Sepphoris—An Urban Portrait of Jesus

By Richard A. Batey

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"A city set on a hill cannot be hid" (*Matthew 5:14*). Words spoken by Jesus almost 2,000 years ago spring to mind as I stand on a ridge at the edge of modern Nazareth. The hill, three miles north and 700 feet below, was the site of ancient Sepphoris. This beautiful Greco-Roman metropolis, adorned with colonnaded streets, forum, imposing theater, palace and villas resplendent in white limestone and colored marble, flourished amid the forested hills and fertile valleys of northern Israel. In the decades following the birth of Jesus, it was the chief city and capital of Galilee.

My view from Nazareth, one that Jesus could have seen, was described by Leroy Waterman, the University of Michigan professor who excavated at Sepphoris in 1931:

> "Across the rolling uplands to the north the peak of snowy Hermon hangs like a fleecy cloud above the horizon; to the west, the blue Mediterranean shimmers under the afternoon sun like a vast molten mirror, while halfway between, in full view and only an hour's walk from Nazareth, lies the site of the city that at the beginning of the first Christian century reared its brilliant acropolis, Sepphoris, 'the ornament of all Galilee,' its capital and its largest and most ornate city, and at that time second only to Jerusalem in importance in all Palestine."[1]

Continuing archaeological excavations here are yielding evidence of a sophisticated urban culture that places Jesus in a radically different environment, one that challenges traditional assumptions about his life and ministry. The popular picture of Jesus as a rustic growing up in the relative isolation of a small village of 400 people in the remote hills of Galilee must be integrated with the newly revealed setting of a burgeoning Greco-Roman metropolis boasting upwards of 30,000 inhabitants—Jews, Arabs, Greeks and Romans. Sepphoris—powerful, prosperous, peace loving—was linked with other Greco-Roman centers on the trade routes of the Greek-speaking East.

Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and the ruler who beheaded John the Baptist (*Matthew 14:10*; *Mark 6:16*; *Luke 9:9*), rebuilt Sepphoris after the death of his father, in 4 B.C. For almost three decades following Jesus' birth, Sepphoris served as the capital of Galilee and Perea, a large territory east of the Jordan River. The proximity of Sepphoris to its satellite village, Nazareth, made contact between Nazareth and this influential urban center convenient and natural.

Following the death of Herod the Great, riots and rebellions flared up in several places

throughout his kingdom. Sepphoris was a center of the uprisings in Galilee. There a rebel leader named Judas the son of Ezekias attacked Herod's arsenal and armed his men with the weapons stored there. The people of Sepphoris were unwilling—or perhaps unable—to prevent him. Judas' rash action prompted the Roman legate of Syria, Quintilius Varus, to order his legions to crush the rebels in Galilee. The Roman army, commanded by Varus' son and by Gaius, a friend of Varus, was supported by infantry and cavalry sent by Aretas, the Nabatean king of Arabia. This combined force attacked Sepphoris, captured and burned the city, and sold the inhabitants into slavery.[2]

When Antipas returned to Galilee from Rome in the spring of 3 B.C., he selected the smoldering ruins of Sepphoris for the location of his new capital. Centrally situated in Galilee, Sepphoris already had a long and impressive history as a seat of government. Antipas launched a vast construction project that lasted throughout the life of Jesus, who was born about 6 B.C. Sepphoris became the nerve center for the government's control of Galilee and Perea. Political policy, military strategy, economic regulation and cultural affairs were administered from this seat of power. Influences from Sepphoris affected the people living in Nazareth as well as other satellite villages. Josephus tells us that Sepphoris was the largest and most beautiful city in the region.[3]

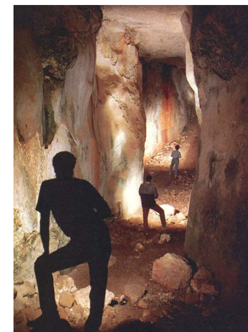
We may envision Antipas riding to the crest of the Sepphoris hill, escorted by his elite horse guard. Accompanying Antipas are architects, engineers and city planners like those who recently built Caesarea Maritima, Sebaste, the Jerusalem Temple and Herod's palaces in Jerusalem and Jericho. They pause among the ashes and broken walls on the summit to survey the landscape. To the north the broad and rich Bet Netofa valley is green from the spring rains. The valley stretches from the Mediterranean Sea east toward the Jordan Rift and the Sea of Galilee. Verdant forests cover the surrounding hills. Mt. Carmel, 18 miles to the west, juts into the Mediterranean. The high ridge three miles to the south hides from view the village of Nazareth nestled around its pleasant spring.

