

2017 Report on TEL BETH-SHEMESH EXCAVATION TRIP Report #1

by Dale W. Manor

The departure from Searcy/Little Rock was smooth and I made all the connections with no difficulties—we actually arrived in Israel about half an hour ahead of schedule. One of the interesting flight sights was flying over my artificial archaeological site in Rosebud, Arkansas and seeing it from 15,000 feet or so (photo right). I named it Tel Achzib which basically translates to “Artificial Ruin.” In 2007 Jeff Hopper encouraged me to build it as a site to serve as a Bible class for the Honors College. Sharon and I then spent some 7 months working on it. It consists of four strata, all of which reflect various aspects of sites and finds from Israel.



After arriving in Jerusalem, we rested at St. George’s Pilgrim Guest House—a facility that was built during the late 1800s and still reflects the serenity of that time. The garden was particularly engaging and calming (photo left). Frank Wheeler and I went into the Old City for our typical visit and saw groups of Israeli military celebrating. Our visit coincided with a strange convergence of the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War and the beginning of Ramadan. There was an extraordinary degree of security, particularly north of the Old City, but everything



was calm.

We picked Jerry Culbertson up on Friday and began our sojourn to the Galilee where we spent all Saturday. Our tour took us to the Golan Heights up some very rugged territory separating modern Israel from Jordan, particularly by the Yarmuk Valley (photo previous bottom). The valley is very rugged and across the way were the heights of Gilead—the general location of Ramot-Gilead, one of the Cities of Refuge of the Bible (Jsh 20:7-9) and also the home territory of Elijah (1 Kgs 17:1).

Our trip onto the Golan Heights was to the area of Bashan mentioned in the Bible as particularly suitable for herding and grazing and was part of the territory that half of the tribe of Manasseh received for an inheritance (Num 32:33). Amos later referred to the particularly healthy cows of Bashan as metaphors of the decadent wives of elite Israel in the 8th century. His indictment resonates with sarcasm: “Hear this



word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria...” (Amos 4:1). I had to find cows in Bashan to photograph (photo right).

One of our goals was to visit the reconstructed 4th-7th century AD village of Qatzrin. It likely would have been little different than life in Jesus’ time. It was an interesting visit, reflecting wine and olive production, weaving, a house that had been fully reconstructed and furnished with standard types of wares that the people would have used. The photo shows part of the interior of one of the houses with the oven in the covered courtyard (photo left).

The focal point of the village was a synagogue, which has been restored to a certain point. Of course, we could not resist a photo sitting on the benches (photo right).

Our next stop was the site of Kursi, which is a traditional location where Jesus cast the demons into the swine. There has been much discussion of this incident, trying to determine the location where it occurred. It is difficult, but as we looked over the geography, this is a reasonable



location (at least more than most along the eastern Galilee coast). Part of the problem is that people tend to read the text as if the swine ran off a cliff directly into the sea below, but a more careful read of the text does not necessarily imply a cliff-type drop off. Instead it simply says that the swine ran down the steep slope and drown in the water (Matt 8:32; Mk 5:11-13; Lk 8:33). The slope from the higher elevation is steep, but the text does not necessarily indicate that the water was immediately at the foot of the hillside. An additional point is the possibility (probability?) that the lake's water level was higher and closer to the hillside.



Given the gentle decline from the bottom of the slope to the water, it would not require much of an increase in the water level of the lake to move the shoreline considerably closer to the slope. As it is, the distance from the slope to the water is now about 400 meters (but that is a guess, given that we did not measure it; photo upper right).

We were all enamored with a wonderfully beautiful tree that was bursting with color. We were unable to determine the name of the tree—the Israelis would tend to name it differently than we, but it looked very much like a form of mimosa (photo left).

During the first weekend after the dig began we made a trip toward the south. I am to read a paper at the ASOR meetings in November and was planning to do some research at a Bedouin Museum near Beer-sheba, but it was closed and does not look like it is in operation any more. That put a damper on my aspect of the trip. As we were leaving, we discussed the prospect of visiting an iconic archaeological site that served as the major premier of archaeological theory and development. William Foxwell Albright had excavated Tell Beit Mirsim so we went to climb the site. To get to it, we had to drive through a grain field that had already been harvested—it was quite an adventure. While there was not much to see on the tel, it was a pilgrimage of sorts to go to such an important site. Albright had identified Tell Beit Mirsim as Debir in the Joshua conquest narrative (Josh 10:38-39), but that identification has generally been abandoned.

