
Review by L. Edward Hicks

It is very rare when a book can simultaneously interest Biblical archaeologists, marine archaeologists, and those interested in more information about the Battle of Migdal as told by Josephus in his *History of the Jewish Wars of Liberation*, but Shelley Wachsmann has accomplished this feat magnificently in his fascinating and very readable story of the discovery, rescue, and preservation of a first-century fishing boat from the Sea of Galilee. The story is a fascinating tale of how a host of people from many different backgrounds and occupations worked almost around the clock for a period of twelve days excavating and transporting the extremely fragile boat from the mud of the lake’s rising waters without damaging it. The boat was then submerged in a chemical bath for 7 years before it could be displayed in the Yigal Allon Museum very near where it was discovered and rescued by members of Kibbutz Ginosar. Not only does Wachsmann praise the hundreds of volunteers from the Kibbutz for their untiring devotion to and work on the project, but he also illustrates how several of these untrained helpers actually formulated some of the previously untested methods for unearthing, cleaning, and documenting the project that proved to be groundbreaking solutions to the myriad of problems that the professional archaeologists from the Israeli Antiquities Authority had never before faced.

Not only does each chapter highlight an important phase of the salvage and restoration, but Wachsmann weaves into the narrative significant aspects of the importance of the find with a brief description of the technical aspects of marine and Biblical archaeology. As impressive as this quality of the book maybe, he also ties the boat to significant events on or near the Sea of Galilee, also called Lake Kinneret, in the history of first-century Israel in which the boat might have played a part. As Wachsmann discusses his research into New Testament stories about events on the lake, as well as Josephus’ story of the Battle of Migdal during the first Jewish uprising against Rome, he artfully places the boat in its historical context as well as describing how his research provided additional clues to help determine who might have built the boat and how it might have been used on the lake. Along this line, a first-century mosaic, discovered recently by Franciscan archaeologists at a private house in Migdal, confirmed many technical aspects of the boat which until then were mere conjecture on the part of the boat’s researchers. The Migdal Mosaic depicted what type of mast and sails were used on similar boats on the lake and made it
easier for the researchers to understand the missing parts of their partially preserved boat. The mosaic clearly showed the size of the crew and the position and type of oars, locks, and steering gear used. The mosaic reinforced Wachmann’s conjecture on these subjects and provided new insights as well.

In each chapter Wachsmann skillfully and effortlessly guides the reader back and forth between the high-tech archeological research techniques of today with many accompanying historical events adding context to the importance of the discovery. Along the way the reader is given geographical and historical information about the area around the Sea of Galilee and the people that fished and sailed from its shores. Much of this information is seen through the eyes of 19th-century Western adventurers like Mark Twain, who described the area in detail in his *Innocents Abroad*. But the most detailed description is from the Scotsman John MacGregor, who sailed the lake in 1869 in his custom-made kayak, the *Rob Roy*. Not surprisingly, the third and longest chapter in the book meticulously details the salvage operation with its myriad of problems and their sometimes almost miraculous solutions using equal portions of ingenuity and pure luck. Chapter Four presents a detailed history of fishing on the lake, especially including episodes from the Gospels detailing their relationship to the history of the lake. Wachsmann notes that Jesus was connected to many boats of the fishermen on the lake, but “there is one other strand that connects Jesus to the wooden boats on the Sea of Galilee: He was a carpenter by trade, as was Joseph before him. Jesus could have appreciated the woodwork and craftsmanship that went into the boats that sailed the Kinneret.” Chapter Five deals with the professional career of noted marine archaeologist Richard Steffy, from Texas A & M’s Institute of Nautical Archaeology, who oversaw the research into the construction and ultimate dating of the craft. Professor Steffy brought to the project many years of experience in the history of ship building on the Mediterranean and its adjoining waters. It was he who provided the technical expertise for the salvage operation. Chapter Six gives an overview of Jewish life in Palestine under the demanding Roman Emperors, whose policies eventually led to the Jewish uprising that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the final stand of the rebels on the heights of Masada. However, before those fateful events, the Roman army first fought the Jews in Galilee, among other areas, and specifically at Migdal, where both land and naval battles left thousands of Jews dead; many of these events were recorded by Josephus. Wachsmann uses this analysis to highlight an important find within the wrecked boat: a pyramid arrowhead. “The arrowhead that Moshele had found may have belonged originally to one of those auxiliary archers attached to Vespasian’s battle group, perhaps one of the same men who later took part in the battle of Gamla.” Chapter Seven details the extraordinary ingenuity used to encase the hull in a floating Styrofoam cocoon which allowed the salvaged boat to be transported to its temporary restoration pool filled with Ethylene Glycol to replace the water molecules in the wood with liquid wax to
further preserve and protect the vessel for future study and, finally, its exhibition at the museum.

