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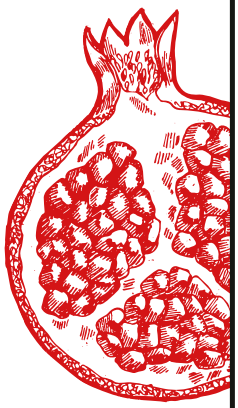

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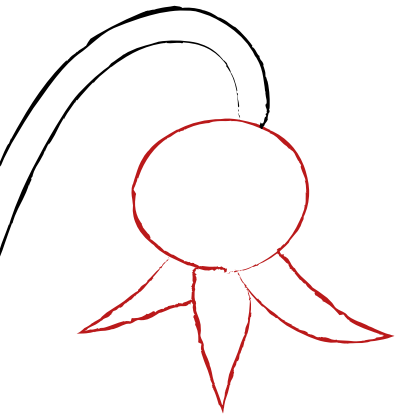
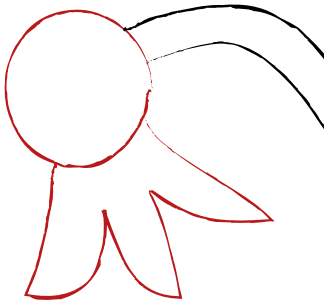


Thematic Issue: Global and Local Cultures in the Roman East



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JESUS AND POVERTY IN THE CONTEXT OF IMPERIAL AND LOCAL ECONOMIES IN FIRST-CENTURY GALILEE

Raimo Hakola

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Keywords: Galilee, Jesus, marginalization, New Testament, Roman economy, poverty

Abstract

The article studies various portraits of the local Galilean economy in consideration of developments made in recent research on the Roman economy. It challenges the view that the Roman economy as it manifested itself locally in Galilee was primitivist and served only the interests of the elite. As it turns out, the economic activities in the countryside were led by various local and regional agents and not by the elite as has often been assumed. Looking at the Roman economy writ large not only helps to correct earlier one-sided views of an allegedly poor Galilee, but also provides comparative material that helps to place the local Galilean Jesus movement as one among many groups in the globalized Roman world that used discourses of poverty as instruments of self-definition and exclusion. The language of poverty does not always indicate a lack of material resources or employment, because it is often used to connote a sense of social marginalization.

Cette contribution s'intéresse aux présentations de l'économie locale galiléenne en tenant compte des développements de la recherche récente sur l'économie dans le monde romain. Elle conteste l'idée selon laquelle l'économie romaine, telle qu'elle se manifestait localement en Galilée, était primitiviste et ne servait que les intérêts des élites. Les développements économiques dans les campagnes ont été le fait de divers agents locaux et régionaux et non d'une élite riche, comme on l'a souvent supposé. Une compréhension plus large de l'économie romaine corrige non seulement une perspective unilatérale sur la Galilée prétendument pauvre, mais fournit également des éléments de comparaisons qui permettent de situer le mouvement galiléen autour de Jésus parmi les nombreux groupes du monde romain mondialisé qui utilisaient les discours sur la pauvreté comme instruments d'autodéfinition et d'exclusion. Ce discours de la pauvreté n'indique pas toujours l'absence de moyens nécessaires à la subsistance ou l'absence d'emploi, mais est souvent utilisé pour connoter un sentiment de marginalisation sociale.

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JESUS AND POVERTY IN THE CONTEXT OF IMPERIAL AND LOCAL ECONOMIES IN FIRST-CENTURY GALILEE

Raimo Hakola

Introduction

In recent decades, economic models and theories have had a significant role in the study of Christian origins in first-century CE Roman Galilee. It is still common in New Testament and early Christian studies to argue that most of the Galilean population was extremely poor and lived close to subsistence level. This reconstruction is used as a fitting background for the presentation of the historical Jesus as the spokesperson for many oppressed Galilean tenant farmers. The Roman presence in Palestine is described as economically oppressive and the period before the First Jewish Revolt (66–70/74 CE) as one of growing economic and social distress and mounting anti-Roman attitudes among many Jewish groups, including the early Jesus movement.

In this article, I review portraits of the local Galilean economy considering the developments made in recent research on the economy in the Roman world. I argue that the above-presented scenarios is based

on models that have been increasingly criticized in recent research. Many studies are based more on rigid sociological or other models than on recent archeological findings in Galilee. Studies on the Roman economy have clarified the central role of local economic agents (agricultural producers, manufacturers, artisans, traders, fishermen) in the shaping of the social and physical environment in which people lived and worked. These recent advances challenge the view that the Roman global economy as it manifested itself locally in Galilee was primitivist and served only the interests of the small elites.

Archeological excavations, most notably in Magdala, demonstrate that urbanization and integration into global socioeconomic networks began in Galilee already in the first century BCE. This makes urgent the incorporation of recent advances in the study of the Roman economy into the first-century Galilean context. I argue that the investments in Magdala supported local economic networks and encouraged the participation of the rural population in regional economy. The economic developments in the countryside were led by various local and regional agents and not by the rich elite as has often been assumed. The larger perspective on the Roman economy not only helps to correct earlier one-sided views of an allegedly poor Galilee but also provides comparative material that helps to place the local Galilean Jesus movement as one among many groups in the globalized Roman world that used discourses of poverty as instruments of self-definition and exclusion. The language of poverty does not always indicate the lack of necessary livelihood, because it is often used to connote a sense of social marginalization.

Oppressive Imperial Economy in Galilee?

Some scholars continue to argue that most of the population in first-century CE Galilee, especially in rural areas, lived permanently at or close to subsistence level.[1] In this scenario, the historical Jesus is por-

[1] Hanson and Oakman 2007; Oakman 2012; Horsley 2013, 44, 113; Crossley and Myles 2023, 40, 70.

trayed as the spokesperson of many oppressed Galilean tenant farmers. The Galilean economy is understood as a part of the political state economy under the tight control of Herod Antipas (tetrach of Galilee, 4 BCE–39 CE) and his imperial patrons.

The above-described model fails to engage in depth with recent advancements made both in the archeological study of the local Galilean economy and major trends in the study of the globalized Roman economy. Using evidence related to archeological field surveys, excavated domestic architecture, and local agricultural, fish, or ceramic production, scholars have increasingly challenged the state economy model and argued that the rural population in Galilee was in many ways involved in regional market exchange and benefited from the growth of the local economy.[2] The supporters of the underdeveloped Galilean economy are often aware of these recent reappraisals, but old models still persist and are recycled in recent interpretations. For example, K. C. Hanson's graph of how the imperial fishing economy functioned in Galilee has since its publication been recycled in many accounts even though neither literary sources nor archeological remains give any direct evidence for the details of the model it represents (Fig. 1).

