

The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition

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Abstract

Building on the earlier studies of ancient fishing by Rostovtzeff and Wuellner, this article examines fishing as a sub-system within the political-economy and domestic-economy of first-century Galilee. I employ a model of embedded economics to articulate the relationships between the various players in the sub-system: the Roman emperors; Herod Antipas; the tax administrators; the brokers, tax collectors, and toll collectors; the fishing families; the hired laborers; the suppliers of raw goods and other products; fish processors; and shippers and carters. This model is developed in order to provide a more focussed frame of reference for the interpretation of the Jesus tradition (metaphors and narratives) and the location of Jesus' activity and network recruitment in Galilean fishing villages.

"And passing along beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew, Simon's brother, casting a net in the sea, for they were fishers." (Mark 1:16)

"The man is like a wise fisher who, having cast his net into the sea, pulled the net up from the sea full of small fish. The wise fisher, upon finding among them a fine large fish, threw all the little fish back into the sea, choosing the big fish without difficulty." (*Gos. Thom.* 8)

Homer to fishers: "Ay, for of such fathers you are sprung as neither hold rich lands nor tend countless sheep." (*Epigram* 17c; Evelyn-White 1914:477)

"And the most shameful occupations are those which cater to our sensual pleasures: 'fish-sellers, butchers, cooks, poultry-raisers, and fishermen,' as Terence says." (Cicero, *On Duties* 1.42)

"On the subject of disciples Rabban Gamaliel the Elder spoke of four kinds: An unclean fish, a clean fish, a fish from the Jordan, a fish from the Great Sea." (*The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* 40; [Goldin](#) 1955:166)

Clearchus of Soli: "Stale salt-fish likes marjoram." (quoted by Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 3.116)

I. Introduction

Both the physical and social geographies of Galilee are heavily impacted by an inland waterway known by various names in antiquity, but most commonly as the Sea of Galilee. This body of water is currently approximately 7 miles wide and 12.5 miles long, but the dimensions may have been slightly different in antiquity ([Freyne](#) 1992:900; Josephus, *War* 3.506). The importance of fish in Palestinian society is signaled by several geographical names ([Wuellner](#) 1967:28-33). Jerusalem had a "fish gate" (Neh 3:3). The capital of Gaulanitus was Bethsaida ("Fishing Village" or "Temple of the Fish-God"), located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee (Mark 6:45). And the Greek name for the town of Magdala on the western shore of Galilee was Tarichaeae ("Processed-Fishville").

Since the synoptic gospels are agreed that Jesus' activity was centered in Herod Antipas's tetrarchy of Galilee, and specifically in the harbor village of Capernaum, this lake could not fail to affect his words or deeds. The following analysis is an attempt to provide a window on part of the political-economic and domestic-economic context for the Jesus tradition, specifically as it pertains to the fishing enterprise on the Sea of Galilee. Significant data-gathering on ancient fishing was carried out by [Wuellner](#) (1967), who built on [Rostovtzeff's](#) work (1941). What I am pursuing here is a more systemic approach to how the activity of fishing operated as a web of relations within the political and domestic environment of the early first century along the lines of the systemic analysis proposed by Elliott, who adapted earlier macrosociological models ([Elliott](#) 1986:13-17). The present study will include not only materials assembled by Wuellner and Rostovtzeff, but also recent Galilean archaeology and inscriptions from around the Roman Empire on taxation and fishing associations.

Based upon the studies of my colleague Douglas Oakman ([1986, 1991](#); [Hanson & Oakman, 2008](#)), it is my observation that biblical scholars commonly tend to misconstrue the Galilean economy (and ancient economies in general) by assuming a market economy similar to a modern European or North American industrialized economy. This general observation connects to a second, more specific, observation: scholars of the Jesus traditions have seriously underplayed the role and significance of the physical and social geography of Galilean fishing on Jesus' development of his network. This lack needs to be addressed. In fact, none of the contemporary treatments of the "historical Jesus" has a single significant thing to say about Galilean fishing beyond the fact that four of the Twelve are identified as fishermen in

the tradition (e.g., [Borg](#) 1987; [Mack](#) 1988; [Crossan](#) 1991; R. A. [Horsley](#) 1993). Only [Rousseau & Arav](#) have even bothered to bring together some of the basic data (1995:19-30, 93-97, 189-90). Further, even works focused on the history and society of Galilee have virtually nothing of importance to say about Galilean fishing in general or its relationship to Jesus (e.g., [Freyne](#) 1980, 1988, 1994; R. A. [Horsley](#) 1996). In his most recent work, however, Freyne does briefly acknowledge the economic role fishing played in Herodian Galilee (1995:35).

II. An Embedded Economy: Politics and Kinship

Fishing was an important part of the Galilean economy in the first century. But it was not the "free enterprise" which modern readers of the New Testament may imagine. Even fishers who may have owned their own boats were part of a state regulated, elite-profiting enterprise, and a complex web of economic relationships. These are symptoms of an "embedded economy." That is to say, economies in the ancient Mediterranean were not independent systems with "free markets," free trade, stock exchanges, monetization, and the like, as one finds in modern capitalist systems. Rather, only political and kinship systems were explicit social domains; economics and religion were conceptualized, controlled, and sustained either by the political hierarchy or kin-groups ([Polanyi, et al.](#) 1957; Dalton 1961; [Polanyi](#) 1968; [Finley](#) 1985; [Malina](#) 1986; [Garnsey & Saller](#) 1987:43-63). For an overall assessment of the setting of Jesus' activity, it is essential to understand the mechanisms of political economies in the ancient Mediterranean in terms of the flow of benefits upward to the urban elites, and especially the ruling families.

