



**JESUS** A JEWISH GALILEAN  
*a new reading of the Jesus-story*  
**SEAN FREYNE**



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A JEWISH  
GÁLILEAN**

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A NEW READING OF THE JESUS-STORY

SEAN FREYNE



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For Gail, Bridget and Sarah  
and  
in memory of my parents  
John Vincent Freyne, died 1940  
and  
Lucy Ellen O'Flaherty, died 1984

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## PREFACE

Yet another attempt to discover the historical Jesus! This topic has been so overworked in recent decades that soon it must surely be due a sabbatical rest. Yet there is always the temptation to believe, naïvely no doubt, that a particular aspect of the topic not yet discovered, or at least not properly treated, could, perhaps, hold the key to an adequate understanding of the issue, which in its present form has been with us for over 250 years. My particular vista has a Galilean angle, prompted by the way in which the Galilee of Jesus has been constructed by different scholars in the more recent past. One occasionally gets the impression that the quest for the historical Jesus is in danger of becoming the quest for the historical Galilee, with all the attendant hermeneutical pitfalls that that particular enterprise has given rise to.

The more immediate context of this particular study has been the invitation to deliver two series of guest lectures on various aspects of contemporary Galilean studies – the Gunning lectures at the University of Edinburgh (1998) and the J. J. Thiessen lectures at the Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Canada, in 2002. I am grateful to the staff and students of both institutions for their friendly reception of my ideas. Their critical engagement has helped considerably in sharpening the focus, even if they will not immediately recognize the final form in which my ideas have emerged. This applies particularly to the ‘long view’ which I have adopted in approaching the various topics from the perspective of the Hebrew Scriptures. The subject of Jesus and the Ecology of Galilee (chapter 2) is, to the best of my knowledge, novel in contemporary study of the historical Jesus. I am grateful to the organizers of the Manson lecture at the University of Manchester for providing me with the opportunity to present my first reflections on this topic (2003), which have here been expanded and revised to provide the horizon within which to develop other aspects of Jesus’ career.

I must acknowledge the patient and gentle prodding of Dr. Geoffrey Green of T&T Clark since this project was mooted several

years ago; he must have thought that the manuscript would never see the light of day. The practical encouragement of Rebecca Mulhearn of T&T Clark International (Continuum) has helped considerably in concentrating my efforts over the last several months. I have had a ready forum for debating my ideas with colleagues and students of the School of Religions and Theology and the Joint Programme for Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies at Trinity College, Dublin. However, an author must take responsibility for the ideas expressed and trust a sympathetic, if not uncritical readership for their final evaluation. My thanks to my friend, calligrapher Mr. Tim O'Neill, for assistance with the maps. I owe a special word of thanks, as always, to my family who have allowed me the time and space to devote myself to this project.

Sean Freyne  
*Trinity College, Dublin*  
*May 2004*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Standard abbreviations are used for the Biblical books, apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls and Rabbinical writings. Biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha and the Loeb Classical Library translation of Josephus is used.

<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of American School of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>ESI</i>	<i>Excavations and Surveys in Israel</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>IAA</i>	<i>Israel Antiquities Authority</i>
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>INJ</i>	<i>Israel Numismatic Journal</i>
<i>JA</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities of Flavius Josephus</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSNTSS</i>	<i>JSNT Supplement Series</i>
<i>JSNTSS</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplementary Series</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSS</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series</i>
<i>JSP</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
<i>JW</i>	<i>Jewish War of Flavius Josephus</i>
<i>Life</i>	<i>Life of Flavius Josephus</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>RHPR</i>	<i>Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses</i>
<i>SNTSMS</i>	<i>Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas Monograph Series</i>
<i>TSAJ</i>	<i>Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism</i>
<i>WUNT</i>	<i>Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament</i>
<i>ZDPV</i>	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>

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# 1

## JESUS, JEWS AND GALILEE: INTRODUCING THE ISSUES

The ebbs and flows of the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus have been a constant preoccupation of western theology for over two centuries, yet no final consensus has been achieved about the identity of Jesus and his movement. It is usual, if somewhat schematic, to number three stages to the modern 'quest' provoked by the posthumous publication of H. S. Reimarus' *Fragments* on the topic by G. E. Lessing in 1786. These stages are: the nineteenth-century liberal lives of Jesus, so trenchantly exposed as modernizing accounts by Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1968), the post-Bultmanian 'new quest' with its somewhat minimalist approach to the question in the mid-twentieth century, and finally, 'the current third wave', mainly, but not exclusively associated with the Jesus Seminar in North America during the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

