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A further note on *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*

Dr Head draws our attention to a recent archaeological find relevant to the question of literacy in the time of Jesus.

Key words: archaeology; Galilee; literacy.

In my recent review of Alan Millard's book, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, I mentioned the problem discussed by Millard, that evidence for reading and writing materials from the Galilee is scarcer than the evidence from Herodian Palestine which allowed Millard to conclude that 'only the most isolated hamlets in Herodian Palestine may have lacked anyone who could read' (*Reading and Writing*, 168), and that in general writing, keeping accounts and memoranda would have been an integral part of life for a huge number of people in the time of Jesus.¹

As I noted in the review, Millard was aware of the problem, and made a three-pronged argument against seeing Galilee as a technological backwater in regard to reading and writing, even though the archaeological and literary evidence is less direct: (a) evidence from a number of key areas (such as Sepphoris, Gamla and Bethsaida) suggest that 'basic features of the culture were no different from those in Judea'; (b) coin hoards reveal evidence of individual wealth and of diverse trading relations; (c) the road network, the building works at Tiberius, and the fish-exporting business at Magdala would all have required writing, and all count against a narrow parochialism (*Reading and Writing*, 179–182, summarised in my review, p. 357).

A recent archaeological find has added considerable weight to this particular argument. In the summer of 1999 a team of archaeologists uncovered a Hellenistic (mid second-century BC) building at Tel Kedesh in Upper Galilee, within a few miles of Lake Semechoni-

1 Millard's book was published as *The Biblical Seminar* 69; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000. The review is in *EQ* 74.4 (2002), 356–359.

tis/Huleh, and within twenty miles of Capernaum.² The archaeologists report that 'the scanty literary references to the site led us to expect a small farming village and/or garrison on the site during this period'.³ They discovered, however, not only a large Hellenistic building with a storeroom of imported amphorae, but

over 1,800 stamped clay bullae, of the kind used to seal and identify official documents written on papyri in the Hellenistic era . . . it is clear from this find that the room must have served as some sort of archive, as well as for pottery storage. We were able to clean only 230 of the bullae while in the field, since they were discovered during the final three days of the excavation. The cleaned samples show a remarkable range of images, from Greek realistic Aphrodite type to Phoenician schematic Tanits, portraits of Hellenistic monarchs and private individuals, as well as some Persian and Egyptian types. The bullae are quite small, averaging only 1–2 cm. in height. Their backs show the impression of the papyri against which they were pressed. Many of the stamped images are small masterpieces of the engraver's art.⁴

The archaeologists comment that these finds were causing them to reconsider their view of the nature of the Hellenistic settlement of Kedesh, and fuller reports from further excavations and the publication of the *bullae* are still awaited. Nevertheless the find offers a remarkable confirmation of Millard's conclusion – that even in settings where literary references are relatively scanty, in comparatively rural north Galilee, there is in this collection of 1,800 *bullae* evidence of considerable written interchanges with different places and cultures, concrete evidence of the archiving of written documents, and the necessary assumption follows that numerous people in such situations must have been well acquainted with the material elements of reading and writing.

Of course in time and space we are still some distance from the

2 Kedesh (sometimes Qedesh, or in Arabic, Qades), in the tribal area of Naphtali, is mentioned several times in Joshua, was one of the 'cities of refuge' referred to in Josh 20.7, and was the home town of Barak according to Judges 4. In the middle of the second-century BC it was the site of a victory for Jonathan over the army of the Seleucid king Demetrias (1 Macc 11.63, 73). It later came under the control of Tyre (so Josephus, *JW*, II.459; cf. *Ant.* XIII.154 which places it on the border between Tyre and Galilee); and was probably the location of an encampment of Titus at the outset of the Jewish Revolt (Josephus, *JW*, IV.104: 'this is a strong inland village of the Tyrians, always at feud and strife with the Galileans, having its large population and stout defences as resources behind it in its quarrel with the nation', Loeb).

3 S. Herbert & A. Berlin, 'Tel Kedesh, 1997–1999' in 'Notes and News: Excavations and Surveys', *Israel Archaeological Journal* 50 (2000), 118–123, from p. 123. Alan Millard brought this to my attention after reading my review in *EQ*.

4 S. Herbert & A. Berlin, 'Tel Kedesh, 1997–1999', 122–123.

time and primary localities of Jesus and his first followers, but this new piece of archaeological evidence offers a good fit with the broader picture that emerges from the wealth of evidence amassed by Millard, and as the jig-saw takes shape the emerging picture suggests that the production of written records would have had a place in the cultural milieu of the Galilean disciples of Jesus.

Abstract

The discovery of a collection of over 1800 stamped clay bullae from the mid second century BC at a Galilean site provides further evidence to supplement the case in A. Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, for the prevalence of reading and writing skills in the area.

Tragically, most of the books written in Roman times have vanished forever. Also we can't even figure out what percentage of the population was literate. Yet we have "graffiti from Pompeii, made by a fuller, a weaver, and other craftsmen" (p 155) not to mention the Roman habit of putting placards everywhere (such as on top of the cross of Jesus Christ) that would suggest a far greater number of people could read. One very interesting section concerned the possible way that the gospel was written. Many people carried note-books which they "carried for their day-to-day business, perhaps hung at the belt"(p 223) where they have noted any striking sayings of Jesus. Altogether, an outstanding book on the subject.