



Around the Sea of Galilee

4. Capernaum

Tony Benson

THE MOST well-known of the towns which lined the Sea of Galilee in New Testament times is Capernaum, because it was the scene of much of the Galilean ministry of Jesus. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament, and archaeological excavations reveal that the site was first settled in the fifth century B.C. at the time when the Persians ruled the land.

The name as we know it is a transliteration into Greek of the Hebrew Kefar Nahum, meaning 'Town of Nahum'. This cannot, however, be the prophet Nahum, for he lived in the seventh century before Christ and is said to be an Elkoshite (Nah. 1:1). It was continuously occupied till about A.D. 1100.

In the nineteenth century, travellers from the West sought to identify the sites of various places mentioned in Scripture, but there was no unanimity on where ancient Capernaum stood. However, in 1865 Charles Wilson identified it with a place called by the Arabs Tell' Hum, interpreted as meaning 'Mound of Nahum', thus linking it with the New Testament 'Town of Nahum'. Much of the site was bought by the Roman Catholic Franciscans in 1894, and the remainder is owned by the Greek Orthodox Church. Extensive excavations were carried out by the Franciscans in the twentieth century, and towards the end of that century the Greek Orthodox Church excavated some of the area it owned. As a result, there does not seem to be any doubt now that the site is indeed that of ancient Capernaum.

There is, however, a difference of opinion over the Arabic name. Some still hold to the 'Mound of Nahum' view. Others say that the Arabic name was not recorded correctly; it is really Talhum, after a rabbi called Tanhum buried there, the local Arabs having changed the pronunciation slightly.

The home of Jesus

If Jesus can be said to have had a home during the course of his ministry, bearing in mind his words, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Mt. 8:20), it was Capernaum. Immediately after the record of the temptation, Matthew goes on to say: "Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, he came and *dwelt* in Capernaum" (4:12,13), indicating that this was his home base from now on. Prior to that, Jesus had lived there for a short while with his family: "After this [his first miracle, at Cana] he went down to Capernaum, he, and his mother, and his brethren, and his disciples: and they continued there not many days" (Jno. 2:12).

The miracle of healing the man sick of the palsy, whose friends let him down through the roof into the presence of Jesus, is instructive regarding this. Mark, after recording that Jesus went out into desert places² (1:45), says: "And when he entered again into Capernaum after some days, it was noised that he was *at home*"

1. The Hebrew equivalent for 'tell' is 'tel', both words being used for the mounds which dot the landscape of Israel, marking the sites of ancient towns and witnessing to the truth of God's ancient warning that, if Israel were disobedient, "I will make your cities waste" (Lev. 26:31). The word 'tel' is often used today in relation to archaeological excavations.
2. Galilee is too well-watered to have actual deserts, and we must interpret "desert places" as uncultivated open areas where there were no people. The "desert place" where the feeding of the 5,000 took place had green grass (Mk. 6:35,39). Nevertheless the countryside would look very dry and withered at the end of the summer compared with the greenness of Britain.

(2:1, RV and RV mg.). Matthew precedes his account of this miracle by saying that Jesus “came into *his own city*” (9:1). At a much later stage in his ministry, after the transfiguration, Mark records of Jesus: “And he came to Capernaum: and being *in the house . . .*” (9:33).

It is a reasonable surmise that the house where Jesus lived at Capernaum was Peter and Andrew’s house. Mark 1 gives an account of the calling of Andrew and Peter, then of Jesus going into the synagogue at Capernaum on the sabbath, then of Jesus and other disciples going into the house of Peter and Andrew, where he healed Peter’s mother-in-law (vv. 16-31). Not many verses after is the reference, quoted above, to Jesus being at home, with Jesus going out on at least one preaching mission in between. In Matthew 17:24-27 we read that Jesus and the disciples came into Capernaum, whereupon Peter was asked by the authorities whether Jesus was going to pay the annual half-shekel tax, to which he replied in the affirmative. We then read: “And when he came into the house, Jesus spake first to him . . .” (RV). The indication is that Peter entered his own home, where Jesus already was.

Preaching and performing miracles in Capernaum

Towards the beginning of his record of the Galilean ministry, Matthew states: “And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues” (4:23). Given that Capernaum was his base, he must have taught in the synagogue there often. There are two occasions where Jesus is specifically said to have taught in the synagogue at Capernaum. The first is recorded in Mark 1 and Luke 4. In the former chapter we are told: “And they [Jesus and some of his disciples] went into Capernaum; and straightway on the sabbath day he entered into the synagogue, and taught” (v. 21). He healed a deranged man there, and then entered the house of Peter and Andrew, as mentioned above. The second occasion was when Jesus gave his discourse on the bread of life after the feeding of the 5,000 (Jno. 6:59).

