

The Biblical City Of Capernaum



“And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: ‘The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: the people who sat in darkness saw a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.’ From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” (Matthew 4:13-17)

Capernaum: The City Of Jesus

Introduction

- I. The city of Capernaum was a small fishing village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, about two miles west of the Jordan River.
 - A. This ancient town is not mentioned by name in the Old Testament.
 - B. Capernaum is referred to as our Lord's "own city" (Matt. 9:1), for it became the center of His Galilean ministry.
 - C. This is interesting since He was not born in Capernaum, His parents did not live in there, and He did not grow up there!
- II. Matthew points out that Jesus began His Galilean ministry here in order to fulfill Old Testament prophecy (Matt. 4:13–16; cf. Isa. 9:1–2).
- III. Five men from around Capernaum (Peter, Andrew, James, John and Matthew) were called by the Lord to be His apostles (Mark 1:16–21, 29).
- IV. Jesus had often stayed in Peter's house in Capernaum and preached in the synagogue there which had been built by a Roman centurion (Luke 7:5).
- V. The city was important enough to have a tax office, over which Matthew had presided (Matt. 9:9).
- VI. Capernaum was also a garrison town, housing a detachment of Roman soldiers, under a centurion, along with administrative officials.
- VII. After His resurrection from the grave, Jesus gave the Great Commission after the "eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them" (Matt. 28:16).

Discussion

I. The Way Of The Sea

- A. The greatest roads of the ancient world passed through Galilee.
 1. The *Via Maris* ("the Way of the Sea", Matt. 4:15) led from Damascus, Syria through Galilee down to Egypt.
 2. The Road to the East led through Galilee away out to the frontiers.
 3. Merchants and traders throughout the world could be found there.
 4. The traffic of the world passed through Capernaum—Jesus could not have picked a better spot to symbolize the worldwide implications of the gospel He was preaching.
 5. One writer said, "Judaea is on the way to nowhere: Galilee is on the way to everywhere."
 6. This helps us to understand how the fame of Christ was spread throughout Syria and "from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan" (Matt. 4:23–25).
- B. "New evidence indicates that Romans indeed lived in Capernaum in the first century A.D. Moreover, far from being a poor, isolated village, Capernaum, the center of Jesus' Galilean ministry, was quite prosperous and was apparently home to gentiles as well as Jews. In the centuries that followed, Capernaum expanded and continued to prosper, in part as a Christian pilgrim center, in part as an important fishing village and commercial center, and in part as a haven for displaced Jews. It continued to include a mixed population of Christians and Jews, as well as others." (*Capernaum From Jesus' Time and After*, Biblical Archaeology Review, Sept./Oct. 1993, p. 55).

- C. "Observing how the Jewish leadership and Herod treated John the Baptist, Jesus strategically launched His own ministry in Galilee of the Gentiles, at Capernaum, which was 'by the sea' (Matt. 4:12–16; cf. Isa. 9:1–2). It was not without reason that the Lord had indicated to Abraham that he must settle on this narrow strip of land that joined three continents. For thousands of years travelers from Africa to Europe, from Asia to Africa passed along the *via maris*, the 'way of the sea.' Right by the locale of Capernaum they passed, and they continued to pass by throughout the days of Jesus. By inaugurating His public ministry in Galilee of the Gentiles along the major international trade route, Jesus was making a statement. This land would serve as a springboard to all nations. The kingdom of God encompassed a realm that extended well beyond the borders of ancient Israel. As Paul so pointedly indicates, Abraham's promise from a new covenant perspective meant that he would be heir of the cosmos (Rom. 4:13). All nations, lands, and peoples would experience the blessings of this benevolent rule." (O. Palmer Robertson, *Understanding the Land of the Bible*, p. 11).

II. The Selection Of The Apostles

- A. Jesus began "preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God" while in the region of Galilee (Mark 1:14–15).
- B. He selected Simon and Andrew, two fishermen, while walking on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:16–18).
- C. He also selected James and John, the sons of Zebedee, while they were mending their nets (Mark 1:19–20).
- D. Matthew, the tax collector, was also selected by Jesus (Matt. 9:9–13).
- E. Jesus taught the twelve in a house at Capernaum (Mark 9:33–37).