The city plan, laid out on the Roman grid pattern adjusted to the contours of the land, has all the elements typical of a splendid Roman provincial capital—a main east-west street (the Cardo) leading to the forum, Antipas' royal residence with its imposing 053tower that offers a breathtaking panorama, a 4,000-seat theater, bath, archives, gymnasium, basilica, waterworks and other buildings. The new capital was named Autocratoris, the Greek translation of the Latin *imperator*, a title given to Augustus meaning "commander-in-chief."[4]

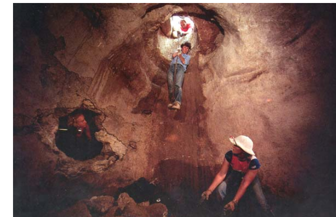
In 1989, I made an inspection tour of the Sepphoris acropolis with James F. Strange, the veteran archaeologist with whom I have worked since 1980 to initiate and carry out the excavation of the ancient city. All around us rose the purposeful sounds of archaeology in action. What a contrast to the silent, abandoned acropolis overgrown with thistles and cacti that my wife, Carolyn, and I had first scouted in the summer of 1979. The trenches left by Waterman's 1931 excavation had eroded, and the walls had collapsed. Around the summit, young pine trees planted by the Jewish National Fund were taking root among the scattered stones of the Arab village, Saffuriyye, bulldozed in the aftermath of the 1948 war. The lone structure left standing was the Roman-Crusader fortified tower, which had served the village as a schoolhouse.

In 1983 Jim Strange directed the first University of South Florida Excavations at Sepphoris, while I worked as the administrative director. We have returned year after year, digging squares down through the Arab remains, the Byzantine occupation layers, to the neatly cut Herodian-style ashlars of the Roman city, to even older levels below. Always the team has kept scrupulous records of the stratigraphy as we sliced down through the layer cake of history, recording each coin and style of potsherd for computer analysis of density, distribution and dating. No shortcuts. No treasure hunting. A solid, unassailable scientific record.

Aerial cameras revealed walls and aqueducts; ground-penetrating radar scanned a labyrinth of tunnels, cisterns, grain silos, wine cellars and storage chambers carved into solid rock deep below the debris of centuries. Special studies brought to light the formidable water supply system, the source of clay for Sepphoris pottery and the ancient population's diet.



"Here was the east gate, leading toward Tiberias and Nazareth," Jim said. He was wearing his old sweat-stained leather hat and his flip-down sunglasses that protected a kind gaze from the sun's harsh glare. His full beard, streaked with gray, could not hide a warm and disarming smile that had encouraged many volunteers to work happily to the point of near exhaustion. "The wall surrounding the acropolis ran in 055this direction," he gestured with outstretched arm.



Walking toward the afternoon sun, he pointed out the main features. "The colonnaded main street, bordered by shops and public buildings, ran west to intersect the major north-south thoroughfare." On the north face of the acropolis, beyond the forum, stood excavated remains of the magnificent 4,000-seat theater built by Herod Antipas in the early first century.

Jim continued to map out the ancient *polis* with its markets, pools, fountains, public baths, ritual baths (*mikva'ot*), residential district and even the probable location of the royal palace of Antipas, which surely copied the design of his father's grandiose winter palace near Jericho.[a] The fragmentary remains of mosaics, wide plaster ceiling molding, frescoed walls, several varieties of imported marble, as well as artistically crafted white building stones all witness to the opulence of this thriving city.

Sepphoris must occupy a central position in the scholarly effort to recover the world of Jesus in Galilee. That is why it has captured the attention of leading New Testament scholars. In 1983 I was invited to present a slide lecture on Sepphoris at a plenary session of the prestigious international society, Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas at its annual meeting in Canterbury, England. The lecture was warmly received and a number of enthusiastic colleagues encouraged me to continue to pursue the excavations.

In 1985 the National Geographic Society loaned us a ground-penetrating radar to facilitate

our excavations. The radar proved to be reliable in predicting subsurface features prior to excavation. Sepphoris at one time occupied approximately 500 acres, and the radar helped to focus our digging on the more promising areas.[5]

Another team, the Joint Sepphoris Project directed by Ehud Netzer of Hebrew University and Eric and Carol Meyers from Duke University, also began to excavate at the site in 1985. Since then the two teams have worked side by side, accelerating the recovery of this historical city. The significance of Sepphoris—a city vitally important to both Jews and Christians—is becoming increasingly evident literally with each spade of dirt.

In short, Jesus lived in a Galilean culture much more urban and sophisticated than previously believed. To acknowledge this fact is to see the man and his ministry from a radically different viewpoint. Jesus in the Gospels was acquainted with the policies of kings, Antipas' government, tax collectors, wealthy landlords and poor peasants, as well as actors from the theater. All these characters assume significant new roles on the stage of an urban and cosmopolitan Galilee.