It will not be possible here to analyze the complexity of the first-century Galilean embedded economy as a whole ([Oakman](#) 1983:17-91; [Hamel](#) 1990; [Freyne](#) 1994, 1995; R. A. [Horsley](#) 1995; [Hanson & Oakman](#), 2008). Suffice it to say, the largest part of the population was composed of peasant farmers, and the family functioned as both a producing and consuming unit. This means that relatives normally worked together, and that kinship ties were fundamental for "guild" or trade relations. This local, domestic economy was often in tension with the larger political economy. Galilee of the first century was ruled by Herod Antipas, a Roman client, and was therefore a form of what [Kautsky](#) calls an "aristocratic empire." Furthermore, it was an "advanced agrarian society" in terms of its form of production and technology. I mention here a few of the basic characteristics of political economies and infrastructures of such societies:

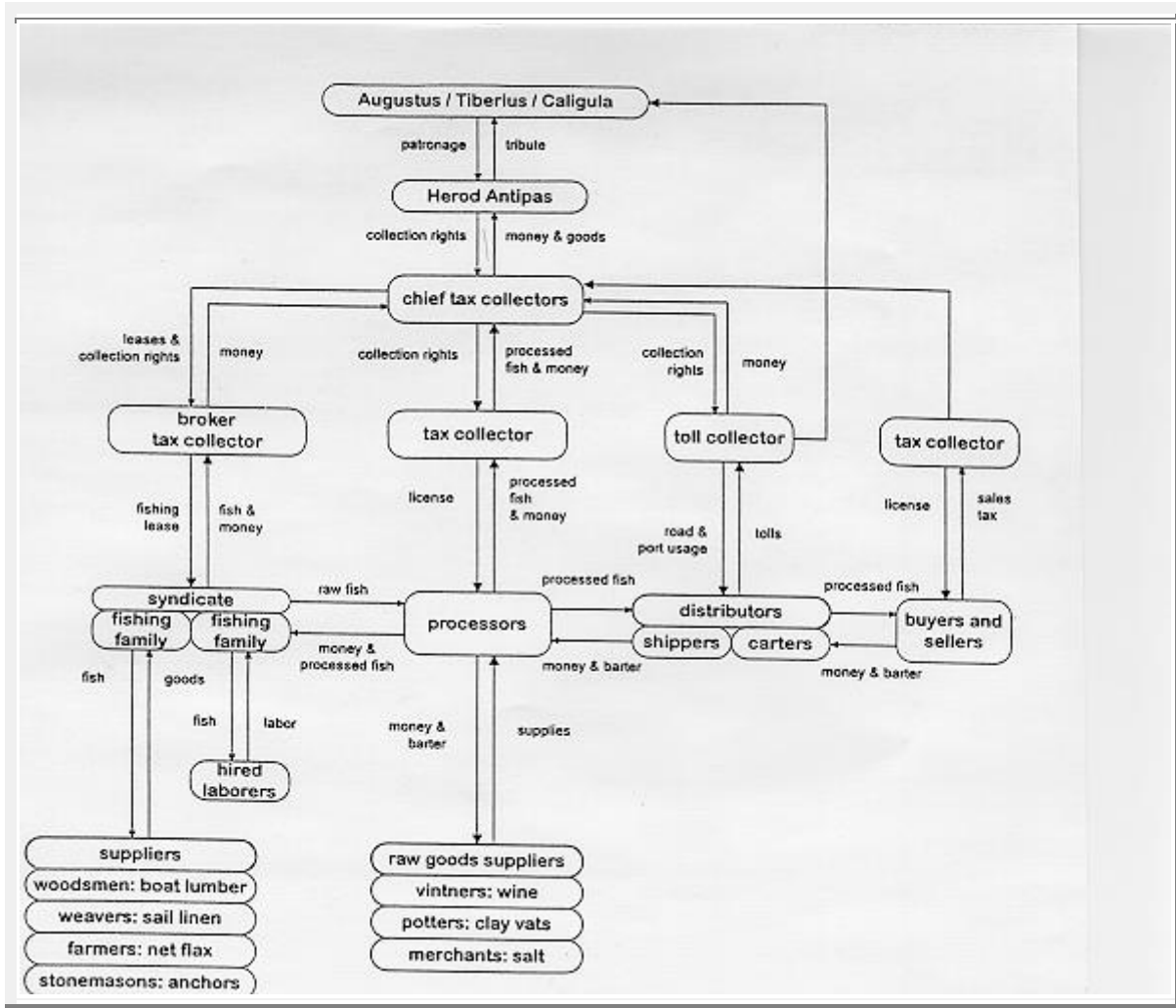
1. The primary functions exercised by aristocratic families are *tax-collection and warfare*: both of these functions serve the urban elites' interests ([Kautsky](#): 6, 79).
2. While the small number of elites compete for honor and the right to control and tax peasant families, peasant families remain at *subsistence level*, reinforced by a sense of "natural" hierarchy ([Lenski](#) : 210-20).
3. These empires are "*exploitative*" in that peasants have no say in their control or taxation ([Kautsky](#): 6, 112; [Lenski](#) : 210-20); and while the peasants are cognizant of their

place in the rather rigid social hierarchy, they develop strategies to evade control through a variety of means (e.g., lying, hiding, protest) ([Scott](#) 1977, 1985).

4. Since much of the peasant families' produce (the so-called "surplus") is extracted by the aristocratic families in the form of labor, produce, and money (through the instruments of tithes, taxes, tolls, rents, tribute, and confiscation), *technological progress* is impeded, minimizing change; the exception to this is the technology of warfare, since it is subsidized by the aristocratic families to protect their power, privilege, and possessions ([Kautsky](#): 7, 103; [Lenski](#) : 210-20).
5. *Improvements in the infrastructure* (e.g., roads, aqueducts, harbors) are for the increased benefit of the aristocratic families, not for the benefit the peasant families in return for their taxes ([Kautsky](#): 114).

