

## *The Myth of a Gentile Galilee*

Mark A. Chancey

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### SUMMARY

The present volume argues persuasively for the essentially Jewish character of first century Galilee. Through detailed study of the literary and recent archaeological evidence, the author successfully questions the "myth of a Gentile Galilee". Reconstructions of the ministry and message of Jesus that presuppose a strong Gentile influence or a large gentile minority in Galilee are historically unfounded: "Scholarly reconstructions that de-emphasize the Jewish character of Jesus' ministry or the Jewish roots of early Christianity by de-Judaizing G. distort Jesus, the Jesus movement, and their Galilean context. The evidence, both literary and archaeological, corroborates the Gospels' depictions of Jesus as a Jew preaching to and working primarily among other Jews. Oft-repeated claims to the contrary appear to be nothing more than a myth" (182). In addition, the volume provides a helpful up-to-date survey of our present state of knowledge concerning Galilee.

### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der vorliegende Band argumentiert überzeugend für den wesentlich jüdischen Charakter von Galiläa im ersten Jahrhundert. Aufgrund eines detaillierten Studiums der literarischen und neuesten archäologischen Evidenz hinterfragt der Autor erfolgreich den „Mythos vom heidnischen Galiläa“. Rekonstruktionen des Dienstes und der Botschaft Jesu, die einen starken heidnischen Einfluss oder eine große heidnische Minderheit in Galiläa voraussetzen, sind historisch nicht gerechtfertigt: „Wissenschaftliche Rekonstruktionen, die die Betonung des jüdischen Charakters des Dienstes Jesu oder der jüdischen Wurzeln der ersten Christenheit durch eine Entjudaisierung Galiläas abschwächen, verzerren Jesus, die Jesus-Bewegung und deren galiläischen Kontext. Sowohl die literarische als auch die archäologische Evidenz stützt die Darstellung der Evangelien von einem Jesus, der als Jude Juden predigt und hauptsächlich unter Juden wirkt. Oft wiederholte konträre Behauptungen erweisen sich als nichts weiter als ein Mythos.“ (182). Der Band bringt zusätzlich einen hilfreichen Überblick über den gegenwärtigen Forschungsstand zu Galiläa.

### RÉSUMÉ

Mark Chancey défend de manière convaincante la thèse selon laquelle la population galiléenne était essentiellement juive au premier siècle. En se fondant sur une étude fouillée des données littéraires et des découvertes archéologiques récentes, il réfute le « mythe d'une Galilée non juive ». Les reconstructions du ministère et du message de Jésus qui présupposent une forte influence non israélite ou la présence d'une minorité non israélite

importante en Galilée sont sans fondement historique : « Les reconstructions critiques qui atténuent le caractère juif du ministère de Jésus, ou qui minimisent les racines juives du christianisme primitif en faisant de la Galilée une région non juive aboutissent à une présentation déformée du ministère de Jésus, du mouvement dont il est à l'origine, et de leur contexte galiléen. Les données littéraires et archéologiques confirment bien plutôt le portrait que les Évangiles nous livrent de Jésus, celui d'un Juif prêchant principalement à d'autres Juifs et œuvrant parmi eux. L'opinion contraire, souvent reprise, n'est en fait rien de plus qu'un mythe » (p. 182). Cet ouvrage fournit en outre une présentation bien à jour des connaissances concernant la Galilée.

\* \* \* \*

While Josephus has given us several detailed descriptions of the topography, the climate and crops of Galilee (= G., e. g. Bell. Jud. III.516-19), similarly detailed ancient evidence for the composition of the region's population is missing. In this study of the available literary and archaeological evidence concerning the population of first-century AD G., Dr Mark Chancey sets out to challenge the often repeated scholarly verdict of Gentile G.. Instead, Chancey argues for the exact opposite: There is ample evidence for Jewish inhabitants of the area and virtually no evidence for gentile inhabitants. The overwhelming majority of first-century Galileans were Jewish. This not just an interesting historical or sociological issue. New Testament scholarship that attempts to contextualise the historical Jesus or the Jesus movement in G. (and Galilean early Christianity for which evidence is scant, e. g. Acts 9.31) must acknowledge and take careful note of the predominately Jewish milieu of the region. Thus it is a question of significance.

