

## Fishing in the First Century

Since the world of the New Testament was essentially that of the Mediterranean Sea, it should not surprise us that the fishing industry was widespread. There were fish markets in many cities. Even the Jerusalem temple had a Fish Gate in the walls surrounding it (Neh. 3:3).

Our focus in this article will be limited to the Sea of Galilee, which is actually a small lake in the northern part of Israel. There,

Jesus spent most of His time; some of His disciples lived and engaged in the fishing industry there. Much of the ministry of Jesus was concentrated in the fishing towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee, towns such as Bethsaida, Capernaum, Gennesaret, and Magdala.

### Controlled from the Top

Although fishing was very much a part of the Galilean economy, it was not what we would call a free enterprise system or creative entrepreneurship. Fish and other commodities were under the control of the elite and for their benefit. What we know as middle class was virtually unknown in the first century. There were the few elites at the top, and then there were the vast masses made up of peasants, artisans, servants, and slaves.

During the lifetime of Jesus and His disciples, some of whom were Galilean fishermen, Galilee was under the rule of Herod Antipas, who in turn owed his position to the good graces of the Roman emperor.

Antipas was obliged to provide not only revenue to the imperial coffers from taxes he collected from Galileans, but also staples such as fish, olive oil, wine, and other commodities. The political and economic system was tightly controlled from the top to ensure that the flow of benefits was always moving upward to the elite and ruling families.\*

Herod Antipas had many people working to make sure that maximum taxes were collected. There were several administrative districts for tax purposes, each employing administrators. Then there were the chief tax collectors, such as Zacchaeus (Luke 19), who in turn had under them the lower-level officials who did the actual collecting of taxes on fish and other commodities. They also collected tolls on the bridges, roads, and ports used to transport fish and other goods. At each level, people bid on the jobs; the winner was the one who would guarantee the highest collection of taxes.

Besides the government, the temple authorities in Jerusalem collected taxes to support the operation of the temple. The brief story in Matthew 17:24-27 is quite significant for our discussion of fishing and taxes. First, the incident in this passage happened in the fishing town of Capernaum. Second, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter, who, along with his family, had been in the fishing business. When Jesus became aware of the tax collectors' demand, he sent Peter to the lake to catch a fish, open its mouth, remove the coin found there, and pay the required tax. Fish and taxes were tightly connected. (Incidentally, Peter did the fishing, in this case, by throwing a line.)

### Fishing Co-ops

An entire family usually entered into the fishing business. These fishing families often formed cooperatives to submit bids to government officials for fishing contracts. For example, two families—Jonah and his sons Peter and Andrew, and Zebedee and his sons James and John—were apparently part of such a business co-op (Luke 5:9-10). If there were not enough family members, hired hands were brought in to do the job, as Mark 1:20 indicates.

Some tax collectors in the Gospels, such as Matthew in Capernaum (Matt. 9:9), could



A 12th-century painting of Peter and Andrew fishing. Fishing was hard work; it meant working long hours, often all night. There were various fishing methods, but the most prevalent in Galilee was the use of a fishing net that would be cast from the shore or from a boat, or the use of a much larger dragnet that would be cast from boats in a circle further out from the shore.

well have been brokers who signed contracts with the fishermen, who controlled the harbors that the government built, and collected leases from fishing families.

## Making It Work

Fishing was hard work. It meant working long hours, often all night (Luke 5:5; John 21:3). There were various fishing methods, but the most prevalent in Galilee was the use of a fishing net that would be cast from the shore or from a boat, or the use of a much larger dragnet that would be cast from boats in a circle further out from the shore. During the day, torn nets had to be repaired.

What did fishermen need in order to practice their trade? Two things have already been mentioned: boats and nets. The boats may have belonged to the fishing families or were owned and leased out by the government. Other industries provided the fishermen with tools, materials, and equipment: wood for boats, flax for nets, cut stones for anchors, linen for sails, and baskets for transporting.

