

NT59: Capernaum Synagogue and Excavations

Photo by Richard Nowitz



There is little doubt that Jesus spent considerable time in the vicinity of ancient Capernaum, where these remains have been uncovered. He may, indeed, have lived and preached on the site marked by these ruins.

At the upper end of the cleared ground is the beautifully preserved and partially restored synagogue of Capernaum. When Charles Wilson investigated this structure in 1866, he assumed it to be the same synagogue in which Jesus preached (Mark 1:21), built by the centurion whose slave Jesus healed (Luke 7:1–10). Scholars in this century, however, have agreed that the building must be at least as late as the latter 2nd or 3rd century, and the Franciscans who carried out new excavations in 1968 found a horde of 10,000 coins sealed beneath the synagogue floor, which convinced them that the synagogue must be dated even later—to the 4th or 5th century C.E. Whatever the date of the present building, it most likely was erected on the same ground as the synagogue in which Jesus worshipped, preached and healed while he lived in Capernaum.

The triple entrance doors of the synagogue face south toward Jerusalem. Some 80 feet directly in front of the synagogue can be seen

the walls of an octagonal building that some scholars now think is an early Christian shrine placed directly over Peter's home, where Jesus seems to have made his residence while in Capernaum (Matthew 8:14–16; Mark 1:29–31, 2:1). The octagonal structure had been known for centuries, and indeed was pointed out by medieval pilgrims' guides as Peter's house. The 1968 excavations, however, uncovered a semi-circular apse on the east side (visible here on the lower right side) in which was a small baptistry, making it clear that this is a Christian church, probably of the 5th century C.E. Moreover, the church was found to have been built directly over a house, probably a house church of the previous century, set inside a square walled enclosure (portions of which also are visible here; note the straight wall segments leading off on either side of the apse). This building in turn was erected over a 1st-century C.E. domestic dwelling in which a central room (under the flat protective roof in this photo) had been given special attention. A two-story-high arch was installed to support a high roof over the room; the room's walls had been carefully plastered and decorated; over 100 graffiti, evidently the work of Christian pilgrims, were

Photo by Garo Nalbandian



found scratched into the plaster of the house. Most of the scribbled texts were in Greek, two were in Latin, several in Aramaic, Syriac or Hebrew. They included inscriptions such as “Lord Jesus Christ help thy servant ...” and “Christ have mercy.” (Some may also have contained references to Peter, though the texts of these are difficult to read and are open to dispute.)

The history of the octagonal building area now appears to have been as follows: A typical house of Jesus’ time next to the Capernaum synagogue came to be revered as the house where Jesus stayed. One particular room of the house was given special importance and eventually was incorporated into the house church of the 4th century. Finally, in the 5th century this room was enshrined in an octagonal Christian church. The octagonal shape was favored in early Christian architecture for buildings that commemorated specially significant events. (We have already noted in the caption for NT50: Church of Nativity, Nave that octagonal walls surrounded the grotto of Jesus’ birth in Constantine’s original Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem.) The room beneath the flat roof in this photo, therefore, may have been identified by early Christians as the very room where Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31) and where the paralytic man was lowered through the house roof by his friends (Mark 2:1–12). That would explain the conversion of this specific room into a shrine by Christian pilgrims seeking cures for their own ailments.¹

¹*The Biblical World in Pictures; BAS Biblical World in Pictures* (Biblical Archaeology Society, 2003; 2003).