III. Galilean Fishing as a Social Sub-System

Diagram 1: The Political Economy of Galilean Fishing



The various families in this political-economic and domestic-economic network of relationships—we must avoid imagining *individuals* who "go to work"—are not equally well documented for Galilee during the first century; some of the relationships are inferred. But I suggest this scenario as a beginning in order to imagine real people involved in real occupations which require a very real network of relationships and transactions. The evidence for the scenario depicted in Diagram #1 is as follows.

1. The Roman emperors became wealthy beyond imagination because of their patronage position with regard to client-kings such as the Herodians (e.g., Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*, "Augustus" 60). These clients contributed to the imperial coffers first of all through annual tribute of two primary types: on land and on persons (e.g., Mark 12:13-17; Josephus, *War* 2.403, 405). Secondly, they profited from indirect taxes of various kinds, including customs fees at ports and roads (Pliny, *Natural History* 12.32, 63-65). And lastly, they were beneficiaries of their clients' wills. This last source of revenue is often overlooked by modern scholars. Josephus reports that Herod the Great, for example, bequeathed Augustus 1000 talents (6 million denarii) and Julia, Augustus's wife, 500 talents (3 million denarii; *Ant.* 17.146, 190). (Herod's

bequests are examined by Hoehner [1972:269-76], Braund [1984:129-64] and Hanson [1990:18].) Suetonius says that in the last twenty years of his reign, Augustus received 1.4 billion sesterces (= 350 million denarii) from his clients in wills ("Augustus" 101).

As Braund points out, the payment of tribute by client-kings has been a controversial issue among Roman historians (1984:64). While Hoehner (1972:298-300) and Freyne (1995:32) believe the Herodians did pay tribute, Schürer disagrees (1973:1:317, 416-17). Schürer's conclusion is based on Josephus's account of Herod the Great's death. At that time, the people of Judea sought imperial relief, not from Roman tribute, but from the weight of Herodian taxes (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.304-11). He also points to Suetonius's report that when Caligula restored kings to their realms he granted them "full employment of the revenues and also the produce of the interval" ("Caligula" 16). Braund contends that client-kings in most cases did not pay *tribute*, even if they paid *annual indemnities* (1984:66). This, however, seems to be a distinction without a difference. I would conclude that Herod Antipas did pay tribute—whether it was technically so specified or not—based upon the following:

a) "Tribute" can take many forms, including the grateful "gifts" of clients to honor their imperial patron—either directly (e.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 14.34-36; 16.16, 86) or indirectly, for example: building temples to the Augusti, or endowing a favorite city of the emperor (e.g., *Ant.* 16.146-49).

b) Tribute was exacted by Julius Caesar from Palestine during the Hasmonean era (*Ant.* 14.202-6).

c) Josephus explicitly states that Herod the Great paid Roman tribute to Octavian/ Augustus; and he also took responsibility for the tribute on lands he leased from Cleopatra and parts of Arabia (*Ant.* 15.96, 106-7, 132-33). Appian says:

He [Octavian] set up kings here and there as he pleased on condition of their paying prescribed tributes: in Pontus, Darius, the son of Pharnaces and grandson of Mithridates; in Idumea and Samaria, Herod; in Pisidia, Amyntas; in a part of Cilicia, Polemon, and others in other countries (Appian, *Civil Wars* 5.75).

Josephus indicates that for Judea, the collecting of Roman tribute was controlled by urban elites (*War* 2.405, 407). As for the people of Batanaea, Josephus says that they were ground down by the tribute collected by Agrippa I (late first century), and thereafter completely crushed by the direct collection of the tribute by the Romans (*Ant.* 17.28).

Another basic way the Romans benefitted from their provinces was through monopolies. Certain trades and industries were essentially "owned" by Rome and contracted to the workers. In Palestine after the First Judean Revolt (66-70 CE), Rome controlled the **balsam trade** (Pliny, *Natural History* 12.54, 111-13; Strabo, *Geography* 16.2.41). In Palmyra the Romans monopolized **salt**, in Tyre the **purple**, and in

Lebanon **lumber**; in Egypt, Rome had monopolies over most major industries ([Heichelheim](#) 1959:228-31; 1970:699). The net profits from these industries, consequently, went to the Imperial treasury.

2. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea from 4 BCE—39 CE with the status of tetrarch (Luke 3:1; Josephus, *War* 1.668; *Ant.* 17.188). The title of tetrarch was determined both by his father's will and his status as a Roman client controlling a relatively small district. He was the son of Herod the Great and Malthake (a Samaritan); and his full brother and sister were Herod Archelaus (ethnarch of Judea) and Olympias (Josephus, *War* 1.562; Hanson 1989:78-79). When Herod Antipas founded the city of Tiberias, Josephus says that he rose to be one of the greatest friends of Tiberius (*Ant.* 18.36). Political life of Galilee under Herod Antipas is analyzed by Hoehner ([1972](#):83-265), Sullivan ([1977](#):306-8), Smallwood (1981:183-87) and Freyne (1988:135-43).

Josephus estimates the annual revenue of Herod Antipas from his tetrarchy at 200 talents = 1.2 million denarii (*Ant.* 17.318). Compare this to the annual revenues of his ruling relatives (Table 1; note that Salome is often overlooked because of her subordinate status to Archelaus):

TABLE 1: Herodian Revenues

RULERS	REGIONS	REVENUES	REFERNCES
Salome	Jamnia, Ashdod, and Phasaelis	60 talents	<i>Ant.</i> 17.321
Philip	northern territories	100 talents	<i>Ant.</i> 17.319
Herod Antipas	Galilee and Perea	200 talents	<i>Ant.</i> 17.318
Archelaus	Idumea, Judea, and Samaria	600 talents	<i>Ant.</i> 17.319-20
Agrippa I	all Palestine	2000 talents	<i>Ant.</i> 19.352

Extracting revenues from the land was consistent with earlier periods, for example under Pompey (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.74, 78) and Julius Caesar (*Ant.* 14.202-3). And the people of Roman-era Palestine clearly considered them a heavy burden, as protests demonstrate (Josephus, *War* 2.4; Tacitus, *Annals* 2.42).

