

## Excavations at Tel Beth-Shemesh -- 2014 and Other Musings -- 4 (this finally is the last one)<sup>1</sup>

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After the excavation ended,<sup>2</sup> as usual we reserved a few days to process things from our work as well as take advantage of the free time to see new places or to visit places we have seen before and take in new perspectives.



After resting somewhat for the afternoon, we ventured forth on Friday to see the excavations on the south side of the Old City and to visit with James Tabor of UNC—Charlotte and Shimon Gibson who is a senior researcher at the Albright Institute in Jerusalem. As it turned out, they had the same schedule of excavation as we at Beth-Shemesh and hence they were not in the field.<sup>3</sup> We decided to return on Sunday.

When we arrived on Sunday, Tabor was out of pocket, but Shimon Gibson was very gracious to show us around. I had met him a few times at the annual meetings around the country (above left). He is quite engaging and eager to share his insights. The work is sifting through remains ranging from modern dumps to Crusaders, into Islamic and to first century elegant estates. The stratigraphy is confusing and it must be a nightmare to sort through the work and make sense of it, but he and Tabor are eager to plow through it and try to make sense of it.

When we could not meet with them on Friday, we changed our plans and hiked along the western wall of the Old City (*not* to be confused with “The Western Wall”—the retaining wall of the Temple area). This is an area that most people do not visit, but it has some fascinating features. I was first introduced to this area in 1988 and Sharon (my wife) and I returned to study elements of it in 2007 while I was on sabbatical. The Israelis have since cleared out intruding components and labeled a good bit of the area.

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<sup>1</sup> I apologize for the severe delay in delivering this report. After returning home, I was inundated with other responsibilities among which were pressing writing responsibilities on top of the regular requirements of

<sup>2</sup> Report on the last week of excavation appears toward the end of this posting.

<sup>3</sup> Some excavations work Sunday through Thursday, following an Israeli work week. These typically are directed by Israelis. Other projects work from Monday through Friday; a number of excavations run by non-Jewish westerners follow this program. Since the excavations on Friday are usually finished before the official Sabbath begins in the late afternoon, early morning work on Friday is not a problem.



Most notable is a set of walls that sort of funnels traffic toward the wall. This opening originally led either into the southern end of Herod's palace or to an area just to the south of his palace. James Tabor suggests that the pavement upon which Pilate sat in his pronouncement of "Behold, the man" (Jn 19:5; in Latin: *Ecce Homo*) was just to the north of this opening<sup>4</sup> (photo left). The narrative points out that the area was a paved (hence "the stone pavement, ...Gabbatha;" Jn 19:13)

and that there was a "judgment seat" there. The "judgment seat" is the Greek word *βημα* (*bema*) and is the same word that refers to where Paul had his hearing before Gallio in Corinth (cf. Acts 18:12, 17; sometimes rendered "tribunal"). The "judgment seat/*bema*" was usually an elevated platform from which the administrator would hear the case and then give his pronouncement.

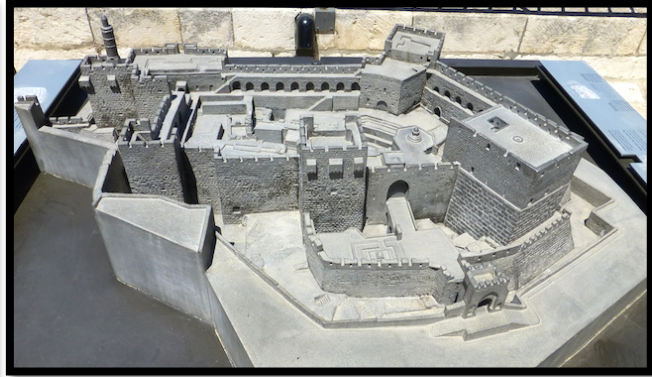


I had already concluded on the basis of a number of arguments that the traditional *Ecce Homo* arch area at the northwest corner of the Temple area and associated with the old Antonia Fortress was not where Jesus' hearing had occurred. It makes little sense for a decadent Roman to by-pass the luxury and opulence of Herod's palace to live in much more mundane barracks rather deprived of luxury. After all, Herod's palace would be available since he had died decades before.

A peculiar feature of Herod's palace construction appeared north of this gateway where it was built immediately over the remains of some tombs from the period of the Divided Monarchy (photo above left). There is no evidence that these were in use when Herod built his palace, but given his tendency for thorough footings and foundations, it seems odd that these would remain intact as part of the footings of his palace. The western wall of his palace would have generally followed the line of the current wall in the photo.

