

Sea of Galilee

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GALILEE, SEA OF [Gk *hē thálassa tēs Galilaias*]. The most common name in the Gospels for that lake where so much of Jesus' ministry took place, taken from the district in which it was located (Mt. 4:18; 15:29; Mk. 1:16; 7:31; Jn. 6:1). It was also named for the fertile plain at the northwest shore, i.e., "the waters of Gennesaret" (1 Macc. 11:67), and thus once in the NT it is called "the lake of Gennesaret" (Lk. 5:1). Josephus consistently uses "Genesar." In addition it was called the "Sea of Tiberias" (Jn. 6:1; 21:1), a name derived in NT times from the capital city built by Herod Antipas on the western shore. Sometimes it is simply called "the sea" (Gk *thálassa*, e.g., Jn. 6:16) or "the lake" (Gk *límñē*, e.g., Lk. 5:2). The Arabic name used today is *Baḥr Ṭabarīyeh*.

In the OT it is called "the Sea of Chinnereth" (Heb *yam-kinneret*, Nu. 34:11; Josh. 13:27) and "the Sea of Chinneroth" (Heb *yam-kinnerot*, Josh. 12:3). In Hebrew and Aramaic *yam* can mean both lake and sea, as is the case also with Gk *thálassa*. The name appears to have been taken from an ancient Canaanite town (Josh. 11:2; 19:35; 1 K. 15:20), which has been identified with Tell el-'Oreimeh, near the northwest shore. The lake formed a part of the boundary of the Promised Land (Nu. 34:11) and of the territory of the Gadites (Dt. 3:12; Josh. 13:27) and was mentioned in connection with the borders of the conquered Amorites (Josh. 12:3). Chinnereth means "harp" or "lyre" and perhaps is derived from the hill of Tell el-'Oreimeh, which resembles an ancient harp. This is more likely than the notion that the town took its name from the lake, which itself is shaped roughly like a harp. (See also CHINNERETH).

I. General Description

The lake is 21 km (13 mi) long and about 13 km (8 mi) wide at the point of greatest breadth. It

is pear-shaped, with the narrow end pointing south and a decided bulge to the northwest. The sea lies in the deep trough of the Jordan Valley with its surface 212 m (696 ft) below sea level. Due to this position it is for the most part surrounded by only a narrow ribbon of plain. Its greatest depth is over 46 m (150 ft). The lake is fed by the Jordan River flowing down from Lake Huleh in the north, as well as by underground streams. The water is clear and sweet, and fish abound.

The north end of the lake is open, with the hills about 3 km (2 mi) distant and green slopes stretching down to the water. On the northwest shore is the plain of Gennesaret. To the south, beginning in the vicinity of Tiberias, there are dark cliffs with only a narrow coast. At the south end the coast widens and the area becomes open once again. The east side of the sea is characterized by a wall of sharply rising hills that form the edge of the Jaulan Plateau (Gaulanitis). The main formation is limestone covered by a layer of basalt. The coast running along the east side is about 1 km (1/2 mi) wide and well watered. This plateau, about 610 m (2000 ft) above the lake, caused most of the life and activity to be confined to the west side. For those living on the east shore, commerce was easier with the towns across the lake than with the villages on the plateau. The shore on both sides is fertile, and water for irrigation is available from springs. There is large-scale agricultural activity around the lake now, although in previous years barrenness and desolation marked the area. Thus today the country is taking on more of the appearance of Jesus' time, when it was the center of industry and commerce in Galilee. See Plate 17.

The climate is semitropical. In the winter the hills and shores surrounding the lake are green, but during the summer the district becomes arid. During May and June the temperature rises as high as 40°C (104°F) in the shade, and by August the heat can become unbearable. The difference in temperature between the surface of the sea and the high surrounding mountains makes it liable to sudden and violent storms, as the cool air from the uplands sweeps down the

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gorges and upon the surface of the water. The Gospels mention two such storms (Mt. 8:24 par; 14:24 par).

II. Cities and Industry

In the NT period cities of considerable size and importance surrounded the lake. The Gospels do not mention two of the busiest centers, Tarichea and Tiberias. Tarichea means “preserving” or “pickling,” and its salted fish were known throughout the Roman world. In Pliny’s time the whole lake was named for this city (Nat. hist. v 15 [71]), and Josephus credited it with a population of forty thousand and a fishing fleet of 230 boats (BJ ii.21.4, 8 [608, 635]). These boats were of good size, for from four to six thousand inhabitants of Tarichea were able to take refuge in them when pursued by the Romans (BJ iii.10.5 [499]). Some have placed the city at the southwest corner of the lake, but it is more probably to be identified with Magdala (present-day Mejdal), about 5 km (3 mi) N of Tiberias.

The name BETHSAIDA, “home of fishing,” also reflects the fishing industry. This city, the home of Peter, Andrew, and Philip (Jn. 1:44), was located at the north end of the sea, possibly 3 km (2 mi) from the coast at et-Tell but more likely on the shore at el-‘Araj. In NT times agriculture, dyeing, and tanning were also important industries in the lake region; but by far the most important was fishing, with the related occupations of boat building and fish curing. The Gospels themselves hint at this great fishing activity and its economic importance. At least four of the disciples—Peter, Andrew, James, and John—were fishermen, and there is no reason to believe that they were poor men. Mark intimated that the family of Zebedee was one of substance when he mentioned the hired servants left to help the father when James and John departed to follow Jesus (Mk. 1:20). That John was acquainted with the household of the high priest in Jerusalem also indicates that his family was one of some means and influence (Jn. 18:15; but cf. L. Morris, comm. on John [NICNT, 1971], pp. 752f).

Hot springs located about 1.6 km (1 mi) S of Tiberias supplied baths, which were famous in the ancient world. They were mentioned by Pliny (Nat. hist. v 15 [71]) and appeared on a coin of Tiberias issued in the reign of Trajan.

CAPERNAUM, at the northwest corner of the lake, was a commercial center where the customs station was located from which Matthew was called (Mt. 9:9 par). About 3 km (2 mi) to the north lay Chorazin (Khirbet Kerâzeh). The principal cities on the east side of the sea were Hippos and Gadara, both of which were much larger in the NT period than today.

III. Jesus’ Ministry

Jesus’ entire ministry was limited to the northern half of the lake. There is no record of His traveling to the south or southwest shore, and apart from the feeding miracle on “the other side of the sea” (Jn. 6:1) and the meeting with the demoniac at Gergesa (Lk. 8:26 par), the east side of the lake played no part in His life. The northern third of this area was predominantly Jewish, but the territory to the south was gentile. The location of Gergesa is uncertain, but the narrative points to a heathen district. The most likely spot is the vicinity of a small place named Kersa on the east shore.

Jesus moved to Capernaum at the beginning of His ministry (Mt. 4:13), and it became the center of His Galilean activity. The actual location of the city was long in doubt, but it has now been identified with Tell Hûm. Tradition has placed the site of the Sermon on the Mount in the surrounding mountain region.

TIBERIAS was one of the most important cities, yet Jesus and His disciples seem to have avoided it. This may have been due to the circumstances surrounding its construction. When it was built by Herod Antipas, he was forced to fill it with a gentile population because it was found to be resting upon the site of an old cemetery and thus the Jews considered it unclean. The Jewish attitude toward the city changed in later years, and after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 135 it became a center of Jewish learning.