A ten-minute walk from the Nazareth spring to the top of the ridge north of the village provides a magnificent vista of the broad and fertile Bet Netofa valley 1,000 feet below. The hill of Sepphoris, three miles north, rises almost 400 feet from the valley floor. The construction of an influential Roman capital city so near Jesus' home in Nazareth redefines the carpenter's occupation in central Galilee. To erect Herod Antipas' new capital, many skilled workers from surrounding towns and villages came to Sepphoris and found employment. Artisans from Nazareth would surely have been among them.

Joseph and Jesus knew of the construction of the new capital and would have been acquainted with artisans and other workers employed on the site. Several years ago Shirley Jackson Case, professor of New Testament at the University of Chicago, made a fascinating observation based on his reading of Josephus.

> "Very likely 'carpenter' as applied to Jesus meant not simply a worker in wood but one who labored at the building trade in general, and it requires no very daring flight of the imagination to picture the youthful Jesus seeking and finding employment in the neighboring city of Sepphoris. But whether or not he actually labored there, his presence in the city on various occasions can scarcely be doubted; and the fact of such contacts during the formative years of his young manhood may account for attitudes and opinions that show themselves conspicuously during his public ministry."[6]

Sepphoris provides a significant new perspective for understanding the world in which Jesus lived and worked, both as a carpenter and a religious teacher. The construction of Herod Antipas' Sepphoris viewed from the ridge above Nazareth is reminiscent of a scene from Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*—a passage that Antipas probably read during his studies in Rome. Aeneas, the legendary founder of Rome, and his companion climb to the brow of a hill

that overlooks the building of the city of Carthage. Located on the North African coast near present-day Tunis, Carthage had rivaled Rome's expansion in the Mediterranean. It is interesting that the Phoenician city of Tyre, less than 40 miles north of Sepphoris, had founded Carthage as an important colony for their trading empire. The scene of Carthage's construction is compared by Virgil to a hive of activity. "Even as bees in early summer, amid flowery fields, ply their task in sunshine…"

Virgil describes Carthage's vast building project and points out the major urban installations and facilities:

> "And now they were climbing the hill that looms large over the city and looks down on the confronting towers. Aeneas marvels at the massive buildings, mere huts once; marvels at the gates, the din and paved high-roads. Eagerly the Tyrians press on, some to build walls, to rear the citadel, and roll up stones by hand; some to choose the site for a dwelling and enclose it with a furrow. Laws and magistrates they ordain, and a holy senate. Here some are digging harbours, here others lay the deep foundations of their theatre and hew out of the cliffs vast columns, lofty adornments for the stage to be!"[7]

No visit by Jesus to Sepphoris is recorded in the 056Gospels, which give only fragmentary accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. After Jesus became widely recognized as an influential religious leader, Antipas sought to kill him (*Luke 13:31*). Sepphoris would not be a safe setting in which to proclaim the coming kingdom of God. However, the Gospels do tell of Jesus' travels throughout all the cities and villages of Galilee and into Phoenicia, the regions of Caesarea Philippi and the Greek cities of the Decapolis, as well as journeys through Samaria to Jerusalem in Judea. It is difficult to believe that Jesus grew up looking at Sepphoris and never visited the capital or met the people living and working there. Even casual contacts with the capital would have given Jesus firsthand knowledge of Greco-Roman city planning, architectural design and sophisticated engineering technology—as well as the cosmopolitan citizens.

The image of king occurs in a number of parables and sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Was Jesus' understanding of kingship influenced by knowledge of Antipas' policies and rule at nearby Sepphoris? From prison John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the one anticipated by John's ministry or should they look for someone else. Jesus tells them to report to John the healings Jesus performed (*Matthew 11:2–6*). After they depart, Jesus asks the crowds what they had gone to see in the wilderness: "A man dressed in soft raiment?" Then Jesus alludes to the ease and luxury characteristic of Antipas' lifestyle. "Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses" (*Matthew 11:8*). Or as Luke phrases it, "Behold,

those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in kings' courts" (*Luke 7:25*). Herod the Great built palaces in Jerusalem and Jericho, as well as in the fortresses at Masada, Herodium, Alexandrium and Machaerus. Antipas erected royal palaces at both Sepphoris and Tiberias. The luxury and ostentation of the Herodian court was legendary, and no expense was spared to create its atmosphere of conspicuous affluence.

One of Jesus' followers was Joanna, the wife of Antipas' finance minister, Chuza. She followed Jesus about Galilee in the company of several other women, who together underwrote the expenses of his itinerant ministry (*Luke 8:3*). Joanna was certainly one person 057who could have told Jesus about the splendor in which Antipas and his court officials lived. The excesses and extravagances of the royal family stood in sharp contrast to the conditions of the poor peasants dwelling on the land. Jesus alludes to his own homelessness, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (*Matthew 8:20*; *Luke 9:58*).

