

GALILEE & SEA OF GALILEE

Galilee. The name Galilee means “circuit” or “district” and refers to the hilly region of Israel north and west of the Sea of Galilee. In the Old Testament, this region is associated with the territory of Naphtali (Josh. 20:7; 21:32; 2 Kings 15:29). The name Galilee has a wider application in the New Testament, encompassing Upper Galilee (northwest of the sea) and Lower Galilee (west of the sea) plus the Plain of Esdraelon. In ancient times, this northern region was more exposed to foreign influences, especially with its various trade routes. Syria and Phoenicia lay to the north, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Samaria to the south, and Gaulanitis to the east. Due to these influences, the region was known as “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Is. 9:1; Mt. 4:14-16).

The Jews in Jerusalem and Judea (the south) sometimes looked down on the Jews in Galilee (the north) as being uneducated, country folks. One area of criticism involved the language of the Galileans. The Talmud says that the Judeans were concerned to preserve the beauty of their language, including the correct spelling and pronunciation of words. In contrast, the Galileans are portrayed as uneducated and unconcerned about such matters. Fun is poked at a Galilean. Since his speech was unclear and many words were similar, it was asked if he meant a “donkey” (*chamor*) for riding, “wine” (*chamar*) for drinking, “wool” (*'amar*) for clothing, or a “lamb” (*'immar*) for killing (Talmud *Erubin* 53a, b). This difference in language explains a scene in the Gospels. Whenever Peter denied Jesus, his speech betrayed the fact that he was a Galilean (Mt. 26:73; Mk. 14:70; Lk. 22:59). The Judean bias against Galilee is evident in the Pharisees’ question to Nicodemus, who had stood up for Jesus: “Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee” (Jn. 7:52).

Galileans were known for their patriotism and courage (Josephus *Wars* 3.3.2). The Jews in that region were more prone to uprisings against Rome than those in Judea. Pilate did not hesitate to kill some Galileans who had come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices (Lk. 13:1). Jesus was portrayed by the Jewish leaders as a revolutionary from Galilee who had come to Judea and Jerusalem, inciting the people to rebel against Rome (Lk. 23:5). A Galilean named Judas is described in the book of Acts as one who mustered a small army in an attempt to revolt (Acts 5:37).

The land of Galilee was known for its fertility, especially the Plain of Gennesaret west of the sea. When praising Galilee, Josephus said it was so fertile that it made even those who were lazy want to work (Josephus *Wars* 3.3.1-2). Crops grown in Galilee included wheat, barley, figs, grapes, pomegranates, olives, and vegetables.

Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is named for the region to the west of it. Several other names are also found in Scripture. It is called the Sea of Kinnereth (Num. 34:11; Josh. 12:3; 13:27). This term likely means “harp,” which may relate to the shape of the sea. A nearby town was called Kinnereth (Josh. 19:35). The sea is also known as the Lake of Gennesaret (Lk. 5:1), either after the Plain of Gennesaret (Josephus *Wars* 3.10.7-8) or a town by that name, both on the northwestern shore. It may be that the name Gennesaret is a Hellenized spelling of the Hebrew term Kinnereth. Finally, this body of water was known as the Sea of Tiberias (Jn. 6:1; 21:1). This name was derived from the capital city built on the western shore (A.D. 20).

Located about 60 miles north of Jerusalem, the Sea of Galilee is approximately 13 miles long (from north to south) and 8 miles wide (east to west) at the farthest points. The fresh water lake is about 630 feet below sea level. At times, the cool air rushes down the steep slopes of the surrounding hills and mountains to the surface of the lake. The warmer temperature rising above the waters meets this cool air, creating a wind tunnel. We read about such squalls on the sea, which threatened the disciples as they sailed in a small boat (Mk. 4:37; 6:48). Jesus demonstrated his mastery over the storm and the sea, proving himself to be the divine Son of God (Mk. 4:39; 6:51).

The Sea of Galilee is fed from the north by the rains and melting snow from Mount Hermon. In the past, this water first went to Lake Huleh. (However, this lake has been drained and is now a nature reserve.) Waters traveled from Lake Huleh into the northern section of the Jordan River, which in turn flowed into the northern inlet of the Sea of Galilee, renewing its fresh waters. Waters from the Sea of Galilee left the southern outlet into the Jordan River, which traveled down to the Dead Sea. An imaginary line drawn from the inlet to the outlet of the Sea of Galilee helps us understand the phrase “the other side” in the Gospels. If one sailed from the west side of this line, “the other side” would be east of it, and vice versa.

Many different species of fish can be found in the Sea of Galilee. This fact serves as the background for Jesus’ fish parable regarding judgment (Mt. 13:47-50). While the adjective “bad” (*sapros*) literally means “rotten” or “spoiled,” it can figuratively refer to that which is “bad” or “evil.” Since Jesus told about a fresh catch, it is unlikely that the fish were “spoiled.” Instead, “bad” probably refers to fish that were not kosher. Unclean fish had neither fins nor scales (Lev. 11:10, 11) and could easily be separated from the clean fish. The bad fish would have been thrown away, whereas the good ones would have been sold at market.

“St. Peter’s Fish” (tilapia) is sold today in restaurants around the Sea of Galilee. This label comes from the time Jesus sent Peter fishing, and he caught a fish with a shekel (*stater*) in its mouth (Mt. 17:24-27). Ironically, the kind of fish is not stated in the text. The *stater* was equal to a 4-drachma coin, which would pay the 2-drachma ($\frac{1}{2}$ shekel) tax for both of them.

The first disciples whom Jesus called were fishermen: Peter, Andrew, James, and John (Mk. 1:16-20). These two sets of brothers were small businessmen and partners. Jesus redirected their quest: “Come follow me . . . and I will make you fishers of men” (Mk. 1:17). They would rescue people from the abyss of sin and death, catching them in the gospel net of God.



Sea of Galilee in the Distance



Docking Area at Ginosar



Tour Boat on the Sea of Galilee



Mount Arbel from the Sea of Galilee



Tiberias from the Sea of Galilee



Tiberias from the Sea of Galilee



Golan Heights Across the Sea of Galilee from Tiberias