# Jesus' Sea Journeys in the Gospel of Mark

In the first part of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is involved in a total of six sea journeys on the sea of Galilee. These journeys (and the information provided by the corresponding accounts in the other three Gospels) have been studied from a variety of viewpoints, and often these studies have questioned Mark's geographical accuracy. In this article, I wish to present a description of these journeys using, as always, the Received Text. I also attempt to show that Mark has not only been geographically accurate, but that there is also an internal consistency and structural pattern in the way in which these journeys are described—features that are largely ignored in many of these studies.

The journeys or voyages have been described by Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Richard Bauckham. Both these scholars, in different ways, present the voyages in ways which, according to their respective analyses, are internally consistent to Mark, but which cannot, as I see it, readily be reconciled with the corresponding accounts in Matthew and Luke.

On the next page is a map to help us.

The Six Journeys

Treating the shore of Sea of Galilee as being divided into western and eastern halves by a north-south line through the middle, the journeys can be divided into three pairs—each consisting of an "outward" journey and a "return" journey as follows:
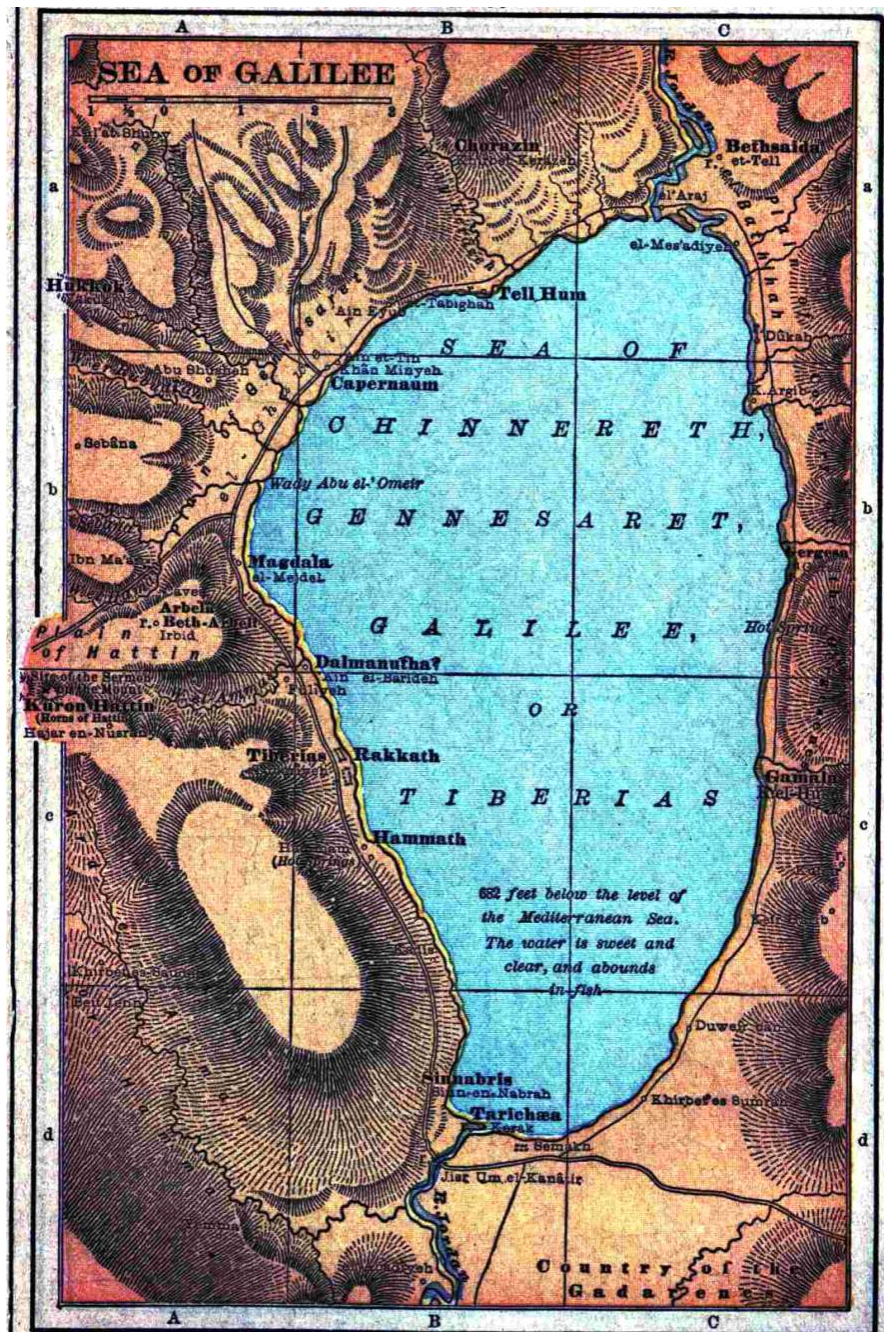
First Pair:

