

## Excavations at Tel Beth-Shemesh -- 2014 and Other Musings -- 1

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Flying has become increasingly a drag, what with all the delays, security issues and crowds. Our plane left Little Rock 45 minutes late (it was the first leg out of Little Rock at 6:00 a.m. with no weather issues!), which made me miss the flight in Chicago to Newark. Fortunately I arrived in Newark with enough cushion to make the flight from Newark to Tel Aviv. Departure from Newark, however, was also delayed for some reason.

Because of delays that Frank Wheeler experienced, I ended up staying in the Tel Aviv airport for another six hours waiting on him. Finally we made it to Jerusalem to rest up before the excavation. Our rendezvous with Jerry Culbertson and Faires Austin of Faulkner University took us on a tour to the Old City of Jerusalem with the plan to start at the Mount of Olives.

Faires had never been to Gethsemane, so we went to the top of the Mount of Olives (photo right: on top of Mt. of Olives with Dome of the Rock/site of the Israelite Temple in the background) from which the others walked down the slope to the garden below. The plan was for me to pick them up at the bottom, but the car we had rented either burned up the transmission or



turbocharger necessitating delivery of another vehicle. The replacement vehicle was also deficient and we swapped it in for a third car in three days! I want to compliment Eldan, the car rental agency, however, which was very understanding and accommodating. We are driving an almost new Subaru, which drives wonderfully!

The visit to Jerusalem the first weekend was interrupted badly by the car episode, so we did not really get to see all that we had planned. On the second weekend, however, we headed north to the Galilee. One of our first sites was at the likely and approximate location of Jesus' baptism. The Bible states that John was baptizing at a place called "Bethany across the Jordan" (Jn 1:28; ESV) and the narrative indicates that the next day Jesus came (Jn 1:29) and John alludes to baptizing Jesus. Most, therefore, understand that Jesus' baptism was near the southern end of the Jordan River just north of where it empties into the Dead Sea. This location easily would accommodate the narrative's description that the priests and Levites in Jerusalem considered John's activities to be alarming and deserving of investigation (cf. Jn 1:19-28).



The reference to “across the Jordan” probably alludes to across the Jordan in relation to Jerusalem. The area has yielded pottery from the early Roman through the late Byzantine periods. A church building was constructed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD and Jerome and Eusebius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century refer to a site in this vicinity to which pilgrims traveled to be baptized where it was believed Jesus was baptized. Ruins of a church building have been excavated in Jordan (photo upper left: church remains) and in 2010, I was privileged to visit

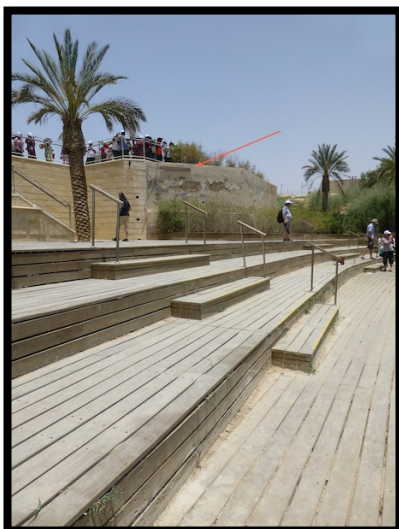
them in conjunction with our appointment to Harding’s International Studies program in Greece.

The Jordanians had constructed a baptismal site to coordinate with the presence of the church building’s ruins. Not to be out done, the Israelis have now done the same immediately across from the Jordanian construction. Our visit to the site almost certainly brought us with in only a few miles of where John was baptizing and where Jesus was baptized and the Holy Spirit descended when the Father spoke (cf. Matt 3:16-17).



With the exception of the “commercialization,” the scene is serene.

One may wonder where amidst the cane and overgrowth the baptism occurred, but surely there were places where the river would be devoid of plants since people would need some place to cross the river (photo right: Jordan River scene).



The density of the vegetation reveals the significance of Jeremiah’s and Zechariah’s references to the “thicket of the Jordan” (Jer 50:44; Zech 11:3 ESV) and Jeremiah’s reference to the “jungle of the Jordan” (Jer 49:19 ESV). Jeremiah mentions wild animals such as lions in the thicket. Travelers from the 19<sup>th</sup> century also mention sightings of lions, tigers, bear, hyenas and other wild animals.

An unusual feature that we noticed in our visit was a plaque indicating the level of the river on 13 January 2013! It was several yards above the level of the river when we visited on 20 June 2014 (photo left: note red

arrow)! Clearly the level of the river still fluctuates wildly, and the Bible alludes to its annual flooding (cf. Josh 3:15).

We proceeded northward to Beth-shean where the Philistines displayed the beheaded body of Saul along with his sons following their deaths on Mt. Gilboa (1 Sam 31:8-13). Beth-shean is an imposing site guarding the intersection of the Jezreel Valley as it descends into the Jordan. It preserves at least 18 levels of towns superimposed one over the other. We viewed the site from the west (photo above right; this is not the normal view showing the ruins of the classical city of Scythopolis at its base).



A corollary of our visit took us to the stream of Harod, which flows eastward from the spring a few miles to the west and descends to the Jordan River (photo right). The waters flowing through the channel were nauseatingly green, but certainly reminiscent of the necessity of a water supply, which was largely perennially supplied by the spring at the foot of Mt. Gilboa where Saul had died.



On Saturday morning, after spending the night at kibbutz En Harod, we climbed a hill behind the kibbutz. The hill provided a spectacular panoramic sweep of the Jezreel Valley with a view from Beth-shean to the east to the spring of Harod where Gideon thinned his troops against the Midianites (Judg 7:1-8), to Jezreel where Jezebel was thrown out the window and died (2 Kgs 9:30-37), to Mt. Tabor which plays in the narrative of Deborah and Barak as well as probably that of Gideon (Judg 4:6, 14; panoramic photo below).