Applying Marxist class struggle theory to first-century Galilee, Robert Myles (2019b) has recently rejected attempts to understand how the Galilean economy had developed above subsistence level by labeling these revisions as representing neoliberal ideology. Myles is extremely critical of my earlier suggestion (Hakola 2017) that the expansion of the local fishing economy opened new opportunities not only for the Galilean elite but also for ordinary fishermen. Myles turns my proposal into a caricature by saying that it presents *petite bourgeoisie* practicing laissez-faire fishing in Galilee (2019b, 124–29). Myles shuts off any relevant discussions of recent archeological discoveries by repeating an old argument that "material remains cannot, as such, be adequately understood without consideration of the prevailing patterns of power relations within Palestine and the Roman Empire" (2019b, 125). I suggest that what Myles describes as "the prevailing patterns of power relations"

[2] Edwards 2007; Mattila 2014; Overman 2014; Mattila 2015; Hakola 2017; Zangenberg 2019.

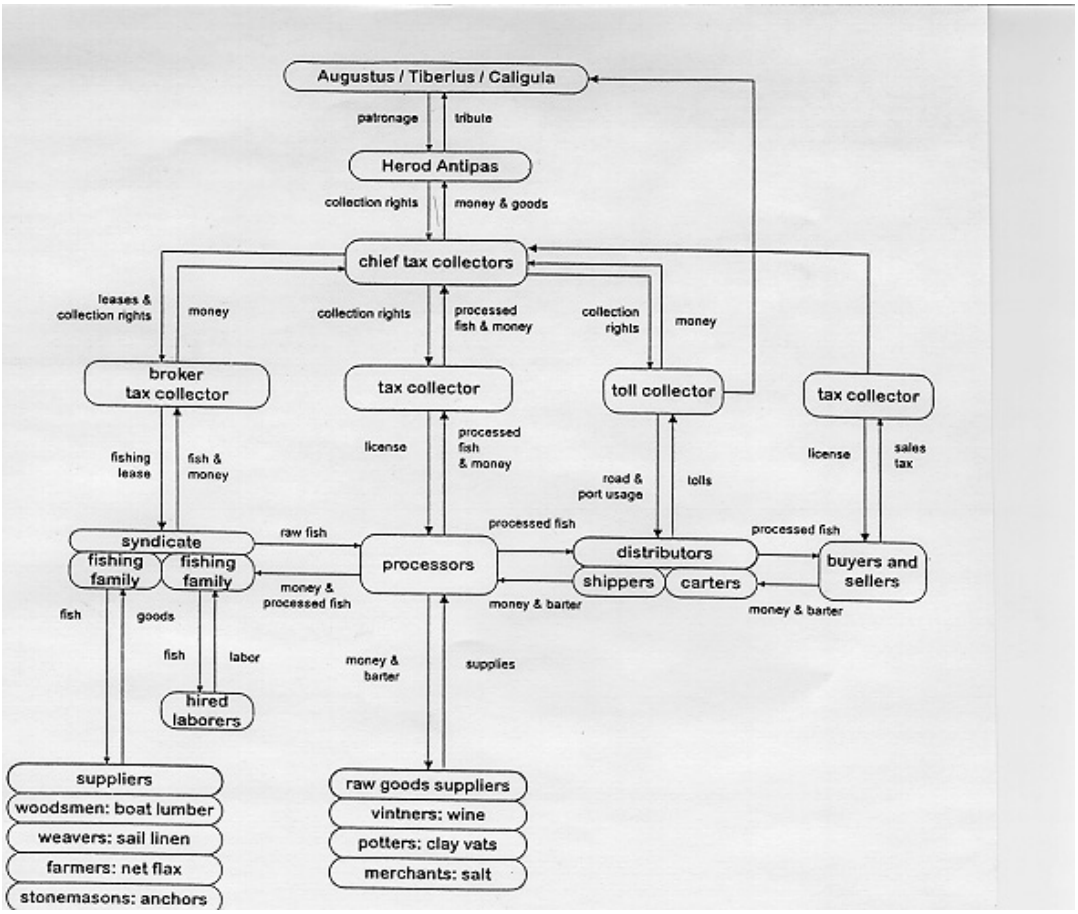

Figure 1. Hanson's (1997) model of the imperial fishing economy in Galilee; taken from a reprint of the original article at https://www.kchanson.com/ARTICLES/fishing

is more based on his theoretical toolbox than on recent studies on the Roman economy or archeological discoveries on the ground in Galilee.

Myles's criticism of my position is but one example of static and detailed sociological models that are based at least implicitly on the so-called "primitivist" position on the Roman economy articulated by Moses Finley in his classic book *Ancient Economy* (originally 1973). Finley's main contention was that the economies of ancient Greece and Rome differed completely from modern economies. According to Finley, the obsession of the ancients with social status meant that economic systems were embedded in status relations. The strict social hierarchy regulated all commercial activities to the extent that a free economy was never able to develop. The economy served the status concerns of the elites, who did not have any interest in developing

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economic systems to become more efficient. There is no room for any interdependent markets and trade in this reconstruction.

Finley's influential model was controversial already when it was first introduced, especially among classical archeologists. This criticism has since increased. Just like new archeological discoveries are rarely incorporated into fixed models of the Galilean economy, one of the recurrent criticisms of Finley's proposal is that, although he used archeological data, he remained skeptical about the capability of archeology to reveal essential characteristics of the ancient economy. For this reason, the "contrast between the views of Finley and those of current archaeology could not be starker" (Erdkamp 2020, 41).[3]

Unlike Finley and many operating with the same presumptions in the field of Galilean studies, most recent research takes as a self-evident point of departure that there was modest per capita economic growth in most parts of the Roman world during the early imperial era.[4] Furthermore, the difference between ancient and modern economies is no longer taken as predetermined. As John Bintliff has concluded: "Older views, famously presented in Moses Finley's classic study *The Ancient Economy* in which Hellenistic and Roman economies were set far apart from capitalism and modern economics are yielding to a proto-capitalist, 'globalist' perspective" (2013, 290). One of the corollaries of this change is that scholars increasingly see it as necessary to apply such modern economic concepts as capital, investment, or markets to the study of ancient economies (Erdkamp et al. 2020b, 3). Earlier, model-based reconstructions of the Galilean economy should be subjected to the same criticism that in retrospect has been directed at Finley's views. These models underestimate the role of markets for production factors, goods, and services as well as the size and complexity of ancient global and local trade (Zuiderhoek 2015, 9).

