

# Archaeological Site of Magdala

*Lecture: 02-26 Lecture: Archaeological Site of Magdala | Israel 2026*

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## SITE OVERVIEW

Location: Magdala (modern site); ancient/biblical names: Migdal Nunia (Mishnaic Oral Law), Magadan (Matthew 15:39), Dalmanutha (Mark 8:10)

Date of Visit: Not explicitly stated

Biblical References:

- Matthew 4:23
- Matthew 15:39
- Mark 8:10
- Luke 8 (Mary Magdalene as follower and financial supporter of Jesus)
- Acts 1 (criteria for replacing Judas)

## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Magdala as a fish processing center: The Mishnaic Oral Law designation Migdal Nunia translates as “the place for drying fish,” confirming the site’s primary economic function in antiquity

Post-feeding of the 5,000 landing point: Per Matthew 15:39, Jesus crossed by boat from the Capernaum area to Magadan/Magdala following the feeding miracle

Roman destruction of the city: According to Josephus, the city’s population was divided on how to respond to the Roman advance. The faction favoring armed resistance prevailed in a vote. Consequently, the Romans destroyed the city entirely. Survivors fled to Tiberias, hid in the caves of Mount Marbelle, were taken as slaves, or died attempting to escape by sea. The shoreline was reportedly red with blood from the slaughter

Zippori comparison: Dr. Schilling contrasts Magdala’s fate with Zippori, which capitulated to Rome and was spared destruction

Hometown of Mary Magdalene: Literally “Mary of Magdala”; a historically significant figure in Jesus’s ministry

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

**First-century synagogue:** Discovered during excavation for the foundation of a Catholic guest house. Dr. Schilling notes this is the best-preserved synagogue in the Galilee and one of only seven synagogues discovered in the country. Its exceptional preservation is attributed to the city's inhabitants having deliberately dismantled it, covering it with dirt before the Roman assault — a hypothesis supported by the discovery of Herodian stones within the structure (flagged as interpretive/speculative)

**Mosaic floors:** Original first-century mosaic floors and painted plasterwork remain visible in the beit kneset (social room) and what Dr. Schilling identifies as the scroll storage room (bimah room)

**Scroll storage room:** A small room off the beit kneset still retains original first-century painting; functioned as a repository for Torah scrolls, which were brought out for Shabbat lectionary readings

**Synagogue layout:** Three-section structure consistent with other Galilean synagogues: (1) Beit Midrash (house of study), identifiable by a carved stone bearing scroll-end decoration; (2) Beit Kneset (social room); (3) scroll/bimah room

**The Magdala Stone:** A uniquely carved stone discovered buried beneath the synagogue floor. The original is designated for the Israel Museum; a replica is displayed on-site. It is the only known instance of a menorah carved on stone from this period. Scholarly analysis concluded that the carvings on each side of the stone represent the view one would have had standing inside the Temple in Jerusalem, effectively making it a symbolic representation of the Temple. Dr. Schilling indicates he can elaborate on individual carvings but deferred for time

## DR. SCHILLING'S KEY POINTS

**Mary Magdalene's status:** Dr. Schilling argues forcefully that Mary Magdalene was a significant and well-documented figure in the Gospels — mentioned more frequently than most of the Twelve. She met the criteria outlined in Acts 1 for replacing Judas (follower of Jesus, witness to key events), though her gender precluded selection at the time

**Correction of a major misconception — Mary Magdalene as prostitute:** Dr. Schilling characterizes the identification of Mary Magdalene with the unnamed prostitute who washes Jesus's feet, or the woman brought before Jesus for adultery, as "absolutely baseless" with "absolutely nothing in the text" to support it. He attributes this conflation to a deliberate medieval Roman Catholic theological strategy: as Mariology (veneration of Mary the mother of Jesus) developed, it became necessary to diminish Mary Magdalene's textual prominence. The Greek Orthodox Church rejected this theology and elevated Mary Magdalene to the status of apostle

**Augustine's statement (4th century):** Augustine, a Catholic theologian writing prior to the medieval period, called Mary Magdalene "the apostle to the apostles"