III. Our Lord's Miracles At Capernaum

- A. Jesus "went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught" (Mark 1:21–34; Luke 4:31–36; cf. Mark 1:32–34).
1. Those in the synagogue "were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."
 2. Jesus also demonstrated His power to heal, for "in the synagogue there was a man who had a spirit of an unclean demon."
 3. Witnesses of the miracle "were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, 'What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him'" (Mark 1:27).
 4. As a result of this miracle "immediately His fame spread throughout all the region around Galilee" (Mark 1:28).
- B. Jesus entered Simon's house and found "Simon's wife's mother was sick with a high fever" (Mark 1:29–31; Luke 4:38–39).
- C. The paralytic was let down through an opening in the roof (Mark 2:1–12).
- D. Jesus cured the man who had a withered hand (Mark 3:1–8).
- E. The healing of "a certain centurion's servant" (Luke 7:1–10).
- F. While Jesus was in Cana of Galilee "a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum" came to Jesus for healing (John 4:46–53).
- G. It was on the Sea of Galilee "toward Capernaum" that Jesus walked on water (John 6:16–21).
- H. It was at Capernaum that Jesus had Peter pay the temple tax (Matt. 17:24–27).

IV. Woe To You

- A. Though Capernaum had been privileged to serve as the center of our Lord's earthly ministry it was doomed to destruction.
 - 1. After the transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36), Jesus “appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go” (Luke 10:1).
 - 2. Jesus pronounced doom upon the inhabitants of the cities who rejected His message (Luke 10:13–15).
- B. “Capernaum was the center of Jesus’ ministry and had witnessed more of his mighty works than any other town. Although He was joyfully received by the common people, the Pharisees and scribes consistently rejected him and his message. These three neighboring towns were the hub of the circle in which Jesus worked in Galilee. Not only had they definitely rejected him, but they were also representative of the nearly total rejection by the Jewish religious leaders in Galilee.” (Ray Summers, *Commentary On Luke*, pp. 131–132).
 - 1. The cities did not attack Jesus—they did not drive Him from their gates.
 - 2. They did not seek to crucify Him, they simply disregarded Him.
- C. “So strikingly did this prophecy come true that only recently has Tell Hum been identified confidently as ancient Capernaum.” (*Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, p. 207).
 - 1. In the middle of the fourth century the city was the recipient of a major, devastating earthquake—much of the area was completely leveled.
 - 2. In the 7th century another earthquake devastated the town.
 - 3. In the 11th century another earthquake devastated the town, and from this fatal blow Capernaum never recovered—it was abandoned.

V. Capernaum Today

- A. In Capernaum today you can find the remains of an ancient synagogue.
 - 1. “The synagogue at Capernaum is not the one where Jesus preached, but is likely to have been built on the same site. There is now considerable controversy over the dating of the reconstructed synagogue. Since its discovery it has been accepted as being late 2nd or early 3rd century, but the more recent discovery of coins from A.D. 383–408 embedded in the mortar suggests that the building was actually erected in the late 4th or early 5th century.” (Jenny Roberts, *Bible Then and Now*, p. 129).
 - 2. Italian archaeologists excavated the site in 1981, though the first excavations took place in the 1920’s.
 - 3. “Two blocks away from the House of St. Peter is the synagogue, the most splendid of buildings to be found in Capernaum. It has a main prayer hall, a portico on the east side, accessible from the prayer hall, and, on the south, an independent porch, on the side that faces Jerusalem. The prayer hall has a broad nave and two narrow aisles, separated by elegant columns. The interior was plastered and colored, and ornamented with reliefs. The carved stone capitals of the pillars, the gables and the cornices are of a richness unexampled among surviving synagogues in Israel. Depictions of animals are common, but a Medusa and even a Roman eagle have been found among the carvings. There are also typical Jewish emblems: a *shofar* (ram’s horn), an incense shovel, and a *menorah* (seven-branched candelabrum); there is also a representation of the Ark of the

