



The Investigator's Gospel

An Eyewitness Journey Through Luke

Session 8 – Chapter 7b – The Land of Jesus

The Sea of Galilee

A freshwater lake nestled in the hills of northern Israel. Its surface is nearly 700 feet below the level of the Mediterranean, some thirty miles to the west. The nearby hills of Galilee reach an altitude of 1,500 feet above sea level. To the east are the mountains of Gilead with peaks of more than 3,300 feet. To the north are the snow-covered Lebanon mountains. Fed chiefly by the Jordan River, which originates in the foothills of the Lebanon Mountains, the sea of Galilee is thirteen miles long north and south and eight miles wide at its greatest east-west distance. Because of its location, it is subject to sudden and violent storms which are usually of short duration.

In the first century the Sea of Galilee was of major commercial significance. Most Galilean roads passed by it, and much travel to and from the east crossed the Jordan rift there. Fish was a major food in the area, and the fishing industry flourished because there was no other significant freshwater lake in the region. Capernaum, which played a major role in the ministry of Jesus, was a center of that industry. The other lake towns of importance were Bethsaida, which means "the fishing place", and Tiberias, a Gentile city constructed by Herod Antipas when Jesus was a young man.

Capernaum

Peter was living and working in Capernaum, a small fishing village on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus called him to become a "fisher of human beings" (Mark 1:17). The busy first-century harbour town was one of the largest and most prosperous of the dozen ancient harbours that were discovered around the Sea of Galilee during a severe drought in the mid-1980s.

At Capernaum, an 8-foot-tall seawall supported a 2,500-foot-long promenade. A series of straight, curved and wedge-shaped piers protected moored boats from the most dangerous winds on the lake. (Even today the Sea of Galilee—or the Kinneret, as the freshwater lake is known in Hebrew—is subject to sudden storms like the squall that nearly thwarted Jesus' boat crossing from Capernaum to the opposite shore [Mark 4:37].)

Capernaum's location may have resulted in its relative prosperity. The town was the first fishing village over the border that divided the territory east of Galilee, controlled by Herod's son Philip, from Galilee, ruled by Herod's son Antipas. The only place on the lake with a factory for pickling fish for long-distance export was Magdala, also in Antipas's jurisdiction. (Pickled fish sauce from Magdala found its way to Rome, according to the historian Strabo). Fishermen from outside the territory had to pay a tax when bringing their catch across the border. The disciples who settled in Capernaum—Peter, Andrew, John and Zebedee—may well have moved there in order to avoid the tax. Despite being businessmen, Peter and John are persons "unlettered" (agrammatōi) and "unskilled in speaking" (idiōtai) as Luke puts it in Acts 4:13.

There is, perhaps, one possible indication of Peter's wealth: The house that early Christian tradition identifies as "Peter's House" is larger than most other first-century Capernaum homes. Peter's house was large but otherwise typical: a one-story, thatched-roof, stone house built around an irregularly shaped courtyard.

Excavations of the house indicate that its largest room was converted into a public gathering place sometime in the mid-first century. The walls were plastered, as was common in public halls, and the domestic pottery was replaced with oil lamps and storage jars. If indeed the room was used by Jesus' followers, this is our earliest archaeological evidence of Christian gatherings.

By the fourth century, the room was clearly used as a church. Pilgrims drew crosses on the walls and scribbled messages like: “Lord Jesus Christ help thy servant ...” and “Christ have mercy.” In the fifth century, a much more elaborate church in the form of three concentric octagons (visible in the photo) was constructed, still centered around the original room. Byzantine Christians built octagonal churches to commemorate sites believed to be of special importance in Christian history; the octagonal Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, built in the fourth century over the cave believed to be the place of Jesus’ birth, is another example. That the tradition of venerating this one Capernaum dwelling begins so early—within living memory of the gospel events—suggests that this is one of the gospel sites well attested by archaeology.

The Decapolis

A district containing ten cities in the NE part of Galilee, near the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:25; Mark 5:20; 7:31). The cities were Scythopolis (Beit She’an), Hippos, Gadara, Pella, Philadelphia, Gerasa, Dion, Canatha, Raphana, and Damascus. Damascus is the only one still functioning as a city. They were built originally by the followers of Alexander the Great and rebuilt by the Romans in 65 BC, by whom they had certain privileges conferred upon them. These were typical Greco-Roman cities with their forums, pagan temples, baths, theaters, hippodromes, and other accoutrements. They were a thorn in the side of the Jews because they introduced elements of non-Jewish life-style and architecture into Palestine during the Roman period. The excavations at Beit She’an especially illustrate the nature of these cities.

Caesarea Philippi

Situated 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee and at the base of Mt. Hermon, Caesarea Philippi is the location of one of the largest springs feeding the Jordan. This abundant water supply has made the area very fertile and attractive for religious worship. Numerous temples were built at this city in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Apparently known as Baal Hermon and Baal Gad in the Old Testament period, this site later was named Pnias after the Greek god Pan who was worshiped here.

