Redemption Begins at Mount Arbel

Introduction

Up to the present day, inhabitants of Eastern Galilee recall an ancient tradition that says that the Messiah, when he comes, will begin his mission of redemption on Mount Arbel.[1] This tradition was confirmed by the first Israeli archaeologist to investigate the site, Zvi Ilan, when he wrote "For centuries it was believed that the redemption of the Jewish people would begin near the townlet of Arbel, perched on a cliff in lower Eastern Galilee".[2] In the same article, he outlines the history of the tradition as follows:

> "Later after Judea had been destroyed in the great Revolt of the Jews against the Romans and Bar-Kochba's rebellion, the Temple priests fled to villages in Galilee, the priests of the house of Jeshua, the ninth of the twenty-four priestly divisions, settled in Arbel. Among the sages dwelling in the town were Rabbi Ze'ira, Rabbi Hiyya Bar Abba, and Rabbi Abbahu, who earned their livelihoods processing flax. It was then … that the association of Arbel with redemption first became widespread. It was said that Rabbi Hiyya (…) and Rabbi Shimon Ben Halafta would go for walks in the plain of Arbel and talk about the beginning of redemption."
>
> "The tradition was still thriving in the seventh century, when the land of Israel was passing from one conqueror to the next. Devout Jews believed that the hardships they were enduring signified the birth pangs of the Messiah. The liturgical poet Eleazar Kallir, who was living in Tiberias during that period, told of the appearance of the Messiah in the plain of Arbel on the eve of Passover."
>
> "The ancient settlement of Arbel apparently survived until the year 747, when a massive earthquake struck the land of Israel. But it continued to be a popular site for pilgrimages…. Numerous pilgrims recorded their impressions of the site. Their writings mention traditional beliefs which had arisen about the graves of its righteous rabbis, including Rabbi Ze'ira and Nittai. Adam's son Seth and Jacob's daughter Dinah and her brothers were said to be buried there as well. Burial chambers hewn in the rock of Mount Arbel, east of the settlement, were apparently used by both residents of Arbel and by Jews from abroad who requested burial on the site where redemption would begin. One of the graves is marked as the burial place of Hezekiah, an early exilarch from the royal dynasty of David – testimony to the belief that from Arbel, the kingdom of David would be reinstated in the land of Israel".[3]

To summarize, after the Judaean refugees settled in Galilee following the destruction and 'ethnic cleansing' of Judaea in 135 CE, many local traditions sprang up around Arbel drawing on biblical, priestly and rabbinical themes. However, the most memorable and enduring of these themes concerned the start of redemption. To this day, investigators have been unable to explain why, or how, this area first became associated with the important subject of redemption.

In his comprehensive archaeological and historical survey of Eastern Galilee, Uzi Leibner poses the problem like this: "The question of what led to the connection between traditions about the redemption or the War of the End of Days and the Arbel Valley and during what period that occurred, is unclear".[4]

---

[1] One of the staff at the Magdala Centre, Migdal Junction, Galilee, recalls a conversation with a local resident who referred to the coming of the Messiah, riding on a white donkey on Mt. Arbel.

[2] Zvi Ilan, "Reviving a 2,000-Year-Old Landmark", *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/89, 61.

[3] Zvi Ilan, "Reviving", 63.

[4] Uzi Leibner, *Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Galilee*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 127, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009; 264, n.132.

References to Arbel in the Rabbinic Literature

An important clue to the origins of the connection between Arbel and redemption is to be found in the Palestinian (i.e. Jerusalem) Talmud: it is the reference to the start of redemption, mentioned by Zvi Ilan above, in the reported conversation between two early third-century *Amoraim*, Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Shimon Ben Halafta, in the plain of Arbel (c. 220-250 CE):

> "The great Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Shimon Ben Halafta were walking in the Arbel Valley when they saw the dawn whose light burst forth. The great R. Hiyya said to R. Halafta the great man: "Such is the redemption of Israel. At first it comes little by little (but) as it continues it becomes greater and greater. What is the reason: "When I shall dwell in darkness, the Lord is my light" (PT Berakhot 1:1:21; Yoma 3:2:5; et par.; the biblical quote is from Micah 7:8).[5]

One of the perplexities facing investigators is the disparity between this evanescent, third-century Talmudic reference to the onset of redemption in a rabbinical exchange at Arbel and the subsequent proliferation of references to the same theme, in the same place, mentioned in the liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) and Redemption literature (*midrashei ge'ulah*) of the sixth and seventh centuries.

Among this seventh century profusion of popular literature on redemption, there is one work which stands out precisely because it relates specifically to Arbel and the nearby city of Tiberias. This work is the Book of Zerubbabel (*Sefer Zerubbabel*), which has been described as "an influential post-talmudic assemblage of Jewish apocalyptic traditions depicting the elusive postexilic biblical leader Zerubbabel as the recipient of a set of revelatory visions which outline a succession of personages and events that are to be associated with the restoration of Israel at the End of Days".[6] Dated to the seventh century (629-636 CE), this book was likely inspired by the defeat of the Byzantines by the Persian Sassanid army, who conquered Palestine and Jerusalem in the early seventh century (614-628 CE), with the participation of more than 20,000 Galilean Jews. Only a few years after the Byzantines regained control of the Holy Land in 628 CE, the Muslim invasion succeeded in ousting them again (638 CE).

The scholar behind a recent version of the text, John C. Reeves, describes the importance of Book of Zerubbabel as follows: "*Sefer Zerubbabel's* importance for the history of mediaeval apocalypticism cannot be overstated. It repeatedly demonstrates how a written text—in its case the Jewish Bible—has achieved an almost unsurpassed authority in the invention and construction of a special kind of discourse that thanks to the political and social turbulence of the times was enjoying widespread popularity among a variety of religious communities in the Near East during the second half of the first Christian millennium".[7] The principal messianic figure not only makes his first appearance in Arbel, but the Valley of Arbel also becomes the site of the final battle:

> "Then Michael, who is (also) Metatron, said to me, 'Come closer and pay careful attention to everything which I will tell you, for the word which I am speaking to you is true: it was one spoken by the Living God. He said to me: 'Menachem b. Amiel will suddenly come on the fourteenth day of the first month; i.e. of the month Nisan. He will wait by the Valley of Arbel (at a tract) which belonged to Joshua b. Jehosadaq the priest, and all the surviving sages of Israel—only a few will remain due to the attack and pillage of Gog and Armilōs and the plunderers who despoiled them—will come out to him. Menahem b. Amiel will say to

[5] Quoted from the Jerusalem Talmud, *Berakhot* 1:1:21, edition by Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999-2015, available online at www.sefaria.org (accessed 03.2024).
[6] From the introduction by John C. Reeves to his new translation of 'Sefer Zerubbabel: The Prophetic Vision of Zerubbabel Ben Shealtiel', in Richard Bauckham, James R. Davila and Alexander Panayotov, eds. *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*. Volume 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013, 448.
[7] Op. cit. 448.

> the elders and the sages: "I am the Lord's Messiah: the Lord has sent me to encourage you and to deliver you from the power of these adversaries! The elders will scrutinize him and will despise him, for they will see that despicable man garbed in rags, and they will despise him just as you previously did. But then his anger will burn within him, "and he will don garments of vengeance (as his) clothing and will put on a cloak of zealousness", and he will journey to the gates of Jerusalem".[8]

Only four months later, in the month of Tammuz:

> 'The Lord God will descend upon the Mount of Olives, and the Mount of Olives will split open at His rebuke. He will blow a great trumpet, and every foreign deity and mosque will crumple to the ground, and every wall and steep place will collapse…. The Lord's Messiah—Menahem b. Amiel—will come and breathe in the face of Armilōs and thereby slay him. The Lord will place each man's sword on the neck of his companion and their dead bodies shall fall there. The "saintly people" (i.e. Israel) will come out to witness the Lord's deliverance: all of Israel will actually see Him (equipped) like a warrior with helmet of deliverance on His head and clad in armour. He will fight the battle of Gog ha-Magog and against the army of Armilōs, and all of them will fall dead in the valley of Arbel".[9]

Clear echoes of this work are found in the *piyyut* of the contemporary liturgical poet Eleazar Qallir (or Kallir), who also seems to have been a resident in the area of Mount Arbel, or Tiberias:

> "In those days and at that time / in the first month which is the month of Nisan / on the fourteenth day in fact/ Menachem Ben Amiel will suddenly come / in the Valley of Arbel his goodness will flourish / and in the vestments of revenge he will clothe his beauty".[10]

After refuting a scholarly proposal linking these traditions to two apocryphal writings of the Second Temple period,[11] Leibner considers the collective historical memory of the local inhabitants to be the probable explanation for the persistence of these traditions in this locality, though he admits it is not clear how this memory relates to the conversation between R. Hiyya and R. Shimon Ben Halafta recorded in the Palestinian Talmud.[12] Was their passing interest in the start of redemption inserted into the text on account of the collective historical memory, or was it the actual source of a tradition that took several centuries to grow and flourish? The second possibility is immediately dismissed by Leibner with the words: "it is difficult to burden the minor tradition in Y with the heavy load of the redemption that *piyyutim* and *midrashei ge'ulah* place upon the Arbel Valley in the following generations".[13]