Josephus calls Herod Antipas a "lover of luxury" (*Ant.* 18.245). This luxurious lifestyle is only comprehensible in view of his extraction of Galilean resources. Since Josephus himself ranked among the urban elite, I take this as quite a cutting comment,

intimating that Herod Antipas was "way over the top."

How many administrative/tax districts (*toparchoi*) Herod employed is not clear from the sources. Were only Tarichaeae and Tiberias toparchies? Or did Sepphoris and Gabara function in this capacity as well? Strange seems to make contradictory statements in this regard (1992:464). If all four district divisions were used, they would have been responsible for roughly the areas listed in Table 2:

REGION	ADMINISTRATIVE TOWN
northeastern Lower Galilee	Tarichaeae
northwestern Lower Galilee	Gabara
southeastern Lower Galilee	Tiberias
southwestern Lower Galilee	Sepphoris

(*Corrected from published version)

Royal taxes and duties paid to Archelaus are discussed further in Josephus, *War* 2.4; *Ant.* 17.204-5.

The Herodians (either Herod Antipas or Herod the Great before him) also seem to be responsible for the construction of the harbors and breakwaters on the Sea of Galilee. The size of the stones and the required construction organization suggest state building projects. The known harbors correspond directly to the locations where Jesus lived or traveled in the gospels (beginning in the north and going counter-clockwise): Bethsaida, Capernaum, Gennesar, Magdala [Tarichaeae], Gadara, and Gergasa; the other known harbors are: Aish, Tabgha, Emmaus, Sennabris, Philoteria, Hippos [Susita], Ein Gofra, and Kefar Aqavya (Nun 1989:15; Gophen & Gal 1992:162; Rouseau & Aray 1995:23). With regard to the regional ruler controlling the Sea of Galilee, Dunkel notes that during the rule of the Ottoman Empire leases and taxes were paid to the Pasha in Damascus (1924). The most recent analysis of Herod the Great and the Herodian family is Richardson 1997.

3. Tax collectors, toll collectors, and brokers (e.g., John of Caesarea, *War* 2.287) are not organizationally differentiated in the ancient sources (for the Roman evidence in

general, [Youtie](#) [1967] and Badian [1972]; for Palestine, [Donahue](#) [1971] and [Michel](#) [1972]). But with regard to the model of Galilean fishing, such persons intrude in all transactions. That there were at least two "layers" to the bureaucracy is indicated by reference to chief-collectors, viz. "tax and toll administrators" (*architelônai*; e.g., Zacchaeus, Luke 19:2). We see the contracting of taxes to "the urban elites and rulers" during the Hellenistic period in Josephus, *Ant.* 12.169, 175, 184. And the term *kômogrammatoi* (*Ant.* 16.203) may refer to the village "accountants" who oversaw leases and other taxes.

Adapting [Rostovtzeff's](#) model based on Egyptian and Syrian evidence, fishermen received capitalization along with fishing rights, and were therefore indebted to local brokers responsible for the harbors and for fishing leases. The location of Levi's toll office in Capernaum—an important fishing locale—probably identifies him as just such a contractor of royal fishing rights (Matt 9:9; Mark 2:13-14; [Wuellner](#) 1967:43-44; contra Theissen, who imagines a frontier toll booth, [1991](#):119nn). This location of a fishing toll-office next to the harbor is paralleled in the first-century inscription from Ephesus (G. H. R. [Horsley](#) 1989:18-19). Horsley also mentions an Imperial-era Latin document concerning a dedication to the goddess Hlundana made by fishing contractors (*conductores piscatus*; *ILS* 1 [1892; repr. 1962] 1462; [1989](#):106).

In a story about the bid by Demetrius (the Seleucid king) for the loyalty of Jonathan (the Hasmonean), both 1 Maccabees and Josephus quote a letter from Demetrius (c. 152 BCE) listing the following taxes he was willing to suspend (1 Macc 10:29-31; 11:34-36; Josephus, *Ant.* 13.49-51):

- a. salt tax
- b. crown tax
- c. grain tax: one-third of the produce
- d. tax on fruit and nut trees: one-half the produce
- e. poll tax
- f. tithe
- g. tribute
- h. imposts/duties

Presumably, the remission of these taxes and tribute previously paid to the Seleucids would subsequently be paid to the Hasmonean rulers and then the Herodians. An important anecdote in Josephus that illuminates imperial tribute (under the Ptolemies), bidding for collection rights, and the like is told about a Judean from Egypt named Joseph:

Now when the day came on which the collection rights of taxes on the cities were sold, and those that were the principal men of dignity in their several countries were to bid for them, the sum of the taxes together of Coele-Syria and Phoenicia, and Judea, with Samaria came to 8,000 talents. Hereupon Joseph [the Tobiad] accused the bidders of colluding to undervalue the taxes; and he promised that he would himself give twice as much for them. But for those who did not pay, he would send the king [Ptolemy] home their whole substance, for this right was sold together with the taxes. The king was

pleased to hear that offer; and, because it augmented his revenues, he said he would confirm the sale of the taxes to him; but when he asked him this question whether he had any securities that would be bound for the payment of the money, he answered very pleasantly, "I will offer good and responsible persons, and ones which you shall have no reason to distrust." And when he asked him to name them, he replied, "I give you no other persons, O king, than yourself and your wife; and you shall be security for both parties." So Ptolemy laughed at the proposal, and granted him the collection of the taxes without any sureties (*Ant.* 12.175-78).