[3] In a similar way, Flohr and Wilson 2016, 35. For Finley's reluctance to use archeology in the study of classical world, see also Hall 2014, 213–14.

[4] Bintliff 2013, 285–90; Flohr 2014, 2344; Erdkamp et al. 2020b, 4–5. Erdkamp (2015, 18) succinctly summarizes: "I do not think that anyone would still argue that stagnation rather than growth characterized the economy of the Roman world."

A catchphrase like neoliberalism can easily be used to belittle the relevance of the intense research that has recently been done on many aspects of the Roman economy. These include the development of grain markets (Erdkamp 2005), the agency of various workers, traders, craftspeople, and professionals,[5] trade and commerce (Bowman and Wilson 2017), and the presence of investment, capital, or innovation (Erdkamp et al. 2020a). While many previous economic models applied in Galilean studies move deductively from a universalist theory to local circumstances, recent studies on the Roman economy represent a bottom-up approach where archeological, epigraphic, and papyrological evidence plays a great role. It seems that if scholars like Myles continue to reject any reappraisals of the Galilean economy as neoliberalism, they need to do the same with regard to most recent studies on the Roman economy; now, they simply ignore this research. It could be a possible yet bold move to discard the relevance of this research and claim that it represents an elite perspective imbued with neoliberalist tendencies. Instead, I see it as a desideratum that the recent advancements in the study of the Roman economy are tested in the local Galilean context so that we could gain a fuller picture of the society where the early Jesus movement first emerged.

There is one more criticism that should be made at the depictions of the Galilean economy based on either Finleyan or Marxist models: they reduce many different worker groups to the single category of the exploited protelariat. Arjan Zuiderhoek (2013) takes issue with both the Finleyan model and the Marxist understanding of the ancient economy; Robert Myles is not the only scholar who has recently applied the latter, but class struggle theories are enjoying a sort of renaissance in the study of early Christianity.[6] Zuiderhoek's criticism applies to

[5] Verboven and Laes 2016; Wilson and Flohr 2016.

[6] Zuiderhoek targets his critical remarks at Geoffrey de Ste. Croix's Marxist classic *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (1981). This work is one of the most important sources on the ancient economy for the writers of a recent article collection on the class struggle in the New Testament (Myles 2019a). However, there are not many, if any, references to more recent discussions of the ancient economy. For the more diverse discussions

many blatant portraits of the allegedly oppressive imperial economy in Galilee. Just like the unspecified ancient proletariat in Marxist theories, the Galilean rural population is often described as exploited by the property-owning classes and as unable to enjoy the products of their own work.[7] The potential surplus from the labor of the oppressed majority is explained as maintaining the extravagant lifestyle of the elites and, ultimately, the emperor and his local client, Herod Antipas. As Zuiderhoek (2013, 39) argues, this kind of position produces "one single class of exploited workers" and minimizes "real legal, social and economic differences" between various forms of forced work (slaves, tenant farmers, debt-bondsmen, etc.) and obscures the distinction between two types of ancient laborers, slaves and free wage workers.[8]

Paradoxically, the theoretical models that seek to embrace and make visible the actors in the lowest levels of the society strip local farmers, fishermen, workers, traders, and artisans of any agency of their own by blending them into one undefined cog in the wheels of the imperial economic machine. The agency and the voice of many of these groups can be discovered in rich epigraphical material and wealthier funerary reliefs that do not express exploitation but "great pride in work and skills, and a strong sense of occupational identity" (Zuiderhoek 2013, 34). This evidence should not be dismissed as representing elite interests but taken as proof that the dichotomy between the abusive elite and abused working class is misleading and the situation on the ground is much more multilayered.

of the concept of class in early Christian studies, see the articles in Keddie et al. 2021. The collection contains some critical evaluations of the relevance of the concept of class in ancient and early Christian studies, but there are not many references to recent studies on the Roman economy, trade, markets, etc.

[7] Hanson and Oakman 2007, 109; Crossley and Myles 2023, 35.

[8] For non-slave labor in the Roman world, see Garnsey 2020, which is in a collection dealing with the different kinds of non-slave work in Greco-Roman antiquity. Garnsey concludes that slave labor "was never dominant in agriculture outside Italy and Sicily" (2020, 35).

The Local Galilean Economy in the Globalized Roman World

The above-described models of the Galilean economy could be taken as products of a "top-down, essentialist perspective," which Jürgen Zangenberg (2019, 271) sees as characterizing many "conventional" approaches to Galilee. Contrary to what is still often claimed (Crossley and Myles 2023, 25), archeological evidence does not reveal only the luxurious lives of the ruling elite but can be used in the reconstruction of various local agents who practiced their professions on the lower levels of the socioeconomic ladder. While the recent findings in Magdala demonstrate the wealth of the local urban elite, this evidence can be connected to the flourishing study of ancient fish production, fishing technologies, and fish markets in the Roman world (Hakola 2017). The Greek name for Magdala, Taricheae, implies that the place was associated with the processing of fish.[9] The same is suggested by Strabo, who mentions Taricheae by the lake and adds that "the lake supplies excellent fish for pickling."[10] The recent excavations have revealed the urban character and prosperity of the site and exposed a regularly planned street grid, a large bath complex with a water network, a fountain house, affluent domestic buildings decorated with mosaic floors, and a harbor (Fig. 2).[11]

The Magdala harbor was built in the late second or early first century BCE and extended in the early Roman period (mid-first century CE).[12]

[9] Ταριχεύω, to preserve meat or fish by salting, pickling, or smoking; ἡ ταριχεία, a preserving, salting; in pl. αἱ ταριχεῖαι, factories for salting fish. In rabbinic sources, Magdala is referred to as *Migdal Nunayya* (b. Pes. 46a: מגדל נוניה) meaning "fish tower." For this and other rabbinic references to מגדל, see Leibner 2009, 218, 229–32; De Luca and Lena 2015, 280 n. 1–3, 298.

[10] *Geogr.* 16.2.45: ἡ λίμνη μὲν ταριχείας ἰχθύων ἀστείας παρέχει.

[11] From 2007 onward, the excavations in Magdala have been carried out by three different teams. The most well-documented excavations have been directed by Stefano De Luca at the Franciscan property; see De Luca and Lena 2015, 280–342. For domestic and mercantile area in Magdala, see Zapata-Meza 2018, 89–108.

[12] De Luca and Lena 2015, 325–26; Lena 2018, 69–88.

