

Galilean Archaeological Sites and Settings

House of Mary in Sepphoris

Suba/Ein Kerem

Nazareth

Cana

Capernaum

Migdal/Magdala

Galilee in the 1st century CE was very much a Jewish enclave. We find very little evidence of Greco-Roman/pagan influence. Coins, frescos, and decorations never portray images of humans or animals, even under Herod Antipas. The various Jewish towns and villages appear to be thoroughly Jewish with stone vessels, *mikva'ot*, kosher food/slaughter, synagogues, secondary cave/ossuary burials, coins, mosaics, frescoes, and decorative styles reflective of Jewish sensibilities. Only outside the Galilee at Caesarea Maritima, Sebaste, and Caesarea Philippi/Banias did Herod build temples to Augustus and Roma.¹ It is also important to note that the major Roman road-building came during and after the 1st Revolt, judging from archaeological remains and milestones that are dated—predating the time of Jesus. Roman roads were primarily to move troops and facilitate Imperial business.

¹ Mark Chancey, "How Jewish Was Jesus' Galilee?," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 33.4 (Jul/Aug 2007): 42-50, 76.

Sepphoris

The ruins of the city of Sepphoris (Heb., *Zippori*) are located 6 km northwest of Nazareth on a hill rising above the Bet Netofah Valley. It was the administrative center of the Lower Galilee from the time of the Second Temple to the 4th century. According to an early-church tradition, it was here that Mary was born and the place her parents lived. At the foot of the ancient city, the Crusader Church of St Anne was built in the 12th century, dedicated to Anna, Mary's mother. The Church is in ruins today and only the eastern wall of the sanctuary survives now incorporated into the western wall of the modern Franciscan Monastery of the Sisters of St Anne. Beneath the medieval Church fragments of a mosaic floor of a synagogue with a 3rd or 4th century Aramaic inscription was discovered in 1908. It reads "Be remembered for good Rabbi Yudan bar Tanhum [bar Botah] who gave [this mosaic]" (*CIJ*, II, no. 857. In 1930 Sukenik found a burial cave with an inscription referring to a Rabbi Yudan, *CIJ*, II, no. 990).

Epiphanius names Sepphoris as among the places that the Judeo-Christian Joseph of Tiberias, authorized by Constantine, built churches around 330 CE (*Against Heresies* GCS I, p. 347). Epiphanius met Joseph as an old man (359 CE) and Joseph told him that in Tiberias, Sepphoris, Nazareth, and Capernaum there were no churches built before because there were no Gentile Christians, only Jewish "Christians," who would call their meeting places synagogues.

Ein Kerem/Suba

Nazareth

Nazareth (Ναζαρά, Ναζαρέτ/Ναζαρέθ cf. Ναζωραϊος/Ναζαρηνός) was a tiny village perhaps 150 people at most in the hills south of Sepphoris. It likely gets its name (“little Branch Town”) from Isaiah 11:1 “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a Branch (נצר) will bear fruit.” The Talmud recognizes this identification in that one of Jesus’ five students (*talmudim* or “teachings”) is called *Netzer*, based on Isaiah 11:1. The rabbis counter, yes, he is the *Netzer* but not of Isa 11:1 but of Isa 14:9 “You are thrown out, out of the grave like a despised shoot.” The Dead Sea Scrolls refer to their group as a whole as a “shoot (*netzer*) of an everlasting plant (1QH XIV, 18) and they often cite Isaiah 11:1 in the context of expectations of a Davidic ruler (4Q285 f7:3). The people as the “shoot” of God’s planning and the anointed one of the Spirit are closely related in Isaiah 60:19-61:4. The latter text is important in the Dead Sea Scrolls as a designation of the final “messianic” figure [Melchi zedek/ מלכי], the “anointed of the Spirit,” who is to come at a certain set time—the first week of the 10th Jubilee of a final 490 year period (11Q13). Luke 4:16-30 seems to reflect a scene where Jesus appropriates these texts to himself, his movement, and the “time” that is at hand. The setting is just after his baptism and retreat to the desert for 40 days. The Jesus movement is called the “sect of the Nazarenes (Ναζωραίων αίρέσεως) in Acts 24:5. Prophetically it is the “land of Zebulon and Naphtali,” “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Isaiah 9:1. The Nazarene “clan” or extended family of Jesus’ relatives settled there after the Babylonian exile—later called the δεσπόσυνοι. They were mainly from the villages of Nazareth (“village of the branch”) and Cochaba (“village of the star”—Num 24:17) according to Julius Africanus (Eusebius, *Church History* 1.7.14).