The distinguishing feature of this most recent chapter of Jesus-scholarship in contrast to its predecessors is the interest in the social, as distinct from the religious aspects of Jesus' life. This shift of emphasis can undoubtedly be attributed to many factors operating within late twentieth-century western society, which have led to an increasing 'secularization' of New Testament studies. Whereas previously the debates were about the various titles that Jesus might have employed as self-designations (Messiah, Son of Man or Lord, for example), or discussions of his role as prophet or charismatic religious leader, today he is typically characterized as a social reformer, a peasant activist or Cynic dissident. It is somewhat ironic, though inevitable that in an age of globalization recent studies of Jesus have been concerned with the local setting of his public life, thus giving rise to a renewed interest in Galilee also.



## The Gospels and the Historical Jesus

This shift of emphasis from the universal to the particular, far from simplifying the task of the historian of Jesus, demands an increased critical awareness across a number of disciplines. Not merely is it necessary to adopt a position on the hotly debated question of the historical nature of the gospels, it is also now important to combine insights from ancient history, archaeology and the social sciences, particularly, cultural anthropology. Ideally, such a project calls for a group of scholars engaged in an interdisciplinary study, yet such is the fascination with the topic that there has been no shortage of scholars essaying the task over the past 25 years. Inevitably, these studies have given rise to varying discussions about the correct procedures to be adopted and methodologies to be employed. Amid such a variety of opinions it becomes imperative to outline, however briefly, the perspective being adopted in this study, if only to give the reader some orientation with which to judge the adequacy of the enterprise.

The most obvious dilemma facing any researcher in the field is surely how to avoid the criticism of some future Albert Schweitzer with regard to modernizing Jesus. Imaginings of the past always involve our awareness of the present, and to the extent that the figure of Jesus can be made to support our own best insights and dreams, it is difficult not to avoid the temptation of co-opting him for our cause. Despite this obvious pitfall, there are those who believe that while a thoroughly 'objective' account of the historical Jesus is an unattainable ideal, it is still possible to avoid the *cul de sacs* of previous scholarship on the subject. Thus, John Dominic Crossan, one of the most prolific members of the Jesus Seminar in the USA, has stated his views on the topic in his usual elegant and trenchant style in the introduction to his best-selling 1991 study. Describing the current situation of many different portraits of Jesus as 'an academic embarrassment', the aim is that his study should 'not add to the impression of acute scholarly subjectivity in historical Jesus research'. He is concerned, he informs us, 'not with an unattainable objectivity but with an attainable honesty', and to this end he exhorts other scholars to follow his 'triple triadic' process, which involves the interplay of an interdisciplinary approach, including the social sciences, a scientific stratification of the Jesus traditions and a critical use of this inventory for historical reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, John Meier, who independently, but contemporaneously with

Crossan, undertook the task of 'rethinking the historical Jesus' is cautious about 'objective' as the proper classification for his study.<sup>3</sup> Yet he believes that striving for such an ideal allows one to avoid 'a rampant subjectivism'. Meier makes the helpful distinction between the 'real Jesus' (problematic though that term is with regard to any past figure) and 'the historical Jesus'. This latter is a modern construct which may, by the use of modern scientific methods, 'give us fragments of the real Jesus'. Even then, however, it becomes difficult to disentangle completely 'the historical Jesus' as a figure in the past from 'the historic Jesus', as the one whose memory continues to influence history, either in a general sense or in the more specifically Christian sense of Jesus as the Risen Christ, the object of Christian preaching and belief as he is represented already in the earliest documents.<sup>4</sup>

The hesitation of both these scholars on the issue of objectivity in regard to the historical Jesus underlines the specific nature of our primary sources, the gospels. Crossan is quite explicit in regard to the problem involved. 'The gospels are neither histories nor biographies, even within the ancient tolerance of such genres', he confidently asserts.<sup>5</sup> It is this understanding of the nature of the gospels that has led him to engage in the elaborate process of stratification of the traditions with a view to establishing potentially authentic material. From the limited database which he thereby establishes, he is prepared to accept only those items for which there is double attestation in two independent sources, thereby leaving himself open to the charge that he has rejected perfectly good historical information, either because it only appears in one source, or because he is not prepared to explore the possible historical information about Jesus that may be contained in the upper, 'redactional' layers of the gospels according to his and his Jesus seminar colleagues' adjudication of the evidence.

