

AT HOME WITH JESUS AND THE APOSTLES: LIFE IN CAPERNAUM IN THE FIRST CENTURY

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Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Luke, that "Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head."¹ Yet as itinerant as Jesus was during his public ministry, it is commonly thought that he came to use Peter's house in Capernaum as the "base camp" from which to go out to preach the Good News, a conclusion scholars gleaned from Scripture itself, particularly the Gospel of Mark.² So why did Jesus choose Capernaum? What was the city like as Jesus knew it? We see the personal association Jesus came to have with this town in the Gospel of Matthew when he writes that Jesus "came into his own town"³ after having expelled the unclean spirits of the Gadarene demoniacs. Based on the geographical clues given in this text from the Gospel of Matthew, that Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee, many scholars have concluded that Jesus' 'own town' was Capernaum.



In the Gospels, we see that many of Jesus' works were accomplished there, although they failed to catch more than passing attention from the residents. If the city was the home of so many of Jesus' miracles and a place where He spent so much time, why did it merit such harsh words as we find coming from Jesus' lips in the Gospel of Luke: "And as for you, Capernaum...you will go down to the netherworld."⁴ Jesus himself responds when he explains that "much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more."⁵ Much had been given to the seaside city of Capernaum -- it had become the mission base of Jesus' ministry, but they did not respond with the corresponding responsibility toward the gift given.

Modern archaeology has made great advances in understanding the layout and daily life in the city of Capernaum in Jesus' day. While the city does not remain today, it was an active town that had its beginnings from the 1st century through the 7th century.⁶ According to Vasiluos Tzaferis, recent discoveries have uncovered a wall that divides two distinct sections of Capernaum that trace back to different eras. Namely, the section a little further from the Sea of Galilee dates back to the 1st century and whose archaeological remains end around the 7th century. The second section seems to begin as the first section was suddenly destroyed and left to disuse.⁷ The author continues that "The first settlement [in Capernaum] was established in the Early Roman period (first century B.C.), and it remained...from that period until early medieval times."⁸ For our purposes, we are more interested in the older section of the city that dates back to the time of Christ.

"The lack of Capernaum's mention in literature from earlier periods betrays its insignificance,"⁹ at least in terms of economic or cultural contributions. While the city is mentioned frequently in all of the Gospels, there is comparatively little written description of what the city may actually have been like. From the Scriptural citations, we hear of a centurion being stationed there, a tax booth, and the presence of crowds, but this only provides a vague backdrop for coming to know the cultural context and functioning of the town through which Jesus passed fairly regularly.

Jonathan Reed comments that there is no evidence for civil or juridical buildings or even defenses against invasion¹⁰ although another author attests that archaeological evidence suggests that rather than a city wall, the houses themselves were protected by walls that extended above the roofs.¹¹ The lack of public inscriptions is another element that is largely missing from the ruins of Capernaum that were an important part of Roman culture in the first century. This absence reveals the relative insignificance of Capernaum at the time and even shows that perhaps it had not been as 'Romanized' as other areas in the region during the

first century. Archaeological evidence suggests that there was a Roman occupying force in the 2nd century -- indicated by Roman baths dating to that time, but not previously.¹²

The archaeological evidence also shows that the general layout of the town was more representative of Jewish settlements of the time than Roman. This is visible in the fact that the streets lacked channels that



General landscape of the ruins of Capernaum
(Source: <http://depositphotos.com>)

carried water and sewage off of the main thoroughfares and were not paved. The city's lack of "centralized planning" or a form of a grid system also indicates that the city had deeper ties to Jewish culture than Roman.¹³

This general and less organized layout of the city, in conjunction with the absence of a wall around the city allowed for a greater growth in population. In fact, according to Reed, "the driving force in Capernaum's layout was not centralized planning, but rather domestic growth around courtyards, which were encircled as members of extended families added houses, walls, or storage rooms."¹⁴ The lack of the defending wall around the city allowed for the expansion of the city limits on surrounding land since the structures of the buildings themselves, made out of basalt and mud, would not have supported a second story. A common house structure found in Capernaum included an area within the residence itself for livestock. Taking this into account and looking at the remaining evidence of the structures from first century Capernaum, scholars have estimated that the population of the city at the time that Jesus would have known it was "between 600 and 1,500 inhabitants."¹⁵

This estimate varies quite a bit depending on whether a scholar holds that Capernaum was near to one of the major roads of the day -- the *via maris*. The estimate of 600 to 1,500 residents of Capernaum holds that the major transport routes had no significant impact on Capernaum and the city was far enough away from important connecting routes, that it went relatively unaffected. However, other scholars claim that Capernaum "remained one of the most important towns in the region of the Sea of Galilee."¹⁶ This claim clearly implying that the city played some role in the major transportation network. However, despite this difference in opinion among scholars, from the evaluation of the single story residences and the spread of buildings outwards, it seems that the estimate given by Reed could be a fairly accurate one, regardless of the city's position on the *via maris*.

