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המכללה האקדמית כנרת - 13300					

below sea level. The first-century village at el-Araj is at about 211 meters below sea level, making it, Arav suggests, an unlikely candidate to be a village existing from the Iron Age through to the early Byzantine era.

## Finding Julias

Josephus Flavius, who was born in about 37 C.E. and therefore lived right after Jesus' time, didn't write much about him per se. Josephus did write about Herod Philip upgrading the fishing hamlet of Bethsaida to a polis which in the year 30 C.E., he renamed Julias in honor of Caesar Augustus' deceased wife Livia aka Julia (Wars II, 168; Antiquities 18, 26).

So although some argue that Josephus was not entirely meticulous about accuracy – no ancient historians were, finding Julias would be strong testimony that the real Bethsaida has been found.

One snag is that the excavators of both e-Tell and el-Araj claim to have found Julias.

At e-Tell the archaeologists found an ancient temple that Philip Herod converted into a temple to Livia/Julia, complete with dedication to the deceased empress, Arav says.

It bears adding that the New Testament, apparently written between 50 to 100 C.E., does mention Bethsaida, but not Julias, the city's later incarnation according to Josephus. He however wrote that Bethsaida existed before the first century C.E. (as one would expect if it in fact evolved from the capital of Geshur). John, for instance, refers to Jesus' disciples Peter, Andrew and Philip coming from Bethsaida, not Julias (John 1:44) and it was apparently written in the late first century or late second century.

Arav believes John's and other references were simply reverting to the old name, by habit, as one does.

Meanwhile, El-Araj's claims to the identification of Bethsaida include the discovery of churches, including possibly the famed Church of the Apostles which, according to Christian tradition dating from the eighth century, was built over the home of Jesus' disciples Peter and Andrew in the village of Bethsaida.

Arav counters that the church found in el-Araj had been built in the early Byzantine period, more than 400 to 500 years after Jesus' time. Absent archaeological evidence and given

that geology had conspired to dump about two meters of sediment onto el-Araj between Jesus' lifetime and the church's construction, one would have needed divine inspiration to locate the spot where the disciples had supposedly lived in the first century, Arav contends.

At el-Araj, the excavators found the remains of a Roman bath (which wouldn't have existed in a Jewish town of the time), a Roman silver coin and some other artifacts that they suggest support the identification of el-Araj as Julias.

Arav, however, argues that when Julias existed, baths for the general public were not a thing in the southern Levant. The first Roman baths in the

## The village is mentioned several times in the New Testament, as the hometown of Jesus' disciples Philip, Andrew and Peter and the place where Jesus is said to have walked on water.

region were built for the Hasmonean and Herodian kings, in their palaces. Only then were they erected in Roman military camps in Judea, in the second century C.E., and city public baths only arose in the Byzantine era, by which time it seems Bethsaida/Julias had ceased to exist. So if there was a bath-house at el-Araj dating to the mid-first or second century C.E., it doesn't attest to a Roman city in Palestine but to a Roman army camp, Arav postulates.

## When Josephus fell off his horse

Before betraying his people, Josephus was known as Yosef ben Matityahu and was a general of the Jewish forces fighting the Roman occupier. In chapters 71 to 73 of his autobiography "Vita," he describes skirmishes with Roman mercenaries fielded by the Roman vassal King Herod Agrippa II at the onset of the Jewish-Roman war (65-66 CE). The mercenaries pitched a fortified camp about one kilometer from Julias on the road to the two cities, in order to disrupt their supply chain, Josephus relates.

## E-TELL

*Continued from page 8*

He then describes his tactic in fighting the mercenary force. Collecting about 5,000 men, he led them to a ravine, whence they ambushed the Romans. And indeed there is one suitable deep ravine descending to the River Jordan on the Galilean side, just opposite e-Tell. They would have prevailed if Josephus hadn't been thrown from his horse when it became mired in swamp and been evacuated to Capernaum. His rattled men lost courage and the Romans won the day.