In my opinion this judgement, scientifically rigorous though it may appear to be, is too restrictive and does not take sufficient account of the nature of the gospels. The alternative to this position is not to return to a naïve historicism that seeks to bypass the critical study of the gospels or minimizes the differences between them. More modest, but realistic goals need to be set on the basis of the character of the evidence which we do possess. This involves the recognition that the gospel frameworks are not random inventions as the Form Critical school had suggested, but seek rather to provide a narrative frame for the *kerygma* about Jesus, once the impetus arose

to provide such an account among the second-generation Christians. This implies that there is no 'pure' historical evidence available in the gospel traditions, no matter how much one seeks to refine the criteria. The gospels themselves are narrative expressions of the *kerygma* or early preaching, and it is impossible to separate out brute historical facts from their kerygmatic intent. Either we accept that the early followers of Jesus had some interest in and memory of the historical figure of Jesus as they began to proclaim the good news about him, or we must abandon the process entirely and adopt the position of Rudolph Bultmann that 'we can know nothing about the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover, fragmentary and often legendary'.<sup>6</sup>

As a reaction to this historical scepticism of his teacher and mentor, Ernst Käsemann expressed the matter trenchantly in his programmatic 1953 paper. 'The exalted Lord,' he writes, 'has almost entirely swallowed up the image of the earthly Lord, and yet the community has maintained the identity of the exalted Lord with the earthly. . . . The question of the historical Jesus is, in its *legitimate* form, the continuity of the Gospel within the discontinuity of the times and the variations of the *kerygma*.'<sup>7</sup> It was important for Käsemann that continuity between the early Christian preaching *about* Jesus and the preaching *of* Jesus could be established on critical grounds, since in his view this was the nature of early Christian belief from the beginning. The early preaching insisted that it was *Jesus* who had died and was risen, and it was this conviction that prompted the development of a narrative about him which made no distinction between the earthly and the risen Lord. Corresponding to this kerygmatic interest in the question of the historical Jesus, there has been a strong tendency to see the gospels as unique documents that cannot be compared with other 'biographic' types of narrative, a position which, strangely, Crossan, as just cited, also seems to espouse. Neither Käsemann, nor Gunther Bornkamm, another influential representative of 'the new quest' for Jesus after Bultmann, were interested in the local aspects of Jesus' proclamation as represented in the gospel narratives. It was the fact of Jesus' existence, and not the details that was important from their perspective. The uniqueness of the message brought forth a unique literary response, it is claimed.

However, this judgement is based on theological rather than on literary-historical grounds, and more recent discussions have situated

these early Christian writings within a larger context of the biographic encomium genre of Greco-Roman antiquity, which includes a historical as well as a propagandistic intention. Thus, the gospel narratives can and should be critically evaluated in terms of their portrayals of Jesus and his ministry while making full allowance for their other perspectives and the modifications that these might bring to the historical intention.<sup>8</sup> To put the matter concretely in terms of the present study, when the evangelists portray Galilean situations in the life of Jesus, it will be necessary to ask whether these merely serve the later interests or whether they might not also reflect judgements about the historical Jesus, since such an interest cannot a priori be excluded from the writers' intentions.

Recent comparative studies of the gospels in terms of genre suggest that they do in fact bear a 'family resemblance' to other ancient Lives, all of which originate from a tripartite 'basis-biographic', comprising of a beginning (*arche*) dealing briefly with the origins of the subject, a middle (*akme*) concentrating on the high-point of the subject's public life, and an end (*telos*) relating the subject's demise and possible vindication.<sup>9</sup> All the gospels fit easily into this basic structure which allowed for numerous additions, expansions and adaptations, but whose essential character is recognizable. Traces of such a 'biographic' interest in Jesus can be detected in Christian writings other than the Gospels also: Q (Lk. 3.3, 4.1, 7.1, 10.13–15, 13.24), Acts (10.37–41) and the Pauline letters (1 Cor. 11.23–26, 15.2–4; Gal. 4.4; Rm. 1.1–2). This is equally true of Josephus' brief account of Jesus when stripped of its later Christian interpolations (*JA* 18.63f.). The socio-rhetorical function of the encomiastic (praising) and propagandistic (apologetic) aspects of such works needs to be considered in evaluating their historical intent, but that is also true of other ancient sources, even Josephus' *Life*.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in the case of the gospels the role of the biographic impulse within a Jewish matrix needs to be considered. In this regard the books attributed to the great Israelite prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, for example, combine the personal experiences and oracular utterances as a single message. For that very reason the historical circumstances of the prophet's life becomes particularly important within a Jewish context.

