Hellenistic Influence in First-Century Palestine and Transjordan

Bastiaan Van Elderen

Professor Robert Coughenour's career as a biblical scholar has been deeply influenced by his interest and involvement in archaeological research. Much of this derived from his friend and mentor, Professor James Kelso. Our professional association and close friendship began in the late sixties and early seventies when we were working together on biblical archaeological projects in Jordan. This contribution to an issue of the Reformed Review which recognizes and honors him upon the completion of an illustrious career as a scholar, teacher, and Christian friend reflects upon our common interest in the Middle East, and more specifically in Jordan.

Robert Coughenour's field is Old Testament studies, but one of his major interests is on the lower end of that spectrum—the intertestamentary period and its literature. My field is New Testament studies—in essence the continuation of his interest. This essay examines a cultural phenomenon which began in the intertestamental period and because of its increased impact greatly influenced the New Testament and Early Christian periods—the role of Hellenism in the eastern Mediterranean world.

Current Discussion of the Role of Hellenism

In twentieth-century scholarship the role of Hellenism in first-century Judaism and Christianity has been variously evaluated. In the first half of this century Hellenism was given a dominant role in the study of the New Testament. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls the pendulum swung the other way and a heavy, almost exclusive, emphasis was placed on the Jewish background of the New Testament. Admittedly, such an emphasis is proper, given that Jesus and the early church functioned in the matrix of first-century Judaism.

However, there is a prior question that must be considered: to what extent was first-century Judaism influenced and qualified by Hellenism? It is now evident that contacts between the eastern Mediterranean peoples and the Greek world occurred centuries, and perhaps millennia, earlier. The major thrust, from which there was no turning back, came in the conquest of Alexander the Great at the close of the fourth century B.C. The Hellenistic Period in Palestine is dated from 325 B.C. to 63 B.C.
This question was addressed by Martin Hengel in his monumental study, *Judaism and Hellenism*. He cautiously concludes:

It is not possible to say that Palestinian Judaism . . . maintained a straight course through the Hellenistic period untouched by the alien civilization and completely faithful to the Old Testament tradition. Still less can it be claimed that it was completely permeated by the Hellenistic spirit and fell victim to syncretism, betraying its original task. The truth lies between the extremes. (I, 310)

He further questions the distinction between Palestinian Judaism and Hellenistic Judaism and indicates that "for the Hellenistic-Roman period the Judaism of the mother country must just as much be included under the heading 'Hellenistic Judaism' as that of the western Diaspora" (I, 31 ff.).

Hengel's thesis has not gone unchallenged. Some have argued that the Palestinian Jews did not hellenize their religion, although they were tolerant of pagans in their midst. Eric Meyers argues that Judaism was not thoroughly hellenized by the Hasmonean period, as Hengel suggests, but that the major process of assimilation did not occur until the second century A.D. In his discussion he used data from his excavations at Sepphoris in Galilee, in order to dispute Richard Batey's use of these data to construct a picture of hellenized Galilee in the first century. Batey's picture has been severely criticized in a number of reviews, not without political overtones.

Batey's coffee-table book vividly and attractively portrays the first-century Roman city of Sepphoris, located about six miles from Nazareth. On the basis of that proximity he suggests some interesting possible influences on Jesus of the Hellenistic culture in Sepphoris, a Greco-Roman city built by Herod Antipas. Not all have been convinced by these suggestions and in a few cases Batey may have speculated somewhat beyond the evidence. However, given the growing body of literary and archaeological data relating to first-century Palestine and Transjordan, Batey has provided an intriguing new perspective.

