

The following quotes are from *The Life and Witness of Peter* by Larry R. Helyer (IVP, 2012)

- “The economy of Bethsaida (on the shore of Galilee)... depended heavily on the fishing industry, as demonstrated by an abundance of fishing hooks, lead weights, anchors, sail and set needles and other gear associated with fishing uncovered in the area A of Et-Tell.” (p. 24)
- Archaeological discoveries on or near the Sea of Galilee have identified “a typical sailing craft for both fishing and transportation as being 25.5 ft long and 7.5 ft wide and 4.1 ft deep and often carried a crew of 5 but could hold up to 15 passengers.”
- The fact that Peter and Andrew as well as James and John worked as partners (or with their father) is evidence that a) this was probably not a lucrative enterprise and b) it took partnerships to make it even worthwhile.
- The kind of fishing they did was not with a “rod and reel” but more likely a trammel net which took considerable skill and manpower. Such a net “was large with floats on the top edge and weights on the bottom so as to form a vertical “wall” below the surface; once in place it was then dragged toward shore”.
- This was an important but probably not a “highly regarded occupation.” (p. 28)
- “The name Bethsaida means “House of the Fisherman,” and the town of Magdala, on the northwestern shore of the lake, means “Fish Tower,” probably referring to a wooden structure in which fish were air-dried. At Magdala - also called Taricheae, a Greek word meaning something like “Place of Salted Fish” – there is evidence of a fish-processing facility just a few miles from Capernaum. This also appears to have been a center for salting fish. Processed fish from the Galilee were carted to Jerusalem and sold in its markets, as witnessed by the Fish Gate in postexilic Jerusalem (Neh 3:3). Mendel Nun has discovered fifteen or sixteen ancient harbors located along the shoreline of this lake... one of the most impressive of which served the village of Capernaum.” (p. 24-5)

Historical and Political Context of Israel/Palestine

Toward the end of the Old Testament period the land of Israel/Palestine was ruled by Hasmonean (Jewish) priests-kings. They held sway from about 135 B.C. but in 63 B.C., the Romans conquered Palestine and withstood later rebellions by Jewish forces in 66-70 A.D. and 132-135 A.D. Under Roman rule, Palestine was a “province”, a political entity with an appointed or at least a Roman-supported King: ie. Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.), Herod Antipas 4 B.C. – 37 and Herod Agrippa 37-44 A.D. (the boundaries were not always the same though). Under a king might also be a Governor. i.e. Pilate

Peter lived then in a country that was under a Roman administration (and army) AND a Jewish Priestly rule which had control over certain aspects of the society as related to

the Jewish people –so largely Jewish religious law. From the Jewish perspective, all foreign powers (like the Romans) were usurpers whose rule was to be tolerated. The real controlling power for them was the priesthood which included the following:

Priests and High Priests themselves: they had ceremonial responsibilities of course but played a leading role in the administration of Jewish laws – ones that were not subject to the Governing authority. One High Priest ruled over the Jewish/religious court: the Sanhedrin

Sadducees: wealthy and aristocratic, some were priests. They sought to maintain the status quo and were less powerful than in earlier times but still the most prominent group in the Sanhedrin

Pharisees: quite influential among the common Jewish population with their interpretation of the Torah. Some of them were also on the Sanhedrin.

Rabbis or itinerant teachers who gathered disciples around them but did not have political power.

Questions to ask as we read various verses from the New Testament about Peter:

How well did the “average” Jewish person, such as Peter and the other disciples, know the Torah: ie the Law (1st 5 books of OT/Books of Moses) and the Prophets (many of the prophetic and historical books that now make up our OT)?

It is clear that Jesus could read and probably write and of course he was very well versed in the Torah but what about the disciples? What were they capable of when it came to reading and writing?

And what the disciples understood about God or God’s intentions for the world can only be determined from what they say and the questions they ask of Jesus.

[In Acts 4:13 (post-resurrection) the Jewish leaders of the day write off the Spirit empowered disciples as “uneducated and ordinary men”. They probably mean they are ignorant of the finer points of the rabbinical interpretation of the Jewish Torah and not necessarily ignorant of the material itself.] (p.19)