

M. M. Silver

***The History of Galilee, 47 BCE to 1260 CE:
From Josephus and Jesus to the Crusades***

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***The History of Galilee, 1538 – 1949:
Mysticism, Modernization, and War***

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LAWRENCE FRIZZELL

lawrence.frizzell@shu.edu

Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079

M.M. Silver has written a two volume work *The History of Galilee*. The first volume begins with the period 47 BCE and ends in 1260 CE. The second covers the period from 1538–1949. The author, a professor of Jewish history and world history at the Max Stern Yezreel Valley College and the University of Haifa, presents this work “based on principles of liberal humanism and inter-faith dialogue” (2:5). He notes “Galilee’s history attains singular import in world history as the place where monotheism multiplied” through Christianity and Islam (2:1).

Silver begins his history in 47 BCE with the appointment of Herod as ruler of Galilee. He then moves to Josephus’ account of his role as a rebel leader in the defense of Jotapata in Galilee and escape to the Roman side. He discusses Josephus’ writing, including his blaming Jewish internecine fights for the destruction of Jerusalem. He also writes “As in the case of the gospels, [Josephus’] history’s magical attraction relies on its imaginatively creative, if not manipulative, presentation of Galilee’s social landscape” (42).

He begins chapter 2, “Jesus and Galilee,” with the presentation of a group of Jews establishing “what would become a new, rival monotheistic religion, Christianity” (51). Both Josephus and Matthew “believed that an immoral generation of Jews had lost God’s favor and the Temple’s decimation was, consequently, punishment” (52). Silver focuses on Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, in Galilee. He emphasizes Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi as “the Gospel’s sole supersessionist reference to the Jesus movement” (84).

Silver reads the phrase in Isaiah 9:1 quoted in Matthew 4:14-16 ("Galilee of the nations") as applying beyond its limited referents in Isaiah and the gospel ("land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali") to the whole Galilee. He asks if some of Jesus' Galilean followers were "converts, not from Judaism, but from paganism to Judaism, meaning that their Jewish roots were relatively shallow?" (62). However, Silver does not attend to the Synoptic problem or the multiple stages of development of the traditions behind the Gospels.

In chapter 3, "Mishnaic Galilee," Silver considers the rabbinic period in Galilee as the time and place "where monotheism multiplied" in the context of the Bar Kokhba revolt against the Romans (132-35 CE) and the growth of Christianity. Because of emperor Hadrian's repressive measures the academy founded by Johanan ben Zakkai moved from Yavne to Usha in Galilee under Shimon ben Gamaliel II: "By consolidating rabbinical Judaism as an effective surrogate for Temple worship, Jews in the Mishnaic period provided their own answer of Jewish renewal, at least implicitly as a rebuttal to the developing Christian project of full schism" (97). Silver provides a good survey of the rabbis' development of the Mishnah as "an authoritative, official code for Judaism" (154). In this period, Silver portrays a "Jewish society divided between illiterate masses of dubious piety, *amme ha'arets*, and a religiously solid elite of 'members' (*haverim*) and progenitors of rabbinic Judaism in segregated *bet midrash* academies" (98). He challenges earlier histories: "The story of Jewish revitalization in Galilee in Tannaitic times has been ignored, again and again, because Christian polemics about the curse of Jewish life in late antiquity became canon in western culture" (99).

Chapter 4 is a study of "Byzantine Galilee." It has a section entitled "Supersession, the Sequel" (192-285), which includes a review of scholarship on whether the thirteenth "blessing" of the *Amidah* applied to *Nošrim* (Christians). Archaeologists have found that in the late Roman and Byzantine periods Galilean Jews and Christians lived in separate villages, undermining claims that the rabbis had Christians in view (180-82). Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* makes this claim in his area of the Diaspora.

In 614 CE the Persians wrested Jerusalem from the Byzantine Empire. Local Jews viewed them as benign rulers in line with Cyrus and his successors in the sixth-fourth centuries BCE. Byzantines and Persians grew exhausted from their fighting, and in 636 the Islamic invaders from Arabia were victorious over the Byzantines at the battle of Yarmuk. Thus "Galilee became the gateway through which Islam began its non-interrupted status as monotheism's paramount power in the region as a whole" (196 - 97). The Muslim caliph allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem, but Tiberias continued to be the Jews' scholarly center. However, these rabbis were increasingly being challenged in interpreting the commandments by the Jewish academies in Babylonia.