First-century Palestine was far from homogeneous and its Judaism was not monolithic. A major contributing factor to this diversity was the influence of Hellenism. Hengel has extensively documented this role of Hellenism in the intertestamentary period in his magisterial study, mentioned above. Further documentation relating to the first century can be found in the two-volume work, *The Jewish People in the First Century*, edited by S. Safrai and M. Stern.
Some Considerations Relating to Hellenistic Influence in the Eastern Mediterranean World

Foreign, that is, non-Jewish, elements were present in the population of Palestine throughout its history. In earlier times these were largely indigenous, but after the conquest of Alexander the Great and during the rule of the Ptolemies and Seleucids migrations throughout the Mediterranean world increased, largely occasioned by easier travel and greater commerce. For Palestine this was a two-way street—foreigners immigrating and Jews emigrating (the Diaspora). As a result, cities that were distinctly Hellenistic arose in Palestine and Transjordan (the latter discussed below) where a majority of the population was non-Jewish. Mussies describes this Hellenistic area in Palestine as the coastal strip from Raphiah to Ptolemais and the interior Hellenistic cities of Phasaelis, Sepphoris, Tiberias, Bethsaida-Julias, Caesarea-Philippi, and Sebaste. The coastal Hellenistic cities were Gaza, Ascalon, Ashdod/Azotus, Jaffa/Joppa, and Strato’s Tower (Caesarea Maritima).

Excavations of many of these cities reveal the heavy Greco-Roman influence in their layout and architecture. These cities often included the typical buildings and installations of a Greco-Roman city: theaters, temples, Roman-style bath complexes, colonnaded streets (cardo maximus and cardo decumanus with a tetrapylon at their intersection), nymphaea, monumental gates and arches. Artifacts recovered likewise reflect this Hellenistic influence and cultural background: coins with Greek legends, typical Hellenistic and Roman ceramics, jewelry, Roman domestic utensils, Greek inscriptions, and ostraca.

This Hellenization-Romanization was also promoted by the building projects of Herod the Great in various cities. Strato’s Tower he renamed Caesarea (Maritima) in honor of Augustus. He magnificently enlarged the city and its harbor, constructing a theater, amphitheater, temple, palaces, and residences (Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews [hereafter: Ant.], 15.331-341. The completion of these building projects was celebrated sumptuously by a great festival, elaborate contests, and shows as exhibited in Rome. This celebration was dedicated to Augustus and celebrated every five years. Herod renamed Samaria Sebaste and rebuilt it as a Greco-Roman city (Josephus, Ant., 15.292-298). In various cities he introduced Roman architecture in his palaces, temples, and monuments. In Jerusalem he built a theater and amphitheater (Josephus, Ant., 15.268) and was even allowed by the Jews to enlarge and rebuild the temple (a striking synergism) (Josephus, Ant., 15.380-423).

Herod’s sons continued building cities in this Greco-Roman tradition, including theaters, temples, and amphitheaters. Herod Antipas built Sepphoris (mentioned above) and Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, named in honor of the Roman emperor. Philip likewise paid homage to the Roman emperor and his wife by rebuilding and renaming Panias as Caesarea (Philippi) and Bethsaida as Julias.
The construction of pagan temples in these Hellenistic cities brought the worship of numerous Greek and Roman deities into Palestine. Some of the names that appear in inscriptions and temples are: Dionysus, Zeus, Ares, Tyche, Aphrodite, Athene, Nike, Eirene, Demeter, Hermes, Persephone, Heracles, and Pluto. The dedication of certain cities to the Roman emperor surely occasioned a measure of emperor worship in them.

Coupled with this Hellenization of Palestine was the introduction of the Greek language and its extensive use from the third century on. In fact, Greek was used almost exclusively on inscriptions in the Roman period. This is a significant cultural phenomenon—a culture is transmitted through its language (it has been suggested that language accounts for more than 60 percent of any culture). Of striking interest here is the presence, although small, of Greek documents at Qumran. Even in such a separated Jewish community there apparently were those who read Greek. Similarly, one must not overlook the fact that Jesus undoubtedly used Greek—even in some of his teaching. An interesting case study in this connection is that three of the disciples of Jesus came from Bethsaida: Philip, Andrew, and Peter (John 1:44; 12:21). It seems preferable to identify this Bethsaida with the city renamed Julias by Philip in honor of the emperor’s wife (mentioned above). The Greeks ('Ελληνες, i.e., non-Jews) who wanted to see Jesus approached Philip for an audience (John 12:20f.) who in turn consulted Andrew (vs. 22). These data suggest not only that these disciples spoke Greek, but also that they had lived in a Hellenistic city with its cultural features.

