

Gil Lain

# Early Ships and Boats



Fishing boats of the first century usually were equipped with both sail and oar, the paddle doubling at times as a rudder as reflected in this mosaic pavement from Sousse in Tunisia.



**Above:** Much of our knowledge about the sea-faring Phoenicians comes from their maritime artifacts, such as this bronze stamping seal.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/  
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/  
NEW YORK (345/14)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/  
FIELD MUSEUM/CHICAGO (368/32A)

The Jews of old regarded the sea as an enemy. The people they knew who lived on Israel's coasts (the Philistines and the Phoenicians) worshiped fish gods and goddesses. Israel had few harbors of her own on the Mediterranean. No visible island tempted the Israelites toward exploration. Scripture had little good to say about the sea and even included one horror story (Jonah).

The Jews of Jesus' day felt much the same contempt for the sea. Jesus Himself said it would be better for a person to have a millstone tied around his neck and be cast into the depths of the sea than to hinder a young believer (Matt. 18:6). The apostle John looked for a day when there would be no more sea (Rev. 21:1). To him (having been exiled on Patmos) the sea represented separation from friends and family.

In spite of these negative feelings toward their own participation in seafaring activities, the Jews, nevertheless, recognized the value of the sea for their own livelihood. Travel on the Mediterranean allowed countries from all over the known world to carry on trade with Israel.

The generally bad feelings about the sea also disappear with the mention of the Sea of Galilee. Although it is termed as a sea, it always has been more of a lake, only thirteen miles long and eight miles wide (at its widest).  
*(continued on page 7)*

**Lesson reference:**  
BBS: Matthew 14:29

**Below:** One of Jesus' more graphic warnings combined the sea and a millstone (Mark 9:42).

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/UNIVERSITY MUSEUM/  
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA (290/30)



(continued from page 3)

est point) and containing fresh rather than salt water. It, too, provided livelihood for countless Jewish people.

Most of the New Testament references to ships or boats on the Sea of Galilee occur in the Gospels. The more common word, *ploion*, (ship) is found fifty times. The less common word, *ploiaron*, is found six times. Although it is translated "little ship" or "boat," a usage comparison between *ploion* and *ploiaron* reveals very little distinction in size. All of the ships on the Sea of Galilee were relatively small.

Our knowledge of these fishing boats is limited somewhat. What we do know we have learned from three major sources: the Bible, fishing boats still found on the Sea of Galilee (most scholars agree that the basic structure of the boats has not changed significantly, even though motorized boats are popular today) and a boat believed to be from Jesus' day.<sup>1</sup> This third source of information is still in the process of being evaluated. Undoubtedly it will prove invaluable to our understanding of early ships and boats.

The boat was discovered by two brothers, Moshe and Yuval Lufan, who live in Kibbutz Ginossar. They had been working near the village of Magdala on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee when a tractor got stuck on the shore. While they were digging out the tractor, they discovered several valuable old coins. When they later returned to look for more coins, they noticed a curved piece of wood. As they began to dig around the wood, they soon discovered an ancient boat. Since the wood was soft and subject to damage, they contacted Mendel Nun, an authority on the Sea of Galilee. Nun helped organize a team to excavate the boat. They were able to bring the boat ashore in February, 1986.

Inside the boat they found a lamp which dated to the first century BC. Outside the boat they found a cooking pot from the same general period. Based on those finds researchers tentatively set the boat's age between the first century BC and the first century AD. It is the oldest boat ever found on the Sea of Galilee. Researchers attribute its survival to its having been covered completely by silt all these years. A fiberglasslike substance was sprayed on the boat to keep the wood from drying out and crumbling to dust. At this writing, work continues on ways to preserve the boat so that everything about it can be studied thoroughly at a later date.

All sources indicate that Galilean fishing boats were between twenty and thirty feet long and approximately seven feet wide. The boat found in 1986 was twenty-seven feet long and seven and six-tenths feet wide.<sup>2</sup> The boats were roomy enough to carry a load of fish and around a dozen men, and sturdy enough to withstand sudden storms. At the same time, they were small enough to be dragged up on shore.

These early boats usually were constructed with coniferous (cone-bearing) woods. Pine, cedar, and cypress were the most common woods used. The boat found in 1986 is made of pine.

Once the wood was selected the carpenter began working with an adze (a flat piece of iron bent to a sharp angle). This tool had a single cutting edge and a perpendicular handle. The adze especially was used to make curved forms. Additionally, the usual woodworker's tools were employed: the axe, the plane, all kinds of augers and drills, mallets and hammers, and of course saws, squares, plumb lines, and levels.

Unlike modern boats, few ancient craft had a keel. Instead, a rather fragile skeleton was covered with

planking, with a plating added inside the skeleton.<sup>3</sup> Where the wood was not notched, it was held together by wooden pegs or metal nails. The seams between the pieces of wood were eventually caulked, using some kind of vegetable-based material. The wood itself was smeared with tar or pitch. Treating the seams and the wood itself helped to prevent water seepage and discouraged marine bacteria from causing wood decay.<sup>4</sup>

Boats on the Sea of Galilee were used primarily for fishing (Matt. 4:21) but also for travel and trading between towns (Matt. 14:22-34). The Jewish historian, Josephus, reported over two hundred and thirty boats on the Sea of Galilee during the first century (*Wars* 2.21.8).