Chapter 6, "Crusader Galilee," offers a brief overview of the first Crusade, which began with the capture of Jerusalem in 1099. Silver focuses on Tancred (d. 1198), whose military exploits earned him the title "Prince of Galilee." Saladin's victory at the battle of Hattin in Galilee in 1187 was a major setback for the Latin Crusaders. They lost Jerusalem and made Acre (on the northern edge of Galilee)

their capital until 1291. Silver focuses attention on the pious French King Louis IX (1214–70), casting him as a hero of this period second only to Saladin. He also looks at major events in the region. These include the battle of Ayn Jalut (Spring of Goliath) near Nazareth in 1260 which brought an end to the Mongol invasion of Islamic lands adjacent to Egypt and the end of the Latin Kingdom based in Acre in 1291. Finally, he also presents sensitive comparisons of this period with the contemporary situation of Palestinians after the 1948 and 1967 wars as well as a critique of Israeli policies that at times are oblivious to the rights of minorities.

Volume 2 covers 1538–1949, though Silver starts with a flashback to the first few centuries CE. Galilee owes its prominence in Jewish history to the centers of study that developed there after the two disastrous revolts against the Romans. Unable to return to Jerusalem, Jewish scholars founded academies there. In his first chapter, “Kabbalistic Galilee,” Silver shows how medieval Spanish Jews in the mystical traditions idealized the Galilean rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (Rashbi), a hero of the second revolt (132–35 CE). As a healer and martyr he was portrayed in ways that resemble portraits of another Galilean Jew, Jesus. The Jewish mystical work *The Zohar* (Book of Splendor) was attributed to him. With roots in this imagined background of ancient Galilee, Spanish Jewish mystics prepared for Jews exiled from Spain to return to the area where Rashbi was buried. In the sixteenth century in Tzfat, the mystical traditions developed by Isaac Luria and his disciples, along with Joseph Karo’s work on Jewish Law *Shulchan Aruch* (The Set Table), exercised enormous influence on Jews of Europe.

In chapter 2, “Ottoman Galilee,” Silver begins with the reign of the prominent Druze prince Emir Fakhr al-Din around 1622. He paid tribute to the Ottoman empire but, facing its army and navy, he fled to Florence (then under Medici auspices). He dreamed of leading a crusade to recover his dominance in Palestine but was unsuccessful. Captured by the Ottomans Fakhr al-Din was executed in 1635. Silver also briefly discusses Christians (the Franciscans) of the region and Jewish emigrants to Safed and Tiberias from eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire. They included members of Hasidic communities, followers of the Baal Shem Tov.

In chapter 3, “The Quest for Historical Galilee,” he discusses the largely secular studies of Jesus that emphasize his Galilean roots. He reviews the works of David F. Strauss, Ernest Renan, and Albert Schweitzer. Silver also reviews works by Abraham Geiger, founder of Reform Judaism, and the Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz, for whom Jesus was a Galilean country yokel pitted against the sophisticated teachers in Jerusalem. The review of writings from the last century moves from Joseph Klausner’s 1922 “biography” of Jesus to Richard Horsley and John Hanson’s *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs* (1985) and Reza Aslan’s *Zealot* (2013). Silver follows Horsley by questioning “[t]he pertinence of Zealotry to the specific period of Jesus’s life in Galilee, its impetus, and its scope” (201). In contrast to European Christians, “Americans have had a manifest tendency to see the Holy Land, its past and ongoing development, through their own American frames” (202). Silver reviews the American Protestant “lives of Jesus” in the nineteenth century and then looks at “the American pilgrimage scene in Israel today” (204). Protestants are not impressed with the traditional shrines (especially those in the

hands of Orthodox and Catholic clergy) and seek “the fifth Gospel in Galilee” (210), where these pilgrims feel most at home (228). Chapter 4, “Zionist Pioneering Galilee,” also covers the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He describes the migration of Jews, largely from Eastern Europe, to the land, and their focus on developing the agricultural potential of Galilee. This is a group less religiously traditional than immigrants from the 18th century.

Chapter 5, “The Fight for Galilee, 1948,” offers mini-biographies of a prominent Arab fighter, Fawzi al-Qawuqii, a native of Tripoli and a leader of the Arab Liberation Army, and a Jewish native of Galilee, Yigal Allon, a leader of the Palmah (a unit of the pre-state army). This approach offers a personal dimension to Israel's War of Independence / *Nakba* (catastrophe in Arabic). Silver hopes contemporary readers will be more influenced by “the better, shared side of their heritages” rather than the tragedies of the past (351).

These two books are written in an engaging style with many North American idioms and allusions. The author might have shown more respect for adherents to the ancient Jewish and Christian traditions. Both volumes have a bibliography and index; the second volume has a helpful glossary.