

Capernaum Archaeological Tour and Biblical History

Lecture: 02-26 Lecture: Capernaum Archaeological Tour and Biblical History | Israel 2026

SITE OVERVIEW

Location: Capernaum (modern site on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee); ancient/biblical name: Kfar Nahum (כְּפַר נַחֻם) — “Village of Nahum”

Date of Visit: Not explicitly stated in the recording

Biblical References:

- Matthew 9:1 — “Jesus went home” (establishing Capernaum as Jesus’ base)
- Luke 7:2–10 (paraphrased) — The healing of the centurion’s servant
- Mark 3:1–6 — Healing of the man with the deformed hand on the Sabbath
- Implicit reference to Matthew 18:6 / Mark 9:42 — Millstone tied around the neck of one who causes a child to stumble
- Implicit reference to Matthew 24:41 — Two women grinding at the mill

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Capernaum served as Jesus’ primary base of operations during his Galilean ministry, where he resided in the house of Peter’s mother-in-law (referenced in Matthew 9:1)

Key events that occurred at this site include:

- The healing of the centurion’s servant (a Roman officer, likely affiliated with Herod Antipas’ forces)
- The healing of a man with a deformed hand on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6), which prompted the Pharisees and Herodians to begin plotting Jesus’ death
- The pronouncement of judgment by Jesus upon the city for its unbelief despite witnessing miracles

Matthew the tax collector was based here, collecting taxes along the Via Maris trade route

The city functioned as a Roman administrative and military center for the northern Sea of Galilee region

Time periods covered: First century CE (Jesus' ministry); Fourth century CE (construction of the white limestone synagogue visible today)

Historical figures associated with the site: Jesus of Nazareth, the Apostle Peter, Matthew (Levi) the tax collector, a Roman centurion (likely under Herod Antipas), the Pharisees, and the Herodians

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The Synagogue: The current visible structure is a fourth-century CE synagogue built of white limestone, constructed atop the first-century CE basalt foundation — the synagogue Jesus would have worshipped in. Excavators carefully cut steps around the first-century foundation to distinguish the two building phases

The Bima: A carved stone bima (Torah ark/platform) was discovered with evidence of wheels, suggesting it was mobile and could be rolled out when additional space was needed. Dr. Schilling notes this interpretation was the conclusion of excavating archaeologists (flagged as interpretive/speculative)

Carved Lintels: Decorative carvings on door lintels include:

- A Star of David (six-pointed)
- A five-pointed Star of Solomon
- A shell motif, interpreted as indicating a holy place — likely the keystone above the synagogue entrance

Corner Columns: A distinctive architectural feature of this fourth-century synagogue — corner columns designed to appear as two separate pillars, with heart-shaped bases where the two column bases meet

Layout: Three-aisle interior layout consistent with other known synagogues of the period; oriented toward Jerusalem

Women's Balcony: A first-century exterior staircase (still visible outside the building) provided access to an upper balcony reserved for women and children

Social/Assembly Room: An additional room was attached for communal social activities (wedding receptions, community gatherings), a feature not present in all synagogues of the period — indicating relative wealth

Peter's House: Located beneath an octagonal church on the site; Dr. Schilling identifies this as the house of Peter's mother-in-law where Jesus resided

Millstone Manufacturing: Basalt millstones manufactured at Capernaum have been found as far south as Beersheba in the Negev desert, confirming wide regional distribution

Olive Press: A stone trough and pit system for olive oil production was identified on site, demonstrating a graduated pressing process yielding progressively less pure oil

DR. SCHILLING'S KEY POINTS

The name “Capernaum” is the anglicization of the Aramaic/Hebrew Kfar Nahum (“Village of Nahum”); the identity of “Nahum” for whom it was named remains unknown

The centurion of Luke 7 is identified as likely a soldier under Herod Antipas, not directly a Roman legionary, given the administrative context of the region

Tax collectors like Matthew were despised because the Roman system allowed them to overcharge taxpayers and pocket the difference, making them both collaborators and extortionists in Jewish eyes

The millstone sayings of Jesus (cf. Matthew 18:6) carry heightened meaning given that Capernaum was a known manufacturing and export center for basalt millstones

The two women grinding (Matthew 24:41) refers specifically to a smaller, hand-operated millstone operated by women; larger millstones required donkey power

All synagogues, including this one, face Jerusalem; the bima would have been positioned on the Jerusalem-facing wall, between the two doorways

The healing of the centurion’s servant and the Sabbath controversy of Mark 3 are both geographically anchored to this specific location

Capernaum’s wealth and social complexity are evidenced by the addition of a dedicated assembly/social room to the synagogue complex

GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Capernaum sits on the Via Maris (the ancient coastal/international trade route), making it a critical commercial and administrative node

The Via Maris route: crosses the Hula Valley → Capernaum → around the Sea of Galilee → Magdala → through Wadi Hammam → across the Jezreel Valley → Megiddo → westward to the Mediterranean coast → south to Egypt

This strategic position explains:

- The presence of tax collectors (Matthew among them)
- The Roman and Herodian military presence
- The caravan trade economy (sandal repair, tent-making, provisions for travelers)
- The manufacturing and export of millstones to distant locations such as Beersheba

Next stops mentioned during the visit: Magdala (immediately following) and Beit She’an (approximately 30 minutes away, with a site closure deadline of 3:00 PM)

The Sea of Galilee borders the site; the northern shore location is referenced throughout

QUOTABLE MOMENTS

“You can go home and tell your friends you’ve been to Kfar Naum, where Jesus lived.”

“This is where he worshipped. I don’t know if that makes any difference at all.” — [Speaker 1, with evident reverence]

“I love Jesus” — [Dr. Schilling’s spontaneous aside when reading Mark 3:3, where Jesus commands the man to stand in front of everyone]

“The millstone is tied around his neck because this is where they’re manufactured.” — Connecting the dominical saying directly to Capernaum’s known industry

PERSONAL NOTES

Follow-up question: What is the scholarly consensus on the precise identification of Peter’s house beneath the octagonal church? What excavation reports document this?

Follow-up question: Is the “Nahum” of Kfar Nahum connected to the biblical prophet Nahum, or is this a different individual? Dr. Schilling stated the origin is unknown — worth further investigation

Note: The bima-on-wheels interpretation was presented as the archaeologists’ hypothesis, not established fact — treat as speculative pending further review

Note: The centurion’s identification as a soldier of Herod Antipas rather than a Roman legionary is a reasonable historical inference but should be cross-checked with the Lukan and Matthean accounts and relevant scholarship

The logistical pressure of the visit (Magdala and Beit She’an same day) may have limited the depth of engagement with certain features — consider returning to the site with more time allocated to the insulae between the synagogue and Peter’s house