That taxes were often paid "in kind" rather than in money can be seen in several ancient documents. Referring to earlier days in Greece, Athenaeum quotes Philomnestus: "For the sycophant got his name from the fact that in those days the fines and taxes, from the proceeds of which they administered public expenditures, consisted of figs, wine, and oil, and they who exacted these tolls or made declaration of them were called, as it appears, 'sycophants' (*sykophantas*), being selected as the most trustworthy among the citizens" (*Deipnosophists* 3.74-75). And the same was true of Hasmonean-era Palestine: ". . . in the second year they shall pay the tribute at Sidon, consisting of one-fourth the produce sown . . ." (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.203). This is consistent with an Egyptian papyrus from the same period (*Papyrus Tebtunis* no. 5; [Hunt and Edgar](#) 1934:60-61; 118 BCE). Rabban Gamaliel (first century CE) is quoted as saying: "By four things does the empire exist: by its tolls, bathhouses, theatres, and crop taxes" (*The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan* 28; Goldin 1955:116).

And this brings us to those collectors who controlled the roads and bridges. The imperial customs duties were based on crossing from one Roman tax district into another; and during the reign of Tiberius, the Empire had ten districts. The duty-rates were 2%, 2.5%, or 5%, depending upon the goods ([Lewis and Reinhold](#) 1990:64-65); and this rate of 2% (more or less) is exemplified by one of the technical terms for customs collectors: *pentêkostologos* ("collector of the one-fiftieth"; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 2.49; 11.481). The toll-fees for roads varied considerably; they also charged for animals (at different rates for camels and donkeys) and wagons. I have not yet found any documentation for Galilean road-tolls, but presumably Herod Antipas collected from the local traffic on roads and bridges within Galilee. In a toll-list from Coptus, Egypt (90 CE), toll-rates do appear, providing some idea of first-century rates of toll in a Roman province. They cover different classifications of people based on gender, status, and profession (e.g., 5 drachmas for a sailor, 20 drachmas for a sailor's woman); and different animals and conveyances (e.g., 1 obol for a camel, 4 drachmas for a covered wagon; *Oriens Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae* no. 674; [Lewis and Reinhold](#) 1990:66-67). The import duty for bringing processed fish into Palmyra in 137 CE was 10 denarii per camel load (*Corpus Inscriptionum Selectae* II.3, 1 [1926] 3913; [Matthews](#) 1984:174-80).

The abusiveness of tax collectors is a well-attested phenomenon from the Roman era, as suggested in the Zacchaeus story (Luke 19:2-8) and the Mishnah (*m. B.K.*; *m. Ned.* 3.4; *m. Toh.* 7.6; [Jeremias](#) 1969:303-12). Philo's characterization of the common first-century attitude toward them is apt:

. . . for cities usually furnish them [taxes] under compulsion, and with great reluctance and lamentation, looking upon the collectors of the taxes as common enemies and destroyers, and making various excuses at different times, and neglecting all laws and regulations, and with all this obfuscation and evasion do they contribute the taxes and payments which are levied upon them ([Special Laws](#) 1.143).

Philo also tells a harrowing story of a tribute collector who harassed those in arrears and their families. The mistreatment even extended to public torture in the marketplace ([Special Laws](#) 3.159-63). From Arsinoe, Egypt (in 193 CE), we have an official complaint lodged with the local Roman centurion by a farmer and his brother against two collectors of the grain-tax and their scribe who physically assaulted the complainants' mother. The attack was precipitated because they had only paid nine out of the ten arbate that were due (*Berlin Griechische Urkunden* no. 515; trans. [Hunt and Edgar](#) 1934:277).

The records also indicate that there were (at least in some ancient locations) fishing police (*epilimnês epistatês*; or what we might call anachronistically "game wardens"), who made sure no one was fishing illegally (viz. without a fishing contract) or selling to unauthorized middlemen (*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 2 [1925] 747; an epitaph from Lake Egridir in Pisidia; G. H. R. [Horsley](#) 1989:105).

4. Fishermen could form "cooperatives" (*koinônoi*) in order to bid for fishing contracts or leases; this is the conclusion of Wuellner (1967:23-25), based on Rostovtzeff's model for Egypt and Syria (1941:297, 1177-79). One of the most interesting observations the gospels make about the Yonah and Zebedee families is Luke's comment that they were a small-scale collective/cooperative:

. . . they signaled to their partners [*metachoi*] in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats . . . For he [Simon] was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so too were James and John, Zebedee's sons, who were cooperative-members [*koinônoi*] with Simon ([Luke](#) 5:7, 9-10a).

Since it appears only in the Gospel of Luke, this description may be due to the evangelist's own experiences or interests rather than those of these fishermen. Yet evidence for fishing guilds in Palestine does exist for a slightly later period (*j. Pes.* 4.30d; *j. M.K.* 2.81b; *b. M.K.* 13b; cited in [Heichelheim](#) 1959:230n). An ancient Egyptian fishing lease from the Roman era is analyzed by Parássoglou (1987). An Egyptian papyrus from 46 CE identifies a fishing collective of thirteen fishermen and their scribe who all took an oath by the Roman emperor (Tiberius) concerning not catching sacred fish (*Pubblicazioni della Societa italiana* 901.7-16; [Hunt and Edgar](#) 1934:373-75). And a fishing cooperative in Asia Minor left an impressive stele dedicating the toll-house for which the cooperative paid in 54-59 CE (*Die Inschriften von Ephesos* Ia [1979] 20; 54-59 CE; G. H. R. [Horsley](#) 1989:18-19). This cooperative (or guild?) in Ephesus included both fishermen and fish-sellers, so that room must be made in the model for cooperation between Galilean fishing families and fish-sellers. The sureties for tax-collectors/brokers are mentioned in the Josephus quote above; but sureties given to these brokers are also mentioned in the Palmyrene "Edict on Sureties" ([Matthews](#)

1984).

