

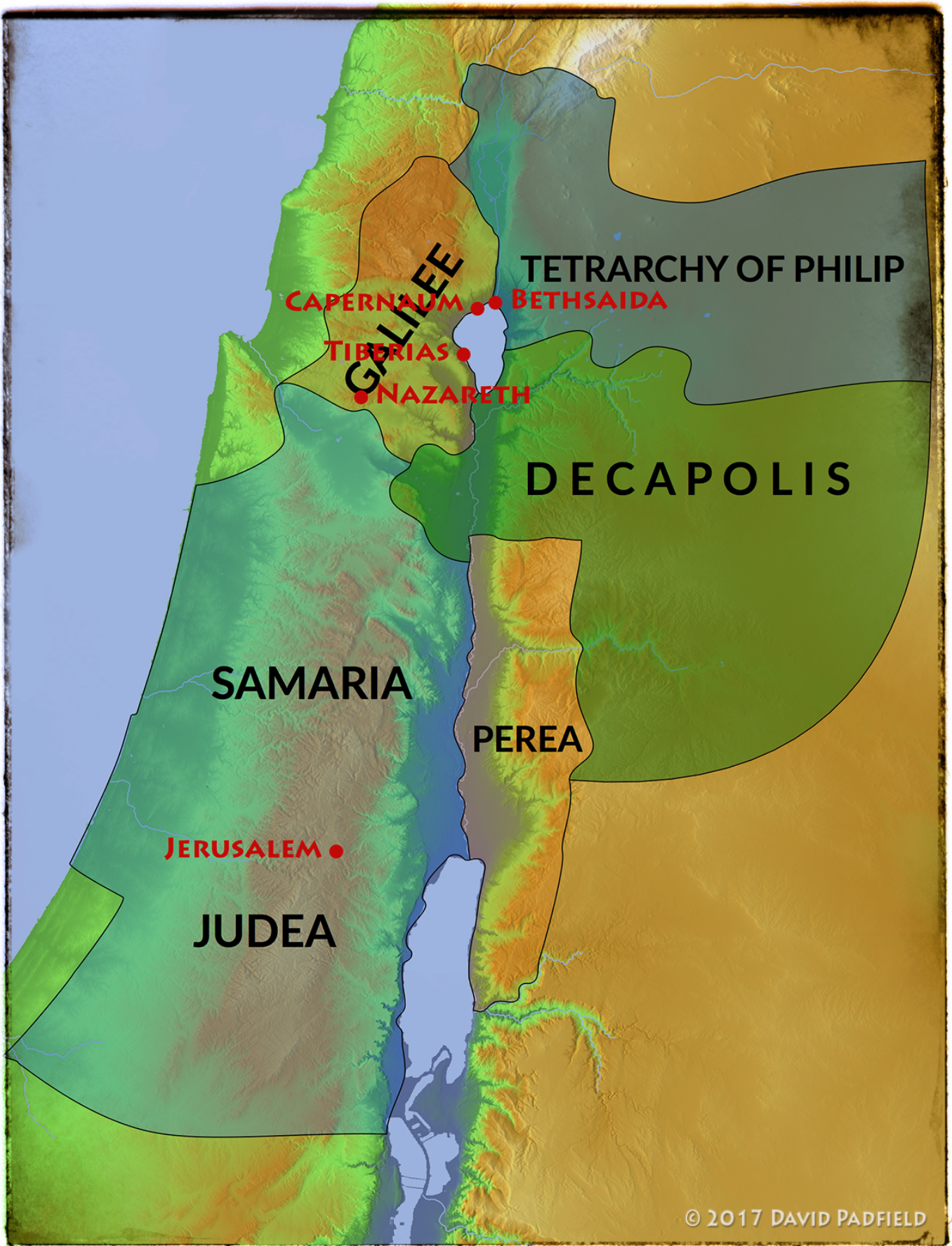
Capernaum



“Then they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught.” (Mark 1:21)

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CAPERNAUM • BETHSAIDA
TIBERIAS • NAZARETH