Journey 1: Jesus, located on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, (presumably somewhere near Capernaum) gets into the boat (Mark 4:1), delivers three parables and then proposes crossing over to the other side (Mark 4:35-36). Following the miraculous calming of the storm, they come to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes (in the Textus Receptus). Matthew's account in the TR has Gergesenes, Luke's has Gadarenes (The NA27 versions of Mark reads Gerasenes.) This is followed by the healing of the Gadarene demoniac.

Journey 2: Jesus now on the eastern shore, gets into the boat (Mark 5:15), and crosses to the other side (Mark 5:21).

Second Pair:

Journey 3: Jesus (again on the western shore) goes in a boat with the disciples to a "desolate place" (Mark 6:32). In the parallel passage in Luke (Luke 9:10) Jesus takes the disciples to a desert place belonging to the city of Bethsaida (in the Received Text). This is followed by the feeding of the five thousand. Mark does not describe this as a "crossing" of the lake, but the parallel passage, (Luke 9:10), by mentioning the desert place belonging to Bethsaida, indicates that this was the case.

Journey 4: After the feeding of the five thousand Jesus sends the disciples to go to the other side of the lake relative to Bethsaida. (Mark 6:45). This is not how this verse is usually translated, and I discuss this in some detail later in the article. In the parallel passage in John 6:16-17, we read that the disciples were making for Capernaum. There is another storm, and Jesus comes to them walking on the water and stills the storm. They come to land at Gennesaret (the region in which Capernaum is situated). John (in John 6:21) says that "instantly, the boat came to be at the land (*ges*) to which they were going".

Third Pair:

Journey 5: This time the journey starts, following the feeding of the four thousand) from the eastern shore, in the region of Decapolis (Mark 7:31). Jesus comes into the region of Dalmanutha (Mark 8:10) which is believed to have been a town on the west coast—near to Magdala. However, Mark does not specifically describe this as a "crossing" of the lake, even though this would appear to have been the case. Matthew (Matt. 15:39) describes the landing as taking place "in the borders of Magdala".

Journey 6: Following a dispute with the Pharisees, Jesus enters the boat and goes to the other side (Mark 7:13). There follows a discussion in the boat with the disciples, and Jesus comes to Bethsaida (Mark 8:22), following which they travel northwards to the villages of Caesarea Philippi.

Archaeological Notes

Two recent archaeological discoveries/excavations are consistent with the above account.

 1) Location of Bethsaida.

 Following archaeological discoveries starting in 2017, there is increasing

evidence that Bethsaida was located at *el-Araj* near the present shoreline of the sea of Galilee, and about a mile south of the earlier (presumed) location at *et-Tel*. Both these locations lie just to the east of the Jordan River, near to its inflow into the Sea of Galilee. *El-Araj* is clearly located on an ancient shoreline of the lake. (There are other views on this too—please see later in this article).

For further details, please see: Notley, R. Steven and Mordechai Aviam. "Searching for Bethsaida — The Case for El–Araj." Biblical Archaeology Review 46, no. 2 (Spring, 2020): 28–39. (There are many other reports and pictures, videos etc. available on the internet).

