

Lincoln Christian Seminary

The Sea of Galilee and Surrounding Towns

NT 899: Israel Study Tour

By

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January 27, 2009

It is more than difficult to explain how the trip to Israel impacted me. I am still discovering the effects of the journey. Its influence will probably not be completely uncovered for many years. Since returning, I have read Scripture more observantly. Biblical city names now stand out to me. Mental images flood my mind. Sights, tastes and smells from my memory bank grab my attention when I read words like 'Nazareth' or 'Capernaum.'

Prior to December 28, 2008 I had known in my mind that geography was important. I had understood lessons about the religious nature of Caesarea Philippi and the significance of Jesus' questions in such a location. When reading in preparation for our trek across Israel, I had attempted to mentally arrange which biblical events had happened at which cities. While some events and locations came natural to me from my years of reading Scripture, this task was difficult for two reasons. First, I had not been taught to read the Bible to notice geography, let alone its importance. Growing up, names of cities were merely words that some Sunday school teachers did not even know how to pronounce, let alone the events that happened in such a place. Secondly, though I had known the setting of many events, it was through memorization. These places were merely dots on a map. Going to Israel has changed all of that.

It has also been challenging to select only one location that most impacted my reading of Scripture. Though literally dozens of sites positively altered how I read and understand the Bible, one stood out among the rest. I had never realized just how many events took place on or near the Sea of Galilee. Again, prior to the trip, I knew that much of Jesus' ministry happened here. However, I had never seen it for myself. While places

like Jerusalem may be more celebrated, the Sea of Galilee probably had the greatest impact on me.

One of my favorite experiences of the whole trip was the boat ride across the Sea of Galilee. This boat ride helped provide so much visual clarity to reading about events from the Bible. Since I have always read Matthew more than any other Gospel, I will use it more frequently than the other three Gospels. After Jesus had heard about John the Baptist being taken into custody and after His temptations, He settled in Capernaum to fulfill words spoken through the prophet Isaiah (Matt. 4:12-16), which Matthew makes explicit in verse 14, “*This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet.*”¹ I had always read through that quotation of Isaiah somewhat haphazardly, not at all realizing that Jesus’ life and work in this area of Galilee was a fulfillment of Scripture.

Simply being on the water on the Sea of Galilee helped me tremendously. For instance, I could easily picture people fishing. It would have been common for brothers to both go into the family trade and be fishing together. Jesus was walking on the shore when He saw two sets of brothers fishing. The first set was Simon and his brother Andrew. This trip opened my eyes to phrases in Scripture that I had always read over. One such example is the words “settled in Capernaum” from Matt. 4:13, which impacts Jesus “calling His first disciples” in Matt. 4:18-20. I had always been curious if Jesus had previously known any of disciples before calling them. While I had heard different theories in the past, I now noticed that Jesus settled in Peter’s hometown. It seems that this would indicate at least some mutual knowledge of each other. This idea also appears

¹ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995, S. Mt 4:14.

likely from Luke's account, since Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law in Luke 4, then is called by Jesus in Luke 5.

Like Simon and Andrew, Jesus encounters James and John. This trip on the boat allowed me to see the actual lake in which all of these men had been fishing. Prior to this trip I could only picture lakes which I had visited. Now, I can see the shore on which Jesus walked. These first four disciples who Jesus called were seemingly in the middle of just another day at work, trying to make a living. They were probably tired and smelled like fish, but Jesus changed their lives on that shore. Simon and Andrew just left their nets right there and immediately followed Him. Likewise, James and John left their boat and their father for Jesus, all for the invitation to become fishers of men.

The world would never be the same. Though these four men each made his own mistakes by desiring to sit in the prominent seats in heaven and by denying Him at His crucifixion, God eventually changed the world through this group. Being on the Sea of Galilee helped me witness shore on which they were called.

The boat ride also enabled me to get a panoramic view of all of the surroundings. From the boat, we could see many cities. This particular perspective brought to life another biblical passage. After the news of the death of John the Baptist, Jesus withdrew by a boat on this very lake. It seems that His desire was to be alone, so He went to a secluded place.

Nevertheless, the people did grant His wish to be alone. Rather, when the crowds heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities. I had not realized just how many cities were actually on this lake. The people started gathering from these cities in pursuit of Him. Matthew says that they followed Him on foot (14:13). They must have

kept their eyes on Jesus' boat while running along the shore to meet Him at His destination.

