

to shake at the presence of the Lord. Ezekiel concludes by saying: "Thus will I magnify Myself, and sanctify Myself; and I will be known in the eyes of many nations, and they shall know

that I am the LORD" (v. 23). May this time soon come when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord and when all nations go to worship the King in Jerusalem.

## Around the Sea of Galilee

### 5. The mystery of Bethsaida

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**A**FTER CAPERNAUM, Bethsaida is mentioned more times in the Gospels than any other of the towns which lined the Sea of Galilee. Yet there are difficulties involved. From secular history it is known that in New Testament times there was a city called Bethsaida Julias on the north side of the Sea of Galilee, but is this the Bethsaida of the Gospels? Some of the references to Bethsaida seem to refer to a town on the west side of the lake. A tel called et-Tell<sup>1</sup> is currently being excavated over a mile north of the Sea of Galilee, and is claimed to be the site of ancient Bethsaida, but is this really so? Some would dispute it. In this article we examine these questions.

#### Bethsaida in the Gospels

Bethsaida is mentioned seven times in the Gospels, and we will begin by looking at these passages.

In Matthew 11:20,21 we read: "Then began he [Jesus] to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not: Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes". Luke 10:13 is similar. There is nothing here to indicate where Bethsaida was located. There is only one reference to Jesus performing a miracle in Bethsaida (see below), and nothing is said of any visit to Chorazin, which shows just how much of his ministry is left unrecorded. John 21:25 is relevant here.

In John 1 we read of Jesus going into Galilee and calling Philip, who is said to be "of Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter" (vv. 43,44). Yet Andrew and Peter lived at Capernaum (Mk. 1:21,29). In John 12:21 we are told that Philip "was of Bethsaida of Galilee". Yet Bethsaida Julias was not in the province of Galilee at that time;

according to Josephus it was built by the tetrarch Philip, son of Herod the Great, and brother of Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee. Philip ruled territories known as Iturea and Trachonitis (Lk. 3:1).

Luke's account of the feeding of the five thousand begins: "And he [Jesus] took them [the apostles], and went aside privately into a desert place belonging to the city called Bethsaida" (9:10). The twelve disciples had just come back from their preaching mission and Jesus wanted to be able to have a quiet talk with them. Moreover, the previous verse says that Herod Antipas wanted to see Jesus, and it made sense for Jesus to take the disciples out of the territory of Antipas and into that ruled by Philip. The other Gospels do not say where they went, but Matthew and Mark say that it was to a "desert place",<sup>2</sup> and all say that they went by boat (Mt. 14:13; Mk. 6:32; Jno. 6:1). We are not told from where they went, but since Matthew, Mark and Luke all refer to the twelve returning from their preaching mission just before they went it is likely that it was from Capernaum since this was Jesus's base, and they would know to find him there.

Mark records that, after the miracle, Jesus "constrained his disciples to get into the ship, and to go to the other side before unto Bethsaida" (Mk. 6:45), yet John 6:17 records that they "entered into a ship, and went over the sea toward Capernaum". The latter is consistent with an original

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1. 'Tel' in Hebrew and 'tell' in Arabic both mean 'mound', both words being used for the mounds which dot the landscape of Israel, marking the sites of ancient towns. The word 'tel' is often used today in relation to archaeological excavations, but uninhabited sites often have Arabic names incorporating the word 'tell'.
  2. This refers to an uncultivated open area where there were no people, not a desert as we know it; Galilee has a good rainfall.

departure from Capernaum, as suggested above. But how could they have gone to Bethsaida for the miracle, as stated by Luke, and returned to Bethsaida after the miracle, as stated by Mark?

The final reference to Bethsaida is in Mark 8. Here Jesus and the disciples go across the lake by boat, and Jesus gives sight to a blind man of Bethsaida (vv. 13,22). After this they go to Caesarea Philippi to the north (v. 27). This is consistent with Bethsaida being a city located on the north side of the Sea of Galilee.