Another feature of Palestine contributing to its cultural modification in the Hellenistic and Roman period was its location at the crossroads of major trade routes (cf. Matt. 4:15). Not only did foreign merchants and traders pass through the land, but the commercial engagements of the native population certainly must have had some cultural spillover (e.g., the international trade of the fishing industry around the Sea of Galilee must have influenced the quality of life in the area.

How did the indigenous Jewish population of Palestine in the first century react to all these foreign influences? These influences were vehemently opposed and staunchly resisted by the Zealots, the political activists. The religionists (e.g., the Pharisees, Essenes, Qumran) opposed these influences but adjusted their religious activities accordingly, as Meyers correctly observes. Josephus (Ant., 16.174-176) reports that in spite of the Roman presence the Jews were able to keep their laws, follow their own religion, and worship their God. On the other hand, the aristocratic Sadducees, with a majority in the Sanhedrin and the priesthood, out of political interests often collaborated with the Roman authorities.

However, these activists and religionists were only a small segment of the population. What about the bulk of the population, estimated to be at least two...
million, the *am ha'aretz*, "the people of the land"? These were the crowds (δημος) that "heard Jesus with delight" (Mark 12:37). Granted that these people were not theologically or culturally sophisticated, nevertheless these Hellenistic features in their environment surely must have affected them. Josephus (*Ant.*, 16.140) reports that a great multitude came to Caesarea for the dedication of the new city and were royally entertained by Herod. At the time of a great festival of games in Jerusalem, Herod by a ruse dissipated the objections of the Jews with the result that the greatest part of the people changed their conduct and were no longer displeased with him (Josephus, *Ant.*, 15.267-280).

Certain segments of the Palestinian population, including some Jews (e.g., at Scythopolis [Josephus, *History of the Jewish War*]—hereafter: *BJ*—2.466), did not participate in the First Jewish revolt—nor did Josephus himself (*BJ*, 3.340-408). Eusebius reports that the Jerusalem Christians fled to Pella in Transjordan (*Ecclesiastical History*) [hereafter, *HE*], 3.5.3), a tradition that seems to have some historical basis. Phillip Sigal, accepting the historicity of this migration, argues that the Jerusalem Christians went to Pella because they refused to participate with their fellow Jews in resisting the Romans, resulting in their ultimate alienation from them.12 In Pella, the Jewish Christians may not have fared very well shortly after their arrival there, since at the outbreak of the war, groups of Jews devastated a number of the cities of the Decapolis, including Pella (Josephus, *BJ*, 2.458f.). All this reflects divided loyalties in Palestine—even amongst the Jews.

In view of the above considerations regarding Hellenistic influences in first-century Palestine, a distinction must be drawn between Judaism as a religious movement and Judaism as a cultural phenomenon.13 Hellenization had very little, if any, influence on the former, perhaps not until after the two Jewish Revolts, as suggested by Meyers.14 On the other hand, Hellenization certainly affected Palestinian culture. And this fact has major significance in New Testament studies relating to the Jesus movement and the rise of early Christianity. These arose in the matrix of a Hellenistic Palestine as much as, if not more than, in an "un-hellenized" religious Judaism. Hopefully, a much-needed balance will prevail in this regard in New Testament studies.

We turn now to another aspect of this Hellenization process in the eastern Mediterranean world.

**The Decapolis and Hellenistic Culture**

In this ongoing discussion of Hellenistic influence in the eastern Mediterranean world very little, if any, consideration is given to the Decapolis. These Greek cities, established in the midst of Semitic territory in north-central Transjordan, represent the earliest presence of Hellenism in this area. Currently the Decapolis is under extensive archaeological investigation as major projects are underway in at least six of the cities. I am participating in one of these
projects, the excavations of Abila. The following discussion will place the Decapolis in its historical setting and suggest its possible Hellenistic influence and contribution to our knowledge of first-century Palestine and environs.