So turning to the first of the two possibilities, Leibner concludes: "Links between the War of the End of Days and the Arbel Valley are likewise suggestive of a historical memory connected with military events more suited to the Hasmonean and Early Roman periods, however, it must be admitted that the entire matter remains elusive and unclear".[14] So, Leibner finds himself in the position of promoting further study: "the question of "historical memory" among the Galilean Jews in antiquity

---

[8] Op. cit. 461-2.
[9] Op. cit. 463.
[10] *Midrashei Geula: Chapters of Jewish Apocalyptic Dating from the Completion of the Babylonian Talmud Until the Sixth Millennium*, ed. Yehuda Even-Shmuel, 3rd ed., Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2017 (Hebrew) 113, quoted in Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 261, n.127 (my translation).
[11] Namely, the *Book of Jubilees* and the *Testament of Judah*, cf. Liebner, *Settlement and History*, 258, n.122. Nevertheless, the name 'Metatron', his identification with the Archangel Michael, his role as revealing angel, the end-of-days messianic theme and overall apocalyptic style of this work betrays its generic relationship to the ancient Jewish apocalypses and also to the *Hekhalot* literature (especially *Sefer Hekhalot*, or 3 *Enoch*).
[12] As the subject of our investigation, the explanation follows towards the end of this essay.
[13] Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 264, n. 132. Y refers to the Jerusalem (*Yerushalmi*), or Palestinian, Talmud.
[14] Ibid.

and its taking shape around sites and monuments in the region still requires comprehensive clarification. An important effort in this direction is the work of Reiner (1996)”.[15]

The Work of Elchanan Reiner (1996)

In his paper ‘From Joshua to Jesus: The Transformation of a Biblical Story to a Local Myth’,[16] Elhanan Reiner starts with Benjamin of Tudela’s list of the holy places in Galilee, which is the earliest known document of its kind (c.1180 CE), and proceeds to identify some of the local religious beliefs and practices maintained through oral transmission, but only obliquely mentioned in the rabbinical literature surviving from the first Christian millennium. The accounts of other travelers like Petaḥiah of Regensburg (c. 1180 CE) are also examined and compared. Assuming the lists reflect the religious life of Galilean Jews, conserved over the preceding centuries, Reiner discovers subtle connections between the mediaeval lists and earlier literary works, such as the *Midrashim*, *Piyyutim* and apocalyptic literature of the Byzantine era. This then allows him to reconstruct facets of local religious life in the region around the northwestern shores of the Sea of Galilee.

In the English abstract of his article, the author introduces the reader into a religious ‘wonderland’, in which biblical personalities and narratives have been transposed on to the Galilean landscape, *pars pro toto*, without much regard for historical fact, or even for parallel and better-established traditions in other parts of Eretz Israel. The abstract continues:

> “The first and major example to be examined consists of lists of sacred sites around the Sea of Galilee that were attached, according to Galilean tradition, to personalities and events dating to the conquest of the Land in the days of Joshua and primarily to Joshua himself. In contradistinction to the biblical tradition, the twelfth-century lists contain a tradition that locates Joshua’s grave in the Galilee, near Tiberias. This is a regional tradition that appears for the first time during the twelfth century, in the itinerary of Petaḥia of Regensburg. This tradition has certain reverberations in midrashic literature, and it appears that that the image of Joshua played a major role in the local myth of Galilee. The article notes further examples of personalities connected to the Galilee contrary to biblical tradition as well as to other Palestinian traditions. A number of these sources are associated with Joseph, son of the Patriarch Jacob, and Miriam the prophetess. The pursuit of traditions linking Joshua to the Galilee uncovers another interesting phenomenon: the identity of the ‘Galilean’ Joshua, located particularly in the vicinity of the Valley of Arbel, is not necessarily that of the biblical Joshua Bin-Nun, but rather any of a list of famous ‘Joshuas’ (and derivatives of that name: Yeshua, Yeshu’ah etc) from subsequent generations, such as the High Priest Yehoshua ben Yehozadak, the tanna Yehoshua ben Peraḥiah, and the site of Yeshua’, one of the twenty-four priestly courses. In this context, the question was raised as to the possible connection with yet another Yehoshua—Jesus—and his link to the Galilee. Various traditions surrounding the crucifixion as described in the gospel of Matthew were examined and compared with midrashim on the death of Jesus as well as with other Jewish materials of a messianic nature and dating to the Middle Ages. These sources, some of which are polemical in their treatment of Jesus, appear to be linked to a common Galilean tradition, which seems to have served as the basis for messianic myths among early Christians as well as Jews”.[17]

As if he were assembling a mosaic from loose tesserae, Reiner has managed to construct, from a plethora of ancient sources, a consistent and coherent map of Eastern Galilean sacred sites and their

---

[15] Ibid.
[16] Elchanan Reiner, ‘From Joshua to Jesus: The Transformation of a Biblical Story to a Local Myth. A Chapter in the Life of a Religious Jew’, *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land*’, Arieh Kofsky and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1998; 223-271.
[17] The abstract in English is taken from the coversheet of the Hebrew version of the above article, at www.jstor.org/stable/23563357. The Hebrew version was published in *Zion*, the Journal of the Historical Society of Israel, vol. סא, no. ג, 1996 (תשנ"ו), 281-317.

religious associations during the first millennium. Using this work as a base, he later extended it into the early second millennium.[18]

Even more remarkable than Reiner's reconstruction of this local map is his interpretation of the emerging picture. The high prevalence of biblical characters named Joshua, supplemented by some called Joseph and Miriam, raises the suspicion that the map reconstructed by Reiner originally competed with the Christian message of salvation, initiated in this area by Jesus of Nazareth at the start of the first millennium. Reiner goes on to confirm this suspicion by finding significant points of interaction, mostly polemical, between the local Jewish traditions and the crucifixion narratives in the Gospel of Matthew and the apocryphal Acts of Pilate.[19]

Reiner's thesis proposes that after the Christian gospel of salvation had spread to other parts of the world, and Galilee had become the "new Judaea",[20] a flourishing centre of Jewish life (post-135 CE), the local Jewish narratives identified by Reiner, or 'myths' as he calls them, became widespread. The names which had previously been associated with the Christian message of salvation (the holy family of Joshua/Jesus, Joseph and Miriam) were replaced by pre-Christian Jewish namesakes, including several figures with names derived from 'Yehoshua', which means 'God's salvation' (Joshua Ben-Nun, Yeshua Nisraf, the high priest Joshua Ben-Yehozadak, Joshua Ben-Peraḥiah). The narratives about these Jewish namesakes would not only have helped the local Jewish population to block out the personalities associated with the Christian gospel, but would also have assured Jewish visitors from Europe, after a tour of these sites, that the Jews still had their own memorials in the Holy Land in spite of the strong Christian presence there.

Reiner's conclusions put us now in a position to identify a significant, though partial, connection between Arbel and the onset of redemption, or salvation,[21] expressed either in the third-century conversation between R. Hiyya and R. Ben Halafta, or in the seventh-century *Sefer Zerubabbel*, written some 500 years prior to the first appearance of the travelers lists of holy sites. Superficially, the connection seems to rest in the allusion to the 'salvation of God' carried by the multiple forms of the name Yehoshua associated with sacred sites around Arbel.

However, on a deeper level, if Reiner's perceptive comparisons between these local Jewish traditions and the Christian crucifixion accounts are correct, there is good reason to believe that the replacement of the Christian message of salvation in this part of Galilee reflects a rival connection with redemption, albeit with a Jewish view of this event. If the prevalence of holy sites in the area around Arbel did represent a living historical memory, it seems to have been singularly focused on de-Christianizing any connection it may have had with the Christian Messiah, and his parents Joseph and Mary, so that eventually, in the late sixth and early seventh century, it could go on and express its own Jewish messianic prophecy in apocalyptic style, as shown in the Book of Zerubbabel.

---

[18] Elchanan Reiner, 'From Joshua through Jesus to Simeon bar Yohai: Towards a Typology of Galilean Heroes', *Jesus among the Jews: Representation and Thought*, ed. Neta Stahl, London: Routledge, 2012; 106-117.
[19] Reiner, 'From Joshua to Jesus', 255-67.
[20] "New Judaea" is a term coined by Oded Irshai in his paper 'Confronting a Christian Empire: Jewish Life and Culture in the World of Early Byzantium' : "By the late third century, the Galilee had been well established as the "new Judaea", and its inhabitants began to form what seems to have been a regional Jewish identity. By weaving expressions concerning space and history into an extensive matrix, the Galilean Jewish inhabitants created their own local, mythic-historic past, importing many biblical narrative traditions from other parts of the land. Thus, they identified the spot where the Children of Israel crossed the Jordan not near Jericho but in a place not far from the Lake Genesereth, and they transferred the tomb of Joshua from the region of Samaria to a location in the Lower Galilee. Through such shifts or re-locations of personages, tombs, and events, the Galilean Jews it would seem sought to challenge the new, unwelcome appropriators of the land", adapted from *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale, New York: Schocken Books/Random House, 2002; 27.
[21] For the sake of simplicity, redemption and salvation are treated as synonyms in this article.

