

Tel Beth-Shemesh Report, 2010

Number 2

The new excavation week began with a flurry of trips to the airport. Frank and I had to make seven trips on Saturday and Sunday to transport all the people to the excavation. Our crew was drastically reduced with the departure of the Harding University Greece group, but the new crew has proven to be very productive. Most of the new people have not excavated before, but a few had. The newcomers have learned quickly.

The narrow strip that we are working has been reduced from four squares to three, but the information that is coming to light is enhancing our understanding of the layout of the site by supplementing the earlier project's work. We are working primarily in what we call Levels 3, 4, and 5 (mostly 3 and 4). Levels 3-4 come from approximately the 11th into the 9th centuries B.C. For most of us, the most interesting finds have come from Level 4, which is roughly the time of the Judges and early Samuel. That is the period when Samson was in the region (literally across the valley about 2 miles north of us) and the Philistines returned the ark of the covenant to Israel and it came first to Beth-shemesh (1 Samuel 6). [We are staying at a kibbutz named Kibbutz Zorah after the site nearby which was Samson's home; Judges 13.]

This week Sarah Yeager of Harding discovered a very nice, fully intact juglet that did not have a scratch on it. She was quite excited about the discovery (as were we to have a vessel that is not broken!).



An interesting feature of Level 4 is the frequent discovery of ovens, which we call "tabuns." Amy Henderson, a recent graduate of Harding, worked very carefully to uncover one and she did an outstanding job keeping it intact. They are usually quite fragile after having been buried so long and their structure having been compromised. There are so many ovens in this level, that Zvi Lederman, one of the directors, refers to the Level as being occupied by the "Tabunites."

By far and away the most frequently discovered artifact on an excavation is a potsherd. They are literally everywhere; you can scarcely walk across our site without stepping on a sherd and most people do not even notice. We try to collect all of them and then have to wash them. The picture shows the group washing their sherds. Parents would probably be shocked to know how well some of their children wash pottery. This is a daily chore; after allowing it to dry, the



students sort the pottery and help with its preliminary evaluation (this task is under the direct supervision of Shlomo Bunimovitz of Tel Aviv University, the other director of the project).

On Thursday, two of my students—Abby Mosby and Lauren Branch—from Harding came to visit. They are here working in an internship project at Arad. I knew they were in the country, but did not know when they would come by. The visit was good and we took them to Jerusalem then next morning.



Some of us visited a site known as Nebi Samwil which is the probable home location of the prophet Samuel. The photograph is taken from Nebi Samwil toward Gibeah, which is the first hill in the horizon to the right of the tall tower. Gibeah was the home of Saul. The distance is not very far, but of course it would have taken some time to make the trip on foot. Further to the right in the photograph is Jerusalem and essentially the low spot in the horizon is where ancient Jerusalem was located.

On Saturday, we visited a site which was recently excavated by Shimon Gibson and James Tabor. They claim it was a site associated with John the Baptist. In my opinion, the basis of the association with John is precarious; it might have been occupied and used by some early disciples of John or early Christians, but to claim that John himself had any association with it seems to me to be a claim beyond substantiation.