Fish processors prepared the fish with salt and sauces as preservatives and seasonings. Carters and shippers hauled the fish to markets both near and far. Each of these businesses in the fish industry was subject to taxation.

## Proud to Be a Fisherman?

Judging from the few comments in ancient sources about fishermen, they apparently did not enjoy a high status. Homer, one of the greatest of the Greek poets (eighth century BC), is reported to have said this to fishermen: "Ay, for of such fathers you are sprung as neither hold rich lands nor tend countless sheep." And Cicero, the Roman philosopher, politician, and orator, who lived about a century or so before Jesus, is reported to have said, "The most shameful occupations are those which cater to our sensual pleasures: 'fish-sellers, butchers, cooks, poultry-raisers, and fishermen.'"

If we add some of the snide remarks made about Galileans by different people in the Gospels, we would probably be justified in saying that those who lived around the Sea of Galilee and whose primary occupation was fishing did not enjoy a very high status. Take for example Philip, who was from the fishing town of Bethsaida on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee and the home of Andrew and Peter. When he told his friend Nathaniel about Jesus of Nazareth (in Galilee) being the Messiah, Nathaniel's response was: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46).

The people of Jerusalem, particularly the religious authorities, did not think very highly of Galileans. During a meeting of the Jewish

council in Jerusalem, when Nicodemus tried to defend Jesus, the others derided him by saying, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee" (John 7:52).

\* K. C. Hanson, "The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition": <http://www.kchanson.com/ARTICLES/fishing.html>.

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## Think about it . . .

- ✓ Why do you think Jesus decided to do the major part of His ministry among people whose primary occupation was the fishing industry in the towns and villages along the shores of the Sea of Galilee?
- ✓ If fishing was so tightly controlled and regulated by the powers that be, it must have been hard for those who were fishermen to leave everything behind and follow Jesus as disciples. What kind of hardships might these men have created for their families? What does this tell you about their commitment to Jesus?
- ✓ Has your commitment to Jesus cost you as much as it cost these disciples? What are some lessons you can learn from your answer to this question?

## COMMENTARY Luke 5:1-11

**L**ots of things come to our minds when we hear Simon Peter's name: The disciple who always spoke up first. The one who ran to the empty tomb to see it for himself. The one who denied Jesus after His arrest. The bold preacher of the gospel on the day of Pentecost. The first leader of the Christian church. However, in many ways, Simon's encounter with Jesus on a fishing boat may be the one with which we can relate the most because he was a "sinner" who responded in faith and who obediently followed Jesus.

There are two other accounts of Jesus' call of Simon (and others): Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 1:16-20. These three stories are similar in several ways. The stories all describe the new disciples as fishermen. All three stories relate what Jesus said about their vocation as fishermen. In all three accounts, the fishermen left everything behind and followed Jesus. In addition, this account in the third gospel follows the same basic steps as Isaiah's description of his call in the temple (Isa. 6:1-8): divine revelation, confession, and call.

### 1. Jesus Teaches from Simon's Boat (5:1-3)

1 *One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God.*

2 *He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets.*

3 *He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.*

1. Before this passage, Luke offers mostly a summary of Jesus' ministry after leaving Nazareth (4:30-44). Starting this scene with

*one day* or "now it happened"<sup>1</sup> suggests that this is a common episode in His ministry. Galilee is the general setting. We know this because the Sea of Galilee was also called *the Lake of Gennesaret* (gen-NEH-sah-ret), named for the fertile region on the lake's northwestern border. The narrator sets the context simply: Jesus was standing and preaching on the lake's shore. While in Acts, *the word of God* usually refers to the message about Jesus, here it is Jesus' message about God's saving activity. *Listening* to Jesus was a "crowd,"<sup>2</sup> the word Luke typically reserves for those who seriously considered what Jesus had to say. This group of people was *crowding* Jesus on the shore or "pressing in on him" (NRSV). The word picture here is of a crowd that is almost on top of Him. With the water behind Jesus, He was "boxed" in.