However, before continuing the search for the origins of the link between Arbel and redemption, we need to examine a related tradition from the same mythical context, one which links Arbel specifically to Yeshua, the head of the ninth priestly course in an ancient list of priests and their Galilean settlements.

The List of the Priestly Courses and their Settlements

It is necessary to consider whether the residence a priest and his family in Arbel could have been a factor in the development of the association between Arbel and redemption. The answer clearly depends on whether the presence of this priestly family was factual and historical, as some believe, or mythical, as in the traditions we have considered above.

From an early fourth-century dialogue in the Palestinian Talmud,[22] and from fragments of various sixth-century *piyyutim* and synagogue inscriptions, Samuel Klein reconstructed a list of the heads of the twenty-four priestly courses based on 1Chron 24,7-18, in which the head of each course is paired with the name of an ancient settlement in Galilee.[23] The town of Arbel is paired with the priestly course of Yeshua Nisraf,[24] the ninth of the twenty-four courses. Although of uncertain origin and significance, Klein suggested that the list represents the historical settlement of priestly families in Galilee after the first and second Jewish Revolts (70-135 CE), and this interpretation of the list is now widely accepted by scholars. Richard Bauckham has recently gone one step further and proposed that the priestly families arrived at the specified settlements much earlier, at the time of the Hasmonean conquest of Galilee (c.103 BCE), and were recruited to help in their administration.[25]

However, the historical veracity of these lists has been challenged by Uzi Leibner, who, without denying the widespread migration of priestly families to Galilee in the wake of the two Revolts (70-135 CE), refutes the real-world realization of the lists on the following grounds: A) Literary invention: the list of 24 priestly courses by settlement has the appearance of being a literary construct, which had no precedent in real life (not even the families of priestly courses in Judaea before 70 CE were concentrated in their own settlements) and would have been logistically impossible to accomplish given the chaotic conditions following the destruction. B) Purely symbolical function: the list seems to have had no historical or geographical value as a record of the origin and status of the priestly families before the Temple's destruction. Instead, it appears to have fulfilled a symbolical function from the time of its conception in the late third or early fourth century CE. C) Land saturation: since Galilee was densely populated and farmed in the first and second centuries CE, it would not have been feasible to settle newcomers in the most highly populated areas, such as those represented on the list. D) Documentary silence: if the 24 priestly families had migrated to Galilee as indicated in the list, in the first and second centuries CE, then it is curious that such a significant development as this was not mentioned in the literature until the end of the third or beginning of the fourth centuries, a silence of at least 200 years.

---

[22] PT *Ta'anit* 4, 6, 68d.

[23] Samuel Klein, 'The *Barayta* of Twenty-Four Courses,' *Various Papers in Research of Eretz Israel*, Vienna, 1924, 1-29 (Hebrew).

[24] As with some of the other names in the list, Yeshua is associated with a second name, 'Nisraf' in his case. The literal meaning of this second name is 'burned', so, in the local religious setting and by simple word association, it gave rise to the identification of Yeshua with the high priest Joshua Ben-Yehozadak, who was called "a brand snatched from the fire" (Zech 3:2).

[25] Richard Bauckham, 'Magdala in the List of the Twenty-Four Priestly Settlements', *Magdala of Galilee: A Jewish City in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,* ed. R. Bauckham, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018; 287-355.

Before going on to propose a non-literal interpretation of the list, Leibner considers some aspects of the list that shed light on its origin and purpose:

1. The earliest reference to the list occurs in the Palestinian Talmud (PT *Ta'anit* 4, 6, 68d), in a discussion dated to c. 290-350 CE, accusing the priestly course of Jehoiarib in Meiron of rebellion and blaming it for the Temple's destruction. In the same passage, a similar charge is levelled at the course of Jedaiah in Sepphoris, claiming they caused the Temple's destruction because of the disobedience to God. This negative midrashic treatment of elements of the biblical list of priestly courses (1 Chron 24) is highly unusual and betrays conflict and rivalry between the sages who wrote the midrash and the authors of the list. As the list emphasizes priestly motifs, its authors were most likely from priestly circles. It is doubtful that the rabbis in this discussion would have been so critical of the priesthood if the priests had an organized and numerically strong presence in Galilee.

2. Some of the settlements in the list were abandoned by the mid-fourth century CE, and by the fifth century others had large Christian communities. These facts make it highly unlikely that the lists were composed as late as the sixth century, when they started to appear in the *piyyutim* and synagogue inscriptions. Rather, they support the assumption that the list was completed around the time it made its first appearance in the Palestinian Talmud, which was around the end of the third century, or start of the fourth.

3. An inscription excavated from a synagogue in Sepphoris, dating from the Second Temple period. indicates that the priests of Jakim and Bilgah occupied this city and not those of Jedaiah as stated in the list. Apart from Sepphoris, there is no evidence of priestly migrations and settlement in the places mentioned, until the list first appeared around 300 CE, and subsequently there is no evidence of priestly settlement in the Late Roman (3rd– 4th cent. CE) or Byzantine (5th– 7th cent. CE) periods. Most of the 24 settlements are rural, relatively small and lacking in cultural or historical importance, and some are unknown outside of these lists. From the data available to him, Leibner has identified a common element among the listed settlements: they were among the first Jewish settlements in Galilee following the Hasmonean conquest in 103 BCE. Settlements that were established during the subsequent Early Roman period (c. 50 BCE) are notably absent from the list. The prominence given to Jewish settlement of Galilee during the Hasmonean period may explain why the course of Jehoiarib in Meiron is the first to be mentioned in the list, as it was from this course that the Hasmonean dynasty was descended.

This perceptive discovery allows Leibner to affirm: "These lists thus show that Galilean Jews of the Roman period knew about sites that were settled by Jews during the Hasmonean era.[26] Based on the partial archaeological information available, it appears that their knowledge was accurate. While the lists in rabbinic literature mention sites for practical halakhic purposes and also refer to settlements outside the Galilee, it appears that the consolidation of the list of the Courses' Settlements was intended from the outset to create a narrative, and a Galilean one at that, since the list includes only settlements in the Galilee and only in a relatively limited part of it".[27]

Proceeding to identify the purpose of this priestly narrative, Leibner recalls the important place of the Hasmoneans in the *piyyutim* of the Byzantine period, in contrast to the little attention given to them

[26] I.e., 350 years before, assuming a composition date around 300 CE.
[27] Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 416.

in rabbinic literature. It was during this period that the priests started to take leadership roles in the synagogues, and priestly motifs became popular.[28] Leibner concludes:

> "A list of settlements in the Galilee was paired with the list of the Priestly Courses that appears in 1 Chronicles attributing each course to a settlement. It appears that the compilers of this "combined" list chose sites that, according to historical memory (or perhaps, an actual list), were settled by Jews following the Hasmonean conquest of the Galilee and were connected to the ethos of the glorious past of the Hasmonean Galilee. The thematic array came together during a period in which treatment of motifs connected with the priesthood and with the Hasmoneans flourished. The theme linked the Priestly Courses of the Second Temple to the local "ancient" settlements that also reflected that same glorious period of priestly leadership".[29]

Leibner makes the case so convincingly for a link between the list of Priestly courses and the Hasmonean conquest that Richard Bauckham has taken it to its literal conclusion. In his chapter on 'Magdala in the List of the Twenty-Four Priestly Settlements',[30] Bauckham dismisses Leibner's objections to a literal interpretation of the list, noting they all apply to priestly migration and settlement following the Jewish revolts (c. 70-135 CE). This clears the way for him to argue for a literal influx of priests and their families in the wake of the Hasmonean conquest of Galilee two centuries before (c. 100 BCE), as represented in the list. Their purpose, he insists, was to administer the newly formed settlements on behalf of the ruling power in Jerusalem, while at the same time continuing to perform their week-long duty every 24 weeks in the Temple.

Bauckham's argument is difficult to refute because he takes the list of priestly courses and associated settlements as a unique source of evidence for the historical situation in Hasmonean Galilee. It has to be admitted that his assertion is theoretically possible, made plausible by force of argument, and unchallenged by contradictory evidence. Nevertheless, in arguing for high profile, priestly leadership in Galilee during the Hasmonean period, the argument *ex silentio*, based on the absence of corroborating evidence, carries much more weight than it would in the case of a lower profile presence. If twenty-four Jewish settlements in Hasmonean Galilee were administered and instructed by cohorts of resident priests for more than half a century, the silence surrounding their presumed impact and influence is inexplicable. Until the first recorded appearance of the list around 300 CE, there is no literary or archaeological evidence of priestly administration in Galilee, even in the histories of Josephus, whose priestly interest would surely have been aroused.

