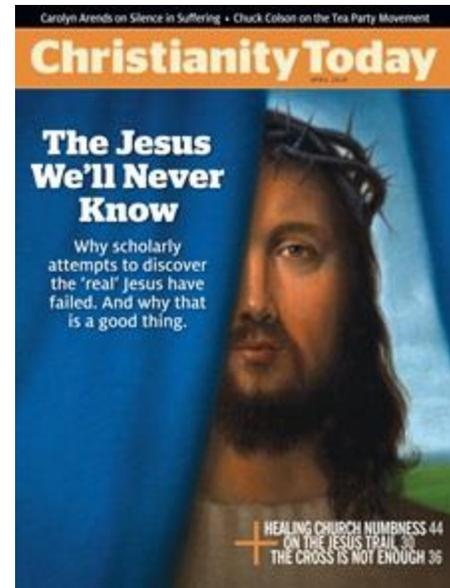


Miracle Boat | Christianity Today

*The surreal, sometimes comical story behind
the discovery of the Jesus Boat.*

by David Neff | April 22, 2010



In 1986, two Israeli fishermen from a kibbutz near Mary Magdalene's hometown made a remarkable discovery: an ancient wooden boat that had plied the Sea of Galilee during the time of Jesus. It had been buried in mud and thus protected from oxygen and hungry microorganisms.

The Yigal Allon Museum now houses the Jesus Boat. The current exhibit is attractive, but unfinished. To attract more visitors (and to help maintain and improve the museum), Christian media executive Don Stillman joined forces with the family of Gonny Kossonogi, daughter of the famous Israeli general Yigal Allon, to form Jesus Boat Inc. In 2009 the group produced a book ([The Jesus Boat](#), by Christian Stillman), a DVD (The Jesus Boat Revealed), a website (thegalileeboat.com), a replica of the boat at the Holy Land Experience in Orlando, and a multimedia tour of American megachurches.

The church presentations, which have continued into 2010, include talks by Kurt Raveh, one of the specialists who supervised efforts to excavate and preserve the boat. On Raveh's recent visit to the United States, David Neff, editor in chief of the Christianity Today Media Group, talked about the discovery with the marine archaeologist, who excavates ancient shipwrecks for the University of Haifa's Department of Maritime Civilizations.

How did you get involved in Israel's marine archaeology?

When the Yom Kippur War started in 1973, Israel asked for volunteers, and I signed up for two weeks. That has become 36 years.

I found myself a beautiful spot on the Mediterranean near Caesarea and the ancient ruins of Dor, King Solomon's major port. I got involved in archaeology there, first as a hobby, then as a profession. I joined the excavations at Tel Dor in the beginning. That excavation is now in its 27th year.

Out in the water, I discovered wrecks. Fishermen had plundered the wrecks and sold items on the black market. So the Israel Department of Antiquities asked Shelley Wachsmann [now at Texas A&M] and me to help create a unit for the protection and study of underwater archaeological remains.

We were pioneers. We had to build everything from scratch. The part of the Mediterranean where we worked had been a major shipping route for 5,000 years. There must have been at least 5,000 shipwrecks we could have found.

Every winter, the southerly storms bring the sand of the Nile all the way up to Haifa. All the sunken ships are under sand, packed very closely so that no microorganisms, Teredo worms, or air come into contact with them. We now have 28 wrecks ranging all the way from the time of King Solomon to Napoleon. It's the largest and best preserved concentration of ancient shipwrecks.

How was the Jesus Boat discovered?

It was a real surprise. After four years of drought, in 1986 the Sea of Galilee had retreated. Two brothers, Jewish fishermen, were walking on the exposed seabed and found coins, pieces of wood, and iron nails. They called us to check into it.

We started cleaning some of the boat, and suddenly we saw the mortise and tenon joints. We found a Roman oil lamp and a Roman cooking pot. It was a boat from Roman times! This is what we had been waiting for.

I'd never been on an excavation where security people protected us, but where we also had an ice cream van and hot dog stands. People came in droves just to watch.

At that moment, there appeared a beautiful double rainbow. It was like a blessing. We danced there like Indians from happiness.

Then the problems started. The wood was completely waterlogged so it was like wet cardboard. Our boss at the Department of Antiquities didn't have equipment. Our group was just two archaeologists, two fishermen, and two others. We had only three buckets and two shovels. An expedition like this normally brings with it a million dollars, a year of preparation, laboratories, and a 40-person professional crew.

It seemed like mission impossible. We needed miracles. Everything was a miracle on this boat. People were so fantastic. People from the nearby kibbutz worked day and night. Christians, Jews, Arabs—everybody joined in. Luckily for us, American ambassador Thomas Pickering and his wife jumped in the mud with us. He helped us get funding and preservation material.

Somebody leaked to the press that this was a Turkish treasure boat that everybody had been [seeking] for 200 years. The area became a madhouse. People trekked over the site looking for gold. People with guns were chasing each other from the site. In the end, we had to be protected by police and guard dogs.

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television stations from around the world were filming what was going on. It's the best recorded excavation I know of.

But then it started to rain. The drought was over, and the water was rising. If we left the boat where it was, it would be preserved. In another 200 years, maybe somebody else would find it. So we raced against time to clean the boat before the water reached it. We built dikes around it to continue the work.

It was so fragile. How did you get it out of the mud?

We built fiberglass ribs to support it, but they were not enough. So we made a cocoon out of plastic foam. We thought that maybe the foam cocoon would float. So we opened the dike, and after 2,000 years, the boat floated again on the Sea of Galilee. It floated about three kilometers to where we had built a pool, by the Yigal Allon Museum.

We then had to take off the plastic. It was worse than the mud. If it were cut with a hot knife, it would produce cyanide. So we had to use our fingernails.

We filled the pool with sweet water until 60,000 liters of polyethylene glycol arrived almost a year later from India, courtesy of Dow Chemical. One day, we noticed that the boat was full of worms. There were eggs in the mud from 2,000 years ago. We're talking Jurassic Park here. We could fight it with the chemicals, but then we'd pollute the water, and it would take another 10 years to get rid of that. We brought in experts from the U.S., but nobody knew how to do it without pollution. All the time, the fishermen stood around smiling. Finally they said, "Leave it to us; it won't cost anything." So they brought some goldfish and carp. The fish lived off the parasites for a year.

Is there anything unusual about the boat's construction?

It's the ugliest boat I have seen. It was made out of 12 different types of wood, most of it recycled. No two planks are the same. You have to give the builder a lot of credit because he made the whole thing out of junk. It floated for a long time. The repairs show between 30 and 60 years of use.

Can you tell how it sank?

Because of where we found it, I personally believe she had been tied to a big pole or a tree. You have flash floods in the winter from the river there. Lots of mud covers everything in its path. Last week we were in Tiberias, where a whole Roman theater had been discovered, perfectly preserved, buried in mud left by a flash flood.

What impact has the Jesus Boat had?

One byproduct of our discovery is that we changed the whole atmosphere of the Sea of Galilee. Twenty years ago, there were big steel tourist boats with disco bars and lots of noise. They destroyed the serenity of the place. Now everything is again wooden boats with sails and singing pilgrims.

Another boat we took out of the Mediterranean after 2,500 years is on exhibit at the University of Haifa. Scientifically, it is more important than the Galilee boat. But nobody knows about it. It gets maybe two visitors a day. The Galilee boat has 2,000 visitors a week—maybe more.

With most of the boats we dig, their importance is their cargo. This boat had no cargo in it. But it has *emotional* cargo.

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