We then drove down to the Dead Sea where we trekked into an area known as the “Stronghold of Zohar.” The site is a Crusader period site that served as a postal stop from Kerak in Jordan to Gaza. The site is in the middle of the deep wadi system, but sits high on top of a rise where it is



protected from the flash floods that might descend the ravine (photo upper left). To access the site, we had to hike about 1.5 miles into the ravine walking in generally the dry river bed (photo upper right). Given the topography and geography, the area is similar to much of the Sinai peninsula where the Israelites wandered in their 40 years. It was easy then to imagine and identify with aspects of their long sojourn; fortunately ours was much less stressful.



There are two major tributaries to the Dead Sea that descend from the west—they are the well-known En-Gedi, the other is from a spring at En-Boqeq near the southern end of the Dead Sea. The spring is essentially perennial, however the volume of water coming down the way was minimal. It was enough, however, to provide lush vegetation (photo left). You will note the density of the growth which is also characteristic of places along the Jordan River. Jeremiah 49:19 refers to the “jungle of the Jordan” as the haunt of wildlife. One can easily imagine a host of wildlife in these environs. The

sounds of the birds and the babbling of the water was quite a contrast to much of the other scenes of the desert area.

Our stay was at the Masada Guest House at the foot of Masada. Our goal was the visit at least one of the Roman camps at the base of the hill. We were not permitted, however, to go into any of them, but fortunately could take pictures through the doorway of the one that had been reconstructed. There are a number of camps that surround the fortress site and the remains are impressive. We were curious as to how many Roman soldiers and/or impressed slaves and captives were put to work to construct the extensive camps and siege wall that surround the entire fortress. How many millions of stones were collected and had to be gathered from sites often significantly removed from Masada. An overwhelming number of the stones show



extensive erosion as wadi stones. The photo (upper left) shows the three of us standing beside one of the unrestored Roman camps.

When we began our trek back toward “home,” we stopped briefly in En-Gedi and got some GREAT shots of ibex standing up and nibbling from the trees (upper right). These positions are iconic in many ancient fertility symbols.



We closed the day with a drive down Wadi Qelt to look at the site of St. George’s Monastery that clings to the cliff of the wadi (above). You can see a path that extends to the right of the monastery. This would have been essentially part of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho which was the setting of the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37). While there are other areas that are less precarious than this section, if the attack occurred along the ravine part of the Wadi Qelt, the effort by the Levite and priest implies very deliberate action to “pass by on the other side.” The ravine section remains the context for increased criminal attacks. The story takes on additional drama and a heightened sense of indictment of the Levite and priest when looking at the probable setting of the story.

EXCAVATION REPORT

We began our work at the site on Monday, June 12—a day later than we normally would. This delay was a result of problems with housing issues. The kibbutz where we normally stayed had increased their rate by 50% (this was partly the result of its changing ownership). The only alternative was one in which we could only first arrive on Saturday night after 10:00 p.m. because of Sabbath, so almost all of us arrived on Sunday when we unpacked and set up our rooms and began working on Monday.



Our goals for this year are basically two-fold. One is to try to expose more of the Late Bronze Age palace (ca. 14th century BC) that we first identified and uncovered in 2008. The second goal is to trace the southern side of the temple that we found dating from about 1100 BC. The latter is the main focus and in a sense the easier to accomplish.

The temple seems to have been reserved for perhaps eating ceremonies and definitely the use of libations. The stones in the temple clearly reflected channels

for receiving and directing liquid in particular directions (above left). The photo shows depressions in the two main large rocks in the middle of the building and if you look carefully, you should be able to see the depression and drain groove in the closest one (the stones have been dislodged from their level positions due to soil shifts through the centuries).



The first week of excavation usually begins slowly. Part of the reason is the need to clean up the site, particularly removing weeds (above left [before] and right [after]). An additional factor of delay is that many of the volunteers have never excavated and we must train them. It is exciting

however, to watch them develop so much more confidence through the course of the season, although admittedly some people end up recognizing that perhaps they should not have come on a dig!



The highlight of the first week was the discovery of a channel just below the temple (left). We do not know for sure the purpose of the the channel. It is tantalizing to recognize that the channel seems to be connected to a temple where libation offerings occurred, but the stratigraphy is such that we suspect the channel has nothing to do with the temple that we have exposed. We are hoping, however, that there might be a temple below the one we have uncovered. This tradition of superimposing one temple on top of another is common in the ancient world; examples of such have been found at Ebla, Hazor, Megiddo, Shechem, and Lachish, among others.

Since the name of the site is “Beth-Shemesh” meaning “house of the sun,” it is probable that there was a shrine dedicated to the sun god (of some kind of cultural definition). We have not specifically identified such a shrine, but we wonder if we may have finally done so. The

archaeology awaits.

Shalom until next report!

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