Another argument against Bauckham's literal historical interpretation can be inferred from the work of Oded Irshai, 'The Role of the Priesthood in the Jewish Community in Late Antiquity: A Christian Model?'[31] In this article, Irshai traces the rise of the Galilean priesthood over the two centuries following the termination of the Jewish Patriarchate in 429 CE, a time characterized by the gradual decline of the rabbinical academies and the proliferation of synagogues as centres of Jewish religious and cultural life, especially in Galilee.

Following the destructions in 70-135 CE, the surviving priests not only lost their high social status, but also their Temple ministry and income. Those who survived and migrated to Galilee would have struggled to settle in that densely populated region and find other sources of income. The leadership of the community had been given to the Patriarch and other non-priestly institutions, and there is

[28] Cf. Oded Irshai, 'The Role of the Priesthood in the Jewish Community in Late Antiquity: A Christian Model?', Jüdische Gemeinden und ihr christlicher Kontext in kulturräumlich vergleichender Betrachtung, Christoph Cluse, Alfred Haverkamp and Israel J. Yuval, eds., Hannover: Verlag Hahnsche Buchandlung, 2003; 75-85.
[29] Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 418-19.
[30] Bauckham, *Magdala of Galilee*, 2018; 287-305.
[31] See n. 28 for the full reference.

good literary evidence of conflict between the ruling rabbis and the local priests. Apart from the Talmudic texts cited above, blaming priestly disobedience for the Temple's destruction, there were also occasions where priestly resentment bubbled over. The most famous of these is a public sermon recounted in *Genesis Rabba* 80, in which the Patriarch was accused of robbing the priesthood from its lawful and traditional tithes.[32] Precisely because the priests were the rightful leaders of the Jewish community, the ruling rabbinical class needed to employ their power and influence to suppress the surviving priests, socially and economically, in order to hold on to their positions of authority. This is precisely the context in which the list of priestly courses makes its debut around the early fourth century CE. The context suggests that the aim of such a list would have been to strengthen the priesthood in Galilee, unify it around its former loyalty to the Hasmonean dynasty, and remind the synagogue communities of their legal obligation to donate tithes to the priests.

Following the demise of the Patriarchate a century later, in 429 CE, and the decline in the centralized government of the Jewish communities, a gradual shift took place in the social and cultural life of the Jews in Galilee, leading to democratization and increasing autonomy at the level of each community. At this point, between the mid-fifth and mid-seventh centuries, the historical sources often refer to 'priests' and 'head priests' in their capacity as 'civil servants', 'envoys' on political or diplomatic missions, and then as community leader or even local visionary.[33] By the sixth and seventh centuries, the priests had attained the most respected positions in the local synagogues, and it was customary at this time to bless and commemorate the priestly courses according to the list of their settlements. It was also a time of great national, religious and messianic revival, fueled by the prevailing weakness of the Byzantine Empire, and the prospect of their defeat following a Sassanid invasion, in which many thousands of Jews participated. Plans were indeed being prepared for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

So, in what way does this historical background conspire to refute Bauckham's literal interpretation of the priestly lists? In the first place, it provides a context and a purpose for the composition of the list, which more closely explain the observed facts of its appearance in the early fourth century and its liturgical role in the sixth and seventh centuries. In Bauckham's scheme, there is a gap of 350-400 years between the relevant historical context (c.100 BCE) and the first appearance of the list (c. 300 CE). The second point concerns the observed eclipse of the priesthood by the non-priestly rabbinical authorities in the post destruction phase, from 135–429 CE. A situation in which the non-priestly rabbinical authorities dominated the Jewish community, and suppressed the surviving priests, would be inconceivable if the priests were not at a serious social and economic disadvantage, and they would never have found themselves in this humiliating situation if they had been established, and were receiving their tithes, from the start of the Hasmonean annexation of Galilee, as argued by Bauckham. If this had been the case, the situation would have been reversed, with the hereditary priesthood ruling over the non-priestly rabbinate and the Galilean Jewish community.

So, we are left with the conclusions of Liebner, stated above, that the list was an imaginative, though historically plausible, reconstruction by priests of the late Roman period, launched with the purpose of improving their social and economic status and raising their profile vis a vis the rabbinical institutions of the time. With the end of Patriarchate in 429 CE, the ascendence of Babylonian Jewry, and the subsequent decline of rabbinical influence in Palestine, the list contributed towards a revival in the preeminence and prominence of the priests in the sixth and seventh centuries. Concerning the

[32] Irshai, 'The Role of the Priesthood', 80, n.19, He adds: "On this compare Epiphanius. *Panarion* 30.11, bringing the testimony of Joseph the Comes about his mission on behalf of the Patriarch to the Jewish communities in Cilicia exacting their tithes and banishing priests from their posts".
[33] Irshai, 'The Role of the Priesthood', 78.

priesthood at this time, Irshai makes some astonishing observations at the end of his paper, which may indicate the next step in solving the mysterious link between Arbel and the start of redemption.

The Role of the Jewish Priesthood in Late Antiquity

Towards the end of the sixth century, the priests who had established themselves in Galilean communities in the wake of the Jewish revolts (70-135 CE) experienced a revival in their social profile and importance, in parallel with their active participation in the synagogues. This may also have been related to preparations for the renewal of the sacrificial cult, and the rising expectation for Temple reconstruction at this time. The extraordinary nature of their participation in these communal gatherings is outlined by Oded Irshai as follows:

> "The synagogue was a cultural catalyst and a stimulating environment in which classical liturgical poetry was composed. Among the most prolific composers of this not too large body of poetry, as pointed out quite recently, the priests, mostly Galiean, loom large.[34] The central themes in their intricate compositions concerned the expected messianic age: the breaking of the yoke of Edom, i.e., Christian Rome, and the rebuilding of the Temple and the reestablishment of the sacrificial cult. Their sacred poetry dominated the yearly liturgical cycle practices in the synagogues…. Messianic expectations were so it seems a burning issue at the time. With the expectation of the Jewish Messiah coinciding with the approaching date of the Consummatio Mundi, or of the Parousia, 500 years following Christ or the 6000 year mark of the Anno Mundi, apocalyptic tensions ran mighty high….".[35]
>
> "The atmosphere of public adoration of the priesthood especially in the Galilee was enhanced by the local synagogue custom to bless and commemorate on the weekly Sabbath gatherings the *Priestly Courses* (משמרות הכהונה) that used to serve in the Temple. At the same time the eruption of the mystical literature of the *Heikhalot* and *Merkabah* which reflected the world of priestly circles going back to the days of Qumran[36] definitely augmented the centrality of the priesthood in the social and cultural context of Jewish Palestine. In this context of the aspired scenario of a Jewish Eschaton with its emphasis on the Temple cult, it was not surprising to find the use of a dating system calculated from the destruction of the Temple in both funerary as well as in votive inscriptions."
>
> "The atmosphere reflected here ties up very neatly with the figure of the visionary-priest, reported above in the name of Jacob and Justus, the two seventh-century merchants.[37] This figure, essentially symbolizing a

[34] At this point, Irshai remarks: "It is important to note that the number of priests among the liturgical poets well exceeds their proportionate number within the community", 'The Role of the Priesthood', 82, n.29.

[35] The paragraph that follows is also of interest: "Thus, during the same years that Jerome was reporting mockingly of Jewish eschatological aspirations—the ending of Roman subjugation—Apolinaris of Laodikea was promoting a radical Christian apocalyptic "end of days" scenario which included the renewal of the Jerusalem Temple with its sacrificial cult, the appointment of a High Priest and the sprinkling of the Red Heifer's ashes. Apolinaris somewhat bizarre eschatological plan was already labelled by his contemporaries, Basil, Jerome and others, as Judaizing and therefore heretical, but however we evaluate it, the fact remains that at the centre of this Christian scenario stood the most essential elements of the Jewish Priestly sacrificial cult" (Irshai, 'The Role of the Priesthood', 82).

[36] But note Peter Schäfer's well-argued objection to the idea that Qumranic literature, especially the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, are the springboard for the mystical ascent in *Hekhalot* literature: " I see no basis for the increasingly popular idea that the community's "ascent" in the songs is the prototype for the Merkavah mystic's ascent in the Hekhalot literature", *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009; 348.

