

Tel Beth-Shemesh Report, 2011

Number 1

Dale W. Manor, Field Director

The flight from the USA to Israel was rather uneventful (which is good). Actually, the flight from Atlanta to Tel Aviv was better than usual in that Dr. Frank Wheeler of York College and I shared a row with no one else sharing it. Frank had randomly chosen seat 47D and I had randomly chosen 47F! Be thankful for the small things in life!

After arriving in Jerusalem and trying to get some rest, we rose the next morning to do some of our customary sight-seeing. We wanted to visit the Pools of Solomon near Bethlehem, but it turns out that they are now in part of the Palestinian held territory. Two issues mitigated against our going there—one, I had promised Sharon that I would not go into occupied territory and second, our car rental agreement restricts us from driving there as well.

While we were not able physically to visit the pools, we were able to see them from the road above. The pools, misidentified as Solomon's Pools, were probably initiated by the Hasmoneans and enlarged and embellished by Herod the Great to provide adequate water to the burgeoning population of first century BC Jerusalem. Occasional evidence of a network of aqueducts still exist leading to the southern edges of Jerusalem. There are three pools, although only the largest one, which is empty appears in the photograph. The three together would have held some 180,000 cubic meters of water (appr. 6,611,000 gallons). Josephus (*Antiquities* 8.186) narrates that Solomon would go to the spring of Etam (which serves as one of the major sources for the pools) to wile away the hours. There is no evidence, however, that Solomon constructed the reservoirs. (The large concrete looking wall in the middle of the photograph is the back of the first of the pools).



After “visiting” the “Pools of Solomon,” we eventually located the cenotaph known as Rachel's Tomb. This is supposed to be where Jacob buried his wife on his return trip from Haran and where Joseph was born, but Rachel died in her childbearing (Gen. 35:16-21). The validity of the location is certainly open to question. The tradition of this location goes back to Eusebius, but the initial elements of the current structure date probably to the 12th century Crusaders who built a dome supported by four columns over the site. In the 18th century, the Muslims enclosed the structure and a vestibule was added in 1841. The accretions of construction have obscured the layout of the building and it is only accessible via a narrow corridor road flanked in places on both side by the imposing walls to corral the Palestinians. One seriously wonders how the Israelis managed to



wrest this territory from the Palestinians. (One picture shows the corridor through which we had to drive to get to the tomb; the second picture is of the exterior of the site as one may now see it; the third picture is a painting of how it used to look).



When we entered the structure, the traditional wash basin was immediately to our right and descending down a long hall, we made a right turn to face the cenotaph of Rachel covered with cloth imprinted with Hebrew. Numerous Israeli men were standing around praying and caressing the cloth as they uttered their prayers. We managed to wind our way through the throng to the back of the tomb only to find our progress stopped with a barrier. The approach to the tomb is divided to permit men on one side and women on the other.



Leaving Rachel's tomb, we headed to the archaeological site of Ramat Rahel (Height of Rachel). The site is on a hill to the south of Jerusalem and would have served as a suitable location to which to flee under times of duress or to get away from the hubbub of Jerusalem life (sort of a Camp David). Some have identified the site as Beth-haccherem (Jer 6:1) and as a location where Shallum (aka Jehoahaz) apparently tried to remodel his palace with forced labor (Jer 22:13-17). A number of very impressive architectural features associated with monumental and state-sponsored construction remain at the site. There is a citadel within a larger area of fortifications; there are even remains of stones that were being quarried which have been left in their place at the quarry! (An example of the monumental ashlar architecture is shown along with stones still in the quarry.)



Our excavation project began on Sunday, although it consisted almost exclusively of the people who had come in association with me. We spent a good portion of the day setting up the basic project necessities. Sunday afternoon the other contingents from Canada (Lethbridge University) and the Israeli students arrived. Our excavation actually began on Monday morning with us waking at our typical 4:00 a.m. alarm time. Because of the "late" start, we excavated Monday through Friday with only one day off for the weekend. Our hours are typically to arise at 4:00 a.m. with the bus picking us up at 4:45 to take us to the site. We leave the site at 1:00 p.m. to return to camp where we eat lunch and then begin the processing of the finds.



A good chunk of our first week focused on lowering the baulks between the various excavation squares. Baulks are the stands of soil that we usually leave behind with which we are able to enter and leave the squares; they also leave record of the excavation by preserving the layer lines of features such as surfaces and stubs of walls that remain in the section. These can be helpful as we try to fill in the details of our work. Sometimes we miss things that we can check later by looking at what remains in the baulks.



The problem with these baulks, however, is that over time they deteriorate and become hazardous. Sometimes that is simply because they are so high; other times it is because of their exposure to the elements and erosion. It is tedious to remove them, but we had to spend most all week doing so for safety reasons. In the process some finds of interest came to light, not the least of which was a spouted bull head which would have been likely used as part of a ritual vessel. Last year we found a similar horse head nearby, but at this point we cannot tell if the two artifacts were related.

