

Tel Beth-Shemesh Report, 2011

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Our second week of excavation continued the tedium of lowering baulks. We had dug to such a level that they had become hazardous, especially with their height and the exposure through several years to dry them out. A few of the squares, however, continued to work in reasonably secure areas.

In the process of dealing with the baulk in one square, the work exposed a very nice chalice in the section. These vessels were often used in rituals of some kind and were typically limited to upper class households or worship locations. We have no indication that the location in which we are excavating is a shrine, so we are more inclined to infer its use by someone who was rather well off. Having said that, I must emphasize that there is not usually significant evidence of social stratification—most of the people lived rather egalitarian. The period in which we are digging is associated with the period of the Judges of the Old Testament and even the Bible tends to imply that there was not a lot of social stratification in the country. (The photo shows the chalice while it was still in the baulk. We had to remove it quickly since it only came to light during the last hours before the weekend. We did not want to risk losing it over the weekend.)



The second photo shows the cobble floor of probably a house, but the north end has eroded down the hill and it is impossible to trace the full plan. The rounded item in the lower right of the picture is part of an olive crushing basin. With further excavation, it is not clear yet whether the basin should be associated with the building itself or whether it was dragged into a pit. We hope to clarify that relationship this week.



The weekend trip involved a trip to the Dead Sea region where we visited the sites of Qumran, En-Gedi and the coast of the Dead Sea. Qumran, of course, is a site associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls. The initial scrolls were accidentally discovered in 1947 with several scrolls from Cave 1 (11 caves eventually were found to have scrolls). The photograph usually shown in textbooks and dictionaries is of Cave 4 which yielded the most finds as far as manuscript and manuscript fragments are



concerned. The photo I show, however, is of Cave 1 from which the first scrolls were discovered including the famous, complete scroll of Isaiah.



The scriptorium was the room in which most scholars believe the scrolls were copied. In it was discovered a long bench and a few ink wells which would have held the ink for the copying process.

Another interesting feature is the cemetery (shown to the right). The investigation of the cemetery has revealed a preponderance of males, but there are some females buried there as well as a child. Of the some 1100 tombs, only a few have been excavated, but osteological studies have revealed that hardly any of the people lived beyond 40 years of age.



My specific goal in the trip to the Jordan Valley was to go to En-gedi. The term means “spring of the young goat.” It is essentially an oasis in the barrenness of the desert. This is one of the locations where David fled from Saul and where Saul attempted to hunt him down (cf. 1 Sam 24). Water is plentiful and the vegetation is thick. A number of caves are in the sides of the hill (one of which plays into the narrative in 1 Sam 24:3-4) and it is easy to imagine David and his men scurrying among the rocks and vegetation for protection. The first photo is of one of the pools that forms from the waterfall further up the way; the second shows the density of some of the vegetation; the third is a view over the ravine toward the east to the Dead Sea and the hills of Moab in the distance.



What I wanted to accomplish at En-gedi was a photograph of an ibex standing on its hind feet nibbling fruit from a tree. I had seen this before and knew it would need a bit of luck to catch one, but I have always enjoyed coming to En-gedi and was certainly willing to wait it out. Ibexes are beautiful goat-like animals (probably the basis of the term *en-gedi*). The adult males sport a beautiful set of horns that curve in a backward arch from their heads.



While I did not find one nibbling the fruit of the tree, I did manage to catch a male using his horns to knock the dates out of the bunch above his head.

A number of ancient cultures in the eastern Mediterranean world would use the image of the ibex nibbling at the fruit of the tree as a motif to represent fertility. This is the closest I came to the actual activity from which the image developed.

Our last stop was at the Dead Sea—known as the “Salt Sea” in the Bible (cf. Gen 14:3). It holds upwards of a 25% of minerals in suspension and is the most saline body of water in the world. Because of its high mineral content, it is impossible to sink. The photograph shows the man floating in the water without any flotation devices whatsoever. The waters have a therapeutic quality to them (depending on the ailment one has) and many people throughout history have sought relief here.

