

Excavations at Tel Beth-Shemesh -- 2014 and Other Musings -- 2

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On the second weekend, the veterans among us—Frank Wheeler, Jerry Culbertson, Faires Austin and myself—took the three newcomers to Jerusalem, two of whom had never been to Israel. One of the group (who will remain unidentified!) commented that I was a mountain goat and that I had taken them over every rock in Jerusalem. I can honestly testify that I did NOT—there are many more rocks to climb! Our visit began with the Old City and

moved to ruins outside the city to the south and into the Kidron Valley.

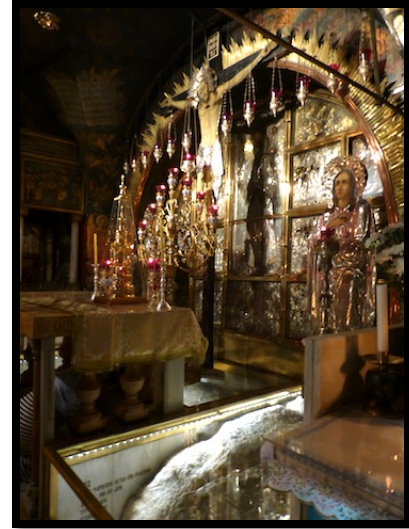
The Old City as it exists today is basically a rebuild by Suliemann the Magnificent beginning in 1537; it encompasses an area less than one square mile. Until about 1860, this was the extent of the town of Jerusalem, but it began to expand with arriving Jewish immigrants. Our entrance into the city was through the magisterial Damascus Gate—so called because it is was the gate from which the main road to Damascus began (photo, above left).

We attempted to go to the Garden Tomb, which was identified by General Charles Gordon of England, who in 1883 identified the area as the location of Jesus' crucifixion and burial. There are serious deficiencies in his analysis, but the location is quite conducive to reflection and meditation. Careful analysis of both his methodology and the data mitigate against the site being the scene of Jesus' crucifixion and burial. The site was closed and we were unable to enter the "park." (It seems odd to me that the site that many believe was the scene of the focal point of Jesus' life—namely the resurrection, which occurred on the first day of the week—is actually closed on the first day of the week!)

Our journey took us to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (entrance of building, photo right). There is reasonable evidence to infer that this is where the



crucifixion and burial of Jesus occurred. For many, the accretion of highly ritualized paraphernalia and activity kills any sense of awe (photo right); for others, it elicits just the opposite. The custody of the church facility is fraught with difficulties. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, a Catholic priest and professor at the École Biblique in Jerusalem, describes the reactions of many: "One expects the central shrine of Christendom to stand out in majestic isolation, but anonymous buildings cling to it like barnacles. One looks for numinous light, but it is dark and cramped. One hopes for peace, but the ear is assailed by a cacophony of warring chants. One desires holiness, only to encounter a jealous possessiveness: the six groups of occupants—Latin Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Syrians, Copts, Ethiopians—watch one another suspiciously for any infringement of rights. The frailty of humanity is nowhere more apparent than here; it epitomizes the human condition. The empty who come to be filled will leave desolate; those who permit the church to question them may begin to understand why hundreds of thousands thought it worthwhile to risk death or slavery in order to pray here" (J. Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land*. Oxford Archaeological Guides. 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; p. 45).¹



The hill of Golgotha, if this is the place, is difficult to see with ritual embellishment obscuring the view. A small hole permits people to reach through and feel the stone surface, otherwise what can be seen is covered with glass. Small sections are visible through glass and the photograph shows an outcropping that still exists (photo right). The reason for the very small amount of stone for both the hill (and the tomb elsewhere) is that, in addition to destruction by marauders and enemies of Christianity, pilgrims often chipped away parts of the respective structures to take back home.

Our next stop was the Western Wall, often referred to as the "Wailing Wall." This is a section of Herod's retaining wall, which provided the level platform on which the Second Temple was built. The term "Second Temple" is the more neutral name given to the temple that was rebuilt by Zerubbabel and then expanded and embellished by Herod the Great. Many refer to the Second Temple as the Herodian Temple because of Herod's sponsorship of the extensive renovation. It was the temple that stood when Jesus and the apostles preached.

¹ I believe this is the best guide on the market to Israel's sites. A later edition is available and it is available in an electronic edition as well.



The Western Wall is the most holy site for most practicing Jews and is now an outdoor synagogue. A dividing wall separates the women from men—the brown wall across the middle of the photo (left). A number of bushy plants grow from the wall; these are hyssop. Someone recently asked me why the Israelis did not remove this. While I do not know the answer, it occurred to me that it may be left, not only because it is natural, but as a tribute to the Bible’s description

of Solomon: “He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall” (1 Kgs 4:33a; ESV).