Jesus appears to have been acquainted with Antipas' banking policies carried out at the central bank at Sepphoris. Once Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answers, "No, seventy times seven!" (*Matthew 18:21*, *22*). Then Jesus relates a parable about a king to illustrate the nature of forgiveness (*Matthew 18:23–35*).

The king wanted to settle accounts with his debtors. One man brought before him owed the king the staggering sum of 10,000 talents, which in today's currency would run into tens of millions of dollars.[8] Antipas' annual revenue from both Galilee and Perea was only 200 talents.[9] So the man's debt was astronomical, and he had no possibility of ever paying it. The king commanded that he, along with his wife and children and all his possessions, be sold and partial payment made. This judgment was consistent with 058the legal practice stipulated in *Exodus 22:3* (compare *Amos 2:6*, *8:6*; *Nehemiah 5:4–5*).[10] Confronted with the horror of this prospect, the debtor broke down and begged, "Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."

Touched with pity at the man's undone condition, the king ignored the incredible promise to pay all and ordered that the huge debt be canceled. But, no sooner had the forgiven servant left the king's presence than he ran into a fellow servant who owed him a small sum, a mere 100 denarii or about 50 dollars. He throttled the poor fellow, demanding immediate payment in full. His fellow servant's plea echoed his own words, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." The forgiven man refused and put his debtor in prison until he should pay his small debt.[11]

When word reached the king of the heartless deed of the servant that he had so graciously forgiven, the king summoned his ungrateful servant and angrily chided him, "You wicked servant!" he said, "I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" Then the king condemned the man to the torturers until he paid his debt or until death freed him. The parable concludes

with the admonition, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”[12]

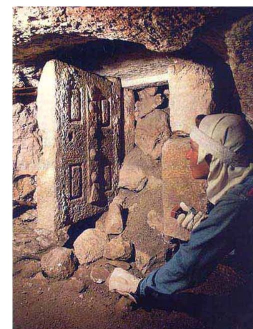
In another episode, Jesus asked what king contemplating a war against another king would not first counsel with his military strategists to determine if with 10,000 soldiers he could repel an attack, although outnumbered two to one. If his army is judged inadequate and defeat is likely, the king will commission an embassy to negotiate a peace treaty (*Luke 14:31–32*).[13]

This specific reference to a king planning a military campaign is significant. Given the strategic location of Galilee and Perea, which served as a buffer between Rome and both the Parthian empire and the Nabatean kingdom, Antipas was preoccupied with his military strength. In typical Herodian fashion and with considerable success, he sought to stabilize his realm with a strong and efficient army. When Aretas, the Nabatean king, routed Antipas’ army in the autumn of 36 A.D., the defeat was due to treachery rather than weakness. So impressive was Antipas’ huge military buildup that Agrippa, his brother-in-law, successfully accused him before the Roman emperor of 059plotting sedition. Antipas confessed that he had stockpiled a large store of weapons and was sent into exile.[14]

Jesus’ saying reflects an awareness of the military planning and preparation that kings must continually make to secure themselves against aggression. Jesus encourages his followers to be circumspect, to count the cost and be willing to pay the price that the security of God’s kingdom requires. “So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (*Luke 14:33*).

The references to kings in the parables and sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels portray Jesus as one whose cultural horizons are far wider than those of a remote Galilean village. The image of king points consistently to the concept of the king’s sovereignty over his subjects. He determines their economic fortunes, freedom and slavery, and life and death (*Matthew 18:23–35*, *22:1–14*, *25:31–46*). The king’s judgments at times are harsh and exacting and at others tempered with mercy, but his authority is never successfully challenged. Such an understanding of kingship may well reflect an awareness of Antipas’ rule from Sepphoris and Tiberias. Antipas’ appointment as king, or tetrarch, came directly from Rome and he represented the vast power of the empire in his territories. Jesus skillfully employs the figure of the king as an unquestioned authority to point toward God’s sovereignty over creation and to challenge his disciples with the seriousness of life in the dawning kingdom of God.[15]

Was Jesus acquainted with stage actors? The classical Greek word *hypocriteµs*, translated into English as “hypocrite,” primarily means stage actor, that is, one who plays a part or pretends. *Hypocriteµs* could also 060describe a person who practiced deceit.[16] Occurring 17 times in the New Testament, *hypocriteµs* is found only in the sayings of Jesus contained in the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke. Jesus uses the image of an actor to criticize those whose religion is an external form rather than an inner fidelity to God. As one commentator has written,



“The word [*hypocriteμs*], derived from the theatre, denoted an actor, then one who played a part or acted a false role in public life; here [*Matthew 6:2*] used of people who want to be known as pious and so help the needy not in a generous sympathy but in a selfish effort to win praise from men.”[17]