[37] In the same article, Irshai describes a fictional, though very real, dialogue between Jacob and Justus, two converted Jewish merchants, concerning their early life in late sixth century Acre and Shikemona, Haifa, in which they recall "some local priests who served as community leaders as well as visionaries—living oracles, sharing with the public their apocalyptic visions. Thus, in one instance, Jacob narrates how… friends returning from Tiberias informed the crowd of a great vision (…) experience by the priest of the Tiberian Jews, in the course of which it was revealed that the Messiah was to come in eight years. Such stories repeated themselves time and again in the turbulent and violent years of Mauricius and Phocas, when the Byzantine Empire was gasping its last breaths" ('The Role of the Priesthood', 78-79).

fusion between a priest and an interpreter of visions especially of apocalyptic nature, had its roots in earlier Jewish post-Biblical traditions.[38] It also had some early and faint Christian parallels.".[39]

If Irshai's sources are accurate and his interpretations are correct, the roles of the Jewish priesthood in the turbulent and violent years at the end of the sixth and start of the seventh centuries, spanned the spectrum between liturgical poet (*paytan*), apocalyptic visionary and eschatological prophet, among other more sober roles, no doubt. In the same generation of priests, there appears to have been a renaissance of end-time apocalyptic prophecy, sometimes expressed in prose, and at other times in poetry. In the writing that survives from this creative period, the traditional styles of both mystical *Hekhalot* literature and apocalyptic are employed and indeed fused.[40] One example of this fusion is to be found in the Book of Zerubbabel, a typical apocalypse of the eschatological type, in which Michael, the leader of the heavenly hosts, is now identified with Metatron, the divinized antediluvian hero, Enoch, in *Sefer Hekhalot*.[41] At around the same time, one of the most prolific *paytanim*, Eleazar Qallir (c. 570–c. 640 CE), drew on many traditional sources, including apocalyptic and *Hekhalot* literature, and elements of both these literary genres appear in his poetry. In these works, a confluence of the apocalyptic and mystical *Hekhalot* traditions is evident.[42]

What is of even greater interest, though, is that this efflorescence of mystical and apocalyptic expression seems to have had a special focus on Arbel, the Valley of Arbel and, to a lesser extent, on nearby Tiberias. As noted and quoted earlier in this essay, the Book of Zerubbabel twice mentions Arbel, once at the first appearance of the Messiah and then at his final battle, and this is echoed in the *piyyut* of Qallir that starts "In those days and at that time". Through mentioning Arbel in these pivotal messianic contexts, both works are picking up and amplifying the traditional association of Arbel with the onset of redemption.

Although Leibner cannot extract any historical or geographical information about Arbel from these writings, due to their literary and apocalyptic character, he can confirm that, because Arbel was inhabited continuously from Hasmonean, through the Roman, Byzantine and up to the early Islamic periods, "it is thus likely that Qallir, who was active during the Byzantine period, possibly in this region (…), knew the place. It is also possible the writer of the Book of Zerubbabel who appears to have been active at the beginning of the seventh century in the area in which the Persian and Byzantine armies clashed, probably in Palestine (…) was familiar with this settlement".[43]

In summary, even if the author of the Book of Zerubbabel and Eleazar Qallir did not reside in Arbel, they were probably of priestly descent, they were familiar with the town and its surroundings, they

---

[38] Quoting 1QpHab II.7-10, Irshai sees those roots "mainly but not exclusively in the Qumranian milieu". This idea has been challenged effectively by Peter Schäfer, see n. 36, above.

[39] Irshai, 'The Role of the Priesthood', 82-83.

[40] Cf. Michael Mack in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol. 1, ed. John Collins, New York/London: Continuum, 2000; 236: "There is scarcely any direct historical link between the two literatures involved" (referring to *Hekhalot* and apocalyptic literature). But here we have a confluence of both kinds of writing in the fragile historical circumstances of the time.

[41] *Sefer Hekhalot* is also called *3 Enoch*, because Metatron is there identified with Enoch the scribe, after he was taken up to the throne in heaven and 'divinized' (cf. Gn 5:22; Jub 4:23; 1*En* 71). Under the influence of the rabbinic *Tannaim* and *Amoraim*, Enoch disappears from the tradition and Metatron is identified with Michael, 'the prince of the world since its creation' (i.e., without ever becoming a human being). The references to Michael as Metatron in *Sefer Zerubabbel* seem to be over-emphasizing the identity, as if to combat those who are still claiming he was Enoch. This is important in what follows (cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd Edition, Vol. 14, eds. Fred Skolnik, Michael Berenbaum, Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA with Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2007; 133).

[42] Cf. Michael Mack, *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol. 1, 229-230, for a brief history of the original separation of apocalypse and *Hekhalot* literature. The reasons for this separation are discussed in Anthony J. Saldarini, 'Apocalyptic and Rabbinic Literature', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 1975; 348-358.

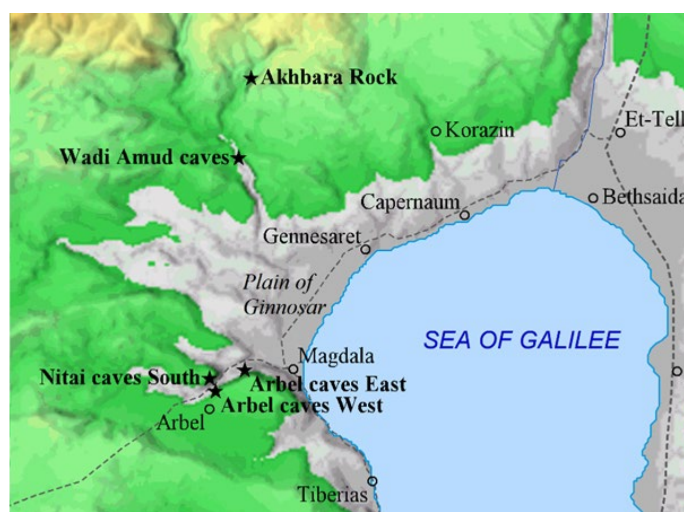
[43] Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 262.

were convinced of its connection with eschatological messianic redemption, and they had thoroughly assimilated the traditional literary forms expressing it, including apocalypse and liturgical poetry (*piyyutim*). Can we therefore postulate a link between the town of Arbel, end-time messianic redemption and the apocalyptic tradition? As messianic redemption is one of the main concerns of apocalyptic literature, the link between these two fields of study needs no explanation, but how does Arbel fit into this nexus? This brings us to our own research on Arbel.

Arbel

Our project began in August 2019, following a visit to the Arbel National Park, near the Sea of Galilee, 2 kms southwest of Magdala. Apart from scattered clusters of man-made caves along the two kilometres of exposed cliff, the National Park embraces the ruins of two ancient population centres: 1) an ancient town and synagogue on the Plain of Arbel, just as it starts to slope down into the valley of Arbel stream (see Arbel on the map below) and 2) the ruins of a dense collection of more than 100 man-made caves carved into the cliff, adjacent to a huge natural cave, 60 metres long, and once fortified by an ancient wall (labelled 'Arbel caves East' on the map).

In 1989, Dr Zvi Ilan was the first Israeli archaeologist to investigate these sites, which he identified as the town of Arbel and the Arbel cave village respectively. From coin and ceramic finds, he dated the foundation of the town of Arbel to c. 120 BCE and that of the Arbel cave village to c. 100 BCE. Around the same time, a demographic shift is observed in the archaeological record of the whole area, indicating the replacement of a Syrophoenician population by Jews from Judaea. Indeed, it is well known that Galilee was conquered and annexed by the Hasmonean king Aristobulus in 103 BCE, opening up this area to migration from Judaea in the south. Regarding the unique collection of caves that he named the Arbel cave village, Zvi Ilan was intrigued not only by the many cisterns and *miqva'ot* he found there, but also by the huge fortified cave, which he intended to excavate. This work was not even started, sadly, for he died the following year. No further archaeological investigation has been carried out at the Arbel cave village, except for an archaeological ground survey conducted by Uzi Leibner (1999-2004), in the part of Eastern Galilee that includes the ruins of the Arbel cave village and the town of Arbel.[44]



Map of the Plain of Ginnosar with the cave sites to the north and south
(created using Bible Mapper 5.0)

[44] Sites 35 and 39 respectively in Uzi Leibner, *Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Galilee*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 127, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009; 237 and 242.

Arbel and the surrounding area have a remarkable history. Josephus (*JW* 1:304-307)[45] tells us that it was the scene of violent conflict during the Civil War (40-37 BCE), when Herod's army camped on Mt. Arbel for several months in 38 BCE, in order to expel the cave-dwelling 'brigands' who were making life impossible for the Arbel residents. From this, we learn that Herod had allies in Arbel whom he came to help, although the people of this region were well-known for their loyalty to the Hasmonean dynasty, and to their recently enthroned king, Mattathias Antigonus, Herod's arch-rival. From the mention of deprived and dispossessed 'brigands', it can be inferred that there was also a social crisis here—a lack of sufficient resources—even though it was a region blessed with abundant water and fertile land.

From these historical references, the results of Leibner's archaeological survey and from our interpretation of certain outstanding features of the Arbel cave village, we have proposed a new hypothesis: that Arbel and the surrounding area was settled and farmed by Essenes, and that the Arbel cave village itself was built and occupied by a male Essene community from around 100 BCE, at about the same time the Essenes settled at Qumran. All this is presented in the first chapter of our book.[46]

Naturally, we then started to wonder whether there is evidence of scribal activity in the Arbel cave village, as at Qumran. No pens, inkwells or scroll-jars have yet been found, or even looked for, but only 30 kms away from Arbel, Lake Huleh (originally called Lake Semechonitis) was then the largest habitat of papyrus outside Egypt. The innovative use of papyrus in this area could explain why 'writing with ink and papyrus' was included among the teachings of the rebel angel *Penemue* (1*En* 69:8-11), and raise the suspicion that the Parables of Enoch (1*En* 37–71)—an ascent apocalypse written at the end of the first century BCE—may have been composed here.

