

CAPERNAUM

Capernaum. The name Capernaum comes from the Hebrew phrase *Kephrah Nahum*, which means “Village of Nahum.” This site, also known as “Tel Hum” (“Hill of Hum”), was a large Jewish village in the first century A.D. It was strategically located on an ancient trade route that ran from Damascus in Syria to Caesarea Maritima on the coast and then on to Egypt. This road was known as the *Via Maris* or “the way of the sea” (Is. 9:1; see Mt. 4:15). Taxes were collected at Capernaum on goods coming from Herod Philip’s domain into Herod Antipas’ territory, whether on the road or by the sea. This furnishes the background of Jesus’ calling of Levi (Matthew) the tax collector (Mt. 9:9; Mk. 2:13-14). Capernaum was located on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee and served an important role in the fishing industry. The first four disciples called by Jesus were fishermen—Peter, Andrew, James, and John (Mt. 4:18-22; Mk. 1:16-20). The fertile area surrounding Capernaum produced wheat, grapes, figs, and olives. The significance of this area is also evident from the fact that a Roman garrison was stationed there.

After his baptism, Jesus made Capernaum his home base of operations (Mt. 4:12-13). He was at “home” at Capernaum (Mk. 2:1), which is described as “his own town” (Mt. 9:1). Jesus once said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Mt. 8:20). Based on this statement, it is often assumed that Jesus lived with Peter in Capernaum. However, it is possible that Jesus had a home there and that his family had moved to Capernaum with him (see Mt. 12:46; Mk. 3:31; Jn. 2:12). Besides those already mentioned, several other important events in the Gospels took place in this city:

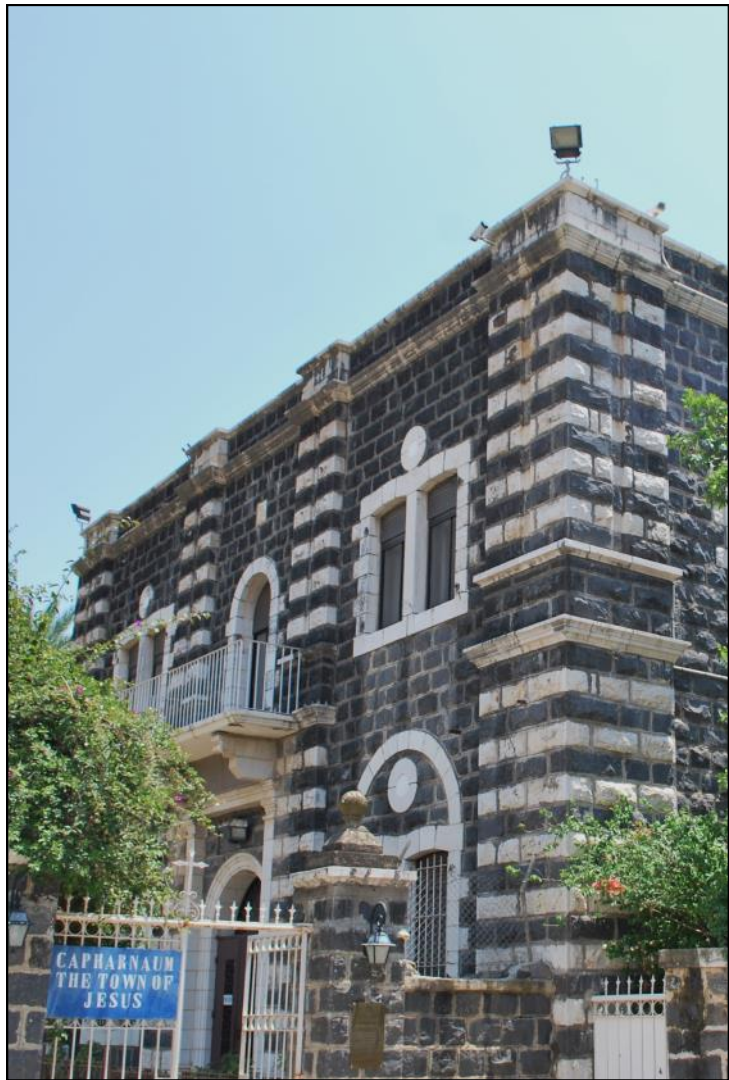
- 1) Jesus healed a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue (Mk. 1:21-28).
- 2) Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law at Peter’s house, as well as others who were sick and demon-possessed (Mk. 1:29-31).
- 3) Jesus healed a centurion’s servant without entering his house (Lk. 7:1-10).
- 4) Jesus healed a nobleman’s servant (Jn. 4:46-54).
- 5) Jesus healed a paralytic and forgave his sins (Mk. 2:1-12).
- 6) Jesus healed the bleeding woman and also raised Jairus’ daughter (Mk. 5:21-43).
- 7) Jesus received a child and used him as an illustration (Mk. 9:33-37).

Generally speaking, the residents of Capernaum (as well as those of Bethsaida and Chorazin) did not respond in faith to the many miracles Jesus performed there. For their unbelief, Jesus said that they would be strictly judged (Mt. 11:20-24).

Capernaum was unoccupied from about A.D. 1000 to modern times. Edward Robinson recognized the synagogue ruins there in 1838. Charles Wilson excavated the site first (1865-1866), and he identified it as ancient Capernaum. After this time, a Franciscan monastery was built and crops were planted over the site to protect it during tumultuous times. Later, the synagogue was excavated from 1905 to 1926. Other parts of the city were unearthed from 1968 to 1986.



