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EXCAVATIONS AT
ANCIENT NABRATEIN:
SYNAGOGUE and ENVIRONS

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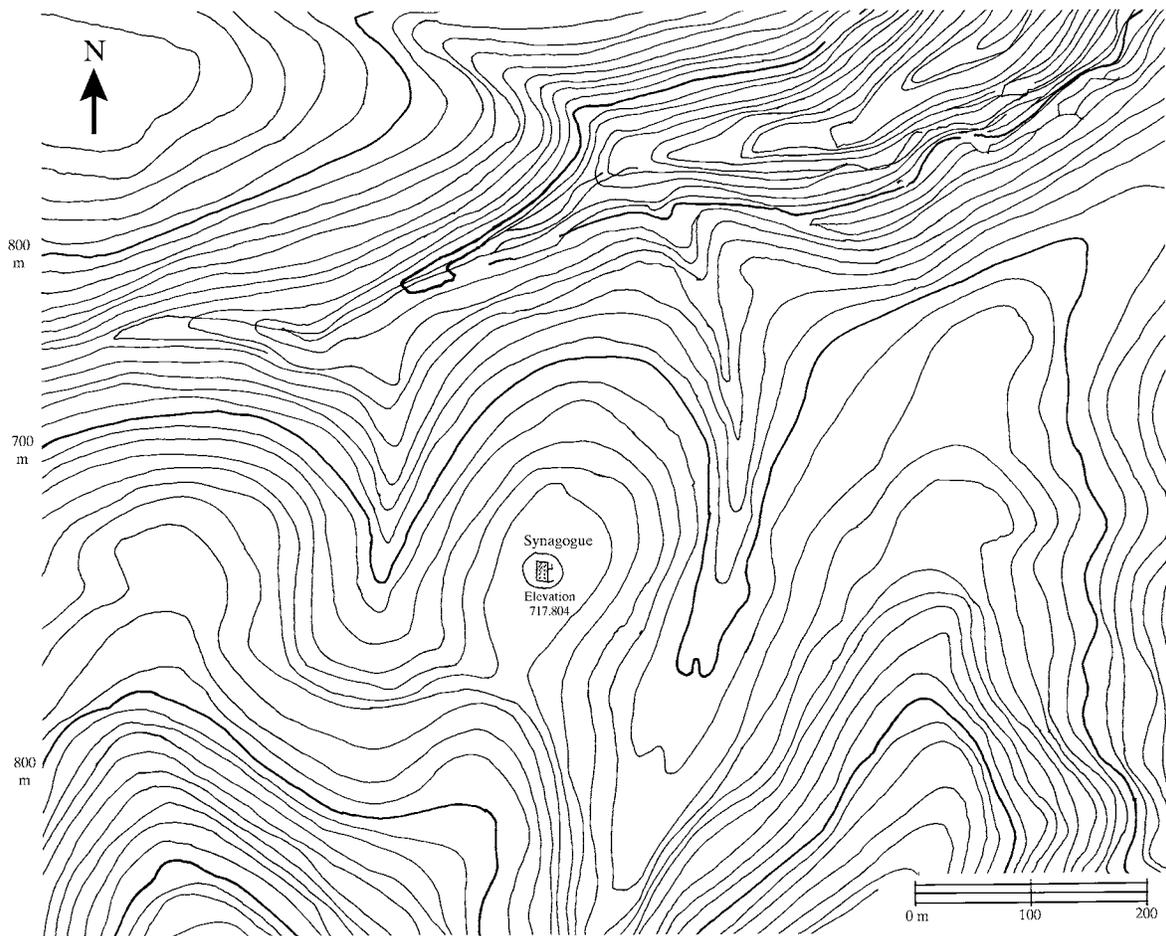


Fig. 2. Topographical map of Nabratein and its environs.

491), which incorrectly associates Jacob of Nevoaraia with the unexcavated and presumably medieval site.

2. Nabratein in the Ancient Literary Sources

Between Texts and Archaeology:
Nabratein and Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia in Rabbinic Literature*

STEVEN FINE

Nabratein has been identified by medieval and modern scholars with a late antique Jewish village known as Kefar Nevoaraia, home of a “student of the sages” known as Jacob of Kefar

* This essay is based on an article entitled “A Cosmopolitan ‘Student of the Sages’: Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia in Rabbinic Literature” in Fine: forthcoming a. Many thanks to Professors Joseph Baumgarten and Eric Meyers for discussing the contents of this paper with me and to Professor Stuart S. Miller for commenting on the manuscript.



Photo 3. View of site during excavation and restoration work taken on July 4, 1980, looking north-northwest, at edge of Nahal Dalton.

Nevoraia.¹ A connection between Jacob of Kefar Nevoraia and Nabratein was noted by medieval Jewish pilgrims to the Holy Land as early as the mid-thirteenth century CE, and this association continues to the present (Irshai 1982/83: 156 n. 17; cf. Meyers, Strange, and Meyers 1981c: 3; Yaari 1976: 91, 141, 434; Ilan 1997: 295). Typical of the medieval accounts, an anonymous student of Nachmanides who visited the site in 1272 wrote that:

. . . From there we went to Nabratein. Close to the valley, in the slope of the mountain, close to the path, is one righteous one [*tsadik*]. They say that he is Rabbi Jacob of Nevoraia (Yaari 1976: 91).

