

# Why Galilee? Part 4 by E.A. Knapp

In our previous installments in the “Why Galilee?” series we made the case for a widespread popular expectation of one or more deliverers who would appear in eastern Galilee – the “wilderness of the peoples” or the “wilderness of Damascus” as the Qumran sect referred to it during the Second Temple Period. Tradition held that the deliverer(s) would appear in this area because of its association with several of the most prominent past deliverers of the Hebrew people, in particular Moses, Elijah and Elisha. As it turned out, this geographical location provided the setting for a number of pivotal revelations of Yeshua’s identity as recorded in the Brit Hadashah (New Testament), as well as serving as the backdrop for most accounts of his teaching and ministry.

But the role of the Galilee in the Brit Hadashah, particularly with respect to the expectation of a coming redeemer, was much more extensive than merely these select scenes. Several other Galilee-related scenes must be included in our discussion in order to fully explore the role of the Galilee in redemptive history. The Gospels report that following the resurrection Yeshua and the angel of the Lord told his followers he would go before them into Galilee (Mt 26:32; Mk 14:27; Mk 16:7). The salience of the phrase “to go before” may be missed by the casual modern reader, but to a 1<sup>st</sup>-century Jewish reader it was immediately evident that this recurring phrase was laden with meaning.

It is clear that this phrase is a reference to Micah 2:13 “*The breaker (the Messiah) will go up before them, and their king will pass on before them,*” but does this explain the full meaning of the phrase with all of its allusions? By no means. As it turns out, this phrase and all its extensive connotations has been explored in depth by Israeli professor Naphtali Weider. Rather than recount his entire

investigation of all of the usages of the phrase “to go before” in Jewish literature I will simply quote at length from his conclusion:

“Here, then, (in the phrase, “to go before”) we have a messianic belief that is rooted in the Prophets; held by the author of II Maccabees, by Philo, and by Rabbi Akiba; articulated in the Palestinian Targum on the Pentateuch and Targum of Jonathan on the Prophets; embodied in the *Qaddish* and *Qedushah*; reflected in the ceremony of the installation of the Exilarch in Babylonia; and shared by the schismatic Karaites – a belief which is epitomized in the key expression “to go before.” The pronouncement *I will go before you* ascribed to Jesus has now to be inserted into this distinguished chain of tradition. In using this formula Jesus was not only alluding to the prediction: *The breaker (the Messiah) will go up before them, and their king will pass on before them*, but was, in effect, announcing the re-enactment by himself – as the new Moses and leader of the messianic Exodus – of the incident of the *Shekinah* going before the people.”

As we can see the phrase “to go before” was well known throughout Jewish communities and closely associated with popular messianic expectation for many centuries. In light of this information the angel’s and Yeshua’s statement that he would “go before them into Galilee” is cast in an entirely new light, abounding with meaning and expectation. Redemption! Further, the new redeemer who will lead the people as Moses did is even expected to be accompanied by the pillar of fire and cloud that led the Israelites through the desert day and night. The return of this pillar of fire and cloud at the dawn of the messianic era is actually forecast in Isaiah 4:5, and 2 Maccabees 2:8 anticipates the return of “the cloud as in the days of Moses.” This association of the messiah with the pillar of fire and cloud can also cast new light (pun intended) on Yeshua’s words recorded in John 8:12:

“And Yeshua spoke again to the people and said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever *follows* me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’”

Placed in the context of the pillar of cloud and fire this teaching takes on a fuller significance. Compound that with the understanding that “the light of life” was a common Hebrew idiom for resurrection and this passage pregnant with meaning.

A well-known later Talmudic tradition even makes use of an aggadic (legendary) pun to tell a story about the messiah, whom it refers to as the “bar nefali” (בן נפלי) based upon Amos 9:11. The lynchpin of this story is the pun “nofelet/nefali” נופלת – נפלי [that is fallen] in which the word “nefali” [my fallen one] represents the homophonic (same-sounding) Greek word for “cloud” – “nefelei” (νεφελη). This entire story requires the reader to understand the pun which results in the messiah being referred to as the “son of the cloud.” Scholars have suggested this story was rooted in this association of the cloud with the messiah.

Returning to the more general issue of the expectation that the messiah would appear in the Galilee, the question has been asked in academic circles why there are so few traces of this belief in later rabbinic literature. Professor Weider suggests that the de-emphasis of this belief, despite its extensive allusions in non-rabbinic literature, is due to the competition that developed between post-Second Temple Judaism and fledgling Christianity. In other words, in response to religious competition the rabbis downplayed this belief in an attempt to further distance themselves from the Christian movement. This competition also inspired other surprisingly dramatic changes in Jewish worship such as the elimination of the mandatory reading of the Ten Commandments in the synagogue service on account of Christian claims that these commandments have special pre-emptive status. Judaism undertook a similar dramatic step when it banned kneeling in prayer in response to persecution.

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In short, it appears that as time went on this belief that the messiah would appear in Galilee was suppressed by the rabbis because it played into the hands of their fledgling Christian competition. This maneuver by the rabbinic authorities proved effective and the powerful connotations of the promise that Yeshua would “go before them into Galilee” was lost to most Christian readers until the present era. Yet, for the first generations of believers the implications of this phrase alluding to Yeshua’s role as messianic deliverer was obvious. It is no accident that the Gospel of John dedicates its entire final chapter to Yeshua’s appearance to his followers on the shores of the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) where they experience a miraculous catch of fish and dine together. While it may be slightly stretching the scope of the “I will go before you” teaching, it is interesting to note that the Gospel concludes with Yeshua repeatedly telling Kephas (Peter) to “follow” him.

The emigration from Jerusalem of the Jewish believers in Yeshua just prior to the Roman attack on Jerusalem offers us one final piece of evidence supporting the widespread belief that the messiah was expected to appear at the end of days in the eastern Galilee region. As the Roman siege on Jerusalem approached in 70 A.D., 40 years after Yeshua’s prophecy that the Temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed, the Jewish believers in Yeshua left Jerusalem and settled in Pella in the northern Transjordan, south of Damascus. According to tradition this

happened in response to an oracle received by members of the community, coupled with their interpretation of Matthew 24. The historicity of the details of this migration is hotly debated in academic circles, but ancient writers such as Hegesippus, Epiphanius and Eusebius attest to the presence of Jewish believers in Yeshua dwelling in eastern Galilee (i.e. the “wilderness of Damascus” or the “wilderness of the peoples”) in towns such as Kokhaba, Batanaea, Paneas, Pella, Beroea and Basanitis (the region of Bashan). The fact that these communities sprang up precisely and almost exclusively in this region where the messiah was expected to appear and finally deliver the Hebrew people from their manifold travails can hardly be coincidental.

Hopefully in light of the last few articles we can now appreciate with a new understanding the words of Matthew 26:31-32:

Then Yeshua said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.”

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