In his introduction (1-10) Chancey describes offers a survey of the commonly held presupposition concerning his topic: "The claim that gentiles were numerous in the G. of Jesus's day is common in NT scholarship. ... According to this view, G.'s large pagan population explains why Matthew 4.15 refers to the region as 'G. of the Gentiles'"(1). To this point no full investigation of the composition of G.'s population or of the extent of Jewish-gentile contact has appeared. Some studies have only adduced literary evidence (Freyne) others have only referred to rabbinic material ("For understanding G.'s population in later centuries, rabbinic texts are of great use, but demographic shifts in the second century CE render those sources less helpful for first century CE G.", 6). Therefore Chancey wants to combine the data unearthed by excavations of a variety of Galilean sites and the literary sources, bridging "the gap between textual studies and archaeology, combining both to provide a more detailed and accurate picture of first-century G." (4). A further laudable aim is to "provide the readers with both descriptive information about G.'s material culture and a reliable guide to the methodological and interpretive debates about those findings, so that they



themselves can determine the significance of individual artefacts or architectural features" (6). Chancey further sketches the sophisticated interrelation between Hellenism, Greco-Roman culture and paganism ("... differentiation between Hellenistic and Greco-Roman culture, on the one hand, and pagan practice, on the other, is crucial for understanding the evidence from G.. These phenomena are related, but distinct", 7) and describes his treatment of the archaeological data. Pursuing only a sub-topic within the larger discussion of the area's cultural milieu, Chancey does not provide a comprehensive overview of the extent of Greco-Roman influence in G..

Chapter one sketches the "Images of Galilee's population in biblical scholarship" (11-27). Chancey identifies the reasons why scholars have suggested that large numbers of gentiles lived in G. (listed on pp. 14f). Such conclusions were usually drawn from the region's repeated subjugation by foreign powers, which resulted in a mixed population, the geographical position of G. along major ancient trade routes, which must have brought about interaction with foreign traders and travellers, and various archaeological finds, which attest a diversity of peoples.

The second chapter gives a fine survey of "The political and demographic history of G." (28-62) with the various successive invasions the area experienced. The examination includes the Assyrian conquest of G., G. in the Persian period, Macedonian and Greek rule, G. and the Maccabees, the Hasmoneans and G., Herodian and Roman rule, G. during the Jewish war, the aftermath of the revolt and a consideration of G.'s population in the first century CE. In view of this history some scholars have concluded that "each of these waves of conquest left a dramatic imprint on the composition of G.'s population, so that in the time of Jesus, elements of all these external, non-indigenous groups dwelled closely together in a small region" (28). Chancey challenges this reconstruction, concluding instead that the historical development "does not demonstrate that Early Roman G. has a mixed population: in fact, it suggests the opposite case. In the first century CE, its inhabitants seem to have been primarily Jewish, with only a few pagans. Not until the second century CE do we have strong evidence of large numbers of gentiles in G. ... The idea that G.'s population included numerous pagans is unsupported by the region's history" (61f).

After an excellent discussion of the nature and problems of the archaeological materials available, Chancey focuses in the third chapter on a number of Galilean communities in the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman periods for which significant amounts of data are available (63-119), e. g. Sepphoris, Nazareth, Cana, Tiberias, Magdala, Capernaum, Chorazin, Bethsaida. Chancey concludes: "... the archaeological evidence for paganism in the interior of G. is limited and ambiguous. ... It is simply not the case that excavations have recovered numerous artefacts testifying to high numbers of non-

Jews living in the interior of G. Such evidence exists only in communities on the border and in nearby regions. The evidence for Judaism is stronger" (118). The testimony of written sources points in the same direction: "... nothing in Josephus or the Gospels suggests that G. was primarily gentile, or even that its population contained a large Gentile minority against a Jewish majority. The impression they give is unambiguous: in the first century CE, G.'s population was overwhelmingly Jewish" (118f). This survey also provides detailed up-to-date information for the various places under discussion, including recent archaeological advances.

Chapter four is entitled "G. and the circle of nations" (120-66), referring to the expression "district of the nations" in Isaiah 8.23 (9.1), quoted in Matthew 4.15. As G. is surrounded by gentile peoples, and as many scholars have argued that this encirclement has been a defining factor in G.'s cultural milieu, Chancey asks, "how much interaction would Galileans have had with their neighbours?" (19). After an excellent survey of the surrounding territories (120-55; on Samaria one may wish to add M. Böhm, *Samaritanen und die Samaritaner bei Lukas: Eine Studie zum religionshistorischen und traditionsgeschichtlichen Hintergrund der lukanischen Samaritanentexte und zu deren topographischen Verhaftung*, WUNT II, 111; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2000), Chancey investigates the extent and nature of contact between Galileans and gentiles from these areas (the road network of G., the trade routes, everyday contact between Galileans and their neighbours). In particular Chancey considers whether G.'s role in regional and interregional trade would have resulted in large numbers of merchants and traders crossing its territory ("As for the claim that G. was a chief route for caravan traffic from near and far, the evidence suggests that ... the chief routed bypassed G., though some were not too far away", 166). The author concludes: "While some interaction between Galileans and non-Galileans indisputably occurred, its extent, like so many of the stereotypical characteristics of G., has been overstated in much recent scholarship" (120), and "... some contact with gentiles did occur in ancient G., and in communities on G.'s fringes, interaction with neighbouring gentiles was probably common. But nothing in the literary or archaeological record suggests that such contact was especially frequent" (166).