Left: Two proposed sites for Bethsaida.
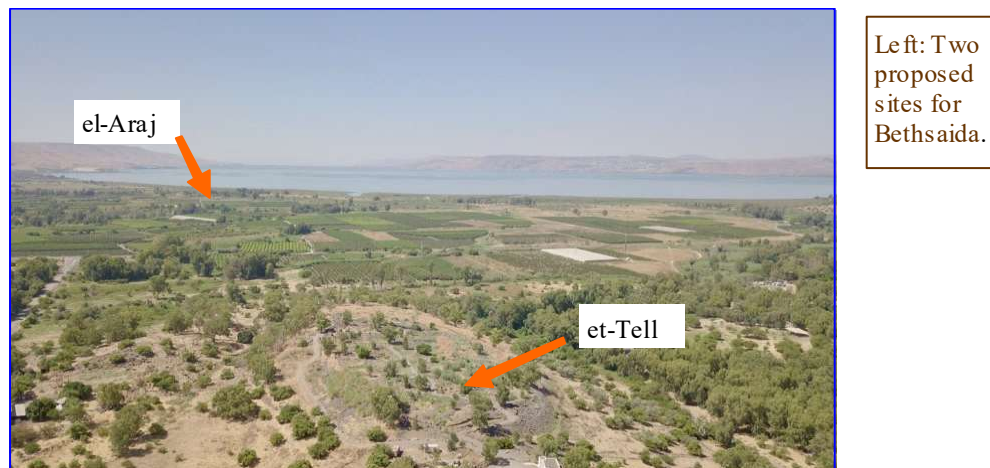
2) Location of Dalmanutha

In 2012, an archaeological survey by Archaeologist Ken Dark of Reading University suggested a possible location for Dalmanutha. The site was situated on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee in the vicinity of Magdala and in the same general location as the famous "Galilee Boat", discovered in 1986.

Notes on the Six Journeys

1) There is an overall structure to the six journeys, illustrated schematically in the diagram on the next page.

2) Three journeys are west to east, three journeys are east to west

3) Neither of the "horizontal" journeys in the diagram on the next page is described as a "crossing" - the remaining four *are* described in this way, and all four specifically include the words *eis to peran*— "to the other side".

4) The Greek wording of the fourth journey needs some explaining as discussed below . . !

Schematic Outline for the Six Sea Crossings
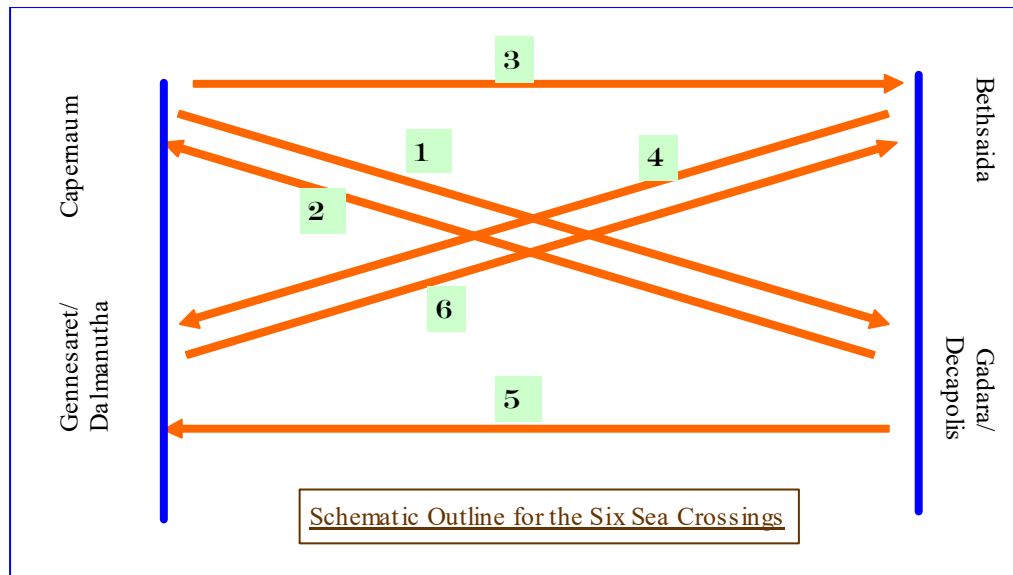
In the translations of Mark 6:45 on the bibehub website, almost all the translations say that "Jesus told the disciples to go to the other side, to Bethsaida" or something equivalent. I am going to be very bold, and follow the view of Lydia McGrew (which I found on lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com) to the effect that these translations are probably wrong.