Jesus challenges his disciples to acknowledge the God who looks on the secret heart and to avoid a religious life of pretense and sham. As another commentator has written, “Such people are ‘hypocrites’ (literally, ‘stage actors’). Out of a good deed which should be done in private they create a public spectacle, with themselves as director, producer, and star, bowing to the audience’s applause. Hypocrisy is the split in a religious person between outward show and inner reality.”[18]

The beautiful theater constructed by Antipas at Sepphoris was the newest and the nearest to Nazareth. However, there were several other theaters in the areas where Jesus traveled. Almost a decade before Antipas was born, his father Herod the Great built the lavish theater at Jerusalem as part of his preparation to celebrate the Actium games in 28 B.C. This celebration honored Octavius’ victory over Anthony and Cleopatra.[19] According to *Luke 2:41–42*, when Jesus was 12 he accompanied his parents “as usual” on their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem at Passover. On these 061trips, it is probable that Jesus became acquainted with this theater.

Herod the Great acquired a reputation as a theater builder. He erected a theater at his winter palace in Jericho and another in the fortified city of Samaria which he renamed Sebaste, the Greek translation of Augustus. The Gospels say that during his brief public ministry, Jesus traveled in the vicinity of both Jericho and Samaria (*Mark 10:46*; *John 4:3–6*), because they were on the two main pilgrimage routes between Galilee and Jerusalem. Herod built a theater in his port city of Caesarea Maritima and even constructed one in Sidon just north of his kingdom, as a sign of friendship toward these neighboring peoples. Jesus also traveled in the district of Tyre and Sidon, that is, Phoenicia (*Mark 7:24*, *31*; *Matthew 15:21*).

The Gospel of Mark says that Jesus also went through the region of the Decapolis east of the Sea of Galilee (*Mark 7:31*). Matthew adds that people from the Decapolis composed a significant part of the crowds that followed Jesus and heard the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 4:25*). The people in these ten Greek cities spoke primarily Greek. Theaters were a standard feature of their city architecture and exerted a strong and pervasive influence on their culture.

In the Sermon on the Mount, a recurring image is that of the “hypocrite” or “stage actor.” Jesus draws on urban images that reflect a shared awareness of the actor’s art and calls his disciples to a genuine commitment to God’s sovereignty over all of life. “And when you pray,” he says, “you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men” (*Matthew 6:5*).[20] This public display of 062piety by some of his fellow Jews is calculated to impress the observers. Like actors repeating their lines on the stage with studied gestures and inflections, these people recited their prayers just to be seen.

When Jesus’ disciples bestow alms or make charitable donations, they must not seek honor and public acclaim by, figuratively speaking, sounding a trumpet in the synagogue or streets —like an actor whose dramatic entrance on stage is announced with a trumpet’s fanfare. “To sound the trumpet, a metaphorical expression comparable to ‘toot your own horn,’ is likely drawn from the fact that rams’ horns were blown and alms were given at the autumn public fasts for rain.”[21] Charitable gifts should be privately made so that the left hand does not know “what the right hand is doing … and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (*Matthew 6:3–4*).

“When you fast,” Jesus instructs his hearers, “do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men” (*Matthew 6:16*). It was customary during a religious fast, as an expression of grief or sorrow for sins, to dress in sackcloth, tear one’s clothes and place ashes on the head. This appearance, accompanied by a long and somber face, was an open display of fasting. The comparison appears to be with the tragic actor who makes up his face to portray dramatically the agony of his character. In the theaters of the Roman provinces, actors or mimes frequently preferred makeup instead of dramatic masks, because it allowed greater flexibility of facial expressions in the portrayal of the character.[22] Subtle nuances could be communicated by the distortion of the mouth or a side glance.

Josephus accurately reported that after the destruction of Sepphoris in 4 B.C., Antipas rebuilt the city on the grand model of a splendid Roman capital. Thousands upon thousands of pieces of datable pottery, a dozen colors of imported marble, fragments of bright frescoes, artistically molded plaster, smooth limestone columns, ornately cut capitals, hundreds of coins, scores of whole ceramic vessels, beautiful mosaics, bronze figures, gold chain, carved ivory and other artifacts all demonstrate that Sepphoris, in the early and middle Roman periods, was indeed a thriving metropolis.

Continuing excavations at Sepphoris have raised the curtain on a new act in the ongoing drama of Jesus and the movement that cast him in the leading role. The stage on which he acted out his ministry was cosmopolitan and sophisticated, and his understanding of urban life was more relevant than previously imagined. The realization that Jesus grew up in the shadow of Sepphoris, a burgeoning Roman capital city, casts new light on the man and his message—light that changes the perception of Jesus as simply a rustic from the remote hills of Galilee. The people to whom Jesus proclaimed his message of hope and salvation—whether Jews, Greeks, Romans or other gentiles—were struggling with life’s meaning in a culture where Jewish traditions and Greco-Roman urban values collided. Jesus’ teachings reflect an awareness of city life shared with his cosmopolitan audience, and he addresses human issues that are curiously contemporary.[23]

> This article is adapted from the author’s book, *Jesus and the Forgotten City* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).