Kefar Nevoraia never appears in rabbinic literature except as the home of Jacob of Kefar Nevoraia. Any discussion of Nabratein in rabbinic sources must, of necessity, focus upon the life of Kefar Nevoraia's only known inhabitant. Even this exercise is not without difficulties.

1. I am aware that there is a certain circularity to this argument. I nonetheless accept the medieval identification both because of the basic conservatism of geographic naming practices in Palestine, and because no competitor for this place name is known. "Kefar Nevoraia" is transliterated variously in modern literature. For the sake of consistency, I have chosen to use the form suggested by Tsafir, di Segni, and Green (1994: 164).

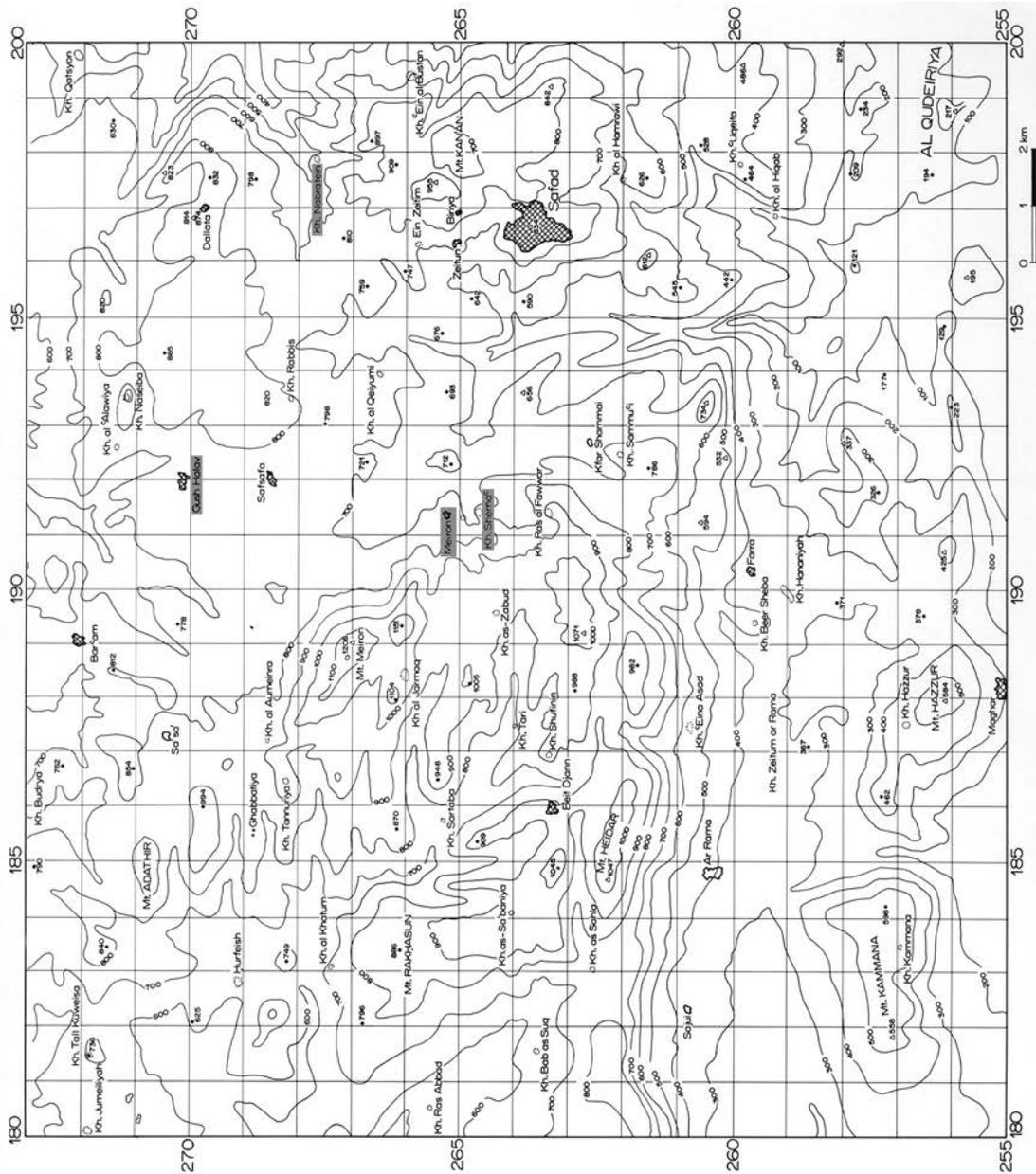


Fig. 3. Contour map of Safed region.

Writing a biography of the modern sort on the basis of rabbinic literature is well-nigh impossible, since the lives of the rabbis, like the lives of biblical characters, were the objects of literary construction, which included de-individuation and a deeply hagiographic impulse (Neusner 1970; Green 1978: 77–96; Fraenkel 1978, 1981, 1991; Goshen-Gottstein 1993; Hirshman 1993). We thus cannot know exactly what a particular rabbi actually said and did at any particular moment. By broadly contextualizing rabbinic anecdotes, we can, however, imagine the “stage” upon which the rabbis functioned and of the concepts that existed when the story was

formed. In this way, we can come as close as possible to the characters that the authors of rabbinic literature were quite certain had once walked the earth. Archaeology and geography are important in this type of reconstruction, for they provide non-literary evidence of Jewish life in antiquity.