**Brief History of the Decapolis**

Prior to the arrival of the Israelites into Palestine, Transjordan was occupied from the south to the north by the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, Amorites, and the kingdom of Bashan. In the tribal division of the area by Joshua, Transjordan was chosen by and allotted to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and part of Manasseh. Resistance to and harassment of the new settlers by the indigenous peoples made the eastern, northern, and southern boundaries of the United Kingdom of Israel and of the later divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah very fluid.

 Assyrian domination which began in the eighth century and continued in the seventh century was followed by Babylonian control. In the sixth century the Persians gained control of the area. In the late fourth century, Alexander the Great conquered the entire area. During the subsequent domination of the area by the Ptolemies and then by the Seleucids, various Greek cities were established in north-central Transjordan, populated partly by veterans of Alexander's army.

Judas Maccabeus captured several cities in northern Transjordan (1 Macc. 5). Later, Hasmonean rulers conquered this area as far north as Mount Hermon and attempted to de-Hellenize and Judaize the Greek cities by giving the inhabitants the choice either of adopting the Jewish faith or of emigrating. In 64 B.C. Pompey conquered Syria and Transjordan. In his reorganization of the area in 64-63 B.C. the Greek cities captured by Jannaeus were given independence and united into a strong "league" identified as the Decapolis. From the end of the first century B.C. through the third century A.D., Transjordan, along with Cis-Jordan, was greatly urbanized and the cities of the Decapolis were enlarged with impressive buildings and monuments.

**Description of the Decapolis**

Initially, as the name indicates, there were ten cities, as reported by Pliny. In Ptolemy this list is expanded to eighteen cities. The lists as given by Pliny (Natural History, 5.16) and Ptolemy (Guide to Geography, 5.14.22 are:
These cities were located on the major trade routes from the east to Palestine and the Mediterranean Sea. Scythopolis (Old Testament Bethshan and the only city west of the Jordan River) on the eastern end of the plain of Esdraelon was at the junction of three major roads entering Transjordan.

The political structure and interrelationships of these cities, and the amount of territory controlled by each, is virtually unknown. Because it is doubtful that they were united in a central or federal government, perhaps the term "league" or "confederation" is hardly adequate.\(^{15}\)

The Greco-Roman character of these cities is evident in their layout: colonnaded north-south cardo maximus and colonnaded east-west cardo decumanus with a monumental tetrapiylon at their intersection. Likewise, the public buildings in these cities are typically Greco-Roman: nymphaeum, public baths, forum, hippodrome, theater(s), and temple(s) dedicated to Greek and Roman deities. The Greek language was used predominantly, as evident in the preserved documents, especially inscriptions with Greco-Roman names.

That these cities were centers of Greco-Roman culture is illustrated by the famous university in Gadara. Gadara was also the birthplace of the Cynic poet Menippus (late fourth century B.C.), the Cynic-Stoic poet Meleager (second century B.C.), the Epicurean poet Philodemus (first century B.C.), and the rhetorician Theodorus (first century).\(^{16}\)

One of the better-known cities of the Decapolis is Gerasa (modern Jerash), located about twenty-two miles north of Amman. Major excavations conducted
here from 1925 to 1940 uncovered the remains of one of the best-preserved Roman cities in the Middle East. At the south end of the colonnaded cardo-maximus is an oval-shaped forum. South of the forum are a temple of Zeus (begun in A.D. 22) and a south theater which was dedicated in A.D. 90/91\textsuperscript{17} and has a seating capacity of about 5,000. In the north sector of the city are the Temple of Artemis, another theater, a nymphaeum, a monumental stairway leading to the temple, and a temple dedicated to Dionysus (under a Byzantine cathedral). A great triumphal arch at the south entrance to the city commemorates the visit of Hadrian to the city in A.D. 129. Near this arch is a sizeable hippodrome. At least fifteen Byzantine churches have been identified in the ruins. Currently the Jordanian Department of Antiquities and the University of Jordan are conducting further excavations of the site.