The synagogue at Capernaum was built for the town by the centurion whose son Jesus was to heal (Lk. 7:1-5). Although it does not say so explicitly, it seems likely that one of the rulers of the Capernaum synagogue was Jairus, whose daughter Jesus raised from the dead. Of the three records of this incident, Matthew’s is the only one which does not give the name, nor state explicitly that he was a ruler of the synagogue,

but it does indicate that the incident occurred in “his own city” (9:1), which, as we have seen above, must mean Capernaum. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record that Jesus healed a man with a withered arm on the sabbath in the synagogue. None of the three records indicate where this synagogue was, but the incident fits into the period in which Jesus was based on Capernaum.

Jesus normally taught in the synagogue on the sabbath, but on other days in various other locations. As stated above, Peter’s house seems to have been Jesus’s home at Capernaum, and from Mark 2:1,2 we learn that on at least one occasion Jesus taught a crowd of people who thronged to him there. On another occasion he taught the crowds from a boat on the sea, presumably Peter’s boat moored at Capernaum. The Sermon on the Mount was traditionally given on a hilltop above Capernaum, a few minutes walk for the fit.

Many of the recorded miracles of Jesus were performed at Capernaum; from the passages already looked at we know that these included the healing of a deranged man in the synagogue, the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law from a fever, the healing of the paralysed man let down through the roof of Peter’s house, the healing of the centurion’s servant, and the raising from the dead of Jairus’s daughter and the accompanying miracle of healing the woman with the issue of blood. These are, of course, but a Divinely-inspired selection of the many miracles that Jesus did, as indicated from what followed after Jesus healed the deranged man in the synagogue and then Peter’s mother-in-law: “And at even, when the sun did set [this indicates that the sabbath was over], they brought unto him all that were diseased, and them that were possessed with devils. And all the city [of Capernaum] was gathered together at the door. And he healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils” (Mk. 1:32-34).

We are told that on one occasion Jesus “began . . . to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not”. These cities were Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. To the latter he said: “And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day” (Mt. 11:20-23). We shall look at what this condemnation means later in the article; for the moment we note that Capernaum must have



The partially restored ruins of the fourth-century synagogue at Capernaum, built on the foundations of the synagogue where Jesus preached

had many more great miracles performed there than are recorded in the Gospels.

The synagogue discovered

It was as long ago as 1838 when the American scholar Edward Robinson visited Tell Hum and noticed, as he put it, “the prostrate ruins of an edifice which, for expense, labour and ornament, surpasses anything we have yet seen in Palestine”, a building which he later identified as a synagogue. When the Franciscans bought the site in 1894 they were careful to preserve this ruined synagogue, which was excavated and cleaned up during the period 1905–1915, and then partially restored. It was assumed that the synagogue was that made famous in the Gospels as the place where Jesus taught.

Further excavations began in 1969, and it is now considered that the synagogue was built in the fourth century A.D. and extended in the fifth century. This conclusion is based on knowledge of other synagogues in the area, many of which have now been discovered, and was confirmed by the discovery of Byzantine coins from the late fourth and early fifth centuries underneath the foundations. (Clearly, if coins are found under-

neath the foundations of a building, the building must have been built after the date of the latest coin.)

It may surprise us to think of a fine synagogue being built in Galilee several hundred years after the time of Christ, for we tend to think that all Jews were taken into captivity in the first century, or at least after the Bar Kokhba revolt in the second century. However, the Jews in Galilee lingered on, and at times prospered, for several centuries before going into decline. Today there is only one place in Galilee which claims to have been continuously inhabited by Jews since the time of Christ, and that is the hill village of Peq'ein, where just one extended Jewish family hangs on amidst Arabs and Druze.

During the excavations that began in 1969 an interesting discovery was made, however. The fourth century synagogue is made of white limestone, but below it is a pavement made of black basalt. The excavators consider this to be too large to have been the foundation of a private house, and think it was the foundation of a synagogue that can be dated to the time of Christ, it being normal to build a new synagogue on the site of an old one. Also, the limestone wall of the



Ancient milestone at Capernaum dating to the time of the Emperor Hadrian, about a hundred years after the time of Christ. As indicated, it stood on the road known as the *Via Maris*, the Way of the Sea (Isa. 9:1), the ancient route that led from Damascus to the Mediterranean coast, then Egypt. Matthew the publican may have exacted tolls from travellers on this route.

later synagogue rests on a wall of much inferior basalt stones, apparently the walls of the earlier synagogue.

