Fisherm

IN THE FIRST CENTURY

By Argile A. Smith, Jr.

MATTHEW 4:12-25 records Jesus calling four of His twelve disciples. Each of the four was a fisherman. Notice some of the details. Peter and his brother were casting a net in the Sea of Galilee. Likewise, James and John were mending their nets. The details in this setting deserve exploration. With a better understanding of the fishermen in Jesus' day, we can better grasp what His call meant to them.

Who Were the Fishermen?

In Jesus' day, most people living in Israel depended on farming and fishing for food. Fishing thus became an important industry, one that was quite profitable. Fishermen generally made more money than farmers.[1]

While fishing was a good way to make a living, it was not easy. It involved back-breaking work that required fishermen to stay busy for long hours every day. The fishing industry involved a predictable but grueling routine. Fishermen would go out in their boats at night and bring in their catch early in the morning. Then they would separate the fish they caught, salt them down in order to preserve them, and deliver them to the market. They sold some fish in Jerusalem at the designated entrance to the city that everyone referred to as the Fish Gate.[2]

The work made fishermen rugged and durable, but it could also make them coarse. They could be harsh and crude in their speech and behavior. That trait did not prevent Jesus, however, from including seasoned fishermen in His band of disciples. He obviously knew about the reputation of the fishermen He invited to join Him. Take James and John, for instance. They were brothers who worked in their father's fishing business; Jesus named them "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17).[3]

The nickname implied Jesus knew about their reputation for getting loud and perhaps even violent at times.

A fisherman's lack of refined social skills may have hampered him in some ways, but it did not prevent him from nurturing productive business relationships with other fishermen. Although some fishermen probably chose to work by themselves, others formed partnerships that enabled them to catch more fish, expand their businesses, and increase their profit.[4]

Where Did They Fish?

All kinds of fish flourished in the Mediterranean Sea, but the fishermen in Israel did not seem to be drawn there. Instead they gave their attention to the fresh-water inland lake commonly known as the Sea of Galilee.

The prominence of the fishing industry was evident in the growth of towns and villages surrounding the Sea of Galilee. Jesus chose Capernaum, a town on the northern shore of the lake, to be the center of His Galilean ministry. In and around Capernaum, He preached to large crowds. Capernaum also happened to be a center of business for the Galilean fishing industry.

Fishing also influenced the names

Lads in a boat on the Nile, ready for a day of net fishing.

Below: Mycenaean pottery found at Paphos on Cyprus, bowl on stand, decorated with a fish motif. Dated about 1200 B.C.

of towns and villages in the area. For example, Bethsaida was a seashore town not far away from Capernaum. A predominantly Gentile town, the name meant "the fishing place."[5]

Fishermen in Israel favored the Sea of Galilee because they could harvest different kinds of fish from there. Three varieties were particularly plentiful. A small fish that resembled a sardine grew well there. Tilapia, otherwise known as St. Peter's Fish, flourished there too. So did carp, which was somewhat larger than tilapia. Although fishermen in the Sea of Galilee caught catfish and eels, they normally discarded them because Jewish people did not eat them (Matt. 13:47-48).[6]

Fishermen focused their work in the Sea of Galilee for another reason. No other significant body of fresh water suitable for fishing existed in Israel. Even the Jordan River held little promise for productive fishing. The Jordan flowed from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. Fish that made their way from the lake and down the Jordan were not as plentiful or very large. If they got to the mouth of the Dead Sea, they died in the salt water.[7]

What Equipment Did They Use?

In the days of the Old Testament, people fished in the Mediterranean as well as the Sea of Galilee. We have few details, though, of how they caught fish. Three references in Job suggest

Below: Bronze harpoons and hooks, Egyptian, dated about 1300 B.C. Harpoon use was typically for sports fishing. Single fish- **ermen used rods, lines, and hooks. Those who made their living off of fishing, though, typically used nets.**