Scythopolis is the only Decapolis city not in Transjordan. Located on the west side of the Jordan, this Hellenistic city surely had a significant role and cultural influence in central Palestine, just south of Galilee. The mound of Bethshan, upon which in Hellenistic times stood a temple of Dionysus, stands beyond the ruins of the Roman-Byzantine Scythopolis. Near the ancient theater (seating 8,000) are the ruins of baths, colonnaded streets, a hippodrome, temples, fountains, and other public buildings. Presently the Israeli Antiquities Authority and Parks and Tourism are engaging in a massive (and perhaps too hasty) excavation and restoration project of Roman-Byzantine Scythopolis.

\textit{Current Work at Abila of the Decapolis}

The large double tell of Abila is located in northern Jordan near the Syrian border and about fifteen miles east of the south end of the Sea of Galilee. Dr. W. Harold Mare began directing archaeological research on this site in 1980 with an extensive survey of the two tells and the valley between.\textsuperscript{18} The excavation of the site began in the summer of 1982 and has continued in alternate years with the seventh excavation season scheduled for the summer of 1994.\textsuperscript{19} The site has extensive remains dating from the Bronze, Iron, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic times. Although no \textit{strata} have been identified from the Hellenistic Period, Hellenistic pottery has been identified in the potsherds uncovered, including some Rhodian jar handles. Extensive surface \textit{remains} from the Roman Period are visible in the valley and the large Byzantine occupation is evidenced by five large churches identified thus far.

On the north slope of the southern tell is a formation in the hillside that appears to be the cavea of a theater. I began directing excavations in this area in 1986. As noted above, a typical \textit{feature} of a Hellenistic city was the theater, and every major Decapolis city has a sizeable one. The features of this \textit{formation} at Abila indicate that it was man-made. However, during early Islamic and Byzantine times its lower levels were extensively rebuilt. Although
our work has been concerned with these remains, scattered traces of Roman occupation have been found, including a limestone street crossing under an extensive Byzantine basalt street. All these remains at the foot of the southern tell have been covered over with more than two meters of debris washed down from above during the centuries. Enough of this material has been cleared so that in the coming season the Roman strata can be uncovered, and possibly the lower remains of the theater. In the valley north of the theater area another team is working on the extensive Roman remains, tentatively identified as a bath complex, a nymphaeum, and other public buildings. No temple has been identified thus far, but presently the two tells are dominated by Byzantine churches where possibly temples would have been located.

The Theater and Hellenistic Culture

The general format of the theaters in the Decapolis cities (e.g., at Philadelphia [modern Amman], Gerasa [modern Jerash], Scythopolis [modern Beit Shan], Gadara [modern Umm Qeis], Pella [modern Tabaqat Fahl]) follows that prescribed by the Roman architect Vitruvius in his *De Architectura*, written in the latter part of the first century B.C. In Book V, chapters 3-9, he discusses the location, acoustics, and plan of a theater. He describes the symmetrical layout of the theater with the semi-circular bank of seats (in the cavea) around a half circle containing the orchestra with the stage area in front of the orchestra (chapter 6). The cavea is divided into six wedge-shaped sections by seven equidistant staircases. This same basic plan is also followed in the theater at Sepphoris.20

The presence of so many sizeable theaters in close proximity in Palestine and the Decapolis poses the question of their use and attendance. The basic purpose of the theater was for the presentation of dramatic performances, tragedies and comedies. This was carried over from the Greek theater to the Roman theater. The Roman theater also was used for farces, mimes, and pantomimes.21 Later, games and contests were conducted in the theaters (for the more extravagant contests, gladiatorial games, animal hunts, and ship battles the amphitheater was used). Public meetings and trials were at times also held in the theater (cf. the trial of Gaius and Aristarchus [and indirectly Paul] in the theater at Ephesus [Acts 19:28-41]).