A martyr named Conon, an imperial gardener who died in Pamphylia under Decius (249-251 CE) declared at his trial: “I am of the city of Nazareth in Galilee, I am of the family (συγγένεια) Christ, whose worship I have inherited from my ancestors, and whom I recognize as God over all things” (*Mart. Conon* 4:2; Musurillo, 186-193).

The ancient village was nestled in the valley between the hills that run east-west, likely around the spring. Excavations have revealed remains of 1st century CE structures.² We know from the 1962 Caesarea inscription that the town is spelled with a Tzade not a Zayin—thus distinguishing it from Nazir or Nazirite (Numbers 6:1-21). Nazareth likely was affiliated with the larger village of Japhia (*Yafa*), a fortified city just to the southwest in the same range of hills. Josephus calls Japhia the largest village in Galilee with a dense population, fortified with a double wall. He says he settled there at one point and Vespasian captured the city shortly after Yosefat (Josephus, *Life* 230, 270; Josephus, *Jewish War* 3.289-306). Nazareth is listed in an inscription found at Caesarea as one of the towns of the 24 courses (משמרות/*mishmarot*) of the priests, that of Happizzes (1 Chron 24:15) who settled in Galilee after the Revolt. This identification is also found in the 6th century CE. Hebrew liturgical poem of Kalir.³ These sources also locate the priestly course of Eliashib at Cana and that of Jeshebeab, the fourteenth course, in Shikhin.⁴

² See James F. Strange, “Nazareth,” in *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods*, vol. 2, *Life, Culture, and Society*, ed. David A. Fiensy and James Riley Strange (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 167-180.

³ M. Avi-Yonah, “A List of Priestly Courses from Caesarea,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 12, no. 2 (1962): 137-39.

⁴ Samuel Klein, *Beiträge zur Geographie und Geschichte Galiläas* (Leipzig: R. Haupt, 1909), 66-67.

Cana

Cana as a significant operational center in the gospel of John is every bit as important as Capernaum in the gospel of Mark. The underlying narrative framework of John that scholars call the “Signs Source” clearly has Cana in Galilee as the operational HQ of Jesus. He and his disciples are invited to a wedding there where he performs his “water to wine” sign as the first of his career in John (John 2:1-12). Jesus’ mother clearly has familial connections to the host of the wedding. Although Jesus takes his mother, brothers, and disciples to Capernaum shortly after this scene they only stay there “a few days.” Their trip apparently has to do with gathering the brothers Peter and Andrew along with Philip who were all from Bethsaida, all of whom had been followers of John the Baptizer. Jesus has a baptizing mission of his own planned for the late spring and summer—after Passover (John 3:22-23; 4:1-3). Nathaniel (known as Bartholomew in the Synoptics, Mark 3:18; Matt 10:1-4; Luke 6:13-16; Acts 1:13-14) was from Cana and most probably provided the connection Jesus had to that city coupled with whatever relationship Mary had to the bridegroom at the wedding there—perhaps Jesus’ sister marrying into the family of Nathaniel (John 21:2). Jesus returns to Cana as his base of operations and extends himself to Capernaum—but from Cana (John 4:46; 6:17-59). Jesus pronounces “woes” upon Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida—the cities on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee (Q 10:12-15). The Signs Gospel implies a continuous stay in Cana.⁵

⁵ Peter Richardson, “What Has Cana to Do with Capernaum?” (*New Testament Studies* 2002:48: 314-331)

