

Why Galilee? Part 2 by E.A. Knapp

In “Why Galilee? – Part One” we briefly reviewed the ancient Jewish and typically Eastern cyclical conception of history, or “pendulum of history,” as I termed it. This gave us a background against which to frame our present question: Why did the Galilee play such a prominent role in the Gospel story, and particularly at the beginning and end of Yeshua’s earthly ministry? Was this a matter of random chance or circumstance?

This question is rooted in a surprising number of New Testament passages from all four Gospels which report that after Yeshua’s baptism by Yochanan the Immerser (John the Baptist) Yeshua immediately proceeded to the north to Galilee and began to teach. But before we dive into the New Testament passages that relate to the Galilee we must first look at a few other ancient sources which also relate to both the Galilee and to Jewish expectations for G-d’s future deliverance of his chosen people. At the outset we should make one geographical observation: For the biblical authors as well as for ancient historians like Josephus, the area of Upper Galilee was understood to extend north and east as far as the outskirts of the city of Damascus, and southward into parts of what is now modern Jordan. Having set the stage let’s take a look at some of these ancient sources which I believe can help illuminate why Galilee may have been the scene of Yeshua’s ministry and his final appearances following his resurrection.

QUMRAN

You carried Sikkuth your king, and Chiun, your idols, the star of your gods you made for yourselves, therefore I will send you from here to Damascus says the Lord, whose name is the God of Hosts.

– Amos 5:26-27

Portions of the Damascus Document were found in the Cairo Geniza in

the late 1800"s and it was later recovered more fully when eight or nine copies were found during excavations at Qumran. This document interprets Amos 5:26-27 and suggests that the Qumran sect went on an Exodus to the "land of Damascus." This is stated more specifically when it clarifies that the sect emigrated "from the land of Judah...to the land of the north." There are many theories about why the sect may have done this, and one of the prominent theories relates to their expectation that a messiah(s) or deliverer(s) would appear in that region. Some scholars believe that this oft-repeated reference to "Damascus" in the scroll is symbolic, a cipher of some sort for "Babylon" or "Qumran." I believe this is not the case, and that the "Damascus" referred to should be taken at face value as referring to the city of Damascus, or perhaps more broadly to the area of the Decapolis – the union of ten Greek cities – of which Damascus was the head. This "Damascus" is prophesied to be the scene of apocalyptic activity leading to the redemption of Israel after her forsaking of the Lord, her capture and her exile.

This same scroll, which predates Yeshua and the rise of the Christianity by two centuries, also mentions a number of prominent key terms which are familiar to us from the New Testament. Among these are references to a group known as "the Way," "sons of light," a "new covenant" and a "star-searcher in the law" who is familiar to us from Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24 and widely understood to be a messiah. Interestingly, in the Damascus Document "Damascus" is mentioned three times as the site of a "new covenant."

The Rule of the Community is another scroll which was found at Qumran and which relates to the sect that lived there. The Rule of the Community tells us that the members will have to proceed to the wilderness in order to prepare the way of the Lord. It also refers to "a time to clear the way in the wilderness." This seems to parallel the War Scroll from Qumran, which begins its description of the eschatological war with the return of the sons of light from "the wilderness of the peoples." This latter phrase is intriguingly reminiscent of the well-known expression from Isaiah 9:1 "Galilee of the Gentiles" – the Hebrew term, "גוֹיִם ," (goyim) translated here as

“Gentiles,” can also refer to “tribes,” “nations” or “peoples”.

These various scrolls, when read in concert, essentially say that the Qumran sect entered into a “new covenant” in the “land of Damascus,” a place that is equated with the “wilderness of the peoples.” This can be seen clearly when comparing the Damascus Document with the Temple Scroll, which was also produced by the Qumran community, though I will refrain from doing so here for the sake of being concise. At this point Ezekiel 20:35-7 is illuminating:

33 As I live, says the Lord GOD, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out, I will be king over you.

34 I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out;

35 and I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face.

36 As I entered into judgment with your ancestors in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, says the Lord GOD.

