

CAPERNAUM



An Introduction by the Rt Rev James M. Stanton, Bishop of Dallas

Capernaum is today an archaeological site important to Christians as the site where Jesus centered the early phases of his ministry. It sits on the far northern-eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee along a narrow strip with the Sea on its southern border and gently rising hills to the north.



In ancient times, the city was important because it controlled two major highways, one running east-to-west and the other north-to-south. This made it a logical place for gathering tolls from merchants travelling along the highway. There was a garrison of Roman soldiers commanded by a centurion. This assured protection for the toll-gatherers (e.g., Matthew), as well as keeping order between the lands ruled by Herod Antipas to the south and Herod Philip to the north.

Tiberias, about 10 miles to the southwest, was the capital of Galilee, and was built by Herod Antipas in the lifetime of Jesus. Between Tiberias and Capernaum lay the Gennesaret Plain, a very fertile area, and the town of Magdala.

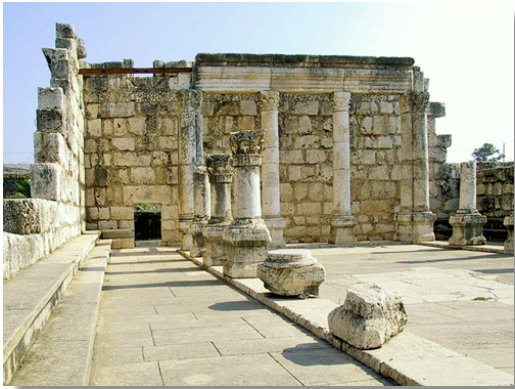
Archeological finds show that the town was at least four miles long. The area was once volcanic and the homes built here were constructed largely of black basalt stone. The abundance of stone made possible a thriving industry in stone-working, and archaeologists have found numerous stone pestles, olive presses and mills for grinding grain. A major industry, however, was fishing, owing to rich waters between Capernaum and Bethsaida about 6 miles to the east. The mouth of the Jordan River is about 3 miles east of Capernaum where it brought nutrient rich waters from the north.

Capernaum was home to a wide variety of workmen and nationalities: farmers, stone masons, artisans, merchants, administrative officials, and, of course, fishermen. They came from all over the region. Unlike

Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, which was a Jewish settlement, Capernaum – like the Galilee generally – had residents of various religions and ethnic backgrounds.

The name of the place, Capernaum, is derived from two Hebrew words: *kfar*, “Village”, and *Nahum*, a name. Its origin is uncertain. Although a certain Nahum is known as one of the minor prophets, it was a common name. The name stuck over time even as the place grew to be more than a village.

A measure of the prosperity of the town can be found in the synagogue that was built in its middle.

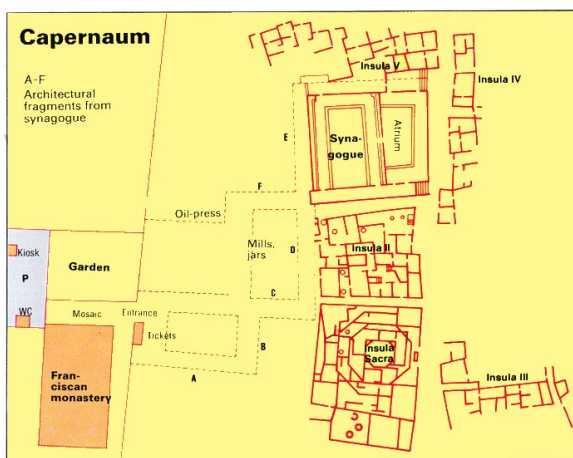


The present synagogue excavation, carried out only from the 1960s, is a building of about 70 ft. in length and 50 ft. in width. It is impressive. This building, however, was smaller than the synagogue Jesus knew and taught in. (Mk 1.21) That building was about 10 ft. larger in both length and width, making it a very large meeting place. It had a hall for prayer and worship, a courtyard, a porch and a small office. The synagogue was oriented toward Jerusalem (south), as was typical of Palestinian synagogues. Originally built in the 1st century, the present structure dates from the 4th century, and was abandoned in the 7th.

Luke tells us that the original synagogue was built by the centurion (Lk 7.5) in charge of the garrison, who was also described as a God-fearer – the typical description of a Gentile who had become interested in the Jewish religion. It is important to note that centurions, as with the Roman army in general, may have been foreign born and raised. Unlike the surrounding buildings, the synagogue was built of white limestone quarried several miles away. The synagogue was adorned by beautiful carvings. At any rate, the gift to the city was very generous.

The size of Capernaum at the time of Jesus is a matter of dispute. Estimates range from 1500 residents to several thousand. The guess-timates are due to the fact that the entire town has not been excavated. Unlike other ancient towns with large populations, the structures in Capernaum appear limited to single-story buildings. Nevertheless, the length of the town suggests that it was home to a rather larger population than the term “village” would describe.

Just south of the synagogue can be found two “insula” or housing compounds.



About 80 ft. from the synagogue is the “Sacra Insula” which has been identified as the House of Peter. Christians have always worshipped in this place from the 1st century. (Beginning in 1990, a strange structure was constructed above the place by Franciscans as a center for pilgrims.) This compound was fairly large, though by no means “elegant.” It was centered on a courtyard, with numerous rooms around it. Mark records that Jesus cast out a demon from a man at the synagogue, then “immediately” entered the house of Simon and Andrew. (Mk 1.21-30) The house was certainly large enough to support two families.

The location and size of Peter’s house indicates that Peter and his brother Andrew were by no means simple “fishermen.” It appears that they, together with James and John, the sons of Zebedee, carried on an active fishing trade. Tradition in fact holds that James supplied fish to the house of the High Priest in

Jerusalem. These men were able businessmen as well as practitioners of their trade. Because of the make-up of the population, it is virtually certain that all of them spoke Greek as well as Aramaic.

Why did Jesus choose Capernaum as his base of operations early in his ministry?

There may be several answers to this question:

1. The city was centrally located to a number of different towns with significant populations. Immediately surrounding Capernaum were the towns of Magdala (Josephus said it boasted a population of 40,000! though this is improbable) and Bethsaida (the original home of Peter and Andrew). To the southeast were the cities of the Decapolis (the Ten Cities), with large non-Jewish populations. To the north west was the region of Tyre and Sidon, also non-Jewish populations.
2. The town permitted ease of transport, either by road or, as seems to have been Jesus' preferred mode, by boat.
3. The town made it possible for Jesus to travel and carry on his ministry without undue attention by Herod Antipas. This was essential to the establishment of his work early in his ministry.
4. The opportunity which Capernaum afforded Jesus to spread his message and work widely in a fairly short time and to a varied population.
5. The town employed people who were bilingual and "multicultural," and who were accomplished in their work.

In short, the choice of Capernaum was an indication that Jesus considered his mission as greater than the limits of Judea. He wanted to find and inspire a cadre of able people whom he could teach and form to carry on his God-given mission far beyond the limits of his native geography.

Jesus did not find ready acceptance, ironically, in Capernaum itself. According to Matt 11.23 (cf. Luke 10.15), Jesus cursed the city for their failure to find faith. Given the make-up and character of the population, this is not particularly surprising. What is surprising is that the people Jesus called to follow him in this place went on to transform the world!



Artist's reconstruction of Capernaum