GALILEE

TETRARCHY OF PHILIP

DECAPOLIS

SAMARIA

PEREA

JERUSALEM •

JUDEA

Capernaum, The City Of Jesus

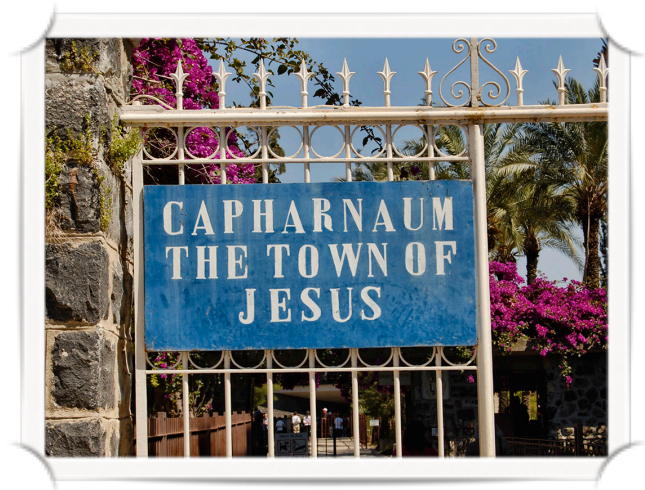
Introduction

- I. The city of Capernaum was a small fishing village on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, about two miles west of the Jordan River.
 - A. The Hebrew name for this village is *Kēfar Naḥum*, which means, “village of Nahum.”
 - B. While this ancient town is not mentioned by name in the Old Testament, it is mentioned sixteen times in the New Testament.
 - C. Matthew refers to Capernaum as our Lord’s “own city” (Matt 9:1), for it became the center of His Galilean ministry.
 - D. This is interesting since He was not born in Capernaum, His parents did not live in there, and He did not grow up there!
 - E. Jesus performed more miracles and preached more sermons in and around Capernaum than at any other place during His entire ministry.
 - F. The residents of this prosperous town were common people who made their living from fishing, agriculture, and trade.
 - G. The road leading to Damascus passed nearby, providing a commercial link with regions to the north and south.
 - H. Capernaum was also a garrison town, housing a detachment of Roman soldiers, under a centurion, along with government officials.
- II. It was in the vicinity of Capernaum that Jesus chose several of His apostles.
 - A. Peter and his brother Andrew (Mark 1:16–18).
 - B. John and James, the sons of Zebedee (Mark 1:19–20).
 - C. Matthew the tax collector (Mark 2:13–14).
- III. Jesus had often stayed in Peter’s house in Capernaum and preached in the synagogue there which had been built by a Roman centurion (Luke 7:5).
- IV. Because of its proximity to the *Via Maris*, Capernaum had a tax office over which Matthew had presided (Matt 9:9).
- V. Prior to His ascension into heaven, Jesus gave the Great Commission after the “eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them” (Matt 28:16).
- VI. Why was this city in Galilee so important in the first century?



I. The Way Of The Sea

- A. One of the greatest trade routes in the ancient world passed through Galilee.
1. The *Via Maris* led from Damascus, via Hazor and Megiddo, down the Mediterranean coast to Egypt.
 2. This road is referred to as “the way of the sea” in both the Old and New Testament (Isa 9:1; Matt 4:15).
 3. Merchants and traders throughout the world could be found there—the traffic of the world passed through Capernaum.
 4. “Capernaum sat on the International Highway running from Egypt to Babylon. Capernaum controlled trade along this route and would have added tax and tolls to travelers, traders and merchandise coming and going. This combined with the fishing industry and the industrial park’s manufacturing of equipment such as grinding stones and olive presses from basalt stone made Capernaum rich.” (Wiemers, *Israel Field Book*, 22)
 5. This helps us to understand how the fame of Christ was spread throughout Syria and “from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan” (Matt 4:23–25).
- B. “The city of Capernaum dates back to the 2nd century BCE, the time of the Hasmonean Dynasty. At the time of Jesus, Capernaum was a city of approximately 1,500—much larger than the small hamlet of Nazareth which may have had a population of only 400 people. Capernaum was also in close proximity to other Jewish towns and was conveniently close to the international trade route linking Damascus to the Mediterranean, the *Via Maris* as evidenced by the marble 2nd-century Roman milestone featured at the site.” (Dintaman and Landis, *Hiking The Jesus Trail*, 122)
- C. “Capernaum was a frontier town, not far from the Jordan and had, according to the latest estimates, between 1,000 and 1,500 inhabitants. A garrison of mercenary soldiers under the supervision of a centurion was also stationed there. They served Herod Antipas. The mercenaries were probably not Romans, but might have been recruited from Phrygia, Gaul or Germany. They protected the frontier, provided back-up for the tax collectors, who had to collect the prescribed duties and generally saw to public order. One of the duties of the publicans was to collect the dues for the fish caught in the lake, whose owner was the king. The custom house of the publican, Matthew, must have stood some place where the *Via Maris* passed close by the lake shore on the outskirts of the town.” (Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel*, 35)