37 I will make you pass under the staff, and will bring you within the bond of the covenant.

38 I will purge out the rebels among you, and those who transgress against me; I will bring them out of the land where they reside as aliens, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.

According to this passage the Lord would gather the people in “the wilderness of the peoples” and this gathering would be the sign of the impending eschatological covenant. The Qumranites identified the „the wilderness of the peoples” with the desert of the land of Damascus. This belief essentially fused two doctrines: The belief that the messianic deliverance would begin in “the wilderness,” and the belief that “the wilderness of Damascus” was to be the scene of that deliverance. Both of these beliefs were suppressed at various times by the rabbis in order to avoid conflict with Rome, which was a very real concern. Josephus, for example records at least one instance of a messianic pretender prior to Yeshua who led thousands of people out

into the desert only to have them be slaughtered and dispersed by the Roman military because of fears of insurrection. The rabbis were afraid of Roman reactions to messianic uprisings; thus many of them clamped down on messianic sermons in the synagogues as well as expositions on the topic of messianic deliverance. The perpetuation of this tradition about the wilderness of Damascus being the scene of redemption may also eventually have been suppressed because of the competition it posed to rabbinic authority following the events recorded in the New Testament, when Yeshua appeared to have so succinctly fulfilled this expectation in startling fashion. But this is getting ahead of ourselves.

Before leaving Qumran, it is worth repeating for emphasis that the aforementioned War Scroll relates to the issue of Galilee and Damascus as well. It begins its description of the eschatological war with the return of the "sons of light" from the "wilderness of the peoples," a place which the sect behind this scroll saw as equivalent to the "land of Damascus." This scroll reflects very similar ideology to that of the Damascus Document.

KARAITES

The Karaites are Jews who believe in the Hebrew Bible but reject rabbinic claims about the authority of the Oral Torah (the rabbinic interpretation of the biblical law, which was considered to be of equal authority with the written Torah.) The Karaite movement is, in a sense, almost a form of Jewish Protestantism, and is the oldest existing Jewish movement opposing rabbinic Judaism. Its origins are not completely known even to this day, though small communities of Karaites still exist throughout the world. Because of their rejection of the Oral Law, the Karaites over the centuries have engaged in extensive Biblical commentary and study. Some of the Karaite commentaries – such as those of Yefeth Ben Ali, a Karaite who lived in Basra in the tenth century – reveal an understanding of the biblical text that is congruent with that of the Qumranites, particularly regarding several points.

1. The role of the region around Damascus. Elijah, the greatest

prophet besides Moses, was associated with this region and 1 Kings 19:15 was perceived as being pivotal to this understanding:

Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus..."

In the narrative Elijah flees from the region of Damascus to the south, wants to die, and goes into a cave in the mountain of God far to the south. God powerfully reveals himself to Elijah, much as he had to Moses on the mountain, and says, "What are you doing here?" before finally telling him to go to Damascus. On the way he passes Elisha (at a spot between Scythopolis and Pella on the map above) who slaughters the oxen he's plowing with and then becomes his understudy. Shortly thereafter, in this same region Elijah is taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot. It is thus easy to understand why Elijah – the prophesied forerunner of the messiah, who was taken up to heaven in the wilderness south of Damascus (much the way Moses was „buried by God“ in this same area, though perhaps slightly farther south) – was expected to return in a similar fashion, and in the same region.

2. There are a number of Tannaitic (rabbinic) writings that make the name "Elijah" practically synonymous with "Damascus," for example Song of Songs 7:4(5):

...your nose is like the tower of Lebanon which looks toward Damascus.

This verse was interpreted by the rabbis to mean "Look for Elijah" (!). Likewise, Yefeth Ben Ali, mentioned above, states in his commentary on Song of Songs that the exiles will be gathered at the boundary of Damascus, citing Amos 5:27.

3. Similarly, Yefeth Ben Ali comments on Song of Songs 1:8:

O fairest of women. Go forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherd's tents.