On Saturday we went to the New Testament period site of Sepphoris, which is about five miles northwest of Nazareth. The city had a history at least a century before Jesus, but it gained ascendancy about 50 BC when it became the seat of government in Galilee. It was destroyed in some of the political turmoil in the decades leading into the life of Jesus. In 3 BC, Herod Antipas began to rebuild the city. Some have suggested that since Joseph and Jesus were carpenters (Matt 13:55; Mk 6:3) and lived so close to Sepphoris that they may have commuted to Sepphoris for work.



Josephus describes Sepphoris as the “ornament of all Galilee” (Ant. 18:27), but it eventually faded in significance with the establishment and construction of the town of Tiberias in about 20 AD. Peculiarly, the site is not mentioned in the New Testament, this in spite of the fact that there was a significant Jewish population there.



The town’s citizens certainly were sympathetic with the Romans, and when the first revolt broke out (which resulted in the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD) they sided with the Romans and hence avoided destruction. Eventually Sepphoris served as the home of a Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi (ca. 135-217 AD) who codified Jewish law, producing the Mishnah.

The remains of the town reflect an impressive Roman period city. The main road preserves grooves where wagons and chariots rolled through the street (photo upper corner). A number of the houses of the elite feature fantastic mosaics. One of them has a scene dealing with the Nile River (dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD; photo 9) while another depicts various activities of Dionysos (3<sup>d</sup> century AD). One scene in the Dionysos mosaic shows the face of a woman who has been dubbed by some as the “Mona Lisa of Sepphoris” (photo right).





In the afternoon, we visited the newly opened synagogue of Magdala, located at the home town of Mary of Magdalene. The synagogue dates from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, hence contemporary with Jesus. Very few synagogues from the 1<sup>st</sup> century have been identified (others include Gamla and Masada). The orientation of the

building does not necessarily face Jerusalem, although the platform on which the Scripture scrolls would be read was oriented in such a way that the reader would face Jerusalem (photo upper left; general view of synagogue).



Most of the first week of excavations involved cleaning up the two years' worth of growth and trash that had accumulated on the site. In the process, however, we found a wonderful stone seal measuring about 4 x 5 cm (= ca. 1½ x 2 inches), depicting a person standing on the back of an animal (photo left). He appears to have a spear in his hand. A scholar who deals with

these issues has suggested that the animal is a lion. The date of the seal is the Iron Age I (ca. 1200-1000 BC). Interestingly, we found a conical seal last time, which depicted a man standing in front of a lion (photo right). The date of that seal also comes from Iron Age I. We cannot connect the two seals chronologically more tightly since the one this year



had fallen out of the baulk into the square and we did not find it in its stratigraphic context.

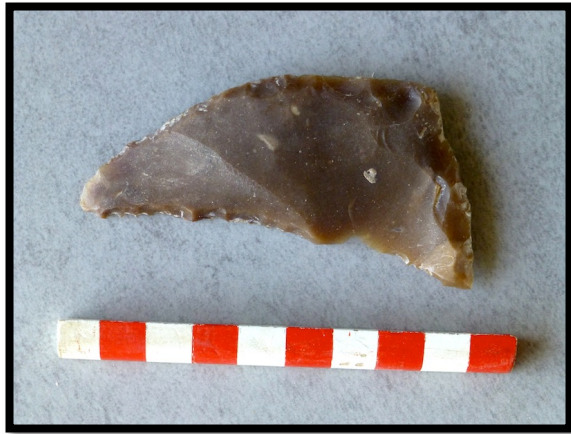
Another goal of the season is to try to determine the relationship of the "temple" to the remains to its north. This has been a challenge and we have not yet accomplished that goal.

A new addition to the team this year is a quadricopter drone (photo 14). I saw a video last fall in which someone sent out a video of a drone over Niagara Falls. Every year we need to take aerial photos of the site.



When I approached the directors of the dig if they might be interested in the acquisition of a drone, they jumped at the prospect. It is fascinating to watch the drone rise from the surface and hover over the site taking photographs sent by WiFi back to an iPad type computer. The photography is fabulous and we are able to take photographs regularly to show the changes that occur in the excavation from day to day. It also permits easier visual connection of the various areas of the site—we are able to see the “forest” and not just the close-up all the time. This will be a “game-changer” in the archaeological community. W. Mark Lanier of the Lanier Law Firm in Houston was the gracious contributor to help us acquire this piece of equipment to advance our work—to him we offer our sincerest thanks.

Among the many types of artifacts we collect are flints. Flint blades and knives were very common before the advent of worked metals, plus they could be as sharp as or even sharper than metal blades. Of course, they could be very brittle and the fine edges chip and break rather easily depending on the material being cut.



For the common people, flint would have been their typical cutting tools rather than more expensive metals. Varying grades of flint occur through the area and these can be fashioned into a host of shapes (photo left).

Joshua 5:2-3 narrates a ceremony in which the Lord commands Joshua to make flint knives to circumcise the Israelites. While we cannot know for sure the shape of the knives, the photograph shows an example of one from our site just about a century after the episode narrated. I am told that an unretouched (freshly formed blade) is as

sharp as a scalpel and would be very effective for the procedure (the thought is still somewhat disconcerting!). The blade that is shown is only *typical* of what might have been used, plus its edges have been retouched and are not as sharp as would have been used typically to cut flesh!

In conclusion, let me thank you for your interest. A second report should be issued in about a week.