### Two Bethsaidas

In the passages referred to above we have what seems to be a clear contradiction between the Mark and Luke records of the feeding of the five thousand, one saying that the miracle occurred at Bethsaida and the other that the disciples sailed across the lake to Bethsaida after the miracle. We also have an apparent inaccuracy in John 12, for Bethsaida Julias was not in Galilee, and an apparent contradiction between John 1, saying that Andrew and Peter came from Bethsaida, and Mark 1, saying that they lived in Capernaum.

The AV margin of Mark 6:45 reads that the disciples went "over against Bethsaida", that is, they sailed to a point opposite Bethsaida, which would be Capernaum. This reconciles the verse with the Luke account, but according to *Ellicott's Commentary* the rendering has no validity. The view taken by believers in the accuracy of Scripture is that there were two Bethsaidas,<sup>3</sup> the other being a fishing village close to Capernaum, perhaps the site called Tabgha, about a mile from Capernaum and the traditional site of the miracle of the miraculous draught of fishes, recorded in John 21. The name Bethsaida means 'House of fishing', and it would not therefore be surprising to have more than one place of this name around the Sea of Galilee.

If there were two Bethsaidas, to which do the various references in the Gospels refer? The two in John would refer to the one near Capernaum, since it is stated in John 12:21 that it was in Galilee, and since Andrew and Peter lived at Capernaum, according to Mark 1, perhaps keeping their boat at Bethsaida. The one to which, according to Mark 6:45, the disciples returned after the feeding of the five thousand would also have been the one near Capernaum. The Bethsaida in the vicinity of which Jesus carried out the miracle would, however, have been Bethsaida Julias, and it is likely that the one where Jesus gave sight to a blind man, as recorded in Mark 8,

was also. We do not know which Bethsaida Jesus condemned in Matthew 11 and Luke 10, but the one near Capernaum is the most likely since it is in the area where Jesus's Galilean ministry was centred.

### Old Testament Bethsaida

Excavations of the mound known as et-Tell, north of the Sea of Galilee, reveal that a significant city existed there at the time of David and Solomon. It is thought that this city might well have been the capital of the small kingdom of Geshur, since it is much bigger than any other ancient city site discovered in the area. In those times there were two small independent Syrian kingdoms called Geshur and Maacah, situated on the east side of the Sea of Galilee (Josh. 13:13). One of David's wives was Maacah the daughter of Talmai king of Geshur, and she was the mother of Absalom (2 Sam. 3:3), which explains why Absalom fled to Geshur after the murder of Amnon (13:37).

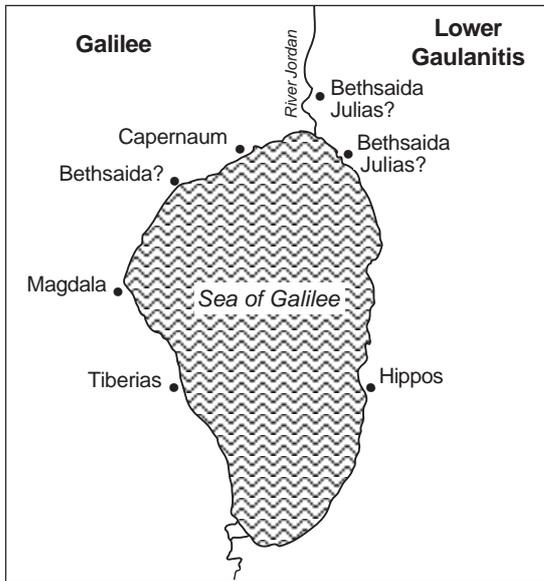
Old Testament Bethsaida (we do not know what it was called in those times) was evidently subject to a variety of influences from the surrounding nations, judging by what has been excavated there. A three-foot high basalt stele bearing a depiction of a bull-headed figure is thought to be representative of a Mesopotamian bull god, its position at the gate of the city indicating that it was regarded as the guardian deity of the city.