Leaving the Western Wall, we proceeded to the City of David which was the focus of David’s conquest as narrated in 2 Samuel 5. The Bible notes that he “built the city all around from the Millo inward” (2 Sam 5:9b). Most scholars understand the millo to be the stepped revetment seen in the photograph (photo bottom left). On top of this structure, Eilat Mazar has recently uncovered remains of an impressive monumental structure that she thinks was part of king David’s palace. Admittedly nothing explicit has been found to make such a direct connection, but she makes a viable case for the identification.

In the millo area is a later construction from the Divided Monarchy (ca. 930-586 BC). An interesting element of the house that was cut into the slope was a toilet seat (see photo and red arrow). The archaeologists worked through the remains and discovered that it dated to the time of Jeremiah. The remains in the toilet indicated that the people were eating



weeds just to survive. This information meshes well with statements in Jeremiah in which he tells them that famine would be rampant through the city. Jeremiah 52:4-6 notes that the Babylonians besieged the city for about an hour and a half and near the end the food was exhausted.

From the eastern slopes of the City of David, one may view ancient tomb openings in the face of the valley wall

opposite the city. These, as now, were outside the city of Jerusalem and this is where wealthy citizens were buried. The photograph (right) shows three tomb openings. Somewhere in the array of houses above these two tombs is a tomb of a royal administrator who likely had been part of Hezekiah's royal court. Most scholars reconstruct the inscription associated with that tomb (not one of the tombs in the photograph) with Shebna who most versions of the Bible describe as the "steward" (cf. Isa 22:15, or a similar term; ESV); he is also described as one "who is over the household" (Isa 22:15). This phrase was essentially an official title of his role in the household of the king. Isaiah condemned him and decreed that he would not be buried in the tomb he had prepared. The tomb usually associated with him preserved an inscription which described a person "who is over the house;" many scholars connect the statement with Shebna. Isaiah 22:16 refers to Shebna's construction of a tomb in the rock. All of the evidence converges to conclude that the tomb was likely Shebna's. Sadly, the inscription is marred just at the point of where the name appears so we cannot be absolutely certain of the identity. The prospects, however, remain tantalizing. (The inscription is on permanent display in the British Museum.)



We had hoped to go through Hezekiah's tunnel and the Canaanite channel, but we arrived too late. We continued our descent, however, into the Kidron Valley where we turned northward. The walls of the valley are quite steep. As I walked I remembered that Jesus had traversed the valley a number of times as he journeyed between Bethany on the east side of the mount of Olives and Jerusalem (cf. Mk 11:11-12; cf. Matt 21:17; Lk 19:29). After we had descended the slope from the top of the City of David, one of the group remembered that he had forgotten a souvenir up in the City of David. We returned hastily to the top and much to our amazement (and exhaustion) it was still there! This trek back up the steep



slope to the City of David further impressed me with how much people in the ancient world walked and how much "in shape" Jesus must have been!

Returning to the valley floor, a shepherd was driving his herd up the valley in front of us (left). One of the fascinating characteristics of this land is its incongruity. This one: a shepherd with his herd next to a cemetery and in the middle of urban sprawl!



A series of impressive ancient tombs stood on the bottom of the slopes of the Mount of Olives. One is known as the Tomb of Absalom (or Pillar of Absalom; left—a “standard” that some of my students have adopted is to measure the height/length, etc. according to me; the Pillar of Absalom is 9-10 Dales high!). The Bible notes that David’s son, Absalom built a monument to himself in the King’s Valley² since he had no heirs (2 Sam 18:18).³ The identification of this monument with Absalom, however, is incorrect. Murphy-O’Connor indicates that the identification with Absalom occurred in 1170 AD. The structure was actually a tomb, but its construction occurred in the first century BC (see Murphy-O’Connor, p. 117). A close look at the photograph depicts very fine ionic columns, which definitely betray a later construction than the time of

Absalom, who lived in the 10th century BC.

With Ehud Netzer’s recent discovery of Herod’s tomb at Herodion and its similar design, some are suggesting that this monument in Jerusalem may have been built by him to commemorate one of Herod’s family members. That suggestion, however, needs further investigation and may never be resolved.

Toward the end of the day, four of us went to a different grove of olive trees in the Kidron Valley than people usually visit (below left). Luke and John indicate that Jesus often frequented the Garden of Gethsemane (Lk 22:39; John 18:1-2). The term “gethsemane” is derived from Hebrew and Aramaic and means “oil press” referring to the pressing of olive



oil. While we cannot identify the exact location of the Jesus’ prayer, the text implies that the area was large enough for Jesus and the apostles to separate into three companies. One of my goals is to try to get a feel for the more realistic settings of the events of the Bible, especially if we cannot identify with reasonable certainty where they occurred. The traditional sites of Gethsemane

²The Bible does not explicitly connect the Kidron Valley with the King’s Valley, but several points of evidence imply their identity. For a discussion of the issues, see W. Harold Mare, Kidron, Brook of (Place), in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (NY: Anchor Doubleday, 4:37-38).