On close examination, the text of the Parables of Enoch does indeed evoke several other topographical features of the Arbel cave village: 1) the description of the 'dwellings of the righteous' in heaven (*1En* 39:4-5; 41:2; 48:1; cf. Jn 14,2) resembles more the individual hewn habitations in the cave village than the communal 'hollow place' in a rock, in the original description (*1En* 22:1,9); 2) the 'ropes of the righteous' as a metaphor for trust in God's name (*1En* 61:3; cf. 46:8) seems to have been modelled on the actual ropes used to reach the higher caves in the cave village, and 3) the rebel angels' descent on Mt. Hermon, mentioned twice in the text (*1En* 39:1-2; 64:1-2), would have been an important reference point for the author, constantly made present by the magnificent views of Mt. Hermon, 70 kms distant in a northeasterly direction.

But there is more compelling evidence that the Arbel cave village was the home of the author of the Book of Parables. Firstly, the author can be identified as a full member of an Essene community, because his unique literary act of recording and preserving the names of the rebel angels (1*En* 69:1-12) represents his adherence to one of the oaths of Essene membership (cf. *JW* 2:142). Secondly, the author's description of the eschatological war (1*En* 56:5–57:3) is taken to be based on an eyewitness account of the Civil War projected into the future, and is therefore used for dating the text to Herod's reign. However, it can also be used to locate the author to a place overlooking the Plain of Ginnosar, which perfectly matches the location of the Arbel cave village. Finally, the social crisis leading to brigandage in this area coincides precisely with a rapid doubling of the population in Eastern Galilee, between 60–50 BCE, as revealed by Uzi Leibner's archaeological survey, which in turn is best explained by massive internal migration and overpopulation caused by the 'Judaean land settlement'

---

[45] The works of Flavius Josephus are abbreviated as follows: *JW* refers to his *Jewish War* and *Life* to his *Autobiography.*
[46] John Ben-Daniel, *'The Essenes of Mount Arbel and Jerusalem: Origins, History and Influence'*, Qumranica Mogilanensia series 20, Mogilany, Poland: Enigma Press, 2023; 7-36. The first chapter can also be accessed at: https://www.academia.edu/76987839/The_Arbel_Cave_Village_Remains_of_an_Essene_Commune .

of Pompey and Gabinius (63-54 BCE). The resulting oversaturation of productive land, coupled with private ownership of large tracts, including the entire plain of Ginnosar, more than adequately explains the social setting of the Parables of Enoch and its uniquely judgmental stance against 'the landowners'. All this amounts to persuasive evidence that the author of the Book of Parables was an Essene who lived at the Arbel cave village in the latter part of the first century BC.[47] It was a time of great messianic expectation and what he wrote was an ascent apocalypse conveying a messianic prophecy. In composing the Parables, the author showed deep familiarity with the Book of Watchers (1 *En* 1–36), which was the first and the foundation of the whole family of apocalyptic writings. On this basis, it would be reasonable to infer that he and his community at Arbel were part of a larger movement that promoted the apocalyptic worldview and produced apocalyptic and pseudepigraphic literature in all its variety. One could say that Arbel under the Essenes became a centre of apocalyptic expression in late Second Temple times.

Concerning the immediate influence of this community, and its messianic prophecy, it has to be said that it was less than a day's walk from Nazareth, a fact that immediately raises the question of personal contact with Jesus of Nazareth. Scholars have long suspected a link between Jesus and the Essenes, from the content of his teaching and his style of scriptural exegesis, but there is no compelling evidence that Jesus was ever a member of the Qumran community or that he ever visited Qumran.[48] However, with the discovery of the ruins of another large Essene community at Arbel cave village, only a day's walk from Nazareth, an alternative possibility presents itself.

When he was only twelve years old, Jesus preferred to discuss the Sacred Scriptures with the teachers in the Temple at Jerusalem, rather than return home with his parents (Lk 2,41-52). Furthermore, the Essene *Community Rule* (1QS 6:13-23) allows for approved young men to join the Essene communities for two to three years before having to commit, permanently, by taking the oath of membership. Josephus confirms this option not only in writing (*JW* 2.137-142), but also in practice, by staying with an Essene Community when he was 16 years old (c. 53-54 CE), in order to learn more about this movement (*Life* 10-11). It is entirely possible, therefore, that while still an adolescent, the Scripture-loving Jesus may have chosen to visit the Essene community at Mt. Arbel for a limited period of time. This would have the advantage of explaining Jesus' detailed knowledge of Essene interpretation, customs, traditions and worldview, without assuming some kind of relationship with the community at Qumran. It would also explain Jesus' personal contact with the Parables of Enoch, whose author was a member of the community at Mt. Arbel.

On this basis, we could simply conclude with James Charlesworth, that "The Book of Parables (*1En* 37-71), appears to be a Jewish work that antedates Jesus, and the author seems to imagine a connection among the Messiah, the Righteous One, and the Son of Man. The work most likely took shape in Galilee, not far from where Jesus centered his ministry. He, thus, could have been influenced by this writing or the traditions preserved in the Parables of Enoch. In this case, his own self-understanding may have been shaped by the relationship between the Son of Man and the Messiah that is found only in the Parables of Enoch. If those in the Enoch group were known as the great scholars who had special and secret knowledge, and if they lived in Galilee, then Jesus would

[47] A more comprehensive presentation and treatment of the evidence can be accessed at: https://www.academia.edu/50310427/The_Parables_of_Enoch_1Enoch_37_71_Provenance_and_Social_Setting .

[48] For a comprehensive analysis of the continuities and discontinuities between the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels and the writings from Qumran, see Simon J. Joseph, *Jesus, the Essenes, and Christian Origins: New Light on Ancient Texts and Communities*, Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2018. On a more popular level, *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Revealing the Jewish Roots of Christianity* by John Bergsma, New York: Image, 2019. The Qumran writings provide the best available evidence, so far, for the link between the Jesus movement and the rival ('Arbelite') branch of Essenes that produced the Parables of Enoch and other pseudepigraphical/apocryphal works.

most likely have had an opportunity to learn firsthand about their teachings through discussions and debates”.[49]

Personal contact with the messianic prophecy of the Parables of Enoch, and possibly its author, would explain many aspects of the public ministry of Jesus Christ, especially his radical identification with the “Messiah Son of Man”, the saviour and judge of mankind described therein. It may also have underpinned the popular worship he received so soon after his death and resurrection. For the purposes of this essay, however, it may help to explain why Jesus chose to begin his public ministry in this area of Eastern Galilee, and how this area became so closely associated with the onset of redemption, and salvation. It certainly confirms the nexus of messianic prophecy of redemption, apocalypse and Arbel that is evident much later in the sixth and seventh-century *piyyutim* and Book of Zerubbabel.

The main problem with this explanation is that neither Jesus Christ, nor the Parables of Enoch, nor the Essenes, were recognized by the rabbinical authorities as having anything to say about the redemption or salvation of the Jewish people. The connection outlined above, between Jesus Christ, Arbel and messianic redemption may resonate in Christian ears, but it cannot explain why, guided by the rabbinical rejection of Jesus as Messiah, the local Jewish population should associate their future redemption and salvation with Arbel.

The persistence of this association among the local Jewish population, in the centuries following the ministry of Jesus, can only be explained if its origin was antecedent to the start of his ministry, thus constituting the origin of both the Christian and Jewish predisposition to link Arbel with redemption. For Christians, the redemption started by the Sea of Galilee, within view of Mount Arbel, early in the first century CE, and was therefore in the past, while for Jews it was still a future hope, leading eventually to the outbreak of messianic fervour in the sixth and seventh centuries, in and around Arbel. It appears that behind both of these Arbel-centred messianic movements, Christian and Jewish, stands the same original source of inspiration.

The Source of the Bond between Arbel and Redemption

As we noted above, an important clue to the origins of the connection between Arbel and redemption is found first in the Palestinian Talmud: it is the reference to the start of redemption in the conversation between two early third-century *Amoraim*, Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Shimon Ben Halafta in the plain of Arbel (c. 220-250 CE):

> “The great Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Shimon Ben Halafta were walking in the Arbel Valley when they saw the dawn whose light burst forth. The great R. Hiyya said to R. Halafta the great man: “Such is the redemption of Israel. At first it comes little by little (but) as it continues it becomes greater and greater. What is the reason: “When I shall dwell in darkness, the Lord is my light” (PT Berakhot 1:1:21; Yoma 3:2:5; et par.; the biblical quote is from Micah 7:8).[50]

The convergence of these three themes in the Rabbis’ conversation—Arbel, divine redemption and light—helps to pinpoint the pre-Christian source and inspiration that we seek to identify. Only in the Book of Isaiah do we find this unique convergence of themes (highlighted in italics):

[49] Charlesworth, ‘Can We Discern the Composition Date of the Parables of Enoch’, *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man: Revisiting the Book of Parables*, ed. Gabriele Boccaccini, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK, Eerdmans, 2007; 467.