The boats were propelled either by a sail (Luke 8:23) or by rowing with oars (John 6:19). The sail was likely square or rectangular in shape and hoisted on a single mast. Normally the sail was made of several lengths of linen cloth sewn firmly together and reinforced by horizontal bands that were at times made of leather.

Oars usually were made from fir or pine. They were secured with tholepins when rowing and were used not only for propulsion but also for steering. The more convenient steering device, however, could be operated by a helmsman near the stern. Of course, what he operated was a rudder. A rudder was advantageous over oar-steering in that it impeded neither the forward motion nor the stability of the craft.

Other gear besides the oars and sail included anchors, nets, and cushions. The first and most common anchors were made of stone. Regardless of the shape, the anchor had at least one hole through which a strong cable was tied. Sometimes wooden anchors weighted with lead were used. Iron anchors were not uncommon in the first century, either. Josephus confirmed the use of an-

chors on the Sea of Galilee. (Wars, 3.10.1).

Certainly, different kinds of seines and nets were carried on these Galilean fishing boats. A boat normally had some extra space at the stern where nets could be stored quite easily.

A third piece of equipment might not be discussed in terms of gear were it not for the fact Jesus used it on occasion. Mark's Gospel records that once when Jesus and His disciples were on the Sea of Galilee, a storm arose. Mark 4:38 says that Jesus was asleep on a pillow. Some historians report that to mitigate the roughness of the beams or other seats within the boat, every rower was provided with a cushion.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the steersman sat on a leather cushion.<sup>6</sup> Noted scholar, William

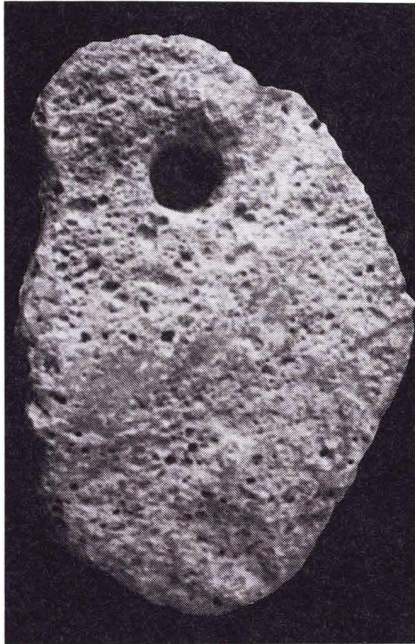
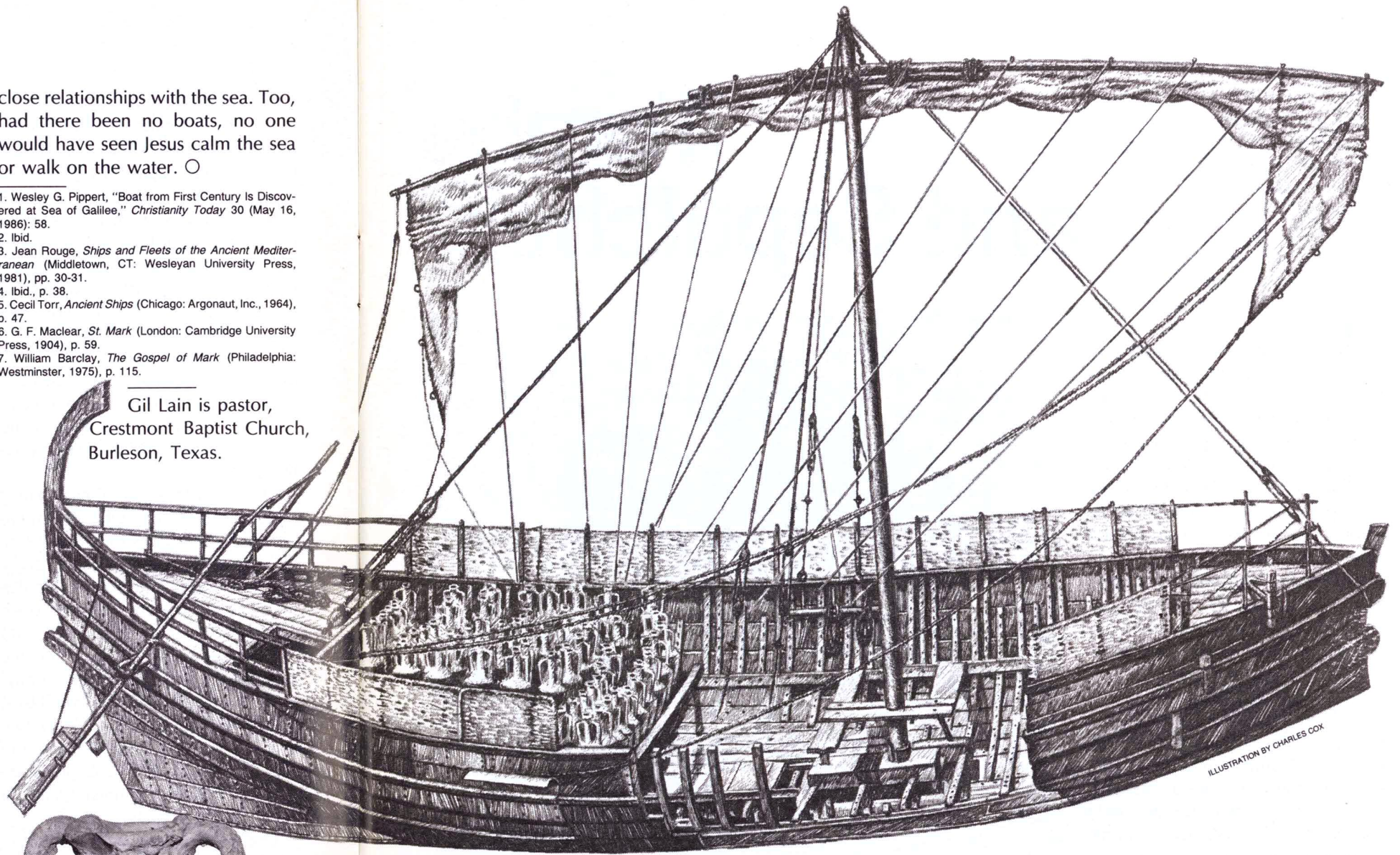
Barclay, said these boats had a cushion provided in the stern for distinguished guests to ride and rest, free from the wind and water.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the general disdain of the Jewish people concerning the vast oceans, it would be hard for us to imagine the Gospels without the Sea of Galilee. Many of Jesus' parables, examples, and disciples had