In this essay I will contextualize the traditions about one member of the rabbinic community of late antique Palestine, Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia. I will draw upon rabbinic sources, Roman law, Karaite, Samaritan, and Patristic sources, archaeology, and geography in my attempt to read the traditions of Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia holistically. I will also refer to current scholarship on ethnic identity. For almost a century scholars have identified Jacob as a “Jewish-Christian.” Rather than interpreting these sources as evidence for Jewish Christianity in antiquity, however, I will argue that Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia served the rabbis as a point from which to reflect upon the ambiguities of Jewish life in the cosmopolitan world of the Roman Empire, particularly within Diaspora communities on the borders of Eretz Israel.

The Jerusalem Talmud and classical amoraic and post-amoraic midrashim all preserve traditions of Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia.² The most complete classical amoraic presentation of Jacob’s exploits appears in *Genesis Rabba*, chapter 7 (Theodor and Albeck 1965: 51–52):³

1. “Let the waters bring forth [swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens]” (Gen 1:20).
2. Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia ruled in Tyre:
3. Fish require ritual slaughter.
4. Rabbi Haggai heard of this and said to him: Come and be whipped.
5. He [Jacob] said to him: A man who said a word of Scripture should be whipped?
6. He [R. Haggai] said to him: How is it Scriptural?
7. He [Jacob] said to him: For it is written: “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly,” etc.
8. Just as the bird must be ritually slaughtered, so must the fish be ritually slaughtered.
9. He [R. Haggai] said: You have not ruled well.
10. He [Jacob] asked: Whence can you prove this to me?
11. He [R. Haggai] responded: Lie down [to be lashed] and I will prove it to you.
12. He [R. Haggai] said to him: It is written: “If flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, will they suffice them? [or if all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, will they suffice them?”] (Num 11:22).
13. “Shall be slaughtered” is not written here but “will be gathered together.”
14. He [Jacob] said: Whip me, for your explanation is good.
15. Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia ruled in Tyre:⁴
16. It is permitted to circumcise the son of a gentile woman on the Sabbath.
17. Rabbi Haggai heard of this and said to him: Come and be whipped.
18. He [Jacob] said to him: A man who said a word of Scripture should be whipped?

2. Irshai (1982/83) has discussed the philological and historical contexts for these traditions with great attention to detail. Though my conclusions differ from his, his study has been invaluable in the preparation of this essay.

3. Parallels are discussed and analyzed by Theodor (Theodor and Albeck 1965: ad loc.). This translation follows the base text, British Museum Add. 27179 as cited by Theodor and Albeck and discussed by Irshai (1982/83: 157–58, 163–64). See especially *y. Yév.* 2:6, 4a; *Qid.* 1, 60a. For the dates and provenance of the rabbinic collections cited in this article, see Strack and Stemberger (1992).

4. *y. Yév.* 2:6, 4a: “Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia went to Tyre. They came and asked him: . . .”

19. He [R. Haggai] said to him: How is it Scriptural?
20. He [Jacob] said to him: For it is written: “And they declared their pedigrees after their families, by their fathers’ houses” (Num 1:18).
21. He [R. Haggai] said: You have not ruled well.
22. He [Jacob] asked: Whence can you prove this to me?
23. He [R. Haggai] responded: Lie down [to be lashed] and I will prove it to you.
24. He said: It is written: “Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them” (Ezra 10:3).
25. He [Jacob] said: And on the basis of Tradition [or a text from the Hagiographa] you will whip me?
26. He [R. Haggai] said: And let it be done according to the Torah (ibid.).
27. He [Jacob] said: whip your whip, for it is well taught!

Jacob of Kefar Nevoia is presented in amoraic traditions as a younger contemporary of the amora Rabbi Haggai. Rabbi Haggai flourished during the third and fourth Palestinian Amoraic generations, circa 280–340 CE (Albeck 1969: 323, 337). Jacob, who did not acquire the title “rabbi,” appears in these traditions to be functioning in Tyre on the Phoenician coast.

Kefar Nevoia, today called Nabratein, is located in Upper Galilee near the ancient Tyrian hinterland. A late antique synagogue has been discovered at this site (Meyers, Strange, and Meyers 1981a; Tsafir, di Segni, and Green 1994: 164), and the tomb of Jacob has been venerated there since medieval times (Irshai 1982/83: 156 n. 17; Meyers, Strange, and Meyers 1981a: 3; Yaari 1976: 91, 141, 434). Jacob’s presence in Tyre would not have been unusual for a Jew of Kefar Nevoia. Rabbinic sources suggest close relations between Tyre and Upper Galilee and also considerable contact between the rabbinic community and the Jews of Tyre (for sources, see Klein 1939: 126–29; Irshai 1982/83: 168 n. 72.). *Sifre Deuteronomy* 316 reflects this relationship in its interpretation of Deut 32:13, interpreting the word *zur*, “rock,” to mean *zur*, “Tyre”: “‘and oil from the flint of Tyre (*zur*, Deut 32:13):’ These are the olives of Gush Ḥalav.”⁵ The preponderance of bronze Tyrian coins from Meiron, Khirbet Shema⁶, and Gush Ḥalav is indicative of the fact that Upper Galilee was part of the agricultural hinterland of Tyre (Raynor and Meshorer 1988; Hanson and Bates 1976; Raynor 1990; Hamburger 1954).⁶