Concerning the Yonah—Zebedee cooperative, G. H. R. Horsley concludes that: "the families of Peter and Andrew, and of James and John, must have been of at least moderate means, since each owned a boat and other fishing equipment; furthermore, these families were able to release two sons for a three-year period (Mark 1.16-20)" (1989:110-11). But the evidence does not require any of this reconstruction. First, given the evidence of the Hellenistic and Roman-era fishing industries, it is at least possible that the boats were actually owned by the brokers and used by the cooperative. Secondly, "moderate means" is a useless and misleading category in a peasant society without a mercantile "middle class." Even if the families owned boats, this would say no more about them than it would about a peasant farmer who owned a yoke of oxen or a flock of sheep. Thirdly, how long the Twelve were "on the road" with Jesus is manifestly unclear in the gospels. The Synoptic story line encompasses a period of one year requiring no more than six months of activity, excluding the rainy season from October to March.

I also disagree with Wuellner's analysis and conclusions about the social status of Galilean fishers. He perceives two "classes" of fishermen: those who did the actual work, and those who owned the boats and made the deals with the brokers (1967:63). He refers to members of this latter group as the "professional middle class fish catcher and fish trader" (24), prosperous from their marketplace deals (45). While he rightly points out that there are "hired laborers," I see no reason to conclude that they were in a different "social class" than the fishing families who owned boats. We see both working alongside each other in the gospels (e.g., Mark 1:20). I conclude that both of these groups were "peasants" in the broad sense, since they both live from their work in the boats. The hired laborers are in a more precarious position because their work was likely seasonal; but that does not make the members of the fishing cooperative "middle class" entrepreneurs (45-63)! Jeremias was also fond of the term "middle class" for anyone above a beggar, but the term is simply anachronistic. The ancient Egyptian observation that the fisher was "more miserable than any (other) profession" was based on the combination of physical hazards (in Egypt, storms and crocodiles) in combination with fulfilling the fishing lease ("The Satire on the Trades"; trans. Wilson 1969:433-43; also Plautus, *Rudens* 290-305 for fishers as low status).

Fishing techniques in the Hellenistic era were of four basic types: a) angling—a rod with hooks on flaxen line; b) casting with flaxen nets; c) fish traps; and d) pronged tridents (Wuellner 1967:17-19; Nun 1989, 1993). While angling is mentioned in the gospels (Matt 17:27), the most common mode of fishing in Galilee seems to have been with nets. Besides the generic word for "nets" (*dictua*; Mark 1:18-19), two different types are mentioned in the New Testament: the casting net (*amphiblêstron*), used either from a boat or along the shoreline (Matt 4:18); and the much larger dragnet (*sagênê*), used from a boat (Matt 13:47). Greek authors, such as Oppian and Aelian, mention as many as ten different types of nets, but we are no longer able to distinguish between all of them. Nets required a great deal of attention: fishers and their hired laborers not only made the nets, but after each outing the nets had to be mended, washed, dried and folded (Mark 1:19).

5. If there were not a sufficient number of family members in the cooperative, the fishermen

had to hire laborers to help with all the responsibilities: manning the oars and sails, mending nets, sorting fish, etc. These laborers represent the bottom of the social scale in the fishing sub-system. In Mark 1:19-20 we find Zebedee as a net fisher who not only has two working sons in the business, but hired laborers as well. This number corresponds to the crew needed for the larger boats. Both farming and fishing made use of these laborers, which might be day-laborers (e.g., Matt 20:1-16) or seasonal workers (e.g., John 4:36; Jas 5:4). That hired laborers were a necessary and important part of the Galilean economy seems inescapable if the gospels are any indication at all (e.g., Matt 9:37-38; 10:10; 20:1-16; John 4:36; 10:12-13).

6. For their work, the fishermen needed resources from farmers and artisans, including (but not limited to): flax for nets, cut stone for anchors, wood for boat building and repairs, and baskets for fish. Both the gospels and Josephus speak of boats on the Sea of Galilee for fishing and transportation. In 1986 an ancient fishing boat was discovered in the mud along the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, just north of Migdal (ancient Magdala/Tarichaeae) (Raban 1988; Wachsmann 1988; 1995; Wachsmann, et al. 1990). Its dimensions were: 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 feet deep; a variety of woods were used in its construction, but it is primarily constructed of cedar and oak. Archaeologists have concluded that the boat was built between 40 BCE and 70 CE, based upon the type of construction, carbon-14 testing, and adjacent pottery. This means that it was the type possibly used by the Yonah—Zebedee cooperative (including their sons: Peter, Andrew, James, and John). This boat originally had a sail, and places for four oarsmen and a tillerman. Boats of this size could accommodate a load in excess of one ton, which means the five crew members and their catch or cargo, or the crew and about ten passengers (Mark 6:45).

7. The fishing trade also entailed the processing of fish. During the Hellenistic era processed fish had become a food staple throughout the Mediterranean, in city and village alike. The result was the development of trade distinctions between those who caught fish, those who processed fish, and those who marketed fish. But as the Ephesus stele demonstrates, fishers and fish-sellers might work cooperatively. The distribution of the catch was also controlled by government approved wholesalers. While fish processors are not explicitly referred to in the gospels, processed fish is mentioned (John 6:9 11; also Tob 2:2).

Fish were processed for preservation and transportation as cured and pickled or dried and salted (e.g., *m. Ned.* 6.4); and wine could be mixed in with fish brine (*m. Ter.* 11.1). The Bible and the Mishnah also speak of eating fish in a variety of ways: broiled or roasted (Luke 24:42; John 21:9; Tob 6:5), minced (*m. Abod. Zar.* 2.6), cooked with leeks (*m. M. Sh.* 2.1), with an egg (*m. Betz.* 2.1), or in milk (*m. Hull.* 8.1). Fish oil could also be used as fuel for lamps (*m. Shab.* 2.2) and as a medicine. The writer Athenaeus (c. 200 CE) waxes eloquent on the variations and the uses of processed fish (*Deipnosophists* 3.116a-121d). He also mentions "processed-fish-dealers." In the work *Geoponica* (a Byzantine compilation of earlier sources) we find the following recipes:

Garum, also called *liquamen*, is made in this way. The entrails of fish are placed in a vat and salted. Also used are whole small fish, especially smelts, or tiny mullets, or small sprats, or anchovies, or whatever small fish are available. Salt the whole mixture and place it in the sun. After it has aged in the heat, the *garum* is extracted in the following manner. A long, thickly woven basket is placed into the vat full of the

above-mentioned fish. The *garum* enters the basket, and the so-called *liquamen* is thus strained through the basket and retrieved. The remaining sediment is *allec*.

