

What is the significance of the Sea of Galilee in the Bible?

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The Sea of Galilee is one of the most familiar bodies of water in the Bible, especially to readers of the Gospels. Many of the events in the earthly life of Jesus Christ took place in the region of Galilee and areas surrounding the Sea of Galilee.

The Sea of Galilee is a vast freshwater expanse located in the Jordan Valley about 60 miles north of Jerusalem. Approximately 13 miles long and 7.5 miles wide at its broadest point near Magdala, the sea resembles the shape of a harp. Situated below the headwaters of the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee is fed with fresh water from snow-topped Mount Hermon and Mount Lebanon. The Jordan River continues out the south end of the Sea of Galilee, flowing downhill until it ends at the Dead Sea. The Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, and the Dead Sea are all located in the Rift Valley, a geological fissure that forms the longest and deepest crack in the earth's crust.

In the Old Testament, the Sea of Galilee is called the "Sea of Chinnereth" or "Chinneroth" (Numbers 34:11; Joshua 12:3; 13:27), named after the town, which is also spelled Kinnereth (Joshua 19:35). Some scholars think this name comes from a Hebrew word meaning "harp." Most Old Testament references to the Sea of Galilee are related to tribal allocations (Numbers 34:11; Deuteronomy 3:17; Joshua 13:27; 19:35). The area included the lands of Naphtali, Zebulun, and Issachar (Joshua 19). The prophet Isaiah foretold that the Messiah would come from the region of Galilee (Isaiah 9:1-2, 6). Jesus, coming from His hometown of Nazareth, fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

In New Testament times, the Sea of Galilee was an important commercial area surrounded

by Capernaum, Chorazin, Bethsaida, Magdala, and Tiberias. Most of the roads in ancient Galilee passed near the sea, and many travelers crossed the Jordan Rift there. Its semi-tropical climate combined with the sulfur springs in Tiberias made the Sea of Galilee a popular health resort destination for sick people. Being the only significant freshwater lake in the region, the Sea of Galilee supported a flourishing fishing industry. Capernaum, a dominant setting in the ministry of Jesus, was the center of that fishing industry (Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:10, 11).

By the first century, the Sea of Galilee had been renamed the “Lake of Gennesaret” or “Sea of Gennesaret” (Luke 5:1). In John’s Gospel, the apostle calls it the “Sea of Tiberias” (John 6:1; 21:1). Many momentous events in the life of Jesus took place around the Sea of Galilee, including the calling of several disciples. Peter, Andrew, James, and John had all been working as fishermen earning a living on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:13-22). Jesus also called Matthew the tax collector from the town of Capernaum on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee (Mark 2:13-17).

Due to geological features on either side of the Sea of Galilee, sudden and severe storms occur regularly on its waters. The Synoptic Gospels record one episode of Jesus calming a violent storm: “Then [Jesus] got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!’ He replied, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’” (Matthew 8:23-27; see also Mark 4:35-41 and Luke 8:22-25).

In one of the most spectacular miracles of the Gospels, Jesus walks on the surface of the Sea of Galilee (Mark 6:45-53; John 6:16-21). In Matthew's version of the story (Matthew 14:22-33), Jesus invites Peter to leave the boat and come toward Him, which Peter does and walks on water. Two other remarkable and well-known miracles that happened near the Sea of Galilee were the feeding of the four thousand (Matthew 15:29-39) and the feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9:10-17).

Jesus taught the crowds by the shore (Mark 4:1-34) and preached while standing in a boat on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 13:2). And the Lord is believed to have delivered His famous Sermon on the Mount on the shores of the sea near Capernaum (Matthew 5-7).

Jesus may have specifically targeted this area to minister and perform miraculous healings (Matthew 9:2-8; Mark 3:1-6) because of the significant number of sick people who sought out the Sea of Galilee's restorative climate and medicinal springs of nearby Tiberias.

On the southeast banks of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus cast out demons from two men of Gadarenes and sent them into a herd of pigs that drowned in the sea (Matthew 8:28-32). Jesus raised Jairus's daughter from the dead near the Sea of Galilee (Mark 5:21-43) and healed a man with an unclean spirit (Mark 1:21-28).

Before His ascension, Jesus appeared in His resurrected body to seven of His disciples for a final miracle catch of fish by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-14). He cooked and ate breakfast with them and then restored Peter into His trust (verses 15-25).

The modern Hebrew name for the Sea of Galilee is Yam Kinneret. Today, the area is a

primary tourist site for the State of Israel and supports the commercial fishing industry. The Sea of Galilee is also the main source of drinking water for Israel.