Sadly enough, I had seemingly read over the detail of the crowds chasing Him. While I mentally had known that it happened, I could not have visualized it prior to our trip to Israel. When we were sailing across the Sea of Galilee, we had a similar view to that of Jesus. I tried to picture thousands and thousands of people running along the shore, waving their hands and shouting as loud as they possibly could. Some were sick and probably trying not to fall too far back in the line. Others were probably bringing sick relatives with them, also trying to keep up with the pace of the rest of the crowd. Everyone wanted to hear Jesus and have Him heal their sick.

It was while I was thinking of this that the compassion of Jesus struck me. Jesus had just lost someone very dear to Him and sought silence. He was most likely seeking communion with His Father. While He was on the boat, He would have seen the crowd and realized that His desires would not be immediately met. Rather than feeling sorry for Himself, Jesus had compassion for those following after Him. Though I have heard the expression, "Hurting people hurt people," Jesus does the exact opposite. Hurting Jesus healed people. While I was on the boat picturing the following crowds, I know that I would not have wanted to show compassion. Confessing this to myself made the compassion of Jesus shine that much more brightly.²

In addition to being able to picture events that happened on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the boat ride enabled me to better visualize events that happened on the lake itself. One such example happens when Jesus sent the disciples ahead of Him on a boat,

² I structured this paper around our trip rather than the biblical text. Therefore, rather than writing about the feeding of the five thousand, I will continue to write about the boat ride. I will resume the topic of the multiplication of the loaves and fish later.

after the feeding of the five thousand men. Jesus had went and dismissed the crowd. Then He finally got to be alone, and He went up on a mountainside to pray. When He had finished, it was the middle of the night, sometime between 3:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. At this time of night, it would have been extremely dark for the disciples on the boat. They were already in the middle of the lake, a considerable distance from shore. While I realized that the Sea of Galilee is not that large, travelers without motor boats would have felt that they were really far from land. In John's account of this story, he is more exact with the distance, "Then, when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat; and they were frightened."³ In addition to this distance, the winds and the waves were beating against the boat.

Just being on a boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee helped me see from the disciples' point of view. Our boat ride was quite different from the ride of the disciples. Our boat was more modern, more secure and probably bigger. On our ride, the lake was perfectly calm, and it was visible outside. Nevertheless, if I saw someone or something walking toward us on the water, I would have been scared to death.

Jesus immediately comforts them, accepts Peter's words to invite him out on the water and saves him. After they got into the boat, the wind died down. It was here that the disciples worshipped Him. It was on this lake that they testified to His identity when they said, "Truly you are the Son of God." While Caesarea Philippi was significant because Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah among all of the religions and deities, the disciples also confessed the Sonship of Jesus on this boat. Only the Son of God could walk on water.

³ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995, S. Jn 6:19.

For me, it was revealing to be on the exact lake that this happened. Like I wrote above, all of this provided visual clarity. While we were in the boat, we read Scripture and sang praise songs. Reflecting on that time of worship made me realize that we were in similar location to the place the disciples worshipped Jesus that late night. I wish Matthew and the other Gospel writers would have provided more details about the substance of their worship. Nevertheless, the boat ride opened my eyes.

When we left the boat on the Sea of Galilee, we got to see a boat that is two thousand years old. The story of the discovery and preservation of this boat is incredible. While *what* we saw here was neat, *when* we saw it made it all the more fascinating. Seeing it directly after we got off of the Sea of Galilee impacted me.

The back-to-back experiences of taking the boat ride and seeing the old boat definitely shaped how I read Matt. 8:23-27. As I mentioned, we rode on a boat that seemed very safe while the water was calm. Yet, when I now read of Jesus calming the storm, I have a whole new picture in my mind. I had not previously known how a boat from the first century might have looked. After having witnessed a boat and the lake, I have a better idea of what happened that day. The boat from two thousand years ago looked nowhere near as secure as our modern boat. Even though they probably either had a bigger boat or some of the twelve disciples were missing, their boat was most likely similar to the two-thousand-year-old boat.