Josephus mentions Cana, Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Tarichaea (Magdala) in connection with the events of 66 CE, when Vespasian had arrived on the coast (*Life* 399-403). He made Cana his base of operations (*Life* 86; 207 “Plain of Asochis/Bet Netofa valley) and also says he lived at Shikhin (*Asochis*) (*Life* 384)

Excavations at Khirbet Qana reveal a thriving Jewish city in the Roman period.⁶ There are a significant number of Hasmonean coins found, a large necropolis, and a village with 60 cisterns, thickly populated, perhaps with 1200 people. The Mishnah text ‘*Ohalot* declares *Qeni* (קניי) as “clean” in terms of ritual purity based on Gentile dwellings (18:7-9). Later liturgical texts (6-7th century) locate the priestly course (*mishmarot*/משמרת) of Eliashib at Cana and an inscription from Caesarea, reflecting the situation after 70 CE. seems to give weight to this later identification.⁷

Capernaum

Given the recent drop in the water level on the Sea of Galilee (7 miles wide/12.5 miles long) the ancient harbors, piers, and breakwaters of the towns along the lake have been exposed. In the time of Jesus the water level was approximately 4 feet lower than today. At least 16 ports existed on the lake and the waters were bustling with hundreds of boats, most connected to the fishing industry. Capernaum had the largest port with a 2500 foot

⁶ Tom McCollough, “[Searching for Cana: Where Jesus Turned Water into Wine.](#)” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 41.6 (Nov/Dec 2015): 30–39 as well as his "Khirbet Qana," in *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods*, vol. 2, *Life, Culture, and Society*, ed. David A. Fiensy and James Riley Strange (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 127-145. Also see James F. Strange, "Cana of Galilee," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1. 827.

⁷ M. Avi-Yonah, “A List of Priestly Courses from Caesarea,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 12, no. 2 (1962):137-39

promenade and an 8 foot wide seawall and piers that extended 100 feet into the lake.⁸ The synagogue is also one of the largest we know from the period, indicating the importance of the town:

Synagogue	Width m/ft	Length m/ft	Area sq. m/sq. ft.
Capernaum 1st Century	18.5/60.7	24.2/79.4	448/4838
Magdala	7.3/23.9	8.1/26.5	59/637
Gamla	15.4/50.5	19.4/63.6	299/3229
Masada	12.8/42.0	16.3/53.5	209/2257
Herodium	12.3/40.3	16.7/54.8	205/2214

In the gospel of Mark (followed by Matt and Lk), Capernaum, the home of the brothers Peter and Andrew along with the sons of Zebedee, James and John, becomes a kind of HQ or base of operations for Jesus (Mark 1:21, 29; 2:1-12; 3:19; 9:33).

The Franciscans acquired the property in 1894 archaeologists have identified the remains of a 1st century house that is identified as that of Peter, or at least his in-laws, with an octagonal-shaped building identified as a 5th century Church built over it. Just 85 feet to the north, and facing Jerusalem, are the ruins of a munificent white limestone 3rd century CE synagogue—with the foundations of a 1st century synagogue below that.⁹

⁸ Mendel Nun, “Ports of Galilee,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 25.4 (Jul/Aug 1999): 18-31, 64.

⁹ Hershel Shanks and James F. Strange, “Has the House Where Jesus Stayed in Capernaum Been Found?,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 8.6 (Nov/Dec 1982): 26-37 and Hershel Shanks and James F. Strange, “Synagogue Where Jesus Preached Found at Capernaum,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 9.6 (Nov/Dec 1983): 24-31.

East of the excavated Franciscan property, on the Greek Orthodox property, recent excavations have revealed a military garrison with a Roman bath and nicer homes than those of the local village. This relates to the Centurion who built the synagogue and is so highly commended by Jesus (Luke 7:1-10; cf. John 4:46-54)¹⁰

Magdala/Migdal

Magdala/Migdal (מגדלא/מגדלה) known in Greek and Latin sources as Taricheae (Ταριχῆαι\Ταριχάϊαι) was a city of remarkable importance well established in the 1st century BCE when Hasmonean power extended into the Galilee.¹¹ Migdal-Nunia (“fish tower”) and Tarichea (“salted fish”) seem to pinpoint the essential idea behind the names in both Hebrew and Greek. Josephus describes the city in detail, including a sea-battle during the revolt (*War* 3.522-531). The city had walls and gates and included a hippodrome and baths. Josephus reports the population as 40,000 and his account of the sea-battle and its aftermath numbers casualties in the tens of thousands (6700 killed in the battle, 1200 subsequently by a tribunal, 6000 were sent to Nero to build the Corinthian canal, and 30,400 enslaved).