We know little about the Jews of Tyre during the late third and fourth centuries. Three (possibly four) funerary inscriptions from Tyre have been published (Roth-Gerson 2001: 174–75, nos. 34–36). All are in Greek. The Tyrian Jews commemorated in these inscriptions had both biblical and Greek names. One Greek/Latin name and three biblical names appear in these inscriptions: “Josephos son of Simonos” and “Sarah daughter of Marcellus.” Priests were apparently buried separately at Tyre. A Greek inscription reads: “Burial place of the most honored priests” (Roth-Gerson 2001: 176, no. 37). The markers of individual priests are not known.

5. Finkelstein 1993: 358. See b. Men. 85b, and Rashi to Deut 32:13.

6. Raynor (1990: 16) notes that “The major difference between the early numismatic evidence from Nabratein and the evidence from Meiron, Khirbet Shema⁶, and Gush Ḥalav can be seen in the lack of Phoenician autonomous and Tyrian city coins found at Nabratein”; see also pp. 18–19. This paucity of excavated Tyrian coins clearly is not, in my opinion, enough to suggest that the relationship between Tyre and Nabratein was substantially different from that of the nearby sites. It simply reflects the fact that Tyrian coins in great numbers were not uncovered.

Inscriptions from Galilee provide additional evidence for Tyrian Jews that corresponds closely with the evidence from Tyre itself. Inscriptions in Greek discovered in Beth She‘arim suggest that some Tyrian Jews, like other Jews from the nearby Diaspora, sent their bodies for burial in this necropolis. The extant inscriptions, which probably reflect a wealthier and perhaps in some cases more rabbinically connected or generally pious element of the Tyrian Jewish community,⁷ indicate that knowledge of Greek and use of Greek names was pervasive. Hebrew appears on one inscription. Above the entrance to Catacomb 19 at Beth She‘arim a tablet found *in situ* bears a Greek epitaph in which both the son and father bear biblical names: “Daniel, son of Iddo from Tyre” is followed by the Hebrew “shalom” (Avigad 1976: 82; Roth-Gerson 2001: 178, no. 41). Avigad notes that the scribe of this inscription “was familiar with the Greek letters but not with the Hebrew.” He speculates that this marker was carved in Tyre and brought to Beth She‘arim “together with the deceased” (1976: 118). In Diaspora and Palestinian communities the simple and emblematic Hebrew word “shalom” is a common formula following Greek epitaphs (Avigad 1976: 82; Roth-Gerson 2001: 153 n. 24; Noy 1999: 135–46).

One woman at Beth She‘arim had a double Greek/Hebrew name. An inscribed lintel at the western entrance of Catacomb 21 reads: “The tomb of Theodosia, also (called) Sarah, from Tyre.” Avigad considers this double naming to be “an accepted practice among Diaspora Jews” (1976: 86; see also Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974: 2: 185; Roth-Gerson 2001: 177, no. 40) though this phenomenon may have been known in the Land of Israel as well (see Lev. R. 32:5; Margolis 1993: 747–48).

The use of biblical names in the Tyre inscriptions and in the Tyrian inscriptions at Beth She‘arim is similar. Like Sarah daughter of Marcellas, who was interred in Tyre, “Esther daughter of Anthos from Tyre,” interned in Catacomb 12 at Beth She‘arim, had a biblical name, while her father had a Greek name (Avigad 1976: 3.27; Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974: 131, 147, no. 2; Roth-Gerson 2001: 177). One rabbi was from Tyre: “Rabbi Simeon son of Jacob from Tyre” (Albeck 1969: 190; on rabbinic connections with Tyre, see Oppenheimer 1991: 154–56). His name fits well among the biblical examples chosen by epigraphic Tyrian Jews. “Severianus the most illustrious synagogue leader (*archisynagogos*) from Tyre” appears together with a Sidonian synagogue leader in a Greek dedicatory inscription on a lintel from a Sepphoris synagogue (see Chiat 1982: 85–86; Roth-Gerson 1987: 105–110 and bibliography). Sidonian and Tyrian Jews, like Babylonians and Cappadocians, seem to have settled in Sepphoris (Roth-Gerson 1987: 107 n. 13). Roth-Gerson suggests that it “apparently dates to the fifth century” (*le-khol hanireh*; 1987: 105). Although little is known about them, the Jews of Tyre were probably not atypical of Syrian Jewish communities or of Greek-speaking Jewish communities in Palestine itself. Their names give us no sense that they were more or less Hellenized than other communities, or that they were any more or less prone to tolerate behaviors that Rabbi Haggai would have found difficult. The extant evidence suggests a community where Jewish identity construction was set firmly within the cosmopolitan context of Roman-period Syria, a region that both Palestinian and Syrian Jews considered the closest Diaspora (Roth-Gerson 2001: 44).

