SIMON PETER AND BETHSAIDA

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Over half a century ago, Oscar Cullmann wrote the following words in the opening pages of his magisterial treatment of Simon Peter:

According to John 1:44 Peter comes from Bethsaida . . . Even if the place itself was Jewish, we must note, nevertheless, that it was located in Gentile surroundings. This is indicated, indeed, as John 1:44 and 12:21 suggest, by the Greek name of his brother Andrew and of Philip, who likewise came from Bethsaida, as well as by the name of Simon himself. . . . If the information of the Gospel of John that Peter came from that place is true, this could be related to the fact that in the accounts of Acts, chs. 10 and 11, Peter champions a universalistic point of view and, as we shall see, is not too far removed from Paul in his theology.2

Cullmann composed these sentences at a time when the study of Galilean archaeology was barely in its infancy, and when his knowledge of it was apparently limited to a footnote reference to Gustav Dalman’s topographical researches in the first two decades of the century.3 The Dead Sea Scrolls had just been discovered, but were a long way from being understood. And rabbinic literature was still virtually unknown in New Testament scholarship: even in his second edition, Cullmann confined himself to half a dozen references to Strack-Billerbeck. Josephus, too, is rarely cited, and never in order to substantiate the argument about Bethsaida.

It is perhaps more surprising, however, that recent monographs on Peter have had so little to add to Cullmann’s statement. In an attempt to develop Cullmann’s argument, Rudolf Pesch’s 1980 monograph did devote a couple of pages to the subject of Peter’s Jewish family

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3 Dalman 1935, first published in German (Dalman 1919, with subsequent editions in 1921 and 1924). The English translation included “considerable additional matter by the Author” (Dalman 1935: v). Having been Director of the Jerusalem-based Deutsches Evangelisches Institut für Altertumswissenschaft des Heiligen Landes (1902–1917), Dalman returned to Palestine from Greifswald in 1925 to become the founding director of the Gustaf Dalman-Institut für Palästinawissenschaft (ODCC 3, p. 448). See also Männchen 1993.
among a largely Gentile population, but without adducing any substantive additional evidence.⁴ Christian Grappe cautiously followed Pesch in a single extended footnote,⁵ but both of them pursued this question only in relation to Peter’s likely knowledge of Greek. Pheme Perkins in 1994 virtually ignored Peter’s connection with Bethsaida, deferring simply to Cullmann.⁶ Recent works by Thiede, Böttrich, and Gnilka have added little of substance.⁷

Is it really defensible to follow Cullmann to such far-reaching conclusions about Simon Peter’s life and personality from what is effectively a single New Testament attestation of his home town? Put as baldly as that, the question is of course impossible to answer. Nevertheless, in view of recent advances in archaeological and historical study of this part of Galilee, it may be possible to supply a little more of the background against which to assess Cullmann’s largely unsupported assertion.

Our procedure will be in three steps. After examining the Gospel tradition about Peter and Bethsaida, we shall consider recent archaeological work on Bethsaida before returning to Cullmann’s thesis and considering a number of possible implications.

I. PETER AND BETHSAIDA: THE GOSPEL TRADITIONS

Was Bethsaida Peter’s birthplace? On the surface, the New Testament’s information about his origin is exceedingly sparse. Leaving aside the manuscript tradition’s well-known confusion over Bethesda in John 5:2,⁸ Bethsaida appears exactly seven times in the Nestle-Aland text of the New Testament: once in Matthew and twice in each of the other Gospels.⁹

A. The Synoptic Evidence

1. What’s in a Name? Simon, Peter, Cephas.

The Gospels unanimously portray Peter as a man who inhabits a bilingual world. His name is consistently given in the Greek form Σιμών, rather than in the Septuagint’s rendition of the Hebrew

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⁴ Pesch 1980: 10-12.
⁸ See Metzger 1975: 208.