Mark 6:45 says,

And immediately He compelled the disciples of Him to enter into the boat and to go before to the other side *pros* Bethsaida until He should dismiss the crowd.

The words for "to go before to the other side to Bethsaida" are:

"*proagein eis to peran pros Bethsaida*" in the Textus Receptus (some other versions have *Bethsaidan*).

Almost all the translations treat the two prepositional phrases *eis to peran* and *pros Bethsaida(n)* as adverbial phrases both modifying the verb *proagein*, and therefore in apposition to one another. They do this, even though the second phrase, *pros Bethsaida(n)*, is nearer to *to peran* than it is to the verb *proagein*. If we treat the phrase *pros Bethsaida(n)* as modifying the nearer expression *to peran* where the word *peran* (which is said to be an adverb by the biblehub website but which is here preceded by the definite article and which thus functions as a "substantive" i.e. a noun—please see the entry in BDAG for confirmation of this) - i.e. *eis to peran* means to the other side - then *pros Bethsaida(n)* takes the meaning "with respect to Bethsaida" - i.e. the journey is to the opposite side of the lake with respect to Bethsaida.

In BDAG, (the NT Greek Lexicon) both these meanings for *pros* occur in section 3 of the definition: the meaning "movement towards" occurs after verbs and is described in subsection a) of section 3 of the definition, and the meaning "with regard to" occurs in subsection e) of section 3.)

(The only translation on Mark 6:45 that appears to allow for the *possibility* that the above translation *might* be correct is the New American Standard Bible translation since it *doesn't* have a comma between "the other side" and "to Bethsaida":

Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the crowd away.)

A More Detailed Look at the Structure of the Journeys in Mark

Mark's Use of Certain Key Words

There are some interesting verbal aspects regarding our six journeys.

First of all, the words "sea" and "boat" both occur 18 times in Mark's Gospel.

Sixteen of the occurrences of "boat" are the "standard" word, *ploion*, and two are the diminutive *ploiarion*. The two diminutive uses refer to small boats used by other people during the journey narratives, whereas all the 16 occurrences of *ploion* refer to events prior to and during the six journeys of Jesus and the disciples. The Greek words for "the boat" occur at the start of each of the six journeys. Jesus' leaving the boat is described twice—at the end of journeys 1 and 4 (Mark 5:2 and 6:53) i.e. after the two "sea miracles". In both cases, the expression "out of the boat" is followed by the word "immediately" which links Jesus' leaving the boat with an event which occurs immediately afterwards, (perhaps to distinguish these disembarkations from ones where there may be a lapse of time before the next event unfolds, or where the next event may be less contingent upon the actual disembarkation itself).

Fourteen of the occurrences of "sea" (*thalassa*) refer to events in and around the Sea of Galilee prior to and during the six journeys (actually the sea is mentioned only in connection with three of these journeys). Another two of the mentions refer to the pigs running in to the sea and being drowned during the healing of the Gadarene demoniac and the remaining two uses of "sea" occur in Jesus' teaching later in Mark's Gospel: these are the reference to the man with a millstone round his neck who is cast the sea (Mark 9:42) and the mountain cast into the sea (11:23). Perhaps these two "judgement" occurrences correspond in a way to the Gadarene demoniac references.

The six journeys are described with different amounts of detail. The mention of the word "boat" is the *sine qua non* of all the journeys—always occurring,

as already noted, at the start of each journey, but, perhaps surprisingly, the word "sea" does not always appear in each journey. Indeed, the last occurrences of the word "sea" in the journey narratives are the repeated mentions of Jesus' walking "on the sea" (Mark 6:48-49) during journey number 4—and "sea" is not mentioned at all in connection with journeys 3, 5 and 6.