However, even if not situated on the route of the *via maris*, Capernaum did seem to be affected by "the foundation of Tiberias ... because of the opening up of trade on the western side of the Sea of Galilee."¹⁷ The opening of this trade route may also explain any evidence or reference to any range of people that the residents of Capernaum may not have had regular contact with previously (centurions for example, since as was stated above, there is no evidence for a permanent Roman presence in Capernaum until the 2nd century.)¹⁸

We see, even by a cursory glance at St. Peter's occupation in Scripture as a fisherman and James and John as well¹⁹, that fishing must have been a dominant profession in first century Capernaum. Given its location on the sea coast, it would be difficult to think otherwise. "The livelihood of the occupants of Capernaum was drawn from the Sea of Galilee."²⁰ In looking at the specifics of the trade that was so central to Capernaum's economy, we can get a "glimpse of that life."²¹ The fishing economy clearly influenced the diet of the city's inhabitants, but also influenced social and business relationships. However, it had deeper influence even on the structure of local society since it is recognized that a "comparatively high degree of organization [is] necessary to maintain ... 'an indigenous fishing economy.'²²

The same environment that contributed to the flourishing of the fishing economy also influenced the architectural development of Capernaum. It is noted that "At Capernaum, the problem of humidity caused by the nearby lake was counterbalanced by paving the floors with large basalt slabs resting on beds of lime."²³ The general structure of the residential buildings were bordered by alleys. The residences were usually organized into blocks around courtyards with the entrances to the residences bordering on the alleys. Most of the floors of both the houses themselves and the central courtyards were "paved" with basalt stones and mortar.²⁴



First century fishing boat discovered during excavations in Capernaum (Source: <http://www.anahtararchaeology.org>)



The foundation of the octagonal church from the 5th century thought to be built upon St. Peter's house (Source: <http://www.biblearchaeology.org>)

As a reference point, there has been extensive study on the house traditionally held to be St. Peter's house. James Strange explains that while the most recent structure was dated to the 5th century and was most likely destroyed two centuries later, it was built on top of a residential structure typical of Capernaum, although even this structure underwent several "renovations" as it was converted into a public place of worship for Christians. The remodeling for public use is noteworthy since there is evidence that "within the first century C.E., the Christian community plastered its main room three times (Corbo 1975: 98). This indicates conversion to public use, as no other structures at Capernaum devoted to a family use plastered floors. Also in this case Christian pilgrims incised their sentiments onto the walls of this redecorated and renovated house."²⁵

The same humidity that led to the paving of floors in public buildings also led to a great health risk for the residents of Capernaum. Reed writes that "evidence from antiquity confirms that malaria was a problem in and around Galilee,"²⁶ even citing the Gospel passages of the fever that Peter's mother-in-law had²⁷ and the centurion's servant that Jesus healed.²⁸ The areas that were prone to malaria were recognized as "closer to crops, fishing, or trade,"²⁹ all of which bring economic and even dietary advantages, but at the cost of higher health risks. Prior to the first century, these malaria-prone regions had often been left unsettled because the inhabitants were looking more for more defensible ground rather than an economic advantage, however by the first century, the interests of the region's residents had changed bringing them closer to the sea.³⁰ "In general, the realities of high mortality and extreme morbidity underscore the appeal of healing stories in the tradition, perhaps especially in the densely populated cities of the Roman world."³¹

While perhaps not the bustling trade center of the region, perhaps it was just this "ordinariness" that drew Jesus to pass through so many times and base a part of his mission from here. The close relationship between all the elements of the lives of Capernaum's inhabitants -- their occupation, their architecture, their health and longevity -- gives an interesting account of what first century Capernaum may have looked like. This understanding can in turn yield a deeper understanding of the context in which Jesus ministered and from which many of the Apostles came from and from which they were sent on their mission to announce the Good News.

¹ Lk, 9:58

² Cf. Reed, Jonathan L. "Jesus and Capernaum: Archaeology and Gospel Stratigraphy." *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-examination of the Evidence*. Harrisburg: Trinity International, 2000. 139-69. Print. p. 139

³ Mt 9:1

⁴ Lk 10: 15

⁵ Lk. 12: 48

⁶ Cf. Tzaferis, Vassilios. "New Archaeological Evidence On Ancient Capernaum." *Biblical Archaeologist* 46.4 (1983): 198-204. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 19 Oct. 2013. p. 200.

⁷ Cf. Ibid, p. 200.

⁸ Ibid, p. 200.

⁹ Reed, Jonathan. "Jesus and Capernaum: Archaeology and Gospel Stratigraphy", p. 140

¹⁰ Cf. Ibid, p. 151

¹¹ Galor, Katharina. "Domestic Architecture In Roman And Byzantine Galilee And Golan." *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66.1-2 (2003): 44-57. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 19 Oct. 2013. p. 52

¹² Cf. Reed, Jonathan. "Jesus and Capernaum: Archaeology and Gospel Stratigraphy", p. 155

¹³ Cf. Ibid, p. 152-3

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 153

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 151-152.

¹⁶ Tzaferis,, p. 200.

¹⁷ Chilton, Bruce D. "Archaeology And Rabbi Jesus." *Bulletin For Biblical Research* 12.2 (2002): 273-280. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 19 Oct. 2013. p. 278

¹⁸ Cf. Chilton, p. 278

¹⁹ Cf. Lk 5; Mt 4; Mk 1

²⁰ Schuler, Mark T. "Recent Archaeology Of Galilee And The Interpretation Of Texts From The Galilean Ministry Of Jesus." *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71.2 (2007): 99-117. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 22 Oct. 2013. p. 104

²¹ Ibid, p. 104; See also Bruce Chilton's article in *Bulletin for Biblical Research*

²² Chilton, p. 277

²³ Galor, p. 55

²⁴ Cf. Ibid, p. 48

²⁵ Strange, James F. "Diversity In Early Palestinian Christianity, Some Archaeological Evidences." *Anglican Theological Review* 65.1 (1983): 14-24. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 18 Oct. 2013. p. 19

²⁶ Reed, Jonathan L. "Instability In Jesus' Galilee: A Demographic Perspective." *Journal Of Biblical Literature* 129.2 (2010): 343-365. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 18 Oct. 2013. p. 357

²⁷ Mk 1:30-31

²⁸ Jn 4:52

²⁹ Reed, Jonathan L. "Instability In Jesus' Galilee: A Demographic Perspective." p. 358

³⁰ Cf. Ibid, p. 358

³¹ Reed, Jonathan L. "Instability In Jesus' Galilee: A Demographic Perspective." p. 365

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