7. See Rajak 1998 for an excellent reassessment of scholarly interpretation of Beth She‘arim and Levine 2005, who attempts to buttress the previous consensus. See also Fine forthcoming.

Rabbinic sources present Jacob of Kefar Nevoiraia as a “student of the sages,” as a junior member of the rabbinic community. In every place where Jacob appears in rabbinic literature, he is shown interpreting biblical texts. In *Yerushalmi Bikkurim* 3:3, 65d Jacob is presented expounding (*tirgem*) biblical verses in what appears to be an extended criticism of the deteriorating social position of the rabbis and the rising status of the urban aristocracy during the third and fourth centuries. Appointments to positions of communal prominence in exchange for payments and the appointment of the non-learned (from the standpoint of the rabbis) were his particular goal. These inappropriate appointments are contrasted with “Rabbi Isaac b. Elazar [who adjudicates] in the synagogue of Madrata (or Marudata) of Caesarea.” Jacob’s mention of a specific rabbi and his location in a specific Caesarean synagogue assumes a relationship between Jacob and this city. Jacob’s presence in Caesarea is taken for granted by the parallel to this tradition in *Midrash Samuel*, a late, perhaps Palestinian, collection. *Midrash Samuel* 7:10 places Jacob’s exposition in Caesarea (Buber 1893: 34b; cf. Levine 1992: 210). There we read: “Jacob of Kefar Nevoiraia expounded one verse in the Synagogue of Marudata of Caesarea and the sages praised him [for it].” An unrelated tradition in *Ecclesiastes Rabba* 7:47, to be discussed below, has a Caesarean rabbi brand Jacob a “heretic.”

A tradition preserved in a Byzantine-period collection, the *Midrash on Psalms* (19:2), also presents Jacob in Tyre, expounding (*tirgem*) a biblical text in a way that is completely within rabbinic norms (Buber 1947: 164 and n. 21; cf. Strack and Sternberger 1992: 350–51). In the *Genesis Rabba* tradition cited above, Jacob adjudicates Jewish law on two parallel occasions. Neusner is undoubtedly correct that “The two stories obviously have been joined together prior to their insertion here” (e-mail communication). This midrashic collection contains both exempla, suggesting a basic tie between them. Jacob of Kefar Nevoiraia pushed the bounds of rabbinic halakhah on two separate, though formulaicly linked occasions. Interpreting Gen 1:20, where the primordial waters brought forth creatures of the sea, Jacob ruled that fish must be ritually slaughtered. He legitimized this procedure through standard rabbinic exegetical method. Jacob’s exegesis of Gen 1:20 assumes a direct relationship between the two parts of the verse. Just as birds require slaughter, he reasoned, so do fish. Ginzberg notes that the *Damascus Document* (12:13–14) forbids the consumption of fish blood, though he was not of the opinion that ritual slaughter was practiced (1976: 79–80, 148, 346–47; cf. Irshai 1982/83: 164–67). Samaritans were apparently strict regarding the consumption of fish blood (Irshai 1982/83: 79–80); and later the Karaites “even insist that the killing of fish requires a certain procedure, corresponding to the procedure of ritual slaughter of kosher mammals and birds (*shehitah*), an opinion that stands in obvious conflict with the sectarian prescription in our [Damascus] document” (Irshai 1982/83: 346–47). *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*, an eighth or ninth century document, explicitly rejects the ritual slaughter of fish (and of locusts) through an alternate exegesis of Gen 1:20. It reads almost like a response to Jacob’s interpretation:⁸

And these, that swarmed from the water—fish and locusts, and are eaten without ritual slaughter, but the bird is not eaten without ritual slaughter.

8. *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* ch. 9, following Hebrew Union College, Klau Library, HUC MS.2043, folio 6a, a Yemenite manuscript thought to date to the fifteenth century. On-line: <http://www.usc.edu/pre-project/graphics/pre05/pre0506a.jpg> (cited September 2008). See Ginzberg 1976: 80.

These [the fish] that were created from water, their blood is to be poured out like water.
And these [the birds] that were created from the earth, their blood is to be poured out in the dust.

The point is that fish slaughter was not beyond discussion by “law-abiding” Jews during late antiquity and the early medieval period, though it was soundly rejected by the ancient rabbis.

In the second example Jacob determines that the son of a Jewish man and a non-Jewish woman may be circumcised on the Sabbath. In rabbinic law circumcision of the son of a Jewish mother on the eighth day overrides Sabbath prohibitions that would normally not allow such a procedure. Jacob suggests that Jewish paternity is sufficient to override Sabbath law, thus establishing that the son of a Jewish man is a Jew (ancient “patrilineality”).⁹ The parallel in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* and versions of *Genesis Rabba* add the following halakhic excursus after line 22 of our *Genesis Rabba* text (Mandelbaum 1962: 65; cf. Theodor and Albeck 1965: 51–52; Melamed 1973: 400, n. 36a):

He [Jacob] said to him [Rabbi Haggai], In accord with which [passage of] the Torah?
He [Rabbi Haggai] said to him [Jacob], From this which Rabbi Yoḥanan in the name of Rabbi Simeon son of Yoḥai said:
“Neither shall you make marriages with them, your daughter you shall not give to his son [and his daughter your son shall not take], For he will turn away your son from following me . . . ” (Deut 7:3–4).
“Your son” born of a Israelite woman is called “your son.”
“Your son” born of a gentile woman is not called “your son.”