Footnotes:

a. See Suzanne F. Singer, “The Winter Palaces of Jericho,” **BAR** 03:02.

Endnotes:

1. Leroy Waterman, *Preliminary Report of Michigan Excavations at Sepphoris, Palestine, in 1931* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1937), p. v. The name Sepphoris means “bird” because (according to a post-Biblical source) it is perched on a hill like a bird (pp. 18, 26).
2. Sean Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian, 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E.* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980), p. 123; Josephus, *War of the Jews* 2.56; *Antiquities of the Jews* 17.271f.
3. Josephus, *Life* 232.
4. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.27.
5. The report of this project has been published in my article, “Subsurface Interface Radar at Sepphoris, Israel, 1985,” *Journal of Field Archaeology* 14 (Spring 1987), pp. 1–8.
6. Shirley Jackson Case, *Jesus, A New Biography* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1927), pp. 205f., and “Jesus and Sepphoris,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 45 (1926), p. 18.
7. Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.420-429.
8. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1963), p. 210.
9. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 17.319.
10. Jack P. Lewis, *The Gospel According to Matthew, Part II* (Austin, TX: Sweet Publishing, 1976), p. 61.
11. John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 75.
12. Eta Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables* (New York Harper & Row, 1966), p. 110.
13. Donahue, *Gospel in Parable*, p. 142, C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1936), p. 114.
14. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.252.
15. The image of king and God as king appear frequently in the Old Testament.
16. Richard A. Batey, “Jesus and the Theatre,” *New Testament Studies* 30 (October 1984), pp. 563f.; Ulrich Wilckens, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), vol. 7, pp. 567f.
17. F.V. Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (New York Harper & Bros., 1960), p. 93. Also Alexander Jones, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965), p. 85; David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972), p. 133; Lewis, *Gospel According to Matthew*, Part 1, p. 99.
18. John P. Meier, *Matthew* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980), p. 58. “The classical meaning of the Greek word is ‘actor in a play.’ The corresponding Aramaic word means ‘a profane person.’ A second-century rabbi remarked acidly that ‘there are ten portions of hypocrisy in the world, and nine of them are in Jerusalem,’” Sherman E. Johnson, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” *The Interpreter’s Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1951), vol. 7, p. 306.
19. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 15.268.
20. James F. Strange pointed out to me that the Greek word translated “street corners” (*plataon*) is plural of *plateia* or colonnaded street. The main street of Sepphoris is

referred to as *palatia* in rabbinic sources. (See *Berakhot* 3; *Y Ketubbot* 1.10). Strange translates the passage in Matthew as, “And when you pray, you must not be like actors, for they love to stand and pray in [public] assemblies and on the corners of the [colonnaded] streets to be seen by people.” Strange stated this idea in an unpublished paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (Nov. 20, 1988).

21. Lewis, *Gospel According to Matthew, Part 1*, pp. 98f. Rabbi Halafta, a first-century rabbi, made it a religious custom at Sepphoris, the residence of influential priestly families, to sound a ram’s horn or a trumpet after benedictions (Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hashanah* 27a and *Ta’anit* 16b).
22. Margarete Bieber,*The History of the Greek and Roman Theater* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), p. 161.
23. The urbanization of Galilee points to the probability that Jesus spoke Greek as well as Aramaic. Present-day debates among New Testament scholars are turning from the question of whether or not Jesus spoke Greek to how well he spoke Greek. Careful study of the Greek text of the Gospels has led some scholars to conclude that a number of parables were composed originally in Greek rather than Aramaic. Batey, “Jesus and the Theatre,” p. 572, note 2; Robert W. Funk, *Parables and Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 28.

SIDEBAR

Now Showing: Did Jesus See This Theater?

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Jesus apparently did not think well of the theater, for he was fond of using the term “hypocrite,” originally denoting an actor, as an analogy to chastise those whose religion is a pretense. He uses some form of “hypocrite” 17 times; by contrast, it never appears in Paul’s letters. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus warns, “Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them…you must not be like the hypocrites…“ (*Matthew 6:1*, *5*). Jesus’ use of this analogy suggests some firsthand familiarity with the theater. And what better place to gain that familiarity than at the theater in Sepphoris, a mere three miles from Jesus’ home in Nazareth?

The theater at Sepphoris was probably a part of the decades-long rebuilding program that Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (4 B.C.-39 A.D.), launched in 3 B.C. The previous city on the site had been destroyed by the Romans as they put down rebellions following Herod the Great’s death in 4 B.C. Building on the foundations of the old city,

Antipas turned Sepphoris into his capital. According to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, Antipas made Sepphoris the largest and most beautiful city in the region. At some point during the reconstruction, Antipas probably installed the theater. Construction of the theater at that time would be consistent with the wave of first-century theater building that gripped the Roman world as the provinces tried to imitate the urban sophistication of Rome.

