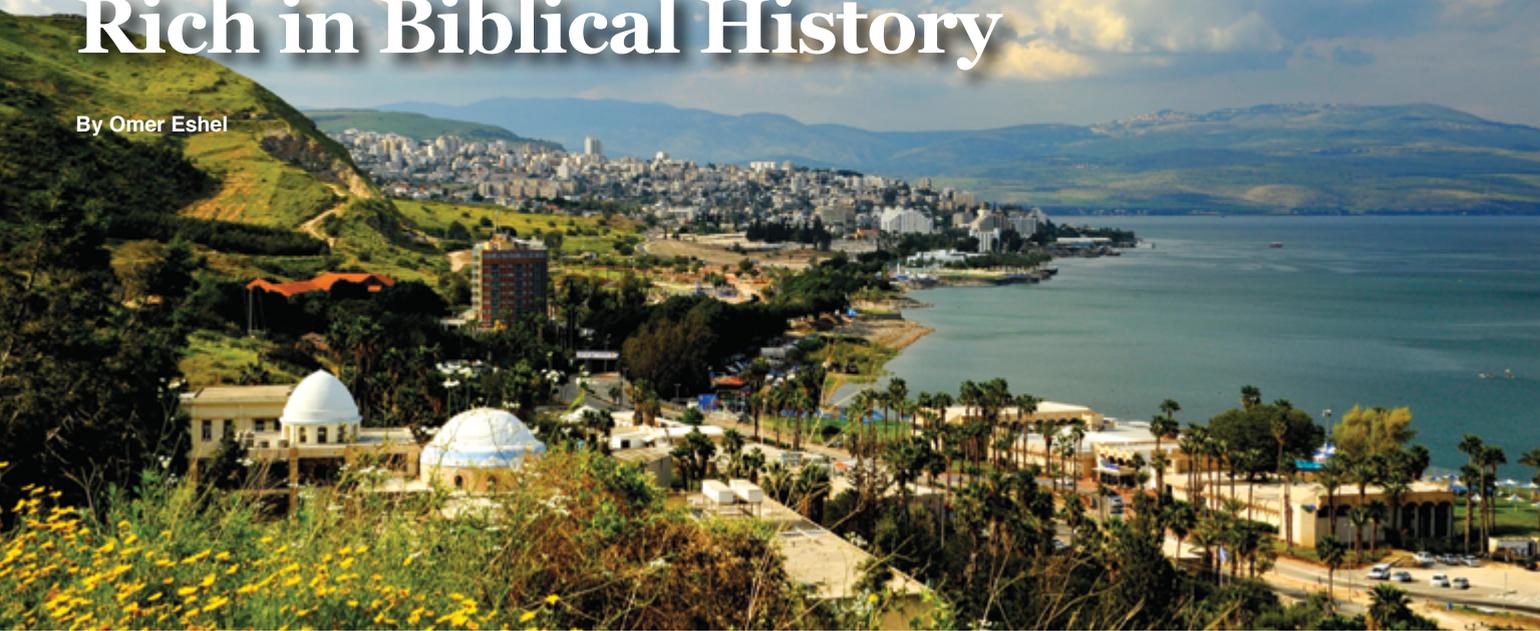


Tiberias

Rich in Biblical History

Named in honor the emperor Tiberias, the city grew to be an important political and religious hub

By Omer Eshel



When I was a young man, I used to go on trips to the Galilee, Golan Heights and the northern valleys with my father, who held the Bible in one hand and a map in the other. We used to walk the trails, and once in a while, my father would stop by a stone mound, leaf through the Bible and say: "See? Read this, this is where Jesus multiplied the loaves and the fish, and this is where Gideon fought the Midianites. King Saul stood on this mountain and watched over Jabesh Gilead, and this town was built by the disciples of Jesus."

On one of our trips, we stopped by Old Tiberias. It was a hot summer day, the sun was blazing, and the basalt ground seemed to be on fire. We stood by a curvy wall resting on the slopes of Mount Bereniki, named after Princess Berenice - sister of Herod Agrippa II, King of Galilee - who later became mistress to Titus, the Roman Emperor who burnt down the Temple in Jerusalem.

"Look at this," my father told me. "Do you know what this is?"

"A pile of stones," was my answer, and all I could think about was diving into the cool waters of the Sea of Galilee.

"It is a theater," said my father. "The Roman theater of ancient Tiberias, just recently unearthed and already a great find that can shed light on the fall of the Second Temple."

"How is that?" I asked, and my father smiled at me and said, "It's a little odd to see a theater in a Jewish town, isn't it? Also, don't forget that the Sea of Galilee's western bank was all Jewish, while the opposite side was still pagan. So why did they build a Roman city in the middle of the Jewish population? And if we think about how close it is to Capernaum, Magdala and Bethsaida, who exactly built this town?"

I paused, then asked, "Maybe the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth?"

My father smiled, looked at me for a while, and said, "Sometimes, stones speak louder than the words of the greatest orators in history."

I closed my eyes, and in my mind's eye went back in time to the building of this ancient town. I started day dreaming...