In both the *Genesis Rabba* and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* versions, Jacob accepts the punishment meted out by Rabbi Haggai, but only after Rabbi Haggai proves to him through biblical exegesis the error of his position. Significantly, the earlier version of this episode, preserved in Yerushalmi *Yebamot* 2:6, 4a and *Qiddushin* 1, 60a, adds considerable ambiguity to the story. There it is stated that the people of Tyre who “came and asked” for Jacob’s opinion. He does not offer it with the kind of stature assumed by *Genesis Rabba* and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*. Further, the Yerushalmi traditions suggest that Jacob only “thought (or, intended) to permit them” (סבר למישרי לון), but apparently had not yet done the deed—as he has in the later versions. His stature and resolve are thus clearly greater in *Genesis Rabba* and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*. In all versions, Jacob is a loyal, if in the opinion of Rabbi Haggai, errant student of the Sages.

In another case of personal status set in Tyre, we hear of Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Ba, a generation before Jacob,¹⁰ coming to Tyre and finding a proselyte who was circumcised but who had not been ritually immersed as the Rabbis would require. According to this pericope, Rabbi Ḥiyya said nothing at the time to question the practice. Later he described this situation to his teacher, Rabbi Yoḥanan son of Naphā. Rabbi Yoḥanan vindicated Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Ba’s decision not to interfere: “You did well you in not disqualifying him,” said the elder scholar. From the subsequent decision of Jacob allowing the circumcision of the son of the non-Jewish

9. See *y. Shab.* 19, 17b, and Irshai 1982/83: 160 for another context where Jacob and R. Haggai discuss the timing of ritual circumcision.

10. Third generation Palestinian Amora; see Albeck 1969: 236–37.

woman and Jewish man on the Sabbath, and from this text, we might assume that laws of Jewish status were, at least at times, followed less stringently by some Tyrian Jews than the amoraic rabbis might have preferred.

The cases of Jacob of Kefar Nevoiraia and of Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Ba suggest a certain fluidity of Jewish identity among Tyrian Jews. Both exogamy and proselytism appear in the relatively small corpus of rabbinic sources that deal with Tyre. Issues of personal status were significant in the other known locus of Jacob's activities, Caesarea Maritima. Levine cites the *Vita of Saint Susanna*, a work included in the *Acta Sanctorum*, as referring to a marriage between a wealthy pagan priest in Caesarea and the Jewish mother of the child who became the Christian Saint Susanna (1975: 72; see also Holum 1998: 166–69)! The complexity of religious identification in Roman Caesarea, and no doubt all cosmopolitan Roman contexts, is expressed in Susanna's mother's complex statement that "Her name [Susanna] will derive from the people of her ancestors, and not from the Greeks." The text goes on to say that "The mother educated her daughter according to the customs and the teachings of the Jews." Whatever the historicity of this document, it is significant for our discussion of Jacob of Kefar Nevoiraia and his apparent willingness to circumcise the child of a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father in third century Tyre (Levine 1975: 72–75). In view of the prohibition against intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews in the Roman Empire during late antiquity, as evidenced in a 388 CE law of Valentinian II and Theodosius I stipulating that "No Jew take in marriage a Christian woman, nor a Christian engage in matrimony with a Jewess" (*Codex Theodosianus* 3.7.2; cited in Linder 1987: 178–82, no. 18), Jacob's actions are all the more significant.

Jacob's rulings, and Rabbi Haggai's strong response to them, reflect the complexities of cosmopolitan Greco-Roman life meeting the academic piety of the rabbis in the land of Israel. The clash of rabbinic standards with those of more cosmopolitan communities is known from within the rabbinic heartland itself, as the fourth–fifth-century synagogue mosaic with its nude, uncircumcised figure of Libra and well-developed image of Helios within the zodiac wheel at Hammath Tiberias B so well illustrates (Dothan 1983: 39–48; Baumgarten 1999: 71–86).

The issue of fish slaughter, however, does not reflect the kind of religious laxity or "assimilation" usually ascribed to cosmopolitan life. On the contrary, this practice suggests a real stringency and impediment to social integration that extends the control already exerted by Jewish dietary laws. If actually carried out, the ritual slaughter of fish would have been quite cumbersome. It would have meant that Jews could only procure live fish, which they would then have had to ritually slaughter very soon after the fish was actually caught. What connects the two cases ascribed to Jacob of Kefar Nevoiraia is the issue that in turn connects them to Jacob's appearance in the synagogue of Marduta in Caesarea. In each of these cases Jacob took positions counter to the established approach through his interpretation of Scripture.

