

Craig A. Evans, 2012 *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence*, Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 978-0-664-23413-3, pp. 208 USD 17.

Reviewed by Merrill Kitchen

In *Jesus and His World. The Archaeological Evidence* Craig Evans, a Canadian New Testament Professor at Acadia College and Acadia Divinity College, explores recently discovered archaeological evidence of first-century CE life in Israel-Palestine and, defending the historical accuracy of the Gospel stories, tests a number of contemporary scholarly assertions about the Historical Jesus. This book consists of five chapters and two appendices that suggest ways in which 21st century readers of the New Testament might reconsider some long-held presuppositions about the religious, geographic and socio-political contexts of the time of Jesus and the early Christian movement. Evans challenges some recent scholarship about a 'minimalist' understanding of the historical Jesus by providing the reader with scientifically rigorous archaeological data that not only affirms the historical validity of some Christian traditions but also opens pathways to new possibilities. The book is written in an easily accessible form for lay readers and relevant questions are appended that can be used for ongoing group discussion.

The first chapter explores, briefly, the likely environment of first century Nazareth, a Galilean village within walking distance of a recently excavated large Greco-Roman city of Sepphoris. Little mention is made of the connection between Sepphoris and the Roman hierarchy at the time of Jesus. It was renamed Autocratis by Herod Antipas and later, during the reign of Nero, 'Neronias' or 'Eironopolis.' By the time the Gospels were written Sepphoris had a Roman 'garrison that included some one thousand cavalry and six thousand infantry' (Miller 1996: 22). At the same time, as noted by Evans, it continued to include an archaeologically identifiable observant Jewish community within its multi-cultural population. Evans acknowledges that there was almost certain connections between the community in Nazareth and their near neighbours in Sepphoris, but rejects the likelihood, asserted by John Dominic Crossan, that Jesus could have been influenced by any Cynic philosophy derived from contacts in Sepphoris at that time.

The second chapter examines the archaeological and literary evidence for up to nine first-century synagogues in the regions encompassed by Israel-Palestine. This evidence confronts assertions that no synagogues existed in the area prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70CE. He points to synagogues in Capernaum, Gamla, the Herodium, Jericho, Magdala, Masada, Modin, Qiryat Sefer, and Shuafat that archaeologists argue could have existed prior to 70 CE. They were not designed just for religious services, but provided a range of educational resources.

The third chapter examines the extent of literacy that would have been likely in the first-century Galilean Jewish community, confronting the arguments of those who suggest that Jesus and most of his followers were most likely illiterate. Evans points to Philo and Josephus for evidence of ancient 'home schooling' where parents ensured the literacy of their children. He also notes the archaeological evidence of extant manuscripts as well as artifacts, such as quills, styluses, inkwells, statues or paintings of scribes.

In Chapter 4, Evans discusses the escalating religious and social conflict depicted in the Gospels between Jesus and the ruling religious priestly elite of the Jerusalem Temple. He points to two stone inscriptions that threatened Gentiles who dared to enter the Jerusalem Temple, and also notes affirmations of this threat in the writings of Philo and Josephus as well as in apocryphal papyrus fragments. The privileged status of the Jerusalem priesthood is evidenced in the excavated ruins of their lavish houses, and their impressive ossuaries and tombs. Interestingly, recent scientific skills have verified the presence of leprosy in at least one of those interred in these tombs at this time.

Jewish burial traditions continue to be explored in Chapter 5. In particular, Evans notes the finding of an ossuary in which the remains of a Jewish man, Yehohanan, were placed at an appropriate time after his death by crucifixion. The sacred nature of Jewish ritual practices are discussed in the context of the burial stories of Lazarus and Jesus noting the enormous respect and honour traditionally offered to the deceased person at the time.

Evans concludes the book with three appendices. The first refutes a recent claim that the tomb of Jesus and his family had been found in an area between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The second appendix addresses the question 'What did Jesus look like?' Evans answers the question with the statement that, 'Jesus probably looked like most 30-year-old Jewish men in the first century,' providing reasonable evidence for his conclusion. The third appendix provides a range of useful questions for the reader to ask about the content in the book. These questions also provide an excellent resource for group discussion.

Overall, this is an easily accessible book written by a person with wide scholarly respect. It opens up many insights into archaeological findings relating to the Gospel story and, more importantly, their relevance to reflections on the historical Jesus.

Miller, Stuart S., 1996 Hellenistic and Roman Sepphoris. *The Historical Evidence*, in Rebecca Martin Nagy (ed), *Sepphoris in Galilee. Crosscurrents of Culture*. Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 21-27.