Figure 2. A building in Magdala that was earlier taken as a "mini-synagogue" but is now securely identified as a Late Hellenistic fountain house. See Bonnie and Richard 2012; photo by the author.

The earliest harbor structure included a *quadriporticus*, consisting of an enclosed rectangular courtyard surrounded by porticoes on all four sides. The proximity of this courtyard to the quay with mooring stones suggests that the *quadriporticus* had an economic purpose as part of

a commercial complex and was not an exercise area as has also been suggested (Fig. 3).[13] Rick Bonnie supports this conclusion by explaining how "the *quadriporticus* was the first space merchants and fishermen had to enter after having loaded and unloaded goods from the boats moored along the quays, and … the harbor could only be reached from the town via the *quadriporticus*" (2019, 46). The number of coins found in this area suggest intense commercial transactions (Guijarro 2018, 165–66). A lot of small-value coinage with different provenances circulated in Magdala, which speaks for the intensity of trade networks around the Sea of Galilee and toward the Mediterranean (Callegher 2023, 54).

The other finds in Magdala include imported artifacts such as glassware, *terra sigillata*, and amphorae, which also suggests that Magdala was an important place of exchange and the center of local, regional, and extra-regional trade.[14] The harbor supported transregional trade across the Lake of Galilee and provided a pathway from the cities and territories east of the lake (Hippos, Gadara) to the Mediterranean.[15] The harbor structures demonstrate the scale of investments that were put into the development of the infrastructure that facilitated the Galilean economy.

We now may have evidence in Magdala for small-scale urban structures related to fish processing. Salted fish was produced such that the fish were placed in alternating layers of salt in either rectangular or circular vats (Greek ταριχεῖαι, Latin *cetariae*) of varying size (Ellis 2011, 67–68). It has been suggested that a series of four plastered, rectangular pools or vats (c. 0.5 × 0.5 × 0.7 m) in a building complex along a street in Magdala could have been used for salting fish.[16] This suggestion is corroborated by references to smaller urban workshops with only a

[13] Guijarro 2018, 163; Bonnie 2019, 45–46.

[14] De Luca and Lena 2014, 122; Guijarro 2018, 180.

[15] Guijarro 2018, 179; Zangenberg 2019, 284.

[16] Avshalom-Gorni and Najar 2013; Hakola 2017, 115; Bauckham 2018, 253–58; Zangenberg 2019, 294.

Figure 3. A quay with mooring stones found in Magdala. The boats were moored either to a hanging cable, metal rings, or wooden poles held by mooring stones. See Lena 2018, 79. Photo by the author.

few vats and with varying floor plans found in several sites around the Mediterranean.[17]

The evidence in the Gospels as well as various small finds such as net weights, sinkers for nets, anchors, and hooks show that various

[17] For the references, see Hakola 2017, 115 n. 15.

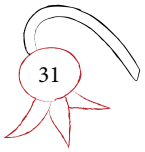
fishing technologies common throughout the Mediterranean were used by local fishermen in the Lake of Galilee (Hakola, Forthcoming). The casting net can be operated by a single fisherman either from the shore (Matthew 4:18; Mark 1:16) or from a vessel (John 21:6). Casting nets were especially suitable for catching small gregarious species such as the endemic Kinneret sardine. Despite its small scale, net casting is an efficient method because it can provide significant catches with a minimum of resource input (Bekker-Nielsen 2010, 191). A single fisherman can operate a casting net, but other net types require the coordination of groups of fishermen. One of the most used types in the ancient world was a beach seine, often called a dragnet (σαγήνη; cf. Matthew 13:47–48). The rationale behind using seines instead of casting nets has to do with the productivity of each method. While casting nets can provide significant catches with a minimum workforce, the production rises more rapidly than the number of required workers when a team of fishermen works with larger nets. This means that the team achieves a greater total catch than if members are fishing with their own casting nets (Bekker-Nielsen 2010, 191). In addition, the catches become more varied and include species difficult to catch onshore by a single fisherman.

The scene described in Luke 5:1–11, where Jesus tells Peter to go into the deep water and let down (χαλάω) his nets (Luke 5:4), most likely refers to fishing with stationary nets, which includes gill and trammel nets. Depending on the mesh size, the gill nets can be used for catching fish of specific sizes because smaller fish can pass through the mesh. The scene suggests that the nets were operated by a group of fishermen (Luke 5:6–7). The term (μέτοχος) used for those who fish together with Peter (Luke 5:5) is used elsewhere for individual "partners" in a local fishing collective, while the term κοινωνός used later to describe James and John as Peter's partners (Luke 5:10) is related to the terminology used in the context of associations (κοινόν).[18] Other passages in the Gospels indicate that fishing was a collaborative business. Simon and

[18] For the dedicatory inscription to Poseidon and Aphrodite from Cyzicus, on the Sea of Marmara, mentioning μέτοχοι, see Marzano 2013, 42–43. Marzano comments that the inscription possibly but not certainly dates to the first century

Andrew are depicted as fishing jointly with casting nets (Mark 1:16; Matthew 4:18) and James and John as mending their nets together with their father Zebedee in a boat (Matthew 4:18). These descriptions imply that the collective work of local fishermen was at least loosely organized and that in Capernaum, like elsewhere in the Roman world, local partnership networks were based on kinship ties.[19] The business by the local fishing collective headed by Zebedee was clearly doing well enough so that hired workers (μισθωτόι) were employed in addition to family members (Mark 1:20).

Fishing with hooks (ἄγκιστρον) is referred to in the New Testament only once (Matthew 17:27), but hooks of varying sizes have been found in different sites around the lake. In addition to recreational elite fishing, fishing with hooks and lines was an efficient commercial fishing technology, especially for larger species (Bekker-Nielsen 2010, 191). This short overview of ancient fishing methods in the region of the Sea of Galilee demonstrates the use of various fishing technologies ranging from small-scale onshore fishing for the needs of small household economies to teams of fishermen using beach seines, nets, and boats planned and constructed for fishing. The stories that mention beach seines (Matthew 13:47), nets used from boats (Luke 5:1–11; John 21:1–11), or fishing with hooks (Matthew 17:27) clearly imply that local fishermen customarily caught also larger fish species.[20] The use of casting



BCE (42 n. 139). For various Greek terms used for associations and their members, see Harland 2009, 27.

[19] For example, two inscriptions from Parium on the Sea of Marmara show that many participants in a local fishing collective were connected by family ties or by manumission; see Marzano 2013, 42–46.