Throughout the remainder of the book the reader is blessed with an introduction to many other important areas of archaeological investigation: the history of Biblical Archaeology and its founding fathers; iconography by studying the Migdal Mosaic; first-century Mediterranean boat building techniques; pottery reading (which helped date those pieces found in or near the boat); and information about different types of anchors used during the period, including why and how they were used. The reader even gets a glimpse of the volcanic destruction of Pompeii and the type of boats used by some, like Pliny the Elder, who unsuccessfully tried to escape the terrible devastation.

The final chapter, using all the sources discussed throughout the book, summarizes in great detail how the boat was built and even conjectures as to who might have built it and why. From all the available evidence, the boat probably was built and rebuilt several times by a poor but skilled craftsman who used whatever materials available, including twelve different types of wood, many of which were very poor substitutes for the unavailable woods better suited to boat building. The boat builder used the outdated, but popular at the time, shell-first construction method of tying the side boards together first using pegged mortise-and-tenon joints before the ribs and keel were later installed.

However, one of the most significant aspects of this volume is that Wachsmann readily consulted the Gospels for historical information that provided context for the life of similar boats on the lake. For Bible-believing Christians, it is important to note that everything found on or near the salvaged boat both expands and confirms the Biblical accounts of activities on the lake during the first century and adds significantly to our understanding of what life was like for those fishermen who lay down their nets to follow Jesus. For me, one of the most significant stories in Wachsmann’s book came from a local Arab Christian fisherman who explained to Wachsmann the answer to a riddle he had encountered while reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus “calming the storm” on the sea. Mark’s version differs from the other synoptic Gospels because Jesus is said to be in the stern, asleep on a pillow. As the excavated wreck proves, these boats had a deck in the stern on which the nets were stored and Jesus could have slept under the deck and stayed out of the way of the other men working the nets, but why was he asleep on a “pillow?” The old fisherman had the answer. Although not used much anymore, boats on the Sea of Galilee as late as the 19th Century, as observed by MacGregor on his journey, used sacks of sand for ballast to keep the boat upright in a storm. “In Arabic, mechadet zabura means ballast pillow.” Whether or not this explanation is accurate, anthropologists and archaeologists have learned through years of experience how a seemingly innocent translation of local terminology
often leads to significant discoveries that highlight the historical accuracy of Scripture.

The book has a detailed glossary and many detailed illustrations of the boat’s construction and many pictures taken during the salvage and preservative operations. Fortunately, the entire process was also filmed, and the many participants were constantly interviewed on film. The entire story is available in a DVD format or on the Website, http://www.jesusboat.com. This reviewer highly recommends this volume to anyone interested in a good detective story, or to any budding young Archaeologists. This reviewer has given several copies as gifts to friends in those categories.

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Review by Kelly Elliott

At times, professors and students who seek to explore history from a perspective of faith may experience difficulty in finding monographs that treat religious history effectively. Works written from a perspective of denominational history or religious studies may suffer from parochialism and hagiographical sympathy with their subjects, while “secular” histories may dismiss theology and religious motivation in favor of exclusively economic or political interpretations. In *Religion versus Empire*, Andrew Porter, who is Rhodes Professor of Imperial History at King’s College, London, offers an interpretation that combines his sweeping knowledge of both primary and secondary sources on the British Empire’s history with a determination to give appropriate weight to the theology and faith of historical actors. The combination makes for excellent history that demands the respect of both secular and religious scholars and provides a fitting example for students at Christian universities.

It has long been a historiographical commonplace that the Protestant missionary movement underpinned and helped extend British imperial authority, especially in the nineteenth century. Where the Bible went, it is