The Bithynians make *garum* in the following manner. They use sprats, large or small, which are the best to use if available. If sprats are not available, they use anchovies, or lizard fish or mackerel, or even old *allec*, or a mixture of all of these. They put this in a trough which is usually used for kneading dough. They add two Italian sextarii of salt to each modius of fish and stir well so that the fish and salt are thoroughly mixed. They let the mixture sit for one night and then transfer it to a clay vat which is placed uncovered in the sun for two or three months, stirring it occasionally with sticks.

Then they bottle, seal, and store it. Some people also pour two sextarii of old wine into each sextarius of fish (*Geoponica* 20.46.1-5; quoted in [Shelton](#) 1988:85-86).

Pliny the Elder identifies Judeans with a particular variety of processed fish: *castimoniarium* (*Natural History* 31.95; cited in [Curtis](#) 1991:145). The town of Tarichaeae ("Processed-Fish-ville"; also known as Magdala) was just a few miles south of Capernaum and was the site of a major fish-processing installation (as attested by Strabo, *Geography* 16.2.45). It is possible that the major Galilean ports (at least on the western shore?) may have quickly shipped or carted a portion of their daily catches to Tarichaeae for processing at this installation. While this processing installation has never been excavated, the harbor at Tarichaeae has been discovered, with a limestone and basalt quay 90m long, with a second breakwater 70m long ([Raban](#) 1993:965).

During the Roman period, vendors sold numerous varieties of processed fish, which differed in terms of the type of fish, the parts of the fish, the process, and the recipe. The four basic types of fish-sauce were: *garum*, *liquamen*, *muria*, and *allex*; but [Corcoran's](#) study has shown that, depending upon the region and period, these could be used as synonyms (1963). The terms *salsamentum* and *salugo* refer to the saline solution used for pickling. It is clear from literary references and amphorae that there were also multiple grades of these products, the best being the *garum sociorum* produced in Spain (Pliny, *Natural History* 31.94). Recipes and comments from the ancients on fishsauces appear in Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*. Analyses of fish-processing in the Roman world have been carried out by [Cutting](#) (1956), [Corcoran](#) (1957; 1963), [Martin-Kilcher](#) (1990), and [Curtis](#) (1991). Recently a Roman-era fish-processing installation has been excavated in France ([Martin-Kilcher](#) 1990), and another in north Africa. This will presumably shed more light on the processing network involved in such a complex enterprise.

8. The materials for fish-processing had to be supplied by (possibly government agents), merchants, farmers, and artisans, including especially: salt, wine, and amphorae, and possibly olive oil ([Heltzer and Eitam](#) [1987]). Very little has been published on salt in the Roman East, but for salt production in antiquity, consult Potts (1994) and the symposium papers in [de Brisay & Evans](#) (1975). The two major possibilities for industrial amounts of salt would come from the Dead Sea to the south or Palmyra to the northeast.

9. The preserved fish and fish sauces could be distributed among merchants throughout Galilee and the rest of Palestine, as well as around the Mediterranean. But it needed to be hauled by carters and shippers. The distributors' route would most likely follow the Via Maris from

Bethsaida in the north, to Tarichaeae on the western shore, through Cana, to Ptolemais/Akko, the port city on the Mediterranean (Wuellner 1967:32-33). From the amphorae found in shipwrecks off the Mediterranean coast of Israel, examples of Zemer Form 39 (a specific size and shape) have been identified by archaeologists as belonging to the first century, and bear traces of fishsauces (Curtis 1991:144). Describing a ship built for Heiron of Syracuse, Athenaeus says: "On board were loaded ninety thousand bushels of grain, ten thousand jars (*keramia*) of Sicilian salt-fish (*tarichôn*), six hundred tons of wool, and other freight amounting to six hundred tons" (*Deipnosophists* 5.209).

IV. The Jesus Tradition and Fishing

My thesis concerning how the Jesus tradition interfaced with Galilean fishing is this: without minimizing farming, herding, and other aspects of Galilean village life, the aphorisms, parables and metaphors, anecdotes, and social network of Jesus are all heavily influenced by the Sea of Galilee and its fish, fishing, fishermen, and fishing-villages. A catalog of the gospel traditions in this regard illustrates the point.

A. Synoptic Tradition

1. Locations Where Jesus Lives or Visits (Fishing Villages and Towns)
 - Bethsaida (Mark 6:45; 8:22; Luke 9:10)
 - Capernaum (Mark 1:21; 2:1; 9:33; Matt 4:13; 8:5; 11:23; 17:24; Luke 4:23, 31; 7:1; 10:15)
 - Gennesaret (Mark 6:53, par.)
 - Magdala/Magadan/Tarichaeae (Matt 15:39)
 - Gerasa (Mark 5:1, par.)
 - Tyre and Sidon (Mark 7:24, 31, par.)
2. Social Network Developed from Fishing Villages and Towns
 - Peter/Simon, a fisher from Capernaum (Mark 1:16-20, par.)
 - mother-in-law of Peter, from Capernaum (Mark 1:29-31, par.)
 - Andrew, a fisher at Capernaum (Mark 1:16-20, par.)
 - James, a fisher at Capernaum (Mark 1:16-20, par.)
 - John, a fisher at Capernaum (Mark 1:16-20, par.)
 - mother of James and John [from Capernaum] (Matt 20:20-23)
 - Levi, a tax-collector (broker?) at Capernaum (Mark 2:14, par.)
 - Mary, from Magdala/Tarichaeae (Luke 8:2, par.)
 - villagers of Capernaum (Mark 1:21-28, par.)
 - crowds from Tyre and Sidon (Mark 3:8, par.)
 - Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20, par.)
3. Aphorisms and Metaphors
 - Good Gifts [bread & fish] (Matt 7:9-11//Luke 11:11-13)
 - Millstone and the Sea (Mark 9:42//Matt 18:6//Luke 17:2//1 Clem 46:8b)
 - Salted with Fire (?) (Mark 9:49-50)
4. Parables
 - The Net (Matt 13:47-48)