[20] Alicia Batten has suggested that stories of large catches such as John 21:1 play with ancient status hierarchies and "turn the big fish … ideologies upside down" (2017, 5–14). Batten mentions many Greek and Roman literary sources that describe the consumption of larger fish species as a special prerogative of the elites. It is indisputable that especially some fresh and large marine fish species were often regarded as a luxury food and eating them was associated with social status and wealth (Marzano 2013, 273–75). However, a distinction was made between freshwater and marine fish, and marine fish was, with some exceptions, valued more than freshwater fish (Marzano 2013, 282). Therefore, it is not self-evident

nets for small gregarious Kinneret sardines or larger beach seines and nets used from boats for larger species has great potential for producing significant catches. Aelian already commended the productivity of net fishing (δικτυεία) and said that it was wealth-bringing (πλουτοφόρος).[21] Local fishing communities could have used parts of their catches for their own needs, but it was necessary to preserve, process, or market the surplus. New findings in Magdala make it likely that the fishermen on the lake, especially on its western shoreline, brought a part of their daily catches to Magdala to be processed in the local workshops or factories.

The growth of Magdala as an urban center began in the late second or early first century BCE, which is the period when Galilee fell into the orbit of the Hasmoneans. In this time, economic, political, and cultural inclinations in the region turned from the cities of the Phoenician coast to the south toward Judea (Leibner 2019). The prosperity and the expansion of fishing markets and trade evident in Magdala most probably opened new possibilities not only for the small urban elite, but for the rural population in the region as well. Uzi Leibner has concluded based on his archeological survey that many settlements were established in the lower Galilee at the same time as Magdala was founded at the end of the Hellenistic period. This wave of settlements continued and strengthened in the early Roman period during the reigns of Herod the Great and later his son Herod Antipas. As a result of this development, many new, mostly small unfortified settlements were founded at many rural sites in the eastern lower Galilee.[22] Bonnie's collection of the evidence for excavated houses in Galilee from 100 BCE to 600 CE points in the same direction; this evidence shows that new houses were built in rural lower Galilee especially during the first century BCE, while

that a special social status would have been attached even to larger fish species caught from the Sea of Galilee. I suggest that things on the ground were different from scattered literary references representing values among the elites and that local fishermen did not regard their catches as luxury food but adopted a more mundane and professional attitude.

[21] Aelian, *Nat. An.* 12.43.

[22] Leibner 2009, 329–34; 2019, 269.

the number of new houses decreases slightly in the following centuries (Bonnie 2019, 236).

According to the Gospels, Capernaum was the base for Jesus's activity in Galilee and the home village of some of his fishermen followers. Capernaum remained a minor village with a small population throughout the first centuries of the Hellenistic era. However, the growth of the population in Capernaum took place concurrently with the foundation and development of Magdala in the first century BCE and early first century CE, as Sharon Lea Mattila has concluded based on the conspectus of all pottery sherds found at the site (2015, 244). Unlike in earlier periods and in late antiquity, cooking ware in Jesus's Capernaum was predominantly locally manufactured, most probably in places such as Kefar Hananya, Shikhin, and Yodefat that were established centers of local pottery production.[23] This suggests that the main economic networks of such small village communities as Capernaum were regional. The evidence for pottery kilns and workshops in Kefar Hananya (Adan-Bayevitz 2015, 182–83), pottery kilns, workshops, and loom weights used for spinning and weaving in Yodefat (Aviam 2015, 113–14), stone quarries, pottery workshops, and oil lamp production in Shikhin (Strange 2015, 98–103), or installations related to small-scale textile industry (either production of flax or tanning) in Khirbet Qana (McCullough 2021, 84) clearly indicates that an important segment of rural population was engaged in occupations that required special skills and were not directly related to subsistence farming.

Moreover, the findings in each of these village sites differ from each other, which indicates that there was "an intentional effort at complementarity as these villages moved beyond subsistence agriculture to industrial production" (McCullough 2021, 86). The evidence in the Gospels and the proximity to Magdala suggests that fishermen at Capernaum were a part of the regional economic fabric, whose different segments supplemented each other. This matches the evidence found elsewhere in the Roman world were small towns and villages filled the gaps between larger cities and provided "country-dwellers with an op-

[23] See Edwards 2007, 362–368; Mattila 2013, 107. For Kefar Hananya, see Adan-Bayevitz 2015; for Shikhin, Strange 2015; for Yodfat, Aviam 2015.

portunity to sell their surpluses and to obtain basic goods and services from non-agricultural specialists" (de Ligt and Bintliff 2020, 14).

The evidence for various small-scale non-agricultural industries in Galilean villages gives us reasons to re-evaluate the relevance of the urban–rural divide model for the regional economy. Scholars applying static sociological models have often concluded that the incipient urbanization in Galilee exacerbated the plight of the Galilean peasants and divided cities and countryside so that the peasants viewed the former with animosity (Hanson and Oakman 2007, 109). However, it is especially the shifting input from work directly associated with subsistence agriculture to urban and rural non-agricultural labor that has recently been taken as a sign and cause of economic growth in the Roman economy at the turn of the first century (Erdkamp 2020, 52). The above-mentioned findings related to many non-agricultural businesses suggest that first-century Galilee participated in this development. The foundation and development of cities such as Magdala and later from 19 CE onward Tiberias shows that the local economy was able to sustain a higher level of non-essential consumption because urban dwellers in general are less involved than rural dwellers in the direct production of essential agricultural goods (Erdkamp 2015, 18–19). As elsewhere in the Roman world, the beginning of urbanization in Galilee contributed to the constitution of "stable markets for rural and urban products and stimulated investment in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors in their hinterlands" (Erdkamp 2020, 53).

Recent studies have emphasized that capital and investment were not the terrain of the elites only. The non-agricultural industries in Galilee could not have been possible without someone investing in potters' wheels, kilns, workshops, stone quarries, etc. Local craftsmen or traders needed to have and apparently did have original assets to acquire capital goods that were necessary for their businesses (Erdkamp et al. 2020b, 8), which speaks to the developing regional economy.

The evidence for investments in agricultural production in Galilee is seen in olive press installations that reflect the increase in olive oil production in the region.[24] This may reflect a larger trend evident in the

[24] Aviam 2013, 13; Mattila 2013, 106–7.

Roman period that was "marked by intensification of vine and olive culture" (Bowman and Wilson 2013, 4–5). Tamara Levit has emphasized that the development of olive presses and techniques associated with them in the Roman world was not uniform but diverse and regional. The local population was active in originating technological changes that suited present social institutions. Skills and innovations necessary for the development of press techniques were developed and made mainly through "artisans' 'tinkering,'" and were passed on "locally, orally, and probably within families and small communities" (Levit 2020, 343). It is likely that the small-scale industries in the various Galilean villages were founded and operated in the same way. Top-down elite or even imperial initiatives do not explain the development of regional economic networks, but these networks should be seen as emerging from the work of various local clusters in small Galilean villages.