After 70 CE the priestly order of Ezekiel, the 20th, is identified with Migdal Nunaiya. The synagogue uncovered in 2009 is the most lavishly decorated of the period with mosaics a meander pattern and Pompeian style frescos associated with Herodian palaces and the priestly mansion in Jerusalem.

¹⁰ John C. H. Laughlin, “Capernaum: From Jesus’ Time and After,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 19:5 (Sept/Oct 1993): 54-61, 90.

¹¹ Stefano De Luca and Anna Lena, “Magdala/Taricheae,” in *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods*, vol. 2, *Life, Culture, and Society*, ed. David A. Fiensy and James Riley Strange (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 280-342.

Gennesar/גיניסר Ginnosar/גינוסר Gennesaret/Γεννησαρέτ D Γεννησαρ (Mark 6:53) the fertile plain to the north of Migdal (3.5 by 1.5 miles). Josephus waxes on about the lush fertility and beauty of the area (*War* 3.516-521). He mentions it 47 times by its Greek name Tarichea. 1 Macc 11:57 refers to Jonathan son of Matthias camping at the “water of Gennesar” before marching on Hazor. Josephus says the native inhabitants call the lake of Galilee (Kinneret) Gennesar (*Jewish War* 3.463). The term “Sea of Galilee” is a Christian toponym (Mark 1:16). Luke uses the correct word λίμνη (Lake) rather than θάλασσα (Sea) with Mark and Matthew, calling the body of water τὴν λίμνη Γεννεσαρέτ (Luke 5:1).

Genesis Rabbah 98,17 offers the etymology “Gardens of the Rulers” (שרים גני). Flusser argues that the Rabbinic suggestion of “Garden of the Princes” goes back to Maccabean claims of royalty.¹² The first two generations of Hasmonean priestly leaders did not take on the title of “king” but according to Josephus, Aristobulus (105-104 BCE), the eldest son of John Hyrcanus ((135-104 BCE), was the first to “assume the diadem,” leading to Alexander Jannaeus who clearly put on his coins the title “Yehonatan the King/βασιλέως Αλεχάνδρου (*Jewish War* 1.70). Josephus lavishing praises John Hyrcanus as the one who combined the “three highest privileges” that of “Ruler” (ἀρχή), high priest, and prophet. Full Jewish independence came with Simon, who according to

¹² See David Flusser, “Who Is the Ruler of Gennesar?,” in *Judaism of the Second Temple Period*, vol.2, trans. Azzan Yadin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press and Jerusalem Perspectives, 2009), 349– 50 and R. Steven Notely, “Genesis Rabbah 98,17 – ‘And Why Is It Called Gennosar?’ Recent Discoveries at Magdala and Jewish Life on the Plain of Gennosar in the Early Roman Period,” in *Talmuda de-Eretz Israel: Archaeology and the Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine*, ed. Steven Fine and Aaron Koller, *Studia Judaica* 73 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 149– 50.

Josephus removed the “yoke of the Gentiles” and was declared “ruler (ἡγεμόνων=שר) and high priest” by the great assembly (1 Mac 13:35-42). Accordingly, “Garden of the Ruler” or “Garden of the Prince” refers to Simon and his son Jonathan, taking on the title שר. The book of Maccabees was called in Hebrew אֵל בְּנֵי שָׂר בֵּית סֵפֶר / “Book of the Dynasty of the Ruler of the People of God.” We know that Alexander Jannaeus was brought up in Galilee from his birth (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.332). Notley, based on Flusser’s suggestion, concludes Ginnosar was a priestly area, also witnessed by the Menorah table found in the synagogue at Migdal.