Sea of Gallee

BY BILL PATTERSON



Upper: Model of the Kinneret boat at Nof Ginnosar. The original, dating back to the time of Christ, was discovered by two brothers at Ginnosar near ancient Gennesaret, In Jesus' day, the Sea of Galilee was lined with about 16 fishing villages. Each town had its own harbor, making transportation easier and fishing an essential part of the local economy.
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB
SCHATZ/NOF GINNOSAR
MUSEUM, ISRAEL

HE WORD *GALILEE* comes from "galila" in the Hebrew ("Galilaia" in the Greek) and means "district" or "circle." The Sea of Galilee takes its name from the region and is also known by other biblical names including Sea of Chinnereth (Num. 34:11; Deut. 3:17; Josh. 13:27) or Chinneroth (Josh. 12:3, KJV), names derived from the Hebrew word for its harp-like shape; Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1; 21:1), after a capital city on the western shore; and Lake of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1), for the fertile plain northwest of the lake. The Sea of Galilee actually is not a sea at all but a freshwater lake 13 miles long, 8 miles across at its widest point, and 160 feet deep at its lowest point.

The Sea of Galilee is about 60 miles north of Jerusalem and at the bottom of a geological bowl, roughly 700 feet below the Mediterranean Sea (only 30 miles to its west) and is surrounded by hills and mountains. The cliffs of hard, porous basalt and the hot springs at Tiberias offer evidence that volcanoes formed this basin. When the cool air from the snowy peaks of Mount Hermon to its north crashes into the hot air rising from the valley lake, dangerous storms can suddenly emerge, such as the one described in Luke 8 that threatened to swamp the boat carrying Jesus and His disciples.

The Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee from the north and out at the southern end towards its final destination in the Dead Sea. In Jesus' day, populous fishing villages dotted the shores of the Sea of Galilee.² Jesus spent much of His ministry there. Capernaum, which during the ministry of Jesus was home of Peter and Andrew (Mark 1:29) and where Matthew collected taxes (Matt. 9:9), was on the northwest. Bethsaida, the original home of Peter, Andrew, and Phillip (John 1:44), and Chorazin were on the north. Gergesa and Hippos were on the east. Tiberias, the capital of Galilee, was on the western shore and three miles farther north was Magdala, home of Mary Magdalene. The fishing industry was an important source of income, and the exportation of fish from the Sea of Galilee was famous in the Roman Empire.³

Jesus called most of His disciples near the Sea of Galilee. Eleven of the twelve spent much of their lives in settlements near its shores.⁴ On or near this lake Jesus performed many of His miracles including feeding the five thousand (John 6), feeding the four thousand (Matt. 15), walking on water (Mark 6), calming the storm (Mark 4), healing the demoniac (Luke 8), predicting where disciples could cast their nets to catch many fish (Luke 5), and forecasting that Peter would pull up a fish containing the coin necessary to pay their taxes (Matt. 17). Major teachings such as the Sermon on the Mount

Right: Ruins of the Gergesa Church date from the Byzantine period. In the foreground is an olive press. At Gergesa, Jesus healed the demoniac.

Below: Basalt columns at Tiberias on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. About A.D. 18, Herod Antipas made Tiberias his capital city for Galilee. It remained so until about A.D. 61.



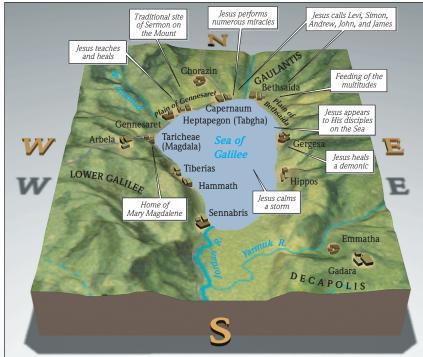


(Matt. 5–7) and a postresurrection appearance (John 21) occurred along the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

The people of the New Testament were influenced considerably by their geographical environment and especially by the Sea of Galilee. In Jesus' time, the Sea of Galilee served both as a vital water source in an arid area and an important food source. It was the fertile setting where Jesus carried out much of His early ministry.









Left: Located about five miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee, ruins at Gadara give evidence of the town's Hellenistic heritage. Shown is one of its three theaters. Pliny listed the Decapolis cities: Gadara, Scythopolis, Pella, Dion, Gerasa, Philadelphia, Raphana, Kanath, Hippos, and Damascus. The **Decapolis** cities formed a league of defense for early Christians facing persecution.

Imagine being beside Jesus as He prayed in the hills overlooking the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee while the sun set in the west (Matt. 14:22,23) or being with the disciples at the lake as Jesus called them to fish for men (4:18-20). From the Sea of Galilee came the means of making a living for an impoverished people. Beside it also came One who still brings the means of eternal living for a spiritually impoverished people.

- 1. Arthur M. Ross, "Galilee, Sea of" in *Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, Merrill C. Tenney, gen. ed. (Nashville: The Southwestern Company, 1976), 296.
- George Adam Smith, The Historical Geography of the Holy Land (New York: Ray Long and Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1932), 447. Smith believes the region of Galilee contained three million people and there were nine cities bordering the Sea of Galilee, each containing 15,000 people or more.
- 3. J. H. Patterson, "Galilee, Sea of" in *New Bible Dictionary*, J. D. Douglas, org. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 450.
 - 4. Merrill C. Tenney, New Testament Times (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 87.

Bill Patterson is pastor, First Baptist Church, Richland, Mississippi.