In the Conclusion (167-82) Chancey writes: "... pagans were a small proportion of G.'s population in the first century CE. The presence of a few gentiles is not incontestable, but their numbers and influence have been greatly exaggerated .... When discussing the particularity of G.'s culture, there is no reason to emphasise a large gentile presence, whether as residents or visitors. An exceptionally high degree of Jewish-gentile interaction does not seem to have been a distinctive characteristic of G." (169f). He further explains why Matthew would have referred to the region as "G. of the gentiles" ("... probably reflects his theme of the slowly unfolding mission to the gentiles. The words 'G. of the gentiles'



alert the reader that even those 'who have sat in great darkness' – the gentiles – will, in time, see 'a great light' ... Matthew does not employ it to tell the reader about G. in his own time. ... Matthew's reference to 'G. of the gentiles' tells us about Matthew, not about G." (173). Chancey draws conclusions for the historical plausibility of the very few stories in the Gospels which report encounters between Jesus and gentiles ("historically plausible ... given what we know of social conditions in G.", 174). Jesus' "Galilean environment should not prompt scholarly speculation that frequent contact with gentiles was formative in the development of his ministry" (179).

Chancey relates the results of this study to the debate about the extent of Greco-Roman influence in G. and the cultural atmosphere of ancient G.. E. g. as for Greek philosophy, "nothing explicitly points to its presence. The remarkable level of cultural diversity presupposed by some who depict Jesus as Cynic-like is largely unattested in the material and literary records" (181, e.g. Crossan, Mack, other proponents listed in n. 56). Therefore, "Scholarly reconstructions that de-emphasize the Jewish character of Jesus' ministry or the Jewish roots of early Christianity by de-Judaizing G. distort Jesus, the Jesus movement, and their Galilean context. The evidence, both literary and archaeological, corroborates the Gospels' depictions of Jesus as a Jew preaching to and working primarily among other Jews. Oft-repeated claims to the contrary appear to be nothing more than a myth" (182).

The volume opens with maps of G. and Northern Palestine, G. and the surrounding areas and of the chief roads and closes with a bibliography, index of passages and selective indexes of places, people and topics (183-229).

The archaeological evidence for the first century is relatively meagre. Much is still to be excavated and for many sites that have been excavated, the discoveries still

await publication. For that which is available Chancey has read the evidence right. His conclusions affirm the historical reliability of the gospel tradition and need to be heeded in our quest for the historical Jesus. They serve as a much needed corrective for attempts to understand Jesus and early Christianity against various features of Graeco-Roman culture to the neglect of this Jewish milieu. This significance of his conclusions justifies the detailed sketch of Chancey's careful and persuasive study.

The one issue to be raised for the present reviewer is whether G. is indeed a homogenous region and can and should be studied as such or whether it is made up of several sub-regions (like Upper G., Lower G. and the area around the Lake of Gennesareth) which would require separate treatment. Do Chancey's results apply to all of G.? Several scholars have argued for the distinct identity and economic and population profile of the area surrounding the lake or at least an increased level of interaction with outsiders through all the commerce around the lake and generated by it (e.g. J. S. Kloppenborg, W. Arnal, E. M. Meyers with reference to Josephus, Bell. Jud. III.516-21, who offers a detailed description of this region; cf. the discussion in J. Zangenberg, G. Fassbeck, "Jesus am See von Galiläa (Mt 4.18)", in C. G. den Hertog, U. Hübner (eds.), *Saxa Loquentur: Studien zur Archäologie Palästinas/Israels: FS V. Fritz*; Münster: Ugarit, 2003, 291-310). It is precisely in this lake shore sub-region with its distinct character that most of the ministry of Jesus is situated ("Jesus wirkte am Rande des jüdisch geprägten Teils Galiläas in einer Kontaktzone zu heidnischer Präsenz", Zangenberg, 303, italics mine). For an interesting recent survey of this area of first century G. cf. G. Fassbeck et al. (eds.), *Leben am See Gennesaret: Kulturgeschichtliche Entdeckungen einer biblischen Region* (Mainz: P. von Zabern, 2003).

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