There is little evidence regarding the use of the theaters in the Middle East. Josephus (*Ant.*, 16.136-138) reports that Herod made a great festival in Caesarea consisting of games, contests, and shows, to be repeated every five years. The locale of this well-attended festival would have been the theater and amphitheater he built there (*Ant.*, 15.341). Similarly, he celebrated games and contests every five years in Jerusalem’s theater and large amphitheater (Josephus, *Ant.*, 19.335-337). Josephus recounts that deathly sickness overcame Herod Agrippa in the
theater at Caesarea where he was exhibiting shows in honor of Caesar (Ant., 19.343-350; cf. Acts 12.20-23 where the occasion is a public gathering).

At times Jewish prisoners were tortured and put to death publicly in theaters (Josephus, Against Apion, 1.43). After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Titus celebrated his father’s birthday by executing thousands of Jewish prisoners in Caesarea and Berytus in public shows and gladiatorial games which were held in the theaters and amphitheatres (Josephus, BJ, 7.37-40).

It can be assumed that theatrical performances were also given in these theaters from time to time. Some of these would have been part of religious festivals and others promoted by local sponsors and benefactors. Their frequency cannot be ascertained, but they were frequent enough for both Jewish and Christian writers to condemn them as sources of immorality, religious pollution, and paganism—also implying that their constituencies were attending them or inclined to do so.

The size of the theaters, often capable of seating 5,000 to 10,000, suggests sizeable audiences (Josephus refers to "great crowds"—the same terminology used to describe the followers of Jesus), perhaps larger than the population of many of the cities. Hence, some attendees must have come from the surrounding areas. In Hellenistic cities, especially in the Decapolis, these would be from the indigenous rural population, largely Jews. Given the extensive poverty and unemployment in the rural areas (and even in the cities, as in Jerusalem), the local theater would have been attractive, as the shows were free and often included handouts.

The theater obviously was a vehicle for political, cultural, and religious propaganda. Consequently, the theater must have had a significant influence on all classes of people, from the upper classes to the am ha'aretz and including Jews and pagans. And given the numerous theaters, especially in the Decapolis, the spread of Hellenistic culture was inevitable through them and their productions.

Significance of These Studies
for New Testament and Early Christian Research

In the first century, Palestine contained an extremely heterogeneous population in a relatively small territory. This mix of Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles was multilingual, although Greek was spoken extensively. A segment of the Jewish population was identified as Hellenists (Ἑλληνισταί; cf. Acts 6:1; 9:29 [and now also read in 11.20 in Nestle-Aland, Novum Testamentum Graece, twenty-sixth edition!], Jews who spoke Greek and had also adopted some Greek ways and habits. This segment was found in Judaism (cf. the synagogue of the "Freedmen" in Acts 6:9 and the disputants in 9:29) and in the early church (cf. the neglected widows in Acts 6:1).
The above discussion clearly indicates how complex first century Palestine was ethnically, culturally, politically, and religiously. It is irresponsible and unconscionable in New Testament studies to ignore this multifarious *Sitz im Leben* of Jesus and of the early church. It would be naive to suggest that the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* was a *simplex* Judaism oblivious to its environment. Even Qumran, howsoever one identifies the community, reflects this diversity in Palestinian Judaism (even with some members who spoke Greek).

It is likewise in this environment that the early church arose. This Jewish Christianity, arising and centered in Jerusalem, was soon eclipsed by other Christian centers in the north and west. However, one area where Jewish Christianity did initially survive was in Transjordan. Before A.D. 70 the Jerusalem Christians fled to Pella (a Decapolis city in the Jordan Valley). Epiphanius reports that these Christians returned from Pella to Jerusalem after A.D. 70 (*De Mesuris et Ponderibus*, 14f.). It can be safely assumed that some remained in Pella. Although Epiphanius (*ibid.*) suggests that the church in Jerusalem between A.D. 70 and 132 was small and struggling, Eusebius describes it as a very important church composed of Jews with fifteen bishops in this period (*HE*, 4.5). However, the end of the Jewish church in Jerusalem came when Hadrian crushed the Second Jewish Revolt (A.D. 132-135) and forbade all Jews from entering the city. It seems that some expelled Jewish Christians went back to Pella since interestingly Eusebius (*HE*, 4.6.3) cites as his source for the information about Hadrian’s conquest and expulsion edict a Christian from Pella who was named Ariston (’Αριστών ὁ Πελλαῖος).