- D. “Apart from Jerusalem, this is the most important of all the villages mentioned in the gospel accounts, for it was here that Jesus established his headquarters for the major portion of his public ministry. Three of his disciples were from Capernaum, and Peter and Andrew had evidently moved there from Bethsaida (Mark 1:29). According to archaeological investigations, the village spread out for a quarter of a mile along the lakeshore. It is probable that fishing was the major occupation of the inhabitants, and it is possible that basalt implements (e.g., olive presses and grain grinders) were produced there as well.” (Rasmussen, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, 209)
- E. “Observing how the Jewish leadership and Herod treated John the Baptist, Jesus strategically launched His own ministry in Galilee of the Gentiles, at Capernaum, which was ‘by the sea’ (Matt. 4:12–16; cf. Isa. 9:1–2). It was not without reason that the Lord had indicated to Abraham that he must settle on this narrow strip of land that joined three continents. For thousands of years travelers from Africa to Europe, from Asia to Africa passed along the *via maris*, the ‘way of the sea.’ Right by the locale of Capernaum they passed, and they continued to pass by throughout the days of Jesus. By inaugurating His public ministry in Galilee of the Gentiles along the major international trade route, Jesus was making a statement. This land would serve as a springboard to all nations. The kingdom of God encompassed a realm that extended well beyond the borders of ancient Israel. As Paul so pointedly indicates, Abraham’s promise from a new covenant perspective meant that he would be heir of the cosmos (Rom. 4:13). All nations, lands, and peoples would experience the blessings of this benevolent rule.” (Robertson, *Understanding the Land of the Bible*, 11)

II. The Selection Of The Apostles

- A. It was in the region of Galilee that Jesus began “preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God” (Mark 1:14–15).
1. Matthew points out that Jesus began His ministry here in order to fulfill Old Testament prophecy (Matt 4:13–16; cf. Isa 9:1–2).
 2. “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali” were portions of the Promised Land that had been given to those respective tribes during the days of Joshua (Josh 19:10–16, 32–39).
 3. Capernaum was in the tribal allotment of Naphtali.
- B. Jesus selected Simon Peter and Andrew, two fishermen, while walking on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:16–18).
- C. He also selected James and John, the sons of Zebedee, (Mark 1:19–21), though these two men were originally residents of Bethsaida (John 1:44).
- D. Matthew (Levi), the tax collector, was also selected by Jesus (Matt 9:9).
- E. Jesus taught the twelve in a house at Capernaum (Mark 9:33–37).

III. Our Lord's Miracles At Capernaum

- A. On one occasion, Jesus “went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught” (Mark 1:21-34; Luke 4:31-37).
1. Those in the synagogue “were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”
 2. Jesus also demonstrated His power to heal, for “in the synagogue there was a man who had a spirit of an unclean demon.”
 3. Witnesses of the miracle “were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, ‘What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him’” (Mark 1:27).
 4. As a result of this miracle, “immediately His fame spread throughout all the region around Galilee” (Mark 1:28).
- B. After leaving the synagogue, Jesus entered Simon’s house and found “Simon’s wife’s mother was sick with a high fever” (Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-39; Matt 8:14-15).
- C. A paralytic was let down through an opening in the roof (Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26).
- D. While in the synagogue on a Sabbath day, Jesus cured the man who had a withered hand (Mark 3:1-6; Matt 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11).
- E. The healing of “a certain centurion’s servant” (Luke 7:1-10).
- F. While Jesus was in Cana of Galilee, “a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum” came to Jesus for healing (John 4:46-53).
- G. It was on the Sea of Galilee “toward Capernaum” that Jesus walked on water (John 6:16-21; Matt 14:24-33; Mark 6:47-52).
- H. It was at Capernaum that Jesus had Peter pay the temple tax with a coin found in the mouth of a fish taken from the Sea of Galilee (Matt 17:24-27).



IV. Woe To You

- A. The residents of Capernaum had the privilege of witnessing more of our Lord’s miracles than any other city, yet they rejected His mission and remained unrepentant.
1. Even though this city had served as the center of our Lord’s earthly ministry it was doomed to destruction.
 2. After the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36), Jesus “appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go” (Luke 10:1).
 3. Jesus pronounced doom upon the inhabitants of the cities who rejected His message (Luke 10:13-15).
 4. The cities did not attack Jesus—they did not drive Him from their gates.
 5. They did not seek to crucify Him, they simply disregarded Him.

- B. In the middle of the 4th century A.D. the city was the recipient of a major, devastating earthquake—much of the area was completely leveled.
 - 1. In the 7th century A.D. another earthquake devastated the town.
 - 2. In the 11th century A.D. an earthquake devastated the town again, and was the fatal blow from which Capernaum never recovered—it was abandoned.

