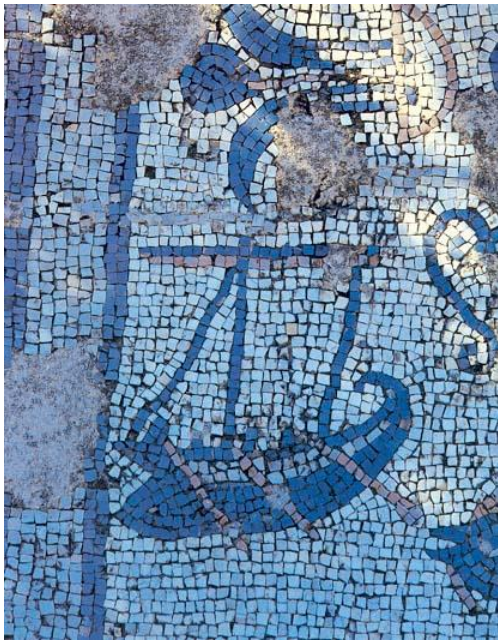


## JESUS IN GALILEE

The synoptic gospels indicate that the larger portion of Jesus' ministry was conducted in Galilee, the mountainous province between the Galilean lake and the Mediterranean Sea. Here, Jesus "went throughout Galilee ...teaching...preaching...and healing" (Mt. 4:23; cf. Mk. 1:36-39). Meaning "the circle," Galilee was bordered on the south by Samaria, on the east by Gaulanitis and the Decapolis, and on the north by Phoenicia. It was still under Roman occupation by the time of Jesus' ministry and ruled by the client king Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great (4 BC—AD 39).

Most of our information about the world of Jesus' public ministry comes directly from the texts of the gospels, all written within the living witness of those who had known and heard Jesus personally. Of course, Jesus also is mentioned in a handful of secular texts, such as, the writings of Flavius Josephus. Some later religious texts, also, especially the Gnostic literature in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century and later, claim to offer memories of Jesus' ministry, but unlike the canonical gospels, they are well-past the time when any living witnesses could corroborate their claims. While there may be some legitimate material in them, their historical value is doubtful and to be treated with considerable reserve.



*In a 1<sup>st</sup> century home in Magdala, archaeologists discovered this lovely mosaic depicting a boat with a mast for sailing and oars for rowing.*

### The Lake and Its Fishing Culture

The water level of the Sea of Galilee has fluctuated through the centuries, and the remains of the ancient harbors used by Galilean fishermen have often been submerged. In 1989-1991, however, during a drought-caused recession of the lake level, the remains of various ancient harbors were exposed, including breakwaters, piers, holding tanks, anchors, mooring stones, and net sinkers. In Magdala, the city most famous because it was the home town of Mary, the earliest witness to Jesus' resurrection, archaeologists discovered a 1<sup>st</sup> century mosaic depicting a fishing boat, probably typical of those used at the time. Fishing was a vocational staple of the lake villages, and of course, several of Jesus' disciples were fishermen. They used seine nets (dragnets) made of netting, sometimes as long as 1000', as well as casting nets of about 20' to 25' in diameter. They also used trammel nets, a device consisting of three layers of netting held together by rope, a feature reflected in the plural use of the term "nets" (Lk. 5:6). This latter is used primarily at night, when fish cannot easily see the netting.

Not far from Magdala, during a severe drought in 1985-1986, an ancient boat was discovered buried in the mud of the shore. Pottery types and Herod Philip coins provided initial dating, and later, this dating was confirmed by radio-carbon techniques to the period from the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century AD. This boat, 26.5' long, 7.5' wide and 4.5' deep, had a round stern, decks in both

## NT ARCHAEOLOGY

the fore and aft sections, and a mast. Hence, the boat could be sailed or rowed. The decks recall the storm when Jesus was asleep, probably under the stern platform, using a ballast pillow (sandbag) for his head (Mk. 4:38).

### The Villages of Galilee

Since much of Jesus' ministry was conducted in the Galilean villages, the excavation of several such villages has yielded considerable material for filling out the picture of village life. Chorazin, one of the towns Jesus condemned because they did not repent (Mt. 11:21ff.), lay in the foothills above the northeastern shore of the lake. The town followed the topography of the hill, which was typical of the dozens of towns in the area. While thus far the major artifacts from Chorazin only go back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, it is to be assumed that at least some of the finds reflect aspects of village life a century or two earlier. Two domestic complexes, a public building, and a synagogue have been excavated, and all were constructed from black, basalt native rock. Walls between rooms were sometimes built as arches so that stone beams could be laid across the parallel walls for roofing. A *mikveh* (ritual baptismal bath) was found in the public building.



*Arched walls in this domestic dwelling at Chorazin were typical of the area. The walls are constructed from basalt stone, a local volcanic rock that abounds in Galilee. Perhaps Joseph and Jesus did construction work with just such stones.*



*The remains of this ancient boat is here in the process of being recovered. After reclaiming it from the mud, it currently resides in a special museum at Ginosaur.*

Bethsaida, another of the villages Jesus frequented, was also the home town of Peter, Andrew and Philip (Jn. 1:44; cf. 12:21) and possibly of James and John as well.<sup>1</sup> Here, Jesus cured a blind man (Mk. 8:22-26), and near here he fed the 5000 (Lk. 9:10-17) and walked on the surface of the lake (Mk. 6:45-52). For a long time, scholars were puzzled over the exact location of Bethsaida, since it disappeared after the 1<sup>st</sup> Jewish revolt in the late 60s AD. Early Christian pilgrims were unable to locate it, and in more recent times, various sites had been proposed. The village, whose name means "house of fish," had always been

<sup>1</sup> Theodotius, a pilgrim who visited Bethsaida in about AD 530, designated Bethsaida as the home town of Zebedee.