### **Non-canonical texts on Mary Magdalene:**

- Gospel of Mary (2nd century, pseudepigraphal): Claims Mary received secret revelations from Jesus that he did not share with the Twelve (non-canonical; not in the biblical canon)
- Gospel of Philip (3rd century, non-canonical): Claims Jesus “loved her more than others” and “kissed her on the mouth” (non-canonical; flagged as speculative and contested)

**Was Jesus married?** (flagged as speculative): Dr. Schilling notes some scholars argue Jesus must have been married to serve as a rabbi, as marriage was the normative expectation. He counters that Jesus’s own teaching on voluntary celibacy (Matthew 19, implied reference to “eunuch by choice”) and his stated commitment to full obedience to the Father indicate a deliberate choice of celibacy — an argument Dr. Schilling states is addressed in his book

**Temple periods clarification:** Dr. Schilling distinguishes:

1. First Temple — Solomon’s Temple, destroyed
2. Post-exilic rebuilding upon return from Babylon
3. Second Temple — Herod’s Temple

Key distinction: Solomon’s Temple housed the Ark of the Covenant (containing the tablets, manna, and Aaron’s rod) in the Holy of Holies; Herod’s Temple’s Holy of Holies was completely empty. At the crucifixion, the curtain tore from top to bottom, exposing this emptiness to the priests

## **GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT**

**Position on the Sea of Galilee:** Magdala sits in the northwestern corner of the Sea of Galilee, south of Capernaum

**Relationship to Capernaum:** Matthew 15:39 and Mark 8:10 place the post-feeding boat journey as originating near Capernaum and landing at Magdala/Magadan/Dalmanutha

**Caves of Mount Marbelle:** Located above the site; used as refuge by fleeing Magdala residents during the Roman destruction, per Josephus

**Adjacent Franciscan property:** The buildings immediately next door are owned by the Franciscans and represent the broader Magdala area; previously inaccessible to visitors

**Fish market infrastructure:** A live fish selection market is present at the site, consistent with the ancient fish-processing identity of Magdala. A mikveh (ritual bath) was fed by a channel diverting water through the houses — an example of first-century Jewish ritual purity practice integrated into the urban layout

**Planned but missed site — Korazin (Chorazin):** Dr. Schilling notes the group missed Korazin due to a routing error earlier in the trip

**Bet She'an:** A fully excavated Roman city with a major Cardo, bathhouse, and first-century enclosed theater; described as a significant site but ultimately skipped due to time constraints. The site closes at 4:00 PM; the group was nearing 2:00 PM on 2026-02-26 with insufficient time to visit

## QUOTABLE MOMENTS

“The Mishnaic Oral Law calls this place Migdal Nunia — the place for drying fish.”

“There is absolutely nothing in the text that suggests that was Mary [Magdalene as a prostitute]. Absolutely no proof of that at all.”

“[Augustine] says this: She became the apostle to the apostles.”

“Some are a eunuch by choice... he was in the third category... he says, ‘I’m a eunuch by choice, because I need to give my full attention to the obedience of the Father.’”

“[The Magdala Stone] is the only place where a menorah is carved on stone.”

“[The Romans] didn’t know to destroy it.” — on the synagogue’s survival

“What do we want seashore property on the Sea of Galilee for?” — recounting the Assemblies of God presbyters’ decision not to purchase the property, which was subsequently bought by Catholics and yielded the first-century synagogue discovery

## PERSONAL NOTES

Follow-up: Verify the precise publication or attribution of Augustine’s “apostle to the apostles” statement — Dr. Schilling dates it to the 4th century; confirm source text

Follow-up: Locate and read the Gospel of Mary and Gospel of Philip in full as recommended by Dr. Schilling; both are available online

Follow-up: Dr. Schilling references his own book on at least two occasions (Jesus as eunuch by choice; Mary Magdalene) — identify title for further reading

Note: The Magdala Stone’s original is designated for the Israel Museum — verify current display status as of 2026

Note: The new church on-site features chapels dedicated to women in Scripture and an altar shaped like a boat, oriented toward the Sea of Galilee — architecturally noteworthy for future reference

Caution: Dr. Schilling’s reconstruction of the city’s vote to resist Rome and the subsequent deliberate covering of the synagogue are presented as scholarly consensus but contain interpretive elements; independent verification against primary archaeological reports is advisable