Bethsaida Controversy

Archaeologists should be led by the evidence, and not force the evidence into their theories.

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Kinneret College in Israel published recently a press release claiming that the first century Bethsaida has been finally and properly discovered. The claim that the large mound e-Tell situated about one mile north of the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and which is under seasonal archaeological excavations for the past 30 years, should not be identified with Bethsaida, is not new. As early as 2006 and 2007 Steven Notley rebutted this identification. In his opinion, Bethsaida should be a Greek city as is inferred from the passage in Josephus stating that the village of Bethsaida was renamed Julias, elevated to a status of a Greek city, populated and reinforced.

Years after these claims, Notley associated with Moti Aviam, an archaeologist of Kinneret College to provide him with the archaeological evidence showing that he was always correct. Approaching an archaeological excavation with presumptions is always the wrong approach. Archaeologists should be led by the evidence, and not force the evidence into their theories.

However, the site they claim to be Bethsaida, namely El Araj, situated at the front line of the shore, has been excavated by Haifa University and the Golan Research Institute directed by me, in 1987. Under a Byzantine layer, we discovered layers of beach deposits and barren of shards of pottery. A few lines of Ground Penetrating Radar that we ran along the shore revealed beach deposits without any layer of inhabitation.

Nevertheless, in Moti's recent excavations, a small segment of a structure, buried two meters under the Byzantine layer which was already seen by me, with a small fragment of a mosaic floor. Based on a silver coin minted by the emperor Nero in 65-66 CE, the expedition rushed to conclude that this tiny feature is the beginning of a major city, identified by them as Bethsaida/Julias. The fact that we did not encounter similar remains in our excavation, nor in a GPR survey, means that the site discovered by the Kinneret College expedition is rather limited in size.

However, based on what is already known from the dig and comparing with the information we gather from the ancient historical sources (the Jewish historian Josephus, the New Testament canonical Gospels, Jewish Rabbinical sources and Christian pilgrims and theologians), we can reconstruct the history of Bethsaida. One does not need to be a rocket scientist to see that so far, the claim of the Kinneret College expedition is extremely premature. E-Tell is a better candidate.

I suggested to Moti that we identify the bath house his expedition discovered as a part of the settlement of the mercenaries of the Herodian king Agrippa II. Josephus tells us that Agrippa II sent a military unit to blockade the routes to the rebellious settlements of Gamala and others. In my opinion Moti simply discovered that camp. Roman bath houses did not permeate urban

centers in this region before the late Roman or early Byzantine period (4-6 centuries CE). Moti argues that his bath house does not look like the Roman military bath houses familiar to us from the excavations of the camps of the second century CE of the Sixth Roman Legion, the Ferrata Legion, stationed by the emperor Hadrian south of Beth She'an and at Lajun, near Megiddo. Moti might be correct, he may not discover another military camp of Hadrian, although Jewish sources state that Hadrian was served pheasants caught at Bethsaida, and so if these sources are correct, Hadrian must have been in the vicinity of Bethsaida. Apparently it is not a Roman legionary camp since Roman legions did not station camps in Judea or Galilee before the middle of the First Jewish Roman war (68/69 CE). Therefore, Moti's comparison to second century legionary camps is totally irrelevant.

However, it might well be that the Kinneret College expedition discovered a Herodian mercenaries camp. If this turns out to be true in subsequence excavations, it will be an interesting discovery since we have no archaeological remains of Herodian's military.

A few gold tesserae used for wall mosaics leads Moti to assume that he discovered a church, since such finds are absent from Jewish synagogues. Their discovery of presumably a church is also interesting. It corroborates the testimony of the eight century German pilgrim Willibald who has written that he saw a church built on Peter's house at Bethsaida. However, the excavators of Capernaum, Fathers Virgilio Corbo and Stanislao Loffreda maintained that Willibald's description suits the discovery of Capernaum and that the monks who copied Willibald report the descriptions of Capernaum were confused with Bethsaida. Still, a few gold tesserae are not a church. Who knows where they originated from? Or even if or when he will find the church. The next hurdle to cross will be Willibald's testimony that the church was built on the house of Peter. One may wonder how this testimony may be interpreted. If and when all these hurdles are overcome, the excavators will be able to reiterate my notion that the Byzantine Bethsaida was at el-Araj. Nonetheless, it is a well known fact that Byzantine period pilgrims cared very little about authenticities and identified place names as they saw fit.

Below is a chart showing what is known today from historical sources in comparing the finds at e-Tel and El-Araj.

What is known from historical sources (Josephus, NT, Jewish Rabbinical sources) about Bethsaida	**Archaeological finds from e-Tell**	**Archaeological finds from El-Araj**
A fishermen village, in the 1st century BCE	Village houses, Fishing gear	No finds
A Jewish village, 1st century BCE	Limestone vessels, typical to Jewish settlement	No finds
Three Jesus' disciples were born there. End of the 1st century BCE	Jewish settlements during the first century BCE	No finds

Jesus at Bethsaida, second decade of the 1st century CE	A Jewish settlement from the time of Jesus	No finds
Jesus precluded towns and in particular Roman towns. He worked in Jewish villages.	A rural settlement from the time of Jesus	No finds
Philip the son of Herod, reinforces the village with population and fortification, 30 CE	A city wall was built around the settlement, new homes built on the submit of the mound	No finds
Philip grants Greek city rights, renames it Julias after Livia/Julia Augustus' wife who died months earlier. The meaning of the renaming is taking part in the Roman Imperial Cult, 30 CE.	A temple was built on the foundations of a Phoenician temple, architectural decorations, temple vessels such as incense shovels, *strigilis*, bronze coins commemorating the foundation of the city in 30 CE	No finds
Philip died four years later	Urban development ceased. Similar process is recorded in Caesarea Philippi.	No finds
Bethsaida/Julias did not take part in the Jewish Roman war, 65-66 CE. Agrippa II send mercenaries to blockade the road to revolting cities on the Golan, such as Gamla and others. Josephus is defeated in the bogs of Bethsaida by the military of Agrippa. 65- 66 CE	No destruction of the settlement found in the excavations. A continuity of coins, a few military gear found.	A bath house, mosaic floor, a silver coin of Nero from 65-66 CE. Most probably this is the military camp of the mercenaries of Agrippa II. Bath houses are known in this period of time only in Roman camps or earlier in the palaces of Herod. No Roman bath house of this period was found in a Jewish town.
Bethsaida in Jewish records in the 2nd-3rd century CE	A fishermen village	No finds
A geological catastrophe in the 4th century CE. The bogs and lagoons disappear, the sea shore withdraws south	E-Tell is abandoned. The fishermen withdraw to the sea shore. The temple's architectural decorations are looted and taken to build the synagogue at Chorazin	A settlement was found in the dig.
No more information on Bethsaida. The place lives in the memory of Christian pilgrims.	No settlement	Perhaps a church was built, perhaps the church Willibald saw. In the Byzantine period this place may have been

The pilgrim Willibald describes a church at Bethsaida, 8th century CE.		identified as Bethsaida. However, similar to many Byzantine identifications, it lacks authenticity.