The extant midrashim depict Jacob as a very complex character—though they do not present enough information to allow us to determine a clear ideological identity (if, in fact, Jacob and his storytellers had one). Far from the agricultural village of Nabratein in which he was apparently reared, and functioning in what the rabbis referred to as the "cities of the sea," Jacob seems to have lived a surprisingly varied halakhic existence that he legitimized through biblical exegesis. This is the sort of autonomous and self-constructed existence that cosmopolitan environments in fact encourage—in Roman times as in our own. As Fishman suggests, paraphrasing Frederik Barth's important work on ethnic identity, "ethnicity functions as a kind of boundaried

vessel, within which the enclosed culture is continually adjusted, with some elements being emphasized and others deemphasized according to a shifting spectrum of influencing factors” (1996; cf. Barth 1969: 38). Modern experience shows that negotiation and redefinition, which can include within it laxity and the identification of new stringencies at the very same time, are part and parcel of minority identities—particularly in cosmopolitan settings. Assuming that the two incidents in which Jacob’s decisions were rebuked reflect the life experience of a single individual (as *Genesis Rabba* clearly shows), then perhaps this approach to identity formation helps to explain this fascinating, and enigmatic character.

Jacob of Kefar Nevoia’s departure from halakhic norms is presented more stridently in *Ecclesiastes Rabba*. This Byzantine-period midrashic collection is dated by Hirshman to the sixth or seventh centuries CE (Hirshman 1983: 25, 106–7; 1988: 37). *Ecclesiastes Rabba* 7:47, comments on Eccl 7:26, “I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets and her hands are fetters: he who is good before God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be ensnared by her.”¹¹

Rabbi Nisi¹² of Caesarea explained this verse in terms of heretics (*minin*):

“Good before God”: This is Rabbi Eleazar,

“And the sinner will be ensnared by her”: This is Jacob of Kefar Nevoia.

“Good before God”: This is Rabbi Eliezer son of Dama,

“and the sinner will be ensnared by her”: This is Eliezer of Kefar Sama.

“Good before God”: This is Hananiah son of the brother of Rabbi Joshua,

“and the sinner will be ensnared by her”: These are the people (*bene*) of Kefar Naḥum.

“Good before God”: This is Judah son of Naqusa,

“and the sinner will be ensnared by her”: these are the *minin*.

“Good before God”: This is Rabbi Nathan,

“and the sinner will be ensnared by her”: This is his student.

“Good before God”: These are Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua,

“and the sinner will be ensnared by her”: this is woman.

That Jacob’s heresy is recounted in the name of a Caesarean rabbi is not surprising in light of his association with Caesarea elsewhere. In the above citation Jacob is categorized as a *min* in the composite list of culture heroes who avoided heresy and of infamous “*minin*” who did not. The referent of the term “*min*” here is unclear. Basing itself primarily in this text, modern scholarship has long held that Jacob was a Judaeo-Christian (Bacher 1892–99: 3.776; Seligsohn 1904: 7.35).¹³ This is stated quite unproblematically by Safrai, who writes that Jacob “converted, or at least was suspected [of being a] Jewish-Christian” (Safrai 1996: 224; my translation). Other scholars have taken a much more circumspect approach.¹⁴ The identification of Jacob as a Judaeo-Christian is made tentatively by Irshai, who recognizes the signifi-

11. Ms. Vatican 291, page 260b, and the variants cited by Irshai (1982/83: 153–55).

12. See Irshai 1982/83: 154 n. 4. A Palestinian amora of the fourth generation; see Albeck 1969: 344–45.

13. Ginzberg (1976: 46) writes that Jacob was “known for his Judeo-Christian tendencies”; Vilnay (1969–84: 4.3776) suggests that Jacob “was apparently a *min*, and believed in Jesus of Nazareth” (my translation); and Meyers, Strange, and Meyers (1981c: 3) write that the *Eccl. R.* tradition “is usually understood to mean that Jacob had embraced Christianity.” See Irshai 1982/83 and the additional bibliography cited there.

14. Albeck (1969: 337) ignored the *minut* charge altogether, as did Hyman (1987: 2.772), who was indeed sensitive to this issue. See the entry for Jacob of Kefar Sakhneh on the same page.

cance of the cosmopolitan context for interpreting the traditions dealing with Jacob. In the end, however, Irshai admits that the evidence does not unambiguously support the identification of Jacob as a Judaeo-Christian (1982/83: 167–69).

