



# MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

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## Capernaum, a Centurion, and Cultural Learning

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After 9/11, deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq moved the armed services to invest in language and cultural education. Shifting from counterinsurgency to great power competition will not reduce this need. Because nuclear weapons states know they must avoid attacks that might trigger retaliation, rivalry may lead to proxy wars and insurgencies – and involvement by American forces. (1) The Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations concept, moreover, contemplates deployments to islands and littorals rather than a few large, vulnerable bases. American service members may again find themselves among the people of many different societies and cultures.

The centers of cultural expertise at Quantico, Maxwell Air Force Base, Fort Huachuca, Pensacola, and Monterey use many teaching methods and draw on research in many disciplines – history, anthropology, area studies, and intercultural communication among them. They draw case studies from many regions of the world. Taking a cue from the British writer L. P. Hartley, who famously wrote, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there,” case studies from different times also may be helpful.

An ancient text provides an example. Attending a military history conference, my wife and I joined a tour that included Israel’s Northern District. Led by a gifted guide, Tito Anidjar, we visited the town of Kfar Nahum, located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. This was Capernaum, where Jesus and five of his disciples lived. There, the gospels relate, he performed some of his miracles. And it was there he met a Roman centurion.

Chaplains discussing the meeting emphasize the healing of the centurion’s servant and faith. This short piece instead focuses on the intercultural dimensions of the encounter between members of a local community and an occupying soldier.

In front of the ruins of the town’s synagogue, (2) our guide recalled Luke 7:1-10.

*When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion’s servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded*

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earnestly with him, “This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.” So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: “Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well. (TNIV)

## Background: Roman centurions at the edge of the Empire

What do we know of Roman centurions? Historians, archaeologists, classicists, and Biblical scholars have all contributed to our knowledge. For the first century C.E., here are some broad brush strokes, drawn from the thorough research of Emory University’s Alexander Kyrychenko. (3)

In the regular Roman army, a centurion led a “century,” 80 men at full strength. There were 60 centurions in an infantry legion of 4800 soldiers. They also commanded in auxiliary units – cavalry, archers, slingers, and light infantry – that were typically raised from new provinces. Others were detailed to the military formations maintained by Rome’s clients. Different units had different mixes of Italian and provincial, and citizen and non-citizen, soldiers.

By that time the Roman army was professional with fixed terms of service, salary, and retirement benefits. There were also forms of “incentive pay” – plunder, for one, or “donatives” given by emperors to assure the loyalty of the legions. An excellent soldier might be promoted to centurion after ten years of service. Promotions valued bravery, efficiency, and the “ability to maintain calmness of spirit and hold their grounds in deadly crisis.” (4) Literacy was required. A centurion could receive up to 15 times the pay of an ordinary soldier.

In general, Rome did not send enough administrators to effectively govern provinces, so soldiers augmented their staffs. Away from the principal cities, it was mostly soldiers who were responsible for local administration and building projects. They protected local populations from bandits and raiders coming from outside the frontiers. They guarded roads, bridges, and the water supply. They augmented tax collection. Centurions received petitions and judged some local disputes. Indeed, “the centurion was involved in the day-to-day life of the province,” “a vital part of the local administration.” (5)

Historians are not agreed whether Capernaum’s centurion belonged to the Roman army or whether he led a detachment of troops in the royal army of Herod the Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Either way, it is reasonable to judge that Capernaum’s centurion, like any modern soldier, was focused on his mission – local administration, policing, and what we would now call “stability.” He had to balance asserting Rome’s control and gaining local cooperation.

Any good centurion at the edge of the empire, then, would benefit from having “culture-general skills.” (6) Gaining cooperation would be aided by knowing more of local society, culture, customs, religion, and hierarchies. He could blunt local resentments over Roman rule and remove seeds of conflict by showing some respect and goodwill. Some empathy – the ability to see things from the Galilean side – would be helpful.

## A Meeting In Capernaum

This background can help flesh out the spare narrative in Luke’s gospel, and it can help us look at the meeting as an intercultural encounter. The centurion asked Jesus to heal his valued servant. As our group of military historians visited Kfar Nahum, our guide pointed to cues in

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Luke's account.

*"The centurion heard of Jesus..."* This Roman soldier was tuned in to local happenings.

The centurion *"sent some elders of the Jews to him..."* Here the account of the same incident in Matthew 8:5-13 differs from Luke's narrative; Matthew has the centurion speaking directly to Jesus. (7) Luke's account, however, allows us to consider the role of intermediaries in communication.

Luke's bare sentence is ambiguous. Perhaps the local elders thought they had best pass on the centurion's request in order to keep on the good side of Rome's local enforcer. Or, the Roman officer judged that his request might be answered if it were presented to Jesus through local leaders. Or, by asking the elders to pass on the request, the centurion may have avoided carping by his soldiers, who would criticize him if he directly asked a favor from Jesus – in Roman eyes an inferior, one more local religious fanatic.

*"...asking him to come and heal his servant."* Not only had the centurion heard of Jesus's earlier miracles, he was ready to credit them.

The elders told Jesus, *"This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation..."* This statement implies that the centurion had come to know the Jews during his tour in Galilee, and while he surely stood for Rome, he developed respect and perhaps even some affection for the Galileans. Luke does not say so, but the centurion's respect perhaps came from serving in this remote corner of the Roman world for some years. (8)

The American service members who came to respect Iraqis and Afghans can surely relate to the centurion's feelings. Speaking of my generation, soldiers and Marines who advised or worked with the Vietnamese armed forces often developed the same respect, and decades later they still take pride whenever they stop at a restaurant or barber shop owned by a family that came from Vietnam.