Thus, when all due allowance is made for the literary considerations, we do less than justice to the intentions of the evangelists if we do not take seriously this 'historicizing' tendency of their work. Their frameworks are discarded as 'later' and unreliable

at the expense of a very different narrative account of our own making, one that often has little to do with real life situations in first-century Galilee. In recognizing the historical intention of the gospel writers, we should, at least initially, show a greater trust in the various leads which they suggest with regard to the course of Jesus' ministry. Even when their actual knowledge of Galilee may be sketchy or not based on personal experience, as first-century Mediterranean people they are much more in tune with situations such as urban/rural tensions and ethnic relations in antiquity than we could ever hope to be through our 'outsider' perspective.

## Galilee and Jesus

The modern historian of Jesus must come to the discussion equipped with more than a critical understanding of the gospels, however. The shift of emphasis from the universal to the local in modern studies of Jesus has shone the torch on Galilee in a way that was not obvious 25 years ago when Professor Martin Hengel of Tübingen suggested to me that a study of Galilee could make an important contribution to our understanding of early Christianity.<sup>11</sup> Little had been written on the subject, and even standard histories of the period merely repeated certain stereotypes of Galilee and the Galileans from the ancient sources. I quickly became aware of the potential dangers of dealing only with the actual period of Jesus' ministry in the reign of Herod Antipas, Apart from having to deal with the vast amount of secondary literature concerning the historical reliability of the gospels, there was the obvious temptation to create a picture of Galilee that would provide the suitable backdrop for the particular role that different scholars wished to attribute to Jesus. These ranged at that time from violent revolutionary to pious *hasid*, and since then the list has been considerably increased, most notably by the introduction of the Cynic-like Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the most shocking example of such a manipulation of the evidence was Walter Grundmann's suggestion in his 1941 study that Galilee was pagan (*heidnisch*) and that 'with greater probability, Jesus was not a Jew'.<sup>13</sup> What in my judgement was called for, therefore, was a study of Galilee that would not focus primarily on Jesus and his Galilean ministry, but which would seek to establish the distinctiveness of the region by adopting 'the long view', one which stretched from Alexander the Great to Hadrian, a period of 400 years, during which

there were many changes. Only in this way would it be possible to avoid the danger of a distorted understanding of Jesus and his ministry, however unconsciously. The picture of Galilee that emerged in that first attempt has had to be revised more than once in the intervening years, as new evidence began to emerge from the intensive archaeological work in the region. Key sites such as Sepphoris have been uncovered and regional surveys have helped to identify the changing patterns of settlement and ethnic identities over time.

What was the nature of the Galilee that Jesus inhabited and how did he relate to that environment? My second book was intended to answer that question, but with hindsight I did not sufficiently integrate the literary approach to the gospels and the historical investigations in the second part of the book, as its subtitle suggested.<sup>14</sup> The present study is intended as a renewed effort to explore the issue of Galilee and Jesus from a different perspective. At the outset it is important to realize that Galilee was not the only theatre for Jesus' life and ministry. Some recent studies have tended to minimize or even ignore his Judean roots and subsequent ministry, basing themselves on a perceived opposition between Galilee and Judea/Jerusalem, and in the process ignoring the leads suggested by the Fourth Gospel, which depicts Jesus as a companion of John the Baptist in the Judean desert and concentrating his ministry on Jerusalem, with Galilee functioning as a virtual place of retreat (Jn. 4.1–2, 45).<sup>15</sup> The historical plausibility of these connections and the role that Jesus played within the variations of first-century regional Jewish identities will emerge more than once as this study proceeds.