5. Narratives

- Call of Peter, Andrew, James, and John (Mark 1:16-20//Matt 4:18-22//Luke 5:1-11)
- Calming of the Storm (Mark 4:35-41//Matt 8:23-27//Luke 8:22-25)
- Feeding of the 5000+ [five loaves, two fish] (Mark 6:35-44//Matt//Luke 9:10-17)
- Walking on the Sea (Mark 6:45-52//Matt 14:22-33)
- Feeding of the 4000+ [five loaves, two fish] (Matt 15:32-39)
- Appearance of Resurrected Jesus [eats broiled fish] (Luke 24:36-42)
- Jesus and boats [narrative transitions] (Mark 3:9; 4:1, 5:2, 18, 21; 6:32; 8:10, 13; and par.)

6. Dialogues/Chreia

- The Rich [Camel Through a Needle's Eye] (Mark 10:35//Matt 19:23-30//Luke 18:24-30)
- Cursing the Fig-Tree [Mt. Cast into the Sea] (Mark 11:20-25//Matt 21:20-22)
- Mustard Seed Faith [Tree Cast into the Sea] (Luke 17:5-6)
- Request for Sign [Jonah & the Fish] (Matt 12:38-40)
- Half-Shekel Tax [taken from fish's mouth] (Matt 17:24-27)

B. Johannine Tradition

1. Locations Where Jesus Lives or Visits (Fishing Villages and Towns)

- Bethsaida (1:44; 12:21)
- Capernaum (2:12; 4:46; 6:17, 24, 59)

2. Social Network Developed from Fishing Villages and Towns

- Peter/Simon/Cephas, from Bethsaida (1:44)
- Andrew, from Bethsaida (1:44)
- Philip, from Bethsaida (1:44)
- Mary, from the fishing village of Magdala/Tarichea (19:25)

3. Narratives

- Feeding the 5000 [five loaves, two fish] (6:1-14)
- Walking on the Sea (6:16-21)
- Wondrous Catch of Fish (21:1-14)

C. Extra-Canonical Tradition

1. Locations Where Jesus Visits or Lives (Fishing Villages and Towns)

- Capernaum (Gos. Eb. 1)

2. Social Network from Fishing Villages and Towns

- Beside the Sea of Tiberias
 - Peter/Simon (Gos. Eb. 2)
 - Andrew (Gos. Eb. 2)
 - James (Gos. Eb. 2)
 - John (Gos. Eb. 2)
 - Thaddeus (Gos. Eb. 2)
 - Simon the Zealot (Gos. Eb. 2)

- Judas Iscariot (Gos. Eb. 2)
 - Matthew (Gos. Eb. 2)
- Magdala/Tarichea
 - Mary (Gos. Pet. 12 [50])
- 3. Aphorisms and Metaphors
 - Millstone and the Sea (Clem 46:8b)
 - Knowing Oneself [sea/fish] (Gos. Thom. 3//POxy 654 3:2//Dial. Sav. 30)
- 4. Parables
 - The Great Fish (Gos. Thom. 8)

V. Conclusions

1. Literary sources, inscriptions and stelae, and archaeological evidence confirm that fishing was an important and organized part of the economy throughout the Roman Empire. Despite the fact that our evidence for Galilee is fragmentary, the model advanced here is at least a beginning for understanding the complex web of participants and arrangements involved in such a complex enterprise.

2. The fishers could hardly be classed as "entrepreneurs" in such a highly regulated, taxed, and hierarchical political-economy. While the boat owners/fishers may or may not have also been involved in fish processing, this would not have made them wealthy, and certainly not "middle class," as many authors have contended, since the whole conceptualization of a middle-class is anachronistic relative to Roman Palestine. The "surplus" went to the brokers and the ruling elite. The importance of fish is further highlighted by the references in the gospels to people who eat fish and carry fish with them. That some of these references appear as metaphors or in non-historical stories does not diminish their importance as believable scenarios in a Galilean context.

3. The hostility of the general population in both Judean and early Christian sources against the telônai may have stemmed originally from the conflict in the economy: the ancient sources stereotype them as inequitable and liable to unjust treatment of the population.

4. With regard to the Jesus tradition, it seems to me that the role of Galilean fishing has been severely underrated for its impact on Jesus' network, locations of operation, aphorisms, parables, and "acts of power." It does not seem an overstatement to say that Jesus' proclamation of God's Reign had its primary audience in Galilean fishing-villages and towns. This at least partially accounts for his avoidance of Galilean cities (notably Tiberias and Sepphoris) and the snide view of his ministry by Jerusalemite elites. It may also account for the tradition of Jesus drawing crowds from the fishing regions of Tyre and Sidon. Because Jesus made his residence in the fishing village of Capernaum during his ministry and traveled up, down, and across the Sea of Galilee, the lives of these real fishing families became the fabric from which he wove many of his metaphors and told his stories. Moreover, it was his sitting in a boat, crossing the Sea, and healing and exorcising in fishing-villages which were the stories vividly told in the earliest Jesus-groups. This hardly seems tangential to our modern attempts

at recapturing the dynamics of Jesus' career in his own setting.

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