Synagogue and Peter’s House in Capernaum

Introduction

Capernaum is an ancient fishing village on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee in Israel. It is home to a celebrated Byzantine-era synagogue as well as the house where Jesus healed a paralytic and St. Peter’s mother-in-law.

In the Bible

Capernaum is frequently mentioned in the Gospels and was Jesus' main base during his Galilean ministry. It is referred to as Jesus' "own city" (Mt 9:1; Mk 2:1) and a place where he lived (Mt 1:13). He probably chose it simply because it was the home of his first converts, Peter and Andrew (Mk 1:21, 29).

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law....

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up." (Mark 1:21-22, 29-30)

Many familiar Gospel events occurred in this village. Capernaum is where Jesus first began to preach after the Temptation in the wilderness (Mt 1:12-17) and called Levi from his tax-collector’s booth (Mk 2:13-17). It was while teaching in the synagogue of Capernaum that he said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (Jn 6:54)
Capernaum is where Jesus healed a centurion’s servant without even seeing him (Mt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10), Peter’s mother-in-law (Mt 8:14-15; Mk 1:29-30); the paralytic who was lowered through the roof (Mk 2:1-12), and many others who were brought to him (Mt 8:16-17). And it was Capernaum that Jesus had set out from when he calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mt 8:23-27).

Jesus was harsh with his adopted home when it proved unrepentent despite his many miracles. "And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you" (Mt 11:23-24).

**Authenticity**

It is actually quite likely the room enshrined within the church of Capernaum is the house of Peter where Jesus stayed. This is supported primarily by evidence for very early reverence and public use of the house (mid-1st century), which would be difficult to explain otherwise. Moreover, the identification is not contradicted by anything found in the excavations and the evidence actually conforms quite closely to the biblical descriptions. Read on for more details.

**History**

Now predominantly an archaeological park, Capernaum was originally a fishing village inhabited continuously from the 1st century BC to the 13th century AD. As the first town encountered by travelers on the other side of the Jordan, it was equipped with a customs office and a small garrison overseen by a centurion.
Christian presence is attested early in Capernaum and the village was predominantly Christian by the 4th century AD. Rabbinic texts from the 4th century imply considerable tension between the Jewish and Christian communities of the town.

Both the church and synagogue were destroyed prior to the Islamic conquest in 638. One possible scenario is that the Persian invasion of 614 gave the Jews the opportunity to act on their resentment of the now-powerful Christian community and demolish the church. In 629, the Byzantine emperor and his troops marched into Palestine, and under this protection the Christians may have destroyed the synagogue.

After the conquest, the village shifted east, where houses, a jetty, a fish market and a church dedicated to St. John Theologos existed until the mid-10th century. The town's prosperity was badly affected by an earthquake in 746 and never recovered.

In the Crusader period, Capernaum was all but abandoned. The site was too exposed for Crusaders to safely build there, despite their considerable interest in its religious importance. In the 13th century, a visitor reported that "the once renowned town of Capernaum is at present just despicable; it numbers only seven houses of poor fishermen."

The site remained virtually abandoned until the Franciscans bought the land in the late 19th century. They raised a fence to protect the site, planted palms and eucalyptus trees from Australia to create an oasis for pilgrims, and built a small harbor. Most of the early excavations (1905-26) and restorations were conducted by Franciscans. St. Peter's House was discovered in 1968.
In 1990, the Franciscans built an unusually-shaped modern church over the site of St. Peter’s house. Hexagonal in shape and rather spaceship-like in appearance, it is elevated on pillars and has a glass floor, so that visitors can still see the original church below. In March 2000, Pope John Paul II visited Capernaum during his visit to the Holy Land.

**Synagogue**

The synagogue of Capernaum is located just inland from the shore with its facade facing Jerusalem. It has been difficult to date, with scholarly opinion ranging from the 2nd to 5th centuries. It stands on an elevated position, was richly decorated and was built of imported white limestone, which would have contrasted dramatically with the local black basalt of the rest of the village. All of this would have given the building great beauty and status.

The "white synagogue" has a basilica-type plan, with a small terrace on the front (south) and a court on the east side. All three entrances are in the south wall; the other walls were lined with columns supporting the roof. A side door in the east wall leads to a courtyard used for community purposes.

Precise dating of the synagogue has proved problematic for several reasons. Aspects of its style suggest a date of c.200 AD and its orientation to Jerusalem also suggests an early date, yet coins and pottery were found under the floors that date from the 5th century. The diverse architectural elements found in the ruins make it difficult to reconstruct coherently. And unusually, it has 12 doors instead of the usual three or four.

One possibility is that it was built at an early date, and the 5th-century artifacts derive from later repair work.
Another suggestion has been that up to four successive synagogues stood here in the 2nd-4th centuries, then dismantled in the 5th century by Christians who rebuilt a pilgrim shrine on the site. This would have occurred at around the same time that a prominent new church was built nearby.

Significant to this discussion is a layer of black basalt foundations beneath the white synagogue. The excavators believe this is the synagogue where Jesus taught and cast out demons (as indicated by the sign on the site, right).

In 381, the pilgrim Egeria said she visited "the synagogue where the Lord cured a man possessed by a devil. The way in is up many stairs, and it is made of dressed stone."

She clearly visited the white synagogue that post-dates Jesus, but this was perhaps built by Christians, or at least taken over by them, for veneration of the "synagogue of Jesus" that lay underneath. Local Christians seem to have preserved the house of St. Peter from an early date (see below); it is reasonable they would have remembered the site of Jesus' synagogue as well.

**Church**

The church of Capernaum was founded on the traditional site of St. Peter's home. Closer to the shore than the synagogue, the house was in a poor area where the drystone basalt walls would have supported only a light roof (which suits the lowering of the paralytic in Mk 2:1-12) and could have no windows.

The floors of these houses and courtyards were made of black basalt cobbles, in which it would have been easy to lose a coin (Lk 15:8).

By the mid-1st century AD, there is evidence that one room in this complex was singled out for public use: pottery and lamps replace utensils of normal family use, and there is ancient graffiti in the plastered walls, some of which mention Jesus as Lord and Christ.

The house was certainly a church by the time Egeria made her pilgrimage in 381, which she said included the original walls: "In Capernaum the house of the prince of the apostles has been made into a church, with its original walls still standing."

Archaeological excavations indicate it was indeed around this time that the room was given a more solid roof, which required the addition of a central arch, and two rooms were added on the two sides. This was probably the work of Count Joseph of Tiberias, a converted Jew, who obtained authority from Emperor Constantine to erect churches in Capernaum and other towns of Galilee.

In the 5th century, the site was razed to the ground and a grander church was built in its place, indicating increased Christian population and pilgrimage to Capernaum. The new church was octagonal in shape and had an ambulatory; this layout is identical to churches of the same type in Italy and Syria and similar to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (built later).
The central octagon enshrined the venerated room from Peter's house, which was given a floor mosaic featuring a peacock and a lotus-flower border. An apse with a baptistery was soon added on the east end. In 570, the Placenza pilgrim reported that "the house of St. Peter is now a basilica."

**What's to See?**

The ruined synagogue and church (described above) stand quite close to each other near the shore, with ruins of 1st-to-6th-century houses in between. Also on the site are finely carved stones that belong to the synagogue (included one with a Star of David), and a new Greek Orthodox church nearby.