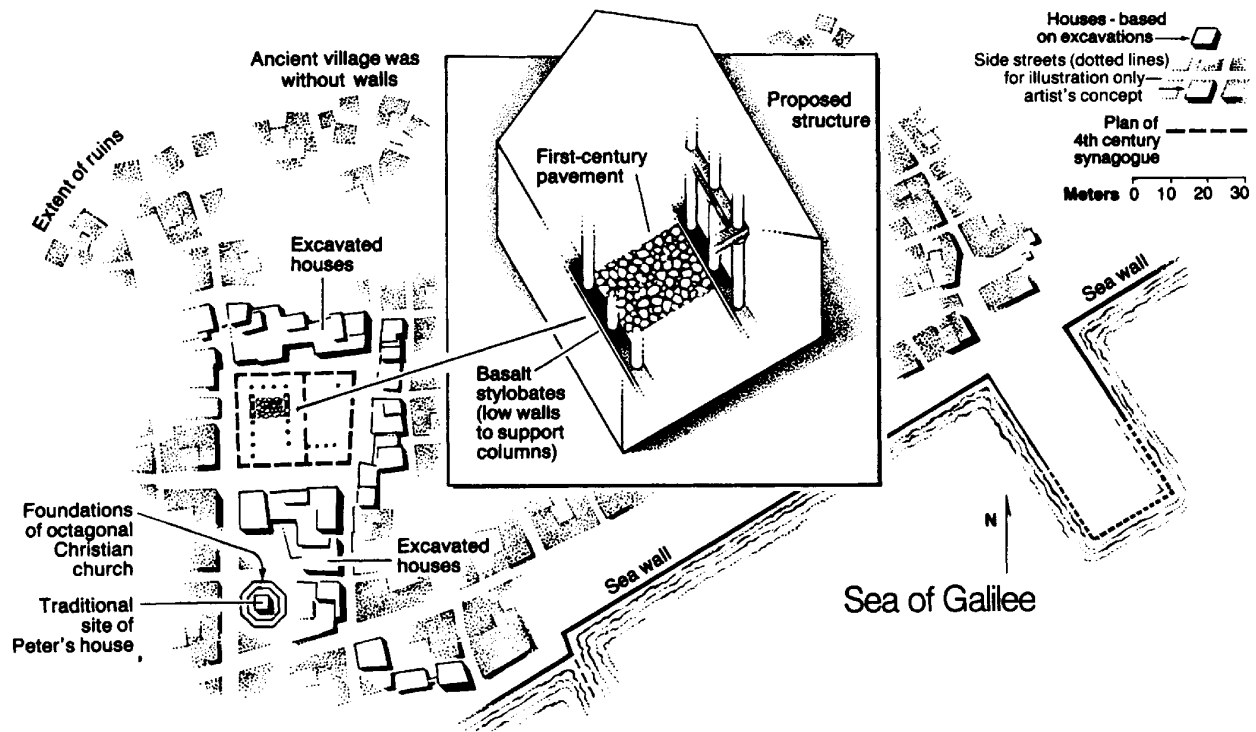
Covenant, depicted as a Hellenistic temple on four wheels.” (G. S. P. Freeman-Greenville, *The Holy Land*, pp. 157–158).