A tiny statuette of the Egyptian god Pataikos found inside the remains of a palace indicates influence from another direction. Two bullae (lumps of clay bearing the impression of a seal) are in the Phoenician style, Phoenicia being nearby. Arrowheads and spearheads amidst a thick layer of ash indicate a siege followed by fiery destruction, thought to have occurred in 734 B.C. when Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria invaded from the north and took all Galilee, as recorded in 2 Kings 15:29. The city was rebuilt afterwards but remained small and insignificant.

### Bethsaida Julias

It was not until about a hundred years before the time of Christ's ministry that the area where et-Tell is situated became Jewish territory again. This happened when the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus conquered the area from the

3. The IVF *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, *Smith's Dictionary of the Bible*, *Speaker's Commentary* and *Ellicott's Commentary* all take this view.



Seleucid kingdom based in Syria. After the Romans took over, this area became part of the territory ruled by Herod the Great on behalf of the Romans. When, after his death, his kingdom was divided amongst his sons, Philip ruled this territory, with the title of tetrarch, as mentioned above. This Philip is not the one who was originally married to Herodias, who left him for his half-brother Antipas (Mk. 6:17). This one, after remaining unmarried for many years, eventually married Salome, daughter of the aforesaid Herodias and the other Philip, and assumed to be the unnamed girl of Mark 6:22 whose dancing so pleased Antipas.

According to Josephus, Philip the tetrarch "advanced the village Bethsaida, situate at the lake of Gennesareth [Galilee], unto the dignity of a city, both by the number of inhabitants it contained, and its other grandeur, and called it by the name of Julias, the same name with Caesar's daughter".<sup>4</sup> It is generally assumed that this Julias was the daughter of the then ruling emperor, Caesar Augustus, and that Bethsaida was built early in the rule of Philip. Josephus mentions the city of Julias on a number of later occasions, and once specifically locates it as being where the Jordan flows into the Sea of Galilee, which is where et-Tell is situated. It should be noted that, although it is common today to refer to the city as Bethsaida Julias, Josephus and other ancient writers always call it Julias.

Fred Strickert, co-director of the excavations at et-Tell, claims that Philip did not build Julias

till much later in his rulership, and that he named it in honour of another Julia, who was wife of Augustus and mother of Tiberius, the emperor who succeeded Augustus and was ruling during the ministry of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> (Tiberius was her son by a previous marriage, and was adopted by Augustus as his son and successor.) This Julia was called Livia until the death of Augustus, but then took on the additional name Julia, the female equivalent of Julius, to indicate her status as a member of the Julian family, named after Julius Caesar, the family from which all the emperors came until Nero was assassinated.

Why then does Strickert think Julias was named after Augustus's widow and not his daughter? And when does he think the city was built? Philip began his rule in 4 B.C., and Julia the daughter of Augustus was exiled by her father in 2 B.C. for immoral behaviour. Even if Philip built a city as soon as he began to rule and dedicated it to this Julia, her almost immediate disgrace would have ensured that the city would not have continued to be known by this name. Strickert argues that Philip founded Julias in A.D. 30. This followed the death of Augustus's widow the previous year at the age of eighty-six, the city being named after her in commemoration.

What is the evidence for this? Strickert says that in the year 30, Philip for the first time issued coins bearing the image of Julia and other coins referring to himself for the first time as 'founder', indicating founder of cities. Although the reference in Josephus cited above refers to Philip founding Julias in the context of the beginning of his reign, it is not specifically stated that the city was founded then. Although he states that the Julia in whose name it was founded was the daughter of Caesar, in his other major work, *Wars of the Jews*, he refers to the building of Julias in the context of mentioning Julia, mother of Tiberius.<sup>6</sup> If Julias was not founded until A.D. 30 then this would have been after the time of the ministry of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> This is consistent with the fact that Julias is never mentioned in the Gospels, only Bethsaida. If the name Bethsaida had been

4. *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XVIII, Ch. 2.1.