Specific locations are sometimes mentioned—the country of the Gadarenes at the end of journey 1, Bethsaida, in connection with journey 4, and the land of Gennesaret at the end of journey 4, the region of Damanutha at the end of journey 5, and Bethsaida at the end of journey 6. Journey 3 has a less specific destination: a desert place.

The expression "to the other side" (*eis to peran*) occurs five times, either in connection with leaving one side of the lake or in connection with arriving at the other, or generally referring to a "crossing over" from one side to the other. Two of these occurrences (Mark 4:35 and 6:45) are Jesus' words of *intention* regarding crossing over, rather than actual descriptions of the crossing over. The related verb *diaperaso* occurs twice, and describes the action of crossing over . I think that the prefix *dia may* suggest a perspective of "the middle of the lake", rather than the beginning or end of the journey in both these cases. So, (depending on how we do the counting and allocating!), approximately half of the six arrivals plus six departures are associated with a "*peran*"-type word. Journeys 3 and 5 do not include such a word, either at the beginning, middle or end!

Observations on the Overall Structure of the Journeys

1) Mark introduces the links between nautical terms (i.e. sea, boat) and the disciples prior to the actual journeys. The first two disciples are called in connection with the repeated word "sea" (Mark 1:16-17), and the next two disciples in connection with the repeated word "boat" (Mark 1:19-20). Then Levi is called in connection with the word "sea" (Mark 2:13-14). Finally, Jesus, withdraws to the sea and gets the disciples to put a boat at His disposal because of the crowds in Mark 3:7-10. This prepares the way for the sea journeys.

2) The first journey—across the sea to the country of the Gadarenes is "paradigmic" in the sense that it provides the fullest account of the features of Mark's sea crossings. Having established the "pattern", Mark provides less detail for the remaining five crossings, but he does so in a chiastically structured way—journey 4 being the fullest of these remaining accounts, and journeys 3 and 5 being the least detailed.

This structure is illustrated on the next page.

The following chart (next page but one) attempts to delineate the occurrences of various significant words, or events in each of the six journeys:

| Journey 1 |

| Journey 2 |

| Journey 3 |

| Journey 4 |

| Journey 5 |

| Journey 6 |
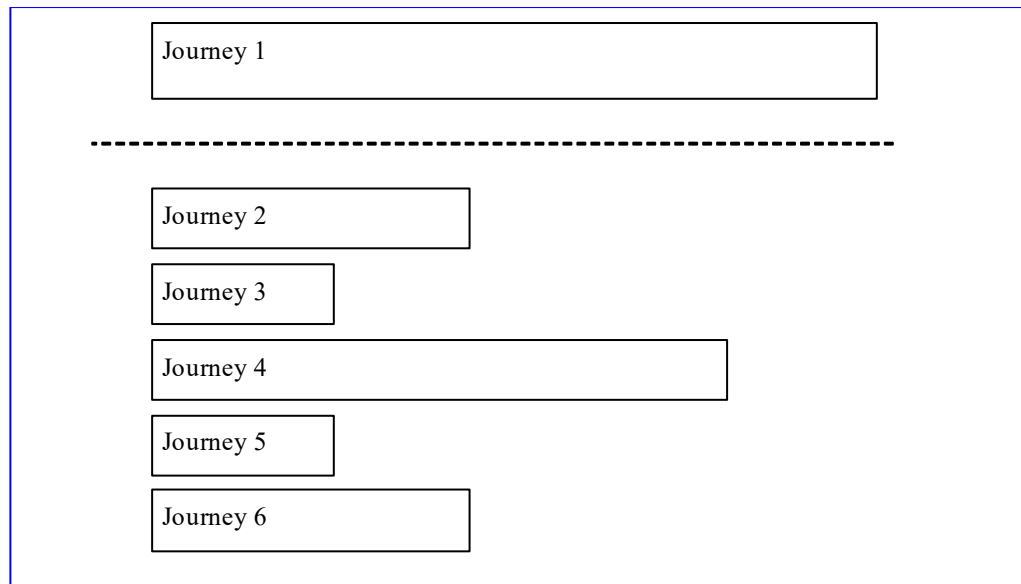
Discussion and Conclusion

I hope this little study has helped to show that there is a structure to Jesus' six sea journeys in Mark. The first two pairs of journeys start from and return to the western shore, whereas the third pair starts from and returns to the eastern shore. Between the second and third pairs, Jesus leaves the western shore and goes overland to the borders of Tyre and Sidon where he heals the Syro-Phoenecian woman's daughter. (I have discussed this healing miracle in another article on the Famous Fox website.) Following this healing, Jesus returns, again overland by a route which (presumably) crosses the Jordan to the north of the Sea of Galilee, then down the eastern side of the sea to the Decapolis region where the miracle of feeding of the four thousand takes place.

The reconstruction offered here uses the Received Text, and it depends on a particular interpretation of the expression *pros Bethsaida(v)* as discussed earlier in the article.

Most conservative exegetes have interpreted this expression differently, and understand the disciples to have been instructed by the Lord to make for *another* Bethsaida on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. The traditional location for this Bethsaida is close to Capernaum, either Tabgha or Aish. These locations are not currently regarded as likely, but they are nevertheless illustrated on the map on the next page but one.

An interesting proposal is that the site at El-Araj (discussed earlier) was actually on the west side of the Jordan during bible times, and that the area south of the Et-Tell site was occupied by an extension of the Sea of Galilee (which has since silted up). According to this view, these were *both* Bethsaidas—one on

Table rotated to landscape orientation.

Journey	Boat mentioned? Start	middle	end	Sea mentioned? Start	middle	end	Event after entry to boat?	Event during crossing?	Peran (="other side") At start	at end	Destination mentioned? At start	at end
1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ ᵃ	✓ ᵈ	✓	✓	✗ (–)	✓ Country of Gadarenes
2	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓ ᵇ	✗	✗	✓	✓ Other side	✗ (–)
3	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓ De-sert place	✗ (–)
4	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓ ᶜ	✓ ᵉ	✓	✗	✓ Other side from Bethsaida	✓ Land of Gennes-aret
5	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗ (–)	✓ Dalman-utha
6	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓ ᶠ	✓	✗	✓ Other side	✓ Bethsaida

Notes: a) Three parables inc. Parable of the Sower. Jesus proposes the sea crossing. (Mark 4:2-35). b) The healed demoniac asks to accompany Jesus (Mark 5:18-20). c) Disciples are instructed to go to other side and Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray. (Mark 6:45-46). d) The stilling of the storm (Mark 4:37-41). e) Jesus walks on the water (Mark 6:47-52). F) Jesus teaches about the two feeding miracles. (Mark 8:14-21).
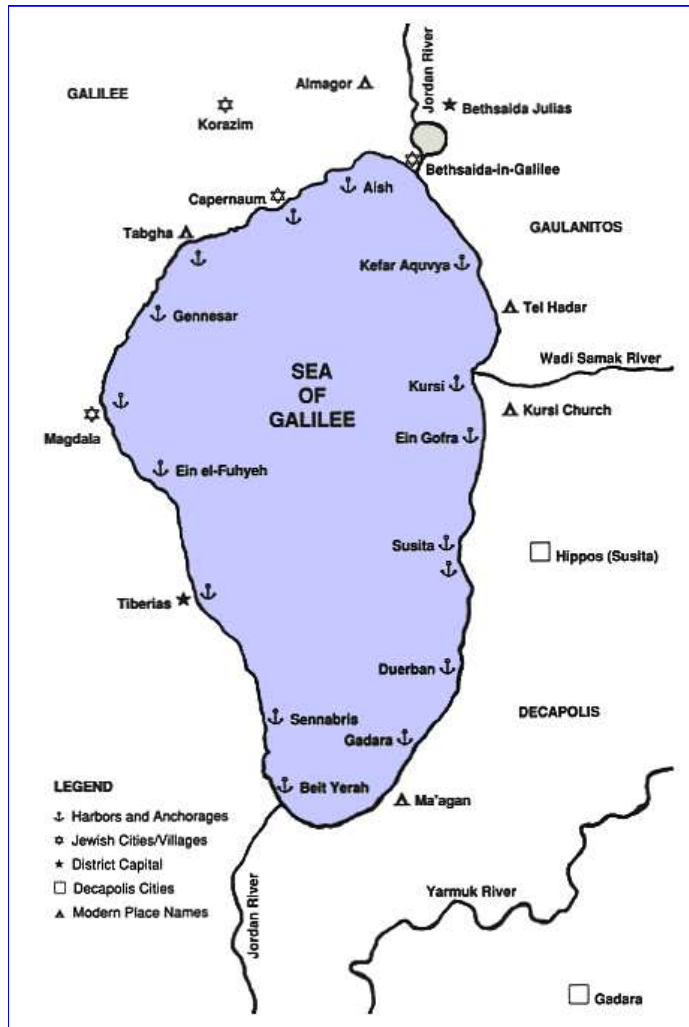
the western shore (Bethsaida-in-Galilee) and one on the eastern shore (Bethsaida Julias). Please see the article, *Ancient Harbours of the Sea of Galilee* on the biblicalarchaeology.org website. However, we will not pursue this (nevertheless interesting!) possibility in the present discussion.
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An argument in favour of two Bethsaidas is that in the Gospel of John (John 12:21), we read that that Philip was from "Bethsaida in Galilee". It is argued that John speaks of Bethsaida in Galilee to distinguish it from a Bethsaida that wasn't in Galilee— hence two Bethsaida's. (However, John may possibly have had *other* reasons for specifying "Galilee" in John 12:12.) Now, at the time of Jesus, Galilee is thought only to have extended as far east as the Jordan River. Both et-Tel and el-Araj are currently east of the Jordan, so, if one of them was a Bethsaida, there still must have been a Bethsaida-in-Galilee somewhere west of the Jordan.