"And it shall have towers, incredible towers, rising over the Sea of Galilee.

"And the marketplace, the most colorful and vibrant in the whole of Galilee! It will make us proud, at last! Why should all the glory go to Caesarea and Jerusalem? We have also earned it! I am telling you, history is being written this very day! It is no longer the Sea of Galilee, but the Sea of Tiberias!"

"The Sea of Tiberias? Come on, Simon, do you really believe a city will rise here? We already have Gamla and Susya; and if it's

Bereniki observation point. Above: View of Tiberias and the Sea of Galilee from Switzerland Forest. Photo: Leon Minister



fish you want, then go to Capernaum and Magdala. Why should Herod built a city here, of all places?"

"Andrew, you fail to understand - this is completely different. We all know that ever since the death of Herod the Great, the country is divided and there are rifts, and you know better than I do that one of Herod's greatest accomplishments was dedicating Caesarea to his patron in Rome - Emperor Augustus. It stands to reason that Herod Agrippa would like to glorify the name of Emperor Tiberius, to earn his favor."

"And what does that have to do with us?" asked Simon. "The Barjonas are a family of fishermen and have always been so. Do you want us to move to your new city and leave Capernaum?"

"I didn't say we should leave, but what would be the harm if we helped build the city? We could earn some extra money, buy a new fishing boat and new nets, and meet new people."

"Think about it, Simon. In a few years you could tell your children you were part of history, and helped build something big, something new. You need to move out of your comfortable and familiar life as a fisherman. Open yourself to the world, it is now or never!"

"And what are they going to build there, in this Tiberias? A synagogue? We already have one, in Capernaum."

No, they will build a city to counter the Jewish town of Gamla, a city of baths that will drain the waters of the ancient hot springs, a city of theaters and marketplaces, of money changers and big streets and beautifully chiseled watch towers. It would become a second Caesarea, a pagan city in the midst of the Jewish population, the new capital of the Galilee.

"You might be right, dear brother, maybe I should become a stonemason. After all, is there anything more solid than a rock?"

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"Master, hurry up, come with me! Quickly! I know every alley!"

"Simon, what do they want from me? Why are they after me? I only want to help, to heal, and to preach of the Kingdom of Heaven."

"I know, Master, I know, but not everyone sees it as we do, especially not the priests and the Pharisees."

"Here, Master, turn left by the marketplace, there is an attic behind the tower, where we can find some refuge."

"Simon, I have to say I am truly impressed. How do you know each nook and cranny in this town?"

Simon lowered his eyes and said:

"Master, I helped build this town fourteen years ago."

"You? But you are a fisherman. What do you know about construction?"

"Master, my brother Andrew stood on this very spot fourteen years ago and told me to get leave my life of comfort as a fisherman and be part of something big that would go down in history. Who knew that fourteen years later, I would lead my Master and my Teacher, and help him with my knowledge of the city? The Lord works in mysterious ways indeed, for 'Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is.'" (Jeremiah 17, 7).

"Nicely put, Simon," said Jesus. "'For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.'" (1 Samuel 16, 7).

"If you did not partake in buliding this town, you would not have been able to help me in my hour of need, so I am very glad you took your brother's advice. Simon, you are my rock, and I trust you. You will help me bring the Kingdom of Heaven, for you are not only a fisherman among men, thou art Peter. Just as you have built a city in Judea and learnt the trade of stonemason, thou shalt be a founding rock and chisel the hearts of men."

Simon lowered his eyes and tears streaked his cheeks, for he knew that here, behind the walls of the city he built, they would be safe, at least for now.

"Get up, Master, please," implored Simon. "The sun is rising; we can go out and return to Capernaum. We have weathered the storm, and the mob is no longer after us. I spoke with some of our followers in the city, and they promised to help us leave this place. We shall head towards the theater, and from there down to the harbor, where we shall set sail under the shelter of night and go back to Capernaum."

The disciples will wait for us there, upon their return from their nightly fishing."

"You are a true friend and a wonderful human being," said Jesus and kissed Simon on the head.

They quickly crossed the alleys by the new theater and went silently down to the harbor.

"Well? How long should we wait for you? Get up," said my father. "How come you always fall asleep when I tell you a story? I just hope your children are more alert when you tell them stories."

"Come on, let's go. I heard they found an ancient fishing boat near Ginosar, not far from here."

This chain of events is of course a figment of my imagination, though it relies heavily on Biblical references, on archeological finds and on some deduction. However, a few facts are well known:

Some of the builders of ancient Tiberias were disciples of Jesus from nearby villages. Tiberias was indeed based on Caesarea as an imperial town for Jews and non-Jews alike. It was also the very center of the fishing trade in the area, and as such, drew many people from all corners of the Galilee and became the district capital and biggest town in the area. Therefore, one can only assume that while staying in Capernaum and the banks of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus probably visited Tiberias and might even have found refuge there, as in other mixed towns of pagans and Jews.

So the story I have told you here may not have happened... or maybe it did. One thing's for sure: Sometimes, stones do speak louder than the words of the greatest orators in history. ●



Barko Park and the coins found in the excavations