5. Ch. 7, *Bethsaida: Home of the Apostles*, Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 1998.

6. Book II, Ch. IX.1.

7. There are complex problems relating the dating of the life of Jesus to secular events, but we know that when he was born Herod was still alive, whereas under the normally accepted dating system which I am following Herod died in 4 B.C.

changed to Julias at the beginning of Philip's rule then the name Bethsaida would have been obsolete some time before the ministry of Jesus, though, as explained above, it seems that most of the references to Bethsaida in the Gospels relate to a different site anyway.

#### **Has Bethsaida really been discovered?**

Excavations of the mound called et-Tell began in 1987, and the excavators have identified it as the site of Bethsaida Julias. Today it is part of the Jordan River Park, an area of woodland through which the fast-flowing Jordan hastens towards the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. The site is signposted as Bethsaida and referred to as such on maps. We visited the park on a hot Saturday afternoon in March 1999, and followed the path through the excavated remains of a city. From the southern end of the tell we looked across flat cultivated fields towards Galilee, shimmering in the heat over a mile away.

Excavations here have unearthed various items connected with fishing. One large house is called the Fisherman's House. It is built around a courtyard in which were found various items of fishing equipment. Altogether over a hundred artefacts to do with fishing have been discovered on the site: stone anchors, weights for fishing nets, fish hooks and needles. A clay seal depicts a fishing scene, and it is conjectured that this was used to stamp jars of salted fish exported to other parts of the land.

This evidence that the city was heavily involved in fishing seems not to match with the fact that the city is now over a mile from the lakeside. Geologists have explained this as the result of an earthquake sweeping debris across the northern end of the lake and cutting the city off from the water. Lake clays containing the remains of water creatures have been found at the foot of the tell, showing that it was once lapped by the sea.

This all sounds clear cut, but it has not satisfied everybody, notably Mendel Nun, the veteran kibbutznik who is the leading expert on all aspects of the lake, and was referred to earlier in the series.<sup>8</sup> Nun thinks the site of Bethsaida Julias is to be found closer to the shore of the lake, at a site called el-Araj, as yet unexcavated. There are two main reasons for objecting to et-Tell as being Bethsaida Julias. The first is that, if the lake came up to the bottom of the mound in New Testament times, other sites, like Capernaum, would have been under water. The second is

that a city founded by one of the Herod family would have had a theatre, public baths, a hippodrome, a temple and other buildings associated with a Roman city, but these have not been found. In response to this the excavators say they have in fact discovered the remains of a building which seems to have been a temple. It is in the pattern of a Roman temple and incense shovels have been found there.

If most of the references to Bethsaida in the Gospels refer to a place close to Capernaum, then the issue of whether et-Tell is Bethsaida Julias is of less interest to us. One of the objections to et-Tell being the Bethsaida of the Gospels is that the latter must be on the shores of Galilee, but this objection is removed if there were two Bethsaidas, with the one near Capernaum being the one referred to in the context of fishing and boats.

#### **What happened to Bethsaida?**

The answer to this question depends, of course, on where we mean by Bethsaida. There is nothing known of a fishing village called Bethsaida near to Capernaum outside the Gospels. Regarding Bethsaida Julias, Josephus records his own involvement in a battle with the Romans in A.D. 67 nearby, but there is nothing to indicate whether the city itself was involved in the revolt of the Jews or whether it remained loyal to Rome. It is referred to by the geographers Pliny (A.D. 77) and Ptolemy (second century) as one of the four major cities of Galilee (not all the cities are the same in both accounts), with Galilee by this time including the whole area round the lake. Pilgrims writing in the sixth and eighth centuries refer to visiting Bethsaida, and one says there was a church there, but where exactly were they writing about?

The archaeological evidence, assuming et-Tell is Bethsaida Julias, is that the city was not much occupied after the first century. Few coins have been discovered from that time compared with earlier times, and there is evidence of considerable earthquake damage. The city seems to have been abandoned rather than destroyed in battle, just one of the many cities of the land that have been ruined and abandoned during the centuries of desolation foretold in the prophecies of the Old Testament.

(To be continued)

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8. "The fishermen", [Jan. 2003, p. 26.](#)