Milestone from Road Linking Damascus to Galilee
(From Hadrian's Reign, A.D. 117-138)



Franciscan Monastery



Crossword on the Monastery Wall:
Zoe ("Life") and Phos ("Light")

The Synagogue. The Capernaum synagogue is one of the most magnificent archaeological ruins in the region. There is some debate concerning the dating of this structure. Some favor the fourth century A.D., while others prefer an earlier date in the third century A.D. It was most likely built on the same site as the basalt synagogue where Jesus taught in the first century.

The impressive synagogue was built of white limestone instead of the local black basalt. The main prayer hall was two stories high, being constructed with a roof that was supported by pillars. It was rectangular in shape (about 67 by 61 feet). The walls of the synagogue were lined with stone benches where worshipers sat. On the shorter, south side of the hall, which faces Jerusalem, there were three entrances. The eastern courtyard (about 67 by 36 feet), which had two additional entrances, was probably added at a later time.

Because Capernaum served as the base for Jesus' ministry, he would have spent a lot of time in the earlier first-century synagogue. Not only was this the place where he healed a man possessed by an evil spirit (Mk. 1:21-28), Jesus also delivered his "bread of life" sermon there (Jn. 6:35-59). Luke revealed that it was a Roman centurion who had built (or financed) the synagogue; Jesus healed this influential man's servant from a distance (Lk. 7:1-10). Apparently, not all Roman soldiers were antagonistic toward the Jews.



Artist's Reconstruction of Capernaum Synagogue: Two Story Prayer Hall with Eastern Courtyard



↑ South Side (Facing Jerusalem)

Inside Prayer Hall ↓





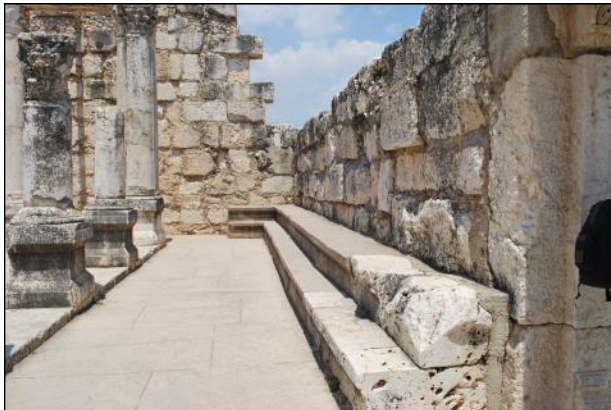
Pillars Along Northern Wall
(Right Pillar Has Greek Dedicatory Inscription)



Greek Inscription:
Herod son of Monimos
and Justus his son,
together with his children,
erected this column.



Aramaic Inscription:
Alpheus the son of
Zebidah the son of John
made this column.
May it be for him a blessing.



Benches Around the Walls of the Main Prayer Hall



Pillars of the Main Prayer Hall



Excavation of Floor Revealing Basalt Ruins of the 1st Century A.D. Synagogue



Exit from Prayer Hall to Eastern Courtyard (Excavation in Foreground)



Eastern Courtyard (Looking Northeast)



Eastern Courtyard (Looking Southeast)



Game Etched on Courtyard Floor

The synagogue was elaborately decorated on the outside, but not on the inside. Sections of stone from the structure are displayed around the excavated site of Capernaum. There was an elaborate entrance to the building. One stone has a carving of a Torah ark (although some interpret it as the ark of the covenant). It looks like a temple on wheels. Also visible are a star of David, a menorah, fruit, and geometric designs.



Peter's House. The house of Peter (and Andrew) was a very important place during Jesus' stay in Capernaum. It is where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, as well as the sick and oppressed of the city, demonstrating that he is the Son of God (Mt. 8:14-17; Mk. 1:29-31; Lk. 4:38-41).

For many years, archaeologists spent their energy excavating the synagogue in Capernaum. Later, some decided to dig within 100 feet south of the synagogue. They discovered an octagonal building dating from the fifth century A.D. (the Byzantine period). Many of these octagonal buildings were constructed in order to venerate particular holy sites.

Under this structure, the archaeologists found what they believed to have been a baptistry. They discovered the remains of a fourth-century building (25 feet by 27 feet). This structure had plastered walls decorated with pomegranates, flowers, crosses, a boat, and fish. It also had numerous inscriptions, which are written in Greek, Syriac, Aramaic, and Latin. One example reads, "Lord Jesus Christ help your servant." Other inscriptions contained the name of Peter, suggesting that this home had been associated with his memory in ancient times.

After further excavation, archaeologists discovered that this structure was originally a house which had two courtyards. A round oven was found in one of the courtyards, indicating that it was used as the main family room. The other courtyard may have been used for animals or as a work area.



Octagonal Basilica with Inner Sanctuary ("Peter's House")



Ruins of Octagonal Basilica ("Peter's House")



Mosaic Floor



Looking Down into Inner Sanctuary



Modern Sanctuary Built over Octagonal Basilica ("Peter's House")



Other Houses in Capernaum



The upper millstone of an olive press was often turned by a donkey. Jesus said, “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone [lit. ‘a millstone of a donkey’] hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (Mt. 18:6). The “sea” was a reference to the Sea of Galilee.



Olive oil would have ran down the channel of this stone, through the spout, and into the vat in the ground.



Two stones were used together for grinding grain. The lower stone (right) is cone shaped. The upper stone (left) would fit on top of it. The grain would have been sifted through the upper stone, which was turned by a wooden beam that fit in the square notch.



These stone jars are reminiscent of the ones in the story of the wedding feast at Cana. The ones at Cana were much larger, "each holding from twenty to thirty gallons" (Jn. 2:6).