2. The *two boats* must have been nearby, since (a) Jesus could see them, (b) they were *at the water's edge* (the same phrase translated as "by the lake" in v. 1), and (c) Jesus used one of the boats to continue teaching (see v. 3). The introduction of the two boats helps explain matters later (v. 7). The fishermen had "stepped away"<sup>3</sup> from the boats and were busy *washing* or "laundering"<sup>4</sup> their nets, which indicates that they had completed their night's work. These nets were probably made of linen and were used only at night because fish could see them during the day. They needed to clean debris from the nets in the morning before it dried and became impossible to remove.

3. While the fishermen had stepped away from the boats, Jesus stepped *into* the one that belonged to *Simon*. Luke offers no reason why Jesus chose this boat, nor does he mention Jesus asking permission to enter it. However, this is not the first time that the paths of Je-

sus and Simon crossed (see 4:38-39; see comments later on 5:5). All we are told is that Jesus asked Simon to *put out a little from shore*. Then, Jesus *sat down*, which was the posture of a teacher, and He “continued to teach”<sup>†</sup> from the security of this floating platform.

## 2. Simon’s Miraculous Catch of Fish (5:4-7)

**4** When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”

**5** Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

**6** When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.

**7** So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

**4.** Luke does not include the content of Jesus’ teaching, since what Jesus had to say at the end of the scene stands out more prominently in this story. However, throughout Luke’s Gospel, the use of the verb translated *speaking* refers to the proclamation of the gospel.

Jesus’ instructions to Simon are a blend of accurate details and absurdity. The verb *put out* (cf. v. 3) was a nautical term for going out to sea. However, to go out *into deep water* meant that Simon was to return where he had fished all night. The instruction to *let down the nets* is a plural verb; it is not directed only to Simon but also to the others with him! The size and weight of the fishing nets would have required two-to-four men to work together. Yet, the instructions would have seemed absurd, since Jesus (the carpenter) was basically telling these fishermen how to fish. For starters, Jesus told them to use nets that were for night fishing. He was going against the experts!

**5.** Simon’s response to Jesus underscores how absurd the instructions were. The verb translated *worked hard* suggests that they were exhausted. They had fished all night long, and still had caught nothing or what seemed to be nothing when compared to their efforts. It seemed ridiculous to go back during the daytime after their relative lack of success.

However, all this apparent absurdity is qualified by Simon’s address of Jesus as *Master*. This is not a title that can be translated “Lord,” “Sir,” or “Master,” like we find in verse 8. Rather, this title literally describes someone who stands over another in authority. Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells about Jesus being addressed in this way. Only disciples (8:24, 45; 9:33, 49) and 10 needy lepers (17:13) used this title to call on Jesus. In other words, only those who recognized something about Jesus’ divine authority responded to Him like this.

Why would *Simon*,

of all people, address Jesus this way? How would he know of Jesus’ authority and respond like this, especially when the instructions went against his own (better) judgment? Readers of Luke’s Gospel should remember that this is not Simon’s first encounter with Jesus. Earlier, Jesus healed the mother-in-law of Simon (4:38-39). So, there may have been good reason behind Jesus getting into Simon’s boat. And there was good reason for Simon to agree to do as Jesus instructed simply *because you say so* or “because of your word.”<sup>†</sup>

**6-7.** The original wording suggests that Simon and those with him on the boat let the nets down only once when they caught the amazing haul of fish. Unlike a similar episode in John 21:1-14, no exact number of fish is specified. Rather, Luke emphasizes the size of the catch by focusing on the results: The nets *began to break* or “were about to burst apart.”<sup>†</sup> In their attempt to bring in the miraculous catch, they *signaled* or frantically “waved”<sup>†</sup> to get the attention and help of their *partners* (a technical term for “business associates”) in the other boat. After they came to the rescue, both boats were so loaded with fish that they *began to sink*, a nautical term used to describe what frequently happened on the seas. However, Luke does not focus on the potential danger to the fishermen, but provides a vivid picture of the massive size of the catch.