V. Capernaum Today

- A. Italian archaeologists excavated the site in 1981, though the first excavations took place in the 1920's.
- B. The remains of what was probably a first-century synagogue were discovered beneath those of a later, Byzantine-period synagogue.

- 1. The first-century structure archaeologists uncovered featured a basalt floor 60 feet wide by 79 feet long.

- 2. This was very possibly the synagogue at which Jesus taught (Mark 1:21).

- 3. “The synagogue at Capernaum is not the one where Jesus preached, but is likely to have been built on the same site.

There is now considerable controversy over the dating of the reconstructed synagogue. Since its discovery it has been accepted as being late 2nd or early 3rd century, but the more recent discovery of coins from A.D. 383–408 embedded in the mortar suggests that the building was actually erected in the late 4th or early 5th

century.” (Roberts, *Bible Then and Now*, 129)

- 4. “The site of Capernaum is known today as Tel Hum. Here archaeologists have discovered the remains of a Jewish synagogue that was built during the AD 300s. This is obviously not the synagogue in which Jesus taught and healed. But underneath this building they discovered the ruins of another synagogue from the New Testament era. These could be the foundation stones of the synagogue from Jesus’ time.” (Knight, *The Holy Land*, 251)

- 5. “The most magnificent and famous structure discovered along this main axis is its northernmost public building, the limestone synagogue, perhaps the most impressive in Israel. The limestone out of which this synagogue was constructed was not available locally and had to be transported into the village. Its architectural and stylistic features have led some scholars to contend that it dates to the second–third centuries, based on comparison with contemporary art and architecture found in Syria and Asia Minor. Both the numismatic and ceramic finds, however, indicate that it was in fact constructed in the late fifth or early sixth century.” (Mattila, “Capernaum, Village of Nahum, from Hellenistic to Byzantine Times,” 220)



6. “Two blocks away from the House of St. Peter is the synagogue, the most splendid of buildings to be found in Capernaum. It has a main prayer hall, a portico on the east side, accessible from the prayer hall, and, on the south, an independent porch, on the side that faces Jerusalem. The prayer hall has a broad nave and two narrow aisles, separated by elegant columns. The interior was plastered and colored, and ornamented with reliefs. The carved stone capitals of the pillars, the gables and the cornices are of a richness unexampled among surviving synagogues in Israel. Depictions of animals are common, but a Medusa and even a Roman eagle have been found among the carvings. There are also typical Jewish emblems: a *shofar* (ram’s horn), an incense shovel, and a *menorah* (seven-branched candelabrum); there is also a representation of the Ark of the Covenant, depicted as a Hellenistic temple on four wheels.” (Freeman-Grenville, *The Holy Land*, 157–158)
 7. “A most distinctive feature of the present synagogue is the absence of a Torah niche in the middle of the wall facing Jerusalem as was the usual practice in Roman-Byzantine synagogues. Interestingly, a fragment of a cornice presents the well-preserved sculpture of a Torah shrine on wheels. It may represent the biblical story of the Ark being carried on a cart (1 Sam. 6:11; 2 Sam. 6:3) or, more likely, it may represent a movable receptacle for Torah scrolls. According to some scholars... it could have been a practice that, in this type of synagogue, the Torah was wheeled in at the beginning of the worship service, symbolizing God’s presence. The destruction of the Temple by Titus in 70 C.E. may have led to the custom of keeping the Torah scrolls in a fixed place within the synagogue itself.” (Rousseau and Arav, *Jesus and His World*, 42)
- C. Simon Peter owned a home in Capernaum, which is mentioned several times in the New Testament (Mark 1:29–31; Matt 8:14–15).
1. A site that may have been the location of Peter’s house has been excavated—located just 84 feet south of the synagogue, at the bottom of three layers of construction.
 2. The topmost layer has been identified as the ruins of a fifth-century octagonal church; the second layer, a fourth-century house-church; and the lowest layer, a simple, first-century home.
 3. The house had narrow walls, which would have been too weak to support a second story or a roof of masonry—it probably had a roof of branches covered with earth.
 4. This house, or one like it, could have been the scene of Jesus’ healing of the paralytic man who was lowered through the roof (Mark 2:4).