The spring emerged from the large cave which became the center of pagan worship. Beginning in the 3rd century B.C., sacrifices were cast into the cave as offerings to the god Pan. Adjacent to the sacred cave is a rocky escarpment with a series of hewn niches. We know that statues of the deity were placed in these niches by depictions of such on coins of the city.

Caesarea Philippi became a center of Greek-Roman culture, a city known for its pagan worship, its prestigious status as the capital city of Herod Philip’s domain, and its significant Gentile population. A large shrine to Augustus (as “Son of a God”) was constructed there. References to “the district of Caesarea Philippi” (Matt 16:13) and “the villages of Caesarea Philippi” (Mark 8:27) reflect the city’s status as the power center of Philip’s territory. These factors, together with the sheer rock cliff at the worship site, made this an ideal place for Jesus to make His historic announcements.

Peter’s declaration, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” challenged the gods in the niches of the cliff and their devotees who worshiped these gods as though they actually existed.

If Jesus were standing with His disciples in front of this sheer cliff, it would explain His use of the metaphor “rock” used in His conversation with Peter. The word He used was “petra,” a term that would be used to describe such a bluff.

Jerusalem in the Days of Jesus

The Temple Steps

The western flight of stairs leading to the main entrances of the Temple Mount was 200 feet wide. Excavators uncovered the easternmost part of this staircase with its alternating long and short steps. This is mentioned frequently as a site where Jesus taught large groups of people.

The Pool of Siloam

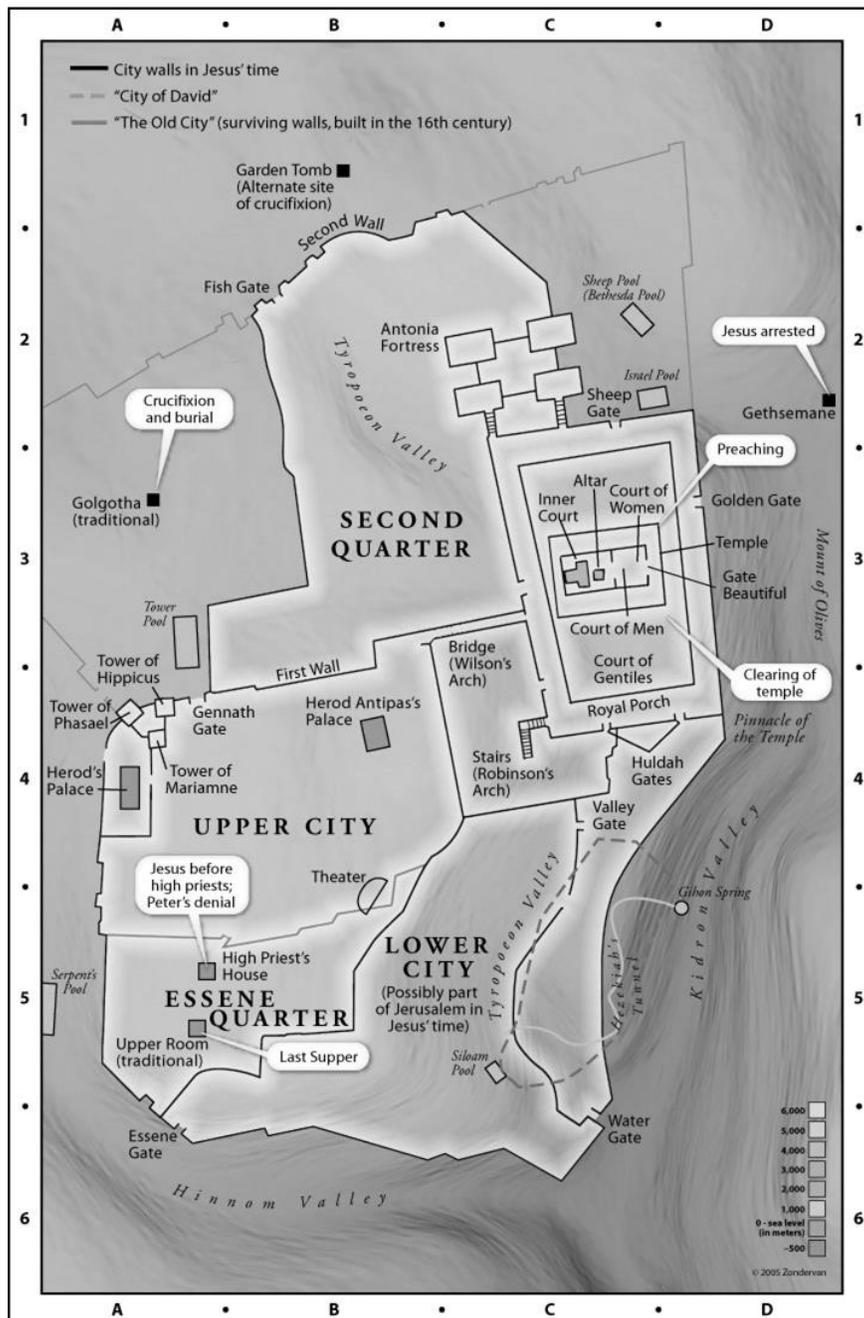
The Pool of Siloam, where Jesus ordered a blind man to go to wash mud out of his eyes, lay undiscovered until 2004. Then a drainage repair crew, working on pipe maintenance, uncovered large stone steps that had led to an ancient pool dating from the first century BC. Until then, a much smaller pool 50 metres north-west, at the end of Hezekiah's Tunnel, had been regarded as the Pool of Siloam. The actual pool had been destroyed by the Romans around AD 70 and gradually covered by debris. It was fed by water from Hezekiah's Tunnel, through a channel leading from the smaller pool.