## 3. Jesus’ Call to Mission (Luke 5:8-11)

**8** When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”

**9** For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken,

**10** and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.”



Early 20th-century photo of a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. Much of the ministry of Jesus was concentrated in the fishing towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee, towns such as Bethsaida, Capernaum, Gennesaret, and Magdala.

**11** So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

**8.** Although Simon may have expected to catch some fish, he probably did not expect to catch as many as they did (see v. 9). However, he recognized the amazing catch as a demonstration of divine power. The phrase *fell at Jesus' knees* suggests that Simon knelt before Jesus, both a sign of humility and the typical posture for prayer.

Three aspects of Simon's request are noteworthy. First, his request that Jesus *go away* or "depart"<sup>†</sup> from him contrasts with the interests of the people of Nazareth (4:16-30). They apparently desired what Jesus could do for *them*; Simon did not seek Jesus' power for his own benefit. Surprisingly, this was Jesus' own request of some demons (v. 35). However, here this request was probably a response of fear, a common response of biblical characters to divine revelation.

Second, Simon addressed Jesus as *Lord*. This term could also be translated "Master" as an equivalent term to the one found in verse 5. However, in this instance the word is a common title given to God and to the resurrected Jesus. It seems likely to interpret this address as reflecting a deeper meaning, especially in light of the resurrection.

Third, Simon described himself as a *sinful man*. In some ways, Simon appears to be hard on himself, since he had responded obediently to Jesus' instructions. However, this is the first time in Luke's Gospel that someone is described as "sinful" or a "sinner." Jesus later became known as a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (7:34). Some used the term "sinner" for those whom they identified as outsiders to the people of God. Luke, however, identifies this category of people as those who respond in faith to Jesus. Thus, this self-description and reaction may be similar to what Isaiah experienced in the temple (Isa. 6:1-5). In other words, it may be an expression of awe and unworthiness before the holiness of God.

**9-10a.** The reason for Simon's response is given here: It is not only that Simon and the others were astonished, but that astonishment had "seized them"<sup>†</sup> or "completed engulfed them."<sup>†</sup> All this was due to the amazing catch of fish. The others included *James and John*, who were *Simon's partners*. The term *partners* is different from that used earlier (v. 7). The word here is more general and refers to sharing. The word commonly translated "fellowship" in the New Testament (*koinonia*) comes from the same family of words. Simon Peter, James, and John later form Jesus' inner circle that would allow them to share in many aspects of Jesus' ministry. They would also be part of those early



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days of the church in Jerusalem where the believers shared all things with one another (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37).

**10b.** Jesus' response to Simon has three parts of significance. First, the command *don't be afraid* offered reassurance for Simon's response of fear. There is a pattern that develops early in Luke's Gospel: Those who encountered the divine all responded in fear, and all received these same words of assurance (1:13; 1:30; 2:10). Second, *from now on* signals a break from the past. Third, Jesus called Simon to be one who would *fish for people* or literally "catch people alive."<sup>†</sup> We should not confuse the wording here with the expression, "fishers of women and men"<sup>†</sup> in Matthew (4:19) and Mark (1:17). Those who fished ended up killing their catch; the wording in Luke's Gospel emphasizes a mission that offers life—life due to God's saving work.

**11.** Although Jesus' call was directed at Simon, Simon and his partners all responded to that call. The expression *left everything* is repeated in Luke's Gospel as a sign of obedience (5:28; 14:33; 18:22-23). This included leaving family and one's means of support. In that day, one's obligations were to the family, where a person's security was found. The radical nature of this call, particularly regarding one's family, is reflected in later teachings of Jesus (12:49-53; 14:25-33). Thus, to follow Jesus was not only a physical act but a declaration of spiritual allegiance. Since Simon had already responded to Jesus only on the basis of His word (5:4-5), the next step for him was to follow Jesus on a path that would take him to unknown places.

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