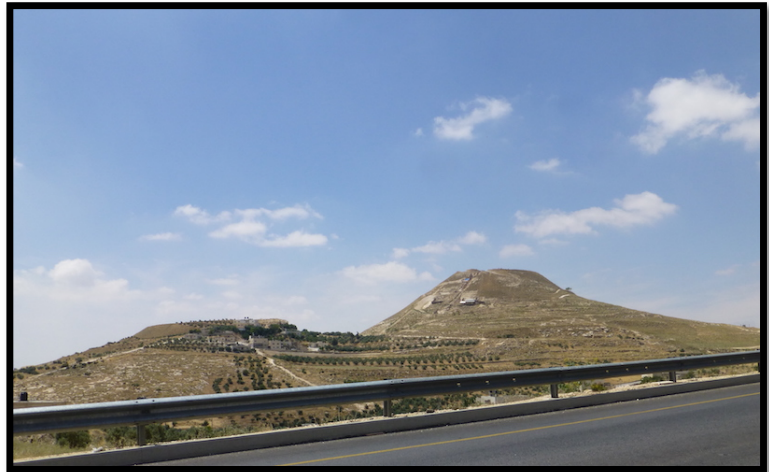


## Excavations at Tel Beth-Shemesh -- 2015 and Other Musings -- 2

Dale W. Manor, Ph.D.  
Field Director of the Excavations, Tel Beth-Shemesh  
Professor of Archaeology and Bible, Harding University

On the first weekend of the excavation season, we went twice to the Jerusalem area. away On Friday, we traveled to Herodion where Herod was buried. For a long time, people debated whether Herod was actually buried at the site or not. A few years ago, however, Ehud Netzer identified the mausoleum that was associated with the Herodian processional. Fragments of the sarcophagus were found as well. It is thought that the desecration to the sarcophagus occurred when Jewish rebels took control of the site and expressed their contempt for Herod in their treatment of the mausoleum. Otherwise the Jews of the Bar Kochba revolt in the second century AD (132-135 AD) used the site for their own defense and raids and Murphy-O'Connor suggests that the Herodion may have actually been Bar Kochba's headquarters.

The Herodion is a volcano-shaped hill with a commanding view of the entire area (photo right, the Herodion is the hill to the right; it is NOT, however, a volcano—much of its shape was artificially constructed by Herod for his own purposes). It offers a dramatically beautiful panoramic view of the area (photo below shows a panorama to the north of the site), and is also well situated to keep lookout should someone attempt to attack (Herod seemed almost





perpetually paranoid of threats to his rule, and hence its value for the Bar Kochba revolt as well).

The grandiose opulence of Herod's building projects is shown, not only in the artificial raising and shaping of the site of Herodion, but also the elaborate artificial lake with an island in the middle (photo left; the pool is to the left in the photo and the remains of part of the quarters is to the lower right of the pool). The Herodion was not just a site to be used as his burial place, but he

had designed and used it as one of his palatial quarters. In addition, to the SE of the pool he had special quarters constructed for his guests to stay when they might need or want to visit.

Inside the structure were cold, tepid, and hot baths, typical of Roman luxury. The central area is thought to have had gardens and on the south side there was a dining/reception room which was later converted to a synagogue (photo right; room is the pillared room in the middle of the photo). Our group sat in the far western end of the synagogue for a photo (below right). The group consisted of Dr. Jerry Culbertson of Faulkner University; Peter McGraw a student at Harding School of Theology; Dr. Frank Wheeler of York College; and myself.



Water was supplied into a series of cisterns from the pool below, which in turn was supplied by water from sources near Bethlehem and the so-called "Solomon's Pools" (who likely did not construct the pools). The cisterns still show evidence of the water levels, even after 2000 years! (see photo on next page; lines of the water level appear on each side just below the middle of the photograph).





Ehud Netzer discovered the actual burial site in ruins apparently the result of contemptuous treatment by the Jews of the first few centuries. Locating the site took years and helped fuel the argument that Herod was not really buried at Herodion. The photograph of the model (below right) is based on elements of the ruins that Netzer discovered and the footings of the structure are clearly visible (photo below left). If you compare the model with the block remains, you should be able to make out the foundation and lower courses. The model has a black line that shows where the stones of the mausoleum are still in place and the other photograph shows those stones. It is rather sobering to realize that you are looking at the ruins of the mausoleum of the man who attempted to kill Jesus as an infant. Of course, scores of other people were also objects of his treachery. In an ironical way, it

is somewhat fitting that the tomb of the man who perpetuated so much evil on his citizens has been obscured through the centuries.



On Saturday we took several of the group to Jerusalem for a one-day tour. Among the sites was a visit to the so-called Garden Tomb, which offers a reasonably serene environment to contemplate the wonders of Jesus' life and resurrection. The probability of this being the site where Jesus was buried is almost nil, but for me it is a good location to think and meditate, at least compared with the more likely site of his resurrection in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (the photo shows Allison Robinett of Oklahoma Christian in the doorway of the tomb).