However, it is (apparently) known that some time between A.D. 30 and A.D. 84, Galilee had expanded to include large areas to the east of the Jordan and

the Sea of Galilee. If John was writing his Gospel after this territorial expansion, and he was referring to the location of Bethsaida *at the time of writing*, then that would obviate this "need" for a second Bethsaida west of the Jordan. (In this case, John would presumably have been specifying Bethsaida *in Galilee* for reasons other than distinguishing this Bethsaida from a nearby one outside Galilee.)

There is a very interesting piece of information in John's account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. (Many thanks to Lydia McGrew - mentioned earlier - at lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com for pointing this out) . . .

We already know from Luke that this miracle took place in a desolate place (9:12) near Bethsaida (Luke 9:10), and we know from elsewhere in John (John 1:44) that Philip, Andrew and Peter were from Bethsaida. Now, in John's account of the miracle, we read,

"Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?" (John 6:5b). It is interesting that Jesus specifically asks *Philip*: he as a native, would presumably have "local knowledge"! Now Philip does not answer in a very "insightful" way, but note who quickly steps in (to try to deflect Jesus from a line of questioning which does not show Philip in a particularly good light?)—Peter, Philip's fellow Bethsaidan!! This is an example I suggest of John's observational powers (as well as his understated humour which I have noticed elsewhere.) (For a collaboration between Philip and Andrew, Peter's brother, please see John 12:22).

Finally, (in this rather disjointed discussion/conclusion!), I would like to mention that Jesus' first two journeys (from the western shore to Gadara and back again) are structured within an "inclusio" involving "crowds" and "sea": in Mark 4:1 we read ,

"Again, He began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about Him".

Likewise in Mark 5:21 we read, " . . a great crowd gathered about Him and He was beside the sea".

The link between crowds and sea may be significant. The sea is symbolic of people in the bible (particularly Gentiles and sinners) (e.g. see *Through New Eyes* by James Jordan) and the disciples were called to be "fishers of men".

In the next article, I hope to look at the structure of the two "intercalated" healings that followed Jesus' return to the western shore in Mark 5:21 (the woman with the haemorrhage and Jairus' daughter). I think that Mark 5:21 serves both as a "structural marker" which separates these healings from what has gone before as well as simultaneously "belonging" to the account of the two healings—but more of that later!!