## NT ARCHAEOLOGY



*This is the Bethsaida (et-Tell) excavations recognized by the Israel Antiquities Authority and opened for tourists (with posted signs).*

Capernaum, a town on the shoreline in which Peter owned a home (Mk. 1:21, 29), became the center of Jesus' Galilean ministry (Mt. 4:13). According to Luke, it also was home to a Roman military officer (Lk. 7:1-10). Evidence of Roman occupation has been verified by the discovery of a 1<sup>st</sup> century bathhouse lying beneath the ruins of a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century bathhouse. Such a public building tends to confirm the existence



assumed to be on the lakeshore. When it was finally identified in the late 1980s, it lay more than a mile north of the present shoreline. However, further geological investigation demonstrated that in ancient times the fishing village lay right on the ancient shore, and during the past two millennia, the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, exacerbated by a major earthquake and landslide, had moved southward. In the excavations, various fishing implements, such as, lead weights, line sinkers, stone anchors, and a fisher's seal, were recovered. The seal depicts two fishermen casting a throw net from the prow of a flat-bottomed boat. Coins from Bethsaida, minted in AD 29-30, bear the impress of Herod Philip. Various pottery fragments as well as a few whole vessels have also been discovered. Even more recently, the question about the identification of Bethsaida has been reopened with yet another candidate, el-Araj, so as is sometimes the case, what is considered a "done deal" in archaeology may not be quite so settled.



*Fishing implements, like these netting needles, hooks and sinkers (from et-Tell) have been found at both sites, so at present the jury is still out.*

of a Roman officer and garrisoned soldiers. Also, a stone stairway was uncovered that

*While it would be too fanciful to argue that this stone stairway in Capernaum is the one implied in the story of the paralytic (Mk. 2:1-5), it is surely a good example of just such an installation.*

## NT ARCHAEOLOGY



*Excavations of the Capernaum synagogue, a residential area, and an octagonal church, beneath which was discovered the 1<sup>st</sup> century house-church*

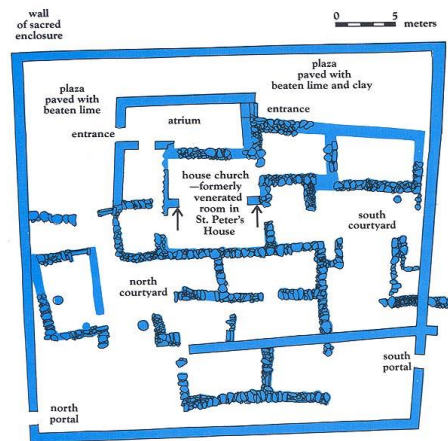
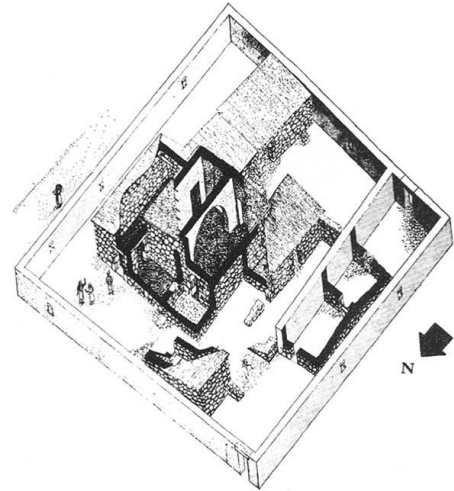
once led to the roof, recalling the event in the gospels when a man was let down through a roof in order to gain access to Jesus (Mk. 2:1-5).

Even more fascinating has been the discovery of three superimposed structures, all of them Christian. The upper structure was an octagonal church dating to the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

Beneath it was yet another church structure dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and the graffiti on the walls left by pilgrims in Greek, Syriac, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin are clearly

Christian (i.e., “Lord Jesus Christ help your servant,” “Christ have mercy,” various symbols of the cross, etc.). The central hall of this church, in turn, had originally been a residence dating no later than the 1<sup>st</sup> century (the date was established by Herodian coins and lamps). This 1<sup>st</sup> century house had been improved by plastered walls, a feature that is relatively rare, suggesting that this room had come to public use. In the Christian graffiti on the walls, what appears to be the name of Peter appears twice. Is this *the* Peter, or some other Christian with that nick-name? There is no way to know for sure. However, that this house church may once have been the domicile of Simon Peter is not unlikely. The recovery of fish hooks suggest that the residents were connected to the fishing industry. As early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century, pilgrims were identifying this structure with the description, “The house of the chief of the apostles has been turned into a church.”

In addition to Galilean villages, a number of the cities in the Decapolis have been excavated, including Beth Shean, Gerasa, and Gadara. Gergesa (Kursi), on the east side of the lake, is the site of a 5<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine style basilica church built to commemorate the swine miracle (Mt. 8:28//Mk. 5:1//Lk. 8:26). Not only early Christian traditions give credence to this identity, but also the fact that this is the only site on the entire eastern side of the sea where there is a steep bank from which the swine could have leaped into the sea.



*A drawing and floor plan of the 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century house church with Christian graffiti. Originally built of black basalt stone, the stone surfaces were plastered in the central hall. Circumstantial evidence suggests that it could be the home of Simon Peter.*