Another issue which will emerge as highly significant in this study has been raised recently in a stimulating manner by the Norwegian scholar Halvor Moxnes.<sup>16</sup> He rightly points out that in discussing Jesus' identity many studies have concentrated on his distinctive conception of time, ignoring the importance of place in establishing and maintaining identity. Moxnes' reflections are based on recent social-scientific discussion of the meaning of place, and more particularly the loss of the sense of place in modernity, other than as a stage on which to engage in the tasks of a globalized world, driven by market capitalism. Time and progress become synonymous, and the successful person is therefore not tied to any one place, but is a global citizen. A Jesus-figure, related to a particular location is of little significance in such a culture. It is not surprising, therefore, that

an interest in Jesus in his own place has arisen, as Moxnes astutely notes, in third-world situations, where people who are often the victims of western economic exploitation find in the stories of Jesus and his engagement with the marginalized of his own place a powerful motive for resistance to their oppression.<sup>17</sup>

Once the idea of place is retrieved in regard to Jesus and his ministry it is important to note that it is not an unproblematic concept. For many people today, having a sense of place is a bulwark against what they perceive as the instability and uncertainty of modern life. Place becomes a static, immovable concept with rigid boundaries and unchanging identity. This attitude can function at the personal, but also at the national level, in support of aggressively nationalistic policies. In contrast to this understanding, Moxnes suggests a fluid sense of place as a human construct that is constantly being negotiated and redrawn as different interest groups struggle for control of the social structures which define a particular place. Thus, places and their identities should be seen as unfixed, contested and multiple. 'Instead of seeing places as bounded enclosures,' writes Moxnes, 'we should see their identities as formed in interactions with the outside and with others.'<sup>18</sup> Moxnes' study proceeds to view Jesus' ministry in Galilee from a spatial perspective at both the micro level of redefining domestic space and the macro level of establishing an alternative regional identity which had been defined and controlled by the Herodian ruling elite. We shall have occasion to engage with his insights throughout this study at various points.

When one looks at the modern history of Galilean studies in the light of Moxnes' reflections it becomes clear that Galilee has been constructed in various ways by different interest groups over the past 200 years. Such interests do not necessarily disqualify the results, since from the perspective of place considered as a human and social construct, and not a given and static entity, it is possible, even probable, that multiple Galilees co-existed in antiquity. However, the plurality does remind us of what Historian of Religions, Jonathan Z. Smith says: 'Human beings are not placed; they bring place into being.'<sup>19</sup> How has Jesus' Galilee been constructed in the modern period and whose interests have these portrayals served?

Galilee as such does not feature in the nineteenth-century Lives of Jesus, because Galilee did not matter except as a stick with which to beat Judea and Judaism. The French scholar Ernest Renan is one fascinating, if disturbing example of this trend. He wrote his celebrated *Vie de Jesus* in 1863 as he was engaged in a project for the

French government of mapping Phoenicia (modern Lebanon). He had formerly been a Catholic seminarian, who had rejected his Christian faith, but with his fascination for Jesus as a historical figure undiminished. The romantic tone of his *Vie* is touching, written in a hut in southern Lebanon, with the whole of Galilee stretched out below him. 'The landscape,' he writes, 'is like a fifth gospel, torn but still legible.' The lush verdant terrain can be favourably contrasted with the barren Judean hills farther south, a contrast that mirrored the attitudes of the inhabitants of both regions, especially their religious attitudes. 'The north alone made Christianity,' he wrote, whereas 'Jerusalem was the home of that obstinate Judaism, which, founded by the Pharisees and fixed by the Talmud, has traversed the middle ages and come down to us.'<sup>20</sup> This thinking reflected a common nineteenth-century ethnographic assumption that there was a causal connection between the natural environment and the character of the inhabitants of a region. The German scholar, David Friedrich Strauss, whose study of Jesus had greatly influenced Renan, wrote: 'The Galileans had simple and energetic minds, whereas the Judeans had a higher culture and much more foreign intercourse. However, they were fettered by priestcraft and Pharisaism.'<sup>21</sup>

Not merely did Renan and Strauss share the false assumptions about the relationship between ethnicity and place of their own day, they also shared western colonial attitudes towards the Middle East. Idealization of the great centres of civilization such as Egypt, Mesopotamia and Palestine, the land of the Bible, co-existed with denigration of the present inhabitants of the region. This reflected the deeply anti-Semitic mindset of much European scholarship of the period, especially directed towards Jews and Judaism, as exemplified in Renan's caricature, which was equally standard description of those Jews of his own day who refused to assimilate to the Enlightenment values. Inevitably, therefore, Jesus had to be distanced from Judaism, and the portrayal of Galilee as different from the south, even to the point of being racially mixed, served this purpose well. Thus, a trend was established, traces of which, as in the case of Grundmann noted above, could re-surface at any time, and to which modern scholarship is still not totally immune, even from our post-holocaust perspective.

At the very time that Renan, Strauss and others were denigrating ancient Judaism and using their particular portrayal of Galilee and Galileans for this purpose, many European Jews were still coming to



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