[50] Quoted from the Jerusalem Talmud, *Berakhot* 1:1:21, edition by Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999-2015, available online at www.sefaria.org (accessed 03.2024).

"But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the *land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali*, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.
The people who walked in darkness have seen a great *light*;
Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them the *light* has shined.
You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy;
They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as the fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
And the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it.
With justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this" (Is 9:1-7, ESV; 8:23–9:6 NAB).

To clinch the connection, we only need to recall that Arbel sits on the border between the ancient tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, and therefore symbolically represents these two geographical areas in the above passage from Isaiah. This not only clarifies how Arbel became a messianically charged location, but also explains why Arbel and its environs were chosen by the Essenes returning from the 'land of Damascus' in 100 BCE,[51] as a suitable place to establish themselves and work to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the imminent messianic redemption of Israel. We suggest it was the Essene communities at Arbel and at the Arbel cave village that forged the connection, implicit in Isaiah's messianic prophecy above, into an enduring bond between Arbel and messianic redemption, influencing firstly the messianic movement of Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Mt 4:12-17), and then, 600 years later, the messianic expectation expressed in the Book of Zerubbabel.[52]

Leibner's archaeological survey informs us that Arbel was inhabited continuously and intensely from its foundation around 120 BCE right up to its destruction by earthquake in 749 CE, while the Arbel cave village was occupied continuously from 100 BCE until around 250 CE, when its population declined to zero over the next 75 years for unknown reasons.[53] Little is known about the survival of the Essenes after 70 CE, though Martin Goodman finds no reason to doubt that they did survive for a considerable time until they were declared extinct by the fourth-century Christian heresiologist Epiphanius.[54]

Assuming that the Essenes did survive the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE,[55] Arbel and the Arbel cave village would have provided a relatively safe and secluded site in Eretz Israel where Essene

[51] For the background to their return, see pp. 5-7 of the following article: https://www.academia.edu/50310427/The_Parables_of_Enoch_1Enoch_37_71_Provenance_and_Social_Setting .
[52] The naming of this apocalypse after Zerubabbel also links it to the text of Isaiah, specifically to the passages, like this one, that describe the future messianic 'servant' as a royal successor of David and an agent of justice; cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, rev. ed. Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996; 191.
[53] Cf. the table of population size, in Leibner, *Settlement and History,* 239. The decline in population coincides exactly with the Plague of Cyprian (c. 251-270 CE), which was described as a rapidly fatal diarrheal illness, thought by some to have been a Viral Haemorrhagic Fever (Ebola or Marburg), but Cholera also enters the list of possibilities.
[54] Martin Goodman, 'Sadducees and Essenes After 70 CE', *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, ed. Stanley E Porter, Paul Joyce and David Orton, Leiden/New York/Koln: Brill, 1994, 547-346; the relevant passage in Epiphanius is *Panarion* 19.5.6-7.
[55] In the first Revolt (66-70 CE), the destruction was localized to Jerusalem and a few other places of active resistance. According to Josephus (*JW* 2,124) and Philo (*Hypothetica* 11.1), the Essene communities were to be found in every town

scribes could have continued to produce and preserve their apocalyptic writings up to and beyond the suppression of the second Jewish revolt in 135 CE. Late first century works, with an Essene character, such as 4 Ezra, Apocalypse of Abraham and 2 *Enoch*, could have been composed there. In the case of the earliest layers of 2 and 3 *Enoch*, this is not mere speculation because both of these apocalypses have their roots in 1 *Enoch*, whose final editing and central composition, the Parables of Enoch, we have already traced to the Arbel cave village. Although the textual history of both these works is complex, there is a logical, though non-linear, progression in the spiritual status of Enoch running through all three books, starting from 2 *Enoch* increasing to 3 *Enoch* and reaching its zenith in chapter 71 of 1 *Enoch*. This trend has been called the Enoch-Metatron trajectory.[56] In 2 *Enoch* ('Slavonic Enoch'), Enoch himself is taken up to the divine throne and transformed into a glorious angel; in 3 *Enoch* (*Sefer Hekhalot*), the divinized Enoch is an archangel called Metatron, enthroned beside the Almighty and wielding executive power on his behalf. In chapter 71 of 1 *Enoch*, the glorified Enoch is enthroned and worshipped as the Messiah Son of Man, whom the Almighty has appointed from before the creation of the world as the universal saviour of the righteous and judge of wicked angels and men.[57] Through an apotheosis, Enoch was transformed into a second deity in heaven, where his newly conferred, divine status can be compared to that of only one other human in history, Jesus Christ, a fact that suggests this comparison may help to understand Enoch's meteoric elevation and exaltation.[58]

The problem with this outline of Enoch's promotion from angel, to archangel, to second deity in heaven is that it is non-linear, according to most recent dating of the respective works: 1 *Enoch* is said to have been composed around 1 BCE, although most scholars agree that the relevant chapter, chapter 71, was added later, and is now estimated to date from the mid-first century CE;[59] 2 *Enoch* is generally agreed to have been written around the end of the first century, or beginning of the second,[60] and 3 *Enoch* did not reach its final edition until the fifth to seventh centuries CE, although it is said to contain earlier material. According to the accepted chronological order, 1 *Enoch* breaks the orderly progression observed in 2 *Enoch* and 3 *Enoch* by describing Enoch, at the outset, in his most exalted and deified state.[61] It appears that his status diminishes significantly in 2 *Enoch*, but

---

and village. Their scattered distribution and relative autonomy may explain the literary and theological variety of the writings that have come down to us, having Essene features and provenance 'unknown'.

[56] Cf. George Nickelsburg in *1 Enoch 2: A Commentary on the Book of Enoch Chapters 37-82*, George Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, Hermeneia series, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2012; 69-70; and Peter Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven: Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity*, Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020; 99-133. For the Palestinian origin and subsequent history of 3 *Enoch*, see P. S. Alexander's introduction to his translation in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2015; 229-239.

[57] There is some debate about whether the Messiah Son of Man is praised and worshipped in 1 *Enoch* 37-71. Richard Bauckham has recently opposed this view ("Son of Man", Vol. 1, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2023; 93-101), by arguing that the Messiah Son of Man receives obeisance not worship, while Peter Schäfer (*Two Gods in Heaven*, 45-49) insists that his enthronement for judgment (1 *En* 62:2-9; 69:29) is indeed a barely disguised theophany. In this case, Enoch's vision describes two Gods in heaven and plays a part in the subsequent development of the 'two powers heresy', with which Schäfer is well acquainted. Since the Messiah Son of Man is delegated the same divine tasks of redemption and judgment that were previously imputed to God himself, it would be shamefully ungenerous to deny him the same measure of divine praise and worship for the successful performance of those tasks (cf. Rev 5:9-14).

[58] Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ*, New York: New Press, 2012; 82-95, esp. 94-95; but compare Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven*, 51-53.

[59] Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *1 Enoch 2*; 20,71.

[60] Around this time, a *cosmos* with seven heavens became conventional in apocalyptic writings, cf. 'The Seven Heavens in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses', *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*, Adela Yarbro Collins, Leiden: Brill, 1996; 21-54.

[61] Cf. Andrei A. Orlov, 'Roles and Titles of the Seventh Antediluvian Hero in the Parables of Enoch: A Departure from the Traditional Pattern?', and William Adler 'A Dead End in the Enoch Trajectory: A Response to Andrei Orlov', in *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man*, 110-142.

then rises to almost the same level in 3 *Enoch*. No satisfactory explanation for this discontinuity has been proposed, despite the fact that Enoch's apotheosis closely parallels the Ascension and Glorification of Jesus Christ and that the chapter describing it (chap. 71) is a later addition to the text.[62]

One plausible suggestion is that Jesus of Nazareth set out to fulfil the messianic prophecy announced in the Parables of Enoch[63] and, by so doing, he created a split in the Essene movement, between those who accepted him as the Messiah Son of Man and promptly became Christians (cf. Acts 2:41; 6:7), and those who did not. The non-Christian Essenes responded by editing the Parables of Enoch into a single volume, now called 1 *Enoch*, adding chapter 71 and the Noachide sections in the editorial process. This was a cunning ploy, as chapter 71 identifies the antediluvian scribe Enoch as the Messiah Son of Man, retrospectively blocking the Christian claim that it was Jesus Christ. The addition of chapter 71 not only reclaimed the Parables of Enoch for the non-Christian Essenes, but at the same time prevented its use as a proof text for Christians. However, in order to replace Jesus by Enoch, the author of chapter 71 had to relate how Enoch, a mere human being, assumed the identity of the Messiah Son of Man, whom he had just described as a separate, divine and preexistent individual in the heavenly visions granted to him. What is more, following the divinization of his body, Enoch is greeted by the Almighty and the four archangels with the words "*You are that Son of Man who was born for righteousness*" (*1En* 71:14), a proposition that would have been scandalous in the first century, to every form of Judaism except Christianity (cf. Jn 8:58-59).[64] On the one hand, the message for Christians was that Enoch, not Jesus, was the Messiah Son of Man, and on the other hand, the non-Christian Essenes could unite around the supremely exalted status of their ancient hero, Enoch, in a way that would, in the future, direct them away from eschatological messianic expectation (apocalypse) and more to mystical experience (*Hekhalot writings*). As noted by Orlov and Adler, the high hopes pinned on Enoch in chapter 71 were never realized and ended in a 'dead end'.[65]