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<sup>4</sup> See his blog at [jamestabor.com/2013/06/05/where-was-pilates-judgment-seat/](http://jamestabor.com/2013/06/05/where-was-pilates-judgment-seat/)



Our survey moved us northward around the western exterior remains of Herod's palace northward to the Jaffa Gate. The Romans deliberately left *some* of Herod's palace intact to broadcast to the world the grandeur and strength of a town that they had conquered when they destroyed the rest of the city in 70 A.D. (*Wars*

7.1). Most notable is the base of what is referred to as Phasael Tower (above left). The large stones at the base of the tower are the remnants of that tower; the smaller stones of the upper courses are of Mamluke construction (beginning ca 1250 AD). A wonderful metal model (above right) shows the citadel as it now stands with a helpful legend to explain the various structural and chronological components of the building. Through the centuries, other walls were built over the remains, most of which date from the time of Sulieman the Magnificent (ca. 1531 AD). The Israelis have converted the complex into a museum.



A special display in one of the sections focused on medical procedures in the ancient world, with particular emphasis on various herbs and potions that people commonly used. One feature that is a subject of debate is the use of poppies in medical procedures (or other activities?). During the 15<sup>th</sup>—13<sup>th</sup> centuries a peculiarly shaped vessel known as "bilbils" were common (photo left). Some have suggested that the



shapes of these represent inverted poppies (photo right) and that they were vessels to hold opiate derivatives and hence, at least sometimes, for medical use (this argument is open to some debate, which is currently under further investigation).

Another feature was the discovery of some votive offerings from the Pool of Bethesda. The gospel of John narrates an episode in which Jesus heals a man who was at the pool hoping to

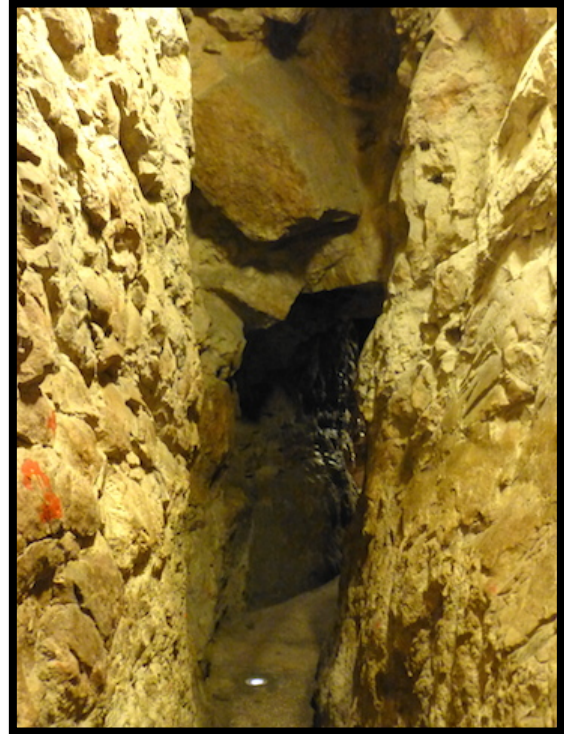
be healed in the waters (John 5:1-9). From another time, these offerings of “feet” were left behind (photo right) either as petitions to heal the foot, or as appreciation for its healing. The discovery corroborates the Bible’s narration of a tradition of healing associated with the pool of Bethesda.<sup>5</sup> This tradition of votive offerings was widespread in the Greco-Roman world at various Aesclepieia scattered through the empire. I have had the privilege to visit other such hospitals at Corinth, Epidaurus and Pergamum. The museum showed an array of herbs and chemicals that were common, among them asphalt, cinnamon, mandrakes (cf. Gen 30:14-18), hyssop (Lev 14; Num 19; Psa 51:7), henna, figs (cf. 2 Kgs 20:7); balm of Gilead (Gen 37:25; Jer 8:22; 46:11; 51:8), spikenard (Song of Solomon 1:12; 4:13-14; John 12:3); myrrh (Song of Solomon 4:13, along with henna, saffron, cinnamon, myrrh and frankincense).



As we were about to leave the citadel, we located an old postern gate, which penetrated the northeast fortification wall into the moat outside (above left and right). It is not clear if this gate dated to the time of Herod, but the stones on the interior are characteristic of Herod’s construction.

<sup>5</sup> This biblical episode serves as the basis for so many hospitals being named “Bethesda,” perhaps the most notable is the Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland where President John F. Kennedy’s autopsy was performed.