The identification of *minim* has perplexed scholars and clerics for the greater part of two millennia. Much of this discussion has its roots in the rabbinic “benediction against the *minim*.”¹⁵ As S. Krauss aptly writes, “how much blood has been spilt [as a result of it], and how much more ink” (1935: 137; translated by Horbury 1998: 72). Almost every major European or American scholar of rabbinic literature and history has voiced an opinion regarding the identification of the *minim*, in no small measure reacting to the significance of this question for early Christian studies. A consensus has developed among rabbinic scholars and is well expressed by S. J. D. Cohen: “The Rabbis lumped together all those who questioned rabbinic Judaism. It made no difference to the Rabbis whether their opponents were Gentile Christians, Jewish Christians, Gnostics of any variety, pagans, or dissident Jews; all of them, to the exasperation of later scholars were called *minim*. From the rabbinic perspective they are all the same” (1980: 3). D. Sperber writes in a similar vein that “Any attempt to identify *minim* with one single sectarian group is . . . doomed to failure . . .” (1972: 12). S. S. Miller too suggests that *minut* (heresy) represents “a broad range of possibilities.” He argues that at Sepphoris, and by extension throughout the rabbinic corpus, “all encounters [presented in Rabbinic literature] are between individual *minim* and rabbis. To extrapolate from these few instances cohesive groups, movements, or distinct communities of like-minded *minim* is to go beyond the evidence” (1994: 400 nn. 92 and 93). Setting aside the historical question, R. Kalmin notes that “overly careful attempts to determine the precise heresy described in the sources may be misguided. These sources give us rough stereotypes and sketches drawn in extremely broad strokes rather than finely nuanced portraits or scientifically precise descriptions” (1994: 169). The term *min*, applied to Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia, serves to categorize Jacob among the rabbinically liminal—those who are close enough to the rabbis to be part of them, yet whose behavior sets them apart negatively. This term is never used to describe Jacob in classical midrashim, sources that are closer to his own time, but rather reflects a later classification.

To conclude: the traditions of Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia, like so many others in rabbinic literature, leave us with more questions unanswered than answered. The relationship of the sources on Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia with the village of Kefar Nevoaraia in Upper Galilee was well known during the Middle Ages. It is quite possible that this wayward student of the sages lived in this village at a time of the Late Roman synagogue, according to the proposed dating of the excavators. The traditions of Jacob could certainly have been known. Jacob’s specific ideology is difficult to pin down (if such a thing ever existed), although there is no evidence to brand him a Jewish-Christian. This association of Jacob with Christianity has been forged by modern scholars. A recently published coffee-table book published in Israel in Hebrew, *The Jewish Holy Places in the Land of Israel*, grapples with Jacob’s problematic identity, which placed him beyond the borders of Eretz Israel and on the edges of the rabbinic community itself. This book of contemporary Jewish hagiography is forced to face the problem of Jacob the *min* straight on: “*Prima facia*, the early sources do not especially complement Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia, but the fact that

15. The bibliography on this subject is vast. The most recent discussion, with a very extensive bibliography is by Horbury (1998: 8–11, 67–110).

his tomb became a holy place testifies, perhaps, that his failings were specific, and that his other qualities were meritorious” (Michelson, Miller, and Salomon 1996: 175).

Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia was, it seems, a member of the rabbinic community attempting to deal with life in the complex cultural mix of the eastern Mediterranean coast. In the course of adapting to that environment, he came into dispute with at least one of his seniors among the rabbis and became the model of the errant student in rabbinic sources. In offering this interpretation, I have used recently developed models of ethnic identity. Jacob’s connection to the rabbinic movement and the gravity of his “error” must both have been quite intense, for Jacob of Kefar Nevoaraia’s exploits were remembered by the later rabbis; and ultimately he was memorialized in a list of infamous “*minim*.” This is fortunate for us. Had Jacob not been so deeply troubling to the rabbis, his exploits would undoubtedly have been forgotten or gone unnoticed; and we might have no sense of the ancient name of the place we now call Nabratein.

3. Previous Archaeological Explorations and Excavations

The site was first noted in modern times by Charles W. Wilson, the British Major-General and Royal Engineer who founded the Palestine Exploration Fund in 1865. He proceeded to undertake a reconnaissance survey of Palestine in 1865–66, during which he identified a number of Galilean synagogue sites, including Nabratein. Conder and Kitchener thus attributed the site’s discovery to Wilson, and they mention that he made a squeeze of the inscription that he saw on the fallen lintel of what he rightly identified as a synagogue (1881: 244). Yet they also report that the French philosopher, Semitist, and archaeologist Joseph E. Renan, who traveled widely in Phoenicia and Palestine in 1860 and 1861, had apparently visited the site in 1860. They reproduce part of one of Renan’s letters in which he mentions both the synagogue and the lintel with an inscription (shown in Photo 31, p. 92):

From Tiberias we turned north again to complete the examination of the Jarmuk district, and at some ruins called Nabratein discovered an old synagogue, on the lintel of which was an inscription in Hebrew and over it a representation of the candlestick with seven branches, similar to the well-known one on Titus’s arch at Rome.

(Letter IV; in Conder and Kitchener 1881: 244)

Renan too made a squeeze of the inscription, which he published without any attempt at reading it (1864: 777, Pl. LXX, 5A–B).

Another record of an explorer’s visit to the site appears in the report of the French Pales-tinologist, Victor W. Guérin, who carried out major surveys of Judea (in 1863), Samaria (in 1870), and Galilee (in 1875). His detailed memoirs of those journeys are found in his seven-volume work, *Description géographique, historique, et archéologique de la Palestine*, published in three stages (1856, 1874–75, 1880). Guérin arrived at the site, which he called “Kharbet Nabartain (Nebarta),” at about 10:30 A.M. on November 17, 1875. He noted the presence of ruins, with broken columns, on two hills not far from each other, near the spring of Nabratein. He reported the ruins of several buildings on the slightly lower hill to the north. One of them he identified as an ancient synagogue, aligned north–south, its interior divided into three sections by two rows of five columns. His estimation of the columnation and his measurement of