to realize that to understand a biblical text, one must be aware of the social and cultural context in which it originated. That basic insight has been brought into sharper focus by the use of insights from sociology and archaeology. This approach is especially important for understanding the sayings of Jesus and the narrative tradition about him in terms of its Galilean setting. Fresh analysis of the rabbinic sources, especially by Jacob Neusner, have shown that the Mishnah and Talmud developed long after the time of Jesus, and cannot be used to shed light on his teachings. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the fresh examination of other extra-biblical Jewish writing of the centuries just before the time of Jesus have shown how richly diverse Judaism was in the time of Jesus. What comes dear in the documents from this time is how central for Jews — and by extension, for early followers of Jesus — was the question as to what the criteria were for membership in the people of God. Also evident is the powerful hope, among Jews and Gentiles of this period, in some kind of divine intervention that would defeat the powers of evil and establish justice in the world.

This process of analysis of the Jesus tradition has been helped greatly by the insights from cultural anthropologists. Clifford Geertz has expressed this as follows: “The view of man as a symbolizing, conceptualizing, meaning-seeking animal, which has become increasingly popular both in the social sciences and in philosophy . . . opens up a whole new approach not only to the analysis of religion as such, but to the understanding of the relations between religion and values . . . It seems necessary to continue to interpret symbolic activities — religion, art, ideology — as nothing but thinly disguised expressions of something other than what they seem to be: attempts to provide orientation for an organism that cannot live in a world it is unable to understand.” He goes on to state that scholars therefore must seek to understand “how people define situations and how they go about coming to terms with them.”<sup>1</sup> The analysis of actions, customs, utterances, images, and the fresh appropriation of older tradition must be undertaken as a means by which a social movement formulated and conveyed meaning<sup>2</sup> but Geertz does not regard sociology as a purely objective scientific discipline. Instead, he urges interchange between social scientists and scholars in the humanities, with the latter serving as “the source of imagery” for social-scientific analysis.<sup>3</sup> Another sociologist, Peter Berger, has noted that every human society has its own corpus of what is officially accredited wisdom, which is taken as self-evidently true.<sup>4</sup> Although these perceptions and insights begin through a charismatic individual, they take formal shape and survive only through institutional developments.<sup>5</sup>

It is precisely this kind of process which is evident in the gospels, where the insights and perceptions of Jesus are preserved, but also adapted in light of the developments that took place in the Jesus movement by the end of the first century. This movement toward conceptual and community formalization has long been noted by New Testament scholars and continues to be refined.<sup>6</sup> What is new is the increasing information about the Galilean context in which Jesus lived and launched the movement which became Christianity. In a careful, well-informed analysis of early first century Galilee, Archaeology, the Rabbis and Early Christianity, Eric Meyers and James Strange have analyzed texts, buildings, coins, pottery, inscriptions, and have concluded that Galilee in this period was linked commercially and culturally with the wider Roman world, and was crossed by busy, major road routes. Sepphoris, only a few miles from Nazareth was fully developed as a Roman style city precisely during the lifetime of Jesus. It is even conceivable that Jesus and Joseph — who were “builders”<sup>7</sup>, not simply carpenters — may have worked in building this city. References in the gospels to the cities of the Decapolis and the coast of Tyre and Sidon, as well as the very early emergence of a Christian community in Damascus, show that the Jesus movement began quickly to spread out into the wider Gentile world. The widespread evidence for the use of Greek in Galilee during this time raises the question whether Jesus was bi-lingual, which would have contributed to the rapid outreach of the movement to Greek-speaking people. The Israeli scholar, Magen Broshi, has observed that Lower Galilee in this period was one of the most densely populated areas of the entire Roman Empire. This shatters the older scholarly picture of Jesus as living and teaching in a land of scattered farming villages. It also means that the rapid geographical and cultural spread of the movement he launched makes sense, given the Galilean context in which he lived. Jesus’ own open attitude toward those excluded by ritual and moral norms (“a friend of tax-collectors and sinners.” Lk 7:34) makes sense in Galilee.

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1 Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 131.

2 Geertz, Clifford, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). p. 12.

3 Geertz, *Local Knowledge* , p. 25-26.

4 *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity*. (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1992), p. 29.

5 Berger, *Far Glory*, p. 137-139.

6 Analysis and summary of the results of this mode of analysis are offered in my recently published study *Jesus in History*, 3rd ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt-Brace, 1995).

7 The Greek term is *tekton*.