Smallholders, Artisans, and Tax Farmers in Galilee

Based on some of Jesus's parables (Matthew 20:1–16; Mark 12:1–12 and *par.*) and papyrological evidence mainly from Ptolemaic Egypt, New Testament scholars often conclude that agricultural economy in Galilee was dominated by large estates where local peasants were forced to work. However, there is no archeological evidence of larger isolated farmhouses in eastern lower Galilee. Excavated rural houses, however, are found in small village communities (Bonnie 2019, 246). Typical houses in villages such as Capernaum were arranged around a central courtyard that formed "an important hub in social affairs" involving the extended families who "communally owned the courtyards in such houses, while individual family units occupied the rooms surrounding it" (Bonnie 2019, 244). Rather than working as forced laborers on the larger estates owned by distant landowners, it is more probable that those in villages directly involved in agricultural labor had their own parcels of land to work on.

It has been long customary in New Testament studies to apply theories on peasantry to Galilee and essentially call all members of the local population peasants. However, the use of this term has been criticized

in studies on agriculture in the Roman world. Paul Erdkamp (2005, 57, 61) has argued that the term "peasantry" may "conceal social stratification and economic diversity" and is therefore "an inexact term, due to the partial participation of the peasant household in strategies that are part of a wider economy." A more convenient term also in the Galilean context is "smallholder," which designates "that group within rural society that was involved in direct agricultural production and that was neither servile nor wealthy" (Erdkamp 2005, 57). The rural population was not uniform, but there was "the spectrum of the smallholder" (Erdkamp 2005, 61) with the defining characteristic that they were "owner cultivators" whose basic labor resource was their own family (Garnsey 2020, 34). As the rural population lived in nucleated villages like the small Galilean settlements, co-operation between separate households was common. Even though households resided separately in their own structures and cultivated small, dispersed plots, they could use the same working animals and implements (Erdkamp 2005, 68–69). The smallholders known throughout the Roman world also populate Jesus's parables. Besides working on their plots of land, they regularly kept some sheep and goats for their own livelihood while "possibly selling some of their products, like cheese and wool, on the market" (Erdkamp 2005, 72).

What we know of Jesus before he started his public career as a preacher fits well in the emerging new picture of the multilayered Galilean economy in which many independent lower-level agents participated. Mark recounts how the people in Jesus's hometown Nazareth, after learning of his miracles and wisdom, began to ask: οὐχ οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ τέκτων? (Mark 6:3). While the word τέκτων has traditionally been understood to mean "carpenter," Matthew Robinson (2021, 443) has recently made a good case for understanding the word as referring to a "builder-craftsman," who in a small village like Nazareth "would have likely taken on various jobs, including that of bricklaying and stonemasonry to properly build homes as well as other necessary structures and items." The material elsewhere in the Mediterranean, mainly from Roman Egypt, shows that these kinds of trained artisans could have expected compensation for their work and that in general skilled laborers earned more than their unskilled peers (Bernard 2016, 64).

While Roman writers articulating elite sentiments sometimes expressed scorn for crafts and trade, there is enough literary and epigraphic sources to show that expert workers with special competence were often esteemed for their know-how, technical dexterity, and talent (Tran 2016, 260). Practiced workers received their special knowledge and skills through an apprenticeship that was the source of pride and formed the foundation of their professional self-esteem and identity (Tran 2016, 256). The increasing number of occupational titles in funerary epitaphs and occupational scenes in funerary reliefs in the Roman East shows how various craftsmen saw their occupations as symbolizing a social distinction that they did not acquire by political means (van Nijf 1997, 69).

Tax collectors (τελῶναι) are often portrayed as associating with Jesus in the Gospels. This probably reflects the sociohistorical reality in Jesus's Galilee, even though the Gospel writers may have used the tax collectors for their own narrative reasons. Mark recounts how Levi, son of Alphaeus, is sitting at the custom house and later arranges dinner, which Jesus and his disciples attend with "many tax-farmers and sinners" (Mark 2:14–15). Many models of the Galilean economy implicitly start from the premise that Rome was a "predatory state" that tried to maximize tax revenues from the provinces to secure the privileges of a ruling elite.[25] However, the notion of the predatory state does not necessarily explain the role of taxation or tax collectors in the imperial economy. The auction-based tax systems had led to many abuses during the late Republican era. The imperial hierarchy intended to eliminate the worst abuses and, with the creation of a regular census schedule, to make the assessment of taxes within a given locality more consistent.[26]

A part of this reform was to replace tax farmers with local tax collectors such as Levi and his colleagues mentioned elsewhere in the Gospels.[27] The presence of the custom house (τὸ τελώνιον) in Capernaum suggests that Herod Antipas followed the recently instigated imperial fiscal

[25] For the notion of the "predatory state" in the study of Roman economy, see Kehoe 2013, 35.

[26] Kehoe 2013, 35–7; Gutiérrez and Martínez-Esteller 2022, 379.

[27] Matthew 5:46, 9:9–13, 11:19, 21:31; Luke 5:27–32, 7:34, 15:1.

policies by appointing local officials that helped to expand the tax base (Udoh 2014, 380). The head of the custom house, in Latin *uilicus* or in Greek οἰκόνομος, was accompanied by one or more assistants (van Nijf 2009, 288). This most likely explains why tax collectors so often appear as a group in the Gospels. The custom house was not only the place where custom transactions took place; it was also the place where local custom officials resided. The collection of customs helped to create local bureaucracy that was able to use their position as a source of status and social mobility (van Nijf 2009, 288).

The presence of local custom officials among Jesus's adherents supports the claim that those who decided to follow Jesus were not the poorest Galileans living at the subsistence level. As Jesus's words imply, his followers were people who had left their homes, fields, and families (Mark 10:28) and the accompanying social status. We must abandon a simplistic distinction between a small, abundantly wealthy elite and the rest of the population living in destitution. The evidence in Galilee is in line with other evidence from the Roman world that supports the notion of an economic continuum from the narrow elite to steadily broadening "middling" groups as we move down the "resources ladder." The above evidence suggests that Jesus and his early followers belonged to those various lower-level middling groups who enjoyed relative economic security even though their standards of living were far from the more affluent conditions experienced by the Galilean elites living in centers like Tiberias and Magdala. If this is the case, how should we understand Jesus's references to the poor and poverty? To answer this question, we must review how various Jewish and Greco-Roman sources used discourses of poverty as instruments of self-definition and exclusion.