Like the scene where Jesus walks on water, the disciples are caught in a boat while a storm arises. This storm came up suddenly. Page and Volz note that such storms were not out of the ordinary due to the fact that the surface of the Sea of Galilee was 680

feet below sea level.⁴ In such a boat in such a lake, I am sure the disciples actually believed that they were going to die unless Jesus woke up and saved them. In the past, it has been easy for me to read this story and not realize that this would have actually felt like a life and death situation for them. However, Jesus calms the winds and the waves. The disciples respond to this with amazement, and like the walking on water, a question about the identity of Jesus. They ask, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”

Therefore, taking a boat ride over the Sea of Galilee was very enlightening. It definitely enhanced my view of the calling of the disciples, the crowds chasing Jesus, walking on water and calming the storm. However, in addition to these events that either happened on the lake or its shore, several other events took place in the near proximity of the Sea of Galilee. I was struck by the closeness of places such as the Mount of Beatitudes, Tabgha and Capernaum.

The Mount of Beatitudes overlooks the Sea of Galilee. Obviously, today it has been highly decorated with plants and landscaping. However, what really impacted me was the closeness of this location to the Sea of Galilee. Like I have mentioned, when picturing the Sea of Galilee, I had just always pictured lakes like have known. However, this body of water is much different from the bodies of water I have seen. Maybe the biggest distinction is that the Sea of Galilee is surrounded by mountains. While I had understood that the area around the water was not flat, I had not realized how many mountains were present.

⁴ Charles Page and Carl Volz. *The Land and the Book: An Introduction to the World of the Bible*. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1993), 169.

While we cannot be sure that this mount called the Mount of Beatitudes is the exact location of Jesus giving the beatitudes, this sight still helped me visualize the event. If it did not happen in this exact spot, it probably happened in a similar type of location near the Sea of Galilee. I shared the same sentiment as Murphy-O'Connor, who wrote, "Although devoid of archaeological interest, it is worth a visit....Its shady gallery is the best place from which to contemplate the spiritual dimension of the lake; one can see virtually all the places in which Jesus lived and worked."⁵

The scenic background view is of mountains overlooking this body of water. This fact, for example, helps me understand Matt. 5:14-16.⁶ Here Jesus says, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."⁷ While I had known what this passage meant, I could not see the topographic background. Since the Sea of Galilee is among mountains and hills, cities on those hillsides are very visible. Cities like Tiberias and Magdala are visible from the shore and the lake. Therefore, whether the Sermon on the Mount happened on a place like the Mount of Beatitudes or on a lower hill behind Capernaum,⁸ the landscape in this general vicinity makes this teaching come alive.

⁵ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor. *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide (Oxford Archaeological Guides)*. 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 280.

⁶ I understand that many scholars believe that the Sermon on the Mount is a number of teachings given at different times in different locations, but I am assuming that Jesus gave the whole Sermon on the Mount after the Beatitudes.

⁷ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995, S. Mt 5:14-16.

⁸ Peter Walker. *In the Steps of Jesus: An Illustrated Guide to the Places of the Holy Land*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 68.

The Mount of Beatitudes is considered in the city of Tabgha.⁹ I confess that, before I started reading for the trip, I had never even heard of the city named Tabgha. It is the location where tradition claims that Jesus multiplied the loaves and the fish.¹⁰ It is located just off the Sea of Galilee. In Jesus' day, Tabgha had a harbor, making it a fishing location.¹¹

Again, here the Sea of Galilee makes a difference in how I understand a passage. Returning to Matthew 14, I had never realized that the disciples were so close to a fishing location. Jesus said these words to His disciples about the crowds, "They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!"¹² The disciples responded back to Him by telling Jesus how little food they had. I had always imagined that their response was mainly about money. In other words, I had thought that they meant, "Where could we buy enough food to feed so many people? We do not have that much money." However, after seeing its vicinity to the Sea of Galilee, some of the disciples might have had a slightly an additional thought going through their minds. The fishermen in the group might have thought, "Jesus, do you expect us to go catch fish right now? Its late, we are tired and hungry too." Then, Jesus shocks them by multiplying the loaves and the fish.

Still other Gospel writers inform us of Jesus activity on this lake, but call it the Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1, 23; 21:1). Tabgha is the traditional location of where Jesus manifested Himself to His disciples after His resurrection.¹³ He told the disciples to cast their nets on the other side of their boat. Then they caught 153 fish and ate breakfast

⁹ Page and Volz, 173.

¹⁰ Though Benedictine tradition claims that Tabgha is the spot, it might have been on the northeastern side of the lake. Nevertheless, it was really close to the Sea of Galilee.

¹¹ Walker, 69.

¹² Matthew 14:16

¹³ Page and Volz, 174.

together. This, then would be the place where Jesus asked Simon Peter three time if he loved Him more than these.

