

First Century Holy Land Artifact Popularized in U.S.

A Holy Land artifact that dates back the time of Jesus is expected to draw Christians' interest in celebrating the roots of their faith.

Dubbed The Jesus Boat, the 27-foot wooden fishing boat was discovered by two brothers in 1986 in the Sea of Galilee after a drought. The vessel, officially dated to the first century, was preserved and put on display at the Yigal Allon Museum in Israel.

Although no one knows whether Jesus or His disciples ever used the boat, Christians helping promote the Jesus Boat believe it can "stir the imagination" and "inspire the faith of people."

"There's a strong interest in this area among Christians, and we believe that the Jesus Boat can serve as a touch point," said Don Stillman, a Christian marketing executive who partnered with the owners of Yigal Allon to found The Jesus Boat initiative. "We hope that it might set off a spark in their spirit to delve deeper into the origins and tenets of their faith."

This summer, a series of megachurch events, a book written by Stillman's son, Christian, and a documentary will further introduce The Jesus Boat to U.S. audiences. The story of The Jesus Boat project is to be presented at a series of large-scale live church events, and to smaller churches by satellite broadcasts, Stillman said.

In April, a replica of The Jesus Boat was put on display at the Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Fla. A piece of the original wood from the boat is also on display as part of exhibit.

"It seemed to be a good fit for us here at the Holy Land, where visitors coming here can see this replica of a boat that was discovered from the time of Christ," said Mike Everett, on-site director of the Holy Land Experience, which is owned by Trinity Broadcasting Network. "It's become kind of an interesting, important feature here at the Holy Land, another example of what the ancient city of Jerusalem might have been like."

Skip Heitzig, pastor of Calvary Chapel of Albuquerque, N.M., hosted The Jesus Boat documentary, which is to air on television some time this fall. "The Jesus Boat was way more than a documentary about an ancient boat. It's really a testimony to the faithfulness of God," Heitzig told Assist News Service. "Through the film, we paralleled the story of a lost boat and a lost nation—Israel—both of which were 'resurrected' after 2,000 years. It tells of a boat that wouldn't stay buried in a land that couldn't stay buried."

Stillman said that while the string of remarkable events surrounding the boat's survival and discovery had led some to believe it may have been one in which Jesus sailed, it was being presented as "an affirmation of faith, not an icon to be worshiped."

The book and documentary will be followed by other resources that will include small group materials and other products related to Israel and Christianity's Jewish roots, Stillman said.