The next day the forces clashed again, but upon hearing that the Jewish forces were to be reinforced, the Romans retreated to their fortified camp. And they stayed there for a long time, perhaps until the end of the second century C.E., says Arav.

He notes that the Tal-

mud relates that Emperor Hadrian visited the region of "Tzaidan" (Bethsaida) in 130-132 C.E. He would most probably have been hosted in that same army camp, and indeed the excavators of el-Araj reported on second century C.E. finds, fitting the time of Hadrian's visit, Arav adds. This, he believes, bolsters his argument that the rivals didn't find Bethsaida-Julias, but rather a Roman army camp from the Herodian period.

Wherever it was, references to Bethsaida disappear in the third century C.E. Its doom wasn't at the hand of enemy forces as so often happened in these parts. It was seismology. In the year 363 C.E. a powerful earthquake rocked the Galilee and another came two years later. Landslides dammed the Jordan River and when it broke through, the lagoons of the Sea of Galilee and plain of Bethsaida became silted. Fishermen had to move their operations and that was that.



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Ruth Schuster

**“W**oe 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” – Matthew 11:22, quoting Jesus.

Many miracles Jesus is purported to have performed in Bethsaida, and was irked that the townspeople did not thereafter “repent,” according to Scripture. The village is mentioned several times in the New Testament, as the hometown of Jesus’ disciples Philip, Andrew and Peter; the place where Jesus is said to have walked on water, cured a blind man (Mark 8:22-25), and fed 5,000 people with two fish and five loaves. The Roman-Jewish historian Josephus wrote in the “Antiquities of the Jews” that Philip the tetrarch, son of King Herod the Great, “advanced the village Bethsaida, situated at the lake of Gennesareth, unto the dignity of a city” called Julias.

However famed 2,000 years ago, its location has been forgotten. But there are two main contenders for the biblical Bethsaida by the Sea of Galilee: the archaeological sites of e-Tell and el-Araj. (A third contender, the village of Messadiye, has largely dropped from the contest, on the grounds that the ruins there seem too mean to fit the descriptions and seem to date to a later time.)

Prof. Rami Arav of the University of Nebraska at Omaha has been making the case of e-Tell (which just means “the mound”) for almost three decades, and stresses that it has been accepted as the “real Bethsaida” by the Israeli government’s Place Names Bureau. That is why e-Tell appears as “Bethsaida” on official maps, Arav points out. He and colleagues have been publishing academic papers arguing the case of e-Tell from 1988 to date, and refuting the case of el-Araj, which is promoted by Prof. R. Steven Notley of Nyack College, New York and Mordechai Aviam of the Kinneret College on the Sea of Galilee.

Both e-Tell and el-Araj are quite close to one another by the River Jordan as it flows into the north of the Sea of Galilee. Either could suit the character of biblical Bethsaida as a fishing village.

Arav however argues that if anything, el-Araj was a



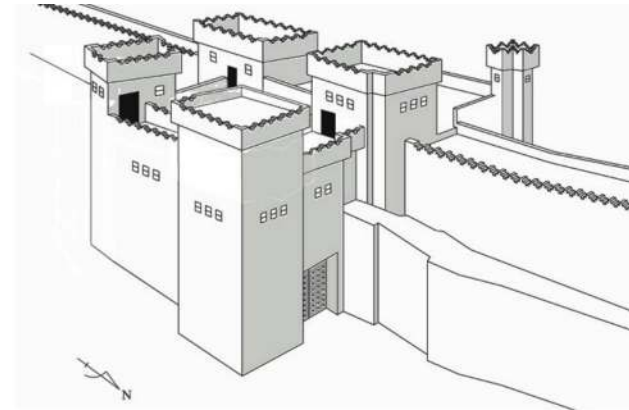
A depiction of Bethsaida circa the 8th to 9th centuries B.C.E.

Hanan Shafir



Two moon-god steles of different ages found at e-Tell.

Hanan Shafir and Ilan Szulman



An isometric rendering of the gate of Bethsaida.