³The Bible indicates that Absalom had three sons (2 Sam 14:27), but we probably should infer that they died before this pillar was constructed. All anthropological evidence points to a high mortality rate in the pre-modern world. This would account often for the frequent stated desire to have many offspring.



are all viable (although only “identified” beginning in the 4th century AD), but they have typically been overly developed to compromise their natural character. There is an orchard of olive trees on the slopes of the Kidron that is free of the tourist dressings and is reasonably preserved much like the setting would have been in Jesus’ day. We were quite happy for the visit and some quiet time to reflect.

Saturday involved a trip to the Israel Museum. This museum is a premier stop displaying thousands of archaeological finds dating from prehistoric to modern time. Our focus was the biblical material.

In the afternoon, we visited the Valley of Elah (which is the valley in which we stayed for four weeks). We visited the bed of the brook of Elah from which David collected his five stones to kill Goliath. The photograph (above left) shows Patrick Boyns of Britain and Esther Samuelson from Virginia (a recent graduate of Harding). Of course, they searched and found some suitably “smooth stones” as appropriate souvenirs of the classic encounter (1 Sam 17:19, 40).

We traveled east up the road toward Bethlehem. This was likely the route that David traveled when his father sent him to deliver food to his brothers’ commanders at the encroaching battle as well as to check on their welfare (1 Sam 17:17). It is the easiest and most direct route from Bethlehem to the valley. The Romans later recognized its value and made a more formal road in the valley. Part of that road still exists and consisted in shaping the limestone. The photo (left) shows me walking along the road.



Somewhere along the longer route of this road leading from Jerusalem through Bethlehem to Gaza, would likely be where Philip intersected with the Ethiopian official as he was returning home from Jerusalem (Acts 8:26-28). Almost certainly the baptism occurred further down the road than here, but it was thrilling to be in place likely connected with a significant biblical event.

I can easily imagine the Ethiopian being confused by the events that had recently unfolded in Jerusalem and which had culminated in the stoning of Stephen. Threats had been leveled against the new Jewish group of Christians, likely spearheaded by Saul (cf. Acts 7:54-8:4). Isaiah 53 was an effective argument for the fulfillment of prophecy through Jesus and likely he had heard the swirl of anger and point-counterpoint. Perhaps like us, he was bewildered by all this confusion and argument and needed a calm atmosphere in which to try to sort it out. As he returned home traveling along this road, this stranger approached and inquired whether he understood the passage. Philip seized the opportunity to teach him about Jesus, and thus the gospel found its way to Ethiopia as well as to a eunuch—also fulfilling an aspect of Isaiah’s prophecy (cf. Isa 56:3).

Be aware that we do excavated (five days a week from 5:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and then process finds back in camp). Thus, turning to the excavation itself...

One fascinating find was the torso of a small bull figurine (photo left). Its head and legs were missing, but it was otherwise well made. It was located in a pit, just to the north of the Iron Age I temple. Given the context of its find, however, it likely had nothing to do with the temple. It apparently came from a later time. Interestingly the Iron Age I temple (ca. 1100 BC) that we discovered 3-4 years ago had no figurines associated with it (thus far at least—we have not fully uncovered it). That lack of presence, however, would not necessarily preclude use of images and idols in domestic contexts—the biblical book of Judges certainly indicates such.



A routine task of every excavation involves “reading the pottery.” The photo shows me

sitting with Shlomo Bunimovitz, one of the co-directors as we (mainly he) reads the pottery. The task is to determine preliminarily the date of the pottery (and hence the



period of the site’s occupation), but also to see if we may have missed some stratigraphic changes. That is what happened with the bull figurine—we initially had thought that it was from the same time period as the temple, but the pottery that otherwise was found in its context, included a number of pieces that were later. The principle is that later pottery should not be in lower levels, unless there is a pit, which had been filled with newer material that might have been mixed with older



material. This check-and-balance has proven valuable on a number of occasions.

Shlomo is one of the best in the world to read especially the Late Bronze Age into Iron Age pottery (e.g., that dating from 1600 BC to 1000 BC) in Canaan and the eastern Mediterranean.

In my role as the Field Director, I am not often able to excavate (left). Sometimes I insist on doing some of the work. The volunteers who have never been on excavations with us before often are surprised to find out that I actually know how to excavate! This photograph is not a staged one—I was actually excavating to try to see if we had reached the founding levels of the stone wall—we

had. (It is similarly a rarity to see either of the co-directors excavate either, hence I am in good company!)

Until next the next installment, Shalom -- שלום.