4. “A most distinctive feature of the present synagogue is the absence of a Torah niche in the middle of the wall facing Jerusalem as was the usual practice in Roman-Byzantine synagogues. Interestingly, a fragment of a cornice presents the well-preserved sculpture of a Torah shrine on wheels. It may represent the biblical story of the Ark being carried on a cart (1 Sam. 6:11; 2 Sam. 6:3) or, more likely, it may represent a movable receptacle for Torah scrolls. According to some scholars ... it could have been a practice that, in this type of synagogue, the Torah was wheeled in at the beginning of the worship service, symbolizing God’s presence. The destruction of the Temple by Titus in 70 C.E. may have led to the custom of keeping the Torah scrolls in a fixed place within the synagogue itself.” (Rousseau and Arav, *Jesus and His World*, p. 42).
- B. Among the excavations at Capernaum you will find a house which some claim originally belonged to Simon Peter.
 1. Peter did live in a house at Capernaum (Matt. 8:14).
 2. “The house of St. Peter, often mentioned by the Synoptic Gospels in relation to the activity of Jesus in Capernaum, and recorded later on by pilgrims, was rediscovered in 1968 under the foundations of the octagonal church some 30 meters south of the synagogue. The history of that house where Jesus lived, can be summarized as follows: (1) the house was built in the Late Hellenistic period; (2) in the late first century A.D. it was changed into a ‘domus-ecclesia’, i.e. became a house for religious gatherings; (3) in the fourth century A.D. the same ‘domus-ecclesia’ was enlarged and was set apart from the rest of the town through an imposing enclosure wall; (4) in the second half of the fifth century A.D. an octagonal church was built upon the house of St. Peter and remained in use until the seventh century A.D.; (5) the identification of the house of St. Peter is based on the combination of archaeological data and literary sources which run side by side in a wonderful way.” (Stanislao Loffreda, *Recovering Capernaum*, p. 51).
 3. A new church building has been built over the ruins of this house.
- C. Just north of the synagogue is a Roman milestone from the time of the Roman emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117–138), which was discovered in 1975.
- D. “On your way out, look for a fine olive-oil press and some small hand made mills made from hard and durable volcanic basalt. Its advantages over the limestone found in the rest of Israel gave the Sea of Galilee region the raw material for an important export commodity in ancient times: agricultural equipment. Such mills have been found as far afield as Masada, Jerusalem, and the Mediterranean coast. To the right of the olive-oil press is a capital of a column with Jewish symbols in relief—a seven-branched menorah, a shofar (ram’s horn), and an incense-shovel—of objects still in use—to preserve the memory of the Temple with which they were associated.” (*Fodor’s Israel*, Caroline Haberfield, editor, p. 268).
- E. Other items of interest include a flour mill and a wine press, both made of volcanic basalt.

- F. In 1986 a drought brought the water level of the Sea of Galilee to record lows.
1. Two Israeli men spotted a plank from the first fishing boat ever found dating from the time of Jesus.
 2. After an 11-day excavation the boat was submerged in a preservative to keep its waterlogged timbers from disintegrating.
 3. The boat can be seen at the Yigal Allon Centre near the town of Migdal.
 4. The boat was about 27 feet long, used a seine net, and would have had four rowers and a helmsman.