Poverty in Jewish Tradition

It is well-known that various traditions in the Hebrew Bible put a special emphasis on the vulnerable position of the poor, widows, and orphans.[28]

[28] For the poor and poverty in the Hebrew Bible, see Unsok Ro 2002; Hoppe 2004; Levin 2013, 281–300; Armitage 2016, 129–56.

What is of interest for the present article is how the language of poverty is used as an expression of self-identity in some postexilic writings, especially in many Psalms, where the poor represent the faithful and the righteous who anticipate their vindication before God.[29] According to a scholarly trajectory, these Psalms represent the emergence of a distinct group that understood poverty as a special privilege in front of God.[30] There is an ongoing discussion of how to describe the socioeconomic situation of this group. Some scholars have claimed that these Psalms represent the "theology of the poor" of an impoverished and oppressed group that used poverty language to affirm a positive identity when threatened by the power elite in Jerusalem (Bremer 2015, 83–95). However, other scholars have argued that the writers of the Psalms used the terminology related to poverty metaphorically. It is noteworthy that some of the Psalms were transmitted as written by the king David, who identifies himself as poor in front of God. Johannes Unsok Ro has made an important point that the production of such high literacy texts as Psalms demanded sophisticated skills that were a special privilege of a well-educated minority. Therefore, it is likely that "the authorial group of the relevant texts was not itself materially poor but belonged to a wealthier class that felt excluded and disenfranchised by those actually in power" (Unsok Ro 2008, 607).

In many late Second Temple period writings, poverty is connected with those regarded as God's elect whereas wealth is seen as a characteristic of their ungodly enemies. Many passages in the wisdom of Sira imply that Ben Sira and his students did not see themselves as belonging to the poor; the rich and the poor are described as identifiable social groups that seem to be distinct from the writer's own immediate group (Sirach 8:1–2; 13:1–4).[31] In some passages, the use of synonymous parallelisms implies that the rich are identified with the wicked and the godly with the poor (Sirach 13:17–21). This kind of use of language shows that Sira is working with traditions that used the rich and the poor as labels to make a distinction between the ungodly

[29] Ps. 9:19; 37:14; 40:18; 86:1.

[30] Lohfink 1986, 153–76; Levin 2013, 292–98.

[31] For Ben Sira's teaching about wealth and poverty, see Mathews 2013, 63–79.

and the devout (Mathews 2013, 72). The same phenomenon is attested in various Enochic traditions where the rich and the wealthy become increasingly identified with the sinners and the wicked (Mathews 2013, 44–62).

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain various references to the use of wealth, poverty, and the poor, even though it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a complete overview of these passages. [32] The exact details concerning the emergence and early history of the Qumran movement are not clear, but most scholars agree that the movement had its origins in dissident priestly circles during Hasmonean rule. The origin of the movement in affluent priestly circles indicates that discussions about wealth and poverty do not necessarily reflect the destitution of the writers and their primary audiences. However, these discussions illustrate how groups and people representing various socioeconomic backgrounds could have adopted the language of poverty to construct an affirmative self-image. The two major rule documents, the *Damascus Document* and the *Community Rule*, give different instructions about the use of wealth, but neither of these documents imply that those addressed were actually living in core poverty (Armitage 2016, 167). The *Community Rule* shows that those who join the community are expected to share their wealth with the community (1 QS 1:11–12). Shared wealth becomes a marker that signals the boundary between those who belong to the community and outsiders (Mathews 2013, 103–7).

The *Damascus Document* takes up the expression "the poor ones of the flock" from the book of Zechariah (cf. Zech 11:11) and uses this as a designation of those who revere God and escape the corruption of the present age (CD 19:11). It has sometimes been claimed that the adaption of the term "poor" as a self-designation in the *Damascus Document* was occasioned by some sort of economic oppression from those outside (Murphy 2002). However, the content of the document does not necessarily support this claim because those addressed are described as working and admonished to give their two days' wages each month to the community. The members of the community seemingly

[32] Murphy 2002; Unsok Ro 2002, 9–34; Mathews 2013, 80–120; Armitage 2016, 165–71.

had enough means to support the poor and the needy as instructed in the *Damascus Document* (CD 6:21; 14:14). In addition, some of the recipients presumably owned slaves and livestock and were engaged in agricultural trade (CD 12:8–10). Mark Mathews has concluded that the term "poor" in the *Damascus Document* functions as "an identity marker rather than a description of their economic circumstances. The Damascus community took a voluntarily position of marginalization in order to gain a voice in the dominant religious discourse as the faithful remnant of God" (2013, 94).

One of the Psalms that identifies the poor and needy with those who walk upright is Psalm 37, which was reinterpreted by the Qumran movement. In these renderings, the term "the congregation of the poor" (4QpPs 2:10; 3:10) is used to describe the group of God's elect. It is noteworthy that the label "the congregation of the poor" is used together with many other self-identifications like "the congregation of his chosen ones who carry out his will" (4QpPs 2:5) and "those who have returned from the wilderness" (4QpPs 3:1). This indicates that poverty language has become one of the ways to express the distinctiveness of the writer's own group and its perceived faithfulness, humbleness, and righteousness. Upon a careful analysis of poverty discourse in the Pesher Psalms, Jutta Jokiranta concludes that the self-designation "congregation of the poor" was used to strengthen the social identity of the writer and his ingroup, inasmuch as the poor were presented as those who are in the right ethical and spiritual relationship with God and their perceived humiliation was seen as self-chosen and belonging to God's plan (2013, 148).

The above overview is all too brief but shows how the expressions related to wealth and poverty were increasingly used as a means of self-identification in various Second Temple sources. Such positive attributes as "humble," "righteous," or "faithful" are attached to those designated as the "poor," who represent the ideal authorial self-images, whereas those outside are described as the "rich," who are presented in many texts as corrupted by their wealth and as oppressing God's elect.

Poverty in Roman traditions

It has sometimes been thought that the positive assessment of poverty and the poor found in Jewish and Christian traditions was in principle foreign to Greco-Roman traditions. Finley's passing remark in *The Ancient Economy* is often cited by New Testament scholars as evidence of this; Finley says that Jesus's phrase "Blessed are the poor" (Luke 6:20; Matthew 5:3) "was not within the Graeco-Roman world of ideas, and its appearance in the Gospels … points to another world and another set of values" (1999, 38). However, recent discussions of poverty in the Roman world suggest that this assessment is simplified. From the late Republican and early imperial period onward, there appear more and more positive evaluations of poverty in various sources. The expansion of the Roman rule brought about profound socioeconomic changes and made the poor as a social group more visible than earlier, even though the voice of the actual poor is seldom heard in the literary sources.

