

## FISH, STORMS AND A BOAT

How did this boat, made of wooden planks from the cedars of Lebanon, with oak ribs, survive for nearly 2,000 years? When it was no longer seaworthy, it was apparently left at a dockyard where parts from its interior were removed and used to repair other boats. In the course of this dismantling, the boat was covered with silt carried down by the sudden flooding of a nearby stream. It was this packaging of mud that preserved the boat until the day, nearly 2,000 years later, when it was discovered by two brothers, fishermen from Kibbutz Ginossar.

The boat is 8.8 metres long, 2.5 metres wide and 1.25 metres deep (29 x 8 x 4 feet). These are almost exactly the measurements of boats used by seine net fishermen on the Sea of Galilee until the middle of this century when such fishing was discontinued. It has been called the Kinneret Boat, the Magdala Boat, the Galilee boat, and the Jesus Boat, and it is the first detailed message from the maritime and fishing history of the Kinneret which we have received. Pottery shards found within and near the boat, as well as Carbon-14 dating of the wood, indicate that the boat plied the Sea of Galilee during the first century C.E. – a time that was crucial in the history of the Jews, and for the entire world.

In the early years of that century, Jesus and his disciples sailed the Sea of Galilee in boats like the one recently discovered, while in 67 C.E., during the great revolt of the Jews against the Romans, the Sea of Galilee was the scene of a naval battle between the Jewish nationalists in similar boats and a fleet of Roman vessels (Josephus, *The Jewish War* 3:522-531). Beyond any doubt, this boat sailed the Sea of Galilee and docked countless times at the ports that ringed the lake during that era.

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Adam gave names only to animals and birds, apparently avoiding fish entirely (Genesis 2:19-20). The names of about fifty fish are mentioned in rabbinic literature, but the Torah merely makes a general distinction between clean fish which Jews are permitted to eat (vertebrate), and unclean (without bones) (Leviticus 11:9-12, Deuteronomy 14:9-10). Clean fish are generally recognised by the presence of fins and scales.

The reason for this lack of detailed information about fish in the Hebrew Scriptures is simple: the early Jewish experience was born in the desert, and fish were far less common than other creatures. Nor were the writers of the Gospels much more familiar with the names of the fish of the Sea of Galilee. Thus in Matthew 13:48, the “bad” fish were the catfish which, because they had no scales, could not be eaten according to the Mosaic dietary laws, and the “good” were all the others in the catch.

### Small Fish

The Gospels mention another difference between fish, that of size: the “large fish”, *musht* (St. Peter’s Fish) and *biny* (barbels), and the “small fish” (sardines). “Small fish” are mentioned clearly in the miracle of the feeding of the 4,000. According to Matthew 15:34 and Mark 8:5-7, “seven loaves and a few small fish” are what the followers of Jesus had brought to eat.

The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 appears in all four Gospels. Matthew 14:17, Mark 6:38 and Luke 9:13 mention “five loaves and two fish”. John’s version (6:9) is slightly different in that he specifies that the bread is loaves of barley and a different Greek word for fish is used; *opsaria* (small fish) instead of *ichthues* (fish). We may assume that the small fish were not young individuals of large species, but sardines which are by nature small. These, with bread, in fact made up the staple diet of the local population.

Strabo, a first-century Roman geographer and historian, wrote that “at the place called Taricheai the lake supplies excellent fish for pickling” (*Geographica*, XVI, 2:45). The centre of the sardine pickling industry was the town of Magdala, called in Greek *Taricheai*, meaning *the place where fish are salted*. It was the sardines which were most suited for pickling, since they appeared in

large quantities during a short season from November to February and needed to be preserved. The large fish were sold fresh, and there was always a good market for them among the local population.

Two small fish are pictured in a sixth-century mosaic floor at Tabgha, in the Church of the Multiplication, which was built to commemorate the miracle performed by Jesus. We see a basket containing four loaves with a fish on either side. However, these fish do not appear to be from our lake. All fish caught in the Sea of Galilee have only a single dorsal fin, while those shown in the mosaic have two dorsal fins. The artist who designed the Tabgha mosaic probably came from abroad to do the job and worked from an established pattern. He clearly did not make it his business to inspect the fish of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus, however, had a personal acquaintance with the life of Galilean fishermen, as can be seen from Matthew 7:9-10: “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?”

This reference to stone and snake is taken from the fisherman’s daily experience, and it symbolises the frustration of a disappointing catch. It often happens that instead of fish the net brings in mostly stones, and it may even occur that together with the fish the net may haul up a water snake which is common in the lake. One can imagine Jesus’ followers, carrying their bundles of bread and pickled sardines, appreciating these homely references to a reality they knew well.

## **Weather Forecasts**

Gazing at the sky to forecast the weather is an age-old custom the world over, and the ancient fishermen of the Sea of Galilee watched the sky carefully. Knowing the moods of the lake was essential for their activities. We find an echo of this in Jesus’ saying: “When it is evening you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red’. And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today for the sky is red and threatening’” (Matthew 16:2-3).

Natural phenomena have not changed in this region: a red evening sky means fair weather around the lake the following day, and a red morning sky signals stormy weather. The weather forecast in Matthew is accurate, and confirmed by generations of residents around the Sea of Galilee, including this writer.

## **Storms on the Lake**

Storms on the Sea of Galilee are mentioned twice in the Gospels. In one, Jesus’ disciples had gone ahead of him by boat to the other side of the lake but ran into a storm along the way. According to Matthew 14:24 (cf. Mark 6:48) their boat was being “buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.” Jesus came to their aid walking on the water and when he got into the boat with them, the storm winds ceased. Matthew added to this story another maritime event – Peter’s attempt to walk on the water too (Matthew 14:28-31).

Mark and Matthew state that after this stormy voyage the disciples finally reached their destination safely, Gennesaret on the western shore (Matthew 14:34, Mark.6:53). According to John 6:17, the ship arrived at Capernaum, but in any case, both accounts indicate that the ship was heading into a winter storm, either southerly or westerly.

The other stormy event occurred when Jesus, again on a winter evening, sailed with his disciples from Capernaum to Gergesa (Matthew 8:28, Mark 5:1, Luke 8:26). During the voyage “a storm of wind came down on the lake, and they were filling with water, and were in danger.” Jesus rebuked the wind and waves, “and they ceased, and there was a calm” (Luke 8:22-25 – parallel accounts are in Matthew 8:23-27 and Mark 4:35-41).

This is an accurate description of an easterly storm on the Sea of Galilee, closely matching the experience of modern fishermen who have set out during the winter to fish for sardines along the north eastern edge of the lake and have been caught by the well-known easterly storm. Even today this storm, which usually starts in the early evening, is good cause for apprehension among fishermen.

## **Boat from Magdala**

In February 1986, when a drought had drastically lowered the water level in the Sea of Galilee, an ancient wooden boat was excavated from the exposed lake bed near the coast at Migdal, ancient Magdala. Amid much publicity, it was painstakingly transported in its entirety to a especially constructed building at Kibbutz Ginossar, not far from where the boat was found. In all probability, this boat sailed the Sea of Galilee for many years toward the end of the Second Temple period, and was used for both fishing and transportation.