people used hooks and harpoons to catch fish (Job 41:1-2,7). The hooks were made of bone or iron and attached to a line that the fisherman held by hand.[8]
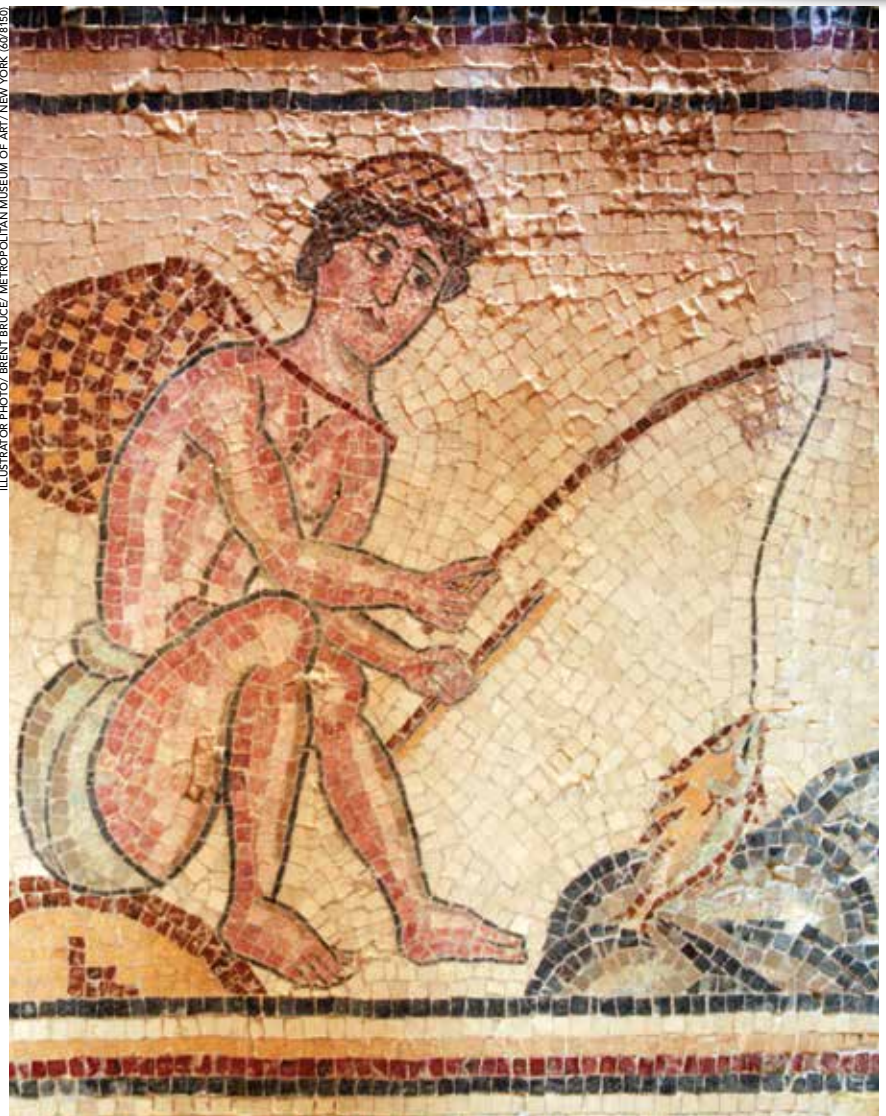
The New Testament has an account involving the use of hooks to catch a fish (see Matt. 17:27). The vast majority of New Testament references about fishing, though, involve nets. Fishermen in the first century used three different kinds of nets, each indicated by a different Greek word. Matthew mentions each in his Gospel.

Fishermen sometimes used a simple

Below: Located in the Church of Saint Lot and Saint Procopius (early Christian martyrs) a mosaic dating to the mid-6th cent. A.D. depicts a man pole fishing.

Right: Limestone decorative fragment from Egypt dates about 2700–2200 B.C. and shows three flathead mullets (*Mugil cephalus*, Latin).
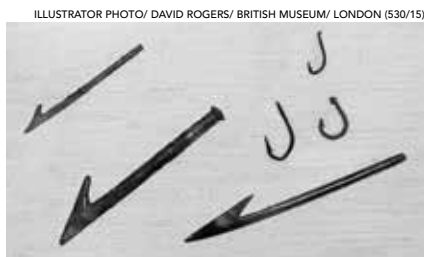
cast net, typically round and about 13 feet in diameter. Fisherman placed heavy objects like stones around the edge so the net would sink quickly. Whether in a boat, on shore, or in shallow water, fishermen would keep this type net close at hand so they could cast it over a school of fish. Even though this simple net was useful, fishermen could use it only during the day.[9] This was the type Peter and

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Above: Overlooking the ruins of ancient Capernaum with the Sea of Galilee in the distance.

Upper left: Gentleman sells musht, also known as "St. Peter's fish," at an open-air market outside of Luxor, Egypt.

Left: Fishermen working with their nets, at the harbor of Patmos.

A fisherman depended on his nets and thus took good care of them. Every day he would wash, inspect, and mend his nets. That is what Peter was doing the day Jesus encouraged him to try one more time to bring in a catch. That was also the day Peter left his nets and followed Jesus as a disciple (Luke 5:1-11).

With these details, we get a clearer picture of what Jesus had in mind when He told Peter and Andrew that He would make them "fish for people" (Matt. 4:19). As we reflect on the details today, we have a greater appreciation of His call for His disciples in the twenty-first century. 𝕭

Andrew were using when Jesus called them: "As He was walking along the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the sea, since they were fishermen" (Matt. 4:18).

Another kind of net was something like a dragnet or a seine. About 16 feet high and up to 800 feet long, this net had rocks tied to the bottom and floaters attached to the top. Fishermen in one boat could use it, or they could suspend it between two boats that were guided close to shore. From there, they would pull the dragnet onto shore with ropes. That was why fishermen favored a sandy shore with a gentle slope. Jesus compared this type net to the kingdom of heaven: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a large net thrown into the sea. It collected every kind of fish, and when it was full, they dragged it ashore, sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but threw out the worthless ones" (13:47-48).

Still another kind of net was a little more complex and resembled a modern-day trammel net. It actually consisted of a series of parallel nets that fishermen suspended between two boats. Fishermen in a third boat would drive the fish into the nets. This kind of complex net worked particularly well for catching big fish in deep water. This was the type net that Peter and Andrew used in their fishing business before they began to follow Jesus. "Immediately they left their nets and followed Him" (4:20).

1. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 55.
2. Roland K. Harrison, "Fish" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* [ISBE], gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 309.
3. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
4. Adrianus Van Selms, "Fishing" in ISBE, 311.
5. Roger Crook, "Galilee, Sea of" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 618.
6. "Fish" in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* [EBD], rev. ed. Allen C. Myers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 384; Harrison, "Fish," 309.
7. "Fish" in EBD, 384.
8. Roland K. Harrison, "Fishhook" in ISBE, 309.
9. Information on nets in this and the following paragraphs is drawn mainly from "Fishing" in EBD, 385.

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