Later we ventured eastward to the City of David and worked our way through the aqueduct associated with the “waters of Shiloah that flow gently” (Isa 8:5). This was a water system that carried water from the Gihon spring along the eastern flank of the Ophel ridge. Smaller tunnels toward the east released water to the gardens and fields in the bottom of the Kidron Valley (cf. 2 Kgs 25:4; see photo right). When the Assyrians threatened Judah in 701 BC, Hezekiah sponsored another, more secure system to transport the water to a more suitable location. Perhaps he reacted to the historical reality of David’s capture of the Jebusite city through the original water system (2 Sam 5:5-10), which the newer system replaced. Chronicles narrates their concern: “And when Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come and intended to fight against Jerusalem, he planned with his officers and his mighty men to stop the water of the springs that were outside the city; and they helped him. A great many people were gathered, and they stopped all the springs and the brook that flowed through the land, saying, ‘Why should the kings of Assyria come and find much water?’” (2 Chr 32:2-4; the “brook that flowed through the land” likely refers to the channel through which we walked). If you look carefully at the photograph, you can see the large stones that hang down from the roof of the channel, which blocked overhead access to the water—this apparently is part of what Hezekiah was attempting to accomplish—to deprive the Assyrians access to the water either for their own use or from sabotage (cf. also the description in 2 Chr 32:30).



Walking further south, we arrived at the Pool of Siloam, mentioned in John 9:1-7 as the scene where Jesus sent the blind man for healing (photo right; the photo shows only the NE edge of the pool; the remainder is under the debris accumulation on the left side of the photo). This pool was the reservoir into which Hezekiah’s newer water tunnel emptied. Hezekiah’s memorial epitaph reads: “The rest of the deeds of Hezekiah and all his might and how he made the pool and the conduit and brought water into the city,…” (2 Kgs 20:20; an allusion to the pool also appears in Isaiah 22:11).





Our exit from the Pool of Siloam followed a drainage channel that extends southward along the western wall of the Temple area down the Tyropaeon Valley into the Kidron. During the Roman siege of Jerusalem, some of the residents attempted to escape through these sewers. The Romans, however stopped them (see *Wars* 6.373-80). It was sobering to tunnel our way through these sewers and connect so vividly with that destruction (photo left).

On a side note, people often ask how does all that debris accumulate necessitating our excavation. The photo shows a section of unexcavated debris inside the southwest corner of the old city of Jerusalem (photo right). Not only would one need to work through this pile of debris, but the automobiles also rest on additional debris that the archaeologist would need to remove. All of this accumulates through wind-blown dust (which is quite easy in Israel), people depositing trash and the general deterioration of any structures that might have been in the area if they were not continually refreshed.



Our excavation had ended before the touring described above. The activities at the site remained exciting. One of my tasks often entails guiding tour groups at the site and providing brief explanations of our project (above left). The photo shows one of the larger groups that came through. This one was primarily from Michigan, consisting predominantly of young

professionals (usually the groups are smaller and are either teen/college age or retired. In 2010, Ray Vander Laan, of *That the World May Know* fame, came through with a group [previous page photo bottom right]).



On one of the last days of excavation before we started to clean for photographs, square E23 had worked all season with minimal finds. Then they discovered a game piece (above left; you can infer its size by the denim weave on which it rests). I excitedly took it to one of the directors. A group of people from the Israel Antiquities Authority was visiting and one of them said, "Is it an inscription?" I said, "No, it is a game piece." They seemed not to be very interested. A little bit later the archaeologists in E23 found what looks like either a bone or ivory inlay to a game board (above right). They then discovered another game piece. All this was quite exciting since we do not normally find such artifacts.

Two squares over, C23 discovered a cylinder seal (below left). I took it to the visiting group and said, "You were not impressed with the game piece, so here is a cylinder seal!" That got their attention. Later, one of our staff rolled it out on a piece of pliable plastic (below right). Interestingly one of the elements on the seal is a lion.



We have discovered quite a number of lion characteristics at Tel Beth-shemesh. Among them are a seal in 2012 showing a man confronting a lion; this seal with a lion on it; a seal that we found this season with a lion drawn on it; and the fact that the name of the queen associated with the site on the Tell el-Amarna tablets has a name that translates to: “Lady of the Lionesses.” Interestingly all of this in an area within three miles of where Samson is described as killing a lion with his bare hands (Jdg 14:5-7). The photo below is a panorama of the valley north of the site. Timnah is just over the ridge about a third of the way from the left edge of the photo; Samson’s home is on the top of the ridge on the right where there are few trees.



We will have to wait to see where all of this takes us. Our plans are to excavate in 2015 from May 31-June 25. We are open for volunteers.



tell if it is the attack rocket or the defensive “iron dome.” The Israelis, however, manage to carry on with life and two days after the vapor photo, we witnessed a wedding at the hotel where we were staying (right).

A number of people have asked about the effects of the Arab-Israeli conflict on our work. The hostilities began the Monday before we ended. On Tuesday, we were called to a bomb shelter late in the evening; we could hear percussion blasts in the far distance. Thursday evening, when the dig had ended, Frank and I were in Jerusalem and saw the accompanying rocket vapor streams (left); I cannot





You might note the gender segregation in the photo, the white mass are the males and the females are the others to the upper left. Regardless, life goes on.

We still need to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Psa 122:6), as well as “for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim 2:2).