Like the nearby locations of the Mount of Beatitudes and Tabgha, Capernaum's location near the Sea of Galilee is also important. I am sad to confess that I could not have located most Israeli cities on a map before going there. Capernaum was no exception. It is just over a mile away from Tabgha on the shore. It was the home of Simon Peter. For some reason, the thought had never crossed my mind, "I wonder how close Peter's hometown was to the lake." Indeed, it was right on the north side of the Sea of Galilee, which explains his career as a fisherman.

Not only was this the hometown of Peter, but Matthew 4:13 says that Jesus settled here after He left Nazareth.¹⁴ Capernaum's location on the Sea of Galilee is important, though I had not noticed it prior to this trip. Matthew says that it is in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. He, quoting Isaiah, calls this area, 'the way to the sea.' That is to say that Capernaum was right through a major trade route. Its specific location helped link Mesopotamia and Damascus with the Mediterranean and Egypt.¹⁵

Capernaum's location on the Sea of Galilee was also important for another reason. It was the final town on the west side of the Jordan River. After Herod the Great died, Galilee was divided by the Jordan River. The west side of the Jordan River was still called 'Galilee.' The east side, however, was called 'Gaulanitis.' Therefore, Capernaum was a port city that was also a border city, which probably meant that it saw a greater amount of revenue.¹⁶

¹⁴ Though I briefly mentioned this passage above, I bring it up now because I have sought to structure this paper in an order similar to our travel through this region.

¹⁵ Walker, 71.

¹⁶ Ibid.

That fact probably led to an increase of tax collectors. In fact, it was here that Jesus called Matthew. Again, I am embarrassed about how many times I have read the book of Matthew, only to find how little I knew about the geography behind his words. For example, Matt. 9:1 says, “Getting into a boat, Jesus crossed over the sea and came to His own city.” I always assumed that Matthew meant Nazareth. However, Nazareth is not on the Sea of Galilee. Though I had even memorized Matthew 4, I did not put the pieces together that Capernaum was the town in this reference. The setting of Matt. 9:1 is continued in Matt. 9:9-13. Here, Jesus calls the tax collector Matthew while at Capernaum. The location of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee and near the border makes it understandable about why Matthew was there.

Walker also notes one more reason why the geography of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee is important. “It is conceivable that the reason why these disciples had moved house to Capernaum was precisely because they could avoid paying repeated taxes as they transported their fresh fish to the places (like Magdala/Tarichaea on the western side of the lake) where their fish could be preserved.”¹⁷

Capernaum, and its location on the lake, was clearly a significant town for the ministry of Jesus. He healed many people there. Matthew, after having earlier noted that this was Galilee of the Gentiles, records Jesus healing a Gentile. Jesus healed the Roman centurion in Matt. 8:5-13 and commends him for his faith. The announcement that a Gentile, a Roman no less, had greater faith than anyone in Israel would have shocked anybody near enough to hear these words.

Though Capernaum was a center of the ministry of Jesus, it received a woe from Him. Jesus said, “And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You

¹⁷ Ibid., 71.

will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.”¹⁸

Capernaum, however, was not the only city along the Sea of Galilee in which Jesus went. Other stories mention that He went to Gennessarat (Matt. 14:34). I also was not aware how close Magdala, the hometown of Mary Magdalene, was to the Sea of Galilee. In addition, I was really unaware about how close the Decapolis was. Though the cities and places I have mentioned thus far have been on the western side of the lake, this group of ten Gentile cities was on the eastern side of the lake. It was from the Decapolis that crowds followed Jesus (Matt. 4:25). Therefore, the central location of the Sea of Galilee was important because Gentiles were able to follow Jesus freely. Again, when I had read Matt. 4:25, I had not ever pictured that this crowd was full of Jews and Gentiles, from Jerusalem and the Decapolis. Just being on the Sea of Galilee helped me realize that Jesus had a racially-mixed crowd following Him.

The Sea of Galilee is very important in the Gospels. I am ashamed of how little I knew before our journey to Israel. This trip to Israel expedited my understanding of the Sea of Galilee’s significance. If I had not gone to Israel, it would have probably taken me several more years to make the connections that I have made recently. Prior to the trip, I had not realized how central this lake was to the story of Jesus. It was here He called His disciples, He lived, He was chased by the crowds, He walked on water, He calmed the storm, He preached, He taught, He appeared after His resurrection, He performed miracles and He traveled. I would not have guessed that a simple boat ride and a few moments of teaching would have unlocked so much of the Gospels to me.

¹⁸ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995, S. Mt 11:23.

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