Jesus himself spent some time in Transjordan. The first visit recorded in the Gospels is the healing of the demoniac(s) residing in the cemetery (Matt. 8:28-34 = Mark 5:1-20 = Luke 8:26-39). On the basis of the textual evidence (Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, twenty-sixth edition and *The Greek New Testament*, fourth revised edition) read εἰς τὴν χώραν Γαδάρας (i.e., Gadara) in Matthew 8:28 and εἰς τὴν χώραν Γερασηνῶν (i.e., Gerasa) in Mark 5:1 and Luke 8:26. Mark reports another visit by Jesus to the Decapolis in 7:31. Both Matthew (19:1) and Mark (10:1) report that Jesus was in Perea in Transjordan before the final journey to Jerusalem. John locates Jesus in Transjordan before the raising of Lazarus (10:40). This is identified as the place where John had baptized (cf. John 3:26). In John 1:28 John is reported to be baptizing in "Bethany across the Jordan." R. Riesner has identified this "Bethany" as Batanaea in the Decapolis. This then would place Jesus in the Decapolis another time. How extensive the Jesus movement was in the Decapolis cannot be ascertained, but Mark’s reference (5:20) to the healed demoniac’s proclamation in the Decapolis is provocative.

There is an early tradition that members of the family of Jesus resided in Transjordan. Eusebius quotes a sizeable portion of a letter written by Africanus to Aristides in which reference is made to the δεσπόσυνοι, relatives of the Lord.
who were located in the Jewish villages of Nazareth and Cochaba (HE, 1.7.14). Cochaba, also mentioned in the Talmud, the Onomasticon, and by Epiphanius, is located in the southwest part of Batanaea, north of Abila and east of the Sea of Galilee. In an appendix to the Acts of Paul in a Coptic papyrus (New Testament Apocrypha (1965), II.388) there is an account of Paul speaking at Ephesus about his conversion in Damascus where he says: "I entered into a great church with the blessed Judas, the brother of the Lord. . . ." The use of the name Nazaraeans for certain Jewish Christians in Transjordan may derive from the presence of people there from Nazareth.

Two Jewish Christian movement associated with Transjordan are the Ebionites and Nazaraeans. Epiphanius, Jerome, and Eusebius locate these movements in northern Transjordan and Syria, largely in the area of the Decapolis. Although there is a measure of overlapping in these suggested locations, it is clear that Jewish Christians were living in the Decapolis. And this would then be the provenance of a number of Jewish Christian documents, including the apocryphal gospels: Gospel of the Ebionites and Gospel of the Nazaraeans.

It appears that this Jewish Christianity in Transjordan declined in the third century and was supplanted in the fourth and fifth centuries by Byzantine Christianity. With the present growing interest in Transjordan and the Decapolis, as seen in the number of current excavations, new data regarding the Roman and Byzantine periods will be obtained to provide a better understanding of this area and its role in early Christianity.

Conclusion

Two trajectories regarding the New Testament and early Christianity have been suggested in this study. The first seeks to place the Jesus movement in its Palestinian cultural setting, and the second seeks to understand the Jewish Christianity that emerged from the Jesus movement in terms of its migration from Jerusalem to Transjordan.

It is appropriate that this study dedicated to Robert Coughenour should conclude with a discussion about archaeology in Jordan. This has been the locus of his archaeological work and research. And for him and for me, part of this interest was motivated by a love and concern for the Arabs in the Middle East.

ENDNOTES


4. Ibid., 81-91.


13. This distinction is also very relevant in evaluating the present situation in the Middle East vis-à-vis Israel's claim to the land on biblical grounds.


18. This survey is reported in the *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin*, 1 and 18 (1981).


24. Other variants include Γεργεσηνων (i.e., Gergesa, modern Kursi) and Γεργυστηνων (i.e., Gergustes).