However, between the two Revolts (70-135 CE), when messianic fervour was at its most militant (especially during the war of Qitos and the Bar Kochba revolt), the identification of the Messiah Son of Man with Enoch, as stated in chapter 71 of the Parables, would have clashed with the more militant messianic portraits in texts such as 4 Ezra, the Psalms of Solomon and the Sybilline Oracles.[66] In this context, the author of 2 *Enoch* needed to portray Enoch in a way that minimized his messianic status and reemphasized his original functions as a scribe and cosmic explorer. Two or three centuries later, after Christianity had become the dominant religion in Syria-Palestine, defined by the Nicaean Creed, Enoch's status needed to be revised upwards again to rival that of Jesus Christ. So, in 3 *Enoch* (*Sefer Hekhalot*), Enoch, who is now called Metatron,[67] appears as a 'second power in heaven' in the eyes of some, despite sharp criticism by the rabbinical authorities.[68] It should

---

[62] For referenced arguments (empirical, tradition historical, literary critical and theological) supporting the view that chap. 71 was a later addition, see pp. 6-9 at https://www.academia.edu/111586920/Reframing_the_Son_of_Man_Debate
[63] I have made the case already at: https://www.academia.edu/88575655/The_Rise_and_Fall_of_the_Parables_of_Enoch_1En_37_71_John_the_Baptist_Jesus_of_Nazareth_and_John_of_Patmos .
[64] Because it admits that the Messiah Son of Man, who is a second deity in 1 *Enoch* 37-71, was born as a human being and therefore conforms to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation of God.
[65] For the references to their analysis and observations, see n. 61 above.
[66] This is an understatement: identifying Enoch as the Messiah Son of Man would have appeared absurd beside these other messianic prophecies, precisely because it presented the towering figure of the Messiah Son of Man as a bookish, non-Davidic, non-Jewish figure from the distant past.
[67] Several explanations for this name have been given, but the most satisfactory in my view explains it as a transliteration from the Greek *meta* (beside, next to) *thronos* (throne): Metatron is the one 'beside the throne'.
[68] Cf. Peter Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven*, 99-138.

be no surprise that the final redaction of 3 *Enoch* contains editorial insertions opposing its binitarian stance, most likely emanating from a Talmudic centre in Babylonia at some point between the fifth and seventh centuries.

In summary, the three books of Enoch (1 *Enoch*, 2 *Enoch* and 3 *Enoch*) do form a coherent tradition when understood in the historical circumstances that produced them, and perhaps more importantly, as a foil and a bulwark against the Christian Gospel and Creed.[69] The provenance of these books is unknown, and many would say unknowable, but with the identification of Arbel cave village as the home of the Parables of Enoch, and the origin of the compilation we recognize as 1 *Enoch*, it is quite possible that 2 *Enoch* was also written there. With the depopulation of the cave village from 250 to 325 CE, for unknown reasons,[70] 3 *Enoch* would have been produced elsewhere within the same group, possibly in the town of Arbel itself, as the highly distinctive name 'Metatron' is found in other Galilean works such as the Palestinian Targum (*Tg Jonathan* to Gen 5:24) and the fourth-century Palestinian work *Re'uyot Yeḥezqe'l*.[71] It is generally agreed, though, that the final redaction of 3 *Enoch* took place in Babylonia where it underwent rabbinical correction, evidenced by the insertion at 3 *Enoch* 16 and its resemblance to a passage in the Babylonian Talmud (BT *Hagigah* 15a).

Although the connections between the Essenes of Arbel and the Enoch-Metatron tradition are somewhat speculative, their ties to the Parables of Enoch are on a surer footing. It was this messianic prophecy that provided the proximate prophetic background for the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah Son of Man, and established the reputation of Arbel as the place where salvation would start, in accordance with the Isaiah 9:1-7 (cf. Mt 4:12-17). However, by rejecting the salvific significance of Jesus' ministry, the Jewish refugees from Judaea received the local tradition linking Arbel with redemption as an unfulfilled prophecy, which continued to inspire messianic enthusiasm. Since this messianic expectation was tied to the restoration of the Temple institution,[72] every political movement that created an opening for rebuilding the third Temple led to an outburst of messianic anticipation and activity. It happened first in the early second century, under Nerva and Trajan (96-115 CE); it happened again in 363 CE under the Emperor Julian the Apostate, and it happened finally in 614-628 CE, with greater success than before, when the Sassanid army was joined by a Jewish force and conquered Jerusalem for more than a decade, until it was taken back by the Byzantine Christian Emperor Heraclius in 628 CE, only to fall to the Arabs in the next decade (638 CE). Nevertheless, the partial achievements of this final attempt produced a renaissance of apocalyptic literature in every quarter, for the rabbinical censorship that had previously removed these writings from publication[73] had moved to Babylon and the Jewish communities were now overseen by the priests, some of whom are likely to have been descendants of the Essenes of Arbel.

---

[69] "The Jewish answer to Christianity is a Jewish answer insofar as it refers back to the eminently Jewish traditions as they are preserved in the rich literature of the Second Temple period. And it is also a response to *Christianity* insofar as it directly confronts the shape that these traditions assumed in the New Testament and early Christian literature", Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven*, 138.

[70] See n. 53 above.

[71] P. S. Alexander, 3 *Enoch* in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 1, 229.

[72] Most clearly expressed in the second-century Aramaic Targum to Isaiah 53, cf. Jostein Ådna, 'The Servant of Isaiah 53 as Triumphant and Interceding Messiah: The Rception of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 in the Targum of Isaiah with Special Attention to the Concept of the Messiah', *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, eds. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, Eng trans. by Daniel P. Bailey, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2004, 189-224.

[73] See n. 42.

Conclusion

This essay takes up Uzi Leibner's challenge to determine how Arbel and its vicinity came to have a profound and enduring association with the start of redemption for the Jewish people. He suggests working backwards from the earliest reference in the Palestinian Talmud (start of the third century), and unravelling historical memory in the manner used successfully by Elhanan Reiner. From the records of mediaeval Jewish travelers, Reiner has managed to piece together a network of local shrines in the vicinity of Arbel and Tiberias, which reflect those ancient religious beliefs transmitted orally among the local Jewish population, but scarcely appearing in contemporary texts. In the Byzantine period, the link between Arbel and redemption appears to have been conserved in the commemoration of various biblical personages bearing the name Yehoshua, meaning 'the salvation of God', or its abbreviations (Yeshua, Joshua, Jesus). Comparison with certain passages in the Christian gospel and apocryphal writings indicates that the local Jewish communities replaced the New Testament geography of salvation with names and places evoking the 'salvation of God' from pre-Christian biblical and other sources. Arbel's link with redemption was therefore not dependent on the Christian salvation story, but appears to have preceded it.

Examination of the list of priestly courses and settlements, which appeared in the early fourth century, prompted a historical enquiry into the varied and prominent roles of the priests in the synagogues, following the closure of the Jewish Patriarchate (429 CE) and the transfer of the main rabbinical academies to Babylonia. The roles of the priests in late antiquity indicate a reawakening of interest in mystical and apocalyptic literature, at a time when messianic fervour was peaking due to the Persian invasion of Syro-Palestine (602-628 CE).

Returning to Arbel, we briefly present findings that support the case for an Essene presence in the vicinity of Arbel, and evidence linking the Arbel cave village with a messianic apocalypse called the Parables of Enoch, the centre-piece in the compilation known as 1 *Enoch* (1 *En* 37-71). With this new finding, we are in a better position to explain the pre-Christian link between Arbel and redemption: taking Arbel and its surroundings as representing the ancient border between the territories of Napthali and Zebulun, this link can be traced directly to the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 9, which announces the coming of messianic redemption and envisions it as light dawning on the people of Zebulun and Naphtali. We suggest that this not only gives the biblical justification for the Essene settlement in Arbel, around 100 BCE, but it also explains why Jesus of Nazareth concentrated a large part of his ministry in this area, especially around the Sea of Galilee (Mt 4:12-17). Our study ends with a preliminary attempt to trace the Enoch-Metatron tradition to the survival of the Essene community in the Arbel cave village until the start of the fourth century CE. With this, we have established a chain of links from Isaiah 9:1-7, in the seventh or eighth century BCE, to the Essenes of Arbel, the apocalyptic tradition, the ministry of Jesus Christ, the *Hekhalot* literature, the Palestinian Talmud, and up to the Book of Zerubbabel in the seventh century CE, covering a span of 1400 years.

In conclusion, Arbel is linked to redemption in both Christian and Jewish traditions, in a way that can be traced back, through the Essene settlement of Arbel, to the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 9.

John Ben-Daniel
Old City, Jerusalem
Pesach, 14 Nisan 5784