He sees this as a prophetic call to the spiritual leaders of his sect to go and stay with the people in the wilderness and there anticipate the hour of salvation. In other commentaries Yefeth mentions that

Elijah will make his long-expected appearance, assume the leadership of the exiles and guide them into the holy land. Further, Elijah will appear in the “wilderness of the peoples,” and he himself will perform the central and most vital act of the messianic drama – the restoration of the exiles to the holy land.

These Karaite interpretations date from a thousand years later than the Qumran texts and Yeshua, and yet it is fascinating that these Karaite scholars came up with the same interpretations as the Qumran sect, based even upon the exact same Biblical verses.

RABBINIC TRADITION

There are a host of rabbinic traditions that relate to this particular topic, but one particularly interesting one is in a text called *Lekach Tobh* by Tobhiah Ben Eliezer of Castoria in Bulgaria. This manuscript was composed in 1079 and most of it is a compilation of material from earlier sources. This document has a passage attributed to Rabbi Levi from the 3rd century

which explicitly identifies Upper Galilee as the assembly-place of the returning exiles and the locale for the appearance of the Messiah Ben Joseph (son of Joseph).

In this same vein is another interesting tradition (which we won't explore in depth here) in *Sifre on Deuteronomy*. In this text there is a discussion between two rabbis, one of whom had a mother from Damascus, and who claims firsthand knowledge of the geography there. The debate is set against the backdrop of the implicit assumption that Zechariah 9:1, a verse mentioning “Damascus,” is referring to the beginning of the messianic era. Passages like these are complemented by a number of other passages in which the rabbis cite parallel interpretations to Karaite interpretations like the ones mentioned above, particularly from *Song of Songs* – this despite their intermittent attempts to downplay messianic expectations during the era of Roman supremacy in Israel. It is fascinating to observe that these diverse groups developed similar interpretations independently, expecting Elijah and/or one or two messiahs (depending on which Qumran/Karaite text you look at) to appear in the region of “Damascus”

in the "wilderness."

MUSLIM TRADITION

The Muslim traditions began to develop and coalesce about 600+ years after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem's Temple in 70 A.D., 40 years after the crucifixion of Yeshua. Many portions of Muslim tradition are derived from earlier Jewish traditions, as Jews lived throughout the Arabian Peninsula during the period when Muhammad led his uprising. It is fascinating to discover that we have many Jewish traditions that are not preserved in the Bible, but which have survived in the rabbinic literature and in the Islamic traditions, usually in slightly different formulations. According to the Muslim tradition, at the end of days a "dajjal," or antichrist, also known as the "deceiver," will arise and rule for 40 days or 40 years, depending on the interpretation of the text. Then Issa (= Yeshua), the mahdi (= messiah), is expected to descend from heaven at the white minaret on the outer edge of Damascus. From there he will carry out a campaign against the "dajjal," an antichrist-like "deceiver" whom he will ultimately kill in Lod, the site of the modern Ben Gurion Airport in Israel. Even Gog and Magog show up in the Quran in the context of this scene.

The parallels here between the Muslim tradition and the Qumran/rabbinic/Karaite traditions are striking: Appearance of the messiah(s) and/or Elijah appearing outside of Damascus, revealing himself (or themselves) to the gathered exiles or remnant, and then ushering in the day of the Lord's judgment via an apocalyptic confrontation in the Land of Israel. On the basis of all of these various traditions, which share a common thread, it seems that there was a living oral tradition throughout the Middle East of an expected deliverer(s) at the end of time that would appear on the northeastern border of Israel, in the region of the ancient Damascus and the cities of the Decapolis. This figure(s) would bring judgment on evildoers and deliverance to G-d's people, ultimately giving them security in the land of Israel. This knowledge paints the background for us to now turn to the New Testament and reassess a variety of passages relating to the Galilee and Decapolis region, the large area beginning at

Damascus and extending to the south and west. In doing so we will continue addressing our initial question:

Why did Yeshua appear in Galilee, both at the beginning of his ministry and after his resurrection?

To be continued...

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