Appropriate for a capital, the theater at Sepphoris was a large one, with a stage 061156 feet wide and 27 feet from front to back, and with seating for 4,000, the same capacity as the theater in the great port city Caesarea. Archaeologists have found the front and back walls of the stage, but not the floor; hence the floor was probably made of wood that decayed long ago. This raises the interesting possibility that Jesus and his father, being carpenters, may even have helped build the stage.

In the photo above, archaeologist James F. Strange, director of the University of South Florida excavation at Sepphoris, stands on an unexcavated portion of the theater's stage area as he lectures to some dig volunteers. The step carved out of the bedrock, originally supported smoothly polished limestone seats. Behind the top row of seats, excavators found remains of a colonnade that once supported a roof to shelter the audience.

The theater has been dated to the early first century by the pottery found beneath its walls and in the underground cisterns beneath its seats. This pottery consists of storage vessels, bowls and juglets that probably held water and/or wine for workmen building the theater. Characterized by its red color, thin walls and general style, such pottery is typical of early first-century Roman pottery. However, Eric Meyers, co-director of the Duke University/Hebrew University team, which is also digging at Sepphoris, believes that pottery he has seen in a second-century context at another site is identical; if correct, the pottery beneath Sepphoris' theater would no longer necessarily indicate a first-century date for the theater's construction. Thermoluminescence dating, a technique that tells when an object was last subjected to fire, cannot be used to date the pottery because there is some doubt about its reliability and, in any case, the range of dates it gives is too large to resolve the dispute.

With one exception, no coins have been found in the theater that date before the time of its last use, about 450 A.D., when the theater was deliberately filled in with earth. The absence of earlier coins is probably because any dropped coins were picked up by other theater patrons. The exception is two first-century coins found under the northwest corner of the theater's back wall. Unfortunately these cannot be used to support the first-century date of the theater because they were found in an unsealed context, and so may have been introduced at any time.

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The theater at Sepphoris.

Photograph courtesy Richard A. Batey

Juglet found in a cistern beneath the Sepphoris theater. Pottery finds like this one date the theater to the early first century.

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Ira Block, © National Geographic Society

The acropolis at Sepphoris grandly rises 400 feet above the surrounding fields of central Galilee. Crowned by a fortified tower first built by the Romans in about 350 A.D., the site in the early first century A.D. served as the capital for Herod Antipas, appointed by Rome as tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. In 3 B.C., a year after the death of his father, Herod the Great, Antipas began rebuilding Sepphoris, which had been destroyed by the Romans in an effort to quell a rebellion. Over the next several decades, Antipas created a thriving and sumptuous metropolis at Sepphoris, the remains of which are now being exposed by excavations, visible at left and center and unseen on the other side of the hill. These excavations have so far uncovered four major buildings dated by associated pottery to the early first century A.D., that is, to the time of Antipas's city. In addition to the theater, the seats of which can be seen at center the work has exposed a large colonnaded building (possibly a basilica), a villa and community ritual baths.

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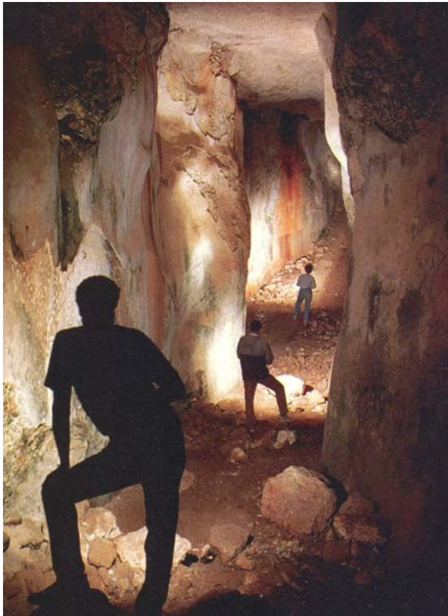
Role reversal. Sepphoris, the great urban center of Galilee in the first century A.D., today stands as a green hillock in the distance, while Nazareth, a small backwater in Jesus' time, now displays the profusion of buildings seen in the foreground. Scholars and lay people alike have often regarded Jesus's upbringing as provincial because of his boyhood in Nazareth,

but the uncovering of first-century Sepphoris puts that background in a new perspective.