5. “The house of Simon Peter was found in 1968 in the first campaign of the excavations. It is situated in the SE corner of a vast insula which extends from the shore of the lake to the Hellenistic *decumanus*. Its N side lies under the balcony of the synagogue; its E side faces an open area which adjoins the *cardo maximus* and to which reference is made in Mark 1:33 and 2:2. The archaeological finds show that this house had already been built in the Hellenistic period, and that therefore, Simon Peter must have acquired it when he settled with his clan at Capernaum. The entry to the vast dwelling was from the open space to the E. The plan of the house had three courts, around which were arranged the numerous living rooms. Among these rooms were two situated on the S side of the N court, which was the court into which one entered from the street. These two rooms were transformed in the apostolic period into a ‘house church’; here the excavators found part of the paving of the floor, which was surfaced with lime plaster—the same type of paving, in fact, which was found some years later in the triclinia of the palace of Herod at Macheron. The walls of the house—church were likewise covered with plaster and had painted decorations consisting of Judeo-Christian emblems. Christian pilgrims of the first centuries scratched on these plastered walls sacred and devotional graffiti in Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Aramaic.” (Corbo, *AYBD*, 1.867)
 6. “The house of St. Peter, often mentioned by the Synoptic Gospels in relation to the activity of Jesus in Capernaum, and recorded later on by pilgrims, was rediscovered in 1968 under the foundations of the octagonal church some 30 meters south of the synagogue. The history of that house where Jesus lived, can be summarized as follows: (1) the house was built in the Late Hellenistic period; (2) in the late first century A.D. it was changed into a ‘domus-ecclesia’, i.e. became a house for religious gatherings; (3) in the fourth century A.D. the same ‘domus-ecclesia’ was enlarged and was set apart from the rest of the town through an imposing enclosure wall; (4) in the second half of the fifth century A.D. an octagonal church was built upon the house of St. Peter and remained in use until the seventh century A.D.; (5) the identification of the house of St. Peter is based on the combination of archaeological data and literary sources which run side by side in a wonderful way.” (Loffreda, *Recovering Capernaum*, 51)
 7. A Catholic church building has been built over the ruins of this house.
- D. On display just outside the synagogue is a Roman milestone from the time of the Roman emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117–138), which was discovered in 1975.



- E. “On your way out, look for a fine olive-oil press and some small hand made mills made from hard and durable volcanic basalt. Its advantages over the limestone found in the rest of Israel gave the Sea of Galilee region the raw material for an important export commodity in ancient times: agricultural equipment. Such mills have been found as far afield as Masada, Jerusalem, and the Mediterranean coast. To the right of the olive-oil press is a capital of a column with Jewish symbols in relief—a seven-branched menorah, a shofar (ram’s horn), and an incense-shovel—of objects still in use—to preserve the memory of the Temple with which they were associated.” (Haberfeld, *Fodor’s Israel*, 268)



- F. In 1986 a drought brought the water level of the Sea of Galilee to record lows.
1. Two Israeli men spotted a plank from the first fishing boat ever found dating from the time of Jesus.
 2. After an 11-day excavation the boat was submerged in a preservative to keep its waterlogged timbers from disintegrating.
 3. The boat can be seen at the Yigal Allon Centre near the town of Migdal.
 4. The boat was about 27 feet long, used a seine net, and would have had four rowers and a helmsman.

Conclusion

- I. “It is often asked what good archaeology can do. At Capernaum at any rate it enables us to tread in the very footsteps of Jesus.” (Freeman-Grenville, *The Holy Land*, 159)
- II. Though the inhabitants of the city had heard the voice of Jesus they were under the judgment of God and destined for destruction.
- III. Hearing Jesus is not enough—we must obey Him (Matt 7:21-27).

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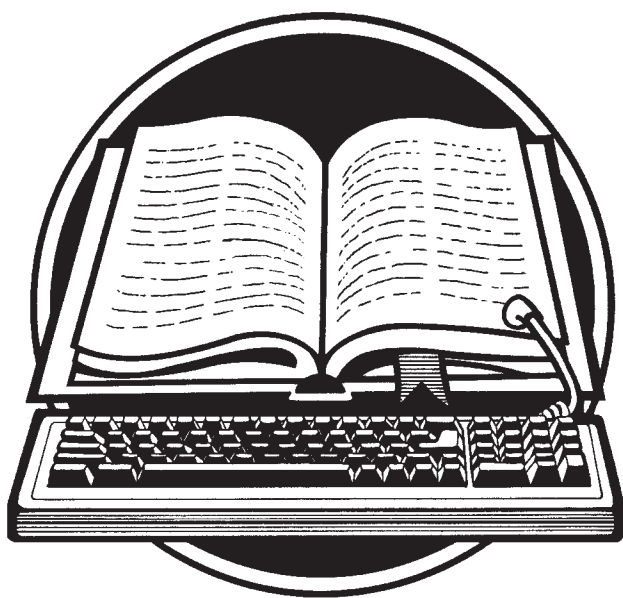
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