We know from Luke 7:5 that the first-century synagogue was provided for the Jews by the centurion. Evidence of Roman occupation has been found in the form of a large bathhouse dating to the second or third centuries A.D. Below it are the remains of an earlier structure, thought also to have been a bathhouse, although it has not been excavated, and dating to the first century, the time of Christ.

The house of Peter

A more controversial claim by the Franciscan excavators is to have discovered the remains of the house of Peter. How could they possibly know whether or not Peter had lived in a particular house? Is this not just a device to attract pious pilgrims? There are many sites all over the land, usually with churches built on them, which claim to be the authentic site of some Scriptural event, generally with little or no evidence in favour of them. I was thus sceptical of the claim,

but, having read the evidence, can see that there is some basis for it. Even if it is not the house of Peter, what has been discovered gives a good idea of what the house of Peter, where Jesus often stayed, could have been like.

What the excavators found was an octagonal church built in the second half of the fifth century when the area was part of the Byzantine Empire, and built on top of the remains of earlier buildings. A pilgrim from Italy who visited Capernaum in 570 wrote: "We came to Capernaum into St Peter's house, which at present is a basilica³", so evidently it was believed then that the church was sited over Peter's house.

A fourth-century pilgrim called Etheria wrote: "The house of the prince of the apostles in Capernaum was changed into a church; the walls [of the house] are still standing as they were". This was written before the basilica was built.

3. Churches built in the days of the Byzantine Empire are generally referred to as 'basilicas', the word being derived from the Greek for 'king', a church being regarded as the house of the King, that is, Jesus.

The excavators found that below the basilica were the remains of a house which had been enlarged into a church during the fourth century, and separated from the surrounding houses by an enclosure wall. Graffiti on the walls containing references to Jesus and Peter confirmed that it was a church, the scripts being typical of those times. This building is evidently what Etheria was referring to.

The original house is dated to before the time of Christ. There is evidence that one of the rooms was used for worship. The walls and floor were plastered, unlike other rooms in the house, and there are almost no remains of vessels of daily living, unlike in the rest of the house, indicating that it was set apart for worship. There is no direct evidence that this was Peter's actual house; the argument is that it would be natural after the ascension for the followers of Jesus in the area to have met in Peter's house for their regular worship, and the references by later pilgrims, quoted above, indicate that it was so regarded.

In my view the claim that this was Peter's house is more plausible than the claim that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is built over the sites of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. In the latter case, though the early Jerusalem believers would have known the true sites, they left the city before A.D. 70, and there would have been no Christians there until the time of Constantine, 250 years later, by which time all knowledge of them would surely have gone. In contrast, the house at Capernaum seems to have been in continual use for hundreds of years from the time of Christ onwards, and the site of Peter's house would have been known, though we cannot rule out the possibility that apostate Christians later pretended that the new church they had built was on the site of Peter's house in order to attract the pilgrim trade. There can be little doubt, however, that the house was the home of an early believer, though there are other candidates besides Peter to whom it could have belonged, such as Zebedee or Jairus.

The original first-century house was built round a central courtyard. There were rooms leading off the courtyard other than those covered over by the later church, and it is suggested that in fact one or more other families lived here. We recall that the house to which Jesus went after leaving the synagogue is described by Mark as "the house of Simon *and* Andrew" (Mk. 1:29), and Peter's mother-in-law also lived there. It opened out onto the main street, rather than onto

the narrow alleyways running off the main street, thus making it easier for people to throng the house (2:1,2), although even the main street would have been very narrow by our standards. The house was hardly fifty yards from the entrance to the synagogue.

Subsequent history

There is some evidence from contemporary writings that both Jews and Jewish Christians lived at Capernaum for several centuries in reasonable harmony. However, after the time of Constantine, when the Roman Empire became nominally Christian, Gentile Christians took over, though Jews still lived there. The building of the new synagogue and of the basilica over the site stated to be Peter's house is evidence that the town flourished in this era. Christian symbols, such as the cross, on the remains of pottery and glassware are common for this period, and the town's associations with Jesus and the apostles would have begun to attract pilgrims such as those quoted from above. There was an influx of Jews in 354 following a revolt in which a number of the exclusively Jewish towns were destroyed, leaving the survivors to find somewhere else to live.