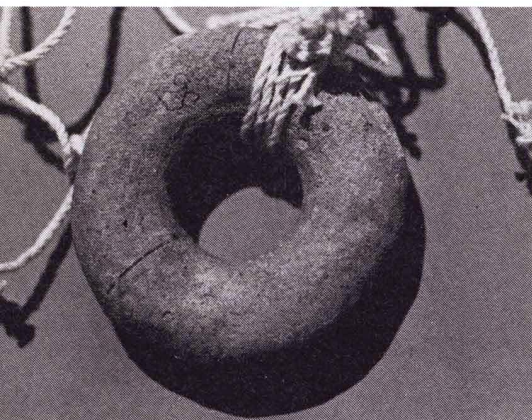
close relationships with the sea. Too, had there been no boats, no one would have seen Jesus calm the sea or walk on the water. ○

1. Wesley G. Pippert, "Boat from First Century Is Discovered at Sea of Galilee," *Christianity Today* 30 (May 16, 1986): 58.
2. Ibid.
3. Jean Rouge, *Ships and Fleets of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), pp. 30-31.
4. Ibid., p. 38.
5. Cecil Torr, *Ancient Ships* (Chicago: Argonaut, Inc., 1964), p. 47.
6. G. F. Maclear, *St. Mark* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1904), p. 59.
7. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 115.

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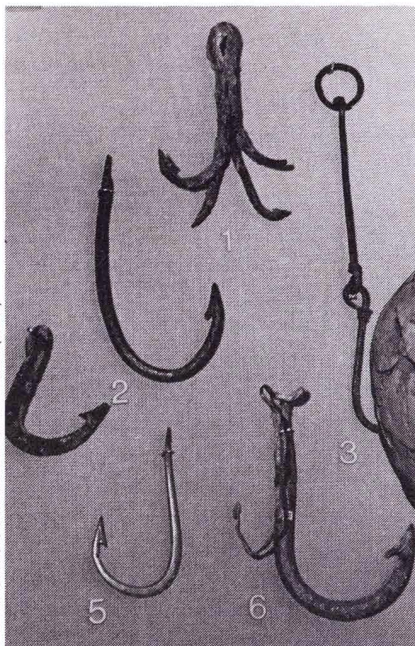
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KEN TOUCHTON/NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM/NAIFA (10/17/85-35A)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE/ THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO/CHICAGO, IL (440/11)

**Above:** Because metals were so precious in the first century, clay rings served as sinkers for fishing nets. **Above right:** This basalt anchor helped a boat mark its place on the Sea of Galilee in the first century.

**Right:** In addition to nets, a variety of hooks were used in early fishing enterprises. **Far right:** Cargo vessels carried liquids and grains in sturdy ceramic jars called amphorae.



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/MILWAUKEE PUBLIC MUSEUM/MILWAUKEE (87/932A)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/JAMES MCLEMORE (13/34/2)

**Left:** One of the major archaeological objects yet given up by the Sea of Galilee is this skeleton of a first-century fishing boat. **Above:** The cut-away drawing shows how many early boats were configured. Racks in the holds kept the pointed-bottom amphorae in place.