The Upper Room

The Cenacle room on Mt Zion in Jerusalem is where two major events in the early Christian Church are commemorated: The Last Supper and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the apostles. The Cenacle is on the upper floor of a two-storey building near the Church of the Dormition, south of the Zion Gate in the walls of Jerusalem's Old City. Archaeological research shows it is constructed on top of a church-synagogue built by the first-century Jewish-Christian community of Jerusalem. A fragment of plaster has been found with a sentence beginning "O Jesus, that I may live . . ." This would have been the first Christian church.

The Mount of Olives

The Mount of Olives, a long ridge to the east of Jerusalem, is the location of many biblical events. At 820 metres, it is Jerusalem's highest peak and offers an unrivalled vista of the Old City and its environs. The ridge, also called Mount Olivet, takes its name from the fact that it was once covered with olive trees.



In the Old Testament, King David fled over the Mount of Olives to escape when his son Absalom rebelled (2 Samuel 15:30). Ezekiel had a vision of “the glory of the Lord” ascending from the city and stopping on the Mount of Olives (Ezekiel 11:23). Zechariah prophesied that in the final victory of the forces of good over the forces of evil, the Lord of hosts would “stand on the Mount of Olives” and the mount would be “split in two from east to west” (Zechariah 14:3-4).

Jesus often travelled over the Mount of Olives on the 40-minute walk from the Temple to Bethany. He also went there to pray or to rest. He went down the mount on his triumphal entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, on the way weeping over the city’s future destruction (Luke 19:29-44). In a major address to his disciples on the mount, he foretold his Second Coming (Matthew 24:27-31). He prayed there with his disciples the night before he was arrested (Matthew 26:30-56). And he ascended into heaven from there (Acts 1:1-12).

In Jewish tradition, the Messiah will descend the Mount of Olives on Judgement Day and enter Jerusalem through the Golden Gate (the blocked-up double gate in the centre of the eastern wall of the Temple Mount, also known as the Gate of Mercy, or the Beautiful Gate). For this reason, Jews have always sought to be buried on the slopes of the mount. The area serves as one of Jerusalem’s main cemeteries, with an estimated 150,000 graves.

The Arrest

The garden of Gethsemane, near the foot of the Mount of Olives, is named in the New Testament as the place where Jesus went with his disciples to pray the night before he was crucified. The garden, about 1200 square metres in area, was well known to the disciples as it is close to the natural route from the Temple to the summit of the Mount of Olives and the ridge leading to Bethany. The name in Hebrew means “oil press”. Oil is still pressed from the fruit of eight ancient and gnarled olive trees that give the garden a timeless character.

Beside the garden is the Church of All Nations, built over the rock on which Jesus is believed to have prayed in agony before he was betrayed by Judas Iscariot.

About 100 metres north of the church is the Grotto of Gethsemane, where Jesus and his disciples often camped at night. In this natural grotto, it is believed, the disciples slept while Jesus prayed, and Jesus was betrayed by Judas and arrested.

The Trial

Built on an almost sheer hillside, the Church of St Peter in Gallicantu stands on the eastern slope of Mount Zion. On its roof rises a golden rooster atop a black cross - recalling Christ’s prophesy that Peter would deny him three times “before the cock crows”. Galli-cantu means cockcrow in Latin.

The scene of Peter’s disgrace was the courtyard of the high priest Caiaphas. Built over the ruins of a Byzantine basilica, St Peter in Gallicantu stands on the likely site of the high priest’s house. Under the church is a dungeon thought to be the cell where Jesus was detained for the night following his arrest.

The Crucifixion and Tomb of the Resurrection

Contained within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the place of the Crucifixion, “Golgotha,” is a spur of limestone still standing two stories high. A short distance away is the remains of the Tomb given for the use of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea. Originally outside the city walls, the expansion of the walls 10 years after the Crucifixion and Resurrection brought the area inside the city. Following the destruction of the city by the Romans in 135, a pagan temple was built over the area. The Christian community continued pilgrimage to the site, which was finally excavated in 316 by order of Constantine, and a church constructed over Golgotha and the Tomb. There is compelling archaeological, historical and literary evidence for the veracity of this location.