*"... and has built our synagogue."* I have not heard that Roman units had Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds to repair or build local places of worship, so these words imply the centurion generously donated some of his own money. This established him in local eyes as, at least, a God-fearing Gentile who adopted some Jewish ways. Our guide Tito noted that such individuals usually did so secretly so they would not be mocked in their own society, and many later became Christians when circumcision was no longer required.

*"Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof."* Our guide at Kfar Nahum offered us a new take on this sentence. This centurion who understood local culture knew that devout Jews, observing laws of purity, would never visit the home of a Roman soldier (or a tax collector). A Jew who did so would have to live with local opprobrium, even ostracism. In this case, then, the centurion may have been so respectful of Jesus and local culture that he would not ask Jesus to enter his home. (9)

*"I myself am a man under authority ... say the word."* The centurion understood authority in its military – its earthly – way. Luke implies that the Roman officer recognized that Jesus had a different and higher authority, able to command the powers responsible for human wellbeing -- and thus to command the healing of the servant. In the coming centuries, acceptance or denial of this insight was at the heart of the relationship between Rome and Christianity.

The Roman world with its conquests, crucifixions, and circuses could be unimaginably cruel,

and there were hard, brutish, and prejudiced men among Roman centurions, as there are among some police forces and military units today. I do not doubt that Roman army recruits were badly hazed, and it was Roman soldiers who scourged and then executed Jesus. They rudely gambled over his garments. Resentment over the abuses of Rome's soldiery was one cause of the later Jewish War (66-73 C.E.). One senses Capernaum's centurion was different, and this may provide a leadership lesson.

The ancient historians (Josephus, for example) often judged that Roman soldiers could reflect good order, discipline, and military skill when they were led by officers and commanders of good character. (10) Under bad or corrupt leadership, however, Roman soldiers earned reputations as rapacious, abusive, insolent, brutal, greedy, and self-indulgent.

That principle endures. Soldiers absorb an officer's attitude toward a local population. When leaders set an example, the behavior of the many individuals in a unit improves too. This has been as applicable in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan as it was in Roman times.

At communion time in churches around the world, believers paraphrase the centurion's words, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." The gospel story is about one centurion's faith, yes, but it is about cultural respect and leadership too. Two millennia later, the modern officer – and the modern national security expert – can learn lessons from the centurion at Capernaum.

Learn the local culture. Know what local people are talking about. Be aware of local taboos. Part of good order and discipline is demonstrating good will and respect for local people. Indeed, showing cultural respect is one more dimension of active leadership.

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## **References**

- (1) As a company grade Air Force officer I witnessed the turn away from counterinsurgency in 1975 – and, as a Foreign Service Officer, I saw the agonized recovery of counterinsurgency and small wars thinking after 9/11. I am persuaded that "Small wars thinking remains vital to studying the full spectrum of conflict," and "Practical small wars capabilities must remain available tools in the toolbox for international engagement." See "An Enduring Vision for Small Wars Journal," *Small Wars Journal*, 19 May 2020, at: <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/enduring-visions-small-wars-journal>.
- (2) James F. Strange and Hershel Shanks, "Synagogue Where Jesus Preached Found at Capernaum," *Biblical Archaeology Society Online Archive*, <https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/9/6/1>. This is the online entry for the article in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, v. 9, no. 6, November/December 1983. See also "Archaeology in Israel: The Synagogue at Capernaum," Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-synagogue-at-capernaum>.
- (3) Alexander Kyrychenko, *The Roman Army and the Expansion of the Gospel: The Role of the Centurion in Luke Acts* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014). Dr. Kyrychenko kindly reviewed an early draft of this article. A much briefer treatment is Helen K. Bond, "What Can We Know about the Roman Centurion?" *Bible Odyssey*, at: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/places/related-articles/roman-centurion>.
- (4) Kyrychenko, 48.
- (5) Kyrychenko, 88.
- (6) This theme was suggested to me by retired Marine Corps Colonel George Dallas, director of the former Marine Corps' Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning at Quantico (now replaced by the Center for Regional Security Studies). See *Culture General Guidebook for Military Professionals*, Kerry Fosher et al. (Quantico: Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning, December 2017).
- (7) The version in Matthew has been preferred by artists. The scene has been painted by Paolo Veronese (1528-1688), Adam Camerarius (active 1644-1665), Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678), Batholomeus Breenberg (1598-1657), Gerbrand van den Eeckhout (1621-1674), Franz Christoph Jenneck (1703-1761), Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727-1804), Jan Brandes (1788-1868) and James Tissot (1836-1902). The scene was also rendered on many (unattributed) Orthodox icons.
- (8) Here the experience of the centurion at Capernaum perhaps paralleled the centurion Cornelius – the first gentile to become a Christian – related in chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles. Cornelius was honored in the Chapel of the Centurion at Fort Monroe, Virginia, dedicated in 1858. Though Fort Monroe is no longer a military installation, an active congregation still worships there.
- (9) Kyrychenko, 157-158.
- (10) Kyrychenko, 53-54, 61-62, 65n, 69, 88-89, 123, 141.