Hanan Shafir



The strong tower at the gate of Bethsaida.

Hanan Shafir

# Was biblical Bethsaida at e-Tell?

The location of the ancient town of Bethsaida has been lost in the fog of time. Prof. Ram Arav makes the case for a leading candidate

Roman army camp and “his” site, e-Tell, was Bethsaida – the later incarnation of the capital of the biblical kingdom of Geshur.

## The enigmatic Kingdom of Geshur

Among the discoveries in e-Tell were monumental fortifications and a city gate, as well as granaries and other food storage facilities and a stele depicting the moon god. Clearly the city at e-Tell was a formidable presence in the Iron Age. Arav and colleagues have identified it as the capital of the Iron Age kingdom of Geshur, based on the finds and its location.

Geshur is mentioned several times in the bible and coexisted with the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, to their north. Yet we know very little about it, possibly because it maintained a good relationship with the Israelites, Arav jokes – unlike the pesky Philistines. “The archive of this kingdom was written on

parchment, a perishable material. How do we know that? Because we have discovered the seals of the documents and not the documents,” Arav tells Haaretz. “The seals were made of clay and this is the reason they were preserved. We would trade the seals for the documents, but unfortunately the people who could trade with us, died millennia ago.”

Don’t we know the name of the capital of Geshur? We do not. Biblical texts do not mention the capital cities of the ancient kingdoms, with one exception: Esther 1:2, “...This is what happened in the days of Xerxes, who reigned over 127 provinces from India to Cush. In those days King Xerxes sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa.”

So with its documents turned to dust and biblical authors unmoved to write about it, the name of Geshur’s capital is unknown—but Arav believes it is the walled city of Zer mentioned in Joshua

19:35. In fact Arav says the translation of “capital” is inaccurate: the word in the Hebrew bible was “bira” which derives from the Indo-Aryan root for “fortress.”

Asked why “Zer” is Geshur’s capital in his opinion, Arav explains that Joshua lists the towns surrounding the Sea of Galilee in a clockwise direction starting with the largest city, Zer – and e-Tell is the largest of all sites around the lake.

Next: Arav argues that “Zer” is none other the original name of Bethsaida.

The Hebrew letters for R and D are often mixed up – mistaken for one another by the ancient scribes because they look so much alike, he says.

Actually “Zer” should have been transcribed as “Tzer” which could equally, Arav argues, be “Tzed” and that, he posits, morphed to Bethsaida [beit-tzed] in Hebrew during the Second Temple period.

So perhaps Bethsaida

does appear in the Hebrew bible, as Zer; which could plausibly be the capital of Geshur; and e-Tell does surely boast monumental ruins befitting the capital city of an Iron Age kingdom.

It is the postulated post-Iron Age name, Beit-tzaida – Bethsaida, that appears in the New Testament, and in writing by the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus, who penned his works in the late first century C.E. (The New Testament was written in Greek and the spelling Bethsaida is the Latin transliteration of Greek alphabet.)

Arav adds that the word “tzed” means both hunting and fishing in Hebrew. The name “house of the fishermen” would suit nearby el-Araj equally well.

But crucially to Arav’s position – so far the excavators of the competing site, el-Araj, haven’t made Iron Age finds, he says. But the village had to exist in the Iron Age, the Second Tem-

ple period, because that’s when its name would have changed from Zer (Tzer, Tzed) to Beit-Tzaida (Bethsaida). During the Second Temple period a lot of place names added the prefix “beth” – “home of” in modern Hebrew, and “temple of” in biblical times, which creates precedence for the name’s extension, he explains.

It bears adding that very, very few archaeological sites have inscriptions from antiquity with their name. Not one has been found in ancient Jerusalem, for instance. The only ones found in Israel so far were in Gezer and Ekron.

In addition: the level of the Kinneret fluctuates madly. Geologists have deduced that the Holy Land was stricken by drought in the first century and the late Mendel Nun, an expert on ancient harbors around the lake, estimates that the lake level during the first century was 210 to 214 meters