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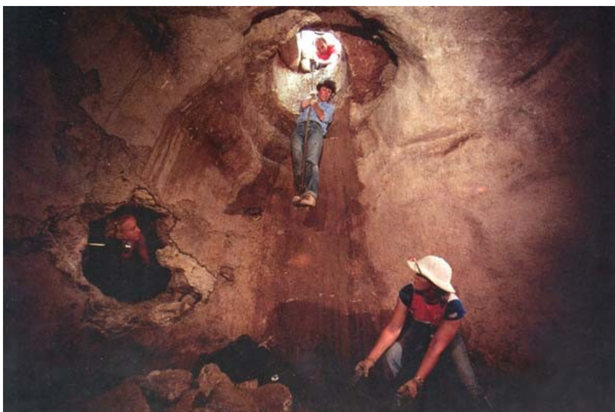
Underground Sepphoris. A triumph of Roman engineering, the reservoir for Sepphoris measures 541 feet long and about 22 feet high at the end seen in the photo. Carved from a natural cavity in the limestone bedrock, it lies about a mile east of Sepphoris' acropolis. A surface aqueduct brought water to the reservoir from the springs of Abel, three miles away, but archaeologists have not yet discovered the tunnel that took the water from the reservoir into the city. Built in the early first century to supply water for Herod Antipas' city, the reservoir continued in use until the fifth century.



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Other underground structures at Sepphoris include a group of four connected chambers. Three of these chambers originally served as cisterns and have the characteristic bell-

shaped form of a cistern; later they were used for dry storage. In this photo, an excavation team member is lowered by rope into Chamber 1. The hole in the wall at left is the entrance to Chamber 3, which contained the same early first-century A.D. pottery types found at the theater and in other structures at Sepphoris. One of the connected chambers (Chamber 2) was used only for dry storage, never as a cistern, as is evident from its shape and lack of plastering.

Jonathan Blair, © National Geographic Society

Built to last, on an early first-century A.D. foundation (dated by pottery beneath it), this broad Roman wall continued in use until 700 A.D. It supported a series of vaulted rooms of undetermined purpose. Whether the building had more than one story is also unknown. The use of this structure remains unknown because the rooms lacked any artifacts or debris that could provide a definitive clue.

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Rolling the bones must have been a popular entertainment among Roman troops. Dice are frequently found associated with Roman army remains at other sites. These two, made of bone and undated, are similar to first-century A.D. Roman dice known from other sites. They turned up in neighboring excavation trenches at the foundation of the fortified tower at Sepphoris. The die at right has seen a lot of use, for it is well worn. By contrast the die at left,

with sharp corners and edges, has been used little, if at all. Their faces exhibit the same arrangement of numbers as on a standard modern die (that is, opposite faces add up to seven), except that the five is to the left of the four and six on the left die and to the right of them on the right die.

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A scrap of linen escaped decay in the moist Galilee climate because it was sealed beneath the earliest, first-century A.D. plaster floor of an underground chamber. A laborer probably dropped the one-inch-long scrap during construction. The cloth's coarse weave resembles burlap. The fragment was found in Chamber 2, a dry storage space connected to three other underground chambers.

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It's marbleous! Endeavoring to enhance the splendor of the new capital that he was building, Herod Antipas imported several varieties of marble from Greece, Egypt, Turkey and Italy, probably including these fragments found in a first-century A.D. context.

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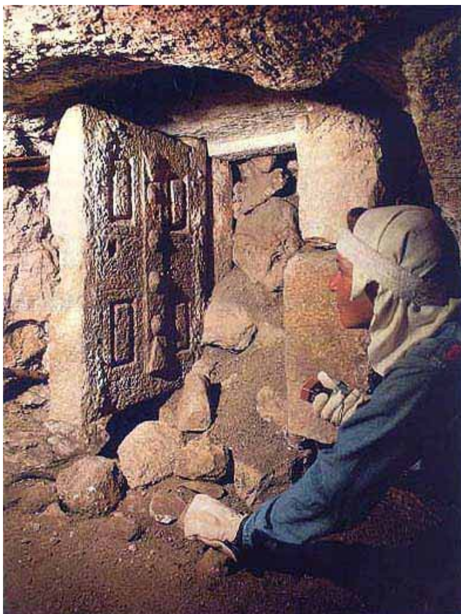
Signs from ancient Sepphoris, centuries before Jesus. A bronze bull, bowl and miniature incense burner (only I inch high) probably date to the Bronze Age (3150-1200 B.C.) or Iron Age (1200–586 B.C.). Found in the cistern of a first-century A.D. Jewish house, into which they had been thrown atop some fourth-century debris, these rare objects constitute a ‘‘fascinating enigma,” according to excavation director James F. Strange, and hint at secrets yet to be learned at Sepphoris.



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Stone tomb door. Carved to resemble the wooden door of a house, the door of this first-century A.D. Jewish tomb on the northwest side of Sepphoris still swings on its hinges, closing to the right in this photo taken from inside the tomb. The purpose of its design was to make the tomb resemble home, to imply that death was the final dwelling and not to be

feared.

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