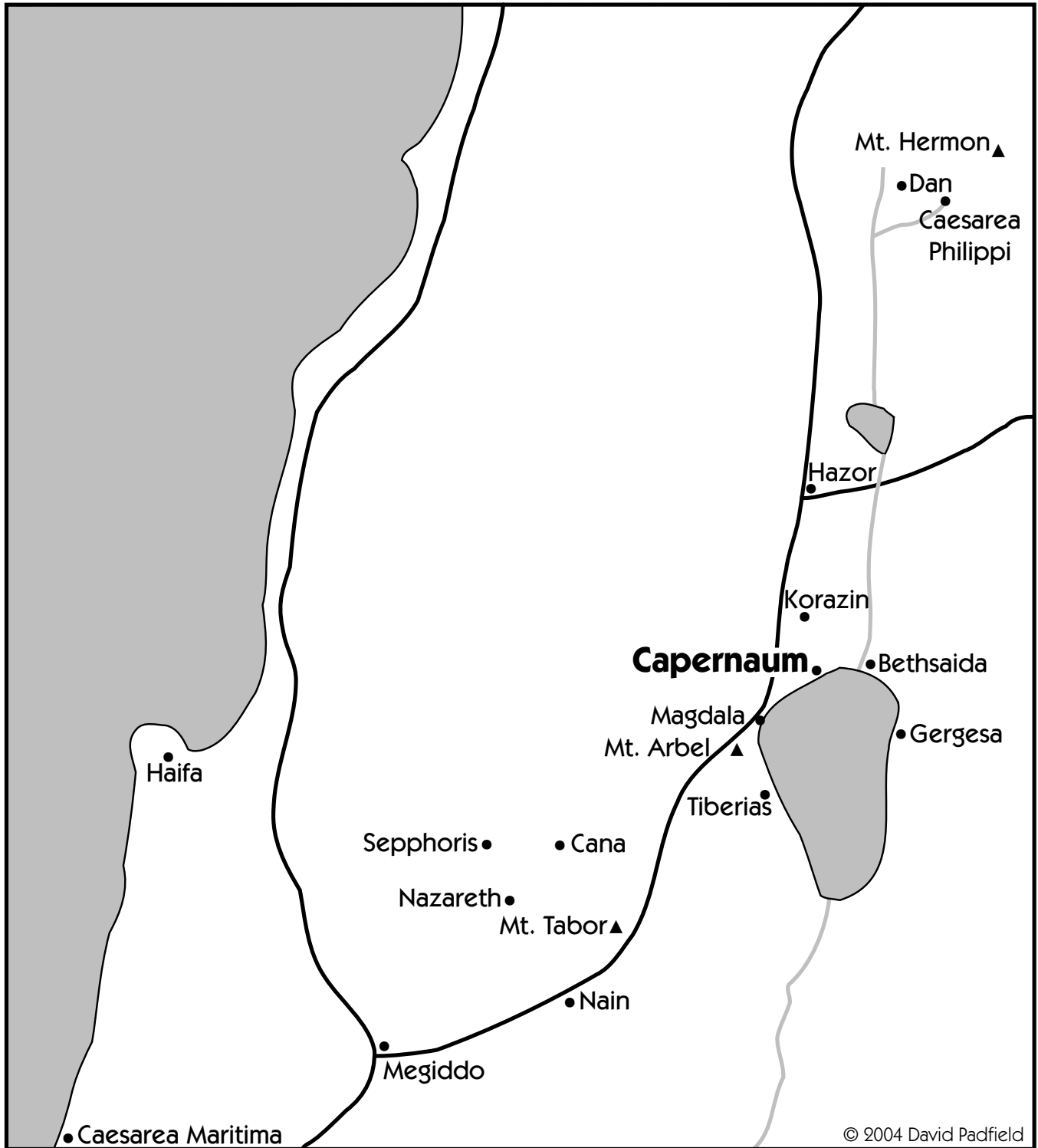
Conclusion

- I. It is often asked what good archaeology can do—at Capernaum it enables us to tread the very footsteps of Jesus!
- II. Though the inhabitants of the city had heard the voice of Jesus they were under the judgment of God and destined for destruction.
- III. Hearing Jesus is not enough—we must obey Him (Matt. 7:21–27).



The Bible Visual Resource Book, Gospel Light Publications, p. 201

The Region Of Galilee



Photographs From Capernaum



Entrance into Capernaum



Synagogue at Capernaum



Memorial over "Saint Peter's House"



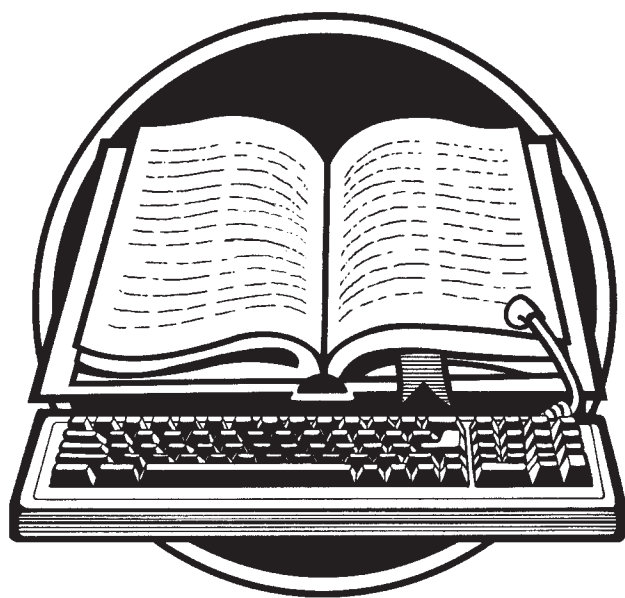
Inside the Synagogue



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