In the seventh century the Arabs conquered the land, and excavations suggest that both the synagogue and the church were abandoned at this time. Earthquakes in the eighth century and the eleventh century devastated the area, and the town seems to have been abandoned after the latter. A traveller in the thirteenth century recorded that there were just seven occupied houses then, the occupiers being all poor fishermen. Like so much of the land, over the centuries Capernaum sank into decline and desolation, until its ruins were identified in our own times, and pilgrims throng the site of so many New Testament scenes.

But what of those words of Jesus in Matthew 11:23,24: "And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee"? What is their fulfilment? It is sometimes said that the fulfilment came in the Jewish revolt of A.D. 70, with the city being destroyed by the Romans. However, as we have seen, Capernaum lasted for about a thousand years after the time

of Christ; there was in fact no widespread destruction of the cities of Galilee when the Romans put down the Jewish revolt.

The word translated 'hell' here is *hades*, not *gehenna*, so there is no suggestion of a fiery destruction, and the exaltation to heaven is clearly symbolic, and applies to the privileged position of the city in having Jesus in its midst, preaching and performing miracles. The bringing down to hell would therefore be symbolic of the city declining to a position of great lowliness, and was fulfilled in the way it has become an uninhabited ruin. The fact that verse 23 refers to Sodom still remaining in Jesus's day if it had witnessed the miracles Capernaum had witnessed indicates that Jesus was referring in this verse to the fate of the cities themselves.

Regarding verse 24, the conclusion seems unavoidable that this is referring to the responsibility of individuals at the judgment to come, since the verse is referring to a day of judgment at which both Sodom and Capernaum are held accountable, and one which Sodom has yet to experience, "it *shall be* more tolerable for the land of Sodom . . .". The citizens of Sodom are responsible because they failed to heed the preaching of Lot, and the citizens of Capernaum are responsible because they failed to heed the preaching of Jesus. However, the latter are more culpable because, as verse 20 says, Jesus had done many miracles in their city, whereas Lot's preaching was not backed up by miracles.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

Who was the Pharaoh of the Exodus?

Martin Cragg

THE MANY attempts to identify the proud Pharaoh of the Exodus have so far failed to provide convincing proof as to his identity. Unlike the Bible, secular ancient annals tend to treat failure with silence, and this Pharaoh was a spectacular failure. It seems strange, then, that the most popular candidates have been the strong warrior kings, for example, Thutmose III or Ramesses II.¹

Some workers have proposed unorthodox chronologies, which, if adopted, would place this pharaoh in a totally different dynasty.² While there are problems with the standard dating and lengths of certain Egyptian periods, there seems to be no convincing evidence requiring drastic corrections to the orthodox dates for the early eighteenth dynasty, which Biblical chronology parallels to the time of the Exodus. There are still some unsolved problems in Biblical chronology, but, if we accept the secular date of 586 B.C. for the destruction of the temple, it leads us to a date for the Exodus around the early to mid fifteenth century B.C. This is not a treatise on chronology, so actual dates are not given, but Egyptian reign lengths given by Sir Alan Gardiner³ are used in the chronological chart over the page to show synchronisms between Egyptian and Israelite records. Thus, within the constraints of Biblical and Egyptian chronologies, readers can 'fit' the scheme to their own favoured dates.

A new dynasty

The Exodus story, after reference to the sojourn of Jacob's family in Egypt and the death of Joseph, states, shortly before the record of the birth of Moses: "Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph" (Ex. 1:8). According to orthodox chronology, about eighty years before the Exodus a new native Egyptian dynasty overthrew the Hyksos (the so-called 'Shepherd Kings'). The Hyksos were Asiatic chieftains who had ruled Egypt from the Delta area for several generations and so could be expected to be sympathetic to the descendants of Jacob who dwelt amongst them.

This new dynasty of Theban kings, founded by **Ahmose I**, took about four years to expel the hated Asiatic Hyksos. One is immediately struck by the similarity between this new king's name (sometimes written Amosis), which was a component of many of the royal names and officials of this period, and that of Moses. The name Moses is Egyptian in origin and means 'born' or 'drawn out', and Pharaoh's daughter (called Thermuthis

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1. *Warrior Pharaohs: The Rise and Fall of the Egyptian Empire*, P. H. Newby, Faber & Faber, 1980, p. 175.
 2. *Ages in Chaos*, Vol. 1, I. Velikovsky, Gollancz, 1952; *A Test of Time*, David M. Rohl, Random House, 1995.
 3. *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, Sir Alan Gardiner, OUP, 1964 paperback edition, p. 443.