However, the profound transformations in the society changed how issues related to wealth, poverty, and the poor were discussed and theorized. Robin Osborne has remarked that in the Roman context "the poor were more often a topic for thinking with rather than a practical problem to be solved" and "the poor were quite often understood as a social and cultural group rather than an economic group" (Osborne 2006, 16–17). If poverty is considered in social and cultural terms, vulnerability, exclusion, and shame were quite often seen as characteristic of the poor (Morley 2006, 32–36). Juvenal's saying, that "there is nothing in the calamity of poverty that is harder to bear than the fact that it makes men ridiculous," demonstrates how, from an elite point of view, shame and poverty were closely linked.[33] It seems that vulnerability, social exclusion, and shame were sometimes overlapping but not necessarily coextensive categories. However, people who experienced poverty in one of these respects may have soon come to be seen as poor in other respects as well.

Roman tradition proposed an ideal image of the virtuous poor man over time. Many Republican and early imperial Roman sources provide

[33] Morley 2006, 35 (with a reference to Juv. *Sat*. 3.153–154).

an idealized portrait of the laboring rural life and evaluate poverty positively as the best defense against a corrupted life in luxury (Osborne 2006, 13). Among those almost legendary figures who were seen to embody values such as the lack of personal ambition, modesty, and willingness for hard work were Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus and later the Elder Cato. These figures are not necessarily presented as destitute but as honoring the laboring life, which enjoys no luxury, and thus they became paradigmatic figures for later positive assessments of poverty.[34] These idealizations of poverty imply that Roman concepts of poverty were often connected to the countryside while urban poverty was often associated with rebellion, crime, and disease (Morley 2006, 35).

While poverty was sometimes romanticized, many elite writers also show a clear bias when they portray indiscriminately the entire non-elite population as poor and connect poverty to idleness (Morley 2006, 36). It is also worth noting that those Latin writers who say something about poverty almost never had anything to do with the actual experiences of those whom we would classify as the Roman poor (Woolf 2006, 92). A case in point is Seneca the Younger, who praised virtuous life in poverty in his many writings even though it is unlikely that he himself had any real experience of poverty. This did not stop Seneca from telling his readers that they should try to live in poverty from time to time.[35] Seneca's views reflect ideas that were quite widespread among Cynics and Stoics, who valued the renunciation of property and the simple life. David Armitage has aptly concluded:

> The active embrace of poverty was thus an option that was seriously advocated in the Greco-Roman world of the first century C.E., particularly in Stoic and Cynic discourse. It was recommended on the grounds that it could prepare one for the possibility of involuntary impoverishment, and more fundamentally that it facilitated the life "according to nature" in which virtue could be most truly manifest. (Armitage 2016, 119–20)

[34] Cic. *Sen.* 56; Plut. *Cat. Maj.* 3.1–5.

[35] Sen. *Lucil.* 18.5–6.

A writer who admired poverty perhaps more than any other is the orator Dio Chrysostom (Armitage 2016, 118–220). In his book *Euboicus*, he presents an idealized portrait of rural life. He extols the simple lifestyle of the hunters among whom his first-person narrator is living. According to Dio, life in luxury and wealth leads to moral corruption whereas poverty is in accordance with nature and leads to respectable deeds and actions. Dio's narrator praises the simple lifestyle of the poor hunters that has made them generous and hospitable.

The ideas that were cherished by various Stoic and Cynic writers appear also in the writings of the Alexandrian philosopher Philo (Armitage 2016, 175). Just like Seneca the Younger, Philo advocates voluntary life in poverty as he praises the wealthy, who are willing on occasion to adopt life in simplicity. The ideals of a simple life and the renunciation of poverty are especially prominent in Philo's description of the sect of the Therapeuts in his *De Vita Contemplativa*. Philo praises the members of this sect, who have voluntarily abandoned property and social status in order to dedicate themselves to the contemplative life.

Jesus and the Galilean Poor in the Context of Ancient Representations of Poverty

The above-summarized material shows that, both in Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions, the language related to the poor and poverty was used as a rhetorical means in various negotiations where individuals and groups constructed their identity and defined borders for acceptable and desirable behaviors. Quite often, those who celebrated poverty belonged to the elite and even counted among the wealthiest persons in their societies (Seneca, Philo). The discussion in the first part of this article has suggested that Jesus and his followers were not poor in the sense that they needed to struggle for their daily livelihood even though they did not belong to the wealthiest Galileans. This makes it possible to place Jesus's references to the poor in the context of ancient, often idealized discussions of the renunciation of wealth and the voluntary acceptance of poverty. Jesus and his earliest followers were not

necessarily the poorest of the poor in Galilean society but, like many other ancient groups, they adopted the language of poverty as a means of self-identification. The historical Jesus already laid the foundation that many later Christian thinkers and groups used as a positive subtext when they employed discourses of poverty as a positive part of their self-expression.

Conclusion

In this article, I have challenged the use of static sociological models that have been applied to show that the Galilean economy was stagnant and that most of the local population lived at subsistence level. Scholars supporting the view of a destitute Galilee often present Jesus as giving a voice to the poor Galileans in his teachings. The representatives of this reconstruction continue to ignore increasing archeological evidence that not only relates to the urban elites but also uncovers the agency of many lower-level actors who contributed to the growth of the regional economy. The available evidence shows that these local fishermen, smallholders, artisans, and tax collectors who populate the Gospel stories and Jesus's teachings actively participated in regional economic networks and enjoyed relative economic security. Jesus's teachings are addressed to these people who, like the artisan Jesus himself, had left behind the social status and safety related to their kinship ties and occupational standing for the sake of the coming kingdom of God. The movement that grew around the artisan-turned-preacher and its adoption of the discourses of poverty can be seen as a variation of common cultural negotiations around the globalized Roman world, where various individual writers and groups used the term "poor" as a positive means of self-designation.

I have taken here some first steps toward the integration of recent discussions of the Roman imperial economy into the Galilean context. Much remains to be done so that we could understand better how local and regional economies functioned as a part of the globalized Roman economy. However, any advance in this research trajectory is impossible if part of New Testament scholarship remains fixed on socioeconomic

models that have become outdated and continues to reject the relevance of archeological findings in Galilee. I think that much can be gained if New Testament scholars can step out of the localized boundaries of their own field and continue the dialogue with the research dealing with the globalized Roman world.

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