We walked up the road to the east of the ancient temple area skirting the slopes of the Kidron Valley. In the photograph are two main tombs. The far right one with the pillar on top is often called Absalom's tomb, so named because of the belief of some that the tomb was the one mentioned in the Bible which Absalom set up in the valley since he had no male children (cf. 2 Sam 18:18). The tomb on the far left is called the tomb of Zachariah. Neither tomb's name has any accuracy. The tombs were products of the Hellenistic era at the earliest since they sport column designs far more characteristic of the later period than the time of the Monarchy or Divided Monarchy. In view of the basic similarity of the column and general design of the pillared tomb, some have suggested that it may have been a tomb ordered by Herod the Great to honor one of his deceased family members—but hard data for this attribution is missing, it is based more on typological similarities of the tomb with the one that Netzer discovered at Herodion.

A place that is always fascinating is the Broad Wall. This wall is referred to specifically in Nehemiah as a geographic reference point in the reconstruction of Jerusalem's city wall (Neh 3:8; 12:38). The reference in Nehemiah is to the wall in its ruined state and alludes to where the wall would have joined the Nehemiah construction from the west. Isaiah, however, refers to Hezekiah's construction works as he prepared for Sennacherib's attack. The people appear to have placed too much confidence in the physical defenses and Isaiah writes: "...you counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall" (Isa 22:10). The photograph clearly shows houses that had been dismantled and the construction of the broad wall on top of the earlier wall stubs—this is a classic stratigraphic example of one construction on top of another!

The streets of Jerusalem are almost always bustling with activity. This kind of scene would have always characterized the city when it was at peace. It is easy to imagine Jesus and the disciples bustling their way through the throng to go from place to place—or Paul as he would enter the city and engage the authorities in his various discussions. It was probably in a scene like this that Jesus would have had to fight his way with the cross and his bruises as he made his way to Golgotha.

After leaving Jerusalem we made our way to a site that appears to have played a role in the life of David. The site is Khirbet Qeiyafa and is in the hills on the north side of the Elah Valley. The site dates from the time of David and likely was constructed for a defensive posture against the Philistines. The photograph is taken with one of the two city gates in the foreground and the site of Azekah the hill in the background. Azekah stands about 2/5 of the way from Qeiyafa and the Philistine city of Gath. The Elah Valley was the scene of David's conflict with Goliath (1 Sam 17) and the valley appears to be referred to as Ephes-

dammim (1 Sam 17:1); one translation is “end [or border] of blood,” which likely describes the valley as a place of border conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines.

The excavation at the site is proceeding somewhat slower than we had hoped. The dilemma is that we know a goal that we are attempting to attain—the Late Bronze Age palace, but in the meantime, a number of features are appearing that we did not anticipate. While these are important discoveries and it is necessary to record the information associated with them, they tend to impede the progress to our anticipated goal.

Last year we discovered and excavated a large olive press installation, which we left through the year for further investigation this year. The photograph (upper right) shows the square and the installation toward the beginning of the season and after the major efforts to clean up the area (the press is the circular structure in the middle). The sand is in the interior to help protect the installation. Since it was lined with plaster, we were afraid that the dry weather and visitors during the off-season might cause the press installation to fall apart. Our goal is to excavate the northern half of the press (to the left in the photo) and remove the soil around it and then cut the installation in half to see how the press relates chronologically to the stone walls to the east (toward the top) and west (toward the bottom).



A major challenge that our site presents are the numerous pits that the people in the ancient world dug. Most of them have nothing in them but soil—no significant presence of garbage or evidence of human occupation, except the ever-present broken pottery, flints and bones, but we find these in fills and occupation layers. The presence of the pits raise severe interpretative problems as we try to disentangle the sequence of soil deposition. The photo to the left shows a pit line as evidenced by the wide white line. The white line shows that the bottoms of pits are not always evenly and symmetrically shaped. Note the serpentine path of the white line—over and under stones. You can probably also see a difference in the



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texture and color of the soil above the line and below it.

As it turns out, the line is not plaster as most people are inclined to infer. Instead it is a composition known as phytolith. Phytolith is the silicon distillate in the plant cellular structure when it takes in the water from the soil. The plant cells eventually deteriorate but the silicon “skeletons” remain. The next two photos show a sample of phytolith with a trowel beside it for scale. It looks like plaster; the

second photo is a macro photo of the phytoliths themselves—notice the broken stems and bits which clearly are the evidence of plant remains. The bed of phytoliths are compressions of a mass of plant material that would otherwise be much thicker than the compact layer that appears in the photo on the previous page.



An impressive feature of our site is the cruciform-shaped cistern that provided the water supply for the people of Beth-Shemesh. We have not located a spring nearby that would have provided water, but people often would dig cisterns for their

personal use. Cisterns are holes dug into rock (or perhaps under some circumstances into the soil) and then plastered to make them watertight. These are mentioned several times in the Bible.

Obviously, a cistern would be a less desired water source than running water. Jeremiah alludes to this comparison when God chastises Judah: “they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer 2:13). Who would normally prefer water from a cistern to a natural flowing, fresh water stream?



The large cistern that the folks at Beth-Shemesh dug has a capacity of some 211,000 gallons of water. It was filled by a series of channels and gutters that would direct the water from the surface of the site into the subterranean cavern. The photo (left)

shows part of one of the channels that still exists on the surface of the site.. One thing in particular to note is the presence of plaster lining the gutter (the front part of the channel is missing its plaster, but the white section in the back is the plaster still in situ). This in itself is impressive that they had the technology to make plaster that would adhere to the surface for literally thousands of years!

Thank you for your interest in our project. Hopefully another report will be forthcoming in the near future.