

# Introduction

IN THE CONTEMPORARY QUEST for the historical Jesus, the socio-economic background of Jesus and its impact on his message and ministry is the subject of intense debate. Among many, it is accepted that the Galilee in which Jesus was born and raised was plagued by grinding poverty, that his followers were primarily poor people, and that his audience was made up of the masses of the poor.<sup>1</sup> Others, however, have argued that Galilee was an egalitarian and economically prosperous society.<sup>2</sup> These contradictory viewpoints have made it cliché that the quest for the historical Jesus is at the same time a quest for the historical Galilee.<sup>3</sup> The geographical and cultural location of Jesus's youth, it is surmised, may help us understand his later message or his pattern of ministry. Certainly scholars of the past have thought as much; the current group seems to have the same opinion.<sup>4</sup>

But we might amend slightly the common currency: it is not so much a quest for the historical Galilee but more precisely a quest for the economy of Galilee. Therefore the quest is a study in contrasts: 1) Some look at Galilee through the lenses of cultural anthropology and macro-sociology; others look at Galilee through the lenses of archaeology and reject the use of social theories. 2) Some maintain that the relations between rural villages and the cities were hostile; others propose that the relationship was one of economic reciprocity and goodwill. 3) Some suggest that Galilee was typical of other agrarian societies—with poor peasants who lived in the rural areas, and exploitative wealthy people

1. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*; Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*; and Horsley, *Galilee*.

2. Overman, "Jesus of Galilee"; Edwards, "Socio-Economic and Cultural Ethos," 53–91; and Groh, "Clash," 29–37.

3. Freyne, "Geography, Politics, and Economics," 76; and Moxnes, "Construction of Galilee—Part I" and "Part II."

4. See the surveys in Moxnes, "The Construction of Galilee"; and Rapinchuk, "Galilee and Jesus in Recent Research."

who lived mostly in the cities; others respond that life was pretty good for everyone in Galilee and that it was an egalitarian society.

How does one sort through the arguments, the data, and even the rhetoric? The following essays will attempt to take a fresh look and propose this author's answers. Throughout the volume a common theme runs: I have sought to avoid the polar opposites. I do not think Jesus was a desperately poor man, nor do I think that most Galileans were landless and half-starving. Yet neither do I think that Galilee was an economic boom center. I do not think that the majority of early Christians were from the poorest rung of society. On the other hand, there were a few elites in the group but not many. The church did, however, take its ministry to the poor very seriously.

The eleven chapters that follow fall into three parts: Part One (chapters 1 and 2) focuses on the historical Jesus and his socioeconomic background. I will argue that Jesus came from a middling class of artisans, was not poor (though his family possessed modest means), and was experienced in urban culture enough to serve as a leader of a mass movement.

Part Two (chapters 3–8) investigates the economic conditions of first-century-CE Galilee. These chapters will find no evidence for widespread indebtedness, landlessness, abject poverty, or starvation. Nor will they argue that the economy was humming along splendidly. There was some prosperity in Galilee at this time, but to speak of an economic boom seems an exaggeration.

Part Three (chapters 9–11) will handle the early church and the economic standing of its members. These chapters will conclude that most early Christians were from about the same middling artisan class that Jesus came from. There certainly were some desperately poor persons in the church and a significant number of slaves, but most were not from those levels. One would even have seen some wealthy persons of high social standing in the ancient church but not many.